Self-presentation styles and Problematic use of Internet communicative services: The role of the concerns over behavioral displays of imperfection

Silvia Casale [a,*], Giulia Fioravanti [a], Gordon L. Flett [b], Paul L. Hewitt [c]

[a] Department of Health Sciences, Psychology and Psychiatry Unit, University of Florence, Florence, Italy
[b] Department of Psychology, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
[c] Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The current study had the dual purpose of identifying consequences associated with perfectionistic self-presentation (PSP) and evaluating these factors as mediator of the proposed link between PSP and Problematic use of Internet communicative services (GPIU). The present study hypothesized that a self-presentation style characterized by the need to avoid displaying imperfections is associated with GPIU because communicating online rather than in person affords greater control through the reduction of non-verbal cues and the greater temporal flexibility. A sample of 200 university student participants completed measures assessing PSP, GPIU, and perceived controllable aspects of behaviors associated with relying on computer mediated communications (i.e. managing nonverbal displays and buying more time before having to respond). Structural equation modeling confirmed that those who systematically try to avoid revealing their supposed "less than perfect" behaviors or performance place great emphasis on the reduction of nonverbal cues and the temporal flexibility offered by the computer mediated interactions, which, in turn predicts GPIU levels. The findings are discussed in terms of their implications for GPIU and for the perfectionism social disconnection model.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Computer mediated communication (CMC) accounts for nearly one quarter of the total time spent online, and almost 83% of Internet users report using social networking sites (Brenner, 2013). According to dual-model (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012), such widespread use is motivated by two primary needs: the need to belong and the need for self-presentation. Self-presentation behaviors, in particular, have stimulated a variety of research because relying on social networking allows users to strategically control how they are perceived by other people. The vast majority of the studies have focused on the role of personality traits, pointing out that behaviors such as self-promotion through status updates (Mehdizadeh, 2010), descriptions of oneself, and photo posts (e.g., Buffardi & Campbell, 2008) are more frequent for highly narcissistic people. Overall, there is a growing consensus that the

online world represents an ideal environment for achieving narcissistic goals through a self-promotional style.

The current paper focuses on individual differences in perfectionistic self-presentation (PSP) in terms of the need to avoid public displays of imperfection. Whereas the effects of narcissism on online behaviors has been systematically explored, little is known about the contribution of self-presentation styles characterized by the need to hide. This element of the perfectionism construct was first identified by Hewitt and colleagues (2003). The current research evaluates PSP from a construct validity perspective by testing the core assumption that people high in this stylistic tendency will prefer form of communications out of "the public eye" because of the controllability they afford in terms of managing nonverbal cues and having more time to respond and react. That is, CMC might represent an ideal tool for communicating among those people who are concerned over displays of imperfection due to concerns about being negatively judged. Those who fear negative evaluations in face to face interactions (FtF) have already been shown to be attracted to various features of the Internet that have been found to be responsible for a preference for online social interactions and compulsive use of Internet communicative services (Casale, Tella, & Fioravanti, 2013; Fioravanti, Dèttore, &

* Correspondence to: Silvia Casale, Department of Health Sciences, Psychology and Psychiatry Unit, University of Florence, via di San Salvi 12, Florence, Italy. Tel.: +39 0552755065; fax: +39 0557947567.
  E-mail addresses: silvia.casale@unifi.it (S. Casale), giulia.fioravanti@unifi.it (G. Fioravanti), gflett@yorku.ca (G.L. Flett), phewitt@psych.ubc.ca (P.L. Hewitt).

Casale, 2012). However, the fear of being negatively evaluated is not necessarily linked to a self-presentation style that is characterized by the need to avoid showing imperfections or perceived shortcomings. Indeed, people can fear being negatively evaluated for a variety of reasons that are not associated with one's own behavior – e.g., physical appearance or socio-economic status – or might fear being judged because of one's own specific behavior rather than concerns about imperfection. On the other hand, a self-presentation style can be conceptualized as a more stable tendency to elaborate attempts to hide mistakes from others (Hewitt et al., 2003). It is plausible that the online environment represents an ideal context for satisfying this need in ways that are consistent with the perfectionism social disconnection model (Hewitt, Flett, Sherry, & Caelian, 2006). According to this model, those concerned about making mistakes in public feel a sense of detachment from other people and might regard the online environment as a more comfortable communicative context in which higher possibilities of finding support are provided (Casale, Fioravanti, Flett, & Hewitt, 2014).

The current study pursues this line of research by investigating the potential mediating role of various Internet attributes in the relationship between a self-presentation style that is characterized by concern with the potential consequences of being imperfect and a Problematic use of Internet communicative services.

