



The relationship between socializing on the Spanish online networking site Tuenti and teenagers' subjective wellbeing: The roles of self-esteem and loneliness



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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the influences of Spanish teenagers' usage intensity of the Spanish online social networking site Tuenti on their psychological wellbeing. Tuenti is the social networking site that is most preferred and used by Spanish adolescents. Hypothesized relationships are analyzed by structural equation analysis in a sample of 344 Spanish adolescents aged 12–17 with an online Tuenti profile. Teenagers' usage intensity of Tuenti was positively related to the degree of socializing on the social networking site. Furthermore, socializing on Tuenti had a significantly positive influence on teenagers' perception of wellbeing. This relationship was not direct, however, but mediated by the intervening variables of self-esteem and loneliness. Results confirmed that Tuenti has become a suitable platform for the development, consolidation and growth of Spanish teenagers' social relations. Contrary to some previous research pointing to a detrimental effect of SNS use on mental health and psychological wellbeing, the findings of this study are in line with those of a number of authors who suggest that SNS use may on the whole be positive for users, including most teenagers.

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1. Introduction

The popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) has been consistently growing in recent years. SNSs such as Facebook are a kind of virtual community that commands a vast global following. In the case of Spain, the *Generation 2.0 Report* (Sánchez-Burón & Fernández-Martín, 2010) states that 78% of Spanish 12–17 year-olds use social networks, whilst the SNS Tuenti is the one they most prefer (80%). Tuenti, which was created in Spain in 2006, is the most widely used social network among Spanish youth. It is a private network, as it can only be accessed through a member's invitation. The minimum age required to create a Tuenti personal profile is 14.¹ Nevertheless, many under-14 teenagers have active Tuenti profiles. In Spain, over 5 million 12–17 year-olds have a profile in this

social network. Apart from personal profiles, commercial brands can also be present on Tuenti through their websites or by creating events that Tuenti users are invited to take part in. Like other social networks, Tuenti is built around the basic information provided upon registration, as well as pictures, comments, videos, etc., posted by users and their friends (Sádaba & Bringué, 2011).

Tuenti has become a suitable platform for the development, consolidation and growth of social relations (Sánchez-Franco & Roldán, 2010). A recent study conducted in Spain (Monge Benito & Olabarrí Fernández, 2011) on the differences between Tuenti and Facebook shows that users of the former highlight the possibility of keeping in touch with close friends, while the latter is considered to be the social network youth prefer for staying in touch with their acquaintances. Tuenti is deemed to be a more intimate social network, and is perceived to be simpler, more intuitive and easier-to-use than Facebook. Likewise, Sádaba and Bringué (2011) point out that Spanish teenagers mainly use Tuenti to maintain and strengthen previously established social relations. Although Tuenti facilitates meeting new people, making new virtual friends and eventually meeting them physically, this is not what motivates most teenagers to engage in this SNS. Their main aim is to keep in touch with their schoolmates and weekend friends. Average time spent on Tuenti ranges from 30 min to over 2 h daily (Martínez-Rodrigo & Sánchez-Martín, 2012). In spite of

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¹ Spanish legislation regarding data protection allows no under-14 teenagers to have a commercial relation with any company or firm without express parental consent. Tuenti highlights its close collaboration with the Spanish authorities in the elimination of all under-14 profiles, as well as its active efforts to identify underage users (Sádaba & Bringué, 2011).

the importance of this network for Spanish teenagers and the time they spend on it, the influences of Tuenti use-intensity on their psychological wellbeing, and in particular the influences of mediating psychological variables, have not yet been studied. The present study addresses this gap in the literature by examining the effects of Tuenti SNS usage on teenagers' subjective wellbeing, and intervening psychological variables.

Previous research has analyzed how the frequency of use of social networks such as Facebook, measured in terms of hours spent or the number of registered friends, relates to psychological variables (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2009; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009; Ji et al., 2010; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006), and the manner in which personality traits potentially influence how people use SNSs (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Ceyhan & Ceyhan, 2007; Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010; Gangadharbatla, 2008; Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Leung, 2002, 2007; Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005; Ross et al., 2009; Wilson, Fornasier, & White, 2010). Several studies have also examined the variables of loneliness (e.g. Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2010; Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009; Morahan-Martin, 1999; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) and self-esteem (e.g. Ehrenberg, Juckes, White, & Walsh, 2008; Niemz, Griffiths, & Banyard, 2005; Wilson et al., 2010) as antecedents of SNS use, but few have analyzed them as a behavioral outcome. How different SNS usage patterns affect teenagers' wellbeing remains rather unclear. There is also no agreement in the literature regarding the influence, either positive or negative, of the utilization of SNSs on teenagers' levels of self-esteem and loneliness. This study proposes a theoretical framework, in which the effects of SNS socializing on wellbeing are mediated by teenagers' degree of loneliness and self-esteem. The theoretical model is tested for the specific case of Tuenti SNS on a sample of Spanish adolescents.

