

Investigating the Phenomenon of the Internet Addictive Usage Among Adolescents and Youth (15-25 years of age) in the City of Tehran¹

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Abstract: *The present paper is an investigation into the phenomenon of the internet addiction as a social problem facing the information and communications age. The phenomenon of the internet addiction has recently emerged in the developed nations as a consequence of the increasing expansion in the network of the electronic communications. Such a phenomenon proves to have already involved a myriad of dysfunctions for the individual, the family, and the society. This paper is an adapted version of a survey research conducted in 2006 on the Situation of the Internet Addiction in Iran. The statistical population consists of the adolescent and the youth between 15 to 25 years of age, who have access to the internet connection. The sample size equals 800 subjects. The findings indicate that the phenomenon of the internet addiction does exist in Iran, too. Although the usage is attributed to most of the adolescent, young users are determined to be normal. Moreover, based on the present research findings, the addictive use of the internet among some of the adolescent and the youth is associated with problems such as evading social responsibility, social isolation, lack of social support, and inefficient job and educational performances. The above-mentioned problems bear direct relationship with the internet addiction, while the latter has an adverse effect on the feeling of self-worthiness.*

Key Words: The Internet addiction; Taking social responsibility; Social isolation; Job & educational inefficiency; Feeling of self-worthiness

Introduction

Access to the internet is on the rise, and everyday increasing numbers of people join in as users of the internet. It is becoming omnipresent: the internet can be found at home, school, and even at the neighborhood shopping center. One estimate indicates that 66 million Americans in 1981, had access to the internet, their number exceeded 83 million in 1999 (Biggs, 2000, p. 1). Among the internet users, the youth make the most use of it. The findings of the research conducted in the U.S.A showed that the internet use was prevalent among the youth more than any other age groups (Bullen & Harre, 2005, p. 5). Children are another age group that uses the internet extensively. In 2005, more than 77 million children entered the cyberspace (Ghamami, 2005, p. 45).

Parallel to the continuing occurrence of an increase in access of the internet, we are faced with a new type of addiction, the internet addiction, which is on the rise in the information age. Like any other addiction, the internet addiction is associated with certain symptoms such as anxiety, depression, peevishness, restlessness, obsessive-compulsive state, seclusion, emotional disorders, and disruptive social relationships. Moreover, as individuals' relations (those of children and the adolescent, in particular) are increased in the cyberspace, their relationships in the real world decrease, and there appears the likelihood of a fall in their educational performance (Samson and Keen, 2005, p. 2)

Through the internet addiction the individuals are transformed into "loose" beings. It drastically influences their social relationships. As a result of excessive use of the internet, the users' work productivity and efficiency fall. These internet users arrive late at work, and under act. Lack of physical activity and obesity accompanied by

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symptoms like back ache, and pain in vertebral muscles are other resultants of the same problem. Even upon withdrawing from the internet, these users experience symptoms of disorder (Seth, 2003, p. 1).

At any rate, the internet addiction becomes more epidemic as the access to online sources increases. The worldwide web is a useful informer which contains rich and entertaining sources. Nonetheless, for many internet addicts the benefits are being transformed into pathologies bringing losses, and psychological and behavioral abnormalities (Ferris, 2002, p. 1). Studies show that %14 of the internet users are pathological users, suffering symptoms of obsessive behavior, narcissism, depression and the like (Zahnister, 2000, p. 1).

The present paper aims to answer several basic questions: (1) whether the internet addiction exists in Iran? ; and (2) What implications addictive use of the internet bears upon individuals (children and the youth, in particular) in various social, cultural and educational settings?

Perspectives and Theories explaining the internet Addiction and its Consequences

What attracts people to the internet, and why do some individuals who enjoy it, experience difficulties and are exposed to risks like losing their jobs and/or becoming entangled in disruptive social relations and financial losses? In response to these questions a number of approaches have been developed. Studying addiction to the internet is an interdisciplinary subject, and its causes and consequences have been investigated, though from different viewpoints, by various sciences such as the medicine, communications, sociology, law, ethics, and psychology. In this section, we have mainly dealt with its psychological and social dimensions. The most important theories on reasons for addictive attraction of people to the internet are:

1. Psychodynamic and Personality Explanations
2. Social Control Theory
3. Behavioral Explanation
4. Biomedical Explanation
5. Cognitive Explanation
6. Cognitive-Behavioral Explanation

