

A study on internet addiction, exposure to sexually explicit material and its impact among adolescents

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Abstract

Internet has become an essential media of our daily life, especially among adolescents and youth. The exposure to sexually explicit material is associated with negative physical, emotional and psychological health outcomes. This study is aimed at identifying the levels of internet addiction and exposure to sexually explicit material and its impact among adolescents. The researcher has employed descriptive research design and the study involved adolescent school students aged 13 to 18 years as respondents (n=280), selected by non-probability sampling from various schools in Ernakulam district. The tool for data collection were semi-structured questionnaire with Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT) and self-constructed tool for assessing exposure to sexually explicit material and its impact.

The results of IAT test indicates a mean score of 40 which falls in the moderate internet addiction level among adolescents. Majority of respondents 65% admitted that they get exposed to sexual contents accidentally while searching for information and 57.6% were found to be irritated when they control the exposure to sexual contents. 56.5% of respondents felt guilty after watching

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sexual content. The study also revealed that 51.8% of participants consider themselves unattractive compared to others.

Keywords: Internet addiction, Sexually Explicit Material, Adolescents

Introduction

The advent of technology and the internet, the world is within the fingertips of the users. Due to the explosion of the digital age, there was a tremendous growth of internet globally, especially in India in the last decade. The internet is an abode of boundless information from different fields, be it on educational subjects or one that pertains to the general lifestyle and behavioural patterns of people, making it as an unavoidable part of our life. It is mainly used for education, entertainment, social networking, and information sharing. As the internet use increases concerns regarding excessive use has also increases. Since Internet has become an essential part of our daily life especially among adolescents and youth, there is a growing concern as to whether internet use leads to an addiction. This study aims at assessing internet addiction and exposure to sexually explicit material among adolescents.

The term “internet addiction” was proposed by Dr. Ivan Goldberg in 1995, to refer to pathological compulsive internet use. Youth linked excessive internet use most closely to pathological gambling, a disorder of impulse control according to DSM-IV and adapted the DSM-IV criteria to relate to internet use in the Internet (Goel et.al 2013). Internet addiction can be simply explained as an uncontrolled use of internet for gaming, social networking, email, blogging, online shopping, gambling or pornography to the extent that affects his everyday activities. Internet addiction makes the individual to live in a virtual world which gradually develops into depression, mood disorders, anxiety and substance abuse. In students it may cause poor academic performance, and this in turn may lead to depression or mood disorders.

Internet Addiction among Adolescents

Adolescence, derived from the Latin word “adolescere” meaning “to grow

up”, is a transition period from childhood to adulthood. Adolescents are defined as young people between the ages of 10 and 19 years (WHO, 2014). One in every five people is an adolescent. Adolescents aged 10–19 constitute about one-fifth of India’s population (UNFPA, 2014). For the purpose of the study adolescents are defined as individuals belonging to 13 to 18 years of age. This age allows more cultural freedom to children. It’s the age for secondary education that stimulates peer group influence and increased access to internet. Children will be able to complete the questionnaire by their own.

It’s during adolescence that major biological as well as psychological growths occur. Development of sexuality is an important bio-psychosocial development that takes place. Adolescence is the period of developing abstract thinking and reasoning. During adolescence, an individual’s thoughts as well as perception creates uncertainty about their sexual beliefs and moral values. The development of an adolescent occurs not in segregation. They are influenced by society and family has influence in fostering their sexuality. Excessive exposure to sexually explicit material during this period distorts their perception on sexuality.

In India, use of internet is enormous, especially in the young population. An article in India Today published in the year 2014 highlights the addiction level of people in India towards internet. A study conducted by a leading global management consulting firm, the London-based AT Kearney Global Research, observes that “... (the) continuous online connectivity is becoming a phenomenon in India, with 53 per cent of respondents in the country saying they are connected to the internet every waking hour.”

Another article published by NDTV on October 2018 regarding the report on internet addiction from All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) revealed that number of people visiting the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) Behavioural Addiction Clinic with complaints of “internet addiction” has almost doubled. It was also reported severe behavioural and psychiatric problem due to internet addiction is increasing in youth, mostly school and college students.

