Motivational processes and dysfunctional mechanisms of social media use among adolescents: A qualitative focus group study

# Details

## Year

2019

## DOI

10.1016/j.chb.2018.12.012

## Issued

2019

## Language

English

## Volume

93

## Start Page

## End Page

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## Type

Journal article

## Journal

Computers in Human Behavior

## Publisher

Elsevier BV

## Topics

* Internet usage, practices and engagement
* Risks and harms
* Online safety and policy regulation

## Sample

42 children aged 12–16 years recruited via a mix of an all-female school and two co-educational schools in East Midlands, UK

# Abstract

Childhood and adolescent experiences have undergone a major transition in interaction with digital technologies
since the advent of smartphones. Following a needs assessment study, adolescent online uses and motivations for
social networking site use were explored. Six focus groups (comprising 42 adolescent students of secondary
schools in the UK) were recruited. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. Six motivational themes
emerged from the analysis, reflecting interactivity and need for control of content and relationships, exhibiting
the dynamic nature of engagement with social networking sites: (i) symbiotic relationship with peers online via
social media and smartphone attachment, (ii) digital omnipresence related to the need for control and loss of
control, (iii) emotional regulation and enhancement, (iv) idealization versus normalization of self and others, (v)
peer comparison and ego validation, and (vi) functionality - facilitation of communication functions. These
findings offer an understanding of the key drivers of normative adolescent social media behaviour that go beyond
the theoretical associations with Uses and Gratifications Theory and Self-Determination Theory, suggesting
an additional alternative motivational factor for social media use, that of need to control relationships, content,
presentation and impressions. This need may be underlying FoMO and nomophobia and could therefore be
responsible for increasing engagement or compulsive use. These findings shed light on cognitive-emotive aspects
that may be implicated in problematic use and may inform interventions targeting excessive or problematic
screen time and specific social media use aspects that merit scientific attention.

# Outcome

"Adolescents reported that SNS use formed a dominant part of their lives, offering both positive and negative affect experiences from use... SNSs were perceived as offering distinct functions
and features, but also to be converging with the adoption of
successful competitor services. The diversity of platforms appeared to
serve a different functional use of entertainment and communication
between the adolescents serving a larger public or private network of
friends, or the smaller group of friends closer to the adolescent.
Social media use therefore appeared to be influenced by the context
and affordances of SNSs and motives via the dynamic interaction with
peers online... [Motivations of social media use include] smartphone and
peer attachment, need to control identity portrayal, content and relationships,
use for emotion regulation and need to define self and social
reality (others)... These findings highlighted control mechanisms,
namely the need to control and exert peer influence on content, relationships,
self-presentation, and impressions... (Throuvala et al., 2019: 171). "Furthermore, evidence suggest that specific structural characteristics
(e.g., Snapchat streaks) and key features of SNSs (i.e., live videos,
the placement of filters for the enhancement of photos prior to posting)
reinforce the motives for use (Griffiths, 2018). Specific behaviours
(constant checking), if not performed, resulted in anxiety and negative emotionality. These behaviours involve the performance of habitual or
ritualistic actions that amplify engagement. The present study identified
a control motive as driving adolescent social media that may be
reinforced by FoMO, nomophobia and powerful emergent structural
characteristics of SNS... These features potentially
shift users from a connecting experience that adds value, to one
with emphasis on the quantity of interaction (i.e., number of streaks,
number of likes on selfie-postings, etc.). Urgency and intensity of habit
and need to control content can define these as adaptive or maladaptive
processes (i.e., the need for belonging versus FoMO).... Finally, the present study also found a perceived merging of oral
and text/instant messenger (IM) communication on SNSs. Adolescents'
oral communication was found to be equivalent with text communication
in the minds of adolescents. Availability and access to SNSs via
smartphones have facilitated the passage from traditional verbal and
face-to-face communication methods to text-based IM communication.
This finding partially reflects the simultaneous use of diverse live
communication features (i.e., text, photo, video, stories, emojis, filters
etc.)" (Throuvala et al., 2019: 172).