“The Internet Made Me Do It”—Social Media and Potential for Violence in Adolescents

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The Slenderman case revives a long-standing debate: does media exposure influence acts of violence in youth?

DIGITAL PSYCHIATRY

In June 2014, numerous news outlets told the chilling story of 2 Wisconsin preteens who had lured their best friend into the woods and stabbed her 19 times. When asked why, these girls reported that the internet meme “Slenderman” drove them to do it.

Following this horrific crime, the typical questions of how and why were asked, but soon came another question: Was the internet, in fact, an accomplice? Had their online activity led to a blurring of fiction and reality in such a way that had allowed them to commit attempted murder?1

This case revives a long-standing debate: Does media exposure influence acts of violence in youth? Recently, the American Psychological Association Task Force re-reviewed the existence of a potential link between violent video game exposure and acts of real-life violence.2 The authors examined the literature from 2009 to 2013 and concluded:

Consistent with the literature that we reviewed, we found that violent video game exposure was associated with: an increased composite aggression score; increased aggressive behavior; increased aggressive cognitions. . . . Our task force concluded that violent video game use is a risk factor for adverse outcomes, but found insufficient studies to examine any potential link between violent video game use and delinquency or criminal behavior.2

Video games are only a small part of the wide expanse of media readily accessible to youths throughout the day. While teenagers engage in an average of over 6 and a half hours of screen time daily (including social media and online videos), the average daily time spent playing video games was just 56 minutes for boys and 7 minutes for girls.3 With adolescents attached to their devices for so much of the day, what should the practicing psychiatrist know about a potential connection between aggressive behaviors and online activity?

The evidence

There is limited research to indicate that an increased number of hours on social media correlates directly with aggressive behavior, but there is literature that connects certain types of internet use to increased aggressive behavior. For example, quality of online exposure may be contributory; youths who perpetrated serious crimes were significantly more likely to have viewed violent online content.4 Moreover, similar to the way media coverage of suicide can act as a contagion for “copycat” suicides,5 there is also evidence that some mass killings may be influenced by other violent acts in the immediate past.6 Now that the internet provides unfettered access to images of real-life violence—eg, recent videos of murders and gang violence uploaded to Facebook Live—overall exposure to, and potential for, copycat violence may be increased. Teens that spend hours “liking” their friends’ pictures on social networking sites may be significantly more likely to have other traits associated with violent behavior.

Quantity of internet use may also be contributory. Several studies connect problematic internet use (PIU) or internet addiction (IA) to increased aggressive behaviors, perhaps because of similar neurobiology between the 2 conditions.7 PIU and IA are often broadly defined as internet use that is uncontrollable, markedly distressing, or time-consuming or that results in social, occupational, or financial difficulties.8 A study of more than 2000 Korean high school students found a nearly twofold increase in aggression in severely internet-addicted youth over mildly internet-addicted youth,6 and similar findings have been replicated in other adolescent studies.9-11 Other measures of aggressive behavior show correlation as well. American high school students who met criteria for PIU were significantly more likely to have been in physical fights than were those in a non-PIU cohort.12
Teenagers who spend hours “liking” their friends’ pictures on social networking sites may be significantly more likely to have other traits associated with violent behavior aside from their internet habits. The goal of a large body of research has been to characterize the population of adolescents with PIU and to examine comorbidities. Alcohol use and depressive symptoms both predict violent behavior in adolescents, and these factors have also been positively correlated with internet use. Perhaps unsurprising given neuroimaging findings that suggest brain structural abnormalities in reward circuitry in adolescents with PIU, adolescent PIU is associated with higher levels of alcohol use. This association has been found both in cross-sectional analyses, as well as in a longitudinal study in which internet overuse corresponded with heavy alcohol use by early adulthood.17,18

While more contentious, there is growing evidence that pathologic internet use may positively correlate with depressive disorders, and even “normal” everyday Facebook scrolling may have long-term consequences. Recent longitudinal studies have found that Facebook use is predictive of a decline in subjective well-being, and similar associations have been delineated between depressed mood and overall social network use, as well as with online chatting.22,23

In addition, while PIU can be conceptualized as an addiction, it has also been characterized as an impulse control disorder. Several studies suggest a high degree of overlap between PIU characteristics and impulsivity. It is this proposed interweaving between impulsivity, depression, aggression, and even increased substance use that may support the idea that adolescents who spend countless hours online may become more violent than they would be if they spent less or no time online.

Implications for psychiatrists

Does excessive Twitter time or continual scanning of Facebook feeds cause adolescent violence? It may be more clinically helpful for us to reframe the question: Are youths with risk factors predictive of assaultive behavior such as substance use, impulsivity, and mood disorders also more likely to spend excessive time online? The answer, from the preliminary studies above, appears to be yes. It would be near impossible—and unrealistic—to suggest abstinence from internet-based activities in these adolescents, but future studies may benefit from continued exploration of the ways in which adolescents utilize social media and online forums to enact aggression (e.g., cyberbullying) as well as incorporation of internet habits within our routine psychiatric evaluation.

Consider asking the following questions within the traditional assessment of an adolescent. If the answer is yes, this should prompt further exploration.

1) Have you ever viewed real-life violent content online?
2) Have you ever cyberbullied or harassed anyone else online?
3) Have you ever gotten into trouble or an argument because you were online too much?
4) Have you ever experienced tension or anxiety that can only be relieved by going online?

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References:


20. Jang KS, Hwang SY, Choi JY. Internet addiction and psychiatric symptoms among Korean


Links: