Stepping Stones Between Two Conflicting Worlds

The Experience of Interpersonal Communication Amongst Self-Identified Problematic Internet Users

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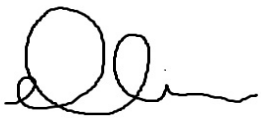
Declaration

I would like to declare that all of the information presented in this thesis is either my own original work or has been gathered from acceptable sources and referenced accordingly.

Date: 24/01/19

Signed: Ellie Harland



Abstract

In the 21st century, we use the Internet to communicate at a level unprecedented in human history. As a result, parallel to worldwide growth in Internet use, there are emerging concerns of its impact on our lives, with much research highlighting social implications. There is controversy within the relevant research literature, as to whether Internet use decreases or increases social connection and as to its psychological benefits or limitations. This paper presents a phenomenological study exploring the lived experience of interpersonal communication within the context of problematic Internet use (PIU). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with six adults who self-identified with PIU and the resultant transcripts served as data for an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Three super-ordinate themes emerged: 1) 'Meeting interpersonal needs' 2) 'Interplay between two worlds: the virtual and the physical' 3) 'Online armour: the Internet as a form of protection.' Participants relate the profound impact that the Internet has had and continues to have on their interpersonal lives and relationships. Whilst there are prominent threads of conflict, difficulty and distress, benefits, opportunities and enhanced social networks are also highlighted. The findings both support and contribute new aspects to the knowledge of PIU, and significantly, provide qualitative insight, which has been somewhat neglected in this field to date. The findings are examined in light of phenomenological ideas and their value in the understanding of PIU and interpersonal communication in the digital age, within the realm of Counselling Psychology and other related fields.

Reflexive Preface

As I consider the elements motivating me to explore interpersonal communication within the digital era, one particular experience stands out. Working on a high dependency children's ward several years ago, I was looking after a little girl of 18 months when she suddenly became very distressed and burst into tears. I tried using every distraction technique I knew - playing games, singing songs and drawing for her, as well as trying to interest her in the musical instruments, story books, paints and UV sensory light-up toys available on the ward. Nothing seemed to alleviate this little girl's distress. Then a nurse arrived with an iPad and as soon as the little girl held the iPad, she stopped crying. In fact, she appeared happy once more, as she worked her way round the screen like an expert. Observing this, I felt deflated and frustrated, as if I was competing with the iPad - a shiny, modern, almost magical device far more effective than my own proposed solutions to her sadness at that moment.

Subsequently, I became increasingly aware of the effects of technological use on our society. On public transport, I noted that nearly every passenger had their head down, either looking at their mobile phone or iPad screen. In social settings, friends were preoccupied with their devices and would even use more than one device at a time. I speculated about the impact of such technology on our personal relationships and specifically, on our capacity to empathise with each other. Would we lose the ability to conduct healthy relationships, instead turning to our devices for answers, help or comfort? Not only did I recognise this tendency in others, I also recognised it in myself. I try hard not to use my phone too much and yet I have a habit of scrolling

through feeds and checking various apps as soon as I wake up each morning. I am clearly just as engaged in the world of technology as the people I have observed.

Embarking on my Counselling Psychology doctorate, I quickly learned the significance of reflection. However, it seems to me that our capacity to reflect is waning, since the technological devices tend to steal that reflective time from us. At any given moment, we are using our devices - when we are waiting for something, sitting on public transport, feeling bored, or even watching television.

Exploring the relevant literature, I became interested in the debate surrounding Internet addiction: whether it should or would be recognised as a clinical disorder in the UK, how different cultures and countries view the issue and how their respective governments are taking action in terms of education, awareness and treatment. I watched a documentary entitled 'Web Junkie', which follows three teenagers in one of China's hundreds of detox camps for Internet addicts. China is one of the first countries in the world to describe excessive Internet use as a clinical condition, declaring Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) to be a clinical disorder in 2008. In order to combat what Chinese authorities deem the greatest social crisis affecting young people today, their government has introduced detox treatment facilities for 'Internet addicts.' Granted extraordinary access, the film-makers show how the adolescents were lured to a rehabilitation centre against their will, to participate in intensely emotional therapy sessions, whilst enduring strict, military boot-camp conditions. The film documents how three boys begin to open up to the health professionals and their families, suggesting the reasons why they feel more connected to 'virtual' life than 'real' life. I was particularly struck by the fact that these teenagers would wear nappies, to avoid the inconvenience of having to leave

their virtual world in order to go to the bathroom. As a Trainee Counselling Psychologist, I imagined how I might approach working with clients who appeared to be ‘addicted’ to the Internet. I wondered how we could measure this phenomenon, how we could separate ‘normal’ and 'pathological’ Internet use in today’s society. I also reflected on my own clinical practice with clients and observed, for the first time, that most of my younger clients use their mobile phones to communicate with me. These clients would use their phones to show me videos and photos, would read out an online conversation or even explain how their difficulties derive from arguments online. I examined how a mobile phone was helping my clients with their communication - specifically, why their mobile facilitated expression of their thoughts and feelings, which they did not seem able to express to me without this technological device.

Considering my personal and professional relationship to this topic and my relatively negative views on technology, conducting this research appeared a difficult task. Throughout my research, I found myself favouring evidence which supported these negative views, at times actively seeking this type of evidence. To begin with, it was challenging to contain my prejudices, which was necessary in order to gain a balanced and fair view of the literature available. However, I now feel able to acknowledge these biased feelings and I am even beginning to accept the many advantages and benefits technology offers us, as social and empathic beings.

1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

An evolving, modern medium, already established as a vital component of many people's lives, there is widespread agreement that the Internet can serve as a tool to enhance well-being. However, parallel to worldwide growth in Internet use are emerging concerns of its impact on our lives and two decades of research has sought to explore the difference between life-enhancing Internet use and problematic use (Griffiths, 2018). Problematic Internet use (PIU) is characterised by excessive or poorly controlled urges, preoccupations or behaviours regarding Internet use and access, that lead to some form of impairment or distress (Shaw & Black, 2008). This behavioural problem, often referred to as 'Internet addiction' (IA) is gaining increasing scientific awareness and recognition, with some researchers declaring it a '21st century epidemic' (Kuss & Griffiths, 2015). Particularly widespread in Asian countries, China was the first country to recognise IA as a serious clinical disorder, reporting an estimated 24 million people as 'addicted' (Liu, 2011). Over the past decade, the IA phenomenon has also been attracting the attention of mental health practitioners and researchers in the western world. Proposed for inclusion in the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), a growing concern for 'Internet addiction disorder' (IAD) was acknowledged, yet DSM-5 claimed there was "*insufficient peer-reviewed evidence to establish the diagnostic criteria and course descriptions*" to identify the behaviour as a mental disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.481).

Despite this, PIU has been reported across all continents, indicating that the phenomenon is recognised worldwide. The prevalence of PIU among the general population is difficult to establish, primarily due to the lack of consensus surrounding conceptualisation, diagnostic criteria and validated assessment instruments and materials (Liu, 2012). Weinstein and Lejoyeux (2010) report that surveys in Europe and America have indicated alarming prevalence rates ranging from 1.5 to 8.2%. Other reports place these rates between 6% and 18.5% (Young & Nabuco De Abreu, 2011) and even from 1% to 37% (Ko, Yen, Yen, Chen & Chen, 2012). Whilst these figures are startling, it is difficult to position the Internet as an object, let alone an object which can give rise to addiction. One may also argue that a complex concept such as IA is impossible to measure or determine using statistics alone.

At present, a global body of data unequivocally highlights the Internet's potential to bring about psychological harm, but whilst the existence of PIU appears undeniable, the condition remains elusive and controversial (Spada, 2014). Scientific understanding of PIU has lagged behind media attention mainly due to inconsistencies and scepticism and as a result "*the concept of IA is at fetal level with no consensus on definition, norms or clinical criteria*" (Ginige, 2017, p.141). As a Trainee Counselling Psychologist, I argue that regardless of these ongoing debates, it is estimated that the need for mental health professionals who can recognise, assess, and treat problematic behaviours associated with Internet use will increase, and as such, it is important that mental health professionals study, understand, and when appropriate, apply evidenced-based approaches to effectively treat their clients (Doan, Yung, Cazares & Klam, 2017).

1.2 Structure

The present study will first review and outline contextual and theoretical issues regarding PIU. PIU will be defined and placed within a historical and political context. Following this, research into interpersonal communication within the context of PIU will be presented and critically reviewed. The end of the chapter will present and discuss a rationale for the current research study and the research questions will be outlined. The following chapter will outline the methodological procedure, including the chosen methodology, epistemological position and research design. Next, an analytic account will present the findings of this study including extracts from participant accounts. Lastly, the findings will be discussed relevant to current research and literature, and limitations and future directions will be presented. The research will be considered throughout from a Counselling Psychology perspective.

1.3 Problematic Internet Use

1.3.1 Conceptualisation

Despite a proliferation of studies on the subject of PIU, classification is a contentious issue. A total of at least 21 different assessment instruments, currently being used to identify PIU in both normative and clinical populations, have been developed to date (Kuss, Griffiths, Karila & Billieux, 2014). Conceptualisations vary substantially, and the cut-off points utilised for classification differ significantly, which impedes research and cultural cross-comparisons and limits research reliability (Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016). Originally introduced by American psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg (1995), the term IAD was generated as a satirical hoax to provoke

introspection in the psychological community. Goldberg used it as a mock disorder in order to evaluate the usefulness of creating new mental health disorders from a clinical perspective. Ironically, the media took hold of this notion and subsequently the concept of IA became socially constructed before any substantial scientific or clinical research existed in the field (Liu, 2012).

It seems that Goldberg's hoax backfired, as there are now as many as seven different terms associated with the concept of PIU, including ‘‘Internet Addiction Disorder,” ‘‘Specific Pathological Internet Use,” “Generalised Pathological Internet Use,” “Maladaptive Internet Use,” ‘‘Problematic Internet Use,” ‘‘Excessive Internet Use,” and ‘‘Compulsive Internet Use” (Davis, 2001; Douglas et al., 2008; Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006). Symptoms associated with the behaviour include obsessive thoughts about the Internet, excessive time spent online, diminished impulse-control, inability to cease use, denial that the problem exists, mood disturbances (including feeling depressed, irritable, and frustrated) as well as a rising sense of tension before logging on and relief of tension and arousal when Internet use starts (Atmaca, 2007; Douglas et al., 2008; Pies, 2009; Young, 1999). Variations in criteria have also been put forward in an attempt to encapsulate the problem. In varying contexts, IAD is viewed as an impulse control disorder not otherwise specified (ICD-NOS) (Pies, 2009), as a symptom of another disorder such as anxiety or depression (Kratzer & Hegerl, 2008), a behavioural addiction (Alavi et al., 2012) or as an abnormal relationship and reliance on technology (Block, 2008).

This confusion about PIU highlights the enduring philosophical controversy surrounding fundamental concepts in psychiatry, such as the boundaries between ‘abnormal’ and ‘normal’ mental states. Whilst psychiatry is clear on notions of

illness, Counselling Psychology (CoP) is not. CoP's distinctive identity considers the understanding of human distress, consciousness, subjective experiences and the self and other, as central to psychology. It is a pluralistic discipline that recognises the contribution of various psychological traditions including the phenomenological, the cognitive-behavioural and the psychodynamic (Douglas, Woolfe, Strawbridge, Kasket, & Galbraith, 2016). CoP has certain salient characteristics: a growing questioning of the medical model and a move towards a more humanistic value base, a developing interest in facilitating well-being rather than responding to pathology and sickness and a focus on the helping relationship. Crucially, CoP is committed to exploring and evaluating the limitations and strengths of all prominent traditions in psychology and contesting the concept of a disorder is amongst the biggest of these (Douglas, Woolfe, Strawbridge, Kasket, & Galbraith, 2016).

While disorders have clinical utility (such as providing a universal language for healthcare professionals, having standardised methods of assessment and helping diagnosed individuals to make sense of their problems), it is argued that by using categorisation and diagnoses, we risk objectifying people and alienating them from humanness (Kendell & Jablensky, 2003). Vassilev and Pilgrim (2007) explain, "*there is no single theory that can tell us everything about a phenomenon; the best we can hope for is to zoom in and out and change the angles of our observation to improve our understanding*" (p. 350).

1.3.2 Controversy and Comorbidity

In their paper entitled 'Internet addiction: reappraisal of an increasingly inadequate concept,' Starcevic and Aboujaoude (2017) argue that the concept of IA is

inadequate for several reasons. For example, what do we mean when we describe a mental condition as a disorder as opposed to a 'normal' form of human distress or suffering? This complex debate impinges on the narrower question of the concept IA and what constitutes as 'addiction' (Pies, 2009). The term 'addiction' may only be a correct designation for the minority of individuals who meet the general criteria for addiction, and it needs to be better demarcated from various patterns of excessive or abnormal use. It is also difficult to understand how we can conceptualise behavioural addiction without labelling common behaviours as obsessive. Starcevic and Aboujaoude (2017) also argue that IA is conceptually too heterogeneous because it pertains to a variety of very different behaviours. They claim that IA should be replaced by terms that refer to the specific behaviours (e.g. gaming, social media, gambling, or sexual activity), regardless of whether these are performed online or offline. This criticism has since led prominent experts in this field to distinguish between generalised Internet addiction (GIA) and specific forms (Brand, Laeir & Young, 2014).

Other researchers state that terminology and conceptual conundrums are responsible for the numerous assessment instruments developed to measure IA and for the frequent lack of concordance between them. While the term IA refers to behaviours that are excessive, these excessive Internet-related behaviours do not necessarily denote addiction, and if the idea of excessiveness denotes too much time spent online, this does not necessarily indicate problematic behaviour (Starcevic & Aboujaoude, 2017). Excessive Internet use is hard to quantify as large proportions of the population are constantly online via smart phones or even at work (Van Rooij & Prause, 2014). The unsuccessful attempts to form time-based cut-offs for Internet use

illustrate this, contributing to the lack of clarity which plagues this field and remains one of the key challenges to the concept of IA.

Another view is that it can be conceptualised as compensatory or a coping strategy whereby negative life situations motivate individuals to go online in order to alleviate their negative feelings and to meet their needs. This form of coping cannot therefore be labelled maladaptive or pathological (Starcevic & Aboujaoude, 2017). In line with this, there are also questions surrounding the demarcation between passionate high involvement and problematic or addictive use. As such, some authors ask whether we can consider liberal Internet use pathological at all? (Pies, 2009). In response to this, the counter-argument uses alcohol misuse as an example in the sense that at a 'reasonable' or 'healthy' consumption level, alcohol is not deemed problematic and is even socially and culturally encouraged but over a certain threshold it is deemed a clinical problem (Young, 1999).

Possibly the strongest argument against the classification of IA as an independent clinical disorder is that existing well-established disorders are the primary causes driving individuals to misuse the Internet. It is asserted that IA is no more than a manifestation of an underlying, primary psychopathology (Musetti et al., 2016). This raises concerns over (primary) disorders being under diagnosed, resulting in inefficient treatment choices on behalf of mental healthcare professionals. Overall, the presence of comorbidities for Internet-use related problems in the clinical context appears to be the norm rather than an exception. Numerous studies investigating the comorbidity of PIU and other pathology have revealed high prevalence rates associated with generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), depression, attention deficit

hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), personality disorders, substance misuse, and social anxiety disorder, amongst others (Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016). However, research has also indicated that some symptoms of IA appear to stand alone and can be differentiated from other psychopathology, providing empirical evidence for the discriminant validity and specificity of the IA construct (Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016).

Whether a consequence or cause, it is suggested that PIU treatment may benefit from therapeutic approaches that combine evidence-based treatments for co-occurring disorders in order to increase treatment efficacy and acceptability for the client (Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016). After all, comorbidity has long existed in the clinical field and the phenomenon of comorbidity itself poses its own serious challenges to traditional psychiatric classification systems which conceptualize mental disorders as discrete pathologic conditions - bringing us back to the wider debate of whether these concepts should exist at all (Wakefield, 2007).

Importantly, the current study is not concerned with current controversies surrounding pathology and categorisation. By contrast, the focus here is to understand on a subjective, humanistic level the experiences shared by individuals who self-identify with this phenomenon and who are seeking help with Internet-use related problems. With an interest in the developmental, contextual and functional approach to behaviour (that is characteristic of the CoP discipline), in this study, IA will be understood as Problematic Internet Use (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2008). The Oxford English dictionary defines 'problem' as "*denoting or relating to people whose behaviour causes difficulties to themselves and others*" ("problem," 2015). As such, the term PIU is considered to be an appropriate overarching term used to

describe an individual's subjective experiences as unwelcome, difficult, harmful and/or distressing (Jenaro, Flores, Gómez-Vela, González-Gil & Caballo, 2007).

1.3.3 Treatment

In his report entitled 'Internet Addiction - time to be taken seriously?' Griffiths (2000) states that while the debate over whether or not the DSM should designate IA as a mental disorder continues, there are individuals with Internet-use related problems currently seeking help. It is therefore an area which requires further exploration and should be of both interest and concern to those in related fields.

A variety of psychological methods for PIU have been reported worldwide, such as boot camp style treatments, family therapy, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), detox camps, group therapy, and mindfulness (Ginige, 2017). However, due to the lack of methodologically adequate research, there is no definitive treatment to date and a recent systematic review of treatments for PIU highlighted limited evidence for the effectiveness of any treatment modality (Zajac, Ginley, Chang & Petry, 2017).

To date, various pieces of research have favoured a cognitive-behavioural approach (Rowicka, 2016). Dr. Kimberly Young (1999), a pioneering researcher in this field, offers recommendations in her book 'Internet Addiction: Symptoms, Evaluation, and Treatment.' These are mostly based on CBT and borrow from existing treatment types, predominantly extrapolated from those used for substance addictions. In line with Young, Davis (2001) posits that PIU results from problematic cognitions, running parallel with other behaviours that either maintain or intensify the maladaptive response. In a model which aims to provide a framework of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) for PIU, Davis suggests that stimuli such as the physical

sensation of typing on a computer keyboard or even the smell of one's original or primary place for Internet use, can result in a conditioned response. Davis states that cognitions about the self may include beliefs or thoughts such as 'I am only good on the Internet,' or 'I am worthless offline, but online I am someone.' It is also noted that 'problematic Internet users' have a sense of guilt about their Internet use, they might often lie to their family and peers about how many hours they spend online, and they cannot stop. This results in diminished self-worth and a further tendency to resort to Internet use. Therefore, the activity that is undertaken or experienced is not necessarily the cause of the problem but rather a symptom of the problem at hand (Wood & Griffiths, 2007). Davis suggests various CBT interventions i.e. keeping a record of Internet use, exposure therapy and thought-listing exercises. Whilst Davis makes interesting recommendations, the proposed model appears to rely on assumptions and lacks evidence-based research. Existing theories associated with similar disorders are hijacked and many bold statements are made, with no reference to specific literature. Finally, the experiences, thoughts and beliefs of these notional PIU clients are inferred rather than derived from findings of the clients' subjective experiences. Ultimately, whilst this model provides guidance in an under-researched area, it also highlights the necessity for evidence-based research. It would be worthwhile to examine whether this cognitive behavioural model is suitable via prospective CBT research with individuals who identify with PIU.

A complicated phenomenon, PIU involves many aspects of life such as psychological, biological and sociocultural and thus, an integrative treatment approach is increasingly considered by the scientific community (Ginige, 2017). There are reports on teacher education, parental training, medication, family therapy and brief intervention therapies, any of which may be combined according to

suitability. A model by Beard (2005) proposes a biopsychological model for PIU: the biological view acknowledges that a combination of genes may exist, causing an individual to develop addictive behaviours; the psychological view highlights the use of classical conditioning to initiate, maintain, or change addictive behaviour. In addition, the social view recognises social, familial, or cultural dynamics that may promote Internet use - for example, escaping familial conflict.

Various researchers state that there is lack of qualitative research in the area of PIU (Kang, Park, Park & Park, 2012). It is argued here that by exploring the personal experiences of individuals who identify with PIU, we will better understand the phenomenon and findings will provide valuable insights to inform treatment appropriately. An example of such valuable insights are demonstrated in findings of a thematic analysis study by Hussain and Griffiths (2009). The study examined the impact of online gaming on people's lives (psychologically and socially) by exploring personal attitudes and feelings towards online game playing and consequent behaviour. The study conducted 71 interviews via online chat or email with online gamers from 11 different countries around the world. Positive psychosocial findings demonstrated how participants used online gaming to alleviate negative feelings such as stress, anger, loneliness and frustration. They also spoke about making new friends and learning about different cultures. On the other hand, participants provided detailed descriptions of personal problems that had arisen through online gaming. Some of the participants related that the addictive nature of some online games had led them to miss work and, as a result, lose their job. The most common adverse effect of gaming was the experience of losing 'real-life' friends, and the break-up of relationships. Other negative side effects included

restlessness when not online, neglect of hygiene, not eating, lack of sleep and missing school (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009). One suggested limitation of this study is that the interviews were conducted via email and online chat. While the researchers maintain that they had acquired detailed and in-depth accounts, one could argue that in-depth, face-to-face interviews might be more beneficial in the understanding of a participant's experience. This is in line with concerns surrounding the authenticity of videoconferencing as a form of data collection (Sullivan, 2012).

The case is made here that further qualitative research studies exploring PIU are vitally needed to inform professionals more comprehensively about the PIU phenomenon and for client-tailored treatment to be developed. Hence, appropriate treatment would become available in place of the current recommended treatment, which seems somewhat inadequately based on PIU's similarity to existing disorders.

1.3.4 Social Implications

The negative repercussions of PIU have been classified into five categories: academic, social, financial, occupational and physical, and of these negative consequences, the social impact of PIU has been deemed the most devastating (Young, 1996).

Some studies show that socialisation is one of the magnets behind the addictive power of the Internet whereby individuals spend excessive amounts of time interacting in 'real time' through e-mail, discussion forums, chat, online games, etc. (Grohol, 2005; Preece, 2000). However, it has been noted that relationships can be

affected to the extent where interactions with friends and family members deteriorate, as time spent with people face-to-face gradually decreases, whilst at the same time relationships with online friends grow stronger (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). PIU has been associated with deficits in social communication, interpersonal relationships and avoidance of social contact (Caplan, 2005). It has even been hypothesised that people who identify with PIU may have an impaired capacity for empathy (Konrath, O'Brien & Hsing, 2011). One study examined the processing of empathy for others' pain with 16 'Internet addicts' (IADs) and 16 controls. The results of the study suggest that during the early automatic and the later cognitive processes of pain, empathy may be impaired in IADs (Jiao, Wang, Peng & Ciu, 2017). The empathy levels in this study were determined by participants' fast reactions to pictures as either painful or non-painful, and via electroencephalography (EEG) data. It may be argued that these measures are insubstantial and that further studies, combining multidimensional measurements of empathy, are needed to confirm these findings.

PIU has also been associated with social anxiety. In a two-year follow-up study conducted in Taiwan, social anxiety symptoms appeared to predict the emergence of PIU (Ko, Yen, Chen, Yeh and Yen, 2009). In addition, a study by Bernardi and Pallanti (2009) found that 15% of adult cases of PIU also indicated a possible diagnosis of social anxiety disorder. Other recent studies have shown that PIU may lead to serious psychosocial dysfunction in an equal number of males and females. In one study of 2410 adolescents (1307 girls and 1103 boys), peer attachment was assessed in line with indicators of PIU. Results found that insecure peer attachment predicted PIU in both sexes. Excessive usage of Internet games and pornography mediated the influence of peer attachment insecurity on PIU, but only in regard to

boys. Conclusively, the authors suggest that increasing the quality of peer relationships may be a fruitful approach in the prevention and treatment of PIU (Reiner et al., 2017).

