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Computers in Human Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/comphumbeh



Shyness and the internet: Social problem or panacea?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 6 May 2008

Keywords:

Shyness

Internet

ABSTRACT

Shyness is a debilitating experience for a large proportion of the population. Shyness can be defined as a form of excessive self-focus, a preoccupation with one's thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions and may vary from mild social awkwardness to total social inhibition. This article explores shyness, its prevalence and effects and examines the role of the internet in the experience and expression of shyness. Compared to research on shyness in the offline world, empirical work on shyness online is relatively scarce. Nevertheless, the research that does exist can be categorized into two seemingly contradictory positions. The first position views the internet as an isolating medium, attractive to shy people and enhancing shyness. The second position describes the internet as an empowering medium, offering opportunities to experience disinhibition and social competence. This paper considers how the two positions might be reconciled. In addition, in order to reduce inconsistencies in the literature and to determine how shy people use the internet, it is suggested that more research, incorporating objective measures and experimental methodologies, is needed.

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1. Introduction

Shyness is both pervasive and problematic for those who suffer it. Some reports suggest that the prevalence of shyness is increasing (Carducci & Zimbardo, 1995). These increases have been attributed to growing social isolation and the progressively mediated nature of communication (Henderson & Zimbardo, 1998a). At the same time, it is often taken for granted that new communication technologies

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facilitate disinhibition and increase social confidence. Sonja Utz (2000) for example, in her examination of friendship online, concluded that “the potential of virtual worlds for overcoming shyness has long been considered and now appears to be somewhat conclusive” (p. 16).

In this review we examine the nature of shyness, its prevalence and impact. We also evaluate the theoretical and empirical literature related to shyness online. We ask how the internet affects shyness and explore the existing support from two seemingly different viewpoints. Does the internet increase shyness and present a particular risk for shy individuals, further isolating them from others? Or can the internet, through its unique features, enhance feelings of social competence and facilitate interpersonal interaction for shy people?

2. What is shyness?

Although widely used, shyness is a difficult term to define. In everyday expression, the term is used to describe reactions and feelings to social interactions and important facets of a person's character (Crozier, 2002). Although shyness is a term commonly used to interpret behavior, its widespread use means that precise meaning is often lacking; shyness is a label that is often applied but not so clearly understood. Indeed some psychologists are not even convinced that shyness is anything more than a common language label used to define an aspect of personality.

One of the primary difficulties in providing a precise definition of shyness is its breadth. Shyness has been described as a preoccupation with one's thoughts and reactions that leads to discomfort in interpersonal situations (Henderson & Zimbardo, 1998a). As such, the construct spans a wide psychological continuum, ranging from mild discomfort and awkwardness in the presence of others, through to traumatic episodes of anxiety that disrupt an individual's life (Zimbardo, 1977). Despite its conceptual breadth, research has identified several core characteristics of shyness. Shyness entails quietness, inhibited behaviour, self-consciousness and apprehension about being negatively evaluated in social situations (Zimbardo, 1977). It involves feelings of awkwardness, concern, tension, and discomfort when confronted with strangers or casual acquaintances (Cheek & Buss, 1981).

Underlying shyness is an extreme concern with self-presentation. Self-presentation theory is based on the assumption that in social situations individuals attempt to control images of self or identity-relevant information (Stritzke, Nguyen, & Durkin, 2004). Shy individuals are motivated to create a desired impression in others, but lack the confidence that they will be able to do so. This leads to a tendency to adopt a cautious and protective self-presentation style during social interactions. The relationship between shyness and self-presentation can be conceptualized in the following formula: $SHYNESS = M \times (1 - p)$. In this formula, adapted from Leary (1996), M refers to impression motivation or the degree to which an individual is motivated to make a desired impression on others, and p is the subjective perceived probability of being able to make the desired impression. Thus, according to this principle, an individual's level of shyness increases when they are motivated to make a desired impression on others, but doubt they will successfully be able to do so. For example, two individuals may interact with the same person. Both individuals may be highly motivated to make a desired impression. However, the first individual may not experience any anxiety or symptoms of shyness, because their perceived probability of making the desired impression is high. In contrast, the second individual may believe that they will be unable to make the desired impression, therefore leading to higher levels of shyness. This formula represents a useful mechanism to predict an individual's level of shyness and help describe why shyness occurs.

Although shy people display reticent outward behaviour, internally, they are in a state of turmoil. Shy individuals are excessively self-focused and preoccupied with their own thoughts and reactions (Henderson & Zimbardo, 1998a) and how others perceive them. Potential contributions to conversations are rehearsed but are abandoned in anticipation that they will be thought banal, inadequate, or inappropriate (Crozier, 2002). Thus, it is easier for a shy person to say nothing than to risk disapproval or rejection from others. To be shy then is to be fearful of social interactions and overly concerned about how one is perceived by others.

Interpersonal interactions represent a primary concern for shy people; however, particular types of interactions can increase an individual's level of shyness. Research suggests that there are five eliciting

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