A Systematic Research Review of Internet Addiction and Identity

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ABSTRACT

A small but growing body of research documents how internet misuse can lead to negative outcomes for individuals. One particularly important area of public concern is the connection between addictive internet usage and human identity. This study addressed the connection between excessive internet use on real-world and virtual-world identity. This systematic research review synthesized research studies conducted between 2008 to 2018 on the influence of internet addiction on identity. Findings revealed that the majority of published studies focused on young individuals aged 9-30 years old (89%) and that the connection between excessive internet use on real-world identity and virtual-world identity was complex and multi-faceted. Online gaming addiction was identified as a leading theme within the published research (30%). Based on study findings, recommendations are made for greater future research attention to internet addiction among adults, comprehensive studies of the relationship between online and offline identity to internet addiction, and the inclusion of internet addiction as a multifaceted disorder in future editions of DSM, which includes online gaming addiction among other forms of online addiction.

KEYWORDS

Internet Addiction, Offline Identity, Online Identity, Self-Presentation, Systematic Review

INTRODUCTION

The entry of technology into different aspects of human lives is undeniable, and human dependency upon this technology is evident. While Internet technology has made human lives easier and facilitated communication with other people and cultures, Internet as any other new technology is a two-sided invention. The Internet is not only a blessing; it can be a curse, too. The enhancement and the alluring features of Internet technology have improved human engagement with it, while arguably complicating individuals' control over this technology.

Recently, excessive Internet use has been linked to an addictive disorder. Internet addiction is defined as "an impulse-control disorder that does not involve an intoxicant" (Young, 1998, p. 238). Throughout the last two decades, academic studies have raised concerns about how excessive Internet use could lead to long-term psychological problems related to online addiction and identity crises.

For instance, a recent meta-analysis which examined Internet addiction in Korea found identity to be one factor associated with Internet addiction (Koo & Kwon, 2014).

While it is difficult to gauge the complex intertwinement of relations between Internet addiction and its influence on identity, it is crucial to understand how identities are constructed within the growing complex nature of technology and communications. In a world increasingly dependent on Internet use in work and life, being aware of the possible drawbacks on identity from excessive Internet use would help individuals to reconsider their Internet use practices. Also, it would help to explain why people behave differently in virtual reality and actual reality. Not only would such studies benefit users, but they would also direct scholars and scientists to examine the gap in knowledge to aid in intervention development.

A number of academic studies have linked the excessive use of the Internet to identity construction issues. Researchers have shed light on how identity could be affected by certain behaviors, e.g., role-play games, that are practiced online. Also, the nature of some online platforms has been linked to the possibility of an individual presenting different identities online and offline. For instance, online chatting groups and social media platforms allow anyone to register with nicknames easily which could promote having another identity online.

While few studies have paid attention to the impact of Internet problematic use on identity; in contrast, online gaming addiction studies are largely present in databases. This can be related to the inclusion of Internet gaming addiction in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5). Surprisingly, the broader term "Internet addiction" is not officially recognized in this publication. This has led to a shortcoming of studies focusing on this addictive behavior; furthermore, such an absence could also be linked to the lack of psychiatric involvement in helping people overcome the negative outcomes of Internet addiction.

Concerns about whether spending more time online could lead to excessive Internet use that may result in adopting or presenting another identity/self which is different from the one presented to the real world have encouraged the researchers to conduct this systematic review of what has been published on this matter. Accordingly, this research paper aims to systematically explore the existing empirical studies investigating the link between Internet addiction and identity over the last decade. This ten-year period reflects the time during which Internet service become more accessible to people especially through the introduction of smart phones and other handheld devices.

Another more specific objective of this review is to investigate the challenges associated with Internet addiction and the construction of one's virtual identity online in juxtaposition with one's real-life identity. Additionally, this review aims to identify the gaps in knowledge or areas that have not been extensively studied regarding this connection. It is hoped that doing so will direct researchers to closely investigate these issues and possibly present more evidence-based work on the impact of Internet addiction on identity. Furthermore, the cooperation of researchers from different fields such as communication and psychology could help to boost the scientific inventory with more information about identity and excessive Internet use.

Therefore, the purpose of this systematic review is to examine the current research investigating the connection between Internet addiction and identity. The review focuses on peer-reviewed research published between 2008 and 2018 to capture the current state of knowledge about Internet addiction and identity.

BACKGROUND

There is no doubt that any new technology may have an influence on users, and the Internet is not an exemption. One of the earliest papers that introduced the issue of Internet addiction (IAD) was an article written by (OReilly, 1996) which was published in *The Canadian Medical Association Journal.* OReilly reported on discussions with a number of physicians and scientists on their Internet use and how they could be "net junkies" or "hooked" to the Internet even while using it for work

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