



Reasons for internet use and social anxiety

Robin-Marie Shepherd *, Robert J. Edelmann

*University of Roehampton, Department of Psychology and Therapeutic Studies, Whitelands College,
West Hill, London SW15 3SN, UK*

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Abstract

A reasons for Internet Use Questionnaire was developed to examine the relationship between internet use, social anxiety, general anxiety, and depression. Research suggests that socially anxious individuals may find it easier to interact online where anonymity can be maintained rather than engage in face to face interaction where being observed by others might induce a fear of negative evaluation. In line with the self-regulation model, it was hypothesised that social anxiety, low ego strength, anxiety and depression, would be related to use of the internet to cope with social fears. The results were partially in line with the hypothesis. Implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Social anxiety

Social anxiety has variously been referred to as both shyness and social phobia. Social phobia, (also known as social anxiety disorder) is at the more extreme end of the continuum of social

* Corresponding author. Address: Currently at the University of Auckland, School of Population Health, Glen Innes, Morrin Road, Tamaki Campus, Private Bag 92010, Auckland, New Zealand. Tel.: +64 9 3737999x86573; fax: +64 9 3737493.

E-mail address: rm.shepherd@auckland.ac.nz (R.-M. Shepherd).

anxiety and ‘includes a collation of symptoms which unlike shyness can vary in severity throughout one’s life’: these symptoms are only elicited in certain social situations (Leary, 1983a, p. 14). In contrast, shyness while at the less severe end of the social anxiety continuum is ‘more likely to be a lifelong characteristic of an individual’s temperament which is experienced in every social occurrence’ (Leary, 1983a, p. 23; Lecrubier et al., 2000, p. 6). At a cognitive level, while shy individuals are more open to social cues enabling them to challenge their social fears, individuals who suffer from social phobia are more likely to focus on their inner turmoil missing social cues (Heimberg, Liebowitz, Hope, & Schneier, 1995).

Social anxiety then lies on a continuum between shyness and social phobia. As such it contains features of both and can be defined as ‘a state of anxiety resulting from the prospect or presence of interpersonal evaluation in real or imagined social settings’ (Leary, 1983b, p. 67). Social anxiety is often associated with general anxiety and depression (Amies, Gelder, & Shaw, 1983; Herbert, Hope, & Bellack, 1992; Kushner, Sher, & Beitman, 1990; Lecrubier et al., 2000; Wells, Tien, Garrison, & Eaton, 1994) which in turn may negatively influence ability to cope in social interactions. In relation to this it has been argued that socially anxious individuals may use the internet as a medium to regulate their social fears and related distress, particularly loneliness, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Caplan, 2002; La Rose, Lin, & Eastin, 2003; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003; Shaw & Grant, 2002).

1.2. Internet use and social anxiety

The internet may well fulfil social needs for some who have particular difficulty establishing social relationships, thus aiding social connectedness and providing a sense of belongingness (McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Roberts, Smith, & Clare, 2000; Shepherd & Edelman, 2001). By providing anonymity the internet provides a forum where it is possible to be less inhibited and intimidated (Grayson & Schwartz, 2000; Stritzke, Nguyen, & Durkin, 2004; Walther, 1996). In this context, Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, and McGuire (1986) report that cyberspace communication alleviates social rejection. Thus, evidence suggests that those who feel less comfortable interacting face to face tend to use the internet more for social interaction while those who feel more comfortable with offline interaction tend to use the internet more for informational searches (Papa-charissi & Rubin, 2000). This is consistent with Hamburger and Ben-Artzi’s (2000) suggestion that women who are introverted and self-conscious will find social contact via the internet less socially distressing and Caplan’s (2002) comment that those who are shy and low in self-esteem may find social benefits as well as a sense of social control from the internet.

Many of the studies in this area have been conducted with university students, in part because of their widespread use of the internet as a social tool; indeed such use among students is increasing (Scherer, 1997). In addition, a number of studies have found a high prevalence of social anxiety among university students who may then turn to the internet as a way of regulating, challenging, or escaping their social fears (Beidel, Turner, Stanley, & Dancu, 1989; Turner, Beidel, Broden, Stanley, & Jacob, 1991). For example, Davis, Smith, Rodrique, and Pulvers (1999, p.259) cite one university student as commenting, “People will only date me over the internet” while Greenfield (1999, p. 83) quotes one university student as stating: “I’m shy in social situations, but am more open on the net, in chat rooms. I’m shy about approaching people at a party or in a large group, for example, but not about talking to people in chat rooms”.

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