PIU has also been linked to the personality traits of shyness, neuroticism, stress, vulnerability, a tendency to procrastinate, low self-esteem (Brand, Laeir & Young, 2014) and also with social influences e.g. lack of social support or social isolation (Caplan & High, 2007). Loneliness has been associated with increased Internet use and authors suggest that lonely individuals may be drawn online because of the increased potential for companionship, the changed social interaction patterns online, and as a way of modulating negative moods arising from loneliness (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003). By contrast to the negative findings of other studies, it has been suggested that anonymity and lack of face-to-face communication online may decrease social anxiety and self-consciousness, which could in turn enhance online friendship formation and facilitate pro-social behaviour (Fleming, 2013). Support for this view was found in a survey of 277 undergraduate Internet users, which assessed differences between lonely and non-lonely individuals in patterns of Internet use. Students in the highest 20% (Lonely) were compared with all other students (Non-lonely). Results found that lonely individuals used the Internet to a greater extent and were more likely to use the Internet for emotional support than others. The social behaviour of lonely individuals was consistently enhanced online and lonely individuals were more likely to report the creation of online friendships and a heightened satisfaction with these online friends. However, whilst the lonely were more likely to use the Internet to modulate negative moods, they also reported

that their Internet use was causing disruption in their daily functioning (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003).

At present, much of the research highlighting social implications associated with PIU involve quantitative measures. As previously discussed, this field is plagued with inconsistent views and understanding of the PIU phenomenon, as well as multiple different measures and definitions of the behaviour, creating confusion and significant obstacles within the breadth of research to date. Whilst acknowledging these findings as significant, their one crucial limitation is a lack of subjective measures for these so-called social deficits. Further qualitative research in the area of interpersonal communication and PIU may enhance these findings and make them more comprehensive.

1.4 Interpersonal communication and the Internet

1.4.1 Online communication

Although two decades or so of academic research has studied the concept of PIU, it is not fully developed and is perhaps even still in its infancy (Starcevic, 2012). In the 21st century we use the Internet to communicate at a level unprecedented in human history, prompting use of the term, 'electronic apocalypse' (Lott, 2015). The Internet and social media, e-mail, instant messaging, discussion forums and online games, have come to occupy a hugely significant role in our culture (Grohol, 2005). As a result, we are, without question, more connected to each other than ever before and yet, some argue, simultaneously isolated. A paradox arises, whereby the Internet can both create, and destroy relationships. In his book 'The End of Absence', Michael

Harris (2014) makes the point that 'the over 30s', (the 'digital immigrants') are the last generation who will remember what it was like to live without an interconnected world. It will fall to them to preserve the memories of a different life experience (one without dependence on the Internet) before our very sense of being shifts permanently and irreversibly into the digital sphere.

There is controversy within the relevant research literature, as to whether Internet use decreases or increases social connection and about its psychological benefits or limitations. Several arguments have declared that online interaction is inherently impersonal, detached and shallow (Turkle, 2015). In contrast, other researchers report that Internet use has significant positive social effects on individuals and groups (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). The latter group of researchers would support the idea that the Internet has expanded our ability to communicate, by allowing users to establish and maintain social relationships across geographical boundaries (Park, 2010).

In offline communication, facial expressions and body movements are typically observed in order to enhance our understanding of the thoughts and feelings of another. These non-verbal cues, used to strengthen verbal messages may include tone of the voice and the maintaining of eye contact (Frith, 2009). It is estimated that up to 90% of emotional expressions offline are conveyed non-verbally (Goleman, 1995). This creates a challenge for online communication, because the mediating technology may restrict the use of non-verbal cues.

Online interventions are increasingly seen as having the potential to meet the growing demand for mental health services, however, research suggests that there are challenges and limitations involved (Dowling & Rickwood, 2013). Provision of

digital therapies in various forms has increased dramatically over the last decade, though given the absence of non-verbal communication cues, findings indicate that many therapists have concerns about whether a therapeutic relationship can successfully be developed online (Francis-Smith, 2014). A grounded theory study by Francis-Smith (2014) aimed to explore how therapists construct their experiences of the therapeutic relationship in online counselling compared to their experiences in face-to-face counselling. Findings indicated that many therapists found working in the cueless (absence of sensory cues) online environment highly challenging and anxiety-provoking. In particular, participants described how cuelessness led to the experience of losing touch with their client as well as feeling out of control in terms of interaction, context and processing. Participants also highlighted the difficulty in responding accurately to clients without sensory steer and worrying about client safety and risk. Overall, the challenges involved in working online appeared to cause great anxiety in practitioners (Francis-Smith, 2014). Migone (2013), who investigated theory of technique in relation to psychoanalysis over the Internet, stated that online therapy is simply a different therapy, in the same way as two therapies, both offline (and both online), may be different from each other.

The same challenges, such as cuelessness, which face online counsellors, may also be relevant to online communication in general. The explosion of social media has led almost 50% of Internet users in America to have online social profiles, with one report stating that social networking is up 82% from previous years as of 2009 (Whitney, 2010). Konrath et al. (2011) contends that social media has not only contributed to narcissism, but has also compounded the problem of isolation and self-obsession. She argues that there is pressure on the user to edit and correct his/her

self-image to a state of perfection, corrupting the ability to form real, unedited relationships. As a consequence of impersonal communication online, today's younger generation appear to have a diminished capacity for real-time conversations or for understanding non-verbal communication and the mind-sets of others. The Internet can also be used as a tool to cause harm, one example of such behaviour being cyber bullying, defined as: "*any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others*" (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278). A potential site for abuse and victimization, the Internet places young people at risk of being bullied or sexually harassed online (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2003).

By contrast, Heirman and Walrave's (2012) cyberbullying study promotes the benefits of anonymity in online communities, for example; without the pressure of rejection or humiliation, individuals suffering from anxiety can socialise online, create friendships and express themselves in an uninhibited way. Outside the realms of bullying, the Internet and social media can serve as a means to connect with people, reach larger audiences and share information. It is argued that whilst there are dangers, the Internet provides innumerable opportunities for growth among children, including benefits such as identity exploration, social support, various educational benefits, development of interpersonal skills, critical thinking skills, as well as possibilities to interact with others worldwide (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). The benefits of online social communities are significant.

There are many different elements to online communication, some of which have been discussed here. Both positive and negative factors associated with online communication are of interest to PIU and help illuminate the possible impact of online users' behaviour.

1.4.2 Empathy, mentalisation and object Relations

Communication is at the centre of empathy. We learn to put ourselves in the shoes of another person through real-life observation and storytelling, and face-to-face interaction is the most human and humanizing thing in which we engage. Being fully present with one another, we learn to listen and this is how we develop the capacity for empathy (Manney, 2008; Turkle, 2015).

The development of empathy begins at birth. Research using brain imaging techniques has shown that when given empathy-eliciting tasks, individuals with secure attachment patterns show activation in the mirroring areas of the brain, whereas individuals with disorganized attachment patterns display significantly less activation – suggesting that their capacity for empathy is impaired (Bucheim et al., 2006). Findings suggest that new-borns as young as 1 day old are perfectly capable of reproducing mouth and facial movements displayed by the human they are facing (Brooks & Meltzoff, 2002). Brooks and Meltzoff (2002) suggest that the 'like me' analogy between an infant and its respective caregiver is the basis for development of (social) cognition. This analogy process develops in a bi-directional way, whereby infants use the observed behaviour of their human carers as a mirror, to gain more knowledge about themselves. Considering these fundamental early interactions,

important questions are being raised concerning the new role of technology in child development and its impact on human relationality (Cooper, 2016).

Mentalisation (also referred to as 'reflective function') is the idea of a relationship between attachment processes and the development of the capacity to envision mental states in self as well as others. It is considered more cognitive, intentional and conscious in comparison to empathy and has recently been explored in relation to Internet use (Fonagy, 2018). The psychoanalytic concept argues that mentalisation is acquired in the context of a child's early social relationships. It enables children to 'read' other people and by doing this, children make people's behaviour meaningful and predictable. Interaction with others is vital, as children's early experiences with other people enable them to formulate multiple sets of self-other representations. Mentalisation involves both a self-reflective and an interpersonal component that ideally provides the individual with a well-developed capacity to distinguish inner from outer reality (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist & Target, 2004).

Pridgen (2010) argues that the Internet has altered interpersonal communication in a way that may accentuate deficiency in the capacity for reciprocal, self-sustaining peer relationships. Growing clinical trends indicate that adolescents with a history of problematic online behaviour are being admitted to psychiatric units, which suggest that young people suffering from behavioural and emotional problems may be especially prone to PIU. It is clear that there is a need to educate adolescents and their families in social training alongside appropriate use of the Internet in order to manage impulsivity, poor judgement and online management. Pridgen states that the treatment of PIU fails to incorporate the recognition of problematic attachment behaviours not only in real-time relationships, but also in destructive and

problematic behaviours online. The article addresses the need to evaluate the association between online communication patterns and the unfolding of disturbances in attachment systems as an important future direction for research aimed at safeguarding adolescents' well-being (Pridgen, 2010).

"*Object relations theory is based on the belief that all people have within them an internal, often unconscious world of relationships that is different and in many ways more powerful and compelling than what is going on in their external world of interactions with 'real' and present people*" (Berzoff, Flanagan & Hertz, 2016, p.124). As such, it is important to acknowledge the processes by which individuals internalise interactions with others and how these internalised object relations may be playing a role in our daily lives. Whilst object relations theory includes (in part) the complexity of external interpersonal interactions with others, it also encompasses internal relations between self and other. This can be seen for example in one's fantasies, fears, dreams and desires which are formed using these collected representations of self and other (Berzoff, Flanagan & Hertz, 2016).

Ballare, Cavaliere and De Rosa (2016) investigated adolescent use of the Internet as an instrument that amplifies individual potentials, relations and knowledge but also as 'a new object,' that modifies ways of relating to others. Firstly, they explored Internet use in terms of risk, specifically the risk of isolation from the 'real' world and substituting virtual relationships for real ones. They suggest that the Internet can interfere with processes and methods of relating, modify instinctual drives and that infantile objects are replaced with new objects. Secondly, taking into account the dynamics outlined, there is discussion around therapeutic intervention for adolescents who are affected in such ways. The authors propose using the

therapeutic relationship, whereby therapists help adolescents overcome the intrusion of Internet technology. Concentrating on the collapse between the real world and virtual world, mentalisation-based treatment can encourage attribution of meaning, integration of the identity, and processes of construction (Ballare, Cavaliere & De Rosa, 2016).

Tremendous advances in communication and computation technology are facilitating multiple changes in the expression of social and sexual desires. Some psychologists are labelling this the 'posthuman era' in which objectification, dehumanization and disembodiment are becoming the norm (Knafo & Lo Bosco, 2017). In their book entitled 'The Age of Perversion,' Knafo and Lo Bosco (2017) state that technologies are reframing the very essence of what it means to be human, whereby the future of this so called 'age of perversion' could either lead to social and existential dead-ends or alternatively to better worlds. They claim that human beings have entered an age of unprecedented digital development that is progressively blurring boundaries between computer and brain, suggesting that machines are becoming more like humans, and humans more like machines - a techno-perversion that is rapidly changing interpersonal and social norms. Within the psychoanalytic tradition, the behavioural aspects of perversion are said to result in dehumanization and eroticization of an object. In the current digital era, they argue that this perversion is invited and easily achieved as a person can become an object (e.g. social media profiles) and fall in love with an object without any face-to-face human interaction (e.g. Japanese men marrying their online or virtual partners). Winnicott's object-relations theory is used to draw comparisons and the authors question whether the famous theory holds a whole new meaning – the modern difference being that the transitional objects in which people develop attachments to are no longer abandoned

(like a child with their blanket). Knafo also jokes that if you want to know a person's unconscious desires or perversions, simply look at their Internet history. The book presents a rigorous, complex, vivid and engaging effort to demonstrate the applicability of a clinical, psychoanalytic concept – perversion – for analysing individual and social realms within contemporary societies. At times Knafo and Lo Bosco make rather sweeping statements and appear overly negative and deterministic about technology. However, The Age of Perversion is an important book which illuminatingly demonstrates the power of psychoanalysis for thinking about issues of subjects / objects in the digital era.

Without the immediacy of direct and attuned emotional connection, it can be argued that empathy, mentalisation and object relations are difficult to achieve. For the vast majority of human history, direct or face-to-face interactions were the norm, but today many points of human connection are mediated by technologies (Turkle, 2015). A cross-temporal meta-analysis of American college students suggests that empathy declined considerably between 1979 and 2009. Konrath et al. (2011) notes that the findings are consistent with societal trends of increasing narcissism and individualism, as well as a general decline in charitable donations and volunteerism among young adults since the 2000's, even allowing for economic factors. The results of this study, that students today are about 40 percent lower in empathy than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago is a stark reality to swallow (Konrath et al., 2011). Interpretation of these findings is complicated by the heterogeneity of research methods and the timescale, and there is also still a lack of consensus on what really influences the outcome of these findings. To date, there is no evidence to suggest that any one factor is to blame. Further research in the area of empathy is needed - firstly, to investigate whether these findings are replicable and

representative of the general population, and secondly, to examine the causes for this perceived decline.

Whilst (face-to-face) empathy may be affected, a modern-age concept known as online empathy or virtual empathy has emerged. Typically formed around individuals with similar interests, online interaction can facilitate friendships, develop relationships and offer the exchange of emotional support (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). A study by Pfeil and Zaphiris (2007) used components of offline empathy, to examine online empathy within an online community for older people, whilst also investigating the influence of mediating technology on the phenomenon. Elements of offline empathy, such as 'understanding emotions' and 'concern', were used to illustrate the potential depth of empathy online. Empathy was prevalent in the online community, with small differences in presentation from offline empathy. For example, a major component of offline empathy - understanding - was also seen online but in subtle and implicit ways, in contrast to offline empathy where understanding is shown explicitly. This study is significant in highlighting the value of technology in the way it enables online social interaction and empathic communication.

As analysed previously, empathic phenomena are extended in order to accommodate *all* different aspects of expressive behaviour, enabling us to establish a meaningful link between others and ourselves in various contexts. This 'enlarged' notion of emotional attunement opens up the possibility to unify the multiple levels and aspects of intersubjective relations (Gallese, 2003). Nonetheless, it is apparent that not only are there opportunities, but also dangers in online communication.

1.4.3 Social functioning

According to Young (1996), the negative repercussions of PIU can be classified into five categories; financial, academic, occupational, social, or physical in nature. Within these categories, the harmful social impact of PIU is perhaps considered to be the most damaging of all. As outlined above, research suggests that relationships can be affected to the extent where face-to-face interactions with people (including close friends and family members) gradually decrease and deteriorate, while relationships online grow stronger (Douglas et al., 2008). For some, the Internet provides anonymity, it is used as a way to combat social isolation, counteract unwanted feelings or, sometimes, treat a medical condition (Chou, 2001). There are benefits in that communicating online can be faceless - it can remove physical hindrances, thus allowing those with problems in socialising and with low self-esteem to engage in social interactions (Griffiths, 1998).

While basic human nature remains fairly constant, we are influenced to some extent by interaction with our environment and particularly by our use of digital media. In this modern age, populations are turning to the virtual realm to experience intimacy, closeness and connection in other forms. An illustration of this, *LovePlus is* a dating simulator and handheld game, which simulates the experience of being in a relationship, currently used by over 600,000 people worldwide. Humans' open interest in technological 'companion species', such as virtual girlfriends and boyfriends, is even alleged to be threatening the population of Japan (Galbraith, 2011). Whilst welcoming new opportunities to form new relationships and attachments, theorist Turkle (2012) warns that we must be careful not to erode existing bonds.

Psychological literature suggests that because of the many social, instrumental, and entertainment options that mobile phones provide us, they often divert our attention from our current environment (Brignall & Van Valey, 2005; Misra, Cheng, Genevie, & Yuan, 2014). New research suggests that mobile phones may lead us to use the wider technological network available, inhibiting our ability to connect with the people in front of us, thus having a decidedly negative influence on interpersonal relationships (Turkle, 2012). A study that sought to examine the presence of digital devices in social settings evaluated the extent to which the mere presence of a mobile phone impacted relationship quality in dyadic settings (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012). The authors suggested that the presence of mobile communication technology might present barriers to human interactions, particularly when people are having meaningful interactions. In two experiments, a non-descript mobile phone was placed on a nearby desk, outside the participants' direct visual field. The control group had a pocket notebook on the desk in place of the mobile phone. Results found that the presence of a mobile phone incurred negative effects on closeness, connection, interpersonal trust and conversation quality, as well as a perceived decline in empathy. Thus, by their mere presence, mobile phones paradoxically have the potential not only to facilitate but to disrupt human connection and intimacy (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012). Whilst this experiment provides interesting results, it is hard to determine whether the presence of a mobile phone is solely responsible for the differences in behaviour from the control group. However, this is a generic criticism, which can be applied to various behavioural studies. Another criticism of the study is the fact that the individuals involved are strangers. Therefore, the encounter is quite unlike the 'normal' social encounters, which often take place between friends and family.

Eradicating the use of online communication tools and digital media, a field experiment investigated whether increasing the opportunities for face-to-face interaction improved non-verbal emotion–cue recognition in pre-teens (Uhls et al., 2014). The pre-teens who spent five days at an overnight summer camp, where technological devices (television, mobile phones, and computers) were forbidden, were compared with a school-based matched controls group that continued to use electronic devices. Both groups took tests before and after this experiment - the participants were asked to infer emotional states from video clips and photographs of facial expressions. After five days without the use of any electronic devices, the children's capacity for empathy significantly increased in contrast to that of the control group (Uhls et al., 2014). These results provoke an essential debate about the costs and benefits of the huge amount of time children spend in front of electronic screens. Acknowledging that electronic media provides many useful ways to learn and communicate, the study nonetheless suggests that if face-to-face interaction is replaced by technologically mediated communication, valuable skills in reading human emotion may be diminished. Ultimately, this study calls for research which thoroughly investigates the effects of digital media on social development. It is also worth exploring whether these findings from America are replicated internationally.

Li, O'Brien, Synder and Howard (2015) argue that the majority of research concerning PIU in America has been conducted within a quantitative research paradigm which fails to provide a context for the problem at hand. To address this gap, they conducted a qualitative study to explore the experience of 27 university students who self-identified as excessive Internet users and who reported health and/or psychosocial problems associated with their Internet use. Students completed two 'Internet addiction' measures (The Compulsive Internet Use Scale and Young's

Diagnostic Questionnaire) as well as participating in focus groups to explore personal experiences associated with their Internet behaviour. The participants described sadness, stress, boredom, and depression as common triggers for their excessive Internet use. A common theme described social media as being pervasive in participants' lives. Academic underachievement, sleep deprivation, failure to engage in face-to-face social activities and negative affective states were frequently reported consequences of intensive Internet use. The authors concluded that PIU may be an underappreciated problem amongst young adults in America and additional research is advised (Li et al., 2015).

Alongside growing concerns regarding PIU, issues discussed here such as isolation, anti-social behaviour and narcissism amongst others, are perpetuating factors for psychological issues and mental health problems. Research in the area of Internet technologies is growing, however, specific research exploring experiences of self-proclaimed problematic Internet users is needed to provide in-depth understanding of processes, desires, behaviours and consequences.

1.5 Relevance to Counselling Psychology

The central philosophy of CoP holds the subjective worlds of self and other as integral to its practice. With a humanistic value base, a focus on the relationship in therapeutic practice is crucial, whereby helping involves much more than responding to sickness in a standardised fashion (Douglas et al., 2016). As an emerging area of research, all current PIU literature calls for further investigation and in particular, there is a need for qualitative research. To date, most research concerning PIU has

been conducted within a quantitative research paradigm and as such, a number of authors have complained about the relative neglect of phenomenological dimensions of PIU in the literature (Li, O'Brien, Snyder & Howard, 2015). For example, there are a "*lack of qualitative research studies exploring Internet addiction although there has been more than a decade's worth of scholarly articles investigating the concept*" (Douglas et al., 2008, p.3035), "*the research should allow more intensive qualitative research methods to be integrated regarding Internet addiction*" (Kang, Park, Park & Park, 2012, p.223), and "*we suggest that further studies be conducted by interviewing the subjects to determinate the causes and factors related to Internet addiction*" (Salehi, Norozi Khalili, Hojjat, Salehi & Danesh, 2013, p.6). In general, it is argued that PIU literature shows little regard for subjective experiences and, as a Trainee Counselling Psychologist, I feel passionately about contributing to this gap in the field. From now on, Counselling Psychologists and related practitioners will undoubtedly encounter individuals experiencing some form of distress associated with their Internet use. Therefore, more effort should be made to integrate the empirical study of experience more satisfactorily within PIU, in order to inform important issues concerning its treatment, conceptualisation and overall understanding.

In essence, PIU is of growing concern in the realm of mental health but lacks a strong conceptual framework to guide on-going research (Moreno, Jelenchick & Christakis, 2013). Whilst debates over conceptualisation, measurement and classification continue, there are individuals who are seeking help for their PIU-related problems, who experience their condition as distressing and feel it is significantly impairing their functioning (Kuss & Griffiths, 2015). It is believed that

technology and its pitfalls will become a more significant subject in the arena of mental health, and hence the need for mental health professionals who can recognise, assess, and treat disordered behaviours associated with Internet use will also increase. Given the vast expansion and accessibility of the Internet, it is important that mental health professionals study, understand and when appropriate, apply evidenced-based approaches to increase benefits and reduce risks to their clients (Doan, Yung, Cazares & Klam, 2017).

1.6 Rationale and research questions

The increasing popularity of the Internet has generated concerns about possible effects on behaviour and relationships, and research suggests that individuals who have a tendency to use the Internet to excess, may be affected in a negative way. The various positive and negative influences of the Internet in relation to modern-day communication have been discussed within the topics of online communication, empathy, mentalisation, object relations, social functioning and relationships. It is argued that by grasping the social implications arising from PIU, relevant practitioners will be able to understand the modern relevancy, processes and meanings of clients' communications. The rationale for emphasising interpersonal communication is largely due to its significance in everyday functioning and its role in various mental health problems. Additionally, of the negative repercussions associated with PIU, the harmful social impact of PIU is perhaps considered to be the most damaging of all (DeAngelis, 2000; Douglas et al., 2008; Young, 1996). The literature highlights the existence of PIU as a problem requiring professional therapy.

The phenomenon is reported all over the world, and individuals who seek help for problems arising from excessive use of the Internet, experience their online behaviour as distressing and damaging to their daily lives. It is, therefore, recommended that focusing on related and influential factors will result in more effective interventions and treatments for those seeking help.

Although the conceptualisation of PIU is far from settled, and the debate continues as to whether or not it should be a recognised clinical disorder, the increasing prevalence of this phenomenon and its social ramifications suggest the need for further investigation. It is argued that qualitative research in this area has received inadequate attention, resulting in significant gaps in the PIU literature. Thus, a qualitative exploration will serve the purpose of creating as holistic a picture as possible of PIU and the results of this type of inquiry will be valuable to strengthening emerging theory and treatment.

In conclusion, the objective of this study is to present an in-depth and phenomenological analysis of the experience of interpersonal communication amongst individuals who self-identify with PIU. Several research questions were formulated to guide the direction of the research, which are as follows: (1) how do individuals who identify with PIU experience interpersonal communication? (2) how do they perceive interpersonal relationships on and offline? (3) how do they experience empathy on and offline? (4) what are the social benefits and drawbacks of their Internet use?

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative methodology to explore the lived experience of interpersonal communication amongst individuals who identify with Problematic Internet Use. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse data collected via semi-structured interviews with six participants.

