

A Qualitative Inquiry on the Severity of the Impact of Pathological Internet Use on the Life Domains of Indian Adolescents Before and Amidst Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

The impact of Pathological Internet Use (PIU) on adolescents' daily life is overwhelming. This study qualitatively explores the severity of the impacts of PIU, before and amidst the pandemic (COVID-19) on adolescents (M=15.7, SD=1.494), enrolled in the Central and State Educational boards of Kerala, South India. In the methodological process, this study utilized the six-phase processes of data engagement by Braun and Clarke. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (ten) and focus group discussions (twelve) were steered to have a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. The qualitative findings suggested that PIU severely impaired adolescents' life in the cognitive, emotional, behavioural, academic, health and relational domains, especially during pandemic than it was before.

Keywords: Adolescent students, Pathological Internet Use, Qualitative Method.

Pathological Internet Use (PIU) and Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) are two major concerns of the research areas that are within the risk paradigm (Tomczyk, 2020). IAD and PIU are often treated as equal or as synonyms among the numerous literatures that address the misuse of novel technologies (Negin, 2017; Tomczyk, 2020). Smyth et al., (2018) state that all terms that are referred to the PIU designate the same notion that one's inability to control the use to such an extent; that it leads to the negligence of other life areas (Griffiths, 1998; Cash, 2012).

Adolescents are particularly at risk group of engaging in PIU (Widyanto, 2011). COVID-19, an unwelcomed guest hit the world and it has propelled many young people out of their normal routine life (Raj, 2021), that eventually left them with a free access to smart digital devices, like smart phones, tablets and laptops, having no monitoring on their online activity by their parents or elders. This increased screen time swallowed or compromised the normal daily routine of adolescents' playtime, relaxation, family time, schoolwork, mealtime and sleep impairing the regular functioning (Pediatrics, 2021). It is also noted that there is a change in the style in the use of technology among adolescents. This change is voiced by the amount of

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amazingly proliferate time spent, a loss of self-regulation, significant decrease in the quality of study, social interaction, concentration or attention, conflicts in the family and other related issues (Tomczyk, 2020; Koronczai, 2019).

It has been absolutely a boon precisely during the pandemic as it facilitated millions of students communicate and learn in the safety atmosphere of their homes. Despite its revolutionary leap in the lives of adolescents in many ways, it has also brought numerous problems with it, affecting their emotional, social, psychological and physical wellbeing (Raj, 2021), leading to impairment in various life domains (Machimbarrena, 2019) than it was before. Among the copious online threats, the most visible in the recent years are IAD/ PIU-related issues using majorly social media platforms, reflected the most severely affected global phenomena alarmingly among the adolescent group (Tomczyk, 2020) that needs immediate attention.

Theoretical Framework

The present qualitative study intends to explore and analyze the Internet use to the extent that it affects the daily functioning of various life domains of adolescents before and amidst COVID-19. The study also describes and summarizes the potential determinants and its prevalence among adolescent students. This study has the theoretical base of Cognitive Behavioural model of PIU (Davis, 2001) and Mindfulness-based Self-regulation (Bishop et al., 2004).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions.

To what extent the severity of the PIU adversely affects adolescents' daily functioning of different life domains?

In order to explore further, the researcher added the following narrower research questions.

1. What are the online activities that you are mostly engaged in and that you perceive as the one that leads you to decline performance in terms of cognitive, emotional, behavioural, academic, social, health and relational domains?
2. How do you describe the severity of your Internet Overuse? How has it affected your quality of life?
3. How do you describe your engagements on the internet before and amidst the pandemic?
4. What could have contributed to your internet overuse and its prevalence among adolescents?

This current research aims to qualitatively explore the determinants and impacts of PIU among adolescents from 14 to 17 years who are the ongoing students of the Central and State Educational Boards of Kerala, South India (October 2021 to January 2022). It further analyses to what extent the PIU affects the daily functioning of adolescents and compares the severity of PIU and the amount of time spent online before and amidst the pandemic.

