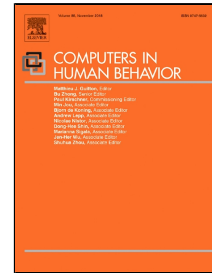


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Investigating the Impacts of Regulatory Focus and Political Skill Within a Social Media Context

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Running head: SOCIAL MEDIA, REGULATORY FOCUS AND POLITICS

Investigating the Impacts of Regulatory Focus and Political Skill Within a Social Media Context

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Abstract

Based on Regulatory Focus theory (Higgins, 1997), we extend existing findings to empirically investigate how regulatory focus and political skill are related within a social media context. Though social media is commonly used in the workplace, it has not yet been studied in relation to the competing paths of regulatory focus (prevention and promotion) and political skill. Our sample included 312 full-time employees. We found a negative path from prevention-focus through political skill dis-incentivizes social media use for enhancement of work mood and work network. A positive path from promotion-focus through political skill incentivizes employees to engage in social media use for enhancement of work mood and work network. Implications and opportunities for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Social Media, Regulatory Focus, Political Skill

1. Introduction

Social media has been defined as “computer-mediated tools that allow people, companies and other organizations to create, share, or exchange information, career interests, ideas, and pictures/videos in virtual communities and networks” (Social media, 2016). This intentionally broad definition accommodates present and future social media technologies which is important in this dynamically growing field. Though originally introduced as a social tool largely confined to use in one’s private life, social media has started to infiltrate work relationships, with colleagues friending and following each other’s social media profiles, job seekers using social media to aid their job searches, and organizations using social media to engage internal and external audiences. As social media use bleeds into the workplace and creates a blurred boundary between the work and personal realms, it is becoming important to understand social media use related to the workplace.

Sixty five percent of American adults now use social media (Perrin, 2015). Although some studies suggest that time spent on the top four US-based social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat) is down across the globe (Tuchinsky, 2016), the numbers of active users on sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Line are still growing, with recent reports indicating approximately 1.65 billion monthly active users of Facebook alone (Wikipedia, 2016a).

Workplace impacts of this use remain uncertain (Weiser, 2004). Some estimate that Facebook use shaves 1.5% off office productivity, and that British companies alone lose an estimated \$2.2 billion per year to social networking (Koerner, 2010). However, other research suggests that social media can help individuals garner resources such as information and connections that can help productivity (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden,

2011). The impact of new technologies, and specifically communication technologies such as social media, has been described as having such parallel “dual effects” (Carlson, Zivnuska, Carlson, Ramanpia, & Harris, 2016; Tehranian, 1990). This research builds upon these prior findings to examine how different motivational mechanisms may explain these dual effects.

To understand these dynamics, we turned to regulatory focus theory (RFT) (Higgins, 1997). RFT suggests that some individuals are motivated by a prevention-focus, hoping to minimize pain by avoiding risk, focusing on following rules, and endeavoring to produce the highest work quality possible. Other individuals have a promotion-focus, whereby they seek to maximize pleasure by focusing on career mobility and activities that further their attainment of visibility and position (Johnson, Smith, Wallace, Hill, & Baron, 2015). Since these motivations are independent strategies rather than two sides of the same continuum, we argue that they likely explain why people use social media for different purposes (Gorman, et al., 2012; Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, 2012) and with different effects. Specifically, we believe the two regulatory foci will be associated with political skill, which is the ability to understand others at work and use that understanding effectively (Ferris et al., 2005). We argue that two different paths emerge out of these associations. One path is that prevention-focus will be associated with low political skill and ultimately a reluctance to use work-related social media. The second path is that promotion-focus will be positively associated with political skill and ultimately with a willingness to use work-related social media. These paths are depicted in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

We seek to make a number of contributions with this research. Firstly, we build a sound theoretical model based on RFT (Higgins, 1997) and prior empirical findings that demonstrate both positive and negative workplace outcomes of social media use at work (Carlson, et al., 2016). Secondly, we seek to explain why some employees choose to engage in social media to enhance work-related outcomes, while others do not. Thirdly, we investigate political skill as a mediating mechanism between regulatory focus and why individuals use social media in work-related circumstances. Finally, we consider the practical implications of these findings for employees and organizations seeking to best leverage the outcomes of social media use, an important and relevant issue.

