Letter to the Editor / Editöre Mektup

Internet Addiction Among Students

Ana Momcilovic[1],
Olivera Iskrenovic-Momcilovic[2]

[1]University of Nis, Faculty of Medicine, Nis - Serbia
[2]University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Education,
Sombor - Serbia

Address reprint requests to / Yazışma adresi: Olivera Iskrenovic-Momcilovic, University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Education, Sombor, Serbia

E-mail address / Elektronik posta adresi: oljkaisk@yahoo.com

Dear Editor,

The Internet is the greatest invention in the field of communication. Technically, it is "network of all networks" that consists of a large number of separate computers connected by a network structure (1). Besides, the Internet is a huge library of information that can not be found anywhere. On the other hand, it looks like the Wild West, having few rules and they are often violated.

Simultaneously the development of the Internet as a medium accessible to the general population has created a field for the different forms of abuse.

Private life occupied by excessive and dysfunctional use of the Internet can result in a development of the Internet addiction. Authorities define Internet addiction as a clinical disorder with strong negative consequences on social, occupational, familial, financial, and economic functioning of personality. The main criterion for the diagnosis of Internet addiction is the excessive time spent on the Internet. However, it should be noted that a period of 4 to 6 hours spent on the Internet may or may not be an indicator of Internet addiction (2).

Today there is no clear consensus about the forms of Internet addiction. According to Suler (3), there are two forms of addiction; general (excessive use of the Internet) and specific type (excessive use of some applications of the Internet). Dr. Kimberly Young (4) categorized five specific types of Internet addiction: cybersexual addiction to adult chat rooms or cyberporn; cyber-relationship addiction to online friendships or affairs that replace real-life situations; net compulsions to online gambling, auctions, or obsessive trading; compulsive web surfing or databases searches reaching information overload; and computer addiction to game playing or programming.

The best-known instrument for evaluation and measurement of Internet use disorder is Internet Addiction Test (IAT), which was designed by Dr. Kimberly Young (5,6). The test consists of 20 items formulated in the form of questions about the impacts of the Internet use on everyday life, social life, productivity, sleep patterns and feelings (7). In the 2011 version of the test, the answers are given on the six-point Likert scale (0="never, 1="rarely", 2="sometimes", 3="often", 4="very often" and 5="always") scores from 0 to 100. The score range is classified as (6):

- 0–30: lack of dependence on the Internet,
- 31–49: a slight degree of dependence on the Internet,
- 50–79: moderate degree of dependence on the Internet,
- 80–100: high degree of dependence on the Internet.

Although there were several attempts to validate IAT (8,9), it is still believed that IAT is not completely reliable and valid psychometric instrument. The reason why we decided to use IAT is that the content of the number of items are grounded in the diagnostic criteria of dependence and compulsive behaviors, which are also closely related with the phenomena of Internet use disorder. Furthermore, IAT is the oldest method and most empirical studies successfully employed this test to measure the Internet addiction severity (needs reference).

We would like to report that most young people enjoy the use of the Internet, and in some cases the use of the Internet may get out of control and transform to an addiction. In our study with 174 senior students from various programs at the Faculty of Education in Sombor, Serbia, the dropout rate was about 5.2%. The most common reason of fail was absence due to illnesses or family obligations. Ninty seven percent of students have a computer at home, 90.9% of students have a regular Internet access. Inquiries about the extent of Internet use raised the worrying situation:

- more than one-third (38.1%) of the students spent more than 2 hours/day on the Internet,
- more than two-thirds (70.3%) accessed the Internet every day,
- about two-thirds (66.1%) had been the Internet user more than three years.

One-third of the students (33.3%) had the scores that indicate the presence of symptoms of Internet abuse. IAT identifies three levels of Internet dependency, mild, moderate, and high level of Internet addiction. According to our study, 3.0% (5) of the students have a high degree of dependence, 9.15% (15) of the students have a medium level, and 21.2% (35) have a slight dependence on the Internet. The average IAT score of all students was 31.73 points. This can be interpreted as an average number of students has a slight degree of Internet addiction.

The fact that one-third of the students are addicted to the Internet is worrying. Like other addictions, Internet addiction leads to a distortion of personality, psychological and physical condition, and social life. An important difference between this and other addictions is that the Internet has both useful and harmful aspects. However, the rational use of the Internet is necessary for everyone. The treatment of Internet addiction should reduce the use of the Internet but not to terminate it. An Internet user has to have a sense of self-control when he/she uses it.

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