International Journal of Pedagogy Innovation and New Technologies

journal homepage: https://czasopisma.aps.edu.pl/index.php/ijpint/index

ISSN: 2392-0092, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2024

Problematic Multimedia Use and Human Mental Health in an Intergenerational Perspective

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Keywords:

problematic internet use, behavioural addictions, mental health

Abstract:

The article is an attempt to explain the problematic use of the Internet, especially in the context of its connection to other mental health issues. It discusses the dangers of prolonged Internet use, such as the intensification of depressive and anxiety disorders. The phenomenon of intergenerational transmission in the aspect of excessive use of multimedia was also analysed, and preventive measures and measures to counteract Internet addiction were presented.

Introduction

Difficulties related to the mental health of the individual, the family and whole societies are becoming in modern times one of the main problems occupying the community of specialists in psychiatry, clinical psychology, pedagogy, sociology. Selected mental problems in society include: mood disorders, including depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, self-harming behaviour, substance and behavioural addictions. Feelings of loneliness, isolation, changes in an individual's hierarchy of needs, motivation or values, are negatively reflected in the search for relief and pleasure in networked activities. Both mental health and mental disorders can be exacerbated by problematic use of new media in children, adolescents and also adults.

Addiction and Problematic Media Use

The nomenclature of Internet addiction is used synonymously: networkaholism, cyber addiction, internet addiction, internet dependence, internet addiction, computer addiction, internet abuse disorder, infoholism, infosusceptibility. In pedagogical, medical and psychological literature, the authors present the following terminological proposals: Pathological Internet Use Disorder/Patological Internet Use Disorder, Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD), Internet Addiction Syndrome (ZUI)/Internet Addiction Syndrome (IAS), Computer and Network Addiction, Computer Addiction, Problematic Internet Use (Polish adaptation of the K. Young test), Excessive Internet Use.

One of the main difficulties associated with human participation in cyberspace is media addiction. An increasing number of phenomena linking the sphere of mental health and the media go beyond the phenomenon of cyberholism, touching on the areas of social isolation, social media overstimulation, the consequences of risky behaviour, online hate or other difficulties relating to the Internet.

As Maciej Tanaś (2015) points out, the Internet realises the eternal human dream of a space of freedom where transcendence is possible, transcending human frailties, barriers of time and space. Virtual reality may

in time appear as more perfect, easier than real reality, while digital media themselves become a factor influencing changes in lifestyle, type of cognitive, creative and ludic activity of children, adolescents and adults. Social, cultural and civilisational transformations are taking place with the participation of information and communication technologies (Tanaś, 2015, p. 11).

In the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Health Problems, Eleventh Revision (ICD-11) authorised by the World Health Organisation WHO, the definition of networkaholism is included in the group of disorders resulting from addictive behaviour. It classifies identifiable and clinically significant syndromes associated with distress or disruption of personal functioning that develop as a result of habitual rewarding activities other than substance use, e.g. internet gambling disorder, online and offline network gaming. The addicted person develops a persistent pattern of repetitive behaviour that becomes a priority and takes precedence over other interests and daily activities. This behaviour continues despite negative consequences such as family conflicts or educational and occupational problems. The pattern is continuous or episodic, but recurs and persists over time (Galecki & Szulc, 2023, p. 39).

In turn, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) has singled out Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) in the fifth version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) classification, in the chapter on diagnostic entities for further study. Symptoms of the disorder include preoccupation with gaming, withdrawal symptoms such as irritability or anxiety, increased tolerance, unsuccessful attempts to control gaming, loss of previous interests due to gaming, continued engagement in gaming despite negative consequences, deception of therapists and loved ones regarding time spent gaming, gaming as a coping mechanism, and the appearance of risk of losing an important relationship or negative consequences in educational and occupational functioning. A diagnosis of the disorder is based on the presence of at least five symptoms with a duration of no less than 12 months (Grajewski & Dragan, 2021, p. 79).

