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What You Don't Know About Motivational Laptop Stickers

Cindy J. Campoverde-Reinoso
Gettysburg College

Stella Nicolaou
Gettysburg College

Kathy R. Berenson
Gettysburg College

Roles

Cindy J. Campoverde-Reinoso '20, Gettysburg College
Stella Nicolaou '19, Gettysburg College

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Abstract

Mental health problems are on the rise among young adults in the U.S. (Kingkade, 2016). At the same time, today's U.S. young adults are significantly more invested than their older counterparts in portraying themselves as "positive" (self-confident, easy-going, and happy; Berenson et al., 2018). Although many have begun to speculate that these two trends may be linked (e.g., Fagan, 2017), little empirical research on this issue exists.

Keywords

mental health, laptop stickers, motivational quotes

Disciplines

Psychology

Comments

This poster was presented at the Sixth Annual Poster Presentation for the [Cross-Disciplinary Science Institute](#) at Gettysburg College (X-SIG) on October 19, 2018.

What You Don't Know About Motivational Laptop Stickers

Cindy Campoverde, Stella Nicolaou & Kathy R. Berenson
Department of Psychology, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA

Background

Mental health problems are on the rise among young adults in the U.S. (Kingkade, 2016). At the same time, today's U.S. young adults are significantly more invested than their older counterparts in portraying themselves as "positive" (self-confident, easy-going, and happy; Berenson et al., 2018). Although many have begun to speculate that these two trends may be linked (e.g., Fagan, 2017), little empirical research on this issue exists.

Accumulating evidence suggests a downside to being so highly invested in "positivity":

- Depressive disorders are higher in cultures where negative emotions are stigmatized and avoided than in cultures where negative emotions are accepted and valued (De Vaus et al., 2018).
- Although negative emotions are commonly assumed to be detrimental to psychological/physical health and functioning, this is mainly only true for people who hold negative beliefs about them (Bastian et al., 2012; 2015; 2017; Luong et al., 2016).
- Feeling social pressure not to experience negative emotions predicts an increase in depression over time (Dejonckheere et al., 2017).
- Relative to neutral control conditions, conditions that attempt to promote "positivity" cause vulnerable individuals to experience more negative moods, more rumination over setbacks, and more feelings of invalidation/isolation (McGuirk et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2009; Marigold et al., 2014).



Hypotheses

Many young adults in the U.S. put "positive" motivational stickers on their laptops. We hypothesized that doing so would be associated with

- Greater feelings of pressure to hide negative emotions
- More mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, self-injury)

Method

Participants

169 men and 203 women from the U.S., ages 18-26 ($M = 23.63$, $SD = 1.89$).

Materials

Participants completed a series of on-line questionnaires that included:

- **Pressure to hide negative emotions**
Participants rated their agreement with 7 statements about feeling pressure to hide negative emotions (e.g., "I have been feeling pressure to put on a positive front when I become stressed or overwhelmed"). Internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$).
- **Depression and anxiety symptoms** (adapted from Derogatis, 1975)
Participants rated how often they experienced symptoms in the last two weeks.
 - 6 items assessed depression (e.g., "feelings of worthlessness"), $\alpha = .93$.
 - 6 items assessed anxiety (e.g., "feeling tense or keyed up"), $\alpha = .92$.
- **Self-injury**
Participants rated how often they experienced non-suicidal self-injurious urges and acts (e.g., "Having strong urges to physically hurt yourself on purpose") in the last two weeks. Two items, $\alpha = .88$.
- **Motivational sticker usage**
Participants were asked whether or not they currently had any stickers on their laptop featuring the following words/phrases: "positive," "happy," "love/believe in yourself," "confidence," "relax," "fun."

Results

- 17.2% of men and 19.2% of women reported using at least one motivational sticker.
- We compared the mental health vulnerabilities reported by participants with versus without laptop stickers in a series of 2 (sticker presence) X 2 (gender) ANOVAs.
- Participants with stickers felt significantly more pressure to hide negative emotions than participants without, and this effect did not depend on gender (Figure 1).
- Depression, anxiety, and self-injury were all significantly higher in participants with stickers than participants without. These analyses also showed significant stickers presence x gender interactions, such that the association of stickers with mental health problems was stronger in men than women (Figures 2, 3, and 4).
- Results were unchanged after controlling for age, race, and socioeconomic status.

