

Suicide and Internet addiction – psychological perspective

Marlena Stradomska¹

¹UMCS University in Lublin
Plac Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 5; 20-031 Lublin, Poland

Abstract— The subject matter of the paper lies on the borderline of two important social problems i.e. Internet addiction and suicide. The problem of suicide is still treated as a social taboo in contemporary world. Those who have attempted to kill themselves as well as their families are discriminated and ill-treated by their immediate environment and driven into inferiority complex. Every so often the only option left to such people is the Internet that offers an attentive ear and consolation because the access to professional help in the real world may be limited in a given place and in a given moment. On the Internet one may talk and exchange information on any topic at any time of night and day. The Internet is a cheap and widely available platform offering websites, chat rooms, forums and support groups for people experiencing the same problems. It should be emphasized however, that there are dark corners on the Internet which should not be visited by wide audiences. Some online contents are just not well-adjusted to the development age of young Internet users. This paper is a discussion of a metaphoric and literal aspect of suicide on the Internet and a call for more scientific research, educational campaigns and psychoprophylaxis related to the subject matter of suicide and self-destruction. The author emphasizes the necessity to raise awareness to the issue of suicide which is still a social taboo and subject to social myths. Although many specialist facilities, associations and institutions are already involved in addressing the problem, the number of suicide attempts has not been reduced mainly because the activities undertaken are scattered and badly coordinated. The effects of these efforts are not satisfactory neither for theoreticians nor for practitioners.

Index Terms— suicide, the Internet, prevention, social media, threats.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Internet and progress in general carry benefits as well as threats to contemporary societies. The positive impact of the Internet cannot be overestimated as it offers a wide access to knowledge, information and entertainment and allows communication between people who are thousands of kilometres apart. Such global contacts enhance personal development of users, their linguistic and social skills. The

Internet is an attractive past time facilitating social interactions, developing planning abilities, psychophysical functions such as reflex, concentration and coordination (Augustynek, 2010). These aspects are of great value for the 21st century society (Cbos.pl, 2019). On the negative side, using the Internet may expose users to contents which are unnecessarily addressed to them, moreover, excessive use may lead to addiction.

A poll conducted by CBOS in 2015 shows that 64% of adult Poles use the Internet regularly. In contrast, in 2002 only 17% of Poles used the medium regularly, which proves how fast the Internet is developing (Cbos.pl, 2015). Rapid development of the Internet is closely connected with current needs and interests of societies. According to another poll, an average grown up Internet user spends about 13 hours per week online. Unfortunately, the poll does not indicate how much time online is spent by children and adolescents who are the age group most vulnerable to dangers posed by the Internet.

On the web life seems easier, more cheerful, carefree and detached from the treadmill of everyday life. In the cyberspace it is ever so easy to break out a relationship, log out, delete from the friends list, block a contact etc. On the Internet young people may re-invent themselves and become a better version of themselves. Any interpersonal shortcomings in the concrete reality may be compensated by short-term online relationships and this frequently happens at the expense of close family and real friends with whom the ties are supposed to be much stronger formally, financially and emotionally (Słowik, 2013). It is also true that when a young person is faced with a problem, the immediate environment is often oblivious of the fact and does not recognise that the child needs to be supported, comforted, understood and heard. This comfort and understanding is available on the Internet and this is where young people turn to when in need, but by being online they sacrifice proper social contacts and communication in the real life (Bartóg, 2015). Another very problematic issue related to the Internet is the fact that some users, especially youngsters, may find some contents incommensurate to their level of development. Excessive and inappropriate use of the Internet



may seriously disturb the life of an individual and may, in consequence, lead to addiction.

