



## Research report

# Parent marital conflict and Internet addiction among Chinese college students: The mediating role of father-child, mother-child, and peer attachment



Xiaojun Yang <sup>a, b</sup>, Lei Zhu <sup>a, b</sup>, Qin Chen <sup>a, b</sup>, Pingping Song <sup>a, b</sup>, Zhenhong Wang <sup>a, b, \*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Psychology, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an 710062, China

<sup>b</sup> Shaanxi Provincial Key Laboratory of Behavior & Cognitive Neuroscience, Xi'an 710062, China

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## ABSTRACT

Previous studies have emphasized the effect of parent marital conflict on youth's Internet addiction. However, few researchers have examined the mediating role of parent-child attachment and peer attachment between marital conflict and Internet addiction. To fill in this gap, this study aims to examine whether father-child, mother-child, and peer attachment play a mediating role between parent marital conflict and Internet addiction. This cross-sectional study included 450 college students in two Universities in China. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted to examine research questions. Results showed that Internet addiction was positively associated with marital conflict and negatively associated with peer attachment. Moreover, both mother-child and father-child attachment mediated the relationship between marital conflict and Internet addiction through peer attachment. To our knowledge, this was the first study examining the mediating role of parent-child and peer attachment between parent marital conflict and youth's Internet addiction. Our findings suggested that educational workers should pay more attention on the development of youth's parent-child and their peer attachment, because youth's attachment played an important role in youth's Internet addiction. Moreover, our findings emphasized that father and mother both important people on the development of youth's peer attachment, which may in turn influence youth's Internet addiction.

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## 1. Introduction

With the widely use of Internet, Internet addiction has become a serious problem among adolescents and young adults (Kaltiala-Heino, Lintonen, & Rimpelä, 2004; Park, Kang, & Kim, 2014; Young & Rogers, 1998). On the precise definition of Internet addiction, there was no consensus in previous studies (Davies & Windle, 2001; Young, 1998). Davies and Windle (2001) considered Internet addiction as a pathological Internet use rather than an addicted behavior, and the over-use of Internet can create social, school, and psychological problems in youth's daily life. In contrast, several others defined Internet addiction as an addicted behavior, and can be regarded as an impulse-control disorder that is unlike the normal substance addiction (Young, 1998). In this study, we

followed the definition of Young (1998), and considered those individuals who appeared to be excessive, obsessive, dependent and uncontrollable on the Internet using as having Internet addiction. Internet addiction of youth may cause negative developmental outcomes including low academic performance (Huang et al., 2009; Park et al., 2014), poor dietary habits (Kim et al., 2010), aggressive behavior of society (Cui, Zhao, Wu, & Xu, 2006), partner interaction anxiety (Odaci & Kalkan, 2010), conflictive family relationships (De Leo & Wulfert, 2013), and higher risks of suicidal ideation and attempt (K. Kim et al., 2006; Lin et al., 2014).

Several empirical studies have been conducted to examine the possible causes of youth's Internet addiction, including external factors and internal factors. For example, as external factors, online communication programs (e.g., email use and instant messaging) and online games (Chou & Hsiao, 2000; van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, & Engels, 2008; Tone, Zhao, & Yan, 2014; Yadav, Banwari, Parmar, & Maniar, 2013) were found positively related to youth's Internet addiction. As for internal factors, emotional attachment (Zhang, Wu, & Lei, 2009), personality traits

\* Corresponding author. School of Psychology, Shaanxi Normal University, 199 South Chang'an Road, Xi'an 710062, China.

E-mail address: [wangzhenhong@snnu.edu.cn](mailto:wangzhenhong@snnu.edu.cn) (Z. Wang).

such as low agreeableness and emotional stability (Charlton & Danforth, 2010; Yang & Lei, 2007), loneliness (Bozoglan, Demirel, & Sahin, 2013), low self-control (Özdemir, Kuzucu, & Ak, 2014), and low self-esteem (Park et al., 2014) were positively associated with youth's Internet addiction.

Recently, increasing number of studies has emphasized the important impact of family on youth's Internet addiction. Specifically, studies have found that parent marital conflict predicted a severe Internet addiction of youth (De Leo & Wulfert, 2013; Kalaitzaki & Birtchnell, 2014; Ko, Yen, Yen, Lin, & Yang, 2007; Li, Garland, & Howard, 2014; Wang et al., 2011; Yen, Yen, Chen, Chen, & Ko, 2007). It is important to examine the underlying mechanisms in the association of parent marital conflict with youth's Internet addiction, as a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms may offer valuable suggestions to clinicians, educational workers, and policy-makers to design more effective treatments and prevention programs targeting youth's Internet addiction.