2. Theory

The premise of RFT (Higgins, 1997) is that employees self-regulate their behaviors with the aim of minimizing pain (prevention-focus) and maximizing pleasure (promotion focus). These two motivations have been established to be independent characteristics (Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, 2012) operating in opposition or in tandem with each other. Regardless of one's regulatory focus profile, the minimization of pain and maximization of pleasure are thought to be achieved by setting goals and then self-regulating one's behavior to attain them (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 1997).

Prevention-focused goals and standards are aimed at minimizing loss and pain by self-regulating one's behavior to align with organizational rules and responsibilities (Higgins, 1997). Examples of loss for a pain-minimizing employee include failure, inaccuracy, and blunders

(Johnson, Chang, & Yang, 2010). Meeting obligations and being perceived as hardworking are highly valued by prevention-focused individuals (Higgins, 1997; Johnson et al., 2010). These types of individuals may be prone to meticulous toil and prudence regarding new ideas and methods (Crowe & Higgins, 1997).

Promotion-focused goals and standards, by contrast, are aimed at maximizing pleasure by self-regulating one's behavior to align with the fulfillment of their personal career ambitions and thirst for growth, advancement, and progression. Formal achievements such as attaining rank (Higgins, 1997), rapid career progression (Johnson et al., 2010), development, change, creativity, and novelty (Kark & Van Dijk, 2007) are all valued by promotion-focused individuals. These types of individuals may be prone to holding themselves to very high standards of traditional success measures such as title, power, and visibility.

Because people generally seek to minimize discrepancies between goals and outcomes (Higgins, 1997; De Bock & Van Kenhove, 2010), people tend to match their behaviors to their goals. Therefore, different sets of behaviors are associated with the two different types of goals (De Bock & Van Kenhove, 2010). For example, employees with a high prevention-focus tend to behave in an avoidant fashion. Avoidant behaviors such as investing time in work tasks rather than social media use, avoiding self-promotion on social media, and operating under the radar of colleagues are all examples of behaviors typical of a prevention-focused employee. On the other hand, employees with a strong promotion-focus could be characterized as exhibiting approach behaviors. Approach behaviors include publicizing one's career achievements on social media, actively using social media to build one's professional network, and using social media to assess status differentials amongst colleagues.

2.1. Prevention-focus

Because prevention-focused people are trying to keep their head down, focus on their work task, and stay out of the limelight, they are unlikely to be particularly skilled at understanding others and their behavior. Political skill refers to the ability to read and understand people at work and to be able to translate that information into goal-directed influence behavior (Ferris, Treadway, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, Kacmar, Douglas, & Frink, 2005; Ferris, Treadway, Perrewè, Brouer, Douglas, & Lux, 2007). Prevention-focused employees put their attention on executing job tasks and excellent task performance rather than on relationship building and exerting social influence. We therefore argue that the trait of prevention-focus is unlikely to be associated with high political skill.

Although people who are prevention-focused are risk-averse, they still want to get ahead and achieve career success. They just approach that goal by focusing more on job tasks than on social understanding and political behaviors. In fact, prevention-focused employees may even see social media use with co-workers as contrary to their motivational goals. Social media is often used as a place to present the ideal self, rather than the real (flawed) self (Green, 2013; McFarland, 2013). These self-promotional tendencies represent exactly the opposite kind of behaviors that a prevention-focused employee is likely to engage in, and yet will be the main content of their viewing when on social media.

