



Mothers' Social Media Dependence and Children's Behavioral Problems: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Social media sites have provided facilities. However, these networks have also been associated with adverse effects including social media addiction. The present study explored the effects of mothers' social media addiction on marital satisfaction.

Methods: This qualitative study was conducted based on the grounded theory and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The research sample consisted of mothers who completed the Social Media Harmful Use Scale and were dependent on social networks. The participants in the research sample were selected using purposive sampling.

Results: The collected data were analyzed using theoretical coding including open, axial, and selective coding. Accordingly, 4 main categories, 9 subcategories, and 34 themes were identified in the data. The results of the study showed that the dependence on social media is the core category in this study. Other categories included the interference of the use of social media with the relationships with family members, the quality of the relationship with family members (spouse and child), and children's behavioral problems (externalizing problems, internalizing problems, and communication problems).

Conclusion: The present study showed that the mothers' dependence on social media is associated with low marital satisfaction as well as an adverse relationship with their husband and children, which is related to their children's behavioral problems. According to the findings, dependence on social media paves the way for problems such as interference of the use of social media with the relationship with the spouse and children, the quality of the relationships, and children's behavioral problems.

Keywords: Addiction, Social media, Marital satisfaction, Children, Behavioral problems

Introduction

Social network sites including Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, etc. are used by

many people in the world today and have been considerably expanded (1). Despite the services provided by these networks in the field of information and communication

facilities, they have also created some problems (2) such as the facilitation of communication with the opposite sex, violation of privacy, the spread of prostitution and promiscuity, pornography, and threats to the foundation of the family (3). One of the most prominent of these harms is social media addiction, which has led to the extreme and obsessive use of Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, Viber, Line, and other social media. This has led to interpersonal problems and disruption in the family, vocational and educational functions, behavioral and personality disorders, social media dependence, and disregard for other aspects of life that have the following symptoms: preoccupation with social media (salience), the use of social media to reduce negative emotions (mood modification), use of social media more and more to get pleasure from it (tolerance), the occurrence of distress in the case of being prohibited from using social media (withdrawal symptoms), the occurrence of interpersonal and internal conflicts in the individual due to the use of social networks (conflict), frequent relapse to previous patterns of behavior after quitting, and attempts to control social media use and failure (4). The use of social media sites reduces communication between family members (5,6) and leads to the husband and wife's neglect for each other (7), disagreements between couples (8), increased extramarital relationships (9-11), increased divorce (12,13), and decreased marital satisfaction (7,12-14). Marital satisfaction means the subjective experience of personal satisfaction with marital relationships and having a good feeling of marriage and its desirability (15). It should be noted that the relationship between the use of social media and marital satisfaction is a two-way relationship, implying that low marital satisfaction causes a person to resort to the harmful use of social media and also the excessive use of social

media leads to decreased marital satisfaction (16). According to Engfer's spillover hypothesis (17), marital problems can be transferred to parenting and the mother-child relationship, affecting the parenting style that develops during mother-child interaction (18,19). Low quality of mother-child relationships can in some cases lead to behavioral problems in children (20). Children's behavioral problems are divided into two categories: Externalizing problems such as acting out, belligerency, disobedience, and law-breaking and aggressive behaviors, and internalizing problems such as isolation, depression, anxiety, and physical complaints (21). According to research, the parent-child relationship plays a mediating role in marital satisfaction and children's behavioral problems (22). In general, it can be suggested that social media addiction causes problems in life (23). The more the addicted person is involved in the harmful use of social media, the more he/she distances from family activities, and this negatively affects the family system (24). Generally, women are more likely to use social media and spend more time on these networks (1). A qualitative study conducted based on the grounded theory showed that the overuse of social media by parents and the resulting conflicts between them cause a disturbed and stressful atmosphere in the family leading to emotional and behavioral problems in children. Besides, the excessive engagement of parents in using social media makes them not have enough time to take care of their children, pay attention to them, and do joint activities with them. Accordingly, the overuse of social media and social media addiction can have adverse effects on the foundation of the family, one of them being conflicts between couples that not only affects the relationship between couples but also spreads to the whole family and affects other family relationships including the