Study Design

Yilmaz (2013) states that qualitative approach to researches differs in many ways from quantitative approach that includes epistemological assumptions, methodological procedures and research methods. According to Li (2015), the collection of qualitative data helps to highlight self-reflections and qualitative responses of the participants regarding their-own

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problematic use of Internet, help to contextualize previous findings related to PIU and add depth to current findings. In this study, the researchers use a qualitative research design to explore adolescents' PIU and to show how impactful its effects on various life domains are. To get more in-depth information on lived experiences based on real life situations, the researchers combined the methods of interviews and discussions with focused groups. Researchers thematically analyzed the experiences, feelings and perspectives of the participants based on the six-phase processes of data engagement, coding and theme development by Braun and Clarke (2020).

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling strategy is used to recruit participants who are ongoing students ($M=15.7$, $SD=1.494$) in the Central and State Educational Boards of Kerala, India.

Procedure

The research procedures of the present study involved a two-step qualitative phase. In the first step, researchers conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews as an attempt to get into the topic deeply and understand thoroughly the underlying emotions and feelings experienced by the participants. This helped to obtain a detailed account of data on the participants' perspectives and make sense of their lived experiences and stories (Balushi, 2018). As the second step, researchers conducted focused group discussions as an extended way of the interview method that could also provide useful insights on the topic. Focus groups are very significant in qualitative research as they can contribute vital information on the proposed topic to get the required data. The essential purpose of this group is to stimulate in-depth discussion and spontaneous interaction among the participants, aiming to explore a predetermined topic based on participants' feelings, thoughts, and understanding of the concept under discussion (Gundumogula, 2020). The data generated through the social interactions of the group were deeper and richer, and helped the researchers to explore the data appropriately and believed it to be more precise, to get the best research outcome. The researchers collected the two-step qualitative data online using the WhatsApp application and google meet. The entire process was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with the approval of the participants and parents for effectual data analysis.

Thematic Analysis (TA) of the Data

According to Braun and Clarke (2019), a good quality Thematic Analysis (TA) rests on a qualitative paradigm and is a good start for research. A thematic analysis was performed, to analyze and describe the congregated information in an accessible format, following Braun and Clarke's (2020; 2019) six-phase processes of thematic analysis. It is a process of identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within and across data in relation to the experiences, views and perspectives of the participants. Considering one of the critical assumptions of thematic analysis to guide the coding process, researchers adopted a flexible and reflexive approach (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The reflexive and active process of coding underscores the subjectivity of the researchers that encouraged a more intricate, and refined theme development in the later stages of analysis.

In the first phase, familiarization served as the best way of engaging with, and gaining insight into different perspectives of the lived experiences of the participants. Several readings of the data facilitated a deep engagement with the raw data and followed a systematic data coding by which researchers attached meaningful labels to the set of data in the second phase. The researchers found a fair quantity of narratives, which substantiate the reliability of the present

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study. The third phase included forming initial themes from coded and organized data; further, the researchers used the method of inductive analysis in the process of coding the data. In the fourth phase, researchers focused on developing and reviewing themes and ensured whether the themes perfectly work in relation to the coded data; while the fifth phase focused on refining, defining and naming themes that guaranteed clarity and quality in the process of TA. In the sixth phase, researchers intertwined the data together for reporting and correlating the results with the existing literature to answer the research questions.

RESULTS

From the systematic and scientific coding of data, the researchers constructed four major themes. Table 1 shows a summarized outline of the themes with their illustrative quotes.

Table 1. Themes and verbatim from Interviews and Focus group discussions

| Theme | Number of Participants Mentioned | Verbatim |
|--|---|---|
| Dysfunctional Thoughts (Distressing thoughts, Distorted thoughts; Automatic negative thoughts) | 10 | <i>Example 1: "...I cannot think of a world without internet.... I often think I am nothing when I am offline... my friends also say that..." (P1).</i> <i>Example 2: "...I will be outdated and not among them if I am not updating ...I fear they will let me down if I am not updated...." (P10).</i> <i>Example 3: "...I get gratification, a kind of satisfaction from chatting, Instagram videos, Facebook updates, sharing, and comments..." (P 2).</i> <i>Example 4: "...I often think nobody likes me, I am alone and feel sad... I feel better when I am with friends online, I am so happy and accepted when I am online..." (P1).</i> |
| Emotional Problems (Emotional dysregulation, Depressive Mood, Stress & Social Anxiety) | 10 | <i>Example 1: "...I cannot control my emotions when my mother gets angry with me....I soon get angry with my friends and parents, and outbursts emotionally so they avoid me sometimes" (P10).</i> <i>Example 2: "...I feel sad, lonely, bored and depressed sometimes. I feel lonely particularly when I am not having my mobile with me..." (P1).</i> <i>Example 3: "...I am anxious and worried, I fear interacting with people face to face, but online I am happy. I feel it is better to be online...my mom compels me to go with her but I will not..." (P3).</i> <i>Example 4: "...I often fight with parents, agitate and shout at them....I throw things sometimes when they irritate me...I am helpless"(P 6).</i> |
| Behavioural Issues (Internet behaviour and the behaviour) | 10 | <i>Example 1: "...My behaviour has changed because of the overuse of the internet... I regret that I could have studied a little more.... My behaviour has become worse after using the internet uncontrollably ... I have changed a lot...friends also say that... (P 3).</i> |

