THE THINKING ABOUT THE CHARACTERISTICS, CAUSES AND COUNTERMEASURES OF ADOLESCENT INTERNET ADDICTION IN CHINA

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Abstraction

As a new clinic 'disease' or 'disorder', internet addiction has caught attention by more and more researchers. China is a special developing country with the biggest population in the world. This paper focuses on discussing the characteristics and causes of adolescent internet addiction of China. Finally, this paper outlines the predicaments and countermeasures of the treatment of adolescent internet addiction in China.

Keywords

Internet addiction, adolescent, characteristic, cause, predicament, countermeasure, China.

Znaky a příčiny závislosti čínských adolescentů na internetu, možnosti nápravy

Resumé

Závislost na internetu je nová nemoc či porucha, která v současnosti přitahuje zájem stále více odborníků. Čína je země se speciálně rychlým rozvojem a s největší populací na světě. Příspěvek se zaměřuje na diskusi o znacích a příčinách vzniku této závislosti u adolescentů v Číně. Také se zabývá možnostmi nápravy, případně léčby.

Klíčová slova

Závislost na internetu, adolescent, znak, příčina, léčba, náprava, Čína.

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Background of the emergence of internet addiction

The concept of internet addiction was put forward firstly by I. Goldberg in 1990 (Young, 1998), and then it was developed by Dr. Kimberly Young. Internet addiction is a new kind of addictive action along with the development of modern information technology. It had appeared in many countries and is becoming more serious (Young, 1998; Kim K, 2006; Xia, 2003). Internet addiction appeared in China relatively later comparing with other developed countries, but it has developed very fast and brought much developmental impairment not only to the teenagers but also to the whole society.

With increasing of amount of clinical cases, researchers have paid more and more attention to internet addiction. There are several different appellations for the phenomenon of internet addiction, such as internet addiction (IA), pathological internet use (PIU), internet addiction disorder (IAD) and problematic internet use (PIU) and so on. All of them include the approximate basic content refers to excess in using internet, which affects individual daily living, learning and work, and at the same time, damaging the individual's physical and psychological health. It is appearing to be a growing social concern. More and more researchers have interests to do some research in this area.

What is Internet Addiction?

Internet addiction is a new pathological phenomenon comparing with other substance addiction, such as alcohol addiction, drugs abuse etc. There are still some debates about if problematic internet use should be called addictive, but internet addicts have much similar behavior as other substance addictions, especially the similar psychological dependency. Because of no interference of substances, it is an effective way that we can explore more psychiatric behavioral rules in the context of impact of a plenty of information. And it is still a special perspective to discover how addictive psychological dependency comes into being. There are some special symptoms include a preoccupation with the internet, increased anxiety when off-line, hiding or lying about the extent of on-line use, and impairment to real-life functioning (Young, 2000). And there are five general subtypes, include addiction to cybersex, cyber-relationships, online stock trading or gambling, information surfing, and computer games (Young, 2000). There is such a definition following:

Internet addiction is defined as any online-related, compulsive behavior which interferes with normal living and causes severe stress on family, friends, loved ones, and one's work environment. Internet addiction has been called internet dependency and internet compulsivity. By any name, it is a compulsive behavior that completely dominates the addict's life. Internet addicts make the internet a priority more important than family, friends, and work. The internet becomes the organizing principle of addicts' lives. They are willing to sacrifice what they cherish most in order to preserve and continue their unhealthy behavior[2].

The impairments of internet addiction for juvenile

As a group, adolescents are heavy users of internet. The following will discuss major negative consequences of addictive internet use.

Individual problems

(a) The decline of academic achievement and physical constitution. Once the adolescent becomes addictive in internet, they will spend most of time in front of a computer and neglect school study. Most teen-age addicts' academic achievement will drop down quickly and cause other academic problems, such as playing truant, lying, cheating. Because of lacking sleeping, regular eating, for the adolescents who are in the key period of physiological development, they will become weaker and weaker. All these will influence their academic achievement again and it will form a vicious circle.

