Social Media and Committed Relationships—What Factors Make Our Romantic Relationship Vulnerable?

IRUM S ABBASI
Social Media and Committed Relationships: What Factors Make Our Romantic Relationship Vulnerable?

Irum Saeed Abbasi¹

Abstract
Many competing social networking websites (SNSs) have gained popularity among Internet users. SNSs offer a new way of communicating with known and unknown connections under the umbrella of “friends.” Online communications can quickly become aggressive as uninhibited users tend to exchange intimate details and are prone to developing an emotional intimacy with their online friends. Research supports that an excessive SNSs use adversely affects romantic relationships due to jealousy, envy, suspicion, surveillance, and infidelity. SNSs use is also linked to low relationship commitment due to the presence of online alternative attractions and also due to the time and emotional investments that are made outside the dyadic relationship. In the current study, we examined 252 married and romantically committed partners (167 females, 85 males) between the ages of 18 to 73 years \( (M = 28.27, \ SD = 12.02) \). We explored the connection between participants’ age and SNSs addiction and also their age with the total number of SNSs accounts. We further examined whether SNSs addiction is linked to romantic relationship commitment. Lastly, we examined whether SNSs addiction is connected to the total number of SNSs accounts. The results revealed that age is significantly negatively related to SNSs addiction and the total number of accounts. Younger participants had higher SNSs addiction scores and reported having a greater number of SNSs accounts. SNSs addiction was also negatively linked to romantic relationship commitment. Finally, individuals who had higher SNSs addiction scores also reported having a greater number of SNSs accounts than those with low SNSs addiction scores. Results from the present study are pertinent and can help counselors customize a treatment plan based on SNSs users’ age and relationship status.

Keywords
commitment, Facebook, relationship, romantic relationship, SNSs, social media addiction

There has been a phenomenal increase in computer-mediated interpersonal interactions in the current era. Many competing social networking websites (SNSs) have spawned to attract users of

¹ San Jose State University, San Jose, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Irum Saeed Abbasi, San Jose State University, USA.
Email: irum.abbasi@gmail.com
all ages, which include popular websites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, Twitter, and Myspace. Social networking applications that are available for mobile devices allow users to access SNSs on the go. The allure of being connected to virtual friends from the convenience of a mobile device can lead to a compulsive SNSs use (Andreassen, 2015). SNSs use is one of the most popular daily activities, especially among adolescents and young adults (Lenhart et al., 2015). Unsurprisingly then, an addictive Facebook use is prevalent in youth (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). Most SNSs users have incorporated two or more social media websites in their daily routine (Davenport, Bergman, Bergman, & Fearington, 2014; Lenhart et al., 2015). However, Facebook remains the most popular SNSs among adolescents and young adults (Lenhart et al., 2015) followed by Instagram and Snapchat (Perez, 2014). Snapchat is also increasingly gaining popularity among millennials due to its extensive privacy features that make it hard for others to retrieve self-destructive messages. Common motivations for using social media include procrastination, checking on others’ activities, keeping in touch with family, and interacting with romantic alternatives (Utz, Muscanell, & Khalid, 2015). Nevertheless, the primary reason for using social media is to maintain relationships (Craig & Wright, 2012). Users also report major affordances offered by SNSs, which include visibility, editability, persistence, and association (Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

One major concern with social media is the potential of developing an addiction due to its compulsive use (Andreassen, 2015). Researchers have previously examined the prevalence of problematic SNSs use (Griffiths, 2013; Griffiths, Kuss, & Demetrovics, 2014). In the SNSs literature, an involvement with social media that disrupts daily activities is referred to as “Facebook intrusion” (Elphinston & Noller, 2011) or social media addiction (Andreassen, Torsheim, Brunborg, & Pallesten, 2012; Ryan, Chester, Reece, & Xenos, 2014; Van den Eijnden, Lemmens, & Valkenburg, 2016). Facebook intrusion/addiction is an extreme attachment to Facebook that interferes with relationship functioning and other usual daily activities (Elphinston & Noller, 2011). Researchers assert that SNSs addiction is rising as a mental health problem and manifests itself as a functional impairment that is commonly seen in behavioral addictions such as euphoria, withdrawal, relapse, and reinstatement (Elphinston & Noller, 2011). Based on the biopsychosocial model (Griffiths, 2005), researchers contend that symptoms of addiction disorder are also common in social media addiction and can lead to the same side effects such as mood modification (changes in mood due to SNSs use), salience (preoccupation with SNSs), tolerance (more time on SNSs is required to get the same pleasure that was previously attained with less SNSs use), withdrawal symptoms (negative psychological symptoms surface when SNSs use is restricted), conflict (interpersonal problems resulting from SNSs use), and relapse (returning to excessive social media use after a period of abstinence).

