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Family Relationship in The Digital World Is Strengthened or Threatened: A Descriptive Study from A Psychosocial Perspective

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Abstract

Digital technology is indeed advantageous, that made our life easy in so many ways and its benefits are enjoyed by everyone irrespective of age, education, socioeconomic status and so on; but at the same time, we cannot ignore the negative impact it creates on the well-being of individuals, families, and the larger society. It makes a whole lot of difference when digital technology is appropriately used and when it is misused or abused. The inherent addictive nature of digital technology increases the risk of individuals getting addicted to the Internet, especially the younger generation, which is a serious threat to interpersonal communication and family relationship. To find the answer to the research question whether advancements in digital technology contribute towards strengthening the family relationship or it threatens the quality of relationship within the family, the current study was conducted among 271 Postgraduate students of Women's college in Madurai. The study variables, Internet Addiction and Family relationships of the respondents are assessed using standardized scales and the findings reveal a statistically significant difference between students with addictive and normal internet usage with regard to their family relationship. The results are discussed from a psychosocial perspective, and strategies are proposed to enhance digital well-being, strengthen the family relationship and thereby sustain and promote the quality of development of the individuals, families and the larger society.

Keywords: Internet Addiction, Family Relationship, Digital well-being, and Psychosocial Strategies.

Globally, countries are striving towards achieving Digitalization in all sectors like health, education, communication, business and so on. Digital India is one of the initiatives of our country to create a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. The aim is to ensure and sustain the development of our country. It is indeed an appreciable effort, provided that the possible negative impact is also taken into consideration and due measures are suggested and implemented. An in-depth understanding of the pros and cons of digital technology is essential to make sure that the good is not outweighed by the bad. If we are not mindful of the degree to which we rely on the Internet, we may develop a pattern of addictive use known as Internet Addiction.

Background:

The word addiction comes from the Latin word 'addictus', which means excessively devoted to something with loss of ability to choose freely or slave. The clinical features of behavioral problems that is Internet-related have been described in various terms, including Internet Addiction Disorder, Pathological Internet Use (PIU), Problematic Internet Use, Excessive Internet Use, Internet Dependence, Compulsive Computer Use and Virtual Addiction

Dr. Kimberly Young (1998) defines it as *any* online-or smartphone related, compulsive behavior which interferes with normal living and causes severe stress on family, friends, loved ones, and one's work environment. Internet addiction can also be described as a disorder in which individual's inability to control his or her use of the internet causes marked distress and/or functional impairment (Tripathi, 2017). Research studies conducted in the past few years reveal that there is a substantial increase in the prevalence of Internet Addiction. Though the internet is widely used by varied age groups, the most vulnerable are found to be school and college students. With regard to the prevalence of Internet Addiction 29.9% of university students met the criterion on IAT for mild IA, 16.4% for moderately addictive use, and 0.5% for severe IA (Nitin Anand et.al.,2018). Studies of late, reveal that there is no significant difference with regard to the prevalence of IA among the genders. Research studies also reveal that IA is positively correlated with Impulsivity, Aggression (Lim et al, 2015; Yen et al, 2007), Social Anxiety (Weidman et al, 2012), Depression (Gamex-Guadix, 2014) and loneliness (Zygouris, & Fotis, 2015); and they are likely to be low in Psychological Well Being (Arvind Sharma et.al., 2017)

We can't deny the fact that lack of parental support and involvement can contribute to Internet Addiction in adolescents. For example, parents who are absent, neglectful, or over-controlling may lead their children to seek and stay online (Niedorys et.al., 2018). On the other hand, it's also worth noting that excessive use of the internet can contribute to family conflict and dysfunction. For example, when family members spend too much time online, it can interfere with communication and quality time spent together, leading to feelings of isolation and disconnection. (Murali and George, 2007; Young, 1999a; Griffiths, 1998)

The current study is an attempt to find the prevalence of Internet Addiction among women college students, assess their family relationships and understand the relationship between Internet Addiction and Family Relationships. The results were analysed and discussed from a psychosocial perspective and strategies were proposed to promote digital well-being as a measure to prevent harmful consequences and sustain the development achieved so far.

Aim:

To study the relationship between Internet Addiction (Problematic Internet Use) and Family Relationship and suggest strategies to enhance Psychosocial Wellbeing of individuals and families.

Objectives:

- To study the prevalence of Internet Addiction among the respondents
- To assess the Family Relationship of the respondents
- To understand the relationship between the study variables

- To find the difference between respondents with Addictive and Non-Addictive Internet use with regard to Family Relationship
- To suggest Psychosocial strategies to reduce Internet Addiction and promote psychosocial wellbeing of individuals and families.

Methodology:

Research design: The study adopted a descriptive research design, which describes the prevalence of Internet Addiction, and the relationship between the study variables such as Internet Addiction and Family relationships. And it also describes the difference between addictive and normal internet users with regard to their family relationships.

