



Family factors in Internet addiction among Chinese youth: A review of English- and Chinese-language studies



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ABSTRACT

Approximately 513 million Chinese citizens used the Internet in 2011, with adolescents reporting comparatively high levels of use. Although numerous studies (reviewed herein) indicate that Internet Addiction/Pathological Internet Use (IA/PIU) is endemic among Chinese youth and trending upward, no prior review has examined family correlates of IA/PIU in Chinese youth. Thus, our principal aim was to evaluate methodological features and substantive findings of all studies examining family correlates of IA/PIU in Chinese youth. Internet, demographic, psychosocial, and psychiatric/behavioral correlates of IA/PIU, and prevalence estimates for adolescent IA/PIU, were also examined using the large set of studies evaluated in association with our principal aim. Comprehensive bibliographic searches identified 42 pertinent investigations. Youth with IA/PIU reported greater global dissatisfaction with their families; less organized, cohesive and adaptable families; greater inter-parental and parent–child conflict; and perceived their parents as more punitive, and less supportive, warm, and involved compared to non-IA youth. IA/PIU youth were significantly more likely to have divorced parents, live with a single parent, and be an only child than non-IA/PIU youth. IA/PIU is prevalent among Chinese youth and associated with diverse family, psychosocial and psychiatric/behavioral impairments, but rarely is the focus of prevention and treatment interventions.

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1. Introduction

More than half-a-billion Chinese citizens accessed the Internet in 2011, according to the 29th national survey of the China Internet Network Information Center ([China Internet Network Information Center, 2012](#)). The 513 million Internet users in China in 2011 represented a 545% increase over the 94 million such users in 2004. The percentage of Chinese citizens older than age 6 who were Internet users likewise increased dramatically, from 7.2% in 2004 to 38.3% in 2011. Record numbers of Chinese citizens also reported use of mobile phones (356 million) and home broadband services (392 million) to access the Internet in 2011 ([China Internet Network Information Center, 2012](#)).

Chinese Internet users were not only (by far) the world's most numerous in 2011, they also spent an average of nearly 1000 h each on the Internet that year. That is, Chinese Internet users were online an average of 18.7 h a week, an increase of nearly a half-hour compared to 2010 ([China Internet Network Information Center, 2012](#)).

Although widespread adoption of the Internet in China has significantly enhanced business and social communication and provided citizens with a key tool for the acquisition of information and entertainment ([Shek, Ma, & Sun, 2011](#)), there is mounting concern (and a rapidly rising number of supportive empirical reports) that some citizens, particularly adolescents and young adults, are developing pathological patterns of Internet use ([Yen et al., 2012](#)). In the rapidly burgeoning literature in this area, seriously dysfunctional patterns of excessive Internet use are often referred to as Internet Addiction (IA) or Pathological Internet Use (PIU) ([Bowen & Firestone, 2011; Zhang et al., 2012](#)). Numerous reports, reviewed below, have identified substantial rates of IA/PIU in Chinese adolescents and young adults, although the measures and criteria used to identify IA and PIU have often varied across studies. Typically, IA/PIU criteria based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) criteria for substance use disorders or pathological gambling emphasize signs and symptoms of preoccupation with the Internet, increasing amounts of time spent on the Internet (i.e., tolerance), discomfiting psychological and/or physical experiences when unable to access the Internet (i.e., withdrawal), unsuccessful efforts to quit or reduce Internet use, recurrent Internet use despite awareness of its deleterious consequences, loss of hobbies, friendships, and a general narrowing of the behavioral repertoire due to excessive Internet use,

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and Internet use to cope with negative moods and interpersonal conflict (Shaw & Black, 2008).

Numerous questionnaires have been developed that purport to assess IA/PIU. Lortie and Guitton (2013) recently examined 14 such measures and evaluated the extent to which they examined common dimensions of IA/PIU. Most questionnaires assessed negative outcomes of excessive Internet use (86%), compulsive Internet use including loss of control over use (79%), and salience of Internet use including anticipation of and cognitive preoccupation with Internet use (71%). Use of the Internet to regulate mood was assessed somewhat less commonly (43%), but is a prominent component of Caplan's (2010) cognitive-behavioral model of generalized problematic Internet use and the Generalized Problematic Internet Use Scale-2 he developed to assess components of the model. Other dimensions assessed less often included use of the Internet for purposes of "escapism," withdrawal symptoms following cessation of Internet use, and a preference for social interaction via the Internet rather than in face-to-face contexts. Lortie and Guitton (2013) noted that instruments purporting to assess IA/PIU often do not include measures of social motivations for Internet use, rarely examine the prognostic utility of these measures vis-à-vis efforts to quit or reduce problematic Internet use, and often employ unvalidated cutpoints for defining IA/PIU. Like Lortie and Guitton (2013), our survey of studies examining family factors related to IA/PIU identified a large number of diverse instruments assessing IA/PIU. Given that these instruments often assessed different facets of IA/PIU in different ways, it should be borne in mind that measurement differences could have significant implications for the interpretation of our study findings, especially with regard to reported IA/PIU prevalence rates. For example, Ko, Yen, Yen, Lin, and Yang (2007) and Ko, Yen, Liu, Huang, and Yen (2009) employed the Chinese Internet Addiction Scale, a 26-item instrument scored with a Likert-type (1 = not at all; 4 = very much) response format that assesses tolerance and withdrawal symptoms, compulsive internet use, and interpersonal, health-related and time management problems associated with IA/PIU. Many other studies we reviewed used Young's Diagnostic Questionnaire (YDQ) (e.g., Chou & Hsiao, 2000), adapted from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, an approach with insufficiently established validity that is relatively crude in measurement terms (Lortie & Guitton, 2013). In some cases, (e.g., Chou & Hsiao, 2000) youth were diagnosed with IA/PIU only if they exceeded cutpoints for IA/PIU on multiple different measures. As noted by Lortie and Guitton (2013), most of the cutpoints employed in the studies we reviewed were not adequately validated.

