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Objective Facebook behaviour: Differences between problematic and non-problematic users



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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to test whether, and how much, specific objective Facebook behaviours are more frequent in problematic than non-problematic Facebook users. Differences between problematic and non-problematic Facebook users in objective Facebook behaviours were examined using frequentist and Bayesian *t*-tests. Participants were undergraduate students ($n = 297$, 80.8% female, age mean = 21.05, standard deviation = 1.88). Problematic Facebook use was assessed using fifteen items adapted from the scale developed and validated for the measurement of Generalized Problematic Internet Use. A specific R package was developed to obtain information about objective Facebook behaviours (friendship activities, events, wall activities, and text messages). *T*-tests indicated that non-problematic and problematic users significantly differ in several objective Facebook behaviours. Bayesian analyses confirmed *t*-test results and supported that Problematic users scored higher than non-problematic users in several dependent variables, such as number of friendships established, number of events attended, all wall activities (e.g. number of “like”), and private messages sent. The analysis of data about objective Facebook behaviours goes beyond the self-reported information about such activities, and helps to understand the role of its potentially addictive activities in predicting PFU.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problematic Facebook use

Facebook addiction or Problematic Facebook use (PFU) have not been recognized as a legitimate disorder yet; however, there is mounting evidence to support that Facebook use can become problematic, and take the form of a behavioural addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Ryan, Reece, Chester, & Xenos, 2016). PFU has been defined as the use of Facebook that creates problems and impairments in different domains of one's life, such as school, work, friendships and romantic relationships (Marino et al., 2016). In other words, people may be defined as “problematic Facebook users” to the extent to which Facebook use pervades their everyday life, and they suffer any distress related to their use of Facebook, including everyday cognitive failures (Xanidis & Brignell, 2016) and

lower subjective well-being (Denti et al., 2012).

Recent research has indicated that problematic Facebook users are more likely to prefer online social interactions to a face-to-face context and to use Facebook for mood regulation (e.g., Caplan, 2010; Marino et al., 2016). Moreover, it is purported that problematic Facebook users are at risk of engaging in cognitive preoccupation and compulsive use related to the use of this social networking site (thus showing deficient self-regulation) (Caplan, 2010). A large body of literature has also examined a variety of possible correlates of PFU, such as personality traits (Tang, Chen, Yang, Chung, & Lee, 2016), mood disorders (Koc & Gulyagci, 2013), motives for use and gratification obtained from Facebook use (Ryan, Chester, Reece, & Xenos, 2014). Importantly, previous studies (e.g., Hormes, Kearns, & Timko, 2014) highlighted that the frequency of use is part of the problematic aspect of this behaviour, showing that problematic Facebook users tend to spend significantly more time on Facebook compared to non-problematic users. However, the amount of time spent on the Internet per se is not necessarily considered indicative of problematic use by scholars in this field (Pontes, Kuss, & Griffiths, 2015); nonetheless, it is plausible that excessive Facebook use contributes to, or maintains,

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problematic patterns of Internet use (Kittinger, Correia, & Irons, 2012). Beyond the frequency and time spent on Facebook use in general, a recent study (Ryan et al., 2016) has suggested the need to deepen the analysis of the relation between different types of activities that users engage in (e.g., updating profiles, posting, texting, playing, etc.) and PFU, in order to be able to better define PFU and to understand the role of its potentially addictive activities in predicting PFU.

In line with the generalized problematic Internet use model (Caplan, 2010), it is possible that the frequent use of specific online applications for mood regulation is associated with cognitive pre-occupation, compulsive use, and negative consequences. However, at this stage of research, there is still a lack of knowledge about the most frequent activities problematic Facebook users engage in when on Facebook. As outlined below, this is in part due to the methods commonly used to measure engagement in Facebook activities (i.e., self-report scales). In this study, we test whether specific objective Facebook activity (friendship activities, events, wall activities, and text messages) are more frequent in problematic than non-problematic Facebook users. Engagement in these activities was not assessed via self-reports, but through the analysis of real data from Facebook users' accounts.