2.2 Qualitative Research

When I began research in this field it struck me that many researchers and healthcare professionals had proceeded straight to theory, action and treatment. I sensed that the voices of the individuals were missing. Philosopher Edmund Husserl famously urged phenomenologists to "*go back to the 'things themselves"*" (Husserl, 2001, p.168) and this resonated with me. After examining the aims of my research, I decided that a qualitative method was most suited to my research question(s). Qualitative research is defined as research which involves the collection and analysis of the accounts or stories that people offer regarding their personal experience. Fundamentally, the intended outcome is understanding rather than explanation, the data therefore being 'words' rather than 'numbers' (Willig, 2013). Qualitative research is important to provide rich descriptions of complex phenomena, illuminating experiences and interpretation of events, giving voice to those whose views may be unheard, to conduct initial explorations and to develop and generate theories to inform practice (Sofaer, 1999).

2.3 Epistemological and ontological position

When I began to think about my epistemological position I considered my research questions and aims – in short, what am I seeking to learn and to understand. Epistemology is concerned with the origin, nature, limits, methods and justification of human knowledge (Hofer & Pintrich, 2004). Specifically, this research study aims to seek understanding into the subjective lived experiences of a small group of people. In this way, I perceived my equally unique lived experience of conducting this research as a significant contribution to my findings. Therefore, this research adopts a critical realist position which accepts that we cannot acquire any objective or certain knowledge of the world. All theories about the world are seen as grounded in a particular perspective, all knowledge is partial, incomplete and fallible and thus, there is acceptance in the possibility of alternate valid accounts of any phenomenon (Maxwell, 2012).

Ontology is the study of being, of existence, and it has important implications for research that are independent of those of epistemology (Scotland, 2012). Critical realism appeals to the real ontological distinctions between the various layers or "strata" in the natural and social worlds. Data that participants provide offers a window or mere glimpse into their subjective reality rather than a direct or 'true' view of their reality (Gorski, 2013). Critical realists retain an ontological realism (there is a real world that exists independently of our own theories, perceptions, experiences and constructions) while simultaneously accepting a form of epistemological constructivism (our personal understanding of the world is inevitably unique stemming from our own perspectives and constructions of reality)

(Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010). Ultimately, I do not believe that it is possible to attain a single or 'correct' understanding of the world. Therefore, I acknowledge that subjectivity is inherent throughout this research - in the analysis, meaning making and findings.

Critical realism accepts that there are enduring and stable features of reality that exist independently of human conceptualisation. Differences in the meanings individuals attach to experiences are considered possible because their experience is subjective. From a critical realist perspective, reality is deemed to be always suspect and only comprehensible via the representations offered by people, restricting us to producing discourses about discourses, rather than true claims about reality (Scott, 2013). A significant challenge for me in the process of this research has been arriving at a point at which the phenomenon PIU aligns with my ontological and epistemological position. I believe that language forms words, theories and concepts to make sense of our existence, hence creation of the term 'problematic Internet use.' However, I also feel uneasy about definitive labels, categories and concepts. PIU and interpersonal communication was something I wanted to explore, however, the way in which I went about it caused me to think long and hard about how I approached this study. A key element of this meant that participant criteria allowed individuals to identify themselves in line with PIU rather than me as the researcher providing cut-off points, objective measures or scores.

2.4 IPA

2.4.1 Rationale (consideration of alternative methods)

In the process of choosing IPA as the most suitable methodology for this research study, I considered various other qualitative approaches. Initially, I ruled out Thematic Analysis (TA) and Discourse Analysis (DA). TA is a method which identifies and analyses patterns in qualitative data. Whilst it is a theoretically-flexible approach which would allow for a phenomenological stance, TA develops themes and patterns across entire data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). IPA on the other hand encourages the researcher to stay close to each piece of data, focusing on the unique characteristics of each participant (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). I therefore concluded that IPA better addressed my research aims and ambition to adopt an idiographic lens. I briefly considered DA, however as a method which evolved from linguistics studies, it is primarily concerned with the nuances of conversation. DA examines language in use, and looks at verbal behaviour as a direct form for uncovering meaning. As I sought to explore subjective experiences, where emotions and feelings are at the forefront, it was clear that DA with its emphasis on language alone, had to be ruled out (Willig, 2013).

A more difficult decision was discarding Grounded Theory (GT) as it shares some features with phenomenology by seeking to collect and analyse data from participants' perspectives in an effort to ensure findings emerge and are not influenced by preconceived ideas. GT method is based on symbolic interactionism, which focuses on social interactions and the meanings assigned to events. As I am

interested in understanding the experience of interpersonal communication, this aspect of GT which studies individuals' social and psychological action/interaction in search of portraying and understanding the process of meaning making from the point of view of those who live it, fit with my aims (Schwandt, 1994). However, GT essentially seeks to explain phenomena by generating theory or further developing existing theories and this research did not seek to explain phenomena but rather to understand them (Willig, 2013). This key difference meant that IPA was the most appropriate choice of research methodology, sitting comfortably in line with my epistemological position, research questions, as well as addressing a gap in the literature.

2.4.2 Overview

IPA first made an impact with a paper by Jonathan Smith (1996), which argued for an approach to psychology which was able to capture the experiential and qualitative, but could still dialogue with experimental and mainstream psychology. IPA is a qualitative research methodology concerned with detailed examination of human lived experience. It aims to convey an individual's experience (as far as is possible) in its own terms and contexts, rather than through predefined category systems (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). While it was not until the 1990s that IPA really made its mark, IPA draws on theoretical concepts and ideas, which have much longer histories. IPA is informed from three fundamental areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Drawing on these theoretical approaches, IPA's distinctive framework facilitates the understanding of an individual's subjective world (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of the lived experience. In IPA it is used as a research tool, to try to understand what human experience is *like* (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). One of the major phenomenological philosophers, Edmund Husserl (1869-1938), was particularly interested in finding a means by which an individual might accurately and rigorously come to know their experience of a given phenomenon. If this could be achieved, Husserl reasoned that experience could transcend circumstance and illuminate a given experience for other people too. Husserl suggested that through phenomenological reduction, we can reduce or suspend judgment and focus our attention simply on analysis of experience. In doing so, we learn meanings and perspectives unique to a person's subjective experience, and come to understand, without having lived these experiences ourselves, what experiences of the world are *like* (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2008). Developing Husserl's work further, other leading phenomenologists such as Heidegger (1889-1976), Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Sartre (1905-1980) moved away from transcendental interests towards a more interpretative position, viewing every individual as embedded in a world which is personal and unique to them. This position highlights the belief that understanding the subjective experience of others can only ever be partially achieved (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. As there are contextual restrictions such as language, objects, and relationships, phenomenologist Martin Heidegger proposed that in order to achieve or access understanding of the personal experiences of others, we must use interpretation (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Heidegger explained that whenever something is interpreted, the interpretation is founded upon the fore-conception, whereby the interpreter brings their prior assumptions, experiences and pre-conceptions to the encounter. Acknowledging the subjective dimensions of

conscious experience, IPA accepts that the researcher plays an active role in the analytic process: "*we must identify the researcher as an inclusive part of the world they are describing*" (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006, p.107). As the researcher, I engage in a concept known as the double hermeneutic, whereby my own conceptions are used to attempt to understand the participant's personal and subjective experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Idiography argues for a focus on the particular rather than the universal. In contrast to nomothetic approaches, which study groups and populations, IPA relies on in-depth analysis of single cases, exploring the lived experience of particular phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). It suggests that absolutely everyone is unique, and therefore should be studied in an individual way, providing a more complete understanding of the individual. However, the German writer, Goethe, states that the particular also underlies the general. By delving into particular experience, we realise that we share a great deal with a person whose experience may at face value seem entirely different from our own. Thus an idiographic lens may also bring us closer to significant aspects of the general (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

2.5 Validity and Quality

In qualitative research, validity involves determining the degree to which researcher's claims about knowledge correspond to their constructs of reality being explored. As a qualitative research method, IPA is inevitably subjective in that no two analysts working with the same data are likely to come up with an exact

replication of the others' analysis. Although this fact is recognised and welcomed by advocates, for others this may raise questions of validity and reliability (Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001).

A number of guidelines for assessing validity and quality in IPA have been produced, and a widely used guide is Yardley's (2008) four broad principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research. These include 1) sensitivity to context, which involves being sensitive to a number of contextual factors such as socio-cultural milieu, existing literature, material obtained from participants as well as the analysis process, 2) commitment and rigour which outlines the need for a degree of attentiveness, thoroughness and consideration throughout, 3) transparency and coherence, which argues that the entire research process must be clearly described and presented to the reader, for a level of self-awareness to be shown by the researcher and a coherent argument for rationale of conducting the research be presented, and 4) impact and importance which simply asks whether the research provides something interesting, original, useful and important (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). In line with Yardley's guidelines, Smith (2015) argues that we can achieve quality and validity in three ways; reflexivity, reflection and journal writing.

2.5.1 Reflexivity

Researchers do not access participant worlds directly, but through a process of intersubjective meaning-making. In order to engage with other people's experiences as such, researchers must be able to identify and reflect upon their own experiences.

Reflexivity is a fundamental part of IPA research. It is a process whereby the researcher states their personal beliefs, perceptions, conceptions, processes and biases, all of which play a part in the research findings (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA has terms known as 'bracketing' or 'epoche' for use by the researcher to reflect and become aware of any biases they have and subsequently the attempt to suspend them, specifically during the stages of analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Husserl (1931) suggested that accurate capturing of the phenomena of lived experience required purging or cleansing of one's mind in order to achieve "*pure phenomenal experiences devoid of assumptions*" (LeVasseur, 2003, p.413). He called this 'the epoche' which consists of 'bracketing' our own experiences by suspending any assumptions or preconceptions about the existence of things, in order to focus attention on the actual, natural phenomena. However, it is important to note that whilst we may strive to achieve what Husserl described as phenomenological reduction through reflexivity, I argue (along with others) that it is an impossible task. As Heidegger states, there is no such thing as pure reflection, because reflection, as with all consciousness, is intentional and thus never entirely uninvolved or separated from the world. As such, I as the researcher am inextricably connected to the world as I see it, however, I try to temporarily suspend my prior beliefs to allow for curiosity and with this the opportunity for other perspectives, meanings and questions to emerge (LeVasseur, 2003).

As the researcher, it was important for me to be reflective at every stage, and most of the time I noted my reflections in a reflexive journal. Another useful tool was to discuss reflexivity and examples of interpretations with my supervisor and peer

researchers. This allowed me to test and develop the coherence and plausibility of my research (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

3. Research Procedure

3.1 Participants

IPA studies require homogenous samples of participants for whom the research questions will be meaningful. Participants who take part in IPA studies are expected to have certain experiences in common with one another, in order to provide multiple perspectives on a shared experience. There is, however, a degree of heterogeneity within a sample and inevitable divergences, as members of any purposive homogenous sample are never seen as identical. Within reason, heterogeneity allows for diversity of views, opinions and experiences across the participant group (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

With IPA, the homogeneity of a participant group involves two factors: 1. interpretative concerns (degree of similarity or variation that can be contained in the analysis of the phenomenon), and 2. pragmatic considerations (ease or difficulty of contacting potential participants and relative rarity of the phenomenon) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Therefore, as PIU is a relatively new and emerging area of research and not yet classified as a legitimate clinical disorder, it was apparent that recruiting participants might be challenging. The concept of PIU remains elusive and despite having various recruitment avenues in mind, it was important to start by recruiting from a broad participant pool. Having examined participant samples from various IPA studies to find relevant homogeneity, the proposed inclusion criteria emerged: adults (18+ years), living in the United Kingdom/Ireland, self-identifying with PIU, that is experiencing their Internet use as a form of impairment and/or distress.

Limitations exist in all research across all study designs, and whilst they are inevitable and impossible to eliminate, it is the ethical duty of the researcher to address any limitations and to account for potential sources of bias (Smith & Noble, 2014). Firstly, the conscious decision to derive participant suitability from self-identification with PIU, rather than by the use of psychometric screening tools or scales, proved to be a laborious process. Ultimately, in line with the epistemological context of this project, the actual self-the participants as problematic Internet users, was considered more aligned with the overall philosophical stance of this piece. Additionally, while at present there are over 45 reported measures for PIU, many of these assessment tools have been sparsely used and very few of them have been evaluated or validated (Laconi, Rodgers & Chabrol, 2014). Thus, it was considered harder to justify the decision to use one of these scales.

The rationale for selecting adults, over 18 years of age, was based on several factors. Firstly, the specificity of a sample can be defined by the rarity of the phenomenon under investigation, and in this case, as a contemporary phenomenon PIU defined the boundaries as slightly wider than with a less specific or more accessible phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Secondly, considering the ethical implications of this qualitative enquiry, and given the time-frame, the identification of this age-range was deemed practical. Lastly, the inclusion and exclusion criteria of a sample must be justified and there was no existing literature recommending the consideration of a specific age range within 18-65 years. Overall, following the examination of these points and the context of this study, the proposed participant sample was deemed suitable. Nonetheless, IPA does not attempt to make claims about reality, nor does it attempt to provide findings worthy of generalisation.

Indeed, IPA is in fact transparent in its position, acknowledging the uniqueness and individuality inherent in us all.

A sample size of six-eight participants is suggested with IPA. Having such a sample allows the researcher to explore in depth similarities and differences across participant interviews. The danger with bigger samples is that the amount of data generated may become overwhelming, and the researcher may not engage sufficiently with each individual case (Smith, 2015). The participant group for this study included four male and two female adults (aged 19-34) who identify with PIU as outlined by criteria proposed in the literature (i.e. an individual's inability to control their Internet use, leading to significant psychosocial and functional impairment) (Shapira, Goldsmith, Keck, Khosla, & McElroy, 2000). Each participant reported their Internet use as troublesome, distressing and even repellent.

3.2 Materials

A recruitment letter/email and poster was used to advertise the study online and in places of relevance such as universities and GP surgeries (see Appendix A and B). A form of interest and participant information sheet provided potential participants with details about the study, such as its aim and purpose, and the implications of their involvement (refer to Appendix C and D). A consent form was used to ask and gain participants' informed consent to participate (Appendix E). A debriefing sheet was provided post-interview to offer participants potentially useful information

about organisations they could access for support should they be required (refer to Appendix F). A distress protocol outlined step-by-step procedures for dealing with participants' potential distress (Appendix G). An interview schedule was developed with a list of open-ended questions and prompts (refer to Appendix H). An audio-recorder was used to record the interview. Finally, a research journal was used to note down any reflections, thoughts or feelings throughout.

3.3 Recruitment Procedure

The recruitment strategy involved four methods:

1. Online posting to related websites, social networking sites, discussion boards and forums
2. Contacting relevant treatment/rehabilitation services in London and the surrounding areas - Nightingale Hospital London Technology Addiction Service, The Priory Group Roehampton (offering a 12 step recovery programme for problematic Internet users) and The PROMIS Rehabilitation Clinic (treatment for Internet addiction)
3. Contacting universities and advertising on campus
4. Word of mouth

3.4 Interview Procedure

Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews are well-suited to IPA studies as open questions enable the participants' experience to emerge (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). Semi-structured interviews also enable the researcher to make interventions in

the moment, with the opportunity to ask participants either to clarify or to expand on areas of interest (Arksey & Knight, 1999). Moreover, in IPA studies the researcher aims to give participants a voice to share their personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation. For this reason, semi-structured interviews are considered the most appropriate form of data collection for IPA studies, and therefore they were the chosen method of data collection for this study (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Once participants agreed to take part, a face-to-face interview was arranged. Participants were asked where they would like the interview to take place, and all took place in either participant homes or a quiet cafe – a comfortable and familiar setting was preferable (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Before the interview began, participants' understanding of their involvement in the study was verified and any of their questions answered. Participants were also reminded of their right to confidentiality, anonymity and withdrawal, before signed informed consent was obtained. Interviews were conducted using questions and probes outlined in the interview schedule (see Appendix H). These questions were based on a review of the concerns and questions in relevant literature. However, it is important to note that the interview schedule was used as a mere guideline. It did not dictate the sequence of the interview, nor was every question necessarily asked. After interviews, debrief sheets were given to participants, and opportunities were provided for them to voice any concerns relating to the study. All interviews were audio-recorded, lasted on average 90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

A pilot study was conducted initially, whereby any potential issues could be flagged – all forms, interview questions, debriefing and general understanding of the participant were checked and considered. No issues or concerns were raised, though several interview questions were edited for the purposes of clarity.

3.5 Analytic Strategy

The aim of IPA is to understand the depth and complexity of an individual's meaning-making. Rather than measure frequency of meanings, the researcher is interested in understanding the participant's world. This is obtained through close engagement with the data and interpretation process, including reflexivity (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

The first step of IPA involves immersing oneself in the data in order to begin the process of entering the participant's world and to ensure the participant becomes the focus of analysis. Firstly, I transcribed all interviews verbatim which allowed me, by listening to the audio-recordings, to familiarise myself with each participant account, entering a phase of active engagement with the data. The transcripts were then read and re-read a number of times. The second step of analysis involved initial coding of the transcripts, whereby semantic content and language were explored. In this case, I used the right-hand margin to note down any significant observations including preliminary interpretations, contradictions, paraphrasing, and use of language (see Appendix J). This process was repeated a number of times before the second stage of analysis took place - the formation of emerging themes. By this time, I had a familiar model of the interview itself as well as a large volume of provisional notes (initial codes). The next task of developing emergent themes involved reducing the

amount of detail in the notes whilst retaining their complexity. The emerging themes, which I noted down in the left-hand margin, comprised words or concise phrases, which aimed to capture the lived experience of the participant as found in the transcript. These themes captured the essence of the initial exploratory notes by reflecting the participant's original words and thoughts and also my interpretations. The hermeneutic circle was considered throughout the process as it is concerned with the dynamic relationship between the particular and the whole at a series of levels. In order to understand any given part of a text, you must also look at the whole (the whole being the transcript, the experience the participant), and conversely, to understand the whole, you must look at the part (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

During the next stage of analysis, I compiled a chronological list of these initial themes for each transcript (see Appendix K). The next step involved fitting these themes together - repeating themes were condensed and similar themes were merged together. Next, with a more concise list, themes were connected together and a themetable was formed using relevant quotations to illustrate the source of each theme in the participant's own words (see Appendix L). This process was repeated for each transcript, and it was important to treat each subsequent transcript on its own terms, as much as possible bracketing the ideas which had emerged from the previous case. Once I had completed an individual themetable for each participant, the next stage involved looking for patterns across cases. This involved looking for connections and differences, discounting or merging themes, relabelling and reconfiguring to form one table of themes which represented the group. Following this complex and lengthy process, the final master themetable was formed, which included three superordinate themes each with three relevant sub-themes (see Appendix I) (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Guided by the master themetable, the final stage of analysis commenced - expanding all themes into a narrative account. Using verbatim extracts from the transcripts to explain, illustrate and support analysis, themes were elaborated and discussed. Care was taken to ensure that there is clear distinction between participant's own words, and my own interpretations (as the researcher). It is important to note that the extracts are not simply paraphrased or summarised, but explored, developed and interpreted (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

An emphasis on ensuring that this research thoughtfully adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Psychological Society (BPS) (2018) was closely attended to throughout. Additionally, the four general principles of 'respect,' 'responsibility,' 'competence,' and 'integrity' outlined in the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct were considered at every point of the research.

Informed consent was obtained from every participant who took part in this study. In order for participant consent to be 'informed', consent forms were accompanied by an information sheet (see Appendix D) which outlined information about the research study (in lay terms) along with details about the researcher and how they could be contacted. A pilot interview was used to practice the processes for informing and debriefing participants in order to make sure that the information was sufficient, clear and easily understood.

Considerable effort was made to ensure that every participant had an accurate understanding of what the research entails. In relation to safeguarding, participants were given information regarding support services available to them in case any distress was induced during or after the interview. They were provided with a debrief sheet (Appendix F) outlining relevant information such as advice about seeking support.

All participants were assured of their rights regarding confidentiality. All participant information, audio-recordings and interview transcripts were stored anonymously and securely in line with the Data Protection Act (1998). With the consent of participants, extracts from the interviews are included in the write-up of research findings, however, pseudonyms are used and all identifying material has been omitted.

3.7 Reflexivity

As a qualitative researcher who has previously conducted two IPA studies, I am familiar with the process of IPA. Whilst this may be seen as an advantage, I had to take special care not to jump ahead to later stages of the research procedure, in particular to the analysis of data and identifying themes. For this reason I decided not to transcribe the interviews until they had all been conducted, rather than transcribing an interview after each one. This was a conscious decision as I was aware that by listening back to interviews and engaging closely with the data I might

subconsciously be affected and perhaps impair any subsequent interviews by asking leading questions or seeking particular answers. It also helped me to resist the desire to begin interpretation ahead of the analysis procedure, instead focusing on each participant's individual unique experience.

Additionally, the one-to-one interview setting reflects that of my day-to-day role as a Trainee Counselling Psychologist. I was aware at points throughout the pilot and early interviews that I was assuming the patient/practitioner role. Such questions as 'how did that make you feel?' are pertinent in both settings and I attempted to be aware of the similarities and differences of these adopted roles so that the line between therapist and researcher was not blurred.

There were many stages and processes in the analytic process. One of the hardest elements was making a final selection of themes, which I then organised into a master themetable. During the initial stages of analysis, I identified over 600 emergent themes from the participants' interviews. Reducing these themes down to nine was extremely challenging and stressful. I felt immense pressure, as I did not want to discard important aspects of the participants' accounts and thus to do an injustice to the participants. I wish that each participant's entire experience could have been included, but due to the nature of this study, an inescapable part of the analysis was the selection of pertinent themes and extracts to the exclusion of others. In my opinion, this aspect of the research amplifies the importance of qualitative studies and the rich, in-depth knowledge they provide. It also reaffirmed my epistemological stance and rationale for conducting this study. It is imperative and a duty of care that practising counselling psychologists allow individuals to be heard and understood, and I hope I achieve this through the findings I have chosen to present.

4. Analysis

The resulting analysis identified three superordinate themes and nine subthemes to reflect and capture participants' subjective experiences of interpersonal communication. The three superordinate themes are: 'Meeting interpersonal needs,' 'Interplay between two worlds: the virtual and the physical,' and 'Online armour: the Internet as a form of protection' (see Table 1). The nine subthemes represent aspects of the lived experience of all six participants. However, pertinent extracts have been selected to support each theme, and whilst only a few of the participant accounts are referenced per theme, their accounts reflect the experiences of all six.

Master Themetable		
Meeting interpersonal needs	Interplay between two worlds: the virtual and the physical	Online armour: the Internet as a form of protection
Seeking self-acceptance and validation	Online communication as real vs. not real	"Idealised version of myself"
Loneliness and fear of isolation	Alone together	"I'm a complete psychopath"
The vicious cycle	"A stepping stone"	Online army

Table 1. Summary of superordinate themes and subthemes

A narrative analytic account is presented, of the interchange between the interpretative activity of the researcher and the participant's account of the experience in their own words. The findings are illustrated via each superordinate theme and its corresponding subthemes, alongside interpretations that derive from participants' accounts. Verbatim extracts from the interviews are included in order to demonstrate clearly the essence of each theme, to give voice to all participants and to illustrate that sensitivity and relevance to the topic are sustained. Crucially, the subjective nature of IPA recognises that as the researcher, my interpretations represent merely one way to make sense of participant accounts and that another analyst might have placed a different emphasis on different aspects of the same account. Furthermore, themes identified and presented were selected based on their pertinence to the research question and, therefore, some aspects of the participant's experiences have not been included (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

In order to understand the accounts of interpersonal communication within the context of PIU, one must position them in the context of the participants' lives (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). A sense of conflict and contention was present in all the interviews. More specifically, the interviews revealed contradictory statements, frustrations, detachment and confusion within the participants' meaning-making. As a result, there is an underlying sense of conflict within the analytic account presented, which should be considered as an overarching theme across all themes and cases. The conflict outlined in participant accounts also had a significant impact on me, as the researcher, when approaching the process of analysis. It was extremely difficult to articulate the internal conflicts that were presented and to make sense of their accounts as I studied the contradictory statements and views.

