

Connecting with Others: A Qualitative Study of Online Social Networking Site Usage

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Abstract

Individuals are being affected by social network site (SNS) usage in significant ways. In addition, the current field of research is contradictory regarding the consequences of SNS use. The purpose of this research was to gain in-depth information of how SNS use affects the lives of heavy users. The study utilized a phenomenological research design to explore the perspectives of participants. Analyzed interviews of eight university students identified five themes: Connecting with others, feelings (emotive responses) resulting from social networking site usage, compulsive use of social networking sites, preferring to have offline relationships, and communication using social networking sites being easier than offline communication. Implications for the profession and future research are also discussed.

Alexander (2012) noted that Facebook had 845 million active users in 2012. The Facebook website accounts for 1 out of 5 Internet page views. Hampton, Goulet, Rainee, and Purcell (2011), of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, published study results stating that 79% of adult Americans use a social networking site. Ninety-two percent of the study participants used Facebook as their social networking site, 21% used Myspace, 18% used LinkedIn, and 13% used Twitter. In a survey of Facebook usage, Hass (2006) found that the average user signs on about six times a day.

Due to the number of users and frequency of use, researchers have examined whether the use of social networking and other internet sites can become disruptive to daily life or lead to other negative outcomes (Vallerand et al., 2003). Griffiths (2000) argued that the use of social networking sites might be a new form of addiction. Further, Ben-Ze'Ev (2004) purported that increased online socialization can affect users' social skills and ability to socialize offline in a healthy manner. The loss of social skills and damage to existing relationships can lead to depression and anxiety. Regardless of whether excessive social networking site usage is a new addiction or just problematic, researchers are finding that usage does have an effect on the users (Vallerand et al., 2003; Ben-Ze'Ev, 2004).

In an attempt to explore why individuals use social networking sites, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) surveyed university students. According to their findings, individuals use social networking sites to keep in touch with friends, make new friends, post or view pictures, feel connected to others, and for dating purposes. One unexpected result was that 87% of the participants reported that they spent 2.5 hours or more a day on Facebook. Kujath (2011) surveyed 183 college students and found that 75% of the participants used Facebook or Myspace

instead of in-person conversations to make offline plans with one another, connect when they could not be together, or develop local groups with which to connect. In contrast to Vallerand et al. (2003) and Ben-Ze'Ev (2004), Kujath (2011) found that social networking sites serve as an extension of in-person relationships and promote offline relationship development. Participants also overwhelmingly reported using social networking sites to connect with people they already knew instead of making new friends.

Social Networking Sites' Effects on Users

Researchers have explored the psychological effect of using social networking sites. Gunduz (2007) noted that Internet and social networking site usage could lead to psychological conditions such as depression or anxiety. Additionally, Block (2008) noted some of the consequences for Internet usage including social isolation, fatigue, and feelings of anger. To explore the impact of removing SNS usage, Sheldon et al. (2011) deprived 1,002 university students of Facebook usage for 48 hours. During the 48-hour period, students displayed reduced aggression toward others, reduced procrastination, reduced negative affect with others, and increased life satisfaction. However, Sheldon et al. also noted that participants showed an increased use of Facebook at the end of the 48-hour period as a means to cope with feelings of disconnection.

In a similar study, Kim, Larose, and Peng (2009) surveyed 635 students from two mid-western universities and found that some participants with low social functioning skills used social networking sites to meet their relationship needs with other people in what they considered a safer environment. However, the researchers found that the participants' emotional and personal conflicts offline were not solved by the transient positive feelings associated with connections through social networking site usage.

Among other mental health symptoms, "Facebook depression" was a term used by Melville (2010) when pre-teens and teens spend large amounts of time using social media sites and then develop depression. Melville stated that this phenomenon occurs when others do not accept the individual online or the individual does not feel connected online.

Instead of focusing on mental health diagnoses, Kalpidou, Costin, and Morris (2011) studied how social network site usage and participant attitudes were related to self-esteem and college adjustment in 70 undergraduate students. The researchers found that the first year students spent more time on Facebook, reported a deeper connection to Facebook, and reported fewer offline friends than their upper class peers. A higher number of Facebook friends was associated with limited academic and emotional adjustment in first year students but was related to positive social attachment and institutional adjustment in upper classmen. With both groups, higher levels of Facebook usage were correlated with lower self-esteem (Kalpidou et al., 2011).

