

# The Effects of Human Behaviour and Personality on Social Networking Usage

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## ABSTRACT

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Online social networking is one of the many social developments brought about by the Internet and Web 2.0, and has made its way into the status quo for modern-day socialization. With this development has come many fundamental changes to the way people communicate with each other. Thus, I believe it is important to examine the practical effects that this shift towards online communication has generated. In this paper, I discuss the relationship between social networking usage and certain aspects of personality. I also argue that, compared to face-to-face communication methods, online social networking services offer a variety of unique opportunities to individuals who exhibit high levels of introversion, neuroticism or both. I begin by laying down the specific definitions of the keywords "social networking", "introversion" and "neuroticism" that the paper will refer to, followed by a brief outline of my argument and what I expect to find from my research. Finally, drawing from other papers relevant to the subject of my argument, I compare my expectations and analyze how they align with these prior studies on the topic.

## KEYWORDS

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Online Communication, Social Networking Services, Personality, Introversion, Neuroticism

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The Internet has had an undeniable effect on modern society. It has revolutionized the way people go about daily life on an almost fundamental level. One of the many facets of modern life that it has redefined is that of social interaction. While this initially started with online discussion boards, forums and internet relay chats (IRCs), the advent of Web 2.0 has introduced many new social avenues to internet users; these include blogs, online video games and, more relevant to the topic of this paper, social networking services.

Online social networking, at its most basic level, involves the use of the Internet to interact and communicate with others. A highly important distinction to make is that while they are often collated into and treated as a single idea, online social networking is, in fact, an entity separate to social media. Social media generally refers to the usage of the Internet to create and share content, rather than being concerned specifically with the communicative aspect, as with online social networking (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Although there is some conjecture that online social networking is showing signs of a slight decline in casual usage in favour of social media, it is still an extremely important part of both the Internet and the lives of many. Indeed, the social networking giant Facebook claims to have had an average of 1.4 billion active daily users in December 2017 (Facebook, 2018). These numbers alone demonstrate that social networking remains a prominent part of the modern world, and is not likely to leave our lives soon. Its use is extremely diverse, extending beyond being solely personal in nature to incorporate the business space and everything in between.

Even more diverse than the application of social networking, however, is perhaps the demographic of its user base. Social networking is a global phenomenon, appealing to people all around the world. It accommodates a wide variety of races, genders, cultures, social classes and personalities. This paper will be specifically examining the behavioural aspect of social networking, looking at its usage by people of different behavioural identities; especially those with a high level of perceived neuroticism or introversion. While social networking has something to offer almost anyone, I contend that frequent use of social networking services has a greater potential to impact the lives of individuals with high levels of neuroticism and introversion.

The purpose of this paper is, foremost, to develop a better understanding of both the influence of social networking services, such as Facebook, and the methods of social interaction employed by individuals characterized by strong levels of neuroticism, introversion or both. This will be accomplished in three main stages. To begin, I will lay down the paper's boundaries. This will include the main scope of the paper, such as a description of the type of individuals that it is concerned with, and specific definitions of what exactly is meant by key terms such as "social networking services", "introversion" and "neuroticism". Using these definitions, I will briefly elaborate on the reasoning behind my argument, noting the results I expect to see from subsequent research and why I expect to see them. Once a proper framework for the paper has been set, I will attempt to support my reasoning with proper research and the provision of relevant studies, tying them into the main subject of my argument; whether or not the use of various social networking sites provides unique opportunities for introverted and neurotic individuals.

The concept central to this argument is that of online social networking. Online social networking is a significant development made possible by the inception of Web 2.0. Despite its extensive appearance in modern culture and academic literature, it is still difficult to ascertain a single definition. Adamic and Adar (2005) described the phenomenon of social networking services (SNSs) as services that are capable of gathering and processing information on users' social contacts in order to generate a large network of users, linked together by their public social connections. An alternate view is offered by boyd and Ellison (2007), who defined them as web-based services where users can create public or semi-public profiles, connect with other users who possess some relevancy to them and inspect the social connections of both themselves and others within the system. This paper will be written in the context of an amalgamation of these two definitions: I will be treating social networking services as web-based services that provide users with the space and tools to create public or semi-public profiles, through which they can form, view and maintain social connections with others in the system, ultimately building up a large network of profiles linked by these social connections. Additionally, while the somewhat related idea of social media does present its own interesting set of implications on the topic of this paper, it will remain outside of the scope being covered.

