

SHOULD WE BE CONSERED ABOUT CHILDREN USE OF INTERNET? – PILOT STUDY

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Abstract

Addiction of internet and problematic internet use is a growing problem in Bosnian scholars. There are many risk factors for addiction and problematic use of Internet found at school and at home. The purpose of this study is to examine scholar's habits and experiences while using the internet and to identify the most common dangers to which children are exposed during a web search. The main risks to which children are exposed while using the internet are: sexual or violent content, direct communication with persons seeking inappropriate relationships, exposure to disturbing, hostile or inappropriate messages, and the isolation of the child due to too frequent and prolonged use of the internet. The study was conducted on a sample of 1,941 scholars from fifth to eight grades in Sarajevo. Problematic use of internet is common among scholars in Sarajevo. Serious risk factors are found at home and at school. The results show that scholars of different ages differ in terms of their use of the internet, owning a Facebook profile, frequency and purposes of internet use, as well as releasing personal information on the internet, confronting pornographic content and internet addiction. Researchers did not find a statistically significant difference between scholars of different ages in experiencing violence on the internet. According to the search results, children whose parents did not pay enough attention to the activities of their children on the internet are more frequently confronted with pornographic content and are more likely to experience violence on the internet and show more signs of internet addiction. Effective measures are needed to prevent the spread of this problem.

Keywords: Internet, Scholars, Addiction, PIU (Problematic Internet Use), Facebook

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Introduction

We live in an information era where knowledge is power. The development of the internet and its availability to the mass of people from the first attempts to link computers into a network has reached an unimaginable success. The internet (also the network) is in a basic sense a computer network which links more networks. As a common name the internet is a publicly available internationally linked system of computers, information and services for its users. In a broader sense the internet is often understood as services like the world wide web (www), the e-mail and direct chatting called the online chat (Ford, 2008: 7). The internet as a medium remains and widens and at the same time our lifestyle is changing as well. It offers the possibility of socializing, reading newspapers and books, watching movies, listening to music, obtaining information and having fun. The change is also noticeable in the way of doing business and the method of shopping (Leiner et al, 2010). It strongly influences the educational processes because it allows distance learning and online courses. Because of the commercialization of the internet and the great amount of different services available, experts are focusing their researches on the internet technology addictions. If in the previous years the main discussion issue was the addiction to television, today's issues deal with internet addiction and the increased amount of time young people and adults spend on searching the internet. We get so used to the luxury, which enables technology that we have already moved away from eye to eye interactions. Every day we see cases where people become more and more estranged one from another. The fact is more and more people break their relationships by SMS; companies are using e-mails to throw someone out of a job (Zerzan, 2008: 47). Chatting on mobile phones, sending SMS's, playing computer and video games, shut into a virtual world on the internet are examples that show us how easy it is to escape from real life to a virtual life. With this statement he directly admits that internet overuse leads to social alienation. The services which allow us to connect to the World Wide Web are available to everyone via computers or smart phones and this is the reason why nobody in modern society imagines a world without these gadgets in the long term. Due to her research results on internet overuse, Young (1998: 240) concluded that this was a mental disorder which she named Pathological Internet Use – PIU. The APA (American Psychological Association) classified the overuse of the internet services as an addiction. Now we can include the PIU in the group of addictions together with drug and alcohol addictions, addiction to video games, gambling and some of the eating disorders (Bonačić, 2010). The experts classify the problematic behaviour connected to internet abuse in different categories (Kim-Haridakis, 2009); from minor behavioural problems [Caplan, 2002; Davis et al., 2004] to PIU [Morahan-

