

Expert claims internet addiction should be recognized as a disorder requiring treatment

18 September 2017



Credit: Flinders University

Pathological internet addiction that triggers deviant behaviour on social networking sites (SNS) should be recognised as a disorder needing treatment, a Flinders University expert says.

Internet [addiction](#) is not recognised as a disorder which means that sufferers are not being treated, causing increased mental strain that can manifest itself in problematic online behaviours. This includes sharing sensitive personal details online or online sexual involvement with strangers.

"Society doesn't recognise the multi-dimensional, complex problems of individuals with [internet addiction](#) disorder," says [internet](#) and mental health expert Dr Mubarak Rahamathulla, a senior lecturer in social work at Flinders University.

"Individuals with the condition will not be diagnosed or offered support and treatment, which causes enormous additional psychological strain, and can lead to problematic deviant behaviours in cyberspace."

Dr Rahamathulla's research into general strain theory, where negative experiences in life can

result in problem behaviours and deviance, finds a very high likelihood that internet addiction sufferers will vent their frustrations through problematic online behaviours.

He says this can be expressed in an anonymous way through SNS, creating social and psychological problems for other internet users and the wider community, and lead to possible crimes.

"Our research argues that individuals with internet addiction may feel victimised and so will feel compelled to engage in a range of deviant behaviours in SNS to vent their emotional strains," says Dr Rahamathulla.

Adult respondents in Dr Rahamathulla's study also reported that their online sexual correspondence through SNS are adversely affecting their real-life relationships.

While monitoring and blocking deviant [behaviour](#) is possible on such social networking sites as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and Twitter, anti-social activity can go unhindered on private mobile messaging applications such as Facebook Messaging, WhatsApp and Google Play.

Dr Rahamathulla says that as worldwide Facebook subscriptions edge near 2 billion people, mobile messaging applications came second to Facebook in 2015 and are still expanding (AC Nielsen, 2016). These more private one-on-one communication channels present increased opportunities for aberrant behaviour, or trigger addictions that generate negative expression.

"The rapid shift from more public social networking to private mobile messaging communications increase the frequency of SNS use, bringing with it possible psycho-social consequences of heavy use of SNS," Dr Rahamathulla says in his latest research paper.

However, rather than blaming the internet, he says the process that leads to pathological internet needs closer examination and identification.

"Excessive use of SNS has been reported as leading to psychological addiction to internet use – which has not been acknowledged as a condition needing attention."

Dr Rahamathulla is calling for more research into intervention therapies, and for recognition of this deviant behaviour as a clinical disorder.

"There is no reliable data available to deeply analyse the nature of internet addiction and its link with deviant and problem behaviours – particularly when its use is so entwined with day-to-day work and social life," he says.

"Classic internet addictive symptoms, similar to drug and alcohol addiction, include mood modification, preoccupation with and increased use of internet over time, possible withdrawal symptoms, conflict and relapse if internet use is restricted."

Dr Rahamathulla's research article, "General strain theory of Internet addiction and its association with deviant behaviours in [social networking sites](#) (SNS)", has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*.

Provided by Flinders University

APA citation: Expert claims internet addiction should be recognized as a disorder requiring treatment (2017, September 18) retrieved 25 November 2020 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-expert-internet-addiction-disorder-requiring.html>

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