

Internet Addiction: A Focus Group Discussion Approach

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Abstract : The internet has become a major part of our day-to-day lives. Gaining information, socializing, performing banking transactions, keeping in touch with friends and engaging in shopping right from one's home is a very attractive alternative to the traditional methods. However, it is very easy for one to get so deeply engrossed in using the internet that it can reach addictive levels. The current study focuses on the attitudes and ideas of adolescents with respect to their internet usage. The sample of the study included 8 teenagers (4M, 4F) aged between 14 and 17 years. They used the internet for 4-5 hours per day for recreational purposes. They were subjected to a Focus Group Discussion where they were encouraged to share with each other their internet related activities, focusing on the content of frequently visited sites, the effect of their usage on significant life areas, effect on their interpersonal relationships, experience of withdrawal symptoms while trying to limit their internet usage and their perception of face-to-face interaction, sports and other offline activities as compared to similar online activities. The study provided a good insight into the problem as issues not previously identified by the researcher were brought to the fore.

Key words: *Focus Group Discussion, Impulse Control Disorders, Internet Addiction, Teenagers.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is defined by technological advances that have shrunk the size of the world figuratively. Technology has taken over almost every area of human life due to the convenience and comfort it offers. From automobiles to household machinery to mobile phones, every piece of technology has helped change human life for the better. Amidst all the technological advancements that surround us, the internet is perhaps the most impressive. Due to the convenience the internet provides in numerous areas of life, it is used by almost all individuals. Knowledge of internet is the need of the hour, no matter what profession an individual is in. Hence, children and teenagers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the internet. As a consequence, the tech-savvy generation of today is constantly surrounded by complicated gadgets that they seem to use with relative ease, leaving their parents clueless about the activities of their children. Parents are either too busy or technologically handicapped to monitor the activities of their children. As long as technology is used in moderation for productive purposes, it is constructive. However, more often than not, the internet ends up being misused for unproductive activities. Obsessive and excessive use of the internet has increased concern over the emergence of the psychological disorder – Internet Addiction. Colman's Oxford Dictionary of Psychology defines Internet Addiction Syndrome as a condition characterized by "excessive pathological Internet surfing, indicated by such signs and symptoms as being preoccupied with the internet; recurrent dreams and fantasies about the Internet; lying to family members or therapists to conceal the extent of time spent online; attempting repeatedly and unsuccessfully to cut down or to stop spending time online, and becoming restless or irritable while doing so; using the Internet as an escape for worry or unhappiness; and jeopardizing a significant job, relationship, or educational opportunity by spending excessive time online" [1]. Internet Addicts, though faced with social or academic difficulties, are often unable to limit the time that they spend online [2]. They experience physical as well as mental dependence on the internet, and also predominant symptoms of addiction such as withdrawal, tolerance and preoccupation with the internet [3].

Young (1999), who has done extensive work in the field of internet addiction, has categorized internet addiction into the following five types [4]:

1. Cyber-sexual addiction (pornography)
2. Cyber-relationship addiction (social networking or chatting)
3. Net compulsion (online gambling or shopping)
4. Information overload (database searching)
5. Computer addiction (online game playing).

It has also been theorized that individuals who get addicted to the internet are actually responding maladaptively to stressful situations. Instead of confronting their problems, internet addicts resort to a faulty coping mechanism. The internet also provides addicts with a certain level of anonymity which helps them abandon their inhibitions. They are able to step out of their comfort zone and engage in activities that they don't do in the real world [5]. Adolescents are an especially vulnerable group when it comes to Internet Addiction [6]. Unlike children, they are quite capable of identifying which type of behaviour can be classified as 'good' and 'bad'. In spite of being armed with this knowledge, they fall prey to online activities that can be potentially threatening. The current study focuses on the general trends in relation to internet addiction among teenagers, with no emphasis on a specific type of addiction. The main objectives of the study were

- (1) To identify the internet usage patterns among the teenaged.
- (2) To identify the content of internet usage among the teenagers being studied.
- (3) To study the effect of internet usage on the significant areas of the lives of the teenagers.
- (4) To study the effect of internet usage patterns on the interpersonal relationships of the teenagers.
- (5) To identify whether teenagers prefer face to face interactions or online interactions
- (6) To identify whether teenagers prefer sports and offline games or online games
- (7) To come up with possible solutions to the internet-usage related problems realized during the paired interview.

