

Psychosomatic Medicine 2017: Depression and impulsivity mediating the relationship between social anxiety and Internet addiction-Catherine So-Kum Tang-National University of Singapore

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Abstract

The Internet is an increasing virtual environment, and its linked functions have become incorporated into people's daily lives. With the rapid increases of users, there is increasing concern that Internet use may become problematic for some individuals. Internet addiction, or problematic Internet use, refers to excessive or poorly controlled preoccupations, urges, or behaviors regarding computer use and Internet access that lead to impairment or distress. Individuals who are keen to Internet also show symptoms like to alcohol and drug addiction such as mood modification, inability to cut down, withdrawal, tolerance, conflict, and relapse. Internet addict regularly use the Internet for unlimited periods, isolating themselves from other forms of social interaction and concentrating almost solely on the Internet rather than on the broader life events. High school and university students are of substantial risk for developing Internet addiction, as they often have free and unlimited access to the Internet and are expected to make use of this technology for learning purposes. Indeed, studies have found that Internet addiction is more prevalent among adolescents and young adults as compared to the general population. For university students, Internet addiction prevalence estimates range from 5%-16% in the United States and Asian countries. In terms of regional differences, cross-cultural studies have found that university students in Asian countries typically show higher rates of Internet addiction than their counterparts in the United States. University students who are addicted to the Internet tend to experience a variety of academic difficulties, health and mental health disturbances, behavioural problems, and disruption of daily routines. Exactly Internet addiction is found to relate to cognitive/neurological impairment and poor academic performance.

Social anxiety:

Social anxiety refers to persistent fear and distress of interpersonal situations that often leads to the anticipation of embarrassment or humiliation. Socially anxious individuals frequently avoid interpersonal situations, adopt maladaptive

coping, and seek out a "quick" way to alter their sustained negative emotional states. They frequently turn to alcohol and drug in order to reduce their anxiety and apprehension. More recently, the Internet has emerged as an alternate platform/outlet for individuals with social anxiety. As compared to face-to-face interaction, the Internet provides a seemingly safe and less threatening platform to communicate and interact with other people, to search for information, and to shop for merchandise. Social anxiety is salient in university students, whose major developmental tasks focus on forming relationships and self presentation. With the accessibility and extensive spread use of the Internet, socially anxious students may perceive Internet use as a safe behavior in reducing anxiety or the probability of rejection and negative feedback from others. Over time, these students may begin to invest a disproportionate amount of attention, time, and effort on the Internet. They may become increasingly rely on the Internet as a way of avoiding the challenges and demands of social situation. This reliance on the Internet may then lead to addiction like use of the Internet. Indeed, the association between social anxiety and Internet addiction has been found among university students in various countries. Studies also show that individuals who rely on the Internet predominantly to satisfy their social or escape needs are at greater risk for developing Internet addiction than those who rely on the Internet predominantly for personal communication and information-gathering purposes.

Depression:

The rates of depression are substantially higher in university students than in the general population. This may be related to boredom with large blocks of unstructured time, low self-esteem with competition from peers, and feelings of being isolated and intimidated in the campus community. According to the mood management theory, individuals arrange their environment in a way that best enables them to terminate or diminish bad moods while facilitating or enhancing good moods. Students who knowledge depressed mood may turn to

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Internet use for mood modification. They may have arousal-oriented motivations for Internet use such as entertainment, information seeking, diversion, and relaxation. Online chatting, online gaming, and other Internet activities can also serve as distractions from rumination. Thus, Internet use can provide opportunities for depressed students to receive immediate reassurance and mood alternation. However, excessive time spending on the Internet will also reduce the time for normal social interactions and leisure activities, resulting in further reliance on the Internet for mood enhancement. present literature has shown a vigorous association between depression and Internet addiction in university students. Furthermore, researchers have proposed the “problematic Internet behaviour syndrome” to refer to the increased propensity toward Internet addiction among socially anxious students who also experience depressed mood. It is argued that social anxiety is often associated with anxiety and depression, which in turn may negatively influence the ability to cope in social interactions. Socially anxious students who are also depressed may use the Internet as a medium to regulate their social fears and related distress, particularly loneliness.

Discussions:

According to the recent Internet World Stat, Asia has the highest number of Internet users in the world, approximately 922.3 million, representing 44% of the world’s Internet user population. University students in Asia have also shown higher rates of Internet addiction as compared to university students in other countries. For the present study, about 9.4% of the surveyed university students in Singapore met the criteria for Internet addiction. This prevalence rate is comparable to rates reported by studies conducted in the United States and European countries, but lower than other Asian countries such as China and South Korea. However, it should be noted that the considerable variance of prevalence rates for Internet addiction among countries may be attributable to differences in diagnostic criteria and assessment tools, study methodologies, and cultural factors. In line with the present literature, the present study showed that Internet addiction was associated with psychological variables of social anxiety, depression, and impulsivity.

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