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|--|----|--|
| when unable to connect) | | <p><i>Example 2: "...I have a habit of checking notifications and updates very often and unable to control despite my attempt to control many a time and I failed to succeed..." (P3).</i></p> <p><i>Example 3: "...Arouses curiosity to see more, which I cannot control...this uncontrolled use of the Internet made me addicted to that..." (P 7).</i></p> <p><i>Example 4: "...I am not interested in talking to anyone. No physical activity, the only activity is being online. I am always alone in my room sitting with my mobile. I rarely come out of my room..." (P 8).</i></p> |
| <p>Physical and environmental Issues (Daily functioning, Physical or Health-related issues, Financial, Family/social and relational Issues)</p> | 10 | <p><i>Example 1: "...I cannot understand and concentrate on online classes, I feel exhausted...hectic. My mind will be wandering, dreaming on the next online activities...." (P10).</i></p> <p><i>Example 2: "...My sleep is disturbed always, when I try to sleep I will not get sleep then I again go online until I feel sleepy, sometimes I get sleep only by morning...." (P 2).</i></p> <p><i>Example 3: "More than 9 hours, till 2 am, sometimes up to 4 am, my main engagements are on the Internet, I skip breakfast, sometimes other meals also. I am too much interested and immersed in the online videos, and chatting with friends makes me lose time sense often" (P 6).</i></p> <p><i>Example 4: "...Prayer time my mind is wandering, loose track while praying....do not remember where I stopped and what I was praying.... totally out of mind and disturbed, so I withdraw from prayer...." (P 9).</i></p> <p><i>Example 5: "...Whenever I ask for some money, I am reminded of my studies and demanding a lot of things. I hate that...over demanding...I need to explain how I spend the money, this makes me uncomfortable" (P 8).</i></p> <p><i>Example 6: "...I rarely speak to my parents; I never see them actually, I see them only when I have food with them, which is also very rare....I prefer to be online than talking with my parents because it entertains me much and I am satisfied with that..." (P 4).</i></p> |

Theme 1: Dysfunctional Thoughts (Cognitive Domain)

In this study, the first theme identified was the dysfunctional cognition, which includes three organising themes such as distressing thoughts, distorted cognition and automatic negative thoughts. Some of the participants agreed that the dysfunctional thoughts often guide them throughout the day without being aware of that. The quotes below exemplify the statement given by the participants:

"I feel lonely, I don't want to be separated, I will get out dated, I am nothing when I am not online, I have no friends, I am alone, I am satisfied and happy when online". My mother

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always finds fault with me, not with my sister', I hate comparison the way she does', I am not accepted'.

Another important noted fact is that the participants perceive themselves as not good; poor self-image, *"I am nothing', 'I cannot remember anything', I cannot succeed', I am not among them' etc.* They often hear same statements from parents, teachers, and peers, who consider them as not good, and in turn eventually, they consider others not good for them. This pattern of thinking often hinders participants from realizing their potential and they go to the extent of compromising with the perceived poor self-image. They continue ruminating on the dysfunctional thoughts that often lead them to unwarranted Internet use and Internet behaviours, despite knowing that it has negative impact on their daily life.

'I sense some danger in it, but still I cannot control my thoughts'. I feel I need to correct myself; at the same time, I do not like if I get corrections. I feel they are not good to me' (Ps3 & 5).

