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Negative consequences from heavy social networking in adolescents: The mediating role of fear of missing out



Ursula Oberst ^{a, *}, Elisa Wegmann ^b, Benjamin Stodt ^b, Matthias Brand ^b,
Andrés Chamorro ^c

^a Ramon Llull University, Barcelona, Spain

^b General Psychology: Cognition and Center for Behavioral Addiction Research (CeBAR), University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany

^c Autonomous University, Barcelona, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNS) are especially attractive for adolescents, but it has also been shown that these users can suffer from negative psychological consequences when using these sites excessively. We analyze the role of fear of missing out (FOMO) and intensity of SNS use for explaining the link between psychopathological symptoms and negative consequences of SNS use via mobile devices. In an online survey, 1468 Spanish-speaking Latin-American social media users between 16 and 18 years old completed the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS), the Social Networking Intensity scale (SNI), the FOMO scale (FOMOs), and a questionnaire on negative consequences of using SNS via mobile device (CERM). Using structural equation modeling, it was found that both FOMO and SNI mediate the link between psychopathology and CERM, but by different mechanisms. Additionally, for girls, feeling depressed seems to trigger higher SNS involvement. For boys, anxiety triggers higher SNS involvement.

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1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have become an essential part of our lives. The increase in new technologies and virtual communication involving personal computers, tablets, and mobile phones is causing changes in individuals' daily habits and behavior (King et al., 2013). With the rise of ICT, parents and teachers worry more about the possible negative consequences of children's and adolescents' excessive or maladaptive use of these technologies and their applications. Longitudinal studies on Internet addiction show that psychiatric symptoms are important predictors of Internet addiction (Ko, Yen, Chen, Yeh, & Yen, 2009), especially depressive symptoms (Gámez-Guadix, 2014). In another longitudinal study, frequent real-time online communication, but not e-mailing, was positively related to compulsive Internet use six months after the initial assessment (Van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, & Engels, 2008). More recently, Internet-based cell phones (smartphones) and online social networking sites (SNS) have become, together with online video games, the main focus of these concerns.

* Corresponding author. Ramon Llull University, Department of Psychology, c/ Císter, 34, 08023, Barcelona, Spain.

E-mail addresses: ursulao@blanquerna.edu (U. Oberst), elisa.wegmann@uni-due.de (E. Wegmann), benjamin.stodt@uni-due.de (B. Stodt), matthias.brand@uni-due.de (M. Brand), andres.chamarro@uab.es (A. Chamorro).

SNS are defined as web-based virtual communities allowing the construction of an individual and partially public profile. These virtual forums for communication are increasingly present in peoples' daily lives, and although their use is expanding throughout the entire population, they are especially popular among teens and young adults. Facebook, at 1.65 billion users worldwide (Statista, 2016), is the most frequently used platform, followed by Twitter and Instagram. With respect to the younger population, social networking has replaced email and instant messaging as the principal focus of teens' online activity (García, López-de-Ayala, & Catalina, 2013), and the age of initial Facebook use is dropping (now 12–13 years). Research has shown that these sites are especially attractive for adolescents because they serve as means to construct their social identities (Oberst, Renau, Chamarro, & Carbonell, 2016) by allowing them to control their profiles in order to express their desired self-presentation. Via those "virtual selves" they can interact with friends and peers in a forum that is often shielded from supervising adults (Carbonell & Panova, 2016). Positive effects of social networking are the management and enhancement of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), connectedness with others (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014), increased self-esteem (Gonzales & Hancock, 2010), and the satisfaction of their need to belong (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012) in a technologically dominated society.

