Title: The Dark Side of Social Networking Sites (SNSs): Understanding the Role of SNS Characteristics in the Formation of SNS Addiction

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Date/Time: 13 November 2015, Friday, 03:30 PM to 05:00 PM
Venue: SR8, COM1-02-08
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Abstract:

Social networking sites (SNSs) have become an important tool for individuals to interact with each other. A lot of statistics indicate that, beyond simply adopting SNSs, a large number of people have used them frequently, sometimes even excessively. In order to prevent the negative consequences caused by excessive SNS usage, we investigate the formation of SNS addiction. We adapt incentive sensitization theory from drug addiction literature to show that the transition from habitual to addictive SNS usage involves a process of neural sensitization in the brain systems. However, different from drug-induced sensitization which is activated when individuals consume sufficient doses of drugs, behavior-induced sensitization can be activated only when the behavior is psychologically and/or physiologically rewarding. We compare the use of SNSs with other online activities, and find that social network characteristics (i.e., number of online friends and activeness of online friends) and communication characteristics (i.e., communication channel and communication content format) moderate the transition from habitual to addictive SNS use. We empirically tested our research model on a large and unique dataset. Unlike past studies that used self-reported surveys to examine addiction and habit, novel behavioral measures were developed to diagnose SNS addiction and SNS use habit based on real SNS activity data in our study. In order to demonstrate the validity of these new behavioral measures, we first conducted a pilot study to show that the behavioral measures of SNS addiction and SNS use habit were consistent with the cognitive measures of these constructs. Based on the results of the pilot study, we selected the best behavioral indicator, which can capture most of the core behavioral symptoms of SNS addiction, to examine the research model in the main analysis. The results of the main analysis provide strong evidence that social network characteristics and communication characteristics moderate the transition from SNS use habit to SNS addiction.