The addiction to the internet develops and grows in response to the previous psychological conditions. In most cases this overall pathological condition includes depression, social anxiety, and a variety of psychosis. When the individual is exposed to the use of the internet, the user's problematic utilization process begins. This background pathology is a predisposition or a tendency of some kind which generates stress. There are, of course, some other factors involved in the genesis and maintenance of the disorder:

First, there are some behavioral reinforcements which act as conditioning factors. The room, chair, touching the keyboard and the mouse, the sound by which the PC starts running, the bugle or ringing of a bell, are all included in this type of factors.

Second, the cognitive malevolence is also active here. This is so because the uncompromising perception concerning the self and the universe produces the main indices of such a disorder. Beliefs such as "no one likes me outside the internet", or that "the internet is the only place in which people truly reveal themselves", and that "everyone is somehow infected with the internet", are problematic cognitive thoughts concerning the "universe".

Third, the qualitative use of the internet depends on the supportive social web that the individual has access to. If all factors are present in the individual without any social support, then the chances are that he/she turns to the general internet addiction which is characterized by acts intended to attract social attention, impersonal behaviors and job negligence. But, if social factors are in place, it is likely that the person develops specific internet addiction in which he/she targets special domains such as games or pornography.

From the behavioral-cognitive point of view, symptoms of the disorder include obsessive thoughts about the internet, weakness in shock control, inability in stopping the use of the internet, and most importantly the belief that the internet is the individual's sole friend. In addition, when disconnected, the individual keeps thinking about the internet, prepares for the next connection, and spends much on buying the internet related items; these are symptoms of the disorder. Another main problem is separating the self from friends in favor of the internet friends, and ultimately he/she feels guilty about the use of the internet, and starts telling the friends lie about the time spent, and tries to keep it as a secret. These are other symptoms of the disorder. These individuals are aware that their action is not socially admired, yet they are unable to stop it. This is so because stopping it results in feeling of less self-worthiness, and consequently more symptomatic behavior will appear (Omidvar & Saremi, 2002, p. 52).

Literature Review

Growhole in an attempt to explain why people use the internet in an addictive manner believes that the reason for people's tendency toward the addictive use of the internet is that they want to avoid problems they face in their personal lives. In a sense, in order to evade the life-related problems people turn to the internet. The addicts often create a 'second life', or a hide-out place to forget their problems while being online, this is very similar to feel numb and drunk, as reported by alcoholics, while drinking (Sexuality Education Resource Centre, 2003, p. 3).

Kratt in his research, conducted in 1999, concluded that the youth withdrawing from social contacts use the internet as an instrument to evade the reality (Lim et al., 2004, p. 2). Other researches have indicated that one of the consequences of dependence on the internet is that the individuals spend less time with their family. Among symptoms of this dependency are seclusion, disorder in sleep pattern, feeling of a need to be alone, and forgetting the family responsibilities. On the other hand, one must admit that it is this factor of social isolation which intensifies the internet addiction among the individuals.

Jung (1996) in his researches also found that %58 of high school students, experienced rapid fall in their studying habits, and then their grades fell considerably and their absence from the school rose, following the excessive use of the internet. Despite its many capabilities, the internet is recognized as an excellent educational tool, alas the young students instead of performing creative activities often enter irrelevant sites, chat rooms, and spend time strolling inside the internet friendship services and dealing with its endless software programs accessing games. Birdi (1996) also found that the excessive use of the internet, making students to stay up, occupying the university's phone lines, has exposed the students to dangers of improper use of the internet, educational difficulties, and lack of participation in the curriculum, which in turn makes the problem of the internet addiction more acute among these individuals (<http://www.internetaddictoin.com>).

Orzak, in a study carried out in 1999 found that the individuals with the internet addiction are those who are abrasive, lonely, and shy, depressed and suffer a variety of other addictions (Chebbi et al., 2000, p. 1).

Seth also observes, in his research, that the internet addiction transforms humans into abandoned and loose individuals and it affects their relationships with others. The work productivity and efficiency of people who use the internet excessively are reduced. These individuals arrive late at work, and under act. Moreover, the individuals addicted to the internet chatting are engaged excessively in virtual relations and the chances of their involvement in unethical issues are high. The internet friendship quickly displaces the importance and status of the familial relationships and those held with the old friends (Fenichel, Michael, 2003).

