



Seeking safety on the internet: Relationship between social anxiety and problematic internet use

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ABSTRACT

As internet use becomes increasingly integral to modern life, the hazards of excessive use are also becoming apparent. Prior research suggests that socially anxious individuals are particularly susceptible to problematic internet use. This vulnerability may relate to the perception of online communication as a safer means of interacting, due to greater control over self-presentation, decreased risk of negative evaluation, and improved relationship quality. To investigate these hypotheses, a general sample of 338 completed an online survey. Social anxiety was confirmed as a significant predictor of problematic internet use when controlling for depression and general anxiety. Social anxiety was associated with perceptions of greater control and decreased risk of negative evaluation when communicating online, however perceived relationship quality did not differ. Negative expectations during face-to-face interactions partially accounted for the relationship between social anxiety and problematic internet use. There was also preliminary evidence that preference for online communication exacerbates face-to-face avoidance.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problematic internet use

In the last decade there has been an increase in the number of studies investigating how the internet influences the lives of those who use it (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007; Chak & Leung, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Shaw & Gant, 2002). At the beginning of 2010, over 1.9 billion individuals were using the internet, of whom 6–13% are thought to be “addicted” to its use (ETforecasts, 2010; Morahan-Martin, 2001). Although researchers continue to debate the exact nature and definition of internet addiction (Morahan-Martin, 2005; Young, 1996), the most widely accepted is Davis’ (2001) cognitive-behavioral model of problematic internet use. According to this model, using the internet to regulate unpleasant moods, becoming attached to the social benefits the internet provides, and perceiving more interpersonal control online than offline, leads to excessive use and the development of compulsions, withdrawal symptoms and negative social, psychological, and/or occupational consequences in the user’s offline life (Caplan, 2002; Davis, 2001). Collectively, these factors

are thought to be symptomatic of problematic internet use (Caplan, 2002).

One of the primary functions of the internet is online communication, with almost 10 million Australians using the internet to communicate with family and friends (The Nielsen Company, 2010). Online communication has been shown to have a positive impact on users as a convenient way to maintain and improve current relationships, which may enhance the self-esteem and well-being of those involved (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Selfhout, Branje, Delsing, ter Bogt, & Meeus, 2009). However, if a network of online relationships or a single online partnership becomes all-consuming, then such relationships can negatively impact their offline lives on a social and/or occupational level (Campbell, Cumming, & Hughes, 2006; Parks & Roberts, 1998). Therefore, it is important to determine which factors predispose individuals to less adaptive use of the internet.

Researchers investigating this issue have found that those who partake in instant messaging and online gaming are more likely to be problematic users compared to those who used the internet for other purposes (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009; Chak & Leung, 2004). However, Caplan et al. (2009) found that while only 2% of the variance in problematic internet use was explained by online activities, 36% of the variance was accounted for by the individual’s psychological profile. There are several psychological vulnerabilities associated with problematic internet use, including loneliness, depression, substance addictions, shyness, and aggression (Caplan,

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2007; Caplan et al., 2009; Chak & Leung, 2004; Ebeling-Witte, Frank, & Lester, 2007; Scealy, Phillips, & Stevenson, 2002; Selfhout et al., 2009). It is thought that these psychological factors predispose individuals to social isolation in their offline lives, so they seek to fulfill their interpersonal needs online, and are thus vulnerable to problematic internet use (McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

Consistent with this idea, Davis' model (2001) proposes that problematic internet use is a consequence of a pre-existing psychopathology, which arises when the internet provides rewards, such as developing better quality relationships online (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Users may come to perceive their online lives as better, both socially and psychologically, and account for this by assuming that their social abilities are better during online compared to face-to-face interactions. Once problematic internet use has developed, it may be maintained by a negative feedback loop, where attempts to reduce use produce stressful physiological responses, such as compulsive or withdrawal symptoms (Caplan, 2002; Davis, 2001). Davis' model provides a way of understanding the relationship between psychological problems, such as depression and social anxiety, and problematic internet use.

1.2. The relationship between social anxiety and problematic internet use

Social anxiety is extremely debilitating due to the negative impact on social networks, and consequent isolation (Gross et al., 2002; La Greca & Lopez, 1998). The disorder is characterized by inflated threat expectancies in social-evaluative contexts, and corresponding avoidance of these situations (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Avoidance also takes the form of subtle safety behaviors, such as over preparation or speaking quickly (Clark & Wells, 1995). While these behaviors function to temporarily reduce anxiety, social successes such as positive feedback may be attributed to the safety behavior rather than personal ability. Consequently, safety behaviors prevent these individuals from learning that they are overestimating the likelihood of negative evaluation and underestimating their social ability (Alden & Bieling, 1998; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Communicating online may be one such safety behavior that allows those with social anxiety to communicate with others while minimizing potential threat and associated anxiety (Erwin et al., 2004; Shepherd & Edelmann, 2005).

