UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO

Colegio de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades

The Positive and Negative Effects of Online Gaming and Internet Use in People with Social Anxiety

Proyecto de investigación

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Psicología Clínica

Trabajo de titulación presentado como requisito

para la obtención del título de

Psicólogo Clínico

Quito, 6 de diciembre de 2018

UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO USFQ

COLEGIO CIENCIAS SOCIALES Y HUMANIDADES

HOJA DE CALIFICACIÓN

DE TRABAJO DE TITULACIÓN

The Positive and Negative Effects of Online Gaming and Internet Use in People with Social Anxiety

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Quito, 6 de diciembre de 2018

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Resumen

Antecedentes: El internet es un fenómeno mundial que cada vez más se ha ido integrando en todas las sociedades alrededor del mundo (Internet World Stats, 2018). A la vez que esto va incrementando también empiezan aparecer riesgos y beneficio en un aspecto psicológico. Por esta razón el objetivo de este estudio tiene como propósito investigar hasta qué punto el internet puede afectar a las personas que sufren de ansiedad social y explorar la oportunidad de realizar terapia con personas que generalmente no estarían dispuestas a buscar terapia debido a su condición psicológica. **Metodología:** Se realizará un estudio en Ecuador para estimar el nivel de personas con ansiedad social que adicionalmente tienen comportamientos problemáticos con el uso del internet. Esto se medirá usando tres tipos de cuestionarios que miden la auto evaluación, la sensibilidad a feedback negativo de otras personas y el tipo de mecanismos de defensa que los participantes usan en un ambiente virtual para determinar el uso problemático del internet en personas con problemas de ansiedad social. **Resultados:** Los resultados esperados según la revisión de la literatura son que las personas con ansiedad social perciben que se sienten mas seguras dentro de un ambiente virtual pero sus relaciones sociales siguen igualmente afectadas negativamente debido a su problema de ansiedad, se espera que una fracción de las personas con este problema se sientan motivadas a asistir a terapia cognitiva conductual en línea. **Conclusiones:** El internet afecta negativamente a las personas con alta ansiedad social, pero existe potencial para ganar beneficios del internet si la manera de usar el internet es adecuada.

Palabras Clave: Ansiedad Social, Psicología, Internet, Videojuegos, Terapia Cognitiva Conductual Virtual, Cuestionarios

ABSTRACT

Antecedents: The internet has become a global phenomenon that has integrated itself into every society throughout the world (Internet World Stats, 2018). As the availability of the internet and all of forms of communications within it evolve, so do the risks and benefits that come with it, including psychological disorders. For this reason, the objective of this study is to research to what extent the internet and its various forms of communication can affect people with social anxiety and explore the opportunity of applying online-based therapy on people who would otherwise be unable to visit a therapist due to their psychological conditions. **Methodology:** A study will be carried out in Ecuador in order to gauge the level of socially anxious people who engage in problematic internet use. This will be measured by using three different types of questionnaires that evaluate self-perception, sensibility to negative feedback from others, and frequency of online safety behaviors. **Results:** The expected results, according to the Literature Review, are that people with social anxiety perceive that they are safer and in control within an online social environment, though in reality their quality of online relationships is just as bad as their offline relationships, due to their inability to form meaningful connections with other people. It is expected that a small fraction of people with this problem will be willing to participate in online therapy. **Conclusion:** The internet negatively affects people with high levels of social anxiety, but there are potential benefits for those that use online communication for healthier purposes.

Key Words: Social Anxiety, Psychology, Internet, Online Gaming, Internet Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Questionnaires.

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INTRODUCTION

For the past two decades, the internet has caused an enormous impact in the daily lives of people around the globe. Specifically, the way people communicate has changed due to the popular use of the internet and online forms of social interaction. Considering this fact, the potential for online social interactions can have a significant impact on people who suffer from social anxiety. For example, there are opportunities for people with social anxiety to communicate with others through less stressful social interactions, as they are not socializing in person with other people (Caplan, 2007). However, it is important to take into consideration that these alternative methods of communication can lead to other issues, such as maladaptive behavior and comorbid mental disorders like internet addiction disorder (Becker, Alzahabi, & Hopwood, 2013). Additionally, these online interactions, whether they take place through online social media or through online gaming with strangers, have been demonstrated to possibly have as much of a positive impact as a negative impact, depending on how the user perceives these interactions (Kaye, Kowert, & Quinn, 2017) (Caplan S. E., 2002) (Whitbourne, Ellenberg, & Akimoto, 2013). Clearly, using the internet and its many forms of communication appears to have both a positive and a negative impact on people's mental health, which will be explored further using the current research available.

A meta-analysis from 2016, which examined the amount of research done on internet phenomena, states that there are over ten thousand studies about the internet. However, the amount of studies done on internet related to social anxiety are less than one hundred (Prizant-Passal, Shechner, & Aderka, 2016). Not only does this mean the amount

of research done is scarce, but also it suggest that there is currently no research methodology that provides consistent results when it comes to researching internet phenomena around mental health (Prizant-Passal, Shechner, & Aderka, 2016). Taking all of this into consideration, the purpose of this study is to review current research on the impact of internet use and social anxiety, and to evaluate the possibilities and risks of using this medium for the benefit of people suffering from this mental health issue in addition to developing a possible online treatment that could reach out to people suffering from social anxiety who spend most of their time online and are unable to seek face-to-face therapy.

Background:

The use of internet and its impact on mental health:

In the contemporary era, the use of, and access to, the internet and online social media has become as much of a necessity for modern life as electricity or transportation. The use of online communications has been increasing over the years: In December 2013, approximately 39% of the world's population was actively using the internet (Cheng & Li, 2014), and as of June 2018, approximately 55.1% of the world's 7.6 billion people have access to the internet. This percentage is likely to rise even more as civilizations develop (Internet World Stats, 2018).

