

Let's Get Real, Not Virtual

Nathan Tong

Age: 16

Grade: 11

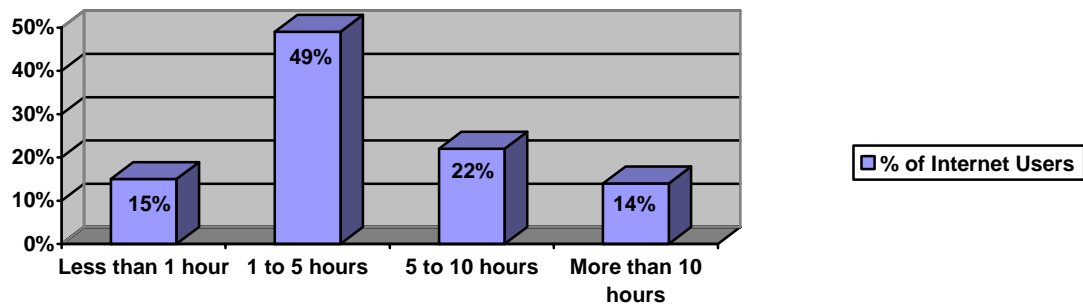
School: Monte Vista High School

The smooth trumpet riffs from Chris Botti's latest album soothed the atmosphere as the incense of the lavender candles tickled the young man's nose. He drooled as he analyzed that perfect figure that caused a brief hiatus in his heart. What was your first love like? Was it the glimmering, scarlet red lips that you long desired to kiss, or was her long, golden brown hair that entangled your affection for her? Was it love at first sight, or was it love at first click? Was it the elegant and playful style she used to design her screen name, fluctuating from uppercase to lowercase after every other letter, or was her charming buddy icon of your favorite television show, say, Scrubs? Did she snatch your heart with that virtual kiss she sent you on Valentine's Day, or was it the tall-tale sign you were in love that she matched all thirty-eight levels on your E-harmony profile? Whether your perfect match was found at that one nightclub Paris Hilton gets paid one hundred grand to show up at, or through countless hours of browsing profiles on match.com, millions of Americans these days are confronted with the challenge of finding their soul mate, a friend, or any simple form of social interaction. But after the cyber revolution and the introduction of the online matchmaking industry, an average man can find true love, simply by participating in a ten minute survey.

We use the internet for countless purposes that completely alter our daily agendas dramatically. From reading the pixilated pages on Facebook, to slaying pixilated creatures on World of Warcraft, the internet is a place where we talk, we work, we play, we shop, we learn, we listen, we meet, and where we love. As mankind progresses into the 21st century, the internet's limitations have expanded to what the primitive and arrogant knuckleheads of the 19th century deemed inconceivable. But like most activities and things we enjoy in life, the internet comes with an extremely pricey tag: countless

hours of our lives. In a survey of 4,113 adults in 2,689 households, the Stanford Institute summarized their findings in a graph (Figure 1) depicting the amount of time an internet user spends online.

Figure 1 Internet Use (Hours/Week)



The internet has ultimately transformed the youth of this generation and it is time we address this issue. First, we must delve into the root causes and the extent as to why the right-click, backspace virtual reality is harmful for us. Secondly, let us investigate the actions of the government and its effectiveness in saving our lives from our hard drives. Finally, we will reprogram our software and get on the right path for solving this mother...board.

The cause of what psychologists deem as Internet Addiction Disorder has its roots in many different areas. One explanation for this cyber phenomenon is best summarized through playwright, Eugene O'Neil, when he states that everyone possesses a mask. Similarly to Peter Parker and his alter-ego, Spiderman, internet users can also disguise themselves as anyone. A young twelve-year-old boy could claim to be a forty-year old CEO of a company while a sixty-year-old woman could identify herself as an eighteen-year-old freshman at Harvard. Furthermore, these people can choose to change their identity at will with a simple click of a button, an ability that cannot be accomplished so

easily in the real world. Another explanation concerns the mood-altering potential of behaviors related to addictions. Just as a person may feel a pleasurable change of mood or “rush” from miscellaneous activities ranging from compulsive shopping to alcohol addiction, internet users also feel a sense of excitement when the “you’ve got mail!” icon or “bobby1624 wants to chat” message pops up on their screen. These cravings for attention online could possibly be a result of a social life that internet addicts lack. Rather than finding companions outside, these addicts spend exceedingly long amounts of time checking their online inboxes as shown in the table (Figure 2) by Stanford Institute.

