Roundtable ABSTRACT

Roundtable 11: Crisis of digital addictions: anthropological perspectives on a growing concern

Organizer: Suzana Jovicic, Joseph Tulasiewicz

Abstract: While substance-based addictions have long been subject of crisis narratives and regulatory initiatives, behavioural addictions remain a relatively peripheral and awkward category, often eluding diagnostic frameworks. However, the last decade has brought digital addictions into the public spotlight with a renewed sense of urgency. Despite considerable public scrutiny, there is still little consensus on this subject across disciplines. This is partly due to the profound and provocative questions that the debate, ranging from wellbeing to harm, raises in relation to previously taken-for-granted assumptions: What can constitute an object of addiction? How should social relationships be constructed? To what extent can technologies be understood to possess (addictive) agency? Is disconnection truly desirable and for whom?

This roundtable seeks to develop a distinctly anthropological perspective on digital addiction and harms, a topic which to date has received little attention within anthropology. It will do so through an expansive and robust conversation, that embraces both sceptical and concerned voices. The roundtable is part of a larger initiative culminating in an edited volume on digital addictions (Tulasiewicz & Jovicic, forthcoming). We invite abstracts that address contentious issues surrounding digital addiction, ranging from models of causality to treatment modalities or epistemological authorities. Roundtable participants will be invited to contribute to the debate by preparing brief statements on overreaching questions shared in advance.

SESSION SCHEDULE

17.09.2025 | Slot 3| 2-0-2

Henni Alava: Painful screentime: morality, addiction and care at pediatric pain clinics

Isabelle Fioroni: Comforted or Controlled? The Ambivalence of Human-AI Relationships

Pietro Vereni, Francesco Marini: Data Reliability and Cultural Intimacy: Understanding Social Media's Impact Among Italian Adolescents

Xin Zhan: Can't Stop Coding: The Addictive Nature of Work in Techno-Capitalism

SESSION PAPERS

Painful screentime: morality, addiction and care at pediatric pain clinics

Henni Alava

Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork on pediatric pain and its care in Finland, this paper explores how 'screentime'—a disputed term laden with the potentialities of addiction, control, and enjoyment—is framed and enacted in clinics caring for young people with persistent pain. Finns have traditionally had lax phone policies for children, but the question of 'screentime' has recently become central to public discourse on youth health, particularly amidst growing concerns about immobility, inadequate sleep, online bullying, anxiety, and persistent pain. In clinical pain care, screentime takes on multiple meanings: it is a source of concern, a suspected medium of social contagion, and a marker of parental failure and a child's self-control. Paradoxically, screentime is also acknowledged as a coping mechanism for children in pain, providing distraction, relaxation, and social connection. By approaching screentime as a multiple rather than a singular concept, I aim to highlight how it is framed and enacted differently across settings, depending on the practices, technologies, and moral evaluations attached to it.
By reflecting on how 'screentime' functions as both a site of potential harm and a therapeutic tool, I seek to contribute to broader anthropological concerns with digital addiction and its impacts on young people's wellbeing.

Comforted or Controlled? The Ambivalence of Human-AI Relationships

Isabelle Fioroni

This contribution takes an anthropological approach to the emotional and relational entanglements between humans and AI. Through multi-sited fieldwork, including interviews and participant observation on Reddit and Discord among others, I study how people develop romantic and friendly relationships with AI personas. To make sense of these connections, it is essential to understand them within their broader social and cultural context. Within this framework, my focus lies on both the positive and problematic dimensions of such engagements. While these relationships can offer meaningful emotional support, they also raise important questions about digital dependency and emotional outsourcing. By centering the stories of those who willingly engage in intimate interactions with AI, I aim to provoke a more critical discussion about what constitutes "harm" and "wellbeing".

Data Reliability and Cultural Intimacy: Understanding Social Media's Impact Among Italian Adolescents

Pietro Vereni, Francesco Marini

Recent studies have increasingly linked problematic social media use among adolescents to the deterioration of youth mental health, with a notable rise in anxiety, depression, and self-harming behaviors—especially among young females in Western contexts.

A major methodological challenge in this field concerns data reliability, as behaviors deemed excessive are often denied or concealed due to internal repression and social stigma. We argue that such limitations can be mitigated through ethnographic engagement that fosters cultural intimacy—a relational space in which shame can be suspended, allowing more honest disclosures.

We tested this approach in a pilot study on social media consumption among Roman high school students. Participants were administered a battery of standardized psychological instruments, including the I-SPIN (social anxiety), the Italian Loneliness Scale (ILS), the Emotional Response subscale (Van Der Schuur et al., 2018), the Problematic Social Media Use Scale (Van den Eijnden et al., 2016), and the Mind-Wandering Questionnaire (MWQ). Prior to the survey, two researchers conducted a narrative-based session in which they openly acknowledged their generational distance and asked students for help in understanding the phenomenon. This narrative inversion reframed the survey as a collaborative exploration rather than a top-down data extraction process.

Beyond its methodological implications, the study's findings confirm international trends, revealing strong correlations between intensive social media use and heightened levels of social anxiety, loneliness, attention difficulties, and depressive symptoms.

Can't Stop Coding: The Addictive Nature of Work in Techno-Capitalism

Xin Zhan

This paper explores the compulsive engagement of software developers who find themselves unable to stop coding. In my ethnographic study of the tech industry in London, such behaviour is often described as "workaholism," with its harmful consequences labelled as "burnout." I argue, however, that these experiences are better understood through the lens of behavioural addiction. Developers often describe coding as a source of passion, purpose, and flow rather than obligation or labour. Yet this deep identification with work can lead to exhaustion, difficulty disengaging, and psychological distress.

Traditional definitions of burnout—rooted in emotional fatigue among caregiving professionals—fail to capture the affective dynamics of tech work. Rather than depletion from alienation, this exhaustion stems from over-engagement. In gamified, screen-based environments, coding becomes a form of play, driven by self-optimization and fear of

falling short.

Unlike internet or gaming addiction, coding addiction is legitimized and even celebrated as an elite activity. This paper examines how the addictive qualities of tech labour—its immersive interfaces, compulsive rewards, and socially sanctioned overcommitment—challenge conventional understandings of labour and subjectivity. It expands the concept of addiction beyond pathology, offering a critical lens on how pleasure, passion, and exhaustion shape work in late-capitalist economies.