THE ROLE OF ONLINE ACTIVITIES AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN INDIAN ADOLESCENTS' EATING DISORDERS: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

T-17

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Keywords: eating disorders; smartphone addiction; academic performance

Eating disorders (EDs) and their contributors are well-studied by now. Among the many of them, smartphone use and social media platforms may play a significant role in body expectations for those susceptible to EDs. Unrealistic expectations of appearance can worsen existing eating disorders, or trigger the start of new ones. Moreover, among those with better academic performance (AP), the risk of EDs can be higher due to elevated self-control and a drive to perfectionism. On the other hand, higher AP can act as a protective factor against excessive online activities. However, these connections are not always clear and unidirectional, and need further exploration.

This study aimed to understand the role of online activities and AP in EDs, hypothesizing that smartphone addiction and higher level of AP may contribute to having disordered eating habits.

The study was based on convenience sampling, involving 112 students from Navrachana International School, Vadodara, India (47.3% females, 52,7% males; mean age=16.0 years). Data were collected using a self-report online questionnaire. It included questions about online time and AP; and consisted of the following scales: Smartphone Addiction Scale (SAS), Eating Attitude Test (EAT-26), and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS).

Based on correlation analyses, EDs were positively related to body mass index (BMI) ($p<.01$), while social support from the family and friends seemed to be protective: it negatively correlated with EDs ($p<.001$). Both smartphone addiction ($p<.01$) and being online during weekdays ($p<.001$) were positively correlated with EDs. Social support and being online during weekdays were found to have a significant correlation with bulimia, oral control, and dieting. AP was negatively correlated with online activities and smartphone addiction. Multiple linear regression estimates for EDs showed that social support ($p<.001$), smartphone addiction ($p<.01$) and being online on weekdays ($p<.001$), AP ($p<.01$), and BMI ($p<.01$) had the greatest role in predicting EDs.

While being online on weekdays played a critical role in developing EDs, smartphone addiction and AP also had significant but relatively smaller associations. In other words, smartphones and online platforms can be detrimental, but they may also provide a tool and a place to educate and advocate. AP can be controversial: partly, it may contribute to the risk of EDs, but it can also act as a protection against excessively being online. Prevention programs are necessary to explain to adolescents to wisely use smartphones and social media, and find alternatives to online activities to avoid excessive usage. In addition, we also need to raise awareness about the hidden symptoms and causes of EDs.