Given the tendency to use social media for self-promotion, it is perhaps unsurprising that social media use has been shown to create negative comparisons with others (Chou & Edge, 2012). Social media use may lead to declines in subjective well-being (Kross, Verduyn, Demiralp, Park, Lee, Lin, Shablack, Jonides, & Ybarra, 2013) as it sets the user up for negative comparisons between their own “real” life and others’ ideal

lives. Therefore, social media use by prevention-focused employees may actually detract from work mood, de-motivating the employee, making the employee feel worse about his or her work life, and negatively comparing his or her work achievements to those of others.

For all these reasons, we argue that prevention-focused employees are unlikely to be politically skilled, and that this particular combination of trait and skill is likely to create a reluctance to use social media to do things like motivate themselves, feel better about work, and compare their accomplishments to others'. We term these motivations as attempts to enhance work mood.

H1: Political skill will mediate the negative relationship between prevention-focus and employees' use of social media for work mood enhancement.

Prevention-focused employees are unlikely to view the network building effects of social media use as being worthy of pursuit. In fact, networking through social media may be viewed by these employees as a distraction from work tasks rather than as a legitimate career-building activity. The self-promotion inherent in social media use (Green, 2013; McFarland, 2013) may be viewed as existing in opposition to prevention –focused goals of staying under the radar and focusing on job tasks.

Some researchers have found that social media use is an impoverished form of social interaction that can weaken social ties and networks (Wikipedia, 2016b). The antecedents of these negative effects of social media use have not been empirically investigated. We reason that these effects may be explained by the existence of a prevention-focus. Prevention-focused employees are unlikely to be politically skilled and as a result are likely to be hesitant to use social media for building their professional network.

H2: Political skill will mediate the negative relationship between prevention-focus and employees' use of social media for work network enhancement.

2.2. Promotion-focus

Promotion-focused people are focused on channeling their energy in a competitive way. They are interested in achieving career success more quickly than others, comparing their achievements to others, and building and leveraging a professional network to attain these goals rather than just staying focused on the job at hand. Therefore, these employees are likely to use political skill to progress their careers. We argue that this tendency is likely to translate to the social media world.

Political skilled employees are thought to be adept at adapting their behavior to different interpersonal contexts, forming friendships, and building coalitions (Ferris et al., 2005; Ferris, et al., 2007). We suspect that this skill will translate to the online, social media context, with promotion-focused employees being likely to use social media in a political way with co-workers to achieve their career goals.

In particular, promotion-focused employees are likely to be politically skilled and therefore may use social media as a way of boosting their work-related mood. Some have argued that because users of social media are often focused on presenting their ideal selves (Green, 2013; McFarland, 2013) that users can create an inflated sense of self and experience esteem boosts by earning likes, fans, followers, and comments. Furthermore, these politically skilled employees understand the self-promotional culture of social media and may be less likely than their prevention-focused peers to make negative comparisons between their own real lives and others ideal lives. These employees understand that social media users are creating an

idealized image and may simply see it as a political game rather than a basis for actual comparisons.

In fact, some research indicates that social media can support social connectedness and belongingness (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013). It can be associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety, and elevated levels of well-being. These findings contradict studies by others that associate social media use with isolation, loneliness, and depression (Chou & Edge, 2012; Kross, et al., 2013). We suspect that these contradictory findings may be explained by the regulatory focus of the user.

Therefore, we argue that promotion-focused employees are likely to be politically skilled, and that they are therefore likely to use social media to elevate their work mood by motivating the employee, making him or her feel good about work, and positively comparing his or her work achievements to those of others.

H3: Political skill will mediate the positive relationship between promotion-focus and employees' use of social media for work mood enhancement.

Social media has affected people's social life in various ways. For example, it allows users to continuously stay in touch with people who might otherwise only be slight acquaintances or even dropped out of one's social circle. By creating the potential for thousands of broad-based social connections, social media allows users to share ideas and connect friends of friends on a sheer numbers scale that is unmatched by face-to-face friendships which may be limited to as few as 150 (Dunbar, 1992). We posit that the trait of promotion-focus is likely to be associated with high levels of political skill, which will lead to the active use of social media as a way of building and maintaining their professional network.