Figure 2 What Users do on the Internet

	Online Games	Work/Business	Shopping	Streaming Videos	Email
<i>% of Users</i>	36%	46%	36%	74%	90%

Although these explanations all lead to internet addiction, the main catalyst for this insidious disease is pathological relationships that develop online with other internet users. After countless hours spent online with other internet users through playing online video games, sharing video links, or simply chatting, a person may begin to develop emotional attachments to online friends regardless of whether or not they have met in person. These virtual communities allow users to fulfill unmet emotional and psychological needs since these relationships can be more intimate, yet less threatening than real-life relationships. People are also attracted to the freedom of expression that is offered by the internet. Although the United States guarantees the freedom of speech through the Constitution, there are still many tacit and controversial topics that people tend to stay away from. Issues concerning race, gender, or religious preference also

hinder people from effectively conveying their messages in real life, as critics will accuse them of being racist, sexist, or religious bigots.

Despite the appealing features that are presented by the internet, compulsive internet usage can be detrimental to almost every aspect of our lives. After extended periods of typing messages to online buddies, we neglect one of the most important attribute that we human beings are gifted with: the art of communication. In an article by Lydia Ramsey titled, “Body Languages Speak Louder than Words,” communication is 7% words, 38% tone, and 55% body language. In order to become true listeners, we must utilize our eyes, ears, and our hearts. Although instant messaging and emails can get across words and ideas, it fails to bring forth emotions and body languages, resulting in only 7% of a true conversation.

If we take internet addiction from a financial standpoint, we can also see that the results are just as harmful. Service provider charges and subscription fees for online games and forums eventually drain a user’s savings account. Internet addicts may also choose to shop online and excessively rely on their credit cards, resulting in larger credit card debts.

Real life relationships are disrupted as a result of excessive use of the internet. Internet addicts spend more time in solitary seclusion and less time with real people in their lives. Arguments may result due to the volume of time spent online. Internet addicts may attempt to conceal the amount of time spent online, which results in distrust and the disturbance of quality in a once stable relationships. In a study conducted by the Illinois Institute for Addiction Recovery, 8% of users find themselves attending fewer social

events, 13% of users spend less time with friends and family, and 26% of users talk less with friends and family over the phone.

While many organizations and institutions have taken up the cause to fight internet addiction, the most shocking part about this issue that has affected a little less than half of the younger generation is the lack of government action taken against compulsive internet usage. While governments in countries such as China and Korea have resorted to strict and disciplinary methods to combat internet addiction, including month-long boot camps and online curfews, the United States has done anything towards solving this predicament, despite the fact that the U.S. is the nation with the most online “citizens” in the world. One of the reasons for the lack of government intervention is because the government simply does not treat internet addiction as a mental illness. However, studies from institutes such as Tel Aviv University’s Sackler Faculty of Medicine classifies internet addiction as an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, ranking it amongst anorexia nervosa, Tourettes Syndrome, and sexual obsessions in terms of deleteriousness. We must adhere to the words of writer, Johann Von Gothe, who warned us, “There is nothing more frightful than ignorance in action.”