SNSs addiction has negative implications on users’ lives including romantic relationship quality (for a review, see Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017a, 2017b). Evidence suggests that merely using SNSs interferes with romantic relationships and is linked to lower relationship satisfaction (Marshall, Bejanyan, Castro, & Lee, 2012; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). Moreover, high levels of SNSs use is significantly linked to physical and emotional infidelity, relationship dissatisfaction, low commitment, breakup, and a higher risk of divorce (Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013; Drouin, Miller, & Dibble, 2014; Gershon, 2010; Kerkhof, Finkenauer, & Muusses, 2011; Liu, Ho, & Lu, 2017; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011; Valenzuela, Halpern, & Katz, 2014). This link may be due to the availability of online potential alternative partners and the ease by which users are able to interact with them (e.g., Drouin et al., 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2014). However, relationship commitment curbs interest in alternatives because committed partners are likely to derogate potential partners, develop optimistic thoughts about their relationship and/or partner, and devalue others’ relationships (Rusbult, Agnew, & Ximena, 2011). Therefore, relationship commitment is an important factor in determining whether the coupledom will survive or not (Rusbult et al., 2011). Commitment is defined as a “willingness and determination to work through troubled times”
(Lauer & Lauer, 1986, p. 57) and is linked to relationship quality, stability, and breakup (Agnew, 2009). Many theories have explained the processes underlying marital commitment. The most popular extant theories of relationship commitment include the cohesiveness theory (Levinger, 1965), the interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), the investment model (Rusbult, 1980), and the tripartite typology (Johnson, 1991). The cohesiveness model (1965) holds that spouses continuously weigh attractions and rewards provided by the relationship, barriers that inhibit quitting the relationship, and alternatives to the primary relationship. Essentially, relationship persists if the outcomes are beneficial to the partners, barriers that inhibit quitting the relationship exert a stronger influence on the partners, and when romantic alternatives to the primary relationship are absent (Levinger, 1965).

The interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) advanced two concepts: Commitment to the romantic partner is strengthened when partners are satisfied with their relationship, and commitment is weakened when alternatives to the partner or relationship status are present (e.g., potential partners, preference to be single). Additionally, the investment model (Rusbult, 1980) highlighted the importance of investments made by partners to maintain their relationship. These investments include intrinsic and extrinsic resources. The intrinsic resources include time and effort, disclosure of personal details, experienced emotions, and importance of relationship linked to self-identity. The extrinsic resources include social status afforded by the relationship, mutual social connections, and material possessions offered by the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998). Naturally, these investments may be lost if the relationship ends (Rusbult et al., 2011); therefore, the fear of losing these investments influence the partners’ commitment to their relationship.

Furthermore, commitment to a partner inhibits individuals in a romantic relationship to take interest in an extradyadic relationship (Rusbult et al., 2011). Research also supports that merely thinking about online potential romantic alternatives decreases relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction with the current partner (Drouin et al., 2015). Highly committed partners tend to think and act in a pro-relationship manner and give off a sense of “we-ness” to the world (Rusbult et al., 2011). Whereas individuals who experience low commitment are prone to developing more interest in alternatives romantic relationship (Cravens & Whiting, 2014). This is supported by empirical evidence that suggests that relationship commitment has a more robust inverse connection with Facebook solicitation behaviors (accepting and sending friend requests from and to romantic alternatives) than the total number of Facebook friends (Drouin et al., 2014).

