# Chapter 41
# Internet Addiction in Context

**Petra Vondrackova**
*Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic*

**David Šmahel**
*Masaryk University – Brno, Czech Republic*

## ABSTRACT

*Internet addiction can be defined as the overuse of the internet such that it leads to the impairment of an individual's psychological state (both mental and emotional), as well as their scholastic, occupational, and social interactions. In this chapter, the authors first present a short historical overview of the internet addiction phenomenon and its place in the context of mental health. They then introduce the contributions of major researchers who focused on defining its core components, designing measurement scales and diagnostic criteria. Furthermore, they focus on the main areas of research in this field: the major surveys regarding prevalence rates and the correlates of internet addiction. In the last section, they introduce basic approaches to the treatment of internet addiction.*

## INTRODUCTION

Internet addiction can be defined as the overuse of the Internet such that it leads to the impairment of an individual's psychological state (both mental and emotional), as well as their scholastic, occupational, and social interactions (Beard & Wolf, 2001). Young (1998) describes Internet addiction as any online-related compulsive behavior that completely dominates the addict's life, interferes with normal living, and causes severe stress to family, friends, loved ones, and one's work environment.

From a historical perspective, in 1996, the American clinical psychologist Kimberley Young (1998) published the results of a two-year study of Internet behavior and misuse, and was the first to place the phenomenon of Internet addiction in a clinical context. This study received widespread public attention, and popular and professional debate. Since the 1990s, Internet addiction has attracted the attention of professionals around the world, mainly from developing and developed countries with widespread Internet access. Some countries, such as the United States, China, South Korea, and Germany, even began developing the first specialized centers focused solely on this phenomenon (Block, 2008). Nevertheless, inconsistencies regarding the terminology still exist. Usually the term "Internet addiction" is used. However, some researches do not agree with using the term "Internet addiction" and use several others, such as "Internet addiction disorder" (Chou, Condron, & Belland, 2005), "compulsive Internet

use" (Black, Belsare, & Schlosser, 1999), "Internet pathological use" (Davis, 2001), "problematic Internet use" (Caplan & High, 2011), and "Internet dependency" (Wang, 2001), each of which reflects a slightly different conception of this behavior. In this text we will use the term "Internet addiction" as an umbrella term for all of these term modifications.

In this chapter, we will first present a short historical overview of the Internet addiction phenomenon and its place in the context of mental health. We will then introduce the contributions of major researchers who focused on defining its core components, designing measurement scales and diagnostic criteria. Furthermore we will focus on the main areas of research in this field: the major surveys regarding prevalence rates and the correlates of Internet addiction. In the last section, we will introduce basic approaches to the treatment of Internet addiction.

The term "Internet addiction" is very broad. It refers to different kinds of overuse of the Internet. Starcevic (2013) stated that the term "Internet addiction" should be abandoned because individuals do not usually get addicted to the Internet in general, but to specific online activities; therefore, being addicted to the Internet implies addiction to a delivery mechanism or to a medium for achieving something. He states that it would be more accurate and appropriate to refer to specific activities that are presumed to be addictive. Some of the most typical online activities related to Internet addiction include online gaming (typically but not only Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games - MMORPGs), excessive online communication (email, chat rooms, and social networking), cybersex activity overload (visiting online pornographic sites and initiating cybersex relationships), and online gambling (betting via the Internet) (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Due to limited space, this chapter does not focus specifically on any of these activities; it focuses on Internet addiction in general.

## BACKGROUND

### Internet Addiction and Diagnostic Mental Disorder Manuals

A majority of experts include Internet addiction together with pathological gambling, compulsive shopping, sex addiction, and eating disorders in the category of non-substance or behavioral addictions. Behavioral addictions display the basic elements of addictive behavior in relation to certain activities and have similarities with drug addiction, specifically with respect to the genetic (Potenza, 2006), neurobiological (Han, Kim, Lee, & Renshaw, 2012), personal (Potenza, 2006), and clinical characteristics (Grant, Brewer, Potenza, 2006). All of the above-mentioned addictions are included in the diagnostic manuals DSM-5 or the ICD-10 (both are explained in the Key Term and Definitions section), except for compulsive shopping and Internet addiction. Internet addiction was considered for inclusion in the official DSM-5 diagnoses, but, in the end, was left it out. However, Internet gaming disorder (the compulsive playing of online games) is classified in the DSM-5 appendix so as to encourage additional research (APA, 2013). According to Pies (2009), the main reasons against Internet addiction's inclusion in the DSM-5's list of mental disorders are that symptoms of Internet addiction are likely to be the symptoms of other disorders, such as depression or obsessive-compulsive disorders, and that creating a separate category would further expand an already fast-growing list of supposed "disorders" and thus undermine the public's trust in psychiatric diagnosis. In 2018, the 11th revision of the ICD should be published, but the revision discussion was started in 2012. The ICD-11 Working Group on Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders noted that Internet addiction is a heterogeneous condition, and that use of the

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