



Research Report

Internet addiction among Chinese adolescents: The effect of parental behavior and self-control



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ABSTRACT

A cross-sectional study of a large, middle-school student sample ($N = 966$) was presented in this paper aiming to examine how parental behavior and self-control influence Internet addiction (IA) among Chinese adolescents. Fifty-one adolescents (the top 5% of IA score distribution) were categorized as at high risk. Males were more likely addicted to Internet than females. MANOVA demonstrated that, compared with non-IA group, adolescents with IA revealed lower mean score for parental positive support behavior and higher for parental negative control behavior and had lower capacity of self-control. SEM analyses revealed that low capacity of self-control had a negative correlation with parents' positive support and a positive correlation with negative control. More importantly, Internet addiction was explained negatively by parents' positive support and positively by parents' negative control and individual low capacity of self-control. Further mediating analyses indicated that self-control accounted for an indirect role between parental behavior and adolescents' Internet addiction. The findings of the present study are of significance in investigating adolescents' problem behaviors and very helpful to provide educational advice for intervening in these behaviors. Moreover, the present finding's potential relevance to Confucian styles of filial parenting was discussed.

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1. Introduction

The rapid rise of the Internet age has popularized Internet use not only for information acquisition but also for entertainments among people all over the world, especially for adolescents. More and more juveniles are absorbed in the Internet and use it for online game playing, shopping, movie watching and chatting. By the year 2011, an estimated 80% of American adolescents had access to Internet (Floros & Siomos, 2013). China Internet Network Information Center claimed that in 2010 nearly 82.9 million Chinese adolescents used the Internet habitually (CNNIC, 2011), and three years later the number had scaled up to approximately 148.9 million, which accounted for 24.1% of 618 million netizens across China, and it keeps rising (CNNIC, 2014).

Internet is a double-edged sword, limited Internet use is beneficial, but excessive and uncontrolled Internet use brings out many maladaptive problems, such as academic failure, social isolation and withdrawal, negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, depression, loneliness), delinquencies (e.g., lying, hostility), decreased quality of life (e.g., lower perceived well-being, self-esteem and life satisfaction)

and even psychiatric disorders (Bulut-Serin, 2011; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Hardie & Tee, 2007; Jang, Hwang, & Choi, 2008; Kim & Davis, 2009; Ko, Yen, Yen, Chen, & Chen, 2012; Li, Garland, & Howard, 2014; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006; Yen, Ko, Yen, Wu, & Yang, 2007), especially during adolescence, if some predisposing personal and contextual factors are present (Pace et al., 2014). So it's necessary to identify the protective and risky factors of adolescents Internet addiction and come up with some educational strategies.

With the awareness of negative influences of Internet addiction on adolescents' mental health and behaviors enhancing widely, lots of efforts have been made to explain why more and more adolescents spend most of their time on the Internet playing games or sending instant messages, which is long enough to induce psychological dysfunction, and what we can do to prevent such a situation. Various individual characteristics (e.g., impulsivity, shyness, introversion, social withdrawal, aggression, poor self-control, narcissist personality) and family components (e.g., social economic status, attachment, parenting style, parent-adolescent conflict, parental monitoring, family function, family cohesion and adaptability) were considered to be contributing factors to Internet addiction (Cao, Sun, Wan, Hao, & Tao, 2011; Griffiths & Dancaster, 1995; Kim, Namkoong, Ku, & Kim, 2008; Lee & Jung, 2012; Lei & Wu, 2007; Leung & Lee, 2012; Li, 2007; Li, Du, Jing, &

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Wang, 2006; Liang, Tang, & Tao, 2007; Yen, Ko, Yen, Chang, & Cheng, 2009; Yen, Ko, et al., 2007; Yen, Yen, Chen, Chen, & Ko, 2007). Previous studies have demonstrated that there existed remarkable differences between IA and non-IA adolescents with regard to individual and family factors, but seldom examined how these two aspects of factors affected Internet use collectively.

The present study aimed to not only assess the prevalence of IA among middle school students in China and compare adolescents with/without IA in terms of parental behavior and the capacity of self-control, but also to elucidate the modulating effect of self-control and parental on Internet addiction. In addition, the present study tried to discuss the potential contribution of traditional filial piety on Chinese adolescents who are deeply influenced by the Confucianism.

1.1. Definition of Internet addiction

The excessive use of Internet has been referred to as several different terms. After analyzing the definition of substance abuse in DSM-IV, Goldberg (1995) introduced the term “Internet addiction disorder (IAD)” and deemed it as a way to relieve stress. Young (1996) came up with the term “problematic Internet use (PIU)” which was derived from the diagnostic criteria of pathological gambling in DSM-IV, suggesting Internet addiction was more like an impulsive control disorder. Hall and Parsons (2001) employed the term “Internet behavior dependence (IBD)” and counted it as a kind of maladjustment of cognitive response which could be corrected by cognitive-behavioral intervention.