Now the question arises as to how does social media affects romantic relationships? SNSs use can influence the quality of romantic relationships by taking time away from one’s current partner. In this context, the time displacement hypothesis suggests that time is not elastic (Nie, 2001; Nie & Hillygus, 2002); thus, people who spend more time on the Internet also report spending less time with their family (Nie & Erbring, 2000). Furthermore, researchers have also explored the link between relationship quality and current exposure to media. They found that viewing media that portrays dream-like relationships may influence viewers’ perception of a perfect relationship (Reizer & Hetsonri, 2014), which makes them disillusioned with their primary relationship (Segrin & Nabi, 2002). The cultivation theory (originally put forwarded for television) might explain the process by which media affects romantic relationships (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Cultivation occurs when people view idyllic presentations of relationships on media and end up accepting or internalizing unrealistic norms, beliefs, and evaluations of their less-than-ideal relationship reality (Reizer & Hetsonri, 2014).

Additionally, previous research has found that age is a predictor of Facebook addiction and that younger population is at risk for addictive Facebook use (Blachnio, Przepiórka, & Pantic, 2015). In this study, we examined whether this relationship holds true for all SNSs (rather than just Facebook) and whether SNSs addiction is related to relationship commitment.
Hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1:** Age will be negatively related to the total number of SNSs accounts.

**Hypothesis 2:** Age will be negatively related to SNSs addiction.

**Hypothesis 3:** SNSs addiction will be negatively related to relationship commitment.

**Hypothesis 4:** The total number of accounts will be positively related to SNSs addiction.

Method

**Participants**

The sample included 252 partners (167 females, 85 males) between the ages of 18 and 73 years ($M = 28.27$, $SD = 12.02$). We included only participants who reported to be either married or in a committed relationship. The married participants were older ($M = 38.55$, $SD = 11.80$) than partners in a committed relationship ($M = 23.73$, $SD = 8.98$). In our sample, 50% (126) of the participants were married and 50% (126) were in a committed relationship. We excluded participants who reported a mental illness diagnosis to avoid confounding SNSs addiction with an addiction disorder. Most of our participants resided in the United States (82.1%). Our sample was from diverse ethnic background and included Whites (47.6%), Asian (26.6%), Hispanic (17.5%), African American (4.8%), Native American (2.4%), and miscellaneous others (1.2%). The participants were also diverse in their educational background. For example, 35.7% had a high school diploma, 18.3% an associate’s degree, 29.8% bachelor’s degree, 15.5% had a master’s degree, 0.4% a doctorate degree, and 0.4% a postdoctorate degree. In our sample, 25% of the participants had 1–3 accounts, 49.2% had 4–6 accounts, and 25.8% had more than 7 accounts.

**Procedure**

An institutional review board at a public university in the United States approved this study. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling; electronic messages containing a survey link were shared on the approving university research website, Facebook, LinkedIn, Amazon Turk, Twitter, and Whatsapp. The inclusionary criteria were being at least 18 years of age and having a heterosexual marital or committed romantic relationship. Once participants agreed to the terms of the research, they were directed to the main survey containing a battery of self-report scales.

**Measures**

**Demographic questionnaire.** The demographic questionnaire included a number of items assessing age, gender, relationship status, length of the relationship, ethnicity, education level, occupation, diagnosis of mental illness, and number and names of social media websites that the participants had signed up for.

**Commitment scale.** This study employed the 7-item relationship commitment subscale from the investment model (Rusbult et al., 1998) to measure commitment in romantic relationships. Participants identified their level of agreement with the statements on a 9-point Likert-type scale (0 = *do not agree at all*, 4 = *agree somewhat*, 8 = *agree completely*). Example items are “I want our relationship to last for a very long time” and “I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future.” Some items were reverse scored. The reliability of the commitment scale for this study was .80.
Modified Facebook intrusion questionnaire. We used the modified Facebook Intrusion Scale to measure Facebook addiction. Elphinston and Noller (2011) developed the original eight item scale to assess behavioral addiction components among Facebook users. These eight items measured the link between the tendency toward Facebook involvement and eight aspects of behavioral addiction such as cognitive salience, behavioral salience, euphoria, interpersonal conflict, conflict with other activities, withdrawal, relapse/reinstatement, and loss of control. Responses were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree), which are summed to indicate the level of addiction. We modified the Facebook Intrusion Scale to cover all SNSs. For this purpose, we substituted the word “Facebook” with “social media.” Example items are “I often think about social media when I am not using it” and “I feel connected to others when I use social media.” The reliability of the modified Facebook intrusion scale for this study was .83.

