



Loneliness and generalized problematic Internet use: Parents' perceived knowledge of adolescents' online activities as a moderator

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ABSTRACT

This study examined adolescents' perceptions of parents' knowledge of their online activities as a moderator of the relationship between loneliness and generalized problematic Internet use (PIU). The purpose of this study was to address two gaps in research. First, previous research has only investigated these relationships from a main effects perspective; the present study extended research by examining generalized PIU from an interaction effects perspective. Second, it is timely to examine the relationship between loneliness and generalized PIU in an adolescent sample which has not been previously explored. A total of 1098 adolescents (49.2% male, 50.8% female) from Grade 8 and Grade 9 classes participated in this study. The key finding was that perceived parental knowledge was a moderator of the relationship between loneliness and generalized PIU; parental knowledge was better able to differentiate adolescents' level of generalized PIU at lower rather than at higher levels of loneliness. This moderator effect was stronger in magnitude for parents who had no awareness of their adolescents' online activities compared to parents who were in the know about their adolescents' online activities. These findings emphasize the importance of prevention and early intervention work with early adolescents and their parents with respect to adolescent loneliness and generalized PIU.

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1. Introduction: problematic Internet use

There is increasing concern about the relationship between psychological wellbeing and adjustment, and Internet use. This is reflected in the growing coverage of this topic in both reviews and empirical studies (e.g., Douglas et al., 2008; Huang et al., 2010; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000). Scholars have variously termed excessive Internet use as problematic, pathological, maladaptive, and addictive Internet use (Beard & Wolf, 2001; Caplan, 2002; Davis, 2001; Huang et al., 2010). Since 2002 when Caplan (2002) called attention to the multiple definitions of problematic Internet use, scholars continue to be faced with the lack of agreement on how to define the construct, a decade later. In this article, we will use the term “problematic Internet use” to describe adolescents' views on the cognitions and behaviors associated with Internet use that may result in negative consequences for the user. We prefer the term “problematic Internet use” for two reasons. First, we agree with both Beard and Wolf (2001) and Caplan (2002) that adopting the addiction perspective is inadequate because it lacks conceptual clarity and it remains debatable whether excessive Internet use constitutes an addiction. Second, compared

to “pathological” or “maladaptive”, the term “problematic” describes the behavior in a more inclusive manner covering the entire range of problematic behavior from mild to severely disturbed behavior.

In this paper, we describe a study that examined adolescents' perceptions of parents' knowledge of their online activities as a moderator of the relationship between loneliness and generalized problematic Internet use (PIU). We will begin by providing a literature review covering the theoretical background of our study. Within the literature review, we provide justifications for our choice of variables of interest for our research focus in this investigation and conclude the review section with our hypotheses. Next we present the method used for our study and the study results obtained. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, the limitations of our work and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Correlates of generalized PIU, and a focus on loneliness

The literature distinguishes between specific and generalized problematic Internet use (PIU). Davis (2001) defined specific PIU as the overuse of content-specific functions of the Internet such as gambling or viewing sexual material, but these problematic

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behaviors can be manifested in an alternative way if the individual were unable to access the Internet. On the other hand, Davis (2001) conceptualized generalized PIU as a multidimensional overuse of the Internet that results in negative consequences for the individual. Manifestations of generalized PIU include maladaptive cognitions and behaviors related to Internet use that are not content-specific. In our present study, we examine generalized rather than specific PIU.

Davis (2001) proposed a model linking both distal and proximal factors to PIU. Davis suggested that distal psychopathological correlates such as depression and anxiety could contribute to both specific and generalized PIU. This has been supported by other researchers finding an empirical link between psychopathology such as depression and anxiety, and PIU (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998). Additionally, Davis' model includes proximal maladaptive cognitions such as negative self-appraisals and low self-efficacy which can also contribute to both specific and generalized PIU. More importantly, Davis argued that a lack of social support from family or friends, and/or loneliness can contribute to generalized PIU. Generalized PIU focuses on the varied problems individuals encounter as a consequence of participating in the online social context (Davis, 2001).

Caplan (2002) tested Davis' (2001) model on the generalized PIU pathway, and found that among psychosocial correlates such as depression, self-esteem, loneliness, and shyness, only loneliness explained a significant amount of variance in generalized PIU. Ample evidence documenting loneliness as an important contributor to generalized PIU has also been found in other research studies employing both qualitative and quantitative methodology, providing empirical support for this link (e.g., Douglas et al., 2008; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000, 2003). On this basis, we chose to focus on loneliness as a variable contributing to generalized PIU.