One of the main reasons why the internet is taking over the world is because of an essential human need: communication. Thanks to online-based communication, it is possible to socialize with other people regardless of distance and without the need to meet others face-to-face. This fact is why online-based social interaction can be so attractive to people with social anxiety. Social anxiety is a disorder characterized by a noticeable and persistent fear of social situations in which embarrassment or humiliation might occur (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The internet provides a medium in which face-to-face interaction is not necessary, as it enables anonymity and free self-presentation (Ju-Yu, Cheng-Fang, & Cheng-Shen, 2012). Because of this, it is relatively easy to avoid criticism and negative evaluations from other individuals. By connecting these two points, it becomes evident that people with social anxiety disorder can use online communication in order to socialize with a decreased amount of perceived risk, compared to the risk they perceive from real-life interactions. In turn, this makes online forms of communication a

very attractive alternative to learning how to regulate their anxiety in real life social situations.

Even though online-based communication can prove a good alternative to coping with environmental and developmental stressors, it can lead to internet addiction. Frequent use of online-based communication can develop into maladaptive behaviors and thus become potentially problematic for the user (Lai, et al., 2015). Studies focusing on the comorbidity of internet addiction have revealed that people with internet addiction are very likely to have psychiatric symptoms and functional impairment in both adolescent and adult populations. For reference, a study performed in Italy revealed that, among the 50 adult participants with internet addiction, 15% met the criteria for a generalized anxiety disorder diagnosis, 15% had social anxiety disorder and 7% had dysthymia. Additionally, the study concluded that symptoms for depression and social phobia were more likely to appear in populations that suffer from internet addiction disorder (Bernardi & Pallanti, 2009).

However, even with risks such as developing comorbid disorders, there must be ways in which the use of the internet can be applied in order to treat the very same problematic behavior that incites the frequent use of online-based communication. Online social media is a relatively new area of research and within the area of psychology specifically there is still much research to be done. Therefore, the research question focuses on the importance of reviewing current research on how people with social anxiety are affected when they are using online based communication, whether it is through text chats, forums, and even online multiplayer games, and the risks and benefits this can bring.

        The literature review presented in this study will review current research on how the internet affects people with social anxiety, the impact it can have as shown in their behavior and their own perception of social competence, and the role of online games on social anxiety. Finally, a review will be produced about the information on current research on this topic and what this means to the future of research in this area.

Literature Review

The following information in this section of the study was obtained from scientific journals such as Cyberpsychology and Computers on Human Behavior, which are relevant to the study of psychological phenomena on the internet, as well as from books about social anxiety. The journals that were cited in this study were obtained through Google Scholar by using key words such as "internet" "online gaming" "anxiety" "online based communication" and by browsing the reference section of the journals themselves for further reading about the topic.

This literature review begins with the concept of computer mediated communication, which includes all types of social interactions that take place through technological means such as computers, phones, gaming consoles and more, and how these social interactions are perceived by the people with social anxiety using this type of communication. This also includes how computer-mediated communication can be more attractive for people with social anxiety, and the difference between computer-mediated communication and real-life interactions. Afterwards, a review on the current research will be done about how social anxiety is manifested in an internet based environment, along with the risks and potential benefits that can occur within online-based communication, which includes the impact online gaming can have on people with social anxiety. Finally, the effectiveness of online therapy will be reviewed in order to ascertain the viability of establishing methods to reach out to people with social anxiety who would otherwise avoid seeking treatment due to their existing condition.

Computer mediated communication and social anxiety

Once again, it is vital to begin this literature review by explaining what computer-mediated communication (CMC) is as, besides face-to-face interactions, it is the primary way people have been socializing ever since the internet became integrated into our society. As explained previously, CMC is any kind of communication that is carried out through technological means, for example: chatting on online social media like Facebook, Twitter, online chats through applications like Skype, videogames and so on. Computers, laptops, video game consoles, and even phones can perform this task (Riva, 2002). CMC and face-to-face interactions differ in several key aspects that make CMC more desirable to people with social anxiety, who behave in a manner that allows them to minimize their chances of leaving a negative impression on others as much as possible (Prizant-Passal, Shechner, & Aderka, 2016). To be more specific, CMC generally uses text-based communication that has less need of audio and visual cues. Evidently, this means that people with social anxiety do not need to fear causing a negative impression on others online, because there is no reason for them to worry about their own physical appearance or reactions when the people they are interacting with cannot see them.

A second key difference between CMC and face-to-face interaction is the possibility, in CMC, to maintain anonymity. In online chat rooms, forums, and many types of online social media, people have the option to hide their identities by using one or multiple

pseudonyms, as most online social media types do not require individuals to use their real names or even use a photograph of themselves to interact with others online (Prizant-Passal, Shechner, & Aderka, 2016). In other words, people with social anxiety can essentially create a virtual shield by masking their personal identity, which means they can recover quickly from negative impressions they leave on other people if they fail at communicating with them properly (Young & Lo, 2012). In fact, CMC does not guarantee that the person's declared identity you see in a chatroom or an online game is real. As stated in an article about CMC, the use of false identities is widespread in online communities; people can even pose as members of a different sex if they want to (Riva, 2002).

The final key difference between CMC and face-to-face interaction is asynchronous communication. During CMC, a person does not necessarily have to respond to interactions right away. In most cases, people who communicate via text-based online chatrooms do not need to be present at the time when people are writing messages and have the option to respond to these messages later. Individuals with social anxiety tend to obsessively evaluate feedback from other people to measure their social performance. In face-to-face communication, this excessive evaluation exhausts the cognitive capacity of socially anxious people, which in turn disrupts the way they interact with other individuals and thus perpetuates their belief that they are not adequate for social situations (Young & Lo, 2012). On the other hand, due its asynchronous nature, CMC provides enough time for participants to process feedback evaluation, while also providing room for people to present themselves in a manner they can be satisfied and simultaneously meeting external social demands.

With all these differences, it is no wonder that people with social anxiety who use CMC are more likely to seek out relationships in an online environment. Furthermore,

because they are not held back by the negative self-perception that occurs during face-to-face communication, they will develop relationships more quickly over the internet (Young & Lo, 2012).

Risks of CMC in Social Anxiety

The internet and all kinds of online social communication can be used in a healthy or positive manner in order to improve one's own mental well-being, through positive behavioral changes, psychological comfort, and ease of access to information and other people who might share interests. However, it can also have negative impacts, such as a deterioration of academic, social, and occupational performance, while also increasing the risk of developing problematic internet use and comorbid mental disorders like depression (Baloğlu, Kozan, & Kesici, 2018).

