

Is 'internet addiction' a misnomer?

March 21 2016, by Mark Griffiths, Nottingham Trent University



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A recent study by Phil Reed and colleagues provides some experimental evidence that internet addicts may be conditioned by what they view on the screen.

I was the first person in the world to publish [an academic paper on internet addiction](#) back in November 1996, so it's good to see that the number of studies into this subject has grown substantially over the last

20 years, investigating the disorder in many different ways. However, despite growing academic insight, to say that someone is "addicted" to the [internet](#) is not as simple as you may think.

The newly published study is one of few in the field that has conducted experiments into internet addiction, rather than surveying participants or examining what happens inside the brains of those who spend excessive amounts of time online.

Reed's research, [published in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry](#), involved 100 adult volunteers who were deprived of [internet access](#) for four hours. The team then asked the participants to name the first colour they thought of, and then gave them 15 minutes to access any websites they wanted to.

The team monitored all the sites that the participants visited, and after another 15-minute period they were again asked to think of the first colour that came to mind. The participants were also asked to complete various psychometric questionnaires including the Internet Addiction Test (IAT).

The [IAT is a 20-question test](#) where each question is scored from 0 (not applicable) or 1 (rarely) up to 5 (always). Questions include, for example: how often do you check your e-mail before something else that you need to do?. In previous IAT studies, those that scored 80 or above (out of 100) are typically defined as having a probable addiction to the internet.

Those classed as "high-problem [internet] users" on the basis of IAT scores in this new study were more likely to choose a colour that was prominent on the websites they visited during the 15-minute period after internet deprivation. This wasn't found in those not classed as internet addicts.

[According to Reed](#): "The internet addicts chose a colour associated with the websites they had just visited [and this] suggests that aspects of the websites viewed after a period without the net became positively valued.

He added that: "Similar findings have been seen with people who misuse substances, with [previous studies](#) showing that a cue associated with any drug that relieves withdrawal becomes positively valued itself. This is the first time though that such an effect has been seen for a behavioural addiction like problematic internet usage".

The problem with 'addiction'

While this is an interesting finding, there are some major shortcomings both from a methodological standpoint and from a more conceptual angle.

The number of high problem internet users that were deprived internet access for four hours comprised just 12 individuals so the sample size was incredibly low. The individuals classed as high problem internet users had IAT scores ranging from 40 to 72, so it is highly unlikely that any of the participants were actually addicted to the internet.

And although the IAT is arguably the most used screen in the field, it has questionable reliability and validity, and since it was devised in 1998, is now very outdated. It also does not use the criteria suggested for internet disorder in the latest (fifth) edition of the American Psychiatric Association's [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders \(DSM-5\)](#). Using more recently developed instruments such as our own [Internet Disorder Scale](#) instead of the IAT would have perhaps overcome some of these problems, as the criteria used to assess internet addiction are directly modelled on the nine used in the DSM-5.

There are also much wider problems with the use of the term "internet

addiction": though the number of studies in the field of internet addiction has certainly grown, most have really investigated addictions *on* the internet rather than *to* the internet. For instance, individuals addicted to online gaming, online gambling or online shopping are not internet addicts. They are gambling addicts, gaming addicts or shopping addicts that are using the medium of the internet to engage in their addictive behaviour.

There are of course some activities – such as social networking – that could be argued to be a genuine type of internet addiction as such activities only take place online. However, the addiction is to an application rather than the internet itself and this should be termed social networking addiction rather than an internet [addiction](#).

In short, the overwhelming majority of so-called [internet addicts](#) are no more addicted to the internet than alcoholics are addicted to the actual bottle.

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