

Chapter 3

Unravelling the Web: Adolescents and Internet Addiction

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ABSTRACT

It has been alleged by some academics that excessive Internet use can be pathological and addictive. This chapter reviews what is known from the empirical literature on “Internet addiction” and its derivatives (e.g., Internet Addiction Disorder, Pathological Internet Use etc.) and assesses to what extent it exists. The chapter briefly overviews (i) the history and concept of Internet addiction, (ii) research on (adolescent and adult) Internet addiction, (iii) the attraction of the online world to adolescents, (iv) Internet users in their own words, and (v) an examination of online versus offline identity. The chapter has demonstrated that research into adolescent Internet addiction is a relatively little studied phenomenon although most effects found among adult users are thought to occur among adolescents too. In conclusion it would appear that if Internet addiction does indeed exist, it affects only a relatively small percentage of the online population and there is very little evidence that it is problematic among adolescents.

THE HISTORY AND CONCEPT OF INTERNET ADDICTION

The notion of ‘Internet addiction’ is not an entirely original one. The more general term ‘computer addiction’ had emerged even when the development of the Internet was still in its early stages. An example of the acceptance of this concept can be found in two court cases whereby the defence

was found ‘not guilty by reason of computer addiction’ (Surratt, 1999). One of these cases took place in London in 1993, where Paul Bedworth was accused of hacking-related crime. He refused to plead guilty as he claimed to be addicted to the computer and because of that, was unable to form the necessary intent. His psychological assessment stated that he spent unnaturally long hours in the computer laboratories and that any of his activities involving computers took precedence over anything else. An expert witness in addictive behaviour con-

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cluded “*He’s completely hooked on computing... The child, whose best friend is a computer rather than a person, is not going to function normally in society. We need to be able to predict how he will behave and what treatments will restore him to normal health*” (Gold, 1993).

Shortly after the Bedworth case was concluded, psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg, in an attempt to force the psychiatric community to re-think the usefulness of creating and labelling new ‘disorders’, made up a set of diagnostic criteria for Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD). He modelled the set after the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) criteria for substance use (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Goldberg also started an online support group called the Internet Addiction Support Group (IASG) for individuals who were suffering from this new affliction. Instead of realising that Goldberg’s criteria was a ruse, popular press journalists seized this idea of a new disorder, and reports of the extent of problems the Internet was causing some individuals soon began to emerge. The first significant publication of IAD was on March 1995 in the *New York Times* entitled “*The Lure and Addiction of Life On Line*” (O’Neill, 1995). While it did not cite any scientific research or use the IAD label, the article claimed that a growing number of individuals were starting to spend so much time on the Internet that it had begun to interfere with some aspects of their lives.

A steady stream of similar articles began to appear, and these articles sparked off the interests of many academics and mental health professionals, one of whom was Kimberley Young. Due to her work, and assisted by the media, the label of IAD had spread throughout online community. For example, Hamilton and Kalb (1995) focused an article in *Newsweek* on Young’s work and her estimate that 2% to 3% of online users were addicted to the Internet. Although they pointed out that Goldberg’s IASG was intended as a joke, they cited many more sites dedicated to Internet addicts such as ‘Webaholics’ and ‘Interneters

Anonymous’. They also quoted various respondents who were self-labelled as addicts. What they did not realise was that many of the WWW pages they cited as proof of IAD were nothing more than parodies, created by online users to mock the idea.

Some academics had alleged that excessive Internet use can be pathological and addictive and that it comes under the more generic label of “technological addiction” (e.g. Griffiths, 1996a; 1998). Technological addictions are operationally defined as non-chemical (behavioural) addictions that involve human-machine interaction. They can either be passive (e.g., television) or active (e.g., computer games), and usually contain inducing and reinforcing features which may contribute to the promotion of addictive tendencies (Griffiths, 1995). Technological addictions can be viewed as a subset of behavioural addictions (Marks, 1990) and feature core components of addiction (i.e., salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict and relapse (see Griffiths, 2005).

- Salience – where the specific activity becomes the most important thing in a person’s life; dominating their thoughts, feelings and behaviour.
- Mood Modification – where the person reports the subjective feeling as a result of that particular activity (e.g., they experience a ‘buzz’ or a ‘high’).
- Tolerance – where an increasing amount of the activity becomes essential to arouse the same level of effect it had previously.
- Withdrawal symptoms – where unpleasant feelings are observed in the absence or cutting back of the activity (e.g., moodiness, irritability, etc.).
- Conflict – which refers to the conflict between the addict and the people around him/her, as well as within him/herself.
- Relapse and reinstatement – where the behaviour would be repeated even after long abstinence.

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