As mentioned before, people who suffer from social anxiety have difficulty when dealing with offline social interactions, and thus they prefer to use the internet as a means to interact with others. Therefore, the internet becomes a key way for these individuals to cope with social anxiety, and it also provides them with opportunities to engage in social communication (Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007).

However, even if socially anxious people see online communication as an alternative to forming relationships within an offline environment, what determines if this is a benefit or a potential risk for a person is the quality of the relationships that people develop. A study by Lee and Stapinski found that people who suffer from social anxiety perceive their relationships to be impoverished and unsatisfactory, and this includes both offline and online relationships (Lee & Stapinski, Seeking Safety on the internet:

Relationship between social anxiety and problematic internet use., 2012). Therefore, even if socially anxious people perceive that they have a better social performance online, it does not appear that CMC provides any concrete improvement in their digitally-formed relationships. The reason for this is that, although studies have shown that the internet can provide benefits to individuals with introverted traits, such as higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of depression when they communicate and engage in relationships with online friends, socially anxious people are marked by a pervasive concern and anxiety over the idea that they can be negatively evaluated by others. This in turn leads them to engage in compulsive and excessive internet use, in order to search for approval while avoiding any kind of negative appraisal, which is likely to lead into developing poor relationships with other people (Weidman, Fernandez, Levinson, & Rodebaugh, 2012). Because of these reasons, socially anxious people are not very likely to receive benefits from online relationships as much as others, but that does not preclude it being helpful for anyone else. A study by Sheeks and associates suggests that CMC relationships can help stigmatized individuals. For example, people with less desirable physical characteristics such as obesity, deformations, and possibly people with different sexual orientations might find online relationships provide them with an outlet for expression and social bonding that they might not be able to find in offline situations (Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007). The reason for this is that these people will risk using appropriate self-disclosure online, which in turn provides more meaningful social support from their online friends. However, highly socially anxious people will try to be as passive as possible or avoid revealing much of themselves in order to remain likable but end up forming shallow, unsatisfactory relationships due to a lack of involvement within the relationship itself (Weidman, Fernandez, Levinson, & Rodebaugh, 2012).

While online communication may be used to avoid the social stressors that come with face-to-face interactions, it can lead to internet addiction as frequent use can develop into maladaptive behaviors and can potentially become addictive. With the widespread growth of internet use, internet addiction is, according to Lai and colleagues, one of the most serious current public health concerns. Problematic internet use during gaming has even been considered to merit inclusion in future DSM editions (Lai, et al., 2015). Additionally, a study based on the mediating role of the internet and psychosocial well-being has demonstrated that internet addiction commonly occurs with depression and social anxiety, which degrades a person's level of psychosocial well-being. However, the study posits that the reason why this happens is complicated, and suggests that the answer lies in assessing the reasons why a socially anxious person uses the internet, including the time spent using the internet, their patterns of communication, and the kind of people they interact with during their time spent online (Lai, et al., 2015).

A meta-analysis on social anxiety by Prizant-Passal and Shechner provides similar results. The meta-analysis found that there is a small, but positive, correlation between problematic internet use and social anxiety. This suggests that people with this condition may be more susceptible to developing pathological internet use. The reason for this is because individuals with these characteristics may rely more on CMC, while avoiding face-to-face interactions, due to using CMC as safety behavior as a way to reduce anxiety and the probability of receiving negative reactions from others. In turn, this reliance may give rise to problematic internet use with addiction-like behaviors (Prizant-Passal, Shechner, & Aderka, 2016).

On the other hand, the way people use online media can also affect their psychological well-being. For example, a study done by Becker and associates revealed that the amount of time people spend on social media simultaneous, particularly while accessing two or more forms of social media simultaneously, can be associated with cognitive processing deficits as well as problems with filtering out unnecessary information and distractions. These findings explain how people with social anxiety may develop problematic internet use because they behave in a way that disrupts normal coping mechanisms by either making rapid shifts of attention away from negative stimuli through multitasking online media, which amplifies feelings of anxiety and depression, or by multitasking as a problematic defense mechanism to distract themselves from negative feedback (Becker, Alzahabi, & Hopwood, 2013).

The effects of the internet on social anxiety appear to be worse depending on the level of a person's social anxiety. A study done by Yen and associates states that people with high social anxiety levels are more likely to employ the problematic internet behaviors mentioned earlier in order to socialize while feeling safe. While this can provide an opportunity for these individuals to seek out online-based therapy, this also means that these people are as vulnerable to social anxiety problems in online situations as they are in offline situations, despite what they perceive when they're socializing over the internet (Yen, et al., 2012).

Online Gaming and Social Anxiety:

A commonly played videogame genre are Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, also known as MMORPGs, which are games in which players can interact with each other and the game universe through an avatar which players create themselves.

A study by Lee and Leeson states that players with social anxiety generally play MMORPGs more frequently than players who are otherwise less anxious (Lee & Leeson, Online gaming in the context of social anxiety, 2015). As seen with other types of CMC, socially anxious people are known to play MMORPGs more frequently due to how they perceive online social interactions to be safer than face-to-face interactions.

Online videogames like MMORPGs can provide people with a chance to create significant relationships while also increasing the amount of social support that would otherwise not be obtained without joining a group of players within the game world. These groups are usually called guilds, which is a group of players who work together to achieve particular goals within the game; these goals can include working together to defeat enemies, trading with other players, or simply socializing with people who share common interests (Longman, O'Connor, & Obst, 2009). Unfortunately, Lee and Leeson's study reveals that players who suffer from social anxiety present difficulties when it comes to developing supportive relationships in the game, which is like all the cases of online interactions reviewed thus far (Lee & Leeson, Online gaming in the context of social anxiety, 2015).

Additionally, a study by Sioni and associates found out there's a high correlation between levels of social anxiety and self-identification with their in-game avatar, which can in turn lead to further problematic behavior. People who identify with their avatar can experience gratification both from their appearance, behavior and external social approval during gameplay. Furthermore, because people with social anxiety are generally insecure about their sense of self and about how other observe them, they may come to perceive their own avatar as their own idealized self. As a consequence of this, avatar identification

is increased, and players will assume their avatar's values, emotions and identity as part of their own. As this behavior increases, the resources invested to develop and maintain their own avatar will start affecting this person's life negatively, as they spend excessive time online as their avatar. This leads to a deterioration of their general state of well-being (Sioni, Burleson, & Bekerian, 2017).