Adolescents, cannot think a world without Internet and smart devices and do not want to be separated from the online world as they spend more active hours online. At the same time, participants are aware of the negative impact of internet overuse especially on their memory as it affects their studies. They cannot concentrate or recollect what they have learned, showing how badly their memory is affected. One participant confesses that,

"..I cannot imagine a world without internet. However, I realize sometimes, how badly it affected me, and how poorly I remember things. 'I cannot remember anything' I think I lost my memory after using internet long time during pandemic" (P1).

Theme 2: Emotional Problems (Affective Domain)

Three organized themes, such as emotional dysregulation, depressive mood and stress and social anxiety, are the components that the researchers identified as problems in the emotional domain. Almost all the participants have consensus that they face emotional problems daily when they confront with family members, teachers, friends and relatives. Their poor ability to manage emotional responses leads to sudden outflow of negative emotions like crying, being sad, develop hatred, anger, irritation and sometimes escalates to even verbal and physical aggressions. One participant expressed that he often fights physically and verbally with his father specially when there is no access to internet.

'I cannot tolerate that I am controlled or monitored...I burst out emotionally, sometimes physically. I easily lose my temper... I cannot control myself'. 'I think I lost my control' (P2).

At times, participants are aware of losing their control over emotions particularly when they experience the severity of its effects daily in their life. They fail to succeed despite several attempts to control, not only their emotions, but also the over use of Internet. One of the participants described the situation:

"What I am doing is not right and good for me, for my mental and physical health and my relationship with my parents, yet I cannot control despite my attempts many a times and I failed to succeed" (P3).

Researchers further observed that participants suffer from social anxiety that has direct impact on the internet overuse. They often hesitate to go out for interacting or socializing with others. One participant stated that:

"I withdraw from groups or gatherings arranged by family or neighbours, I like to remain in my room. I am an introvert and have anxiety when I mingle with others. I prefer to be online

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than interacting with others. I am anxious and worried, I fear interacting with people face to face, but online I am happy. My mom compels me to go with her but I will not... ” (P3).

Some participants are over-worried and experience depression and anxiety, when there is no access to internet. They feel lonely, isolated and overly distracted. One participant reported the same experience:

“It is very tempting to check always. Without Internet, I feel lonely, sad and feel that I have missed the updates, and anxious to know whether they have texted to me or called me, worried and tensed about when I can access again and feel frustrated often”(P8).

Theme 3: Behavioural problems

This theme relates to the feelings and behaviours of adolescents related to PIU in terms of Internet/online behaviour and the behaviour when unable to access internet. Participants demonstrated their typical adolescent behaviour while they are online by their affinity for being virtually inseparable from their smart devices due to the over exposure and attraction to social media and other avenues of entertainment in the cyber world. Adolescents often tinker with and use their devices that severely interrupt their daily activities. Participants expressed, *“I wanted to have my mobile always with me. Every five minutes I check mobile updates even during online classes...have the urge and preoccupied with internet“(P4). “If there is no phone with me I feel bored, and urge to get soon my phone back. “I think about my activities online, and it distracts me even when I sit for studies. I try to somehow finish studies and soon go with mobile and chat with friends or do other online activities.”(Ps 2).*

Most of the participants stated that they spend majority of their waking hours online now than it was before. It sometimes go up to more than 10 hours depending on the individual’s situation; however, the daily average internet use is around 8 to 10 hrs/day. Participants’ major online activities are on social media apps such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Posting and viewing videos in social apps, YouTube videos of one’s interest, online web series, and chatting are the major activities, while a few others search internet for seeking information or show interest in online gaming. Participants, especially girls, are interested in chat groups, social networking sites and video sharing apps. One participant reported,

“I want to “adichupolichu” (it is a common use among youngsters in Kerala for splashy, fun-filled free life)-enjoy maximum my life with friends online...so I post my dance videos, get likes, comments, sharing, which gives me satisfaction, happiness, and feel accepted...I am very active and addicted to social media. I have many friends even those who were not known to me before” (P9).

