



Loneliness, anxiousness, and substance use as predictors of Facebook use



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationships between loneliness, anxiousness, alcohol, and marijuana use in the prediction of freshman college students' connections with others on the social network site Facebook as well as their emotional connectedness to Facebook. A survey of 229 respondents was conducted at a mid-sized public university to examine these relationships. Respondents were currently living in university dormitories and had an active Facebook account. The study examined the aforementioned predictor variables in relation to Facebook connections strategies and emotional connectedness to Facebook. Results showed that anxiousness, alcohol use, and marijuana use predicted emotional attachment to Facebook. Additionally, loneliness and anxiousness, but not alcohol or marijuana use, predicted individuals' connections with others using Facebook. The current study adds to the growing body of literature investigating predictors of why individuals become emotionally attached to Facebook and the precursors to connecting with others on Facebook.

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1. Introduction

While personal and social gratifications that individuals obtain from using social networking sites (Hagin, Abree, Jivani, & Tunick, 2010; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008) help explain why college students use such sites, further examination of connection strategies and the emotional attachment that students feel towards such sites likely provides additional insight into social networking site usage. Loneliness and anxiousness are among several factors that have been used to predict Facebook usage. Individuals who are socially anxious are more likely to use Facebook to reduce their loneliness (Sheldon, 2008) because shy and socially anxious individuals tend to feel more comfortable maintaining social relationships in online settings than they do in face-to-face settings (Ebeling-Witte, Frank, & Lester, 2007). Given that lonely and anxious individuals use Facebook to establish relationships, this study suggests that loneliness and anxiousness have significant relationships with two aspects or purposes of Facebook usage: emotional connectedness and as a connection strategy. Emotional connectedness refers to the degree to which Facebook is integrated into individuals' daily activities (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Facebook connection strategies refers to how individuals use Facebook to (1) find someone with whom they share an offline connection, such as a classmate or a friend, (2) make new friends without any reference to an offline connection, or (3) maintain past relationships such as

high-school friends (Ellison et al., 2007). Thus, the first objective of the present study is to examine whether loneliness and anxiousness predict students' emotional connectedness to Facebook and connection strategies on Facebook.

Moreover, the current study examines whether engaging in alcohol or marijuana use predicts emotional connectedness to Facebook and Facebook connection strategies. In relation to such behaviors, research has indicated that viewing Facebook friends' pictures that convey alcohol use, whether at social gatherings, or at other events where alcohol was present has an indirect effect on willingness to use alcohol, and leads to favorable attitudes towards alcohol use (Litt & Stock, 2011). These findings suggest that when college students view pictures of Facebook friends who attended social gatherings where drinking alcohol had occurred, the individual feels more favorably towards drinking alcohol or sees the behavior as normative. Conversely, individuals who view marijuana-related postings on Facebook are less accepting of the posted images, and view the images as less normative, particularly because it depicts illegal behaviors (Morgan, Snelson, & Elison-Bowers, 2010). Thus, those who engage in marijuana use may be less emotionally connected to Facebook and less likely to upload pictures of marijuana use behaviors. Consistent with previous research, the current study suggests that alcohol use and marijuana use predicts emotional connectedness to Facebook and students' connections on Facebook. Thus, the second objective of the present study is to examine whether alcohol and marijuana use predict students' emotional connectedness to Facebook and connection strategies on Facebook.

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1.1. Internet and Facebook

The internet has opened many new lines of communication and socialization. The primary purpose in making an account on Facebook is to help make new friendships or to maintain and connect with those that already exist (Sheldon, 2008). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) estimated that in 2008 three-fourths of internet users were users of social media sites. One of these social media sites is Facebook, an internet site created in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, a Harvard undergraduate student. In January of 2011, CNBC TV aired a documentary entitled “The Facebook Obsession,” which told the story behind the rise of Facebook, as told by Facebook’s founders. CNBC reported the site to be worth an estimated 50 billion dollars with a million new users every week surpassing Google as the most popular website in the United States. In the documentary Mark Zuckerberg stated that “the site had eclipsed the 500 million users mark in the summer of 2010, meaning one of every twelve people in the world are on Facebook with more than 50% of users using the site everyday.” According to Facebook.com, the site reached 845 million monthly active users at the end of 2011, with about 37.5% of the entire United States population being Facebook users (Saleem, 2010) and Facebook accounts for an astonishing 17.9% of all time spent online (Srinivasan, 2009).

Facebook enables its users to present themselves in an online virtual profile, accumulate friends with whom they can chat online, post comments on each others’ pages, create and join virtual social groups, and view others’ profiles. When viewing others’ Facebook profiles, users can learn about others’ common interests, preferred religion, preferred political party, current and past employment, what college or high school degree they may have earned, hobbies, interests, and romantic relationship status (Ellison et al., 2007).

