



## Research paper

# Association between parental marital conflict and Internet addiction: A moderated mediation analysis



Tingting Gao<sup>a</sup>, Xiangfei Meng<sup>b,c</sup>, Zeying Qin<sup>a</sup>, Han Zhang<sup>a</sup>, Jinglei Gao<sup>a</sup>, Yixi Kong<sup>a</sup>, Yueyang Hu<sup>a</sup>, Songli Mei<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Public Health, Jilin University, NO. 1163 Xinmin Street, Changchun, Jilin Province, China

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, McGill University, 6875 Boul. LaSalle, Verdun, H4H1R3, Montreal, Canada

<sup>c</sup> Douglas Mental Health University Institute, 6875 Boul. LaSalle, Verdun, H4H1R3, Montreal, Canada

## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Parental marital conflict  
Depression  
Anxiety  
Peer attachment  
Internet addiction  
Moderated mediation analysis

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The effect of parental marital conflict on Internet addiction has been well-established; however, little is known regarding the underlying mechanism of this effect. The aim of this study was to explore the mediating effect of depression and anxiety, as well as the role of peer attachment as a moderator in this relation between parental marital conflict and Internet addiction.

**Methods:** The moderated mediation analysis was tested using data from a cross-sectional sample of 2259 high school students who completed questionnaires regarding marital conflict, depression, anxiety, peer attachment and Internet addiction.

**Results:** The results indicated that the effect of parental marital conflict on Internet addiction was mediated by depression and anxiety. In addition, peer attachment moderated the association between parental marital conflict and depression/anxiety.

**Conclusions:** This study helps to elucidate the mechanism underlying the association between parental marital conflict and Internet addiction.

## 1. Introduction

In the era of modern technology, the Internet has become an essential component of our daily life. As of December 2017, the number of Internet users reached 772 million in China, the largest proportion of which was the student group, accounting for 25.4% (China Internet Network Information Center, 2018). Excessive or problematic use of the Internet has been a worldwide phenomenon and is increasingly common in adolescents. Internet addiction (IA) is described as an impulse control problem with an inability to control Internet use that results in a deleterious influence on major life domains (Young, 1998). Internet addiction was significantly associated with numerous negative influences, such as psychological problems, physical problems, poor sleep quality and academic performance (Bener, 2017; Kim et al., 2017; Ko et al., 2012; Upadhyay and Guragain, 2017). However, Internet addiction in adolescents did not bring sufficient attention to the school and family.

Family is the major living environment holding an important influence over the socialization of children (Lovelandcherry, 2000). A

poor family environment may reduce adolescents' sense of security and may significantly increase the risk of individuals' psychological and behavioral problems. The family system theory (Ackerman, 1984; Bowen, 1966) considers family to be a basic emotional unit that has the quality of maintaining the homeostasis of the system. It may be easy to disrupt the system if parents have conflicts with each other. When children perceive the system instability brought about by parental marital conflict, they may engage in problematic behavior. Consistent with this theory, several empirical studies found that parental marital conflict could contribute to Internet addiction (Wu et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2016). A prospective investigation revealed that parental marital conflict was the greatest predictor of Internet addiction (Ko et al., 2015).

While the association between parental marital conflict and Internet addiction has been confirmed by relevant studies, the mediating (how to influence) and moderating (when the influence is more significant) mechanisms underlying this association warrant further investigation.

A line of theory and empirical studies showed that perceptions of interparental conflict have adverse effects on children's psychological

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [gaoting1123@sina.com](mailto:gaoting1123@sina.com) (T. Gao), [xiangfei.meng@mcgill.ca](mailto:xiangfei.meng@mcgill.ca) (X. Meng), [zeyingqin@sina.com](mailto:zeyingqin@sina.com) (Z. Qin), [zhanghanwf@163.com](mailto:zhanghanwf@163.com) (H. Zhang), [13194312508@163.com](mailto:13194312508@163.com) (J. Gao), [13904412998@163.com](mailto:13904412998@163.com) (Y. Kong), [18844194244@163.com](mailto:18844194244@163.com) (Y. Hu), [meisongli@sina.com](mailto:meisongli@sina.com) (S. Mei).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2018.07.005>

Received 16 May 2018; Received in revised form 25 June 2018; Accepted 1 July 2018

