Chapter 11

Therapeutic Approaches for Internet Addiction

Libi Shen
Concordia University, USA

ABSTRACT

The invention of the internet has brought us abundant information, convenience, connection, communication, and entertainment in the past five decades. While people enjoy using the Internet, it has also triggered negative effects. Heavy internet users become lost online, some are addicted to games and social media, and others to their smartphones and online shopping. The problem is that often the Internet addicts do not know they are addicted or, even if they do know, they do not take any therapeutic approaches to improve their conditions. Internet addiction can be detrimental to a person’s mental and physical health. Since the symptoms of Internet addiction are varied and the consequences can be severe, it is essential to closely examine the treatments for Internet addiction. What approaches should people take if their family members, friends, relatives, students, or themselves are Internet addicted? In this chapter, the researcher attempts to revisit and update research on definitions, theories, models, causes, consequences, symptoms, and treatment of internet addiction.

INTRODUCTION

The internet was created in 1969 when a UCLA distinguished computer science professor, Dr. Leonard Kleinrock, sent the first message over the ARPANET (a computer network) to the Stanford Research Institute (Kromhout, 2009; Modesti, 2009). Over the past 50 years, the world has prospered dramatically due to the development of the internet. The invention of the internet has brought copious information and communication as well as innumerable innovation, connection, online shopping, online banking, e-commerce, entertainment, globalization, and so forth to people’s lives. Each day, many people rely on the internet to do their jobs, because many high-tech products (e.g., laptop computers, iPhones, smartwatches, tablets), social networks (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube), communication apps (e.g., Skype, LINE, WeChat, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Zoom, WebEx), and emails (e.g., Google, Yahoo, Outlook) all depend on the internet.

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Therapeutic Approaches for Internet Addiction

The number of internet users has increased from 414,794,957 in 2000 to 3,424,971,237 in 2016 (Internet Live Stats, 2017) and 4.021 billion in 2018 (Kemp, 2018). The top ten internet users in the world are China, India, United States, Brazil, Japan, Russia, Nigeria, Germany, U.K., and Mexico in sequence (Internet Live Stats, 2017). The total number of social media users in the U.S. was 3.196 billion and the number of mobile phone users was 5.135 billion in 2018 (Kemp, 2018). The total number of Facebook active users in 2018 was 2.32 billion (Statista, 2019). At schools, more students pay attention to their smartphones than their teachers’ teaching contents. At home, people sacrifice conversations with family members and spend invaluable time connecting with others on social media all over the world. It seems that the internet has brought distant people closer, but has also removes us from the ones we sit next to at home.

Unfortunately, the use of the internet has precipitated cybercrimes, spam mails, phishing scams, data breaches, Trojan, virus, malware, hacking, and so forth in the world (Shen, 2018). Earlier, Griffiths, Kuss, and King (2012) claimed that “excessive video game playing can have potentially damaging effects upon individuals who appear to display compulsive and/or addictive behaviors similar to other more traditional addictions” (p. 314). Now, Ahmer and Tanzil (2018) found that internet addicts who are social network users demonstrated significant behavioral patterns such as excessive time expenditure, ignored academics, hidden use from family and friends, preferred virtual friendship, frustration on non-availability, source of distraction, failed exam and blamed on social network sites, and emotional irregularities.

What are the causes and symptoms of internet addiction? How have the definitions of internet addiction evolved? What should people do if they or their family members are addicted to the internet? The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of internet addiction in the past two decades and to seek more therapeutic approaches for internet addiction.

BACKGROUND

People who are preoccupied with the internet, who are unable to control their use, and who are jeopardizing employment and relationships are internet addicts (Beard & Wolf, 2001). Approximately 420 million people were addicted to the internet in 2014 (Cheng & Li, 2014). In 2018, 3.1 billion people (one-third of the global population) used social media, which reflected a social media user increase of 13% (Mediakix, 2018). It was estimated that over 210 million people suffer from internet and social media addictions, and it damages people’s sleep because 71% of American sleep with their mobile devices (Mediakix, 2018). Internet addiction has appeared in every age group, with 73% between age 13 to 17, 71% between age 18 to 24, 59% between age 25 to 34, 40% between age 45 to 54, 39% between age 55 to 64, and 44% above 65 years old (About Addiction Facts, 2017). Approximately 64% females and 55% males were caught in the Web (About Addiction Facts, 2017).

In the past two decades, researchers found relationships between internet addiction and other risk factors, such as depression (Akin & Iskender, 2011; Şahin, 2014; Young & Rodgers, 1998), psychopathology (Koc, 2011), self-compassion (Iskender & Akin, 2011), shyness (Ayas, 2012; Doğan & Kaya, 2016), personality traits (Celik, Atak, & Basal, 2012), social networks (Cam & Isbulan, 2012; Simsek & Sali, 2014), psychological well-being (Cardak, 2013), loneliness (Demirer, Bozoglan, & Sahin, 2013; Pontes, Griffiths, & Patrão, 2014), social anxiety (Holm, 2013), drug use (Kurt, 2015), attitudes (Ilhan, Çelik, Gemcioğlu, & Çiftaslan, 2016), and social skills (Karimzadeh, 2015), etc. They also explored the symptoms, evaluation, and treatment of internet addiction (e.g., Beard, 2011; Caldwell & Cunningham, 2011).