Rather than remaining callous towards the issue until it escalates to an even more critical level, the government should begin acting to halt the spread of this surreptitious ailment. One possible method is through the creation of a government-regulated organization to combat internet addiction. The federal government could also allocate funding towards already existing organizations such as the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery. Likewise to how the authorities discourage using drugs, smoking, or having

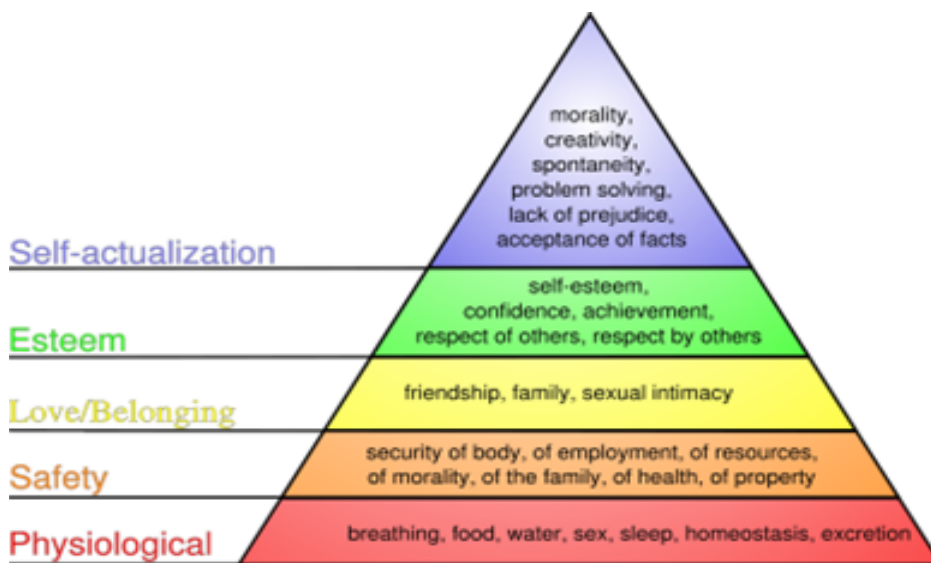
unsafe sex, the government should also resort to utilizing the media to campaign against internet addiction.

While there are many solutions as to how we can solve internet addictions, one practical approach is to stop the addiction while it is at its youngest and most primitive stage. To accomplish this, we must encourage parents to place restrictions and enforce curfews on internet usage in the household. While I applaud the Chinese and Korean governments' effort to counter the increase of internet addiction, I disagree with their method of using strict and disciplinary measures to accomplish their goal. A more effective solution, however, is for parents to dedicate more quality time with their families. Studies have shown that children are influenced more by their parents when they approach their preteen years, a crucial period of time for youths since this is when they learn most of their moral values, values that children adhere to for the rest of their lives. Parents should also encourage children to go outside and explore more by partaking in family excursions. This approach will not only remove children from their computers, but will also encourage them to eventually develop an interest for an open atmosphere as opposed to the dark and secluded rooms, illuminated only by the light coming from the monitor.

Parents also need to assist in helping their children develop a strong sense of self-esteem and personal growth. While internet users claim that freely expressing themselves online boosts their self-esteem, the self-esteem obtained through virtual interactions is completely different from self-esteem obtained through real interactions. Psychologist, Abraham Maslow, categorizes a human's needs in five different areas through his Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 3). The bottom of the pyramid includes the bare essentials

necessary for survival. But as one progresses and grows through life, they eventually reach the level of self-actualization. This final step in life is the fullest potential that an individual can reach. An individual who reaches the level of self-actualization embraces the facts and realities rather than avoiding them, contrary to people who spend prolonged periods of time online, secluding themselves from the real world to engage in the virtual one. If we want to cure society from this new cyber epidemic, we need to encourage everybody to set their goals on achieving self-actualization.

Figure 3 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Maybe your love life isn't doing as successfully as you would like it to be. Perhaps your social life is not doing so great either, but does it mean that you should simply give up and submit to the will of the router? Well, I didn't, and before I was completely subdued by my online girlfriend and the wonders of MySpace, I realized that best things in life are never virtual, they are always real. To overpower the temptations of the information superhighway, we should follow the advice of politician, John Evans, "The internet is like a giant jellyfish. You can't step on it. You can't go around it. You've got to get through it."