II. ADDICTION TO THE INTERNET

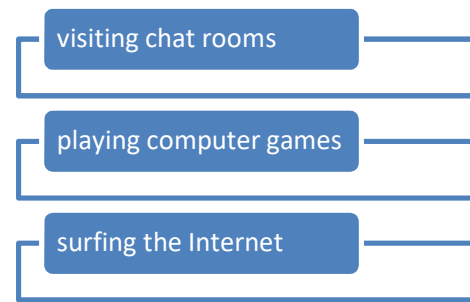
Addiction is understood as a strong focus on performing a given activity or compulsive use of a substance (Janiszewski, 2009). Internet addiction is a relatively new phenomenon. In Polish and foreign literature one may find a number of terms and criteria that help to diagnose the condition (Filip, 2012). M. Griffiths differentiated between three major symptoms of addiction:

- growing dependency,
- frequent mood swings,
- tolerance (Griffiths, 2000).

Addiction to the Internet is becoming an increasingly common global problem which can be considered from psychological, social and family perspective. According to a survey conducted in 2015 by the Public Opinion Research Centre CBOS, the users of the Internet in Poland amounted to 67.9% of the population aged 15+. The majority of average users (98.1%) do not display any disorders in terms of their use of the Internet in everyday life. The results of a screening test show that the Internet Addiction Disorder may affect 0.08 % of the surveyed population, which is 0.12% of all Internet users. Internet users showing certain disorder symptoms constitute a group of 1.2% of the respondents, which is 1.8% of all users, what can indicate that this group is under the threat of falling into addiction (Cbos.pl, 2015). It should be observed, however, that the statistics come from 2015 which may mean that they are no longer valid as the reality surrounding the Internet is rapidly evolving. What can be said with certainty, however, is that the age of the diagnosed with Internet addiction is falling. The statistics show that adolescents are the group at the highest risk of Internet addiction. In the age group 15-17 as much as 6.2% of the sample experience symptoms of Internet dependence or are under the threat of addiction. Unfortunately, statistics regarding the spread of the Internet addiction are, for the time being, unavailable. The only statistics pertinent to this issue can be found in a CBOS communication from 2018, which states that 87% of respondents who have children or grandchildren aged from 6 to 19 agree that at least one child in the household is a frequent user of the Internet resources. The online activities excessively enjoyed by young people include: listening to music, being active on social media, participating in forums, discussion groups and playing computer games (Image 1).

The cyber world is full of stimuli and living online is much easier than living in the concrete reality. If somebody has a problem but the family and friends seem to ignore or fail to recognise it, he or she will easily find many others with the same problem online. Humans as social beings seek acceptance and feeling of security and this is exactly what the Internet can offer to troubled individuals.

IMAGE 1. PATHOLOGICAL INTERNET USAGE – EXAMPLES.



Source: Own work based on (Schuhler, Vogelgesang, 2014, p.18)

Many of them may become overdependent on the Internet and develop an Internet disorder.

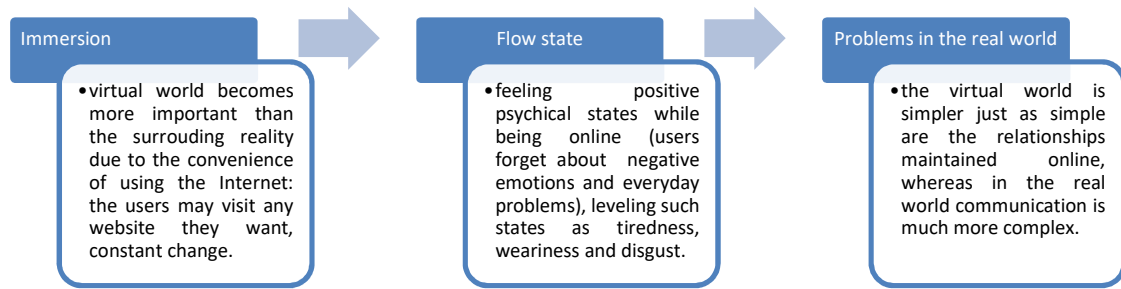
The literature on the topic lists a number of risk factors which foster the development of an addiction, some of them are: early separation from parents (Nixon, Heath 2009), strained relationship with parents, emotional and physical neglect, traumas (Gratz, 2001), violence, especially sexual abuse (Babiker and Arnold, 2002), unfavourable environment which hinders development of mature interpersonal skills and the ability to control emotions which in turns leads to development of inappropriate mechanisms of coping with stress (Brown, Comtois and Linehan, 2002), emotional disturbances, alexithymia and lower awareness of emotions (Nixon and Heath, 2009). In treatment therapies related to Internet addiction the objective is to considerably reduce the time spent online to the absolute minimum which is difficult as the addicts find the virtual world so much better than the real one (Image 2).