Ultimately, I concluded that conflict was at the very heart of the participants' interviews, as the participants clearly struggled to understand and recount their experiences which consisted of intentions, feelings, behaviours and positions between good and bad, helpful and problematic, useful and detrimental, controlling and controllable. As a modern medium, present in almost every area of our lives, the Internet is not necessarily seen as a negative entity, yet for participants, it carried that risk. This everyday mechanism, so strikingly embedded in our modern lives, has multiple functions, layers and uses which makes it impossible to arrive at one singular conclusion about its worth and impact. Bearing this in mind, alongside the subjectivity, which is an inevitable feature of this research, I would like the reader to consider conflict as a thread which pervades the analytic narrative presented.

4.1 Meeting interpersonal needs

This first superordinate theme encapsulates participants' interpersonal needs under three subthemes. The participants identified various interpersonal needs, referencing "talking to someone at all times" and a desire for "feedback" from other people. The importance of these needs being met, coupled with endless opportunities to satisfy these needs online, appears to result in a vicious cycle, resulting in frustration and feeling "stuck."

4.1.1 Seeking self-acceptance and validation

When the participants were questioned, a need for acceptance and validation emerged as a significant motivation for their interpersonal communication. This

theme (relevant to all participants) tentatively refers to feelings of self-doubt or inadequacy deriving from a reliance on online interpersonal communication as a means to gain approval. Their online interactions appeared to indicate that virtual social networks are used as a mechanism by which an individual can attain a sense of acceptance and worth.

> *"It's frustrating when you say something and don't get feedback …… it just exacerbates that almost natural human need for social acceptance and reassurance, by receiving likes you get the 'you're doing things right, that's right, it's correct by our social norm, that fits in with what is acceptable' you get that social acceptance and if you get fewer likes than usual then you think 'oh I won't do that again, maybe I won't play tennis again in Hyde Park in summer didn't get that many likes'" (John, 316-325)*

Above, John describes sharing activity on social media in the hope of receiving approval from his peers. He explains how he becomes frustrated when he does not receive the feedback he desires. Throughout his interview, a significant element in John's need for acceptance appears to be his sexuality, as a homosexual male. John refers to social norms, judgement, adhering to "heterosexual expectations" and the need to belong. The need for inclusion appears to be the inner drive for John's online interactions, and it is perhaps his fear of exclusion that causes him to place an emphasis on feedback, which provides reassurance. At the end of the extract John jokingly suggests that this feedback acts as a social barometer, appearing to determine what he does.

> *"So why do I want to get likes, they're just these little stabs of dopamine aren't they, it goes back to that message like whenever you get the little buzz*

on your phone it kind of feels nice it's a weird sensation you almost get excited you got a message from someone, it's like having a social interaction directly at you and a like is like, 'I like this I like you' maybe it's just social feedback" (John, 337-342)

John describes 'likes' as "little stabs of dopamine," which vividly captures the positive response all participants shared regarding validation, admiration and acceptance. As with a drug, a 'like' is described as if it is a 'high.' John says that there is something "special" about being directly appreciated or admired via a 'like' and his description of the physiological response to these 'likes' acknowledges this. It is fundamentally important to see oneself as being lovable and as shown here, this is gauged by positive feedback.

"People get buzzed over it 'oh I got 100 likes' …… what are you doing it for? Are you doing these things because you're going on holiday, you're getting shredded because you're making yourself feel good? Or are you actually doing it to impress people you don't even know like 100 people, if you get 100 likes on something, you don't even have 100 friends" (Mark, 267-273)

The need for acceptance and validation as one of the driving forces of their social media use was frequently discussed by participants, with particular emphasis on obtaining 'likes.' Mark uses the example of "getting shredded," referring to his own efforts to achieve the optimal physique. He questions the intent of this endeavour, asking whether he does it for himself or for others. Mark also discusses the phenomenon of 'likes' using tentative language so as not to incriminate himself. He

appears ashamed of his desire for 'likes,' questioning others' intentions to gain a great physique, removing himself from the example. However, he later confesses:

> *"Maybe my ego is built off doing something like that but I don't think I show that in social media … but actually if there's a photo when my six pack looks sick I'm going to upload it" (Mark, 346-348)*

Tom also speaks about 'likes,' the weight they hold, and the impact of receiving fewer likes than expected. He explains how this has a direct effect on his self-esteem and sense of self and tries to analyse his lack of likes and how others may perceive him negatively. All the participants shared a frustration with themselves that they let this kind of perceived negative feedback disappoint them, often trying to convince themselves otherwise, as shown by Tom and his internal dialogue:

> *"I put up a post and it hasn't got many likes and I'm like 'damn,' I'm like 'am I not interesting enough?' and then you kind of have to dig yourself out and you're like wait that really is not that big of a deal but during that time it is a big deal" (Tom, 834-838)*

Tom explains that the negative impact of receiving fewer likes than he had expected upsets him to the point that, metaphorically, he needs to "dig" himself out of a hole. He conjures up a striking image of being alone in a ditch, relying on inner strength to pull himself out of this difficult situation. In his effort to recover, we catch a glimpse of his inner dialogue, as he attempts to reassure and soothe himself that it "is not that big of a deal."

The participants appear to recognise these underlying motives for online communication. Lisa echoes John's sentiments of this 'selfish pursuit,' admitting that the purpose of her online interactions is for selfish reasons, i.e. 'it's mainly for yourself I guess.'

> *"I think it's mainly for, for your, from your own perspective to see what other people think of you but it's nothing directly it's mainly for yourself I guess" (Lisa, 369-371)*

4.1.2 Loneliness and fear of isolation

This subtheme details participants' dependency on human interaction, with experiences of loneliness and fear of isolation as the probable root cause. In most cases, participants spoke about the need to be in continuous contact with others online.

> *"You can hide behind a screen and you don't feel so lonely …… just knowing someone is there to talk to, like, and be, I don't know I just feel like with teenagers nowadays we are so reliable on social media so you have to be talking to someone at all times, some days I will just be scrolling through messages just trying to find someone to talk to you which is quite sad but yeah I think it's because you just assume that everyone else is talking to other people" (Lisa, 134-149)*

Participants' experiences were fraught with ambivalence, as demonstrated here by Lisa. At one point, she explains that she hides away from the world, yet at the same time she longs for human connection to ease her loneliness. Whilst there may not be anybody present with her in person, Lisa finds comfort in connecting with friends online to the point of dependency - “you have to be talking to someone." The image of her scrolling through a list of friends, reaching out to someone, reflects a sense of desperation, which Lisa, self-deprecatingly admits is “sad.” She hints at a fear of exclusion and feeling left out as she assumes “everyone else is talking.”

> *“I feel like I am with them and then as soon as they go offline it's like back to reality ha…… you feel like alone in the world …… it's like a horrible, this is really bad but it's like a horrible feeling because you feel like suddenly everyone is gone and you’re by yourself again emmm yeah that's why I wake up so late because I know that someone is awake before me just to send me a message” (Lisa, 560-571)*

Lisa speaks of these online conversations as a form of distraction or escape from her 'real' life and feeling “alone.” Lisa’s loneliness and fear of isolation is highlighted as she describes feeling “alone in the world,” as if “suddenly everyone is gone.” These feelings are powerful and she evokes an image of being deserted in the middle of nowhere, out of reach. She emphasises her dependency by admitting that she purposely sleeps in late so that a message is waiting for her when she wakes. This depiction suggests that the idea of waking up to no messages is unbearable, highlighting a state of dependence.

Below, John refers to a similar pattern.

> *"Read reply read reply read reply read reply read reply so it doesn't stop and it only ever stops really when they decide they don't want to reply, but more often than not, I don't think that I'm the only person that has this kind of feeling which is why these conversations are on-going because I want to read and reply and they want to read and reply until, until we sleep" (John, 1198-1203)*

John scornfully describes his own compulsion to be messaging back and forth all day until he sleeps. This communicative pattern is clearly illustrated through John's repetitious use of the words "read reply." He also appears ashamed of this admission, eager to assume that other people behave in the same way, thus further highlighting his desire for inclusion with everyone else. He reiterates these needs:

> *"It's almost like I need I need that dialogue I need that constant conversation otherwise I don't know if it's loneliness I don't know maybe it's something to do with that but otherwise I almost feel alone there's no one there, who am I talking to, why aren't I talking to someone, so it's less to do with the positive feedback from the buzz of a message and more to do with having someone there all the time" (John, 1167-1173)*

John originally made sense of his constant online interactions as a need for positive feedback, yet he later decides that it is more to do with his dependency on human interaction, preventing him from feeling "isolated" and "cut off." His repetition of

the words "I need" emphasises his strong desire to withstand loneliness by "having someone there all the time."

Mark also feels compelled to reach out to others online in the hope that it may relieve his loneliness.

> *"I feel compelled to if it's, if I'm doing something interesting that might spark up a conversation and then I won't feel so alone" (Mark, 790-792)*

Rather than reaching out to individuals directly, with words or comments, Mark chooses to broadcast a picture or video of something "interesting", in the hope that someone may be attracted by this and initiate a virtual conversation with him. This indirect plea for conversation may also suggest that he is reluctant to be open about his longing for human connection. Instead, Mark seems to be enticing others to reach out to *him*.

> *"I constantly check, it will be like 4 minutes and I will have checked it like five times for no reason whatsoever" (Julia, 59-61)*

Above, Julia suggests that her need for human connection is almost subconscious, as she does not seem to understand why she so regularly accesses Whatsapp (an instant messaging application). It is interpreted that Julia also has a perpetual desire to link up with others.

Whilst many of the participants spoke of their desire for continual online communication, Harry, on the other hand, describes his time spent online as largely

"passive." Here he speaks of his tendency to act as a hermit, withdrawing from human interaction both in reality and online.

> *"I mean I don't have problems talking to people I'm not someone who is shut in the closet and can't talk to anybody but the thing is …… at some point you start longing for human interaction you don't really think about it you don't think I want to have interactions but you are grateful for every time you have human interaction …… it's hard to describe like… I'll just use the word clingy, you kind of come into the clingy" (Harry, 182-190)*

This extract equally displays Harry's strong need to reach out to people to ease his state of loneliness and isolation. At first, it seems that Harry is attempting to persuade himself that he has no difficulty in forming social connections. He refutes the idea that he is "shut in the closet", a very powerful image. Nonetheless, he grudgingly acknowledges some form of loneliness through his quest for human connection. He seems grateful to enjoy human interaction, suggesting he does not interact with other people very much. The description of himself as "clingy" is also striking, particularly in contrast with his earlier phrase, "shut in the closet." The word "clingy" conjures up an image of a small, vulnerable child clinging to their parent, needing love and attention.

4.1.3 The vicious cycle

Conflict and ambivalence emerged as overarching features of all participants' transcripts. This conflict seemed to infiltrate almost every aspect of their experience

and their resulting meaning-making. A vicious cycle can be defined as a chain of events in which the response to one difficulty creates a new problem that aggravates the original difficulty ("Vicious Cycle," n. d.). In this instance, the participants' desire to meet their interpersonal needs appeared to result in "excessive" Internet use and therefore an increasing neglect of other important aspects of their lives. All the participants expressed frustration at finding themselves part of this cycle, torn between the positive and negative aspects of their online communication.

Every participant described how spending considerable time online had impacted his or her relationships and sense of self. This had resulted in them being involved in a struggle to manage their dilemma. John's account below captures much of the participants' ambivalence in relation to their PIU.

> *"The addiction is there because it needs to fulfil something which is unfulfilled …… it's because I'm missing something and I need to kind of fill it and the way I fill it is with this and whether that's a good way of filling it I don't know but it does the job almost and if you don't do it, that kind of need (sorry I'm doing visual cues here) you have that, 'God that needs filling' and this thing fills it if you don't do it the gap is there and it only fills it temporarily I suppose I don't know what that gap is I don't know it's probably some deep rooted emotional thing to do with attachment and relationships but that's something else to explore maybe that's why it's unhealthy because it's distracting from the true root of why I'm doing it, that's probably the damaging part of it, that it's distracting me from something else that needs to be looked at because it glosses over the true problem it's, these small rushes*

of dopamine, it's like I'm trying to think of an analogy it's taking painkillers to get rid of the headache but what's causing the headache? That's the analogy haha …… I never get to resolve the issue that is resolved because I just keep filling… wow" (John, 1243-1264)

John makes the analogy of taking painkillers for a headache to illustrate the vicious cycle phenomenon, where the painkillers provide relief, yet the underlying cause of the headache remains unexplained. His comparison describes a process of instant gratification alongside an unresolved issue. The unresolved issue is likened to a hollow place that needs "filling," which John strikingly mentions nine times in this extract. John's repetition of his need to "fill" this "gap" accentuates his desire and attempts to find a solution, which is difficult for him as he is unable to identify this "gap." Perhaps John is afraid of confronting the real issue, as he flippantly says, "that's something else to explore," whilst using temporary substitutes to "distract" him from the "true problem." John also conveys his ambivalence as he questions whether constant communication is a "good" or "damaging" form of coping. In particular, John indicates that the real issue is likely to be related to "attachment and relationships." Thus, he is seeking constant human connection at a superficial level, without properly addressing these deeper "emotional" needs. By the end of the extract, John surprises himself with his nuanced understanding of his true emotional needs and what he is sacrificing at the same time. This realisation is highlighted as he pauses and reflects, "wow."

Like John, underlying all the participants' experiences of PIU is their undecided view of social media, which they recognise as having both a positive and negative influence on them. This uncertainty is expressed by Tom:

> *"It's almost too much but then you get addicted to it in a way, so it's like you can always have someone there but when they're gone you're like 'I need to talk to someone again' and then if something changes like they become busy you're like 'oh oh they're not talking to me' and you know it's normal for someone not to be talking to you but then you think 'why is this?' and then thoughts about other stuff come in to play yeah it's interesting the normality is that you talk to someone all the time when the reality is that you really shouldn't, it should be more like an excitement" (Tom, 232-240)*

Tom shares his experience of the positive effects of the Internet as he always has "someone there," but also the negative effects, as online interaction stirs his insecurity and paranoid thoughts. Furthermore, his need for reassurance is increased, his dependency strengthened and ultimately, the "excitement" of his interpersonal relations is diluted.

Similarly, Mark's frustration is evident as he presents an internal debate, in which he fails to understand his desire for online activity, when he clearly recognises that this online behaviour has a detrimental effect on his self-esteem. Mark questions himself repeatedly, as he appears frustrated in his search to find answers. It is clear that this distress stems from his inability to change his Internet behaviours, despite the fact

that they cause him to "feel shit." Both Mark and Lisa voice their desire to escape the vicious cycle, whilst stating that their temptation to be online is simply too strong:

> *"What's the point? Why am I letting myself have an avenue? Why am I giving myself a tool to make myself feel shit? Why do I need that? Why am I reading these statuses about people from school? It's useless, and people have a microscope into my life and I have a microscope into their lives and I feel like you're living in the past ……. there was a temptation to do something that made me feel shit I don't think I have ever told anyone that it's hard to admit but I don't think I'm the only one" (Mark, 866-876)*

> *"If I didn't have, if I wasn't so addicted to the Internet….. but it's just so easy to go on the Internet because you know it's there so it's just laid out there for you like dessert" (Lisa, 692-695)*

Above, Lisa refers to her difficulty in resisting the temptations of the Internet. She vividly depicts the nature of her 'addiction,' as she likens it to dessert. Lisa compares her craving for the Internet to that of an appealing, indulgent dessert which is enticingly laid out for her and impossible to reject. It appears that Internet activity is so enticing that a vicious cycle is maintained, leading to more and more internal conflict. This conflict is shown by Julia:

> *"you would think I would never want to touch it again ……. but it's the complete opposite I am constantly being like maybe one day I will see something" (Julia, 127-182)*

"All of that unfolded on social media so I went from one version of self-sabotaging and fucking up my life to still managing to self-sabotage and fuck up my life hahaha it's just like I replaced drugs and alcohol and engaging in sexual behaviours with being a social media addict and allowing it to completely destroy my self-esteem" (Julia, 513-518)

Earlier in her interview Julia described different ways in which social media had brought her pain and sorrow, for example how Facebook helped facilitate her ex-husband's long-term extramarital affair. She expresses frustration with being continuously drawn to social media despite the devastation it has caused her. Julia summarises her behaviour as self-sabotage - she appears almost helpless as she tosses her hands in the air, bows her head and laughs at herself.

As a direct result of this vicious cycle, the participants are depicted as increasingly isolated individuals who are, as a consequence, ever more dependent on their online interactions. The underlying issues of the participants' lives remain unexplored and unresolved. In the example of Harry, online relationships appear to begin to substitute "real life" or physical relationships, pushing him further into isolation. Here, he conveys his internal conflicts as he vacillates between surrendering to isolation and "hanging on":

"You don't want to let go because you're scared of losing the remnants of what you think is actually a healthy friendship but even then even those it's, it's extremely tricky because you, you are trying to hang on to them but at the

same time you're also just letting go at some point because you just you are always just in conflict with yourself because on the one hand you think I don't really need it I can just stay on the Internet and then at the same time you're on the Internet and you feel incredibly shit so you try to hang on" (Harry, 555-563)

The only way to conquer the vicious cycle is through real-life intervention and interaction, but it seems that Harry is too deeply entrenched in his "safe," virtual world to retreat, implying that the Internet enables the cycle:

"You have this hermit tendency nowadays to try, at some point everybody needs space for themselves and there's this great quote that I read from Jim Carrey I think it was actually 'at some point you will realise just how comfortable it is to be alone' how peaceful it is, how whatever, and then it it it gets hard to try and separate yourself from that because you know it is comfortable to be alone everybody knows it I mean every once in a while you just want to be by yourself you know just turn off, nobody to chat to, but then there are a-social people that get comfortable in that and the Internet is no help for them because it just enables them to do it you can work at home now you can order everything online even if you need company you can do that online you can chat with people you can just stay at home" (Harry, 310-322)

Harry's use of the adjectives "comfortable" and "peaceful" to describe being alone, reveals the allure of his "hermit tendency." This description provides insight into the vicious cycle, as Harry spends more time alone, avoiding the

uncomfortable and unsafe alternative of socialising and becomes more and more withdrawn and dependent on the faceless, other 'society', offered to him by the Internet. The more Harry retreats, the harder it may be to reconnect with others in 'real' life. It appears as though avoidance may in fact increase his anxiety about being in social situations, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle.

4.2 Interplay between two worlds: the virtual and the physical

This superordinate theme further demonstrates participants' ambivalence as they negotiate interpersonal communication on- and offline. For some, online and offline worlds are perceived as distinctly separate, but for others these two worlds are very much intertwined.

4.2.1 Online communication as real vs. not real

All of the participants referred to aspects of their experiences as either 'real' or 'not real', mostly referring to interactions being online versus offline. As their Internet use becomes more and more embedded in their lives and relationships, it is apparent that it becomes harder for them to make this distinction. This theme represents the participants' attempts to distinguish boundaries and interpret their personal lives.

Mark spoke about the dangers inherent in the failure to differentiate between what is real and not real online. He voiced his concerns for his niece and nephew and the younger generation who may not be able to detect the difference between the online and offline worlds. His description of this situation as "toxic," is very powerful, perhaps inferring that Mark has personal experience of this phenomenon. Mark's use

of the word “toxic” describes the Internet as something poisonous and extremely harmful. Despite claiming that he can distinguish between what is real and what is not, there are points throughout his interview where Mark appeared to contradict this claim: “there is a blurred line.” As with other participants, it may be the case that he is ashamed to admit this perceived error of judgement.

> *“That probably ain't real life you know and you can separate what's real and what's not there is a blurred line but I think I'm old enough and it's coming to my life at a point where I kind of know what's real and what's not but I think it's toxic for people that can't make that differentiation” (Mark, 426-430)*

Harry categorises face-to-face interactions as “real” and online interactions as “abstract,” reasoning that chatting over the Internet is detached and he does not have to admit that his words are “real.” He explains that the indirect nature of online communication allows him to be flippant and courageous whereas face-to-face communication is directly linked to him, which he finds much more problematic.

> *“I think that if you're sitting face-to-face with somebody it becomes real and if it's, if it’s on the Internet it's abstract …… it's one thing to press enter, it's another to say something I think because once, once you say something it becomes real so for me it was for instance I could chat about ‘I think I have depression’ or ‘I have an Internet addiction’ I could chat with friends about it I could type it or whatever but then actually sitting down with I think it was my Mum that I sat down and chatted to about it and actually saying it, it was completely different it took a lot of effort for me to actually say it because*

once you've said it you have acknowledged it is real if you just write it down its you know that's not real I've, I've just, I've just said something on the Internet but actually saying something to a person is different it's real, it becomes real that's the way I explain it anyway" (Harry, 367-379)

Harry explains this differentiation further by emphasising the impact of distance with online communication. He appears to suggest that face-to-face communication is intimidating, requiring courage and ownership which is very much "real." Harry implies that he finds it difficult to open himself up in this way. On the other hand, communicating online eliminates these obstacles, allowing him to interact from a far. He clearly describes this form of interacting with the verbs "throwing," and "chucking" – the movement involved highlights the distance and disassociation.

"For me it's not it's not really real, I'm not, I'm not sitting down and talking when I'm with somebody and opening myself up to that person, I'm just you know putting it out there but it's not essentially, I'm throwing it instead of putting it in front of me so that people can associate with me versus putting it online, and it's throwing it, there is that distance you know a lot of the time online people work with different names as well so it's not real in a sense it's removed …… I think it's the distance you're not really putting yourself out there it's just one kind of, I'm chucking a little letter over, I know who the girl is on the other side of the wall and I'm chucking a little letter over the wall and not saying it to her face there's a difference I think in my experience there's a difference" (Harry, 463-478)

For Julia, her online and offline relationships appear both separate and intertwined - online interactions appear to dictate "real life" and vice versa.

> *"Simply it's real life inclusion online exclusion ……. she is saying to the world, not just, I feel like it's a kick in my teeth but she's also saying to (my boyfriend) that until you choose somebody else you are not included in this life with us and so there were even pictures of just him in them, she completely excluded him and myself from this wedding ……. so to have people on social media who I am also friends with in "real life" (quotation marks) it makes me feel like I am being destroyed or fractured so it's like wait a second I was at that party why aren't there any pictures of me ……. why are they excluding me it makes me feel like it's not my real life like I'm imagining these friendships in my head" (Julia, 724-756)*

Julia describes a situation whereby she attends a friend's wedding, she has a great time with her friends but the experience of this wedding is later depicted very differently online. Julia recalls how she was purposefully excluded from all online records of this wedding, resulting in her feeling extremely confused and hurt, summing up the cruel differentiation as "real life inclusion, online exclusion." It appears as though her friend uses this indirect form of communication to send a message to Julia, something which she makes no reference to in "real life." As a result, Julia's sense of self is "fractured" to the point where she questions which world is "real?"

Despite the contrast related in the example above, Julia views her online and offline world as integrated. Both worlds interact and intertwine to the point where social media is "ingrained in our ways of being."

> *"So in real life we met up haha real life, social media is actually real life now it is so ingrained in our ways of being it is real life" (Julia, 832-833)*

Julia appears to filter companionship and relationships through social media, and she also appears to personify machines, accepting them as companions. The fluidity between online and offline interpersonal communication is shown below as Julia light heartedly converses with Siri and Alexa:

> *"(Siri talks) really Siri? I mean that's interesting, so Siri just said 'you do know you know,' thanks for chatting because nobody asked you, also I'm pretty sure voice activation is off so that's not creepy or anything.. oh yeah and I also tell Alexa like 'what's up' in the morning haha first thing and ask her to play something happy and she always plays 'Happy' you have no idea how many times I'm like 'stop playing that song nobody's happy when you play that song'" (Julia, 51-57)*

A hint of shame was detected in the above extract as Julia coyly referred to her interactions with Siri and Alexa (the virtual assistants in her life), with whom she greets each morning, as she sarcastically claims it's "not creepy or anything." Interestingly, a desire to feel happy is emphasised as she refers to her frequent request for Alexa to play a "happy" song. This instance appears to affirm the

participant's Internet and technological use as an attempt to fill some form of void in their life. Here, Julia places the onus on Alexa who has the task of making her happy, yet inevitably Alexa fails, as Julia tells her "nobody's happy."

