

# Caught in the web



*Is the internet a safe communication environment for socially anxious individuals, or does it in fact increase social isolation?*

**ROBIN-MARIE SHEPHERD and ROBERT J. EDELMANN report.**

**T**HE past decade has witnessed an explosive growth in the use of the internet; a recent estimate suggests that there are over 400 million internet users worldwide (Nua Internet Surveys, 2001) with an expectation that there will be one billion users by 2005. The introduction of easier access to the internet via digital TV and mobile phones will no doubt ensure this estimate is achieved.

The internet is used for a variety of purposes, both at work and leisure. These include information retrieval, online shopping, entertainment, communication and a host of other activities. As a result of this widespread availability and practical applications, many people spend a great deal of time interacting with or via their computer rather than engaging face-to-face with colleagues or friends.

Whether such changes to our everyday lives brought about by the internet are for

the better or worse has been the subject of much debate. Some have argued that the internet is leading to social isolation and the break-up of social relationships (Kraut *et al.*, 1998; Turkle, 1996). In contrast, others have argued that the internet leads to more and better social relationships, by providing an anonymous (and hence personally 'safe') medium for communication free from geographical constraints (Katz & Aspden, 1997).

It thus seems plausible to assume that internet use may fill a void at least for some people who, owing to their specific psychopathology, fail to establish healthy social relationships. Chatlines in particular may help those who are too shy to initiate conversation or to meet new people in a safe environment (Erwin *et al.*, 2000). Communicating via the internet can alleviate 'feelings of embarrassment' and 'fears of penalty and disapproval' (Siegel *et al.*, 1986). Some may isolate themselves from the non-computer world in order to avoid negative evaluation (Turkle, 1996), a predominant feature of social anxiety and social phobia. The fact that the physical symptoms of social phobia involving blushing, sweating, stammering, and twitching (Amies *et al.*, 1983; Solyom *et al.*, 1986) are also very visible may increase the appeal of the internet as a medium for communication for social phobics. It is possible that internet usage in this context may be regarded as a potential boon to the psychological well-being of such individuals.

However, a number of authors have also noted that social isolation might itself lead to greater internet usage (Shapiro, 1999). Hence, it may well be that it is just such individuals who are particularly at risk of becoming over-dependent on the internet. Excessive use of the internet has led to concern about its possibly addictive potential (e.g. Griffiths, 1996). The search for personality traits that may predict who is predisposed to becoming internet addicted has tended to concentrate on shy,

introverted or socially withdrawn individuals (e.g. Douse & McManus, 1993). Indeed, there is some evidence to support the contention that shyness or social withdrawal may be evident in some excessive users (e.g. Greenfield, 1999). Recent findings suggest those with anxiety disorders such as social phobia may be more at risk of internet dependence. Shapiro (personal communication, 28 June 2000) reports that 9 out of 20 of his internet-dependent sample had a lifetime diagnosis of social phobia.

Most social phobics are unable to form and maintain satisfactory social relationships and subsequently severely restrict their range of social activities (Turner & Beidel, 1989). Social phobics report increased use of alcohol, anxiolytics and other drugs, often as a form of self-medication, to help them cope with social demands faced in everyday life (Schneier *et al.*, 1992). The internet, via e-mail and chatrooms, may provide social phobics with a 'safe' way to access 'social contacts' or to ameliorate painful affect.

The available literature thus raises the possibility of a cyclical relationship between internet dependence and social phobia: (a) social phobics are attracted to the internet because 'virtual' interaction is easier or less threatening than 'real' interaction; (b) the benefits of internet use for social phobics puts them at greater risk of excessive use/dependence; (c) excessive use/dependence increases social isolation and damages 'real-world' relationships. In other words, while there may be short-term benefits of internet use for social phobics there may well be long-term costs. Indeed, if social phobics are adopting false, or even slightly altered, identities or personalities in their chatroom interactions, this may be detrimental in the longer term for establishing real-world relationships.