A growing body of evidence has identified a positive correlation between social anxiety and problematic internet use (Campbell et al., 2006; Caplan, 2007; Chak & Leung, 2004; Ebeling-Witte et al., 2007; Erwin, Turk, Heimberg, Fresco, & Hantula, 2004). Social anxiety has been conceptualized as a risk factor for the development of problematic internet use (Caplan, 2007; Erwin et al., 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000), however, few studies have examined the factors that may account for this relationship. One explanation for this relationship may relate to differences in the expectation of negative evaluation from an online compared to offline audience. Researchers have speculated that the text-based nature of the internet, and the lack of visual cues when communicating online, allows those with social anxiety to conceal, and therefore control, the aspects of their appearance they perceive as leading to negative evaluation, such as sweating and stammering (Alden & Bieling, 1998; Caplan, 2007; Erwin et al., 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). While the internet may be beneficial in terms of facilitating engagement with previously avoided social interactions and activities, preference for online communication may lead to the development of problematic internet use (Caplan, 2003; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Scealy et al., 2002). Preliminary support for this hypothesis comes from recent studies showing that both social shyness and preference for online communication were positively correlated with problematic internet use (Caplan, 2003; Ebeling-Witte et al., 2007).

Based on similar reasoning, some researchers have proposed that online interactions are perceived as safer, in terms of the probability and consequences of negative evaluation, than face-to-face interactions (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007; Caplan, 2002; King & Poulos, 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Consistent with this idea, socially anxious samples report experiencing greater ease interacting on the internet as compared to face-to-face (Erwin et al., 2004). While online communication appears to reduce or regulate social anxiety in the short term (Campbell et al., 2006; Shepherd & Edelmann, 2005), in the longer term confidence to communicate with others beyond the online context may be undermined if successful online interactions are attributed to the unique aspects of the internet, such as anonymity, rather than personal attributes (Clark & Wells, 1995; Erwin et al., 2004; McKenna et al., 2002). This may result in a cycle of avoidance that is perpetuated by online communication, and ultimately leads to the development of problematic internet use and the maintenance of interpersonal anxiety (Andersson, 2009; Erwin et al., 2004; Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007; Shepherd & Edelmann, 2005). Although this hypothesis has not yet been tested directly, preliminary support is derived from investigations of the motives for internet use amongst socially anxious individuals. These participants reported a reliance on the internet as a social outlet that enabled them to avoid face-to-face interactions (Erwin et al., 2004) and other unpleasant situations (Ebeling-Witte et al., 2007; Whang, Lee, & Chang, 2003). This tendency to avoid face-to-face interactions may preclude the beneficial effect of learning, through experience, that their fear of negative evaluation is exaggerated (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

Alternative explanations for the relationship between social anxiety and problematic internet use have focused on potential differences in the quality of online compared to offline relationships. Physical features, such as attractiveness, have been found to determine how much individuals like one another in face-to-face settings (McKenna et al., 2002). Consequently, signs of visible anxiety may be perceived by others as unattractive, which could dictate how successful those with social anxiety will be at forming face-to-face relationships (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; McKenna et al., 2002). Given that concerns about physical appearance are reduced online, socially anxious individuals may be able to develop more meaningful friendships (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Along similar lines, the social compensation hypothesis suggests that socially anxious individuals compensate for poor offline relationships by seeking attachments in an online environment, where the constraints that usually make them interact poorly are reduced (Campbell et al., 2006; Selfhout et al., 2009; Walther, 1996).

Self-disclosure is thought to be the foundation of these less superficial online relationships (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Although disclosure can lead to risks such as social rejection and emotional vulnerability (Pennebaker, 1989), the anonymous nature of online interactions is thought to minimize these risks (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007; Gross et al., 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). The Real Me model of problematic internet use proposes that some individuals have difficulty portraying their "true self" (p. 34) in their face-to-face relationships due to fear of rejection (Bargh et al., 2002). This fear causes them to seek anonymous online relationships, where they can more easily be themselves. This model has been successfully applied to socially anxious participants, who reported they were more likely to portray their true self online (McKenna et al., 2002). One possible explanation for this finding is that the intense fear of negative evaluation experienced by those with social anxiety inhibits self-disclosure in face-to-face relationships. Thus, the comparably less-threatening online context may provide the opportunity to fulfill the social need to belong and to be understood (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). However, the

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