

# The Impact of Family Functionality on Internet Addiction in Left-Behind Children

Lele Huang<sup>1, a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ninth Middle School, Qingdao, Shandong, 266073, China

<sup>a</sup>huanglele248@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** This study explores the influence of two aspects of family functionality, namely parent-child attachment and parental discipline, on internet addiction in left-behind children. It investigates the relationship between parent-child attachment, parental discipline, and internet addiction in left-behind children, in order to provide recommendations for the creation of a positive family environment for these children and the maintenance of their psychological well-being. The study employed cluster sampling, with fifth and sixth-grade students from two rural primary schools in Qingdao, Shandong Province, as participants for a three-month investigation. It is concluded that there is a negative correlation between family functionality and internet addiction in left-behind children. The research reveals that parent-child attachment and parental discipline directly impact the psychological health and developmental environment of left-behind children, which imposes an indirect influence on the likelihood of internet addiction in these children. Therefore, greater parental education on the psychological well-being of left-behind children, along with positive care and supervision, contributes to a high-quality developmental environment, reduces the incidence of internet addiction and facilitates the positive growth and development of children.

**Keywords:** Family functionality; Internet addiction; Left-behind children.

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## 1. Introduction

Internet addiction is a psychological behavior disorder caused by repeated and excessive use of the internet by individuals. It is characterized by a strong craving for the reuse of the internet, withdrawal reactions when stopping or reducing internet use, along with accompanying mental and physical symptoms [1].

Lives in the current digital age are gradually inseparable from the internet, which gives rise to dependency. The internet, as a spiritual ballast for many, is used as a tool to release emotions. However, this detachment from the current development direction of the era has led to an increasing addition to the internet among minors. Internet addiction results in sleep, emotional, academic, and other psychosocial health issues. According to the *2019 National Report on the Use of the Internet in Children and Adolescents*, "the number of underage internet users in China reached 175 million, with a 93.1% internet use rate among adolescents and a 32.9% internet penetration rate in rural underage populations [2]. The increasing number of underage internet users and the younger-age trend of internet addiction issues among urban and rural minors have become prevalent social issues [3]. Due to the long-term absence of familial constraints and inadequate parental discipline, left-behind children are more prone to immersion in the online world. As a result, internet addiction is becoming increasingly severe among the group. In light of this, this paper aims to explore how family functionality affects internet addiction in left-behind children and its impact on the psychological well-being of these children. It seeks to provide insights into the creation of a better family environment for left-behind children to promote their psychological well-being. The paper discusses the impact of family functionality on internet addiction in left-behind children from two perspectives: parent-child attachment and parental discipline, which aim to assist children in more effective use of the internet, maintain their

physical and mental health, and provide guidance for parents of left-behind families to establish more robust family functionality so as to reduce the incidence of internet addiction in left-behind children.

## 2. Influencing Factors

### 2.1. Parent-Child Attachment

Family functionality serves as the bond that measures the emotional connections among family members. A positive emotional bond between parents and children not only promotes the growth of children but helps minors adapt to future society [4]. The theory of parent-child attachment posits that a positive attachment relationship involves more warm and secure parent-child interactions. The greater emotional involvement corresponds to more warmth and security underage children can perceive. Research indicates that the attachment relationship between children and parents in their early years exhibits a relatively stable correlation with emotional health [5]. The maintenance of children's psychological well-being requires a nurturing and warm environment, and parents are the major providers of such an environment. Their more frequent engagement in interaction and connection with their children highlights the close relationship between parent-child attachment and the psychological well-being of left-behind children. If left-behind children fail to establish a secure parent-child attachment before separation from their parents, the child's psychological well-being will be subject to significant impact, which threatens to produce detrimental outcomes [6]. This underscores that insecure and inappropriate parent-child attachment can trigger more behavioral issues in left-behind children, such as internet addiction [4]. Therefore, the absence of family functionality affects the emotional maintenance of left-behind children. The absence of a secure and appropriate developmental environment, accompanied by an unstable parent-child attachment will compromise the

psychological well-being of children and induce adverse behaviors and a higher likelihood of internet addiction in left-behind children.

