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Personality traits, interpersonal relationships, online social support, and Facebook addiction

Jih-Hsin Tang [a,*], Ming-Chun Chen [b], Cheng-Ying Yang [c], Tsai-Yuan Chung [d], Yao-An Lee [b]

[a] Department of Information Management, National Taipei University of Business, Taiwan, ROC
[b] Department of Psychology & Counseling, University of Taipei, Taiwan, ROC
[c] Department of Computer Science, University of Taipei, Taiwan, ROC
[d] Center for Teacher Education and Career Development, University of Taipei, Taiwan, ROC

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ABSTRACT

Because of the prevalence of mobile devices, the overuse of social networking sites has become a global phenomenon. One of the most popular social networking sites, Facebook, has received a considerable attention in recent years, and the excessive use of Facebook has become a major concern in schools. The purpose of this study was to investigate the reasons for Facebook addiction. By surveying 894 college students in Taiwan, we found that although only 1% was classified as addicts, 17.8% were in the alert group. Approximately 80% of the students used Facebook every day, and 10% spent more than 8 h a day on Facebook. Interpersonal relationships and online social support were found to be positively associated with Facebook addiction; however, some personality traits, such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism, were negatively associated with Facebook addiction. Online interpersonal relationships and neuroticism were found to be prominent predictors of Facebook addiction. Practical implications are provided herein.

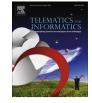© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Because of the popularity of mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablet PCs, the trend of people using these devices for excessive amounts of time is increasing. One of the most intriguing phenomena is the overuse of social networking sites, such as Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter. Smartphone addiction has been the focus of trade journals, television programs, and newspaper articles in recent years. Researchers have investigated the underlying reasons for Internet addiction (Chou et al., 2005; Griffiths, 1998; Kandell, 1998; Young, 2004) and smartphone addiction (Lee et al., 2014; Salehan and Negahban, 2013).

Some scholars have argued that Internet addicts become addicted to various aspects of online use, such as gaming, online sexual activities, and e-mailing or messaging (Andreassen et al. (2012)). Messaging is common on social networking sites and Facebook is the most popular site of this type; therefore, Facebook addiction is an emerging research area.

Numerous reasons exist for using Facebook; past research has adopted different perspectives to examine the use of Facebook, such as personality theory (Aydm and San, 2011; Buckner et al., 2012; Ross et al., 2009; Sariyska et al., 2014; Tan and Yang, 2014), the theory of planned behavior (Pelling and White, 2009), and technology adoption theory and attachment theory (Shin et al., 2011; Oldmeadow et al., 2013). Some scholars have focused on the relationship between

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individual personality traits and Facebook use, and others have emphasized the social support that Facebook provides (Gunuc and Dogan, 2013; Indian and Grieve, 2014; Tsai et al., 2009).

The current study was designed to investigate the underlying relationships among individual personality traits, interpersonal relationships, online social support, and the overuse of Facebook.

2. Theoretical background and research questions

2.1. Personality and Facebook use

Individual personality traits have been regarded as critical predictors of Facebook use. For example, people scoring high on narcissism indices tend to be more active on Facebook. Several studies have focused on the Big Five model of personality traits, in which personality assessment is based on the five main dimensions of extraversion (e.g., being talkative), agreeableness (e.g., being sympathetic and warm), conscientiousness (e.g., being organized and prompt), neuroticism (e.g., being nervous and moody), and openness to experience (e.g., being creative and intellectually oriented). Extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience have been shown to be positively associated with the use of social media (Hughes et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012). People scoring low on conscientiousness are assumed to use social media cautiously and are negatively associated with the use of social media. Neuroticism is assumed to be positively related to the use of social media because it can be used as a method of seeking support.

2.2. Interpersonal relationships and Facebook use

Maintenance of interpersonal relationships has been considered the main reason for the use of social networking sites. A recent review article showed that social networking sites were used mainly for maintaining relationships with offline acquaintances (Kuss et al., 2013). It seems that people use Facebook to maintain existing relationships and to expand personal social networks.

It seems that the greater the need to maintain offline acquaintances, the greater the likelihood of becoming addicted to Facebook. Similarly, the greater the need to maintain online friendships, the greater the likelihood of becoming addicted to Facebook.

2.3. Online social support and Facebook use

Social support is a broad concept that comprises numerous qualitatively different types of support, such as instrumental, informational, and emotional assistance (House et al., 1985). Social support can be considered a communication process that can help people manage and cope with uncertainty, improving well-being (Tanis, 2007). Social support has numerous definitions. For example, Cobb (1976) defined social support as "information leading the subject to believe that he or she is cared for and loved, that he/she is esteemed and valued, and he/she belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation." House (1981) defined social support as the flow between people of emotional concern, instrumental aid, information, and appraisal. We adopted House's definition in this study because it can be applied to both online and offline environments.

Recent studies of social support have reported varied results because of differing definitions of social support and the lack of a clear conceptualization of the construct. However, recent research has generally attempted to measure the functional components of social support because functional support is the most crucial and can be divided into (a) emotional support, which involves caring, loving, and sympathy; (b) instrumental support, which involves providing material aid or behavioral assistance; (c) informational support, which involves offering guidance, advice, or information that can provide a solution to a problem; (d) affectionate support, which involves expressions of love and affection; and (e) social companionship (also called "positive social interaction"), which involves spending time with others in leisure and recreational activities (Sherbourne and Steward, 1991).

The Internet has gradually become integrated into everyday life, thus becoming a crucial medium for giving and receiving social support. Sites such as Facebook, Myspace and Twitter have had a major impact on interpersonal behavior, including online social support. Recent studies have demonstrated that people gain support from friends on Facebook to reduce stress or lose weight.

Facebook can provide three types of social support: informational, affectionate, and social companionship. Informational support involves offering guidance, advice, information, or feedback that can provide a solution to a problem. Facebook provides a convenient channel to quickly receive suggestions from friends. Affectionate support involves expressions of love and affection. Facebook provides several tools, such as its "like" and messaging functions, that can be used to show support and express emotions to friends. Social companionship involves spending time with others in leisure and recreational activities. Facebook seems to provide a safe and trusted online environment in which to share happy moments with friends. In other words, Facebook has provided a convenient channel for people to acquire informational, emotional, and even material assistance from online acquaintances.