Social isolation due to Internet usage has been a special concern in some studies. In their study of the impact of Internet use upon social isolation, Sanders, Field, Diego, and Kaplan (2000) conducted a study with 89 high school seniors who completed a survey that measured Internet usage times, quality of relationships with others, and depression. The students who used the Internet less frequently than those deemed to have high usage were reported to have better relationships with their mothers and friends.

Continuing with isolation, Gentzler, Oberhauser, Westerman, and Nadorf (2011) studied the relationship between social networking sites, feelings of loneliness, attachment style, and relationship quality through a survey taken by 211 college students in general psychology classes. Participants who communicated by phone or face-to-face with their parents reported more satisfying, supportive, and emotionally intimate parental relationships, while participants who used social networking sites to communicate with their parents reported higher levels of loneliness and anxious attachment.

Wilson, Fornasier, and White (2010) posited that individual self-esteem and personality characteristics would predict the results of social network site usage. Participants were 201 students from an Australian university who reported having a personal page on a social networking site. The participants were given the NEO-Five-Factor Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992), the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1981), the Addictive Tendencies for Social Network Sites Assessment, and a verbal assessment for their levels of social networking site usage. Significant predictors from the NEO Five Factor Personality Inventory were extraversion and conscientiousness, in that participants who scored lower on the conscientiousness scale and higher on the extraversion scale used social networking sites more often. In addition, the authors noted that self-esteem can increase and decrease for individuals with high and low self-esteem based upon the tone of feedback from others (Wilson et al., 2010).

Previous authors have performed studies with contradictory results. Valkenburg and Peter (2007) recognized the polarity in views regarding research focused on social networking site usage. Early research (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998) assumed that social networking sites resulted in adolescents forming superficial online relationships that were less beneficial than offline relationships. Time spent online resulted in reduced offline social connections and well-being. However, Valkenburg and Peter noted that many early studies involved participants who had little or no previous Internet access. As people have had higher rates of Internet access over time, they have had more opportunities to maintain their social networks through this medium.

In addition, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) noted that participants in earlier research who used Internet connection services were mostly communicating online with strangers. Current social networking sites were developed to assist users in finding and communicating with existing friends or social networks. With users accessing social networking sites to maintain current social connections, the negative effects of social networking site usage found in previous studies seemed to have been negated. In summary, the authors stated that users who access social networks to develop new contacts do not receive the same positive emotional feedback as their counterparts who utilize social networking sites to maintain current social connections (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

The Concept of Internet Addiction

The field of addiction was historically believed to consist only of addiction to substances (i.e., alcohol, cocaine, or other drugs). Over the past several years, however, researchers, scholars, and clinicians have included behavioral addictions, such as sexual and gambling addictions. According to Goodman (1990), *Internet addiction* is another growing area of behavioral addiction.

As early as 1976, the American Psychological Association (APA) noted that Internet usage could lead to addiction. Clinicians were asked to develop policies and protocols to treat Internet addiction (Chebbi, Koong, Liu, & Rottman, 2007). While Internet addiction has been researched to various degrees, there is no standard for treatment, or even a standard definition. The Internet addiction debate ranges from symptomology, to the definition of specific concepts such as Internet usage time, to the continued argument of whether Internet addiction is a “real” addiction (Byun et al., 2009).

Scholars have drawn many comparisons between Internet and chemical addictions in an effort to establish Internet usage as an addiction. For example, Marks (1990) noted that addictions, whether chemical or behavioral, typically involve compulsions, or repetitive behaviors performed with the goal of reducing anxiety or stress. Additionally, behavioral addictions such as gambling, sex, or Internet addiction are often called compulsions because a person may be performing the addictive behavior to reduce anxiety or stress (Holden, 2001).

The phrase *process addiction* has been used by some researchers (e.g., Berglas, 2004; Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002) to describe an addiction to an activity or a process such as eating, spending money, cleaning, using the Internet, or gambling. Process addictions have similar symptoms to substance addictions. Users develop a perceived loss of control, a decline in enjoyment over time, and use a number of defense mechanisms to hide or justify their behavior. Physical withdrawal symptoms are not always associated with process addictions as behaviors do not impact the brain in the same way substances do (Reinarman, 2005).

While the existence or specific criteria for Internet addiction is still controversial, Block (2008) and other authors have noted excessive Internet usage as potentially problematic.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

1. How do individuals make meaning of their experiences using social networking sites?
2. How social networking site users describe their online and offline social relationships?