COVID 19 factors are highly persuasive with regard to the use of internet. In fact, the situation worsened during pandemic by heightening the severity of PIU among adolescents. They described the experience that without internet their social needs are unmet. Often friends (peers), who were accessing internet, influenced and placed pressure on participants to be online for long hours without break. Further, the requirements to stay at home and quarantine for long days pushed them into the feeling of loneliness and boredom that escalated the use of internet during almost all their fruitful hours. The same was the experience of most of the participants. Some reactions of the participants:

“Before covid, I could spend only limited time online, but now all the time I am with my mobile. Even between online classes my friends compels me to chat and watch some interesting things online. Now I can access everything very easily, do not want to go out for

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anything, everything online and always with mobile. Parents are also busy with their works, even communication are through the social media even if we are in the same house” (P2 & FGD).

“I am Using mobile for a long time without break and have been online longer than before. After class I sit with my mobile, I keep procrastinating all other activities for the cause of being online” (P1). “Because of pandemic, I use internet always than it was before, literally no communication with anyone face to face even if I have chances” (P4),

Participants are often curious to see and know more through the internet. They feel excited and need to update their information on social media, whereby they are gratified, and get a sense of acceptance and achievement. One participant states that,

“The influence of social media, it makes me highly conscious of myself and makes me feel that I become outdated and unaccepted among peer groups and out of the cyber world if I am not updating myself” (P10).

When the participants are unable to connect to internet, they generally get irritated, angry, and feel lonely as if something was missing in their life. They spend time lying on the bed, no food sometimes, feeling bored, anxious, lose interest to do other activities. One participant described the experience:

“I do not get mood to do any other activity when there is no internet access, I get angry, bored, irritated. I cannot keep my mobile away from me, I feel I missed something,” (P8).

Theme 4: Physical and Environmental Issues

The four main areas that come under physical and environmental issues are; daily functioning, physical & health-related issues, financial issues, and relational issues with a worsening impact on adolescents due to PIU. These factors affect severely their daily functioning and lead to functional decline and total waning in the quality of their life. The effects on daily functioning, as reported by participants, include those on academic activities, engagements in spiritual and physical activities, eating, poor hygiene, sleeping etc. For example, participants who are addicted to internet and social media, reported:

“I cannot join with them by saying the response prayers. Totally out of mind and disturbed. So I skip prayer often” (P8). “I skip breakfast, sometimes other meals also, because I am too much interested and immersed in the online videos, and chatting with friends makes me lose time sense often” (P7). “No satisfaction, no happiness, no peace. Only anxiety and sadness when I think about my future. I wanted to become an aeronautic engineer. I think, once I started using internet overly, my daily functioning including my studies, worsened, a total decline in the academic results, interaction, outdoor activity, health, sleep, behaviour etc.”(P6).

Other participants also shared similar experience with regard to the interruption of daily activities due to PIU,

“I keep procrastinating my schoolwork and other activities in the cause of mobile use. Often I skip or failed to answer during reviews in the class, I forget everything” (P5),

Due to PIU, majority of the participants experienced physical and other health issues, which includes distorted pattern of sleep, headache, body pain, eye strain, neck pain, a kind of feel like spinning of head, lack of energy, less appetite and a tendency to skip food to save time for internet use. Participants have awareness that it was due to lack of rest due to late sleep, poor eating habit and under nutrition due to skipping of food.

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“I skip breakfast, sometimes-other meals also, because I will not get time in the morning, I getting up late. I feel tired, I cannot concentrate or be attentive in the online class because of headache and eyestrain, I experience often as my head is spinning, a kind of experience” (P3).

Most of the participants have relational issues with parents and other members in the family, and it is deteriorating day by day. These often include dissatisfaction, unhappiness, hatred, irritation, anger and physical fight with parents, getting annoyed and agitated when controlled, dissatisfaction due to over strict accountability, and no interaction at all or they rarely speak with family members. They also lack parental support, have isolated feeling in the family, get into verbal aggression, feel unhappy with over controlling, feel more demanding and over protective, and eventually neglect parental directions in the family. These participants preferred to be with mobiles all the time than being or interacting with friends or family members or to involve with daily activities that eventually led them to a total decline of their life quality. For instance, one participant stated that,

“I withdraw from gatherings arranged by family or neighbours; I like to remain in my room. I rarely interact with my family members, most of the time I spent with my mobile; despite this, I feel that I am alone in the family, total dissatisfaction and unhappiness. I don't like to be controlled; I retaliate when my parents control me” (P4).

