



Research Report

Psychological predictors of addictive social networking sites use: The case of Serbia

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 9 January 2014

Keywords:

Addictive tendencies in SNS use
Extraversion
Self-esteem
Self-efficacy
Traditional media exposure
Path analysis

ABSTRACT

The popularity of social networking sites (SNS) changed to a great extent not only media environment, but also everyday life activities of modern humans. Despite their obvious benefits in terms of communication, there is evidence of addictive tendencies in SNS use. The study examined psychological and socio-demographic predictors of these addictive tendencies in Serbian SNS users drawn from a representative sample ($N = 2014$), having in mind that Serbia has Facebook penetration rate over European average. Results indicate a low incidence of self-reported addictive tendencies, with some individual differences worth addressing. We developed and tested exhaustive model that included three sets of predictors (socio-demographic, psychological and exposure to traditional media), as well as restrictive models that systematically excluded group by group. Path analysis revealed that psychological traits were stronger predictors than socio-demographic ones: people with lower self-esteem, lower general self-efficacy and higher introversion were more likely to report addictive SNS use. Although our results in general support the so called “social compensation hypothesis”, it can be due to the focus on addictive tendencies instead of other indicators of SNS use.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, Internet has become the main source of information, entertainment, marketing and, relatively recently, irreplaceable tool for communication. Online social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Tweeter, Instagram, LinkedIn have reached hundreds of millions of users (Wilson, Fornasier, & White, 2010). While traditional Internet sites produce content for users to consume, SNSs create environment for users to produce and exchange content (personal pictures, videos, interests and preferences). Social ties formed via SNS tend to cross the physical boundaries – they often comprise of ethnically and culturally diverse groups of people who are scattered around the world.

Despite obvious advantages of online social networking (Shaw & Gant, 2002), there is also evidence of its addictive potential, leading to variety of psychological and social problems (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002; Ehrenberg, Juckes, White, & Walsh, 2008; Wilson et al., 2010). Studies focusing on non-specific Internet use (Armstrong, Phillips, & Saling, 2000; Davis, 2001; Kim & Davis, 2009;

Niemz, Griffiths, & Banyard, 2005; Young & Rogers, 1998), instant messaging and use of smart-phones (Ehrenberg et al., 2008) and those focusing on social networking activities (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002; Ehrenberg et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2010; Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010), demonstrated that their excessive use could have negative impact on everyday life.

As the main purpose of social networking sites (SNS) is to establish relationships, its overuse is often seen as a type of cyber relationship addiction. In this view, it is equivalent to any other addiction, as it (a) interferes with vital life activities, such as sleep, nutrition habits, work or school, and (b) dominates person's life (e.g. virtual relationship problems take over real life relationship problems) (Davis, 2001; Niemz et al., 2005). Wilson et al. (2010) in a similar vein measured addictive tendencies by: level of salience (*One of the first things I do each morning is to log on Facebook (FB)*), loss of control (*I find it hard to control my FB use*), and withdrawal (*I feel lost when I cannot access my FB account*).

Research aiming to identify socio-demographic and psychological predispositions for addictive Internet use came up with a set of predictors. When Internet was in its infancy, it was demographic features that qualified someone to become an addict – one needed to be computer savvy first. Early research (Shotton, 1991) found that typical computer addict was technologically sophisticated, highly educated male. However, since then Internet has become

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much more user-friendly and no longer requires technological skills. Recent research shows that typical Internet user cannot be easily defined by socio-demographic characteristics (Shaw & Gant, 2002), and that only combination of psychological and social factors contributes to the etiology of Internet addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Psychological profile of addictive Internet user most often portrays a relatively poorly adapted person: introvert (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002; Shotton, 1991), with low self-esteem (Armstrong et al., 2000; Davis, 2001; Kim & Davis, 2009; Niemz et al., 2005), prone to social disinhibition (Niemz et al., 2005) and anxiety (Kim & Davis, 2009), high on neuroticism (Ehrenberg et al., 2008). Nevertheless, some studies report on psychological benefits of Internet use, such as decrease of loneliness and depression (Shaw & Gant, 2002).