However in China, most researchers termed the excessive use of Internet as “Internet addiction” and emphasized not only the core symptoms of excessive Internet use, such as salience, tolerance and withdrawal symptoms, but also the related problems of Internet addiction, such as physical condition, time management and social functioning (Chen, Weng, Su, Wu, & Yang, 2003). This definition is appropriate to some extent given that existing researches suggested that Internet addiction and drug addiction might share the same neurobiological brain circuitry. For example, as also found in substance abuse (Bolla et al., 2004; Gaetano & Valentina, 2007), the Internet addicted employed more brain regions (e.g., the parietal lobe, cerebellum anterior lobe, thalamus and midbrain) to finish impulse control task efficiently (Cao, 2007), have higher reward dependency than controls (Han et al., 2007), and suffer from higher level of striatal dopamine (Koeppe, Gunn, Lawrence, et al., 1998) which might impair the function of prefronto-striatal loops, leading to dysfunction in impulse control and decision making.

1.2. Parental behavior

According to Bio-ecological System Theory, individual adaptive competence is largely influenced by the environment nearby (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Family is the earliest and closest environment to which a person has access, therefore, parental behaviors may exert an essential role in individual development. Researchers (Gallagher, 2002; Maccoby & Martin, 1983) differentiated two dimensions of parenting style and Van Leeuwen and Vermulst (2004) renamed them positive parenting and negative control, the former emphasizing affective nature of the parent-child relationship and the latter describing efforts of parents to influence their child's behavior. Each dimension is consisted of many specific parental behaviors, for example, positive parenting includes teaching rules, granting autonomy, care and emotional support, etc., and negative control includes harsh punishment, discipline, ignoring of unwanted behavior and so on. The combination of different parental behaviors was seen as the best predictor of youth development (Pan, Gauvain, & Schwartz, 2013), and in this

sense, consideration into both of parents' affective support and behavioral control is essential when we investigate parenting factors that may influence adolescents' psychological development and problem behavior, such as Internet addiction.

Recently, more and more research found that youth with Internet addiction reported significantly more global dissatisfaction with their parents and families than did their counterparts (Lam, Peng, Mai, & Jing, 2009), which reminded researchers to pay more attention to the influence of parental behavior on adolescents' use of Internet. For example, parents' emotional support (Schimmenti, Guglielmucci, Barbasio, & Granieri, 2012) and care (Yen, Ko, et al., 2007; Yen, Yen, et al., 2007; Yen et al., 2009) were considered as protective factors to low level of adolescents' addiction, whereas the lack of familial affective involvement (Pace et al., 2014), high family conflict and low parental monitoring (Yen, Ko, et al., 2007; Yen, Yen, et al., 2007; Yen et al., 2009), parental abuse and preoccupation with relationship (Schimmenti, Passanisi, Gervasi, Manzella, & Famà, 2013) resulted from parents' emotional neglect (i.e., antipathy, Schimmenti & Bifulco, 2013) acted as risky factors of Internet salience conversely.

1.3. Self-control

Researchers indicated that many problem behaviors (e.g., being heavily in debt, driving without license) could be attributed to an individual's low level of self-control (Keane, Maxim, & Teevan, 1993; Tittle, Ward, & Grasmick, 2003) and the failure of self-control may also be an important cause of addictive behavior, such as alcoholic addiction and Internet addiction (Kim et al., 2008; Lee & Shin, 2004; Oh, 2003). Self-control, namely the capacity to control or regulate one's emotion, cognition and behaviors, is central to competent functioning (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Vazsonyi & Huang, 2010) and poor self-control was deemed as a predictor of social maladaptation (Cecil, Barker, Jaffee, & Viding, 2012). People with low self-control are characterized as impulsive, insensitive, physical, risk-taking, short-sighted, and less verbal (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), in other words, they pursue immediate gratification, prefer shortcuts, enjoy taking risk, like physical rather than mental activities, tend to be self-centered and have less tolerance. Therefore, it can be inferred that adolescents with low self-control probably fail to resist the temptation of Internet and cannot control their use of Internet and guard against the addictive potential.

1.4. Parental behavior and self-control

According to the general theory of crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), low self-control derives from ineffective childhood socialization in which parents fail to monitor the child's behavior and recognize and punish misbehavior when it occurs. Ample evidence in the literature demonstrated that parenting has robust influence on self-control (Cullen, Unnever, Wright, & Beaver, 2008; Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007). Children and adolescents who grow up in a warm and supportive family and can obtain enough care when they are in need, are better able to control their emotion, concentrate on tasks and engage in goal-directed behaviors than those who suffer from parents' unresponsiveness, hostility or neglect in their daily life (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Maccoby, 2000). Individuals acquire the capacity of self-control through several social processes: secure and strong parent-child attachment (Drake, Belsky, & Fearon, 2014; Kim, Jay, & Pasco, 2014), effective supervision, rewards for favorable behaviors, recognition of and punishment for deviant behavior (de Hann, Prinzie, & Dekovic, 2010; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Maladaptive parenting, such as excessive constraint, indulgence or frequent parent-child conflict, can be a risky factor for children's failure in self-control (Vazsonyi & Huang, 2010). Consistently, it's also suggested that

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