mother-child relationship, which is the most fundamental relationship for the child. Marital dissatisfaction and disputes harm the mother's parenting style and cause the quality of the mother-child relationship to deteriorate. This adverse relationship between the mother and child eventually leads to emotional and behavioral problems in children (25). Given that no study has examined the role of marital satisfaction and the relationship between the mother and the child concerning the harmful use of social media sites by mothers of children with behavioral problems, there is a need to investigate this issue and shed light on it. The present study seeks to explore the effects of social media dependence on marital relationships, mother-child relationships, and children's behavioral problems. To this end, a qualitative research method based on the grounded theory paradigm was used. The grounded theory is a type of qualitative research tradition that explains causal relationships between concepts and variables (26).

Methods

The present study was conducted using a qualitative research method based on grounded theory. The research sample included mothers of children aged 3 to 7 years who, according to their own statements, had social media dependence and acknowledged that this dependence interfered with establishing relationships with their family members and the performance of their duties. The participants were selected using purposive sampling from among mothers visiting public places such as parks, cultural centers, and community centers in Tehran and they completed the Social Media Harmful Use Scale. The inclusion criteria were being married and scoring above 60 on the Social Media

Harmful Use Scale. The age of the mothers who participated in this study ranged from 27 to 45 years and their level of education varied from high school diploma to Ph.D. degree. Besides, most of the interviewees were housewives. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. After obtaining the participants' consent, they were interviewed. Each interview lasted about 45 to 60 minutes and the interviews were voice-recorded. The audio files of the interviews were then transcribed carefully. The interview questions were related to the type of use of social media, the hours spent on these networks, the relationship with the husband and child, and the satisfaction with their relationships, and children's behavioral problems. Examples of the questions asked from the participants are as follows: Does the use of social media interfere with your maternal and marital duties? Do your husband and children complain that you are too busy using social media? Do you consider yourself a social media user who overuses such networks? The sample size was saturated with 17 people. The collected data were analyzed using theoretical coding including open, axial, and selective coding proposed by Strauss and Corbin (32). In open coding, the statements made by the participants in the interviews were first read carefully and a theme was assigned to each statement. In the next stage, axial coding, the themes were divided into main categories and subcategories. In the final stage, selective coding, a couple of important categories related to a core category was selected from the identified categories. Credibility was used as a criterion to increase the internal validity of the data collected from the interview transcripts. Credibility means returning the data to the interviewees for verification (26). The interview transcripts and the researcher's perceptions were

returned to the participants in the interview and confirmed by them. To increase the internal validity of the data, the agreeableness criterion was also used. To this end, the extracted themes and categories were kept with the researcher and the interview transcripts were provided to 4 experts to be coded by them to determine the similarities between the themes and categories extracted by the researcher and those extracted by the experts. After the codification of the data by these researchers, there were many similarities between the themes and categories extracted by the experts and the themes and categories extracted by the researcher. The confirmability of the data was determined through continuous engagement with the research problem and the collected data. To this end, all the steps taken in this study including the procedure and the data collection and analysis processes were carefully recorded and a report on the research procedure was presented. It should be noted that to check the dependability of the data, the researchers recorded all events and the decisions and choices made by them concerning the theories, methods, and analysis in a notebook. Besides, a step-by-step procedure was taken to draw conclusions from the data. Moreover, to determine the dependence of mothers on social media, the Social Media Harmful Use Scale was used. The scale was developed by the researcher by surveying experts and professors and reviewing the literature.

The Social Media Harmful Use Scale

This scale was developed by the researcher based on a review of the literature in this field. The scale is a self-report tool to determine the harmful use of social media by mothers. In the initial phase, the questionnaire with 33 items was administered on a sample of 64 mothers. Besides, in the exploratory analysis factor stage, the oblimin rotation was used, and in the final stage, two factors,

i.e. social networks dependence and high-risk behavior in social networks, were obtained. Each item in the scale is scored using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Very often .