H4: Political skill will mediate the positive relationship between promotion-focus and employees' use of social media for work network enhancement.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and Procedure

Using a snowball methodology, we had 96 university students at a public university on the West Coast of the United States recruit individuals that were over the age of 18 and that were working at least 30 hours a week to complete an online survey. The students were provided instructions on the recruiting process and the importance of quality data. In return, the students were given extra credit for having up to five individuals complete the survey. 468 surveys were started out of the 480 potential survey responses. From there 156 responses were removed for failing to have variance in response rate, completing too quickly, or failure to complete the survey resulting in 312 responses (65% response rate).

The final sample consisted of 65% Caucasian and 60% women with an average age of 35.7. The sample was mostly married (68%) and had an average of 16.8 years of work experience. The sample on average spent 10 hours per week on social media.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Regulatory Focus at Work. A six-item version of the original 18-item regulatory focus at work scale developed by Nuebert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko & Roberts (2008) was used to capture both promotion-focus and prevention-focus regulatory focus behaviors. An example item for the three item promotion-focused scale ($\alpha = .76$) is "I take chances at work to maximize my goals for advancement." An example item for the three item prevention-focused scale ($\alpha = .83$) is "I concentrate on completing my work tasks correctly to increase my job security."

3.2.2. Political Skill. A four item measure of political skill originally created by Ferris, Berkson, Kaplan, Gilmore, Buckley, Hochwarter, & Witt (1999), and later validated and reprinted by Perrewe, Zellars, Ferris, Rossi, Kacmar, & Ralston (2004) was slightly revised for this study ($\alpha = .91$). Two of the original six items were deleted due to a lack of applicability to the social media context. The remaining four items were revised to include a phrase at the end of each item specifying the intended social media context of the item. The four-item scale is as follows: “I am able to make most people feel comfortable and at ease around me in a social media context. It is easy for me to develop good rapport with most people using social media. I am good at getting others to respond positively to me using social media. I usually try to find common ground with others in a social media context.”

3.2.3. Work Mood Enhancement. Three items were developed for the purpose of this study to capture how individual’s moods regarding work are enhanced by social media use ($\alpha = .89$). The items all strongly loaded on a single factor. The three items are “I check social media as a way of motivating myself to work harder,” “I check social media to make myself feel better about my work life,” and “I check social media to compare my accomplishments to those of work-related friends.”

3.2.4. Work Network Enhancement. Three items were developed for the purpose of this study to capture how individual’s professional networks at work were enhanced by social media use ($\alpha = .93$). The items all strongly loaded on a single factor. The three items are “I check social media to connect with people from work,” “I check social media to build work-related relationships,” and “I check social media to enhance my work-related friendships.”

3.2.5. Control Variables. We controlled for age and gender on the social media use items in our study (e.g., Barker, 2012).

3.3. Data Analysis

To examine the proposed theoretical model, we conducted structural equation model analysis using LISREL 9.1. We tested the measurement model using covariances at the item level, then we tested the hypothesized model shown in Figure 1. We tested two alternative models to assure this model had the best fit and used the best fitting model to evaluate the hypothesized relationships.

4. Results

Table 1 provides the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables in our study. We first tested the measurement model including 18 indicators and 5 factors, one for each of the scales in our study. The model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 200.70$, $df = 116$, $CFI = .97$, $NNFI = .97$, $RMSEA = .048$). In the measurement model we found all item factor loadings to be significant ($p < .05$) and of adequate magnitude (i.e., $> .40$).

