Differentiating Two Types of Human Repetitive Experience on the Internet

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Differentiating Two Types of Human Repetitive Experience on the Internet

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Repetitive actions and the Internet addiction

Among many discussions, which are related to the specifics of human behavior on the Internet, probably the most important, from both theoretical and practical perspectives, is the one that has been initiated a decade ago and is being continued up to now. It is devoted to psychological qualification of a special type of behavior, most often called Internet addiction disorder (IAD) or Internet dependency. This condition rests on easily identifiable behaviors such as excessive online activity, withdraw or modification of interests and daily experiences in order to be online, including an inability to control sessions of Internet use, or unwillingness to perform offline routines and irritation when disturbed while online. Other symptoms may include, an emergence of unmanageable relationship problems; a ‘hype’ or euphoria associated with access to a favorite Internet service; preoccupation with online activities such as gaming, chatting, gambling, shopping, stock trading, web surfing or database exploration; or involvement in romance, cybersex or cyberporn, etc.

Starting with Young’s (1998) and Greenfield’s (1999) monographs, and several prior web and journal publications, the qualification of certain types of human behavior on the Internet as addictive became a widespread view. Professionals nevertheless, hesitate to qualify so-called technological or behavioral addictions, such as (online) shopping, using Internet, or watching media, or experiences that are not caused by intake of substances, as traditional dependencies. The latter are now believed to embrace both physical, or substance dependencies and psychological dependencies, or addictions. Diverse views on the theme, centering upon Internet addiction, have been reviewed by Davis (2001), Griffiths (2000), Shapira et al. (2003), and Yellowlees & Marks (2007).
We will not go into further detail, mostly due to the fact that the discussants are far from coming to a particular decision. Although the Internet addiction is rather often associated, hypothetically and empirically, with compulsiveness, not all of the authors believe that Internet addictions have compulsive histories. What is certain however, is that all addictive experiences, whether compulsive or not, are repetitive by nature. To call addictive actions repetitive would be certainly less questionable than to call them compulsive.

Indeed, the term repetitive itself seems to be free of clinical connotations, and at the same time, it describes in a reasonable way the sequences of actions undertaken by anyone who can be qualified as an Internet addict. After all, any addiction means that an addict repetitively goes on performing a certain set of actions: for example, smoking, doing drugs, gambling, exercising, going shopping, online gaming, chatting, etc.

This is the first type of repetitive action we are discussing in the paper. The second type of repetitive action refers to the so-called optimal experience patterns that occur while using the Internet.

2. Repetitive actions and flow experienced in online environments

Professor Mihály Csikszentmihályi, a leading researcher on positive psychology, has contributed research on the optimal experience, also known as flow experience, to psychology (2000/1975). During numerous interviews with highly motivated people performing many various activities, Csikszentmihályi found that they provide almost identical verbal descriptions of their characteristic states regardless of the particular sort of their activity. Almost everyone mentioned ‘being in the midst of a flow’, or, to express it in a slightly different manner, “flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future” (Csikszentmihályi, 2000/1975, p. 36).

As a result, Csikszentmihályi (2000/1975 and elsewhere) called this sort of experience flow, or optimal experience, and selected its major characteristics:

- clear and distinct objectives
- temporary loss of self-consciousness
- distorted sense of time
- actions merging with awareness
- immediate feedback
- high concentration on the task
- high level of control over this task
- balance (precise matching) between the available skills and the task challenges
- and lastly, experiences bring full satisfaction and are worth doing for their own sake

The importance of the latter point is marked by the special term Csikszentmihályi coined from Greek: autotelic (self + goal) which means that the only the goal of doing something is just the
act of doing it, regardless of whether external rewards will follow.

