Psychological Impact of Internet usage on Children/Adolescents

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Today with more than 1.5 billion Internet users around the world (Jaffe. A. & Chen. A., 2010), the Internet has become an integral part of our society.

It has spawned a revolution not only for commerce but also in communication and interpersonal behavior.

This technology is changing the way people are socializing, studying, working, shopping, searching for jobs and spending their leisure time (DiNicola. M.D., 2004).
Introduction

- Around the world more than 80% of our youth are spending a large amount of time on the internet.

- Because the internet was introduced at a very young age into their lives, the new generation of children and adolescents became one of the first groups to use internet on a large scale and among the first to begin experiencing problems associated with excessive internet use. (DiNicola.M.D., 2004)

- Therefore, it becomes essential for us to be aware of its impact on adolescent behavior, their psychological well-being and development.
Children/Adolescents Online World

- The internet acts as a mechanism for:
  1. Information dissemination (e.g. educational purposes)
  2. Social Interaction (e.g. social network sites, emails, chats, blogs etc..)
  3. Entertainment (online games, songs, videos, films etc..)
Healthy v/s Unhealthy Internet Use

- How much is too much Internet Usage?
  - When you feel more comfortable with your online friends than your real ones or
  - you can’t stop yourself from playing games, gambling, or compulsively surfing or
  - You start neglecting your relationships, family, school and daily basic needs.
  - Basically when it starts having negative consequences in your life, then you may be using the Internet excessively- leading to

  Internet Addiction
Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD)

- 1 in 3 people consider the Internet to be as important as air, water, food and shelter (Jaffe, A., 2011)
- Horrifying deaths across the world due to compulsive internet use, researchers have identified the possibility of a new disorder - Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD).

- IAD refers to the problematic use of the Internet, including the various aspects of its technology.

- The problem of Internet addiction is so acute that:
  - Internet Addiction has been formally recognized as a disorder by American Psychological association
  - IAD is being considered for the 2012-2013 edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) published by the American Psychiatric Association.
Signs and Symptoms of an adolescent addicted to Internet:

1. Is preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous online activity or anticipate next online session).

2. Needs to use the Internet with increased amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction.

3. Has made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use.

4. Is restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use.

5. Has stayed online longer than originally intended.

6. Has jeopardized or risked the loss of a significant relationship, educational or social opportunity because of the Internet.

7. Has lied to family members, friends or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet.

8. Uses the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression).

Dr Young, K. S. (1996)
Who’s prone to Internet Addiction?

Recent studies have shown that:

- Internet addiction can affect people of any gender, age, and socioeconomic status (Beard & Wolf, 2001)

- The sense of satisfaction that comes along the internet indulgences feeds a negative cycle where more time spent online means less real social contact and less physical activity, increasing the vulnerability to psychological disorders.

- Hence, overuse of internet can genuinely restrain teenagers’ experiences in life, their academic performance, social, psychological and physical well-being.
Risk factors for Internet Addiction  
(Saisan et al., 2011)

- **You suffer from anxiety.** You may use the Internet to distract yourself from your worries and fears.
- **You are depressed.** The Internet can be an escape from feelings of depression, but too much time online can make things worse, contributing to stress, isolation and loneliness.
- **You have any other addictions.** Suffering from other addictions, such as drugs, alcohol, gambling, and sex.
- **You lack social support.** Internet addicts often use social networking sites, instant messaging, or online gaming as a safe way of establishing new relationships and more confidently relating to others.
- **You’re an unhappy teenager.** You might be wondering where you fit in and the Internet could feel more comfortable than real-life friends.
- **You are less mobile or socially active than you once were.** For example, you may be coping with a new disability that limits your ability to drive. Or you may be parenting very young children, which can make it hard to leave the house or connect with old friends.
- **You are stressed.** While some people use the Internet to relieve stress, it can have a counterproductive effect. The longer you spend online, the higher your stress levels will be.  
  (Saisan et al., 2011)
Types of Internet Addiction

- Internet Addiction covers a variety of impulse-control problems:

- **Cyber-Relationship Addiction** – addiction to social networking, chat rooms and messaging to the point where virtual, online friends become more important than real-life relationships with family and friends.

- **Net Compulsions** – such as compulsive online gaming, gambling, stock trading, or compulsive use of online auction sites such as eBay.