Martin/Schumacher, 2000), internet addiction [Anderson, 1998; Scherer, 1997] and the worst case of serious everyday addiction to internet use (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000). Internet abuse is a relatively undiscovered area which offers many options; from cybersex addiction, exaggerating at befriending other internet users, abuses in undisclosed business information, to serious criminal acts which cause harm to individuals as well as companies and countries (Griffiths, 2010: 464). He discovered that clear measures on acceptable behaviour and proceedings must be set and it must be determined what causes the decrease in employee productivity. The most common internet abuse in the workplace is the use of e-mails and browsing the web for private purposes. For this kind of abuse, theoreticians use the term cyberslacking or cyberloafing. Cyberslacking or cyberloafing as an internet overuse in the workplace for private purposes which include browsing, sending and forwarding e-mails (Whitty & Carr, 2006). Cyberslacking can be classified in minor or serious cases, depending on the way of use or frequency. According to the Centre for Internet Addiction 5 to 10% of adults are to some extent addicted to the internet (Chen et al, 2008: 94). In the Netherlands conducted a research which showed that a small group of people addicted to online games (3%) existed, and the share of youths aged 13-16 within this group was 1.5% (Van Rooij et al, 2010: 209). The main internet addiction characteristic is partial or total lack of self-control (Kim & Haridakis, 2009: 1010). The importance of self-control is confirmed by the empirical study which shows the important theory of locus of control in the workplace. The locus of control refers to the extent to which individuals believe that they can take control over events that affect those (Chen et al, 2008: 90). An understanding of this concept was developed in 1954 by Rotter, and has since become an important aspect of personality studies. Individuals or group of people who believe in monitoring their own activities and efforts to succeed in their future belong to the internal locus of control category.

Another group of people who believe in fate, or luck, that is outside their own control belong to the external locus of control category. The rate of internal and external locus of control may contribute to the propensity to internet addiction, and it is more likely that individuals with higher levels of internal locus of control monitor the use of the internet without experiencing psychological dependence and pathological disorders more easily. Internet addiction has become a serious health issue in Asia (Huang et al, 2010). Of course, the excessive use of the internet is becoming more and more present in the younger age groups, which was confirmed by research among primary schools in Ankara. The results showed that boys used the computers and the internet for various

purposes. With aging, the purpose of use changed together with the amount of time online. The sixth graders mostly used the internet for online gaming and learning, while the eighth graders mainly used the internet for chatting. The vast majority of eighth graders used the internet for more than five hours a day. The generation of young people also called the "google generation" (born after 1993) faces worse working memory and reduced multi-tasking due to the excessive use of the World Wide Web (Firat Sipl & Bayhan, 2010: 1087). The younger generation has different behaviour patterns than older internet users. They face a lack of self-confidence, visit less web pages, they focus on a narrower range of fields, and their search terms are entered in a cut and paste manner (Nicholas et al, 2011: 39).

The results of the research, made by Soeters & van Schaik (2006: 34) show that 80% of parents are aware of the dangers of the internet and are concerned about the online content which may be harmful to their children. The use of the internet in the adolescent age leaves both positive and negative consequences. To alleviate the latter, parents and their style of parenting play the largest role. In other study identified a high number of pre-school children using the internet and various parenting styles. The most common style of parenting is the authoritative style (almost 60%) which depends on the age of the parents, their education and gender (Valcke et al, 2010: 459). Great importance is attributed to the parents' relationship to the internet, the frequency of their use of the internet and their prior experiences. The highest rate of internet use is found with those children whose parents use a parenting style without restrictions; on the other hand, the frequency of internet use is lower in the authoritarian style of parenting. The thesis that the most important factor is the conversation between parents and children before they get acquainted with excessive playing of violent video games and online chatting that lead to aggression, delinquency, and the emergence of an unsettling personal state. Holtz & Appel (2011: 56) believe that enforcing a strict time limit when using the internet, does not produce positive effects with adolescents. On the other hand limiting and controlling the use of the media and modern technology is a key problem. Youth's rooms provide shelter and comfort while becoming more and more filled with a variety of media that is difficult for parents to control (Courtois et al, 2009: 131). Because of the internet addiction, minors have difficulty in respecting the rules and their parents' restrictions, resulting in frequent conflicts between parents and adolescents (Wang et al, 2011). In study of Aslanidou & Menexes (2008), about the lack of parental control over internet use in the case of Greek teenagers, came to the conclusion that in Greece the internet is the indicator of social and economic stratification among young people,

as it is more accessible to children of educated parents and those who have higher incomes and come from urban centres. Deviant behaviour associated with the web is often reflected in these social backgrounds. In the future, the internet might further develop in many directions and become the key medium of communication, but certainly it will have an impact on the social side of life, stressed Rueda-Sabater & Derosby (2011: 34). We must be aware that the internet brings an addiction which can be mitigated, starting with proper education, but only under the condition that the youths as they grow up have a real role model. This means that web browsing includes the attendance and active participation of parents, who are in the role of supervisors, at the same time they must be aware of the danger of becoming victims of addiction themselves. The seriousness of the problem is seen in the fact that in some countries they already have clinics for the treatment of internet addiction for children (United Kingdom) and the elderly (USA), where the emphasis is placed particularly on the awareness of the importance of human contact (Valenčič, 2008).

