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Is internet the cherry on top or a crutch? Offline social support as moderator of the outcomes of online social support on Problematic Internet Use



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ABSTRACT

The study is part of a research whose goal is identifying what predictors determine either a positive or a dysfunctional use of Internet. The factor at stake is here social support. Specifically our study, carried out through an online questionnaire, hypothesized a moderation of Offline Social Support in the relationship between Online Social Support, Problematic Internet Use, and Life Satisfaction. The study found that while Offline Social Support reduces the chances of developing a Problematic Internet Use, Online Social Support increases them. Furthermore the data supported the moderation of Offline Social Support in the outcomes of Online Social Support: when the first is low, as the latter increases the Problematic Internet Use gets higher; when Offline Social Support is high, an increase in Online Social Support determines a decrease in Problematic Internet Use. By contrast the moderation of Offline Social Support on the relationship between Online Social Support and Life Satisfaction was not confirmed. Our research show that when investigating psychological constructs related to Internet activity these must be considered in their offline and online variations to provide an answer to the debate on psychological outcomes of undertaking social interactions in Internet land. Our results suggest that the usage of the Web may become dysfunctional when it is meant to compensate for lacks of the “offline life”.

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1. Introduction

Internet is that powerful tool that allows us to have a conversation with someone living some time zones away as if he/she were right there, sitting in front of us. As well as this, some people, as Sherry Turkle (2012) in her Ted talk, claim that communications in the era of the Web 2.0 make us more lonely than ever.

The findings here reported are part of a study that considers the Web as an undeniable resource, a tool that helps people achieving their scopes and agrees with defining Internet a functional organ (Frozzì & Mazzoni, 2011; Mazzoni & Iannone, 2014; Mazzoni, Baiocco, & Benvenuti, 2015). In addition, we believe that the risk associated with Internet usage is the possibility for the user to develop a dysfunctional use. In this case, the Web loses its function of tool and, by contrast, it is the user to metaphorically become the instrument of Internet: such phenomenon is called inverse

instrumentality (Ekbia & Nardi, 2012). The broad goal of the research is identifying what are the key factors that determine whether Internet represents a resource for the person or it rather becomes a problem impairing one's quality of life. The part of the study here considered focuses on social support as a predictor of the quality of one's use of internet.

Social Support has been defined as “the resources provided by another person” (Cohen & Syme, 1985, p.4). Can these resources be conveyed through the Internet? A growing stream of researchers have investigated the relationship between Internet usage and Social Support. Some scholars tried to verify whether making use of the Web affects how much supported people feel. Swickert, Hittner, Harris, and Herring (2002) showed that there isn't a main effect of accessing the Web on the perception of Social Support. They further found that personality plays a moderating role and Internet Usage would enhance perceived Social Support only for users with certain personality traits. Eastin and LaRose (2005) found that the size of one's Online Social Network has a positive relation with the perception of Social Support. A recent study of Rozzell, Piercy, Carr, King, Lane, Tornes, Johnson and Wright (2014) investigated the

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perceived support internet users feel from close and nonclose ties, respectively. Their findings showed that both type of online social connections provide equitable support.

Taken together these studies give a positive answer: the usage of Internet does have the potential of enhancing perceived Social Support.

As a psychological resource, Social Support has been proven to buffer the effect of stressful events and to have a main effect on one's well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Can we assume that because the Web boosts the perception of Social Support, making use of it leads to an increased well-being?

Kim and Lee (2011) followed this line of reasoning and hypothesized a mediating effect of Social Support between the number of Facebook friends and one's Well-being. While the main positive effect of the number of Facebook friends on the Well-being was found, the data did not support the mediation hypothesis.

By contrast, a recent study of Oh, Ozkaya, and LaRose (2014) led to opposite findings testing a similar hypothesis. The path analysis they performed on a sample of 339 adults showed that having a greater number of Social Networking Sites friends increases the amount of supportive interactions undertaken, which in turn enhance the positive affect experienced: Social Support mediates the relationship between positive affect and Well-being. In particular, it would be the "Perceived Companionship" factor of Social Support to directly increase Life Satisfaction¹.

The evidence that social resources received online positively impact on one's Well-being was corroborated by Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, and Marrington (2013), who tested the relationship between Social Connectedness, another measure of the quality of one's social network, and Well-being and found that Facebook Social Connectedness explains additional variance over the offline construct.

