Perceived Social Support and Facebook Use Among Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Online social networks have gained considerable popularity among adolescents, but investigations on adolescent engagement with this technology have been limited. The current study investigated adolescents' Facebook use with regard to their perceived social support characteristics. The data were collected from 255 adolescents in two provincial state schools in Turkey. A personal information form and 12 scaled items were used to collect data. A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on scale items and relationships between social support and Facebook use behaviors were investigated. Findings revealed that perceived social support from significant others were predicted by the time spent on Facebook. More support from actual face-to-face friends meant fewer online friends whereas more support from significant others meant more online friends. Profile and security settings varied with regard to perceived social support as well. Regardless of socioeconomic status, less family support was related with adding unknown people haphazardly, and using Internet cafés. Finally, less friend support was related with resorting to nicknames rather than real names. Findings are discussed accompanied with limitations of the current study and suggestions for further research.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication, Country-Specific Developments, Cyber Behavior, Human-Computer Interface, Online Social Networks, Perceived Social Support

INTRODUCTION

The growth of online social networks has dramatically transformed the ways people communicate. These web-based services allowed individuals to construct and share personal profiles, connect with and manage friend groups with similar interests, self-publish and comment on their unique broadcasting experiences. Even though socializing through these tools have been among the major trends of the day regarding contemporary technology (McLester, 2008); a gap between the developments in social network technology and the dearth of research studies regarding their influences on user behavior has been reported (Baker & White, 2010; Chakradhar, Raj, & Raj, 2009; Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2010).

Online social networks have become common destinations particularly for adolescents (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). This is probably because adolescents are digital natives who
have spent their entire lives using emerging information and communication tools of the digital age (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b, 2009). While benefits of this technology have been acknowledged regarding better opportunities to reach out to others and maintain relations (Amichai-Hamburger & Hayat, 2011; Baker & White, 2010; Van-Cleemput, 2010), there are also some concerns about frequent (Livingstone, 2008) or unethical use (Akbulut, Sahin, & Eristi, 2010a, 2010b).

It has been demonstrated that adolescents’ social characteristics and technology use behaviors are related (Kim, Kim, Park, & Rice, 2007; Stern, 2007; Van-Cleemput, 2010). The intersection of user personality and social media use has been documented as well (Amichai-Hamburger, & Vinitzky, 2010; Correa, Hinsley, & de Zúñiga, 2010; Ross et al., 2009). In this regard, it is fruitful to investigate social media use behaviors with a reference to users’ social or personal profiles so that suggested interrelationships are better clarified. The current study focused on a very popular online social network in Turkey (i.e., Facebook) and investigated the relationships between Turkish adolescents’ Facebook use and their level of perceived social support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social related factors have been considered among crucial predictors of Facebook use. For instance, Cheung et al. (2010) hypothesized that the usage of online social networks was an intentional social action. They explained the phenomenon through adapting the social influence and social presence theories. In this regard, the presence of other was considered the most important feature attracting users to use Facebook, particularly for those who use Facebook for communication purposes. Similarly, Baker and White (2010) adopted the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) to predict Australian adolescents’ use of social networks. The theory accounts for the influences in individuals’ complex behaviors and suggests that intentions are the primary predictors of behaviors. That is, the likelihood of engagement in a specific behavior increases when the intention and the motivation captured by that intention are stronger. Support was found for the theory in predicting frequent engagement in social networks.

The characteristics of online communication can be further explained through a social compensation approach, which can assist the theory of planned behavior in explaining the source of the intention. According to the social compensation approach, socially anxious individuals may resort to social media to compensate for their anxiety. This approach was followed through a comprehensive longitudinal study with 1050 adolescents in Canada; which revealed that using computers to communicate with friends created a comfortable environment for socially anxious adolescents. This positive effect was even more powerful than that of traditional adolescent activities such as participating in organized sports (Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010).

As the social compensation hypothesis accounts for the intention to use online networks, a very relevant variable –social support– can explain social media use as well, because a causal relationship between social anxiety and social support in adolescents was reported (Calsyn, Winter, & Burger, 2005). Based on the study by Cobb (1976), social support can be described as the information leading individuals to believe that they are cared for, loved, valued and considered a member of network with mutual responsibilities. The concept has been repeatedly studied in the literature with diverse populations and demonstrated as a predictor of good physical and mental health (Brown & Riley, 2006; Davidson & Demaray, 2007). For instance, middle school students’ subjective well-being was associated with the degree of both emotional and instrumental support in a suburban US community (Suldo, Friedrich, White, Farmer, Minch, & Michalowski, 2009). Moreover, academic and emotional support provided by social network members appeared to explain a significant amount of variance in
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