How the Use of iPad and Smartphones Creates Social Isolation

Niaz Makhdum Muhammad
Advancing Social Emotional Learning
The United States
niaz@advancingsel.org

Mitch Schneider
The Chicago School of Professional Psychology
The United States
mschneider@ego.thechicagoschool.edu

Allison Hill
Advancing Social Emotional Learning
The United States
allison@advancingsel.org

Douglas M. Yau
Advancing Social Emotional Learning
The United States
doug@advancingsel.org

Abstract: Technology has started to transform our everyday lives, and different smartphones and tablets are increasingly being popular all over the world. However, the negative impacts of using these gadgets are also becoming evident, and researchers have started to focus on these issues. One of the major impacts of gadget addiction is social isolation. Excessive use of smartphones and iPad makes people feel lonely and depressed, and as a result, social isolation is increasing at an alarming rate. Despite the damaging impacts of iPad and smartphone addiction, very few research works have been done so far that have extensively covered these vital issues. This research has focused on how iPad and smartphones create social isolation. At the same time, necessary recommendations have been provided regarding the effective ways of minimizing these negative impacts of using iPad and smartphones so that people can have clear ideas about avoiding social isolation and loneliness while using these useful gadgets.

Introduction

With the advancements of information and communication technology (ICT), responsible and effective technology skills have become indispensable for every learner, professional, leader, and citizen. Technology has started to transform our everyday lives, and smartphones and tablets are increasing in popularity worldwide. However, the negative impacts of using these gadgets are also becoming evident, and researchers have started to focus on these issues. One of the major impacts of smart device use is social isolation. Excessive use of smartphones and iPad makes people feel lonely and depressed, and as a result, social isolation is increasing at an alarming rate.

What is Social Isolation?

As defined by Singer (2018), social isolation is a particular situation when people live alone, have limited contacts with friends and family members, and do not belong to a group (volunteer organization, clubs, or religious organizations). According to Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015), having infrequent social contact and few social network ties, in addition to living alone, are all markers of social isolation. Social isolation is also known as 'social disconnectedness' and 'perceived isolation' (Singer, 2018).

Social isolation is also defined as a "2-dimensional concept that contains an objective absence of contacts or interactions with the contacts and a subjective feeling of limited or lost companionship or social support (i.e., loneliness) resulting from having limited contacts or interactions" (Chen & Schulz, 2016, p. 2).

Uchino (2006) argued that being socially connected is not only influential for emotional and psychological well-being, but it also has a positive and significant impact on physical well-being. Social isolation is also associated with poor health behaviors including poorer sleep, physical inactivity, and smoking (Theeke, 2010).

Social Isolation: Causes and Consequences

The importance of human contact is highlighted by an impressive amount of psychological research. It can become the greatest source of comfort, and also can help people feel protected and safe (DeWall & Bushman, 2011). It also brings a positive outlook, more hope, more happiness, and a better sense of well-being (Arumuganainar & Alwar, 2017). At the same time, ostracism and loneliness can cause serious harm to the physical and mental health of people.

Through iPad and smartphones, people are often involved with addictive behavior related to excessive texting, constant use of social media, online shopping, video gaming, gambling, online pornography, etc. All of these may lead to social isolation, shyness, depression, anxiety, desensitization, lower self-esteem, and impulsivity (News-Medical.net, 2017).

In some cases, people use these smart devices as a way to escape problems or relieve feelings of guilt, helplessness, and depression, and at the same time ignore what is happening in reality. These may result in social isolation, and people are prone to become segregated from the family and also from the society as a whole (News-Medical.net, 2017).

Social isolation can have detrimental impacts on the overall wellbeing of people. Lack of friendship and emotional support can hinder coping ability and increase anxiety. Some recent studies have also confirmed that social isolation increases levels of stress hormones and often leads to a compromised immune system, poor sleep, and cognitive decline (McAndrew, 2016).

In addition to these, people who feel lonely and isolated tend to have poor physical health as well. As identified by Valtorta et al. (2018), social isolation and loneliness are associated with an increased rate of cardiovascular diseases. In another study involving 32,624 men, it was identified that socially isolated men have 90% increased risk of cardiovascular death and more than double the risk of death from suicide or an accident (Singer, 2018). In addition, they have double the risk of non-fatal stroke (Singer, 2018).

Students suffering from social isolation also fail to achieve academic success. Rosenstreich & Margalit (2015) examined students' loneliness and social isolation in relation to academic achievement and success in school. They concluded that social isolation has harmful effects on emotional, physical, and cognitive wellbeing and also has a negative correlation with academic success in schools.

Again, people who feel socially isolated fail to successfully contribute to society and the nation as a whole. As a consequence, they often feel a lack of meaning in their life (Arumuganainar & Alwar, 2017). Considering these harmful effects of social isolation, psychologists and researchers have tried to focus extensively on this issue.

The Problem

Due to the excessive use of smartphones and iPad, people develop a desire for immediate gratification and quick feedback. In real life, this is not always possible to achieve these as anticipated. Furthermore, addiction to smartphones and iPad contribute to developing shorter attention spans and increasing boredom, and people are gradually becoming excluded socially. Despite these damaging impacts of iPad and smartphone addiction, very few

research works have been done so far that have extensively covered these vital issues. Hence, necessary initiatives have been taken in this study for bringing new dimensions on how iPad and smartphones create social isolation.

Unnecessary and excessive use of iPad and smartphones is confirmed if the following signs are present (Vaghefi, 2017):
- Ignoring what is happening in real time in favor of what is virtually happening.
- Using smart gadgets for escaping problems or relieving feelings of guilt, helplessness, depression, or anxiety.
- Getting anxious or paranoid in case of the absence of a smart device.
- Constantly checking the smart device, even when it does not vibrate or ring.

