

## **CYBER-SURFING AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY: WHERE ARE WE?**

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Technologies, such as computers and the Internet, have become enmeshed in young people's lives. World Internet Project survey, 2008 conducted in 13 countries revealed that among youth 12-years to 14-years, 88% in the United States used the Internet; the percentage of Internet users in this age group was 100% in the United Kingdom, 98% in Israel, 95% in Canada, and over 70% in Singapore. Among adolescents, the communication applications of the Internet such as instant messaging, blogs, and social networking sites are especially popular. As the Internet has become pervasive in the lives of young people, their online activities and interactions have become the focus of intense research. It is evident that the Internet presents risks as well as opportunities to adolescent development. The Internet can also provide benefits in the areas of cognitive, social, and physical development, and can also be used for health promotion and to deliver treatment interventions. Internet can be a positive tool for student learning as well as youth empowerment and well being. There is evidence that computer and Internet use improves test scores, history chronology learning, and motivation to learn. Though older students seem to benefit more from online aids than younger students, and some very young students may worsen in technological formats compared with traditional paper and pencil formats.

Although beneficial, the internet use is not without risks. For youth, the negative aspects of the Internet include Internet addiction as well as online risks such as exposure to sexually explicit material and online victimization including harassment or cyber bullying and sexual solicitation. Such exposure is related to greater sexual uncertainty and more positive attitudes towards uncommitted sexual exploration among youth. The potential for dangerous offline consequences makes online victimization an important concern. In the past two years, there have been at least more than 300 cases of child cyber crimes. In reality, most Internet youth-adult sex crimes are characterized by an open seduction that may begin with a sexual solicitation. It has also been suggested that factors related to immaturity, impulsiveness, histories of abuse and interaction styles make certain youth more vulnerable. The more prevailing concern for online harassment and cyber bullying is the negative effect victimization has on the mental, emotional, and social development of its victims. Being a victim of cyber bullying has been linked to increased social anxiety and there is evidence that both cyber bullies and cyber victims are more likely to exhibit off-line maladaptive behaviors (school problems, assaults, and substance use) than youth not involved in cyber bullying. The likely intervention and prevention means would be shifting away from advocating

complete avoidance (e.g. do not talk to strangers) and limiting online disclosure for all youth to a targeted focus on high-risk youth and behaviors.

The most distinguishing clinical features reported by Problematic Internet User (PIU) adolescents are withdrawal, tolerance, lies and secrecy, and conflict, preoccupation, inability to self-limit, and using technology as an escape. Several studies in the United States and others and numerous anecdotal reports, suggest possible links between overuse of the Internet by adolescents and young adults and negative health consequences such as depression, attention deficient/hyperactivity disorder, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, hostility/aggression and separation anxiety, excessive daytime sleepiness, problematic alcohol use, or injury associated with negative academic consequences such as missed classes, lower grades, and even academic dismissal. The relative risks ranged from an OR of 1.02 to an OR of 11.66. The strongest correlations were observed between PIU and depression; the weakest was hostility/aggression. Depression and symptoms of ADHD appeared to have the most significant and consistent correlation with PIU. Associations were reported to be higher among males in all age groups. The above mentioned issues are equally important to the children and adolescents living in India as well.

However, given that the majority of studies are of cross-sectional design, causal relationships could not be identified. Publication bias and methodological issues should also be considered when interpreting these results. Prospective cohort studies, in this area of research, are necessitated in order to detect the causal relation between these respective variables. It is recommended for further research to focus on larger epidemiological studies using standardized methodologies. In-depth investigations that focus on the distinctive content of online activities in relation to problematic internet users are critically needed.