The Addiction Addiction?

A review of

**Internet Addiction: A Handbook and Guide to Evaluation and Treatment**
by Kimberly S. Young and Cristiano Nabuco de Abreu (Eds.)

Reviewed by

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A recent online petition sponsored by the Society for Humanistic Psychology (2011), and currently carrying over 12,000 signatures, expresses serious misgivings regarding several facets of the upcoming fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM–V)*. Among the stated concerns are the lowering of diagnostic thresholds, the dangers inherent in diagnosing questionable “disorders”—particularly in vulnerable populations—and the medicalization of common emotional responses to living. *Internet addiction disorder* is singled out as a proposed diagnostic category that is of particular concern due to its lack of an empirical basis in the scientific literature. Thus, it gives one pause to encounter a book titled *Internet Addiction: A Handbook and Guide to Evaluation and Treatment*.

In part, such apprehension is warranted: The mental health treatment industry has in the past succumbed to passing fevers when drama surpasses knowledge, and an illusion of
certainty trumps an abiding humility. Now in my 35th year as a clinician, like many in my generation I managed to avoid jumping on ephemeral bandwagons, including the satanic cult “epidemic” of the 1980s and the admonition that clinicians should hypnotize virtually every client to uncover the multiple personality disorder that was lurking just beneath the surface of even mild depression. Readers can add their own examples, but the lesson is clear: The field of psychotherapy, driven by both compassion and commerce, can encourage us to minimize critical thinking while we forge ahead into a chimera of certainty that is generally fleeting. Thus, I hope I can be forgiven for approaching Internet Addiction with mild trepidation.

That being said, there is much to commend in this book because it presents an impressive range of current views of problematic Internet use and, in doing so, provides fascinating insight into human beings who, again and again, have been seduced by the siren call of new technologies that allow us to experience aspects of life in ways previously impossible. One can easily imagine that when radio first became prevalent in homes, many became concerned by the amount of time some family members spent with head cocked next to the infernal device when there was work to be done.

Of course, in those days the concept of addiction was not applied to most human activities as it is now. However, the advent of television engendered concerns regarding the dangers inherent in this technology (e.g., see Mander, 1978), although inpatient units for its treatment were not to my knowledge established. What is different about Internet-based problems that has led to more aggressive statements regarding the imperative of intervention? What is it about this new technology that has proven so simultaneously useful and potentially harmful?

In the chapter titled “Uses and Gratifications of Internet Addiction” LaRose presents a sociocognitive model that outlines some of the potential needs met by excessive Internet use and explores how Internet use can become a nonconscious habit, hypothesizing that for some people it “becomes a quick fix and an instant cure that washes away troubling feelings, feelings that they have not yet learned to deal with” (p. 70). Clearly, such investigation is extremely beneficial as psychologists examine the interaction of human beings and technology and, in doing so, arrive at original understandings of not only the effects of new technologies but also the nature of human beings.

Caplan and High, in their chapter, seem to wisely moderate the assumption of addiction by focusing on problematic Internet use, which seems much more intellectually defensible even if the term is less marketable than addiction. In doing so, they survey noteworthy research regarding the social dimension of online behavior, examining how this form of relationship differs from face-to-face contact and how it can contribute to feelings of well-being, even as more vulnerable participants may come to depend upon online connection instead of expanding their social possibilities. Chapters such as these are constructive highlights of the book; they openly explore the online world without constraining themselves within a model of addiction.
Other chapters are equally appealing in their examinations of more specific and more uniquely online activity. For example, Blinka and Smahel write in their chapter “Addiction to Online Role-Playing Games” that gamers are drawn to this activity due to its reliable effect of improving mood states, although the authors note that, for some players, the games become a life priority that requires increasing devotion of time, while they report difficulties feeling in control of the amount of time they devote to online gaming.

