

Social networking sites and mental health: A review

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Abstract

Social networking sites have become an important part of modern life. They are generally defined as web-based platforms that allow individuals to create their own personal profile and build a network of connections with other users. Numerous other SNSs exist, although many are popular only among certain sub-groups or within particular geographic regions. Most SNSs also facilitate public and private messaging, photo, video and other content sharing, provide live updates, and enable the formation of groups and organizational pages. SNS's made the flow of information quick and enable the people of one region or one nation connect with people of other region and other nations. Facebook is the most widely used social networking site and the global statistics for Facebook in the second quarter of 2016 stands at 1.7 billion. 2.42 billion People of the world population are using SNS which is expected to reach 2.95 billion in 2020. An estimated 650 million of these users are expected to be from China alone and approximately a third of a million from India. The research, however, remained unclear about these dynamic changes by SNS and whether some of these changes may affect certain normal aspects of human behavior and cause psychological problems. Several studies have indicated that the prolonged use of social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter may be related to signs and symptoms of depression. Some other research studies have indicated that certain SNS activities are associated with lower levels of self-esteem and confidence, especially in children and adolescents. Other studies have presented opposite results in terms of the positive impact of social networking on self-esteem. This paper is an attempt to just summarize few of the research studies pertaining to SNS and present an overall scenario of present research about SNS.

Keywords: SNS, mental health facebook, depression, anxiety

Introduction

During the past 10 years, the rapid development of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter, My Space, and Whatsapp and so on has caused several profound changes in the way people communicate and interact. Social Networking Sites (SNS) also called social media is a kind of platform where people from different backgrounds and different countries and nations connect with one another and form social connection and relations. All of the social networking sites are internet based where an individual has to create his separate profile id through which he can connect with other people. The opinion that these networks and relations are formed only with people of the same background, similar profession or some other shared interests is not solely true. Most social network services are web-based and provide means for users to interact over the Internet, such as by e-mail, by instant messaging and through online forums. Social networking sites provide its users a unique platform of sharing ideas, share videos, digital photos and videos, posts, and to inform others about online or real-world activities and events with people in their network. While in-person social networking, the Web enables people to connect with others who live in different locations, ranging from across a city to across the world.

As of September 2013, 73% of online adults were using an SNS of some kind and 42% were using more than one SNS. Facebook is the most popular platform (with more than 1.19

billion monthly active users⁴), followed by Twitter (500 million users worldwide).

There is considerable growth in the number of users for every SNS. Facebook, as the biggest social networking Web site, has more than one billion active users in 2013 which raised to 1.7 billion in the second quarter of 2016., and it is estimated that in the future, this number will significantly increase, especially in developing countries. Facebook is alone reporting 1.04 billion daily active users worldwide on average as of December 2015. Facebook is used for both business and personal communication, and its application has brought numerous advantages in terms of increasing connectivity, sharing ideas, and online learning.

There is debated presently going on regarding the benefits and negative impacts of SNS. Since social networks are a relatively recent phenomenon, the potential relationship between their use and feelings of loneliness and depression has not yet been properly investigated. Most of the research on this issue has been published during the past few years, and so far, the scientific community has not been able to interpret and discuss the results fully. A number of studies have been conducted pertaining to the impacts of SNS and it has been indicated that the prolonged use of social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook, may be related to negative signs and symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. Further, some studies have revealed that certain SNS activities might be associated with low self-esteem and lower levels of

confidence, especially in children and adolescents. Other studies have presented opposite results in terms of the positive impact of social networking on self-esteem. The relationship between SNS and mental health problems to this day remains controversial, and research on this issue is faced with numerous challenges. Although several studies have made the connection between computer-mediated communication and signs and symptoms of depression, this issue remains controversial in current psychiatry research. There are many potential reasons why a Facebook user may have a tendency to become depressed, as there are numerous factors that may lead an already depressed individual to start to use or increase their use of SNS. This concise review focuses on the recent findings regarding the suggested connection between SNS and mental health issues such as depressive symptoms, changes in self-esteem, and Internet addiction.

Donneley and Kuss (2016) ^[4] conducted a study to identify relationships between Social Networking usage, SNS addiction, and depression. These researchers also investigated the impact of newly introduced social networking sites like Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. The research related to these newly SNS was limited. 103 young adults participated in this cross-sectional online study. Each participant filled out a questionnaire consisting of the Centre for Epidemiologic Studies of Depression Scale-Revised (CESD-R), Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT), along with general questions relating to SNS use. The results of their study revealed that Instagram and SNS addiction are predictors of depression. The results also showed that Instagram use predicted SNS addiction and there was no such relationship existed between Facebook, Twitter or Snapchat and SNS addiction or depression. This study found somehow mixed results as only Instagram predicted the negative psychological impacts on health.

In 2013, Kross *et al.* published a study on the relationship between Facebook use and subjective well-being in young adults. The design of their research was based on text messaging the participants five times per day for 2 weeks in order to evaluate their mood, feeling of loneliness, social interactions, and social Facebook use. This approach was combined with the application of a conventional set of questionnaires, such as the Beck Depression Inventory, Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale, Social Provision Scale, and Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale. The results indicated that users' subjective perception of well-being and life satisfaction may be undermined. It goes without saying that any decline of this sort may increase depressive signs and symptoms. One of the reasons why time spent on SNS may be associated with depressive symptoms is the fact that computer-mediated communication may lead to the altered (and often wrong) impression of the physical and personality traits of other users. This may lead to incorrect conclusions regarding physical appearance, educational level, intelligence, moral integrity, as well as many other characteristics of online friends. Chou and Edge published an article about the potential impact of using Facebook on students' perceptions of others' lives. The study carried out on 425 undergraduate students of at a state university in Utah reported that Facebook use is linked to participants' impression that other users are happier, as well as the feeling that the 'life is not fair.' Perceiving others as

happier and more successful does not necessarily result in depression.

