



Compulsive internet use in adults: A study of prevalence and drivers within the current economic climate in the UK [☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 11 September 2013

Keywords:

Compulsive internet use
Internet addiction
Problematic internet use
Technophiles
Workaholism
Employed/unemployed

ABSTRACT

Compulsive Internet Use (CIU) refers to a maladaptive relationship with the tool, including a loss of control over the use, the use for mood change and withdrawal symptoms. Most studies have relied on student samples, thus little is known about its prevalence in adults. The first objective of this study was to examine CIU in adults that were either employed ($N = 260$) or unemployed within the last year ($N = 256$). Second, the drivers of CIU were examined, with a focus on attitudes that reflected the reality of long working hours and job insecurity that people experience in current workplaces. A high risk of CIU (63%) with no significant differences between employed and unemployed individuals was found. However, unemployed individuals were in the highest band of Internet use, a risk factor for CIU. Interestingly, unemployed 40–55 years old females experienced higher CIU than their male counterparts. Regarding drivers of CIU, the job attitudes working excessively and compulsively were the strongest predictors, beyond emotion stability. This was particularly true at high levels of social support. In view of this, organizations should proactively evaluate the risks associated with encouraging working excessively as ill-health consequences associated with CIU could outweigh the benefits.

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1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the Internet supports all areas of human interactions. It is used for entertainment purposes, people maintain their friendships through social networks and it directly or indirectly affects most work processes. In this context, the Internet has become a ‘universal enabler’ of everyday life. However, the omnipresence of this phenomenon could have a double-edged sword impact in people’s lives. For instance, emails enable efficient, instant, borderless communication with agents within and outside the organization. Nevertheless, [Marulanda-Carter and Jackson’s simulation study \(2012\)](#) revealed that interruption due to constant emails caused individuals to take one-third longer to complete tasks. Alongside the links between technology and productivity, researchers have turned their attention increasingly to this phenomenon’s impact on well-being. Evidence suggests that some individuals can lose control over the use of the Internet, and this negatively interferes with core aspects of their lives both in the short term (e.g., increased levels of stress at work, diminish work life-balance); and the long term (e.g. social isolation,

depression and anxiety). This maladaptive use of the Internet has been coined as ‘Compulsive Internet Use’ (CIU). Because of the high reliance that individuals have on this tool, researchers are faced with the challenge of identifying risk factors that make individuals vulnerable to develop a pattern of problematic usage.

The economic crisis in the Western world has led to organizations searching for efficiency in utilizing resources ([Datta, Guthrie, Basuil, & Pandey, 2010](#)). This has resulted in high employment insecurity. For those who remain in employment, excessive workloads and long working hours are common in the technology driven workplaces ([Young, 2010](#)). In this context, the authors of this paper believe that job attitudes and associated behaviors (i.e. working compulsively and working excessively) will be key drivers of maladaptive Internet use. Further, the role of socio-demographic variables related to the world of work (employed vs. unemployed), and life-style factors (i.e. hours of usage and main source of social support), are also expected to be key factors to understand compulsive internet use. In this paper the prevalence of compulsive internet use, and its predictors with a working age population, balanced in terms of gender and employment condition, will be examined. This is expected to overcome the excessive focus on young samples. Second, the authors move beyond distal drivers of compulsive internet use which other studies examine, and focus on the job related drivers in line with the salience that employment has acquired in today’s society for individuals’ identity and well-being.

[☆] This research was funded by the REF funding of the University of Northampton.

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2. Compulsive internet use: definition, dimensions and prevalence

Scholars initially coined the excessive use of the Internet and the loss of control over its use as 'Internet addiction', due to its similarities with substance abuse problems (Young & Rogers, 1998). However, the term addiction has strong connotations of physiological adaptation, a key feature of substance-based addiction that behavioral ones do not share (e.g. Griffiths, 2000; 2010). Meerkerk, van den Eijnden, Franken, and Garretsen (2010) adopt the term compulsive internet use in order to reflect the behavioral aspects that substance and non-substance addictions share (i.e. loss of control and conflict). The authors define it as 'the pattern of Internet use characterized by loss of control, preoccupation, conflict, withdrawal symptoms, and use of the Internet as a coping strategy' (Meerkerk et al., 2010: 729). The American Psychiatric Association has not included compulsive internet use in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM IV), yet various authors have recommended its inclusion in future publications (Block, 2008). Without a formal diagnostic criterion, Young and Rogers (1998) adapted the DSM IV criteria for impulse control disorders, since these also involve a failure to control behavior despite the negative consequences. Similarly, Meerkerk et al. (2010) develop their diagnosis tool based on pathological gambling, a specific impulse control disorder. On the other hand, Griffiths (2000) built on previous work on a range of behavioral addictions and conceptualizes compulsive internet use as a subcategory within this group. They all highlight that compulsive internet use includes salience of the Internet as it becomes central to the person's life; mood change related to the use; loss of control over the use; withdrawal symptoms; conflict and tolerance. Griffiths (2000) and Young and Rogers (1998) also refer to a dimension of relapse (i.e. re-establishing behavior even when one stops it for a long time).

