The Factors that Influence Adolescents’ Engagement in Risky Internet Behavior: an observational study in Romanian Adolescents

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Abstract: - We investigated factors that influence adolescents’ engagement in risky Internet behavior, in particular the factors relating to negative impacts on adolescent development: social interactions, sexual activity, and their emotional development.

Material and method: All the students, aged between 15 to 18 years old, come from 7 high schools of Iasi, Romania. The authors examined risk factors of teens internet use at 283 teenagers, who had been involved in an online activities and completed a survey to assess relationships among development and (a) amount of Internet use (with the identification of a possible computer addiction), (b) the interference of excessive use with school grades and social life, sexual activity, and their emotional development.

Results indicated that the following factors were found to be predictors of adolescents development: frequency of Internet use, parental rules, type of personal information given out, frequency of chatting, inappropriate websites have been visited, and type of internet advice heard.

Conclusion: Our results showed a significant positive correlation between measures of Internet use and time spent online for the Internet. Implications for and development as impacted by social support networks, are discussed. Finally, Internet use was associated with identity status. These results suggest that the Internet may be an important aid for teenager as they searched for an young identity.

Keywords: Adolescents, Behavior, Internet, Risk factors, Identity

1 Introduction

Internet addiction disorder (IAD) is an emerging cause of morbidity and has been recently considered to merit inclusion in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition.

Nancy Willard, educator and educational technology consultant, in her book, surveys the dangers that young people face when using the Internet. The longest chapter of the book, unsurprisingly, concerns the kids and teens getting involved in online sexual activity, which is one of the best documented in the book.

In every culture, people are expected to act within a certain set of rules. Some people live in a world where they are ashamed of who they are, and try to hide their true self behind a mask. Others are curious as to what it would be like to live the life of someone else [1].

They commonly use computers for playing games, completing school assignments, email, and connecting to the Internet. On-line, the most frequent activities are school work, email, games, and finding information.

Identity is the result of the process through which the individual assumes social values, shared norms of behavior and knowledge which allow the individual to feel part of a social group and at the same time, allow him to be recognized. Therefore, viewed as part of the psychical dimension that permits the realization of self [2], [3].

The construction of a healthy sexuality is a major task facing adolescents. Another major task facing adolescents is that of developing stable and consistent identities: gender, sexual, moral, political, and religious [4], [5].

A stable identity consists of one’s self-definition, as well as the roles and relationships one takes on, and one’s personal values or moral beliefs [6].
2 Methods

2.1 Design

For collecting the data concerning this issue we used a questionnaire for the students with 28 items. These were aimed at highlighting: (a) amount of Internet use (with the identification of a possible computer addiction), (b) the interference of excessive use with school grades and social life, sexual activity, and their emotional development.

The data were processed using the SPSS statistics software, 13.0 versions.

2.2 Participants

The survey included a representative sample of 283 high school students. All the students come from 7 high schools in Iasi, Romania, aged between 15 to 18 years old and included 45.7% girls.

2.3 Procedure

They volunteered to confidentially complete surveys during their regularly scheduled class times. Most questions supposed to rate on a scale the frequency of occurrence of a certain event or issue; some questions solicited an open-answer or to choose an answer from a list. The themes were chosen according to the objectives of the study and were based on the previous research concerning students’ interests and needs at this age. Surveys contained a combination of demographic items, interval scales, and open-ended questions.

3 Results

Both the boys and the girls think that the computers are absolutely essential in today’s society.

All adolescents included in this study reported having online activities on the Internet.

Results show a high tendency of students to spend more time online, giving up their social or family duties.

56% of teenagers report that often and very often it happens to stay longer in front of the computer than initially expected. The results within the groups show a tendency of the 15-18 years old students to lose control more often of the time spent online.

Concerning the time spent in using the computer, the results show that children spend a considerable amount of time online, on average more than five hours per day (Table 1).

All students prefer to use the computer very late, after 11 pm.

Participants were queried whether parents talk to them about what they do on the Internet, and whether they would tell their parents about receiving pornographic junk mail. More than 73% of the subjects admit they do not or only occasionally discuss online behavior with their parents. (Fig.1)

We could not say that the family is not present when 15 to 18 year-olds use their computers, but this is rather a passive presence and lacking involvement.

Clinical diagnoses included 8% attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, 7% hypomania, 35% generalized anxiety disorder, 18% social anxiety disorder; 10% dysthymia, 12% obsessive compulsive personality disorder, 5% personality disorder, 5% met criteria for eating disorder. Severity measures of IAD were associated with higher perception of family disability \( (P \leq .001) \) Adolescents with Internet addiction were more likely to have substance use experience.

