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## The association between alcohol use and problematic internet use: A large-scale nationwide cross-sectional study of adolescents in Japan

Hisayoshi Morioka<sup>a</sup>, Osamu Itani<sup>b,\*</sup>, Yoneatsu Osaki<sup>c</sup>, Susumu Higuchi<sup>d</sup>, Maki Jike<sup>a</sup>, Yoshitaka Kaneita<sup>b</sup>, Hideyuki Kanda<sup>e</sup>, Sachi Nakagome<sup>a</sup>, Takashi Ohida<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Division of Public Health, Department of Social Medicine, Nihon University School of Medicine, Tokyo, Japan

<sup>b</sup> Department of Public Health and Epidemiology, Faculty of Medicine, Oita University, Yufu, Oita, Japan

<sup>c</sup> Division of Environmental and Preventive Medicine, Department of Social Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Tottori University, Yonago, Tottori, Japan

<sup>d</sup> National Hospital Organization Kurihama Medical and Addiction Center, Yokosuka, Kanagawa, Japan

<sup>e</sup> Department of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, Shimane University, Izumo, Shimane, Japan

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** This study aimed to clarify the associations between the frequency and amount of alcohol consumption and problematic Internet use, such as Internet addiction and excessive Internet use.

**Methods:** A self-administered questionnaire survey was administered to students enrolled in randomly selected junior and senior high schools throughout Japan, and responses from 100,050 students (51,587 males and 48,463 females) were obtained. Multiple logistic regression analyses were performed in order to examine the associations between alcohol use and problematic Internet use such as Internet addiction (Young Diagnostic Questionnaire for Internet Addiction  $\geq 5$ ) and excessive Internet use ( $\geq 5$  h/day).

**Results:** The results of multiple logistic regression analyses indicated that the adjusted odds ratios for Internet addiction (YDQ  $\geq 5$ ) and excessive Internet use ( $\geq 5$  h/day) became higher as the number of days in which alcohol had been consumed during the previous 30 days increased. In addition, the adjusted odds ratio for excessive Internet use ( $\geq 5$  h/day) indicated a dose-dependent association with the amount of alcohol consumed per session.

**Conclusions:** This study revealed that adolescents showing problematic Internet use consumed alcohol more frequently and consumed a greater amount of alcohol than those without problematic Internet use. These findings suggest a close association between drinking and problematic Internet use among Japanese adolescents.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, use of the Internet has increased worldwide, and a large proportion of users are adolescents. In Japan, the internet utilization rate of Japanese adolescents increased from 72.8% in 2001<sup>1</sup> to 96.3% in 2009.<sup>2</sup> With the rapid global popularization of the Internet in recent years, issues related to problematic Internet use (PIU) among adolescents have arisen,<sup>3–11</sup> potentially affecting adolescents' health<sup>3–9,11</sup> and social activities,<sup>3,8–10</sup> including school performance. Recent studies have found that 6.7% of adolescents

(aged 15–19 years) in Hong Kong,<sup>5</sup> 4.04% of students (aged 14–18 years) in the United States,<sup>8</sup> and 3.1% of students (mean age, 16.16 years) in Greece<sup>10</sup> were evaluated as Internet addicts. In addition, 17.1% of adolescents (ages 12–18 years) in Singapore reported using the Internet more than 5 h per day.<sup>9</sup>

However, to date, a standard definition of PIU has not been established. Spada et al. argued that there were no officially or broadly accepted diagnostic criteria for PIU, even in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.<sup>12</sup> Rial et al. reported that previous studies have referred to PIU as Internet addiction (IA), compulsive Internet use, pathological Internet use, excessive Internet use (EIU), or Internet dependence.<sup>13</sup>

Recent studies have reported that PIU is associated with depression and anxiety,<sup>3,5–9,11</sup> sleep disorders (e.g., excessive daytime sleepiness),<sup>4</sup> and substance use (e.g., tobacco).<sup>7,8</sup> PIU among

\* Corresponding author. Department of Public Health and Epidemiology, Faculty of Medicine, Oita University, 1-1, Idaigaoka, Hasama-machi, Yufu-shi, Oita 879-5593, Japan.

E-mail address: [itaniosamu@oita-u.ac.jp](mailto:itaniosamu@oita-u.ac.jp) (O. Itani).

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adolescents is a public health problem that has recently emerged and requires corrective action.

Another public health issue is alcohol use among adolescents. Previous studies have indicated that heavy alcohol consumption during adolescence has long-lasting adverse social and physical effects (e.g., antisocial behavior, such as violence<sup>14</sup>; mental disorders<sup>15</sup>; and a decline in cognitive function<sup>16,17</sup>). Some epidemiological studies have also examined and reported the effects of alcohol use on Internet addiction among adolescents in recent years.<sup>4,18,19</sup> Ko et al. conducted a cross-sectional study of 2114 high school students using a self-administered questionnaire and reported that problematic alcohol use was associated with Internet addiction.<sup>18</sup> Sung et al. performed a nationwide, web-based epidemiological study of adolescents and concluded that alcohol use was significantly associated with Internet addiction only among girls.<sup>19</sup> They postulated two hypotheses to explain the association between alcohol use and Internet addiction. One hypothesis attempted to explain this association from a psychological perspective. Based on Jessor's Problem-Behavior Theory<sup>20</sup> (psychosocial proneness), they viewed problematic forms of behavior, such as alcohol drinking, as a symptom of specific psychosocial factors that are common to many behavioral problems. They inferred that alcohol drinking caused other types of problematic behavior, such as Internet addiction, through such common psychosocial factors. The other hypothesis was based on a neurophysiological perspective: neurotransmitter systems (e.g., serotonergic and dopaminergic) have pathophysiological associations with both alcohol use and behavioral addictions.<sup>21</sup>

