



# The relationship between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem: Findings from a large national survey<sup>☆</sup>



Cecilie Schou Andreassen<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Ståle Pallesen<sup>a</sup>, Mark D. Griffiths<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Bergen, Department of Psychosocial Science, Bergen, Norway

<sup>b</sup> Bergen Clinics Foundation, Centre of Competence, Bergen, Norway

<sup>c</sup> Nottingham Trent University, International Gaming Research Unit, Psychology Division, Nottingham, UK

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Addictive use of social media has become an area of increasing research interest.
- This study examined addictive social media use in over 23,500 participants.
- Addictive use of social media was associated with being young, female and single.
- Addictive use of social media was related to higher narcissism.
- Addictive use of social media was related to lower self-esteem.

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## ABSTRACT

Social media has become an increasingly popular leisure activity over the last decade. Although most people's social media use is non-problematic, a small number of users appear to engage in social media excessively and/or compulsively. The main objective of this study was to examine the associations between addictive use of social media, narcissism, and self-esteem. A cross-sectional convenient sample of 23,532 Norwegians ( $M_{\text{age}} = 35.8$  years; range = 16–88 years) completed an open web-based survey including the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS), the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Results demonstrated that lower age, being a woman, not being in a relationship, being a student, lower education, lower income, lower self-esteem, and narcissism were associated with higher scores on the BSMAS, explaining a total of 17.5% of the variance. Although most effect sizes were relatively modest, the findings supported the notion of addictive social media use reflecting a need to feed the ego (i.e., narcissistic personality traits) and an attempt to inhibit a negative self-evaluation (i.e., self-esteem). The results were also consistent with demographic predictions and associations taken from central theories concerning “addiction”, indicating that women may tend to develop more addictive use of activities involving social interaction than men. However, the cross-sectional study design makes inferences about directionality impossible.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last few years, the use of social media has become an increasingly popular leisure activity in many countries across the world (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Individuals visit social media sites to engage in many different types of entertainment and social activity including playing games, socializing, passing time, communicating, and posting pictures (Allen, Ryan, Gray, McInerney, & Waters, 2014; Ryan, Chester,

Reece, & Xenos, 2014). Although this has quickly become a normal modern phenomenon (boyd & Ellison, 2007), concerns have been raised regarding the potential addictive use of social media (e.g., Andreassen, 2015, Griffiths, Kuss, & Demetrovics, 2014). Such excessive and compulsive use has been explained by general addiction models (Griffiths, 2005) and defined accordingly as “being overly concerned about social media, driven by an uncontrollable motivation to log on to or use social media, and devoting so much time and effort to social media that it impairs other important life areas” (Andreassen & Pallesen, 2014, p. 4054).

### 1.1. Addictive use of social media

The term ‘Internet addiction’ has been criticized for being too un-specific in terms of content. Consequently, some scholars have

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\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychosocial Science, Christiesgt. 12, NO-5015 Bergen, Norway.

E-mail address: [cecilie.andreassen@uib.no](mailto:cecilie.andreassen@uib.no) (C.S. Andreassen).

suggested content-related ‘addiction subtypes’ such as ‘cybersexual addiction’, ‘social media addiction’, ‘net compulsions’ (e.g., stock trading, gambling, shopping), ‘information overload’, and ‘computer addiction’ (e.g., games, programming) (Young, 1999, 2015).

When drawing the line between addictive and non-addictive (e.g., excessive, enthusiastic) behaviors, scholars use specific addiction criteria (Griffiths, 2005). Accordingly, addictive social media use should thus be manifested by being preoccupied by social media (salience), using social media in order to reduce negative feelings (mood modification), gradually using social media more and more in order to get the same pleasure from it (tolerance/craving), suffering distress if prohibited from using social media (withdrawal), sacrificing other obligations and/or causing harm to other important life areas because of the social media use (conflict/functional impairment), and desiring or attempting to control the use of social media without success (relapse/loss of control).

Consequently, as problematic social media use may represent a specific form of ‘Internet addiction’, the Bergen Facebook Addiction Scale was specifically developed in order to assess this behavior using the aforementioned addiction criteria (Andreassen, Torsheim, Brunborg, & Pallesen, 2012). Although the scale has demonstrated reliable and valid psychometric properties across several studies (e.g., Andreassen et al., 2012, 2013; Phanasathit, Manwong, Hanprathet, Khumsri, & Yingyeun, 2015; Wang, Ho, Chan, & Tse, 2015), a generic instrument capturing the totality of all social network sites, as opposed to measuring addictive use of one specific social network site only (i.e., Facebook), has been called for (Griffiths et al., 2014).

