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Social networking addiction, mental health, personality traits, and user motives

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, researchers have examined whether people's personal and private lives are shaped by the use of online platforms for social interactions. The growing popularity of and reliance on social networking platforms across the world has led to increased concerns about social networking addiction. There is a growing concern and an urgent need for more information about the possible emotional and interpersonal effects of excessive social media use across the world, including in South Africa. This study aimed to explore the nature of the relationships between social networking addiction and depression, anxiety, and stress as indicators of mental health in a South African sample. The study also examined whether personality and user motives moderated the relationships between social networking addiction and depression, anxiety, and stress. In addition, the study explored how participants themselves described their use of social media networks, allowing for a deeper understanding of the potential consequences of the country's high reliance on social media and smartphones.

This study employed a convergent mixed methods approach. For the quantitative component, the design was non-experimental, correlational, and cross-sectional and for the qualitative component, the design was descriptive, interpretive, and phenomenological. For both sections, a non-probability, convenience, and snowballing sampling method was used to gather data from an online survey. The final sample consisted of 612 South African young adults between the ages of 18 and 35. The survey included a demographic questionnaire, the Social Networking Addiction Scale (SNAS), the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21), the Big Five Inventory (BFI), the Scale of Motives for Using Social Networking Sites (SMU-SNS), and short open-ended questions to capture participants' perceptions about using social networking. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics, correlations, hierarchical moderated multiple regression, and conventional content analysis.

All four scales used in this study demonstrated sound internal consistency reliability in the sample. The findings also demonstrated a low prevalence of social networking addiction and moderate levels of mental health problems in the sample. Significant, positive, relationships between social networking addiction and mental health were identified, suggesting that participants who reported higher levels of social networking addiction symptoms also reported higher levels of poor mental health in the form of depression, anxiety, and stress. Multiple regression showed that social networking addiction was also a consistent, significant, and positive predictor of depression, anxiety, and stress in the sample.

With regards to personality, neuroticism was positively related to social networking addiction and extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness were negatively related to social networking addiction. Extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were all significantly and negatively related to and predictive of depression, anxiety, and stress, while neuroticism was significantly and positively related to and predictive of depression, anxiety and stress. Agreeableness was the only personality trait that significantly moderated the relationships between social networking addiction and mental health in the sample. Specifically, agreeableness moderated the relationships between social networking addiction and depression and social networking addiction and stress such that higher levels of agreeableness reduced the strength of the relationship between these and thus acted as a buffer in these relationships.

With regards to user motives, all nine motives were significantly and positively associated with higher levels of social networking addiction. However, only the motives of new friendships, social connectedness, following and monitoring others, entertainment, dating, and social recognition were significantly and positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and stress in the sample. The motive of academic purposes was significantly and positively related to anxiety and stress, and both information and self-expression were significantly and

positively related to anxiety. In the regression models, only a motive for new friendships significantly predicted depression; motives for new friendships, following and monitoring others, and dating significantly predicted anxiety; and motives for social connectedness and following and monitoring others significantly predicted stress. None of the user motives moderated the relationships between social networking addiction and mental health.

Finally, the qualitative information provided by the participants supported the study's quantitative findings and existing literature pertaining to the harmful effects of social networking addiction and mental health. Major themes that emerged included positive, mixed, and negative emotions from using social networking sites; negative emotional experiences including social pressure, procrastination, constant exposure to negative content, and addiction; over-involvement including excessive time, overdependence, over-investment in online interactions, and negative physical and emotional consequences from overuse; and issues around regulation and comparison with others.

This appears to be the first South African study that has explored the relationships between social networking addiction, mental health, personality, and user motives. The main findings from the study have several potential implications for theory and practice, including the growing usage of social media sites in South Africa and participants' understandings of this, the prevalence of social networking addiction and levels of mental health and the connection between these, and the extent to which personality and user motives play a role in social networking addiction and mental health. The findings also highlight the critical need for more theoretically informed intervention and treatment programmes for excessive social networking use, as well as further research to better understand the mechanisms contributing to current rates of depression, anxiety, and stress in South African young adults.

Keywords: social networking addiction; social media addiction; behavioural addiction; mental health; depression; anxiety; stress; personality traits; user motives; South Africa.