



Research Report

Compulsive Internet use and relations between social connectedness, and introversion



Erica McIntyre*, Karl K.K. Wiener, Anthony J. Saliba

School of Psychology, Locked Bag 588, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW 2650, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 28 February 2015

Keywords:

Compulsive
Internet use
Introversion
Internet addiction
Social connectedness

ABSTRACT

This study aims to further understand factors involved in compulsive Internet use, with specific focus on the relation between social connectedness, the trait introversion, and compulsive Internet use. While Internet use can enhance social connectedness, compulsive Internet use has been associated with poor social connectedness. The factors that make a person vulnerable to compulsive Internet use and its negative effects remain unclear. The personality trait introversion has been associated with poor social connectedness, and there is disagreement on whether or not social interaction on the Internet is beneficial for people high in this trait. Australian university students ($N = 168$) participated in an online survey. Standardised scales were used to measure social connectedness, introversion, and compulsive Internet use. Results show that introverted adults report more compulsive Internet use symptoms than extroverts. In addition, introversion partially mediated the relation between compulsive Internet use and social connectedness. The results raise questions for future research into factors involved in the development of compulsive Internet use and its effect on social connectedness, especially in those who are introverted.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has evolved into a mainstream tool used by most people in the developed world for a broad range of daily activities (Khang, Kim, & Kim, 2013; Odacı & Çıkrıkçı, 2014). The ubiquitous influence of the Internet continues as new applications are developed to facilitate communication, social activities, online shopping, paying bills, entertainment and work related activities (Shen & Williams, 2011). While there are many positive outcomes of this technology there are also psychosocial problems that can occur if overused. Meerkerk and colleagues (2010) found that compulsive Internet users reported more loneliness, were less satisfied with life, experienced more depression and had lower self-esteem. This finding is of particular concern for people who are introverted, as it has been demonstrated that they use the Internet frequently for social interaction, and have high rates of compulsive Internet use (CIU: van der Aa et al., 2009). This article is concerned with the negative impact of Internet use and explores the relations between compulsive Internet use (CIU¹), social connectedness, and the personality trait introversion.

1.1. Compulsive Internet use: a definition

Compulsive Internet use is often referred to as an impulse-control disorder, suggesting it is a behavioural addiction (Meerkerk, Van den Eijnden, Vermulst, & Garretsen, 2009; Muusses, Finkenauer, Kerkhof, & Billede, 2014; Van Rooij, Schoenmakers, Van de Eijnden, & Van de Mheen, 2010). Research has demonstrated this addiction to be a dysfunctional compulsive behaviour that occurs with specific activities used online, and not the Internet as a whole (Meerkerk et al., 2009; Shen & Williams, 2011). This is reflected in the DSM-5, which has included both Internet gaming and Internet gambling as distinct disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Consistent with this, the term CIU will be used in this paper as it is described by Meerkerk and colleagues (2009). They identified five dimensions of CIU: loss of control, preoccupation (cognitive and behavioural), withdrawal symptoms, coping or mood modification, and conflict (inter and intra personal). These dimensions reflect a cognitive behavioural model where maladaptive cognitions maintain the compulsive behaviour (Davis, 2001).

1.2. Social connectedness and compulsive Internet use

Compulsive Internet use and its relation to social connectedness is complicated, with inconsistencies in nomenclature, and rapidly

* Corresponding author at: Charles Sturt University, Locked Bag 588, Wagga Wagga, NSW 2678, Australia. Tel.: +61 438 448 653.

E-mail address: emcintyre@csu.edu.au (E. McIntyre).

¹ Compulsive Internet use.

changing technology and Internet use behaviour. Social connectedness is a multidimensional construct that includes concepts such as affiliation, companionship, friendship, engagement and loneliness (Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Hagerty and colleagues (2007, p. 293) defined social connectedness as occurring “when a person is actively involved with another person, object, group or environment, and that involvement promotes a sense of comfort, well-being and anxiety-reduction”. This definition reflects the complexity of the construct, and recognises the importance of the quality of a person’s connectedness and its effect on their psychological wellbeing.

Poor social connectedness has been found to be a contributing factor in the development of CIU (Meerkerk et al., 2010; Shen & Williams, 2011). While associations between social connectedness and Internet use have been found, the nature of the relationship continues to be debated. Shen and Williams (2011) argued that as Internet users spend more time online they reduce the time they spend with close social ties in the “real world” which has been found to result in increased loneliness. However, this does not seem to be the case for all individuals. Kraut and colleagues (2002) found that heavy Internet use increased social connectedness, but only in those with strong social support. In their study heavy Internet users with poor social support had worse social connectedness. It could be suggested that those with poor social connectedness are more likely to use the Internet for a social purpose, however they do not necessarily receive psychosocial benefits for doing this.