On the other hand, a recent study (Chan, 2015) concluded that a greater deal of online interactions may in some case be detrimental to Well-being. This finding is not new in the literature: Leung and Lee (2005) showed that whereas Social Support has a positive relationship with Life Satisfaction, the latter is negatively associated with the use of the Web for social interaction.

These mixed evidences keep the question open: does online support increase/decrease or not have an impact at all on one's Well-being?

Caplan (2003) found that engaging in social interactions in online land may lead to developing a Problematic Internet Use. Specifically he showed that preferring online social interaction over face-to-face interaction increases the negative outcomes of Internet on one's life. Many scholars focused on the additive potential of Social Networking Sites (Harfuch, Murguía, Lever, & Andrade, 2010; Andreassen, Torsheim, Brunborg & Palessen, 2012; Koc & Gulyagci, 2013). These evidences suggest that the usage of internet for social interaction could be linked to Problematic Internet Use or to Internet Addiction.

Such a perspective opens the way to the research question: does Online Social Support lead to develop a dysfunctional usage of the Web?

While Casale, Fioravanti, Flett, and Hewitt (2014) found that perceiving low Social Support increases the chances of developing a Problematic Internet Use, Wang and Wang (2013) focused both on the impact of Online and Offline Social Support on Internet Addiction. Their study carried out in Taiwan found that the former

is positively associated with Internet addiction, whereas Offline Social Support has a negative relationship with Internet Addiction.

1.1. This study: offline and online social support, well-being and problematic internet use

The present study answers Wang and Wang (2013)'s call for a research that investigates the same variables in a different cultural background. By contrast, we decided to focus on Problematic Internet Use rather than focusing on Internet Addiction². We hypothesize that:

H1. Offline Social Support (OffSS) negatively predicts Problematic Internet Use (PIU) H2. Online Social Support (OnSS) positively predicts Problematic Internet Use (PIU) In addition to address this issue, the research aims to shed light on the mixed findings in the literature: is online social support linked to Life Satisfaction and/or to PIU? "Much remains unknown regarding the benefits and the drawbacks of online social support" (Mitchell, Lebow, Uribe, Grathouse, & Shoger, 2011, p.1858).

It is here claimed that studies investigating the social dimension at stake may have led to inconsistent evidences because they treated Social Support as an unitary construct. Drawing on Wang and Wang (2013)'s distinction between Offline and Online Social Support, we propose that in order to investigate the effects of Social Support these two dimension must be considered as distinct. Furthermore, we suggest that they must be simultaneously taken into account. Namely, the present study hypothesizes a moderating effect of Offline Social Support on Online Social Support in determining the effects of the latter on Problematic Internet Use and Well-being. In doing so we agree with Swickert et al. (2002), who believe that, in studying the relationship between Internet and Social Support, moderating effects must be investigated. The same view is supported by Oh et al. (2014), who suggest that the studies about psychological outcomes of online networking may have brought to mixed findings because moderator and mediator effects were not considered.

H3. OffSS is a moderator between OnSS and PIU and Life Satisfaction.

We believe that the outcomes of online social support on the recipients are either positive or negative depending on how strong is his/her perception of support in the offline life. We'll refer to this view as the "social compensation vs enhancement hypothesis", as already defined by Zywicki and Danowski (2008). That is, if seeking online social support is meant to compensate for weak offline social networks, the user will tend to develop a Problematic Internet Use. H3.a. OnSS positively predicts PIU only when OffSS is low. By contrast we hypothesize that those who are strong in their perception of Offline Social Support will benefit from receiving Online Social Support ("social enhancement hypothesis"). H3.b. OnSS predicts Life Satisfaction only when OffSS is high.

2. Method

2.1. Data collection and participants

Data have been gathered through an anonymous online questionnaire, available in Italian in a website made up for the study and spread via e-mail and Social Networking Sites. Considering only the respondents who fully answered the questionnaire, the sample

¹ The current study will refer indiscriminately to Well-being and Life Satisfaction, as previous researches treated the two constructs as equitable. See, for instance, Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten (2006), who used Life Satisfaction scale (Diener et al., 1985) as measure of Well-being.

² We agree with Moreno, Jelenchick, and Christakis (2013), who argue that while the term "addiction" refers to a disease implying loss of control and withdrawal symptoms and overuse, the expression of "Problematic Internet Use" broaden the concept to a usage of Internet that negatively interferes with the offline life.

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