

INTERNET ADDICTION—TYPES, SYMPTOMS AND TREATMENT

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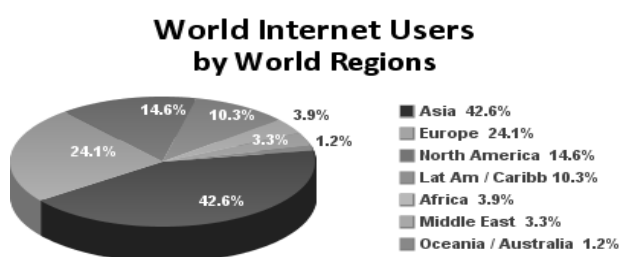
Abstract

The importance of internet is growing widely. Use of internet as a means of communication, entertainment, and gathering knowledge has risen. Using internet has become a part of our daily activities since it helps us to exchange information in matter of seconds. The Internet has been growing exponentially and is instrumental in various fields, such as business, education and health care arenas. Computer access and use among adolescents and other age brackets have grown exponentially over the past decade. The Internet is viewed as a new social environment in which universal adolescent issues pertaining to identity formation, sexuality and self-worth are explored in a virtual world. With this information this article focuses on internet addiction, an addiction which is most prevailing in our society irrespective of age. Internet addiction like any other addiction is compulsive dependence on internet. The present article talks about the percentage of internet users in various regions of the world, various types of internet addiction, the at-risk people to develop internet addiction, diagnosis and how it can be alleviated.

Key words: Internet; uses of internet; internet addiction; internet addiction types; treatment

1. Introduction

The importance of internet is growing widely. Use of internet as a means of communication, entertainment, and gathering knowledge has risen. Using internet has become a part of our daily activities since it helps us to exchange information in matter of seconds. The usage of internet has grown rapidly in few decades. According to the net source as on September 2009, there are 1,733,993,741 internet users worldwide. The below figure 1 shows statistics of internet users of various world regions. From this figure it is seen that Asia has the highest number of internet users in the world followed by Europe.



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
1,733,993,741 Internet users for September 30, 2009
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Figure 1. The percentage of world internet users by world regions.

The top ten internet user countries in Asia are China, Japan, India, Korea (South), Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Taiwan.

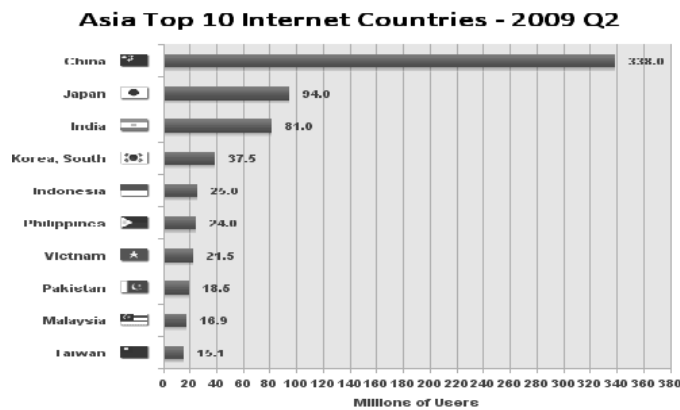


Figure 2. Asia's top 10 internet user countries.

The most widely used language on internet is English (478 million) followed by Chinese (348 million). In India there are 81,000,000 internet users. The top ten cities using internet in India are Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Kolkata, Chennai, Pune, Hyderabad, Ahmadabad, Surat and Nagpur. 85% of internet users in India are male, working women form 11% of the internet user population. As on March 2008, the most visited sites in India are Yahoo, Google India, Google, Orkut, Rediff, Youtube, Blogger.com, Windows Live, Rapid Share, Wikipedia.

2. Uses of internet

Internet is a place where one can vent out his feelings, this helps people to be psychologically healthy. Many research studies showed that on-line interactions provide social support to the otherwise isolated adolescents. Research has also proved that internet is used as a good educational tool. Spending more time on-line has showed improvement in reading among children. Internet has been used by many children and youth to get information on health—information on nutrition, exercise, sexually transmitted diseases etc. Internet was used as a create awareness about HIV/AIDS. Internet is a source where adolescents can get more information about things they cannot or feel embarrassed to discuss with others (APA, 2006).