In contrast Nie and Erbring (2000) found that increased hours spent on the Internet has reduced television and newspaper use and not the time individuals spent with family and friends. This finding was also supported by Leung (2004) who found that those with CIU watched significantly less television than non-compulsive users. These results suggest that those with CIU reduce a range of their daily activities in the “real world”. This also appears to be the case with social interaction, as individuals are using Internet communication tools instead of more traditional forms of communication—such as the telephone and letter writing (Douglas et al., 2008). It could be argued that this change in the use of communication tools may be beneficial for some individuals who find face-to-face interaction difficult.

Despite research suggesting the potential benefits of communicating online, research has also demonstrated that increased online social interaction has a negative psychosocial impact on some people. Caplan (2003) measured CIU, preference for online social interaction and psychosocial wellbeing. The results showed that a preference for online social interaction predicted severity of CIU. Caplan concluded that excessive use of synchronous social Internet activities may cause dysfunction in daily life in those that prefer to socialise using the Internet. These results further support the suggestion that online social interaction has negative consequences for some individuals, and that individual differences may be involved in the development of CIU. However, research findings are conflicting on which individual differences determine a person’s preference for online social interaction, and consequently an individual’s risk of developing CIU.

1.3. Introversion, social connectedness and compulsive Internet use

The literature suggests that existing individual differences such as loneliness, depression, certain personality traits, and low self-esteem may increase a person’s susceptibility to developing CIU (Caplan, 2002; Meerkerk et al., 2010; Odacı & Çelik, 2013; Weiser, 2001). Van der Aa and colleagues (2009) explored the moderating role of personality traits between daily Internet use and CIU in Dutch adolescents and young adults. They suggested that the quality of a person’s social connectedness predicts their

vulnerability to developing CIU. They concluded that it is easier for introverted individuals to make social connections online so they increase the amount of time spent doing this, and consequently their face-to-face social interaction reduces. Their study demonstrated that the development of CIU is dependent on an individual’s ability to control their Internet use. In addition, they concluded that CIU may be influenced by certain personality traits, specifically finding that those who were more introverted reported more CIU (van der Aa et al., 2009).

Van der Aa and colleagues (2009) also suggested that daily Internet use may develop into CIU if an individual has poor social connectedness, provided the use of social Internet applications provide reinforcement of an alternative social life that is preferable to the one that exists off-line. Other research has demonstrated that individuals who are introverted have difficulty developing social relationships and prefer to use the Internet to converse with others (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002; Ebeling-Witte, Frank, & Lester, 2007). Those who are more introverted tend to be less socially connected in the “face-to-face world” and can have a greater tendency for negative affect compared to those who are more extroverted (Lee, Dean, & Jung, 2008). Those higher in introversion have also been shown to use the Internet differently, which may impact their social support. Mitchell, Lebow, Uribe, Grathouse, and Shoger (2011) found that increased use of certain Internet activities predicted higher amounts of introversion, and a reduced amount of social support. Therefore, people who are introverted are likely to have poor social connectedness, which may lead to a preoccupation with using the Internet to interact with others that may become problematic (i.e. increased risk of developing CIU). The practical implication of this is that introverts are more at risk than others, so this study will examine introversion, compulsive Internet use, and social connectedness.

1.4. Expectations

Compulsive Internet use (Davis, 2001; Meerkerk et al., 2010) and introversion (Lee et al., 2008) have been found to be associated with poor social connectedness. However, the relationships involved are unclear given the conflicting conclusions in the research reviewed above. This study will add to the literature on CIU in an Australian context, and seek to explain the relations between the trait introversion, social connectedness, and CIU.

Hypothesis 1. Introverted individuals will have more CIU symptoms than extroverted individuals.

Hypothesis 2. The relation between CIU and social connectedness is mediated by the trait introversion.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

Purposive convenience sampling was used to recruit undergraduate and postgraduate students ($N = 168$) from Charles Sturt University. This was an opportunity sample as the researchers had access to participants, and it was known that the students used the Internet. Participants were required to be 18 years old or over, and to have had Internet access at home for at least 12 months prior to completing the survey. All participants met the criteria for this study, however nine participants were removed from the analysis as they failed to complete the survey. The final sample ($n = 159$) consisted of 33 males and 126 females. Thirty percent of participants were aged between 26 and 35, with 25% between

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