1.1. Negative outcomes of maladaptive SNS use in young individuals

The positive aspects of online social networking notwithstanding, the rewarding nature of this social monitoring may be leading to the emergence of compulsive checking behaviors and excessive engagement in social media, and therefore, to negative psychological consequences. Research has provided clear evidence that overuse or maladaptive use of ICT can have negative effects on the well-being and psychological functioning of children, adolescents, and young adults (Brooks, 2015; Fox & Moreland, 2015; Kross et al., 2013; Rosen, Whaling, Rab, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013; Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015). With respect to SNS, maladaptive use has been identified as a potential mental health problem (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Parents usually worry about their adolescent children being "hooked on Facebook" and spending too much time on SNS and with their smartphones, thus having less involvement with their real-life environment and with school issues. There are several studies showing an association of time spent on SNS and lower grade point averages (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010), less connection to peers (Barker, 2009), lower self-esteem (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011), and higher depression (Lin et al., 2016; Pantic et al., 2012). However, the overall time spent on SNS does not seem to be the exclusive factor in maladaptive SNS use (Muench, Hayes, Kuerbis, & Shao, 2015). Likewise, high social media engagement itself is not considered to be problematic (Turel & Serenko, 2012). Rather, specific individual vulnerability factors determine the possible negative psychological effects of SNS engagement, such as younger age (Błachnio, Przepiórka, & Pantic, 2015), distortion of the online profile (Oberst et al., 2016), and existing mental health problems, chiefly depression (Gámez-Guadix, Orue, Smith & Calvete, 2013). Bhagat (2015) emphasizes that the use of SNS is associated with psychosocial difficulties, such as low self-esteem, but also with mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness. The author concludes that Facebook seems to be very attractive for lonely individuals and especially those with psychopathological symptoms. This is in line with other studies that explore the close relationship between SNS use and depression (Błachnio et al., 2015; De Cock et al., 2014; Hong, Huang, Lin, & Chiu, 2014; Koc & Gulyagci, 2013). Moreno et al. (2011) show that college students with depressive symptoms are more active on Facebook and are more willing to discuss their problems publicly. The findings suggest that individuals get positive feedback online and receive support from their friends online, which could result in a more public self-presentation. The use of SNS also seems to be related to poor social adaptation, such as social anxiety (Bodroža & Jovanović, 2016; Ryan & Xenos, 2011). The results emphasize the relevance of SNS for individuals who try to cope with real life social problems and to gratify social needs online.

However, the direction of this association is often unclear, because existing research on this topic is mostly cross-sectional. It may be that individuals with anxiety and depression tend to use more SNS, or it may also be that those who use social media intensively develop increased depression (Lin et al., 2016). Gámez-Guadix (2014) conducted a longitudinal study of increasing problematic Internet use by adolescents with previous depressive symptoms. His results suggest that previous psychological distress is a risk factor for engagement in problematic online social interactions. An additional finding is that this effect is reciprocal; the use of online social interactions to alleviate distress also contributes to an increase in depression. A recent systematic review (Anderson, Steen, & Stavropoulos, 2016) highlights that the most tested relationship is the link between mood and anxiety disorders and excessive Internet use. The proposed explanation for this link is that young people seek relationships online to compensate for difficulties in face-to-face relationships by using the Internet as an emotion-regulation strategy. More specifically, a systematic review of quantitative studies revealed that the relationship between online social networking and depressive symptoms is highly complex, and the impact of online social networking on wellbeing can be both positive and negative (Baker & Algorta, 2016). These authors suggest that the heterogeneous outcomes of these studies are due to underlying mediating and moderating factors. As found in a longitudinal study on problematic Internet use with a Spanish-speaking sample (Gámez-Guadix, Calvete, Orue, & Las Hayas, 2015), deficient self-regulation, consisting of diminished self-control over cognitions and behaviors related to the Internet, seems to play a key role in the maintenance of problematic Internet use, by increasing the preference of users for online interactions over time.

This is consistent with the results reported by Wegmann, Stodt, and Brand (2015) demonstrating that the link between depression and social anxiety, on one hand, and pathological use of SNS, on the other, is mediated by cognitive factors such as the individual's expectations of SNS use. When psychopathological symptoms exist, individuals may expect that the Internet or SNS will help them escape from negative feelings, experience pleasure, and receive positive feelings. These expectations

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