4.2.2 Alone together

Online communication provides participants with human contact. It is easier to engage with and easier to avoid, yet it leaves them feeling less connected with people and more connected to simulations of them. This theme explores the force of online communication and how it alters participant's social lives. The participants speak about the juxtaposition of being constantly connected with others online, and yet feeling disconnected when face-to-face.

Lisa fails to make sense of social interactions with friends, who she ironically describes as "antisocial." She describes face-to-face interactions whereby she and her friends are together physically yet at the same time are essentially in their own individual worlds, by being engrossed in activity on their portable phones. This situation provides the context for this theme, 'Alone Together.'

> *"I think it's really weird, it just feels so antisocial which doesn't really make sense, there will be points when I realise all we have done for like 2 or 3 hours is be on our phones and I think to myself why don't we go out for a walk or do something that is actually good for us because we might as well just be at home by yourself doing the same thing rather than being together*

so we should be appreciating being together but it just feels like it's a waste of time it is a, a just a waste of time" (Lisa, 319-325)

Lisa appears frustrated as she fails to rationalize these social situations. She would like to benefit from time spent together with friends, but each friend is more drawn to online rather than offline communication. Though it has been established that the participant desires human connection in order to counteract loneliness, face-to-face connection does not seem sufficiently fulfilling and rather like a drug, leaves the participant craving more. By contrast, Lisa mentions spending time with a friend, whom she does not communicate with regularly online:

"I have a friend who I do try and message her but she doesn't use social media she's quite good with it she doesn't talk on it regularly so when I do see her it's like, it's like I saw her this holiday and it was one of the nicest days because that's when I had so much to talk about because we had so much to catch up on and it was such a relief to be able to see someone fresh and new not knowing anything about them and having a nice catch up in a coffee shop and I feel like our friendship is going to last long because we don't need to keep in contact all of the time we just appreciate being together which is also a lot more healthier" (Lisa, 281-289)

In the polarising example of social interaction above, Lisa highlights the negative impact of constant online communication. Describing her previous social experience as "a waste of time," Lisa describes this social contact as "one of the nicest days." She attributes this positive encounter to the fact that she does not often communicate

online with her friend, explaining that their time apart allowed them to appreciate one another, be present with one another and therefore enjoy a "healthier" friendship. Tom describes a similar experience:

> *"In my relationship it was very much we message all day and then we call at the end of the day and then we don't have much to talk about because we knew everything.. so I think overuse of it is quite a big issue like that's why I try to keep away from my phone as much as possible, well I try to but it's still difficult to keep away from phones because they are always there, it is always connected to you and you are always communicating with people" (Tom, 185-191)*

As with Lisa, Tom struggles to rationalise his constant messaging online. He shares the dilemma over mobile use in that he cannot "keep away from it", despite realising that his use is problematic and ultimately has a negative impact on his friendships. A sense of shame is detected as Tom says he knows it's "a big issue" and tries to keep away from his phone "as much as possible." It is almost as if Tom is embarrassed about his "overuse," admitting that he does try to address this but it is simply too hard to disconnect. Below, Tom also appears infuriated, as he acknowledges that his continual online communication is "pointless" and unhelpful as excessive use ends up in "oversaturation."

> *"But there is oversaturation that's a big thing and I just felt like I was speaking to them all day but I hadn't really gained anything from it and I like coming away from a conversation like this where you're like 'ah actually I*

spoke with someone and had a conversation' rather than just pointless pushing against each other just for the sake of it" (Tom, 332-336)

John stated that when given the opportunity to have face-to-face interaction, he would prefer to engage in immediate online messaging. In the extract below, John explains that rather than speaking with his flatmates about a topic in which he has little interest, he is relieved to be able to converse online. This highlights a desire for John to be in control, to communicate on his own terms and the possibility of escaping the confines of his reality.

"I sit there with my flatmates and they want to talk about Love Island, I'd rather be talking about something else than Love Island but I can't get away from this conversation, the only way I can get away from this conversation is by having a WhatsApp conversation with somebody else and I can talk about nuclear threat in North Korea or something, something that I think is more important and more enjoyable to talk about" (John, 549-555)

4.2.3 "A stepping stone"

All six participants spoke optimistically about their ability to sustain online relationships with family and friends, with whom they would otherwise lose touch. The Internet was perceived as a 'stepping stone,' which enables relationship maintenance, initiation, and enhancement, and generally benefiting relationships by

allowing participants to keep in touch easily and regularly. However, four of the participants also spoke about ways in which this mechanism could be misused and promoted dependency, thus harming their relationships.

Tom credits Facebook for providing a "stepping stone" for him to learn how to communicate and form friendships. Earlier in his interview, he explained that he used to be "very introverted" and "could barely talk to females at all." Facebook seemed to provide him with a platform from which to initiate gradual interaction with his peers, eventually resulting in the development of friendships offline. He commends Facebook for teaching him this skill and thus building his confidence. However, Tom appears to be praising Facebook's usefulness "back in the day," referring to a specific time in his life. Using the past tense, Tom states that he "would get invited to parties," suggesting that this may longer be the case. Significantly, Tom also warns of the dangers in becoming reliant on the use of Facebook as an aid, implying that Facebook is only helpful when used cautiously. It is possible that becoming "overly dependent on it" changed his experience from being initially positive, to negative - "cut it out altogether."

> *"That really helped like forced me into it in a way so like it did kind of provide a stepping stone into talking normally to people and then you reach a stage where you're overly dependent on it and you've got to take a shift from cutting it out altogether, so it's like a stepping stone to talk to people and I think it is useful it was a useful tool for me because I would get invited to parties and stuff and that was a big thing back in the day" (Tom, 540-546)*

The participants also spoke of the positive role social media can play in the nurturing and maintenance of relationships. Like Tom, Julia is grateful to social media for facilitating one of her closest friendships. Julia relays meeting her friend "once", on a beach in Bali five years ago, and how the functionality of social media subsequently allowed their friendship to develop. Julia states that whilst the friendship was "built" online, this has no reflection on the quality of their friendship.

> *"It was just sheer coincidence that we met and she is one of the closest people that I know now and she has been on social media and in real life been there ... I've known people for 20 years and they have not been there for that and it was through social media that we actually built up our relationship" (Julia, 649-653)*

Not only does the Internet provide an opportunity to communicate with friends across geographical boundaries, it offers the opportunity to communicate with anyone and everyone. The participants acknowledged that social media provided the added bonus of interaction with well-known figures they admire and respect:

> *"I can talk I can tweet and try and interact with people that I really admire in different sporting environments and I think that is a major positive" (Mark, 531-533)*

In conclusion, the facility offered by this bridge between the online and physical world seems to help participants sustain relationships and also communicate openly with every type of Internet user. Whilst all participants recounted positive

experiences relating to this metaphorical "stepping stone," nonetheless there were also concerns over its use. For three of the six participants, their continual online interaction appears to hinder their face-to-face interaction, resulting in "oversaturation" as described by Tom.

> *"We have to keep talking to each other on social media but it comes to a point where you literally cannot say more like there's nothing more to say normally when you're with someone in real life it's ok to have just pauses and stop talking we like watching movie or like you don't have to talk but on social media you always have to talk otherwise it's awkward so I feel like it does ruin it when it comes to meeting up with people in real life you have nothing else to say to each other because you have let it all out on social media" (Lisa, 165-173)*

> *"I don't think it's healthy and I think it removes that excitement on that aspect of it because obviously you want to have, you want to meet up with somebody and be like 'hey I haven't seen you in so long what have you been doing?' whereas it's more like 'oh I saw you doing that I saw you at the park' it's like I've got nothing to tell you and I think ideally I wish that it was all face-to-face because I like face-to-face it's one of the most raw forms of talking" (Tom, 672-679)*

Above, Lisa and Tom outline their fears that a reliance on the Internet as a stepping stone might give rise to excessive consumption. Whilst they discuss positive aspects of this process such as the consolidation of friendships, they also note how over-use

could have the opposite effect, eliminating connection altogether. Abuse of social media may lead to the pressure to keep talking all the time, creating impossible demands on people and end in damaging relationships.

Similarly, Harry explains that the Internet is a useful tool, providing constructive opportunities to connect with others. However, Harry does not perceive the Internet as a "replacement."

> *"It's a useful tool I think but for me I don't think, it's not a replacement, I think personally if I were to I think if I'm going to continue on this path the path that I am on if I don't do anything about it I will end up without any real friends I will just end up on the Internet alone" (Harry, 643-647)*

Harry's stance highlights the position of the Internet as a means to communicate but not as a substitute for "real friends". A stepping stone can be defined as 'an action or event that helps one to make progress towards a specified goal' ("stepping stone," n.d.). In contradiction, Harry declares that should he continue to rely on the Internet for human connection, he will regress, eventually becoming friendless.

4.3 Online armour: the Internet as a form of protection

The heading 'Online armour' refers to the protection, courage and invincibility the Internet gives participants. Each participant described ways in which the Internet offered them forms of protection - as a way of sustaining relationships, a form of

self-expression, a means of social support and validation, and as a form of coping. The Internet was also used as a means of feeling safe; of expressing emotion; as an escape or mechanism to avoid negative situations and emotions; of evasion; to feel strong and successful; to feel happy, and a means of 'punishing' themselves or others. This superordinate theme addresses these different characteristics of the participants' 'online armour.'

4.3.1 "Idealised version of myself"

It appeared that the profiles of the participants in online social communities represented alternate or idealised identities, usually depicting an enhanced version of themselves. This was seen as the attempt to project online the life they wish to lead and the identity to which they aspire. Hence, the Internet gives the participants scope to display certain characteristics - for example, Julia hopes to appear "loveable," Harry wishes to be "brave" and "smart," and John is "funnier."

> *"It's very different in real life for instance with girls you can flirt online with a girl because she's she's, she's far away you can do that easy but when you're in person you become incredibly awkward so that's, that's for instance a problem that I'm in so I do, I do feel like a fairly different person when I'm talking to other people online you're braver because you're not seeing them" (Harry, 435-440)*

In Harry's case, online interaction allows him to disguise his implied social anxiety, as he describes himself in reality as "incredibly awkward" face-to-face. He appears

to feel secure enough in his online interactions to allow himself to be more open and "brave", presumably because the Internet provides a cover for his real sense of self-worth and eliminates the possibility of him being judged negatively. However, he does not have the opportunity to further these relationships in a genuine way or to have his fears allayed (that he feels he will be harshly judged in social situations). As a result, Harry finds himself in a difficult position, almost as though he is "stuck." Face-to-face interaction remains a challenge whilst his online interaction fails to provide him with the "real" human connection he longs for. Julia also presents herself in a different light online:

> *"When I put that stuff on social media it's just kind of like 'I'm ok,' this is me saying to the world 'I'm ok,' probably because my girlfriends know that I'm just not" (Julia, 586-588)*

> *"There is a part of me, there are three or four friends who are still friends with (my ex-husband) on my Facebook and I want, there is a part of me that is like maybe one day he will look haha and he will see haha" (Julia, 574-576)*

Julia seems to use social media to portray herself in a positive light, almost as if she is putting on a 'brave face.' Online, to the external world, Julia is declaring that she is "OK," but within her internal life, there is a very different narrative. The motivation for Julia's enhanced, idealistic self-portrayal, appears to be the hope that her ex-husband will view this and perhaps be impressed by it, though she appears ashamed of this and laughs guiltily at it. The rosy facade that she creates seems to

reassure Julia, whilst her life is she admits, at the same time, "falling apart," a part of her, her online persona, can be managed and controlled to her liking. Later in her interview, she explains that it allows her to maintain her "dignity." Similarly, John tends to disguise his less attractive qualities online:

> *"Most of the time I am a geek, lazy, like stay in bed till 11 like.. don't go to the gym, eat pizza, I'm not sending pictures of the McDonald's that I ate on Instagram am I? I'm taking some pictures of like this lovely tasting menu I had two Wednesdays ago but haven't posted a picture yet.. but actually I'm eating a Big Mac it's gross and I've also ordered a wrap as well I'm being disgusting and I haven't posted that, so there are aspects of my Instagram life, my personality is a honed in version slightly idealised version of myself" (John, 408-415)*

In the passage above, John clearly outlines the gulf between reality and his online profile. He describes how the online realm projects an "idealised version" of himself, for example, eating a lovely meal at a good restaurant. The "disgusting" part of himself can be hidden and compartmentalised. John's use of the word "disgusting" portrays a powerful sense of self-loathing and shame. It is as if John can inhabit a fantasy world in order to escape a part of himself and hide the actions which he deems shameful and repulsive to others. At the end of the extract, John does not surrender fully to this 'shameful' self-image, as he tries to separate the undesirable behaviour from his self-concept, suggesting that his social media profile is "honed in" and "slightly idealised" but not entirely false. Below, John shares how the Internet allows him to hide other parts of himself:

"They don't necessarily know that I'm gay so if I post a picture of me with another guy or even commenting on an attractive guys photo then I know that a lot of judgement has been made and it might not necessarily be like 'oh I can't believe, that's gross' it's more like 'oh I didn't know that oh oh' and the expectation of what I should be posting is there and if I don't adhere to that expectation there is judgement and I'm very conscious of that, I'm very conscious of what I post because of that and what I like, so knowing that there is this heterosexual expectation I check what I post because of that because it doesn't adhere to what is normal, well what is expected so I suppose I don't necessarily feel that free in the online space" (John, 1102-1113)

The anonymity offered through online interaction benefits the participants in several ways. These include a sense of acceptance by other individuals with similar interests, a sense of 'belonging' and greater intimacy with others. John speaks about heterosexual normative identities and how the online forum gives him the opportunity to hide his homosexuality and experience a more conformist life. Hiding this aspect of himself, he alludes to potential feelings of shame and possibly a lack of self-acceptance. Online, he does not allude to his homosexuality and therefore it may be assumed that he is heterosexual. John very deliberately presents himself in line with these societal "expectations". Significantly, John speaks about not feeling "free" in the online space because he has to monitor his actions; yet from a different standpoint, he is able to portray a life that may appear desirable to him, without the negative judgement experienced by someone identifying with a sexual minority.

Perhaps John fantasises about being "normal," whereby the Internet allows him to transcend his reality and live an alternative life, escaping the confines of his physical world. Based on John's reluctance to reveal his sexuality online, it is possible that John has had negative experiences relating to this aspect of his identity and being online offers him the ability to protect himself. The danger, however, is that online profiles seem to encourage participants to disguise their true feelings, so that they spare themselves the experience of rejection or disapproval:

> *"People can be overly affectionate online as well you can throw out stuff like you can say 'I love you' and you wouldn't say that, you wouldn't say it because you were scared of the reaction, you might not get it back.. but you just have this barrier in a way between two people" (Tom, 926-930)*

> *"You can throw out a compliment online that you may not actually say to them in person, you know you can say like 'you're gorgeous' to someone but in person you would stumble over your words" (Tom, 943-946)*

Tom also highlights the protection given by the Internet. Without having to face possible rejection, the distance or "barrier" inherent in these online communications allows people to be more open or daring. Tom is therefore in a position to transcend the bounds of reality, in a situation where he can be courageous and present his "best side," though he later counters this, by declaring that "it's not the true side of yourself." Nonetheless, Tom is eager to distance himself from this introspective remark, by using the second person pronoun, "you", as well as using the general noun, "people." All the participants tended to use this form of linguistic self-

distancing, possibly in an attempt to detach themselves from the private thoughts shared or to avoid ownership. Alternatively, the participants may just be revealing glimpses of an inner monologue. Below, Lisa changes her pronouns from "I" to "you" to "people" and "they" within the space of a few sentences:

> *"I think people use social media as well because they feel like, you feel quite different, you feel like if you post something or say something online you feel like a different person.. maybe that people will like you more and talk, talk about you to other people" (Lisa, 461-464)*

The above highlights the desire in Lisa to be talked about or validated as a person of interest. At the same time, this extract reveals the previously observed reluctance of the participants to admit this desire openly. Social media allows Lisa to present a 'modified' version of herself, a version which Lisa appears to consider superior and more likeable than the true, 'real' version. It remains unquestionable that the aim of all participants is to be desired, appreciated and accepted.

4.3.2 "I'm a complete psychopath"

The personal functionality of the Internet as a form of 'online armour' appears to protect; inspire feelings of control and self-confidence; provides human connection and allows the communication of emotions. At the same time as receiving positive, ego syntonic benefits from their online interactions, the participants also acknowledge that these interactions have negative consequences. This again indicates the participants' strongly ambivalent stance towards the Internet. As shown

previously, the Internet permits participants to present themselves in an idealised or desirable way, and yet, by contrast, the faceless nature of online communication also seemed to arouse and facilitate anti-social behaviour.

Harry explains that online interaction promotes cowardice:

> *"For instance breaking up with somebody via text people do it, it's cowardly as hell but people do it, and why? Because they don't have to face the other person, it's not necessarily something that you have to see" (Harry, 450-453)*

The description "cowardly as hell," captures a strong sense of condemnation. It is unclear whether Harry is speaking from personal experience of ending a relationship via text message, as he uses the anonymous words, "people," and "they." However, there is a strong sense of loathing in evidence, as he guesses at the reasoning for this spineless behaviour, switching pronouns from "they" to "you" at the end of the extract, perhaps suggesting that he did not have to witness any hurt caused. Similarly, Tom reiterates below the facelessness of online interaction can elicit a "horrible" side of himself.

> *"You can be more horrible on social media than you can be in real life because you don't have that immediate reaction, you can be a horrible person and it's just the fact that you're not having that face-to-face.. you can call anyone any kind of name and you're like 'oh it's fine it's on a phone'" (Tom, 895-899)*

The fact that communication is mediated via a phone or the Internet is seen as diluting unkindness or even malice. Tom reasons, "it's fine it's on a phone," implying that the consequences of his behaviour are less severe, without the presence of a real person during name-calling.

John shared how he could be devious online, using the tools and information available to him to his advantage:

> *"This sounds a bit creepy, I would have gone on Facebook looked at one of their interests and then posted a picture which resonates with their interest.. that's a bit sneaky and a bit psychopathic when I say it out loud but loads of people do it" (John, 382-385)*

It seems as if these "horrible" and "sneaky" interactions are rarely considered or analysed. They take place online, which represents an entirely different playground to the one offered by the real world. This is evident with John's sudden realisation of his behaviour, whereby he details his calculating and devious tactics and acknowledges that it is "psychopathic." John's surprise admission appears to make him feel ashamed, as he quickly reassures himself that "loads of people do it."

Similarly, Mark's account emphasised the confusion he felt as he struggled to manage or comprehend his behaviour.

> *"I would find myself just like for hours like 'no no no no' scrolling through judging people and afterwards I would be like 'you're a dick why have you*

done that you don't even know these people' and I'm just like 'not pretty not pretty not pretty' haha and I'm like 'you ain't all that' it's so bad I look at it and think why have you just done that, that's just so wrong but it feels good" (Mark, 606-611)

Mark perceived himself as being cruel and judgemental whilst using online dating apps, which he found alarming. Mark seems to regard himself as a "keyboard warrior," a term he had used earlier in his interview. This description references the power an individual can assume online - the keyboard allows the keyboard warrior to manifest his/her aggression in a safe environment, one step removed from reality and from which there are no 'real-life' repercussions. In the extract above, protected by his phone, it is suggested that Mark is capable of concealing his own insecurities by judging these women harshly. He describes his behaviour as "wrong" and he declares that he feels like "a dick," whilst also having the insight to know that putting these women down makes him feel superior.

Other applications online seemed to elicit varying unpleasant behaviour from the participants. For example, three participants spoke about the social media application, Snapchat, which deletes all forms of interaction (text, video, photographs) after 24 hours. Lisa explained that it was a forum for "gossiping" and paranoia, commenting anxiously that "everyone's keeping secrets." For Mark, the function of Snapchat allows him to send a "risky" text, without having to face the consequences when he wakes the next morning:

"It's silly with Snapchat I might send people a message with text that will delete after 24 hours, maybe it's linked to self-esteem, but I might want to send a risky text to someone but I don't want it to be saved forever if I'm really drunk and I send something to someone when I wake up the next morning it's disappeared" (Mark, 794-798)

There is a sense of invincibility associated with this feature that permits even more unsafe interactions than other apps. Significantly, Mark wonders whether this devious type of behaviour may be linked to his self-esteem. Without a log of evidence to catalogue his actions, Mark can behave in a more precarious manner without repercussion or sanctions, as his online activity is deleted as if it had never existed. Therefore, any potential threat to Mark's self-esteem is removed. Participants equally spoke about another feature of Snapchat - a location service, which allows you, at all times, to see where all of your online friends are located. These online forms of surveillance made participants feel as though they were being inescapably "monitored." Respondents also suggested that this all-pervading app device generated unwanted behaviours in themselves:

"It's horrible it's just a map and you know where everyone is in the world, I go on it loads and it's so bad and I feel like a stalker and you know that people are stalking you … you can literally just see other people where they are what they are doing and for how long they have been there and who they are with and it's really bad if you're in a relationship because obviously I can tell if my boyfriend is lying to me where he is at and who is he with and like it's you're scary, you don't have a personal life anymore but people love that

because they don't feel lonely at the same time, and I feel like what more can Snapchat do now" (Lisa, 532-540)

Amongst other aspects of herself that this app feature induces is that of "a stalker", which Lisa admits to with shame. Lisa shares how she is constantly drawn to what she calls a "map", anxiously needing to check the whereabouts of her boyfriend and whether he is telling her the truth. There is clear conflict as Lisa is portrayed as grappling with the advantages and disadvantages of having unwarranted access to others. On the one hand, people are stripped of their privacy and independence, but on the other, Snapchat is creating a social world for them, where their sense of aloneness is eased and even temporarily eliminated. At the end of the extract, Lisa despairingly asks how much further Snapchat can push the boundaries. She is referring to the social pressure she experiences to be present online as much as possible, in order to keep up-to-date with social media and thus avoid being left out or "left behind."

Julia was the only participant to share her personal experience of being on the receiving-end of a series of brazen and vicious online communications. This had a profound effect on Julia's psychological well-being:

"You can't come back from ghosting someone like I am a human being, there were 10 years of our lives and you erased them you erased them from Facebook you erased them from public life you erased them from our personal lives you erased me" (Julia, 296-300)

Julia shared her experience of falling victim to disrespectful online behaviour from so-called friends of hers. She tearfully and emotionally explained that she was "tormented" when, following her divorce, her friendship group fell apart and she was treated in a blatantly horrible way via the Internet. Julia uses the term 'ghosting,' the practice of ending a personal relationship with someone by suddenly and inexplicably withdrawing from all communication. Julia considered herself to have been "erased" by her friends of 10 years standing, who deliberately chose to avoid the emotional discomfort of confronting relationship difficulties face-to-face, in 'real' life. Quite evidently distraught, Julia intimates that she was inhumanely, helplessly, and involuntarily "erased."

Having been betrayed extensively online by her ex-husband, long-term friends and her church, Julia angrily and despairingly shares her frustration with social media. A part of this frustration is with herself, as she recognises her own compulsion to participate in, and constantly check, social media, despite the pain and suffering it has caused her:

> *"What the hell is the point of social media? It became, it started as a platform of sharing authenticity and it's turned into this complete shit-storm of narcissism and hatred" (Julia, 602-604)*

"This complete shit-storm of narcissism and hatred" - Julia's use of language here explosively and emotionally captures her frustration, helplessness and loathing towards social media and possibly also towards herself for engaging in it. She angrily asks a rhetorical question, demanding some for of rationale of her

engagement with something that causes her so much harm – "what the hell is the point?"