Method

Qualitative research (Creswell, 1998) provides a method for researchers to learn about a phenomenon that has little research by exploring the experiences of people in their natural environment rather than confirming or denying a preconceived theory (Hunt, 2011). As social networking site usage is a phenomenon that has received little research focus (Kim et al., 2009), this research used a qualitative phenomenological methodology. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the following research questions: (1) How do individuals make meaning of their experiences using social networking sites? (2) How social networking site users describe their online and offline social relationships?

Participants

The sample comprised eight undergraduate and graduate volunteers who chose to enlist after responding to advertisements on student-developed pages that focus on social groups within universities (e.g., freshman, movie clubs, etc.). The participants were selected based on reported usage of social networking sites of at least 2.5 hours daily. Several previous researchers, including Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008), noted that the majority of participants in their studies used social networking sites at least 2.5 hours daily. Participants were able to drop out at any point before or during data collection; however, no participants dropped out. There were six female and two male participants. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 40. Seven participants were Caucasian. The other participant was Hispanic.

Materials/Instruments

Demographics Questionnaire. A demographics questionnaire was created for this study that included standard categories such as age, gender, and college level. This information was useful when identifying themes among the participants.

Semi-structured Interview. A semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions was developed by the researcher for this study and used to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the eight participants. Each interview ranged in length from 45-60 minutes. The following is an example question: How does social network site use impact your life?

Reflexive Journal. An integral portion of phenomenological inquiry involves the inclusion of the researcher as an instrument (Creswell, 1998). Thus, the primary researcher maintained a reflexive journal of the process indicating any notable issues or events that occurred with the participants, the process, or any reactions that occurred within the researcher. The reflexive journal was used to (a) triangulate the data provided by the participants and provide a greater validity to the results, (b) assist the researcher in processing his own biases and assumptions during data collection, and (c) to process the researcher's experiences during data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1998).

Research Team. The research team for this study consisted of the principal researcher, an external auditor, and another member skilled in qualitative research.

Procedure

The primary researcher obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from a Georgia university to conduct this study as part of his doctoral dissertation research. Research subjects were culled from two universities in the southeast region of the United States. Purposeful sampling was done by posting advertisements for participants on student-developed Facebook pages at several southern universities. The researcher emailed study information and informed consent documents to individuals who responded to the advertisement and then conducted pre-screening phone interviews with potential participants to explain the purpose of the study. Once the participants signed the informed consent documents and asked any questions, the researcher collected data from face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

After the eight interviews, the researcher transcribed each interview verbatim to use for data analysis. Between interviews, an external auditor with experience in qualitative research

was consulted for debriefing. The researcher used member checking once the data were analyzed, and the themes were located by sending the study results to the participants for confirmation (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in a number of steps. First, the primary and secondary researcher sought to describe the identified phenomenon from the participants' perspectives without adding their own judgments, setting aside their own assumptions regarding the phenomenon in a process known as *bracketing* (Wertz, 2005). In the second step, the researchers developed non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements relevant to the phenomenon into invariant meaning units in a process called *horizontalization*. Next, *coding* was the process of reviewing the data for recurring themes and categories (Dye, Shatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). The invariant meaning units were clustered into textures to describe the meaning and depth of the phenomenon to form *textural descriptions* (what is actually experienced) and *structural descriptions* (how it is experienced; Moustakas, 1994). During the fourth step, the researchers then used the *constant comparison* method to inductively code while maintaining simultaneous comparisons. The constant comparison method includes (a) categorizing data bits, (b) comparing the data bits, and (c) refining the categories.

A codebook was developed by the primary researcher as the project developed. Initial categories were based upon data culled from the literature. As the project continued and themes arose, new codes were added to the codebook. Information was designated as a theme if two of the three researchers agreed, resulting in a final consensus of themes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Limitations

Despite efforts to the contrary such as triangulation of data and multiple coders, it is important to note that there are limitations in this study. Due to the small sample size, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the overall population. In addition, the participants were all from the southeastern United States region; therefore, findings may not be applicable to anyone outside this region. The researcher did not attempt to research co-occurring disorders that may account for any of the subjects' experiences using social networking sites. Any number of factors, including mental health issues or offline situations, may have influenced the participants' experiences using social networking sites. Also, the researcher based the results of the study on one interview per participant. The participants provided responses in the moment that may not have been representative of their views at all times.

