

Prevalence of Internet addiction disorder in selected government departments in South Africa

Dr Blessing Mbatha

University of South Africa

Department of Communication Science

PO Box 392, UNISA, 0003, South Africa

Tel: +27 12 429 8264 Fax: +27 12 429 3346

mbathbt@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

The aim of this paper was to determine the prevalence of Internet addiction disorder (IAD) amongst the civil servants in the uMgungundlovu District Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Through a survey, key government departments in the province were selected through systematic and purposive sampling techniques. Questionnaires, that were largely structured, were distributed to 52 managers from 4 government ministries, namely, Department of Arts and Culture, Home Affairs, Education and Health. The results indicate that there is high possibility that majority of the respondents may be suffering from IAD given the significant number of respondents spending a lot of time on the Internet each week. In addition, the findings reveal that the respondents do neglect household chores, social and work responsibilities in order to spend more time on the Internet. In conclusion, the Internet is not the enemy just because people become dependent on it. It has many important and necessary benefits.

Keywords: Internet addiction, South African, public sector, Internet, Information, communication technology, Internet abuse

1. Introduction

This paper aimed to determine the prevalence of Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) amongst the civil servants in the uMgungundlovu District Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. In order to achieve the stated aim, the paper set out to establish the amount of time the respondents spent on the Internet each week, to establish whether the respondents stay online longer than they intended, to find out how often do people complain to the respondents about the amount of time they spend online, and to establish how often do respondents' job performances or productivities suffer because of Internet usage. This was poised in a research question: what is the level of Internet addiction disorder in government departments in the uMgungundlovu District Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal. In essence, the problem investigated in this paper pertains to the fact that in recent years, the prevalence of Internet use worldwide has increased dramatically, with the current estimated number of users exceeding 800 million (Mbatha, 2010; Mbatha, Ocholla & Le Roux, 2011; Internet-Addiction, 2012). Along with all benefits the Internet brings, problems of excessive use are also becoming apparent, such as neglect of academic, work, and domestic responsibility, disruption of relationships, social isolation and financial problems have all been identified as consequences of heavy Internet usage. IAD is a growing problem facing today's society and it destroys many families, couples and individuals, both young and old. Mbatha (2010) supported by Internet-Addiction (2012) points out that IAD not only threatens the psychological well-being of individuals, but quite possibly the entire social fabric. In addition, this psychological disorder is defined as uncontrolled Internet-related behaviour which interferes with or impairs normal functioning, and causes severe emotional distress for the individual, their family,

friends, or their loved ones. The Internet has become the mainstream form of media and an integral part of modern life in South Africa (Mbatha & Ocholla, 2011; Mbatha, 2012). It is worth noting that by the end of 2007 South Africa had registered at least 7, 8 million users which is the increase of about 163 percent (SA yearbook, 2008:122). The number of Internet users in South Africa for year-end 2008 was estimated at 4,590,000. At the end of 2007, the number of Internet users in South Africa was 4,070,000, then 3,830,000 by the end of 2006 and 3,600,000 in 2005 (SA yearbook, 2008:115). This shows the number of people who are vulnerable to IAD.

1. Literature review

Simply put, IAD is a relatively new term used to describe when a person becomes "addicted" to the time he/she spends online (Mbatha, 2010). Bursten and Dombeck (2004) observed that, ten years ago, the only people who spent a majority of their leisure time on the computer were paid members of the technology industry. Today, however, surfing the web has become a social activity and marketable as bar hopping or going to the movies. As the web has become a part of mainstream life, some mental health professionals have noted that a percentage of people using the web do so in a compulsive and out-of-control manner. It is worth mentioning that spending too much time in front of a computer screen is tremendously unhealthy. Star (2003) cautions that it can be fatal. In a few extreme cases, a Taiwanese man died of exhaustion after playing computer games non-stop for 32 hours in an Internet cafe. Sadly, the man was found in the cafe's toilets, bleeding from the nose and foaming at the mouth, and died before he reached hospital. On the other case, a South Korean man perished in similar circumstances, after spending 86 hours in an Internet cafe. It is true that many people worldwide, usually adolescent boys have had their lives completely taken over by computer games. They play and think about them most of the day, and then dream about them when they go to sleep. Meanwhile, as the addiction sets in, everything else suffers. Friends and family are neglected. Homework is ignored. Other pastimes are given up. The "gamer" soon becomes a lonely, underachieving nerd with little to talk about except the latest level he has completed. The computer is now his or her closest companion (Guttridge, 2005).