Internet gaming addiction disorder is a type of addiction characterised by an excessive tendency and need to use online games, which leads to negative consequences such as increased levels of social anxiety, reduced social skills, problems with effective relationships with other people, and a higher incidence of anxiety and depressive disorders. Researchers point (Mohammadi et al., 2023) to the neuropsychological consequences of addiction and indicate that problematic use of online games may correlate with microstructural abnormalities in the central nervous system. Certain abnormalities and changes in the brain's white matter correlate with particular features of the games and the stage and progression of addiction, as well as its duration (Mohammadi et al., 2023).

The topic of Internet addiction was also taken up by K. Young (2009), who, on the basis of her research, standardised a tool for examining Pathological Internet Abuse. The test was developed from a description of the diagnostic categories of behavioural disorders, such as pathological gambling according to DSM IV. According to the author, the process of entering into addiction itself is a psychological-behavioural syndrome, related to reactions and behaviours in response to stimuli. In addition, the process involves the relationship between the person and the object (media), and similarly affects addicts who are found to share common traits or patterns of behaviour (Young, 2009, p. 13). Of the eight symptoms of harmful Internet use according to K. Young, at least five would have to have occurred in the past year to diagnose addiction. The test is arranged in the form of questions, exploring key areas of the subject's functioning (Young, 2009, p. 13):

— Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet to the point that you are constantly thinking about the online sessions you have had and/or looking forward to the next ones?
— Do you feel the need to increase the amount of time you spend online in order to get more satisfaction (have more satisfaction)?
— Have you made repeated, unsuccessful attempts to control, limit or stop your internet use?
— Have you felt inner turmoil, had a depressive mood or been irritable when you tried to limit or stop your Internet use?
— Do you happen to spend more time online than you originally planned?
— Have you ever risked losing a loved one, an important relationship with other people, a job, study or career because of spending too much time online?
— Have you ever lied to your relatives, therapists or anyone else in order to hide your own excessive interest in the Internet?
— Do you use the Internet to escape from problems, or to avoid unpleasant feelings (e.g. feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety or depression)?

The questions formulated by K. Young lead to the definition of Internet addiction as an impulse control disorder (Young, 1996). Impulse control disorder involves continuing an activity despite simultaneously feeling high emotional tension and experiencing cognitive dissonance. The sense of dissonance concerns the rationalisation of the consequences and distant effects of the activity. A person with a self-control problem is aware of the difficulties experienced, but is unable to prevent the activity from taking place. Excessive Internet users are therefore characterised by a lack of resistance to the impulse to use the Internet. They feel a sudden increase in tension, experience arousal, drive and have a need to perform an activity/action as immediate gratification to defer and relieve tension (Rabe-Jabłońska, 2005, p. 108).

Intergenerational Transmission of Internet Addiction

Internet addiction appears to be a phenomenon subject to intergenerational transmission. Children observing their parents' online style of functioning begin to act in a similar way.

Young children under the age of three are spending more and more time in front of a screen (TV, computer, portable game player, mobile phone, smartphone, iPad, tablet). Studies show that in the United States, 82% of one-year-olds and 92% of two-year-olds spend about two hours in front of a screen every day. Parents, on the other hand, despite understanding the harmfulness of the use of a phone/tablet by such a young child, treat this time as 'time for themselves' or 'a way to bore and make their child cringe' (Felińska & Grzegorzewska, 2020, p. 723).

The child learns by observing the adult's behaviour. A factor that directly determines the parent-child relationship is the overall severity of the parent's Internet abuse. The most important element in effectively protecting children and adolescents from unconstructive use of new technologies appears to be interventions directed at the parent group. Psycho-educational interventions, aimed at increasing awareness of the dangers of cyberspace and reducing e-media abuse, initially target the parents themselves. At a later stage, based on a behavioural modelling mechanism, they are also transmitted to children (Wojtkowska et al., 2023, p. 100).