The results of these previous epidemiological studies have not contradicted these hypotheses. However, these studies had some important limitations: they were poorly representative national samples, with comparatively small sample sizes of a few thousand subjects<sup>4,18</sup>; they had unknown or extremely low (less than 50%) response rates<sup>4,18</sup>; there was a possibility of substantially large selection bias due to the adoption of a web-based survey method<sup>19</sup>; and they failed to adjust for some potential confounding factors (e.g., lifestyle habits, such as smoking and exercise, as well as mental health status).<sup>4,18</sup> In addition, as none of these studies considered the amount and frequency of alcohol consumption, the existence of a dose-response relationship between alcohol use and Internet addiction was unknown. Therefore, we designed the present study to address these shortcomings and yield more epidemiologically accurate evidence. If the association between drinking and PIU status in adolescents is investigated using a design that compensates for the limitations of the previous studies, the key factors of this association may be elucidated. This knowledge is highly beneficial for public health, not only because it will clarify how drinking and PIU are associated, but also because it will improve healthcare guidance for adolescents who suffer from PIU by addressing their drinking status. Therefore, in the present study, we conducted a survey on alcohol use and PIU (e.g., IA) among junior and senior high school students in Japan.

## 2. Methods

In the Japanese education system, a child enters junior high school at the age of 12 years. Junior high school is compulsory 3-year education, and those who wish to further their education may go to senior high school for another 3 years. In this report, the grades in junior high school are described as the 7th to 9th grades, and those in senior high school as the 10th to 12th grades.

The number of all registered high schools as of May 2011 in Japan was 14,621 (10,018 junior and 4603 senior high schools). Among them, 140 junior (enrollment: 65,053) and 124 senior high schools (enrollment: 101,591) were randomly selected using a

single-stage cluster sampling method with probability proportional to size. We requested the selected schools to participate on a whole-school basis.

The same number of self-administered anonymous questionnaires as the number of students enrolled in a school were sent to all selected schools. Upon arrival of the questionnaires, the responsible person at a given school determined whether the school would participate in the survey on a whole-school basis. At participating schools, the questionnaires were distributed to students by homeroom teachers. Each completed questionnaire was placed in an envelope, and then it was sealed with an adhesive flap by each student. All questionnaires were collected by teachers before being returned to us on a whole-school basis. The survey was conducted between October 2012 and March 2013. The following ethical considerations were taken account: we requested the teachers not to peer at questionnaires over students' shoulders while students were filling out the questionnaires, and we assured anonymity of the questionnaires. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Nihon University School of Medicine.

The questionnaire items used in this study were developed from questionnaires used in similar previous studies. To assess Internet use, all questions of the 8-item version of the Young Diagnostic Questionnaire for Internet Addiction (YDQ)<sup>22</sup> were translated into Japanese and added to the current questionnaire. Reliability and validity of the YDQ were verified in previous studies.<sup>23,24</sup> According to a meta-analysis by Frangos et al., the overall Cronbach's alpha of the YDQ is 0.889.<sup>23</sup> Cronbach's alpha of the YDQ in this study was 0.937. Similar to previous studies involving adolescents,<sup>5,10,25</sup> IA was defined as an affirmative answer to at least 5 of the 8 YDQ questions. We also included a question on the average number of hours spent using the Internet per weekday during the previous 30 days. EIU was defined as 5 or more hours of use per day, based on a previous study with adolescents. As IA and EIU were reported as PIU in a previous study,<sup>13</sup> we referred to both IA and EIU as PIU in the present study. With regard to alcohol consumption, we included questions on the number of days during the past 30 days on which the respondent had consumed alcohol and on the amount of alcohol consumed per session.

As a mental health indicator, the Japanese version of the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12)<sup>26,27</sup> was used. Doi et al. investigated its reliability and validity and reported that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.83 for men and 0.85 for women. We used the questions from the "depression and anxiety" and "decrease in positive feeling" factors of the GHQ-12.<sup>27</sup> One question from each of the two factors was selected for the present study, and subjects who answered affirmatively to either question were defined as having poor mental health (GHQ score  $\geq 1$ ). Previous studies have shown that evaluation of mental health status using depression symptoms with the GHQ-12 and with this cutoff point had a sensitivity of 87.0% and a specificity of 85.1%.<sup>28</sup> The Cronbach's alpha in this study was 0.816.

First, the prevalence of IA based on sex and grade was calculated. Then, the association between sex and IA was examined using a chi-square test. Calculations and analyses of EIU were performed using the same approach.

Next, the prevalence of IA based on the number of days on which alcohol was consumed was calculated. Then, an association between the number of days of alcohol use and IA was examined using a Mantel-Haenszel test for trend. Furthermore, the prevalence of IA based on the amount of alcohol consumed per drinking session was calculated. Then, an association between the amount of alcohol and IA was examined using a Mantel-Haenszel test for trend. Calculations and analyses of EIU were performed using the same approach.

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