



Problematizing excessive online gaming and its psychological predictors



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ABSTRACT

This study problematizes the common methodology in studies on excessive internet use where psychological characteristics are sought as unique predictors of negative outcomes. It suggests that some predictors may be significant only by virtue of being examined in isolation. In an attempt to add to this methodology the present study explored motivations for a particular online activity, MMO gaming, and the association with excessive use. The study used survey data from players of World of Warcraft (WoW), a popular MMO game. The psychological characteristics investigated were based on previous studies of excessive internet use and included social anxiety, loneliness and stress. The motivations were achievement, escapism and social interaction. The results revealed that although loneliness and social anxiety were correlated with excessive use, they lost significance when stress was controlled for. Furthermore, all psychological predictors lost significance when escapism and achievement were controlled for. These results suggest that psychological characteristics only have an indirect effect on negative outcomes and that this relationship can be better explained by motivations acting as a mediating variable. Based on these results an alternative conceptualization was offered, termed *compensatory internet use*, emphasizing that excessive use may be more usefully framed and investigated as a coping strategy rather than compulsive behaviour.

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1. Introduction

Excessive internet use¹ is typically described as a state where the individual has lost control of his/her internet use and keeps using internet excessively despite experiencing negative outcomes (Young, 1998). Most often reports concern cases where individuals lose sleep or skip meals because they spend time on the internet, or where the internet use has resulted in conflicts with family members and important others, or led to the detriment of a job or educational career. Initial research on the negative outcomes of internet use was conducted by Young (1998) who conceptualized the phenomenon as an impulse-control disorder, deriving diagnostic criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) diagnosis for pathological gambling. Young contended that the DSM-IV diagnosis of pathological gambling was most akin to the pathological nature of excessive internet use and that adopting the criteria would be helpful in clinical settings and stimulate further research.

Researchers have since explored a number of psychological characteristics in order to find unique predictors for excessive internet use. Examples are depression and suicidal ideation (Kim

et al., 2006), self-esteem and sensation-seeking (Armstrong, Phillips, & Saling, 2000; Widianto & McMurran, 2004), loneliness and shyness (Caplan, 2002, 2003, 2005; Whang, Lee, & Chang, 2003), locus of control (Chak & Leung, 2004), attitudes toward computer networks (Tsai & Lin, 2001), attention-deficit/hyperactivity/impulsivity symptoms (Yoo, Cho, & Ha, 2004), psychosocial well-being (e.g., Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009; Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011; Young & de Abreu, 2011) as well as the association with various personality traits (e.g., Leung, 2007; Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005; Whang et al., 2003).

This paper problematizes the common research methodology in studies on excessive internet use. The methodology follows a framework whereby psychological characteristics are theorized, then investigated, as unique predictors of excessive use. I propose in this paper that instead of the compulsive nature that excessive use is ascribed in the literature, it is better understood as a coping strategy grounded in understandable (but not always healthy) motivations. Empirical data will be offered to support the proposal that research should move away from a methodology where singular psychological characteristics are sought as the unique predictors of excessive internet use. In addition to the necessity of controlling for a broader set of influencing factors, this paper will show that including motivational factors is helpful in explaining why certain individuals use the internet excessively despite experiencing negative outcomes. This approach facilitates much needed theory building about why excessive use occurs, a task surprisingly

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¹ Or internet addiction, compulsive internet use, problematic internet use – labels that have been used interchangeably to describe more or less the same concept (Widianto & Griffiths, 2006).

neglected despite the number of studies conducted in the field (Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006).

Since internet use has significant nuances and should not be treated as a monolithic activity (Bergmark, Bergmark, & Findahl, 2011; Shen & Williams, 2011), the empirical section will focus on a particular internet activity; the popular Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) game genre. MMO games have featured prominently in the discourse on excessive use (e.g., Caplan et al., 2009; Kuss, Louws, & Reinout, 2012; Smahel & Blinka, 2011; Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008; Young & de Abreu, 2011) and players have been suggested as particularly vulnerable to negative outcomes (Kuss et al., 2012; Lo et al., 2005; Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005). This activity provides a starting point for theorizing the relationship between psychological characteristics, motivations and excessive internet use.

2. Background

As Davies (1992) has suggested, approaching the phenomenon of “intense use” from a medicalized perspective of addiction and compulsion can be more harmful than helpful because it situates the researcher within too narrow a framework of thought for a phenomenon that is social, cultural and psychological. Indeed, research on excessive internet use has focused on its psychological predictors and considered few alternative explanations.

