



Haven't we met somewhere before? The effects of a brief internet introduction on social anxiety in a subsequent face to face interaction[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Social anxiety occurs in a range of social situations, the salience of which is influenced by prevailing modes of social contact. The emergence of computer mediated communication (CMC), buoyed by the recent explosion of social networks, has changed the way many people make and maintain social contacts. We randomly assigned 30 socially anxious and 30 low social anxiety participants to a brief internet chat introduction or a control internet surfing condition followed by a standardized face to face (FTF) interaction. We hypothesized that for socially anxious participants the chat introduction would reduce anxiety of and preference to avoid the subsequent FTF interaction. Results supported hypotheses for most indices. Findings suggest that, at least for the common situation in which internet chat precedes FTF interaction with the same person, such contact may reduce social anxiety. It is not known whether this decrease would generalize to FTF contact in other contexts. It is suggested that CMC might be construed as a particularly useful form of safety behavior that may help in the allocation of attentional resources to process new information relevant for disconfirmation of negative beliefs maintaining social anxiety. Potential clinical implications are discussed.

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Introduction

The salience of anxiety-provoking situations in social anxiety disorder is determined, to some degree, by socio-cultural context and prevailing norms (Heinrichs et al., 2006; Kleinknecht, Dinnel, Kleinknecht, Hiruma, & Harada, 1997; Lipsitz, 2004). In societies with arranged marriages, for example, few individuals would be bothered by social anxiety of dating. Technological changes may also impact on the expression and features of SAD. In the 1990's some patients with SAD reported that the advent of caller identification increased their level of anxiety about making phone calls due to the added aspect of disclosure prior to initiating the conversation. Conversely, the recent increase in cell phone use by teens (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005) now allows many socially anxious youth to bypass the once-dreaded, brief telephone exchange with their friend's parent who answers the family house phone.

Computer mediated communication (CMC)

The internet has had a palpable influence on humankind. More than 1.9 billion people (more than 25% of the world's population) now have access to the internet. Although the internet has multiple functions, its role as a communication network is becoming increasingly prominent. Findings of a number of surveys indicate that a primary function of internet usage is to maintain interpersonal relationships (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). This social function has been greatly enhanced by the emergence of social network services such as Facebook, which as of September 2011 boasted some 800 million users. Some early evidence suggested that these social networks were being used more to sustain existing relationships than to develop new ones (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). However, the function of these networks is rapidly evolving and other studies support their importance for developing new relationships (Steinfeld, Ellison & Lampe, 2008). An increasingly common scenario involves initial introductory contact via computer mediated communication (CMC) which leads to subsequent face to face (FTF) contact. Thus our very first contact with an unfamiliar person is increasingly occurring not in a FTF meeting or over the telephone, but via CMC.

McKenna and Bargh (2004) highlight two aspects of CMC which make this form of communication qualitatively different from other

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modes. First, when people interact in a text-based medium, it is possible to remain anonymous or conceal aspects of one's identity. Second, unlike FTF communication, CMC is free of important nonverbal features of communication (e.g., tone of voice, facial expressions) and prominent interpersonal features (e.g., physical appearance, skin color, age and gender). This perspective is consistent with Sproull and Kiesler's (1985) early observation that text-based communication through the internet "narrowed the bandwidth" of social communication, compared to traditional FTF communication.

Social anxiety and CMC

The potential social impact of CMC may have special importance for individuals with high levels of socially anxiety who experience particular challenges in the realm of social interactions. Because of its "narrow bandwidth" and limited exposure to scrutiny, CMC may offer an especially appealing alternative to face to face and telephone communication for this population. Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire (1984) suggested that the elimination of nonverbal features of speech, physical scrutiny, and pressure for real time response would reduce concerns over social rejection, which is a primary focus of social anxiety. Along these lines, McKenna and Bargh (2000) proposed that the absence of the above aspects plus the potential for anonymity in CMC allows the socially anxious to interact with less anxiety and thus to be more inclined to form online relationships. Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, and Fox (2002) found that introverted workers reported feeling more comfortable expressing their "real selves" (i.e., disclosing personal information) via CMC vs. other forms of communication, an advantage not found in extroverted workers.

