

Online life: between inverse instrumentality and functional organs

Introduction

We shall all agree that Internet dramatically changed the world where we live: it cut distances and caused a revolution in the way we communicate, work deal with our daily life. By doing so Internet shaped our mindset, thus who we are, as Sherry Turkle points out in her TED talk.¹ It became therefore a major challenge of scholars gaining an understanding of how people behave when accessing the Internet and how they are affected by its usage. We propose here a new framework to study psychological aspects related to the Internet. Before doing so the current approaches will be discussed.

Most of the studies dealing with the effects of Internet usage point out the risks associated to it. Well known is the concept of Internet Addiction. Firstly introduced by Young,² this type of addiction is compared to other such as gambling, drug and alcohol because of the symptoms of withdrawal and loss of control that it entails. The problem gained the attention of scholars and practitioners, who strived to find both psychological and pharmacological treatments to it.³ Some other professionals approach the phenomenon as a Problematic Internet Use.⁴ Such concept broadens the issue to a usage of Internet that negatively interferes with one's offline life.⁵ Both the so far-mentioned approaches mean the Internet as a potential danger. The researches that are based on this theoretical assumption aim to find what variables would increase the likelihood of developing a dysfunctional usage of Internet. Low self-esteem,⁶ loneliness⁷ and low Extraversion⁸ have been identified among these factors.

While most of the scholars dealing with <the psychology of Internet> embrace the above reported perspective, good deals of researches are based on a positive-technology approach. That is, the Web is deemed as a resource and the main research question becomes: what positive consequences does the usage of Internet lead to? A team of Dutch researchers found, in a sample of adolescents, that receiving positive feedbacks in social networking sites increases self-esteem.⁹ Such finding was confirmed in a sample of Chinese and Taiwanese students¹⁰ suggesting that the evidence holds cross-culturally. Besides enhancing self-esteem, Internet has been found to serve as a facilitator to create and maintain bridging and bonding social capital.^{11,12}

Thus, it is necessary to build a theoretical framework that goes beyond the dualism Internet as a risk/as a resource and puts together such perspectives. On one hand we believe that Internet cannot be meant as a risk neglecting its functional potential. On the other hand the approach of questioning to whom Internet is a risk should be adopted when meaning the Web as a resource: under what conditions is it more likely to provide an enhance in self-esteem, to facilitate the creation/maintenance of social capital...? In order to address such issues we propose a theoretical framework that interprets Internet usage as continuum whose extremes are functional organ and inverse instrumentality. As a functional organ Internet is a tool that boosts human possibilities and helps achieving scopes.¹³ Drawing on Ekbia and Nardi's¹⁴ inverse instrumentality we further suggest that the user may lose control over the tool and become himself the object of the usage. The main research question that this theoretical framework

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leads to is: what factors/conditions incline the user towards the functional organ/inverse instrumentality conditions?

Discussion

In the light of the approach that we propose, finding the elements that play an important role in determining the type of usage that the person makes of the Internet would be not only useful to buffer the risks associated to the Web, but would be necessary to enhance the positive consequences of Internet usage. According to the results of first research we conducted adopting the functional organ/inverse instrumentality framework, some of the key factors to act on to improve internet usage would be self-esteem, self-control, mindfulness and social support.

The same study provides an answer to an open debate about the phenomenon of social enhancement vs social compensation in Internet land. Zwynca and Danowksi¹⁵ pointed out that people with more developed social networks in their offline life tend to grow greater ones also in Internet (social enhancement) and that people who have weaker social networks compensate for it in the Web (social compensation). Kuss and Griffiths¹⁶ call for a better understanding of the issue and suggest that both phenomena may lead to develop a dysfunctional Internet use, since both mechanisms would lead the users to make a more and more intensive usage of the Web. By contrast, our results suggest that while social compensation may indeed lead to develop an inverse instrumentality, social enhancement may be one mechanism leading to an usage of Internet as functional organ. Namely, we found a moderation of offline social support on the relationship between online social support and Problematic Internet Usage such that the former increases the latter only for low levels of offline social support. When offline social support is high, an increase in online social support decreases Problematic Internet Usage.

These preliminary findings come from a study that used the construct of Problematic Internet Use to assess the usage that is made of internet, associating low and high scores on the scales to functional organ and to inverse instrumentality, respectively. The choice of adopting one single scale comes from conceiving the two types of Internet usage as extremes of the same continuum. The methodological debate is open whether to build up two different scales to assess the two conditions.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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