The next ambiguity that I shall attempt to make clear is who the exact target group of this paper is. To answer this, precise definitions of the terms "neuroticism" and "introversion" will be provided. Disregarding any implications or direct effects of introversion, an introvert is generally described as one who simply exhibits low levels of extraversion. In other, non-circular words, introversion may be characterized rather succinctly by one's tendency to avoid frequent social situations, as well as a high sensitivity to social and even possibly sensory stimuli (Aron & Aron, 1997; Costa & McCrae, 1980). Neuroticism – not to be confused with neurosis – is, on the other hand, more difficult to provide a definition for, as there is still very little consensus on what exactly it implies. H. J. Eysenck and M. W. Eysenck defined it in 1985 as a tendency to respond more quickly when subject to stimulation, as well as a tendency for this arousal to decay more slowly. Costa and McCrae also offered another similar but unique view, defining it as a measure of one's emotional instability and tendency towards negative emotionality (as cited in Ormel, Riese & Rosmalen, 2011). For the sake of brevity, this paper will be aligning itself with the latter definition by Costa and McCrae.

Originally described by Wiggins (1968) as the "Big Two" dimensions of personality, extraversion (and, consequently, its inverse, introversion) and neuroticism remain highly important factors in one's expression of self, according to modern personality theory. Given the prominence and influence of these two personality domains on one's engagement in social activities and interaction, it is not surprising that they seem to be among the most significant determinants of social networking usage with regards to personality (Ross et al., 2009). Thus, I argue that it is not unwarranted to attempt to extrapolate information and possible implications regarding social networking experience from the intensity of these two traits. Specifically, I contend that there are two major divisions of social networking experiences that are affected by these traits. Following this paragraph will be a brief overview of my thoughts on this subject and some conjectural reasoning behind it, which will be examined more rigorously afterwards.

My first expectation is that these kinds of individuals are more likely to disclose information about themselves online and self-identify with the version of themselves that they express over social networks rather than the self that they publicly show offline. Expanding on this idea, I will argue that individuals who are introverted, neurotic or both may be more inclined to form stronger interpersonal bonds over the Internet than in real life.

My second supposition regarding the impact that I contend the aforementioned behaviours have on social networking experiences and usage is that those who possess low self-esteem – typically associated with high neuroticism – or frequently experience some type of shyness – thought to be associated with high neuroticism and often introversion (Jones, Schulkin & Schmidt, 2014) – are likely to find social networking more appealing than traditional, face-to-face communication and socialization techniques, at least when compared to those who do not exhibit these traits. This assumption bases itself upon the anonymous nature of the medium, as well as on its non-committal nature, which gives users the ability to participate at their own pace and stop whenever they desire. One issue that still remains, however, is the potential for condemnatory or otherwise negative reception online. A particularly relevant instance of the effects of neuroticism is that of one's self-esteem. Low self-esteem is a trait associated with neurotic individuals (Judge, Erez, Bono & Thoresen, 2002). In the context of social situations, it often embodies itself as a greater sensitivity to or fear of rejection, or an expectation of criticism. Despite the problem still inevitably remaining online, I would assert that the anonymity that social networking services afford their users provides an appealing buffer to this kind of reception, potentially making these services more approachable.

The effects of behaviour on social networking seems to be an extremely prominent area of research, and thus there have been plenty of studies on topics related to the topic of this paper. Of particular relevance, especially to my first claim, is a study conducted by Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel and Fox (2002) that endeavours to determine any possible connection between the personality of social Internet users and how they both present themselves and identify with this sense of self over the Internet, compared to face-to-face interaction. As expected, a positive correlation was found between introverts and neurotic individuals and the revealing of a more accurate form of self over the Internet (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel & Fox, 2002). Issues with this study, however, lie both in its age and the fact that it does not specifically seem to concern social networking. In fact, this study even seems to predate the emergence of the first service to be considered a form of social networking, Friendster, founded on the 22nd of March, 2002. While these initial results do show promise, further research into this area seems to be required.