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well-being. Exposure to parental marital conflict leaves children in an emotionally unpleasant family environment, which children are more susceptible to perceive as they become older (Turner and Barrett, 1998). Parental marital conflict, as an important stressor in the lives of children, is one of the most powerful correlates of an individual's mental health problems (Hayatbakhsh et al., 2013). According to the cognitive-contextual framework (Grych and Fincham, 1990), the appraisal of meaning of parental marital conflict is correlated to how children function. This theory states that children make cognitive appraisal, ascription of blame and expectations regarding the coping efficacy. Children who blame themselves for parental conflict may exhibit depression, while children who perceive the conflict as a threat to the appraisal of being may suffer from anxiety. The emotional security hypothesis (Davies and Cummings, 1994) indicated that the constant parental conflict could lead to a child's sense of emotional insecurity. Not only a long-term negative emotional state but also the inappropriate parental conflict ascription of blame will increase the risk of mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety. In addition, a systematic review demonstrated that depression is one of the most important co-morbid disorders with Internet addiction (Carli et al., 2013). Several studies reported depression as a causal factor predicting IA in the follow-up period (Bin et al., 2013; Ko et al., 2009). A longitudinal study found stability in the relationship between anxiety and IA over time (Stavropoulos et al., 2017). Both depression and anxiety were significantly associated with IA (Kim et al., 2016). Individuals with negative feelings may use the Internet as a self-medication measure to cope with mental health problems (Khantizian, 1991; Lai et al., 2015). When the Internet user experiences the relief of depression and anxiety temporarily, he is vulnerable to addiction (Bozkurt et al., 2013). Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Depression and anxiety would mediate the association between parental marital conflict and Internet addiction. Specifically, parental marital conflict would be positively associated with depression and anxiety, which would, in turn, be positively associated to Internet addiction.

During adolescence, children generally experience a transition from depending on parents to depending on peers (Raja et al., 1992). With the increase in age, adolescents spend more time with their peers; therefore, peers become another environmental factor influencing their development. Individuals with a high level of secure attachment are less inclined to observe stressors and are more prone to seek coping styles against stress actively (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006). Therefore, securely peer attached adolescents might be less influenced by parental marital conflict. A meta-analysis indicated that insecure peer attachment increased an individual's vulnerability to suffer from depression and anxiety (Gorrese, 2015). Compared with a high level of peer attachment, adolescents with a low level of peer attachment are more likely to lack emotional support and will be more likely to experience depression and anxiety. Peer attachment was found to be a moderator in the relationship between exposure to violence and internalizing problems (Salzinger et al., 2011). A multiple mediation model found that good peer relationships may relieve depression of elementary school students, ultimately leading to a low level of Internet addiction (Zhou et al., 2017). Insecure peer attachment may amplify the negative influence of parental marital conflict on IA; however, the relevant empirical studies are relatively scarce. The present study will verify the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Peer attachment would moderate the indirect association between parental marital conflict and Internet addiction via depression/anxiety. Specifically, the indirect association between parental marital conflict and Internet addiction would be stronger for high school students with lower peer attachment than for those higher in peer attachment (Fig. 1).

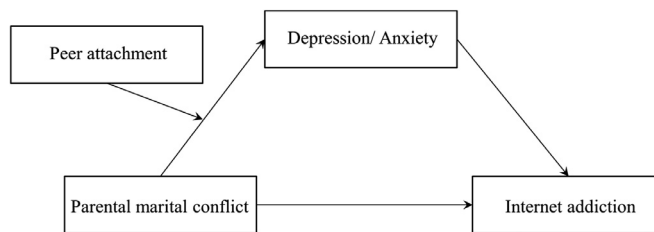


Fig. 1. The conceptual framework of the moderated mediation model.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were students recruited using the convenient method from a senior high school in Jilin Province, China. The well-trained data collector guided participants to complete paper questionnaires in the classroom. A total of 2378 students participated in this study; however, 2259 questionnaires were collected after excluding incomplete ones. The cross-sectional study was conducted from October to November 2017. This study has received approval from the Research Ethical Committee of Jilin University. We obtained verbal consent from school administrators and students before data collection.

### 2.2. Instruments

#### 2.2.1. Children's perceptions of interparental conflict (CPIC)

Parental marital conflict was assessed using the Chinese version of children's perceptions of interparental conflict (CPIC) (Chi and Xin, 2003). The CPIC scale was developed originally by Grych et al. (1992). We only adopted the characters of conflict subscale, which contained 19 items and three dimensions, including conflict frequency (6 items), conflict intensity (7 items), and conflict resolution (6 items). Items were rated on a 4-point scale extending from 1 (never) to 4 (always). The higher scores represented the higher level of conflict. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the subscale of characters of conflict was 0.91.

#### 2.2.2. Depression, anxiety, stress scale (DASS-21)

The Chinese version of DASS-21, a revision based on the version by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995), was used to measure the level of depression, anxiety and stress over the previous week (Gong et al., 2010). This questionnaire comprises three subscales and each domain consists seven items. We adopted the depression subscale and anxiety subscale, which were answered on a 4-point Likert scale from 0 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much or most of the time). Higher scores revealed more severe mental health symptoms. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for depression subscale and anxiety subscale were 0.86 and 0.79, respectively.

#### 2.2.3. Inventory of parent and peer attachment (IPPA)

Peer attachment was assessed using a subscale from the inventory of parent and peer attachment (IPPA), comprising 25 items (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987). This inventory had three subscales, including trust (10 items), communication (9 items), and alienation (6 items). Each item was scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = almost never true, 5 = almost always true), with higher scores indicating more secure peer attachment. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for peer attachment was 0.93.

#### 2.2.4. Young's diagnostic questionnaire (YDQ)

Internet addiction was assessed using YDQ, which was composed of eight yes (1)/no (0) questions (Young, 1998). The total scores ranged

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