The popular press is full of articles braying news about Internet addiction; try typing “Internet addiction” into the search field of your favorite search engine and start browsing. A Google search in mid-December brought up 768,000 English, French and German pages on the topic.

The popular Web site netaddiction.com has a self-test anyone can take to computer a score suggesting the degree of “level of addiction.” The scoring chart provides the following guidance:

The higher your score, the greater your level of addiction and the problems your Internet usage causes. Here's a general scale to help measure your score:

- 20 - 49 points: You are an average on-line user. You may surf the Web a bit too long at times, but you have control over your usage.

- 50 - 79 points: You are experiencing occasional or frequent problems because of the Internet. You should consider their full impact on your life.

- 80 - 100 points: Your Internet usage is causing significant problems in your life. You should evaluate the impact of the Internet on your life and address the problems directly caused by your Internet usage.

Why does this text send shivers down my back? Could it possibly be because it’s too easy?

In a scholarly meta-analysis of 39 scholarly, peer-reviewed articles about quantitative research on Internet addiction published between 1996 and 2006, an international team of researchers [1] found that many authors had failed to define Internet addiction; others had contradictory definitions. The research team chose to define Internet addiction as follows:

For the purposes of this study, we define Internet addiction following Beard’s holistic approach wherein “an individual is addicted when an individual’s psychological state, which includes both mental and emotional states, as well as their scholastic, occupational and social interactions, is impaired by the overuse of the medium.”[2]

Byun et al. found that

- A wide range of methods has been used to detect “Internet addiction” as defined in the individual studies, resulting in wide variations in the proportions of the study populations classified as affected. Indeed, in some studies where the same populations were studied using divergent definitions of the problem, the proportion of “addicts” varied by as much as 50%.

- Many researchers have focused on “five dimensions: compulsive use, withdrawal, tolerance, interpersonal and health problems, and time management problems.” Attempts
to link Internet addiction to personality traits, intelligence, disorders such as attention deficit/hyperactivity and mood disorders were generally not successful.

- Survey respondents were usually selected through Internet-mediated self-selecting surveys, but randomized sampling usually produced significantly lower proportions of the target behavior in the samples. Furthermore, many of the samples were focused exclusively on high school and college students and may have ignored older populations involved in specific forms of Internet-mediated abuse such as compulsive online gamblers.

- Analytical methods applied to the data collected by the authors of the papers under study tended to use relatively simple confirmatory inferential statistics such as analysis of variance and regression. However, many of the studies had such small sample sizes that the validity of the probability estimates relating to the hypotheses under test could be challenged.

More on this topic in the next column.

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References:


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