



# Children and Juveniles on the Internet From the Victim's Perspective (Some Aspects of Addiction)

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ABSTRACT	ARTICLE HISTORY	
<p>The Internet plays a significant role in young people's and children's social and personal lives. This medium often replaces their social contacts, the hierarchy of needs and desires, and authorities, serving as a practical "time filler" and a sense of existence. It makes them victims of the information society in the strict victimological sense of the word. It is more addictive than pharmaceuticals and provides a sense of existence for many young people. It degrades them physically and mentally. This article identifies these threats and directly points out their victimological context. The aim of the article is to highlight certain aspects of victimization in children and adolescents in the context of using modern information tools and techniques. A review and summary of the most significant scientific findings regarding addiction to modern technologies have been conducted. This represents a contemporary form of victimology and a way to create the victim paradigm in the information society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Addiction to modern means of communication and technology. It is more destructive than it may seem in common parlance. It causes not only somatic effects but is primarily a social addiction. The victim that a young person becomes presents a new paradigm in victimology.</p>	<p>Received Revised Accepted Published</p>	<p>5<sup>th</sup> June 2023 28<sup>th</sup> July 2023 30<sup>th</sup> August 2023 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023</p>
<p>Copyright © 2023, <i>Wierzchowski, T.</i> This open-access article is distributed and licensed under <b>the Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.</b></p> 	<p><b>KEYWORDS</b> <i>Internet, victimology, addiction, child, culture.</i></p> <p><b>HOW TO CITE?</b> Wierzchowski, T. (2023). Children and Juveniles on the Internet From the Victim's Perspective (Some Aspects of Addiction). <i>Acta Humanitatis</i>, 1(2), 144–159. <a href="https://doi.org/10.5709/ah-01.02.2023-04">https://doi.org/10.5709/ah-01.02.2023-04</a></p>	

## **1. Introduction.**

In today's world, the Internet has become an integral part of social life. It serves not only for acquiring knowledge, exchanging information, and doing professional work. However, it has also become the most popular form of entertainment and the most common way to spend leisure time. Therefore, it is not surprising to hear about the growing interest in it among researchers analyzing social relationships concerning the so-called "information society" and the "Internet culture" (Castells, 2007, p. 28). Media are an "extension of man" of his imagination, intentions, and opinions. They enable the creation of a global village—a contemporary development trend in which electronic media breaks down temporal and visual boundaries, providing society with the opportunity for mass-scale conversation. In this sense, the world becomes a small settlement, and connectivity becomes easy, convenient, and accessible to nearly everyone (McLuhan, 2004, p. 10). The whole world is connected through the Internet. Compared to previous years, there has been a dynamic growth in the popularity of the Internet in Poland (GUS, 2016). The youth show the highest level of activity in cyberspace. Using the Internet has become almost a daily routine for children and teenagers. From a young age, the virtual sphere accompanies them in their cognitive, recreational, and interactive activities (Wrońska, Lange 2016, p. 15).

The very rapid development of mass media, progressing "at the speed of light," intervenes in practically every aspect of our lives. Media, often referred to as the "fourth estate," convey various types of information to their audience, which is us, the people. We receive information through messages that educate and entertain us in our leisure time. Images, color, sound, and motion influence our intellectual, emotional, verbal, non-verbal, and manual activities. The Internet, often called the "virtual world", seems more exciting and natural than the world that surrounds us in reality. Mass media shape our personalities, how we behave, and how we function. They engage us ultimately.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, humanity is highly susceptible to the confusion caused by mass media, and children are the most vulnerable to this influence. They can be easily manipulated and disoriented. Everything seems essential in the Internet, television, radio, or print media, and if it is not there, it simply does not matter. Every more or less significant issue, even the tiniest



triviality presented by the media, is elevated to high importance. Media create new, less-known dependencies between the user and the computer, tablet, or phone. Innocent entertainment becomes a problem, and it is usually noticed too late. This worries parents, while others rejoice. Producers of games, videos, or gambling make vast sums of money through this social pathology. The profits they gain from these forms of entertainment are measurable. However, the side effects and disorders arising from addiction induced by social media are more challenging to quantify.

