Chapter 4

I’m Always Online: Well-Being and Main Sources of Life Dis/Satisfaction of Heavy Internet Users

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ABSTRACT

Internet use has become an integral part of our lives. It provides a lot of benefits; however, excessive use can have serious consequences for one’s well-being. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to explore well-being of heavy Internet users. Empirical research was conducted on 500 students of engineering, who were divided into groups based on the total time per day reported spending in various online activities. The comparison of subjective well-being and sources of life satisfaction and dissatisfaction showed that heavy Internet users were less happy compared to light users. Heavy Internet users found more satisfaction in various entertainment activities, while light users found more satisfaction in love life and family. Findings of this research provide some important theoretical findings, but also point out that the continuing research is needed to further explore the relation between Internet addiction, time spent online, and well-being.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the Internet has risen exponentially in our lives. While at the end of the 20th and in the beginning of the 21st century online activities were mostly used as an additional social and business tool, nowadays they have become an integral part of all life aspects among various groups of people – especially among younger generations. Not only an increasing number of people (regularly) uses the Internet, but
for an increasing number of them being available online 24/7 (through smart-phones and tablets) has become a common, acceptable, even desirable behavior.

However, certain forms of Internet use are related to non-beneficial health outcomes. The term Internet Addiction Disorder was first introduced by Goldberg (1996) to describe pathological and compulsive use of the Internet. This kind of addiction is defined as an impulse-control disorder that does not involve an intoxicant (Young, 1996) or as a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (Bastani, 2008). Morahan-Martin (2007) and Widyanto and Griffiths (2007) define problematic Internet use (PIU) as a syndrome that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral symptoms related to difficulties with managing one’s offline life. Although Internet addiction is not included in the official manual of American Psychiatric Association (2013), Internet gaming disorder is listed in it as a disorder requiring further study (Section III - Conditions for Further Study). Chou and Hsiao (2000) claim that Internet addiction represents a global mental health problem, and epidemiological studies showed that the international prevalence rate of Internet addiction among adolescents varied significantly from 0.9% to 38% (Xu et al., 2012).

This chapter will not focus on the Internet addiction per se, but on one of its symptoms: excessive Internet use and its relation to well-being of a particularly vulnerable group - students of electrical engineering and computing. Namely, due to the nature of their study, they are forced to be online much more in comparison with an average population of emerging adults.

BACKGROUND

Time Spent Online and Internet Addiction

Various research confirmed positive relationship between higher consumption and a higher level of addiction (e.g. Chen & Fu, 2009, Beutel et al., 2011; Frangos, Frangos & Sotiropoulos, 2011). Likewise, an increased amount of time spent on the Internet, i.e. excessive Internet use represents a fundamental indicator of Internet addiction (Chou, Condron, & Belland, 2005). As an illustration, amount of time spent on the Internet was an item in the Young’s (1996) Internet Addiction Diagnostic Questionnaire. To investigate Internet addiction of adolescents, Müller et al. (2016) explored, among other things, the frequency of their online activities (e.g. gambling, pornography). Furthermore, Soule, Shell, and Kleen (2003, p. 66) emphasized “long hours” of Internet use as one of the Internet addiction symptoms, while Weinstein and Lejoyeux (2010) highlighted “higher frequency of Internet use” as a factor “predictive of problematic Internet use” (p. 280). Finally, Young’s (1998) research results show that Internet dependents spent an average of 39.5 hours per week on Internet activities, while Internet non-dependents spent an average of 4.9 hours. According to Chou, Condron, and Belland (2005), Chen and Chou (1999) reported that the Internet addiction “high-risk” group spent about 20 hours per week online, while the “non–high-risk” group spent about 9 hours online.

Well-Being

The concept of well-being refers to optimal psychological functioning and experience (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Well-being is a multi-faceted and subjective concept; it is related to various domains of individuals’ life such as health, social relations, achievement, leisure, material status, and mental health (Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2009). Subjective well-being refers to one’s own satisfaction with those aspects, but
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