Research problem

The main risks to which children are exposed while using the internet are: sexual or violent content, direct communication with persons seeking inappropriate relationships, exposure to disturbing, hostile or inappropriate messages, and the isolation of the child due to too frequent and prolonged use of the internet. Considering these risks, the researchers conducted a study whose aim was to examine scholar's habits and experiences while using the internet and to identify the most common dangers to which children are exposed during a web search. In accordance with the defined research aims, we decided to study the habits and experiences of children using the internet, differences in the experiences between scholars of different socio-demographic features, the correlation between parents' interest in children's online activities and children's exposure to pornography, violence and signs of internet addiction. Also, we were interested in testing the connection between the use of the Facebook social network and signs of internet addiction.

Methodology

The study was conducted on a sample of 1,941 scholars from the fifth to eighth grades, 51.9% boys and 48.1% girls. Participants were scholars from seven primary schools in Sarajevo. Due to the fact that there is no standardized instrument for the research problem examination, the researchers developed a questionnaire containing not only questions related to socio-demographic features but also questions about the experiences of children using the internet. Also, the researchers used

the set of questions to assess the development of internet addiction which is based on common criteria of addiction (Griffiths, 1996; Jeriček, 2002; Young, 2004; Beard, & Wolf, 2001). The set of questions for assessing the internet addiction development also included the question about the frequency of internet use, which led to the conclusion that the use of the internet for more than three hours a day is one of the signs of internet addiction. While formulating the questionnaire it was determined that at least four positive answers to a set of questions indicate the development of internet addiction. Furthermore, special attention was paid to adapt the issues to the children's ages.

Findings

The results expose 93.4% of children use the internet and that the percentage of internet use is high not only among scholars from the city, but also those living in the suburbs, which indicates a large spread of this medium among participants and displays the impact this medium has on children. Most scholars (80.9%) have internet access at home, while 56.8% of scholars use the internet every day, on an average of one to three hours. Extreme use of the internet (more than six hours per day) was recorded in 5.8% of the scholars. These results indicate that there are growing numbers of children whose main content of their free time is using the internet. A lot of the time that children spend on the internet does not leave them much time to socialize and play with their peers, talk with family members, play sports, etc., which can have a negative influence on their overall development. This study confirmed the hypothesis that the internet is becoming a children's lifestyle because they use it in all areas of life, all away from socializing, learning, and playing to have fun.

The results expose 77.9% of children use the internet to socialize with friends, which suggests that children see the internet as the means to fulfil their need for belonging, which is one of the basic human needs (Maslow, 1943). About 60% of scholars use the internet for school and learning. Encyclopaedias, different studies, courses, programmes and conferences are available on the internet which facilitates the access to literature and makes it varied. But, web pages are sometimes made by non-professionals, or those who are not competent to write on certain topics which can cause mediocrity, since the information on the internet is not checked, and it is often superficial. The negative impact of the internet is reflected in the loss of reading habits, an uncritical view of issues, and the copy-paste syndrome. 42.5% of scholars used the internet for playing games. This result implies that the development of technology has led to significant changes in traditional social games. Children spend more time playing computer games, including on-line

games in which they compete with other players. These forms of games, unlike previously popular games, require fewer social skills, don't require physical activity and contact with children, provide very few opportunities to use their imagination and to find their own solutions to different problems. Such widespread use of the internet for playing games can have adverse effects on a child's development, since violence is used for reaching the levels, collecting points and solving problems in many of these games which provide the children with the opportunity to learn new forms of aggression, and also may increase the tendency towards aggressive behaviour.

It is important to bear in mind that not all computer games have negative and harmful effects on a child's development. There is a whole range of educational and entertaining games, which can be a valuable medium for learning.

