Internet as a new space for life: phenomenological view

Nikolay Pervushin a*

a Novosibirsk State University, Novosibirsk, Pirogova st. 2, Novosibirsk, 630128, Russia

Abstract

This article presents a phenomenological research of internet-addictivity. Internet-addictivity is understood as a human’s feature in modern society which means perception of the world of the Internet as a field of finite values, not less important than daily occurrence. Here we are trying to overcome medical discourse in relation to this feature by using phenomenological alternative. The article shows some of the results of conducted empirical study, which allowed to create 2 polar ideal-typical constructions – internet-addictivity and non-addictivity. With internet-addictivity Internet is used principally value-rationally. Internet conducts to the creation of the "We-group", the shortage of which is possible in daily life. In the plans for the future there is nothing connected with family; freedom has a special value. Internet-addictivity is characterized by presence of experiences and emotions about the Internet, which are not weaker than in everyday life. For non-addictiveness is typical understanding of the Internet as a secondary reality, or, in the extreme case, as a way, as a tool, not as a separate world.

Keywords: Internet, daily occurrence, internet addiction, internet-addictivity, non-addictivity, world picture, phenomenology, field of finite values, medical discourse

1. Introduction

In contemporary post-industrial society information starts to be a major resource, and the Internet is the main source and tool storage, production, distribution of it (Abels, 1998). Usage of information technologies leads to the creation of a new feature of social life – internet-addictivity, which is interesting for sociologists, psychologists and is characterized by newness and dynamism. The researchers noted the negative impact of the Internet and a corresponding view on the internet addiction is forming. It is noted that excessive uncontrolled usage of the Internet

* Nikolay Pervushin. Tel.:+4-345-3342-131.
E-mail address: nickd17@yandex.ru

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).
Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Research and Education Center.

doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.04.940
could lead to stress, loss of money, physical exhaustion, conflicts with others, etc. Addicts worse cope with everyday responsibilities, have problems in real communication, in family, at work, in their sexual lives; there are cases when long-term lack of access to the Internet resulted not only in a state of desperation and stress, but also led to the suicide (Husserl, 2005; Korytnikova, 2010; Marchenkova, 2010).

Given the different criteria for determining addiction, the proportion of Internet addicts in various countries ranges from 2 to 30% of Internet users (Tsoi, 2012). Rapid internetization is accompanied by the growth in number of addicts. This problem is estimated as severe and significant as alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling, etc.

In this study we have moved beyond the medical discourse. This position is similar to the idea of Surrat and is in line with the position of William James that the only criterion of reality is a psychological belief of its existence (Davydov, 2002; Surratt, 1999).

We find it useful to distinguish between "addictivity" and «addiction». Internet-addictivity is a new term that implies a phenomenological description. It can be used in sociology and social psychology for a new phenomenon in society, avoiding such definitive categorizations as "addict / non-addict."

Internet-addictivity is a property of experiencing the world of the Internet as a reality (field of finite values), not less important than daily.

The idea of internet-addictivity as a feature of modern society is developed on the basis of ideas of phenomenologists in the framework of qualitative research strategy (See. Schutz (Abels, 1998; Davydov, 2002), Husserl (2005) Berger, Luckman (1996)).

Phenomenologists point out that in contemporary society we should be more relative in considering all the worlds, including daily occurrence, as one of the worlds, but not as the only (Abels, 1998; Berger, Luckman, 1996; Shutz, 2003). Despite the quasi-reality of all worlds, except daily, Schutz notes their importance, claiming that they are realities and they influence the thinking and action of a man in the world of other people (Shutz, 2003).

In line with these ideas, the Internet can be seen as an opportunity to construct a new world and internet-addictivity can be interpreted as an expression of involvement in this new world. In our study, users with a tendency to internet-addictivity were considered as persons with certain characteristics in their interaction with the world and its perception, but not as persons with a deviant behavior. Hence the importance of studying the pictures of the world of users with a tendency to internet-addictivity; moreover, in studied literature, such information is not available.

Definition of the Internet world is facing difficulties. It is necessary to distinguish between usage of the Internet as a tool for everyday life, as a continuation of everyday life and as a way of constructing a new reality. Thus, the perception of the Internet is not unified in minds of users; however, we can’t say that social reality is something united; rather we should talk about the set social realities. The Internet can be a part of or a continuation of everyday life, and perhaps another world (or, probably worlds).