Besides these, internet is used to communicate effectively and efficiently. Internet shopping is becoming most trendy these days. It also helps people to keep themselves informed about new developments in their field. It helps you to be in touch with your friends, relatives and thus develop your relationships.

Inspite of these uses, internet has many disadvantages. The most common among them is internet addiction. It has become a most pressing problem today. The first internet addiction study was done in US by Kimberly Young in the year 1996. Till recently it was not considered as a mental disorder but now it has been decided to include internet addiction as a disorder in DSM V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V) which is planned to be released by 2012.

3. What is internet addiction?

Addiction is defined as “compulsive, uncontrollable dependence on a substance, habit, or practice to such a degree that cessation causes severe emotional, mental, or physiological reactions” (Mosby’s Medical Nursing & Allied Health Dictionary, 1998).

Internet addiction implies the abnormal use of internet. The American Psychological association has listed out some criteria to diagnose internet addiction. They are given below:

- **Tolerance:** Tolerance is the need for increasing amounts of time on the Internet to achieve satisfaction and/or significantly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of time on the Internet.
- **Two or more withdrawal symptoms** developing within days to one month after reduction of Internet use or cessation of Internet use and these must cause distress or impair social, personal or occupational functioning. These include psychomotor agitation, i.e. trembling, tremors, anxiety, obsessive thinking about what is happening on the Internet; fantasies or dreams about the Internet; voluntary or involuntary typing movements of the fingers.

- Use of the Internet is engaged in to relieve or avoid withdrawal symptoms.
- The Internet is often accessed more often, or for longer periods of time than was intended.
- A significant amount of time is spent on activities related to Internet use e.g., Internet books, trying out new World Wide Web browsers, researching Internet vendors etc.
- Important social, occupational, or recreational activities are given up or reduced because of Internet use.
- The individual risks the loss of a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of excessive use of the Internet.

4. Types of internet addiction

Internet addiction can be of the following types:

1. *Cyber sexual addiction*: this is a type of addiction wherein the individual involves himself in virtual sexual activities. It is characterized with masturbating while chatting, sending messages that provokes sexual feelings.

2. *Cyber relational addiction*: a person with this type of addiction gives no importance to real life relationships—family, friends, relatives, colleagues etc., they are more involved in online relationships because this is a commitment free, responsibility free relationship and more over the people involved get emotional support from each other. This type of addiction is more dangerous when the individual plans to meet the online friend, because of the reality attached to it—appearance, behavior, style of talking, voice, etc.

3. *Internet gaming addiction*: this type of addiction includes partaking online games, e-auctions, e-shopping, forming online communities etc.

5. *Information overload*: some people are more obsessed with collecting more and more information on certain areas. This activity of collecting information will slowly become very strong attaining the obsessive-compulsive levels.

5. Who are at risk for internet addiction?

1. Mostly it is the adolescence who are vulnerable for internet addiction. Their curiosity nature and tendency to explore make them more susceptible to addiction. Today's higher education system compels the students to browse net for their assignments, readings, practical works, research work, downloading application forms, online classes etc., while doing these works online they slowly enter the chat room leaving their academic works unfinished. Teenagers are very sensitive and are more concerned about their looks, number of friends they have, number of opposite sex friends they have, knowledge they have in various fields etc. Internet helps them in finding friends of both sex, personal appearance pays no role here, confiscates their feeling of loneliness and it is a place where they can express their feelings and emotions. More over using internet and having online friends, gives esteem and group acceptance to the teenager.

Familial factors also endorse the use of internet. To escape from family problems one may engage himself in internet surfing. Peer influence is strong in usage of internet. Modeling also place an important role in usage of internet.

Kimbely Young reports that those who spend 38 hours and more online and as a result their work gets affected then they are infected by internet addiction. A study on online gamblers since 2007 reveals that 11.9 per cent of internet users are internet addicts.

Other than adolescents, people suffering from clinical depression, social phobia and those who feel lonely and isolated are at more risk for internet addiction.