2.2. Relationship between loneliness and generalized PIU

In a meta-synthesis of qualitative studies on generalized PIU across a period of 10 years from 1996 to 2006, Douglas et al. (2008) reported that feelings of loneliness and social isolation are antecedents that can facilitate heavy Internet use with negative effects being felt in scholastic, occupational, interpersonal, financial or physical domains. In a separate study, Caplan (2002) examined several psychosocial variables such as depression, self-esteem, loneliness, and shyness, and their relation to generalized PIU in a sample of undergraduates. The two psychosocial factors most strongly correlated with negative outcomes of Internet use was loneliness and self-esteem (Caplan, 2002). More importantly, of the psychosocial variables studied, only loneliness was a significant predictor of generalized PIU, and Caplan (2002) suggested that perhaps the link between loneliness and generalized PIU may be stronger than that of depression and generalized PIU. Similar findings on the association between loneliness and excessive Internet use have been reported in other studies with undergraduates (e.g., Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000, 2003). Thus far, research has focused on the main effect of loneliness on generalized PIU, which has been well documented.

As we have noted earlier, generalized PIU includes behavior that range from mild to severe. The potential for serious negative consequences exists for individuals at the more disturbed end of this continuum (Caplan, 2002; Davis, 2001). For example, in Morahan-Martin and Schumacher's (2000) study, they found that 72.8% of undergraduate Internet users reported at least one symptom indicating that Internet use is contributing problems in their lives while 8.1% reported four or more symptoms and were classified in the study as "pathological" Internet users. Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2000) suggested that the incidence of generalized

PIU may be higher among college students than adults. Likewise, Brenner (1997) reported that younger users of the Internet reported experiencing more problems than older users, and suggested that this could reflect a less-developed ability to manage multiple roles and demands on one's time. Regardless of the specific reason that may have accounted for the finding, the argument that younger users are more vulnerable than older users remains plausible. Adolescents have been called "digital natives" and according to a Pew Internet survey, almost three-quarters of adolescents (73%) are active users of social networking sites, for example (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Despite adolescents' high usage of the Internet and their vulnerability to the potential negative effects of Internet overuse, there is limited research on this topic using adolescent samples. To the best of our knowledge, the relationship between loneliness and generalized PIU has only been studied in undergraduate but not in adolescent samples.

2.3. Relationship between parents' perceived knowledge of adolescents' online activities and generalized PIU

In contrast, the relationship between parents' perceived knowledge and awareness of their adolescents' online activities and generalized PIU has been extensively studied in adolescent samples. Greater parental knowledge and awareness of adolescents' online activities have been associated with lower levels of generalized PIU, and this has been reported in a large-scale survey study of 2373 Grade 7 students from Southern California (Sun et al., 2005). Similar findings have been reported using adolescent samples from Italy (Milani, Osualdella, & Di Blasio, 2009), China (Huang et al., 2010), South Korea (Park, Kim, & Cho, 2008), and Singapore (Liau, Khoo, & Ang, 2008).

Various researchers have examined parental monitoring and supervision of adolescents' online activities in relation to generalized PIU. On the surface, there appears to be a large body of research documenting that parental monitoring of adolescents' activities is associated with positive adjustment, and on this basis, parents of adolescents have been encouraged to keep track of their adolescents' whereabouts and activities (e.g., Jacobson & Crockett, 2000; Montemayor, 2001). We agree with Liau et al.'s (2008) argument that the definition and conceptualization of parental monitoring merits greater scrutiny. For example, Kerr and Stattin (2000) point out that while many studies use the term "parental monitoring", they are measuring parental knowledge and awareness of adolescents' activities rather than parents' efforts at tracking and surveillance. In fact, there is empirical evidence to suggest that parental effort at tracking and surveillance was not related to adjustment; instead, it was child disclosure of information to parents that accounted for better adjustment (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Similarly, consistent with these findings, Liau, Khoo, and Ang (2005) in a survey study using a Singapore sample, found that parental supervision techniques such as using filters and checking sites visited by adolescents were not related to adolescent engagement in risky Internet behavior; rather, adolescents who told their parents that they received pornographic junk mail were less likely to have engaged in risky Internet behavior. Taken together, this suggests that it would be parents' knowledge of their adolescents' online activities rather than parental surveillance and tracking efforts that could be associated with lower levels of generalized PIU.

2.4. Present study and hypotheses

Two gaps in research can be identified. First, previous research has examined the relationship between loneliness and generalized PIU, and perceived parental knowledge of adolescents' online activities and generalized PIU, from a main effects perspective.

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