Internet Addiction and Exposure to Sexually Explicit Material

The world has evolved into a highly sexualized milieu, and frequency and exposure of sexual content in conventional media has increased progressively. The exposure to sexually explicit material is associated with negative physical, emotional and psychological health outcomes. It provides misconception regarding sexuality and sexual relationships which in turn distorts both sexual attitudes and behaviour. Lack of reliable knowledge about sexuality during the transition period from puberty to adolescence, leads to morbidity and sexual behaviour problems.

Pornography should be defined as (any) material that (i) creates or elicits sexual feelings or thoughts and (ii) contains explicit exposure or descriptions of sexual acts involving the genitals, such as vaginal or anal intercourse, oral sex, or masturbation" (Reid et al., 2011).

Pornhub, one of the most popular pornography websites reported that 4,599,000,000 hours of pornographic videos were watched worldwide. Their statistics also showed that the website was visited approximately 23 billion times meaning that around 44,000 people visited the site every minute (Pornhub.com, 2017)

For the purpose of the study, internet addiction is defined as spending large amount of time on internet in such a way, that it interferes with children's daily functioning and increases exposure to sexually explicit material. Sexually explicit material is defined as any media such as videos, images, advertisements, hyperlinks, popup messages, games, online magazines and any other material availed through internet, that may have a direct bearing or may be linked with the sexual behaviour of adolescents.

Pornography in India

As smartphone and internet access continues to increase, more people will be able to expose to sexually explicit material. As per the Information Technology Act, 2000, '...watching or possessing pornographic materials is not

considered illegal in India, whereas the publication, production and its distribution is considered illegal?

As per report of Pornhub, in 2016, smartphones accounted for 70 percent of traffic, with only 28 percent from desktops, and the remaining 2 percent being tablets. However, in 2017, smartphone numbers access rose to 86 percent of all Indian viewers, pushing desktops down to 13 percent. Pornhub's 2017 report revealed that Indians constituted, the third largest pornography consumers were women comprising 30 percent of the total number of Pornhub visitors (India.com Buzz Desk, 2018).

To an extent parents are responsible for the problematic internet use among children. The lack of parental supervision and unbounded freedom lead children to internet addicts. They must encourage and motivate their children to increase real-world social interaction, than spending time in the virtual world; however, virtual world pull children to it. In India, use of internet is enormous, especially among the young population. Hence, the researchers deemed it necessary to study pattern of internet usage and exposure to sexually explicit material in young adults in Indian setting and its relationship with their mental and physical health. It is in this background, we undertook the present study to take a close look at the enormous use of internet among the youth in India.

Review of Literature

The study conducted by Goswami, Kumar & Singh (2018) came up with the major factor of internet usage among adolescents as social networking. The study analyses significant correlation level of internet addiction (IAT score) and gender, medium of education, device used to access internet, purpose of usage and time of internet use. Another study by Goel, Subramanyam, & Kamath (2013) discovered higher levels of internet addiction among male adolescents than females. The study also shows that addicts were found to have increased level of anxiety and depression. The overall findings of this study reveal that pathological internet users had characteristically low self-esteem,

and were socially withdrawn.

Through a study Singh (2018) points out that majority of the respondents (54.8%) have accessed books or magazines with sexual contents and some of the respondents had the practice of watching pornography on a daily basis, and nearly half of the adolescents did watch 'occasionally', creating implications for risky sexual behaviours. By carrying out a study Dutta (2016) compared the psychological effects of internet addiction like somatic symptoms, anxiety or insomnia, severe depression and social dysfunction among students with or without internet addiction. The results showed that there existed an enormous difference in the overall mental health of internet addicted and internet non-addicted students.

Another study by Smith (2012) explored both men and women as adolescents, viewed sexually explicit material online with consistent frequency. The results revealed the motivations for viewing sexually explicit content as sex curiosity, curiosity about sexually explicit material, watching with romantic partners, in groups, or for individual sexual pleasure.

