Social Networking Addiction: Emerging Themes and Issues

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Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are virtual communities where users can create individual public profiles, interact with real-life friends, and meet other people based on shared interests [1]. SNS usage patterns from both consumer research and empirical research indicate that overall, regular SNS use has increased substantially over the last few years [1]. SNSs are predominantly used for social purposes, mostly related to the maintenance of established offline networks, relative to individual ones [1]. However, recent evidence suggests that individuals may feel compelled to maintain their online social networks in a way that may, in some circumstances, lead to using SNSs excessively.

In many areas of behavioral addiction, there has been debate about whether some excessive behaviors should even be considered as genuine addictions (e.g., video game playing, internet use, sex, exercise, etc.) and the same debate holds for addiction to social networking. Griffiths [2] has operationally defined addictive behavior as any behavior that features what he believes are the six core components of addiction (i.e., salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, conflict, and relapse). He also argues that any behavior (e.g., social networking) that fulfills these six criteria can be operationally defined as an addiction.

Researchers have suggested that the excessive use of new technologies (and especially online social networking) may be particularly problematic to young people [3]. In accordance with the biopsychosocial framework for the etiology of addictions [2], and the syndrome model of addiction [4], it is claimed that those people addicted to using SNSs experience symptoms similar to those experienced by individuals who suffer from addictions to substances or other behaviors [3]. This has significant implications for clinical practice because unlike other addictions, the goal of SNS addiction treatment cannot be total abstinence from using the internet per se; it is an integral element of today’s professional and leisure culture [1]. Instead, the ultimate therapy aim is controlled use of the internet and its respective functions, particularly social networking applications, and relapse prevention using strategies developed within cognitive-behavioral therapies [3].

To explain the formation of SNS addiction, Turel and Serenko [5] recently summarized three overarching theoretical perspectives that may not be mutually exclusive:

- **Cognitive-behavioral model:** This model emphasizes that ‘abnormal’ social networking arises from maladaptive cognitions and is amplified by various environmental factors, and eventually leads to compulsive and/or addictive social networking.

- **Social skill model:** This model emphasizes that ‘abnormal’ social networking arises because people lack self-presentational skills and prefer virtual communication to face-to-face interactions, and it eventually leads to compulsive and/or addictive use of social networking.

- **Socio-cognitive model:** This model emphasizes that ‘abnormal’ social networking arises due to the expectation of positive outcomes, combined with internet self-efficacy and deficient internet self-regulation eventually leads to compulsive and/or addictive social networking behavior.

Based on these three models, Xu and Tan [6] suggest that the transition from normal to problematic social networking use occurs when social networking is viewed by the individual as an important (or even exclusive) mechanism to relieve stress, loneliness, or depression. They contend that those who frequently engage in social networking are poor at socializing in real life. For these people, social media use provides such people continuous rewards (e.g., self-efficacy, satisfaction) and they end up engaging in the activity more and more, eventually leading to many problems (e.g., ignoring real life relationships, work/educational conflicts, etc.). The resulting problems may then exacerbate individuals’ undesirables. This then leads such individuals to engage in the social networking behavior even more as a way of relieving dysphoric mood states. Consequently, when social network users repeat this cyclical pattern of relieving undesirable moods with social media use, the level of psychological dependency on social networking increases.

A behavioral addiction such as SNS addiction may thus be seen from a biopsychosocial perspective [2]. Just like substance-related addictions, it would appear that in some individuals, SNS addiction incorporates the experience of the classic addiction symptoms, namely mood modification (i.e., engagement in SNSs leads to a favorable change in emotional states), salience (i.e., behavioral, cognitive, and emotional preoccupation with the SNS usage), tolerance (i.e., ever increasing use of SNSs over time), withdrawal symptoms (i.e., experiencing unpleasant physical and emotional symptoms when SNS use is restricted or stopped), conflict (i.e., interpersonal and intrapsychic problems ensue because of SNS usage), and relapse (i.e., addicts quickly revert back to their excessive SNS usage after an abstinence period).

It is generally accepted that a combination of biological, psychological and social factors contributes to the etiology of addictions [2,4] that may also hold true for SNS addiction. From this it follows that SNS addiction shares a common underlying etiological framework with other substance-related and behavioral addictions. However, due to the fact that the engagement in SNSs is different in terms of the actual expression of (internet) addiction (i.e., pathological use of SNSs rather than other internet applications), the phenomenon may be worthy of individual consideration, particularly when considering the potentially detrimental effects of both substance-related and behavioral addictions on individuals who experience a variety of negative consequences because of their addiction.

Research into social networking addiction has been relatively...
whether social networking addiction exists is debatable depending upon the definition of addiction used, but there is clearly emerging evidence that a minority of social network users experience addiction-like symptoms as a consequence of their excessive use [7]. Studies endorsing only a few potential addiction criteria are not sufficient for establishing clinically significant addiction status. Similarly, significant impairment and negative consequences that discriminate addiction from mere abuse have (to-date) generally not been assessed in published studies. Thus, future studies have great potential in addressing the emergent phenomenon of SNS addiction by means of applying better methodological designs, including more representative samples, and using more reliable and valid addiction scales so that current gaps in empirical knowledge can be filled.

References