The new terminology and the corresponding new aspects of treating psychological reality can be found in extensive studies within psychology and its neighboring disciplines, including, for example, education and ethnography. It is important to note that one of the most intensely developed areas of optimal experience research is flow experienced in the IT environments (Finneran & Zhang, 2005). Numerous research directions are presented in the literature. The most developed areas of research include:

- the usage of the optimal experience patterns in e-learning
- online instruction and distant education
- in computer- and Internet-mediated communication, particularly in instant messaging and chatting
- in consuming the web media sources and online entertainments
- in web marketing, e-shopping, and business applications of web sources
- in playing computer games, video gaming and online gaming, including online multiplayer games
- in web navigation, exploratory online behavior, and search of the content items on the web
- in illegal penetrations into cyberspace environments, in hacking, for example, and in computer security regulations
- in psychological rehabilitation by the means of the high-tech equipment and programs, such as in immersive systems of virtual reality
- lastly, in the measurement of the web-site attraction and its friendliness for consumers, as well as in usability testing and in the adaptation of web sources to target populations

A detailed review is presented elsewhere (Voiskounsky, in press).

Optimal experience means that people seek enjoyment (Csikszentmihályi, 2000/1975) and thus, keep performing certain actions associated with experiencing flow. An external observer would notice that all those seeking flow go on performing, often on a daily basis, repetitive actions, sometimes almost or partly identical. This is the second type of repetitive experience discussed in the current paper.

3. Two types of repetitive actions: the false analogy

Although the two types of repetitive actions psychologically differ, some scholars display an erroneous tendency toward confusing and blending them. They indicate that both types of experience welcome repetitive actions. Contrary to this view, any analogy between flow and addiction is psychologically inadequate, and correlations between the symptoms of the optimal experience and the Internet addiction cannot be justified. Indeed, the meaning of the optimal experience is that of a principally positive psychological phenomenon, flow being understood as an enjoying experience with a strong positive impact on lifestyle and the quality of life. Opposite to that, an addiction is a sort of escape from personal problems and a decrease in the quality of life.
The tendency of associating flow experience with addictive types of behavior is referred to primarily with online, video or computer gaming (Chen & Park, 2005; Chou & Ting, 2003; Wan & Chiou, 2006). The idea that flow experience causes addiction is stated, for example, in an empirical paper by Chou and Ting (2003). The authors provide logically reasonable, but psychologically insufficient arguments, namely that “people who enjoy flow experience during an activity may develop a tendency to repeat the activity... Repetition of a particular activity may eventually develop into a tendency toward addiction... Flow experience is the precondition that actually activates addiction” (Chou & Ting, 2003, p. 665). Moreover, they empirically testify to this sequence of statements. In fact, they believe that the repetitive behavior, not necessarily the flow experience, may activate the addictive activity.

These authors, as well as some other scholars, fail to realize that replications and repetitions are the outer, visible part of actions, taken apart from their inner meanings. The psychological meaning of a tendency toward the multiplicative repetitions of an enjoyable activity is totally opposite any sort of addictive behavior. In the psychological context, a term mimetic flow was introduced for activities that “turn out to be poor in complexity potential, which is an essential feature of authentic flow activities and a prerequisite for individual development. Moreover, such activities do not foster the participant’s constructive integration in the culture” (Massimini & Delle Fave, 2000, p. 28). Examples of mimetic flow include, the authors note, the intake of drugs and psychoactive substances, stealing, passive leisure activities like watching TV, abuse of technological artifacts, including computers and the Internet.

In a recent study (Wan & Chiou, 2006), it has been empirically shown that flow experience is negatively correlated to Internet addiction. The authors’ further analysis differentiates satisfactions from dissatisfactions inherent in the online gaming experience, and provides well-justified evidence that the addicts seek a kind of a relief from their dissatisfaction in the process of gaming. Thus, flow and addictive states have little in common: while the repetitions of certain actions take place, the psychological nature is entirely dissimilar. The reduction of the flow experience to repetitive actions is psychologically inadequate. The result, easily understood from the flow theory, hinders further attempts to validate that repetitive forms of online behavior, related to addictions and to optimal forms of experience, are of the same psychological background. The experimenters should fully realize this conclusion.

References


3 THOUGHTS ON “DIFFERENTIATING TWO TYPES OF HUMAN REPETITIVE EXPERIENCE ON THE INTERNET”

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I also agree with you. I think that there are lots of lessons to be learned from this book. By not reading the book, we miss out on some things that are a certain impact to our
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