There are many terms to describe the existing internet boom: "social media", "social networking sites", "Web 2.0", or "interactive network". Without a doubt, "boom" is the perfect word here – after all, nowhere else in the virtual world does business thrive as much as on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube. The "fourth estate" has become very famous in the last decade, so we are dealing with a new threat that is evolving rapidly and dynamically.

## **2. The Problems of Young People with Internet Addiction.**

Addiction is a disease that arises as a side effect of the consumption of substances (such as alcohol, nicotine, cocaine) or the consistent performance of activities (gambling, video games, smartphone usage) that initially provide pleasure but over time become a daily life obligation and hurt a person's personality and their life, work, relationships, or even their health. An addicted person may lose control over their behavior without realizing it and, as a result, may face numerous problems for themselves and their loved ones.

Addiction is a progressive medical condition that involves the degradation of a person's psyche, and often their physiology, due to the compulsive use of psychoactive substances or the performance of activities considered rewarding. Initially, the use of addictive substances brings immense pleasure, even a state of euphoria (as they stimulate brain areas responsible for pleasure). However, as addiction develops, a person cannot function normally without them. They begin to crave these substances or activities. Abstinence, on the other hand, causes significant suffering. The complex path of addiction always leads from using it for mood enhancement or pleasure to using it to avoid discomfort. Addiction is not related to willpower. According to the latest research by American specialists, it is a "chronic brain disease that



requires appropriate treatment", whether it is related to alcohol, drugs, or gambling. Dr. Michael M. Miller from the American Society for Addiction Medicine states that addiction is not just a matter of bad behavior. At the same time, he emphasizes that it is a chronic disease requiring long-term treatment, similar to conditions like diabetes or heart disease, sometimes even for life (Miller, 2018, p.245.) In this new definition, American specialists highlight that addiction is a brain disorder intended to help the families of affected individuals. The doctors treating these cases understand why relapses are so expected and complete recovery is often elusive.

What happens in the brains of addicted individuals? Specialists broadly describe disruptions related to emotions, thinking, and behavior.

Some people are genetically predisposed to addiction. However, addiction can also affect those without prior exposure to it. All it takes is trying it once, and the cycle begins. Many individuals experiment with gambling, alcohol, or games to relax or cope with stress and problems they cannot handle. This is often the case with young people. Although we stereotypically divide addictions into psychological (without intoxication) and physical (with intoxication), it is challenging to pinpoint purely physical addiction, as the brain processes closely tied to neurotransmitter communication and synaptic connections are involved in the analyzed phenomenon. Therefore, one can be addicted to anything, any object, or any person that positively and effectively stimulates our brain (activates it). ICD-10 and DSM-IV<sup>1</sup>

They present a very similar set of symptoms characteristic of addiction. When making a distinction, we can talk about addiction when at least three of the symptoms described below occurred together over one month (or when one symptom persisted for a year): (a) intense, even overwhelming, desire to use a substance (known as alcohol craving, drug craving, etc.) or engage in an activity; (b) loss of control over when to start and when to stop; (c) apathy, experiencing withdrawal symptoms upon cessation; (d) realization of the need for larger doses to achieve the desired effect and an increasing frequency of engaging in the activity; (e) total absorption in matters related to substance use, radical changes in previous interests, entering new social circles, adopting a different lifestyle, and giving up or reducing physical activity in favor of other forms of entertainment, such as tablets, computers, or smartphones; (f) wasting

precious time; (g) unsuccessful attempts to quit the addiction; (h) convincing oneself that one cannot live or behave generally without it, inventing excuses and reasons for why a person should continue, self-justification.

Below is a table confirming the beginnings of addiction among the surveyed youth.