Another limitation in this study is that the participants were all college students. College students are a diverse population ranging in age, ethnicity, beliefs, living situations, and any other number of factors. Some of the participants were in undergraduate programs and others were in graduate programs. Students are also different depending on the region or country of the university they attend, curriculum, and theme of the college (e.g., liberal arts, religious). The participants provided information through self-reports during their interviews. Due to the intimate nature of some reports, their statements may have been intentionally false or misleading in an effort to avoid negative judgment from the researcher.

Results

Five themes were identified as a result of the data analysis: Connecting with others, feelings (emotive responses) resulting from social networking site usage, compulsive use of social networking sites, preferring to have offline relationships, and communication using social networking sites is easier than offline communication. Each of these findings is discussed in detail as follows.

Theme One: Connecting With Others.

All participants reported the recurring theme of using social networking sites to develop and maintain communication and relationships with others. Participants reported using social networking sites to maintain connections with offline friends near them, offline friends not near them, family near them, and family not near them. For example, Mr. Blue stated:

It's how I stay in touch with a lot of people. A lot of my former coworkers at my previous job, that's how I stay in touch with them. A couple of my college friends, high school friends, so you know I get home from work I don't want to go anywhere. I'm not a physically social kind of person. It allows me to stay in touch with people, some of whom live across the ocean.

Subtheme 1: Increased Use Of Social Networking Sites Due To Limited Offline Interactions. Most participants stated that their social networking site usage increased when they did not have offline interactions with others. For example, Ms. Blue stated, "I talked to people [on social networking sites] because I was bored and lonely [in offline life]."

Subtheme 2: Increased Feelings Of Isolation when not using social networking sites. Participants noted experiencing a variety of negative emotions when asked how they would feel if they had to refrain from using social networking sites. Most of the responses referred to feeling isolated from other individuals. Participants used terms indicating that they would feel alone or that they would lose their social connections if they had to stop using. Ms. Purple noted, "you feel really alone."

Subtheme 3: Using Social Networking Sites To Develop Offline Events. Participants reported using social networking sites to develop offline plans with people. Some participants stated that they used social networking sites to find individuals with similar interests with whom to develop political, religious, or social offline groups. Some participants used social networking sites to make plans with individuals with whom they had close offline relationships, such as family or friends. The format of social networking sites allows for communicating with many people and listing exact plans. Ms. Blue stated:

I met people at work and school. I added them on Facebook so I could reach them if I needed to and ask them a question or learn more about them and see what they posted that I might not know about. It's become more to enhance real life relationships.

Theme Two: Feelings (Emotive Responses) Resulting From Using Social Networking Sites.

All participants noted that they experienced both positive and negative emotive responses due to interacting with others on social networking sites. The responses varied between participants regarding the emotive responses and the language used to describe them. The following sub-themes include a few examples.

Subtheme 1: Positive Emotive Responses. All participants noted that positive responses from others resulted in positive emotive experiences. All of the participants noted that people responding to comments they made on the pages of others or their own pages in a positive manner resulted in emotive responses often described as good feelings. Most participants initially responded that these favorable comments made them feel “good” or “happy.” With further probing, participants were able to report more specific emotive responses. Ms. Blue stated, “Part of my gratification need is satisfied through social networking.”

Subtheme 2: Negative Emotive Responses. All participants noted some negative emotive responses to the comments of others. Whereas the female participants provided statements indicating a moderate to severe level of impact, the male participants noted minimal impact from others’ negative statements. Ms. Red noted, “disagreeing with me makes me feel rejected.”

Participants experienced some internalizing of negative comments by others but did not react with a negative response. Those participants noted they would delete the friend who made the comment or ignore the comment. For example, Ms. Green stated:

It’s fine if people disagree. I’ll try to see their side of it and argue mine. Some people are not name-calling and they’re just sitting there discussing their point of view, I’ll discuss. If they call me stupid or something, I’ll ignore it.

By contrast, Mr. Green stated he reacted with verbal aggression to others’ negative comments. He stated, “I would flame them.” When asked what flaming was, he responded “brutal verbal attacks.”

Theme Three: Compulsive Use Of Social Networking Sites.

