

Daria J. Kuss  
Halley M. Pontes

Advances in Psychotherapy –  
Evidence-Based Practice

# Internet Addiction



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# Internet Addiction

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# Dedication

To Henry  
D.J.K.

To Emilia  
H.M.P.

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# Description

The concept of addiction has expanded considerably in recent years to include many types of excessive and addictive behaviors, and is now no longer restricted to behaviors related to the misuse of substances. The use of different Internet applications and videogames has become increasingly popular among people. Although there are indeed many benefits and advantages the Internet brings to all of us, there is a growing concern among several stakeholders (e.g., governments, clinicians, etc.) in relation to potential detrimental and addictive effects of the Internet for a minority of individuals. The term *Internet addiction* entered the medical lexicon in the mid-1990s, and since then, an increasing number of scientific reports about excessive and addictive use of this medium has been published in the literature. We discuss the nature of Internet addiction, including its terminology, definition, motivational factors, epidemiological status, potential risk factors, and methods for treatment. This book is a guide for professionals, academics and researchers working in the field, as it combines up-to-date research evidence with practical guides for how to run clinical and psychotherapeutic sessions, using an evidence-based treatment approach.

## 1.1 Terminology

Since the mid-1990s, a wide range of terms have been adopted to describe excessive and detrimental use of the Internet. In most cases, heterogeneity in the terminology results either from (a) the theoretical premises that the authors identify, and/or (b) the way in which Internet addiction was clinically assessed. Some of these terms used include *Internet addiction disorder*, *pathological Internet use*, *compulsive Internet use*, *virtual addiction*, *problematic Internet use*, *generalized pathological Internet use*, and *Internet use disorder*, etc. In this book, the term *Internet addiction* will be used for the sake of consistency to describe generalized (nonspecific) addictive use of the Internet. Other specific terms such as *videogame addiction*, *Internet gaming disorder* (IGD), and *social networking addiction* will also be used to refer to specific types of Internet addiction.

When studying the psychological implications of excessive Internet use, the primary object of addiction is the experience that is stimulated by the contents found online and/or the interactive experience of gaining access to this material or these applications online. Research on Internet addiction has investigated a wide range of online behaviors, their potential addictive properties, and how

**The best nomenclature for defining Internet addiction is still unclear**

such behaviors can result in functional impairments. One example of these behaviors is online gaming and the associated detrimental effects emerging from videogame addiction. The literature on videogame addiction has adopted a broad range of terminologies to define the phenomenon, including *computer game dependence*, *problem videogame playing*, *videogame addiction*, *Internet gaming addiction*, *pathological videogame use*, *online gaming addiction*, *problematic online game use*, *video game dependency*, *pathological gaming*, *problematic online gaming*, and more recently, *IGD*, and *gaming disorder*.

Social networking addiction is also an emerging issue within the Internet addiction literature. Previous scholars have used different terms to characterize this phenomenon, such as *social network addiction*, *online social networking site addiction*, *Facebook addiction*, *addiction to social networking sites*, *social network site addiction*, *social network disorder*, *social media addiction*, and *social media disorder*. Throughout this book, the term *social networking addiction* will be adopted for the sake of consistency.

## 1.2 Definition

The definition of Internet addiction has been extensively debated and developed considerably over the past 20 years. Notwithstanding such debates, a minority of users will become addicted to the Internet; this addiction is regarded as a behavioral addiction often associated with serious health-related impairments. In broad terms, Internet addiction can be defined as a behavioral pattern of Internet use encompassing a dysfunctional craving for the use of the Internet for unregulated and excessive periods of time, with accompanying significant psychosocial and functional impairments that are not accounted for by any other disorder. Weinstein, Feder, Rosenberg, and Dannon (2014) defined Internet addiction by excessive or poorly controlled preoccupation, urges, and/or behaviors regarding Internet use that lead to impairment or distress in many life domains. Initial theoretical efforts to define Internet addiction saw it as similar to pathological gambling, further defining it as an impulse-control disorder not involving the ingestion of psychoactive intoxicants (Young, 1998b). Furthermore, Internet addiction has been defined as a compulsive-impulsive spectrum disorder involving online and/or offline computer usage patterns featuring excessive use, withdrawal symptoms, tolerance, and negative outcomes (Block, 2008). Internet addiction is also a type of technological addiction, which is conceptually operationalized as a nonchemical (behavioral) addiction involving excessive human–machine interactions (Griffiths, 1995). In this context, technological addictions, such as Internet addiction, represent a subset of behavioral addictions encompassing six key components that are common to all addictive behaviors (Griffiths, 2005; also see Section 2.3).