A more complex question is how the use of CMC may impact on social anxiety in other modes of interaction. On the surface, CMC provides a useful first step, which might facilitate smoother entry into other forms of interaction, including FTF. This positive effect is indeed suggested by survey results, which indicate that CMC allows those who are high in shyness to develop and maintain relationships (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Further support for the notion of a facilitative effect of CMC comes from the efficacy of internet-based treatments for SAD (e.g., Andersson et al., 2006; Berger, Hohl, & Caspar, 2009). Although these treatments involve specific, directive techniques which are not typical of CMC, the apparent fluidity with which contact beginning with CMC translates into broader clinical benefits for SAD lends support to a broadly facilitative role for this modality.

However, reliance on CMC could also constitute a form of safety behavior (Salkovskis, Clark, & Gelder, 1996) through which socially anxious individuals avoid threatening aspects of social interactions. If so, continued use and reinforcement of this behavior could maintain or even increase overall patterns of social avoidance and prevent disconfirmation of negative beliefs regarding social situations. In a recent study, safety behavior was strongly related to anxiety and negative beliefs in a SAD patient group (Okajima, Kanai, Chen, & Sakano, 2009) and reduction of safety behavior in socially anxious individuals is associated with greater fear reduction than exposure alone (Taylor & Alden, 2010). It should be noted, however, that distinguishing between safety behaviors and adaptive coping strategies may depend on underlying motivations (Thwaites & Freeston, 2005), which have yet to be systematically assessed in CMC.

Noting an association between social anxiety in young adults and increased time spent in internet chat, Mazalin and Moore (2004) suggest that this tendency might naturally preclude opportunities to form valuable FTF relationships. In another survey social anxiety was a strong predictor of preference for CMC over traditional FTF interactions, and this preference was associated with negative outcomes such as missing social engagements

(Caplan, 2007). Similar negative effects are also suggested by Pierce (2009) in a survey of teens in which social anxiety was positively associated with use of CMC but inversely with making friends online. Along these lines, Gross, Juvonen, and Gable (2002) asked seventh grade students to report their CMC partners' closeness on a four point scale (ranging from a stranger to best friend). They found that social anxiety was associated with greater CMC partner distance and that CMC partners were more likely to be complete or relative strangers. They suggest that for the socially anxious CMC may intensify disconnection from FTF contacts. Campbell, Cumming, and Hughes (2006), in an internet survey, found that those who were high in social anxiety were more likely to experience CMC as addictive. Erwin, Turk, Heimberg, Fresco, and Hantula (2004) found, in a survey of socially anxious internet users, that CMC use led to some benefits in the form of increased social support and confidence. However, socially anxious users continued to experience social-evaluative concerns in CMC and expressed a preference for CMC over FTF. They suggested that CMC constitutes a "partial exposure," which serves as a comfortable refuge for socially anxious, but which also reinforces continued avoidance of other social situations. Absent fear-relevant aspects of social situations, continued exposure to CMC would not be expected to allow for meaningful fear reduction.

The present study

We sought to examine the effects of a brief internet chat introduction on social anxiety in a subsequent FTF contact in an experimental study including individuals who were high and low in social anxiety. To date, the direct effects of CMC on social anxiety have not been experimentally tested. We examined this question in the increasingly common situation in which a CMC introduction is followed by a face to face meeting with the same person. This is the usual sequence in situations such as internet dating, which have been found to be useful for individuals who are high in social anxiety (Stevens & Morris, 2007). One possibility is that CMC would provide a non-threatening first step that would allow for some familiarity and that this would reduce irrational fears of the FTF meeting. However, given the possibility that CMC reflects a safety behavior or partial exposure, it is possible that CMC would have little or no effect on subsequent FTF interactions. Finally, it is possible that a CMC introduction would *raise the stakes* of the first meeting. The CMC interaction might intensify expectations of the socially anxious individual who may also perceive the other party as having increased expectations of them, thus increasing irrational fear and desire to avoid.

To address this question we randomly assigned high and low socially anxious individuals to a CMC vs. a control internet surfing condition followed by a standardized FTF interaction. We assessed self-reported anxiety, subjective arousal, expectation of success and preference to avoid the FTF situation before and after each phase. Our overall assumption, based on evidence from surveys (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al., 2008) and suggestive evidence from internet treatment programs, was that CMC would reduce subsequent anxiety and avoidance. Therefore we hypothesized that socially anxious participants who engaged in a brief CMC interaction would report lower a) anxiety, b) subjective physiological arousal, c) avoidance, and d) greater expectation of success in the subsequent FTF interaction compared to those engaged in a control (internet) surfing condition.

Method

Design

The study used a two by two by two mixed design with repeated measures on one variable. The first factor, a between subjects

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