The importance of the intergenerational transmission of Internet attitudes is also emphasised by J. Lenardon (2007), systematising guidelines for a safe and shared model of digital media use in the family space. One of the most important elements in creating a community of understanding with the child in terms of the Internet is to join the child in his or her Internet activities. The next points are: agreeing and allowing the child to pass on knowledge that the parent does not have, without feeling a loss of parental authority; teaching the child that, in a threatening or emotionally unpleasant situation, it is possible to end the experience and ask for help; adopting an attitude of not blaming or blaming the child for experiencing unpleasant online experiences; regularly talking to the child about people they meet online; setting rules about meeting people met online, only in the presence of a parent; talking to the child about values, emotions, entertainment and education in the media world (Lenardon, 2007, p. 66).

An analysis of the literature and empirical research in the field of media competence of parents and educators indicates a great need for competence education of the generation of parents themselves. Researcher S. Livingstone (2010) notes the reflection of technological change in children's understanding of the importance of the family home. Using the term 'multimedia home', the researcher draws attention to the centralisation of the functioning of the home as a family and sense of place, centred around the media (Livingstone, 2010).

A typology of parental styles of mediating multimedia use is presented by A. Kołodziejczyk (2013). In restrictive mediation, parents impose specific family rules, install software solutions that regulate the time and quality of Internet use. In the case of instructive mediation, parents enter into a dialogue with the child on topics concerning the opportunities and risks of multimedia use while spending time together with the child in the online space. Finally, 'reverence', as a deliberate relinquishment of control of the young person, expresses trust in the young person's media competence (Kołodziejczyk, 2013, p. 63).

It seems reasonable to introduce the term: intra-family system for adequate media use. The system encompasses all members of the family and provides an opportunity to establish contact with the child, reduce intergenerational distance, and play a protective, preventive and psycho-educational role in the context of online risks.

Measures to prevent and counteract **the intergenerational transmission of problematic Internet use** include strengthening digital competence in children and young people. Natalia Walter proposes (based on the concept of Yuhyun Park, 2016) the following breakdown of digital competence understood as a protective factor in Internet addiction:

— digital identity: understood as the ability to create and manage one's own image and reputation online,
— use of digital media: treating digital tools as intellectual and cognitive tools,
— digital security: ability to manage risks and avoid online threats in a psychosocial context (cyberbullying, grooming, radicalisation),
— digital protection: ability to respond to and protect against online threats in the context of computer hardware and software (hardware, hacking, spamming),
— digital intelligence, which consists of digital communication, i.e. the ability to collaborate with other network users, the ability to search, analyse and create messages, and digital literacy, i.e. understanding and respecting human rights in the virtual world (Walter, 2017, p. 22).

Overview of studies

Arkadiusz Dudziak and Malgorzata Sitarczyk (2023) studied the role of temperament in the risk of Internet addiction in secondary school and university students. The researchers noted that the risk of addiction arises particularly in situations of high tension or stress. The addiction process itself is associated with feelings of tension, understood in both emotional and somatic terms. In people who compulsively perform particular compulsive activities, an inflated sense of threat and the need to regulate tension and engage in subjectively safe harm-reducing behaviour prevails. Pupils and students, often experiencing emotional tension and reacting strongly emotionally in low-stimulating situations, therefore show a higher vulnerability to the risk of Internet addiction (Dudziak & Sitarczyk, 2023, p. 187).

Roman Solecki (2023), on the other hand, presents the results of a study on the prevalence of depression, a sense of meaning in life and Internet addiction among final year primary school students. The findings are worrying, as symptoms of depression were noted in 27.6% of pupils. Control problems in the use of the web affect one in four pupils in grades 7 and 8 and almost one in three pupils in grade 6 (30.3%). When asked about their sense of purpose in life, 14.8% of Grade 6 pupils say they have concluded that they lack purpose in life, while 13.3% of Grade 8 pupils say they do not ask anyone for help in difficult or crisis situations. The researcher also points to the need to monitor children and adolescents' psychological condition and to include the variable of sense of purpose in life or lack thereof in research to confirm whether it is a protective factor against depression or addictions (Solecki, 2023, p. 42).