Nevertheless, a recent study by Colder and associates on the time spent playing online games suggests that there might be potential social benefits for players, depending on the purpose of why they're playing. For example, players who are heavily engaged in gaming but enjoy by interacting with friends and value the quality of their relationships tend to obtain psychological benefits through reducing their loneliness and social anxiety, by either making new online friends or by extending their offline relationship to an online relationship. On the other hand, people with social anxiety who are heavily engaged in gaming but reject deeper social interactions tend to have a more pathological use of gaming and thus risk having further problems (Colder, et al., 2017).

Effectiveness of Online Therapy on people with Social Anxiety:

According to Yen and associates, only about half of people with social anxiety ever seek treatment. This is because of the symptoms of social anxiety itself, which prevents them from seeking a therapist due to their fear of social interactions. For this reason, the internet has been considered as an alternative tool for reaching out to those people who would otherwise be unable to undergo therapy because of their pre-existing psychological condition (Yen, et al., 2012). Based on traditional CBT treatment methods for social anxiety and with the goal of decreasing real-life social anxiety, gradual exposure therapy can be applied online: patients over the internet can begin to interact with their therapist via

text-messaging, then eventually progress to less asynchronous methods of communication such as real-time chat, then voice communication, and finally video-based communication. Eventually, therapy could move on to more traditional face-to-face methods, once the patient is ready for it (Aaron & Clark, 2010).

However, there is a further, alternative method of therapy that can reach socially anxious people. Internet cognitive behavioral therapy, or ICBT, is a method of therapy which is exclusively carried out through the internet and which has the potential to attract people who would otherwise not try to seek treatment. Research done by El Alaoui and others on the effectiveness of ICBT has shown that treatment of social anxiety under this type of therapy can result in improvements of symptoms of anxiety and depression over fifteen weeks of treatment and which were persistent after a follow-up examination six months after the initial treatment was finished. Considering this, ICBT has the potential to increase the availability of effective evidence-based treatments for patients that are wary of social interactions (El Alaoui, et al., 2015).

Additionally, a study by Hedman and others states that ICBT can have as much effectiveness as traditional CBT treatments for socially anxious people. ICBT not only provides persistent improvements, but also has some advantages over face-to-face treatment. For example, availability of ICBT is not restricted by time or distance, because the therapist as well as the patient can proceed with the treatment at any time or place that seems convenient for both (Hedman, et al., 2011). This is not the only study to ascertain the value of ICBT. A systematic review on ICBT by Olthuis and others selected thirty-eight studies which examined the effectiveness of ICBT over CBT on social phobia, panic disorder with agoraphobia, generalized anxiety disorder, post traumatic stress disorder and

obsessive-compulsive disorder within controlled trials. Results shows that there were no significant differences between CBT and ICBT. Therefore, the study concluded that ICBT appears to be an efficacious treatment for anxiety in general, but future research is needed in order to ascertain its potential within real world applications (Olthuis, Watt, Bailey, Hayden, & Stewart, 2016).

Methodology and Study Design

The main objective of this study is to produce an exploratory evaluation of how the internet has affected socially anxious individuals and their willingness to go into Internet Cognitive Behavior Therapy in Ecuador. Psychological research regarding internet phenomena in Latin American countries is lacking, so this study could potentially provide insight on the possible differences the internet can have across various nations (Cheng & Li, 2014). For this purpose, the Seeking Online Safety Questionnaire (SOSQ) will be used. The SOSQ is a self-report measure that examines to what degree respondents prefer methods or features of online communication, such as text messaging or video chat, which allow them to feel greater levels of perceived interpersonal safety and control. The higher the person's total score on the SOSQ, the more their online communication preferences are driven by the need for online safety (Kamalou, Shaughnessy, & Moscovitch, 2018). The usage of the SOSQ procedure, in addition to asking a question about the participant's willingness to participate in ICBT, should help with gauging the amount of people with social anxiety who display problematic internet usage in Ecuador, and the possibility of establishing a way for clinical psychologist to reach out to these people and treat their social anxiety. In addition to this, the study will include The Negative Self-Portrayal Scale (NSPS), which is a self-report questionnaire that evaluates the extent to which people are concerned about revealing information (Moscovitch & Hyuder, 2011). Finally, The Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale II (bFNEII), which is a questionnaire used to assess fear of negative evaluation in both online and offline communication (Carleton, McCreary, Norton, &

Asmundson, 2006) will also be used. These three questionnaires will be used in conjunction in order to single out people who participate in this study and suffer from social anxiety.

Participants:

As it will be difficult to assess how many participants within Ecuador can be officially diagnosed with Social Anxiety Disorder, the study will ideally comprise of one hundred or more participants. As the internet usage is still not widely spread in Latin American countries (Cheng & Li, 2014), participants will most likely be adolescents, college students and young adults of any gender in the middle and upper class, ranging from 13 to 30 years old. Because the only participants with consistent access to the internet are likely to be of a higher socioeconomic class than the majority of Ecuador's population (INEC, 2018), they will not be representative of Ecuador's population as a whole. Consequently, the study will not provide data relevant to the entire population until access to the internet is easily available nationwide.

Recruitment of Participants:

As this study mainly involves the internet, recruitment will take place through advertisements on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, and through the student email systems of the main universities of Quito, such as USFQ, UDLA and PUCE, in order to achieve the maximum amount of exposure. These advertisements will include e-mail contact information for ease of access. Because it is an exploratory study, the time limit to collect as much information as possible should be around three months. Depending on the number of participants, they will receive a monetary reward of $10 USD that will be transferred to a PayPal account or other service that permits online money transfers.