(b) The confusion between realistic roles and virtual roles. When the adolescents overly addict themselves to the virtual roles of internet, they are easy to miss realistic selves. They will meet role conflicts when they use internet rules to deal with realistic relationships. Usually, when teenagers meet frustration in interactive relationships, they want to look for consoles through virtual internet friends for negatively escaping reality. That will enhance the roles conflicts and alienation of interactive relationships in real life. It does not benefit for the development of adolescent personality and social development. The data from '*The report of Chinese adolescents' internet addiction in 2007*' discovered there were relative differences between adolescent internet addicts and adolescent non-internet addicts. Adolescent internet addicts had more interactive relationship problems than non-internet addicts. Such as, the relationship problem

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[2] What is internet addiction. Accessed time: Nov. 13, 2008 via: http://www.netaddiction. com/faq.htm.

between teacher and student, between parents and child, among peers, was 22.32 %, 21.59 %, 21.35 % respectively (CYAND, 2008).

(c) The decline of moral sense. Because of its anonymity, convenience and escape (Young, 2000), internet provides more free space to adolescents. In the virtual internet space, they are not supervised by adults, such as teachers and parents. They can talk freely and do not need face to face. Because of lacking enough self-control, the adolescents are easy to indulge themselves in internet games, pornography webs and chatting rooms. In one investigation of 3000 adolescents, 46.7 % of them admitted they browsed pornography websites (Wei, 2003). In addition, internet addicts are more apt to transgress in internet use, such as stealing other people's e-mails or private information, transferring internet virus. According to one investigation of internet adolescent users, 37.4 % adolescents thought it was normal to speak graceless words, 24.9 % adolescents thought people can do anything that need not care about others in internet (Research group of Chinese scientific institute, 2000). All these will cause adolescents' decline of moral sense and cause more juvenile delinquency. Then it produces more familiar and social problems.

Familiar problems

Once the adolescent becomes addictive in internet use, there are inevitable conflicts among family members.

(a) The conflicts between parents and child. For the sake of internet use, adolescent need abundant time and money, they will cheat on their parents and get more money from parents, even stealing money from family. When parents find their child is addictive in internet use, they will be very angry, sad, disappointed and worried. They will complain their child and try all kinds of ways to prevent the child from using internet again. Most parents will use the compulsive approach to deal with their child's internet addiction. But the intervention of internet addiction is not a simple process. It is a complicated process and needs parents' continuing patience, effort and cooperation and exterior support system. Adolescence is in the treasonous stage. In the treatment stage or relapsing stage, the child will try all kinds of ways to rebel for internet use. That will cause abundant conflicts between parents and the child.

(b) The conflicts between parents. Some parents will complain to each other when they find their child's internet addiction. Because the successful intervention of internet addiction is a long and complicated process, then for most of parents, how to recover the child's internet addiction will puzzle them

and make them feel tired. Some marital discords will be produced. And in other words, parents' marital discord is one important potential factor that causes their child's internet addiction.

Chinese adolescents' status quo and characteristics of internet addiction

Compared with other countries, Chinese adolescents' internet addiction has following outstanding characteristics:

The age of the main body of internet users and internet addicts respectively younger than other countries

Until December, 31, 2007, the Chinese adolescent internet users under 25 years reached 0.107 billion, which was more than half of Chinese internet users (50.9 %), the adolescent internet users were the biggest age group (CNNIC, 2008). And according to 'The report of Chinese adolescents' internet addiction in 2007', the percent of adolescent internet addicts was 9.72 % in the adolescent internet user population; it was a very high proportion.

Comparing to other countries, especially developed countries, Chinese main body of internet users centralized the age period from 15 to 25, but other countries focus on 20 to 30 years old. And we have a big internet addictive proportion from 15–20 years old. At the same time, there are still more than 30 % adolescent internet users in the adolescent internet user population have the tendency of internet addiction, they are a high-risk crowd. So, the research of problems of Chinese adolescent internet addiction is serious and necessary.

The aims of internet application focus on cyber-chat and cyber-games

Usually, there are five general subtypes, including addiction to cybersex, cyber-relationships, online stock trading or gambling, information surfing, and computer games (Young, 2000). The problems of pathological internet use in China focus on cyber-chat or making friends and cyber-games. The addictive adolescents' aim of cyber-chatting or making friends was near 50 %; and the aim of cyber-games was more than 40 % (CYAND, 2008).

