

MISQ Archivist

Technology-Mediated Dangerous Behaviors as Foraging for Social–Hedonic Rewards: The Role of Implied Inequality

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Abstract

Technology-mediated dangerous behaviors (TMDBs), such as posting selfies while driving or posting private information, are prevalent and require possible interventions. Knowledge about their drivers, and specifically the role of information in stimulating such behaviors, is limited. To address this gap, this paper turns to foraging and risk-sensitivity theories. These theories suggest that animals engage in more dangerous behaviors when their perceived need for calories is high. Similarly, humans increase their financial risk-taking when sensing dissatisfaction with what they have. Importantly, inequality information can increase such perceptions and change people's risk-taking propensity. Adapting these ideas, the paper postulates that TMDBs resemble food-seeking in animals in that they (1) are goal-oriented, (2) can be dangerous, and (3) yield unknown (probabilistic) rewards. Therefore, TMDBs are explained from foraging and risk-sensitivity theory angles. Focusing on social media users (Studies 1–4; four experiments; total $n = 2,504$), we argue that (1) it is reasonable to view users as foraging the “fields of social media” for social–hedonic rewards, (2) it is possible to alter their risk appetite and TMDBs through inequality information and upward comparison mechanisms, (3) this process can be mediated not only through cognitions, but also emotions, and (4) perceived scarcity of rewards and social comparison orientation affect this process. Next, the paper extends the core aspects of this theory to the state-level in Study 5 and argues that objective financial inequality can explain differences between U.S. states in TMDBs such as texting while driving and relative interest in TMDBs, such as pranks. The findings largely support these assertions. They illuminate the role of information, notably inequality, in driving TMDBs, extend prior research that has focused on basic needs (e.g., physiological needs in the case of food intake decisions) to the case of higher-order human needs (e.g., needs for belonging, esteem, and self-actualization) as catered to by nonphysiological, social–hedonic rewards, and point to important mechanisms that translate inequality into TMDBs.

Keywords: Foraging theory, risk-sensitivity theory, social media, risky behaviors, decision making, technology-mediated dangerous behaviors