

Elevated social Internet use and schizotypal personality disorder in adolescents

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Abstract

Introduction: In the past decade, the use of the Internet as a forum for communication has exponentially increased, and research indicates that excessive use is associated with psychiatric symptoms. The present study examined the rate of Internet use in adolescents with personality disorders, with a focus on schizotypal personality disorder (SPD), which is characterized by marked interpersonal deficits. Because the Internet provides an easily accessible forum for anonymous social interaction and constitutes an environment where communication is less likely to be hampered by interpersonal deficits, it was hypothesized that SPD youth will spend significantly more time engaging in social activities on the Internet than controls.

Methods: Self-reports of daily Internet use in adolescents with SPD ($n=19$), a control group with other personality disorders ($n=22$) and a non-psychiatric control group ($n=28$) were collected.

Results: Analyses revealed that the SPD participants reported significantly less social interaction with ‘real-life’ friends, but used the Internet for social interaction significantly more frequently than controls. Chat room participation, cooperative Internet gaming, and to a lesser degree, e-mail use, were positively correlated with ratings of SPD symptom severity and Beck Depression Inventory scores.

Discussion: Findings are discussed in light of the potential benefits and risks associated with Internet use by socially isolated SPD youth.

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Keywords: Schizotypal; Adolescent; Internet; Social deficit

1. Introduction

Internet use is a rapidly growing technological and social phenomenon that has increased from 26.2% of U.S. homes having access in 1998 to 41.5% in 2000, and roughly 9.6% (581 million users) of the world population uses the Internet (NTIA Release, 2000). There is an expanding body of literature indicating that

Internet use is linked with psychiatric symptoms and syndromes. Numerous case reports document that some heavy Internet users (i.e., individuals using the Internet for more than several hours per day for non-work related activity) suffer from psychiatric disorders (Treuer et al., 2001; Sa’adiah, 2002; Iftene et al., 2004). Similarly studies of young adult samples indicate that self-reported loneliness is positively correlated with the rate of Internet use (Engelberg and Sjoberg, 2004; Nichols and Nicki, 2004), and individuals who report excessive Internet use are characterized by an elevated

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rate of psychiatric disorders (Black et al., 1999; Shapira et al., 2000, 2003; Yoo et al., 2004). A recent study of normal high school students revealed that heavy Internet use was associated with heightened psychiatric symptoms on self-report measures (Yang et al., 2005).

Some mental health experts have expressed concern that excessive Internet use may have a negative impact and contribute to psychiatric symptoms (Bremer, 2005). For example, Shapira et al. (2003) argue that heavy Internet use may negatively impact social and emotional functioning. As a reflection of these concerns, it has been suggested that heavy Internet use should be considered a disorder in its own right; and researchers have variously labeled it “Internet addiction disorder”, “Internetomania”, and “pathological Internet use” (Orzack and Orzack, 1999).

In contrast, it has been suggested by some researchers that for many individuals the Internet can serve as a resource for social support that is unavailable elsewhere (Berger et al., 2005). For example, Wolak et al. (2003) conducted a telephone survey to explore the characteristics of youth who had formed close relationships via the Internet. They found that youth who had online relationships were more likely to report depression, sexual assault, and conflict or poor communication with parents. Thus, troubled youth may use the Internet as a venue for social involvement. Of course, the findings linking high rates of Internet use with adjustment problems may simply indicate that individuals with such problems are drawn to the Internet. In other words, high rates of Internet use may reflect a dysfunctional tendency to avoid direct social interaction.

Because Internet use is a relatively new and burgeoning phenomenon, systematic research aimed at characterizing problematic Internet use and understanding its relation with psychiatric disorders is in its infancy (Goldsmith and Shapira, 2006). In particular, there is a dearth of empirical studies of the psychiatric correlates of Internet use by adolescents, and we are aware of no studies of Internet use in clinical samples of youth. Yet, researchers and clinicians recognize that the Internet is rapidly growing, and that excessive Internet use appears to be linked with psychiatric symptoms and may be detrimental. For these reasons, there is a need for systematic research aimed at identifying the nature and correlates of Internet use by youth with adjustment problems.

Schizotypal personality disorder (SPD) involves a variety of social and cognitive deficits that are viewed as subclinical manifestations of schizophrenia. It can be reliably diagnosed in adolescents and is a risk factor for later psychotic disorder (Tyrka et al., 1995; Walker et al.,

1998). The diagnostic criteria for SPD include excessive social anxiety, odd speech, constricted affect, suspiciousness/paranoia, ideas of reference, odd beliefs/magical thinking, and unusual perceptual experiences (DSM-IV, 2004). A key criterion for SPD is a “lack of close friends or confidants other than first-degree relatives” (Criterion 7, APA, 2000).

The symptoms of SPD interfere with social interaction (Ambelas, 1992). During adolescence, a time period characterized by an increasing degree of peer evaluation or scrutiny, odd or eccentric behavior will likely hamper peer relations (Wolff, 1991). For example, the inappropriate or constricted affect (Criterion 6) associated with SPD impairs communicative ability (Dworkin et al., 1993). Further, researchers have found that, compared to psychiatric and non-psychiatric controls, adolescents with SPD exhibit marked non-verbal deficits including irregular and limited gesturing (Mittal et al., 2006), higher frequencies of motor abnormalities (Walker et al., 1999; Mittal et al., 2007b), and problems in interpreting non-verbal cues (Logan, 1999).

Given these findings, it is plausible that individuals with SPD would be drawn to the Internet because it is a venue in which receptive and expressive interpersonal deficits are less likely to reciprocate in exclusionary behavior from peers. Specific symptoms of SPD might be associated with specific patterns of Internet use. For example, a proclivity toward magical thinking or an over-active fantasy life (Criterion 2) might be associated with a preference to use fantasy games on the Internet as a platform for interacting with peers. Further, it is possible that cognitive stores that would have been used while compensating for interpersonal and social deficits during real-world social interactions (Logan, 1999), may be freed up while interacting in a virtual environment; because this could potentially result in an enhancement of performance in interactive goal driven tasks, it is possible that individuals with SPD might prefer this sort of game. Another point to consider is that odd speech (Criterion 4) and inappropriate or constricted affect (Criterion 6) may lead to peer rejection during real-life encounters. However, those individuals with SPD who yearn for interaction with peers might find chat rooms to be an outlet where these symptoms are less likely to interfere. Finally, there are some symptoms that are likely to relate to social Internet use across domains. More specifically, excessive social anxiety (Criterion 9) may lead schizotypal individuals to choose gaming, e-mailing, and chatting as a social platform. Factors potentially contributing to social anxiety, such as misinterpreting interpersonal situations,

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