### 1.1. The role of parent marital conflict on youth's Internet addiction

The family system theory (Bowen, 1966) regards family as a basic emotional unit. This theory assumes that pressure from emotional conflict between any two family members can spread into a family triangulation that is a minimum stable emotional unit formed by father, mother, and child. Marital conflict, as an important stressor in the family, may cause children's problematic behavior (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). Specifically, empirical studies have indeed found that parent marital conflict could influence youth's Internet addiction. For example, several studies have found that the perceived marital conflict of youth could significantly predict one's signs of addictive online behavior (De Leo & Wulfert, 2013; Luo & Peng, 2008; Peng & Zhou, 2007; Wang et al., 2011; Yen et al., 2007). In line with these empirical findings, a recent review also emphasized the role of a conflictual family environment on youth's Internet addiction (Li et al., 2014). They found that youth with Internet addiction were more likely to suffer from dysfunctional family problems including parent marital conflict. Following these findings, we assumed that parent marital conflict could negatively predict youth's Internet addiction.

### 1.2. The association of parent marital conflict with parent-child and peer attachment

According to the emotion secure hypothesis theory (Davies & Cummings, 1994), when children perceive parental conflict, they may feel insecure and appear to be fear with parents and/or be away from them. This may cause children's insecure attachment with their family. Attachment in family can be defined as an enduring emotional bond with either parents or peers (Ainsworth, 1989). Empirical studies have explored the association between marital conflict and children's attachment. For example, researchers have found that a higher level of parent marital conflict was positively associated with children's hostility in both father- and mother-child attachment relationships, which may also predict a problematic peer relationship (Owen & Cox, 1997; Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). Therefore, it can be assumed that parent marital conflict was negatively related to youth's parent-child attachment (i.e., father-child attachment and mother-child attachment) and peer attachment.

### 1.3. Father-child attachment, mother-child attachment, and peer attachment

Parent-child attachment and peer attachment are positively

related. The early attachment theory indicates that a better parent-child relationship could positively influence the development of peer attachment (Bowlby, 1980). This theory suggests that interaction with parents during infancy period could form an internal working model of children in relation to parents, which includes the expectancy about the reliability and availability of important others and the beliefs about personal worthiness of love and support. Attachments formed during infancy may persist throughout individual's whole life and generalize to relationships with others, and may influence individual's affect, cognition, and behaviors in subsequent attachment quality including peer attachment (Bowlby, 1980; Ma & Huebner, 2008). Specifically, empirical research has found that peer-attachment was an important mediator between parental-child attachment and several other factors (e.g., adolescents' life satisfactory, positive social adjustment, and anxiety) (Chen & Feng, 2013; Ma & Huebner, 2008; Wu & Wang, 2014).

Moreover, although researchers normally assumed that father-child attachment was less important than mother-child attachment, father-child attachment has been recently confirmed to have unique contribution to the formation of good peer relationship (Emmanuelle, 2009; Lieberman, Doyle, & Markiewicz, 1999; Lindsey, Caldera, & Tankersley, 2009). The meta-analysis of Fox, Kimmerly, and Schafer (1991) has indicated that secure attachment to one parent was dependent upon the security to the other parent. They indicated that father-child attachment and mother-child attachment was similar. Thus, we assumed that the role of father was as important as mother on youths' development of peer attachment.

### 1.4. The relationship between attachment and Internet addiction

A poor parent-child attachment has been found to be a risk factor contributing to children's addictive online behavior (Lei & Wu, 2007; Luo & Peng, 2008). Moreover, previous studies have found different roles of father-child and mother-child attachment in youth's Internet addiction. For example, a good quality of father-child relationship negatively predicted adolescents' Internet addiction directly and indirectly through loneliness, whereas the mother-child relationship merely has an indirect negative effect on Internet addiction through loneliness (Zhang et al., 2011). On the dimensions of parent-child attachment, researchers have found that a high level of father-child trust could predict a low level of adolescents' Internet addiction, and mother-child alienation positively predicted youth's problematic behavior (Deng, Fang, Wu, Zhang, & Liu, 2013).

Moreover, several studies also examined the role of youth's peer attachment in their Internet addiction, and found that the quality of peer-attachment contributed to Internet addiction of adolescents (Lei & Wu, 2009; Li et al., 2014). Specifically, Lei and Wu (2009) have found that peer-attachment could negatively predict adolescents' Internet addiction. On the dimensions of peer attachment, studies have found peer alienation could directly predict adolescent's Internet addiction, whereas peer trust and communication have indirect effects on Internet addiction through online games preference and self-identification. Following these findings, it can be assumed that mother-child, father-child, and peer attachment were significantly related with youth's Internet addiction.

### 1.5. The mediating role of attachment between parent marital conflict and Internet addiction

Regarding the underlying mechanisms in the association of parent marital conflict with youths' Internet addiction, parent-child attachment has been found to be a mediator between the two. Specifically, a study found that both father-child attachment and

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