Hypotheses:

- There is a significant relationship between Internet Addiction and Family Relationship.
- There is a significant difference between Addictive and Non-Addictive Internet users with regard to Family Relationship

Sampling: A questionnaire was sent to all Post graduate students of Women's College in Madurai and 271 students who responded to the questionnaire were considered for the study.

Tools of Data Collection:

- (i) A semi-structured questionnaire prepared by the researcher was used to collect sociodemographic details
- (ii) The Internet Addiction Test is a 20-item scale developed by Dr. Kimberly Young (1998). The IAT measures the severity of self-reported compulsive use of the Internet. It is widely used in a variety of test settings for adults and adolescents. The questionnaire measures specific characteristics and behaviors associated with compulsive use of the Internet, that includes compulsivity, escapism, and dependency, and it also assesses the problems related to addictive use in personal, occupational, and social functioning.
- (iii) To measure the family relationship of the respondents, the 16-item Brief Family Relationship Scale (BFRS) by Carlotta Ching Ting Fok et.al. (2011) was used. The BFRS is adapted from the 27-item Relationship dimension of the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1994), consisting of Cohesion, Expressiveness, and Conflict subscales (9 items each).

The collected data were analyzed and interpreted using descriptive statistics, correlation, and t-test. Based on the key findings, strategies to enhance psychosocial well-being were proposed.

Results And Discussion:

Table No:1
Distribution of Sociodemographic details

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
LOCALITY		
Rural	78	28.8
Urban	193	71.2
TYPE OF FAMILY		
Nuclear	218	80.4
Joint	53	19.6

The table shows that the majority of respondents (71.2%) are from urban areas. The number of students who proceed to collegiate education are comparatively far below the students from the urban areas. From the table, it is also evident that the majority of respondents (80.4%) belong to the nuclear family system which indicates that the preference towards the nuclear family system is more than the preference for joint family system. The consequences of such preferences could also be reflected in various dimensions of the life of the respondents. The type of family system, whether joint or nuclear, can indeed have an influence on Internet addiction among children. Both family system has its own challenges, and we cannot generalize because family structure is not the sole factor that determines the development of Internet Addiction.

Table No:2
Distribution of respondents based on the level of Internet Addiction

Level of Internet Addiction	Frequency	Percentage
Normal	128	47.2
Mild	100	36.9
Moderate	42	15.5
Severe	1	0.4
Total	271	100.0

From the above table, it is evident that respondents with different levels of Internet Addiction is slightly higher than the respondents with normal level of internet use, which is an issue of concern to be taken into consideration. Among the students with unhealthy use, the majority are in the mild level (36.9%) and subsequently, the moderate (15.5%) and the severe level (0.4 %) are considered to be the high-risk category who experience the negative consequences of addictive use of the internet. The findings are aligned with the number of previously conducted studies. Post-pandemic studies reveal that there is a drastic rise in the mild and moderate level of Internet Addiction.

Table No:3

Table showing the relationship between study variables

Variables	Internet Addiction	Family Relationship
Internet Addiction	1	
Family Relationship	-0.293(**)	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The analyses of data using Pearson’s Correlation indicate a statistically significant negative correlation between Internet Addiction and Family Relationship ($r = -0.293^{**}$). The relationship between Internet Addiction and Family Relationships is complex and interconnected. Further, the complex nature of Internet Addiction, its interconnectedness and the consequences are presented in the discussion section.

Table No:4
Difference between Non-Addictive and Addictive Internet users with regard to Family Relationship

Variables	Non-Addictive Internet Users (N=228)		Addictive Internet Users (N=43)		t-value
	M	SD	M	SD	
Family Relationship	76.97	12.93	68.97	12.58	3.739***

From the above table, it is evident that there is a statistically significant difference between the Non-Addictive and Addictive Internet Users with regard to their Family Relationships, especially in terms of maintaining a cohesive relationship, emotional expressions, and handling conflicts. The result also implies that there is deterioration in the quality of relationships within the family in the context of digitalization, threatening the system of family as a primary institution of socialization.

The results of the study clearly indicate a statistically significant relationship between Internet Addiction and Family Relationship and the difference between addictive and non-addictive internet users in different dimensions of family relationship is also statistically significant, and hence the research hypotheses are accepted.

Impact of Internet Addiction on Family Relationships:

Addictive Internet Users tend to neglect real-life relationships that are often displayed in a decreased level of quality time and engagement with their family members, leading to strained relationships and decreased communication within the family. Whereas the nonaddicts actively participate in family events, communicate openly, and have a sense of connection and support within their family. They are more likely to have healthy social connections and effectively manage their time and priorities, striking a balance between online activities, academics, and other responsibilities, which helps them experience autonomy and the sense of fulfillment of their purpose in life. It is important to note that

the relationship between Internet Addiction and family relationships can be bidirectional and influenced by various individual, familial, and contextual factors.

