

Digital communication technologies and mental health

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Impact paragraph

The rise of smartphones and social networking sites (SNS) has been accompanied by concerns inside and outside academia that these digital communication technologies negatively influence mental health. The present dissertation enhances our understanding of this pressing matter. Here, I will discuss three ways the findings from the present dissertation may contribute to this debate in the academic and public domain.

A first key message is that what we do on smartphones and SNS may be more important than the amount of time we invest in them. Researchers can benefit from this insight by decomposing aggregate usage metrics of digital technologies into meaningful subcategories such as (subtypes of) active versus passive use or social vs. non-social use. Smartphone owners and SNS users can profit from this insight by engaging in those usage types that benefit most users such as warm reciprocal interactions while avoiding exposure to self-relevant achievement-focused content of others. Counsellors should also be aware of the differential effects of different usage types and use this knowledge when designing interventions for clients who experience negative mental health consequences due to their usage of digital communication tools. Rather than exclusively preventing (or strongly limiting) clients to use smartphones or SNS, a valuable alternative may be to nudge clients towards healthier usage styles. Finally, policymakers could launch information campaigns to make the general public aware of which usage types are most beneficial for most people. However, such endeavors are complicated due to the role of individual differences, which we discuss next.

A second key message is that user characteristics matter in the context of SNS and smartphone use. This implies that scholars should pay more attention to moderators such as age, gender, and personality traits to systematically explain for whom usage of smartphones and SNS is beneficial versus detrimental. Moreover, smartphone owners and SNS users can benefit from this insight by being aware of their own vulnerability factors. For example, when SNS users realize they have neurotic tendencies or tend to compare themselves with others, they should exercise extra caution when using smartphones and SNS. This insight is also important for counsellors as assessing their clients' proneness to engage in social comparisons and neurotic thoughts may help them to evaluate their clients' risk of suffering adverse outcomes when using smartphones and SNS. Finally, policymakers can use these insights to make the public aware of which user populations are at increased risks when using digital communication tools.

The third key message is that it is critical to make a distinction between non-problematic and problematic usage of digital communication technologies. Researchers may benefit from this insight by assessing both engagement types and identifying mechanisms that turn regular usage into problematic usage. Smartphone owners and SNS users may benefit from this insight by critically

reflecting on the degree to which they have control over these communication tools rather than exclusively focusing on the amount of time spent on these devices. Counsellors could examine whether their clients have user characteristics that make them especially vulnerable for problematic usage styles and can implement interventions targeting amendable, lower-level mechanisms (e.g., fear of missing out) to reduce addiction-like symptoms in their clients. Finally, policymakers can make use of this insight to raise awareness about specific risks associated with problematic usage of digital communication technologies. Somewhat ironically, smartphones and SNS can be used as practical tools for such information dissemination and educational campaigns.

Finally, each of the three key messages obviously also has consequences for smartphone and SNS developers but this is a complex matter. Whereas certain recommendations do not necessary clash with profit maximization (e.g., nudging warm reciprocal interactions) others may do (e.g., avoiding problematic engagement and associated usage time). However, we believe that smartphone and SNS developers should take their responsibility by, at least, providing independent researchers access to anonymized usage data such that the complex interaction between user characteristics and usage types can be even better understood.