Ethical considerations

The present study was conducted following ethical principles and taking into account the participants' rights. To this end, after recording the participants' voices and transcribing the interviews, the audio files of the interviews were deleted and the manuscripts were only available to the researcher. Besides, to comply with ethical standards, unreal names were used for the participants in transcribing the interviews and analyzing the data.

Result

This section presents the results of qualitative data analysis. The collected data were analyzed using theoretical. Coding including open, axial, and selective coding, and 4 main categories, 9 subcategories, and 34 themes were extracted from the data. The main categories were dependence on social media, the interference of the use of social media with the relationships with family members, the quality of the relationship with family members, and children's behavioral problems. The identified subcategories were main symptoms of social media dependence, secondary symptoms of social media dependence, the interference of the use of social media with the relationships with the spouse, the interference of the use of social media with the relationships with the child, the quality of the relationship with the spouse, the quality of the relationship with the child, externalizing problems, internalizing problems, and communication problems. Table 1 presents a summary of the results of open and axial coding.

Table 1 .Themes, subcategories, and main categories extracted from open and axial coding

Main categories	Subcategories	Themes
Dependence on social media	Main symptoms of social media dependence	Overuse of social networks Additional efforts to control social media use The use of social network beyond the intended time
	Secondary symptoms of social media dependence	Mood swings if no network connection is accessible Failure to do duties Escaping from unpleasant moods
The interference of the use of social media with the relationships with family members		Raising concerns Creating verbal challenges Creating physical fight Dissatisfaction with the spouse's spending time on social media
	The interference of the use of social media with the relationships with the spouse	The spouse doing things stealthily Going into a sulk Decreased verbal communication Doing fewer joint activities with the spouse Bilateral dependence of couples Neglect of family members Dissemination of dependence to all family members
	The interference of the use of social media with the relationships with the child	Child complaint Doing fewer joint activities with the child
The quality of the relationship with family members	The quality of the relationship with the spouse	Marital dissatisfaction Cold and weak relationship with the spouse The couple's inattention to each other
	The quality of the relationship with the child	Child punishment Unsatisfactory communication with the child Lack of child care Negative modeling of the mother by the child The child's noncompliance with parents' orders
Child problems	Externalizing problems	Aggressiveness Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder The use of bad language and offensive words
	Internalizing problems	Isolation Fear and anxiety
	Communication problems	Lack of assertiveness skills Problems in making friends

After extracting the themes and categories through open and axial coding based on the memos and analyses performed by the researcher in selective coding, in the last stage of theoretical coding, the dependence on social media was selected as the core category that can have consequences such as the interference of the use of social media with the relationships with family members, the quality of the relationship with family members, and children's behavioral problems. The relationship of the category of dependence on social media with other categories was expressed in the form of a

theory. The main categories and subcategories and their themes are discussed in the following section.

Dependence on social media

The core category of social media dependence was divided into two sub-categories of the main and secondary symptoms of social media dependence. The overuse of social networks, additional efforts to control social media use, and the use of social network beyond the intended time are among the main symptoms of dependence on social media. Mood swings in the absence of access to social media, interference of the

use of social media with the performance of duties and responsibilities, and the use of networks to escape unpleasant emotions such as loneliness and helplessness are among the secondary symptoms of social media dependence.

The interference of the use of social media with the relationships with family members

This main category was divided into two subcategories including the interference of the use of social media with the relationships with the spouse and the interference of the use of social media with the relationships with the child. Being busy on the phone leaves less time for the husband and wife to pay attention to each other and thus they will have less verbal communication. Besides, the overuse of social media sometimes makes the child complain of the mother.

The quality of the relationship with family members

This category consisted of two subcategories: The quality of the relationship with the

spouse and the quality of the relationship with the child. Acknowledging marital dissatisfaction, a cold and weak relationship between the spouses due to the spouse's personality traits, and complaining about the couple's lack of attention to each other are among the themes that shape the quality of the dysfunctional relationship with the spouse. Negative child modeling of the mother and physical punishment are among the issues that reduce the quality of mother-child communication.