Pressure to hide negative emotions

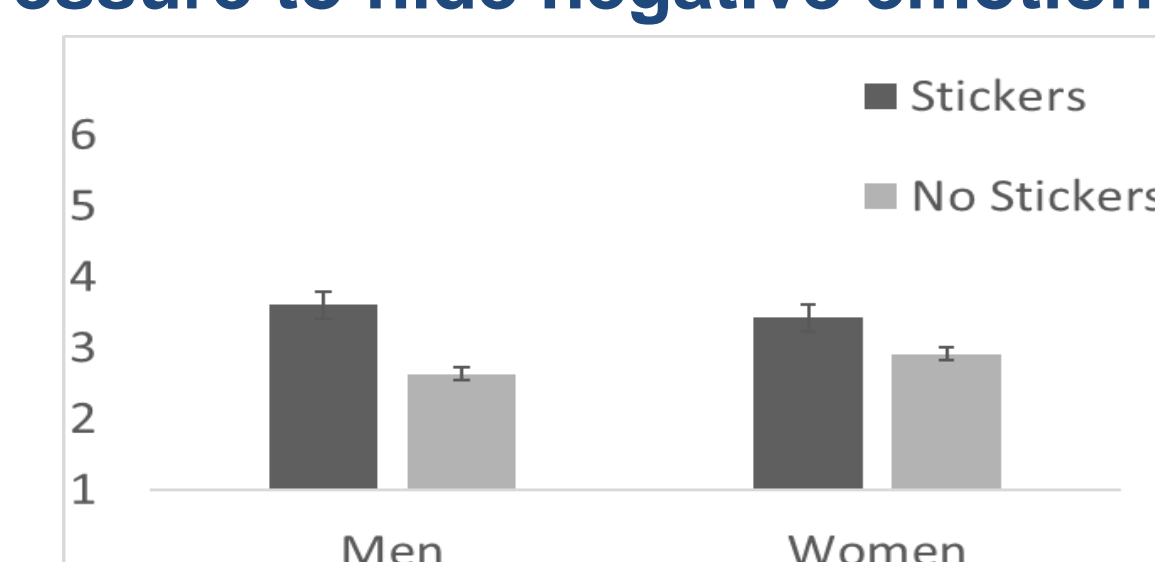


Figure 1. Pressure to hide negative emotions as a function of sticker presence and gender. Interaction effect, $F(1, 368) = 2.56$, $p = .111$. Effect of sticker presence, $F(1, 368) = 25.59$, $p < .001$.

Depression

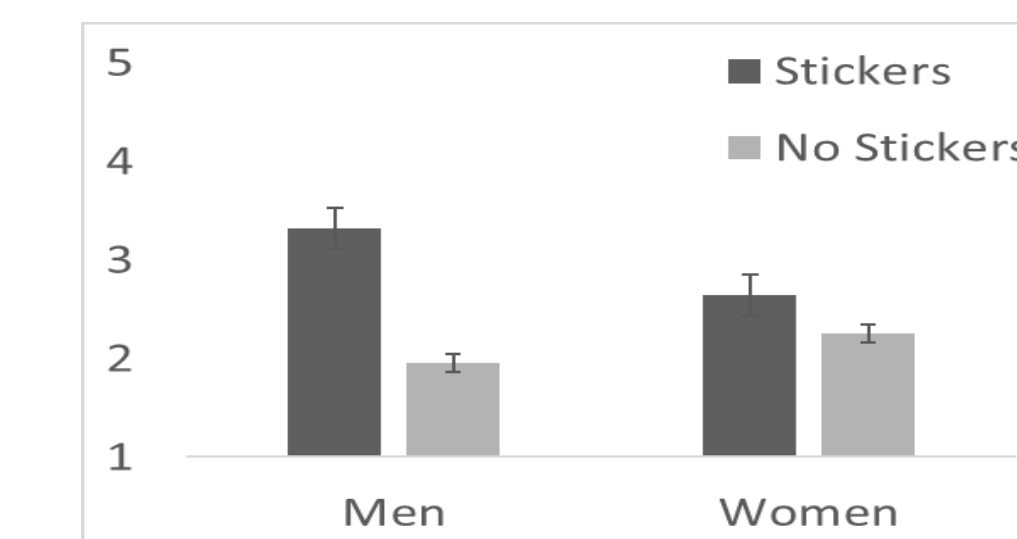


Figure 2. Depression as a function of sticker presence and gender. Interaction effect, $F(1, 368) = 10.96$, $p = .001$. Effect of sticker presence, $F(1, 368) = 36.14$, $p < .001$.

