The Use of Web-Based Social Networks: Trends, Antecedents, and Consequences

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Abstract

Online Social Networks (OSNs) have redefined interpersonal relationships and added a new dimension to communication patterns. According to latest reports, there has been a steep rise in the number of active social media users around the globe. The present paper is a review of research evidence on the antecedent factors leading to such usage and its consequences thereof. Unique features of the virtual environment trigger certain personality traits which are reported to be major predictors of social networking behaviour. Studies on the impact of social media on consumers have unearthed both positive and negative consequences. Research findings, for example, reveal that social media consumption has a therapeutic effect in terms of fulfilment of certain needs and an increase in self-esteem; whereas activation of a narcissistic state and lowered self-control have an adverse effect on psychological well-being and behaviour. The paper summarizes the workplace implications of web-based social networking and also briefly discusses the recent and emerging trends in digital behaviours with particular reference to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords

Online Social Networks, Facebook, Personality Traits, Narcissism, Covid-19.

Introduction

With Web-Based Social Networks also called Online Social Networks (OSNs), becoming an inseparable part of both personal and professional lives of individuals, it is virtually impossible to imagine a world devoid of social media. Social networking sites have added a new dimension to social interactions and interpersonal communication. Extensive research has been done on the behavioural and psychological antecedents and consequences (both positive and negative) of the usage of online social networks. What

motivates people to use these sites? Do social networking and associated online activities affect their behaviour and well-being? Such questions are addressed by researchers and behavioural scientists. Most of the research studies have employed large samples of social media users particularly adolescents, both male and female.

The inferences enlisted in academic publications and research reports by various agencies on the use of internet and social media were incorporated in this paper. EBSCO host and ProQuest were the two databases used for accessing studies on the topic in question. Resources obtained through Google search were also reviewed along with scholarly articles cited in Google Scholar and Research Gate.

Table 1 Summarizing the sources reviewed to construct the research paper

Period	Journal Article	Article in a Periodical	Report	Conference Proceedings	Book Section	Book	Grand Total
2000 or prior	11	-	-	-	1	5	17
2001-2005	5	-	-	-	-	-	5
2006-2010	9	-	-	2	1	1	13
2011-2015	10	1	-	-	2	-	13
Beyond 2015	5	1	4	-	-	-	10
Grand Total	41	2	4	2	3	6	58

A recent Hosting Facts report (March, 2020) compiled social media statistics based on GlobalWebIndex report and Statista Research and Analysis Department. As per Statista (2020), "The number of active social media users around the globe is 3.8 billion and the 3 most popular social media and networking platforms are Facebook (2,449,000 million users), YouTube (2,000,000 million users), and WhatsApp (1,600,000 million users)." GlobalWebIndex report (2020) says that "Facebook Messenger is ahead of WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter and that on an average consumers spend 2 hours and 24 minutes every day on social media and messaging apps." With regard to India, Statista Research Department (March, 2020) has forecasted that "by 2023, there would be around 448 million social network users in the country. With YouTube and Facebook remaining the most popular social networking sites, it is estimated that by 2023, the number of Facebook users would be 444.2 million, making India, perhaps, the largest Facebook user base in the world."

The present literature review is an attempt at capturing the psychological factors associated with the use of web-based social networks. The paper is a prelude to empirical research on the behavioural correlates of social networking particularly within organizations.

Recent Trends in the Usage of Online Social Networks (OSNs)

An analysis of peoples' motivation behind using social media has been detailed in GlobalWebIndex's report (2020). The report is based on an online survey of digital behaviours of over 688,000 internet users aged 16-64 across 46 markets. A key finding of this survey was that people are using social media more for entertainment than connecting with others. "Finding funny or entertaining content" was the main reason why 16-24 year olds (45%) took to social media. Using social media in leisure time (43%) came next followed by the motive to remain updated with current affairs (40%). Also content consumption through purposeful activities has replaced the indulgence in social activities. Staying in touch with friends was found to be a less powerful motivator for 16-24-year olds but was the main reason for all other age groups. The survey predicts that since Generation Z and millennials are less interested in the social aspects of social media, it will be more of an entertainment hub in the near future. Highest-indexing motivation or the distinct reason for using social media for Gen Z (aged 16-22) was to follow celebrities (24%) and for Millennials (aged 23-36) it was to network for work (26%).

Following were inter-continental differences on the most distinctive motivation for going on social media:

i. Latin America: To research/find products to buy (46%)
ii. North America: To stay in touch with what my friends are doing (49%)
iii. Middle East & Africa: To network for work (30%)
iv. Europe: To stay in touch with what my friends are doing (44%)
v. Asia Pacific: To share details of what I'm doing in my daily life (22%)

Another finding was that despite social saturation and decrease in the time spent on social media, multi-networking in the form of number of social media accounts held by the user is in vogue. As per the report, Millennials top the list with an average of 8.1 accounts followed by Gen Z (7.9), Gen X (6.3), and Baby Boomers (4.6).