By results 41.9% of scholars use the internet for downloading movies, music or images, while 14.5% use the internet to search without a target. This phenomenon is closely associated with the insufficient copyright protection in our country, which prevents children from learning to appreciate the work of art and copyrights. 77.7% of children have a Facebook profile, which indicates the huge popularity of this social network in our region. Facebook has become one of the most popular online destinations in the world in recent years. Social networks can provide children with a sense of social acceptance, and thus they satisfy one of the basic human needs, the need to belong. But if they use the internet excessively, children can become alienated and detached from the real world. Facebook allows you to restore and maintain contacts, exchange ideas and information, provides you with cooperation and mutual support and a disseminated network of friendships. While it helps you develop self-confidence, it also has its drawbacks, such as creating emotional bonds too soon, the illusion of knowing another person well, as well as impersonation, identity theft, pornography, paedophilia, harassment, blackmail and addiction.

About two thirds of scholars stated that their parents are never or only sometimes interested in what their children do on the internet, which suggests that parents do not realize the importance of their presence during the child's use of the internet, or the significance of conversations with their children about the dangers of the global network. They also don't show enough interest in their children's activities on the internet. In that way, the internet and television, take the educational role for children, and children find things that are inappropriate for their age. More than a third of children met with pornographic content searching

the internet. Although these experiences can be seen as intentional - when children look for such contents because of curiosity, or random - when children receive a spam message, advertisement or mail with a pornographic content, both represent serious sexual stimulation for the children which has adverse effects on their socialization.

64.4% of children who use the internet declared their personal information on the internet. Children are very prone to unwillingly reveal personal details and photos about themselves, their friends and family, without thinking about who can see them and thus they become the target of many internet predators. This shows that very little attention has been paid to the protection of personal data, and that children are insufficiently aware of the dangers and consequences of the disclosure of personal data. The results present there is a trend towards various forms of violence and abuse on the internet, so that 33.9% of children have experienced one or more forms of violence on the internet, most of them got some nasty comments, or someone was impersonating them, and some of them had an offer to meet with a person they had met over the internet.

It happens that adults who do not have friendly intentions sometimes may pose as children in order to establish a relationship of trust and friendship, with the aim of luring a child for a meeting that usually ends with real sexual abuse. The most worrying data which are obtained in this study is that 20% of scholars show some signs of development of internet addiction. In fact, every fifth child prolongs the use of the internet to achieve the satisfaction, neglect obligations because of the internet, use the internet as a refuge from problems, anxiety and depression, express helplessness to control the use, or use it for a longer time than initially planned, and use it more than three hours a day. These indicators suggest that the internet has taken a central place in the everyday life of a large number of scholars who spend more time on the internet, but also put in the background all the other activities and in that way they become socially isolated and neglect their duties. And given the fact that scholars want to use the internet more and more, we can predict that its use will grow in the future, and thus will increase the possibility of internet addiction. The high risk of internet addiction is in our failure to recognize its signs and to react in time. As a relatively new phenomenon, internet addiction is mentioned only rarely, with insufficiently clear guidelines, and because of this professionals do not pay enough attention to this problem, which creates the possibility of this phenomenon's escalation. Internet addiction can have a negative impact on children's socialization and the development of social skills and because of that they may have trouble making friends in the real world.

Given the fact that their peers have a large influence on the formation of their personality, the development of social skills, and the adoption of social norms and values, such a child will be deprived of the valuable experience of socializing with peers.

Staying too long in the virtual world a child can become alienated from the real world and people, leaving his/her natural need to belong unfulfilled, and the child can try to meet his/her need with his/her friends on social networks. However, virtual contacts are usually superficial and usually things in real life are different from what we imagine them to be, so that virtual friends differ from what they are like in real life. Given that social networks allow the representation of people as they want to be seen by the others, it affects the development of self-image because our psychological image is partly based on how others see us. Such individuals will have a distorted image of themselves and their abilities. Also, such children might be in conflict with their environment, because while spending too much time on the internet children ignore their obligations and fail to meet the expectations and demands of their social environment, for which they will probably not have any interest or inclination to perform. The study found that girls use the internet much more frequently than boys, more of them have a Facebook profile, and use the internet more often for school and chatting, while boys more frequently play games (Table 1). On the other hand, the results show a higher exposure of boys to pornographic contents and violence on the internet. They also express more signs of internet addiction.

In addition, the researchers found that parents are significantly less interested in the activities of male children on the internet. This result can be explained by the fact that the upbringing of male and female children is traditionally different, but also by the fact that men are seeking sexual contact more often with juvenile girls, which increases parental concern, and thus the interest in online activities of their female children. However, cases of physical abuse of boys have been recorded, which emphasizes the importance of parental interest in their children's activities on the internet, regardless of their gender.