Favorite online activities are chat for both groups girls and boys (Table 2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hour/day</th>
<th>girls</th>
<th>boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1h - 4h</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4h – 8h</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over 8h</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Time spent online per day

Fig. 1 Teenagers and the discussion about online behavior with their parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorite online activities</th>
<th>boys</th>
<th>girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer games</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overload information</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Favorite online activities

Internet computer addiction among teens is very often the cause of family arguments because the teen will forget social and family events preferring to use their computer instead. Very often an internet addict will stay up all night playing games or using a chat room. In the worst cases, teens will quit school or college favoring their computer and internet addiction.

The study also showed that girls tend to practice more protective behavior on the Web than boys. The researchers believe this is because girls consider online privacy more important than boys do.

It’s clear teens don’t take online security invasions seriously, however it is nice to hear that they know right from wrong as it pertains to Internet safety. This just goes to show how important it is to get Internet security in our schools. Make it part of their high school curriculum. Parents, make it part of your dinner table discussion.

Both sexuality and personal identity are key adolescent issues [10]. Consequently we see that adolescents spend a lot of time talking about sex, exchanging sexual jokes and sex-oriented literature as well as using sex slang [11]. They are also sexually active.

Boys were significantly more likely than girls to be pathological internet users (4.7% vs. 3.5%; p < 0.01) and girls were more likely than boys to have no symptoms (44.6% vs. 26.2%; p < 0.01).

Relationships in the real world may be neglected as those in the virtual world increase in importance. Academic performance is likely to suffer.

4 Discussion

The impact of Internet use and abuse is increasingly being investigated, and social scientists are beginning to address related issues. Frequently mentioned as a recruiting tool, Internet accessibility is often provided free of charge, with many schools having Internet connections in residence hall rooms or available at home 24 hours per day. [7]

However, research among sociologists, psychologists, or psychiatrists has not formally identified addictive use of the computer as a problematic behavior. This study investigated the existence of computer addiction and the extent of problems caused by such potential misuse. This study utilized an adapted version of the criteria for pathological gambling defined by the DSM-IV (APA, 1994).

We may observe some of the psychological symptoms for those who are addicted to internet

1. Having a sense of well-being or euphoria while at the computer
2. Inability to stop the activity
3. Craving more and more time at the computer
4. Neglecting family and friends
5. Feeling empty, depressed and irritable when not at the computer
6. Lying to family and friends about activities
7. Problems with school or work. [8]

Withdrawal symptoms, like moodiness and irritability after a few Internet-free days, as well as skipping other activities to devote more time to online, are other symptoms of Internet addiction. [9] The most frequent type of theoretical model for conceptualizing the role of media in human development is an effects model, in which the content of media is believed to affect children’s attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors [10].

Because of the importance of interacting with others to gain social competence, concerns have been raised that children who form “electronic friendships” with computers instead of friendships with their peers might be hindered in developing their interpersonal skills. More than one-fifth of all children between ages 15 and 18 report having a computer in their bedroom, suggesting that the computer often may be used in solitude, robbing children of time for other social activities and interfering with the development and maintenance of friendships. Indeed, in our study we found that, among high school students more than 60% of all their computer time is spent alone.

Excessive computer usage can also be masking more difficult problems that your child is facing, or difficulties in the family. It may be necessary to seek outside help for a child with computer addiction. Family therapy may be beneficial. You can ask your child’s school counselor or a local community mental health specialist to provide you with local contacts. [11], [12]

The engaging nature of Internet communications and interactive games means many children and teens have trouble keeping track of time when they're online.

Research has found that adolescents make use of mass media to learn about two important aspects of identity development—sex and gender [13]. It is important to remember that participants in online environments can be relatively anonymous and do not have information about each others’ bodies such as age, gender, race, physical appearance, and physical attractiveness [14]. Information about bodies is especially relevant to sexual conversations and activities that are popular among adolescents and that they engage in online [15].

Mitchell et al., 2003, found that a variety of parental supervision techniques such as having rules
about the number of hours spend online, asking what youth do online, checking the history function, and using filters were not related to the risk of receiving sexual solicitations. However, two particular Internet rules relating specifically to not having face-to-face meetings, and not meeting strangers online lowered the risk of such a meeting. Also, adolescents who had heard the Internet safety advice never to arrange to meet anyone were less likely to have had a face-to-face meeting.

In society of today media provide common ground for all adolescents and are an important socialization agent for adolescents. Dr. Douglas Gentile, Director of the Media Research Lab at Iowa State University reports, "Almost one out of every ten youth gamers shows enough symptoms of damage to their school, family, and psychological functioning to merit serious concern."

