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Pathological Internet Use: Psychologists Examine Who Is Hooked On The Net and Why

***Social Support, Sexual Fulfillment and
Created Personae Cited as Main Attractions***

CHICAGO -- Searching the seemingly limitless sites on the World Wide Web for information or amusement can be fun and can eat up a lot of time, but according to psychologists who are studying those whose Internet use has crossed the line from 'avid' to 'compulsive,' information gathering is not the main attraction for pathological Internet users. Their findings were reported at the 105th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (APA) in Chicago.

Psychologist Kimberly S. Young, Psy.D., of the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford, reported the results of her on-line survey of 396 internationally dispersed Internet users who met her criteria to be classified as '[Internet dependent](#).' Her findings challenged some common perceptions about heavy Internet users, specifically that they are mostly computer-savvy males. To the contrary, 20 percent more women than men responded to the survey (which doesn't necessarily mean women are more likely than men to be Internet addicts) and nearly half of respondents (42 percent) were either homemakers or high school or college students with no permanent paying jobs. Only eight percent were in high-tech jobs such as computer programming, systems analysis or engineering.

In answer to the question 'What applications do you most utilize on the Internet?' less than 10 percent of the Internet-dependent respondents said they surfed the Web or used information protocols (such as gophers or ftps) the most. On the other hand 35 percent indicated they used chat rooms and 28 percent said they participated in 'Multi-User Dungeons' or MUDS (interactive on-line fantasy games) the most, 'making the case that data base searches are not the actual reasons dependents become addicted to the Internet,' Dr. Young notes. Pathological Internet users, she says, are not looking for information, but for social support, sexual fulfillment and the ability to create a persona.

Social Support

Chat room and news groups can be very attractive to 'people whose real lives are interpersonally impoverished' but who can use the Internet to develop 'social foundations that are lacking in their immediate environments,' Dr. Young says. Through the Internet people can quickly establish virtual relationships with other people that feel close, but aren't really -- 'almost like watching a soap opera and thinking of the characters as real people.' People who are otherwise timid can express strong opinions on controversial issues or raise troubling issues on the Internet without fear of retribution.

Sexual Fulfillment

Respondents to Dr. Young's survey perceived 'Cybersex' -- playing out erotic fantasies of engaging in novel sexual acts via Internet -- as the ultimate safe sex method to fulfill sexual urges without fear of disease. 'Unlike 900 numbers which can be traced or risking being seen at an adult bookstore, dependents viewed Cybersex to be completely anonymous and unable to be traced. They felt free to carry out illicit sexual impulses and were able to act in ways that differed from real life conduct without fear of repercussion,' Dr. Young found.

Creating a Persona

You can be anyone or anything you want to be on the Internet and for those who suffer from 'low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy or frequent disapproval from others' creating a secret on-line identity can be very tempting, Dr. Young says. 'In Cyberspace, a shy person can become outgoing, a non-sexual person can be sexual, a non-assertive person can be forceful, or an aloof person can be gregarious. Dependents are able to play out parts of themselves that they fear or hate in order to consciously confront such aspects of their personalities.' But, she adds, unleashing repressed aspects of one's personality through interactive fantasy games on the Internet can be like letting the genie out of the bottle: 'what is awakened emotionally though the emergence of repressed aspects of the self are difficult to submerge back into the unconscious.'

What Constitutes Pathological Internet Use?

Adapted from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fourth Edition* (DSM-IV) to Addictive Internet Behavior by Kimberly S. Young, Psy.D.

Do you:

1. feel preoccupied with the Internet (i.e., thinking about the Internet when offline)?
2. feel a need to use the Internet with increasing amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction?
3. have an inability to control your Internet use?
4. feel restless or irritable when attempting to cut down to stop Internet use?
5. use the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a poor mood (i.e., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety or depression)?
6. lie to family members or friends to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet?
7. jeopardize or risk the loss of significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the Internet?
8. after spending an excessive amount of money on on-line fees, often return another day?
9. go through withdrawal when offline (e.g., increased depression, anxiety, etc.)?
10. stay on-line longer than originally intended?

Individuals who met four or more of these criteria over a 12-month period were classified as dependent.

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Presentation: 'Internet Addiction: What Makes Computer-Mediated Communication Habit Forming?' by Kimberly S. Young, Psy.D., University of Pittsburgh, Bradford. Session 1180, 1:00 PM, August 15, 1997, Hyatt Regency Chicago, Columbian Room.

Internet Gender Gap Narrows

As recently as four years ago, males outnumbered females on the Internet by a margin of 20 to one. That, according to psychologist Janet Morahan-Martin, Ph.D., of Bryant College, should not have come as a surprise: the Internet was developed by (largely) male scientists and mathematicians and was embraced by the (largely) male computer culture. But Dr. Morahan-Martin notes, despite the historic and continued dominance of the Internet by males, the gender gap in Internet use is narrowing rapidly, from 20 to one in 1993 to three to one today.

'One area of Internet use where males do not dominate,' Dr. Morahan-Martin says, 'is in using electronic mail (e-mail).' Several studies, she says, have found that 'females are more favorable towards e-mail than males and are even more likely than males to use the Internet for communication with friends and family.'

Dr. Morahan-Martin expects that the gender gap in Internet use will continue to narrow as access prices come down, technological changes make it more user friendly, as more girl- friendly computer and Internet games are developed and as girls and boys grow up with more-or-less equal exposure to computers and the Internet. But, she notes, at the moment, computers and the Internet are still thought of as new technologies and technology is still male-dominated. 'SONY currently is running an ad with a black and white picture with one boy pushing another in a go cart. The copy reads: '50 years ago, it was: 'Who can build the best soap box?' Now it's: 'Who can build the best Web site?' The toy has changed, but it's still a boy's toy that boys and men build and play,' she concludes.

Presentation: 'Gender Differences in Internet Use' by Janet Morahan-Martin, Ph.D., Bryant College, Smithfield, RI. Session 1180, 1:00 PM, August 15, 1997, Hyatt Regency Chicago, Columbian Room.

(Full text available from the APA Public Affairs Office.)

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