Internet usage and 'internet addiction' in students and its implications for learning

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The popular stereotypes surrounding various types of hacking and computing addiction (e.g. Turkle, 1995) indicate that 'addicts' tend to be socially unskilled male teenagers who have little or no social life and / or self-confidence. Recent surveys have confirmed that a vast majority of Internet users are in fact male. A survey by Pitkow and Kehoe (1996) indicated that 32% of users access the Internet through education providers and that 28% of them are college students. Two recent studies have examined excessive Internet use among a US student population. Although unrepresentative of the general public, students are considered high-risk for problems because of ready access and flexible time schedules (Moore, 1995).

Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (1997) examined what they termed 'Pathological Internet Use' (PIU) in 277 students. Pathological Internet users accounted for 8.1% of the total sample and were more likely to be male (12.2% males; 3.2% females). Scherer and Bost (1997) surveyed 531 students about their Internet use and developed a checklist of ten clinical symptoms to parallel the symptoms of substance abuse and dependency. Results indicated that 49 respondents (13%) of weekly users scored three or more on the dependency checklist and that the majority of these were male (71%). Thirteen percent of the sample reported Internet use had interfered with either their academic work, professional performance or their social lives. All surveys examining addiction have failed to indicate that it exists mainly because the criteria chosen appear to be only peripheral to the core concepts of addiction.

Previous research by some of the authors (Griffiths, 1995; 1996; Griffiths & Sparrow, 1997) has shown that the Internet may be addicting. One of the objectives of this research project (funded by Nottingham Trent University) is to determine the object of the addiction and the implications it may have for impeding student learning. It must also be noted that since students appear to be at the greatest risk, such research will help in the formulation of problem prevention policies.

There is little in the way of information about normal and excessive Internet usage and its development in the student population and / or it's impact on student learning. The current research project has only just begun but aims to:

- establish empirically the prevalence of 'Internet addiction' amongst the student population;
- determine the object of the excessive use and / or addiction, e.g. the medium of communication, aspects of its specific style (e.g. no face-to-face,

Accepted: 20 March 1998

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etc.), the information that can be obtained (e.g. pornography), the playing of (role) games, gambling and/or talking to others in chat rooms or on Internet Relay Chat;

- determine and analyse the structural characteristics of the Internet based on the previous work of Griffiths (1993). For instance, it may be the case that those people who use the Internet may become more 'addicted' because of the increased number of structural characteristics (due to its multimedia design);
- collect empirical demographic data on Internet users. This includes types of activity that people perform on the net (e.g. e-mailing, information browsing, file transferring, socialising, role-game playing etc.), previous computing experience and the frequency in each of these types of internet activity, and how long they spend per computing session etc.

The project consists of two major studies. The first is questionnaire based and examines demographic details, types of Internet usage, frequency measures and an adapted version of the DSM-IV addiction criteria (as applied to internet usage). The second study is qualitative in nature and consists of focus groups and single interviews with regular and excessive Internet student users. These interviews will probe more deeply into the areas outlined in the project aims. The research will hopefully be generalisable to a number of other technological addictions (e.g. computers, computer games) with wide implications for research into the field of behavioural (non-chemical) addictions. It will also help in the formulation of policy to prevent excessive non-productive use of the Internet.

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