4.3.3 Online army

Participants shared how their online communities offered them support and strength. They were hugely reassured that someone can always be contacted via the Internet, whether it be a close friend or a stranger in an online forum. This virtual source of human support came in the form of an 'online army' which could protect, rally round and support participants whenever necessary. The 'online army' offered participants the opportunity to access mutual support and to discuss their experiences frankly and openly, in a safe and physically anonymous environment. The online, anonymous environment appeared to allow participants to express one form of 'real' self, a form which might be deemed unacceptable in the 'real', offline world. In essence, the Internet offered them a valuable space in which to express personal views and relate experiences, which might well be judged negatively in offline surroundings.

Below, Julia speaks about the support she received online whilst she was undergoing fertility treatment:

> *"The support group online was the only thing that kept me alive because when I was in the fertility treatment (crying) those women were cray, they were all in their forties and they are all trying to have babies, and I'm in my 20s just trying to cope with the fact that I never will and I couldn't speak to them face-to-face because I would be like this all of the time (points to her*

face) and they were like that all of the time so the online community is the thing that saves me because they would, those 4 hours and those chat rooms were the thing that really got me through, I completely forgot about them haha because when you're away from it you're like I'm never going back to that time" (Julia, 367-377)

Julia had explained earlier that her friends did not understand the difficulties of her fertility treatment and yet a 'specialist' online support group was able to fulfil her emotional needs, by providing her with an outlet for her feelings and saving her from isolation. These interactions seemed to act as a form of therapy. Julia believed that these strangers, who formed the online support group, 'saved her life,' as they had listened to her and understood her struggle. While Julia talks about this period in her life, when she was facing fertility problems and treatment, she is extremely emotional, at times almost unable to speak. She acknowledges the anonymity and physical protection provided by the Internet as another benefit of her online support group, in that it allowed her and other women the means to communicate freely and articulate their experiences without the distraction of physical displays of emotion. A further advantage of online social communications was a lack of expectation that people would sustain the relationships made online. Participants would often strike up an online conversation with someone, at any time without the need to contact that person again. The flexibility of being able to go online at their discretion at any time of the day or night, seemed to be a huge source of comfort for participants. This is highlighted at the end of the extract, as Julia admits she "completely forgot" about the support group, the same support group that she praises for keeping her alive. Although Julia was able to access the forum in 'real time,' (i.e. at the very moment

she wished to express her emotions or seek advice), she abandoned this very forum once it had served its purpose. Indeed, Julia seemed able to leave this period of her life behind her.

Julia shares another similar experience:

> *"Within days my friends rallied around me on Facebook and were like 'we see you, we hear you, we know you messed up, we don't like it, no Bueno, not cool, but let's work it out' and within days we are all meeting up and we are all rallying" (Julia, 854-857)*

Julia's use of the term "rallying" evokes an online army made up of friends who can assemble readily online, as if they were literally gathering round Julia to support her. Access to the Internet seemed to offer limitless support to the participants, whether it was the support of strangers or friends, from nearby or faraway:

> *"I think it's an escape and also I just think it's inescapable and you can also build a support network so if you're feeling low you could talk to anyone and they are there at any click of a button" (Tom, 344-346)*

Prefacing his views with typical ambivalence, Tom describes online communities as both helpful, "an escape," and unhelpful, "inescapable." Tom believes that the Internet provides endless support which can be accessed immediately. He suggests that there is comfort and peace of mind in knowing that "endless support" is a "click of a button" away. Lisa echoes Tom's sentiments:

"Just knowing someone is there to talk to" (Lisa, 144)

Whether or not you choose to use the resources available from the Internet, Lisa seems to find solace in the simple knowledge that people are there on the Internet, should she need to engage with them. John also refers to a substantial support network:

> *"You are literally communicating with anyone who wants to hear what you have to say there is a pool of millions of people who can hear what you say and who treat it as if you are having a private conversation with a friend" (John, 250-253)*

John describes the process of reaching out to others almost as though he is spreading his bets. He believes that by reaching out to a "pool of millions of people," you are hoping that somebody will notice you and respond. Again, this sort of plea made online, eradicates the likelihood of rejection, as John explains that you are not communicating with anyone directly, but merely hoping that someone will "want to" reply. It is striking, based on participants' narratives, that online support is available in many different forms and allows continuous access. The online nature of this support was seen to offer participants various advantages - anonymity, a safe space, an emotional barrier, like-minded people who could become 'friends', and protection from feared outcomes such as rejection, disapproval or feeling misunderstood.

5. Discussion

5.1 Review of the current findings in relation to the existing literature

The present study explored the subjective experience of interpersonal communication amongst individuals who identify with PIU. The current findings relate to the 'social consequences' associated with PIU, as reported in the literature (Katz & Rice, 2002; Young, 1996). The findings revealed that a primary function of participants' Internet use was interpersonal connection, which could offer them acceptance, validation and relief from loneliness. There were also other reasons for their online engagement, including the need for support, help in sustaining relationships and the means to present the best possible version of themselves. Whilst participants expressed a preference for online, as opposed to offline, communication, they were also caught in a dilemma, as they had difficulty in weighing up the positive and negative impact the Internet had on their relationships, identity and psychological wellbeing. Consequently, conflict and ambivalence emerged as a central overarching theme.

The participants' struggle to rationalise their experiences, thoughts and feelings regarding their PIU, is parallel to the on-going controversy with regard to PIU conceptualisation, which still lacks consensus on definition, norms or clinical criteria (Ginige, 2017). The Internet has become an inseparable part of today's modern society and daily life. It appeared extremely difficult for the participants to assess the pros and cons of their behaviour and to find a "healthy balance" of online activity. Literature supports these findings, with some researchers stating that ambivalence is at the heart of addictive disorders and mental health, holding a central role in the

development and maintenance of various clinical disorders (Miller & Rollnick, 1991). Ambivalence can be defined as "*the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone*" ("ambivalence," n.d.). It is said that ambivalence emerges when positive consequences experienced with an object of addiction, are challenged by adverse consequences, resulting in confusion and conflict (Sussman & Sussman, 2011). In research exploring the experience of ambivalence in anorexia nervosa, similar experiences were reported. The authors of this research believed that anorexia is different from other mental health disorders, as it is regarded positively by those who have anorexia. As a result, treatment can be extremely challenging, since patients are often reluctant to give up the aspects of the disorder which they regard as beneficial. The tendency to have "*conflicting motivations*" or "*feeling two ways about something*," then immobilises the patients' decision-making process during treatment. In parallel to the participants in the present study, ambivalent individuals are said to split positive and negative consequences of their addiction, resulting in two choices: the option to flee into health or alternatively, into a more exclusive bond with the object of their desires (Williams & Reid, 2010). PIU poses a unique challenge, as the all-pervasive role of the Internet in daily life makes it extremely difficult for people to distinguish objectively between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' Internet use.

5.1.1 Meeting interpersonal needs

The first superordinate theme identified was based on participants' interpersonal needs. Suler (1999) argues that PIU is determined by users' multiple needs and how the Internet meets those needs. Suler maintains that understanding such needs can

illuminate how and why some people become pathologically involved with the Internet. In accordance with this view, the participants expressed motivations for their interpersonal needs to be met, represented here under the subthemes 'seeking self-acceptance and validation,' and 'loneliness and fear of isolation.' Participants' interpersonal needs correspond with those reported in the literature, for example, as part of his theory which sought to explain human interaction, social psychologist William Schutz' (1958), outlined three interpersonal needs: control (maintaining satisfactory relationships with people in respect to power and influence), inclusion (the need for a sense of belonging and human connection) and affection (the need for appreciation and recognition). These findings reinforce the view that socialisation is one of the main magnets behind the addictive power of the Internet (Grohol, 2005). Elaborating on this theory, the present findings suggest that interpersonal needs (self-acceptance, validation and human interaction) represent the underlying reasons for this socialisation.

Another motivation for participants' online communication appeared to be linked to isolation and loneliness. Interpersonal needs have long been associated with loneliness, and these findings are also consistent with PIU literature (Young, 2008). For example, a study exploring the relationship between loneliness and PIU, found that individuals who are lonely use the Internet to compensate for their poor social skills. The findings suggest that individuals who are not psychosocially healthy (i.e. lonely) find it hard not only to maintain social interaction, but also regulate their Internet use. Moreover, these individuals tend to face additional problems in their lives besides their loneliness. The authors explain that the exacerbation of their problems may drive these individuals to rely further on online activity as a means to

lessen the impact of the problems or even escape them, and this in turn results in greater loneliness and isolation (Kim, LaRose & Peng, 2009). The authors of this study and others, suggest potential for a worrisome or malicious cycle of unregulated Internet use if not moderated, a cycle which emerged in the present study, illustrated in the third sub-theme, 'the vicious cycle' (Morahan-Martin, 1999; Yao & Zhong, 2014).

The participants seemed to try to meet interpersonal needs in both a resourceful and a defensive way. The defensiveness displayed may be understood via psychodynamic processes. A recent study reported PIU as positively associated with several defense mechanisms, such as greater use of passive aggression, displacement, denial and autistic fantasy (Waqas et al., 2016). Various research has found that problematic Internet users find refuge from their problems in the virtual environment, finding it easier to express themselves online, giving rise to a virtual self. This form of self is different from the self presented in the physical world, creating internal and interpersonal conflict (Waqas et al., 2016). The immersive potential of the Internet may explain these defences. In the case of autistic fantasy, players within fantasy role playing games have identified themselves with the in-game characters for decades already, even experiencing the emotions of their characters within themselves (Laconi, Vigouroux, Lafuente & Chabrol, 2017). Additionally, over the last ten years, there has been a rise in the prevalence of 'catfishing,' a deceptive activity which involves adopting a fictional online persona (Knafo & LoBosco, 2017). A study by Wood (2011) exploring the role of the Internet in sexually compulsive behaviour suggested that the Internet provides a vehicle for the expression and disowning of sadistic impulses; fuels manic defences

and invites narcissistic and part-object relating. The combined effect of these processes was said to have the potential to undermine superego functioning leading to a breakdown of ego controls in vulnerable individuals.

On the other hand, one argument against the pathologizing of Internet use is that online activity merely offers a coping strategy, and that an attempt to meet individual needs and alleviate negative feelings should not be deemed maladaptive or a clinical disorder (Kardefelt□Winther et al., 2017). This belief is aligned with findings outlined by Kurniasih (2017), whereby the 'Internet addicted' respondents stated that their Internet use formed a part of their daily needs. Results of a similar study involving 'gaming addicts' found that participants' online gaming was used to alleviate negative feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009).

Online communication provided participants with an easily accessible form of human contact, whilst paradoxically, participants implied that Internet use also made them lonely. Turkle (2015) explains that this form of interaction can be fulfilling, but it can also have adverse effects, whereby connectedness with others is replaced with connectedness to simulations of them. Furthermore, Turkle argues that in a world of electronic companions and social media, we must consider exactly what we are seeking and also sacrificing. A dilemma arose as participants struggled to negotiate these tensions: "you are longing for human interaction but at the same time you don't want it because you have just grown so comfortable at home alone…. you are always just in conflict with yourself." Thus, one explanation may be that the faceless nature of online communication is insufficient, supporting the view that physical cues

(touch, emotional expression, non-verbal communication etc.) are significant aspects of a relationship (Docan-Morgan, Manusov & Harvey, 2013).

The use of online communication may help individuals to satisfy their social needs and the desire to belong, whilst also giving them the opportunity to hide certain personal characteristics ("awkward"), attributes ("lazy, disgusting") or behaviours ("sneaky and a bit psychopathic"), that result in feelings of shame and self-disgust. There is evidence in the literature which shows that the Internet is often used to regulate negative feelings. It is suggested that people who experience shame, might use online communication in order to hide their perceived negative attributes, whilst alleviating the negative emotions and cognitions linked to their shame. This continued gratification-seeking may gradually turn into compulsive usage patterns which, in hand, can intensify and reinforce Internet use, resulting in a vicious cycle (Casale & Fioravanti, 2017).

Within any unhealthy or excessive preoccupation there are positive features to be found. In his paper entitled 'To get what you need,' Suler (1999) attempts to make the distinction between healthy and pathological Internet use, stating that "*with truly pathological addictions the scale has tipped*" (p.393). In other words, the bad outweighs the good, resulting in serious disturbances in one's ability to function, and the increase of subjective feelings of distress. The overarching theme of ambivalence returns, as participants struggle to find a balance between the benefits (meeting their interpersonal needs) and the costs of their Internet use. PIU treatment should be viewed differently from treatment for other addictive disorders, where abstinence is

considered the primary solution. As the Internet is so interwoven with our daily lives, the answer cannot simply be to live without it. Instead, we must consider the underlying impulses or needs which drive the problematic behaviour. The findings outlined in this superordinate theme provide insight into these needs.

5.1.2 The interplay between two worlds

The second superordinate theme identified was based on the interplay between participants' online and offline worlds. Researchers argue that online tools create a dilemma for Internet users. To date, literature reports mixed findings regarding the role that online communication and social media play in fostering social connectedness, suggesting that there are both positive and negative psychological outcomes (Allen, Ryan, Gray, McInerney & Waters, 2014). The positive outcomes reflect the ease with which individuals may form and strengthen online friendships, and be part of online groups and communities. However, the negative outcomes reveal the creation of ostracism, alienation and the fostering of mental health problems such as social anxiety and depression (Wu, Outley, Matarrita-Cascante & Murphreu, 2016). The fact that participants in the present study reported mixed experiences of online use reinforces the belief that online communication has both positive and negative effects.

One of the adverse effects associated with PIU is the deterioration of 'real time' friendships, as online friendships grow stronger (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009). The subtheme 'Alone together,' considers participants' experiences of being constantly connected with others online, and yet feeling disconnected when face-to-face. They stated that perpetual online interaction resulted in "oversaturation," whereby time

spent with friends face-to-face became "awkward" as participants were left with nothing to talk about, having shared all their news online as and when it happened. Significantly, one particular study reported findings that real-life social skills are a necessary foundation for the use of technology in a beneficial way (Wu et al., 2016). Therefore as long as individuals preserve their face-to-face social skills, they may be shielded from the potentially negative impact of their online interactions. Further research is needed to consolidate these findings.

The participants spoke about seeking "the right balance" between face-to-face and online social interaction. Individuals with problems in establishing close relations in a real social-life context, may rely on virtual environments. Such problems may be understood in terms of developmental deficits. Adult attachment theory has been explored in relation to PIU, and to date the literature suggests that insecure attachment styles are indeed associated with PIU. In a study by Moghadam, Rezaei, Ghaderi and Rostamian (2016), medical students with a secure attachment style had lower PIU scores compared to students with other attachment styles. A secure attachment style indicates that individuals have positive self-perception; see themselves as worthy of being liked; have a greater expectation of being trusted by others and are supportive and well-intentioned. These characteristics eliminate any problems in establishing closeness to others and they use the Internet appropriately, when necessary. By contrast, individuals with insecure attachment styles and characteristics such as negative self-presentation; low self-confidence; fear of abandonment or rejection; avoidance of proximity to others and the need to be accepted and validated, have higher PIU scores. The authors of the study suggest that such individuals may regard online communication as an opportunity to meet their needs and tend to spend long periods of their daily lives online. These findings

support the view that social media outlets and online social interaction can serve attachment functions and may be particularly attractive to individuals with interpersonal difficulties (Oldmeadow, Quinn & Kowert, 2013).

The participants also spoke about the functionality of their online interaction as a "stepping stone," enabling the initiation, maintenance and enhancement of relationships. These findings reinforce existing views - for example, a recent study found a link between social connectedness and introversion, suggesting that the Internet is a helpful tool for people who struggle to connect face-to-face (Mcintyre, Wiener & Saliba, 2015). Literature relevant to various age groups, from adolescents to the elderly, has also suggested that online communication decreases self-consciousness, social anxiety and enhances friendship formation (Gatto & Tak, 2008; Shaw & Gant, 2002). Whilst the participants shared their positive experiences of this "stepping stone" function, they also referenced the dangers of misuse or dependency, which had a negative impact on their relationships. Again, these fears shared by participants are supported by widespread alternative views of the negative ramifications associated with online communication (Turkle, 2017).

In early writings about the Internet's role in society, assertions were often made that were either extremely optimistic or pessimistic (Boase & Wellman, 2006). To conclude, the findings from the present study indicate that the Internet neither singularly destroys nor radically enhances interpersonal relationships. Rather, it is clear that participants' experiences are subjective and complex, consisting of both advantages and disadvantages.

5.1.3 Online armour

The third and final superordinate theme, 'online armour,' described how the Internet offered participants forms of protection. The anonymity and physical barriers intrinsic to online communication appeared to shield participants from negative judgement, and give them the opportunity for self-expression and social support.

The participants recounted that their online communication and social media profiles represented alternate or idealised identities, usually depicting an enhanced or different type of personality to their own. They apparently wished to discard their inadequacies in order to gain acceptance, appreciation and approval, which, according to literature may be linked to low self-esteem, fear of rejection and feelings of inadequacy (Bahrainian & Khazaee, 2014).

Fear of negative evaluation has been reported as the strongest indicator of social media addiction (Savci &Aysan, 2017). Research has identified that young adults with low-level self-presentation skills and fear of negative evaluation, prefer online social interactions to face-to-face social interactions, resulting in a significant risk factor for social media addiction (Casale, Fioravanti, Flett & Hewitt, 2014). Similarly, research has found that lonely, depressed and socially anxious individuals are oriented towards online environments where disclosing one's real identity is not necessary (Huan, Ang, Chong & Chye, 2014). Online environments are considered safer and less threatening alternatives to face-to-face interaction, providing individuals with the opportunity to present themselves as they wish, without disclosing their true identity. In line with findings reported in the literature, the participants in the present study shared their experiences of being "funny," "brave,"

"smart" and confident online whilst hiding the "disgusting," "awkward" and "cowardly" aspects of themselves. Thus, it is no wonder that they prefer to communicate online and spend more time in virtual environments (Savci & Aysan, 2017). It is suggested that PIU treatment should focus on the individual's perceived inadequacies, in order to achieve a positive interpersonal experience both online and face-to-face.

The protective function of the Internet (as described by participants and illustrated under this theme) may also be considered as a defensive function. This viewpoint draws on psychodynamic processes, which is of particular significance to counselling psychologists and other health-care professionals, who may be working with PIU presentations. One defence mechanism appeared to be self-presentation, which involves the avoidance of the physical directness of face-to-face communication. In almost all social interactions, people are motivated to engage in strategic self-presentation to avoid making undesired impressions on others. Social anxiety arises from the desire to create a positive impression of one's self on others, together with a lack of self-presentational confidence. Caplan (2006) states that in order to increase their perceived self-presentational efficacy, socially anxious individuals are highly motivated to seek low-risk communicative encounters. Thus, online social interaction may be extremely appealing to those with interpersonal difficulties, because their self-presentational efficacy online is perceived as greater than the one in face-to-face interaction. Such findings underline the argument that lonely individuals are drawn to the interpersonal advantages offered by online social interaction.

While the faceless nature of the Internet allowed participants to present themselves in an "idealised" way, it also seemed to arouse and facilitate anti-social behaviour. Anonymity is often regarded as a negative feature of online communication because it allows individuals to behave antisocially without being at risk of facing repercussions (Iane, 2011). Dangers associated with online communication include the rise of cyberbullying (Campbell, 2005), impulsive and aggressive behaviour (Mottram & Fleming, 2009), and a lack of empathy for others (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015). The participants shared how the facelessness and anonymity of online communication elicited undesirable or shameful behaviour, supporting findings that anonymity affects the frequency of antisocial behaviour, even with individuals who have a reasonable sense of morality (Nogami & Yoshida, 2013).

Although it is true that anonymity may encourage malicious intent, Lane (2011) argues that its value in communication should not be overlooked, as online anonymity strips communicators of prejudices such as gender, race and nationality, allowing opportunities for new communication which would otherwise be impossible due to the shackles normally imposed by face-to-face communication. Thus, anonymity can allow individuals to have a voice without having a name, which links to the third subtheme, 'online army.'

The theory that people are so vitally important to each other that social needs are ingrained in our very biology, is one that has been consolidated over decades (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). The participants referenced this deep need for human connection, describing how they were constantly interacting with others and how the Internet provided them with an endless source of social support. This support

appeared in the form of an ‘Online army’ which could rally round, reassure and protect participants, whenever necessary, within a safe and physically anonymous environment.

Online support groups exist for a wide range of specific topics, mental health problems and stigmatised conditions, allowing individuals to express views about their experiences that would be judged negatively in offline surroundings. Online forums are created in an unusual way, with the perceived anonymity of the Internet facilitating the sharing of normally withheld, or even pre-conscious facets of illness. Forums also allow participants to raise health concerns in ‘real time,’ as they experience them, in the context of their own lives, and in a private and convenient way. The ability to ask questions and share advice with an interested audience is considered a powerful tool by those who can make their voices heard. Indeed these forums act as a type of therapy (Smith, Bartlett, Buck, & Honeyman, 2017). In a specific example, Julia recounted that her fertility support group provided a platform for herself and other women to share their everyday experiences, giving users a valuable opportunity to commit their lived experience, ask questions and seek advice from those with shared experience. Julia credited this group with ‘saving her life,’ reducing her anxiety and helping her to feel less alone. Similarly, all participants spoke about the comfort they drew from knowing that “someone is always there” and always contactable, whether a close friend or a stranger. These findings draw us back to the issue of interpersonal needs, outlined in the first superordinate theme. The power of online support is unmistakable - it is a tool that offers great potential, and further research in this area can aid healthcare professionals to use it as an effective resource by facilitating groups and signposting patients to relevant online support networks.

5.2 Limitations and future research directions

The present study explored the experiences of interpersonal communication of six adults, who identified with PIU. Following IPA's idiographic feature, this study does not attempt to simplify or take a reductionist approach with each person's experience of PIU, but rather it presents a significant contribution to the limited qualitative literature of PIU. Furthermore, this study emphasises unique findings, resulting from the researcher's interpretations and attempts to understand how self-identified problematic Internet users made sense of their relationships and communication, whilst respecting IPA's hermeneutic feature (Smith et al., 2009).

Though efforts were made to avoid methodological shortcomings, certain limitations need to be recognised when considering the results. One possible limitation lies in the participants' preference for online communication. It is suggested that face-to-face interviews may have prompted a sense of discomfort, a fear of disclosure and a reluctance to talk about their experiences, for fear of being judged. The participants also shared contradictory statements and used distancing language, perhaps reflecting their struggle to share their true thoughts and feelings. It is possible that had the participants been interviewed via the Internet instead, (aided by the 'protection' they described) they may have found it easier to communicate more freely and openly. It would be interesting to repeat this study, conducting interviews via the Internet, in order to examine possible differences.

The credibility of findings is the core of high-level qualitative research. Concerning IPA studies, where interpretation plays a central role, the openness regarding the active role played by the analyst represents an inherently reflexive and transparent

attitude (Shaw, 2010). Despite this, member checking (also known as participant validation) is one technique that can be used to verify the credibility and trustworthiness of findings. Member checking offers participants the opportunity to examine the analyst's results and interpretations for accuracy and resonance, bearing in mind their own experiences. Due to questions about methodological usefulness and ethical problems (e.g. the potential for damaging participants and challenging the researcher-participant experience), the current study did not include this process, which highlights another possible limitation (Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller & Neumann, 2011). It is suggested that future qualitative studies consider the inclusion of this technique not only to enhance credibility, but importantly, to promote the voice of the participants (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell & Walter, 2016).

