

SOCIAL AND RELATIONAL ASPECTS ASSOCIATED TO THE MASSIVE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN ADOLESCENCE

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Abstract

Objectives. The main purposes of this study were to explore: a) the relationships between massive use of Social Networks sites (SNs) in adolescence, school burnout levels and friendship quality; b) gender differences in massive and problematic use of SNs.

Material and methods. A number of 140 Italian high school students (M=72.9%) aged 16-18 years participated in the study. Students were asked to complete self-report questionnaires: an *ad-hoc* scale for investigating SNs use, The Generalized Pathological Internet Use Scale-2 (GPIUS-2; Caplan, 2010), The Parent and Peer attachment inventory for Friendship Quality (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987), The School Burnout Inventory (SBI; Samlela-Aro et al., 2009).

Results. Results showed positive relationships between massive SNs use and friendship quality ($r = .30, p < .01$); compulsive SNs (GPIUS-2) use and school burnout total score ($r = .25, p < .01$); massive SNs use and female gender ($r = .17, p < .05$), and finally a positive relationship between SNs use for mood regulation and school burnout total score ($r = .20, p < .05$). Moreover, significant difference emerged between females and males in SNs massive use, with higher levels reported by females (M=23.55, DS=3.614) in comparison to males (M=21.89, DS=4.261); $t(138) = -2.13, p < .05$.

Conclusions. Overall, this study highlighted different dimensions that could influence SNs massive and problematic use in adolescence, specifically school burnout and friendship quality. Structuring interventions in order to promote socio-relational skills among peers and to prevent school-related burnout could prevent problematic use of SNs in adolescence.

Keywords: social networks, school burnout, friendship quality, adolescence.

Introduction

Using social networks sites (SNs) in adolescence has been reported to be one of the most frequent Internet activity (Cerrato, Martin-Perpina and Vinas-Poch, 2018; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008) and over the years, the Internet and SNs have become an essential social context for adolescents. While there have been positive outcomes associated with SNs use, such as new opportunities for sociability, there were also been negative ones: research has shown that some adolescents tend to use Internet and SNs excessively or in a maladaptive way with negative consequences on different aspects of their life, such as school, relations with parents and peers and their psychological wellbeing (Ballarotto et al., 2018; Livingstone et al., 2011). Literature underlines that, in adolescence, girls show higher levels of massive Internet use than male peers, showing in association both higher levels of internalization and externalization problems. They also spend more time on SNs than boys and seem more interested in the relational aspects of SNs (Anderson, Steen and Stravropoulos, 2016). In this regard, studies show that girls use SNs primarily

to seek closer and more intimate relationships with their peers, to share emotions and personal problems, to keep in touch with peers from their offline lives and with friends they rarely see, to reinforce friendships, and to make plans with friends; on the other hand, boys reported using SNSs to flirt and make new friends and are more interested in playing online games (Ballarotto et al., 2018). In adolescence, SNSs' use leads at searching for autonomy, intimacy, identity and socialization (Borca et al., 2015). Specifically, communication with peers resulted as primary function of SNSs. Studies showed that adolescents have a broader online friendship network than offline, although the majority of them perceived these online relationships as unsubstantial (Espinoza and Juvonen, 2011). Starting an online friendship exposes to fewer risks considering the possibility of asynchronous and anonymous online communications (Buote, Wood and Pratt, 2009). SNSs could help in strengthening existing friendships, allowing adolescents to communicate with peers in a context where they appear more comfortable in sharing their feelings (Borca et al., 2015). For these reasons, online communication is perceived by adolescents as more effective than offline communication, also contributing to increasing perceived reciprocal confidence among peers (Valkenburg and Peter, 2007). During adolescence, pressures of schoolwork and responsibilities could affect students' stress levels, and this stress could result in burnout syndrome (Walburg, Mialhes and Moncla, 2016). Specifically, school-related burnout includes three significant dimensions: exhaustion at school, cynicism toward the meaning of school, and a sense of inadequacy at school (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). High levels of school burnout seem to be associated with lower levels of school engagement and academic achievement (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru and Jokela, 2008). Moreover, school burnout could also be the result of a discrepancy between school expectations and high standards, and their real school results (Kiuru et al., 2008). For this reason, it could be possible that the students with higher levels of burnout would perceive a gap between whom they want to be and who they are with a consequent desire to escape from themselves, using, for example, SNSs (Walburg, Mialhes and Moncla, 2016). Considering that SNSs are particularly prevalent among adolescents, it could be interesting focusing on how stress situations such as school-related burnout could influence the massive use of SNSs. The main aim of this study was to explore, in a group of adolescents, the relationships among SNSs massive use, friendship quality and school burnout levels, in order to investigate risk and protective factors associated with a maladaptive use of SNSs.