According to Dr. Suzanne Martin, Youth and Education Researcher at Harris Interactive, "The prevalence of video gaming in youth culture in combination with this level of pathological video gaming is great cause for concern and highlights the need for further research in this arena."

Gamers who were surveyed and classified as pathological were receiving lower grades in schools than their peers, were more likely to have video game systems in their bedrooms (65%), were spending much more time playing games each week (averaging 24.5 hours per week), and were also more likely to have been diagnosed with an attention deficit problem.

But when they use media materials towards identity formation or coping, when they participate in a media-based youth subculture, adolescents are also, in a larger sense, participating in activities that are part of their socialization.

Overall, as Internet use increases, the perceptions of online relationships are more positive. This finding also reflects the results of previous studies regarding media and technology that positive relationships among computer use and ratings of computer liking. Cyberspace offers all sorts of opportunities for adolescents to satisfy that need to express, explore, and experiment with their identity. The good aspect of online anonymity is that it encourages teenagers to discuss things about themselves that they would hesitate revealing in real life. Teens can learn a lot about themselves from that.

People in cyberspace feel more uninhibited, and express themselves more openly. Researchers call this the "disinhibition effect." Sometimes teenagers reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes. Or they show unusual acts of kindness and generosity. On the other hand, they explore the dark underworld of the internet, places of pornography and violence, places they would never visit in the real world. We might call this toxic disinhibition [3], [16].

Several factors are at play in this online disinhibition: Dissociative anonymity (You Don't Know Me); Invisibility (You Can't See Me); Dissociative imagination (It's Just a Game); Asynchronicity (See You Later); It's All in My Head; Minimizing authority; Personality Variables; True Self?; Self Constellations Across Media; Altering Self Boundary [14].

Since adolescents choose both their media and their peer group, they have more control over their socialization from these agents compared to their socialization from agents over whom they have less control, such as their family or school. Chat enables researchers to look at this socialization process up close and personal.

The adolescents who spend a lot of time conversing on the Internet, it will be inevitable that their online social skills will be improved. They will be encountering people of various ages and cultural backgrounds, so they have the opportunity to learn how to relate to a wide variety of people. Under optimal conditions, those skills may carry over to their in-person life.

Without seeing or hearing the real person behind the typed words or avatars, they (probably unconsciously) behave as if the other person is some kind of robot or video game target. Being able to hide behind their online anonymity makes the abuse even easier to inflict. It provides an easy, safe way to satisfy that need to vent the frustrations of their real life [13].

Not all adolescents are so extreme in their tendency to misbehave online. The more intensely teens act out, the more likely they are having problems in their real life and are using the Internet to vent and escape from those real life tensions [16].

We need to develop effective consumer education programs to induce teenagers to use the Internet correctly; these programs can be offered on-line and off-line, in school, and at home. Even though our compulsory education system does not offer consumer studies courses, there are some alternative ways to teach students proper Internet use during their study of home economics and ethics. A family consumer program for using the Internet correctly could also be made available. A family program could be of great importance as the major Internet usage place for addicts is the home. Additionally, Tapscoff (1998) indicates that sound internet use within the family would probably improve the communication and interaction between family members. If the family does not know how to use the internet properly, communication within the family can be obstructed. In the long run, it is necessary to lessen the burden on high-school students by reducing their sense of alienation and teaching them that Internet use can actually increase these feelings.
Even though, at that moment, the adolescent may be trying to avoid dealing with these tricky emotional situations in-person, navigating these situations online can be a good way to practice skills that later will generalize to their face-to-face encounters. On the internet, they may indeed find what they are missing. Or, because of the partial anonymity of cyberspace, which allows lots of room for fantasy and imagination, they may think they have found what they are missing.

5 Conclusion

The results show that computer use is widely spread among Romanian high school students. They often use sleeping time in order to enlarge time spent on computer. Even if only few of them might be considered at risk of being addicted. Similar to substance abuse prevention programs aimed at creating drug-free workplaces, specialized training can educate teenagers about the warning signs of online addiction to assist in early detection. Research has documented serious consequences of using the Internet in an addictive manner—social isolation, depression, anxiety, academic performance reduced and financial debt as a result of obsessive online gambling, shopping, or gaming.

One of the interesting conclusions about the internet is the opportunity to offer teenagers to present themselves in a variety of different ways. They can alter their style of being in wild experiments with their identity by changing their age, history, personality, physical appearance, even their gender. Online relationships are a growing phenomenon—and potentially dangerous.

Also, by spending their time communicating with the online person, they are spending less time working on their "real" relationship, so this will degrade.

References: