

New framework could help online addicts reduce their usage

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Isaac Vaghefi is an assistant professor of management information systems at Binghamton University, State University of New York. Credit: Binghamton University

Research has shown that internet addicts do not always feel guilty about

their usage, and in many cases, they do not even perceive their usage as problematic. A new model developed by researchers at Binghamton University, State University of New York could help addicts realize that their usage is a problem and reduce it.

Isaac Vaghefi, assistant professor of management information systems at Binghamton University, has developed a framework using a theory from psychology known as [cognitive dissonance](#), which is the discomfort felt by those whose actions conflict with their beliefs (e.g. someone who believes that smoking is unhealthy but chain smokes). Along with Hamed Qahri-Saremi, assistant professor of information systems at DePaul University, Vaghefi developed a model showing that the degree of users' cognitive dissonance can make a difference in their willingness to quit their online addiction.

"Dissonance is what we need to work on and what we need to help increase for users to make sure that they will do some action to limit their control," said Vaghefi. "We have users who say, 'I know I'm using a lot, but everyone around me is using a lot.' What we need to do is highlight the [negative consequences](#) for them. We can objectively use instruments that will show them the negative outcomes, so they will understand these consequences. Once people see those negative consequences, they will act on them and will be motivated to exert self-control."

Vaghefi tested the model on data collected from 226 students at Binghamton University, who said how much they were intending to either stop or continue their usage of [social networking sites](#). The findings show that a plausible way to help individuals to reduce or quit usage is to increase their cognitive dissonance. The findings suggest that making users aware of their addiction, in particular the consequences on personal, social, and academic lives caused by addiction, increases their cognitive dissonance about their behavior.

"People have already looked at the role of guilt in regard to technology use and how we can change it," said Vaghefi. "But what was not explained was how we can create this feeling of guilt. It's through this cognitive dissonance, a negative emotional state of mind, that once created can actually have an impact on the actual behavior and intention of people to stop or discontinue their usage habit."

Vaghefi believes that addressing these issues is especially important considering how commonplace technology usage and online behaviors are to today's youth. "It's so widespread and prevalent, especially the younger generation. These are people who have been raised with technology. They don't even feel that there is a problem. If you highlight the consequences for them, they will hopefully do something," he said.

Vaghefi presented "From IT Addiction to Discontinued Use: A Cognitive Dissonance Perspective" at the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences. His work was nominated for best research paper.

Provided by Binghamton University

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