Internet-based Addictions and Holding Tech Companies Accountable

Gauri Bhrigu, Simon Fraser University

Keywords: internet-based addictions, social media, ethics

SFU Health Sciences Undergraduate Journal

In this digital age, being chronically online is easier now than ever before. However, prolonged exposure to the Internet can lead to adverse health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, poor sleep, and psychological distress (Bhargava et al., 2021). In the last decade, with the rise in Internet usage, it can be seen how most mainstream social media companies, like Meta, TikTok, Pinterest, etc., have incorporated shopping platforms into their applications. Facebook Marketplace, for example, provides its users with a digital space to buy and sell products (Piranda, 2022). TikTok and Instagram, on the other hand, host businesses and content creators who sell and promote products to their audiences. As online shopping and internet use have become interconnected with each other, it would be fair to interpret online shopping addictions as Internet-based addictions (Nyrhinen et al, 2023). Thus, this paper intends to explore how prolonged internet use impacts both online shopping behaviors and health outcomes for users while highlighting the commodification of the time spent online on social media platforms and its impact on society.

Online shopping addictions describe the tendency to engage in problematic shopping behaviors that have a negative impact on personal finances, social relationships, and the emotional well-being of individuals (Nyrhinen et al, 2023). The Internet can fuel these problematic behaviors because of its accessibility, affordability, anonymity, convenience, and disinhibition (Andreassen et al, 2015). Unfortunately, most assessment criteria used for shopping addictions are outdated, and one paper calls for using a new screening tool called The Bergen Shopping Addiction Scale (BSAS) to make up for this (Andreassen et al, 2015). This study was conducted on 23,537 participants and the results show the risk factors (neuroticism, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, extroversion, younger age groups, the female sex, and being chronically online) and the protective factors (conscientiousness, agreeableness, intellect,

education, and self-control) associated with online shopping addictions. This paper was said to be the first of its kind to put shopping addiction in an addiction framework and thus, highlights the importance of recognizing non-substance-related addictions as real addictions (Andreassen et al, 2015). The intertwined relationship between different personality traits like conscientiousness, agreeableness, low self-esteem, extroversion etc. shows the link between the personality of an individual and internet-based addictions (Jiang et al, 2017). Moreover, this study analyzed how people with pre-existing risk factors are more likely to develop shopping addictions (Andreassen et al, 2015). Another study conducted a survey following 1,000 young adults in Finland where their online shopping patterns and financial issues were looked at from the perspective of self-regulating their phone usage (Nyrhinen et al, 2023). Results show that low self-regulation led to more online shopping, which then led to financial stress and feelings of poor money management among the youth. This highlights how online content can exacerbate addictions in youths with low self-regulation and high internet usage (Nyrhinen et al, 2023). This helps to establish the association between the personality of an individual, time spent online, the content that users interact with, and their ability to regulate how often they are online. Considering this, it is important to highlight that online content itself is not the sole reason behind increased internet activity and problematic behaviors among people (Bhargava et al, 2021).

Technology companies monetize the time users spend on their platforms, often introducing new features and content to keep users engaged for longer (Bhargava et al, 2021). These businesses run on the commodification of their users' attention, and this prevalent phenomenon is coined as an “attention-economy model” (Bhargava et al., 2021). This implies that the companies do not prioritize users’ best interests and instead put increasing profit margins

first (Bhargava et al, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a noticeable pattern of an increase in addictive online behaviors, such as compulsive online shopping, particularly among the younger demographic (Nyrhinen et al., 2023). This pattern strongly shows how well the attention-economy model works and how much of an incentive Technology companies have to maintain the model (Bhargava et al, 2021).

While the World Health Organization has characterized excessive Internet use as a growing problem, there still seems to be some debate about whether excessive Internet use can be categorized as a behavioral addiction (Bhargava et al, 2021). With the increasing prominence of the Internet in everyone's day-to-day life and with excessive Internet usage becoming more socially acceptable, a contemporary framework and up-to-date policies are needed to put users first more now than ever before (Andreassen et al, 2015). To understand the normalization of excessive Internet use, looking at how these platforms are designed is necessary. Research shows that social media is designed to be addictive (Bhargava et al, 2021). Social media platforms use addictive tools like variable rewards, social validation, the removal of stopping cues and using adaptive algorithms to maintain user engagement. This method of holding users' attention to create profits incentivizes technology companies to continue creating addictive platforms and content, leading to a toxic cycle. This is morally wrong as it is exploitative of the users, who often are unaware of how their attention is being commodified (Bhargava et al, 2021).

Therefore, proper regulations are needed to hold IT companies accountable; the issue lies in the constant and vast amount of hyper-specific content readily available, with little to no ways to regulate that flow of information (Nyrhinen et al., 2023). One study categorized college students into three groups of high, medium and low-severity online shopping addictions and found that there was a positive correlation between time spent online and shopping addictions,

and a negative association between shopping addictions and self-control (Jiang et al, 2017). This shows how helping consumers improve their self-control and reduce time spent online can help reduce the prevalence of harmful online shopping behaviors (Jiang et al, 2017). A randomized experimental study found that when social media users decreased their time spent online, they experienced fewer symptoms of depression a week later than the control group who had continued to use social media (Bhargava et al., 2021). For instance, Apple has implemented features into its iOS system to alert users about their internet usage over a certain period of time as a way to increase awareness and encourage self-discipline (Bhargava et al, 2021). Technology companies can build platforms that allow for a healthier relationship to exist between users and social media (Bhargava et al, 2021).

Promoting the importance of regulation and highlighting the adverse health impacts of being chronically online can help change the mainstream normalization of constant Internet usage. In conclusion, time spent on the Internet and a failure to self-regulate are key to understanding how online shopping addictions are developed. Social media enables online shopping addictions, especially when users have pre-existing tendencies that put them at a higher risk of addiction. While Internet addiction is a public health concern, it is also a moral and ethical problem that should be considered among all consumers, policymakers, and social media companies (Bhargava et al, 2021). Future research should focus on recommended Internet usage guidelines, strategies to promote self-control, education on healthy online behavior, and the ethical implications of social media business models.

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