

Chapter 4

Psychological Benefits and Detrimental Effects of Online Social Networking

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ABSTRACT

With the growing prevalence of wireless communication technologies, social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. have become an important venues for interpersonal communication. This chapter provides a detailed overview of the current literature on online social networking with respect to its beneficial and detrimental effects on psychological wellbeing. In particular, it provides empirical evidence for the associations of SNS use with depression, self-esteem, loneliness, subjective wellbeing, social anxiety, attachment, personality traits, and addiction. Furthermore, it identifies the characteristics of individuals who are more prone to social networking, and presents possible mediators and moderators playing a role in the relationship between social networking and mental health. The chapter overall provides a comprehensive guideline to parents, researchers, educators, healthcare, and communication professionals to the issue of online social networking from a psychological perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Online social networking plays an important role in the way people communicate and interact. It has benefits for children and adolescents such as socialization, communication, increased learning opportunities, and assessing health information, however it has also some detrimental effects such as cyberbullying, online harassment, and sexting (O’Keefe & Clark-Pearson, 2011). The statistics show that there were 2.34 billion social network users worldwide in 2016 and the number is expected to reach to 2.95 billion by 2020 (Statista Facts on Social Networks, 2017). The average social media user spent 1.7 h per day

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on social media in the USA and 1.5 h in the UK, with social media users in the Philippines having the highest daily use at 3.7 h. (Statista, 2017).

The growing popularity of online social network sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter has attracted the attention of many scholars, and they have shown particular interest in understanding the psychological correlates of SNS use. Accordingly, this chapter aims to provide a detailed overview of the current literature with respect to the benefits and detrimental effects of online social networking on psychological well-being. To do so, it reviews current empirical evidence for the associations of SNS use with various mental health outcomes including depression, self-esteem, loneliness, subjective well-being, social anxiety, attachment, personality traits and addiction. Furthermore, it identifies the intrapersonal characteristics of individuals who show more tendency to use SNSs. Thus, this chapter would contribute to parents, researchers, educators, healthcare and communication professionals in providing theoretical information and practical implications of online social networking.

Throughout this chapter, several issues are addressed. First, a general introduction to the definition and history of online social networking is given and the emergent interest in this concept is discussed. Second, the empirical research focusing on the relationship between online social networking and psychological variables are systematically reviewed. A comprehensive search is conducted to gain understanding of the existing literature about the benefits and detrimental consequences of online social networking. For this purpose, SSCI, EBSCOhost, Psych ARTICLES, Scopus, and ProQuest electronic databases are consulted for the literature search using several keywords such as *social networking, psychological well-being, mental health, self-esteem, depression, anxiety, loneliness, personality, addiction, attachment etc.* The priority is given to the articles published in the last decade. Finally, practical implications and suggestions for future research are proposed through addressing plausible moderators and mediators in relation to social networking.

BACKGROUND

Social networking websites (SNSs) have become important venues for interpersonal communication and relationships. SNSs are virtual groups where personal information via profiles are shared, meet with other people based on common interests, and contact with people by writing messages or adding them as friends (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). The history of social networking sites dates back to 1997, when individuals are linked via six degrees of separation (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), then, the society is viewed as becoming increasingly inter-connected. Without considering time and space, individuals connect with one another online and SNSs have become an important leisure activity for many people (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

The sites may have different orientations related with work (i.e. LinkedIn), romantic relationship (i.e. Friendster), sharing interests (i. e. Myspace) or social connection (i.e. Facebook) (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). The most popular networking sites are respectively Facebook, Whatsapp, Youtube, Facebook Messenger, WeChat, QQ, Instagram, Qzone, Tumble, Twitter, etc (Statista Facts on Social Networks, 2017). In 2004, Facebook was launched as an online community for students at Harvard University (Byod & Ellison, 2007) and has since become the world's most popular SNS. Currently, Facebook is the most dominant SNS in the U.S with 1.97 billion registered users (Statista Facts on Social Networks, 2017). One reason Facebook is the most popular social networking site is the convenience it

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