



Digital Addiction

Definition, Characteristics and
Countermeasures

Disclaimer

This material has been prepared following a literature review in the area of digital addiction as well as various studies conducted by the ESOTICS Research Group at Bournemouth University

The material presented is prepared by

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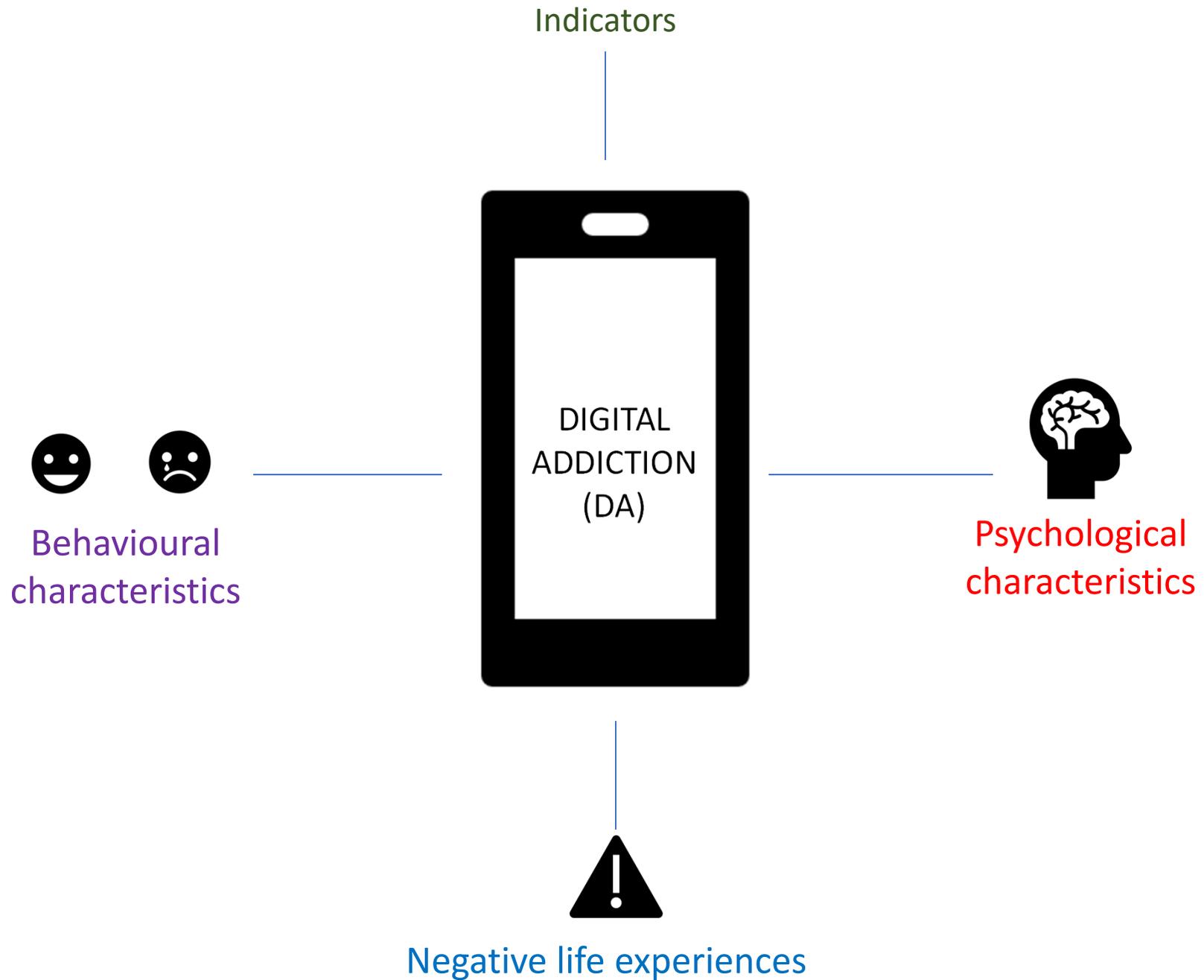
The material has been discussed and refined iteratively with experts in addiction counselling at StreetScene Addiction Recovery.

Please note we use the term “Digital Addiction” as a label to describe compulsive and excessive use of digital devices. This is not intended as a clinical term. Other phrases have been used to describe these types of behaviours.



Introduction

Digital addiction refers to the use of digital devices such as smartphones in a way that is excessive and compulsive. It is a relatively new concept that there has been a lot of debate around. Psychologists have different opinions on whether or not it really is an addiction, and what constitutes healthy use of digital devices. This document presents the conclusions of current research on this topic, to help people come to their own decisions about if they feel they need to change their use of digital devices.



What are the indicators of DA?

Time spent using the digital device or on games/ social networks – but time by itself is not a definitive measure, as people may be using devices for work or study

Frequency of usage – an individual may in total only use their device for an hour or two a day, but if they are checking that device very frequently throughout the day it may be an indication of DA

Using the digital device at odd hours – waking up to check the device, or staying up late to do so, although depending on the individual's work schedule this may not necessarily be a reliable indicator

Number of contacts – a very high number of contacts that are far greater than the individual could realistically interact with may be an indication that the individual is using their digital device in an impulsive or hasty way

What are the psychological characteristics of DA?