Anxiety

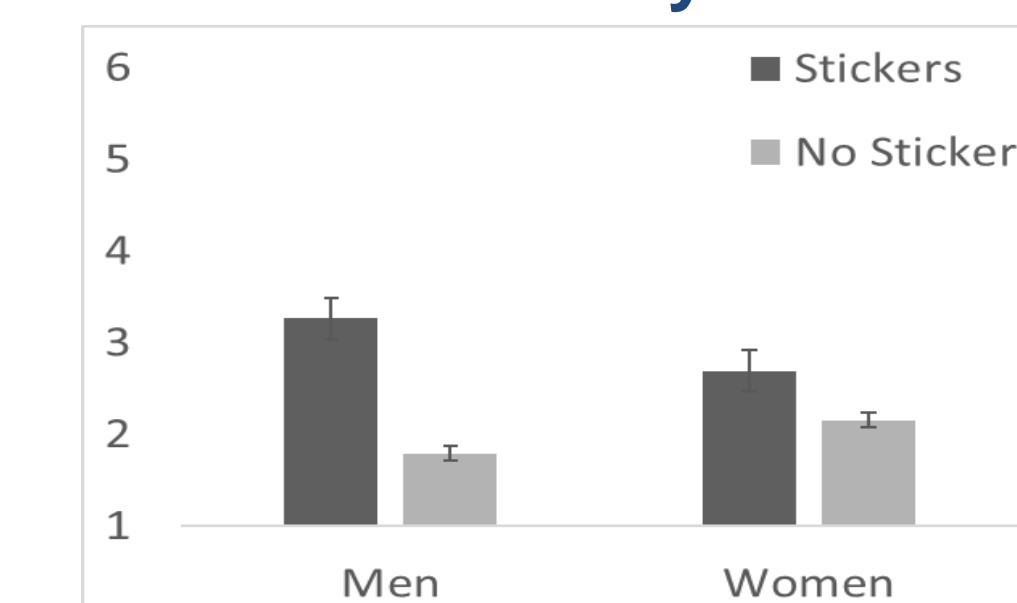


Figure 3. Anxiety as a function of sticker presence and gender. Interaction effect, $F(1, 368) = 11.31$, $p = .001$. Effect of sticker presence, $F(1, 368) = 52.88$, $p < .001$.

Self-Injury

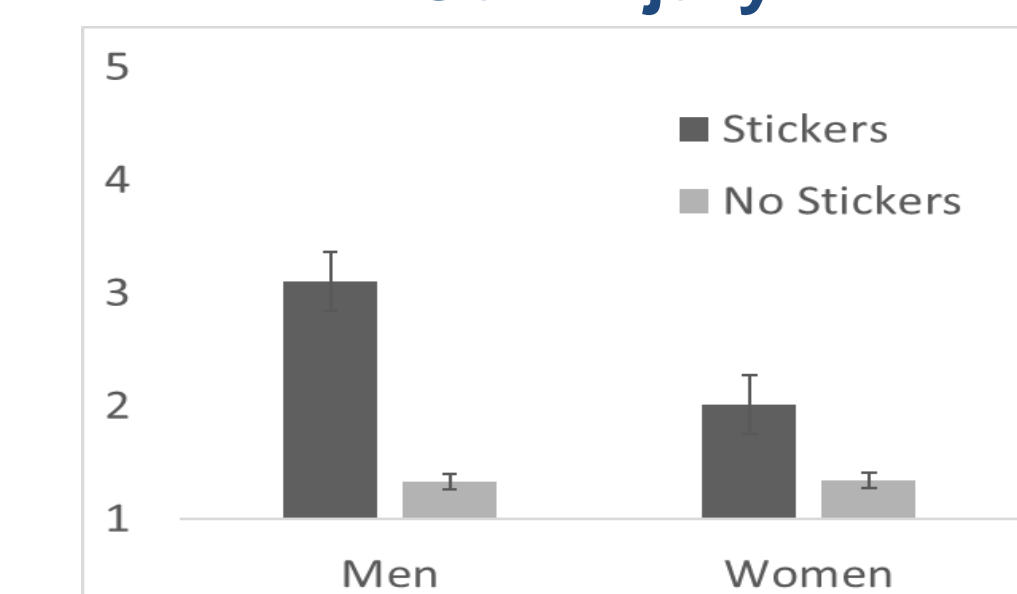


Figure 4. Self-injury as a function of sticker presence and gender. Interaction effect, $F(1, 368) = 19.71$, $p < .001$. Effect of sticker presence, $F(1, 368) = 96.18$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

As predicted, use of motivational laptop stickers was associated with feeling more pressure to hide negative emotions, as well as more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and self-injury. Unexpectedly, associations between sticker usage and mental health problems were significantly stronger in men than in women.

This is the first empirical evidence we know of linking the use of so-called "positive" motivational stickers with mental health vulnerabilities.

- Perhaps people with mental health concerns are more likely to apply motivational stickers, to try to make themselves feel better, and/or to try to present a more "positive" image to others?
- Perhaps use of motivational stickers increases mental health problems for people who believe they need to always be "positive," because the stickers constantly remind them of a goal that is nearly impossible to live up to?

This study cannot determine the direction(s) of the associations we found, but we have developed follow-up studies to address this using experimental and longitudinal designs.