1.2. Frequency of specific activities and PFU

Previous studies have examined the associations between the frequency of specific activities people engage in on Facebook and/or the amount of time spent on Facebook and several individual characteristics and personal outcomes. For example, the number of friends has been previously considered one of the social capital indicators (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), whereas Facebook informational use (i.e., reading the news posted by one's friends) has been associated to adolescents' civic engagement (Lenzi et al., 2015). Other studies have described different patterns of Facebook use for different personality traits showing that, for example, individuals who score high on neuroticism prefer wall activities (Ross et al., 2009), those high in narcissism are more likely to frequently update their status and to value their profile picture, whereas extroverts have a large number of friends and photos posted (Ong et al., 2011). However, an important limitation of this line of research is that the majority of these studies assessed the frequency of use of different applications and the quantity of specific Facebook features engaged with exclusively through self-report measures (e.g. Oberst, Renau, Chamorro, & Carbonell, 2016; Rosen, Whaling, Rab, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013).

Indeed, in such studies, participants were usually asked to rate the frequency of their own engagement in different sets of Facebook activities, such as chatting, reading news feeds, posting status update (Dantlgraber, Wetzel, Schützenberger, Stieger, & Reips, 2016), posting photos, posting comments on others' Facebook profiles (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014), clicking "like", adding or requesting to add new friends, joining or creating events, playing games, and joining or creating groups (Rosen et al., 2013). Researchers often selected a set of Facebook applications and used different rating scales to assess the frequency of use. For example, in a recent study (Vogel, Rose, Okdie, Eckles, & Franz, 2015) participants were asked to rate the frequency of Facebook status updates and comments on others' Facebook profiles over a long period of time (one year or more) on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = never or almost never, 2 = once a year, 3 = once a month, 4 = once a week, 5 = once a day, 6 = multiple times a day), whereas in a study by Rosen et al. (2013) 15 different Facebook activities were included and rated on a 7-point scale referred to a shorter time span (1 = never, 2 = once a month, 3 = several times a month, 4 = once a

week, 5 = several times a week, 6 = daily, 7 = 0 several times a day).

Such variety in activities measured and rating scales employed hampers the comparisons between results of different studies. Most importantly, self-reported use of Facebook tends to suffer from essential limitations, such as limited response accuracy due to memory failure and potentially distorted self-perception of Facebook use; the latter being particularly relevant for problematic Facebook users. In support of this view, Fenichel (2009) argued that users often do not realize (or fail to report correctly) their behaviours or amount of time spent on social networking sites because they can remain "in their minds" also when offline. The other side of the coin is that users (especially those most "problematic") may underestimate the number of actions they do on a daily basis when on Facebook. For example, a study by Junco (2012) showed that there was a significant discrepancy between self-reported and actual time spent on Facebook, confirming the need to adopt alternative methods to gain data about actual behaviours in Facebook studies.

To our knowledge, no attempt has been made to assess the frequency or amount of "objective" Facebook behaviour and to link this to PFU. Therefore, the aim of this study was to test whether, and how much, specific objective Facebook behaviour is more frequent in problematic than non-problematic Facebook users. In other words, do problematic Facebook users differ from non-problematic users in terms of frequency of objective Facebook behaviour?

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The study included 297 Italian students of the University of Padova (Italy), aged between 19 and 35 years ($M = 21.05$; $SD = 1.88$) who had a Facebook account. Among them, 80.8% ($n = 240$) were women and 19.2% were men ($n = 57$). Participants were first asked to answer an online questionnaire by logging in an institutional website using an anonymous personal code. They were then asked to provide a copy of their Facebook data (see Table 1), downloading a zip folder from their Facebook profile which contains several html pages. Participants were instructed to use the function "download a copy of your Facebook data" in the settings section of their Facebook profile and to name their folder with the same personal anonymous code used to complete the questionnaire (full instructions for downloading data from Facebook accounts are presented in the following official Facebook link: <https://www.facebook.com/help/131112897028467/>). All participants were assured of the confidentiality of both their responses to the questionnaire and "objective data" provided. They all agreed to give their written informed consent. The Ethics Committee of Psychological Research at the University of xxxxx, Italy, gave formal approval for this research.

2.2. Measurement of key variables

Problematic Facebook Use. PFU was measured with fifteen items adapted from the scale developed and validated by Caplan (2010) for the measurement of Generalized Problematic Internet Use (Marino et al., 2016). Participants were asked to rate their agreement with each item (e.g., "I prefer online social interaction over face-to-face communication"; "I have used Facebook to make myself feel better when I was down"; "I have difficulty controlling the amount of time I spend on Facebook"; "I would feel lost if I was unable to access Facebook"; "My Facebook use has created problems for me in my life"). Answers were provided on a 8-point scale (from (1) "definitely disagree" to (8) "definitely agree") and they were averaged to form a PFU score. Higher scores indicate higher

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