A very significant trend that emerged from a custom survey run in the UK and U.S was towards 'social gaming'. Social games are played through social networks marked by authentic connections based on shared interest, skill, cooperation and teamwork and help overcome some of the frustrations associated with traditional social networks such as lack of actual human connection, discriminatory and hateful behaviour and the like. For 16-24 year olds, gaming helps diversify and deepen online relationships. As per the survey, "for most people, games are no longer episodic consumptive media, but are now the basis of new massive online communities. This means that while social media is becoming more

of a media consumption space, the gaming industry is emerging as a more genuine space to build connections." Another advantage is that online games can be played without necessarily disclosing one's private life. 61% of people said that they are motivated to play a social network game because it helps relieve boredom whereas 38% played games to have fun with people they know. These reasons rank higher than the thrill associated with skill progression, competition, and game immersion. Female online gamers reported that in social gaming they can be their real selves and are not afraid to be judged by others. Multiplayer games are a means of escapism, generate feelings of immersion and let players socialize on their own terms.

Antecedents Leading to the Usage of Online Social Networks (OSNs)

A substantial amount of research has been carried out to explore the psychological antecedents leading to the use of web-based social networks. According to Joins on (2008), "Building social capital and surveillance are the two main reasons for staying in touch on online social networks." The term 'surveillance' defined as "keeping track of others' activity, reading what they write, or looking at what they post on their wall" was first used by Lampe and colleagues (2006) in their seminal work on Facebook. Subscribing to the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory McQuail (1994) says that, "there are four main motivational needs: information, entertainment, social interaction, and personal identity which explain SNS behaviour."

Grace et al. (2015) in a comprehensive study found that personality traits predict facebook usage or non-usage. Subscribing to the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory (Hoyer and MacInnis, 1997; Jacoby 2002), the investigators concluded that the virtual environment of facebook was a situational variable which interacted with particular personality dispositions of the user and each personality disposition was associated with a unique need. Acknowledging a link between personality and motivation, it was inferred that psychological features or properties of facebook led to the gratification of particular needs of users which resulted in social networking behaviour. In short, individuals with characteristic personality profiles were motivated to use social media to gratify particular needs. Four online aspects of facebook were found to be linked to a personality characteristic:

1. Interaction
2. Self-image control
3. Usage volition
4. Risk

'Interaction' was found to be linked to the personality disposition of sociability. Individuals high on this characteristic have a strong need to maintain social relations. The ease of two-way conversations and the feature of staying in touch with people irrespective of geographic boundaries provide an impetus to use facebook. Thus, users scored significantly higher on sociability than non-users.

The 'self-image control' feature of the online environment was found to be particularly appealing to shy individuals who are low on self-disclosure and experience uneasiness and awkwardness in social interactions (Cheek and Buss, 1981). The asynchronous and non-visual communication online fulfils their need to control their self-image, self-identity and expression. In other words, people with this personality characteristic are more comfortable online because they can project themselves the way they want to and are able to express better online. Shy individuals, apart from being high on its usage, are prone to internet addiction (Chak and Leung, 2004).

The authors found a link between 'usage volition' and the personality trait of susceptibility to interpersonal influence which refers to the degree to which an individual succumbs to social pressure. Such an individual is high on the need for approval and owing to peer pressure to join the Facebook community uses facebook more often, although the behaviour is non-volitional to begin with.

An easy access to personal information (Acquisti and Gross, 2006), cyberbullying, sexual harassment (Bryce and Klang, 2009), and hacking and identity theft (Chakraborty et al., 2013) are different types of the 'risk' feature in all social networking sites. Individuals who have a concern for privacy are particularly high on the need to guard their personal information thus displaying general caution in virtual environments. This finding was also supported by Buchanan et al. (2007).

Thus, every personality trait was associated with a need that was fulfilled by a feature of facebook's virtual environment. The conclusion about facebook users drawn from the study by Grace et al. (2015) was that they like to interact and converse with others, use facebook as a platform to project themselves in a positive light, abide by social norms, trust others, and feel at ease within an environment where physical closeness with others is not required. Psychological traits or dispositions are not the major antecedent variables behind social media usage rather they are mediators between the stimulus (facebook environment) and the response (facebook consumption).