In all, based on the previous research, other consequences of the internet addiction are: feebleness in social relationships with others, and the occurrence of disorder in real life skills (King, 1996, p. 7), disorder in professional and private life of the individual (Duran, 2003, p. 3), lack of control on conducts, distorting the time, and a reduction in modesty and decency (De Angelis, 2000, pp. 1), tearing away from the real life (Bullen & Harre, 2000, pp. 3).

Also based on the previous research, the most important reasons for the internet addiction are: A drastic change in the individual's psychological state and temperament (Chebbi et al., 2004, p. 2), evading the reality and withdrawing from contacting others in the society (Lim et al., 2004, p. 2).

Theoretical Framework of the Research

The theoretical framework of this research is a combination of some of the perspectives as discussed above, with the previous research. In studying the relationship of variables concerning evading social responsibility and the internet addiction, the Hirschi's social control theory is used. Based on this, the less committed the individual is towards others, the more likely his/her tendency toward deviant behavior, including the addictive internet use.

To study the relationship of self-worthiness with the internet addiction, we have utilized the cognitive-behavioral approach. The individual's belief that only within the internet he/she holds power, and is considered "somebody", and that it is "there" that he/she receives some sort of respect, is a source of the individual's tendency toward addictive use of the internet.

In examining the relationship of lack of social support with addiction to the internet, we, again, have used the cognitive-behavioral approach. The individual's belief that the internet constitutes his/her sole, sincere and special friend, increases his/her interest in virtual friends, while reducing his/her interest in real-life friends, resulting in social isolation.

As shown in the figure below, the phenomenon of addictive use of the internet has a bi-directional relationship with each of the variables of self-worthiness, lack of social support, social isolation, educational and job failure, and evading the social responsibility. In fact, these variables, while affecting the internet addiction, are also recognized as its consequences. This recognition, which points to the existence of a bi-directional relationship, is also acknowledged in the previous research.

Considering such a theoretical framework, the model used in this research for explaining the internet addiction is shown in the following figure:

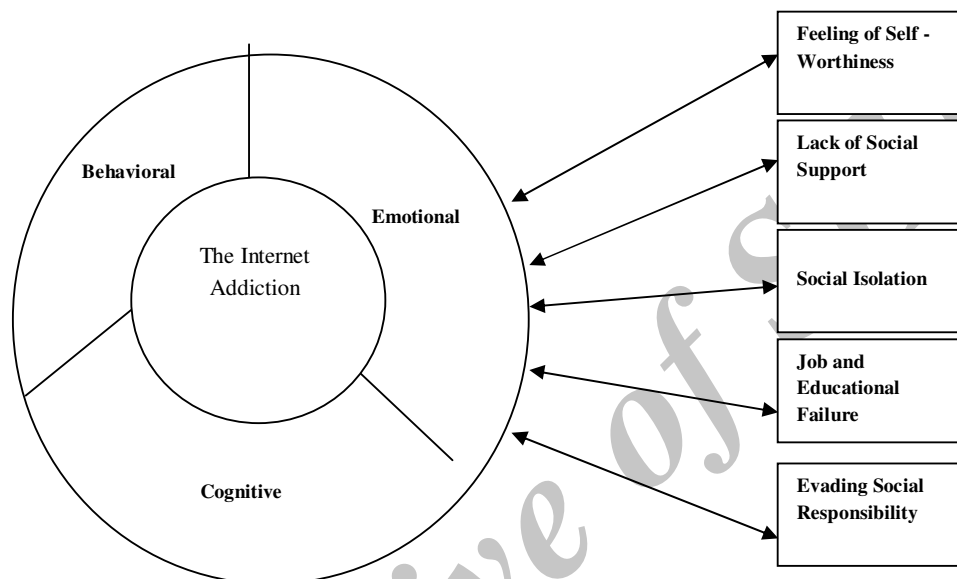


Figure 1: The Model of Relationship between the Addictive Usage of the Internet and Psycho-Social Problems.