Griffiths provides a captivating chapter on “Gambling Addiction on the Internet,” explaining not only how the act of gambling can be problematic but also how the additional dimensions of the online gambling experience (e.g., convenient accessibility, frequent rewards, electronic cash, and alluring pop-ups for further sites) complicate what already is a seductive activity for some. Delmonico and Griffin explore the recent landscape of “Cybersex Addiction and Compulsivity” and valuably investigate how anonymity, avoidance of immediate consequences (e.g., the possibility of leaving a site if a conversation becomes uncomfortable), the centrality of fantasy, and relative lack of social hierarchies affect the nature and development of online relationships. Whitty explores the area of Internet infidelity, deftly describing the unique lure of online sites where individuals can pursue infidelity through the development of both online and offline relationships.

In these chapters, as well as in others, the authors are clearly focused upon trying to convey their understandings of the formation and nature of human difficulties arising within an online environment. Since this is a relatively new technological marketplace of information and relationships, it surely deserves the kind of incisive examination that fills this volume. Other chapters are more dependent upon the assumption of a truly addictive phenomenon. Young contributes a chapter on clinical assessment issues, and other authors present chapters on the treatment of Internet addiction—both inpatient and outpatient—from cognitive-behavioral, systemic, and twelve-step perspectives.

Although this book provides insights into the shape and nature of problematic Internet use, it unfortunately and too often does so by beginning with an assumed conclusion—that is, averring that problematic Internet use is a true addiction, a mental illness, a disease. Despite its penetrating perspectives, the book’s potential is mitigated by the relatively consistent insistence that this is a “real disorder,” a “real disease,” a “real addiction.”

Nowhere is the case plausibly and critically established that problematic Internet use represents what we know as an addiction or disease or that this difficulty meets the criterion that “Internet addiction, like chemical addictions, is a primary, progressive disease” (p. 207). The assumption is perhaps no more clearly illustrated than in this revealing sentence from the book’s introduction: “In 2008 the American Medical Association estimated that five million children suffered from an addiction to games and considered calling gaming overuse an addiction in its revised diagnostic manual” (p. xvi). In other words, the conclusion that problematic Internet use is an addiction was established prior to it being established.

Without doubt, establishing a problem as a disease provides benefits. As noted by pioneer alcoholism researcher George Vaillant, that process “is a useful device both to
persuade the alcoholic to admit his alcoholism and to provide a ticket for admission into the health care system” (as cited in Peele, 1995, p. 199). The same is true here: A diagnosis can persuade individuals to face their problem and provide them with a pathway to health care. At the same time, diagnosis can influence a client to take a more passive stance toward life problems and to reduce his or her personal agency (e.g., see Drewery, Winslade, & Monk, 2005).

Indeed, one’s perception of oneself and one’s life experiences changes when viewed through the lens of an embraced diagnosis. A participant in a study of the effects of psychiatric diagnosis (Knight & Bradfield, 2003) said, “I have been taught to be aware of every shifting mood and change. Anticipation and judgement [sic] of every mood and behavior is not natural and is not allowing one to live freely; but externally, always out of oneself, like an observer” (p. 12).

That is, clients can come to view themselves and their self-efficacy differently, perhaps by perceiving their problematic behavior as an inescapable product of an ongoing disease process. This makes it more difficult for individuals to appreciate their own self-efficacy or to believe that immersion in the Internet may be a passing phase that they will successfully traverse. The addition of longitudinal studies on the natural course of Internet difficulties or on the prevalence and form of “spontaneous remission” of the difficulty would have added desirable dimension to this book.

Arguing that problematic Internet use may not be a true addiction is not the same thing as saying it never poses problems to human beings, and we should challenge ourselves with important questions. Can a human activity be a problem without it being considered a mental illness, disorder, or disease? If not, why? If so, can we not still offer assistance and compassion for those who have difficulties moderating their use of the Internet? If not, why? Must problematic behavior be pathologized or medicalized in order to “earn” the care and compassion of others, be they professionals or nonprofessionals? These are neglected questions on both professional and cultural levels that beg to be addressed.

Finally, and perhaps most important, can the field of psychology continue to ignore the psychological effects of the act of diagnosis? Might it not have a negative effect on individuals to be told they have a lifelong, inherent addictive disease? How might this change their views of their problem, of their abilities to change, and of themselves? Should we not explore and understand the psychological effects, positive and negative, upon the diagnosed?

And what about the effects on psychologists? Can the field’s compulsive, nonconscious drive to label problems as diseases become—dare I say it—an addiction?

References