II. METHOD

2.1. Sample

The sample for the present study consisted of 8 students (4M, 4F) between the ages of 14 to 17 years. They admitted spending about 4 to 5 hours (or more) on online activities for recreational purposes. These students belonged to various schools in Pune city, Maharashtra. They studied together in a coaching class – Academy for Personal Study Assistance. All the students were of Indian nationality.

2.2 Procedure

The participants were subjected to a Focus Group Discussion in order to gain better insight into their opinions with regard to their Internet activities. Permission of the director of the coaching class was sought to conduct a Focus Group Discussion with the students. After the students' classes were over the FGD was conducted in an empty classroom provided by the director. The true purpose of the study was revealed to the students only after the FGD was conducted. Students were requested to sign a letter of consent stating that their participation was voluntary. Permission for participation was also sought from the parents of the participants. Students were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and opinions stated during the FGD. The group discussion was audio recorded with the permission of the participants for further analysis.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Reasons for Using the Internet

Participants unanimously agreed that they used the internet for social networking, chatting, downloading, gaming, shopping and video chatting. They agreed that they used the internet for academic purposes as well but not as much as they did for recreational purposes.

“Everyone can find a little piece of themselves online which makes it more attractive”

Participants agreed with the above statement, made by one of the students, that they can each find something on the internet that attracts them to it and keeps them coming back for more. According to the participants, online activities are sustained since they have captured their interest.

“It helps me forget my problems”

Online activities help provide an escape, albeit a temporary one; to the problems individual face in the real world. They are able to put aside their problems while online.

While discussing about the amount of time spent online, participants agreed that they more often than not ended up using the internet for longer than previously intended. Studies do indicate that internet addicts often lose track of time while online [7].

“Engrossed while using the internet that you forget what's around you”

“You think that you'll use it for half an hour but then when you look at the clock and notice it has already been 2 hours”

Participants admitted to entirely losing track of time while online. They believed that the reason they spent so much time online could be because they can easily access the internet through their phones and tablets. They were also of the view that it was not problematic to use the internet for about 3-4 hours per day, because a lot of their daily activities (socialization, chatting, gaming and academic) involved the use of the internet.

Theme 2: Effect on Significant Life Areas

While discussing this topic, the very first response received from the participants was -
“I have no life”

The participant meant that most of their activities revolve around the use of the internet, due to which most of their time was spent online. They spent very little time in the ‘real world’.

In relation to the effect of their online activities on their Academic life, participants stated
“(They received) Less percentage”

“We say we want to do our projects but we are busy chatting with our friends, so we don’t complete our projects and get bad remarks”

“It (internet usage) leads to a lot of procrastination”

There was unanimous agreement among the participants to the fact that their studies were affected negatively due to their internet usage patterns. One of the participants stated that they were so distracted while studying that they felt compelled to check their phones whenever a new online notification arrived. And even though they intended to just check their notifications for just five minutes, the time they actually spent online would often get stretched. This caused them to lose out on precious time that could have been spent on their studies.

While discussing the effect of their online activities on their Social life, participants stated that
“My social interactions have improved”

Participants believed that their social life has been affected in a positive way, since the chatting and social networking options on internet have helped them stay in touch with their friends continuously. They don’t have to depend on phone calls or actually meeting each other, to stay connected with each other.

While talking about the effect that their internet activities had on their Familial life, participants stated
(Parents are) Always criticising”

(Parents say) “We don’t give time to our family”

They’re right” (About parent’s responses towards their online activities)

Participants stated that their family life has certainly been negatively affected by their internet usage. They mentioned that their parents would constantly criticise them in relation to their online activities. Participants were aware of the why their parents criticized their online activities and also agreed with their parents criticism.

In spite of being aware of the effect their online activities were having on their academic and familial life, they were still unable to limit their online activities since it provides a good form of recreation.

Theme 3: Effect on Interpersonal Relationships

“Our parents think that we ignore them when we are online”

Participants mentioned that their relationships with their family and relatives have gotten strained due to their online activities. A few of them also stated that their parents had enforced time restrictions on their internet usage. Some others also confessed that their parents would also hide their phones or tablets and would even turn off the Wi-Fi to control the amount of time their children spent online.