On similar lines, Pagani et al. (2013) concluded that extraversion – one of the Big Five (Costa and McCrae, 1991; McCrae and Costa, 1987) traits and social identity expressiveness served as stimuli behind the active use of social media web sites. The extraversion-introversion dimension is pervasive in personality psychology. Extraverts as opposed to introverts are high on sensation seeking, energetic and yearning for the company of others. Introverts, by contrast, have low need for stimulation, become over aroused in the face of social interactions, have low activity levels and are comfortable spending time alone (Eysenck, 1967). Extraversion has been found to go together with emotional expressiveness (e.g., Kenny et al., 1992), a willingness to communicate (e.g., Burgoon, 1976; McCroskey and Richmond, 1991), and high self-esteem (Mac Intyre et al., 1999). However, research on the role of extraversion-introversion in social networking is equivocal. As in the case of shy individuals, introverts find it easy to interact in relatively anonymous online contexts (McKenna and Bargh, 1998) viewing virtual relationships more secure than real ones (Anderson, 2001).

On the lines of Grace et al. (2015), Rodríguez-Ardura and Meseguer-Artola (2018) researched on how the virtual environment of facebook prompted hedonic immersive experiences in the user (in the form of imagery, presence, and flow) which resulted in attitudinal and behavioural changes which in turn increased online engagement. 'Imagery' was referred to as the projective fantasies and mental representations created by the user of situations and personal connections witnessed in the virtual environment. This augmented reality is a result of the individual's feeling of being actually present in the online environment – an experience labelled as 'presence' by the researchers. Further, the highly engrossing environment led to disengagement from immediate surroundings resulting in cognitive episodes of flow – a feeling of absorption by being virtually "placed" in an artificial environment. A link was also found between the personality trait of OSL viz. Optimum Stimulation Level and inner, subjective immersive experiences which further lead to user engagement and a preference for facebook. Individuals possessing this trait are high on boredom proneness and seek excitement, adventure and novelty. The higher levels of arousal that they seek can be achieved either from the external environment or via inner mechanisms (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992), thus explaining their greater facebook usage.

Consequences of the Usage of Online Social Networks (OSNs)

Hoffman and Novak (2011) found a link between the extent of engagement in online activities and need-satisfaction. The needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Deci and Ryan, 1985; 2000) are satisfied both from interaction with other people and

social media content. Being social on FB, posting, creating and consuming content result in the satisfaction of the three needs. The fulfilling of basic needs through person-interactivity is understandable. But these needs are also satisfied through interactivity with social media technology or content. When using social media, apart from connecting to people, individuals either consume or create social media content (Hoffman and Novak, 2011). Thus social media usage leads to the attainment of relationship goals (e.g. Sheldon et al., 2011) and content goals (Hoffman and Novak, 2011). Social media interactions have been found to result in the fulfilment of other social needs such as affiliation, self-expression, and self-presentation. Furthermore, identification with online social groups serves to enhance an individual's collective or social identity (Rosenberg, 1979). This in turn increases the users' self-esteem and sense of personal well-being (Gonzales and Hancock, 2011; Valkenburg et al., 2006).

Investigators like Buechel and Berger (2012, 2018) find the consequences of facebook use therapeutic. They found that people post self-relevant or personal content (thoughts, feelings, actions) in status updates as a result of emotional instability (prior to posting). This "microblogging" helps express negative emotional experiences, enhances 'perceived' social support and a sense of well-being thereof. Thus, this type of sharing aids emotion regulation. 'Emotional stability' was found to be the only Big Five personality factor significantly related to status updating. Some of the characteristics of individuals low on emotional stability are: inability to regulate their emotions (Gross and John, 2003), a greater need for emotional sharing (Saxena and Mehrotra, 2001), experiencing emotions more intensely (Barr et al., 2008) and negatively (Costa and McCrae, 1980), and high social anxiety (Luminet et al., 2000). They perceive an increase in their social capital due to the online network of friends (Ellison et al., 2007). This less threatening online environment (Bargh and McKenna, 2004) acts as a "social buffer" resulting in a momentary rise in self-esteem.

In a study on the negative consequences of browsing facebook, Wilcox and Stephen (2012) found that it resulted in a decline in financial and psychological well-being. Regular facebook usage led to decreased spending control and lowered performance on a persistence self-control task. The activation of a narcissistic state with apparently high self-esteem occurring after facebook usage explains these negative consequences. The heightened self-esteem, instead of leading to positive social behaviour, results in a narcissistic state marked by self-promoting tendencies, excessive desire for self-presentation, and defensive self-enhancement. The Narcissistic personality is one of the 'Dark Triad' personalities. However, narcissism, as per the study is also a mindset which continues to influence behaviour even after the individual has logged off from the social

network. Also, excessive social network usage lowers self-control and adversely affects performance on tasks requiring self-regulation. These effects are particularly salient in consumers who maintain a strong virtual network of friends. The uniqueness of the study is that it unravels the reciprocal relationship between Narcissism and FB usage. Individuals possessing the trait are high on FB consumption and conversely, greater use of FB fosters Narcissism.