2. The concept of a word picture

In this study, we understood the picture of the world as a reality displayed in the mind of the individual (Wittgenstein); reflection, focused on the life-world (Husserl); the content of consciousness, perceived and experienced life-world, which is classified in the form of the system of relevancies (Berger,Luckman, 1996; Husserl, 2005; Shutz, 2003, Wittgenstein, 1958). The system of relevance is a structured current representations in human mind; a common principle of construction the picture of the world (Shutz, 2003). These systems are implemented in schemes of typifications that guide understanding and interpretation of the situation and the world (Berger, Luckman, 1996; Shutz, 2003). With their help, through the consciousness and practices institutional frameworks of daily occurrence are designed (Berger, Luckman, 1996). It is important that world is objectified in the minds of people in their language, for the Internet it is objectified in a form of slang (Berger, Luckman, 1996).

3. The methodology of the study.

In this study we were focused on the pictures of the world of Internet users. We were interested in such components of it as values, motives of using the Internet, perceptions of "we-group" and "they-group" (or "us" and "them") and space-time structure. In addition, it was important to apply to feelings of people on the Internet, because the core of the world picture is "I feeling" (Shutz, 2003). Finally, a special role in the study was given to social
experience, which includes subjectively important details of biography, as well as experienced current social circumstances. Social experience, which was being felt, is contained in the picture of the world.

Our research intention was to reveal the specifics of pictures of the world of Internet users with a tendency to internet-addictivity. As our research perspective implies the emphasis on subjective senses of the person, on how he or she perceives the social world, we selected qualitative research strategy, which focuses on understanding subjective meanings and their interpretation (Tsoi, 2012, Young, 2000). 29 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Novosibirsk (in Akademgorodok) in 2013. In parallel with conversation we monitored respondent’s reactions; also, the way of reaching agreement with the respondents for interviews, the format of their choice of communication was reflected. We used two versions of the interview: direct "face-to-face" communication and online dialogue, actually two different methods, using identical guide. Interview contains features of narrative (life story, the story of Internet use) leitmotif (the same phenomenon at different stages of life - social clubs, hobbies, friends, internet use) and focused (around the Internet) interviews (Gotlib, 2005).

Interviews were conducted with active internet users who are 17-23 years old. By activity we mean intensive use of the Internet (more than 6 hours / day). In the study pre-test questions, corresponding to theoretical (phenomenological) representation of addictivity, were main criteria for sampling. These are questions about the actual, normal and desired time spent on the Internet. For example: «How many hours (approximately) do you use the Internet per day? How many hours a day is it normal to spend on the Internet? How much time do you want to spend on the Internet, if there are not any restrictions and other occasions (non-Internet?) » Users without tendency to internet-addictivity have a clear understanding of normal and desired time spent on the Internet, actual time spent on the Internet is more than normal and desirable. At the same time they are willing to reduce the residence time on the Internet, as more oriented to stay in the nonvirtual world of everyday life.

For users with a tendency to internet-addictivity there is no image of «normal» time spent on the Internet or they think that they spent on the Internet lower time than «normal»; also they want to spend more time on the Internet.

For the group of "medium" there is a certain mismatch: for example, they can spend 6 or more hours per day on the Internet, saying that there are no rules, but they would like to be there for three hours or less. Presumably, for representatives of "medium" group the Internet is perceived as a secondary, subordinated world, but a lot of time is spent without any pragmatic reasons (as opposed to users without the addictivity).

4. Results of empirical research of internet-addictivity by appealing to pictures of the world.

Ideal-typical constructions were identified and designed. They represent poles of internet-addictivity. Real Internet users are to greater or lesser extent carriers of internet-addictivity, lying on a continuum between these two poles. We emphasize that we identified and will describe ideal-typical constructions, but not the characteristics of real Internet users.

So, what is the specificity of world pictures of users with or without internet-addictivity?