Insert Table 1 about here

Our next step was to test the hypothesized model shown in Figure 1. This model builds on the previously established measurement model incorporating 4 predicted paths as well as allowing gender and age to predict the outcomes in the model. The hypothesized model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 296.97$, $df = 123$, $CFI = .95$, $NNFI = .93$, $RMSEA = .067$). All hypothesized paths were found to be significant ($p < .05$). In order to ensure the fully mediated hypothesized model was the best fitting model we tested two alternative models where in each case one of the regulatory focus dimensions was allowed to directly relate to both forms of social media use. Alternative model one added a path from promotion-focus to work mood enhancement and one

path to work network enhancement ($\chi^2 = 295.35$, $df = 121$, $CFI = .95$, $NNFI = .93$, $RMSEA = .068$, $\Delta\chi^2 = 1.32$, $\Delta df = 2$). Thus there was not a significant difference at $p < .05$ for model fit and neither of the paths were significant. Alternative model two added a path from prevention-focus to work mood enhancement and one path to work network enhancement ($\chi^2 = 294.39$, $df = 121$, $CFI = .95$, $NNFI = .93$, $RMSEA = .068$, $\Delta\chi^2 = 2.58$, $\Delta df = 2$). Again the model was not significantly different at $p < .05$ and neither of the paths were significant.

The standardized path coefficients for the model can be found in Figure 2. We found a positive relationship between promotion-focused regulatory focus and political skill ($b = .38$, $SE = .09$, $p < .05$). In addition, we found a negative relationship between prevention-focused regulatory focus and political skill ($b = -.20$, $SE = .08$, $p < .05$). Political skill was positively related to both work mood enhancement ($b = .35$, $SE = .06$, $p < .05$) and work network enhancement ($b = .39$, $SE = .06$, $p < .05$). The control variable of gender was not significantly related to either of the social media use variables. However, the control variable of age was negatively related to both work mood enhancement ($b = -.23$, $SE = .06$, $p < .05$) and work network enhancement ($b = -.27$, $SE = .06$, $p < .05$).

 Insert Figure 2 about here

The indirect effects between each of the regulatory focus factors and social media use were examined. Hypothesis 1 was supported in that the indirect effect of promotion-focused and work mood enhancement was positive as expected through political skill ($b = .13$, $SE = .04$, $p < .05$). Similarly, Hypothesis 2 was supported in that the indirect effect held from promotion-focus to work network enhancement through political skill ($b = .15$, $SE = .04$, $p < .05$). Hypotheses 3

and 4 were supported as predicted where the indirect effect between prevention-focused and work mood enhancement was negative ($b = -.07, SE = .03, p < .05$) as well as with network mood enhancement ($b = -.08, SE = .03, p < .05$).

Insert Table 2 about here

5. Discussion

Our goal with this research is to explain why some people choose to engage in social media with work friends to enhance their mood and build their network while others do not. To this end, we explored the role of regulatory focus and political skill in predicting these outcomes.

Results support all four of our hypotheses. We found significant negative paths from prevention-focus through political skill that dis-incentivizes employees to engage in social media use for work mood enhancement (H1) and work network enhancement (H2). We conjecture that the efforts of prevention-focused employees to avoid loss and produce high quality work precludes much use of political skill and in turn may be related to a reluctance to use social media with colleagues to enhance work mood or build a professional network. In contrast, we also found significant positive paths from promotion-focus through political skill that supports the use of social media for work mood enhancement (H3) and work network enhancement (H4). We argue that the promotion-focused employee, with an eye to rapid career advancement, is likely to leverage political skill and extend it to the social media realm to enhance work mood and build professional networks.

An interesting finding that was not hypothesized was that the relationship between our control variable of age and social media use was significant and negative for both work mood enhancement and work network enhancement. We conjecture that this result suggests that the older you are, the less likely you are to engage in these social media behaviors. However, this post hoc rationale is unconfirmed, and provides an opportunity for further empirical investigation.

These findings have interesting practical implications. Managers seeking to build a stronger organizational presence on social media may want to select promotion-focused employees for that kind of work role. Promotion-focused employees may have an intuitive understanding of how to leverage social media for the benefit or organizational visibility that prevention-focused employees may not have. On the other hand, promotion-focused employees may also benefit from the reminder that work task performance should not be neglected in favor of spending time on social media. When prevention-focused employees are selected for a social media role in an organization, they may benefit from some training on effective use of social media within the context of building work relationships. Some encouragement may help these employees achieve some career success that amplifies their excellent task performance.