Seabrook, Kern, and Rickard (2016) ^[23] conducted a systematic review with an aim to examine the research on depression and anxiety in the context of SNS's. It also aimed to identify studies that complement the assessment of mental illness with measures of well-being and examine moderators and mediators that add to the complexity of this environment. A multi-database search was performed and the research that was published between January 2005 and June 2016 relevant to mental illness (depression and anxiety only) were extracted and reviewed. Positive interactions, social support, and social connectedness on SNSs were consistently related to lower levels of depression and anxiety, whereas negative interaction and social comparisons on SNSs were related to higher levels of depression and anxiety. SNS use related to less loneliness and greater self-esteem and life satisfaction. Findings were mixed for the frequency of SNS use and a number of SNS friends. Different patterns in the way individuals with depression and individuals with social anxiety engage with SNSs are beginning to emerge. The systematic review revealed many mixed findings of depression, anxiety, and SNS use. The methodology has predominantly focused on self-report cross-sectional approaches; future research will benefit from leveraging real-time SNS data over time. The evidence suggests that SNS use correlates with mental illness and well-being; however, whether this effect is beneficial or detrimental depends at least partly on the quality of social factors in the SNS environment. Understanding these relationships will lead to better utilization of SNSs in their potential to positively influence mental health.

McDougal *et al.* (2016) ^[19] conducted a study on psychiatric patients with an aim to examine the moderator whether Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have a negative moderator effect on the established relationship between perceived social support and depression. 301 psychiatric patients were included in this study and completed the tools related to depression, perceived social support and SNS use and demographic information. After the data was collected, stepwise multiple regression analysis was carried out for significant interaction effects. There was no significant interaction of SNS use on the relationship between perceived social support and depression when measured by Social Media Use Integration Scale or by hours of SNS use per day. There was a significant negative relationship between perceived social support and depression, and a significant positive relationship between hours of SNS use per day and depression, measured by the Beck Depression Inventory-II.

Kuss and Griiffiths (2011) ^[4] conducted a review of psychological literature related to online social networking and addiction and attempted to provide empirical and conceptual insights into the emerging problem of addiction to SNS's. The findings indicate that SNSs are predominantly used for social purposes, mostly related to the maintenance of established offline networks. Moreover, extraverts appear to use social networking sites for social enhancement, whereas introverts use it for social compensation, each of which appears to be related to greater usage, as does low conscientiousness and high narcissism. Negative correlates of SNS usage include the decrease in real life social community

participation and academic achievement, as well as relationship problems, each of which may be indicative of potential addiction.

Takahashi, Uchida, Miyaki, Sakai, Shimbo, Nakayama (2009)^[25] conducted a study to explore the potential benefits and harms of SNS for depression based on a concurrent triangulation design of mixed methods strategy, including qualitative content analysis and social network analysis with 105 participants. Median age was 36 years, and 51% (36/71) were male. There were 37 valid respondents; their number of friends and frequency of accessing the SNS were significantly higher than for invalid/nonrespondents ($P = .008$ and $P = .003$). Among respondents, 90% (28/31) were mild, moderately, or severely depressed. Assessment of the SNS was performed by determining the access frequency of the SNS and the number of friends. Qualitative content analysis indicated that user-selectable peer support could be passive, active, and/or interactive based on anonymity or ease of use, and there was the potential harm of a downward depressive spiral triggered by the aggravated psychological burden. Social network analysis revealed that users communicated one-on-one with each other or in small groups (five people or less). A downward depressive spiral was related to friends who were moderately or severely depressed and friends with a negative assessment of the SNS. SNS for people with depressive tendencies provides various opportunities to obtain support that meets users' needs.

Yang (2016)^[27] explored the association between Instagram activities and loneliness and the role of social comparison orientation. A total of 208 undergraduate students attending a U.S. mid-southern university completed a self-report survey. Results of the study showed that Instagram interaction and Instagram browsing were both related to lower loneliness, whereas Instagram broadcasting was associated with higher loneliness. SCO moderated the relationship between Instagram use and loneliness such that Instagram interaction was related to lower loneliness only for low SCO users. The results of this study revealed implications for healthy SNS use and the importance of including personality traits and specific SNS use patterns to disentangle the role of SNS use in psychological well-being.

Discussion

Social networking sites provide its users a unique way of interacting with people and society at large. The type of activity, time spent and related issues made these SNS's topic of interest. Concurrent literature provides the mixed results regarding uses and ill uses of SNS's. A handful of studies suggest that SNS's are essentially the reason behind the depression and low self-esteem as indicated by the studies conducted by Donneley and Kuss (2016)^[4] and Kross (2013)^[12]. These studies revealed that overuse of SNS is associated with lower levels of confidence and an impaired sense of self-become pervasive that hamper the overall functioning of an individual. On the other hand, several studies suggest the opposite results and revealed that the use of SNS's is positively related to health behaviors and social support and relatedness. A study conducted by Seabrook, Kern, and Rickard (2016)^[23] showed that positive interaction on Facebook leads to lower depression and anxiety whereas

negative interaction provides higher levels of depression and anxiety. Further research is required to ascertain the relationship between SNS's and mental health outcomes and fill this research gap. There is also little research so far available on the cultural difference with related to SNS's which also need to be conducted.

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doi: 20 Feb 2017