



Short communication

Online social networking addiction among college students in Singapore: Comorbidity with behavioral addiction and affective disorder



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 May 2016

Received in revised form 16 September 2016

Accepted 29 October 2016

Keywords:

Social networking addiction

Behavioral addiction

Comorbidity

Affective disorder

ABSTRACT

Purpose of the research: This study aimed to determine the prevalence of addiction to social networking sites/platforms (SNS) and its comorbidity with other behavioral addiction and affective disorder among college students in Singapore. 1110 college students (age: $M = 21.46$, $SD = 1.80$) in Singapore completed measures assessing online social networking, unhealthy food intake and shopping addiction as well as depression, anxiety and mania. Descriptive analyses were conducted to investigate the prevalence and comorbidity of behavioral addiction and affective disorder. Chi-square tests were used to examine gender differences.

The principal results: The prevalence rates of SNS, food and shopping addiction were 29.5%, 4.7% and 9.3% respectively for the total sample. SNS addiction was found to co-occur with food addiction (3%), shopping addiction (5%), and both food and shopping addiction (1%). The comorbidity rates of SNS addiction and affective disorder were 21% for depression, 27.7% for anxiety, and 26.1% for mania. Compared with the total sample, students with SNS addiction reported higher comorbidity rates with other behavioral addiction and affective disorder. In general, females as compared to males reported higher comorbidity rates of SNS addiction and affective disorder.

Major conclusions: SNS addiction has a high prevalence rate among college students in Singapore. Students with SNS addiction were vulnerable to experience other behavior addiction as well as affective disorder, especially among females.

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1. Introduction

Social networking sites/platforms (SNS) are web-based virtual communities where users interact with real-life friends and meet other people with shared interests. SNS (e.g., Facebook and Twitters) have attracted large numbers of users around the globe. Teenagers and college students tend to make the most use of SNS. About 24% of teens go online “almost constantly” (Lenhart et al., 2015) and 59.4% of college students visited social networking sites several times a day (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013). An international analysis in different countries showed cultural and regional differences in terms of SNS use. Evidence from previous studies showed that Singaporean adults spent the longest time on the Facebook to connect with friends and share updates on topical

news (Experian, 2011) and 71% of Singaporeans had a Facebook profile (Internet World and Statistics, 2016). US college students reported greater use of SNS than students in China (Jackson and Wang, 2013). In addition, there was also gender difference in SNS use. Females relative to males reported greater overall use and time spent on SNS (Lenhart et al., 2015)

SNS use can become addictive, especially among young people. Although not formally recognized as a clinical diagnosis, SNS addiction incorporates the experience of “classic” addiction symptoms similar to chemical addiction (Andreassen, 2015; Griffins et al., 2014; Kuss and Griffins, 2011; Ryan et al., 2014). These addiction symptoms include: neglecting personal/work life, preoccupation, mood alteration, withdrawal, inability to cut down, and relapse. However, an excessive use of SNS by itself does not necessarily equate with addiction. Reviews studies have shown that about 12% of US adults were addicted to Facebook, 24 to 35% of Chinese college students would be classified as addicted to SNS, and a low rate of 1.6% Facebook addiction was found among Nigerian undergraduate students (Andreassen, 2015; Kuss and

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Griffins, 2011). There were no conclusive findings confirming higher rates of SNS addiction among females than males.

Internet addiction, or problematic internet use, is characterized by excessive or poorly controlled preoccupations, urges or behaviors regarding internet use that lead to impairment or distress (Young, 2009). There is a paucity of study assessing the relationship between SNS addiction and internet addiction. A preliminary study suggested that the use of Facebook may contribute to the severity of symptoms associated with internet addiction (Kittinger et al., 2012). General internet addiction also tends to co-occur with other addiction such as substance use, gambling, overeating and excessive sedentary behavior (Kuss and Griffins, 2011). A study has found that 61% of the participants pursued at least one and 31% engaged in two or more problematic behavior of overeating and excessive internet use (Malat et al., 2010). Currently, there is not yet any published data on the co-occurrence between SNS addiction and other behavioral addiction. Since SNS use takes up a large amount of available time, it would only co-occur with other behavioral addiction that also has an outlet via SNS. In fact, SNS nowadays have become more diversified, and some sites can also be used for gaming, gambling as well as online shopping. It is plausible that SNS addicts may develop co-addiction with various activities that are available in these sites. Furthermore, there are already empirical evidences that documented the association between SNS use and affective disorder, including depression and anxiety in both Western and Asian countries (Andreassen, 2015; Kuss and Griffins, 2011; Ryan et al., 2014; Rosen et al., 2013). It is thus argued that SNS addicts are at high risks of experiencing negative mental health symptoms.