Continuing this research somewhat, Ryan and Xenos (2011) conducted a study on the relationship between Facebook usage and "Big Five" personality model results; that is, the individual's perceived concentration of the following five personality factors: "openness to experience", "conscientiousness", "extraversion", "agreeableness" and "neuroticism". Ryan and Xenos noted that, while previous research seemed to indicate a positive correlation between shyness and frequency of social networking usage, how they actually used the medium had not been taken into account, leading to potentially misleading results. Indeed, their findings indicated that shy users were, in fact, no more or less likely to spend more time on social networking than other users. There was, however, a correlation with extraversion. According to their study, extraverted people appear to use social networking more frequently than introverted people (Ryan & Xenos, 2011). This does make sense, as extraverted people are typically more engaged by social interaction, and possibly see social networking as an addition or "extension" to other types of socialization. Another interesting statistic was that neurotic individuals were more likely to use Facebook's "Wall" feature. This supports the idea that neurotic individuals prefer asynchronous forms of communication over synchronous or "live" communication (Ross et al., 2009; Ryan & Xenos, 2011). However, I argue that a key detail with these results is that they seem to be specifically based on the frequency of social networking usage rather than reporting user preference with regards to offline interaction. Introverted users socializing less than extraverted users almost seems like a given; what is important to this paper is whether or not they are more inclined to use it as a replacement for other, more traditional forms of communication, compared to their extraverted peers.

With this, we can finally examine a study conducted by Sheeks and Birchmeier (2007). Their research seems to indicate a positive correlation between usage of computer-mediated communication and both shy individuals (Sheeks and Birchmeier, 2007). Of note is that the definition of shyness that was used in their study seems to overlap significantly with the definition of introversion provided earlier in this paper, to the point where both traits appear to have been considered closely related, if not one in the same, for the sake of the study. However, I do not believe this makes the study any less relevant to this paper. Their research ultimately concludes that these types of users, who generally tend to struggle to engage in meaningful social situations, are more likely to find online social experiences more approachable and even more rewarding. In addition, it draws an interesting parallel between these kinds of individuals and individuals who exhibit high sociability. Individuals who showed a tendency towards at least one of these traits seemed more satisfied with computer-mediated communication.

In the case of shy users, it was also observed that they are indeed more inclined to display their "true-selves" over the Internet as opposed to face-to-face interaction. The idea of a "true-self" stems from the idea that an individual has two modes of self: their "actual self", describing the version of one's self that is normally portrayed during social interaction and their "true-self", describing the version of one's self that they believe accurately portrays their true personal characteristics. The ability to reveal one's so-called "true-self" has been found to enable the forging of stronger interpersonal relationships (as cited in Sheeks and Birchmeier, 2007). This would seem to indicate that individuals who exhibit introversion, neuroticism or both may be equipped to reap unique benefits from online communication mediums, such as social networking, the most prominent method of communication on the modern internet.

As is apparent, social networking has revolutionized the ways in which people communicate, opening up a plethora of new ways for them to socialize. Contrary to what one might initially expect, these new opportunities are not limited to those who are outgoing and sociable. In fact, I argue that individuals who possess introverted or neurotic personality traits are just as capable of benefiting from these digital technologies. The two traits are both typically characterized by the experience of inhibitions that make social interaction difficult. The Internet, however, provides them with a place where they are much freer to express themselves without fear of social consequences. Using social networking and other forms of online communication, these individuals can find some respite from many of the things that cause these inhibitions.

Initial research on this subject also appears to suggest that this is the case. There is evidence in favour of the claim that individuals with introverted or neurotic personality traits are not just more inclined to prefer online communication methods, but to benefit more from them as well, giving them the opportunity to form stronger interpersonal bonds than they would otherwise be capable of or comfortable with forming. While the total evidence remains under debate and is far from conclusive, with further research definitely being required, I believe it holds important implications. Social networking has an undeniable potential to be able to help those who need it most.



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