Children's behavioral problems

The main category of children's behavioral problems included three sub-categories of externalizing problems, internalizing problems, and communication problems. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and the use of bad language and offensive words are some of the most common externalizing problems, and isolation, fear, and anxiety are categorized as internalizing problems. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the main and subcategories identified in this study.

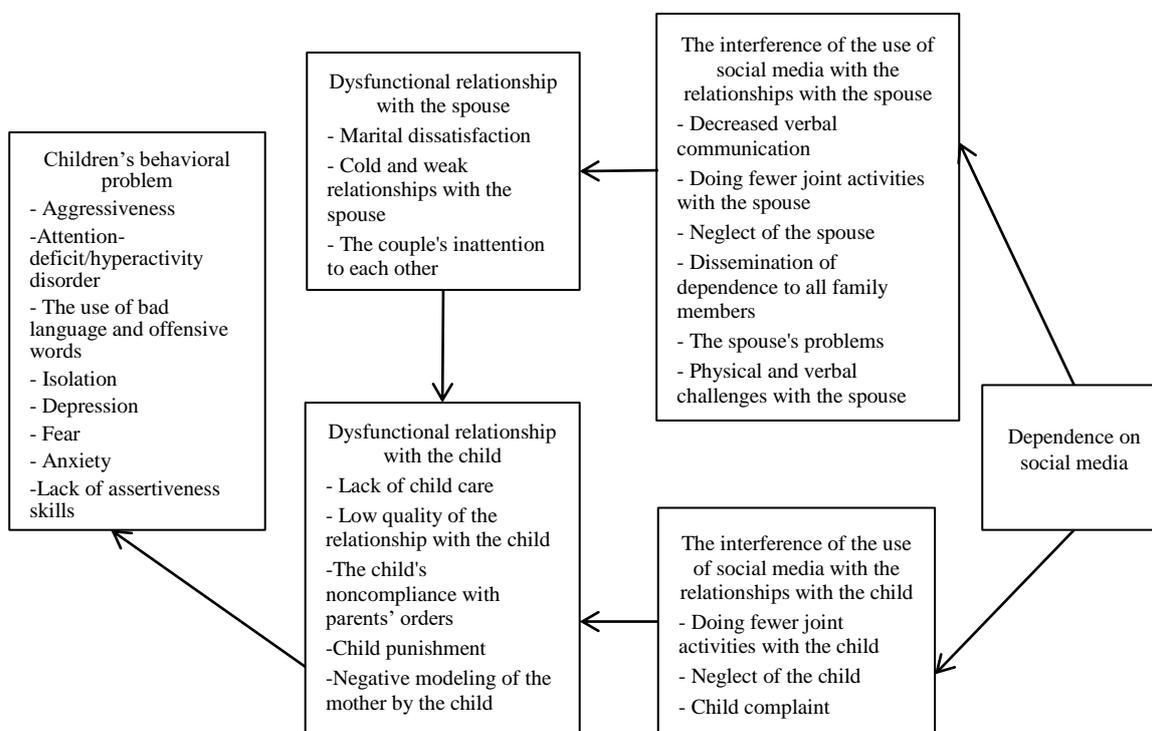


Figure 1. The effect of the mothers' dependence on social media on children's behavioral problems

Discussion

The present study provided a qualitative analysis of mothers' dependence on social media and children's behavioral problems. The results of the study suggested that the mother's dependence on social media is associated with symptoms such as excessive use of networks and their use beyond the intended time, interference with the performance of tasks, and the additional efforts to control social media use. Such dependence can have adverse effects on a person's life, interpersonal relationships, and daily functioning. For example, it can reduce a person's verbal communication and joint activities with his or her spouse and the person may neglect his or her family members, and this dependence can spread to the whole family. Besides, a person's excessive use of social media and networks can lead to other family members' dissatisfaction and complaint followed by verbal and physical challenges. As a result, marital satisfaction decreases, and there will be a cold and weak relationship between the couple and they will not pay enough attention to each other. Moreover, the dependence on social media reduces joint activities with the child and leads to disregard for him/her. The couple's disturbed relationship with each other, the presence of a family atmosphere full of tension and conflict along with the low level of attention and love between parents, low marital satisfaction, and also the interference of the use of social networks with establishing good relationships with the child can make mother not be able to properly care for the child, so the quality of communication between mother and her child is reduced, the child does not follow mother's instructions and sometimes causes her to resort to physical punishment of