Research Hypotheses

Considering the theoretical framework, expounded earlier, this research's hypotheses are:

- 1- There is relationship between the internet addiction and taking of social responsibilities.
- 2- There is relationship between the internet addiction and social isolation.
- 3- There is relationship between the internet addiction and job and educational failure.
- 4- There is relationship between the internet addiction and the lack of social support.
- 5- There is relationship between the internet addiction and feeling of self-worthiness.

Methodology

This is a survey method research. The statistical population consisted of adolescents and youth between the ages of 15-25 residing in Tehran, who had access to the internet. Among them, a sample of 800 persons was selected. The sampling was carried out through two methods. The first method used the cluster sampling (PPS), in which a total of 600 persons were selected by referring to the household. In the second method, a total of 200 users were considered through the random sampling among café nets in Tehran, whom were subsequently interviewed and who filled a questionnaire.

The questionnaire has been our main measuring instrument in this research. In order to measure the degrees and aspects of the internet addiction, a combination of the Davis Scale (comprising 20 questions), and Kaplan's Questionnaire (comprising 28 questions), with a thorough consideration of the Iranian socio-cultural setting, was used. Having prepared the preliminary questionnaire, a pre-test was administered on a 50-subject sample from the total sample to ensure the reliability of the items.

The Findings

Section One: Descriptive Findings

A) The frequency distribution of the respondents in terms of having a computer and access to the internet:

- 1- Out of all the subjects comprising the sample, %94.8 had a computer at home.
- 2- Among the sample population, %37 had been using computers for less than three years, and %76.8 of the respondents has been using a computer for less than six years.
- 3- Out of the sample population, %61.6 had been connected to the internet for less than three years. But, in all, the average of access to the internet within the sample was three years and 69 days.
- 4- Out of the sample population, %68.1 had access to the internet connection for 10 hours per week.
- 5- Out of the sample population, %72.5 connected to the internet for less than 2 hours per each connection.
- 6- Within the sample population, %44.3 of their internet use was defined as "education and work" related affairs.
- 7- On average, out of every 9 households referred to in Tehran city, there existed only one adolescent or youth between the ages of 15-25 who had access to the internet.
- 8- Within the sample population, only %76.4 of the individuals had access to the internet at home, and %9.5 used the connection through the café nets.

B) The frequency distribution of the respondents in terms of the degree of the internet addiction:

In this research, we study three aspects of the phenomenon of the internet addiction. These three aspects are emotional, behavioral, and cognitive. The results are as follows:

- 1- Out of the sample population, %25.8 were addicted to the internet emotionally.
- 2- Out of the sample population, %33 were addicted to the internet behaviorally.
- 3- Out of the sample population, %21.6 were addicted to the internet cognitively.
- 4- Combining the various aspects of the internet addiction, the results indicated that out of the sample population, %66.4 were not addicted to the internet, while %24.3 were addicted to the internet use.

C) The frequency distribution of the respondents in terms of psycho-social problems:

- 1- Out of the sample population, %60.2 had high-level feeling of taking social responsibility, while the rest showed medium and low levels of such a feeling.
- 2- Out of the sample population, %73 lacked social isolation, and %27 had high- and medium-levels of social isolation.
- 3- Out of the sample population, %73.7 suffered low-level job and educational failure, while %26.3 exhibited medium and high levels of such a failure.
- 4- Out of the sample population, %64.8 enjoyed high level of social support, while %35.2 showed medium and low levels of such a support.
- 5- Out of the sample population, %60.7 enjoyed high level of self-worth feeling, while %18.2 showed medium and low levels of such a feeling.

Section Two: Analytical Findings

The analytical findings of this research are presented under the two categories of (1) The test of the relationship between the internet addiction and the influencing and consequential variables and, (2) The test of the difference and the spread of aspects of the internet addiction:

A) The test of the relationship between the internet addiction and psycho-social problems:

- 1- There existed a significant relationship between the two variables of the internet addiction and that of evading social responsibility ($R=0.38$ $F=0.01$). In other words, the higher the level of the internet addiction in an individual, the lower was the level of his/her taking social responsibility.
- 2- There was a significant relationship between the internet addiction and social isolation ($R=0.36$ $F=0.01$). That is, the level of social isolation rose as the degree of the individual's internet addiction was increased.
- 3- A significant relationship existed between the two variables of the internet addiction and job/educational failure ($R=0.34$ $F=0.01$). It means that the more intense the individual's addiction to the internet, the higher is the degree of his/her failure in job and education.