Table 1: Gender differences in the experiences of Internet use

VARIABLE	SEX %		χ ²
	male	Female	
Internet use	93.0	93.9	7.10*
Owning a Facebook profile	75.8	79.8	4.2*
Socializing with friends	74.7	81.3	11.35**
Use of the internet for school and learning	51.5	68.5	54.05**
Use of the internet for downloading music and pictures	42.3	41.4	0.12
Aimless search	16.6	12.2	7.18**
Playing games	52.4	31.8	78.26**
Publishing personal data	62.3	66.7	3.72
Exposure to pornographic content	48.2	22.1	134.39**
Experienced violence	38.6	28.9	19.21**
Internet addiction	22.6	17.2	7.81*
The frequency of use			29.58**

Source: authors (2011)

Note: ** p<0.01; * p<0.05

The study found the increased use of the internet, Facebook profiles, publication of personal data, meeting with pornographic content and expression of signs of internet addiction among scholars in the upper grades (Table 2), which underlines the importance of parents' attention to the internet activities of their teenage children.

Table 2 - Age differences in the internet use experiences

VARIABLE	CLASS %				χ ²
	V	VI	VII	VIII	
Internet use	90.4	92.5	93.8	96.4	17.74**
Owning a Facebook profile	68.9	73.5	82.6	83.9	37.97**
Socializing with friends	70	73.5	81.8	84.5	34.48**
Use of the internet for school and learning	59.1	60.0	59.9	59.7	0.07
Use of the internet for downloading music and pictures	35.7	37.8	47,9	44.4	17.54**
Aimless search	14.6	12.5	15.2	15.9	2.6
Publishing Personal Data	55.7	58.0	69.3	72.8	39.82**
Playing games	56.0	47.1	36.7	33.3	53.25**
Exposure to pornographic content	16.0	29.1	45.5	47.1	115.46* *
Experienced violence	29.4	34.1	34.5	36.6	4.69
Internet addiction	13.2	16.6	21.2	27.4	27.61**
The frequency of use					103.20* *

Source: authors (2011)

Note: **p<0.01; *p<0.05

Conclusion

Research shows that parents' lack of interest for what children are doing on the internet significantly affects the increase of unwanted exposure to pornographic content. It's a similar relation between parental interest and experiencing some form of violence over the internet. Also, the indifference of parents for their children's online activities increases the likelihood of developing dependence on the internet. The shift from the real world into virtual activity causes a reduction in the time spent interacting with the family. All this points to the importance of parental supervision and their interest in their children online activities. While parents are increasingly expressing concern about the excessive internet use of their children, little is known about the role parents can play in preventing their children in the development of their internet addiction. Good communication and rules of the contents that are searched for can prevent the development of addiction. Strict rules about the amount of time of internet use, however, can promote excessive use due to the fact that the ban increases the interest in certain activities.

According to the results of this study, using Facebook increases the likelihood of addiction to the internet. While establishing new friendships and socializing, children through the Internet can satisfy their need for contact, for belonging, however, the excessive use of social networks brings the risk of developing an internet addiction, which results in the neglect of duties, family, friends, and leads to social isolation. So even though Facebook connects people, it also alienates them, and separates them from the real world and it is a vicious circle in which an unmet need to belong affects participation in social networks and groups in order to release the feelings, and these activities can only further increase alienation. Although the internet has its advantages, we must look at the traps set that pose a danger to most of the children uncontrollably searching the internet content that is often inappropriate for their age and stage of development. It is necessary to emphasize the need for schools to encourage pupils to a safe and positive internet use. Specifically, it is recommended that teachers give scholars assignments to search the internet (which will be pre-checked by the teachers themselves) to ensure scholars have positive examples of using the internet, compared to the risk of use that is often present in large numbers. It is therefore important that teachers monitor trends and educate scholars on the use of the internet, and alert scholars to the potential inaccuracy of information, as well as to all the dangers that this medium can have. Also, if teachers are in conversation with the scholars and learn that one of them has been a victim of violence or inappropriate online behaviour, it is necessary to consult with professionals from institutions dealing with these issues, such as family counselling, mental health centres, police stations or some non-governmental organizations, where they will get advice on how to approach a certain situation and how to motivate scholars to report violence. Internet use in schools should be controlled such as to prepare the terms of use, and to put computers in a visible place.

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