Another limitation is that the study recruited adults from a predominantly Caucasian background, with one Asian participant. Additionally, John, who was the only homosexual participant, discussed experiences particular to his sexual identity. Thus, it would be advisable to employ a similar qualitative design where factors such as age, gender, sexuality, cultural and ethnic backgrounds could be explored. The forms of Internet use by the participants were not specified in this study. Whilst all participants shared incidents of time spent on social media sites and instant messaging apps, they also spoke about watching pornography and TV series online. Currently, the concept of PIU represents Internet use as a whole, yet some researchers have suggested making the distinction between generalised Internet addiction (GIA) and specific forms (Brand, Laeir & Young, 2014). Repeating this study with specific forms of Internet use could be beneficial in consolidating the findings, further contributing to this under-researched area and therefore making it

possible to move from the particular to the universal (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Furthermore, there is the likelihood that selection bias might account for results. The recruitment strategy involved participants volunteering in response to a flyer (see Appendix B) and so it is possible that the experiences shared by participants who put themselves forward for the study may have differed from those people who did not respond to the recruitment call. Additionally, the criteria for PIU used in this study did not include clinical or empirical cut-off scores established for distinguishing PIU, but rather relied on participants' own self-reflections and self-reports, which are subjective in nature.

Despite these limitations, participants' self-reflections and qualitative responses regarding their own perceived PIU add depth to findings, and help to contextualise previous research results related to PIU, including its history, triggers, patterns and consequences. It is hoped that the current findings will stimulate further debate and investigation of this emerging area.

As regards future research, the use of qualitative research methods is essential. At present, one of the main barriers in the field of PIU is the inconsistency and disagreement surrounding conceptualisation and measurement. Therefore, it is argued that these types of qualitative enquiry would lead to the availability of in-depth, relevant and insightful findings, which are essential to the understanding of any phenomena. Further studies are recommended to promote the voice of problematic Internet users themselves. Suggestions for such studies are as follows:

- An exploration of the experience of specific subtypes of PIU (e.g. social media, compulsive buying, or sexual activity) in order to compare and contrast specific Internet behaviours and their related difficulties.

- The overarching theme of conflict and ambivalence emerged from the findings of this study. This theme has been identified and explored in relation to various mental health problems, yet it has not, to date, been addressed within PIU literature. It would be helpful to explore conflict and ambivalence further, in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of this subject in relation to PIU.
- Researchers are advised to address the limitations outlined above and to repeat the present study with various participant samples across different ages, genders and cultures. These types of investigation will provide a more comprehensive understanding of PIU and discern the individual differences and characteristics amongst different generations and social groups.
- Dyadic explorations in this area would also enhance our understanding of interpersonal processes and relationships between people within the context of PIU. Although researchers frequently make use of individual interviews and focus groups as sources of qualitative data, there has been far less attention paid to dyadic interviews, which involve a conversation between two research participants. It is proposed that a dyadic study might help to pinpoint themes connected to relationships, gaining perspectives from both sides of a relationship.
- Research and clinical initiatives also need to focus on providing the best possible care for individuals who experience significant impairment and distress as a consequence of their Internet use. Studies exploring the efficacy of different types of psychological interventions (e.g. psychodynamic, systemic and compassion-focused approaches) are encouraged, in order to establish the best forms of treatment for individuals who seek help.

5.3 The role of Counselling Psychology and clinical recommendations

Recently, mental health traditions have become more open to integration, which is in line with CoP's epistemological position of pluralism and essence of engaging with subjectivity. Within CoP, there is criticism with the so-called 'cookie-cutter' medical model that possibly hinders individually tailored treatment and has a tendency to pathologize individuals. Instead, formulating from a broad-based, integrated and multi-model perspective, which pinpoints personal meaning within its wider systemic, organisational and societal contexts is preferred (Douglas et al., 2016).

The pluralistic approach of CoP operates as a meta-theory, holding key principles such as inclusivity, transparency, egalitarianism and a celebration of diversity and difference (Cooper & McLeod, 2007). This research hopes to illustrate the importance of ideography, illustrating that a number of factors (biological, social, psychological, systemic etc.) are seen to interact producing a unique experience for the client (Johnstone & Dallos, 2013). The findings demonstrate the need for self-identified problematic Internet users' voices to be heard, in the hope that theory, conceptualisation and evidence-based treatment will derive from the true experts (our clients), rather than from ourselves, the professionals. The findings of this study have provided in-depth insights into the lived experience of interpersonal communication within the context of PIU and have resulted in the following recommendations:

Increase awareness: PIU is a phenomenon that has been recognised worldwide and alarming prevalence rates have been reported (Weinstein & Lejoyoux, 2010). The present findings have shown that participants experience ambivalence related to their

Internet behaviours and frequently seemed ashamed of different aspects of their PIU and online communication. It is suggested that these facets of their experience may make it hard for them to seek help. Although the concept of PIU and presented diagnostic criteria has not been formally adopted by the mental health community, the education of mental health professionals will enable them to recognise and treat clients with PIU related difficulties more easily (Li et al., 2015). Additionally, a greater appreciation of the power and pull of the Internet will guide the therapeutic approach and in line with the findings of the present study, PIU should be considered as a critical influence on interpersonal needs, relationships and identity. Information on PIU should also be included in education and broader training programmes related to mental health and well-being. This approach may help to normalise the experiences of PIU, while simultaneously increasing the likelihood of individuals to seek professional help.

Use online support networks as valuable resources: Participants greatly valued the comfort and support accessible to them online, with one participant crediting an online support group for "saving" her. It is suggested that such online groups and forums could be used as a powerful resource in any area of mental health. Not only do these forums provide therapeutic benefits to users, they also offer valuable data to mental health professionals, and where possible, this data should be available to gain further insight into the subjective experiences of users and their needs. In the current climate, where the NHS is oversubscribed, online support groups could be used as additional resources to assist and enhance treatment. For clinicians, there is also huge potential for this proposed use of data, though there are also pitfalls to consider. Understanding and gaining insights into the characteristics of successful online

support networks is needed to assist the design, development and sustainability of forums (Smith et al., 2017).

Implications for clinical practice:

In a world where technology is engrained in daily life, abstinence-based treatment cannot be seen as a viable approach. Alternatively, based on the current findings, the following questions might be posed: 'How can I find the balance between enhancing and problematic Internet use?' and 'How can I meet my interpersonal needs in a positive way?'

From a therapeutic point of view, the complexity of working with a client requires an integrative approach that can appropriately respond to the needs of each client, taking a critical stance against the 'one size fits all' approach. One of Counselling Psychology's commitments is to pay attention to context (Douglas et al., 2016). The present findings relate to the social implications of PIU, in particular the importance of human connection, social support and acceptance. Considering these findings, one proposal is that treatment emphasises a systemic approach relating to the interpersonal needs of the individual. Using this systemic approach, clients are not to be seen in isolation, but in their familial and social circles, and treatment may involve family members and support networks in order to help clients cope with their psychological difficulties (Herwig-Lempp, 1996).

The overarching theme of ambivalence emerged as a significant aspect of the participants' experience. By recognising this ambivalence, practitioners may improve the quality of treatment with a therapeutic context that takes account of a client's mixed motivations. The proximal goal is to exercise the conflict and resulting

ambivalence so that both sides become tolerable to the client. As a result, rather than making assumptions about what is best for the client, the therapist is more readily admitted into a client's world. Instead of ignoring the psychodynamics of ambivalence and resistance, by steering clients towards the seemingly healthy alternatives, the challenge for therapists is not to take a position with regard to the outcome. Thus, exploring critical aspects of the conflict, therapists might allow clients to meet life's shifting demands (Shaffer & Simoneau, 2001).

From a CBT perspective, Problematic Internet Users could potentially benefit from cognitive restructuring techniques aimed at increasing their perception of control over their circumstances. Such techniques could improve their mental wellbeing by helping them to decrease their loneliness and social anxiety. Enhancing Problematic Internet Users' perception of control might also increase their ability to adopt problem-focused coping strategies, aimed at overcoming their challenges in a practical way. Thought balancing techniques could be used to reframe their perceived inadequacies, which in turn could protect their self-esteem and self-efficacy (Beck, 2011).

Additionally, the participants' PIU-related distress appeared to affect the self, in the form of shame and self-criticism, and to affect relationships with others, in the form of distance. "*Shame is a painful self-conscious effect associated with the perception of having a personal attribute, characteristic or behaviour that others find unattractive or undesirable and that may result in rejection or being put down*" (Boersma, Håkanson, Salomonsson & Johansson, 2015, p.89). Indeed, compassion and empathy towards the self could be seen as the antidote to self-criticism and shame. Several treatment approaches have been developed recently, in order to target compassion in particular, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT),

Mindfulness, and Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT). Specifically, CFT focuses on developing an accepting and warm attitude towards the self and others in order to counteract shame, self-criticism and isolation (Gilbert 2014). Integrating influences from cognitive behavioural theories, neuroscience, Buddhism, evolution theory, social psychology and attachment theory, CFT is largely built on the idea that emotional suffering is exacerbated and perpetuated by constant self-attacking and shame which prevents people from being able to effectively sooth and support themselves as well as seek and receive support from others (Boersma et al., 2015; Gilbert, 2014). It is possible that compassion-based treatments may assist self-identified problematic Internet users with difficulties related to shame and self-criticism, as identified in the participant accounts. Furthermore, problems relating to concepts of the self, i.e. social anxiety, self-acceptance, loneliness, conflict and low self-esteem, may also be addressed.

From a psychodynamic perspective, various interventions could be used to target interpersonal conflict and possible ego deficits relating to the emergent themes of this study. To date, determining the attachment style and possible mentalisation dysfunctions of individuals with behavioural addictions, has proved useful as a way of finding vulnerability factors which can be addressed in therapy. Addressing patients' difficulties in understanding their own and others' mental processes could be a good starting point for targeting PIU-related problems. As social beings, mentalising is intrinsic to our daily existence and forms the basic structure of our relational network (Vasilu & Vasile, 2017). Mentalisation-based treatment includes techniques which may improve problematic Internet users' capacity to mentalise, in order to understand and alleviate problematic behaviours.

Originally put forward by Sigmund Freud, the instinct theory of aggression posits that aggression is an innate biological drive. Human society regards this trait as an element that needs to be controlled and channelled for the good of society, so that we don't descend into animalistic chaos (Jaffe, 1982). It is possible that the Internet may serve as an outlet for this drive, echoing Knafo and Lo Bosco's (2017) view that one's Internet history is an avenue to the unconscious. As such, individuals who mask such aggression with a respectable facade in the physical world, may allow their 'darker side' to manifest online, in a protected and anonymous environment. In Jungian psychology, this unconscious aspect of the personality is referred to as 'the shadow' or the unknown dark side of the personality. According to Jung, 'the shadow', in being instinctive and irrational, is prone to psychological projection, which may explain 'keyboard warriors,' 'catfishing,' cyber-bullying and other antisocial online behaviours described by participants under the subtheme 'I'm a complete psychopath.' These hidden aspects of the self are significant and may be addressed in psychotherapy.

Lastly, it is crucial that professionals gain a greater understanding of their clients' experiences, by ensuring that they have a basic knowledge of common technologies and associated terms (e.g. "ghosting," "trolling" and "keyboard warriors"), as well as familiarity with popular apps (e.g. Snapchat and Instagram).

Continue to investigate PIU: Further investigation is sorely needed to understand PIU in the general population and within specific contexts. At present, quantitative research dominates this field. Further qualitative exploration is needed to strengthen existing findings, providing first-person accounts of the different characteristics of the experience of PIU. For example, the experience of ambivalence, loneliness,

accessing online support or antisocial behaviour may advance the findings reported here.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Final words of reflexivity

I embarked on this research project wondering how the Internet impacts our interpersonal lives. At the beginning of this research process, I held relatively negative views regarding the role of Internet use and technology in our society. I had become more and more aware of my own reliance, (and that of others), on mobile phones and with this grew a frustration at the way they pervaded every part of my daily life. I observed children and young people failing to interact on a human level, due to preoccupation with technological devices; my own friends and family seemed constantly preoccupied with messages and news feeds. Embarking on the literature review in the early stages of this research, I noticed how my personal feelings and negative bias were infiltrating this process. I found myself being drawn to studies which affirmed my negative views, whilst discounting those with positive findings. I quickly observed my biased position and made a marked effort to be impartial, in order to stand over this research as credible, fair and valid. I subsequently used reflexivity to limit my own preconceptions and beliefs. An example of this was the interview procedure I followed with the participants - once participants had spoken at length about their negative experiences relating to PIU, I noticed that I would encourage them to discuss the positive aspects of their experience, to guarantee a balanced, unbiased account. It was not until later on in this research process, during the analysis procedure, (and on identifying conflict and ambivalence as an overarching theme across participant accounts), that I realised the PIU phenomenon is far more complex than I had originally thought. I recall that I originally expected

to reach a position whereby the Internet would be generally considered as either a positive or a negative influence on interpersonal communication. As I reach the end of this research study, I can now see how I was wrong. The participant narratives, in parallel with my own reflections, uncovered an infinitely more nuanced perspective on the phenomenon of Internet use, which is intertwined with modern day interpersonal communication and relationships. I feel that I have learned a great deal during this research process – about PIU, the value of socialisation, the role of the Internet in our modern lives and myself. The research has transformed the way I view the ability to socialise in the 21st century, leading to both personal and professional growth.

In light of the findings, I propose that we should consider a broader approach to the treatment of individuals presenting with PIU. Currently, CBT is the treatment model of choice with more empirical support than any other form of treatment (Malak, 2018). However, despite evidence underlining the efficacy of CBT, I believe that psychological distress has multiple causes and maintaining factors and that it is impossible for one single model to account for these processes. As a Trainee Counselling Psychologist, I am aligned with a pluralistic philosophy, holding key principles such as inclusivity, transparency and acknowledging diversity and difference within my approach. I therefore prefer to formulate from a broad-based, integrated and multi-model perspective, which pinpoints personal meaning within its wider systemic, organisational and societal contexts. I strongly believe that future research should include the exploration of other treatment modalities, some of which have been considered here.

Lastly, I acknowledge that there were many other threads and themes which could have been usefully explored and I am disappointed that I could not include more of them in the final edit. I felt extremely privileged that the participants had elected to share their personal experiences with me, and I felt a great responsibility to try and do justice to their accounts. However, at this point, I am content to have provided a snapshot of the experience of interpersonal communication amongst self-identified problematic Internet users. I trust that this study offers an important record of their lived experience and may help them, and that the findings will inform theory, practice and research.

6.2 Conclusive summary

The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of interpersonal communication amongst individuals who identify with PIU. This was carried out through the analysis of semi-structured interviews using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Few qualitative studies have examined the lived experience of PIU, and it was therefore hoped that the current study would add to existing knowledge of this phenomenon, which to date has primarily come from quantitative research.

A complex and multi-faceted medium, the Internet is embedded in modern society and therefore it is vital to understand both the costs and benefits for individuals experiencing PIU. There is potential for this study to contribute to the sphere of Counselling Psychology and related fields, as evidenced by the support in relevant

literature for the findings presented. In addition, the study highlighted the voices of individuals identifying with PIU, a practice which has been somewhat neglected in the literature thus far. The results of the study represent a move towards a deeper understanding of the ways in which problematic Internet users experience interpersonal communication online and offline, and also how they perceive their own social identities and social functioning. This study has significant professional implications for treatment in the mental health arena. It supports continued research in this field, so that professionals can better understand the phenomenon of PIU, contribute to awareness, and implement research-based, broader psychological interventions which are tailored to the individual.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A - Recruitment letter/email

Dear (participant),

My name is Ellie Harland and I am a Trainee Counselling Psychologist studying at London Metropolitan University. I am interested in the experiences of individuals who identify with problematic Internet use. I am hoping to interview a small number of people in a place that is local and convenient, in order to learn more about how the Internet impacts everyday life. The interviews will be private, anonymous and confidential, lasting between 60 – 90 minutes.

I am looking for;

· Individuals aged 18 years +

· Living in the UK

· Self-determined problematic Internet users or 'Internet addicts'

· Have recently experienced (within the last 12 months) some personal distress as a result of their Internet use. This may include, for example; relationship difficulties/ emotional difficulties

I am hoping that these interviews will add to current research by looking at your personal experiences of this phenomenon. It is an opportunity for you to have your say and to share your unique experiences relating to your Internet use. I plan to use this research to inform health services about how they understand this concept and to change the way they support people who feel they have a problem with their Internet behaviour.

If you are interested, please contact me on the email address/telephone number below and I can send you more information about what the study will involve.

Your time and interest is sincerely appreciated.

Many thanks,

Ellie Harland,

Researcher and Trainee Counselling Psychologist

London Metropolitan University

Email: [redacted]

Telephone: [redacted]

APPENDIX B - Recruitment flyer/poster

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!

ARE YOU ADDICTED TO THE INTERNET?

The increasing popularity of the Internet has generated discussions about possible effects on behaviour and relationships. This research seeks to explore how excessive Internet use impacts our interpersonal communication, relationships and empathy. Would you like to share your experience? If yes...

Are you eligible?

- Individual aged 18 years +
- Living in the United Kingdom/Ireland
- Have recently experienced (within the last 12 months) some personal distress as a result of your Internet use

What would you have to do?

Meet for an informal interview in a local and convenient place to talk about your experiences

Get in touch!

If you are interested in taking part or would like more information please contact Ellie Harland at [redacted]

APPENDIX C - Form of interest

Research - Exploring the Lived Experience of Interpersonal Communication Amongst Individuals who Identify with Problematic Internet Use: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Please read the information provided before completing this form.

I have read the information provided and I am interested in participating in Ellie Harland's research about experiences of interpersonal communication and problematic Internet use. I give permission for Ellie Harland to contact me within the next couple of weeks to provide me with further information regarding my participation in this research study.

Name:

Contact telephone number:

Email address:

Thank you for your interest,

Ellie Harland

Researcher and Trainee Counselling Psychologist

London Metropolitan University

Email: [redacted]

Telephone: [redacted]

APPENDIX D - Information sheet

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research study exploring the experiences of interpersonal communication amongst participants who identify with problematic Internet use (PIU). Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand what the research will involve and why the research is being carried out. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If there is anything that you find unclear or if you would like further information, please do not hesitate to contact me, the researcher using the contact details below. Thank you for your time.

Who is the researcher?

My name is Ellie Harland. I am a Trainee Counselling Psychologist, and I am carrying out this research as part of a doctoral qualification in Counselling Psychology. The research study is being supervised by Catherine Athanasiadou-Lewis (see contact details below).

Why is this research being conducted?

The objective of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of how individuals who identify with PIU experience communication, including their views, thoughts and feelings on the subject. Research has shown that excessive Internet use can result in distress and various difficulties for the user. In particular, existing research has established a link between problematic Internet use (PIU) and issues surrounding communication and relationships. To date, no research has explored what it is like to experience interpersonal communication on and offline amongst individuals who believe they have Internet use related problems. This research aims to enhance relevant clinicians' and healthcare professionals' understanding of the phenomenon in question by emphasising the voices of problematic Internet users themselves. In doing so, the findings hope to contribute to promoting appropriate treatment for those who seek help.

Why have I been invited to take part in the study?

Individuals who identify with PIU are being invited to participate in this research. I am hoping that between six and eight people will agree to take part.

Do I have to take part in the study?

Participation is entirely voluntary. You are merely being invited, and are under absolutely no obligation to take part in this study. Additionally, if you agree to take part in the study, you may change your mind at any stage up until four weeks after your interview, without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will first have the opportunity to discuss the research further with the researcher and to ask any questions you may have. Following this, if you still want to participate, an interview will be arranged. The interview may take place in your home, or at a quiet and local place you are comfortable with at a time

convenient for you. The interview will entail meeting with the researcher for one in-depth interview about your experiences regarding PIU and interpersonal communication. The interview will take roughly 60 minutes and will be audio recorded. It is not a formal interview, there are no right or wrong answers and the questions are not devised to be challenging. Once the interview is finished, you will have the opportunity to ask any questions you may have. Following this, the interview will be written up and the audio recording will be destroyed. When I have analysed the transcript of your interview and others, the results will be written up in the form of a thesis. Upon completion, if you so wish, you will have access to the research findings as well as the opportunity to provide your feedback to the researcher.

What are the potential benefits of taking part?

You will benefit from having the opportunity to talk openly about your experiences and engage with some reflection. In a general sense, your participation in this study will help improve understandings of PIU and therefore hopefully help to inform and improve treatment (for those who seek it) in the future.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

You will be asked to discuss your experiences of interpersonal communication and personal relationships. You could potentially find this difficult and distressing, however every measure will be taken to minimise the risk of distress. If during the interview you do become upset, you will be given the option to take a break or stop the interview completely. Additionally, if there are any questions you do not wish to answer you can simply skip to the next question. Once the interview is completed, there will be some time for you us to speak about any issues raised. If you need further support, I will be able to advise you of who you can talk to. I will also provide you with an information sheet outlining relevant sources of support.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any concerns, complaints or queries about any aspect of the research study, please contact my supervisor Dr Catherine Athanasiadou-Lewis (contact details below).

Confidentiality

All information collected about you during the research process will be strictly confidential, in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). The information will be kept safely, securely and in a format that will not allow for you to be identified. By requirement, all information related to this research will be kept by the researcher for a maximum of five years. After this time, the information will be destroyed.

What happens when the research has finished?

Once the interviews are complete, the data will be analysed by the researcher. The results will then be written up as part of a doctoral thesis project with the possibility of published in a peer-reviewed journal. All information and any quotes taken from interviews will be strictly anonymous and will not allow for you to be identified.

You will not be contacted again after participating in this research, unless you have requested further information.

Is it possible to receive feedback about the study?

If you would like to learn about the results of your analysed interview, you are encouraged to contact the researcher, who will welcome any feedback you may have. Some participants will also be asked to participate in participant validation. Additionally, if you would like to gain information about the research findings as a whole, written information can be sent to you once the research is complete.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

The researcher's contact details

Ellie Harland
Trainee Counselling Psychologist
London Metropolitan University
Email: [redacted]
Telephone: [redacted]

The research supervisor's contact details

Dr Catherine Athanasiadou-Lewis
Counselling Psychologist/ Research Supervisor
London Metropolitan University
Email: [redacted]
Telephone: [redacted]

APPENDIX E - Participant consent form

Research - Exploring the Lived Experience of Interpersonal Communication Amongst Individuals who Identify with Problematic Internet Use: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Please read the information sheet before completing this consent form

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided regarding the above research. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information and to ask questions. I am aware that I may contact the researcher if I have any further queries.

2. I understand that my participation in the above research is voluntary. I am free to withdraw at any time up until four weeks following my interview, without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.

3. I understand that this interview will be audio-recorded and following the interview, it will be written up. Any quotes from my interview used in the publication of findings will be anonymised.

4. I understand that all research materials will be stored safely, securely, and anonymously and that any information I provide will be confidential.

I agree to take part in this research

Name:

Date:

Signature:

If you have any queries or concerns regarding any aspect of your participation in this research, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Ellie Harland,

Researcher and Trainee Counselling Psychologist
London Metropolitan University
Email: [redacted]
Telephone: [redacted]

Dr Catherine Athanasiadou-Lewis
Research Supervisor
London Metropolitan University
Email: [redacted]
Telephone: [redacted]

APPENDIX F - Participant debrief form

Research - Exploring the Lived Experience of Interpersonal Communication Amongst Individuals who Identify with Problematic Internet Use: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Thank you for taking part in this research. If you have any questions, or if you would like to spend some time discussing anything that the interview brought on, we now have some time to do so. Additionally, if you wish to discuss anything at a later date, please do not hesitate to contact me (details below).

Sometimes, when we talk about our personal experiences, we can find ourselves becoming more upset than usual. It may be that our interview brought up some difficult memories or feelings for you. If this happens, there are various sources of support you can contact.

- You can contact your GP to discuss any concerns you may have. They will be able to guide you in the right direction or help you to take further action.
- You can contact the researcher (Ellie Harland) who will help you, together with her supervisor, to access the most appropriate local services available to you.
- You can contact The Samaritans, who are a service for people experiencing distress and despair. They are available 24/7. Telephone contact: 116 123

In the event of helplessness, extreme distress and/or if you are considering causing harm to yourself or to others, you are advised to go immediately to your GP practice where an emergency appointment should be requested. If for some reason you cannot access your GP practice, go to the A & E department of your nearest hospital.