It is difficult to describe univocally the impact of the Internet on the functioning of a human being. The after-effects may be multi-layered and diversified. Many people simply do not realize how much time they waste on social media and on the Internet in general which has become a serious 'time eater' forcing people to spend hours on end in an unproductive way. There is a number of factors that make the Internet so appealing (Image 3).

The factors that decide about the attractiveness of the Internet include:

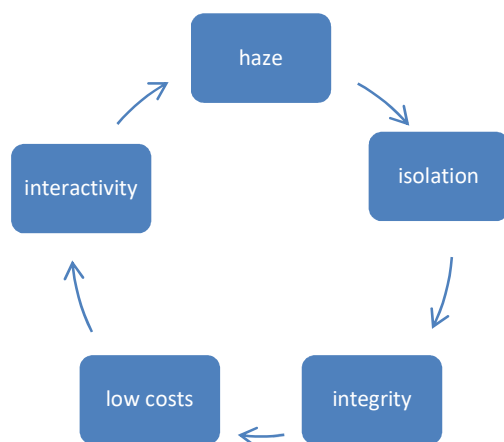
- haze which is a consequence of the availability of the Internet;
- isolation - some users may have a tendency to withdraw from the concrete reality and choose the world of fiction in which they may forget about everyday problems and duties;
- integrity – using the Internet has recently become commonplace due to wide availability and low costs;
- interactivity which offers multiple ways of expression (Słowik, 2013).

IMAGE 2. EXPERIENCES IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD.



Source: Own work based on (Schuhler and Vogelgesang, 2014, pp.28-30).

IMAGE 3. FACTORS DECIDING ABOUT THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE INTERNET.



Source: Own work based on (Delmonico, Griffin, Moriarity 2001, after: Słowik 2013, pp. 115–123).

In a given time perspective these factors may give rise to a dependence condition in which individuals when deprived of the access to the Internet experience negative emotions, have a feeling that there is something missing in their life and find it difficult to fill the time. When an addicted individual is not using the Internet for a longer while, symptoms characteristic for withdrawal can be observed (Griffiths, 2000). Internet addicts are easy to recognise when due to external reasons they are unable to connect to the Internet, such people often react with psychological or physical aggression when they cannot go online to use the resources of the Internet (Janiszewski, 2009).

III. WEB 2.0 SUICIDE MACHINE

Despite growing popularity of various social media, some people feel the need to walk away from social networking sites. Deleting data from such sites is a long and difficult process for technical but also emotional reasons. Individuals who have decided to leave social networks and delete their profiles very often do so as an aftermath of negative life experiences. The demand for services that help to disappear from social networking sites is satisfied by websites such as Web2.0 Suicide Machine which advertises itself as follows:

“Want to disappear from Facebook or Twitter? Now you can

scrub yourself from the Internet thanks to the Web2.0 Suicide Machine, a nifty service that purges your online presence from these all-consuming social networks.” (Suicidemachine.org, 2019).

The very name of the service reveals somehow inappropriate approach to the issue of suicide. Web 2.0 suicide machine is a website helping to commit suicide on social networking sites but this menacing name clearly suggests putting an end to one’s life in a real way. In fact here the term suicide is treated metaphorically as vanishing from the social media. The website promises assistance in disappearing from the Internet faster, safer, smarter and better. The creators of the website appeal to those who are fed up with social media and challenge them to get rid of false friendships and start living web2.0 free life: “Tired of your Social Network?.