These dimensions have informed the development of diagnosis tools and evaluation of prevalence of addiction in various countries which have been primarily focused on teenage populations (e.g. Balakrishman and Shamim, 2013; Niemz, Griffiths, & Banyard, 2005). In the UK, Niemz et al. (2005) reported that 18.3% experience pathological Internet use; however, Kuss et al.'s recent study (2013) found only 3.2% of prevalence in the same country using a clinical diagnostic tool that derives from the diagnostic criteria for substance dependence. Young individuals are more vulnerable to different addiction agents, thus we cannot generalize prevalence to the general population (Byun et al., 2009). Further, there are limited studies with adult samples and some of these do not include prevalence figures (Buckner, Castille, & Sheets, 2012; Meerkerk et al., 2010). The first survey conducted with a large American sample reported around 6% of compulsive internet use (Greenfield, 1999). More recently, Lu et al. (2011) reported prevalence around 30% in Japanese employees. In a study with German individuals prevalence was around 14.4% (Montag, Jurkiewicz, & Reuter, 2010). To the authors' knowledge, there are not any current prevalence figures of individuals in employment age in the UK. Establishing prevalence is important as evidence suggests that compulsive internet use results in depressive symptoms, loneliness, low self-esteem, anxiety and physiological symptoms (Caplan, 2002). Specifically on working age samples, excessive Internet use leads to information fatigue syndrome (i.e. information overload), high cognitive costs and emotional stress, chronic insomnia, relationship problems and burnout (Kakabadse, Kouzmin, & Kakabadse, 2000; Marulanda-Carter & Jackson, 2012; Young, 2010). In short, the high presence of the Internet in our working and social lives and the negative consequences justify the need to understand the construct's prevalence and its drivers.

3. Drivers of compulsive internet use: theoretical model

Davis (2001) explores the drivers of problematic Internet use from a cognitive-behavioral perspective and distinguishes between proximal and distal Internet drivers. Distal drivers refer to the necessary condition for the problem to arise, but on their own are not sufficient to cause compulsive internet use. In the original model an underlying psycho-pathology is a pre-requisite for the maladaptive use to develop and is therefore conceptualized as a 'distal' driver. Conversely, the proximate drivers are enough to produce the problem on their own and are closely linked to the cognitive-behavioral manifestations of compulsive internet use. In Davis's (2001) model, proximal drivers are distorted cognitions that result from the interaction between the underlying pathology and the exposure to technology. It is argued that that the necessary condition of an underlying pathology leads to a rather limited view that could leave the development of compulsive internet use in healthy individuals unexplained. Thus, the model tested in this paper builds on the distal versus proximal drivers' concept, but shifts the focus to the study of individual and situational drivers without the pathology pre-requisite. This may lead to the identification of drivers with greater explanatory power for the wider population.

3.1. Distal drivers

Distal drivers, refer to those variables that have been related to compulsive internet use, yet on their own are not enough to cause the condition (Davis, 2001). In early studies, researchers suggested that high Internet use was an obvious indicator of the problem (Greenfield, 1999). With the advancement of studies in compulsive internet use, scholars have conceptualized the latter as a more complex phenomenon with dimensions that mirror other behavioral addictions including withdrawal, conflict and loss of control. Notwithstanding, spending a high number of hours is conceptualized as a proxy of compulsive internet use, and there seems to be a strong positive correlation between these variables (Chou & Hsiao, 2000). This is understandable since spending long hours on the Internet will leave little time for offline interpersonal relationships, which could lead to conflict, a key dimension of compulsive internet use. Nevertheless, high usage might result in positive outcomes under specific life circumstances. For example, studies have found that high engagement in online gaming in older adults result in better well-being than older adults who did not play (Allaire et al., 2013). Thus, high usage seems to be a necessary yet not sufficient cause for compulsive internet use hence, it is hypothesized as a distal driver.

The economic crisis has contributed to a highly unstable employment landscape, with many people experiencing job loss or struggle to access the job market following graduation (Datta et al., 2010). For those who either lost their jobs or struggle to access the job market for the first time, the Internet has become a central tool to locate job opportunities. In Kakabadse's qualitative study (2007), unemployed individuals were more likely to spend more hours on the Internet. Although it cannot be hypothesized that unemployed individuals are going to experience a higher level of compulsive internet use, it is expected that they engage in significantly more hours outside work than those in employment.

Hypothesis 1. Unemployed individuals spend significantly more hours of Internet usage than those in employment.

In a society that spends increasingly more time online, more of our social support is obtained through online encounters (Ryan & Xenos, 2011). In online interactions deception is likely to appear and there is a high risk of misunderstanding due to the lack of

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