



Perceived stress, sensation seeking, and college students' abuse of the Internet

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ABSTRACT

College students ($n = 140$) were examined to test whether sensation seeking and perceived stress would predict abuse of the Internet. Previous studies have found that disinhibition, boredom susceptibility, and total sensation seeking scores were related to Internet abuse (Chaney & Chang, 2005; Lin & Tsai, 2001). Because stress has been documented to have a negative effect on students (Pierceall & Keim, 2007), and may be linked to Internet use (Lavoie & Pychyl, 2001), it was tested as a possible predictor of Internet abuse. This study also analyzed abuse of the Internet for sexual purposes, because sexuality is prevalent online, and college students are in an age of sexual exploration. Results of stepwise regression analyses revealed that disinhibition and total perceived stress were predictive of Internet abuse for sexual purposes, and perceived hopelessness and boredom susceptibility were predictive of Internet abuse for non-sexual purposes. Implications for students and Internet abuse are discussed.

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1. Introduction

It has been noted that a college student receives the following when they begin school: an ID card, a meal card, and high-speed Internet access (Young, 2004). Results of a survey of 2054 college students from 27 universities and colleges revealed that 74% of college students use the Internet four or more hours per week, with 19% using it 12 or more hours per week (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2002). Researchers suggest that college students' greater accessibility and usage of the Internet may increase their vulnerability to Internet abuse (Brenner, 1997). The proposed reasons include increased accessibility, freedom, autonomy from authority, large periods of unstructured time, and encouragement given from school faculty and administration to use the Internet, all of which leaves students more vulnerable to Internet abuse (Kandell, 1998; Moore, 1995; Young, 2004).

Physical and psychological risks associated with the use of the Internet have been identified (Brenner, 1997; Greenfield, 2000; Griffiths, 2000; Kraut et al., 1998). Abuse of the Internet may be correlated with psychological impairment including social withdrawal/alienation, dysfunction in interpersonal and romantic relationships, and loss of occupational/educational productivity (Greenfield, 2000). Fortson, Scotti, Chen, Malone, and Del Ben (2007) examined 485 college students using adapted DSM-IV criteria for substance abuse to test for Internet dependency and found

that dependent individuals showed signs of social withdrawal and isolation, depressive symptoms, and had problems managing responsibilities. These negative findings have been found consistently in the relevant literature (Brenner, 1997; Greenfield, 2000; Griffiths, 2000).

Currently, there is no standardized definition of Internet abuse. In fact, a discussion has arisen regarding whether Internet "addiction" exists and, if it does, how it should be viewed in relation to other disorders (Shaffer, 2002). Various nomenclatures include: Internet addiction (Young, 1999), Internet addiction disorder (Goldberg, 1996), Internet dependency (Wang, 2001), problematic Internet use (Caplan, 2002), pathological Internet use (Davis, 2001), and Internet abuse (Fortson et al., 2007). Yet, critics posit that Internet addiction is a creation of the psychological and psychiatric professions (Eppright, Allwood, Stern, & Theiss, 1999). Although there may be some addictive aspects of it (Shapira et al., 2003; Young, 1996), "addiction" is difficult to define with the multitude of applications online; hence, Internet abuse will be used to include all of the aforementioned symptoms. Specifically, Internet abuse is defined as using the Internet for any purpose that leads to distress or impairment in one's life.

There is a growing consensus that certain applications, rather than the Internet as an entity, are conducive to abuse (Bell, 2007; Griffiths, 2000; Yen, Ko, Yen, Wu, & Yang, 2007). The Internet is abused in myriad ways with various applications (Davis, 2001; Young, Pistner, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 1999). It may be helpful to determine first whether an individual abuses the Internet for non-sexual purposes (gaming, web surfing, etc.) or sexual purposes. This distinction is useful because the Internet has a plethora of applications that can be abused and often is used as an outlet for

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sexuality. Cooper (2004) has labeled the factors that make the Internet such an attractive outlet for sexuality the Triple A Engine: accessibility, affordability, and anonymity. Others have highlighted convenience and escapism (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Young, 1999).

1.1. Sensation seeking

Sensation seeking theory provides evidence of an individual characteristic that may contribute to Internet abuse. Sensation seeking is “a trait defined by the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience” (Zuckerman, 1994). Sensation seeking has been found to influence both occupational choices and the types of reactions and interactions in which individuals engage (Roberti, 2004). Sensation seekers are motivated by the novelty of the experience and the complexity of the stimulus, and they attempt to increase the intensity of the stimulation they experience (Roberti, 2004; Zuckerman, 2006). For example, high sensation seekers are more likely to engage in sports (Zuckerman, 1994), show a greater desire to engage in physical aggression (Joireman, Anderson, & Strathman, 2003), to watch violent action films (Aluja-Fabregat & Torrubia-Beltri, 1998), and are more prone to listen to rock music (Little & Zuckerman, 1986). Sensation seeking also tends to be more common among men than women (Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Thornquist, & Kiers, 1991). Furthermore, sensation seekers show a tendency to seek out media depicting arousing material (Greenberg & Woods, 1999; Schierman & Rowland, 1985; Vanwesenbeeck, 2001; Zuckerman, Tushup, & Finner, 1976) and hold more permissive sexual attitudes (Zuckerman, 1994). This would make the Internet very attractive, given that the Internet has become a novel outlet for sexual expression (Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, & Boies, 1999; Griffiths, 2004) and has begun to replace traditional means of accessing sexually explicit material (Chou, Condon, & Belland, 2005).