1.1. SNS use and socializing

SNSs offer a new tool to its users for the creation and maintenance of social relations and are used for both establishing and maintaining social connections (Barker, 2009; Kujath, 2011; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Pfeil, Raj, & Panayiotis, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Sheldon, 2008; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Previous research has confirmed that indeed socializing is one of the main reasons why teenagers use SNSs such as Facebook (Boyd, 2007; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Liu, 2008; Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). In their study of 881 adolescents (10–19 years of age) who had an online profile on a Dutch friend networking site, Valkenburg et al. (2006) found that the frequency with which adolescents used the site stimulated the number of relationships formed on the site and the frequency with which adolescents received feedback on their profiles. Teenage use of SNSs mostly comprises relationship management, communication with their own social circle, or connecting with other teenagers who share similar interests, as well as interaction with the opposite gender (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Ellison et al. (2007) showed that Facebook was used for bridging and bonding of social contacts, which provided users with emotional satisfaction. Steinfield et al. (2008) found in a longitudinal analysis of panel data from Facebook users that the intensity of Facebook use in year one strongly predicted bridging social capital outcomes in year two. They suggest that Facebook use helps reduce barriers that lower self-esteem students might experience in forming large, heterogeneous networks that are sources of bridging social capital. SNS-use seems to facilitate managing a certain identity and persona in a social context, since the relatively impersonal nature of

the online environment is seen to help young participants in negotiating the practicalities and difficulties that can arise offline, in terms of managing relationships (Dunne et al., 2010). Thus, through connecting and reconnecting with friends and family members, SNS use satisfies socializing needs (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). Whereas online communication is also used for relationship formation (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), some research suggests that SNSs are used more to maintain social relationships than to extend social contacts. This has been shown, for instance, in the case of Facebook (Kujath, 2011; Sheldon, 2008).

Overall, SNS use intensity seems to be related with teenagers socializing on SNSs. The possibility of being in uninterrupted contact with peer groups may be one of the main reasons of Tuenti's current success (Sádaba & Bringué, 2011). In line with the reviewed literature, it is hypothesized that use of Tuenti increases teenagers' socializing, such as maintaining relationships and strengthening ties with their friends.

H1: There is a positive relationship between use of the SNS Tuenti and teenagers' socializing on Tuenti.

1.2. SNS use and loneliness

A stream of research has related SNS-use with a decrease in social contacts and increased loneliness of the individual. Internet use absorbs time from face to face interaction with family and friends (Brenner, 1997). Earlier research found a relationship between increased Internet use and feelings of loneliness and depression (Kraut et al., 1998). Loneliness can be a by-product of excessive Internet use, because users invest in online relationships at the expense of their real-life relationships (Morahan-Martin, 1999; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000). Moody (2001) showed that low levels of social and emotional loneliness were both associated with high degrees of face-to-face friendship networks, while high levels of Internet use were associated with low levels of social loneliness but high levels of emotional loneliness. Internet use may decrease social wellbeing, even though it is often used as a communication tool. Kim et al. (2009) found that individuals who were lonely or did not have good social skills could develop strong compulsive Internet use behaviors resulting in negative life outcomes (e.g., harming other significant activities such as work, school, or significant relationships).

However, a number of studies point to the need for a re-examination of the relationship between SNS use and feelings of loneliness. In contrast to the perspective that SNS use isolates individuals, SNS use may indeed decrease social isolation. In Kraut et al.'s (2002) study, for instance, when studied over a longer time period, Internet use was no longer positively related to loneliness and depression, but in fact showed up negatively. Shaw and Gant (2002) found that Internet use significantly decreased loneliness and depression, while perceived social support increased significantly. Specifically for Tuenti, Sánchez-Franco, Buitrago-Esquinas, and Yñiguez (2012) showed that community satisfaction leads Tuenti members to develop community participation and feelings of belonging and identification with other members. Several other studies support the notion that SNS use contributes to reducing loneliness among users, increases conceptions of social support and leads to greater feelings of bonding and social capital (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003; Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; LaRose, Mastro, & Eastin, 2001). SNS use may enhance individual's feelings of group belonging (Koh & Kim, 2004) and reduce loneliness through community membership experiences (Kozinets, 1999).

In line with the latter, more positive perspective of social and psychological consequences of SNS use, it is suggested here that satisfaction of the need for socialization and the maintenance

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