

Sticking to the net

by Edith Wu



(Below) Pui-yin says she does not want to quit her "addiction" to Facebook.



Pui-yin stares at the screen of her netbook for minutes waiting for updates from her friends on the internet.

The 21-year-old spends around 30 hours online every week, with much of that time devoted to surfing on Facebook, a social networking website. She visits it every day, with the highest record of 50 times within only one day.

"I can stare at the 'live feed' section for five minutes to wait for updates, as if it were a TV screen!" said the social work student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

From the "live feed" section of the website, pui-yin can get the latest updates of her friends, which she described as being "full of gossip" and an important element of her obsession. Besides informing pui-yin about what her friends are doing at the moment, it shows also her their relationship statuses, newly uploaded photos and videos, messages left, events participating, and so on.

"When I find a new message from a friend, I'd feel very excited. If not, I'd feel lost," she said.

Pui-yin said she is "in a morbid state" of being a Facebook addict: though she is aware of how frequently she visits the website, she does not want to stop.

Pui-yin is amongst the many internet users who are aware of their obsession with, or even addiction to, the internet.

In Hong Kong, the overall internet addiction rate among people aged between 18 and 54 is 1.7 per cent, but about one in 16 people in the age group of 15 to 19 is classified as an internet addict, according to Jean Hee Kim, assistant professor of the School of Public Health at the Chinese University.

Another type of high internet usage behaviour, according to Dr Kim, is called pathological internet use, which is considered "milder than internet addiction" and afflicts more than 40 per cent of the population.

She said people who have pathological internet use are told constantly that they spend too much time on the internet.

The rapid rise of Facebook, which has more than 120 million active



users according to the statistics it released in early November, has preoccupied many youths' time and attention.

Thomas Cheung Lok-man, 23, said he visits Facebook mainly to add new "friends" whose photos on the website interest him.

The humanities and social sciences student at the City University of Hong Kong has a friend list of 919 people on Facebook. Yet, most of them are young girls that are not his friends in real life.

"I'll try to add them (as friends) whenever it's possible to do so," said Cheung, adding that the photos of the girls which attract him are "very beautiful".

While Cheung said it would be hard for him to count the number of times he checks the photo albums on Facebook every day because he browses them very often, he denied he is addicted to it.

"I can stop whenever I want to. I won't visit Facebook when I am busy with assignments," he said.

Besides social networking websites, online games also draw

in many people who want to build virtual relationships.

Form Five student Terry Wu Chiu-ming had the experience of building "close relationships" with whom he called "wives" in the online game he played when he was 13.

Wu, 16, told *Varsity* that some online games require the players to know a girl on the internet and chat with her every time she is online. "You'll be elevated to higher levels together with the girl in the game, and then get 'married' there. And every time you see each other (online) you'll call each other husband or wife," he said.

Wu said he was playing a game that involved heroes, and everyone there had the tendency to build bonds with one another.

A girl was calling him a "bro" at first, but later started calling him "boyfriend" because she "just wanted to try cyber love". They soon began dating online every day.

The relationship cooled down later and ended when the girl quitted the game. Wu said he was not at all serious about it. He said

(Below) Terry Wu Chiu-ming dated a girl on the internet as he was playing an online game three years ago.





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Some of the platforms where internet addicts linger on are online games and social networking websites.

it is because he knew there could be “a lot of lies”.

“Maybe she was faking her age,” said Wu. “Or she’s probably a guy! You never know. We had never seen each other!”

However casual the relationship may sound, Wu had given his “wife” a number of game avatars and weapons, which had indirectly cost him a lot of money and time to collect. In fact, the game requires an annual subscription fee of HK\$1,000.

When asked why he started a relationship he now deems so meaningless, Wu said: “The reason was simple. I just tried cyber love for the sake of trying, just like people play games just for the sake of playing games.”

While online game players like Wu become involved in virtual romance, friends of 22-year-old July Cheung Chun-lai come and go along the days he plays online games.