- **Cybersex Addiction** – compulsive use of Internet pornography, chat rooms, or fantasy role-play sites impacting negatively on real-life intimate relationships.
Cyber-Relationship Addiction: Social Interaction

- Adolescence is a period of transition between childhood and adulthood whereby identity formation, peer relationships, sexuality and self-worth are explored.
- Today for adolescents, the internet is acting as a new social environment where these adolescence issues are being explored.
- A transformation is being noted in how they communicate, establish and maintain relationships and find social support.

- Due to spending countless hours on the internet:
  - children now spend a very limited time with family and actual friends.
  - There is weakening of family bond and limited real life social interaction resulting in distorted social skills and social cues.

- Online social interactions may help an adolescent fulfill unmet real life social needs and thereby reinforce prolonged Internet use.

- Adolescents are moving from a ‘realistic’ social world to a ‘virtual’ social world.
Teens often create personal pages where they can make up or post their real identities, personal profiles, and pictures on websites such as Myspace and the Facebook and blogs.

A study (Polly Klaas Foundation, 2006) showed that:
- half of teens ages 13-18 often communicate through the Internet with someone they have not met in person;
- one-third plan to meet someone face-to-face whom they have only chatted through the Internet;
- almost 12.5% discovered that someone they were communicating with online was an adult pretending to be much younger.

This poses a safety risk since it is difficult to discern someone’s “real” identity over the Internet.

Fake Identities are easy to produce and to sell on the Internet.
Adolescents and Virtual/Fake Identities

- In the virtual social networking world, the adolescent is not present as a physical subject, but only as a virtual representation.
- A virtual representation doesn’t have an identity in the psychological sense.
- What we attribute to this ‘fake’ identity is only partly conscious.
- It is mostly made up of ideas and feelings in the form of fantasies, visions, unconscious tendencies, wishes and complexes.
- Creating fake identities deters from “real life” social situations as it allows for individuals to create any image of themselves with little or no social repercussions.

This is called the **Online Disinhibition Effect**

- The core concept of the Online Disinhibition Effect refers to a loosening (or complete abandonment) of social restrictions and inhibitions that would otherwise be present in normal face-to-face interaction during interactions with others on the Internet.
Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, J., 2004)

- **Online Disinhibition** affects motor, instinctual, emotional, cognitive and perceptual aspects of an individual.

- **6 primary factors** behind why adolescents sometimes act radically different on the internet than when they do in normal face-to-face situations:
  1. You Don't Know Me (dissociative anonymity)
  2. You Can't See Me (invisibility)
  3. See You Later (asynchronicity)
  4. It's All in My Head (solipsistic introjection)
  5. It's Just a Game (dissociative imagination)
  6. We're Equals (minimizing authority)

- These factors interact and supplement each other resulting in a more complex, amplified effect.

- Can lead to aggressiveness, psychological and social disorders & **Deindividuation** (a state of reduced self-awareness or even “loss of self”).
Empirical research indicates that adolescents who spend excessive time online social network sites:

- experience greater declines in their social and psychological well-being and become depressive (DeFife. J. 2010);
- have lower levels of self-esteem & psychological symptoms of maladjustments. (Berndt et al., 1999; Stocker, 1994);
- engage in self-harming behavior such as suicidal ideation and suicidal attempts (Spruijt & deGoode, 1997).

Thereby promoting Social Isolation, disruption in making genuine, meaningful social ties and Social disengagement.
Compulsive online gaming has been responsible for some horrifying deaths across the world, including examples from China and South Korea of addicts playing for 50+ straight hours before going into extreme cardiac arrest.

Of particular concern is the youth getting addicted to online gaming, which is estimated to reach $19 billion in revenue by 2013.

Increase in online gaming brings a high exposure to violence and explicit content online.

Excessive Gaming or Online Gaming Addiction can be classified as an impulse control disorder, defined as an urge to continuously play game despite harmful negative consequences or a desire to stop.
Internet Addiction: Online Gaming

- Violent online games have a strong effect on children and adolescents.
- The reason being that they lack the real life experiences to judge whether something they see on screen is realistic.

- Online gaming violence doesn’t have a direct effect on children and adolescents rather it:
  1. Conditions them in learning aggressive behavior
  2. And desensitize them, making them more prone to inflicting self harm and harm to others.
1. Learning of Aggressive Behavior

- According to the social learning theory, children may imitate the acts of aggression as seen through the electronic media (Gunter & McAleer, 1997; Anderson & Bushman, 2002).