4.1. Specificity of perception of space and time.

At any degree of internet-addictivity in the pictures of the world space shrinks to a single point from which everything and everyone is available at present of the Internet. Differences in perception of time were revealed in pictures of the world: in the absence of internet-addictivity there is a marked dependence of time on the Internet on everyday life: "In the evening everyone is sitting on the Internet for fun, and in the morning - at work. In the morning the city works and at night pubs, theaters, and so forth open their doors for people who are searching for certain entertainments»

In the presence of internet-addictivity independence of internet time on social is important, it is a great advantage of the Internet: "On the Internet, there is no clear time. You can do everything whatever and whenever you want".
4.2. Specificity of the characteristics of "we-group" and "they-group."

Ours and others ("we-group" and "they-group") in the everyday world are relatively certain in the absence of internet-addictivity; while there is lack of differentiation of these groups on the Internet, or they coincide with such groups from everyday life.

In the absence of internet-addictivity group of "ours" usually consists of friends who exist in the everyday world; they are "friends" on the Internet too. Perception of "others" in the world of everyday life is associated with any defamatory actions; "others" on the Internet are associated with the rejection of some manifestations which are similar to those in everyday life (rude, stupid and so on). Often "others" are not called: "«Mine» - my friends on the Internet. All the people who are not familiar are strangers ... «Mine» means personal acquaintance. In life you see someone and he seems to be «mine»; on the Internet I can’t call anyone «mine» without knowing the person directly (off-line).

In the presence of internet-addictivity user quite concretely describes the following «we-group» and «they-group» in daily life, but "we-group" is rather small, especially in comparison with it in the world of the Internet, where the number of "friends" is much larger and boundaries and features of this group are clearly defined. Internet is perceived as a machine for "producing we-group", which mainly consists of people whom user doesn’t know directly (off-line) and compensates for the lack of personal contact in daily occurrence. Moreover, often these "we-group" and "they-group" are differentiated by typifications of Internet slang.

Analyzing answers on the question «how could you divide, classify web users?» we revealed that in the absence of internet-addictivity such groups are identified on the basis of socio-demographic characteristics of users or on the basis of their activity. Characteristics of activity are dependent on socio-demographic status. "Young and adults. Those who use it for fun, for work, mainly for education, etc."

In the presence of internet-addictivity the level of proficiency of the Internet is important ("we-group" often consists of users who are well versed in the Internet). Types of usage are formulated in the language of the Internet slang (typifications in the language of the world of Internet).

4.3. Specificity of feelings about the Internet.

In the absence of internet-addictivity feelings about the Internet are absent or are related to daily occurrence: waiting for letters that affect the course of daily life, negative feelings caused by overuse of the Internet (it is mentioned that time could be spent more useful, more valuable or correctly in everyday life). "I can’t say that I have any feelings about the Internet."

In the presence of internet-addictivity there are feelings caused by waiting for messages which are not connected with daily life (off-line world) and users are upset in case of their absence. Informal communication on the Internet is not less important than daily, so the joys and grievances are really strong. Absence of the Internet causes anxiety; there are active attempts to enter this world; painful feelings caused by impossibility to be on the Internet as there is no alternatives and interesting activities in daily life. "On the Internet I could avoid disasters in the history of my country and get a lot of fun ... And I am pleased. And I'm happy."

4.4. Social and emotional loneliness.

In case of internet-addictivity weak involvement in various social circles and a lack of close emotional ties in daily occurrence is revealed. Here we see the contrast to the conclusions of N. Tsoi (Tsoi, 2012), as users with a tendency to internet-addictivity may experience not only social, but also emotional loneliness: "I have studied in 8 different schools, but have never taken root. I have many friends, but there is no one whom I could call high-grade friends. I am of the Internet."
4.5. The objectives implemented with the help of the Internet.

Absence of internet-addictivity is connected with the use of the Internet as a mean and a tool to achieve certain goals efficiently and effectively. Values of information and comfort (search for information, downloading books, electronic payments) are recognized.

In the presence of internet-addictivity goals and values are more likely not to be external towards the Internet, but they are inside the Internet: "On the Internet a lot of more interesting things than in daily world could be found. Here everything is easier. Every day you can be in some other world. Life becomes more and more filled. You can easily find something on the Internet that is in absence in your daily life."