The main problem following this approach was that researchers found significant associations with a great number of psychological characteristics and presented these as stable predictors of excessive use. This may seem like a promising result, but in the end it has only diluted the literature. Knowing that almost all psychological characteristics, when examined in isolation, statistically contribute to the likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes of internet use has not contributed much to a theory of why this happens. Furthermore, the characteristics may be significant only by virtue of being examined in isolation from other variables. This leads to the first hypothesis and research question that will be tested in this paper.

H1. Psychological characteristics are significantly related to negative outcomes of use only when examined separately.

RQ1. Do psychological characteristics relate significantly to negative outcomes when other psychological characteristics are controlled for?

This approach needs to be problematized because psychological screening of an individual will invariably discover several significant predictors of excessive internet use without offering any substantial knowledge of their meaning or the relationship with other predictors, rendering this method less useful both for research and clinical practice. This calls for alternative approaches to investigating excessive internet use that are not solely grounded in an investigation of psychological characteristics. While the psychological characteristics of the individual are likely to be part of the issue, as a focal point these seem to lead to a dead end in terms of useful diagnoses and theory building. There has been plenty of speculation about why certain characteristics are associated with excessive use but such speculation is untenable when too many characteristics emerge as significant predictors. The empirical section of this paper will focus on the motivations for MMO play as an alternative complement, suggesting that these contribute valuable knowledge about continued excessive use in the presence of negative outcomes. When exploring the association between psychological characteristics and excessive use, the researcher is forced to speculate about why a characteristic compels an individual to go online. Motivations for internet use adds an important

dimension by establishing the connection between psychological characteristics and motivations for use, thereby offering more substance to the discussion of why people are motivated to use the internet excessively and how this relates to their psychological state. Motivations for use provide a context for theorizing excessive use outside a framework of addiction and compulsion, while retaining the important point that some people keep using the internet despite suffering negative outcomes. From a clinical perspective, motivations for use may be changeable while psychological characteristics are more stable over time. If motivations play a crucial role in excessive use, understanding where the motivations stem from would be useful for clinical intervention.

The proposed alternative approach, which I will refer to as *compensatory internet use*, derives partly from Young (1998) who suggested that internet use can serve compensatory purposes. This is an idea often mentioned in the literature on excessive internet use (e.g., Armstrong et al., 2000; Bessière, Kiesler, Kraut, & Boneva, 2004; Caplan & High, 2011; Chak & Leung, 2004; Griffiths, 2000; Whang et al., 2003; Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006; Young, 1998, 2009; Young & de Abreu, 2011) but rarely empirically investigated (Caplan et al., 2009 is a notable exception). Young suggested that individuals could have motives for going online that are based on a desire to fulfill unmet real life needs or alleviate dysphoric moods. This is different from compulsive behaviour in that compensatory use may imply conscious action whereas compulsive behaviour implies loss of control. This interpretation has major implications for how the study of negative outcomes of internet use is conducted, and so far the interpretation and research methodology has centered on loss of control, a framework of addiction and its psychological predictors. As a counterpoint, Shen and Williams (2011) stated that:

“It is clear now that the effects of [internet use] are very much dependent on the purposes, contexts, and individual characteristics of users. In other words, who they are, with whom they use the media, **and for what purposes** collectively explain a sizable portion of the consequences of use.”

(p. 143, emphasis added)

Shen and Williams highlight the importance of incorporating details about motivations for internet use in studies concerned with effects, as the outcomes are likely a product of several factors in addition to psychological characteristics. This approach may account for the possibility that excessive internet occurs because the internet has something to offer that the individual wants or needs. As a coping behaviour, this could be unhealthy in the long run; but that need not align it with the compulsive nature of addictions. As Williams et al. (2008) stated there needs to be a transition in effects studies from simple direct effects models (i.e. examining factors in isolation) to models that incorporate mediating factors. The compensatory view frames motivations as crucial mediators between psychological factors and negative outcomes, mediators that need to be taken into account in empirical work. Following on Shen and Williams (2011), motivations may be better predictors of negative outcomes as they capture the purpose for using an application which is influenced, but not uniquely determined, by psychological characteristics.

A validated framework for motivational factors in MMO games was constructed by Yee (2006, 2007) and has been used for research on excessive use (Caplan et al., 2009; Kuss et al., 2012). The framework measures a player's orientation to online gaming in relation to the three broad motivations of achievement, social interaction and immersion. The achievement motivation measures the desire to gain power, advance rapidly and accumulate in-game status or wealth. Social interaction measures the motivation to chat with others, form relationships with other players and

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