We hope that this research stands to offer several contributions to the literature. Exploring the dual nature of regulatory focus helps us to explain some contradictory findings about the impacts of social media use. While some research indicates that using social media can support social connectedness and belongingness (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013), lower levels of depression and anxiety, and elevate well-being, others studies suggest the opposite (Chou & Edge, 2012; Kross, et al., 2013). Our findings suggest that both of these impacts may be possible depending on the regulatory focus of the individual.

Like all research, this work does have some weaknesses. Because our results are based on snowball sampling, it would be useful to replicate and extend these results in an organizational context. Doing so could bring more focused approach to the study, as culture, industry, location, and other variables would likely be fully or mostly controlled. Additionally, because we collected all our IVs and DVs at the same time, common method variance is a potential issue. With that being said, our respondents were from many organizations, had many different roles, and worked in a variety of industries, all of which help to ease concerns related to the generalizability of our results. We hope future researchers will design studies to address our limitations.

We see this research as an exciting starting point for future research in the area. For example, future researchers may explore how social media use is related to network size. It would also be interesting to explore the impacts that social media use has on the intersection of work and family. There also may be a tipping point where social media use shoots promotion-focused employees in the foot – exploring the possibility of a curvilinear relationship between promotion-focus, social media use, and career outcomes would be very interesting and could also lead to more research on where and how social media use becomes less of a tool and more of an addiction.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we found a two significant path originating from self-regulatory focus and terminating at social media use for two outcomes. The first path is a negative path, with prevention-focus being related to little use of political skill, which is related to little tendency to use social media for work mood enhancement and work network enhancement. The second path is a positive path, with promotion-focus being related to frequent use of political skill, and

heightened tendency to use social media for work mood enhancement and work network enhancement. We hope this research is useful to organizations, managers, and employees seeking to better understand the potential predictors and impacts of social media in the workplace.

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Wikipedia. (2016b). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_networking_service retrieved at 3:50 pm 7/12/16

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Figure 1: Conceptual Path Model