As SNS are designed as a tool for interpersonal communication, psychological profile of their addictive user can be even more specific. Similar set of personality traits appeared to be associated with the excessive SNS use, such as: low self-esteem and low life satisfaction (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Tazghini & Siedlecki, 2013; Wilson et al., 2010), those scored higher on the trait of neuroticism and conscientiousness (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010), lower levels of openness to experience (Ross et al., 2009; Skues, Williams, & Wise, 2012). While low self-esteem was consistently confirmed as an important predictor of SNS overuse (Kim & Davis, 2009; Tazghini & Siedlecki, 2013), the influence of other personality traits, especially extraversion, did not prove to be consistent. A number of studies reported extraversion to be negatively correlated to higher Internet use (Landers & Lounsbury, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2004), supporting the so called “social compensation hypothesis” that claims people with lack of real social relationships can profit most from virtual relationships. Others reported that higher extraversion was correlated to stronger addiction tendencies in SNS use, in line with “rich get richer” hypothesis (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Ehrenberg et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2010). Some authors explain these contradictory findings by asserting that different personalities use SNS in a different manner: extraverts use it for social enhancement, whereas introverts use it for social compensation (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011).

In contrast to vast number of studies exploring “first line” psychological traits as predictors of addictive SNS use, there is relatively little evidence of impact of “meta-traits”, such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994) on this type of behavior. It can be hypothesized, however, that low self-efficient individuals would be more prone to develop addictive tendencies, as a non-productive behavior pattern.

It is clear that addictive SNS use is a complex phenomenon that needs to be investigated further, using multiple perspectives. Since SNS is a form of media use this analysis should also examine its relationship with more specific media consumption, especially exposure to traditional media (print, TV and radio).

It is also important to note that different ways SNS use is defined and measured, lead to different results. Studies that focused

on addictive behavior or feelings typically yielded strong psychological correlates (Wilson et al., 2010). Studies with more descriptive orientation, measuring the features of SNS use such as number of friends, amount and type of uploaded content, membership in virtual groups failed to find such strong correlations (Ross et al., 2009; Skues et al., 2012). However, some authors highlight that even with the latter type of studies, when behaviors are not self-reported but objectively measured, the correlation re-appears (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Ross et al., 2009).

Finally, there is a need to investigate these phenomena in more diverse cultural environments, i.e. within non-English speaking social network users. According to *Internet web statistics survey (December 2011)*, FB had 43.3% penetration rate in Serbia in December 2011, which was higher than European average (29.8%). Despite this widespread use of social sites, the SNS-related behavior in Serbian population is not studied in detail, especially on large, representative samples.

The aim of current study was to develop a model that would relate key psychological predictors such as self-esteem, extraversion and self-efficacy, socio-demographic predictors and traditional media exposure, to addictive social networking among general population in Serbia. We developed and tested exhaustive model (Fig. 1) that included all three groups of predictors, as well as restrictive models that systematically excluded group by group.

Although we measured addictive behavior, our test should not be viewed as a diagnostic tool. We aim to capture individual differences in this behavior pattern and investigate its psychological and demographic background.

2. Materials and methods

Data was collected via telephone interview in September 2012, on a nationally representative sample ($N = 2014$) of Serbian population older than 12. We opted for this age cut-off, as official policy of major social networking sites is allowing users older than 13 to open accounts. The average length of the interview was 25 min. Data was collected by the Research agency Ipsos Strategic Marketing.

2.1. Instrument

Self-esteem was measured by Rosenberg's 10 item scale (Cronbach's Alpha = .74), with minimum of 10 and maximum of 50.

Extraversion was measured by a subscale from BFI, consisting of eight items (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). The respondents assessed how much each of the adjectives describes them personally: sociable, outgoing; successful in fighting for your rights; talkative; enthusiastic; energetic; shy, inhibited; usually silent; reserved. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .77 allowed for computing total extraversion score varying between 8 and 40.

General self-efficacy was measured by a mini scale proposed by Bandura (2006), with one item: “On average and in general, what

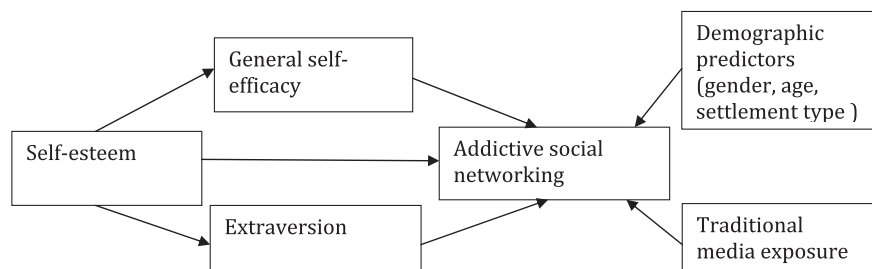


Fig. 1. Exhaustive model of different predictors of addictive social networking.

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