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One minute more: Adolescent addiction for virtual world

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Abstract

More and more children and adolescents choose to live in a virtual world, a world of computers and televisions, losing touch with the real world and its problems. Undoubtedly that the benefits of computers in everyday life can not be questioned, absolutely in every field of science or life the computer has become a good and indispensable friend due to its specific effectiveness. But things do not stop here because we know that anything, no matter how good it is, used excessively, especially during childhood and adolescence, may lead to seizure, to addiction and even disease.

This paper has a dual purpose: to find both the degree of computer use by teenagers as extracurricular activities and also the factors that push them to use excessively the computer in their spare time. The main objectives of the article are: to draw attention to the fact that adolescents who spend too much time in front of the computer quickly become to have different problems in various areas of life; to identify the extent of computer use by adolescents, as a extracurricular activities; to explore the factors favoring that it causes adolescents to excessively use computer during their spare time; to present the consequences and the effects of computer dependency into the lives of Romanian teenagers.

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Keywords: Addiction; adolescence; computer; excessive use; Internet.

1. Introduction

More and more children, from the earliest age, start being initiated in how to use the computer, and the main purpose of this is an educational one. But how is it possible to transform an educational program into an addiction? Pretty easy and involuntary because the possibilities that the computers and internet are offering aren't limited just to educational programs for children and teenagers, instead offering very attractive games and other recreation programs which used excessively by the child or teenager can grow to addiction.

Recent studies (Roco, 2004) show that the persons who spend very much time using the computer soon get to develop various problems. For children and teenagers the computer is mainly a recreation tool and many times it consumes the entire free time (Dinca, 2004).

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Freud (2004) presents the adolescence as an age of important changes. Being there in a latent form until adolescence, the instincts become active, and this situation is unbalancing the mental state.

Some authors call this computer and internet addiction “the one minute more syndrome “ according to the answer of the persons asked to leave the internet or to shut down the computer (Mitrofan, 2005).

Due to the excessive utilization of the computer and internet, the most affected areas of the child and teenager’s life are the following: the health (mental and physical), the emotional and social life.

2. Excessive utilization of the computer – Advantages - Disadvantages – Effects

It is obvious that both advantages and disadvantages and also effects are found in the excessive utilization of the computer and internet. We will mention just a few :

2.1. Advantages:

- Easy access to a large amount of information;
- Speed in finding world wide events;
- A very attractive alternative in spending the free time;
- The chance to control the lives of his game’s heroes, but in the limits of the program’s script;
- The improvement of the cognitive capacity;
- A stronger self confidence, a higher self esteem;
- Decreasing the boredom and the temporarily depression;
- Increasing the number of friends from “chat” services.
- The refuge into another world.

2.2. Disadvantages:

- Informational overload;
- Internet based relation addiction;
- He forgets face to face communication;
- The student’s involvement in educational programs decreases;
- Eye problems, headaches and back pains occur;
- Continuous tiredness due to the lack of sleep;
- The lack of physical activity;
- He is not paying attention to basic needs;
- Low communication with his family;
- Decreasing teenager’s social activities;
- Increasing the depression and loneliness on long term.