DISCUSSION

The current study supplements to the existing literature, using qualitative methodology to examine the severity of the effect of PIU on adolescents with regard to the daily functioning of various life domains. The first theme highlighted in this study that, adolescents often hold dysfunctional thoughts and issues related to poor perception abilities and difficulties in regulating one's feelings and cognition. Hadlington (2015) observed that impairment in this area due to PIU has received very little empirical attention, however, the negative impact of high frequency exposure to digital media and internet on human cognition, and in the development of adolescents' cognitive processes are often emphasized. Participants in this study reported an array of harmful impact of PIU on their cognitive functions in terms of decision-making, perception, integration of thoughts/sensations and memory/retention capacity. This finding is consistent with the previous studies (Small et al, 2009; Chamberlain, 2017; Meng. et al., 2020) that confirm the finding when they state, the cognitive processes act as an intermediary between emotional and behaviour responses and the task is to help adolescents to discover their mistaken perceptions. Firth et al, (2019) cited the impact of PIU on adolescents' attention, endorsing the statement that it is 'an easily distracted generation'. This finding corroborates with the present study that sheds light on the attentional issues, among adolescents, which includes, reduced ability to focus and a limited span of attention that often has a distracted mind.

The second theme is concerned about the effect of PIU in the affective domain; consists of poor emotional responses and other related negative emotional states such as depressive mood, fear, sadness, anger, loneliness, boredom, frustration, stress and social anxiety. Participants in this study widely reported that disregulated emotional condition is common among adolescents who are with PIU. Sudden out bursts of emotions such as anger, cries, sadness etc. are often reported to be due to lack of self-control over such emotions when the access is interrupted. The studies, (Caplan ,2010;, Davis, 2001; Kardefelt-Winther et al, 2017; Spada, 2017) also suggest the negative consequences of internet use in the daily life is due to difficulties in controlling one's own feelings, and cognitions. It is further reported, participants spent long time online as a coping strategy for negative affective states such as stress,

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boredom, loneliness etc. Previous studies (Faghani, 2020; Werling, 2021; Cheung et al., 2018) also viewed that, as a primary means of coping with boredom, loneliness, and social isolation, adolescents show an instantaneous craving to engage in the internet, mainly social media sites.

The third theme emphasizes the impact of PIU on the behaviour of the participants, in terms of internet /online behaviour and the behaviour when unable to access. COVID-19 brought about drastic changes in the adolescents' life causing an adverse impact on their behaviour and daily functioning. As reported by the participants, the length of online time and internet's pathological use and its negative impacts worsened during pandemic. The strict adherence of the pandemic protocols, closing of the school, staying at home, absence of recreational and physical activities, social gatherings, meetings etc. have literally led them to the excessive online behaviour spending more than 8 hours a day. Studies by Werling (2021), Dong (2020) and Rakhmawati et al., (2021), reported similar situation that the addictive internet use among adolescents heightened during the pandemic spending more than 8 hours per day. In this study, the reported Internet behaviours were frequent checking of updates, long time being online, and being with phone always (food, study and sleep time). This finding brings in line with that of some previous studies (Rakhmawati et al., 2021; Tenzin, 2019), which suggest internet has become an indivisible part of daily life, keeping the phones turned on 24 x 7 to access the internet from anywhere at any time. Behaviours when there is no access, as reported by the participants, include irritated, angry, loneliness and feel as if something is missing in their life. Previous studies (Meng et al., 2020; Rakhmawati et al., 2021) propose similar experiences that adolescents felt the need to carry mobile phones at all times as to cope with the feeling of missing and irritated. It is worth mentioning that adolescents often hold the idea and are led by pseudo-consciousness by which one is highly conscious about updating themselves with latest trends in the cyber world, if not, outdated and unaccepted among peer groups and in the cyber world. To the best of my knowledge, found no information in the literature that supports this finding and needs further research to confirm the present finding.