2. Theoretical framework

3.1 Model of Pathological Internet use

Grohol's Model was found useful as this paper sought to determine the prevalence of IAD amongst the civil servants in government departments in KwaZulu-Natal. In his model, Grohol (2005) observes that the peoples' behaviours online are phasic. That is, most people with "Internet addiction," are likely newcomers to the Internet. Newcomers are going through the first stage of acclimatizing themselves to a new environment by fully immersing themselves in it. Since this environment is so much larger than anything we have ever seen before, some people get "stuck" in the acclimatization (or enchantment) stage for a longer period of time than is typical for acclimatizing to new technologies, products or services.

3. Methodology

Through a survey, key government departments were targeted. Due to the diverse and enormous nature of the public sector in South Africa, the study narrowed its focus down to government departments in KZN province. Precisely, five (5) district municipalities out of eleven (11) were selected, namely: uMgungundlovu; uMzinyathi; Zululand; uThungulu; and Sisonke. In these districts, four government departments were targeted, namely: Departments of Arts and Culture, Home affairs, Education and Health. These departments were selected by using purposive and systematic sampling techniques. The three stages used in the sampling process include the identification of highly spread and service intensive departments, the categorisation of personnel in the selected departments into top, medium and lower level management and lastly, the division of the service areas into rural or urban based centres. In order to further increase the chances of obtaining a representative sample, systematic sampling was applied. In this technique, five (5)

out of eleven (11) suitable district municipalities were selected whereby every second district from a list was chosen. This sampling technique also helped to prevent biasness in the selection process. The sample size for the whole study was two hundred and sixty (260) managers. These managers were selected because they have physical access to ICTs and they play a major role in the diffusion and adoption of ICTs in their respective departments. Those who completed the questionnaires and returned them were one hundred and fifty two (152). This article reports on the findings obtained from the Zululand District Municipality. In this district, fifty two (52) self-completed questionnaires were administered to the respondents. The overall response rate was thirty seven (37; 71%). The data collected was analysed using thematic categorisation and tabulation, and the findings were presented descriptively.

4. Results and discussions

5.1 Demographic profile of the respondents

Out of fifty two (52) respondents, thirty seven (37; 71%) answered the questionnaires and there was a fairly spread of adults, mostly between the ages of 31 and 59. There were also a fair proportion of General Managers (66%) and Deputy Managers (34%). In like manner, there was a fair even spread related to education levels, which varied from 66% with junior degrees, followed by 33% with honours degrees. The majority of the respondents were from the Department of Education, followed by the Department of Health, Home Affairs and Arts and Culture respectively.

5.2 Time spent on the Internet per week

One of the objectives of the study was to establish the amount of time the respondents spent on the Internet each week. The respondents were therefore provided with a list of possible answers to choose from as was applicable to their situations. Figure 1 below summarises responses emanated from the respondents.

Figure 1: Time spent on the Internet per week (N=37)