The Role of Smartphones and iPad on Creating Social Isolation

From a neurological perspective, when a person uses a smartphone to read an email, respond to a social media post, or get an answer to a question, dopamine is released, neurons get fired, and the user experiences a quick, short, and immediate satisfaction. (Delzo, 2017). This makes people more interested in using these devices rather than having contact with real people, as these "live" interactions take longer for the user to receive a response and receive this gratification. This is one of the way smartphones and iPad often create social isolation.

The results of a recent survey revealed that nearly 20 percent of college students are addicted to smartphone (Vaghefi, 2017). Another research by Pew Research Center concluded that 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and 45% say they are online 'almost constantly' (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). These teens also experience various kinds of social, personal, and workplace problems due to the compulsive need to use smartphones in a constant manner. They also exhibit signs indicating social isolation, shyness, low self-esteem, and social anxiety (Vaghefi, 2017).

Communication via smart devices is not similar to real-life communication. Similarly, real emotions cannot be substituted by the emoticons. In order to gauge the intentions and emotions of a person, it is normally looked for through speech and body language to understand another person's emotions and intentions. This is not possible through social media interaction using smart gadgets, where the other person is not seen or heard. Rather, they are distracted by the device, and unable to share deeply with each other. This causes different problems like social isolation (Futurescope, 2018).

In some cases, students receive less respect from surrounding people when they have poor academic achievement. This may create different behavioral problems and low self-esteem, and they often start spending more time with smart gadgets in a search for a sense of belonging and self-satisfaction (Kim, 2013). This also leads to social isolation as well.

Many of the students spend too much time browsing the Internet on their phones. This often results in feelings of loneliness, increases in depression, withdrawal from family activities, and at the same time creates false senses of interaction and unrealistic expectations (Shapira, et al., 2003). Consequently, they may become isolated from their peers and also from social interaction. It is also identified that the increase in using the Internet also increases the feelings of isolation, which leads to a vicious circle of social withdrawal (Pratarelli, et al., 1999). Kim, LaRose, and Peng (2009) also concluded in a similar manner.

Different massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are immensely popular among the gamers, who use their smartphones and iPad for playing these online games. Due to cognitive stimulation, curiosity, enjoyment, and recreational refreshment, gamers like to spend their time playing these games. However, as suggested by Cole and Griffiths (2007), they can also develop compulsions to play MMORPGs, which can lead to social isolation where the individual prefers the virtual world over the real world. Also the anonymity of users in the virtual world may encourage behaviors such as taunting and bullying that typically are not displayed in live settings. For elderly people, the use of smartphones and iPad can increase social isolation if communication through these devices is not reciprocal (Chen & Schulz, 2016).

Recommendations

The most important measure that needs to be taken for avoiding social isolation due to the excessive use of smartphones and iPad is to make certain that these devices are used in a sensible manner. The teachers and parents should take all the necessary initiatives to make sure that the kids are not being addicted to smart devices. In addition to spending time with smart gadgets, they should also spend time productively, with people in the real world.

According to Kim (2013), different behavioral treatments can be appropriate for helping a learner get rid of smart gadget addictions. These include cognitive behavioral approach (CBT), motivational interviewing (MI), mindfulness behavioral cognitive treatment (MBCT), mindfulness behavioral cognitive treatment (MBCT), etc. All of these are effective and useful methods for changing thoughts and behaviors related to smart gadget addiction.

Some of the communication applications, like Facebook Messenger, can be used as intuitive, easy, and accessible platforms for maintaining collaboration with friends and family members. This can minimize the problems related to social isolation (Arumuganainar & Alwar, 2017). Some of the social networking sites can also have positive impacts on reducing social isolation through four mechanisms: engaging in activities of interests, gaining social support, connecting to the outside world, and boosting self-confidence (Chen & Schulz, 2016). However, it is also needed to make sure that the use of these platforms does not lead to addiction. In fact, sensible use of ICT can significantly foster social connectedness and social support.

In order to minimize the harmful impacts of smartphones and iPad in creating social isolation, students should be encouraged to use these devices as tools to expand learning. For instance, in elementary schools, different applications on iPad are used to give access to appropriate books, which are easily adaptable to the student's competency level. Furthermore, these smart gadgets can be used as multimedia devices that can help the students in their learning processes. It is also important to develop new smartphone applications that can play effective roles in gaining academic success and also in enhancing their social and emotional skills.

Proper initiatives should be taken to make sure that while using the smartphones and iPad, youngsters are able to delay gratification significantly longer. This will also encourage them to discover new things and have a love of learning. Otherwise, the need for immediate access and instant gratification can ruin their interpersonal interactions and have an impact on their relationships with others, which may also lead to social isolation.

Furthermore, awareness should be increased regarding the causes and harmful impacts of social isolation, and how the use of smartphones and iPad contributes to that. These smart gadgets should be effectively used for voice and video calls, sharing and receiving photos, and also for finding local events and things to do within the communities. All of these measures can work in reducing social isolation through the excessive use of smart gadgets.

Conclusion

This study has focused on the ways smartphones and iPad are contributing to social isolation directly and indirectly. The results of the study will be vital for future researchers and policymakers to identify ways to ensure the safest use of electronic gadgets so that its harmful effects, particularly social isolation can be averted. Considering the ubiquitous use of technology, there is no way to prevent people from using smartphones and iPad. However, necessary steps should be taken so that using these gadgets do not cause any harm, like increasing social isolation.

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