

Childrens' Excessive Social Networking: A Brief Overview of the Empirical Literature

Aims

A small body of empirical research suggests that a minority of child and adolescent social network users experience symptoms traditionally associated with substance-related addictions, including mood modification, tolerance, salience (preoccupation), and negative consequences (e.g., loss of control, neglect of educational activities, family relationship problems, etc.). A systematic literature review was carried out examining excessive social networking addiction among children and adolescents.

Key Findings

- Between January 2000 and May 2012, approximately 30 empirical studies have investigated excessive use of social networking sites (SNSs), but very few have specifically examined this among children and adolescents.
- More than 500 million users are active participants in the *Facebook* community alone, and studies suggest that between 55% and 82% of teenagers and young adults use SNSs on a regular basis.
- Empirical research indicates that regular SNS use has increased substantially over the last few years. This supports the availability hypothesis that greater access and opportunity to engage in an activity (in this case SNSs) is associated with an increase in its uptake.
- SNS use has also been found to differ by age group. For example, a study comparing teenagers (aged 13-19 years) with older SNS users (aged over 60 years), showed that younger users' networks were larger and their friends more similar to themselves in terms of age.
- One study of 233 teenage students (64% female) found that high-level usage (defined as using SNSs at least four times per day) was significantly predicted by self-identity and belongingness.
- Another study of 201 teenage students (76% female) indicated that high extraversion and low conscientiousness scores predicted both addictive tendencies and time spent on SNSs. The researchers suggested that the relationship between extraversion and addictive tendencies could be explained by the ability of use of SNSs to satisfy extraverts' need to socialize.
- There is a need for further examination of motivations for SNS usage, as well as a wider variety of negative correlates related to excessive SNS use. Furthermore, clear-cut and validated addiction criteria for SNS addiction are needed.

- Overall, the available research indicates that social networking by adolescents is a highly popular and prevalent activity, but only a very small minority appear to suffer problems as a result.

Policy Context

Recent press reports have claimed that the excessive use of online social networking sites may be potentially addictive. The mass appeal of online social networks could potentially be a cause for concern, particularly considering the increasing amounts of time children and adolescents spend online. From a psychological perspective, it may be plausible to speak of 'Facebook Addiction Disorder' (or more generally 'Social Networking Site Addiction Disorder') because addiction criteria, such as neglect of personal life, mental preoccupation, escapism, mood modifying experiences, tolerance, and concealing the addictive behaviour, appear to be present in some people who use SNSs excessively.

Methodology

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using the database *Web of Knowledge* and *Google Scholar*. The following search terms were entered: social network, online network, addiction, compulsive, excessive, use, abuse, motivation, personality, and comorbidity. Studies were included if they (i) included empirical data, (ii) made reference to usage patterns, (iii) motivations for usage, (iv) personality traits of users, (v) negative consequences of use, (vi) addiction, (vii) and/or comorbidity and specificity.

Sources

Kuss, D.J. & Griffiths, M.D. (2011). Online social networking and addiction: A literature review of empirical research. *International Journal of Environmental and Public Health*, 8, 3528-3552.

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