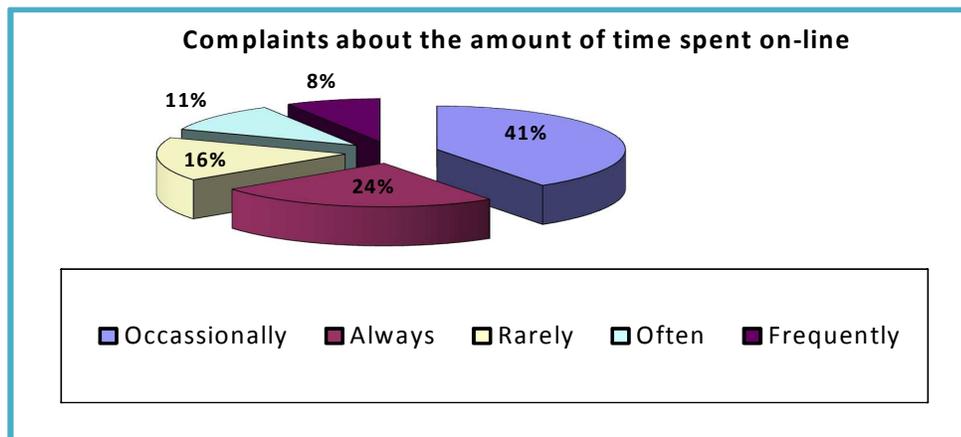


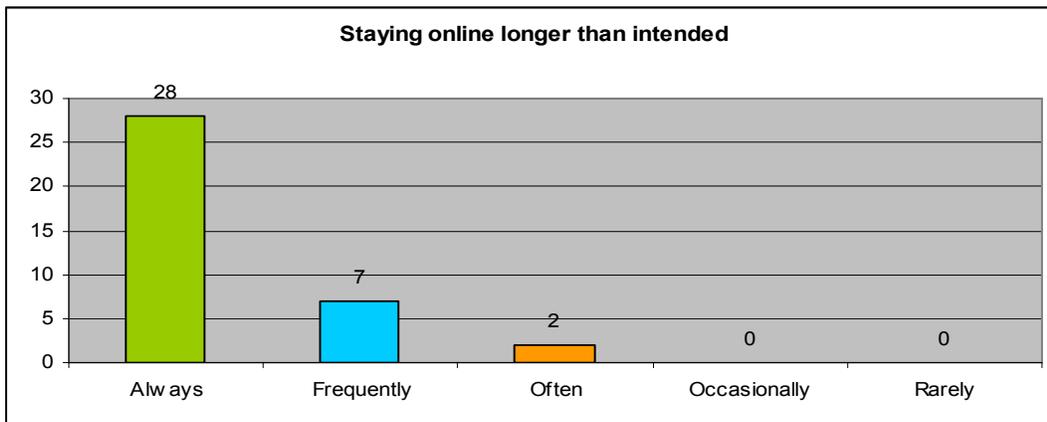
Figure 1 above indicates that the majority of respondents 24 (65%) spend more than 30 hours on the Internet each week. Those who spend 16-30 hours on the Internet were also fairly significant 10 (27%), while only 3 (8%) spend 5-15 hours on the Internet per week. Notably, none of the respondents indicated to be spending less than 5 hours on the Internet. It would be fair enough to conclude by saying that there is high possibility that among the respondents, there are many Internet addicts, given the significant number of respondents spending chunks of time on the Internet each week. However, this item alone cannot determine whether a person is addicted or not. For such conclusion to be made, a number of items need to be measured first. Young (1998) and Bursten & Dombeck (2004) describe Internet addiction as spending too much time online

such that it adversely affects marriages, family and social life, work, and psychological and physical well-being of a human being.

5.3 Staying online longer than intended

Figure 2 below indicates responses to the question “How often do you find that you stay online longer than you intended”. The respondents were provided with options on the scale of 1 (rarely) through 5 (always) to choose from as was applicable to their situations. Figure 2 below provides responses emanated from the respondents.

Figure 2 Staying online longer than intended (N=37)

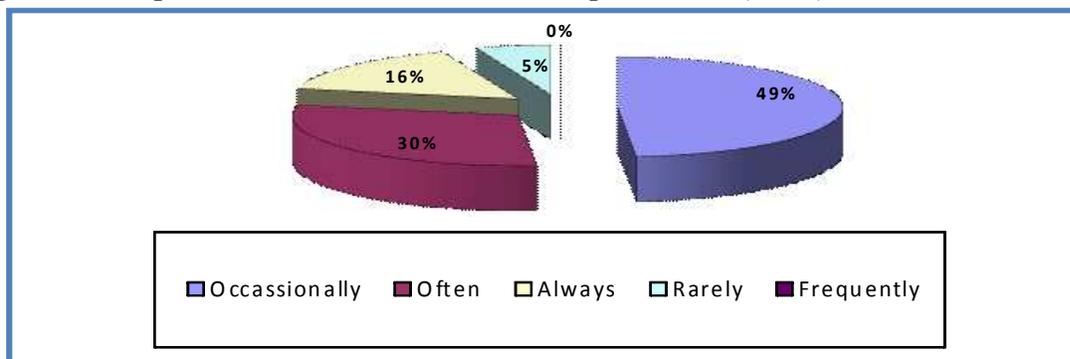


When asked to comment on staying online more than intended, once again the results are shocking as the majority of respondents (28; 76%) revealed that they always stay online more than intended. Those who indicated that to them it happens frequently are represented by (7; 19%), while those who said it happens often were the minority (2; 5%). None of the respondents said it happens occasionally and rarely. Once again, one would be tempted to say that there is high possibility that the majority of the respondents may be suffering from IAD. Bursten & Dombeck (2004) and Indian-child (2001) are of the opinion that addicted users feel unable or unwilling to get up from the computer and walk away. As a result, they sit down to check electronic mail or look up a bit of information, and end up staying online for many hours or longer than intended. Sharing similar sentiments, Mental Disorders (2007) states that one of the symptoms of IAD is excessive time devoted to Internet use.

