



SINGLE CHILD FAMILY & PROBLEMATIC USE OF INTERNET: EXPLORING IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INTERNET USERS

Manoj Kumar Sharma., Nitin Anand., Ashwini Tadpatrikar., Prasad Kannekanti and Ameer Hamza

SHUT clinic, Department of Psychiatric Social Work, Govindaswamy Block, NIMHANS, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

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ABSTRACT

Background: Promotion of healthy use of technology among users has been a growing concern among the caregivers. Absence of other sibling and associated loneliness has been seen in relation to presence of problematic use of internet. The present communication is going to explore the problematic internet use & its association with single child families. **Material & Methods:** Treatment seekers at SHUT clinic (Service for Healthy Use of Technology) were assessed for exploration of the association of internet addiction and single child family. 70 Adolescents and young adult internet users were assessed on internet addiction test and video game addiction questionnaire. **Results:** Users had internet addiction as well as video game addiction. Qualitative analysis revealed association between loneliness, free time and easy availability/accessibility of internet technology devices. **Conclusions:** The findings have implications for evolving a parenting module to increase the frequency of family quality time, quality family interactions with adolescents and young adult internet users and promotion of pleasurable offline activities with peers.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

The use of internet has grown exponentially worldwide. In 2014, the international telecommunication union (ITU) estimated over 2.8 billion internet users worldwide and the numbers seem to increase every day (ITU, 2014). In India, the total numbers of users are more than 2.5 million and it has the highest yearly growth rate in the world as estimated in 2014 by Internet and mobile association of India (IAMIA, 2014). Internet and associated technology use initially was viewed as an advancement which helped overcome logistical barriers for professional and personal communication. However now it has become a liability. The effects of internet use on adolescent's emotional and behavioral development have been a recent area of research and it is gaining tremendous interest amongst mental health professionals. Study Reference.

Excessive internet usage or pathological internet use (PIU) has been included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-V) in the appendix for condition requiring further research (Block, 2008). Earlier it was included in Impulse control disorders or behavioral addiction but now after the alarming growth in the internet usage especially among adolescents and young adults and its harmful consequences this area of research has gained momentum worldwide. There is still confusion about the

terminology and difference between internet use and pathological internet use (Pies, 2009). The term pathological internet use (PIU) was defined by Young in 1996 keeping the gambling model in mind. Young defined PIU as psychological dependence on the internet and it is characterized by the increased investment of resources on Internet and it related activities, having unpleasant feelings when offline, increasing tolerance to the effects of being online, and denial of problematic behaviors (Young, 1996). It is evident that definition is based on increased usage and tolerance effects.

Worldwide epidemiological studies about show the prevalence rate of PIU in the US to be 8.1%, in Europe the prevalence rate was 18.3%, in England, 8.2% in Greece and 5.4% in Italy. In Asia PIU prevalence rate was 37.2% and it was mostly prevalent amongst adolescents and young adults (Internet world stats, 2010).

Recent studies indicate various socio-demographic and cultural factors associated with PIU. Some studies have shown that male gender, low parental involvement, low peer relationships have been implicated to be major contributing factors (Durkee, T., Kaess, M., Carli, V., Parzer, P., Wasserman, C., Floderus, B., Wasserman, D., 2012)

Due to changing socio economic conditions the family structure has changed from joint to nuclear family and among them many nuclear families are restricting to single children.

Many researchers have focused upon the importance of siblings in acquiring social skills and pro-social behaviors like helping, sharing and also studies have linked single children to more often experience loneliness (Pontes *et al*, 2014). However some researchers have differed and concluded that single children grow up to be extroverts and helping adults (Trent, 2011). Children with siblings rely more on siblings on providing support, companionship and security (Feldman, 2006). Absence of siblings leads to lack of emotional support leading to loneliness (Newman, 2008). Loneliness has been found to be most important factor in predicting problematic internet use (Pontes, 2014). Adolescents had higher scores on Young Diagnostic Questionnaire for Internet Addiction (YDQ). In a study, 12395 participants from 11 study sites in Europe were randomly selected from 178 schools. They found that adolescents having no siblings were associated with significantly higher YDQ scores.⁷ They reasoned that adolescents with no siblings showed greater possibility of alienation from normal socialization resulting in lower social communications (Durkee *et al*, 2012). Some researchers have found that when lonely people are not successful in their offline social interactions, they attribute their failure as due to their lack of social skills and pro-social behaviors, in turn increasing the frequency of problematic internet use. Loneliness may also directly influence preferences for online interaction, since lonely individuals feel they can interact with others and express themselves better online than offline (Mckenna *et al*, 2002). In the light of available literature, it can be concluded that children without siblings feel lonely as they are not able to express themselves optimally in normal social communications and feel dissatisfied with their interpersonal experiences. Thus, they sought to online interactions which in turn feed into their loneliness.

Owing to the economic independence and strenuous family planning awareness programs, many Indian families are opting for nuclear and single child families. The impact of the changed family structure on the psychosocial development of children has been widely researched. However researchers have differed on the positive and negative aspects of children and its effects on their development. The present communication throws light on presence of internet addiction among single child families attending the SHUT clinic (Service for Healthy Use of Technology). It is India first technology deaddiction clinic.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

70 technology users who presented at the SHUT clinic (Service for Healthy Use of Technology Clinic), at NIMHANS Centre for Well Being, Bangalore, Karnataka, India for management of their of excessive use of technology were assessed through clinical interview as well as with internet addiction test (IAT), video game questionnaire and Mobile phone screening questionnaire. This sample of 70 users was in age group of 16-20 years and in a majority of this sample, the treatment consultation was initiated by their caregivers. IAT is 20 items questionnaire to be answered on likert scale from 0 to 5. Score of 20-49 indicate average user; 50-79 indicate problematic user & 80-100 indicates significant problems due to internet (Young, 1996).

