



Review Article

Problematic use of technology amongst LGBTQ people

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Abstract

The present paper aims at discussing the vulnerabilities amongst the LGBTQ community in comparison to the general population. LGBTQ people amount to a significant part of our society, approximately 11%, and are dealing with specific mental health issues and a significantly higher burden than that of the general population. Like other addictive disorders (SUDs), people with the LGBTQ community are also at a high risk of Internet addiction and other related cyber-psychiatric conditions. Upcoming research has identified the problematic use of the internet amongst sexual minorities, which has become a concern regarding their habit-forming nature and potential abuse. Technology today controls every aspect of our lives, creating stumbling blocks in various domains. It has become crucial to address behavioral addiction via increasing awareness about its risk and mindful use of technology; early identification of the problem and its management. This paper outlines the definition of internet addiction and its related consequences along with social media addiction, dating applications, and sexual addiction among the LGBTQ community. It also briefly discusses the current scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on these addictive behaviors amongst sexual minorities.

Keywords: LGBTQ,
Problematic technology use,
Technology addiction

Introduction

LGBTQ people are among a significant part of our society, approximately 11%, and are dealing with specific mental health issues and a significantly higher burden than that of the general population. (Russell et al., 2016; Van Der Pol-Harney et al., 2018). Like other addictive disorders (SUDs), people with the LGBTQ community also have a high risk of Internet addiction and other related cyber-

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psychiatric conditions (Han, X. et al., 2019). Hence forth it is worth discussing (in the present paper) the vulnerabilities of LGBTQ or people of sexual minorities about behavioral addictions, namely smartphone addiction, social media addiction, and sexual addiction. This paper will also briefly discuss the current scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on these addictive behaviors among people in the LGBTQ community. Problematic use of technology is now widely discussed in the literature, and 'gaming' as 'disorder' is now accepted as a 'valid clinical entity' in Upcoming ICD-11 (World Health Organization, 2018) and provisionally in DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Apart from Gaming disorder, other conditions like 'Internet Addiction' or 'Problematic internet use' is one of the most studied conditions and is broadly considered as a condition characterized by excessive preoccupation and use of the internet (or smart phone or social media) along with significant impairments in physical, psychological, interpersonal, social, financial, or occupational domains of life. (Gökçearslan et al., 2016). There are various high-risk factors, as found in available studies, like younger age groups, male gender, loneliness, presence of psychosocial stressors, individual personality traits, history of comorbid psychiatric illness like depression, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders in adults and ADHD, social phobias, conduct disorders in adolescents and younger population. (Wu et al., 2015)

Sexual minorities or people with non-heterosexual identities may have a unique lifestyle, culture as well as vulnerabilities (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018). Due to their sexual identity, this population faces discrimination, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, societal and legal problems (Cyrus, 2017), which often results in poor mental health outcomes. (Van Der Pol-Harney et al., 2018) Living a double life by hiding their sexuality

from the outer world due to the fear of non-acceptance, they are often imposed to live a 'closeted life', which creates internal conflicts in the long term and can have negative consequences that expose sexual minorities towards an increased risk for different sorts of behavioral addiction (Juergens & Parisi, 2021). Behavioral addiction such as smart phone addiction, online gambling addiction, sexual addiction, social media addiction could be associated with increased aggression, anxiety, depression, somatic complaints, suicide, and substance abuse (Khodabakhsh Ahmadi, 2017).

Some of the reasons for increased behavioral addiction in the LGBTQ community can be attributed to limited opportunities, high level of discrimination at work, lower job satisfaction, low productivity, loss of employment, and not receiving promotions (Sears, et al., 2014). Due to these psychological and social vulnerabilities, this population is prone to risky behaviors like substance use, sexual violence, high-risk sexual behaviors, HIV, and AIDS (Juergens & Parisi, 2021). Similarly, in the current 'internet culture', these people are at risk of 'internet addictions' like smartphone addiction, social media addiction and other psychiatric conditions like sexual addiction, cyberbullying or stalking, etc. (Han et al., 2019). These disorders are termed differently in the different research, and there is ongoing taxonomical debate about considering these disorders as independent conditions or varied presentation of a single entity (Montage et al., 2021).

Social media addiction, dating applications and sexual addiction among LGBTQ community

Smart phones contemporarily have become the virtual platform for enjoyment, enabling the individual to manage their daily routine tasks. Although the advantages of the

technology are enormous, it either directly or indirectly hampers our mental health and our interpersonal relationship (Gökçearsan et al., 2016). There is a significant relationship between smart phones and increased loneliness, timidity, and anxiety (Yao & Zhong, 2014). LGBTQ community faces poor interpersonal relationships in real life due to the stigma attached to them, whereas smart phones provide a platform to connect to various things and people. The need for connecting over virtual reality through social networking sites and various dating apps to keep in touch with the other person, in reality, could also lead to social isolation (Yao & Zhong, 2014)

LGBT community is not very vocal about their identity in real life, and earlier it used to be a very personal experience, but with the help of social media platforms, the expression of coming out has changed remarkably as it allows users to connect, express ideas, emotions, feelings, and thoughts. This has caused high use of social media amongst the LGBT community. According to the statistics of 2014-2015, 8% of the LGBTQ community used Facebook in comparison to 57% of the general population, 5% used Twitter in comparison to 21% of the general population, and 5% used Instagram in comparison to 15.5% of the general population (Paula Fagan, 2017).

The research found that people reported spending an excessive amount of time using dating applications like 'Grindr', 'Tinder', 'Planet Romeo', 'Lesly', 'As You Are', 'Zoe', 'Surge', 'Just she', which cater specifically to gay, lesbian and people with other sexual preferences. (Castro Ángel et al., 2020). These social media cum dating applications are now most popular among the LGBTQ community because they efficiently provide accessibility to people with similar preferences, opportunities to socialize and make friends.