Study Design:

This study will be completed entirely through online means. Participants will be sent an email containing the framework in how they will take part in the study. Following the procedure applied in the SOSQ, and in order to standardize social context and to ensure provocation of social anxiety, participants will be asked to imagine three similar scenarios which include the following: Meeting with a new acquaintance whom they had met only once before in a face-to-face situation, and who wishes to get to know the participant better; meeting face-to-face with a group of people they share a common interest with; and finally, meeting face-to-face with a friend who wants to spend time with them. All these scenarios have a common context that the participant must keep in mind when answering the SOSQ, which is that the participant wants to connect with this person, group, or friend again, and that the questions must be answered while keeping this context in mind. After this is done, the participant will be asked to consider a variety of online methods of communication, such as text messages, online gaming, e-mail and others, which they could use to socialize with this stranger, group, or friend. Subsequently, they will proceed to answer the questions within the SOSQ, the NSPS, and the bFNEII, as well as a demographic questionnaire which includes questions such as age, gender, average time spent online, and reasons why they use internet social media. The final question will ask participants if they're interested in, or know someone who is interested in, the possibility of participating in Internet cognitive behavioral therapy.

Data Analysis:

Data obtained from finished questionnaires will be analyzed by doing correlational analysis between the total scores achieved between the SOSQ, NSPS, bFNEII and their time spent online in order to evaluate the participants self-reported levels of social anxiety, frequency of internet use and fear of online negative self-evaluations.

Ethical Considerations:

Once a participant has shown interest in participating in this online study, the researchers will begin by e-mailing the participants a consent form that will entail all the information regarding the type of study this is and how their information will be used. This form will be approved by the Ethics Committee of USFQ, which states that psychologists must inform the purpose, duration and procedures of any kind of research or study. Participants have the option of withdrawing from the study at any time and will not be required to explain the reason of their withdrawal. Additionally, all of the participants will have complete anonymity and confidentiality. Finally, should any participant choose to object to having their results being published, they can have their information removed from the study and it will not appear in any publication.

Data Analysis

Anticipated Results:

As mentioned previously, only half of the people with anxiety disorder ever seek treatment because of their psychological condition (Cheng & Li, 2014). Therefore, the number of participants is likely to be low, and thus the results will not be representative of the already small population that is the subject of the study.

However, results should be similar to previous research observed in the literature review. People who score high on the SOSQ and the rest of the scales are expected to have problems developing relationships both in online and offline situations. Because of this, they depend on maladaptive social strategies that buffer their feelings of safety and control (Lai, et al., 2015).

One of the important questions within the study is the reason why participants use the internet. As has been stated in the literature review, several problematic internet use behaviors, such as online media multitasking, excessive online gaming, or excessive social media use depend on the reason why people use the internet (Becker, Alzahabi, & Hopwood, 2013) (Colder, et al., 2017) (Whitbourne, Ellenberg, & Akimoto, 2013) (Prizant-Passal, Shechner, & Aderka, 2016). The reason why participants use the internet will determine what kind of problematic behavior may exist within a Latin American population of socially anxious people who have problematic internet use, or if it exists at all in this nation.

Discussion:

The initial purpose of this study was to analyze the possible benefits and risks of internet use on people with anxiety disorder, as well as possible methods of therapy treatment that could be used to reach out to people who were unable to get proper therapy due to their existing symptoms. Ultimately, the literature available provided answers that will be explained in detail below.

Several studies on social anxiety and the internet revealed that people who suffer from this condition can perceive benefits from developing relationships within an online environment (Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007) (Lai, et al., 2015) (Lee & Leeson, Online gaming in the context of social anxiety, 2015). However, these studies also demonstrated that these perceptions are false, as their ability to develop meaningful friendships or support is just as bad in face-to-face interactions as it is within an online environment (Prizant-Passal, Shechner, & Aderka, 2016).

Although on face value it seems as if there are no benefits that people with social anxiety could obtain from the internet or online gaming, there appear to be exceptions. For example, most studies attribute people with high social anxiety levels as the most problematic when it comes to developing maladaptive internet behaviors and coping mechanisms (Yen, et al., 2012) (Kamalou, Shaughnessy, & Moscovitch, 2018) (Young & Lo, 2012) (Weidman, Fernandez, Levinson, & Rodebaugh, 2012). What this means is that, if social anxiety levels are lower, people can benefit from online relationships, as long as their intent in using the internet is about risking self-disclosure with people online and

earnestly investing themselves emotionally in these relationships, rather than trying to avoid deeper bonds by having shallow interactions with others online.

Finally, there seems to be hope when it comes to reaching out to people who would otherwise be unable to participate in therapy, as treatments such as Internet Cognitive Behavioral Therapy begin to prove themselves to be effective methods of therapy that have potential due to their similar effectiveness to face-to-face CBT and the advantage of not requiring the patient to be present face-to-face in order to apply an effective treatment (El Alaoui, et al., 2015).

As the internet and its impact on psychological disorders is a relatively new area of study, it is even more difficult to assess what risks and benefits the internet can provide, especially because of how dynamic the internet is, due to all the different types of applications that can be used. Therefore, this exploratory study managed to review current research on the internet and its effect on social anxiety, but as the internet and society evolves it is uncertain how future studies will manage to research internet phenomena.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the internet does have an impact on social anxiety. Current research states that people with high levels of social anxiety use the internet as a means to cope with a lack of meaningful face-to-face relationships, by using an online method of communication where they perceive they are safer and free from negative evaluations from other people. However, this does not mean that their ability to create meaningful relationships is improved in online social interactions, and this can lead into further pathological problems. Nevertheless, if the levels of social anxiety aren't as high, people can reap benefits from online social interactions, as long as they are willing to risk healthy safe disclosure with like-minded people who can provide social support.

The effectiveness of ICBT in recent years has proven that there can be alternative methods for providing therapy for people, this means the internet could potentially become a tool for therapy applications that have never existed until now. Ultimately, the future will tell how well therapists can reach out to people who might never have attended therapy otherwise.

Limitations:

Because this study is meant to explore how internet affects socially anxious people and what risks and benefits they can gain from it, the study itself mostly provides current information on how socially anxiety manifests in this online environment. The research proposed is also only meant to explore and the current situation of social anxiety and

problematic internet use within a select population in Ecuador. Therefore, the scientific relevance of this research has potential to contribute to current internet psychological investigations, but further investigations about this topic within Latin American nations are required in order for the research to have more relevance. Additionally, a great limitation that affects this study is that socially anxious people are not very likely to risk participating in research such as this one, so the number of participants would decrease even more.