The notion that family factors may play an important role in the onset and intensification of adolescent IA/PIU has been the focus of considerable theorizing and empirical work in recent years. Further, it is conceivable that IA/PIU in adolescents and young adults could contribute to family disharmony in a multiplicity of manners. However, family factors associated with IA/PIU in Chinese youth have not, to our knowledge, previously been reviewed (Ko, Yen, Yen, Chen, & Chen, 2012). Thus, the primary aim of this investigation was to systematically review the methodological characteristics and substantive findings of English- and Chinese-language studies evaluating family correlates of IA/PIU in Chinese (including Taiwanese and Hong Kong) adolescents and young adults. A secondary aim of this review was to examine IA/PIU prevalence estimates and Internet, demographic, psychiatric, and behavioral correlates of IA/PIU in Chinese youth identified in the set of 42 family factors studies we reviewed in association with our primary aim. Findings of this review could lead to increased understanding of the role family factors play in the etiology of IA/PIU among Chinese youth and to greater appreciation of the manifold adverse effects of excessive Internet use on family functioning.

2. Methods

Several methods were employed to ensure that the search for pertinent studies was encompassing. First, *PubMed* and *PsychInfo* databases were selected for searching because, together, they index ~24 million biomedical and psychosocial research records, have sophisticated search features including controlled language Thesauri, and provide coverage of more than 8000 journals including approximately 90 leading Chinese-language journals. Initial searches were conducted on May, 18, 2012. The search phrase "Internet addiction" was used to conduct free-text searches with no limits in both bibliographic databases and yielded 256 relevant records in *PubMed* and 594 records in *PsychInfo*. Each abstract of all identified records was then read and reviewed for relevance by two independent raters who determined whether each article reported any findings related to family factors in adolescent/young adult Chinese citizens with IA/PIU. Both reviewers took an inclusive approach, whereby any study that examined IA/PIU in Chinese adolescents and young adults that evaluated IA/PIU in relation to family structure variables, family sociodemographics, family functioning and climate, attitudes toward family, parenting practices, and relationship with parents was selected for inclusion in the review. Specific family factors identified included global dissatisfaction with parents or family; high inter-parental, parent-child, or general family conflict; family stress; family organization; relationships with fathers, mothers, or parents that were low in trust, communication, involvement, support, monitoring, warmth, and love; parenting practices characterized by greater authoritarianism, disengagement, alienation, punitiveness and rejection toward youth; parental use of corporal punishment; and parental and sibling alcohol and drug use and attitudes supportive of substance use. Family socioeconomic status, parental occupational and educational status, status as an only child or only child at home, birth order status, parental marital status, family recreational practices, and other family variables were examined.

Adolescents and young adults who were the focus of this review were in junior and senior high school or were college undergraduates or were members of corresponding age groups. There was near unanimity of the two raters (i.e., W.L., M.O.H.) with regard to identification of relevant articles, with the two raters differing only with respect to the inclusion of two studies. In these two cases, the final decision vis-à-vis inclusion of the studies was made by the senior author and in both cases the decision was to include the studies (M.O.H.). The first author is fully bilingual in Chinese and English, whereas the second and third authors are native English-speakers. In selecting and reporting findings, the authors consistently reported the precise terms used the papers themselves (e.g., alienation, authoritarianism, etc.) in order to avoid translation issues to the fullest extent possible. *PubMed* and *PsychInfo* provide substantial coverage of Chinese-language studies of IA/PIU and include English-language abstracts for these studies. Chinese-language articles were then read in their entirety and abstracted by the first author of this paper, whereas English-language articles were read and abstracted by the last author. Three raters then reviewed all entries in Tables 1 and 2 to ensure their accuracy.

A total of 42 relevant studies were identified: 24 English-language reports and 18 Chinese-language reports. More specific searches were later conducted on September 6, 2012 by combining the search terms, "Internet addiction," "Pathological Internet Use," Chinese, "Taiwanese," "Hong Kong," and "family." These searches yielded the same 42 reports as identified previously. Thus, the searches performed were comprehensive and reliable. However, it is possible that some Chinese-language studies were not identified because *PubMed* and *PsychInfo* do not provide exhaustive coverage of the Chinese-language scientific literature.

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