Adolescent internet users are the main force of cyber-games and the students at middle schools and primary schools are the loyal users of cyber-games. At present, the population of middle school and primary school students who play games on line have reached 36.82 million, which is 17 % of whole population of students at middle school and primary school, 73.1 % of the whole population of internet users at middle school and primary school. (CNNIC, 2008)

The place of internet use focus on family and internet café

Usually, Chinese adolescents would like to choose their family or an internet café to use internet. Relatively, as the alternative place of internet use, school is not the favorite place to be chosen by adolescents. Approximately 60 % of adolescents will use internet in the family. And as an important complement, there are 47.8 % of adolescents who choose internet café to use internet (CNNIC, 2008). Whatever comparing with developed countries or developing countries, it is seldom to see such flourishing industry of internet café in other countries.

Severe cases of adolescent internet addiction are increasing

There are more and more severe cases of adolescent internet addiction reported in news or happening in our real life. These increasing severe cases include sudden death caused by long time internet use, theft or robbing because of lacking of money to logon, bleeding conflicts with other people for online-games, and so on.

It is reported that an online funeral was organized for a girl who died after spending consecutive days playing the Black Dragon Prince game and a man was sentenced to life for stabbing a 23-year-old gamer to death in a dispute over a cyber sword in the same game. One Beijing judge, Shan Xiuyun, declared that 90 per cent of juvenile crime in the city was internet-related[3].

These severe cases cause serious consequences and bad influences to related individual adolescents, family and society. And these phenomena are concerned by more and more scholars.

Analysis of main reasons of characteristics of Chinese adolescent internet addiction

Adolescence is a transitional stage from childhood to adulthood. After the development of this period, an individual will be more mature through physical growth and the development of psychology and sociality. At the same time, adolescence is a special and complicated developmental stage which is full of contradictions and conflicts; we can call it the phase of crisis. There are some main characteristics in this phase, such as imbalance development between psychology and corporeity, contradictions between the feeling of adult and the status quo of half or incomplete mature, the special psychological and behavioral changes caused by these contradictions and conflicts, etc. Because of its anonymity, convenience and escape (ACE model) (Young, 2000), internet can

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[3] China's young escape into the web, The Observer. Sunday November 20, 2005. Accessed time: Nov. 10, 2008 Via: http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2005/nov/20/news.china.

be accepted quickly by the mass of adolescent. They can talk and play freely and do anything without the supervision of adults. Everyone is equal when they are online. And most of the half mature adolescents lack enough willpower to resist these temptations of internet, especially when they meet frustrations and failures in their real life.

Why does the internet addiction of Chinese adolescents have these characteristics? I think there are following reasons:

The rapid development of Chinese economy since the Chinese reform and opening-up

With the persistent development of Chinese economy, especially after middle of the 1990s, more and more families and schools have money to buy computer as the assistant teaching and learning tool. It is more popular in big or middle cities of China. Because the rural economy development lags behind urban, there are few families that buy computer for children. But there are lots of internet cafés appearing almost all over the country after middle of the 1990s. You can easily find an internet café even in a remote small town. So the most teenagers in rural areas go to internet café to use internet. And many adolescents would like to choose internet café to use internet for avoiding the adults' supervision. So, it is the reason why internet café and family can become the most important two places which adolescents would rather choose. The rapid development of Chinese economy since the Chinese reform and opening-up provides the physical environment for adolescent internet addiction.

One child national policy of population and unitary evaluation criterion of adolescent development

Because of the pressure of huge population, the Chinese government insists carrying out one child national policy of population to control the expand of population since late of the 1970s. It is a special policy of population comparing to other countries. As it brings the apparent effects of reducing the population, it brings many potential problems in social developmental areas, especially in families. The traditional big family gradually becomes the nuclear family. The only child in the family is prone to be coddled and indulged by numerous family members, such as parents, grandparents from mother's side and from father's side. And at the same time, they have been endowed too much expectations by the family, because they are the only descendants of their families. Under such developmental circumstance, the adolescent tends to form some ill characters, e.g. bad self-control, yielding themselves up, having no feeling of duty and responsibilities. And in China, the study of teenagers is still exam-

oriented, only a small percentage of high school graduates have opportunities to enter colleges under the competitive education system.The evaluation criterion of adolescent development is unitary, that's to say, if a teenager can get good academic achievement, he or she would be the 'good' student of teachers, 'good' child of the family, the child will have a brilliant future. By contraries, they would be the 'bad' student, 'bad' child, it will be difficult to get success in the future for their 'fails'. This criterion neglect the teenager's other abilities and talents. The adolescents who cannot get the high scores tend to produce inferiority complex and discouragement. And some of the adolescents who had once gotten good academic achievements will indulge themselves after entering into university, because they lose their interest in learning on the base of long time exam-orientated study.