- The relationship between viewing media violence and the level of aggressiveness builds over time.

- Following repeated exposure to violent behavior, children and adolescents can be encouraged to behave more aggressively as they may learn that violence is a useful and appropriate way of solving one's problems.

- Children who strongly identify with aggressive characters and perceive violence as realistic tend to display more pronounced aggressive tendencies (Gunter & McAleer 1997).
2. Desensitization

- Violent games desensitize children to cruelty and may make them more likely to commit violent acts in real life.

- An alarming number of children seem to experience pleasure in their violent media encounters, and express insatiable demands for more of the violent content (Schwartz & Matzkin, 1999).

- Research conducted on adolescents – whereby repeated exposure to films portraying violence, especially with a sexual context where women are victims, was found to shift the attitudes of the young men to be less sympathetic towards rape victims and more lenient in their judgments about alleged rapists.

- Thus repeated exposure to graphic depiction of violence may lead children/adolescents to adjust their emotional reactions to it. These altered emotional reactions may be carried over into more realistic settings (Gunter & McAleer 1997).
The Internet has become a highly sophisticated channel for distributing sexually explicit material actuating compulsive sexual behavior, sex trafficking, and sex crimes (Galbreath & Berlin, 2002).

According to a survey performed by the London School of Economics (2002), 90% of children between ages 8 and 16 have viewed pornography on the Internet.

In most cases, the sex sites were accessed unintentionally when a child, often in the process of doing homework, used an innocuous word to search for information or pictures.

Such free access and exposure to this information by adolescents who have not yet developed a full maturity, could pose negative impacts on adolescent development and could potentially manifest in their social interactions with peers, their sexual activity, and their emotional development (Subrahmanym et al., 2006).
Internet addiction: Cybersex and pornography

- Pornography and cybersex addiction has more than just psychological and familial ramifications.
- Adolescents show an increased risk for significant physical and mental health problems and a greater likelihood of committing a sex-based crime (Fagan, P., 2010).
- Empirical studies reveal that adolescents engaging in high level of pornography or cybersex report:
  - Higher rates of sexual aggression
  - Lower levels of self-esteem
  - Feelings of loneliness and major depression
  - Greater risk of teenage pregnancy
  - Desensitization
  - Boredom
  - Distorted perceptions of social reality
  - Objectification of women as ‘sex objects’
  - “Rape myth acceptance”

(Fagan, P., 2010)
When the internet took off in the late 1990s, among the different online groups that began to develop, some of the online communities began encouraging eating disorder behaviors and attitudes such as Pro-Anorexia, Pro-Bulimia and Pro-Eating Disorders.

In 2010, of 180 online websites, 83% contained suggestions for engaging in eating disorder behaviors (Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson & Peebles, 2010).

Excessive internet use also predicts High risk of Obesity – children or adolescents no longer play or do exercises. (Risks of heart attack, stroke, cancer and diabetes)
Parental Control

- If we severely limit a child or teen’s Internet use, they might rebel and go to excess.
- If a child or teen is showing signs of Internet addiction, there are things that we can do to help:
  - **Encourage other interests and social activities.** Get your child out from behind the computer screen. Expose kids to other hobbies and activities, such as team sports and afterschool clubs.
  - **Monitor computer use and set clear limits.** Restrict the use of computers, to a common area of the house where you can keep an eye on your child’s online activity, and limit time online. This will be most effective if you as parents follow it. If you can’t stay offline, chances are your children won’t either.
  - **Talk to your child about underlying issues.** Compulsive computer use can be the sign of deeper problems. Is your child having problems fitting in? Has there been a recent major change, like a move or divorce, which is causing stress?
  - **Get help.** Teenagers often rebel against their parents but if they hear the same information from a different authority figure, they may be more inclined to listen. Try a teacher, doctor, or respected family friend. Don’t be afraid to seek professional counseling if you are concerned about your child.
Therapy and counseling for Internet addiction

- Therapy can give a child/adolescent a tremendous boost in controlling Internet use.

- **Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy** provides step-by-step ways to stop compulsive Internet behaviors and change one’s perceptions regarding Internet and computer use.

- Therapy can also help learn healthier ways of coping with uncomfortable emotions, such as stress, anxiety, or depression.
REFERENCES

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