Participants produced multiple statements related to their thoughts about social networking usage becoming compulsive. Ms. Black noted, “Every other day I think I should stop this” in relation to wanting to stop social networking site usage. Mr. Green stated, “It becomes an addiction.” Mr. Blue noted, “I was incapable of not playing actually [referring online role playing games with friends].” Many participants reported using social networking sites more often than they initially anticipated. For example, Ms. Black noted, “I open my phone and go to Facebook and then catch myself thinking ‘why am I doing this?’”

Subtheme 1: High Frequency Of Use. Many of the participants noted frequently using social networking sites throughout the day and some participants stated they were constantly using social networking sites. Other participants were more specific and stated they used social networking sites during breaks in their day. Mr. Blue reported he used social networking sites “when I first wake up, first get in, intermittently throughout my workday, during lunch break, at least every hour.”

Ms. Pink provided a rationale for frequent social networking site usage by stating:

People always are sharing new information so I feel like it's overwhelming just to check it once a day. Then you're overwhelmed with a lot of information. There's a lot of things I want to look at, but don't have time all at once like read a news story or watch a news clip. For me I need to catch up every couple of hours to see so I don't have to do all of it at once.

All of the participants noted that they used multiple devices to access social networking sites throughout the day.

Subtheme 2: Desire To Use Social Networking Sites Less Frequently. All female participants stated that they wanted to use social networking sites less, and neither of the male participants reported wanting to use social networking sites less. Ms. Pink stated, "I want to back down more from usage and the Internet in general, especially when I come home at night. I want to read more and get away from all of that."

Subtheme 3: Using Social Networking Sites To Avoid Offline Responsibilities. All participants reported choosing to visit social networking sites as a way of avoiding performing daily task requirements or responsibilities. Ms. Red stated, "I waste a lot of time there and I avoid doing things that I should be doing such as school or work-work. It's really helpful for procrastination."

Though trying to limit her usage, Ms. Pink stated that she had used social networking sites instead of spending time with her family. She noted:

[Using social networking sites] with my family during dinner and I'm guilty of that so is my husband, but that is something that we have been cutting back on because it's not a valuable experience as what your real relationship, your marriage and family.

Theme Four: Preferring To Have Offline Relationships. Participants noted beliefs regarding the ways in which social networking site usage affected their offline lives and relationships. All of the participants preferred to interact by phone or in-person when communicating with close friends. When asked how she would rather communicate, Ms. Pink stated, "call me." Ms. Black stated:

Online I cannot tell them as many things as I would face-to-face. Some of my friends that are very close are in Mexico and I would rather have them in the same room than talking through computers. We miss so much. I use Facebook because I like to socialize and I don't get to do it all the time with school, my daughter, and that's the only thing that gets me that feeling of socializing. I would rather have my friends come over to my house than on Facebook. It makes me happier.

One rationale provided for participants' preference to talk directly with close friends was that there are aspects of conversation, such as hand gestures and vocal tones that cannot be conveyed in online conversations. When asked what is missing in a phone conversation, Ms. Red stated:

Because of all the things like facial expressions and hand gestures. You can tell so much about a person by their face when they're talking. Also,

you get to hug them and shake their hand. That's a huge part of human connection.

Subtheme 1: Damage to Offline Relationships Due To Social Networking Site Usage.

Participants noted first-hand experience, reports from others, or concerns about negative offline ramifications due to social networking site usage. Some participants stated that people may find hidden messages their loved ones have sent or received from either ex-romantic partners or current hidden romantic partners. Participants provided either personal stories or those of people they knew who discovered their significant other's involvement in an intimate relationship by reading their social networking site communications. For example, Ms. Purple stated, "people find out things that other people didn't want them to find out like if you cheated on your boyfriend and the other guy post something on your wall."

Ms. Green offered an explanation for why people develop online romantic relationships while in offline romantic relationships. She stated, "it tends to be due to a breakdown in the communication in that relationship on a daily basis and whatever it is that's lacking, the other partner finds in someone online."

Aside from secret communications and relationships, participants noted offline relationships could be damaged due to individuals spending too much time using social networking sites and not enough time with offline peers. Participants noted family and romantic partners often complained about their online usage. Ms. Black stated, "My mother-in-law tells me there are other things I could be doing [besides social networking]."