Tracy et al. (2014) did a study on 18-50 year olds and found that facebook usage as well as the type of facebook activities had a link with empathy and narcissism. Gender differences were also found. The findings indicated that chatting, in males led to Perspective Taking – a form of empathy and the photo feature enhanced their ability to imagine themselves in fictional situations. For females, viewing videos correlated with the degree to which they could identify with someone's distress. Females on the whole were found to be significantly higher on emotional empathy whereas males displayed greater cognitive empathy. However, the data also indicated that the photo feature was linked to narcissism as discussed later.

However, the findings relating to a link between use of SNS and empathy are equivocal. Studies indicate enhanced empathy because youth can practice their empathetic responses (Stern, 2008) and express their feelings better online than in personal interactions (Wandel, 2009). The time spent on online activities was related to altruistic behavior, such as cheering someone up, complimenting, showing concern, and offering help (Wright and Li, 2011). An opposing set of findings (e.g., Konrath et al., 2010) says that constant exposure to negative events hardens individuals making them rather insensitive.

Narcissism marked by self-ascribed authority, superiority, entitlement, and self-absorption (Ames et al., 2006) is antithetical to empathy. In the study by Tracy et al. (2014), Narcissism was related to profile picture ratings (on physical attractiveness, being cool, glamorous, and fashionable) in males. Both ratings on the profile picture and frequency of status update predicted the narcissism score in females. The study by and large, revealed that facebook was more an instrument for staying connected than for self-promotion.

Workplace Implications of the Usage of Online Social Networks (OSNs)

The workplace use of social media has been found to have both positive and negative effects. Koch et al. (2012) in a case study on IT employees found that the internal social networking of the company improves employee morale, reduces turnover, and promotes a sense of well-being, organizational commitment and employee engagement.

Organizational social networking (or work-sponsored internal social networking) is also helpful in on boarding the new hires by enabling them to build networks, receive guidance on a difficult task and obtain the much needed moral support from their seasoned fellow colleagues. At the outset, the new hires are, by and large, consumers of information but later they begin to contribute and enrich the social networking systems within the company. On attaining seniority, they start using the system for inducting and mentoring new employees (Koch et al., 2012).

For Gen Y, the social networking site harmonized work and social life resulting in positive emotions, building of social capital, knowledge sharing and organizational learning. Digital connectivity of this kind results in innovative customer solutions through collaboration and thoughtful conversations providing the company with a competitive advantage. Warner (2013) has reported that workers who are encouraged to use Twitter, Skype, and other online sites are more productive. This refutes the belief that social networking is a waste of company time. Research has been done on the perceptions of employees about social media usage at work. 60% of them believe that social networking enables good decision making and 82% think it leads to effective workplace relationships. (O'Connor et al. 2016). However, researchers say that organizations should implement SNSs cautiously. On the one hand they serve as a business application and on the other hand there is the issue of cyber security. Bizzi (2018) found research evidence on the flip side of SMNs at work, according to which who employees interact with on social media is a determining factor. The effects will be positive if employees share meaningful work experiences with their colleagues. However, they will be distracted, unproductive, and likely to leave the organization if they use social sites to build connections and networks outside the organization. The problem can be addressed in two ways. To reduce retention risk social media training can be given to employees so that they focus on positive behaviours like collaboration. Also, employees' accomplishments can be celebrated on the digital platform which will further result in employer branding.

Conclusion and Implications

The discussion would be incomplete without touching upon the role of web-based social networks in these times of the Covid -19 pandemic. Social networking sites are a source of fake news, misinformation and information overload referred to as 'infodemic' by researchers which makes it imperative to use social media in a responsible way. During the early stages of the outbreak of Covid-19 researchers (Gao et al., 2020) in Wuhan found a positive correlation between depression and anxiety and the extent of exposure to SNSs. The reason primarily was found to be exposure to mass trauma In order to combat

the "infodemic", the researchers recommend cross-sector collaborations for filtering out false information and transmitting accurate information though proper channels.

HEC Paris (2020) reports that companies can use social media for commercial purposes viz. advertising a brand, or for communal goals viz. increasing their customer base. Hence, social media is either used to *talk to* customers or to *talk with* customers which in turn leads to they talking to each other through the brand. At the individual level, people can reach out to one another to make sense of what is happening. With people staying indoors, online shopping is likely to be a trend. The results of a survey by a relationship health app detailed in Hindustan Times (May 14, 2020) show that two-thirds of unmarried or long distance couples remain connected with their partners over phone and video chats. Social media is both a blessing and a boon in this period of unprecedented change.

The article has implications for mental health and for work outcomes in the areas of human resource management, organizational behaviour and marketing management.

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