The lack of robust formal diagnostic criteria to assess Internet addiction represents a methodological shortcoming, as researchers tend to adopt modified criteria for pathological gambling to assess Internet addiction. Pontes, Kuss, and Griffiths (2015) argued that although Internet addiction may share some commonalities with other substance use disorders, the suitability of such criteria in the assessment of Internet addiction is questionable. A study

**Internet addiction can lead to serious mental and physical health-related impairments**

by Tonioni et al. (2014) investigated two clinical samples (31 Internet addicts and 11 pathological gamblers) and a control group of 38 healthy individuals to ascertain whether Internet addiction patients exhibited distinct psychological symptoms, temperamental traits, coping strategies, and relational patterns in comparison with pathological gamblers. This study concluded that Internet addicts presented significantly higher mental and behavioral disengagement associated with augmented interpersonal impairment. Moreover, temperamental patterns, coping strategies, and social impairments appeared to be different across both addictions. Although Internet addicts and pathological gamblers appear to share relatively similar psychological profiles, previous research found no overlap between these two groups (Dowling & Quirk, 2009), further supporting the notion that the two phenomena are separate disorders.

Given the evolving nature of Internet addiction as a psychological construct and clinical phenomenon, more recent theoretical developments have defined it within a continuum of problem severity. Researchers from a cognitive-behavioral and sociocognitive perspective often employ the term *problematic Internet use* to describe a more common and less severe problem than is suggested by the term Internet addiction. Accordingly, problematic Internet use is usually situated by cognitive-behavioral researchers in the middle range of the continuum of problem severity and emphasizes the mild and benign nature of related negative outcomes (truancy, foregoing social events) of unregulated Internet use. Conversely, addiction researchers place Internet addiction at the upper end of the continuum, as they view the issue as a pathology, which implies the experience of serious negative life consequences (divorce, dropping out of school, dismissal from a job; Pontes, Caplan, & Griffiths, 2016).

Further theoretical developments have defined Internet addiction as an addictive syndrome (Shaffer et al., 2004), referring to a cluster of symptoms and clinical expressions related to an abnormal underlying condition. In this case, not all symptoms or signs are present in every expression of the syndrome, and some manifestations of a syndrome may have unique signs and symptoms. In this context, Internet addiction might be a distinctive expression of the same underlying syndrome reflecting multiple opportunistic expressions (Griffiths, Kuss, Pontes, & Billieux, 2016). Despite the recent advances, other scholars have argued that Internet addiction is a misnomer that should be abandoned due to the high conceptual heterogeneity of the term and because being addicted to the Internet implies that someone is addicted to a delivery mechanism. Thus, sustaining the concept of Internet addiction might require that one ignore the fact that Internet addicts are no more addicted to the Internet than alcoholics are addicted to bottles.

With regard to the definition of videogame addiction, researchers have traditionally adopted a broad range of definitions to describe its detrimental effects. However, in May 2013, the fifth revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) by the American Psychiatric Association (APA; APA, 2013) was published, and it proposed IGD as a tentative mental health disorder warranting further research. Accordingly, IGD is defined as a persistent and recurrent involvement with videogames that may lead to significant clinical and functional impairments of daily work and/or educational activities. IGD is indicated by endorsement of five out of nine symptoms over a 12-month period – namely (i) *salience*: excessive

**Internet addiction may be understood within a continuum of severity**