1.1. Self presentation style and perceived relevance of CMC characteristics

The hyperpersonal perspective (Walther, 1996) argues that Internet-based communication tools allow individuals to optimize their self-presentation because CMC exchanges are easier to control and strategically manipulate than FtF behaviors. A consensus has emerged around the notion that online communication allows major control over information disclosure, which, in turn, allows people to be more strategic in managing self-presentation when compared to FtF (Bibby, 2008). Whereas the perception of internet attributes has recently been empirically studied in order to explain the superiority of CMC in terms of intimate exchange (e.g., Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007), in studies that address self-presentation and online behaviors these attributes are usually seen as structural, fixed aspects of CMC (e.g., Bargh, 2002). However, the importance attached to CMC characteristics has been shown to differ greatly on the basis of the subjective perception of personal competence in FtF social interactions. For example, Peter and Valkenburg (2006) found that socially anxious adolescents more strongly value the controllability of internet communication and perceive it as broader, deeper, and more reciprocal than non-socially anxious respondents. Similarly, those with higher social anxiety traits were found to attach higher self-relevance to the CMC attributes and engage in a more socially-involved pattern of interpersonal responses in CMC (Young & Lo, 2012). These patterns might suggest that, even though the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people is universal, personal aspects have an impact on both the way the CMC is perceived and the user's specific online behaviors. If an individual perceives that a certain medium is appropriate to fulfill a particular need (e.g., self-disclosure), he or she will attach more relevance to this medium and the attributes of that medium that fulfill these needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974).

Recent literature has focused on the effects of narcissism on online behaviors, since the behavior of narcissistic people is often motivated by a self-promotion aim in personal interactions that is used as a means of self-enhancement (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). The self-promotion style has been called acquisitive self-presentation because presenters seek approval by emphasizing attractive aspects of themselves (Arkin, 1981). However, in 1959

Goffman suggested that self-presentation can be also be motivated by the avoidance of disapproval, which leads to a protective (instead of acquisitive) self-presentation. In other words, whereas acquisitive self presentation among narcissists is done in order to seek approval, protective self-presentation is aimed at avoiding disapproval. This distinction has also been addressed by Hewitt et al. (2003), who distinguished between a self-presentation characterized by the drive to appear to others as perfect by promoting one's "perfection" and a personal style of presentation characterized by the drive to avoid displaying imperfection. Whereas perfectionistic self-promotion involves actively proclaiming and displaying one's perfection, and is more typical among narcissists, attempts to hide displays of imperfection is an avoidant style that stems from a defensive and threatened view of the self, and is strongly associated with fears of negative evaluations (Jain & Sudhir, 2010). Recent empirical evidence (Sherry, Gralnick, Hewitt, Sherry, & Flett, 2014) supports the idea that perfectionistic self-promotion is positively and uniquely related to narcissism since a grandiose but fragile self-concept leads narcissists to promote an image of perfection in pursuit of the admiration of others.

Although the association between narcissism and online behaviors has been deeply explored (e.g., Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010), less is known about uses and abuses of online communication among those with a self-presentational style characterized by nondisplay of imperfection. Individuals who prefer this self-presentational style should avoid situations where their behavior will become the focus of scrutiny by others, and where personal shortcomings or inabilities may be revealed (Hewitt et al., 2003). In keeping with the hyperpersonal perspective, CMC might enable these people to express identity-important characteristics that they are unable to express in FtF situations. Most important, the temporal flexibility and the reduction of nonverbal cues might be especially appealing as a tool for avoiding displays of personal imperfections. The text-based nature of the internet and the lack of visual cues when communicating online might allow those with a nondisplay self-presentation style to conceal, and therefore control, their supposed shortcomings or faults. As a consequence, since the main purpose of a nondisplay presentation style is the avoidance of negative evaluations, the online environment might represent a more comfortable and safer context compared to FtF interactions. This is also consistent with O'Sullivan's study (2000), which found that participants preferred mediated interpersonal channels when their self-presentation was threatened. However, the preference for online social interactions is considered by the cognitive-behavioral model of Problematic Internet Use (PIU; Caplan, 2010; Davis, 2001) as a precursor of behavioral addiction to Internet communicative services. Moreover, previous research has given preliminary support to the hypothesis that this preference may lead to the development of PIU (e.g., McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

1.2. Problematic use of Internet communicative services

Many definitions of PIU have been provided, the vast majority of which share an emphasis on a brand of impulse control deficit that is characterized by an inability to regulate the time spent online, resulting in negative consequences with regards to everyday functioning. Compared to other perspectives, the cognitive behavioral model of PIU (Caplan, 2010; Davis, 2001) addresses the need of including in the conceptualization and measurement of the phenomenon the preference for online social interactions (Caplan, 2010) as a key factor that helps distinguish between primary – those that would not exist in the absence of the Internet – and secondary forms of PIU. The primary form has been called Generalized Problematic Internet use (GPIU). Even though GPIU