# PSYCHOLOGY OF COMPUTER USE: XL. ADDICTIVE USE OF THE INTERNET: A CASE THAT BREAKS THE STEREOTYPE

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This case involves a homemaker 43 years of age who is addicted to using the Internet. This case was selected as it demonstrates that a non-technologically oriented woman with a reportedly content home life and no prior addiction or psychiatric history abused the Internet which resulted in significant impairment to her family life. This paper defines addictive use of the Internet, outlines the subject's progression of addictive on-line use, and discusses the implications of such addictive behavior on the new market of Internet consumers.

This research note concerns the case of a 43-yr.-old homemaker whom the author recently interviewed as part of a larger study designed to examine addictive use of the Internet (Young, 1996). Media attention on the subject of "Internet addiction" has stereotyped those who become addicted as predominantly young, introverted, computer-oriented males. Further, prior research has indicated that predominantly object-oriented introverted males become computer addicted (Shotton, 1989, 1991), and educational specialists have shown that women report lower self-efficacy than men when asked about their use of information technologies (Busch, 1995). In contrast to these observations, this case was selected from the author's original study, as it demonstrates that a non-technologically oriented woman with a self-reported content home life and no prior addiction or psychiatric history, abused the Internet which resulted in significant impairment to her family life.

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## DEFINING ADDICTION

The original project was initiated based upon reports which indicated that some on-line users were becoming *addicted* to the Internet in much the same way that others became addicted to drugs, alcohol, or gambling. The way to clinically define addictive use of the Internet is to compare it against criteria for other established addictions. However, the term *addiction* does not

appear in the most recent version of the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1995). Of all the diagnoses referenced in the DSM-IV, substance dependence may come the closest to capturing the essence of what has traditionally been labeled addiction (Walters, 1996) and provides a workable definition of addiction. The seven criteria considered under this diagnosis are withdrawal, tolerance, preoccupation with the substance, heavier or more frequent use of the substance than intended, centralized activities to procure more of the substance, loss of interest in other social, occupational, and recreational activities, and disregard for the physical or psychological consequences caused by the use of the substance.

While many believe the term *addiction* should only be applied to cases involving chemical substances (e.g., Rachlin, 1990; Walker, 1989), similar diagnostic criteria have been applied to a number of problem behaviors such as pathological gambling (Griffiths, 1990; Mobilia, 1993; Walters, 1996), eating disorders (Lacey, 1993; Lesieur & Blume, 1993), sexual addictions (Goodman, 1993), generic technological addictions (Griffiths, 1995), and video game addiction (Griffiths, 1991,1992; Keepers, 1990; Soper, 1983). Therefore, in the original study was developed a brief seven-item questionnaire which adapted similar criteria for substance dependence in the DSM-IV to provide a screening measure of addictive use of the Internet (Young, 1996). If a person answered "yes" to three (or more) of the seven questions, the person was deemed to be an Internet "addict." It should be noted that the term Internet is used to denote both the actual Internet and on-line service providers (e.g., America Online and CompuServe) in this paper.

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## A CASE STUDY

This subject reported that despite being 'computer phobic and illiterate," she was able to navigate easily through the on-line system of her new home personal computer because of the menu-driven applications provided by her on-line service. Her on-line service was the only application for which she used her computer, and she initially spent a few hours per week scanning a variety of social chat rooms, i.e., these are virtual communities which allow multiple on-line users to converse or "chat" instantly with one another in real time. Within a 3-mo. period, the subject gradually needed to spend longer periods of time on-line, which she estimated to reach a peak of *50* to 60 hours per week. She explained that once she became established in a particular chat room where she felt a sense of community among other on-line participants, she frequently stayed on-line longer than she intended, e.g., two hours, reporting sessions lasting up to 14 hours. Typically, she logged on the first thing in the morning, she constantly checked her e-mail throughout the day, and she stayed up late using the Internet (sometimes till dawn).

She eventually felt depressed, anxious, and irritable whenever she was not in front of her computer. In an effort to avoid what she referred to as "withdrawal from the Internet," she engaged in activities to stay on-line as long as she could. The subject canceled appointments, stopped calling real life friends, reduced her interpersonal involvement with her family, and quit

social activities she once enjoyed, e.g., bridge club. Further, she stopped performing routine chores, such as the cooking, cleaning, and grocery shopping, that would take her away from being on-line.

The subject did not see her compulsive use of the Internet as a problem; however, significant family problems developed subsequent to her overuse of the Internet. Specifically, her two teenage daughters felt ignored by their mother, as she was always sitting in front of the computer. Her husband of 17 years complained about the financial cost of the on-line service fees which he paid (up to $400.00 per month), and about her loss of interest in their marriage. Despite these negative consequences, the subject denied that this behavior was abnormal, had no desire to reduce the amount of time she spent on-line, and refused to seek treatment despite repeated requests from her husband. She felt it was natural to use the Internet, denied anyone could be addicted to it, felt her family was being unreasonable, and found an unique sense of excitement through on-line stimulation that she would not give up. Her continual overuse of the Internet eventually resulted in becoming estranged from her two daughters and separated from her husband within one year of the purchase of her home computer.

The interview with this subject took place six months subsequent to these events. At that time, she admitted having an addiction to the Internet "like one would to alcohol." Through the loss of her family she was able to reduce her own use of the Internet with no therapeutic intervention. However, she stated that she was unable to eliminate on-hne use completely without external intervention nor was she able to reestablish an open relationship with her estranged family.

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## DISCUSSION

Given the recent surge in access to information technologies (Graphics, Visualization, and Usability Center, *1995),* we have a new generation of diverse computer users. As this case suggests, contrary to the stereotype of a young, male, computer-savvy on-line user as the prototypic Internet "addict," new consumers of the Internet who do not match this general stereotype are just as susceptible. Given the severity of the family impairment in this case, future research should focus on the prevalence, characteristics, and consequences of this type of addictive behavior.

This case suggests that certain risk factors may be associated with the development of addictive use of the Internet. First, the type of application utilized by the on-line user may be associated with the development of Internet abuse. The subject in this case became addicted to chat rooms which is consistent with prior research that has found highly interactive applications available on the Internet (e.g., virtual social chat rooms, virtual games called Multi-user Dungeons played in real time simultaneously with multiple on-line users) to be most utilized by its consumers (Turkle, 1984, 1995). Research may document that, in general, the Internet itself is not addictive, but perhaps specific applications play a significant role in the development of Internet abuse.

Secondly, this subject reported a sense of excitement when using the Internet which can be paralleled to the "high" experienced when people become addicted to video games (Keepers, 1990) or gambling (Griffiths, 1990). This implies that the level of excitement experienced by the on-line user while engaged in the Internet may be associated with addictive use of the Internet.

Based upon the issues raised here, it would be beneficial to adapt the brief questionnaire (Young, 1996) for use in classifying cases of such Internet abuse. By monitoring such cases, prevalence rates, further demographic information, and implications for treatment can be obtained. More significantly, one may show whether this type of behavior is implicated in or acts as a substitute for other established addictions, e.g., chemical dependencies, pathological gambling, sexual addictions, or if it is a co-morbid factor with other psychiatric disorders, e.g., depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders.

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