5.4 Complaints about the amount of time spent online

Figure 3 below provides responses that emanated from the respondents on the research question “how often do others in your life complain to you about the amount of time you spend online?” The respondents were therefore provided with options on the scale of 1 (rarely) through 5 (always) to choose from as was applicable to their situations. Figure 3 below summarises responses emanated from the respondents.

Figure 3: Complaints about the amount of time spent online (N=37)

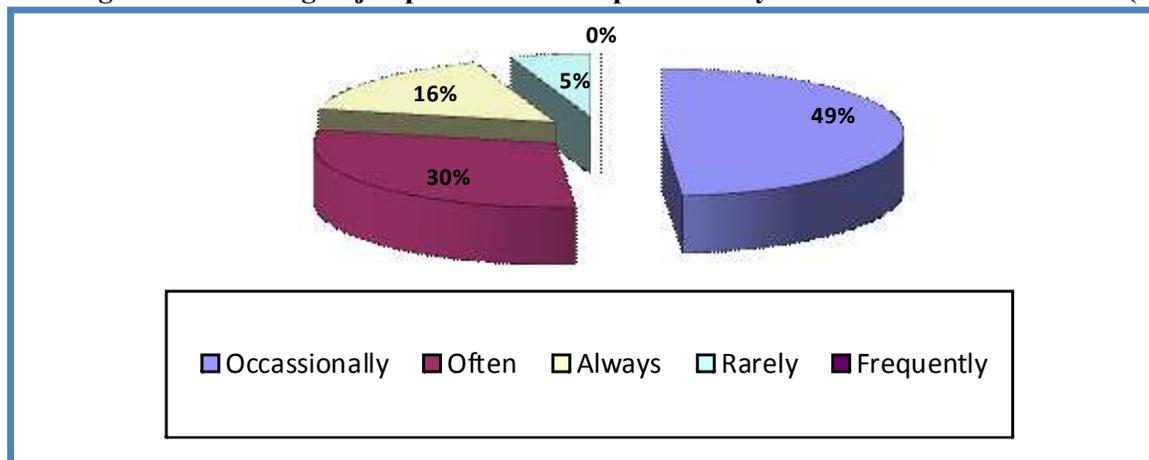


When asked to reflect on grumbles about the amount of time they spend on the Internet, a significant number of the respondents (41%) revealed that it happens occasionally, followed by 24% who indicated that it happens always. Those who said it happens rarely were 16%, while 11% revealed that it happens often. The minority were those who revealed that they get complaints frequently. The overall response rate indicates that respondents do get complains occasionally. Cyber-junkies (2009) note that the addict spends more and more time in solitary seclusion, they are spending less time with their loved ones. Arguments and interventions often lead to the addict lying about how much time they spend online, which invariably leads to distrust and discontentment from loved ones.

5.5 Suffering of job performance or productivity because of the Internet use

The study also sought to establish how often respondents' job performances or productivities suffer because of Internet usage. The respondents were provided with options on the scale of 1 (rarely) through 5 (always) to choose from as was applicable to their situations. Figure 4 below summarises responses that emanated from the respondents.

Figure 4: Suffering of job performance or productivity because of the Internet use (N=37)



When asked to comment on suffering of job performance or productivity because of the Internet use, the majority of respondents 49% revealed that it happens occasionally. Those who said it happens often were also fairly significant 30%, while 16% indicated that it happens always. Notably, only 5% said it happens rarely. Noteworthy, none of the respondents said it happens frequently. The overall response rate shows that respondents' job performance does suffer which simply shows that there is a problem with the use of the Internet. Strictly speaking, this is one of the methods of describing a person who is addicted to the Internet (Internet addict). According to Internet-Addiction (2012), IAD is an uncontrolled Internet-related behaviour which interferes with or impairs normal functioning, and causes severe emotional distress for the individual, their family, friends, or their loved ones. Egger and Rauterberg (1996) strengthen the aforementioned views by pointing out that IAD can also disrupt one's academic performance or one's job performance.