2.3. Effects for short and long time:

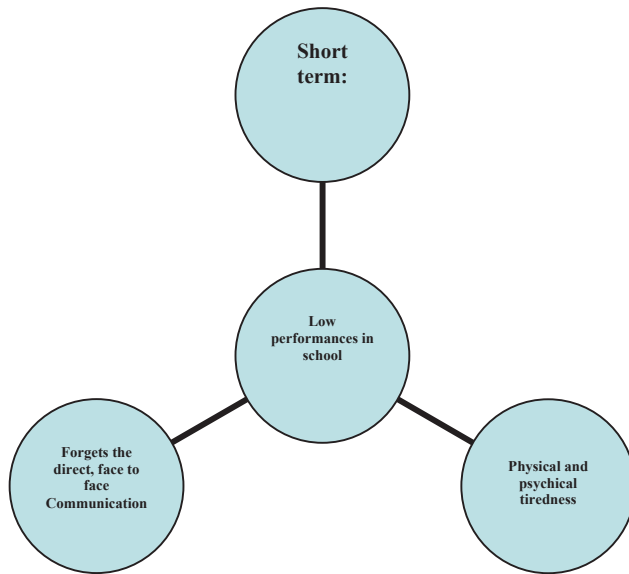


Figure 1. Effects excessive utilization of the computer

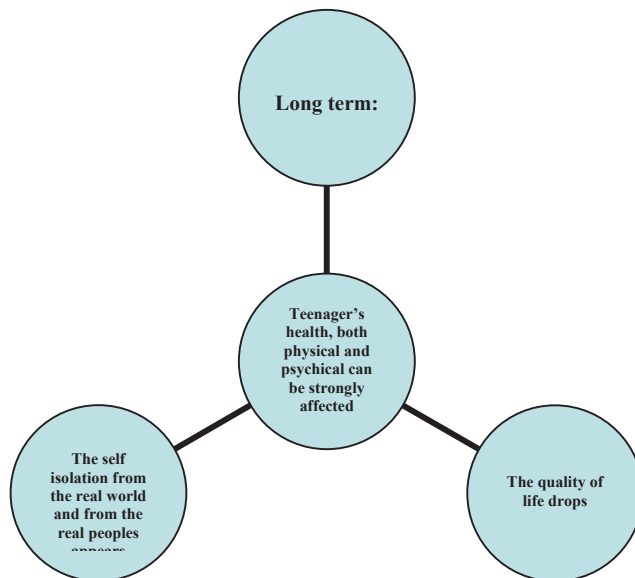


Figure 2. Effects excessive utilization of the computer on the long term

3. The methods used in research and their results.

In this study it has been used the quantity research and the questionnaire survey method, in order to investigate both the level of computer's utilization by the teenagers as a extracurricular activity and to identify the factors which push the teenagers to excessively using the computer!

Sample research included a number of 200 students learning in a high-school from Timisoara, having between 15 and 19 years old. The selection criteria of this high-school were that each student must have a personal computer at home and full access to it in his spare time.

The following 3 instruments were used in the research:

- A questionnaire for identification of computer's use by the teenager as a extracurricular activity. The questionnaire was made with 30 closed questions that test the degree of computer use by adolescents, beyond normal school curriculum.
- A questionnaire for investigation of the psycho-socials factors which the teenager is confronting with. It was made with 25 closed questions and 10 opened questions highlighting the psych-social factors the teenager is facing, nowadays, in his life: poverty, loneliness, losses, family support or lack of support from the people he care.
- Beck Scale for measuring depression. The scale was used in its short form, with 14 groups of statements that highlight the absence or presence of emotional mood in adolescent life: sadness, pessimism, sense of failure, dissatisfaction, guilt, indecision, changes in self-esteem, difficulties in their activity, sleep problems, fatigue, weight losses, concern about his physical condition, lack of libido.

The statistical data analysis was operated with SPSS 16 and had two stages:

- A. The descriptive stage - during which it had been calculated the answer frequencies for every single item of the questionnaire.
- B. The comparative stage – during which it had been calculated the answer frequencies for every single item according to the studied group and during which it had been effectuated the χ^2 comparison test, taking in consideration as significant values of p less than 0.05 (95% probability).

Following the analysis and the interpretation of results of the first questionnaire were formed three research groups, depending on the degree of computer and Internet use by teens as extracurricular activities, with these levels:

Table 1 Levels to use of computer

Levels	Teenagers' number
Low use of computer	49 teenagers
Medium use of computer	80 teenagers
Excessive use of computer	71 teenagers

The research results have identified the factors which stimulate and promote extensive use of computer and Internet by adolescents, in order to compensate:

- Feelings of insecurity
- Family problems
- School problems
- A poor social life
- Financial problems.

Because of poverty and many shortcomings that adolescents confront during this period, cause them to spend more time in another world, unreal, "virtual", which is more easily accessible and manageable than the real world in which we live. "Virtual" world helps a teenager to access almost anything, very quickly, without money or with less money. This world does not humiliate him and also it creates a satisfaction and a safety feeling. The safety feeling that adolescent feels in this "virtual" world, is also due to lack of attention of his parents which are too busy with so many other things in which he feels excluded, causing him to spend more time on the internet where he does not feel alone anymore.

However, applying the Beck Scale for measuring depression, it has been found that in all three groups it is present the depressed mood, to a certain extent. Maximum of depression was ranked by score 3.00 and 0 mark was applied to record cases completely without depression. Under 0.50 was considered actually the absence of depression and thought that there has been a 2% of adolescences who used a computer within a lower range. From 0.5 to 1.2 we can refer to a moderate depression (relatively small). In this category there were 68% of adolescents who had a lower and average computer use. Between 1.20 and 2.00 we can speak of a severe depression. Within 15% of adolescents were using the computer and internet in an excessively way. Above 2.50 is the threshold of extreme depression, with death risk, where fit 5% of adolescents who were using the computer excessively.

It is obvious the direct link between excessive use of computer by adolescence and the presence of depression mood and most of it, what is the level of depression for adolescent.

3. Conclusions

Behind the excessive use of computer by adolescents, in addition to interest, preoccupation and intelligence it can hide psycho-social factors and many frustrations of adolescent that have accumulated over time and which are obvious in this vulnerable period of his life, called adolescence. Because of lack of family support, many teenagers choose to fill their free time by using computer and internet which offer ways of socialization, communication and information, but sooner or later it will drive them away from their family and from the real world.

Through this work we wish to draw a warning for both adolescents and parents, but also for their teachers as well, to be involved in the adolescents' life and to help prevent the excessive use of computer as an extracurricular activity during their free time. Excessive computer and internet usage by teenagers can lead to addiction and in the end, even to diseases.

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