THE IMPACT OF INTERNET USE ON CHILDREN/ADOLESCENTS

By Miss Kaleyvani Geeseeny Sawmy
Clinical Psychologist
Children’s motives

- Few studies have been conducted – that can explain people’s motives for using internet.

- Research suggest that children use media for **entertainment** and relaxation purposes (to relieve boredom, to play games, or for **social interaction**) however little is known about what really motivate children to use Internet.
Adolescents’ motives

- Use the Internet more for **social interaction**

- Social identity, peer interactions, and relationships become increasingly important - thus, it is likely that they become more interested in the Internet for communication purposes, such as e-mail or chat

- As they mature, they begin to use the Internet more for information purposes
Gender Differences

Boys

- Entertainment
- More interested in playing video and computer games
- The Internet provides many opportunities to play online games

Girls

- To seek information, for example, for their homework (as girls are more compliant so they will listen to parents and teachers)
- Social interaction (since girls used to chat and keep in touch with friends)
NEGATIVE BEHAVIOURS

- Exposure to Violence
- Addiction
- Social Relations
- Pornography
- Eating disorders
Exposure to Violence

- With the growing use of the internet by children, there is an increase in online games.

- These games are very violent and expose children to explicit content and violent situations thus desensitizing the children and making them more prone to inflicting self harm, as well as harm on others.

- Media violence will have a strong effect on young children. The reason being that they lack the real life experiences to judge whether something they see on screen is realistic.
A person does not become violent while playing a violent internet game but he/she is affected.

Two main effects of violence:
A. Learning of aggressive behaviour
B. Desensitization
A. 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 1997:103; Melville-Thomas 1985:9).

- Children may learn that violence is a useful and appropriate way of solving one's problems.

- Children can be encouraged to behave more aggressively following exposure to violent behavior.

- Children who strongly identify with aggressive characters and perceive violence as realistic also tend to display more pronounced aggressive tendencies (Gunter & McAleer 1997:103)
B. 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 media encounters** with violent entertainment, and express insatiable demands for more of the violent content (Schwartz & Matzkin 1999:117).

- 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 judgments and emotional reactions may be carried over into judgments made about victims of violence in more realistic settings (Gunter &McAleer 1997:105).
The Internet has been called a behavioral addiction.

A behavioral addiction is one in which an individual is addicted to an action.

Any activity can be addictive if done to extreme. For example, some of the normal everyday activities that can be addictive are jogging, eating, work, etc.

Even the workaholic is a behavioral addiction just like the Internet. If it "changes your emotional state in some way" then it can be classified as a behavioral addiction.

This type of addiction is actually very common. Internet addiction, like any other addiction, has signs and symptoms.

Signs of an addicted person:
- they deprive themselves of sleep in order to spend more time on-line
- neglect other important activities such as work, family and friends, or socializing in general to surf the Internet.
- losing track of time while on-line, or people close to you complain about the amount of time spent on-line, logging on while already busy with something else (work, family time, etc.)(Cochran, 1996)
Internet Addiction Disorder

- Internet addiction disorder refers to the problematic use of the Internet, including the various aspects of its technology, such as electronic mail (e-mail) and the World Wide Web.

- Internet addiction disorder is not listed in the mental health professional's handbook, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition, text revision (2000), which is also called the *DSM*.

- Internet addiction has, however, been formally recognized as a disorder by the American Psychological Association.
According to Dr. Kimberly S. Young, assistant Professor of Psychology, University of Pittsburgh at Bradford, the **vulnerable**s are those who are lonely, bored, depressed, introverted, lack self esteem, or have a history of addictions.

Studies show that Overuse of the Internet can genuinely restrain **teenagers' experiences in life, their performance academically, overall happiness, and physiological well-being.**
Social Relations

- Using internet to communicate with others is an increasingly popular activity - especially among girls.

- The social effects of such internet use may depend, in part, on whether these online social contacts are with family and friends, or with strangers and acquaintances.

- A two-year study documented that, despite the use of the Internet for such social purposes, teens who spent more time online experienced greater declines in social and psychological well-being during their first year with access to the Internet.
Due to spending countless hours on the internet, children now spend a very limited time with family and actual friends.

Therefore, there is a weakening of the family bond and also limited interaction with actual people.

As a result, the children may miss out on real life interaction with different relatives’ results in distorted social skills & limited real life social network.
Social isolation during adolescence is often a very painful emotional experience.

Adolescents who do not report having close friendships consistently have lower levels of self-esteem and more psychological symptoms of maladjustment (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999; Stocker, 1994).

Previous literature suggests a relationship between social isolation in adolescence and depression (Rubin & Mills, 1998).

Adolescents who report lack of social support and feelings of isolation may behave in self-harming ways such as suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Spruijt & de Goode, 1997).
Social disengagement is associated with poor quality of life and diminished physical and psychological health.

When people have more social contact, they are happier and healthier, both physically and mentally.
Distorted Sense of Reality

- *Adolescents and the Internet* by Nathalie Louge

A nationwide poll showed that half of teens ages 13-18 often communicate through the Internet with someone they have not met in person; one-third have talked about potentially meeting someone face-to-face whom they have only met through the Internet (Polly Klaas Foundation, 2006).

Further, almost 12.5% discovered that someone they were communicating with online was an adult pretending to be much younger.

Teens will 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.
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.

Thus, although the Internet may serve as a catalyst for communication and may increase social competence of socially anxious teens, it may also encourage fake identities and a false image of real life situations.

These socially anxious teens may have a tendency to resort to computer communication as a substitute for real life interactions (Subrahmanyan et al., 2006).
the Internet has become a highly effective and profitable means of distributing sexually explicit material, as well as a sophisticated channel for 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 (Subrahmanyam et al., 2006).
Pornography has an adverse effect on older adolescent boys and young men already at high risk for aggressive behavior.

- High-risk factors include impulsivity, hostility to women, and promiscuity. In this group, very frequent use of pornography is associated with a much higher rate of sexual aggression (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000).
Due to teenagers’ curiosity and interest in relationships and sexuality, they seem more likely to give out personal information, which may potentially make them vulnerable.

Parents and educators should be well aware of this risk, which can be greatly minimized by some family rules about computer use.

According to Magid (1998), parents should make it a family rule to
- (a) never give out personal information, such as home address, school name, or telephone number in chat rooms or via e-mail;
- (b) never allow a child to arrange a personal meeting with another computer user without parental permission; and
- (c) always remember that people online may not be who they seem to be
Eating Disorders

- Sites pro-anorexia or pro-bulimia or combination of both – tips on ideal weight

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

- Open lines of communication
  - Talk to your children about Internet risks.

- Educate your children:
  - giving out personal information
  - ethical behaviour (bullying, harassment)
  - healthy sexuality: for the inevitable pornography
Behavourial Aspects

- spends an excessive amount of time on-line
- receives phone calls, mail and/or gifts from strangers
- quickly changes the monitor or turns off the computer when someone else enters the room
- withdraws from normal activities – wants to go on the computer rather than play or go out with friends
- The danger associated with giving out personal details or setting up personal meetings with individuals they met via the Internet
References