As we know, adolescence is one of the most important periods of transition. The conditions we had mentioned above would heavy their burden. When they cannot stand or encounter even small frustration, they will look for the released approach, escape real-life pressures. Because of its anonymity, convenience and escape, internet becomes one of the favorite ways that adolescents would like to choose.

Three kinds of lack of current adolescent' development in China

Usually, three main lacks will appear in adolescent development, including the lack of fatherly function, plays and peers[4].

The lack of fatherly function

The father is very important for the adolescents, especially for the boys. In the family, the role of father often represents the rule, order, duty, responsibility, brave and reason. How the father role works will affect the forming of adolescent self-control, the achieving of responsibility, and the brave of meeting frustration. Usually, father is more busy than mother. Most fathers will devote most of their time to their work but most mothers have to spend more time with their children. Father lacks enough time and opportunities to take part in the education of his child, extremely in a divorced family.

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[4] Why Chinese children always suffer from internet addiction and 90 % of them focus on playing computer games. Accessed time: Nov. 12, 2008 via: http://news.xinhuanet.com/edu/2006-10/11/content_5187284.htm.

The lack of plays

Many people should consider play only belongs to childhood. For example, for adolescents, their duty is to study hard; they do not need play more. In fact, everyone needs play, playing is a kind of a special relaxing approach through which people can get fresh energy and happy feelings. As the matter of fact, the play plays an important role in adolescent life. Good and abound plays can help adolescents to develop their social roles and pressure releasing. The appropriate physical plays can help adolescents release superfluous energy and unhappy feelings and get happiness and the sense of success outside of academic learning, particularly for adolescent boys, such as playing football. For Chinese adolescents, even children, they have not enough time to have plays. They must finish burdensome homework, someone has to attend some training class to cultivate so-called strong suits except the academic achievement. Most parents think they cannot let their children fail at the 'starting line'. Consequently, the children should do everything the parents think it is benefit for the child's future but plays. Comparing children, adolescents have heavier study burden, have more psychical pressure and growing annoyance, but less playing time. How to get the alternative thing? Internet can provide so many interesting games and funning things, so, as the alternative, it is easy to be addictive by adolescents.

The lack of peers

As we know, peers play an important role in an adolescent's social and psychical development. The quantity of peers and the quality of peer relationship will heavily affect the adolescent's successful transition from family to society. For the sake of one child policy of population, most adolescents born after the late 1980s have no sibling, the natural peer. With the great change of the family structure, nuclear family lives alone, the child has few chances to play with their cousins. In most cities, people live in high buildings, they have no interest to know neighbors, so, the people living in the same building often do not know each other at all even if they live in the same building for a long period, not to mention that the child can easily know peers and make friends with the other neighbor children. It is difficult to develop a high quality peer relationship with classmates during limited school time. But internet can give adolescents the 'endless' chances to make new friends.

The adolescents can play games, make friends and get sense of achievement; all of these can compensate the lacks mentioned above. So, internet has great attraction to adolescents and easily makes them addictive.

Mass of rural stay children and migrant children lack supervision

In the process of China's social, economic and political reform and development, large numbers of peasants have migrated to cities for better job opportunities since the 1980s. The population of migrants was more than 100 million in 2000, 140 million in 2005 and 150 million in 2006 (Zhai and Duan, 2006).

Most of these migrants, once they have settled down in the destination, they will either bring their children to cities or generating many migrant children. Because of various political constraints about child schooling at the place of destination, most of migrants cannot bring children to the cities. Consequently, only a small proportion of children live with migrant parents, those children are called migrant children, but most children have to stay in their original home without parents or with only one parent. Those children are called as stay children. According to China's 2000 census, there are about 7–8 millions of stay children (Duan, 2005). Due to lacking strict supervision of parents and immature ability of self-control, lots of stay children have been a high-risk mass and a part of them have been addictive to internet.