4- Between the two variables of the internet addiction and lack of social support, there existed a significant relationship ($R=0.28$ $F=0.01$). In other words, the more intense the individual's addiction to the internet, the lower is the amount of social support he/she receives.

5- There was a significant relationship between the two variables of the internet addiction and feeling of self-worthiness ($R=0.29$ $F=0.01$). It means that the lower the degree of the internet addiction, the higher is the individual's feeling of self-worthiness.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present paper dealt with a new social problem concerning the fruition of the internet technology in Iran. The internet was introduced in Iran in 1994. Ever since then, the number of its users has grown considerably each year. Based on a report by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology of Iran, within the span of the past four years only, the number of the internet users has grown by 25 times as many. It is, therefore, an inevitable need to understand scientifically such a growing phenomenon in Iran, keeping an eye on its implications. This research has attempted a sociological investigation into the internet addiction and its consequences among the adolescent and the youth residing in Tehran city.

The research findings indicate that the respondents have an average internet access of 11 hours and 22 minutes per week. The average of connection duration of the respondents per each connection is one hour and 56 minutes. According to Holmes, when the amount of time spent on the internet use is below 19 hours per week, then that may be regarded as constituting a normal internet usage for the individual. Thus, in Holmes view, if an individual spends more than 19 hours per week on the internet, then he/she would be considered as an internet addict. Nonetheless, a "proper" definition of an internet addict, as Holmes maintains, is the one who spends at least 38 hours per week, or 8 hours per day, on the internet. In any case, regardless of quantity of the time spent on the internet, one can focus on symptoms of addiction to it.

Based on research findings, it can be argued that the amount of the time spent on the internet among adolescents and youth in Iran is normal, and it does not come close to an addictive usage threshold. In fact, out of the total sample population, 66.4% of the adolescent and the youth who enjoyed the internet connection was not addicted to it. Yet, considering current trend in the growth of the internet in Iran, the 24.3 percentage of addicts to the internet among adolescents and youth, is a matter to be taken into serious consideration. One may posit the question of whether we are, considering the growth of the internet gradual penetration ratio in Iran, to face the spread of the internet addiction in Iran in the near future. In other words, one may adopt the assumption followed by a question: that given the current rate of the internet growth, and the increase of its users in Iran, would such growth and increase be matched by a growth in the internet addiction in Iran?

As to the degrees of the spread of each aspect of the internet addiction, the findings showed that 25.8% of the respondents was emotionally, 33% was behaviorally, and 21.6% was cognitively addicted to the internet.

Based on the research findings, most of adolescents and youth under study showed high levels of social responsibility. Moreover, the majority of the respondents were not involved in social isolation situations, had high educational and job achievement levels, enjoyed high measures of social support, and finally, their feelings of self-worthiness were rather high.

But, again, based on the research findings, those individuals who used the internet in an addictive manner felt less responsibility as far as their society and surroundings were concerned, involved in more social isolation situations, experienced more cases of failure in terms of their job and education, enjoyed less social support, and had lower rates of self-worthiness.

With regard to the consequences of the internet addiction, it should be pointed out that the internet, by itself, is an impartial and neutral device. The importance is to be attached to the fact that how the internet is being used by the individuals. If the internet is used properly and positively, it is a medium which would contribute much to the societal development. Otherwise, it is fraught with numerous problems. In other words, the worldwide web is an instant information network containing countless sources, the improper and excessive use of which, by some individuals who may immerse themselves in the depths of computer world, while divorcing from the real one, may result in converting the benefits into losses. The current global situation bears testimony to such an improper usage by some of the users in many nations. This has brought about a modern type of addiction, that of the internet in the information age which has embraced the computer revolution. At any rate, the internet dependency and the addictive use of it is the source of disturbance and disorder which can be found at the individual and societal levels, bearing numerous implications for adolescents and youth, in particular.

Our research findings are indicative of problems such as: lack of social responsibility, absence of social support, the presence of social isolation, and prevalence of failure in job and in education, and the feeling of worthlessness. These constitute both the consequences and causes of the improper and addictive use of the internet. Those affected by these problems in the society, feel more attachment toward the internet and its virtual space, thus becoming addicted to it. Such an addiction, in turn, intensifies the ordeal that these kinds of users already find themselves in.

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