Liberate your newbie friends with a Web2.0 suicide! This machine lets you delete all your energy sucking social-networking profiles, kill your fake virtual friends, and completely do away with your Web2.0 alterego. The machine is just a metaphor for the website which moddr_ is hosting; the belly of the beast where the web2.0 suicide scripts are maintained. Our service currently runs with Facebook, Myspace, Twitter and LinkedIn! Commit NOW (Suicidemachine.org, 2019)!”

The website operators take over profiles of those who have decided to quit social media and erase their online presence. In order to initiate the suicide process customers must provide their log-in details to the social networking site they want to be deleted from. Then the private contents and friend relationships are removed but without deleting or deactivating accounts which still feature some information such as contact number and place of work. Once the process is completed, the user is included in a memorial album of all the suicides. The entry in the memorial album contains his/her profile picture, name and ‘last words’. (Suicidemachine.org, 2019).

Although at the moment virtual suicides are not very common, the popularity of the website is growing. According to experts, the Suicide Machine has assisted more than 1,000 virtual deaths, severing more than 80,500 friendships on Facebook and removing some 276,000 tweets from Twitter (TIME.com, 2019). These numbers seem staggering, however, the social networking community is growing every day and every month in every region of the world. According to reports,

Facebook is visited by 282 million European users per day, monthly this figure rises to 381 million (Proto.pl, 2019). The Internet news portal Wyborcza.pl observes that despite a number of image problems and scandals Facebook is still growing stronger (wyborcza.pl, 2019).

The idea behind Web2.0 Suicide Machine is very interesting as it addresses a serious problem of Internet overuse but it is also slightly controversial. Specialists of the Polish Suicidal Association alarm that any remarks reinforcing the validity of a suicide death are forbidden (Polskie Towarzystwo Suicydologiczne, 2019). Services like Web2.0 Suicide Machine may unnecessarily disseminate the subject matter of suicide death through e.g. encouraging users to write a farewell letter.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The intention of the paper was not proving that Internet addiction may lead to a suicide death. The author's aim was to show that these two aspects may overlap in the virtual reality. In the 21st century, life without the Internet seems difficult to imagine. The Internet has become an integral part of human existence offering a number of benefits and rewards. A wide spectrum of possibilities, functionality, attractiveness and convenience offered by the Internet may become grounds for addiction. Websites like Web2.0 Suicide Machine may be well-meaning in encouraging people to live a web-free life, but the very name of the service may create a pejorative connotations for many Internet users and associations with killing yourself in the concrete reality.

For experts of the Polish Suicide Association, the priority issue in counteracting suicide is implementation of a widely understood prevention programme. On 14 January 2019, the author of the paper entered the phrase 'how to kill myself' in the google.pl search engine and in 0.19 seconds there were about 13 500 000 search results. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of various anti-suicide organisations, the top hits feature anti-suicide services such as support groups (translation from Polish: do you want to kill yourself too/ there are a lot of us-seriously/ howtogo.pl). The top position websites also include statistics on suicides in Poland in 2018, online help services e.g. Wykop.pl as well as suicide prevention manuals such as the Suicide Guide and the First Aid Questionnaire which can be downloaded for free and which offer instructions on how to help a suicidal person. On top of that, there are links to suicide prevention crisis hotlines (116111.pl, 2019) which feature words of consolation and the emergency phone number for those in distress. Unfortunately, along such sites there are services, chat rooms etc. that advocate suicide and instruct how to kill oneself fast and without much pain. It is vital to educate young people about various dangers that lurk on the Internet. Banning the access to the virtual world is not a good solution, the child will always find an opportunity to go online: at a friend's house or in the school library. Personalisation of preventive activities may contribute to limiting the scope of Internet addictions and related psychological, social and family issues (Polskie Towarzystwo Suicydologiczne, 2019). Young generations should be trained and educated to use the Internet

in a correct way and warned against possible threats awaiting them online so that they could grow up and develop in a harmonious way. Bearing in mind that the number of children suffering from the above mentioned conditions is growing, it can be expected that in the near future the Internet addiction prevention will be a fast-developing field.

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