Who commits virtual identity suicide?
Differences in privacy concerns, Internet addiction, and personality between Facebook users and quitters

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Introduction

In the last decade, the Internet has been seamlessly integrated into many routines of our daily lives, constituting a place, where people meet and interact. This socializing process through the Internet has been termed Web 2.0 and is strongly associated with new forms of Internet applications also called social networking sites (SNS; McGee & Begg, 2008; O’Reilly, 2005). Facebook, as one of the leading social networking sites, has meanwhile attracted more than 500 million users worldwide – a number that is still rising.

Recently, however, a counter-movement of users formed deciding to leave social networks by quitting their accounts (i.e., committing a so-called virtual identity suicide). A manifestation of this counter-movement was the website of the online initiative Quit Facebook Day (see Figure 1). On this website, Facebook users had the possibility to announce their intention to delete their account on May 31, 2010 which was declared the Quit Facebook Day. The website also had a blog, giving users the possibility to discuss the topic or to post their successful deletion of their Facebook account. We posted a short invitation for participation in regular time intervals on that blog in order to recruit virtual identity suicides.

Facebook users. Regular Facebook users (n = 321; 70.5% female) were on average 31.0 years old (SD = 11.3, range 11–75 years). Our primary source was the website of the online initiative Quit Facebook Day (see Figure 1). On this website, Facebook users had the possibility to announce their intention to delete their account on May 31, 2010 which was declared the Quit Facebook Day. The website also had a blog, giving users the possibility to discuss the topic or to post their successful deletion of their Facebook account. We posted a short invitation for participation in regular time intervals on that blog in order to recruit virtual identity suicides.

Method

In order to investigate whether Facebook quitters differ from Facebook users, we conducted a large-scale online study and examined privacy concerns (Privacy Concern Scale; PCS: Buchanan, Paine, Joinson, & Reips, 2007), Internet addiction scores (Internet Addiction Test; IA-T: Young, 1998), and personality (Mini International Personality Item Pool personality measure; Mini IPIP: Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006) in both groups. Furthermore, we directly asked Facebook quitters for their reasons for leaving Facebook.

Facebook quitters. Quitters (n = 310; 71.5% male) were on average 31.0 years old (SD = 11.3, range 11–75 years). Our primary source was the website of the online initiative Quit Facebook Day (see Figure 1). On this website, Facebook users had the possibility to announce their intention to delete their account on May 31, 2010 which was declared the Quit Facebook Day. The website also had a blog, giving users the possibility to discuss the topic or to post their successful deletion of their Facebook account. We posted a short invitation for participation in regular time intervals on that blog in order to recruit virtual identity suicides.

Results

Facebook quitters were older and included more men than the sample of Facebook users. To account for this, we used two-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) controlling for sex and age (Table 1). Key findings from this series of analyses included that Facebook quitters had significantly higher general concerns about privacy, higher Internet addiction scores, and were more conscientious than Facebook users (Table 1). Effect sizes for privacy concern were small to medium, whereas effects for Internet addiction and conscientiousness were small.

Table 1. Adjusted means and results of a two-way ANCOVA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>M şaitter</th>
<th>M usuário</th>
<th>F [1, 617]</th>
<th>Cohen’s d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Privacy</td>
<td>18.4 (6.17)</td>
<td>16.3 (6.06)</td>
<td>18.34***</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet addiction</td>
<td>44.8 (16.24)</td>
<td>41.2 (15.90)</td>
<td>7.56***</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>3.2 (1.07)</td>
<td>3.2 (1.05)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>3.9 (0.88)</td>
<td>3.9 (0.86)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>3.2 (0.96)</td>
<td>3.1 (0.94)</td>
<td>3.72*</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>2.7 (0.92)</td>
<td>2.7 (0.91)</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>4.1 (0.90)</td>
<td>4.0 (0.88)</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. M = adjusted means controlled for different sample composition (age, sex). Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviations.

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Furthermore, a qualitative analysis of the reasons for quitting Facebook was conducted. We allowed for the possibility that each participant’s written statement could be classified into more than one category. This resulted in 465 coded single statements. Reasons for quitting Facebook were mainly privacy concerns (49.0%), followed by a general disaffection with Facebook (12.5%), negative aspects of online friends (10.3%), and the feeling of getting addicted to Facebook (7.2%; other/unspecified, 20.6%).

Discussion

The present research is the first to focus on psychological characteristics of individuals leaving social network sites (SNSs) by committing so-called virtual identity suicide on Facebook. The typical Facebook quitter in our sample can be characterized as male and in his early 30s. He is more concerned about his privacy and uses the Internet more frequently than Facebook users (but both groups have already slightly higher Internet addiction values than found in other samples). Because he is more conscientious than the average Facebook user, he might weigh privacy concerns more heavily than the benefits of Facebook (e.g., communication opportunities offered by Facebook). Furthermore, he might want to reduce his online time (particularly on Facebook) which might eventually lead him to quit his Facebook account.

References


Figure 1. Screenshot taken from www.quitfacebookday.com

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