4.6. Possibilities of the Internet in pictures of the world

In case of internet-addictivity Internet usage is associated with its relevant opportunities in comparison with the world of everyday life (subjective perception of them as relevant is especially important as these "opportunities" are not some objective properties of the Internet): "I construct my ideal world. I don’t like our world, and there I can avoid the mistakes, those terrible events that have happened in real history. I want to change the course of history. In ordinary life I would like to change the world, but I don’t have such opportunities, and on the Internet and games I could easily do it."

Images of possibilities of the Internet in case of internet-addictiveness can be classified in following way:

1) Possibility of better expression of ideas (something close to the idea of discourse in the interpretation of Habermas (Furs, 2000)): "You can better express the idea, not to repeat yourself ... You can stop the communication at any time. Interaction there is more intelligent. In daily life you won’t find such interesting conversations as some discussion in my wall in «Vkontakte»;"

2) the opportunity to hide themselves under the mask, to hide the stigma (in the interpretation of I. Hoffmann (Hoffmann, 2000) it discredits a person in terms of presentation of self to others): «This is the image that I am designing. It is an ideal self. I want my positive sides to be seen. It is possible to hide your appearance, manner of speaking, etc. Your appearance doesn’t matter in online communication. Avatar is not me, it is just the image. I can hide all the things that I do not like in myself»;

3) the possibility to select any topic and point of view - an opportunity to be closer to the ideal communicative situation (in understanding of Habermas (Furs, 2000): "On the Internet we mostly discuss not local, but global problems. In daily life, domestic and «grounded» things are mainly discussed. I can talk about politics. Generally, this topic is highly controlled, and the Internet is a space of freedom for speech and there it is impossible to control the people. Anywhere else there is no such freedom. Here you can discuss everything. There I have a feeling of permissiveness »;

4) the absence of social sanctions for "wrong statement and behavior": "there are no restrictions, there are the easiness of interaction, the possibility of sincerity, and the opportunity to be unpunished";

5) escapism, an opportunity to build a perfect world and to enter it in a game or anime: "plunge into another world with your head, an escape from the oppression of the world, from the failures... To be a winner and a creator. To solve something yourself. It gives the chance to feel like a living person »;

6) lack of binding practices to place and time: «Everything can be accessed immediately in the presence of the Internet ... On the Internet you can always do everything you desire: communicate, argue, shoot, score a goal…»

7) the opportunity to express their opinion on the various spheres of life, including the socio-political situation: "I think and read a lot about it, I write on the forums and in discussions in «vkontakte», but I would not go to meetings or other protest events".

4.7. Values and plans for the future.

In the presence of internet-addictivity in the world pictures there is a value of freedom and there are no plans to create a family. This topic is moved to the periphery, it does not attract interest, the family is not a priority and
value: "I want to be independent, to be well off and not to think about money. I have no plans on family life… Childfree".

Pictures of the world in the absence of internet-addictivity include values of family, intimate relationships, especially important for the development of life trajectories.

4.8. Representations about the rational.

In absence of internet-addictivity is associated with a pragmatic understanding of the Internet, in which speed, low cost, more options for selection, more comfort (instrumental motives, goal-orientated action) are important. Also, some practical advantages are significant: ease of use in official letters, the ability to communicate with many people at the same time on different topics and so on. Absence of internet-addictivity was also associated with a priority of live, direct communication, which requires personal contact and without any economic interests.

Focusing on intonation, eye contact, tactile sensations, etc is accompanied by the need for personal communication in everyday life. A link between absence of internet-addictivity and the unwillingness to discuss on the Internet details of personal life, values, desires, and so forth was revealed in the process of analyzing conducted interviews. At the same time, in a personal meeting these topics could easily be the subject of discussion.

In the presence of internet-addictivity it is more convenient to discuss politics, science, society, history, cinema, literature and so forth through the Internet. The need of personal communication is not recognized; intonation and eye contact are not so significant as thoughts and ideas which could be expressed much more clearly online, if only because there is more time for reflection, thinking about answers and questions and for discussion itself. Internet use is not caused by pragmatism but by recognition of the value of the Internet itself, its possibilities and forms of communication (value-rational action): "If we were talking off-line, you'd hardly heard even 30% of what I have written" or "often do not communicate with friends in everyday life for weeks, and prefer to correspond in «VKontakte» ".