Also the authors of the report *Use of the Internet in 2024*, associated with the CBOS Social Opinion Research Centre, present interesting dynamics in the behaviour of Internet users. For several years, the number of adults using the Internet regularly has remained at 77%. The earlier increase in the number of users, registered initially in 2021 and then in 2022, was most likely contributed to by the time of social isolation associated with the COVID-19 epidemic. The lack of Internet use in the survey group correlates with older age and lower education level. In 2024, especially in younger respondents, a constant online presence prevails, rather than just going online for a specifically defined purpose (CBOS, 2024, p. 17). The new style of using cyberspace, understood as constant online functioning, seems to be becoming a way of life among children and young people.

An interesting study on a group of both pupils and their parents was conducted by Anna Wojtkowska, Ewa Hewiak and Agata Gąsiorowska (2023). The authors of the study indicate that the most popular electronic device among the primary school pupils surveyed turns out to be the mobile phone (95.4%), while the least popular is the television (15.1%). Furthermore, pupils most frequently use e-media to watch short forms, i.e. 'videos' on the Internet (95.9%), and contacting friends is only the second reason for using the Internet (91.2%). As many as 11.5% of all pupils play computer games on a daily basis, 28.4% of pupils have a high tendency to abuse digital technologies, while 7.2% show high signs of e-media addiction. Additionally, in parent-child diads, there is a noticeable difference in the perception of the severity of e-media abuse in children. Parents are less likely to assess their children's risk as high, with as many as 47.3% of parents assessing the risk lower than their children did (Wojtkowska et al., 2023, p. 99).

Changes in the style and ways of regulating emotions among young people through the use of psychoactive substances to problematic use of the Internet over several years are presented by the authors of the report *Addiction in Poland* (2023). Despite the fact that alcoholic beverages are the most widespread psychoactive substance among schoolchildren, used more often than cigarettes or drugs, a systematic downward trend in

alcohol consumption among 15-16-year-olds over the past years is visible, from 65% in 2003 to 47% in 2019. In addition, the results of the 2021 CBOS survey show an ongoing systematic downward trend in the group of students using drugs in the past 12 months since 2016. At the same time, a steady increase in the number of hours spent by adolescents on Internet use is clearly observed. Currently, adolescents spend an average of 4 hours and 50 minutes a day on the global web, while on non-school days this time extends to an average of 6 hours and 10 minutes (Szmidt et al., 2023, p. 6).

Mental Health Risks of Being Online

Children, adolescents and also young adults are a social group that is particularly vulnerable to the onset of psychological problems in the context of Internet use. The rapid flow of information, the improved possibilities to move around, to benefit from medical or technological advances, offer many advantages. At the same time, the chaos of communication or the lack of support in busy and absent parents, entail destructive effects in the psychological sphere and may predispose to pervasive depressive, anxious or self-destructive behaviours in children and adolescents (Dmitruk-Sierocińska, 2023, p. 26).

Dependence on new media can lead to health harms such as sleep problems, social harms such as loss of loved ones, friends, or psychological harms such as mental breakdown, mood disorders including depressive disorders. In addition, Internet addiction may correlate with other addictions, this time substance addictions such as alcohol, drugs, legal highs, drugs; suicidal thoughts and tendencies, acts of self-aggression, somatisation disorders (Ogonowska, 2014, p. 39).