Table 1. Percentage Distribution of Responses to the Question  
"Have you ever experienced?" by Age

Yes	G*	PG**
	%	%
Using the Internet longer than initially planned	78,9	85,9
Feeling anger when the Internet was slow or unavailable	52,9	71,3
Improving your mood by using the Internet	61,9	69,2
Skipping a meal to be able to use the Internet	12,0	8,2
Giving up sleep to use the Internet	20,1	22,2
Neglecting school duties to use the Internet	24,5	33,1
Withdrawing from other extracurricular activities to use the Internet	12,8	13,3
Refusing to meet with friends in order to use the Internet	8,3	9,0
Deceiving your parents to be able to use the Internet	19,5	18,6

\* G – junior high school

\*\* PG – upper secondary school

Source: NASK, Warszawa 2017 r.

The results presented in the table are indeed concerning. The increasing frequency of addiction symptoms with the age of young people is alarming. High school students, much more than their peers in junior high school, are gaining notoriety for internet addiction in the following situations: "using the Internet longer than originally planned" (G: 78.9%; PG: 85.9%), "feeling anger when the internet is slow or unavailable" (G: 52.9%; PG: 71.3%), "improving mood by using the internet" (G: 61.9%; PG: 69.2%), "not completing school assignments to access the internet" (G: 24.5%; PG: 33.1%). The verified initial signs of habit or addiction in the



surveyed society may not necessarily develop into a full-blown addiction. The habit of using the Internet is increasing among children and adolescents.

## 2.1. Types of Addictions.

*2.1.1. Computer Addiction.* A computer is an electronic device for processing information, offering many possibilities through software, disk drives, USB ports, and internet connectivity. What sets modern computers apart from all other devices is their programmability, allowing the addition of a list of instructions to the computer's memory that can be executed at any time. Programming can be likened to reading a book. Most often, when we visit computer stores, we opt for games.

Computer games are a hobby that occupies an increasing amount of young people's free time. They are currently the most crucial part of the daily lives of young individuals. These games invite them into a fascinating, colorful, dynamic, adventure-filled, and exciting world of the virtual realm (Andrzejewska, 2008, p. 80). Each game is different, setting a goal for the player to progress to the next level. Along the way, there are many obstacles to make the task more challenging. Participating in computer games provides plenty of opportunities for fulfilling the player's unfulfilled dreams. In this interactive world, achieving things that are forbidden or impossible in reality without significant difficulties is possible. In a computer game, teleporting from one place to another in the universe, reaching the farthest corners, traveling, fighting, killing, and driving a car like a reckless road pirate at very high speeds without regard for signs, signals, or traffic rules can all be done with ease.

Each computer game is unique and diverse, following specific rules, having its own developed system, being voluntary (participants can decide whether to play), and teaching competitiveness. All these elements make up the characteristics of computer games. Through continuous improvement of computer technology so-called innovations, games nowadays are becoming increasingly realistic. To enhance their authenticity, companies hire individuals from various professions and experts in different fields of science. A novelty is games with virtual reality technology, which allows the player to participate in the game environment in an invented reality. The player believes they are outside the monitor and experiences the sensation of being transported to and remaining in a new environment. In this world, they can take part



in various episodes, view computer-generated landscapes, meet computer-generated characters, and even become someone else, a famous hero.

Online games are a new type of game that acts as a relay. They allow participants to have fun with a larger group of players. These games primarily involve conversations among players, understood only by those initiated into the game through an agreement to play. Such cooperation with others involves establishing everyday actions, facilitating the exchange of experiences, and focusing on discussions about the game itself. In this type of game, players are free to move around, and the creators do not influence their course, although sometimes it may differ from their intentions.

After monitoring and researching young people, it is evident that computer games are unsafe. They contain significant aggression and violence, which can harm children's psyche and reinforce patterns they consider normal. It needs to be clear how they can distort a child's imagination. Logged-in users lose their sense of time slipping away and may not even realize how life is passing them by. Such experiences significantly impact the personality, character, and disposition of very young individuals, often reducing their sensitivity and emotional responsiveness, sometimes even making them heartless. Many games, or rather the way they are constructed, assume an individual's involvement and solitary struggle against a group of rivals. The player is alone in the fight against the world. In this game, they often use dangerous tools that allow them to kill opponents. According to game developers, pain and blood are the most exciting combat elements. Correlation with such games has irreversible effects on a child, blurring the boundary between the natural world and the one imagined by the computer in a short time. As is well known, the enchanted world of computer games quickly becomes addictive. The temptation to play overrides all other activities and responsibilities. Children are curious and eager to explore it without any difficulty. They effortlessly teleport themselves into a world of fantasy, illusion, and delusion, where everything becomes more straightforward and fascinating.

