Chapter 2

Internet Addiction: A Modern Societal Problem

Shaun Joseph Smyth
Ulster University, UK

Kevin Curran
Ulster University, UK

Nigel Mc Kelvey
Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Internet addiction is a recent phenomenon which describes a state where people become so involved in online behaviour to the detriment of other aspects of their lives. Treatment camps for young people have sprung up around in a bid to address this contemporary issue. This chapter examines the factors in Internet addiction, its definition, the complications which exist in the various diagnostic methods of successfully diagnosing Internet addiction and the criticism directed towards some of these diagnostic methods. We also examine which individuals are at risk of developing this condition. We look at positive diagnosis of the addiction and the resultant effects it has on an individual’s family life, employment, social life and personal wellbeing before finally looking at possible methods and treatments that can be used in treating Internet addiction.

INTRODUCTION

While the 20th century proved to be the century which provided us with a time of great advances in both information and communication technologies the 21st century however is proving to be the age of the Internet as we enjoy access to vast amounts of information from all over the World and many different forums for communication. The Internet plays an integral part of our modern lives and as advances are continually being made in the world of information Technology (IT), it becomes substantially easier to access. As it’s uses continually increase, especially among the younger generation (Akin and Iskender, 2011), the Internet means that we no longer need to go searching for information but rather information
arrives at our homes on a computer screen via the simple click of a computer key. The Internet provides a wealth of services at our fingertips, including online gaming, shopping, gambling, communication with friends, social media sites as well as an abundance of information for research purposes and it enables businesses to carry out operations in the form of Electronic Commerce (e-commerce) (Hersh, 1999; Poon, 2000). These and many other services are all readily available through the very accessible Internet which can be accessed without leaving the comfort of our chair at home.

Most people make use of the Internet as a functional tool performing their day-to-day personal objectives which may include booking hotels or making airline reservations. However certain individuals experience an inability to control their Internet use resulting in distressful symptoms of psychological dependence (Brand et al. 2014). The limits however, to which many individuals are engaging with the Internet and its many functions such as a means for communication is a subject of much discussion, as the topic of Internet addiction (IA) continues to be the subject of much debate among researchers in mental health (Young, 2004). Despite the vast numbers of Internet users which exist the benefits of the Internet are reported to far outweigh the opposing consequences which result from extreme use such as Internet addiction which reportedly is not yet recognised by the ICD-10 (International classification of Diseases) or the DSM-IV which is the 4th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Murali and George, 2007). Internet addiction is referred to in several different ways and the terms “Internet addiction disorder (IAD),” “Problematic Internet Use (PIU),” “Excessive Internet Use,” “Compulsive Internet Use,” “Pathological Internet Use,” and “Computer Addiction” have all been used to refer to the same notion which is that an individual gets so involved in their online use to such an extent that it leaves other areas of their lives neglected (Griffiths, 1998; Cash et al. 2012; Yan et al. 2014; Li et al. 2014).

The remainder of this chapter looks at what constitutes an addiction, the definition of Internet addiction, the complications which exist in the various diagnostic methods of successfully diagnosing Internet addiction, the criticism some of these diagnostic methods have taken and the effects of excessive Internet use by both students and employees. This chapter also highlights those individuals which are at increased risk of developing this condition including positive diagnosis of the addiction and the resultant effects it has on the individual’s family life, employment, social life and personal wellbeing before finally looking at possible methods and treatments that can be employed for treating Internet addiction.

BACKGROUND

Even though the last 15 years has witnessed the number of Internet users increase by 1000% research into Internet addiction is however, still in its infancy (Kuss and Lopez-Fernandez, 2016). With the growth of the Internet over the last two decades the number of Internet users and individuals experiencing problems as they have lost control over their Internet use and experienced negative issues in their daily lives such as problems at work or school, has risen extensively (Brand et al. 2014). There are currently over three billion Internet users worldwide which accounts for 40% of the world’s population. The first billion was reached in 2005 as 2010 witnessed the second billion and the level reach three billion in 2014 as the growth in smartphones and other devices enables online and Internet connectivity (Zafar, 2016). A recent nationwide study in 11 European countries reported the occurrence of obsessive Internet users to range from 11.8% in Israel to 1.2% in Italy (Lai et al. 2013).