Subtheme 2: Simultaneous Use Among Partners. Participants who were living with partners or significant others noted simultaneous social networking site usage in the home. The idea of two partners using social networking sites while with one another is noteworthy as some of the statements participants provided resulted in this researcher concluding that participants were choosing to engage with others, but not the individuals in the room with them. Some attributed the lack of interpersonal interactions in the home to this simultaneous usage. In response to using social networking sites together, Ms. Black stated, "Especially at night when we're tired, when we're dead brained. We've gone through the conversation of how our days have been and then we just want a break."

Some participants stated they used social networking sites at the same time and discussed their online experiences. Mr. Blue noted that he and his wife would spend their evenings sitting at computers next to one another and would discuss their online interactions. He stated:

Me and my wife have our own computers and they're right next to each other. We'll talk about what we're looking at. I'll show her what's on mine and she'll show me what's on hers so it's still social for us. We're doing it together and we're sharing each other.

Theme Five: Communication Using Social Networking Sites Is Easier Than Offline Communication.

All participants noted communicating through social networking sites was more accessible, less intrusive, and a more thoughtful method of communication than offline communication methods. For example, Ms. Purple stated, "it's a way to communicate without

being pushy by saying ‘I’m thinking about you but I’m not expecting a response right away.’” Participants also reported expecting quicker responses from social networking in contrast to phone calls and email. For example, Ms. Black noted, “I’ve tried email but Facebook works better because people are on Facebook a lot more than email. It’s easier for me to put it on Facebook and get a response than texting or calling.” Mr. Blue noted that individuals could interact with many friends in a short time frame. He stated, “It allows me to catch up with a lot of people in a short time.”

Subtheme 1: Superficial Online Relationships. All participants had views regarding the genuineness of online relationships. The majority of participants felt online relationships were not as genuine as offline relationships. Ms. Black stated, “It’s [online interactions] superficial like Facebook.” Ms. Blue stated, “It’s easier for me to have an online relationship because it’s shallower and less in depth [than offline relationships].”

Subtheme 2: Online Anonymity. Participants felt it difficult to judge an individual’s character in an online relationship due to the lack of opportunities for more in-depth evaluation. For example, Ms. Purple noted, “The first impressions you get [on social networking sites] usually aren’t what the person is like. There’s no way to know what the person is really like until you meet them [offline].” Participants also noted that individuals often interacted differently in online versus offline relationships. For example, Mr. Green stated, “I’ve gotten into ridiculous wars with people online and we never interact that way face-to-face ever.” He also stated, “It’s perception that while online you’re anonymous. You don’t have anyone there that will cut you.” Mr. Green noted that he used online anonymity to his advantage. He also reported that he used false profiles he called *stalker profiles* to maintain engagement with people who did not want to engage with him.

Subtheme 3: Varying Levels Of Communication According To Association. Participants noted that they interacted differently online with individuals they deemed friends or acquaintances. Mr. Green stated, “If just an acquaintance I would post on their wall. If it’s someone I’m close to I would send them a message.”

Discussion

This study explored the phenomenon of social networking site usage and its effects. The data produced five themes and sub-themes based upon participant interviews, the researcher’s reflexive journal, and demographic data. One implication was that increased online usage decreases offline social involvement. A clinician may want to set goals with clients for developing offline interactions, such as (a) setting time limits on online usage, (b) engaging clients with existing offline social groups (e.g., previous friends, available family, community activity groups, or local volunteer agencies), or (c) social skills training.

Another finding was that female participants stated that they wanted to use social networking sites less often. Neither of the male participants desired to use social networking sites less. This may be due to both males working in the technology industry. None of the participants was able to provide an alternative activity to using social networking sites. The lack of other options provided insight into the participants’ limited ability to lessen social networking site

usage. A therapist may choose to have clients explore the past for previous activities. Therapists may also explore volunteer or sports opportunities in their communities.

Also, individuals who utilize social networking sites reported they would feel isolated if they limited social networking site usage due to losing their social support. Therapists should take note of this sub-theme as it highlights the negative emotional ramifications individuals may experience when they lessen use. A therapist may increase screening for depression if clients choose to limit their social networking.

In addition, negative interactions from others on social networking sites resulted in individuals' feeling negative emotive responses such as hurt or rejection. Individuals who use social networking sites more frequently than others, especially in harsh conditions such as cyberbullying, may experience negative emotive responses after use. Therapists working with adolescents or individuals with frequent online conflict may treat lowered self-esteem or self-image with clients.