The fourth theme highlighted the impact of PIU on the physical, environmental facets of adolescents; include daily functioning, physical, and health related factors, financial issues, and relational issues. The effects of PIU on daily functioning, as reported by participants, include those on academic activities, engagement in spiritual, physical and social activities, eating, personal hygiene, sleeping, household chores etc. The testimonials revealed that the daily activities of the participants interrupted significantly due to the increased online behaviour. Poor scholastic performance and grade, no engagement in the spiritual and physical activities, skipping food, sleep deprivation; poor hygiene, no social interaction etc., enhanced considerable reduction in the quality of their life performances. A study conducted by Liu, (2021) affirms that uninterrupted daily routines in the life of adolescents', play an important role in the upkeep of their life quality. Previous studies (Kuss DJ, 2016; Meng. et al., 2020) further suggest that, PIU interferes with the daily life significantly, impairing academic and social functions. Health related issues are another important matter of concern for adolescents who are prone to PIU. In this study, the reported concerns of participants in terms of health are; headache, body pain, eye strain, neck pain, a kind of feel like spinning of head, lack of energy, less appetite and malnutrition. Previous research findings have steadily shown a series of adverse effects of PIU on health and relational domains (Lo, 2021) and reported massive reduction in the quality of their life from the perspective of adolescents themselves (Ravens-Sieberer, 2021). There is no clear evidence found, that can substantiate the present study's finding on the issues related to finance. The reported issues are too much control over

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using money, unsatisfied demands and needs, more demanding and over strict accountability. This area demands further study to know how severe its impact on adolescents' life.

In terms of family and quality relationships with others and social support, it was found that, deteriorated parent-child relationship substantially reduced parental affection and support; monitoring and control over their children were optimal during this pandemic period. They prefer using the internet rather than spending time with their family members or friends. This finding is reliable with the previous studies (Cacioppo, 2019; Rakhmawati et al., 2021; Meng. et al., 2020), which expounded that poor family relationships and parent-child conflicts often lead to reduced parental surveillance and control over their internet use and adolescents preferred to be online rather than interacting with family members (Alheneidi, 2021). A qualitative study conducted by Lo, (2021) supports the view that relationships in the family and family related issues are constantly associated with PIU among adolescents.

Adolescents are the most susceptible category and are at-risk to develop PIU irrespective of the time before or during pandemic COVID-19. However, during pandemic, the severity of their condition reached its heightened level; that they used internet / smartphones not only to mitigate the burdens caused by the pandemic COVID-19 but also as the typical adolescent behaviour that the tendency to go online despite knowing its hampering impact on them. From the perspective of the participants, the experience was intensifying when compared to the time before the pandemic as the condition significantly worsened the subjective well-being and quality of the functioning of their life.

Limitations

This study has no exemption from some confines. In terms of research, needed quantitative study to verify the findings of the present study. Limited sample size is another limitation of this study. For the collection of data, researchers considered adolescents between 14-17 years, and are from four schools cantered at Cochin, Kerala, which is only one of the southern states of India, which would possibly limit the viability of the findings to a larger population. Despite these limitations, this study gathered valuable findings from the participants that provided future directions to the researchers and practitioners.

Implications

This study facilitated the researchers' inquiry to understand the PIU and the severity of its impact on various life domains and the quality of life performances of selected adolescents in India. PIU and its addictive behaviours have subjected to an array of researches, yet it remains as an unresolved global concern, to be adequately explored and managed. Based on the findings of this study, one should give equal importance to all the domains of adolescents' life to find ways to support them effectively. Further, this study sheds light into the future interventions that may guide the participants to develop skills to live with Internet without interrupting the quality functioning of the daily life and the future of adolescents. Warranted future studies in this area, as adolescents are the most vulnerable group and often considered the creamy layer of the society, whose vulnerability affects the family, society and the future of the nation at large. It may also help the researchers to investigate further on findings that have less consensus with previous studies on the, false consciousness that adolescents hold to feel and be one with the peer group and part of the cyber world, and on the dissatisfaction due to parental strictness on accountability.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the severity of the impact of PIU on adolescents in Kerala, India, during and before the pandemic COVID-19. A growing saturation is found in the daily lives of adolescents linked with PIU, having a complex and bi-directional affiliation between what is happening online. What differentiates this postmillennial generation from other generations is the massive use of the Internet on mobile phones longer time now than earlier. This greater exposure intensifies the chances of Pathological Internet Use and subsequently increases its prevalence alarmingly. The biggest challenges now before us to deal with are the increasing screen/online time in adolescents' internet access almost 24 x 7 and the deadly impacts of social media on them. The present study's findings, match with the worldwide research findings that call for an urgent attention on the said issues.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest involved in this study.

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