the child. These factors together along with the child's negative modeling of the parents make the child engage in behavioral problems including externalizing problems such as aggression and attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder, which means excessive motor activity at inappropriate times with a lack of attention, internalizing problems such as isolation, depression, fear, and anxiety, and finally communication problems such as lack of assertiveness skills.

The results of this study are consistent with the results of a study conducted by Pirjalili et al. in Tehran on a sample of 25 couples aged 35 to 50 years, which indicated the impact of social networks on marital disputes and the effects of such disputes on the mother-child relationship and ultimately children's behavioral problems (25). The effect of dependence on social media on the interference with the relationship with the spouse and its adverse effects on this relationship have been also emphasized in studies conducted on young couples in the United Kingdom and the United States (7,12,13,14). This finding is in line with the results of a study by McDaniel et al. on American couples (16) who found a two-way relationship between social media use and marital satisfaction. Similarly, another study showed the positive relationship between family conflicts and Internet addiction among fourth and fifth-grade students in primary schools in Ahvaz (5). This finding was also confirmed in a study on female students in Tehran (6). The impact of dependence on social media on the parent-child relationship and the decline in the quality of this relationship was also evident in other studies in the field showing the

negative impacts of the Internet and social media on family relationships (5-7). In general, the results of the present study are consistent with the systemic theory in family therapy, which indicates that the onset of symptoms of a disorder in a person such as a child is a sign of a disorder in the relevant system, i.e. the family, and also if a person has a disorder and dysfunction, the whole family will be affected (27). This finding can be explained with reference to the fact that a mother's social media addiction and excessive and harmful use of social media can affect both her marital satisfaction and the relationship with her child. The association of the dysfunctional relationship with the spouse with the child's behavioral problems and the reduced quality of communication with the child can be partly explained by Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological systems, which indicates that the marital relationship indirectly affects the mother-child relationship and thus influences the child development and performance (28). This finding is also supported by a study on preschool children in Tehran (29) that indicated marital conflict is a negative predictor of the parent-child relationship. Similarly, another study on children aged 3 to 9 years in broken families such as single-parent families indicated the mediating role of maternal parenting behaviors in the relationship between the quality of the communication with the husband and child behavior (31). The effect of marital satisfaction on the mother-child relationship in the present study is consistent with the spillover hypothesis (17) showing the transfer of marital problems to parenting behaviors and the direct effect of the mother-child relationship on children's behavioral problems with findings such as predictability

of child behavior through the mother-child relationship (30), the existence of a negative relationship between authoritative parenting with internalizing and externalizing problems in children (31) and the existence of a positive relationship between authoritarian and permissive parenting styles with these problems (20). The limitation of time for interview was the limitation of the present study

Conclusion

The results of the present study can be explained in light of the fact that the healthier and more proper the use of social media, the higher will be the quality of the relationship between couples and also the ability of the mother to meet the needs of the child in a more desirable way and have a better relationship with him/her. As a result, the child has higher mental health. In contrast, the use of social media in a harmful way, that is, the mother's dependence on the use of social media creates conflicts between couples and causes the mother to be dissatisfied with her married life, then such dissatisfaction and conflict are transferred to her parenting behaviors, and the mother cannot have a good relationship with her child, resulting in behavioral problems in the child. Given that this study explored women's social media dependence, future studies can explore men's dependence on social media and its effect on the relationship with the wife and family members, as well as the effects of the dependence of both couples on social media on the family simultaneously.

Conflict of Interest

This article was extracted from a study based

on a doctoral proposal approved at Alzahra University with the code of ethics 1332879. The authors would like to appreciate all the participants in the present study.

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