



The moderating role of psychosocial well-being on the relationship between escapism and excessive online gaming



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to empirically test the proposed theory of compensatory internet use, suggesting that people who play online games excessively are motivated to do so because they need to cope with psychosocial problems (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014a; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014b). The study used survey data from players of World of Warcraft (WoW), a popular MMO game. The indicators of psychosocial problems were high stress and low self-esteem and the motivation was escapism. The empirical analysis investigated interaction effects between indicators of psychosocial well-being and motivations. It was hypothesized that the relationship between escapism and negative outcomes would be positive for individuals with high stress or low self-esteem, which would be indicative of escapist online gaming as a coping strategy. However, this was only expected for individuals who experience more negative outcomes from their online gaming, which would highlight an important difference between those who experience many problems and those who experience few. The results showed that both stress and self-esteem moderated the relationship between escapism and negative outcomes as expected. In both cases, the relationship between escapism and negative outcomes was positive in the presence of more psychosocial problems (i.e. high stress or low self-esteem) for those who experience many negative outcomes, but not for those who experience few. The results support the theory of compensatory internet use and suggest that excessive online gaming may be a coping strategy for life problems rather than a mental disorder as proposed in DSM-V.

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1. Introduction

Online gaming is a rapidly growing hobby amongst people of all age groups, where the Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) game is one of the most popular genres with millions of players across the world. Due to their immense popularity, MMO games have become a hot topic for researchers investigating excessive online gaming. Most research on the topic is based in one way or another on Young (1998), who conceptualized internet addiction¹ as an impulse-control disorder based on the existing diagnosis for Pathological Gambling found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Since then, researchers have approached the phenomenon of excessive internet use and excessive online gaming from a perspective of addiction and mental disorders. The dominant theoretical stance suggests that gaming addiction is a legitimate behavioral disorder (e.g., Young, 2009; Lemmens,

Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). It is argued to be symptomatically similar to substance dependence (Salguero & Moran, 2002; Hsu, Wen, & Wu, 2009; Kuss, Louws, & Reinout, 2012) and appears to be caused by a variety of vulnerability factors and is associated with a number of psychiatric co-morbidities (e.g., King, Delfabbro, Zwaans, & Kaptsis, 2013; Kuss et al., 2012). It is worth mentioning that internet gaming disorder has also been included in the appendix for the DSM-V pending further research.

Several arguments have been made about the addictive potential of MMO games in particular. Blinka and Smahel (in Young & de Abreu, 2011) stated that rewards in an MMO game are often closely tied with long-term and everyday presence in the game, which would increase the incentive to play every day and for increasing periods of time. Based on this, some researchers have argued that the games' reward schemas may induce operant conditioning via variable-ratio reinforcement schedules (e.g., Charlton & Danforth, 2007; Hsu et al., 2009; Hussain, Griffiths, & Baguley, 2012; King & Delfabbro, 2009) which will keep the player playing. A less compulsion-centered approach to the subject has focused on the motivations that underlie online gaming. A validated framework for motivational factors in MMO games was constructed by Yee (2006, 2007), measuring a player's orientation to online gaming

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¹ Also referred to as excessive internet use, compulsive internet use, problematic internet use – labels that have been used interchangeably to describe more or less the same concept (Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006).

in relation to the three broad motivations of achievement, social interaction and immersion. This framework has been used in studies on excessive online gaming (e.g., [Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009](#); [Kuss et al., 2012](#); [Yee, 2007](#); [Kardefelt-Winther, 2014a](#)) and the results suggest that certain motivations, primarily escapism, reinforce maladaptive patterns of uncontrollable gaming which can result in social or occupational negative outcomes for the player.

In this paper I wish to move away from a view of excessive online gaming as an addiction and a mental disorder. The purpose is to empirically investigate the theory of compensatory internet use that I have described in detail elsewhere ([Kardefelt-Winther, 2014a](#); [Kardefelt-Winther, 2014b](#)), but which has as its basic tenet that excessive internet use occurs when people are motivated to go online to cope with life problems. The degree of life problems determine how strong the need and motivation to cope is, and the stronger the need the more time will be spent online to the detriment of other activities. Gaming provides certain affordances that may facilitate coping but the game itself is not the culprit, it merely acts as a potential facilitator of compensation for psychosocial problems. The idea that internet use may be a way to cope with negative feelings is not new and often mentioned in the literature on internet addiction and excessive online gaming (e.g., [Armstrong, Phillips, & Saling, 2000](#); [Bessi re, Kiesler, Kraut, & Boneva, 2008](#); [Chak & Leung, 2004](#); [Hussain & Griffiths, 2009](#); [Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009](#); [Kuss et al., 2012](#); [Shen & Williams, 2011](#); [Whang, Lee, & Chang, 2003](#); [Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006](#); [Young, 2009](#); [Young & de Abreu, 2011](#)). However, this is rarely empirically investigated or reflected in research, perhaps because the idea seeks to go beyond a framework of addiction and compulsion. This study is done against the background of earlier work showing how escapism, a motivation for online gaming ([Yee, 2007](#)), mediated the effects of stress on negative outcomes ([Kardefelt-Winther, 2014a](#)). These results indicated that direct effect models focusing only on psychosocial problems as predictors may not be adequate when exploring the antecedents of excessive online gaming.