Findings on sensation seeking and Internet abuse have varied. Some have proposed that high sensation seekers are not drawn to the Internet. Lavin, Marvin, McLarney, Nola, and Scott (1998) found that sensation seeking scores were negatively related to Internet usage in college students. Yet, in a sample of 753 Taiwanese high school adolescents, Internet dependents scored significantly higher on total sensation seeking and disinhibition than Internet non-dependents (Lin & Tsai, 2001). Similar studies examining a sample of Chinese middle and high students did not find that sensation seeking led to Internet abuse (Qing-Xin, Rong-Gang, Yan, Xian-Gang, & Kan, 2005). It is possible that the negative findings are due to methodological differences and problems defining Internet abuse. Examining Internet abuse as it relates to sexual matters may be necessary. For example, viewing sexually explicit material online has been found to lead to Internet abuse later on (Meerkerk, Van Den Eijnden, & Garretsen, 2006). Perry, Accordino, and Hewes (2007) examined sexual sensation seeking and sexual compulsivity among 307 college students. They found that with students who used the Internet for sexual material, as they progressed through school (or consumed more material), their sexual sensation seeking score increased. Further, Chaney and Chang (2005) suggest that among men who have sex with men (MSM), those with increased levels of boredom may be more likely to abuse the Internet for sexual purposes. Although this was hypothesized for MSM, it is possible that college students experience a similar relationship between boredom and Internet abuse. However, further examination of college students' abuse the Internet for sexual purposes and how that abuse relates to different aspects of sensation seeking is needed to elucidate any relationships that may exist. Total sensation seeking, disinhibition, and boredom sus-

ceptibility warrant more careful examination, as these variables may be related to Internet abuse, but have been studied with different populations in previous research. This study aims to examine the role that these variables play in a sample of college students.

1.2. Perceived stress

Perceived stress entails perception or assessment of threat coupled with a lack of resources to combat the stressor, irrespective of the actual threat or tax on resources (Greenberg, 1981; Lazarus, 1966). Many researchers have found increasing stress levels among college students (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Roberti, Harrington, & Storch, 2006). Pierceall and Keim (2007) examined the perceived stress of 212 college students and found that 75% of the students were classified as having moderate stress, 12% as having high stress, and only 13% having low stress. Perceived stress also has been found to influence physical health (Ng & Jeffery, 2003; Pandya, 1998; Tennant, 2000) and have negative effects on students by reducing academic performance (American College Health Association, 2007). The connection between Internet abuse and perceived stress needs to be further examined. Some researchers have found that the Internet is used by some as a means of stress relief (Lavoie & Pychyl, 2001). Further, previous studies have found that impulse control disorders (Shapira, Goldsmith, Keck, Khosla, & McElroy, 2000) and depression (Caplan, 2003, 2005; Young & Rogers, 1998) are found among those that abuse the Internet. Although it is not possible to determine any causal relationships, and a bidirectional relationship may exist, it is possible that those who have pre-existing psychological problems may use the Internet as a means of stress relief. In the same manner, it is possible that the high level of stress associated with college life may lead some individuals to abuse the Internet. Additionally, the Internet's saturation with sexually explicit material may be especially attractive to college students eager to explore their sexuality.

1.3. Current study

With the potential influence of the Internet on college students' overall well-being, further elucidation of how college students abuse the Internet and what factors lead to that abuse is warranted. Two predictions were made for this study. First, based on the findings Lin and Tsai (2001) and Chaney and Chang (2005), it was predicted that scores on the disinhibition, total sensation seeking, and boredom susceptibility scales will be associated with abusing the Internet for sexual purposes but not for non-sexual purposes. Although previous studies examined different populations, this study is the first to examine these variables among college students. Further, we predict that some of the mixed findings may be related to the lack of examination of sexual uses of the Internet. We anticipate that the Internet will appeal to sensation seekers only if they use the Internet for sexual purposes. Additionally, based on Lavoie and Pychyl (2001), it was predicted that perceived stress will be a predictor of Internet abuse for sexual and non-sexual purposes. Due to the high levels of stress that college students experience, we expect that perceived stress will lead some individuals to use the Internet for both sexual and non-sexual purposes.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data were collected from 58 male and 82 female undergraduates attending two 4-year public universities in the southeast Uni-

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