Results

Table 1 shows the Pearson’s correlation between the variables. The main variables of interest for the present study are age, the total number of accounts, SNSs addiction, and relationship commitment. Regression analyses were conducted to examine the variability in our dependent variables that are accounted by our predictor variable. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, age is negatively related to the total number of SNSs accounts, $F(1, 250) = 14.50, p < .001, R^2 = .05$. Younger participants report having more SNSs accounts. We find that as the age of the participants increased, the number of SNSs accounts significantly decreased; 5% of variability in the number of SNSs accounts is explained by age. Although the effect size is small, we report that 1-year increase in age is linked to .23 points decrease in the number of accounts. An age increase of approximately four years corresponds to a reduction of one SNSs account. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, age is also negatively related to SNSs addiction, $F(1, 250) = 10.31, p < .01, R^2 = .04$. Four percent of the variability in SNSs addiction is accounted by age. Essentially, one-year increase in age corresponds to a reduction in SNSs addiction score by .19 points. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, we found that SNSs addiction is significantly negatively related to relationship commitment, $F(1, 250) = 12.64, p < .001, R^2 = .05$. In other words, 5% of the variability in commitment score is accounted by SNSs addiction. For one-point increase in SNSs addiction, commitment decreases by .22 points. Even with a small effect size, we can see the inverse trend between SNSs addiction and relationship commitment. Finally, consistent with Hypothesis 4, we find that the total number of SNSs accounts is positively related to SNSs addiction, $F(1, 250) = 9.50, p < .01, R^2 = .03$. Three percent of the variability in SNSs addiction is accounted by the total number of SNSs accounts. For one SNSs account increase, SNSs addiction score increases by .19 points. Hence, individuals who have more SNSs accounts also report significantly higher SNSs addiction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. SNSs accounts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. SNSs intrusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>45.69</td>
<td>5.03</td>
<td>28.58</td>
<td>31.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>7.15</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>9.63</td>
<td>12.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 252$. Correlation is significant at the **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$. 

Discussion
Consistent with previous findings (Blachnio et al., 2015; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011), we found that age is negatively related to SNSs addiction. We additionally found that age is negatively related to the total number of SNSs accounts. Younger people had more SNSs accounts, which may be the underlying cause of their tendency towards SNSs addiction. SNSs addiction scores also predicted variability in commitment scores. It is noteworthy that the commitment scores of the married participants were higher ($M = 46.73, SD = 6.11$) than the committed partners ($M = 44.65, SD = 7.94$); albeit, the SNSs addiction scores were not significantly different. Moreover, partners in a committed relationship reported more SNSs accounts ($M = 5.12, SD = 1.97$) than did married partners ($M = 4.93, SD = 2.10$). Furthermore, participants who reported higher SNSs addiction scores also reported significantly more SNSs accounts. This finding that higher number of SNSs accounts is related to low commitment could be because an increased number of SNSs accounts may expose users to more online friends. Therefore, the susceptibility of time and emotional investments with the extra-dyadic partner(s) increase with an increase in the total number of SNSs accounts.

Furthermore, increased TV consumption is inversely related to relationship satisfaction (Holmes & Johnson, 2011). On the same line, this study also found that SNSs addiction is inversely related to relationship commitment. As mentioned earlier, presence of alternatives weakens relationship commitment (interdependence theory), and people use social media to connect with alternative romantic partners (Drouin et al., 2014). This study extends the previous findings and suggest that the perception of an ideal partner or an ideal relationship portrayed on social media may lead partners to negatively evaluate their own partner or relationship and decreases their relationship commitment. By linking an increased SNSs use with low relationship commitment, this study finds support that the cultivation theory may also hold true for all social media and not just TV. It is notable that we did not measure SNSs monitoring or solicitation behaviors; therefore, we cannot conclude that the participants’ low commitment scores were due to engaging in interpersonal communication with potential romantic alternatives. Nevertheless, previous researchers have found that relationship commitment is inversely related to behaviors such as soliciting potential romantic alternatives on social media (Drouin et al., 2014). It is therefore plausible from previous and the present research that taking interest in online alternatives may be the root cause of decrease in relationship commitment.