Connecting to their community empowers them by getting a sense of belongingness (Zervoulis et al., 2019), which is very difficult specifically for this population without the world of internet. These social media applications also provide geo-location-based availability of people, which has its added advantages and risks. These features increase the chances of 'instant connection' of people and sharing of personal information, which may lead to developing instant but a false sense of intimacy without the 'efforts put in for friendship' or 'emotional or behavioral investments and demands' (Griffiths, 2009). These online relationships may lead to online sexual behaviors like 'sexting' or 'video-sex' to offline sexual encounters and risky behaviors. There are reports of increased risk of unsafe sexual practices among these population, and the risk may increase with the help of online support features (Heijman et al., 2016)

On the virtual platform, these people of the LGBTQ community have been allowed to conceal their identity or disclose them after some chatting or only 'share picture of their undressed body parts' or 'decapitated body pictures'. This phenomenon may have another psychological impact, like desire to look sexually appealing or perfect; body Image issues (Body Image, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity, 2019), sexual myths and disturbances related to their 'shape of sexual organ' and 'sexual performances' (Moreno-Domínguez, 2019). Another critical aspect of the internet is to provide 'anonymity', which maintains privacy, and individuals tend to pursue the desires and acts which are challenging to express in real-world society (Bapna et al., 2016). This anonymity and maintaining the discreteness further make it easy to get involved in frequent sexual acts. Overall, these sexual dating and hookup applications increase the risk of sexual addiction and

other behavioral addictions. (Tavares et al., 2020)

Sexual impulses that cause impairment in overall functioning are referred to as sexual addiction. According to research, 60% of people with a history of childhood abuse, such as an unfriendly environment, neglectful parents, and emotional starvation for love, have sexual addiction (All Psych, 2014). It becomes the substitute for boredom, anxiety, and an escape from reality. Lack of support from the family and the outside world can introduce them to inappropriate sex (All Psych, 2014). All these experiences provide meaning to them for a shorter duration. With the rapidly growing use of the internet today, sexual acting out has become viable, and all can be sought in one place. Sometimes sexual minorities are stuck in a co-dependent relationship where they do not enjoy sex but only try to please their partner due to the fear of abandonment. People are indulging in sexual addiction due to the abundance of various dating applications easily accessible to them. With these behaviors, some people pay the price of their time, relationship, and personal well-being (All Psych, 2014).

Covid-19 pandemic and increased vulnerability of internet addiction:

The world is presently fighting a global pandemic that has contributed to increased behavioral addiction in the LGBTQ community. Increased behavioral addictions help them cope with subjective isolation and provides them a sense of belongingness. Moreover, with the movement restriction, they feel trapped, which barely leaves them with the opportunity to explore others of similar interests (Gato et al., 2021). These LGBTQ people are largely surviving by interacting and meeting with people of their community. During the current pandemic, social distancing is a significant challenge for

them and leads to decreased positive and supportive interpersonal interaction (Bauer, 2020). Some of the LGBT people used to live away from their family members after coming out to their families and avoided negative interaction. Due to lockdown or work-from-home, now they are being forced to return to their homes and face negative familial interaction (Gato et al., 2021). Loss of job opportunities and homelessness are other factors that have also been reported as an added new stressor for the LGBTQ community during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ao, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the essential and non-essential screen has been tremendously increased in general, and the risk of addiction is now higher in vulnerable populations. Many of the online communities of dating and social networking have provided a waiver to video call and other subscriptions to maintain and increase the interpersonal connections, which may further increase the chances of problematic use (Gato et al., 2021).

Challenges in identifying behavioral addictions

The development of behavioral addiction, such as sexual addiction, gambling addiction, shopping addiction, internet addiction, etc., is similar to substance addiction; vulnerable individuals often find themselves hankering and participating in it in an unhealthy manner and suffer similar adverse repercussions as physical dependence (Mission Harbor Behavioral Health, 2021). Behavioral addictions are different such that they often do not come to clinical attention due to their considerable acceptance in modern society as “normal activities.” People cannot think of being addicted to them (Mission Harbor Behavioral Health, 2021).

Unfortunately, almost all forms of behavioral addictions have no standardized diagnosis method as they are new to the medical and

mental health field. With the increased use of technology and the lack of awareness amongst society, the prevalence of these disorders has surged (Mission Harbor Behavioral Health, 2021). Although they can be overcome with the help of a mental health professional who can guide individuals regarding the healthier ways of adapting to these compulsions through various forms of therapies. The most common forms of therapy used are cognitive behavioral therapy (Grant et al., 2010) and group therapy (Mission Harbor Behavioral Health, 2021). Behavioral addictions do not affect the same physical manner, as chemical intoxication or other substance addictions do. However, they can take a toll on the person's mental health and lead to immense suffering if left untreated. Recovery from these disorders is possible only once the person has insight into the problem and can address their addicted behavior and its role in controlling the person's life (Mission Harbor Behavioral Health, 2021).

Conclusion

Problematic internet use (smart phone or social media) is addictive and is related to impairments in day-to-day life. Given the backdrop of a global pandemic, the general population becomes vulnerable to use excessive internet, thereby leading to problematic internet usage. Considering LGBTQ being a minority, the pandemic acts as a risk factor for increased internet usage amongst this community. Increased use may be attributed to lower job satisfaction and productivity, loss of employment, and not receiving promotions. The implications of behavioral addiction in connection to sexuality cannot be overlooked. Therefore, it becomes crucial to address behavioral addiction via increasing awareness about its risk and optimal and mindful use of technology, early identification of the problem, and its management. LGBTQ

people with comorbid mental conditions should be routinely screened for behavioral addiction or problematic use and addressed accordingly.

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