## 2.2. Parental discipline

Parental discipline plays a crucial role in the growth of children. Reasonable parental discipline can create a positive family and developmental environment and exert a favorable influence on the physical and mental development and the formation of values in children. Effective parental discipline can reduce the likelihood of undesirable behaviors in children, and, as such, play a beneficial role in family functionality to guide children in their receipt of a higher-quality family education [7]. An essential aspect of family education is online education, where parents guide children on how to use the internet to create a positive online environment and encourage responsible internet use. Warren defines parental internet supervision as the strategies parents use to control, supervise, and interpret the media and content that children and adolescents come into contact with [8]. However, there is a prevalent absence of parental control in the families of left-behind children since parents usually work away from home for long periods of time. These children do not receive parental care and discipline from an early age, which results in an inadequate and non-nurturing developmental environment. This absence exerts a significant impact on the psychological and personal development of left-behind children, who not only suffer inner loneliness but may also develop a rebellious mentality. Left-behind children, without both care and restrictions, tend to seek comfort and freedom in the external environment during their exploratory phase of growth, which may lead them to explore unconventional avenues. The internet, with its enticement and content, attracts these curious, left-behind children to try and become obsessed with the online world until they gradually become desensitized. Without minimal parental supervision and the ability to cultivate effective self-control during their growth, left-behind children may be exposed to excessive internet use and addiction, which ultimately undergo deterioration and develop into internet addiction.

## 3. Research

### 3.1. Hypothesis

The hypothesis posits a negative correlation between family functionality and internet addiction in left-behind children.

### 3.2. Research Subject

The study employed cluster sampling, with fifth and sixth-grade students from two rural primary schools in Qingdao, Shandong Province, as participants for a three-month investigation. The first test (T1) was conducted in April 2023, involving 1567 valid participants (856 males, 711 females, average age  $11.97 \pm 0.77$  years). The second test (T2) was conducted in May 2023, with 1539 valid participants (842 males, 697 females, average age  $11.97 \pm 0.76$  years). The final test (T3) was conducted in June 2023, with 1584 valid participants (863 males, 721 females, average age  $11.99 \pm 0.77$  years).

### 3.3. Research Methodology

The assessment of family functionality was rated on a culturally appropriate scale for Chinese adolescents

developed by Shek et al. [7,8]. The questionnaire assessed three dimensions: interpersonal relationships, conflicts, and communication, with a total of 9 questions. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 indicating "very dissimilar," 5 indicating "very similar"). The questionnaire demonstrated robust reliability and validity in previous studies [3,4]. In this study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the questionnaire was 0.87, with individual dimensions for interpersonal relationships, conflicts, and communication being 0.88, 0.70, and 0.80, respectively.

The research focused on fifth and sixth-grade rural left-behind primary school students. Informed consent forms were distributed to students and their parents, and with their consent, the test were conducted in stages. Firstly, teachers conducted a preliminary assessment of students, those with sensory impairments or intellectual disabilities excluded. Data on students' internet use time and content were collected on a class-by-class basis. Experienced psychology graduate students, at least two per class, served as the main examiners. Participants were instructed to independently complete the questionnaire, with small gifts provided to each participant.

## 4. Conclusion

The research indicates that internet addiction is more common among left-behind children with long-term parental absences compared to those with shorter parental absences. Long-term parental absence contributes to a higher incidence of psychological health issues and rebellious behavior in left-behind children because children with long-term parental absence receive less family education. As a result, they experience more severe family dysfunction compared to those with shorter parental absences. Consequently, left-behind children with parental absences struggle to resolve and alleviate psychological health issues during their developmental process. They fail to cultivate a strong parent-child attachment, secure a sense of security, and receive effective and reasonable parental discipline. In this context, left-behind children attempt to become obsessed with and dependent on the internet in compensation for their psychological loss. It is evident that the absence of parent-child attachment and parental discipline directly influences the psychological well-being and life environment of left-behind children. The indirect consequence of these adverse psychological health issues is the common occurrence of internet addiction in left-behind children with long-term parental absences, which highlights the detrimental impact of unfavorable family functionality on the incidence of internet addiction in left-behind children.

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