What if our children are the screen-obsessed couch potatoes of the future?

March 30 2015, by Paul Levy

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The idea of "digital addiction" has returned to the fore with UCL researchers suggesting physical activity should displace the compulsive watching of television, internet surfing and video gaming. Often it's

suggested that at least gaming is more active and engaged than merely passively watching television, but the UCL study's authors regard gaming as "just a different way of sitting down and relaxing".

The problem with the topic of digital addiction is that there are no definitive scientific studies that have established it as a genuine condition. As far back as 2006 the *American Journal of Psychiatry* recommended digital addiction be more formally recognised, but studies are still largely piecemeal and no authoritative view exists.

A rising new addiction

Yet each year more studies are published that support the journal's view that "internet addiction is resistant to treatment, entails significant risks, and has high relapse rates."

Recently a few more accounts from around the world have emerged supporting the view that digital addiction is growing, and may be storing up problems for the future. A survey in New Zealand highlights the withdrawal symptoms people feel when not connected. The "fear of missing out" is another phenomenon that forms part of the dimension of digital addiction, as recently described in a survey in Japan. Here addiction is linked to the need to use specific apps, rather than a more general need to "connect" online.

The Net Children Go Mobile report in Ireland based on surveys conducted by researchers at the Dublin Institute of Technology highlights how many children are online a lot after 9pm. It shares concerns around the potential toxic combination of being "always-on" and exposed to potentially distressing content. As with drug use, addiction itself is one problem, while the "substance" or content of that addiction causes different kinds of harm.

How to measure the problem

Research that attempts to physically measure the impact of digital addiction is also expanding. A study from the University of Missouri reports that measurable increases in stress can be recorded when people have their smart phones taken away.

There has even been a rise in clinics serving digital addicts, an increasing amount of personal testimony from self-described addicts, as well as more firmly established evidence for repetitive strain injuries arising from overuse of technology.

It all points to an urgent need for far more comprehensive research – research that can really inform how the government approaches the problem with policy, as well as something to guide parents and managers in the workplace.

A lack of digital denial

Interestingly, research attempting to deny digital addiction is almost impossible to find. Even as researchers claim that cell phone addiction can harm the parent-child bond, or that phone addicts may be more prone to mood swings, academic voices against are few and far between. Why is this?

It could be because the current research hasn't made any significant impact on existing corporations and commercial models. When studies were published claiming definitive proof of dangerous mobile phone radiation the brain, particularly in children, those speaking out against the claims were vocal and many in number. That battle is raging to this day, with the potential harm of wearables now coming under scrutiny.

I believe this battle is so energetic because the consequences, as with the tobacco industry, are directly and profoundly commercial. At present, digital addiction is an opportunity for innovation, both social and technological.

Putting digital in its place

We might better manage our digital devices by learning to [place them more mindfully](link) and skilfully – to learn to "handle our digital drink". There are always [apps to help us manage our addictions](link). Digital addiction has innovations in online child safety, the ways parents ration access to devices, better education – and even apps that prevent users constantly connecting. It might be that the impact of digital addiction and the way it manifests itself will have to be ever further revealed before serious research begins.

Added to this is the fact that many argue that profound freedom is a core principle in the digital space – any regulation or top-down governance, such as in the realms of alcohol, smoking, or gambling, will be strongly resisted. If the internet is in any way equivalent to a drug, then, according to the web's founding father, Tim Berners-Lee, that drug [is a "human right"](link)). So the corporations working with digital devices and content wait and watch. While the evidence for digital addiction grows, it isn't harming iPhone sales, and is unlikely to dent the success of smartwatches.

From India to America, from China to England, concerns that our children are turning into couch potatoes grow. But until a tipping point is reached, parents and teachers, managers and gamers will carry on checking into clinics, reading the top ten tips, possibly to become a generation with prematurely arthritic fingers, backache, and a whole host of yet to be named psychological disorders.

Source: The Conversation