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Technology Addiction: an Exploratory Study of the Negative Impact of Technology on Consumer Welfare

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The purpose of this article is to bring the technology addiction (TA) discussion into the realm of consumer research and to sensitize researchers, policy makers and practitioners to the idea that TA poses a real threat to consumer welfare. The extant literature on consumer pathological use of various technologies is reviewed to support the necessity of adopting technology in general as a unit of analysis. Evidence from a qualitative study suggests that TA is a behavioral addiction and that the object of addiction is not the technology itself but rather the cumulative experience it affords.

[to cite]:

Monica A. Hodis and Gordon C. Bruner II (2009) , "Technology Addiction: an Exploratory Study of the Negative Impact of Technology on Consumer Welfare", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 36, eds. Ann L. McGill and Sharon Shavitt, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 840-841.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14519/volumes/v36/NA-36>

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The medical model, combined with media representations, fuels a fat prejudice and a cultural fat phobia, which makes it difficult to negotiate a fat identity. This phobia, combined with a struggle with weight, contributed to the poor self-esteem and anxiety experienced by our informants. Ironically, comfort food was the widespread coping mechanism used by many to regulate these negative emotions. Emotional eating was found to be a destructive spiral throughout our interviews: feeling anxiety over body image caused them to reach for comfort food to feel better, which led to weight gain and ultimately increased anxiety.

A large number of obese consumers see their bodies as both a subject and an object. The subject of the body involves the perception of the world through one's body. The objectified body is the body as perceived by the world; this is the socially constructed body. Many of the informants fragmented their bodies and described particular parts. It is the tension created by thinking that the world perceives a part of the body as inferior that makes it so difficult to negotiate a fat identity. The constant monitoring and regulation necessary to approximate the cultural ideal is challenging and requires cultural and economic capital; access to these resources is critical to having control over one's body project, yet is not accounted for when interpreting obesity using medical discourses.

By reintroducing, and working to combine experience with other historical and cultural perspectives, it is possible to construct an explanation for obesity that has additional implications beyond those provided by the medical model. Implications that respect personhood and take into account the importance of self-concept and self-esteem. As we continue to investigate this complexity, we need to include narrative and embrace a body politics. We need to construct explanations that are multilayered, bridging macro and micro perspectives, and we need to liberate consumers from repressive cultural discourses. This is the hope and vision of transformative consumer research. This article takes a small step toward this vision by bringing the voice of the obese to the conversation.

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to bring the technology addiction (TA) discussion into the realm of consumer research and to sensitize researchers, policy makers and practitioners to the idea that TA poses a real threat to consumer welfare. The extant literature on consumer pathological use of various technologies is reviewed to support the necessity of adopting technology in general as a unit of analysis. Evidence from a qualitative study suggests that TA is a behavioral addiction and that the object of addiction is not the technology itself but rather the cumulative experience it affords.

Technology is one of the most important symbols of advancement and has been reshaping the fabric of society for generations. While normal use of technology will improve and enrich the consumer's life, overuse and abuse of technology can lead to addiction and have a long-lasting negative impact on consumer welfare. Yet, the adverse impact of technology on consumer welfare is a greatly under-researched area. The purpose of this article is to introduce technology addiction (TA) to consumer researchers as well as policy makers and practitioners so that it may be viewed more seriously.

Consumer behaviorists with an interest in consumer welfare have only investigated deviant consumer behaviors such as compulsive buying, drug abuse, and eating disorders. TA and the adverse impact of technology on consumer welfare have remained largely untouched. However, mounting evidence suggests that TA is a serious problem and can no longer be ignored. Americans are starting to show serious signs of dependence to their cell phones (Licoppe and Heuritin 2001; Wickle 2001). College students spend increasing amounts of time playing online games, resulting in decreased academic performance, poorer interpersonal relationships, and increase in social anxiety (Chou, Condon, Bellan 2005; Lo, Wang, and Fang 2005). Neuroscientists have recently discovered evidence indicating that video games have an addictive potential not much different from drug or gambling addiction (Singer 2005).

Based on the extant knowledge, TA is defined here as *a compulsive, unnecessary use of technology that interferes with the individual's life, as well as his/her mental and/or physical well being. It is a psychological addiction to the cumulative experience one derives from one's involvement with the technology.* As a process addiction, TA dulls and distorts the addicts' reality allowing them to escape dealing with their true feelings and interfering with normal functioning and information processing (Schaeff 1987). In their compulsive pursuit, tech addicts will neglect important aspects of their lives and will display symptoms of loneliness, depression, even isolation from friends and family. They will experience anxiety and withdrawal symptoms as well as craving when denied their habitual involvement with technology (Greenfield 1999).

Addiction is not as much a factor of the time spent or of the specific technology used, but of the activities performed and the purpose and outcome of the consumer's involvement with the technology. The use of technology for socio-affective regulation has a high chance of resulting in addiction, while using the same technology for information acquisition will most likely not result in addiction (Weiser 2001; Park 2005). Addiction is more likely to be severe when technology acts as a depressant to alleviate dissatisfaction by enabling individuals to escape from the negative aspects of their lives (Park 2005; Wan and Chiou 2006). On the other hand, the potential for addiction is also possible when technology is used as a stimulant, as a means of deriving excitement and entertainment.

A method of establishing whether TA is truly an addiction is to compare it against clinical criteria for other established addictions (Griffiths 1995). Qualitative evidence was gathered to determine if TA, as a behavioral addiction, exhibited the six core characteristics of addiction as identified by Griffiths (2000): salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict and relapse. Focus group and in depth interviews with heavy users of technology were conducted in order to gain insights into the drivers of technology overuse and serve as a basis for a more extensive quantitative study. Previous research suggests that young, well educated individuals, college students in particular, are most likely to become addicted to technology (Kandell 1998; Hall and Parsons 2001). Given this, the participants in the focus group were college students attending a large, Midwestern U.S. university. The study used the interpretive research template recommended by Altheide and Johnson (1994).

The participants who exhibited the characteristics of addiction viewed technology as central to their lives. They often lost track of the increasing amount of time spent using it, indicating that a state of flow is one of the antecedents to addiction. Their compulsive use of technology was driven by the derived benefits, combined with a sense of necessity and duty to be "on call." One of the perceived benefits was the fact that it gives individuals a sense of control over their lives. Paradoxically, however, the large number of contact points often generated internal conflicts and made them feel like they were losing control over areas of their lives. Other perceived benefits were indicative of mood management (boredom, relaxation, escape) as well as a need for entertainment and arousal, supporting both the depressant and stimulant models of addiction.

An important insight gained was that consumers do not use different technologies in isolation but interchangeably and in conjunction. The focus is to achieve the desired goal, to gain the desired benefit, and consumers will use the technology they find most contextually appropriate out of those available at that time. It was evident that a study of consumer addiction to individual technologies would present an incomplete picture of reality. In order to truly understand the dysfunctional consumption of technology, it is urged that technology products (in general) be the unit of analysis. The direct and indirect insights gained into the behavior of tech addicts clearly suggest that the object of addiction is not the technology itself, but rather the cumulative experience that it enables, as suggested by Peele (1985). The findings also indicate that a major part of learning how to cope with the disadvantages of technology is knowing that they exist. This suggests that there might be a need for educating the public about the addictive potential of technology and how to cope with it to minimize that eventuality.

Based on the insights gained, future research should test a model of technology use and addiction on a larger population. Since abstinence is not a realistic option for TA, a model that accounts for the factors and stages responsible for the onset of addiction is essential in understanding and combating the negative effects of dysfunctional technology use on consumer welfare.

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