People with DA may experience **conflict** between their desire to use their digital device and their other commitments, such as for example someone failing to meet a work deadline because they have spent an excessive amount of time on social media

People with DA may use their digital devices for **mood modification** – that is they may rely on their device as a way of relieving stress or boredom

What are the psychological characteristics of DA?

People with DA may become concerned that they are being left out of social activities and interactions with their friends, which is known as **Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO)**

People with DA may become pre-occupied with their digital device and social media even when they are not using, which is known as **salience**

What are the psychological characteristics of DA?

People with DA may experience **withdrawal** symptoms if they are not able to access their digital device for a prolonged period of time, which may include feelings of anxiety, stress and irritation

People with DA may increase their usage of digital devices and social media in order to get the same satisfaction as previously, which is known as **tolerance**

What are the behavioural characteristics of DA?

DA might be characterised by a number of behaviours. People may exhibit **obsession** with their digital device, feeling that they have to check it continuously. This may lead to **excessive** use, where the person is checking or interacting with their device in a way that interferes with other activities. People may also find that checking their device becomes **compulsive**, in that they are unable to resist the urge to do so. This can be reflected in a sense of **loss of control**, where the person feels that they lack the ability to manage their own device usage. This in turn can lead to **impulsivity**, where the person uses their device in a **hasty or reckless** way, such as posting images from social events without fully thinking about what the consequences might be.

What negative life experiences are associated with DA?

1

Dietary and physiological problems may arise from playing video games or using social networks continuously for hours at a time, due to missing meals or eating excessive amounts of fast food

2

Family and social relationships may suffer, due to conflicts over the individual's use of the digital device or their lack of face to face interaction with others

3

The individual's mental wellbeing and their sense of self-worth may suffer, from their perception that they are not able to control their own behaviour

4

Academic and work problems may arise, due to the individual not meeting their commitments since they excessively use their digital device

Why do people develop DA?

To develop social relationships – it is natural for us to want to develop friendships, and digital technology can make this much easier in a number of ways

To escape from real life problems – in the short term this may reduce our stress levels, but in the long term can become maladaptive

To meet social norms of digital devices and social media – although we like to think of ourselves as individuals we are all influenced by what we think is the norm for our peer group

To share and receive information – we are driven to understand our social world, so it is normal for us seek out information and to spread this amongst our social group

Why do people develop DA?

To increase self-esteem – social media allows us to carefully sculpt how we are seen by others, which means we can portray ourselves in a way that makes us feel better about ourselves

To fulfil social expectations – part of being in a social group means taking part in certain activities such as wishing people a happy birthday or expressing sympathy if someone in the group is experiencing difficulties, which social media can facilitate

To provide entertainment and to alleviate boredom – if someone dislikes having nothing to do then digital devices provide an easy source of distraction

To gain popularity – we like to know what our social standing is, and social media sites allow both the individual and others to see how many likes or followers they have

What can I do if I think I have DA?

DA is a relatively new concept, and at the moment there is not enough research evidence for it to officially be classed as a mental health disorder. This means there are no universally accepted prevention or treatment approaches. There are though some basic actions that you can take that may help you address DA

- Record your use of digital devices
 - There are several apps that track your use of your smartphone and present this information back to you. Research suggests that simply being made aware of our behaviour can help us take greater control over it.
- Challenge your own assumptions
 - We may use digital devices and social media because we feel our friends expect us to do so, and that we'll be excluded from the group if we don't. Question if this is actually the case. Are you genuine friends really going to abandon you just because you don't like one of their posts at 2am?
- Set goals, but be realistic
 - When trying to change our own behaviour it is good to set a goal, such as limiting yourself to one social media post a day. Research shows though that behaviour change is most likely to succeed when it is gradual – if you set yourself a very ambitious goal right from the start you are more likely to fail and more likely to feel that we will never be able to change.

Contact

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Further Information

<https://research.bournemouth.ac.uk/project/dar/>

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying the Bournemouth University website. The page title is "Digital Addiction Research". The header includes the university logo and the word "Research". A navigation menu lists various categories like Home, Themes, Centres, Projects, REF 2014, Research Environment, Events, Research briefings, and Student Engagement. Below the navigation, there's a breadcrumb trail: Home > Research Projects > Digital Addiction Research. The main content area features a large image of people in a restaurant setting, with a white box overlaid on the image containing the text "Digital Addiction Research". Below the image, there are three circular icons: a red one with a laptop, a blue one with a plus sign, and a pink one with a person. To the right of these icons, there are dropdown menus for Faculty (Faculty of Science and Technology), Research Centre (Computing and Informatics Research Centre, Research Centre for Behaviour Change), and UoA (UoA 4, UoA11). The main text on the page reads: "We study Digital addiction (DA) as an emergent research area and explore a problematic usage of digital media described by being obsessive, excessive, compulsive, impulsive and hasty. We particularly focus on aiding people adjust their usage style through the use of digital technology itself. This research is led by Dr. Raian Ali and it is a joint effort between the Department of Computing and Informatics and the Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Science and Technology at Bournemouth University. We also have a rich outreach knowledge exchange programme". On the right side, there is a section titled "Latest news from this project:" with a date "12th February 2018" and a headline "EROGamb wins Best Project Award at ICE Totally Gaming Research Exchange". The text below the headline states: "The EROGamb project was presented by Dr. Raian Ali at the ICE Totally Gaming Research Exchange Event in London, Feb 7th, 2018. Among 4 finalist projects, EROGamb was elected for the...".