Declaration:

- I confirm that during the course of my participation in this study and upon leaving, the interviewer took care to ensure that I was comfortable and in no distress.
- I confirm that the interviewer conducted our meeting in an ethical, professional and appropriate manner.
- I confirm that I am aware of sources of support, which I can access if I feel I need to.
- I confirm that I am happy for the research to proceed using my material.

Name:

Date:

Signature:

If you have any queries or concerns regarding any aspect of your participation in this research, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Ellie Harland
Researcher and Trainee Counselling Psychologist
London Metropolitan University
Email: [redacted]
Telephone: [redacted]

Dr Catherine Athanasiadou-Lewis
Research Supervisor
London Metropolitan University
Email: [redacted]
Telephone: [redacted]

APPENDIX G - Distress protocol

Protocol to follow if participants become distressed during participation:

This protocol is devised to deal with the possibility that some participants may become distressed and/or agitated during their involvement in this research study. Below a three step protocol is outlined, detailing signs of distress that I, the researcher will look out for, as well as relevant action to take at each stage. It is not expected that extreme distress will occur, nor that the relevant action will become necessary. However a protocol is included, in case of emergencies where such professionals cannot be reached in time.

Mild distress

Signs to look out for:

1. Tearfulness
2. Voice becomes choked with emotion/ difficulty speaking
3. Participant becomes distracted/ restless

Action to take:

1. Ask participant if they are happy to continue
2. Offer them time to pause and compose themselves
3. Remind them they can stop at any time they wish if they become too distressed

Severe distress

Signs to look out for:

1. Uncontrolled crying/ wailing, inability to talk coherently
2. Panic attack- e.g. hyperventilation, shaking, fear of impending heart attack

Action to take:

1. The researcher will intervene to terminate the interview/experiment.
2. The debrief will begin immediately
3. Relaxation techniques will be suggested to regulate breathing/ reduce agitation
4. The researcher will recognize participants' distress, and reassure that their experiences are normal reactions to distress
5. If any unresolved issues arise during the interview, accept and validate their distress, but suggest that they discuss with mental health professionals and remind participants that this is not designed as a therapeutic interaction
6. Details of counselling/therapeutic services available will be offered to participants

Extreme distress

Signs to look out for:

1. Severe agitation and possible verbal or physical aggression
2. In very extreme cases- possible psychotic breakdown and begins to lose touch with reality

Action to take:

1. Maintain safety of participant and researcher
2. If the researcher has concerns for the participant's or others' safety, he will inform them that he has a duty to inform any existing contacts they have with mental health services, such as a Community Psychiatric Nurse (CPN) or their GP.
3. If the researcher believes that either the participant or someone else is in immediate danger, then he will suggest that they present themselves to the local A&E Department and ask for the on-call psychiatric liaison team.
4. If the participant is unwilling to seek immediate help and becomes violent, then the Police will be called and asked to use their powers under the Mental Health Act to detain someone and take them to a place of safety pending psychiatric assessment. (This last option would only be used in an extreme emergency)

Cocking, C. (2008). *Protocol to follow if participants become distressed during participation.* London Metropolitan University

APPENDIX H - Interview schedule

1. How do you experience communication with others?
    - Online/ offline?
    - Has this changed over time?
2. What means of communication do you use?
    - Do you have specific purposes for specific means, if so, what are they?
    - What are the benefits/drawbacks of these?
3. What do relationships mean to you?
    - Family/friends/work colleagues
    - What are the most important aspects of a relationship for you?
4. What is your level of connectedness with others?
5. How does your Internet use relate to your interpersonal relationships?
    - Emotionally/behaviourally/physically
6. What are the social benefits and drawbacks of your Internet use?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share?

APPENDIX I - Master themetable

Master Themetable		
Meeting interpersonal needs	Interplay between two worlds: the virtual and the physical	Online armour: the Internet as a form of protection
Seeking self-acceptance and validation *"It just exacerbates that almost natural human need for social acceptance and reassurance" (John, 319-320)*	Online communication as real vs. not real *"That probably ain't real life you know, and you can separate what's real and what's not" (Mark, 426-428)*	'Idealised version of myself' *"I'm eating a Big Mac it's gross and I've also ordered a wrap as well, I'm being disgusting and I haven't posted that, so there are aspects of my Instagram life, my personality is a honed in version.. slightly idealised version of myself" (John, 412-415)*
Loneliness and fear of isolation *"It's almost like I need I need that dialogue I need that constant conversation otherwise I don't know if it's loneliness I don't know maybe it's something to do with that but otherwise I almost feel alone" (John, 1167-1170)*	Alone together *"I think it's really weird it just feels so antisocial which doesn't really make sense there will be points when I realise all we have done for like 2 or 3 hours is be on our phones" (Lisa, 319-321)*	'I'm a complete psychopath' *"You can be a horrible person and it's just the fact that you're not having that face-to-face.. you can call anyone any kind of name and you're like 'oh it's fine it's on a phone'" (Tom, 897-899)*
The vicious cycle *"You are always just in conflict with yourself because on the one hand you think I don't really need it I can just stay on the Internet and then at the same time you're on the Internet and you feel incredibly shit so you try to hang on" (Harry, 560-563)*	'A stepping stone' *"It's like a stepping stone to talk to people and I think it is useful it was a useful tool for me" (Tom, 543-545)*	Online army *"The online community is the thing that saves me because they would, those 4 hours and those chat rooms were the thing that really got me through" (Julia, 373-375)*

APPENDIX J – Sample of annotated transcript for Tom

Emergent themes	Original transcript	Exploratory comments
‘Throw out stuff’ online Distance/ detachment with OC Cyber confidence Avoiding rejection Online ‘barrier’ You are connected and disconnected at the same time	I: *So do you think that that happens? people say things online that they wouldn't necessarily say –* T: Oh yeah and people can be overly affectionate online as well you can throw out stuff like you can say I love you and you wouldn't say that you wouldn't say it because you were scared of the reaction.. you might not get it back, but you just have this barrier in a way between two people.. but then it also connects them, it's such a weird concept, it is an odd concept *I: Do you think you have more confidence online?* T: I think I used to but now I have more confidence in person and less confidence online I think I used to have more confidence like I could say risky stuff and get away with it and be like oh well I was just in the moment where is in person if you say something and they just stop talking it's like ‘shit, did I say something wrong’ whereas online you can be like ‘haha it was a joke’ whereas in person you can't really have that immediate response ‘haha it was a joke’ so yeah	‘Throw out stuff’ with little thought or fear of consequence? The movement of ‘throwing’ suggests distance and detachment ‘People can be’ rather than ‘I can be’ Difference between typing ‘I love you’ and saying it Braver and bolder online without having to face unwanted reactions/ rejection There is barrier between you, you are protected? There is both separation/distance and connection/closeness Difficult to make sense of it
You can be risky online without fear of repercussions Feeling invincible online Differences between f2f and OC		Used to feel more confident online but that has changed You can be risky online without fear of repercussions, whereas as in person you have to face the response and take ownership You can get away with things online The intent/tone is flexible online (you can say it was a joke) Difference between online/f2f communication

Online 'barrier' permits both oppression and affection You can overcome restrictions of f2f interactions 'In person you would stumble over your words' Holistic self (same person on/offline) Presenting best side of you online Projection/ generalising experiences Conflict – SM is good and bad Would like to 'escape from it all'	it's interesting how there is a barrier which breeds oppression and bad stuff but also affection and talking to someone and complimenting them.. you can throw out compliments online but you may not actually say them in person you know.. you can say like 'you're gorgeous' to someone but in person you would stumble over your words.. so yeah it is interesting it kind of helps out either way *I: Do you see yourself differently?* T: in terms of my online presence I think I stay true to myself online as well as in person but I think I do try to show the best side of me online when I'm on my Instagram I do.. definitely do.. like this is my last photo this is my best thing, yes, I like, I think basically it is interesting how you will always give off your best impression online and like your best impression may not be your best impression in person.. you may try to be but there is human error and flaws and stuff so it does eliminate that in a way it is interesting, I say interesting a lot I have realised that haha it is curious how people just give off that different side of them like their most positive side, yeah, it is cool social media is sick and it will go somewhere but I think by the time I'm 50 I will just want to be done with it and I want to have a brick phone again and…. I hope so or I'll move	There is 'a barrier' online which 'breeds oppression' – you can be risky/ bad The barrier also allows you to be affectionate Two extremes (oppression/affection), not all bad or all good In person 'you would stumble over your words,' difference between online self and f2f self. Cyber confidence. Online you are without hindrances/restrictions of physicality OC is helpful Sees himself as holistic/consistent across all media and f2f Contradictory? 'Show best side of me online' Giving off your best impression online, presenting self in best light, why? Online impression may be different to f2f impression Human error and flaws cannot be hidden f2f but can be online? Errors and flaws can be 'eliminated' online Repetitious use of the word 'interesting,' perhaps trying to make sense of it all? Suddenly aware of his impression f2f with me? Switches to 'how people' generalising his experience, reassurance that everyone does it? 'Different side of them' Conflicting view? SM is 'cool and sick' but he wants to be

The Internet is a 'useful tool' The Internet provides opportunities FOMO OC keeps people connected 'A necessary evil' Paradox Using it 'right' Frustrated with its alluring nature Conflicting views	to America and that will just be me done, that's one of my plans, just to escape from it all get away from social media have some friends out somewhere like in Finland or something just away from social media that's my jam.. that's what I want to get to *I: why do you say that's what you want when you are 50 and not today?* T: because it is a very useful tool and if you use it right it can be one of the most helpful things in the world, you can build businesses on your phone and if I jump ship now I wouldn't like.. you can get career prospects on your phone, I've had, the only way I got my job at the moment in uni was because I emailed someone and if I moved out to America or if I moved out to somewhere in Finland I don't think I would have had that.. social media is good at keeping people connected because gone are the days of walking into businesses or firms with your CV it's only applying online now so it is a necessary evil in a way.. but yes social media is useful and also not useful it's just this weird time of finding out what it's actually there for and how much you want to take part and how much you don't want to take part.. the only reason I stopped was because I was like 'damn I am spending a lot of time on my phone' like I've been on 3 hour Instagram	done with it when 50 Would like to go back to the 'brick phone' era 'Escape from it all' wanting to get away/ break free from it. Working towards a point where he can get away from it all I'll quit tomorrow, V. Johnson Wants to 'get to' the point at which he can get away/escape SM is a 'very useful tool' It is helpful and provides great opportunities By jumping ship now he could miss out The Internet can provide career opportunities Fear of missing out? SM keeps people connected Times have changed, we do things online now 'a necessary evil' – unpleasant but must be accepted, powerful description Paradoxical, useful and also not useful, not singularly good or bad Still figuring it out, how to use it, how much to take part Suddenly realised he was

‘Sprees of just scrolling’ Frustrated with his Internet behavior Paradoxical	sprees of just scrolling, it's like ‘what am I doing?’ it’s so much jargon it's so much useless bits of information and memes and photos of people I don't care about so yeah it's interesting it is interesting it’s time wasting you know and everyone likes time wasting yeah it's, it's cool	spending a lot of time on his phone Scrolling for hours without realising Jargon/ useless information, not gaining anything – appears frustrated with himself Contradictory/ conflict/ paradoxical Time wasting but everyone likes time wasting

APPENDIX K – Initial emergent themes for Tom

Different self on vs. offline
Hiding emotions online
Recognises a decline in social skills
Online communication impacts ability to communicate face-to-face
Change over time in communication
Phone as a form of avoidance
Value of non-verbal communication
Differences in communication across generations/ cultures/ contexts
Learned over time how to effectively communicate
Importance of empathy
Learned how to communicate via his job
Face-to-face communication is a skill
Importance of social cues
Wanting your voice to be heard
Tendency to retreat in busy situations
Communication as central to his work
Importance of being heard
One learns how to communicate via their environment
Instant messaging does not suffice when arguing
Significance of having an emotional gauge
Edited version online vs. raw version offline
Face-to-face communication is raw
Online communication allows someone to detach from interactions
Interactions can be manipulated online
Fear of being called out online
Everything is recorded online (held accountable)
Best version of self is presented online
Projection
More blunt / direct / brave online
Too many different conversations occurring at once online
Constantly interacting with others (unnecessary)
Running out of things to say
Overuse has a negative impact on relationships
Phone as an extension of you
'Someone is always watching'
Intrusive / invasion of privacy is scary
Comfort in knowing someone is always there
Cannot escape it
Wants to be present but is drawn to phone
Wasted time / could be doing something worthwhile
Confused as to why he spends so much time online
Conflicted self
Conflicting views
'A necessary evil'
Addictive nature of social media
Needing someone there
Not wanting it but wanting it

Overthinking / paranoia
Nothing is left unsaid
'Catch-ups' no longer have a place
Ideal world is smartphone free
FOMO (fear of missing out)
Impossible to achieve a balance
Visual communication is easier
Must accept the modern way
'Useless jargon clogs brain'
Time wastes away online
Benefit of being able to connect with anyone at any time
No boundaries online
Maintaining long-distance relationships online
Excessive online communication is 'oversaturation'
Using it right
Screen as an escape / distraction
Dangers of overusing the Internet
Importance of a support network
Different relationships offer different things
Different platforms for different communicative means
Presenting best version of self online
One picture allows you to communicate with a whole audience
Generalising own experiences / relates to others
Reaching out for attention / connection / validation
Popularity contest
Obsession with likes
Likes are tokens of appreciation
Seeking acceptance
Gradually cares less about other people's lives
Recognises others tendency to be self-centred
Facebook as a stepping-stone
Videogames caused him to lose all social skills
Fine line between a helpful tool and a dependency
Facebook invitations boosted his confidence
Now believes his best version is presented in person
Importance of empathy
Hard to be empathetic online
Face-to-face communication is raw / 'throwing it all out there'
In control online
People can abuse the online space (crying for help)
Being watched the whole time / constantly monitored
Accepts that this is the modern way
Expected to be available at all times
Would like to exist in a different era
Online communication destroys face-to-face excitement / novelty
No going back
Cannot obtain 'feeling' online
Social pressure to keep up
'Keep up or get left behind'
Smart phones are essential nowadays

No more spontaneity, everything is premeditated / planned
Phones are coping mechanisms
Avoidance becomes too comfortable
Anti-social social gatherings
Unusual in his ability to communicate compared to peers
Work forced him to be social
Missed opportunities
Not open to meeting new people
Impact on mental health
Social media involves ‘constant rating’ against others
Impact on self-esteem
Satirical
Need to update others on every move
People demand your attention and expect a response
Online communication does not seem real
Cyber confidence
Protected behind a screen
‘Throw stuff online’ detached / distanced from interactions
Getting away with risky things online
Sees himself as holistic between two worlds
Face-to-face communication means you cannot hide your flaws
Frustrated with its alluring nature
Future plan to escape from it all
Internet as a useful tool
The Internet provides opportunities
Paradox

APPENDIX L - Tom's themetable

Tom's Themetable		
Master theme	**Subtheme**	**Extract**
Interplay between two worlds	Online invincibility	*You can be more horrible on social media then you can be in real life because you don't have that immediate reaction, you can be a horrible person on social media but it's just the fact that you're not having that face-to-face.. you can call anyone any kind of name and you're like 'oh it's fine it's on a phone' (895-899)* *I commented and it started this beef and I was thinking I would never have said that to this person but I did it online, and that's a really good example because I felt a lot more safe behind a screen and then he was like pull up and we will see what will happen and I was I fuck hahaha that was a bad idea (915-919)* *People can be overly affectionate online as well you can throw out stuff like you can say I love you and you wouldn't say that you wouldn't say it because you were scared of the reaction you might not get it back but you just have this barrier in a way between two people but then it also connects them it's such a weird concept it is an odd concept (926-931)*
	Online communication as a "stepping stone"	*Yeah I was very introverted like I wouldn't talk to people, there's like different stages so when I first started school I spent my life in my house and I could barely talk to females at all and then that developed to I could talk to people but one on one not in a group I can't do it at all and then when I got into sixth form it was more friends and I could deal with groups and I when I got to this I could deal with any number of people (86-91)* *It was it was interesting because like when I first started going online I got Facebook quite late for my year group and it was interesting how it kind of gave me a way of learning how to communicate with people because I used to spend a lot of time at home I was just playing in my garden and stuff and on my computer because I used to be addicted to*

		videogames like fully addicted I lost all social skills (532-537) *That really helped like forced me into it in a way so like it is kind of provide a stepping stone into talking normally to people and then you reach a stage where you're overly dependent on it and you've got to take a shift from cutting it out altogether so it's like a stepping stone to talk to people and I think it is useful it was a useful tool for me because I would get invited to parties and stuff and that was a big thing back in the day (540-546)*
	Online edited version vs. physical raw version	*You can give an edited version of yourself you can edit what you were saying what you were giving to someone where is if you're talking to them there is not a lot of time for you to process what you were saying (122-124)* *I think the difference is you are giving your best side of you when you're editing your response which is sometimes good because you always want to give the best side of yourself em but then it's not the true side of yourself in a way because everybody has got different mannerisms that they just blurt out randomly and that's kind of who you are and how you communicate but you know I know people who are just completely different online (148-154)* *Showing them this is the best side of you a picture taken on a beach somewhere so it's interesting how you are communicating with a lot of people when you post just one photo but it's showing that side of your life (420-423)* *In person you are throwing it all out there and you don't know how they are going to react whereas on there you can choose to respond to some people (596-598)* *There is a barrier which breeds oppression and bad stuff but also affection and talking to someone and complimenting them you can throw out compliment online but you may not actually say them in person you know you can say like you're gorgeous to someone but in person you would stumble over your words (942-946)*
	Face-to-face avoidance	*Humans always find a way of avoiding conversations (20)*

		It's so weird how we message people to come outside even that interaction is gone that initial hey let's go walk to the car hey how are you doing it's gone it's like getting my car and it's almost uncomfortable but it's just the way It Is unfortunately (722-725) *I just whipped out my phone and it was the best way to just avoid talking to them so it is kind of useful in a negative way but then it is useful to be like a look at this photo look at this thing and you can share your experiences through your phone in a social aspect but yeah a lot of it is avoidant in a way because if you don't want to talk to someone the best way is to take out your phone (731-737)*
Constantly connected	'You are always communicating'	*It's almost too much but then you get addicted to it in a way so it's like you can always have someone there but when they're gone you're like I need to talk to someone again and then if something changes like they become busy you're like oh oh they're not talking to me and you know it's normal for someone not to be talking to you but then you think why is this and then thought about other stuff coming to play yeah it's interesting the normality is that you talk to someone all the time when the reality is that you really shouldn't you should be more like an excitement (232-240)* *They are always there it is always connected to you and you are always communicating with people (190-191)* *I can talk to people I want to talk to and I can connect with people I wouldn't have any dream of connecting with a tool like if I didn't have a phone so like I could when I had a long distance relationship with my girlfriend there were 160 miles between us and I used to drive a lot so without a phone I don't think we would be together I think just the foundation of us talking all the time kept us like knowing where each other were where's if it was just like I can only call you occasionally I wouldn't feel as confident in a relationship as I did so yeah (316-323)*

	Invasion of privacy	*I like the idea of hearing someone hearing it from their mouth rather than and also with Facebook and stuff if you say something on the telephone they can't be like it can only be said like oh you said this rather than actually screenshotting what you said in the past because everyone says stupid stuff like everyone says stupid stuff and people being able to capture that in that moment and added it or show it at a certain time can put anyone in a negative light so I think talking to someone it's useful to like not have that fear of being called out answer in things or certain phrases not that I do say certain phrases to be called out on haha (134-143)* *Yeah I have that shit off all of the time, like with my girlfriend we had that on for each other and I will get a message and she's like what the fuck are you doing here and I'm like I'm just here I'm just talking to someone and they are like why are you in the library and I'm like I don't know just because I'm in the library and it's so weird like having Big Brother watching you I hate it that's what I don't like about it (622-627)*
	'There is oversaturation'	*In my relationship it is very much we message all day and then we call at the end of the day and then we don't have much to talk about because we knew everything so I think overuse of it is quite a big issue like that's why I try to keep away from my phone as much as possible will I try to but it still difficult to keep away from phones because they are always there it is always connected to you and you are always communicating with people (185-191)* *It's almost too much anyway like when you know everything about someone you don't really it leaves not a lot to be desired does that make sense so you know everything that they are doing and you kind of I don't know there's no communication left to be had like there's no… sorry what was the question? (224-228)* *But there is oversaturation that's a big thing and I just felt like I was speaking to them on all day but I hadn't really gained anything from it and I like coming away from a conversation like this where you like ah actually I spoke with someone and had a conversation rather than just pointless pushing against each other just for the sake of it so drawbacks wise yeah just like oversaturation I think that's mainly it (332-337)*

		Just people wanting information about you I think we are all getting a bit too comfortable with revealing everything about ourselves and that's it kind of takes away the interestingness about people it's like I know where you are out of the time I know what you're doing all of the time I know about your life (635-639) *I don't think it's healthy and I think it removes that excitement on that aspect of it because obviously you want to have, you want to meet up with somebody and be like 'hey I haven't seen you in so long what have you been doing' whereas it's more like 'oh I saw you doing that I saw you at the park' it's like I've got nothing to tell you and I think ideally I wish that it was all face to face because I like face to face it's one of the most raw forms of talking (672-679)*
Interpersonal needs	24/7 support network	*I think it's an escape and also I just think it's inescapably and you can also build a support network so if you're feeling low you could talk to anyone and they are there at any click of a button (343-346)* *If I see someone, this is really bad, but if I see someone who is reaching out I will be there to support them but if it's someone who does it a lot I feel as though.. what is the point? you're not getting anything back you need to sort it out another way (603-606)*
	Social acceptance, validation and inclusion	*You are kind of communicating like you are trying to show everyone the best side view and I think if anyone says they're not trying to show like the coolest side of ourselves like I will only post on Instagram when I'm feeling good about myself like if it's a cool thing that I'm doing and I might go hey look at this I'm doing something cool and you hope to get response would like say something like that that's another interesting thing about likes because it's a very it warped a lot of people's ideas on like if they are liked or not depending on the amount they have (429-436)* *Being online does spam a lot of thought about yourself it does have a huge impact because it is just a constant rating of how you are against other people and it's like Black Mirror it's getting that way it's getting that way (827-830)*

		I've been like, like my stuff and then I put up a post and it hasn't got many likes I know my damn I'm like am I not interesting enough? And then you kind of have to dig yourself out and you're like wait that really is not that big of a deal but during that time it is a big deal so yeah (834-838) *You kind of have to keep going with it and keep using it in the modern era or you get left behind and if you get left behind then you are stuck (703-705)*

APPENDIX M - London Metropolitan University ethical approval

LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY
LIFE SCIENCES & COMPUTING

London Metropolitan University,
School of Psychology,
Research Ethics Review Panel

I can confirm that the following project has received ethical approval by one anonymous reviewer and the School of Social Sciences to proceed with the following research project:

Title:	Exploring the Lived Experience of Interpersonal Communication Amongst Individuals who Engage with Problematic Internet Use: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
Student:	Ellie Harland
Supervisor:	Dr Catherine Athanasiadou-Lewis

Ethical clearance to proceed has been granted providing that the study follows the ethical guidelines used by the School of Psychology and British Psychological Society, and incorporates any relevant changes required by the Research Ethics Review Panel. All participating organisations should provide formal consent allowing the student to collect data from their staff.

The researcher is also responsible for conducting the research in an ethically acceptable way, and should inform the ethics panel if there are any substantive changes to the project that could affect its ethical dimensions, and re-submit the proposal if it is deemed necessary.

Signed: Lange-Küttner Date: 13 February 2017

Prof Dr Chris Lange-Küttner
(Chair - Psychology Research Ethics Review Panel)

Email [redacted]