Furthermore, our finding that SNSs addiction and commitment are significantly negatively related is consistent with the time displacement hypothesis. Time is nonexpandable; therefore, time spent with online friends/alternatives is traded off with the time that individuals could have invested with their significant other. Theoretically, it is this lack of an intrinsic investment of time with the primary partner, which may lead to lower relationship commitment (investment model).

Implications
This study has implications for researchers, therapists, and educators. Researchers can gain insight from this study and develop age-appropriate SNSs that would limit the amount of time young users could spend online. SNSs developers could develop applications with built-in mechanisms that would limit the number of SNSs accounts an individual can sign up for. More importantly, educating users about the adverse effects of SNSs addiction is crucial. Informed users can sign up for programs to track the amount of time they spend on SNSs daily. Also, customized notifications can remind users when they spend more than previously decided time on SNSs. Acknowledging that online social communications are prone to be uninhibited, school counselors and therapists can assist partners in setting up boundaries around SNSs use. In this context, researchers have coined the term “nettiquette” to refer to online interaction rules (spoken/unspoken) about acceptable or
unacceptable online behaviors (Helsper & Whitty, 2010). It is crucial to understand that online interpersonal communications can lead to jealousy, conflict, and suspicion in a romantic relationship (Muise et al., 2009). Even apparent innocuous messages between potential alternatives can easily develop into flirtation and could lead users to uncover their deepest intimate thoughts and desires (Carter, 2015). These communications can eventually lead to emotional infidelity (Clayton et al., 2013; Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Valenzuela et al., 2014). It is noteworthy that the present study found that younger people had a greater number of SNSs accounts, which was also positively linked to their SNSs addiction scores. Considering these findings, counselors should identify the population at risk for SNSs addiction and educate them to be wary of the factors that could increase their vulnerability in an online environment. Finally, counselors can devise effective treatment plans to combat adverse romantic relationship outcomes.

Limitations and Future Directions
Results from the present research should be interpreted considering the limitations of the study. This study was based on a cross-sectional design; therefore, causal inferences cannot be made from our study. Unknown causal mechanisms may be at work in the association between the study variables. We used self-report scales, which are considered less reliable. Moreover, we did not match our participants with their partners, Therefore our findings are based on the actor effect (effect of self on the relationship) and not the partner effect. Furthermore, results from this study cannot be generalized to individuals who are not in a heterosexual relationship. Our non-heterosexual population sample was less than 1%; therefore, to reduce the sexual orientation confound, we only included heterosexual participants. Moreover, the results from this study cannot be applied to individuals who are casually dating because our sample included only those who were either married or were committed to a partner. Furthermore, these results cannot be generalized to people with a diagnosis of mental illness; we excluded participants who reported to have a mental illness diagnosis. It is noteworthy that diagnoses such as obsessive-compulsive disorder or any of the behavioral addiction disorders could have potentially confounded the present findings. Lastly, we did not assess the underlying reasons for SNSs use, which can be manifold. Future studies can measure SNSs use motivations and examine whether SNSs addiction is related to unique actions taken during alternative monitoring. Despite these limitations, this study found support for the cultivation theory in the context of SNSs. Finally, this study not only confirmed earlier findings that Facebook addiction is related to low relationship commitment but also extended these results to be true for all SNSs and not just Facebook.

Authors' Note
The data used for this study can be requested by e-mailing the author at irum.abbasi@gmail.com

Acknowledgments
The author wishes to acknowledge the continued support and mentorship of Drs. Georgia Sadler (UCSD) and Vanessa MalCarne (SDSU).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
References