Cheung recalled his experience of spending more than 10 hours playing online games every day five years ago. He had dropped out of secondary school and spent plenty of time at home.

“Besides eating and playing games, I didn’t care about anything,” said Cheung. “I needed to be on the games in order to catch up with my ‘friends’, as they’d be all attaining higher levels whenever I was away, then it’d be hard to catch up.”

Most of his real friends, however, had become estranged from him since they did not play the same games. “That’s also the reason why I played even more frequently. My own friends weren’t looking for me anymore,” he said.

However, “friendship” built through online games is not long-lasting. “I’d add my game partners on as a MSN chat client, but each time after I stopped playing a game, friends from that game would not talk to me again,” said Cheung.

He also constantly paid for game avatars and online game monthly subscription fees. The most expensive item he had bought was a special edition weapon which “could not be found anywhere else” and cost him more than HK\$1,000.

Currently, Cheung is taking a pre-employment training course offered by the Hong Kong Employment Development Service, and thus his gaming hours have been reduced to around four hours a day.

Nevertheless, he said he has no plan to stop playing: “I know there’s a problem, but there’s no solution.”

Younger students obsessed with the internet have drawn the attention of social workers. According to a survey conducted by the Social Services Department of Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong (ELCHK), over 80 per cent of the 23,000 students from Primary One

to Form Three who took part in the survey responded that surfing the internet has become the most important part of their lives. Of these, more Primary One students responded in this way.

Keswick Chuk Wing-hung, social worker and communications manager of the ELCHK, said that banning young students from using internet at home is an “head-in-the-sand” policy because they sometime have to be online to do their homework.

Mr Chuk said younger children lack self-control. “The best way to help these young addicts is to get them someone who can help them differentiate positive and negative information on the net,” he said.

Meanwhile, the chairman of the Hong Kong Internet Society, Charles Mok Nai-kwong said that internet technology is not to be blamed for the “somewhat exaggerated” internet addiction.

He added that internet addiction is more a problem with young people playing games than with adults using the internet or email for work.

“Then again, on the practical side, it is useless to blame something so prevalent and that one cannot avoid,” he said.

While internet addiction may be one of the disadvantages that internet communication technology brings to the society, Mr Mok added

Are you an internet addict?

He is still chatting with his friends on instant messenger and checking e-mails at 2 a.m., though he has an early appointment next morning.

He is not necessarily an internet addict though, according to the expert.

Jean Hee Kim, assistant professor of the School of Public Health at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, said that how long one spends on the internet is not the only criterion for classifying whether people are internet addicts.

“Theoretically, people who spend 10 hours a day without any of the patterns would not be considered ‘addicts’ whereas someone spending much less time can be an internet addict,” she said.

Dr Kim provides a checklist below to see if you are addicted to the internet. She said if you say “yes” in any five questions out of the eight below, then you are probably addicted.

that its advantages, like opening up people’s mind by enhancing information flow and exchange, outweigh the disadvantages.

“Can anyone envision the life without information communication technology today? No computer and no internet? It is unimaginable and impractical,” Mr Mok said. ■

Are you...

- preoccupied by the internet?
- increasing your time spent online to achieve the same degree of satisfaction?
- repeatedly make unsuccessful efforts to control internet usage?
- feeling restless when you try to cut down on internet usage?
- staying online longer than you originally intended?
- risking the loss of a significant relationship, job or educational opportunity because of the internet?
- lying to your family or therapist about your internet usage?
- using the internet as a way of escaping from problems or making you feel better?

Dr Kim also added that most internet addicts are fully aware of the harm of excessive internet usage, so education is probably more likely to help prevent, but not treat internet addiction.

She said treating underlying psychological problems by counselling and joining support groups could be appropriate ways to reduce internet addiction levels, as many internet addicts go online when they are feeling depressed, anxious or stressed.