Furthermore, participants in this study noted a loss of control in terms of not being able to limit usage, using when they did not intend to, and using for longer than intended, thus indicating a pattern of habitual, compulsive, and addictive usage. This behavioral pattern is similar to Marks (1990) description of addiction involving compulsions, or repetitive behaviors. Some participants were unaware they were using at times. Some could not perform recreational activities without using social network sites intermittently. Researchers in the field of addictions should further explore whether addiction symptoms related to internet or social networking site usage should be included as a formal addiction category.

Also, participants used social networking sites to procrastinate. Participants reported social networking as a good outlet for procrastination because it allows people to connect to each other and is always a source for new information, such as what is occurring with friends, news, or entertainment. Procrastination can be unhealthy when it is enacted too often, resulting in the avoidance of offline responsibilities such as family, work, or schooling. Interestingly, participants recognized that they used social networking sites to procrastinate and that this damaged their offline relationships yet persisted. Therapists may be able to utilize client insight to motivate clients to change the frequency of their social networking site usage.

Also, some participants noted a lack of engagement with their partners due to both individuals using social networking sites simultaneously. On a long-term basis, lack of engagement can lead couples to seek therapy or leave one another. They may also form relationships with others online to fill their need for connection (Young, 1999). Relationship therapists should take note of the potential effects of social networking site usage. A therapist may explore client interactions with others in social networking sites in an effort to repair relationships.

Likewise, Dew and Chaney (2004) noted that anonymity allows individuals with sexual addictions to talk freely online about their wants and desires, conversations they may not have openly in public even with strangers. Individuals may not make offline attempts to find partners such as going to a bar or making attempts at work, but they may look online for partners without

fear of being embarrassed or having to hide their addiction. As individuals with sexual addiction use social networking sites for sexual purposes more often, the online sexual behavior is reinforced by physiological responses as well as the temporary psychological relief provided by sexual Internet activities (Putnam & Mayheu, 2000). Reinforcing sexual behavior with few inhibiting factors can lead to the compulsive use of social networking sites. A therapist treating a client with a sex addiction should explore his or her social networking site usage to discern pertinent psychological factors.

As noted by the participant who used stalker profiles, individuals are not always honest. Social networking sites allow individuals to portray aspects of themselves that may be exaggerated or untrue. One harmful aspect of this behavior is allowing individuals to languish in a false identity rather than actively working on their issues. It may also set individuals up for lowered self-esteem and depression if they meet others offline and the falsities of their identities are exposed. Of more concern, some people use false identities to harm others. Clients may set themselves up for danger by interacting with and making plans with people they have not met in offline life (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2008). Parents of adolescents or guardians of other vulnerable populations should consider dangerous individuals that may be in contact with their loved ones online. Therapists working with families should educate their clients regarding potential online danger, as well as how predators can deceive and harm individuals.

Research Recommendations

Future research related to social networking site usage may provide a more in-depth understanding of social networking sites in several ways. Researchers could build upon this study with a larger participant group to either confirm or repudiate the results. Furthermore, replication of this study with multiple interviews per participant may establish a more consistent and reliable data set. Researchers can also utilize the results of this study to develop a grounded theory study to create theory surrounding the effects of social networking sites and reason for use. In addition, findings from this phenomenological study may assist in the development of quantitative studies on a larger scale. Also, the themes resulting from this study could be tested in a quantitative study utilizing significantly more participants. Finally, gender differences may be a focal point in future studies due to the differing desires to limit social networking site usage based upon gender.

Summary

The results of this study imply that social networking site usage is a phenomenon that individuals utilize to connect with one another. Some individuals use social networking sites more often when isolated in life and feel isolated in return when they limit their social networking site usage. Individuals emit positive and negative emotive responses to others, similar to face-to-face interactions. At times, social networking site usage allows individuals to ignore offline relationships and responsibilities. Individuals use social networking sites compulsively and often struggle when they try lower their use. Individuals desire genuine online relationships but believe them to be superficial. Finally, social networking sites allow individuals to present themselves in ways that may not be realistic due to anonymity.

In addition, the outcomes of this study are important to therapists treating clients and researchers in the field of addiction and counseling. Because the results of this study provided a snapshot of the phenomenon for eight participants, more research is required to truly understand the phenomenon and prepare therapists for the future. Future researchers can apply the results of this study to further develop the knowledge of how this phenomenon affects individuals and how to provide effective treatment for those seeking assistance.

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