

Transcript for Professor Gernsbacher's Lecture Video: "Internet Addiction"

We now come to a topic that I'm afraid a few students, each semester, before we begin our course, believe will be the primary focus of our course. And that topic is

Internet Addiction.

I'm not sure why some students believe that a course titled "Psychological Effects of the Internet" will focus predominantly on Internet addiction.

SLIDE: Psychology, which most of you know is the study of human behavior, is itself is much broader and richer and more diverse than simply the study of

SLIDE: addiction.

To be sure, studying addiction is an important component of studying psychology.

Indeed, I know first-hand how incredibly important it is for psychological scientists to study addiction. My family recently lost a family member to alcohol addiction. Over several years, we watched, quite helplessly, while this close family member fell more and more into the power of alcohol addiction.

I will never forget the pain of watching the grips of alcohol addiction take over this family member.

So, I definitely know that studying addiction is an important component of studying psychology.

But studying addiction is just ONE component of studying

SLIDE: psychology. Psychology is much broader than addiction.

And, our Psychological Effects of the Internet course, approached the breadth of psychology in the same way that an

SLIDE: an Intro to Psychology course would.

We talked about the effects of the Internet on learning, memory, attention, perception, education, development, aging, social interaction, personality, emotions, motivation, decision making, judgment, and more. These are all units you remember from Intro to Psychology, and they are all units we had in our Psychological Effects of the Internet course.

The topic of our current Unit is clinical psychology. And one component of clinical psychology is addiction. But again, addiction is just one component even of clinical psychology.

SLIDE: Similarly, a few students have previously told me that before beginning our course, they assumed a course titled "Psychological Effects of the Internet" would focus predominantly on negative effects of the Internet.

We have definitely covered numerous negative effects of the Internet in our course.

SLIDE: For example, starting way back in the very first unit of our course,

SLIDE: we studied the negative fears about technology, both historically and in current day.

SLIDE: In our unit on Learning, we studied false conceptions of learning when people simply watch YouTubes and other Do It Yourself videos rather than learning to DO those things themselves – by DOING them.

SLIDE: In our unit on Education, we studied the problem of Cheating in Online courses.

SLIDE: In our unit on Communication, we studied how easily the Internet can broadcast messages that were not intended to be broadcast so broadly. The negative repercussions of broadcasting unintended messages, due to broadcast power of the Internet, can include losing jobs and missing out on employment opportunities.

SLIDE: In our unit on Socializing, we talked about the negative effects of cyberbullying.

SLIDE: In our unit on Emotions, we talked about the negative effects of emotional contagion, when we catch negative affect from other people on the Internet.

SLIDE: And in this unit, we're talking about Internet addiction.

These are just some of the negative effects of the Internet that we've covered in this course. But, as you know, we've also covered

SLIDE: positive effects, and that's because the Internet, like most everything else in this world, has both positive and negative sides to it.

Therefore, when teaching a course on the Psychological Effects of the Internet, it would be inappropriate for me to focus on only the negative effects, just like if I was teaching a course on the

SLIDE: Effects of Weather, it would be inappropriate for me to focus on only the low frequency, negative effects, such as tornadoes, hurricanes, droughts, and floods, and exclude the more typical and positive effects, such as

SLIDE: providing the atmospheric conditions we need for our food.

So, just as the effects of everyday weather comprise considerably more than hurricanes and tornadoes, so too the effects of everyday Internet use comprise considerably more than Internet addiction.

However, and most importantly, there's considerable debate about whether

SLIDE: Internet addiction is even real, meaning whether it's really an addiction. For one thing, as we discussed earlier in the course, people have feared every new technology. And those fears most often evolved into the worry that technology was addictive.

SLIDE: In an article titled "What technology are we addicted to now?", Louis Anslow reports that "From novels to telephones to smartphones, we're always supposedly hooked on the latest medium."

SLIDE: "When a new thing comes along, [first] people say it'll never catch on. [Then] When it catches on they say it's a fad. [Then,] When the fad gains enough traction, they say it's an addiction."

SLIDE: For example, you remember that back in the late 1800s, there was great fear of novels, and in particular, young women reading novels. And that fear led to the claim that young women were becoming addicted to novels. For example, in 1897, distinguished physician, Dr. J. R. Hayes, wrote, in a chapter titled "The Evil of Novel Reading" that

SLIDE: "the mischief of voracious novel-reading can be likened to the drink-habit" – meaning alcoholism.

SLIDE: And that "Temperance – meaning abstention – from reading novels is as great of a virtue as the abstention from other vices.

In the case of so-called novel addiction, there was eventually some gender parity. Before the turn of the century, young men were also believed to be addicted to novels, and, in particular,

SLIDE: what were called dime novels. Dime novels were mass-produced paperbacks, such as westerns, romance novels, or

SLIDE: mysteries. These paperbacks were called dime novels for the obvious reason that each one cost ten cents. Sometimes, when young men committed various crimes in real life, they were to have committed the crimes because they were addicted to dime novels.

For example, in the late 1800s, the New York Times reported that

SLIDE: two young men, “ruined by dime novels,” were arrested for “shooting a car driver.” Indeed, the article concludes by claiming that the boys are “addicted to dime novel reading.”

SLIDE: Similarly, in another article about two boys committing a murder, the article claimed that

SLIDE: “according to residents, the boys were addicted to dime novel reading.” These claims remind me of similar claims made about the Slender Man attack in Waukesha, Wisconsin back in 2014. For the Slender Man case, some newspaper articles claimed were that the teenage girls who committed the gruesome assault were addicted to the Internet.

Historically, it wasn’t just reading novels that were claimed to be addictive. Listening to the radio was also claimed to be addictive, as was

SLIDE: Talking on the telephone. This article claimed that not only were 1950s adolescents phone addicted, but that quote “the bizarre positions” the teenagers adopted while talking on the phone,

SLIDE: quote “head on floor, feet on chair,” were quote “a tranquilizer to the adolescent.” That article also claimed that 1950s housewives were addicted to phones.

SLIDE: These women were claimed to quote “spend the greater part of most mornings [talking on the phone] with one or two friends.”

And, of course,

SLIDE: TV was claimed to be addictive. This article from 1956 claimed that for quote “some children – and adults, too – television-watching can be habit-forming to the point of real addiction, requiring professional help to cure.”

SLIDE: Similarly, this article from as recently as 1991, claimed that TV addiction is like substance dependence, meaning that TV addiction is like being addicted to drugs or alcohol.

We see similar claims about Internet addiction in current day.

SLIDE: For example, this article, from 2012, claims that “Internet addiction changes the brain like cocaine” does.

SLIDE: This article, from 2017, claims that “Giving your child a smartphone is like giving them a gram of cocaine.”

SLIDE: And this article claims that “Designers are using a mysterious user interface – a dark UX -- to turn you into a sleep-deprived internet addict”

SLIDE: And this article claims that you’re probably already addicted to Virtual Reality!

Are any of these claims different from what media studies scholars tell us have been happening for decades – that every new technology has been claimed to be addictive, and few really were.

SLIDE: Can you really be addicted to the Internet?

We don't know. But what most psychiatrists think is that there might be specific addictions that are Internet enabled. For example,

SLIDE: A small proportion of people might qualify as being addicted to Internet-based gaming,

SLIDE: or Internet-based gambling,

SLIDE: or Internet-based shopping,

SLIDE: or Internet-based pornography,

SLIDE: or some other Internet-based activity.

But most likely these individuals would be or perhaps previously were addicted to non-Internet based gambling, shopping, pornography and the like.

The Internet is simply the medium, not the addiction.