6. Recognizing internet addicts

Block J (2008) has identified the symptoms of internet addiction. They are:

- feeling of euphoria and happiness caused by online surfing or chatting;
- increasing volume of time and money spent on internet;
- loss of interest for friends, family and their lives;

- depression caused by the disconnection with computer or internet, passionate waiting for internet surfing. Some of the physical symptoms include tunnel involvement of hand nerve stem, dry eyes, head ache, back ache, irregular nutrition, and insomnia.

Besides these, Block J (2008) has pointed out four main components of internet addiction, they are:

- Misusage of internet, which is connected with a loss of time sense.
- Abstinent syndrome - feeling of aggression, anxiousness, irritation caused by internet absence.
- Constant desire to up-grade a PC, to buy new soft or hard ware.
- Propensity for lie or argue, lowering of total effectiveness, social isolation and exhaustion.

Byun. S. et al. (2008) in his article “Reflection of Empirical Studies on Internet Addiction: It is Time to Move Forward” has cited down the classic tests developed to examine internet addiction. These tests were based on DSM IV criteria for dependent behavior on a substance or an activity. The criterion includes intemperance, changed tolerance level, withdrawal symptoms and loss of control (Thatcher and Goolam, 2005a). The tests thus developed are briefed below:

In the year 1996 Goldberg developed the internet addiction disorder scale by adapting DSM IV criteria. He was the pioneer in empirically examining Internet addicted behaviors and development of the Internet Addictive Disorder (IAD) scale. Goldberg provided several diagnostic criteria to identify Internet Addiction Disorder including hoping to increase time on the network, dreaming about the network, and having persistent physical, social, or psychological problems.

In 1998 Young K developed a simple and easy-to-use test to diagnose internet addiction. She named her test as Internet addiction Diagnostic Questionnaire (DQ). Her test was based on the DSM-IV’s definition of Pathological Gambling. He claimed that excessive use of Internet is another type of behavioral impulse-control disorders. If respondents answer “yes” to more than five among eight questions, they were defined as Internet dependent users. The questions include:

1. Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet?
2. Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use?
3. Have you jeopardized or risked the loss of a significant relationship, job, educational, or career opportunity because of the Internet? etc.

The cut-off score of “five” was consistent with that of criteria for pathological gambling.

Using DSM IV criteria Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2000) formed the Pathological Internet Use (PIU) scale containing 13 yes or no questions. Individuals who answered positively to more than four of the 13 questions were categorized as pathological Internet users.

Chen Internet Addiction scale (CIAS) assesses Internet related problems with five dimensions—compulsive use, withdrawal, tolerance, interpersonal and health problems, and time management problems.

7. Is internet addiction curable?

Internet addiction seems to be an overt expression of some previous addiction. It is seen that a person who is having sexual addiction visits pornography sites frequently which is one form of internet addiction. A person who is more involved in off-line gambling now uses internet for his gambling and becomes an internet addict. Therefore, it is unclear if internet addiction a separate disorder or is technological support for already existing problems or addiction.

Whatever the case may be, internet addiction is treated more like any other addiction. Since we are living in a technological era we cannot avoid computer and internet completely from our life. Having computer and internet has become the basic necessity today. Therefore, complete avoidance of internet from ones life is not the true treatment for internet addiction. Instead treatments should focus on helping the addicts to learn to use internet in moderation.

If a person's Internet addiction disorder has a biological dimension, medication like antidepressant or anti-anxiety drug may help them. Psychological interventions may include changing the environment to alter associations that have been made with Internet use, or decrease the reinforcement received from excessive Internet use. Psychological interventions may also help the person identify thoughts and feelings that trigger their use of the Internet. Interpersonal interventions may include approaches like social skills training or coaching in communication skills. Family and couple therapy may be indicated if the user is turning to the Internet to escape from problems in these areas of life (Beard K, 2009).

Relapse is common in any type of addiction disorder. Recognizing and preparing for relapse is often a part of the treatment process. Identifying situations that would trigger excessive Internet use and generating ways to deal with these situations can greatly reduce the possibility of total relapse (Beard K, 2009).

8. Few important sites for prevention and management of internet addiction

Welcome to the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery

<http://www.responsiblesurfing.com/products/website-blocking-monitor/free-trial/>

http://www.responsiblesurfing.com/articles_Internet_addiction/

http://www.responsiblesurfing.com/internet_Contracts/

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<http://www.apa.org/releases/youthwww0406.html>; <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>;

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