“Our relationships with our friends have become better”

Participants believed that their friends are very encouraging about their online activities since they were able to constantly chat and keep in touch with each other.

Theme 4: Face-to-face Interaction Vs Online Interaction:

“We can have more fun while talking face-to-face with others”

Participants stated that they spend quite a lot of time interacting with others on online instead of face to face conversations. However, they agreed that they preferred interacting with others face-to-face as compared to on the internet. They believed that there was a chance that they were more likely to be misunderstood while texting/chatting instead of talking face-to-face with the other person. They also felt like they could express themselves better when the person that they are interacting with is in front of them.

Participants unanimously agreed that chatting/socializing through the internet was only helpful to stay in touch with their friends. It was, however, not preferred to face-to-face interaction.

Theme 5: Sports and Online Games Vs Online Games

“Get to know new people from around the globe”

“When we complete a level, we want to know what will be there in the next level”

“Candy crush is very addictive”

Participants stated that all of them engaged in online gaming, though each of them preferred different games. Participants agreed that among all online games, they preferred interactive / Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG) where they can interact with other players from around the globe and even end up making new friends. A participant stated that all games have different levels of difficulty, which

makes it even more intriguing. A participant mentioned that such games leave the player guessing what the next level would be, and also keep the player coming back for more. Also, each level is like a milestone, and a player's status online depends on the level that they have completed. One participant actually described the game Candy Crush as "addictive". It means that they are aware of the addictive qualities of online gaming.

However, when asked about their preference, participants stated that they preferred Outdoor/Indoor (Offline) games as compared to Online games because they found Outdoor games to be mentally and physically beneficial. Also, outdoor games gave participants an opportunity to socialize with their friends.

Theme 6: Withdrawal Symptoms

"We miss the internet"

"Feel alone"

"Something's missing"

"Uneasy"

"Jealous of siblings who get to use the internet"

Participants agreed missing the internet when they were forced to stay away from it, especially during their school hours, exams or due to restrictions imposed by their parents. They would often feel alone or lonely, and felt the constant urge to go online.

Possible Solutions to the Problem:

Participants agreed that when it comes to their overall internet usage patterns, the negatives outweighed the positives. They were aware that their internet habits were problematic and needed to be changed. Participants discussed the ways in which they could limit their time online or use the internet in a more productive way.

There should be a schedule for it"

"We should use it when we are free"

Instead of using it for leisure, we should use it to check out some informative websites, not limited to studies"

"Engross ourselves in other work or read books" Participants discussed how their time away from the internet could help them focus more on their studies. They also agreed that it would give them more free time that they could spend with their family and relatives. One participant opined that it would be helpful to take the help of their elders and other people who got along perfectly well without the internet and employ their coping strategies to fight the urge to spend time online unnecessarily. Though it was the participants themselves who suggested these solutions, they stated that these solutions would not be very easy to implement in real life. They openly denied trying to implement these solutions in their lives because they were very reliant on the internet and wouldn't be able to implement or follow through with these restrictions.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the present focus group study helped gain some interesting insights into the attitudes that teenagers have when it came to their internet usage. The findings indicate that teenagers do spend an unreasonable amount of time online for recreational purposes rather than for productive / educational purposes and they seem to not find this problematic in the least. Teens are also aware of the fact that the amount of time that they spend online has a negative effect on their family and academic life. But they are unable to limit their internet usage in spite of having an insight into the problem. The present study also indicated that though teenagers use the internet as an alternative to socialization and recreation, in actuality they preferred having face-to-face interactions with others. They also preferred playing outdoor games instead of online games as compared to online games. Teenagers are also aware of the withdrawal symptoms that they experience while away from the internet. They are also aware of the methods which will help them distance themselves from the internet but they are unwilling to adhere to these methods / solutions since they are very obsessed with their online activities. The internet is an important part of the tech-savvy generation of today. However, obsession with the internet or Internet addiction is an unfortunate reality that has been affecting teenagers to a great extent. It is a problem that needs to be tackled with urgency. Careful observation and supervision of activities of teenagers by parents and significant elders in relation to their internet activities is of utmost importance. In addition seeking timely professional help for individuals who exhibit signs of addiction to the Internet should also be of top priority.

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