Material and methods

A number of 140 Italian high school students (M=72.9%) aged 16-18 years participated in the study. Considering the use of SNSs, 82.1% of students used Instagram, and only 15% used Facebook. Furthermore, 2.9% reported not to use SNSs. Students were asked to complete self-report questionnaires: *An ad-hoc scale for investigating SNSs use*; the questionnaire was composed by seven items measured on a five-point Likert-scale (1= I never use it for this reason; 5= I always use it for this reason). Higher scores indicate massive SNSs use. *The Generalized Pathological Internet Use Scale-2* (GPIUS-2; Caplan, 2010); students' pathological Internet and SNSs use were assessed with this 15 items-questionnaire, measured on a five-point Likert-scale (1=completely disagree; 5=completely agree). For this study, two subscales were used: Mood regulation and Compulsive Use. *The Parent and Peer attachment inventory for Friendship Quality* (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987); four items from the inventory were selected for this study to measure adolescents' closeness to friends (Valkenburg and Peter, 2007) items were measured by a five-point Likert-scale (1=completely disagree; 5=completely agree). The selected items were "When my friends know that something is bothering me, they ask me about it," "I tell my friends about my problems and troubles," "My friends help me to understand myself better," and "When I am angry about something, my friends try to be understanding.". *The School Burnout Inventory* (SBI; Fiorilli et al., 2014; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009) assessed students' school burnout, and it is composed of nine items

rated on a 6-points Likert scale (1=completely disagree; 6=completely agree). Higher scores indicate high school burnout.

Results

Intercorrelations among studied variables were measured by bivariate Pearson correlations and are displayed in Table 1. Results showed positive relationships between massive SNs use and friendship quality ($r = .30, p < .01$); compulsive SNs (GPIUS-2) use and school burnout total score ($r = .25, p < .01$); massive SNs use and female gender ($r = .17, p < .05$), and finally a positive relationship between SNs use for mood regulation and school burnout total score ($r = .20, p < .05$). An independent *t*-test was performed in order to investigate gender differences in SNs massive use. Results, displayed in Table 2, showed a significant difference between females and males in SNs massive use, with higher levels reported by females (M=23.55, DS=3.614) in comparison to males (M=21.89, DS=4.261); $t(138) = -2.13, p < .05$. Moreover, females reported higher levels of total school burnout ($M_{female}=3.28, DS=1.041$; $M_{male}=2.78, DS=1.048$); $t(138) = -2.04, p < .05$.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations among studied variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Massive SNs use	1						
2.Mood regulation	.40**	1					
3.Friendship quality	.30**	.15	1				
4.Compulsive use	.39**	.42**	-.12	1			
5.School Burnout	.10	.20*	-.01	.25**	1		
6.Gender	.17*	.01	.27**	.09	.17*	1	
7.Age	.13	-.03	.11	-.02	-.07	-.13	1

SNs Social Network sites; * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 2. *t*-test results comparing males and females on studied variables

Variables	Males (N=102)		Females (N=38)		<i>t</i> -test
	M	SD	M	SD	p
Massive SNs use	21.89	4.26	23.55	3.61	.035*
Mood regulation	1.88	.92	1.89	.74	.933
Compulsive use	1.95	.84	2.13	.75	.262
School Burnout	2.78	1.04	3.18	1.04	.044*

* $p < .05$

Discussions

The main aim of this study was to investigate, in a group of adolescents, existing relationships among SNs massive and problematic use, school burnout levels and friendship quality. Literature underlines significant associations between school burnout and problematic use of the Internet in adolescence (Salmela-Aro et al., 2017). From our results emerged a significant positive association between adolescents’ perceived school burnout and problematic SNs use: the more adolescents reported higher levels of burn-out, the more they massively use SNs. According to literature (Walburg, Mialhes and Moncla, 2016) higher levels of school-related stress perceived by students could induce them to use SNs, perceived as more reassuring and comfortable, in order to escape from reality. Moreover, from our results emerged a significant positive association between SNs massive use and perceived friendship quality: the more adolescents perceive their friendships

as supportive, the more they report using SNs. These results are in line with the literature (Espinoza and Juvonen, 2011; Borca et al. 2015). Some adolescents may use SNs in order to strengthen their friendships, perceiving online communication as deeper and close. Online emotional disclosure is perceived as more intimate and comfortable by adolescents and, for this reason, online communication as more effective than the offline (Valkenburg and Peter, 2007). When adolescents have an offline friendship network in which experience feelings of affiliation and trust, a higher SNs use will help them in maintaining closeness and support with the group (Espinoza and Juvonen, 2011). Finally, considering gender differences, our results underlined how girls reported higher massive use of SNs the boys. These data are in line with the literature (Anderson, Steen and Stavropoulos, 2016) and specifically, recent studies highlighted that girls, in comparison to boys, use SNs searching for more intimate and close relationships in order to share emotional and personal problems (Ballarotto et al., 2018).

Study Limitations

This study has potential limitations. First, our sample was mainly composed by males' adolescents, consequently more heterogeneous samples should be used to test the generalizability of these findings in future investigations. Moreover, this research has a cross-sectional design and therefore it is not possible to draw causal inferences about relationships among variables; further longitudinal researchers are needed to examine and understand these relationships over time.

Conclusions

Overall, this study highlights different dimensions that could influence SNs massive and problematic use in adolescence, specifically school burnout and friendship quality. Structuring interventions in order to promote socio-relational skills among peers and to prevent school-related burnout could prevent problematic use of SNs in adolescence.

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