Video game questionnaire (Gentile, 2009) it is 11 items questionnaire. The questions are answered in three choice format of yes/no/sometime. A score of 6 or more yes indicates addictive use of video game. Mobile screening questionnaire

(Sharma *et al*, 2013) evolved through focus group discussions for the screening mobile phone addiction. It is a four items questionnaire assessing the domains of craving, control, compulsion and consequences. The likert scale method was used for scoring the responses (0 to 4).The maximum score is 16 on this scale. The score of 12 & above is indicative of excessive use of mobile phone. The items have got content validation.

RESULTS

Users were in the age group of 16-20 years belonging to upper socio economic status families. All users were from the nuclear families having working parents & single child family.

Table 1 Pattern of score on Internet addiction test:

Types of addiction		Frequency	Percentage
Internet addiction	Mild (>50)	0	0
	Moderate(50-79)	2	2.8
	Severe(80-100)	68	97
Video game addiction		67	95.7

Table I shows that 97% had significant problem due to internet use and 2.8% had moderate dysfunction due to internet use. 96% had the addictive use of video game

Table2 Dysfunctions due to indulgence in internet use

Dysfunctions	Percentage
Disturbance in academic functioning	99
Biological disturbance in form of decreased sleep	97
Inconsistent meal timings due to excessive use of technology	92
Postponement of work due to internet	98
Psychological problems(irritability ,anger etc) related to internet use	82
Physical problems(dryness of eyes/neck strain)	84

Table II shows that significant dysfunctions seen in the academic area.

Table III Situations associated with use of internet/video game use

Reasons for use	Percentage
Free time	98
Accessibility to technology means	100
Loneliness/unavailability of other at home	100
Lack for opportunity for social interaction with others	99
Enjoying online interaction	99
Only way to enjoy	96
Not much scope for outdoor activities	99
Gives autonomy to do whatever one wants	96

Table III shows that lack of opportunity for social interaction/enjoyment associated with online activities/decreased scope for out-door activities were associated with usage.

Qualitative analysis of the obtained information revealed presence of permissive parenting, lack of interaction with parent, and caregivers frequently get distracted by technology devices and easy accessibility of technology devices (smart phone, laptop, ipad etc). Whereas the family, whose users were in the problematic users category, caregiver's were able to spend ample time with the user whenever they were around.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate a trend toward excessive use of technology among families having single child. 96-98% of users had significant problems due to internet/video game use (Table I). The dysfunctions were seen in the form

academic /biological/psychological and physical area (Table II).The reasons associated with use accessibility, unavailability of other at home, free time, enjoyable activities etc (Table III).The reasons for using online method have been attributed to lack of opportunity for interaction in the family domain. The present findings have relevance in the context of available studies. Single children have been found to be higher on loneliness and the negative correlation has been seen between loneliness and instant messaging (Lasgaard M. Nielsen A,Elomose M,Goosens L, 2010) (Van den Eijnden *et al* 2010). The literature also indicates that parents of single children are more socially isolated, have less stable social support systems and experience life changes to be more stressful than married parents (Marsha, 1983). Youth with internet addiction or problematic internet usage have a high likelihood to have divorced parents, living with a single parent, and be the only child of the parent (Li *et al*, 2014).

In this background, the single children may also find it difficult to learn skills to build social relationships and support systems. This scenario possibly increases puts them at risk for loneliness, and an increased use and reliance on internet as a way to keep themselves engaged and surrounded with virtual activities and relationships. In a meta-synthesis of qualitative studies on Internet addiction from 1996 to 2006, it was found that loneliness was one of the main antecedents of internet addiction along with feelings of isolation, low self-confidence, and low self-esteem (Bahadir Bozoglan ,Veysel Demirer ,Ismail Sahin, 2013) (Douglas, 2008). In addition, boredom has also been indicated to be having a significant association with problematic internet usage. Boredom was also found to be associated with loneliness but not as a significant predictor in this reported research(Skues, J., Williams, B., Oldmeadow, J., Wise, L, 2016) .The rationale for highlighting the role of loneliness among children and adolescents is that it is one of the key factors which can be moderated by parents and professionals to bring down the usage levels of internet to healthy levels. Further, the other reasons for increased usage of internet like availability and accessibility of technology, cost of access to internet, and decreased opportunities for engaging in outdoor activities in crowded urban landscapes cannot be directly moderated by professionals.

It can also be hypothesized that lonely internet addicts found the quick boost produced by the mood-altering online experiences very enjoyable and thereby were likely to repeat the experience again thus perpetuating the extent of Internet's deleterious effects in their lives (Cooper, 2002). Further, it has been reported that youth with internet addiction or problematic internet usage are more dissatisfied with functioning of their families, have greater interpersonal conflicts with parents, and witness more conflicts between parents.

These youth perceive their parents to be more punishing and less involved and supportive towards them(Marsha, 1983) Problematic use of internet was lessor among users staying in joint family (Van den Eijnden *et al*, 2008). The study has limitation in terms of absence of control group of non-addicted internet users. However, this report throws light on a trend for excessive use of technology among children from single child families. The study has implications for assessing the associated reasons for excessive use of technology; evolving parenting modules to increase the frequency of family quality time, increase frequency of family interactions and promotion of pleasurable offline activities, life style changes which

incorporate in person social interactions among the technology users and especially among those adolescents who belong to single parent families.

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