Prevalence and Correlates of Internet Addiction in Undergraduate Students: Assessing with Two Major Measures

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ABSTRACT

This study determined if two different internet addiction assessments would identify the same individuals as addicted to the internet. A total of 224 undergraduate internet users were surveyed using a stratified sampling plan based on the proportional allocation technique to procure as diverse a sample as possible. The assessments used were Young’s Internet Addiction Test (IAT), Caplan’s Generalized Problematic Internet Use Scale (GPIUS), a demographic questionnaire, and a reasons-for-use questionnaire. Results showed that about 0.9% of the sample could be considered addicted to the internet according to both the IAT and GPIUS, which is a smaller percentage than found in previous studies. There were too few participants identified as addicted to the internet to determine if these two assessments identified the same individuals as addicted; however, over a third of the sample was identified as “at risk” for addiction by one assessment and not the other. These results show that the assessment measure used is of extreme importance when diagnosing internet addiction and more robust sampling procedures may lead to fewer internet addicts identified, which could be a more accurate reflection of internet addiction in the target population.

Keywords: Excessive Internet Use, Internet Addiction, Measurement, Problematic Internet Use, Undergraduate Students

INTRODUCTION

A proportion of the internet user population experiences some negative consequences of excessive internet use as well as symptoms that can mirror an addiction. In its most general form, researchers (Beard & Wolf, 2001; Griffiths, 2000; Young, 1999) have called this phenomenon “internet addiction.” Chak and Leung (2004) report that hospitals with internet recovery services can be found in many parts of the United States, citing examples such as the McLean Hospital in Massachusetts and the Illinois Institute for Addiction Recovery at Proctor Hospital, indicating that internet addiction is an actual problem. Studies investigating internet addiction have also been conducted in many countries, including Taiwan.
Internet addiction is a growing concern across the world.

Since internet addiction is not recognized as a legitimate mental disorder in the DSM-IV and there is no standard definition of the term, many researchers have attempted to define this disorder. For example, Young (1999) defined internet addiction as “an impulse control disorder which does not involve an intoxicant” (p. 2). Kandell (1998) defined internet addiction as “a psychological dependence on the internet, regardless of the type of activity once logged in” (p. 12). Beard and Wolf (2001) define the term as “…use of the internet that creates psychological, social, school, and/or work difficulties in a person’s life” (p. 378). Hall and Parsons (2001) view internet addiction, or what they call “internet behavior dependence,” as a “maladaptive cognitive coping style that can be modified through basic cognitive behavioral intervention” (p. 314). Griffiths (2000) argues that internet addiction is a subset of a behavioral addiction and as such contains the core components of an addiction, including salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse. With all of these definitions taken together, internet addiction can be summarized as a maladaptive pattern of internet usage that significantly interferes with a person’s normal daily routines or activities, including but not limited to relationships with friends, family, and loved ones, one’s work or school environment, and one’s psychological well being.

The major symptoms of internet addiction seem to include tolerance, or increasing amounts of time on the internet to achieve satisfaction, compulsive use and withdrawal, and consequent problems with family, friends, loved ones, as well as problems at work or school. Hall and Parsons (2001) identify some other symptoms of what they call internet behavior dependence (IBD). These symptoms include failure to meet major role obligations at work, home, or school; longer use with less enjoyment; restlessness, irritability, and anxiety when not using; extended use with unsuccessful attempts to cut down, control, or stop use; and continued use despite knowledge of physical, psychological, or social problems associated with excessive use. Davis (2001) reports that the associated psychopathology of internet addiction includes symptoms such as “obsessive thoughts about the internet, tolerance, diminished impulse control, inability to cease using the internet, and withdrawal symptoms” (p. 187).

Different Assessments and Internet Addiction

A recent review of the literature on internet addiction found the prevalence varied substantially, ranging from 0.3% to 38% in the population of internet users worldwide (Chakraborty, Basu, & Kumar, 2010). One major reason for this large disparity may be the type of assessment instrument used in each study included in the review, given that there is no standard internet addiction assessment instrument. Since a variety of different assessments have been used in the past and there is a considerable amount of variation in existing studies in estimating the prevalence and effects of internet addiction, it is hypothesized that this variation can be attributed to the assessment used to measure the construct. The development of different assessments to measure internet addiction is guided by a researcher’s hypothesized notion of how internet addiction develops, and as such, may identify different individuals as addicted to the internet. If different internet addiction assessments yield different conclusions about who is addicted to the internet, comparisons across studies that use alternate assessments...
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