A further limitation is the scarce amount of research done on the internet itself. As mentioned at the beginning of this study, by the end of 2016, there were around ten thousand journal articles about internet investigation and around 40 articles about social anxiety and internet phenomena. This means that this area of research is bound to have a large amount of inconsistencies and contradictions, as researchers struggle to find an appropriate way to investigate internet and its relation to psychological disorders.

Future Implications:

Future studies should consider investigating the purpose of people using the internet, as it seems to be the key in understanding how pathologies can develop in an online environment, especially social anxiety. Additionally, the online gaming world environment found in MMORPGs could be investigated in order to find if there's a way to apply therapy within an online environment through player avatars. Although no evidence for this kind of application exists so far, it seems to be an interesting avenue to explore for future therapy applications.

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anxiety and internet communication in adolescents. . *Personality and Individual*

Differences, 51(1), 78-83.

ANNEX A: ADVERTISEMENT

ANNEX B: APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF THE STUDY AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Comité de Ética de Investigación en Seres Humanos
Universidad San Francisco de Quito

El Comité de Revisión Institucional de la USFQ
The Institutional Review Board of the USFQ

SOLICITUD PARA APROBACION DE UN ESTUDIO DE INVESTIGACION

INSTRUCCIONES:
1. Antes de remitir este formulario al CBE, se debe solicitar vía electrónica un código para incluirlo, a comitebioetica@usfq.edu.ec
2. Enviar solo archivos digitales. Esta solicitud será firmada en su versión final, sea de manera presencial o enviando un documento escaneado.
3. Este documento debe completarse con la información del protocolo del estudio que debe servir al investigador como respaldo.
4. Favor leer cada uno de los parámetros verificando que se ha completado toda la información que se solicita antes de enviarla.

DATOS DE IDENTIFICACIÓN
Título de la Investigación
The Positive and Negative Effects of Online Gaming and Internet Use in People with Social Anxiety
Investigador Principal *Nombre completo, afiliación institucional y dirección electrónica*
Pedro Salazar, Universidad San Francisco de Quito, psalazarsa@gmail.com
Co-investigadores *Nombres completos, afiliación institucional y dirección electrónica. Especificar si no lo hubiera*
No aplica.
Persona de contacto *Nombre y datos de contacto incluyendo teléfono fijo, celular y dirección electrónica*
Pedro José Salazar Alarcón, 023801986, 0998600597, psalazarsa@gmail.com
Nombre de director de tesis y correo electrónico *Solo si es que aplica*
Mariel Paz y Miño, mpazymino@usfq.edu.ec
Fecha de inicio de la investigación diciembre *2018*
Fecha de término de la investigación marzo *2019*
Financiamiento no *aplica.*

DESCRIPCIÓN DEL ESTUDIO

Objetivo General *Se debe responder tres preguntas: ¿qué? cómo? y para qué?*

Producir una evaluación exploratoria en Ecuador sobre como el internet afecta a los individuos con ansiedad social y su disposición para ir a terapia cognitiva conductual en línea. Esto se evaluará con el Seeking Online Safety Questionnaire (SOSQ), el Negative Self-Portrayal Scale (NSPS) y The Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale II (bFNEII) para medir que tanto los participantes se sienten seguros dentro de un ambiente virtual y como esto refleja posibles problemas para socializar del participante y su nivel de ansiedad al entablar conversaciones tanto en el internet como en situaciones sociales en la vida real.

Objetivos Específicos

- Determinar el número de personas con ansiedad social que usan el internet de manera problemática en Ecuador a través de los cuestionarios SOSQ, NSPS y bFNEII.
- Analizar el impacto que tiene el internet sobre las personas con ansiedad social que participan en el estudio.
- Evaluar que tan dispuestos están los participantes para hacer terapia a través del internet.
- Realizar futuros estudios sobre esta área si los resultados del estudio exploratorio son significativos.

Diseño y Metodología del estudio *Explicar el tipo de estudio (por ejemplo, cualitativo, cuantitativo, con enfoque experimental, cuasiexperimental, pre-experimental; estudio descriptivo, transversal, de caso, in-vitro...) Explicar además el universo, la muestra, cómo se la calculó y un breve resumen de cómo se realizará el análisis de los datos, incluyendo las variables primarias y secundarias.*

El estudio es de tipo cuantitativo con un enfoque exploratorio. La investigación requiere de participantes voluntarios que accedan a responder los cuestionarios Seeking Online Safety Questionnaire (SOSQ), Negative Self-Portrayal Scale (NSPS) y The Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale II (bFNEII) para determinar la cantidad de personas que sufren de ansiedad social que usan el internet. Adicionalmente, se realizara una pregunta sobre su disposición a realizar terapia a través del internet. Considerando la literatura sobre este tema, se espera que la mayoría de los participantes sean adultos jóvenes. Se espera al menos una muestra de al menos 50 participantes para que el estudio sea significativo. Los participantes recibirán un correo electrónico con los cuestionarios, los cuales serán usados para medir el nivel de incidencia de ansiedad social y su conducta virtual.

Procedimientos *Los pasos a seguir desde el primer contacto con los sujetos participantes, su reclutamiento o contacto con la muestra/datos.*

1. Enviar anuncios sobre el estudio a través de medios sociales como Facebook, Twitter, y correos para estudiantes en Colegios y Universidades.
2. Contactar a los participantes al enviar un correo electrónico que explica a detalle el propósito del estudio y además una solicitud que confirme su participación.
3. Confirmar participación con envió de consentimiento informado al investigador.
4. Proveer a los participantes con los cuestionarios SOSQ, NSPS y bFNEII además de preguntas demográficas y su disposición para participar en terapia cognitiva conductual a través del internet.
5. Evaluar los resultados obtenidos de los participantes que logren completar los cuestionarios para determinar la viabilidad de realizar futuros estudios sobre este tema en Ecuador.