5. Conclusion and recommendation for further study

This paper sought to determine the prevalence of IAD amongst the civil servants in the uMgungundlovu District Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal. The literature indicates that IAD is real. Thus, there are people out there who use the Internet as a means of escapism in the same way a drug addict gets high, and do so for a myriad of reasons and in a wide variety of ways. However, it is vital to note that the Internet is not the enemy just because people become dependent on it. It has many important and necessary benefits. It is fast, ecologically sound, convenient and informative. In many ways it makes our lives much simpler. Conversely, it makes our lives more complex. It also worth pointing out that the Internet provides an escape from reality and everyday problems just like alcohol or drugs. However, some argue that the interaction with other

people on the Internet fills a social void. Thus, people assume new identities; others interact with that identity and the person may assume these online relationships are the same as the real thing. It becomes a problem when people become so engrossed and enmeshed in online activities, and their "other" lives to the point of neglecting their health, relationships, jobs, and other responsibilities. As with many of life's pleasures, moderation is the key. The findings indicate that the majority of respondents spend more than 30 hours on the Internet each week. In addition, the study established that the majority of respondents always stay online more than they intended. It is also worth pointing out that the Sufferance of job performance or productivity because of the Internet use happens occasionally. It should be noted that this is one of the methods of describing a person who is addicted to the Internet. Although it is a tough claim to make, the interpretation of findings indicate that there is high possibility that the majority of the respondents may be suffering from IAD. Thus, this paper recommends that more focused research on IAD in a working environment is highly needed because some people have lost their jobs and some even their lives due to it.

References

- Bursten, J. & Dombeck, M. (2004). Introduction to Internet Addiction. [Online] http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=3830&cn=66 [Accessed September 10, 2011].
- Cyber junkies (2009). History of an Addiction. [Online] http://www.slais.ubc.ca/COURSES/libr500/03-04-wt2/www/C_Hill/vulnerable.htm [Accessed September 24, 2011].
- Egger, O. & Rauterberg, M., (1996). "Internet Behavior and Addiction." Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich [Online] <http://www.ifap.bepi.ethz.ch/~egger/ibq/res.htm> (Accessed September 10, 2010).
- Griffiths, M.D. (2000). Does Internet and computer "addiction" exist? Some case study evidence. *Cyber-Psychology & Behaviour*, 3, 211-218.
- Grohol, J.M. (2005). Internet Addiction Guide. [Online] <http://www.psychcentral.com/netaddiction/> [Accessed September 21, 2011].
- Guttridge, L. (2005). Chinese suicide shows addiction dangers. [Online] <http://play.tm/news/5928/chinese-suicide-shows-addiction-dangers/> [Accessed September 21, 2010].
- Indian-child (2001). Symptoms of Internet Addiction. [Online] <http://www.indianchild.com> [Accessed September 02, 2010].
- Internet-addiction (2012). What is Internet addiction. [Online] <http://www.Internetaddictionhelp.com/index.php> [Accessed September 23, 2011].
- Mbatha, B.T. (2010). Internet Addiction Disorder. In Lesame, NC, Mbatha, B.T., & Sindane, S. (eds). *New media in the information society*, Pretoria Van Schaik, pp. 193-202.
- Mbatha, B.T., Ocholla, D.N. & Le Roux, J. (2011). Some implications of Information and Communication Technologies on public service work environments in South Africa. *Information Development*, 27, 47–62.
- Mbatha, B.T. & Ocholla, D.N. (2011). Contextualising the use of ICTs in the public sector, the case of selected government departments in KwaZulu-Natal. *Mousaion*, 29, 193–208.
- Mbatha, B.T. (2012). Exploring the potential of electronic commerce tools in South African SME tourism service providers, *Information Development*, 29, 1–14.
- Mental Disorders (2007). Internet Addiction disorder. [Online] <http://www.minddisorders.com/index.html> [Accessed September 23, 2011].
- South African Yearbook. (2008). South Africa, Communications [Online] <http://www.gcis.gov.za/docs/publications/yearbook/2008/chapter5.pdf> [Accessed August 20, 2010].
- Star, S. (2003). Death by computer games. [Online] <http://app1.chinadaily.com.cn/star/2003/0501/vo2-4.html> [Accessed September 21, 2011].
- Walther, J.B. (1999). Communication Addiction Disorder: Concern over Media, Behavior and Effects. [Online] http://psychcentral.com/archives/walther_cad.pdf [Accessed September 23, 2012].
- Young, K. (1998). *Caught in the Net*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Zulu Kingdom. (2004). The Zulu Kingdom. KwaZulu-Natal. [Online] <http://www.kzn.org.za/kzn/> [Accessed September 03, 2011].