Cyber addictions: toward a psychosocial perspective

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Literature review of the cyber addictions phenomenon.
- An international overview of the research results regarding the addictive components of this behavioral contemporary condition.
- Analysis of the theoretical models (pathological/medical model) and the social issues.
- Propositioning a psychosocial perspective in order to create more conditions for prevention and to a certain extent empowering persons and their social networks.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The concept of cyberaddiction is far from being unanimously accepted by scientists (Ko, Yen, Yen, Chen, & Chen 2012; Pezoa-Jares, Espinoza-Luna & Vasquez-Medina 2012; Nadeau et al., 2011; Perraton, Fusaro & Bonenfant 2011). The same is true of addiction to videogames (Hellman, Schoenmakers, Nordstrom, & Van Holst 2013; Coulombe 2010); or to Facebook (Andreassen et al., 2012; Levard & Soulas, 2010). While certain researchers wished to see this condition included in the DSM-5 (Block, 2008), others question the operational and practical bases for the diagnostic criteria. Some see cyberaddiction as a problem linked more to time management, to brain deficits, to an impulse-control disorder or to psychosocial conditions while others consider it to be a pre-existing comorbidity.

Considering that most addiction problems are generally understood more as individual and pathological problems rather than the result of psychosocial conditions (poverty, unemployment, weak social ties, social exclusion, hyper individualism, etc), the aim of this article is to propose a psychosocial perspective for this emerging trend in cyberaddictions. To what extent social conditions and cyberaddiction behaviors constitute a potential pathology? Can we include a psychosocial approach to gain a more general picture of this contemporary issue? In response to these questions, a contextualization and an attempt to define cyberaddiction will be followed by an analysis of some major issues in the development of this type of addiction. A demonstration of the cycle of addiction on how people develop addictions, including cyberaddictions, will be done within a psychosocial perspective in order to seize the multifactorial aspects of this addiction.

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Contents

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1. Introduction

The emergence of the Internet and online gambling has led the private and public sectors to consider the gaming opportunities created by this new and increasingly globalized space. Furthermore, estimates show that 100 million individuals will gamble on their mobile devices by 2018 (Freeman, 2014). Several studies have shown that the prevalence of online gaming is three to four times higher than that of other kinds of gambling (Pezoa-Jares, Espinoza-Luna and Vasquez-Medina (2012); Griffiths, 2000, 2002, 2010). This increase is due to certain intrinsic characteristics of the online game modalities: convenience of electronic payments, gaming on credit, speed, anonymity and interactivity.

International population studies confirm that cyber addiction is spreading rapidly and is becoming increasingly common around the world. In a last research aiming at identifying psychological risk factors among Chinese smartphone users, Wu, Cheung, Ku and Hung (2013) underline that there is a dramatic spread of smartphones accompanied by the ever increasing popularity of social networking sites (SNSs). This study demonstrates that daily usage of SNSs via smartphones was positively associated with addictive tendencies.

In South Korea Internet addiction is considered one of its most serious public health issues (Choi, 2007; Groom, 2013; Koh, 2007). In Europe, the estimated prevalence rate for cyber addiction ranges between 1% (Bakken, Wenzel, & Götesman, 2009), 2% (Kaltiala-Heino, Lintonen, & Rimpela, 2004), and 6% (Zboralski et al., 2009). In the United States, the range is between 0.9% (Schoenfeld & Yan, 2012) and 4% (Liu et al., 2011), while in Asia the impact is more severe, ranging from 8.1% (Cao et al., 2011) to 10.7% (Park, Kim, & Cho, 2008). In Turkey, frequent and prolonged Internet use confirmed the strong trend for increase in the incidence of cyber addiction. (Günüç & Kayri, 2010).

2. What is cyber addiction? Toward a definition

The concept of Internet addiction was originally proposed satirically by Ivan Goldberg in 1995 on a chat forum used mainly by psychiatrists (Tisseron, 201: 533). One year later, Young suggested considering addiction to the Internet as an actual new clinical pathology. Based on pathological gambling criteria in the DSM-IV, she created a 20-question test that measures how seriously the web affects a person's social life (Young, 1996). That being said, the concept of cyber addiction is by no means unanimously accepted by scientists (Agence de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal, 2012; Nadeau et al., 2011; Pascutini, Lançon, & Gavaudan, 2012: 134, chap. 17; Perraton, Fusaro, & Bonenfant, 2011).

3. The example of video games and Facebook: some markers of cyber addiction

In one of the rare studies based on clinical reviews of 11 cases, Pascutini et al. (2012: 136, chap. 17) used tests evaluating Internet use and the Tejeiro-Salguero scales for video games, depression, impulsivity, and sensation seeking. The average gaming time was 66.9 hours per week, ranging between a minimum of 14 and a maximum of 140 hours per week. Valleur and Matysiak (2004), Rossé (2012), and Hautefeuille and Wellenstein (2012) confirmed this trend based on MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games). According to Berthier and Parisot (2012: 25), who studied these kinds of games, World of Warcraft (WOW) is the most popular. Created in 2004, WOW now has more than 12 million players with an average age of 27 years, of whom 84% were men and 16% women (Gill, 2012; Berthier & Parisot, 2012: 36). A recent study of 1,420 online gamers playing MMORPGs revealed that the rate of cyber addiction ranges between 3.6% and 44.5%, depending on the

type of assessment used (Hussain, Griffiths, & Baguley, 2012). Among the most important risk factors, years of exposure and total time spent online were identified as central to the development of the pattern of cyber addiction (Hellman et al., 2013). From a clinical point of view, Rossé (2012) provides valuable information for a practical understanding of the process of potential cyber addiction. First, it emphasizes the generation gap that often separates parents who do not understand this technological world from their children. Second, Rossé (2012: 127) identifies three factors related to the young gamer's personality for a potential cyber addiction:

1. the process of individuation and separation/autonomy from the parent's world necessary for young people to construct their own identity;
2. recourse to escape into video games rather than facing the conflicts and communication with the parents;
3. use of video games in response to the collapse of the self-image.

In this context, clinical observations show that young people often play video games with the implicit—and sometimes explicit—blessing of their parents, who generally pay for these products and services. This tendency seems to be strongest in disengaged families, where there is often a lack of family rules and rituals (Suissa, 2005). According to Rossé (2012: 130), the factors explaining potential cyber addiction also include:

- infiniteness: there is no end to gaming; it takes place 24/7 and is therefore accessible day and night. When a player is inactive, other gamers keep playing;
- certainty: when one executes the right action, gratification is immediate.
- immersion: the magical and aesthetic worlds contribute to a significant visual attraction;
- the importance of player's community and interdependence: because gamers do not reveal their real identity and personality, and social reaction in the public sphere is put on the back burner, this social world organized around anonymity can encourage them to get "hooked" on the virtual social network;

4. Hooked on Facebook

Today, the milestone of Facebook one billion users has been exceeded (Levard & Soulas, 2010). On a per capita basis, Canadians are actually the greatest Facebook users in the world; on average, the typical user has 225 "friends." Several scientific studies try to determine whether and to what extent overuse of Facebook can constitute a cyber addiction (Andreassen, Torsheim, Brunborg, & Pallesen, 2012; Couderc, 2012; Hofmann, Baumeister, Foerster, & Vohs, 2012; Hofmann, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2012; Hofmann, Schmeichel, and Baddeley (2012).

Exploring why people act against their own better judgment and intentions, Hofmann, Baumeister, et al. (2012) has proven that addiction to social networks is due to the lack of constraints they impose, compared to, for instance, the need to obtain psychoactive substances outside the home, which makes it a more difficult habit to acquire and support. In other words, and despite the scientific fact that substances such as alcohol and tobacco are known for their addictive properties, they generate much lower levels of desire and need than the urge to consult social networks.

According to Hofmann, Schmeichel, et al. (2012), addiction to social media is more difficult to treat than addiction to alcohol or cigarettes precisely because this kind of desire is more difficult to resist in view of its greater availability and lower cost. A doctoral thesis by a French psychiatrist attempts to answer the question of why people are so infatuated with Facebook (Couderc, 2012). The results revealed that young "addicts" spent three times as much time on Facebook as the average user: 191 minutes per day. The intense need to connect and the