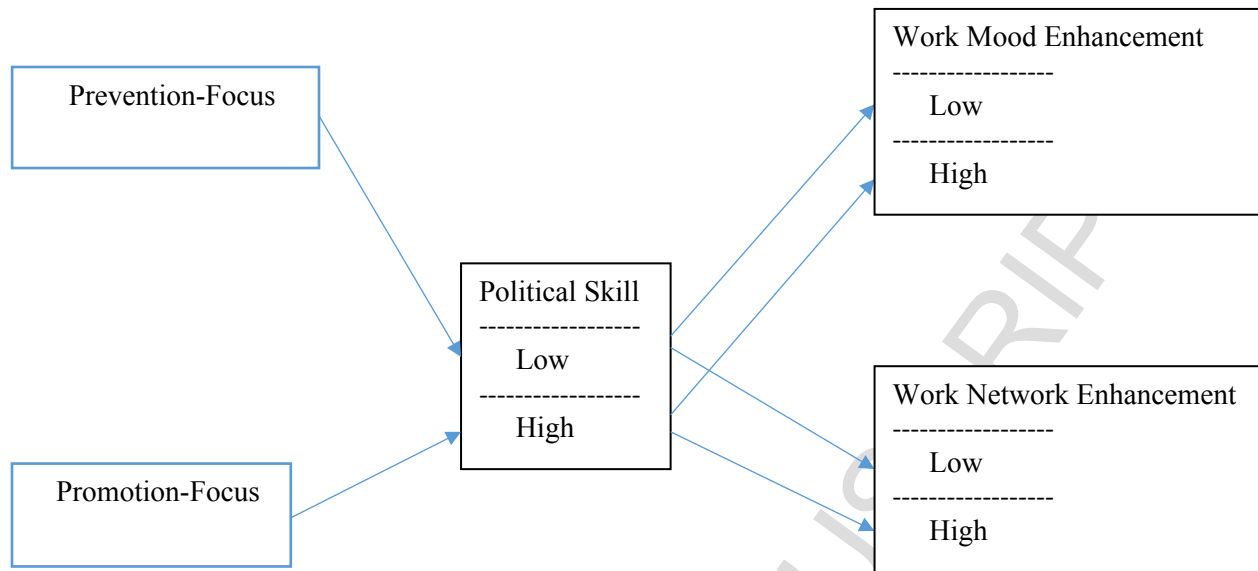
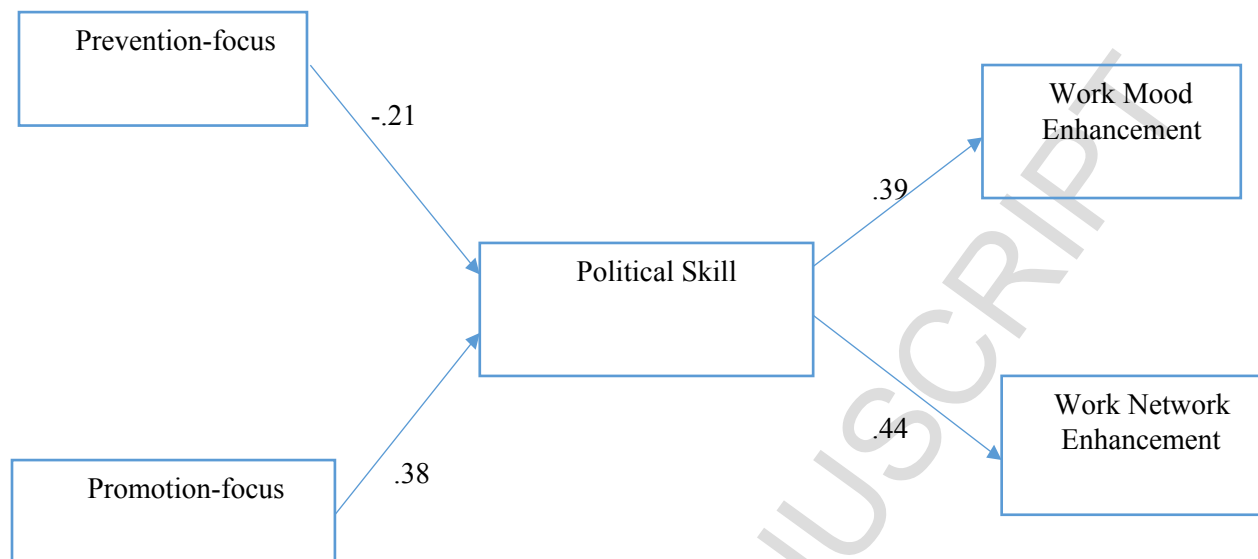


Figure 2: Path Model Results



Highlights

- Two self-regulatory paths inform employee choices to use social media at work.
- Prevention-focus is related to less use of political skill and social media.
- Promotion-focus is related to more use of political skill and social media.
- Social media can be used to enhance work mood and work network.

Table 1: Correlations

Correlations^b

		RFPROM	RFPREV	POLSK	MOTMOOD	MOTNET
RFPROM	Pearson Correlation	1	.503**	.228**	.141**	.187**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.010	.001
RFPREV	Pearson Correlation	.503**	1	.036	-.063	.019
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.506	.252	.721
POLSK	Pearson Correlation	.228**	.036	1	.392**	.419**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.506		.000	.000
MOTMOOD	Pearson Correlation	.141**	-.063	.392**	1	.577**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.010	.252	.000		.000
MOTNET	Pearson Correlation	.187**	.019	.419**	.577**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.721	.000	.000	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). b.

Listwise N=337

Table 2: Indirect Effects

Pro->Polsk-> Mood .15

Pro->Polsk->Net .17

Rev->Polsk->Mood -.08

Prev-> Polsk->Net -.09