

Facebook Mirrors Existential Anxiety?

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Abstract

The study was conducted with the primary objective of identifying if the three domains of existential anxiety proposed by Paul Tillich in his work “The Courage to Be” in the year 1952 (Fate & Death, Guilt & Condemnation, and Emptiness & Meaninglessness) are reflected in the contents shared by the Facebook users. The study was conducted on a sample of 15 young adults (11 female, and 4 male) who were friends with the researcher on Facebook. The participants were selected after a two-step screening process; the first step of screening took place in the form of participants responding back to the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ) by Carl F. Weems, and the second step took place in the form of selecting the respondents who have medium to high levels of existential anxiety in the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ). Thematic Content Analysis was used to analyse the profiles of the participants. The results indicated a reflection of existential anxiety in the posts made by the participants; “Fate & Death” being the most commonly reflected theme while “Guilt & Condemnation” was the least reflected theme. Thus, Facebook can be used during the counselling process in a clinical/organizational setting to gain a better understanding of the client/employee.

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Key Words: Existential Anxiety, Mental Health, Counselling, Facebook, Projective Technique, Human Resource

Introduction

As John Donne (1624) said, *"No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee"* in his 'Devotions upon emergent occasions' and 'SeuerallSteps in my Sicknes', he brought out how we all are aware of our death and also how we all are interconnected to others (Schwartz, 2009).

Despite its positive benefits (Shaw & Gant, 2002; Ellison, et al., 2007), internet is also known to have negative side-effects like depression, loneliness, and stress (Feinstein, et al., 2012). It is also observed that individuals who are lonely or do not have good social skills can develop strong compulsive internet use behaviours which in-turn can lead to negative life outcomes (Kim, et al., 2009).

For ages, man has been plagued by questions like why is he alive, what would happen when he died, what is the purpose of his life, etc. It is a question that many people have tried to answer and are still trying to answer (Schwartz, 2009).

Even though meaninglessness is a problem faced by many of today's world (Dreyer, 2004), we all strive to find meaning in our lives and often we derive it through our interpersonal relations. It is this very reason why loneliness becomes a threat to many individuals (Schwartz, 2009). In today's world, the most common medium to initiate interpersonal relations is the virtual world through social networking sites.

Social Networking Sites (SNS)

Man, for eons, strive to connect with others, and has the innate need to share. And in today's world, one of the strongest medium of sharing are social networking sites, of which

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one of the biggest example is Facebook, a platform that merges the two worlds of an individual; the private, and the public. And as time passes, it is observed that there has been a rise in the use of social networking sites (Livingstone & Brake, 2010).

Adolescence and early adulthood is a phase when an individual is highly social in their social sphere; but along with the activeness, the individual also goes through quite a lot of turbulence, which in-turn can lead to negative thoughts. Many a time adolescents and young adults use the platform of social networking sites to broadcast thoughts, behaviours, and intentions (Cash, et al., 2013).

Facebook

The most popular social networking site is Facebook, and the popularity is clearly reflected in the statistics. According to the statistics published by Facebook on June, 2013, there were 1.15 billion monthly active users. It is also seen that approximately 80% of the users are outside the U.S and Canada.

Facebook in India

Even though there are many local social networking sites in India like Fropper.com, Bharatstudent.com, etc., till now, India is following the trend of the rest of the world; i.e., Facebook. Based on statistics from June, 2013, with 63,792,680 Facebook users, India ranked third in the world (Neirhoff, 2013).

Existentialism

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines existentialism as “*a chiefly 20th century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrines but centring on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad*”.

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Even though a concept that originated in the early 20th century, existentialism holds significance even today. Existential elements of freedom, self-care, self-creation, etc. are of major emphasis even in the 21st century (Steven, 2010).

Existential Anxiety

Existential anxiety has been described by Paul Tillich (1952) as the threat of nonbeing and facing nothingness. He identified that existential anxiety is reflected through three common themes or dimensions; i.e., fate & death, guilt & condemnation, and emptiness & meaninglessness.

Fate and Death. This is the most basic and universal form of anxiety from which no one can escape in totality. Everybody is aware that they have to die one day, and this awareness triggers a fear that they would disappear from this world. With the fear of eminent death, arises the anxiety about fate. This particular anxiety arises because of the concept of pre-ordinance. (Tillich, 1952)

Emptiness and Meaninglessness. This is the anxiety about the loss of meaning and purpose in life. The anxiety of meaninglessness is triggered when the individual doubts the meaning of their own existence itself. And when the person is threatened by nonbeing of one's spiritual life and they fail to derive pleasure and satisfaction from anything, the anxiety of emptiness arises within them. This frustrates an individual and rives them to search for a greater meaning, which in turn leads to the arousal of the anxiety of meaninglessness. (Tillich, 1952)

Guilt and Condemnation. This form of anxiety arises when one's moral selfaffirmation is threatened. People know that they are burdened with responsibilities, and that his performance is looked upon by others. But many a times, more than others, it is man himself who judges himself and tries to live up to certain expectations. And whenever the person perceives that he hasn't lived up to the requirements and expectations, or that he has

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done something wrong, it leads to the anxiety of guilt, which in-turn leads to selfcondemnation for he fears that he will be condemned by others (Tillich, 1952).