Recolección y almacenamiento de los datos *Para garantizar la confidencialidad y privacidad, de quién y donde se recolectarán datos; almacenamiento de datos—donde y por cuánto tiempo; quienes tendrán acceso a los datos, qué se hará con los datos cuando termine la investigación*
Este estudio respeta todas las consideraciones éticas expuestas en el mismo. Todos los participantes que accedan a involucrarse deben firmar un consentimiento informado antes de participar. Este consentimiento indica los objetivos del estudio y como se va a utilizar la información obtenida. La participación de las personas es completamente voluntaria y se pueden retirar del estudio en cualquier momento sin ninguna repercusión. Adicionalmente, toda la información obtenida será confidencial y serán eliminadas una vez completado el estudio.
Herramientas y equipos *Incluyendo cuestionarios y bases de datos, descripción de equipos*
Seeking Online Safety Questionnaire (SOSQ), Negative Self-Portrayal Scale (NSPS), The Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale II (bFNEII)

JUSTIFICACIÓN CIENTÍFICA DEL ESTUDIO

Se debe demostrar con suficiente evidencia por qué es importante este estudio y qué tipo de aporte ofrecerá a la comunidad científica.

Los estudios sobre los fenómenos de internet y su impacto en personas con ansiedad social es un área de investigación reciente y existe poca información sobre este fenómeno en países latinoamericanos como Ecuador. El internet es una herramienta que cada vez más se integra a la cultura mundial, por lo tanto, es importante evaluar qué beneficios y riesgos existen con respecto al uso del internet y personas con trastornos psicológicos como la ansiedad social. Adicionalmente, es posible que existan diferencias culturales de como las personas utilizan o perciben las relaciones sociales por el internet dependiendo del país así que este estudio puede dar un cierto nivel de conocimiento sobre estas diferencias con un enfoque en un país latinoamericano como Ecuador.

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DESCRIPCIÓN DE LOS ASPECTOS ÉTICOS DEL ESTUDIO

Criterios para la selección de los participantes *Tomando en cuenta los principios de beneficencia, equidad, justicia y respeto*

Los criterios de inclusión es cualquier persona que acceda a participar en el estudio. Debido a que es una investigación exploratoria, esto significa que el estudio incluye preguntas demográficas para determinar el tipo de incidencia de este fenómeno dentro de Ecuador.

Riesgos *Describir los riesgos para los participantes en el estudio, incluyendo riesgos físicos, emocionales y psicológicos, aunque sean mínimos y cómo se los minimizará*

Debido a que todo el estudio es realizado a través del internet, no existen riesgos para los participantes. Sim embargo, algunas de las preguntas pueden inducir un nivel de ansiedad si la persona se siente vulnerable a ser evaluado de manera negativa. No obstante, se recuerda que las situaciones presentadas en el cuestionario son imaginadas y no existe un riesgo real para la persona.

Beneficios para los participantes *Incluyendo resultados de exámenes y otros; solo de este estudio y cómo los recibirán*

El estudio no ofrece un beneficio inherente para los participantes ya que es una serie de cuestionarios que deben ser completados. Ya que este tipo de estudio no se ha realizado en Ecuador, es posible que este estudio pueda ser el primero de muchos que investiguen sobre el impacto del internet en la psicología en países Latinoamericanos.

Ventajas potenciales a la sociedad *Incluir solo ventajas que puedan medirse o a lo que se pueda tener acceso*

Este estudio tiene el potencial para hacer conocer los efectos que tiene el internet en personas que busquen desarrollar sus relaciones en un ambiente virtual. Esto puede ser de gran ayuda para personas que quieran beneficiarse y aprovechar la manera de como socializan en este ambiente.

Derechos y opciones de los participantes del estudio *Incluyendo la opción de no participar o retirarse del estudio a pesar de haber aceptado participar en un inicio.*

Los participantes pueden decidir no participar y retirarse en cualquier momento del estudio sin ningún tipo de repercusión negativa.

Seguridad y Confidencialidad de los datos *Describir de manera detallada y explícita como va a proteger los derechos de participantes*

El estudio respetará todas las consideraciones éticas para individuos que decidan participar. Todos los participantes deberán firmar un consentimiento informado antes de realizar los cuestionarios. En este se establecerán especificaciones sobre los objetivos del estudio y se confirmará que la participación es completamente voluntaria sin repercusiones negativas en ámbitos laborales o personales si deciden no participar o retirarse en cualquier momento del estudio. Todos los cuestionarios que sean administrados a los participantes serán utilizados solo para términos de la investigación y serán destruidos tan pronto se acabe el estudio. Aparte, se garantiza que todas las herramientas que se utilizarían son estandarizadas y con evidencia empírica de su eficacia.

Consentimiento informado *Quién, cómo y dónde se explicará el formulario/estudio. Ajuntar el formulario o en su defecto el formulario de no aplicación o modificación del formulario*

Cada participante deberá firmar un consentimiento informado antes de involucrarse en el estudio.

Responsabilidades del investigador y co-investigadores dentro de este estudio.

El investigador tiene la responsabilidad de respetar la situación de los participantes si estos deciden retirarse de la investigación.

Documentos que se adjuntan a esta solicitud *(ponga una X junto a los documentos que se adjuntan)*			
Nombre del documento	Adjunto	Idioma	
		Inglés	Español
PARA TODO ESTUDIO			
1. Formulario de Consentimiento Informado (FCI) y/o Solicitud de no aplicación o modificación del FCI *	X		X
2. Formulario de Asentimiento (FAI) *(si aplica y se va a incluir menores de 17 años)*			
3. Herramientas a utilizar *(Título de:: entrevistas, cuestionarios, guías de preg., hojas de recolección de datos, etc)*	X		X
4. Hoja de vida (CV) del investigador principal (IP)			
SOLO PARA ESTUDIOS DE ENSAYO CLÍNICO			
5. Manual del investigador			
6. Brochures			
7. Seguros			
8. Información sobre el patrocinador			
9. Acuerdos de confidencialidad			
10. Otra información relevante al estudio (especificar)			

 (*) La solicitud de no aplicación o modificación del FCI por escrito debe estar bien justificada.

PROVISIONES ESPECIALES
Esta sección debe llenar solo si aplica. En ella se incluyen manejo de población vulnerable y muestras biológicas, manejo de eventos adversos, seguros de incapacidad o muerte, entre otros.