*2.1.2. Smartphone as an Addiction.* Today, young people do not exist without a smartphone. Some cannot imagine life without this device. With this gadget, one can perform any task. One can make bank transfers, shop at the store, control household appliances, and



play various games. Its role is immense; it is an indispensable part of the modern world, simply making our lives easier. Society, in general, struggles to make decisions about when a phone is necessary and when it should be turned off. According to research by the Center for Public Opinion Research, many older people are bothered when small children use their phones in various situations.

Most people who own smartphones know they can use them at any time. It is not easy to do without this gadget. Smartphones have many multimedia features (camera, radio, MP3 player) and combine the functions of a mobile phone and a portable computer. The capabilities of this device are the basis for the tremendous financial success of its manufacturers (Samsung sold 70.7 million units, Apple 37.4 million, LG 10.3 million, Huawei 9.9 million smartphones). These multifunctional toys play a significant role in today's Internet globalization and account for over 50% of the mobile phones sold worldwide, indicating the increasing connectivity of people with the Internet (Bębas et al., 2017, p. 80).

In today's world, seeing a teenager without a smartphone is rare. It is even harder to convince them to put down this toy because they spend too much time with it. Young people use their smartphones practically everywhere, including school, which is often seen as a problem. Teachers have considered implementing a ban on using phones during classes, and there have even been discussions about it during school meetings. However, it proved to be a challenge as it would require the consent of all parents in the school, which is often unrealistic. Even when the phone's ringer is turned off and it is set to vibrate during classes, students still use them for any pretext, and they sometimes argue that they need to stay in touch with their parents. Consequently, parents struggle to establish contact with their children as they dedicate too much of their free time to what is happening on their phones – playing games, chatting, and watching videos<sup>2</sup>.

According to young people, a mobile phone is the best thing to happen to them; it connects them to the outside world. Taking a smartphone away from a young person is like a Sisyphean task, a significant challenge. Phones are used by young people, as well as both young and old, for making calls, sending SMS and MMS messages, taking photos, communicating with peers through messaging apps, listening to music, recording videos, and browsing the Internet. In



modern times, everyone relies on a mobile phone, which serves as a means of ordinary communication.

Society has become accustomed to constant contact with friends and acquaintances through phones and social media platforms, all from the comfort of their homes, i.e., remotely. Having a mobile phone is more complex than it may seem. Both young people and adults claim that mobile phones make their lives easier, help maintain social connections, and, most importantly, save valuable time. However, we are becoming slaves to our mobile phones, constantly waiting for someone to call or message us. This constant anticipation can lead to high-stress levels, making us more susceptible to various health issues.

Mobile phone addiction can be expensive. New smartphones with even better features are released every year, enticing people to purchase the latest models. Sometimes, these phones can cost several thousand units of currency. Fashion and media also have a significant influence on society. Through social media, advertising encourages us to buy new products. Advertising plays a pivotal role in driving consumer demand.

Addiction to social media, especially among young people, often results in long hours spent in front of a computer monitor. This time could be better and more meaningfully utilized. The lives of young individuals should not be limited solely to virtual acquaintances. Society should not begin and end the day thinking only about logging back into social media platforms. In this way, we isolate ourselves from real life and impose increasingly narrower boundaries on our development.

Similarly to other addictions, individuals addicted to social media initially neglect their household responsibilities and later lose touch with reality. Sometimes, they may even forget their basic physiological needs, such as eating, sleeping, or personal hygiene.

An essential threat to a user's personality on social media is the camouflage of their authentic identity and its virtual expansion in cyberspace. By transcending the boundaries of time and space, the Internet offers sample opportunities for concealing one's true identity, deceiving others, and self-creation (Gajda, 2006, p. 25). The Internet allows individuals to be multiple different personas simultaneously. Anonymity enables the selection of a self-image



and its integration into life. In the online world, one is noticed only through what they write and publish on various platforms.