To answer the question, whether digital technology and its advancements strengthen or threaten the family relationship? First of all, we have to understand the nature of its impact from different perspectives. Advancements in digital technology have definitely contributed towards communicating with family members who are far away physically; on the other hand, for a reasonably large number of people, it has also made the family members psychologically distant when they are present with them physically. In the digital world, gadgets occupy a significant position in the family. People prefer spending more time and money on gadgets than on family members. They are not able to differentiate real and virtual life. They are unable to discern what is right, wrong, good, and bad; and living in the grey areas of life is being normalized, accepted, and promoted. But this impact is reversible; if we allow the God-given intelligence to control and supersede our dependence on the artificial.

Intentional efforts have to be taken to regulate our digital use. We have to be mindful of the extent, purpose, and outcome of our digital usage and evolve strategies that would be helpful at the individual, familial and societal level. To practice the most appropriate strategy, a clear understanding of Digital Wellbeing and its strategies is essential. Adopting strategies for promoting digital well-being among youth has become especially important; by prioritizing it, we empower them to become responsible and healthy digital citizens, able to leverage technology's benefits while mitigating its potential risks and negative effects on their well-being. The following are some strategies that could be promoted.

Strategies To Promote Digital Wellbeing:

i) Digital Strategies (Tools of Digital Wellbeing)

The practice of preserving a healthy and balanced relationship with technology is referred to as digital well-being. It involves the utilization of digital tools and strategies that monitor and promote physical, mental, and emotional well-being, while minimizing the potential negative effects of excessive screen time and digital distractions. Digital wellness is a personal endeavor, and different tools and strategies are effective for different people. It is our individual responsibility to discover the most suitable digital tools and to develop digital habits that promote our well-being.

ii) Family Strategies

Understanding the significant functions and characteristics of a healthy family would enable us to evolve effective strategies that would help us address Internet Addiction, which is now becoming a serious public health concern.

Families that are most successful, functional, happy, and strong are not only balanced but

- Committed to one another
- Appreciate each other
- Spend time together (both qualitatively and quantitatively)
- Have good communication patterns
- Have a high degree of religious/ spiritual orientation, and
- Are able to deal with crisis in a positive manner (Gladding, 2011; Stinnett, 1998; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985).
- Express affirmation and encouragement

- Work through difficulties together and they look within the family for strength rather than looking to something outside
- Equip its members to discover how to draw the line between right and wrong, between good and evil.

Broadly, it can be categorized as follows

- **Promoting Cohesion-** Promoting cohesion in families is essential for maintaining healthy relationships, fostering communication, and creating a sense of belonging. Primarily Unconditional Positive Regard, Love, Care, Support and Emotional Bonding are the key factors that could be achieved by practicing the above-mentioned and is an ongoing effort that requires active participation from all family members.
- **Permitting Expression-** Respecting Uniqueness, accepting differences, Open communication, Creativity and Independence are the key factors. Expressiveness in families plays a crucial role in fostering healthy relationships and maintaining psychosocial well-being. It creates a safe and supportive environment where family members can connect and bond on a deeper level. It helps family members understand each other's experiences, joys, and challenges, leading to stronger emotional connections.
- **Pacifying Conflict-** The key factors are Cooperation, Compatibility, and the 3Fs'- Fears, Faults and Failures are handled without rejection or condemnation. Conflicts are a normal part of family life, and resolving them takes time, patience, and effort. By employing strategies such as Active Listening, Being respectful, Finding common ground, Compromise, Win-Win Solution, Apologize, Forgiveness and by maintaining open lines of communication, we can pacify conflicts and promote a more peaceful and loving family environment.

Conclusion:

Internet addiction requires a multi-faceted interventional approach involving individuals, families, educational institutions, policymakers, and the technology industry. Compared to the attainment of development, the obstacles we must overcome to sustain the progress we have made thus far are numerous. By implementing the Digital India Mission, India has significantly advanced in a variety of sectors. It is the responsibility of each individual to safeguard the development and advance it till we reach a state of sustainability and maximize its benefits. Especially the youth, who are in the productive age group, have to be wise and act with discernment in using digital technology by being aware of its pros and cons and adopt practices that promote responsible and balanced internet use. Thus, we can minimize the negative consequences of addictive internet use, promote digital well-being, and ensure that the internet is utilized as a tool for sustainable development rather than a threat or hindrance.

Families must be aware of the challenges that their children face, get involved, and provide the essential support they need. It is of paramount importance for educational institutions to raise awareness about Internet Addiction, provide resources for prevention and intervention, and promote healthy online habits among students. The increasing reliance of students on the internet for everything can be slowed down by providing alternate activities and support networks, as well as by fostering an environment that promotes a balanced approach to technology.

Addressing Internet Addiction and promoting healthy family relationships requires a multi-faceted approach, including education, awareness, open communication, setting boundaries, and seeking professional help when needed.

Positive and supportive family relationships are crucial for the psychosocial well-being of individuals, especially adolescents and young people. Strong family bonds, open communication, and emotional support contribute to a sense of belonging, security, and overall happiness. Healthy family relationships provide a buffer against stress and can enhance an individual's overall well-being, which in turn contributes to the well-being of the larger society.

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