In exploring the positive and negative effects of the internet on social relations with regard to social phobia, it is important

## ANGELA'S STORY

Angela was a 49-year-old who reported using the internet two to three hours a day, five days a week, adding that she would spend far more time online if her son, who lives at home, was not also an avid user. She voiced concerns that her use of the internet was becoming addictive. She obtained scores of 73 on the SIAS, 37 on the SPS and 45 on the BDI, indicative of severe anxiety and depression. Her main use of the internet was for sending and receiving e-mail and conducting information searches; she described interacting online as being far more conformable for her than interacting offline. She also stated that she made slight use of chatrooms but required some degree of courage to do so. She felt that she was extremely lonely before she used the internet, which has helped her to feel less cut off from the world. Interestingly, she felt that her use of the internet had not disrupted her offline relationships, although she commented that she tends to ignore her husband when she is online.

that research uses appropriate screening measures (such as the Social Phobia Scale (SPS) and Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS): Mattick & Clarke, 1998; the Beck Depression Scale (BDI): Beck & Steer, 1990). Participants, who can be recruited from self-help groups for anxiety problems, should meet DSM-IV criteria for social phobia, identified on the basis of clinical interview (First *et al.*, 1998), as well as by obtaining scores on an internet dependence screen suggestive of clinical dependence. The latter nine-item measure, similar to Young's screen (1996), was developed to parallel similar criteria for substance dependence in the DSM-IV. Structured interviews can then centre on use of various aspects of the internet and use of other potentially addictive behaviours and the individual's attributions for making such use.

The boxes on these pages are fairly typical cases we have come across that can illustrate possible relationships between internet use and social phobia. From these examples, there may well be reason to suppose that arguments suggesting both positive and negative effects of the internet on social relationships are correct, at least in the case of social phobia. The internet clearly provides at least some social phobics with a 'safe' forum through which to make 'social contact' with others. In at least some instances Shapiro's (1999) contention that isolation leads to internet use may be an accurate assertion. Although, on the basis of the screening

measure administered, the internet use described by the two illustrative cases is excessive, they both offered a positive rather than a negative view of such use, echoing similar findings reported in other studies (e.g. Greenfield, 1999). In particular, both note that the internet not only provides them with a means for engaging in social contact with others but also allows them to feel more comfortable while doing so.

One possible explanation for this is that excessive use of the internet, like other potentially addictive behaviours, initially serves to boost one's perceived psychological well-being, while potentially eventually leading to further isolation and distress. While the short-term gains and hence the positive side of internet use is highlighted by both case studies, the possible longer-term negative consequences for real-life relationships is less evident.

Whether the internet is widely used by social phobics as a means of securing social contact with others, and the possible balance of positive versus negative implications are the main issues for our ongoing research. However, the positive advantage provided by the internet as a 'safe' communication medium for this subgroup of the population may mean they are particularly vulnerable to becoming dependent on it.

Whether social phobia leads to excessive internet use and whether such use is to the detriment of effective communication skill in real-life contact can

## BARRY'S STORY

Barry was a 53-year-old who took early retirement following promotion to a position that required more direct contact with people. He obtained scores of 34 on each of the SIAS and SPS (recommended cut-off for identifying clinical groups 34 and 24 respectively) and 22 on the BDI. He reported using the internet for about 30 hours a week, his main use being to access the chatrooms for sending and receiving e-mail and conducting information searches. He described interacting online as being far more comfortable for him than interacting offline, commenting that 'it enables you to be who you want to be'. When asked if his internet use impaired his relationship with his wife, he commented 'what relationship?', adding that his wife would go to bed at about 8.30pm and he would then indulge in the chatrooms, including cybersex with one woman. Interestingly, he denied feelings of loneliness while adding 'you would not believe how many lonely women are out there in the chatrooms'.

only be established via carefully controlled longitudinal studies using suitable comparison groups. While initial research with a small community sample suggests a decline in social contact with increasing internet use over a 12- to 24-month period (Kraut *et al.*, 1998), the question of vulnerability to dependence, particularly in relation to social phobia, has not been addressed. In addition, the process by which attrition in social skills might occur has been neglected. For example, does the loss of emotion-recognition skills precede decrements in nonverbal communication capabilities and verbal skills? This may be particularly pertinent in the case of social phobics whose skill-related behaviour is generally rated as less adequate than that of non-socially phobic comparison groups (Baker & Edelmann, 2001).

The internet provides a wealth of communication possibilities for an ever-increasing proportion of the population. Identifying both those who may be at risk from overuse and the positive and negative implications of such use presents an exciting challenge for future research.

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