

Chapter 63

Internet Addiction

Petra Vondrackova

Masaryk University, Czech Republic

David Smahel

Masaryk University, Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

Internet addiction can be defined as overuse of the Internet leading to impairment of an individual's psychological state; this includes both mental and emotional states, as well as scholastic, occupational, and social interactions. Internet addiction was first mentioned in a clinical context by Kimberly Young in 1996, since then it has received attention from experts in various scientific fields. Perhaps due to its short history, the concept of Internet addiction has not been fully developed and there are still many unanswered questions, particularly regarding the terminology, definition, and its clinical relevance. Realized studies on Internet addiction have focused on (a) prevalence estimates, (b) negative correlates, (c) defining the core components and designing measurement scales and/or diagnostic criteria, and (d) treatment approaches. Future research should focus on clarifying the concept of Internet addiction and related terminology, and creating a standardized instrument for measuring Internet addiction.

INTRODUCTION

Internet addiction can be defined as overuse of the Internet leading to impairment of an individual's psychological state (both mental and emotional), as well as their scholastic, occupational, and social interactions (Beard & Wolf, 2001). Internet addiction bears similarities to drug addiction, and is therefore included with pathological gambling,

compulsive shopping, sex addiction, and eating disorders in the category of nonchemical addiction behavior (Hall & Parsons, 2001). But "Internet addiction" is not explicitly included in the diagnostic manuals. In June 2007, the American Medical Association discouraged the American Psychiatric Association from including "Internet Addiction Disorder" as a formal diagnosis in the next edition of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) (Grohol, 2007). The main reasons against Internet addiction's inclusion are

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0315-8.ch063

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 for this pathology will further expand an already fast growing list of supposed “disorders” and undermine the public’s trust in psychiatric diagnosis (Pies, 2009).

Kimberly Young (1998b) a well known researcher in this field, describes Internet addiction as follows: “*Internet addiction is defined as any online-related, compulsive behavior which interferes with normal living and causes severe stress on family, friends, loved ones, and one’s work environment. Internet addiction has been called Internet dependency and Internet compulsivity. By any name, it is a compulsive behavior that completely dominates the addict’s life.*” Other researchers, however, do not agree with using the term “Internet addiction” and use several other terms, such as “Internet pathological use” (Morahan-Martin & Schumacker, 2000; Davis, 2001), “compulsive Internet use” (Black et al., 1999), “Internet addiction disorder” (Chou et al., 2005), “problematic Internet use” (Beard, 2005; Shapira et al., 2003; Caplan, 2002) and also “Internet dependency” (Chen et al., 2001; Wang, 2001).

Some of the most typical online activities related to Internet addiction include: online gaming (research is mainly focused on Massive-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG)), excessive online communication (e-mail communication, chat-rooms, and social networking sites), cybersex activity overload (visiting online pornographic sites and initiating cybersex relationships), and online gambling (betting on the Internet) (Šmahel et al., 2009; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2010). Due to limited space this chapter does not focus specifically on any of these activities. We recommend readers seek further books and articles which describe problems with these activities in more detail (i.e. Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2010).

In this chapter we will first present the historical view of the phenomenon of Internet addiction, and the main areas of research in this field: the major surveys regarding prevalence rates of Internet addiction and the correlates of Internet addiction. We will then introduce the contributions of the major researchers who focused on defining its core components, designing measurement scales, diagnostic criteria, and treatment approaches.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND MAIN RESEARCH AREAS

The phenomenon of problematic use of computers has been discussed since the late eighties. In 1989 Margaret E. Shotton published the book “Computer Addiction? A study of computer dependency” presenting an investigation of the syndrome of computer addiction based on case studies of volunteers from all over the UK who considered themselves to be dependent upon computers. She arrived at the conclusion that “computer dependency” exists but that it was not a clinical pathology, and nor did it constitute a threat to computer users themselves.

The concept of Internet addiction was first used by the New York psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg in 1995. Although he intended his text describing the diagnostic criteria of this new mental disorder as a joke for the amusement of the online community, the name and description of the disorder has been used ever since. In 1996, American clinical psychologist Kimberley Young published the results of a two-year study of Internet behavior and misuse, and placed the phenomenon of Internet addiction in a clinical context. This study gained wide public attention through media reports, and the popular and professional debate surrounding Internet addiction grew (Reed, 2002). Young founded The “Center for Internet Addiction”, focused on studying various aspects of Internet addiction. She investigated the basic aspects of Internet addiction, which were later

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