Furthermore, in every corner of cyberspace, one can be someone else – presenting as a super macho in one group and as a seeking support girl in another. "Girls style themselves as boys, and vice versa. However, the computer cannot see your embarrassment when you enter the world behind the glass screen, where an ordinary grey mouse can be sensual and sexy, polite kids can be impolite, and even quiet and peaceful individuals can curse just as much as old rogues" (Berso, 2000). Young people, and even children, create interactive accounts, establish blogs and new circles of friends, and, as a result, spend long hours chatting online. This leads to a degradation of social contacts and an increased inability to form normal face-to-face relationships. Many teachers are alarmed when they observe their students not engaging in conversations, and instead, each of them sits in front of a computer monitor after classes. This also gives rise to mass shyness and, consequently, a fear of interpersonal interactions. However, it is also about breaking barriers in actual contact, which can teach social reflexes and adaptability in everyday life and even stressful situations. Such online contacts are established very quickly, one might say - instrumentally and are often quickly terminated; they do not turn into lifelong friendships. All online conversations are less likely to encourage a focus on the other person; we ignore their gestures and facial expressions, which may make the conversation seem less friendly. Ultimately, this happens because a face-to-face conversation is more personal and emotional.

Being on internet forums is particularly important for teenagers. According to Filiciak et. al., the style of using new technologies in this age group can be called "connection" and "attachment" (cit. Charzyńska, Gwóźdź, 2014). These terms are related to the constant presence in the digital world, maintaining relationships, and using various devices (including mobile ones) that always provide access to the Internet.

### **3. Causes of Addiction.**

Social media are viral among children and adolescents. Their rapid development and easy access have led even the youngest to use them very early, and sometimes, they manage better than adults. Mobile phones, tablets, and computers with internet access are in their possession



from a young age. Parents who allow their children to use these devices do not always fully realize the negative impact they can have on the development of their children – both psychologically, emotionally, and physically. Addiction has many reasons, which depend significantly on the individual's character. Unfortunately, if someone has a weak will, they quickly fall into the trap of addiction.

Emotionally stable individuals are less likely to succumb to and become entrapped in addiction. It is different for people with personal issues with low self-esteem, as they are more prone to various addictions. Beauty, hairstyle, gender, education, skin color, profession, or beliefs do not matter. Everyone is equal, and there is no intolerance. The only determinant of an individual's worth is proficiency and speed in navigating the online world (Moczydłowska, 2000, p. 6). Media addiction is quite a complex phenomenon and is still difficult to diagnose. There is very little scientific literature on this subject in libraries, and there is still a lack of precise research.

When focusing on the causes of addiction, we can try to differentiate the factors into two areas: internal and external. In the internal sphere, we include children and adolescents with issues with themselves, their personalities, and self-acceptance. The surrounding world disorients this segment of society. Typically, they seek values and the meaning of existence, sometimes taking examples from others. Such individuals often experience internal conflicts within families, relationships with peers, and even struggles. They endure emotional tension, are frequently lonely, and are very reserved. Escaping from these problems is often sought in virtual reality, which they increasingly turn to. It is precisely during such impulses that addiction can develop. The quickest addiction to form is often related to the Internet. When facing problems, we cannot handle, we tend to find companions with similar character traits on the Internet. Spending time with them is more enjoyable, and conversations are satisfying. Getting to know someone and establishing new connections in online chats is easier.

On the other hand, external factors include the family environment, school, and peers. Children draw various stimulating patterns for their further development from their family environment. For a son, the father is often the ideal to emulate, while for a daughter, it is the mother. The warmth of the home environment makes it easier for a child to adapt quickly to



the conditions prevailing in a given place. All these stimuli significantly impact the psyche, character formation, and development from the moment of birth. Upbringing is a long and laborious process, undoubtedly decisive and influencing a person's functioning in simple, challenging everyday life. It can lead to their development or hinder it. A child's susceptibility to addiction can often result from parenting mistakes. Ineffectively chosen parenting methods that do not consider the child's predispositions or disagreements with the child's choices for their future can cause frustration and tension. Another factor leading to addiction is forgetting that a child has psychological needs, including belonging, self-realization, and safety.