4.9. Social experience

The presence of internet-addictivity is accompanied by the following characteristics of social experience:
- Poor integration into different sections / social clubs (which members are united by common love to sport, art, hobby, etc) / associations;
- Indifference and lack of understanding from relatives in general or in relation to a specific activity;
- Negative past experience: for example, failure to communicate with the opposite sex or bureaucratic delays;
- Parent’s divorce or absence of parents (or of one of them);
- The absence or small number of close friends (to such degree that a person had never celebrated his birthday);
- Too rigid parental control or supervision of social institutions;
- A negative attitude towards their own appearance and manners of communication.

These conditions were typical and subjectively relevant in the presence of internet-addictivity. In addition to this, narratives were different in valuable aspect: in presence of internet-addictivity there is a rather strong criticism about past and present, some disappointment. In the absence of internet-addictivity user’s life story seems to be more optimistic (even if there were some sad or tragic events).

5. Conclusions

We found empirical clarification of our original theoretical definition: in pictures of the world with Internet-addictivity Internet is perceived as no less important reality than the daily occurrence. Internet is perceived as a world of bigger opportunities, as a chance to get into a world that is not inferior to the daily. Sometimes this world is more preferable.

In world pictures in the absence of internet-addictivity Internet is perceived as a convenient tool or as the world, secondary (subordinated) to the daily.

Our initial theoretical construct must be changed, since we have assumed that the Internet in any way is perceived as the world (reality), as a field of finite values, but it was found that in the absence of internet-addictivity
it is not always perceived as a separate reality, a full enclave. So, the status of the world of the Internet as the "world" is not something commonly shared (like the world of science and the world of sleep). In some interpretations it's just an effective tool which used in everyday life.

Absence of internet-addictivity is accompanied by identity of human perception on the Internet and in everyday life, and (or) negative attitude towards another state of things (when an Internet image seriously differs from offline). Significant role of the Internet in life is recognized, but there is the ability of the critical evaluation of its negative impact (amorphousness, sedentary lifestyle, weakening of the ability to think independently, etc).

So, in world pictures with internet-addictivity Internet is perceived and interpreted as a separate world, demarcated in meaning; it is not less important than daily, whereas in the absence of internet-addictivity it is either a part of everyday life (daily occurrence), or an enclave inside the ultimate reality (daily), which role is rather modest and secondary.

References

Abels, H. (1998). Romantic, phenomenological sociology and qualitative social research. Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology, 1, 114-138. (in Russ)
Berger, P. L., Luckman T. (1996). The Social Constructioning of Reality. Moscow: Medium. (in Russ)
Davydov, Y. N. (2002). The history of theoretical sociology. 3. Moscow: Canon. (In Russ)
Furs, V. N. (2000). Philosophy of unfinished modernity Habermas. Minsk: EKONOMPRESS. (In Russ)
Gotlib, A. S. (2005). Introduction to sociological research: qualitative and quantitative approaches. Methodology. Research Practice. Moscow. (in Russ)
Hoffman, I. (2000) Presentation of Self in everyday life. Moscow: Canon. (In Russ)
Husserl, E. (2005). Selected Works. Moscow: Publishing House "Territory of the future ". (In Russ)
Korytnikova, N. V. (2010) Internet addiction and deprivation as a result of virtual interactions // Sociological Studies, 6, 70-79. (In Russ)
Marchenkova, N. G. (2010). Internet socialization of youth: an analysis of the relationship with Internet addiction. Vocational education, 4, 55-58. (In Russ)
Martynov, K. (2012). From slaktivizm to the republic. Why the Internet revolution become a reality. Logos, 2, 19-27. (In Russ)
Schutz, A. (2003). Equality and semantic structure of the social world. The semantic structure of the everyday world. Essays on the phenomenological sociology. Moscow: Institute of the "Public Opinion ". (In Russ)
Surratt, C. (1999). Netaholics? The creation of a Pathology. N.Y.: Nova Science Publ.
Tsoi, N. A. (2012). Social factors of the phenomenon of Internet addiction. Vladivostok. (In Russ)
Wittgenstein, L. (1958). Logico-Philosophical tractate. Retrieved from http://www.gumer.info/bogoslov_Buks/Philos/Vit/LogFil.php (in Russ)
Young, K. S. (2000). Diagnosis - Internet Addiction. Internet world, 2, 24-29 (In Russ).