Discussion: the predicament and countermeasures of the treatment for adolescent internet addiction in China

The predicament

Most people have no common sense of internet addiction

Internet use is a new phenomenon appearing with information technology developing at top speed. Computer is more popular only after the late 1990s in most urban areas in China. Most urban parents whose are older than 40 are not good at using computer, not to say the rural parents. And most of parents do not know what the internet addiction is. When their children are addictive, they do not know how to deal with that. There are two typical attitudes towards their addictive child. One is they would take forced approaches to forbide their child to use internet again. Another is the parents are extremely scared about internet addiction and have no idea how to deal with their children's internet addiction.

Lacking of support system for the family with an internet addictive child

Usually, the parents with an internet addictive child cannot get a social support. Now there are few formal centers of internet addiction treatment in China. And because internet addiction is a new disorder appearing recently, many psychological counselors, educational educators, clinic psychologists have not enough preparation of professional knowledge and practical experience of

internet addiction treatment. For the parents with an internet addictive child, to successfully solve the problems of internet addiction is still very difficult.

The neglected high-risk crowd

As we mentioned above, the mass of rural stay children is one big and potential high-risk crowd. If we do not pay much attention to this problem, more and more stay children would be addictive to internet. How to care of the rural stay children is still a complicated problem related to governmental, social, economic and educational supports.

The countermeasures

Building social support system

The first thing should be an increasing publicity and educational activities to arise public attention and common sense about internet addiction. Secondly, the Chinese government should still develop a corresponding legal system and enhance the lawful supervision to teenagers' internet use in internet cafés. Thirdly, it is an urgent thing to cultivate large numbers of multi-disciplinary professionals to serve for the prevention and treatment of internet addiction. At the same time, we have so many internet addicts, but few centers of treatment, so building some professional public and private treatment centers for internet addiction is still urgent.

Psychoeducation

A handful of Netizen have formed since the middle of the 1990s. China now has 130 million people who can get online even in the most remote places. But the way how to correctly use computer did not have time to develop. With the computers getting more popular gradually, we should carry out lectures about how to prevent internet addiction when we teach basic computer using skills and knowledge, especially at primary and middle schools. To prevent using computers is impossible, the key point is how we can guide teenagers to correctly use computers and how to control overly internet use; this is a more important and effective approach than to force teenagers not to use computer and logon. And when the teenagers know the characteristics, categories, and consequences of internet addiction, they will be more prone to have consciousness to control themselves not to use internet overly.

But most important is how adolescents can avoid the lacks mentioned above in their growing process. The pressure can be too much for some adolescents

in the real life, especially if they fail. Then they escape to the virtual world to look for achievement, importance, satisfaction and a sense of belonging. How to help them to find these in real life? It will be a very complicated problem.

At first we must transform the exam-oriented unitary evaluation criterion and dig out the other potential talents of children out of academic achievement. There is no doubt that academic achievement is very important, but it is not all. This will correlate to the deep educational reform of China.

Secondly, the schools and communities should provide more healthy and active plays and all kinds of interesting activities to promote the communication and contact among teenagers. They can find more peers and have more chances to get friendship, happiness and satisfaction.

At last we must emphasize the important function the father acts in family education. When both parents actively take part in the education of their child, the child will most benefit from family education. It is very important to cultivate the sense of responsibility and the ability of self-control to children, that will help adolescents raise the ability of resisting overly internet using.

And the mass of rural stay children, migrant children and lots of children from divorced families or single parent families are a high-risk crowd. They need more care and concerns. We must enhance the care for high-risk crowds.

Further studies in internet addiction of adolescents

What is internet addiction? Should it be an addiction like other substance addictions? How to explain this kind of addictive phenomenon? Are there some biological and psychological differences of internet addiction between different nations and different ages? What type of treatment is the most efficient one?... All these international questions still are confusing for the professionals.

Dr. Young had done much work in the area of internet addiction. Her program is based on cognitive-behavioral techniques and she also focuses on the spiritual principles of twelve steps. We need to incorporate the expertise of the knowledge of internet addiction and further studies.

How to explain the internet addiction in China? Now most theories and treatments of internet addiction still come from the developed countries. As we know Chinese internet addiction has some its own characteristics, we can utilize other work and borrow ideas from other countries, but we cannot explain and implement these ideas into status quo directly. We need to do further studies in this new research area.

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