1.2. Loneliness, anxiousness, and Facebook

Participants who spent a significant amount of time on the internet reported higher levels of perceived loneliness and a greater number of daily stresses than people who did not use the internet as often (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011; Kraut, Patterson, & Lundmark, 1998). Kraut et al. (2002) found that introverted individuals using the internet experienced decreased community involvement and increased loneliness, while extroverts using the internet showed increased community involvement and decreased loneliness. Furthermore, Kalpidou et al. (2011) found that first-year students with many Facebook friends reported experiencing poorer emotional adjustment in college, suggesting the likelihood that first-year students seek out friends on Facebook as a coping strategy to relieve the stress that is associated with poor adjustment. These results lay the foundation to the current study’s examination of whether college freshmen who have adjusted poorly to their new environment, as evidenced by higher levels of loneliness, will display higher levels of emotional attachment to Facebook and will use Facebook to make social connections.

Sheldon (2008) found that people who are socially anxious use Facebook to reduce emotional stressors, such as feelings of loneliness in a new environment. Individuals are often motivated by a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, those who are socially anxious may find it difficult to fulfill this social need in real world social contexts and may therefore turn to the internet (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). This may be because shy and socially anxious people tend to feel more comfortable maintaining social relationships in online settings than they do in face-to-face interactions (Ebeling-Witte et al., 2007). Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) found that internet users who avoided face-to-face interaction, chose the internet as a functional and rewarding alternative to face-to-face interactions in order to fulfill interpersonal needs. Shyness, which is similar to anxiousness and is defined as “anxiety

reactions, tension, discomfort, aversion, and an inhibition of normal social behaviors when in the presence of others” (p. 337), is significantly positively correlated with time spent on Facebook and with favorable attitudes towards Facebook (Orr et al., 2009). Hagin et al. (2010) found that those who are socially anxious use Facebook for companionship more than those who are less socially anxious. Additionally, Caplan (2007) found that social anxiety mediated the relationship between internet use and loneliness, and was directly related to negative effects of internet use. The current study investigates whether anxiousness is predictive of Facebook connection strategies and levels of emotional connectedness to Facebook.

1.3. Health behaviors: alcohol and marijuana use and Facebook

Media exposure has an impact on the normative perceptions of substance use among adolescents (Wills, Sargent, Gibbons, Gerrard, & Stoolmiller, 2009). One common exposure of normative perceptions of substance use may come from Facebook (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Research has indicated that 25–37% of older adolescents post information related to alcohol use on their profile (Litt & Stock, 2011; Moreno, Parks, & Richardson, 2007; Moreno, Parks, Zimmerman, Brito, & Christakis, 2009). Based on the alcoholic content of these photos and comments, individuals may develop a perception of how normative alcohol use is among peers of varying ages, including older peers. Since having older friends is associated with substance use among adolescents (Leatherdale, Cameron, Brown, Jolin, & Kroeker, 2006; Litt & Stock, 2011), it is important to determine how viewing profiles of peers (some of whom are likely older) who use alcohol influences adolescents’ normative perceptions and other alcohol-related risk cognitions. Viewing Facebook pictures that convey alcohol use as normative has an indirect effect on willingness to use alcohol and encourages favorable attitudes towards alcohol use (Litt & Stock, 2011). When college students view pictures of Facebook friends who attend social gatherings where drinking alcohol has occurred they view future alcohol consumption more favorably (Litt & Stock, 2011). In the current study, it is hypothesized that freshmen students who consume alcohol may be more emotionally connected to Facebook and use Facebook as a connection strategy with others.

In contrast to alcohol use, individuals who view marijuana-related postings on Facebook are less accepting, particularly because it depicts illegal behavior (Morgan et al., 2010). Since marijuana use is a less socially accepted behavior than consuming alcohol, individuals are less likely to upload marijuana use behaviors on Facebook (i.e. images of smoking marijuana, paraphernalia, etc.). Thus, we hypothesized that higher levels of marijuana use will result in lower levels of emotional attachment to Facebook. Furthermore, since smoking marijuana is a less socially acceptable behavior, we further hypothesize that students who engage in marijuana use behaviors are less likely to connect with others via Facebook. The hypotheses are derived from the notion that marijuana users are more likely to miss out on the opportunity of meeting others at socially acceptable gatherings and because of the social stigma of patently illegal behavior.

1.4. Objectives and hypotheses

The purpose of the present study is to examine the predictor variables of loneliness, anxiousness, alcohol use, and marijuana use in the prediction of student connection strategies on Facebook and students’ emotional connectedness to Facebook. Specific hypotheses are that loneliness, anxiousness, and alcohol use would yield a significant positive relationship with Facebook connections strategies and with students’ emotional connectedness to

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