The issue of Internet-related disorders today encompasses a growing and increasingly diverse group of phenomena. With technological developments and an increasingly unpredictable future, it can be assumed that both classifications and new definitions of digital addictions will continue to evolve. New e-addictions described in recent years include:

— FoMo (Fear of Missing out) – the feeling of having to follow information created by other online users – is an addiction concerning the fear of missing out on information or being left out, and the feeling of anxiety not staying up to date in social media spaces such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat or news media (Tomczyk, 2019, p. 143),
— nomophobia (No Mobile Phone Phobia) – an addiction associated with the manifestation of fear and anxiety of separation from the telephone (Czerski, 2022, p. 137),
— doomscrolling – is an addictive search for negative information that involves feelings of fear, anxiety and tension. Although initially the Internet user tries to explore a particular topic in order to calm down and avoid difficult emotions, he or she ends up falling into the trap of obsessive and intrusive pursuit of a particular activity, e.g. checking news about disasters, war moods. This type of addiction has been linked to passive and habitual use of social media, anxiety states and poor self-control (Sharma et al., 2022, p. 1),
— cyberchondria – this is the addictive activity of searching the internet for medical information about one's own and a loved one's health. Health anxiety manifests itself in obsessive doubts and an intrusive search for knowledge in order to diagnose one's ailments or reduce tension and uncertainty (Woronowicz, 2021, p. 132).

Further problems that may arise from problematic Internet use are **depressive and anxiety disorders** or obsessive-compulsive **disorders** (Ha et al., 2007). Adolescents diagnosed with Internet addiction manifest a higher risk of depressive disorders. Moreover, addiction itself has a stronger effect on the risk of depression among them (Ye et al., 2023).

Depressive disorders themselves fall into the category of affective disorders in which there are periodic changes in emotion and mood. These disorders include depressive episodes, recurrent depressive disorder, dysthymic disorder, depressive behavioural disorder, and disorganising emotion dysregulation disorder (manifested by tantrums, irritability and irritability). Symptoms of depression include: somatic symptoms (headaches, abdominal pain, sleep disturbances, appetite disorders, chronic fatigue), disturbed mood (sadness, depression, feelings of unhappiness, mood lability, irritability, feelings of hopelessness), cognitive dysfunction (attention and memory disorders, learning difficulties), anxiety symptoms (separation anxiety, restlessness), self-injurious and aggressive behaviour (self-harm, oppositional and rebellious behaviour, substance or Internet abuse), disturbed self-image (negative self-perception, excessive perfectionism, feelings of guilt, negative

image of one's body), difficulties in social relationships (arguing or silence, isolating oneself, hypersensitivity to rejection) (Radziwiłłowicz, 2020, p. 413).

In addition to depressive disorders, anxiety disorders are also correlated with addiction. This is a broad group of disorders in the pathogenesis of which psychogenic factors are most commonly recognised. Anxiety disorders are divided into: separation anxiety disorder (fear of separation of an attachment object), specific phobias (constant, unjustified fear triggered by imagining at least a difficult situation), social phobia (constant fear occurring in social situations, especially those involving judgement), panic disorder (recurrent panic attacks with somatic symptoms e.g. feeling that 'something terrible is about to happen'), agoraphobia (fear of being in places or situations that are perceived as threatening, e.g. a person feels that it is safest to be only at home), generalised anxiety disorder, in which heightened fear and anxiety are combined with worry, a sense of being stranded, fatigue (Cierpiałkowska & Górska, 2016, p. 309).

Anxiety and depression disorders, as well as other types of mental disorders, largely co-occur with behavioural addictions. It is difficult to assess unequivocally whether it is the increase in emotional disorders in children, adolescents and adults that is causing an escape into problematic phone or computer use, or whether excessive networking and social isolation are contributing to an outright epidemic of mental disorders.

Summary

Modern human functioning remains closely linked to the use of modern technology. At the same time, it is observable, globally, that depressive and anxiety disorders are on the rise in societies. International research indicates that there is a phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of attitudes associated with Internet space and that there is a correlation between excessive, problematic use of the Internet and the occurrence of mental disorders, both in children, adolescents and adults. Diagnosis of these phenomena alone is not enough. What is needed is the cooperation of specialist circles in order to develop specific assistance, intervention, support and prevention methods and to introduce them into pedagogical, sociological and psychological practice.

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