Existential Anxiety and Globalization

Existential anxiety, which is on the rise along with the process of globalization (Sanderson, 2004), is a phenomenon of which very little is known of; especially in relation to the youth (Berman, Weems, & Stickle, 2006). Existential anxiety has been found to be associated with psychological distress and problems like anxiety and depression (Scott and Weems, 2013; Weems, et al., 2004). With globalization, the east and the west are coming closer, but till date it is observed that there are differences in self-esteem and psychological well-being between eastern and western cultures (Spencer-Rodgers, et al., 2004).

Objective

The study aimed to identify if the three domains of existential anxiety proposed by Paul Tillich in 1952 (Fate & Death, Guilt & Condemnation, and Emptiness & Meaninglessness) are reflected in the contents shared by the Facebook users.

Following are the specific objectives that were looked upon through the study:

To identify if there is a relation between existential anxiety and the contents shared by a Facebook user.

Identify if there are any striking difference in contents shared by males with existential anxiety and females with existential anxiety.

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Results

Table 1

Frequency of themes reflected by the participants

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Theme															
Fate and Death	1	12	10	13	11	11	1	6	4	48	7	16	13	19	10
Guilt and Condemnation	0	3	1	5	6	0	3	0	0	38	0	3	19	20	18
Emptiness and Meaninglessness	1	7	1	20	1	2	2	2	1	61	6	6	4	9	9

Discussion

The study was conducted with the aim of identifying if the three domains of existential anxiety proposed by Paul Tillich in 1952 (Fate & Death, Guilt & Condemnation, and Emptiness & Meaninglessness) are reflected in the contents shared by the Facebook users. The study was conducted on 15 young adults (11 female, and 4 male) who were friends with the researcher on Facebook. The participants were selected after a two-step screening process; the first step of screening took place in the form of participants responding back to the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ) by Carl F. Weems, and the second step took place in the form of selecting the respondents who have medium to high level of existential anxiety in the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ). Thematic Content Analysis was used to analyse the profiles of the participants and explore if the contents shared by the

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participants reflect any of the themes proposed by Paul Tillich in 1952, i.e., fate and death, guilt and condemnation, and emptiness and meaninglessness.

The most prominent and important finding of the study is that Facebook profiles of people with medium-high levels of existential anxiety do reflect elements of existential anxiety in their posts. Even though it was also found that some participants like PS reflect existential anxiety in their Facebook profiles in substantial amounts and at a high frequency, while participants like AN hardly reflect existential anxiety in their profiles, none of the profiles observed failed to reflect existential anxiety.

Even though it is possible that extraneous variables like the mood of the participant might have influenced some of the posts made, but through theoretical saturation, and because of the projective nature of the study, we can say that despite that possibility, existential is reflected in the posts made by users with existential anxiety.

Of the three themes proposed by Paul Tillich, i.e., Fate and Death, Emptiness and Meaninglessness, and Guilt and Condemnation, the theme that was most commonly reflected in the contents shared by the participants was Fate and Death (42.32% of the total 430 posts analysed) and was reflected by all the participants; this is mildly in line with the findings of the 2013 study by Cash, et al. which brings out how social networking site users make references of suicidal ideations, mental problems, depression, etc. This finding can be used to gain a clearer picture of clients who are susceptible to depression or committing suicide but do not verbally express their thoughts and emotions. The second most commonly reflected theme was Emptiness and Meaninglessness (30.69% of the total 430 posts) and was reflected by all the participants; this finding can be used by the therapists to help the clients gain a greater meaning of life, as meaning in life has been associated with greater psychological wellbeing (Rathi & Rastogi, 2007). While Guilt and Condemnation was the least commonly reflected theme (26.97% of the total 430 posts) in the posts made by the participants and was reflected by 66.66% of the participants.

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With regard to gender differences, it was observed that as compared to the 40.05% of the female participants, 50.53% of the male participants reflected the theme of Fate and Death, and similarly, unlike the 28.78% of the female participants, 37.63% of the male participants reflected the theme of Emptiness and Meaninglessness. But the third theme of Guilt and Condemnation, the trend is seen to be reversed with 11.82% of the male participants reflected this theme while 31.15% of the female participants reflected the same; this goes in line with the 2009 study by Etxebarria, Ortiz, Conejero, and Pascua which brings out how men experience less guilt than women.

As Facebook is a medium of expressing oneself (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009), this method of analysing a person's Facebook profile, can be applied in both a clinical and counselling setting as a projective technique to gain a better understanding of clients who are likely to have existential anxiety, but are unable to express it clearly verbally. The existing tools like the Existential Anxiety Questionnaire (EAP) by Carl F. Weems measure existential anxiety, but doesn't consider the nature of the existential anxiety the taker of the questionnaire experiences. Secondly, this method being projective in nature, the chances of faking are also comparatively lower than objective tests (Ziegler, 2007) as the person making the Facebook post is unaware that that post would reflect existential anxiety or not.

Problems like anxiety and depression are related to existential anxiety (Scott & Weems, 2013), thus by tackling existential anxiety, we would be able to handle these issues; and it would help to identify an underlying factor that usually goes undetected. With regard to workplace performance, mental health is known to have a powerful impact on absenteeism, productivity, and job satisfaction (Harnois & Gabriel, 2000); thus, by addressing existential anxiety, these concerns can be addressed as well for higher performance levels at an organization.

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