Reasons for Addiction Caused by the School Environment. Preparing for life in the school environment is a process that involves interactions between educators and students. The outcome of these relationships is the wealth of experiences gained by the student. It is through school that we have such opportunities. A well-organized school environment should be rich in motivating stimuli for developing interests (interest clubs). Peers influence the motives that push toward addiction. Making acquaintances with peers also has an impact on a child's development. Children and adolescents acquire skills in dealing with people through such peer relationships. According to Gas (2004), these relationships primarily concern "self-assuredness among other people, as well as a sense of being accepted by others, as well as social skills and independence and social tolerance" (Poleszak, 2004, p. 156). Some factors have a destructive impact on the behavior of young people. Peers with whom young people spend their free time significantly influence their character. The development of a person's worldview depends on the environment they come from and their peers. It can be quoted here, "You become like the people you hang out with."

Factors conducive to addiction in the peer environment include: (a) incorrect relationships between peers; (b) lack of self-acceptance; (c) lack of communication with peers; (d) not knowing one's position in the group, feeling out of place.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks.**

The Internet has become an integral part of young people's lives. The time they spend online continues to increase year by year. Children and adolescents often use insults offensive comments, and share compromising photos and videos of others without thinking, which is a



form of cyberbullying. Each year, the number of young people who become victims of cyberbullying is on the rise. Typically, children are unaware of the potential dangers they may encounter online, including the existence of cybercriminals and fraudsters. Children often easily share their private personal information; unscrupulous individuals can exploit. By sharing things like phone numbers, their parents' credit card PINs, or discreet information about their family with their peers, children do not realize the dangers they are exposing themselves and their surroundings to. The entire society constantly escapes to the virtual world to avoid their problems. When children have issues, they do not notify their parents; instead, they communicate with strangers on internet forums. Relationships with peers are formed through instant messaging apps. The popularity of new technologies and the increasingly fast pace of life mean that not everyone can adapt to this world. Some need help with the new developments and learn how to defend themselves against the consequences of these changes. Research shows that the least resilient group includes children and adolescents because the virtual world tremendously influences them. Teenagers, during their adolescence, are curious about new things and quickly adapt to them, which can sometimes turn into addiction. The length of time young people spend online contributes to this. Thanks to the Internet, young people cross the threshold of real life, immersing themselves in the virtual world, often filled with many special effects that become their everyday reality. Such uncontrolled use of digital media often changes a person's intellectual functioning, limits their thinking to the real world, causes significant behavioral changes, and can result in a solitary existence.

It is unfortunate that young users often need to be more adequately prepared for safe online navigation. Parents often need to be made aware of the dangers their children face online, and they may only become aware of these risks through their children's school education. It is crucial to emphasize the need for additional education in schools to raise awareness among young people about the various threats associated with the latest technologies. These threats extend beyond addiction to content that disrupts their developmental processes or involvement in criminal activities. They also encompass the risk of losing what is most precious: privacy, intimacy, and identity. Cyber threats are becoming an increasingly significant social and educational problem, given the scale of interest young people have in activities within the cyber



realm. With its rapid development and vast resources, the Internet is primarily harnessed by young individuals. It has become an inseparable part of their social life, daily activities, and entertainment. In today's world, imagining a teenager who could live without new technologies is challenging. The Internet is a crucial tool for learning, education, and entertainment. When used cautiously, it provides access to vast knowledge, facilitates building relationships, and can even lead to financial opportunities.

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### **Authorship and Level of Contribution:**

Dr. Tomasz Wierchowski contributed to the design and implementation of the research article, the analysis of the results, and the writing of the manuscript.

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## **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> The International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, ICD-10, uses the term "depressive episode." In contrast, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV), uses the term "major depression."

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.terapiemlodziezy-oaza.pl/oferta/uzaleznienie-od-telefonu>