### 1.2. Addictive use of social media and demographics

Some studies have reported higher levels of addictive social media use among men (e.g., Çam & Isbulan, 2012; Ryan et al., 2014). However, research has more consistently shown that addictive use of social media is more prevalent among women than men (Andreassen, 2015; Griffiths et al., 2014), and it has been suggested that women are more inclined to develop addictive behaviors towards activities involving social interaction (Andreassen et al., 2013; Kuss, Griffiths, Karila, & Billieux, 2014; Van Deursen, Bolle, Hegner, & Kommers, 2015). Furthermore, studies also report higher scores on social media addiction scales in younger compared to older people (e.g., Andreassen et al., 2012; Kuss et al., 2014). This has good face validity as these online platforms play a crucial role in the leisure and social lives of adolescents and young adults (Allen et al., 2014). Young people have quickly become accustomed to being constantly “online”, and appear to adapt to new technologies faster than their older counterparts (Prensky, 2001). In addition, social media may represent an arena where the younger generation can explore and develop their identities and culture without interruption from parents or those in a position of authority (Andreassen, 2015; Mazzoni & Iannone, 2014).

Research also suggests that individuals that are not in a personal relationship are more prone to developing addictive social media use than people who have partners (Kuss et al., 2014). Again, this has good face validity as sites that promote social interaction may represent ground for meeting potential partners, or serving as an important social function along with feelings of belongingness (Andreassen, Torsheim, & Pallesen, 2014; Ryan et al., 2014). Taken together, in the present study, it is hypothesized that individuals that are of younger age, women, and not in a relationship will score higher than their corresponding counterparts on a social media addiction scale (Hypothesis 1).

### 1.3. Addictive use of social media and narcissism

Research indicates that personality plays a role in addictive use of social media (e.g., Andreassen et al., 2012, 2013; Hong, Huang, Lin, & Chiu, 2014; Wilson, Fornasier, & White, 2010). The few studies

exploring individual differences in terms of narcissism have found it to be positively associated to different online social networking activities (La Barbera, La Paglia, & Valsavoia, 2009; Malik & Khan, 2015; Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Wang, Jackson, Zhang, & Su, 2012). This appears to be meaningful as social media use allows individuals to express their ambitions and show their successes to a potentially large audience, and to obtain highly visible rewards and recognition through “likes” and positive comments from other social media users. Most contemporary studies refer to narcissism as a relatively broad behavioral trait domain, expressed by, among others, self-centered grandiosity, arrogance, manipulateness, and similar features (Alarcón & Sarabia, 2012). However, the complexity of the narcissism construct needs highlighting.

Narcissistic personality disorder, a pathological form of narcissism, is formally recognized by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in terms of high levels of self-importance, fantasies of unlimited success, feeling special and unique, lack of empathy, envy, and arrogance (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, more moderate and non-clinical levels of narcissistic traits have sometimes been viewed as healthy by providing an outlet for self-confidence and self-assertion (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; Muller, 2014). Either way, as social media may represent a gratifying medium for individuals with elevated narcissistic traits in particular, it is hypothesized that narcissism will be positively related to addictive use of social media in the present study (Hypothesis 2).

### 1.4. Addictive use of social media and self-esteem

Core self-evaluations (e.g., self-esteem) also appear to play a role in addictive social media use (Andreassen, 2015). Such evaluations may involve core beliefs, attributions, schemata, and automatic thoughts – and that have the power to activate behavior in general (Beck, 1995), including social media activity. Hence, if an individual thinks “I am not likable” or “I have poor social skills” – while at the same time believing that having a large number of friends or followers will change such self-evaluations – this may facilitate addictive social media participation. In line with this, previous research has shown that people with low self-esteem regard social media as a safer place to express themselves than people with high self-esteem (Forest & Wood, 2012), and a negative relationship between self-esteem and addictive use of social media has been reported (Hong et al., 2014; Malik & Khan, 2015; Wang et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2010). In short, it is hypothesized in the present study that self-esteem will be negatively associated with symptoms of addictive social media use (Hypothesis 3).

### 1.5. The present study

Against this theoretical and empirical background, data stemming from a large sample were analyzed in order to investigate whether demographics and dispositional traits were associated with addictive use of social media (Hypotheses 1–3). Although these hypotheses have to some extent been tested in previous research, most empirical studies to date have relied upon small opportunity and/or targeted samples (e.g., university students), often employing non-validated measures of addictive social media use (Andreassen, 2015; Ryan et al., 2014). Consequently, the present study contributes to the literature in at least two important ways. First, the data are not collected from an opportunity or targeted sample. The large sample size also boosts the statistical power and increases the chance of identifying correlates of addictive social media use. Second, the study utilizes psychometrically validated instruments in which addictive use of social media in general (instead of focusing on a specific platform, i.e., Facebook) is accounted for – making it a novel and specific addition to this research field.

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