CRONOGRAMA		**AÑO**							
Descripción de la Actividad (pasos a seguir dentro del proceso de investigación, comenzando por el contacto inicial, reclutamiento de participantes, intervención y/o recolección de datos, análisis, publicación…)	**Fechas**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

CERTIFICACIÓN:

1. Certifico no haber recolectado ningún dato ni haber realizado ninguna intervención con sujetos humanos, muestras o datos.   Sí (X)   No (   )
2. Certifico que los documentos adjuntos a esta solicitud han sido revisados y aprobados por mi director de tesis.   Sí (   )   No (   )   No Aplica (X)

Firma del investigador: _____ (con tinta azul)

Fecha de envío al Comité de Bioética de la USFQ: _____

Comité de Ética de Investigación en Seres Humanos
Universidad San Francisco de Quito

El Comité de Revisión Institucional de la USFQ
The Institutional Review Board of the USFQ

Formulario Consentimiento Informado

Título de la investigación: The Positive and Negative Effects of Online Gaming and Internet Use in

People with Social Anxiety

Organización del investigador *Universidad San Francisco de Quito*
Nombre del investigador principal *Pedro José Salazar Alarcón*

Datos de localización del investigador principal *023801986, 0998600597, psalazarSA@gmail.com*

DESCRIPCIÓN DEL ESTUDIO
Introducción *(Se incluye un ejemplo de texto. Debe tomarse en cuenta que el lenguaje que se utilice en este documento no puede ser subjetivo; debe ser lo más claro, conciso y sencillo posible; deben evitarse términos técnicos y en lo posible se los debe reemplazar con una explicación)*
Este formulario incluye un resumen del propósito de este estudio. Usted puede realizar cualquier pregunta que tenga al enviar un correo al investigador principal. Este estudio tiene como objetivo medir conductas que causan ansiedad tanto en el internet como en situaciones sociales que sean cara a cara. Para hacer esto usted debe responder a tres cuestionarios. Usted se puede retirar en cualquier momento del estudio sin ninguna repercusión.
Propósito del estudio (incluir una breve descripción del estudio, incluyendo el número de participantes, evitando términos técnicos e incluyendo solo información que el participante necesita conocer para decidirse a participar o no en el estudio)
El estudio consta de participantes voluntarios que deciden acceder a responder los tres cuestionarios.
Descripción de los procedimientos (breve descripción de los pasos a seguir en cada etapa y el tiempo que tomará cada intervención en que participará el sujeto)
1. Enviar anuncios sobre el estudio a través de medios sociales como Facebook, Twitter, y correos para estudiantes en Colegios y Universidades. 2. Contactar a los participantes al enviar un correo electrónico que explica a detalle el propósito del estudio y además una solicitud que confirme su participación. 3. Confirmar participación con envió de consentimiento informado al investigador. 4. Proveer a los participantes con los cuestionarios SOSQ, NSPS y bFNEII además de preguntas demográficas y su disposición para participar en terapia cognitiva conductual a través del internet. 5. Evaluar los resultados obtenidos de los participantes que logren completar los cuestionarios para determinar la viabilidad de realizar futuros estudios sobre este tema en Ecuador.

Riesgos y beneficios (explicar los riesgos para los participantes en detalle, aunque sean mínimos, incluyendo riesgos físicos, emocionales y/o sicológicos a corto y/o largo plazo, detallando cómo el investigador minimizará estos riesgos; incluir además los beneficios tanto para los participantes como para la sociedad, siendo explícito en cuanto a cómo y cuándo recibirán estos beneficios)

Debido a que el estudio es realizado por internet, no existen riesgos inherentes en el estudio. Sin embargo, las situaciones presentadas en los cuestionarios pueden incrementar sensaciones de ansiedad en los participantes.

Confidencialidad de los datos *(se incluyen algunos ejemplos de texto)*

Su privacidad es importante, por lo cual su información se mantendrá confidencial.

1A) Si se toman muestras de su persona estas muestras serán utilizadas solo para esta investigación y destruidas tan pronto termine el estudio

1B) Si usted está de acuerdo, las muestras que se tomen de su persona serán utilizadas para esta investigación y luego se las guardarán para futuras investigaciones removiendo cualquier información que pueda identificarlo *(si aplica)*

3)   Su nombre no será mencionado en los reportes o publicaciones.

4)   El Comité de Bioética de la USFQ podrá tener acceso a sus datos en caso de que surgieran problemas en cuando a la seguridad y confidencialidad de la información o de la ética en el estudio.

Derechos y opciones del participante (se incluye un ejemplo de texto)

Usted puede decidir no participar y si decide no participar solo debe decírselo al investigador principal o a la persona que le explica este documento. Además, aunque decida participar puede retirarse del estudio cuando lo desee, sin que ello afecte los beneficios de los que goza en este momento.
Usted no recibirá ningún pago ni tendrá que pagar absolutamente nada por participar en este estudio.

Información de contacto

Si usted tiene alguna pregunta sobre el estudio por favor comuníquese al siguiente teléfono 0998600597 que pertenece al investigador principal Pedro Salazar, o envíe un correo electrónico a psalazarsa@gmail.com

Si usted tiene preguntas sobre este formulario puede contactar al Dr. William F. Waters, Presidente del Comité de Bioética de la USFQ, al siguiente correo electrónico: comitebioetica@usfq.edu.ec

Consentimiento informado *(Es responsabilidad del investigador verificar que los participantes tengan un nivel de comprensión lectora adecuado para entender este documento. En caso de que no lo tuvieren el documento debe ser leído y explicado frente a un testigo, que corroborará con su firma que lo que se dice de manera oral es lo mismo que dice el documento escrito)*

Comprendo mi participación en este estudio. Me han explicado los riesgos y beneficios de participar en un lenguaje claro y sencillo. Todas mis preguntas fueron contestadas. Me permitieron contar con tiempo suficiente para tomar la decisión de participar y me entregaron una copia de este formulario de consentimiento informado. Acepto voluntariamente participar en esta investigación.

Firma del participante	Fecha
Firma del testigo *(si aplica)*	Fecha
Nombre del investigador que obtiene el consentimiento informado	
Firma del investigador	Fecha