SNS addiction is worthy of individual attention, particularly when considering its potential comorbidity with behavioral addiction and mental health problem. This study focused on the prevalence of SNS addiction and its co-occurrence with other behavioral addiction (unhealthy food intake and shopping addiction) and affective disorder (depression, anxiety, and mania) among college students in Singapore.

2. Subjects and methods

2.1. Sampling

A convenience sample of 1110 college students aged between 18 and 25 years old were recruited from a major comprehensive university in Singapore. The students were recruited from different departments of the university via advertisement in university websites, students activity centers, and dormitories. A total of 1300 questionnaires were distributed and 1110 valid questionnaires were collected, with a response rate of 84.6%.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Social networking addiction

A modified version of the 6-item Bergen Facebook Addiction Scale (BFAS) was used to measure SNS addiction (Andreassen et al., 2012). The original term “Facebook use” was changed to “online social networking” to include the use of various SNS (Andreassen, 2015; Griffins et al., 2014). Scoring 3 or above on at least four of the six items is categorized as SNS addiction. Internal reliability of this scale for this study was 0.83.

2.2.2. Food addiction

The modified Yale Food Addiction Scale (mYFAS) was used to measure addiction to unhealthy food intake (Flint et al., 2014). This scale includes 1 question from each of the 7 diagnostic items plus 2 individual items that assess the presence of clinically significant impairment and distress respectively. Scoring at least three

symptoms and the criterion of a clinically significant impairment or distress is used to identify food addiction. Internal consistency of this scale for this study was 0.85.

2.2.3. Shopping addiction

The 7-item Compulsive Buying Scale (Faber and O’guinn, 1992) was used to measure shopping addiction. Individuals scoring at or below 1.34 are classified as with shopping addiction. The internal reliability of this scale for this study was 0.68.

2.2.4. Affective disorder

Depression, anxiety and mania were measured by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Scoring at least 5 of the 9 items on the depression scale during the same 2 week period is used to classify depression. Scoring 3 (or more) of the 6 symptoms on the anxiety scale (with at least some symptoms having been present for more days than not for the past 6 months) is used to identify anxiety. Scoring 3 (or more) of the 7 symptoms in the mania scale is used to classify mania. Internal reliabilities for this study were 0.87 for depression, 0.82 for anxiety, and 0.76 for mania.

2.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed with the computerized statistical package, SPSS version 23. The original cut off scores of the scales were used to ascertain the rates of behavioral addiction and affective disorder. Descriptive statistics including mean, SD, frequencies and percentages were used to describe the data.

2.4. Ethics

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the affiliated university of the authors. Informed written consents were obtained before students individually completed a set of anonymous self-administered questionnaire.

3. Results

3.1. Sample characteristics

The study sample consisted of 1110 (416 males, 694 females) university college students in Singapore. The mean \pm SD of age was 21.46 ± 1.80 years old, and about one third were first year students.

3.2. Prevalence and comorbidity of SNS addiction with food and shopping addiction

Among all surveyed students, the prevalence rates were: 29.5% for SNS networking addiction, 4.7% for food addiction, and 9.3% for shopping addiction (Table 1). About 3% of the total sample reported both SNS and food addiction, 5% reported both SNS and shopping addiction, and 1% reported all three measured behavioral addiction. Females relative to males reported higher co-occurrence rates of SNS and shopping addiction ($p < 0.05$).

3.3. Comorbidity of behavioral addiction and affective disorder among the total sample

For the total sample ($N = 1110$), the comorbidity rates were 21% for SNS addiction and depression, 27.7% for SNS addiction and anxiety, and 26.1% for SNS addiction and mania (Table 1). More females than males reported both SNS addiction and affective disorder ($p < 0.001$).

For food addiction, the comorbidity rates were 3.7% for depression, 4.7% for anxiety, and 4.3% for mania. For shopping

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