2. Testing the theory of compensatory internet use

In an attempt to bring the psychological approach and the motivational approach together, [Kardefelt-Winther \(2014a\)](#) investigated psychosocial well-being and motivations for play in conjunction and showed empirically that the relationship between psychosocial well-being and excessive online gaming was mediated by motivations for play. This formed the basis for the theory of compensatory internet use. Methodologically, this suggests that psychosocial well-being may be usefully explored as part of a chain of events rather than focal point. In other words, psychosocial well-being may be considered an underlying cause for motivations for play, and in some cases this interplay may lead to negative outcomes (2014a). While previous research on excessive online gaming has focused either on the direct effect of motivations for play on negative outcomes (e.g., [Caplan et al., 2009](#); [Kuss et al., 2012](#)) or the direct effect of psychosocial well-being on negative outcomes (e.g., [Fioravanti, D ttore, & Casale, 2012](#); [Kim et al., 2006, 2009](#); [Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011](#); [Van Rooij, 2011](#); [Young & de Abreu, 2011](#)), this study will explore how psychosocial well-being and motivations for play interact in predicting negative outcomes. While the theory is applicable across different internet activities and platforms, this paper seeks to test the theory in the context of online gaming. To the author's knowledge, this is the first study to explore the interaction between psychosocial well-being and motivations for play in this context. The following paragraphs will briefly discuss one gaming motivation and two indicators of psychosocial well-being that were used in this study, together with an outline of their respective associations with excessive online gaming.

2.1. Escapism

In early media and communication studies several researchers examined escapism as a key motivation for internet use. [Miller \(1996\)](#) suggested escape as a primary motivator for seeking gratifications through the internet. Similarly, [Parker and Plank \(2000\)](#) found that both a relaxation and an escape factor predicted internet usage. These findings have been replicated across a number of studies (e.g., [Ferguson & Perse, 2000](#); [Korgaonkar & Wolin, 1999](#)). [Young \(2009\)](#) has suggested that people may go online to experience subjective mental escape, making internet use an effective emotional escape strategy for everyday life, but where adverse consequences may follow. In regards to gaming, [Hussain and Griffiths \(2009\)](#) reported in a qualitative study that over one third of gamers claimed that relaxation and escape was a key function of playing. In a study of online gaming, [Yee \(2007\)](#) found that the best predictor of a high score on Young's Diagnostic Questionnaire (1998) for internet addiction was escapism, indicating that the player is using the online game to avoid thinking about real life problems. This suggests that players who go online with the motivation to escape from life problems may experience more negative outcomes from their gaming, a result supported by subsequent studies (e.g., [Caplan et al., 2009](#); [Kuss et al., 2012](#)).

2.2. Perceived stress

Perceived stress can be defined as a situation that is appraised as threatening or otherwise demanding and where insufficient resources are available to cope with the situation ([Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983](#)). In relation to media use, ([Zillmann, 1982](#); [Zillmann & Bryant, 1985](#)) investigated the relationship between stress and television viewing and suggested that television can temporarily alleviate the negative feelings from stress by displacing anxious thoughts. This led researchers to propose that some viewers may use the television primarily to relieve stress which could lead to feelings that were addictive in nature ([Anderson & Collin, 1996](#)). [Whang et al. \(2003\)](#) reported that work-related stress significantly increased internet use amongst people who displayed symptoms of internet addiction, while those who were not excessive internet users instead reported higher levels of drinking when stressed. [Whang et al. \(2003\)](#) concluded that people use different behavior repertoires to cope with stressful situations and that internet use may be one such behavior. In support of this argument, [Leung \(2007\)](#) found that playing online games may reduce stress arousal for children and adolescents.

2.3. Self-esteem

Self-esteem can be defined as an evaluation of one's self-concept, which is heavily dependent on reflected appraisals, social comparisons, and self-attributions ([Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989](#)). Several studies found an association between low self-esteem and internet addiction (e.g., [Fioravanti et al., 2012](#); [Kim & Davis, 2009](#); [Ko, Yen, & Chen, 2005](#)). [Douglas, Mills and Niang \(2008\)](#) suggested that being online removes physical and interpersonal hindrances which allows those with low self-esteem to engage in social interactions, but may also lead to overuse of the internet. Online gaming has been proposed as a way for individuals with low self-esteem to escape reality and allow the player to compensate for a weak self-image by seeking out a game they have mastery over (e.g., [Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011](#); [Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008](#)).

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