Research Methodology

Research Question

What are the patterns of internet usage and consumption of sexually explicit materials among adolescents? Does a pattern of usage lead to addiction?

Objectives

1. To identify the level of internet addiction
2. To assess the extent of exposure to sexually explicit material
3. To assess relationship between socio-demographic variables and internet addiction among adolescents

Research Design

The present study focuses on phenomenon of internet addiction and ex-

tent of exposure to sexually explicit materials. Since the study is not truly experimental, the researcher preferred a descriptive design.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted among schools students ranging in the age group 13 to 18 years, from different schools of Ernakulam District. Using purposive sampling,different schools were identified,from which students from high school and higher secondary classes of government-aided, unaided and CBSE schools were selected as respondents. Informed consent was sought from students and respective class teachers were present at the time of data collection. A total of 280students were included as respondents. Only school going adolescents between 13-18 years were included in the study; both male and female participants is included to ensure heterogeneity

The research used questionnaire method for the purpose of data collection. The respondents were administered semi-structured questionnaire with standardized scale of internet addiction called Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT), along with a self-constructed questionnaire for assessing exposure to sexually explicit material.

IAT has been developed by Dr. Kimberley Young in 1998, consisted of a 20-item, 5-degree Likert scale that measures the severity of self-reported compulsive use of the internet. The total score is 100. The scores for each item was summed up, and the higher one scored, the greater was the level of addiction. Total scores ranging from 20 to 39 points are considered to be 'average' online user usage indicating 'average' level of Internet addiction; scores of 40 to 69 indicate the presence of a 'moderate'level of Internet addiction; 70 to 100score indicate a higher dependence upon the Internet indicative of 'severe' addiction.

The IAT is a worldwide accepted and validated testing instrument, with research assessing the sensitivity and validity of these score ranges published in several journals. The study by Dhir, Chen, & Nieminen(2015) scrutinizes the psychometric properties of the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) with a total

of 1,914 junior and senior high school students in India. The study results show that a one-factor model for IAT exhibits good psychometric properties and fits well with the study data. The present study provides empirical evidence that the IAT is a valid and reliable instrument for measuring internet addiction.

Key Findings

The age of participants (n=280) ranged from 13-18 years. Scores on the IAT test indicates a mean score of 40, which is indicative of a 'moderate' level of internet addiction among adolescents based on the scoring pattern of the scale. Assuming equal variance in t-test, it was found that there were significant gender difference in internet addiction test (IAT). ($t=3.158$, $p=0.002$)

On calculating the responses on questionnaire assessing exposure to sexually explicit materials it is found that majority of respondents (65percent) admitted that they get exposed to sexual contents accidentally, while searching for information. 57.6percent were claimed to be 'irritated' when they 'control the use of internet' or 'exposure to sexual contents'. About 65.8percent among the adolescent surveyed agreed that external controls such as parents, teachers, and religion can exert 'control' on them from watching sexual content. Respondents amounting to 56.5percent felt 'guilty' after watching sexual content. The study also revealed that 51.8percent of the respondents considered themselves 'unattractive', when compared to others.

Suggestions for Future Researchers

Utility of Sex Education and its impact on reducing sexually explicit material consumption can be investigated among adolescents

The study findings also suggest the importance of developing psycho-social interventions to address internet addiction and sexually explicit material consumption.

Factors that promote viewing of sexually explicit material and how it impacts on behavior is to be studied scientifically in detail.

Conclusion

The study mainly focused on studying the levels of internet addiction and extent of exposure to online sexually explicit material among adolescents. Through the study the researcher attempts to assess internet addiction levels, exposure to sexually explicit material and its impact among adolescents. The results obtained through analyzing and interpreting the data reveals that there exists moderate level of internet addiction among adolescents which further leads to exposure to sexually explicit material which in-turn results in deviation from normal behavior having serious repercussions on the social front. The researcher found that there is significant difference in gender with regard to the use internet and exposure to sexually explicit material. The researcher thus conclude that internet addiction and sexually explicit material exposure have significant impact on in adolescent boys and girls. Psycho social interventions need to be enhanced in school interventions of social work to address this menace.

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