



Cyberaddictions: Toward a psychosocial perspective



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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, others question the operational and practical basis for the diagnostic criteria (Block, 2008).

Through a review of literature and results from research findings; the aim of this article is to propose a psychosocial perspective for the cyberaddiction phenomenon. By a psychosocial perspective, we mean the inclusion of social determinants (weak social ties, social exclusion, hyper individualism, poverty, unemployment, etc) and not only the individual characteristics associated with the disease model in the addiction field. 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. As a conclusion, 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

1. Introduction	1914
2. What is cyberaddiction? Toward a definition	1915
3. The example of video games and Facebook: some markers of cyberaddiction	1915
4. Hooked on Facebook	1915
5. Individualism and the emptiness of social ties as determinants of cyberaddictions	1916
6. Addiction: an overview of the psychosocial approach	1916
7. Conclusion and outlook	1916
Role of funding source	1917
Contributors	1917
Conflict of interest	1917
References	1917

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 (Agence de la santé et des services sociaux de Montréal, 2012; Griffiths, 2000, 2002, 2010; Papineau & Leblond, 2010; Pezoa-Jares et al., 2012). 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 cyberaddiction 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

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study demonstrates that daily usage of SNSs via smartphones was positively associated with addictive tendencies.

In South Korea Internet addiction is considered as one of its most serious public health issues (Choi, 2007; Groom, 2013; Koh, 2007). In Europe, the estimated prevalence rate for cyberaddiction 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, Desai, Krishnan-Sarin, Cavallo, & Potenza, 2011), while in Asia the impact is more severe, ranging from 8.1% (Cao, Sun, Wan, Hao, & Tao, 2011) to 10.7% (Park, Kim, & Cho, 2008). In Turkey, frequent and prolonged Internet use confirmed the strong trend for the increase of the incidence of cyberaddiction (Günüc & Kayri, 2010).

2. What is cyberaddiction? 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, 2011: 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 cyberaddiction is by no means unanimously accepted by scientists (Faisal, 2013; Nade Nadeau, Acier, Kern, & Nadeau, 2011; Pascutini, Lançon, & Gavaudan, 2012: 134; Perraton, Fusaro, & Bonenfant, 2011).

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

In one of the rare studies based on clinical reviews of 11 cases, Pascutini et al. (2012: 136) used tests evaluating Internet use and the Tejero-Salguero scales for video games, depression, impulsivity, and sensation seeking. The average gaming time was 66.9 h per week, ranging between a minimum of 14 and a maximum of 140 h 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 1420 online gamers playing MMORPGs revealed that the rate of cyberaddiction 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 cyberaddiction. From a clinical point of view, Rossé (2012) provides valuable information for a practical understanding of the process of potential cyberaddiction. 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 cyberaddiction:

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

Exploring why people act against their own better judgment and intentions, Hofmann et al. (2012) have proven that addiction to social networks is due to the lack of constraints that 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 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 min per day. The intense need to connect and the postponement of obligations—school, work, administrative or household duties—ensure that the monomaniacal, exclusive investment in Facebook trumps other sources of interest and pleasure (social media anxiety disorder or SMAD).

Another study by a Norwegian psychologist led to the creation of a tool called the Bergen Facebook Addiction Scale to measure addiction (Andreassen et al., 2012). This scale was created on a sample of 423 students (227 women and 196 men), and the findings were similar to those of Couderc (2012): addiction is more likely to occur among young users who are anxious and live in precarious social situations in which virtual communication is less anxiety-provoking than face-to-face communication. According to Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012: 249), Facebook Addiction Disorder can be defined as follows:

“When people are afraid to disconnect from Facebook because they think they are going to miss something important.”

To sum up, some social media users develop an abusive relationship with Facebook connections. Something that was intended to facilitate social ties may, in some cases, culminate in the opposite result: increasing isolation from real social ties.

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