CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is arguably one of the most significant technological developments of the late 20th century (Jagboro, 2003). It allegedly opens the world to everyone, regardless of race, creed, sex, etc. Established only a few decades ago, the Internet is a system of enormous technical and social complexity. It comprises a gigantic but almost invisible universe that includes thousands of networks, millions of computers, and billions of users across the world (Greenfield & Yan, 2006). College students can receive help with their assignment, investors can keep track of stocks, sports scores and statistics are just a click away for fans. These are but a few of the myriad ways people use the Internet.

The Internet is the latest in a series of technological breakthroughs in interpersonal communication, following the telegraph, telephone, radio, and television. Internet has been vilified as a powerful new tool for the devil, awash in pornography, causing users to be addicted to hours each day of “surfing” hours during which they are away from their family and friends, resulting in depression and loneliness for the individual user, and further weakening neighborhood and community ties. The main reason people use the internet is to communicate with other people over e-mail and the principal reason why people send e-mail messages to others is to maintain interpersonal relationships (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

One of the novel aspects of the Internet for social life is the wide variety of special interest newsgroups available. There are also e-mail facilities in which group members can post messages to all other members, and websites specializing in every topic imaginable. These virtual groups can be fertile territory for the formation of friendships and even close relationships because of the shared interests and values of the members.
The internet affords a new and different avenue of social interaction that enables groups and relationships to form that otherwise would not be able to, thereby increasing and enhancing social connectivity. Children and young people are already leading users of the internet and mobile phones across the world.

Adoption of socially interactive technologies is high among adolescents. Aside from email, the most often used Internet tool for peer communication is instant messaging. As adolescence is the development period during which growing persons make a transition from childhood to adulthood; it is a stage fraught with confusion, anxiety, curiosity and peril. All adolescents show concerns regarding developmental issues such as identity, self-image, increased autonomy and relationships.

Adolescents want to be in constant touch with their peers. Even if they are settled in different countries for higher education they use various means of communication to stay in tune with them. Earlier they communicated to them through letters, telephones, telegraphs etc. whereas the advantages and technology paved to use mobiles, internet, E-mail, skype as means of communication.

Studies have shown that an increase in virtual interaction decreases the amount of face to face interaction between people and this in turn may lead to social isolation and depression, psychological distress and loneliness. Individuals who used the internet more showed declines in face to face communication with family, smaller social circles, and higher levels of loneliness, stress and depressive symptoms. The internet use can displace valuable time spent with family and friends (Nie & Erbring, 2000). They concluded from a cross-sectional diary survey that the internet use damages social interaction with family members.

By offering fast-paced, inexpensive, online communication, internet allows for new online youth social networks to form and evolve. These online networks, in turn, may affect the offline social and friendship networks in which youth are immersed.

Parks and Floyd (1996) administered a questionnaire concerning friendship formation to people participating in Internet newsgroups (electronic bulletin boards
devoted to special interest topics). Results showed that on-line relationships are highly similar to those developed in person, in terms of their breadth, depth, and quality.

As adolescents stand at the threshold of adulthood, they need authentic knowledge that helps them to understand the process of growing up in particular reference to their psycho-social well being, so that they are well equipped to cope with the problems they confront during the transitional phase.

Reports in the press and surveys from parents find points of view that range from exuberant-discussing how socially interactive technologies can save youth from social isolation and depression-to alarming-focusing on how constant use of these technologies fosters antisocial behavior (Turow, 1999). The reality lies somewhere between these two extremes. As with the adoption and use of any other technology, there are a variety of factors that affect how internet is used on an individual level, as well as group dynamics that come into play.

But the internet offers a range of negative challenges too. Nie and Erbring (2000) argued that the Internet was creating a “lonely crowd” in cyberspace, because Internet use “necessarily” takes time away from family and friends. However, the evidence very consistently points in the opposite direction concerning the effect of Internet use on off-line community involvement.

On no issue has research on the social effects of the Internet been more contentious than as to its effect on close relationships, such as those with family and friends. Internet use led to negative outcomes for the individual user, such as increases in depression and loneliness, and neglect of existing close relationships. They are: lack of family bonds; low self-esteem; inability to express opinions and questions; and inability to socialize.

Restricting internet access is a necessary but insufficient solution. But what is needed is healing the personality weaknesses that virtually guarantee some individuals will fall victim to Internet temptations. Studies show that those most likely to get into trouble are not deterred by limits on Internet access. Given the net’s ubiquitous
presence, they will find a way to get online—at the local public library, if not elsewhere. Therefore, a key challenge to parents and educators is identifying the risk factors and the individuals most at risk.

There is evidence that internet addiction has a negative effect on academics (a drop in grades), family relations (having to hide their excessive Internet use from parents), physical health (sleep deprivation due to long hours of Internet use), mental health (depression), and finance (cost of accrued Internet expenses). Interactive communication applications such as chat rooms, instant messaging, e-mail, and online games have most commonly been associated with Internet addiction among youth and lose their identity.

1.1 NEED FOR THE STUDY

Given that so many adolescents are spending so much time on the Internet, it is essential to be aware of its impact on adolescent behavior, well-being, and development.

Technology is changing the nature of problems (Young, 1996). Symptoms often identified were a preoccupation with the internet, an inability to control use, hiding or lying about the behaviour, psychological withdrawal, and continued use despite consequences of the behaviour (Young, 2007). The internet has positive aspects including informative, convenient, resourceful and fun, but for the excessive internet users, these benefits turn out to be useless. Most individuals use the internet without negative consequences and even benefit from it, but some individuals do suffer from negative impacts. Psychologists and educators are aware of the potential negative impact from excessive use and related physical and psychological problems, Griffiths (2000) and Greenfield (2000).

There has been an explosive growth of internet usage worldwide and this is expected to continue with its use becoming an integral part of everyday life. The internet has become more accessible in homes, schools, colleges, libraries and internet cafes; access is further aided with the increasing affordability of home computers over
the last decade. Preliminary studies done by the National Center of Education statistics (DeBell & Chapman 2003), have shown that a large number of children and adolescents in America (5 to 17 years old) have access to the internet and are being exposed to the internet at a very early age (National Center for Education statistics, Computer and Internet Use by Students in 2003).

Common online activities include completing school work, playing online games, reading and writing emails and engaging in real time chatting (DeBell and Chapman (2003); Hunley et al 2005). The internet provides tremendous educational benefits including access to information across a wide variety of topics, establishing educational links and enhancing communication with teachers and classmates. However, excessive internet use can lead to negative outcomes such as poor school performance (Young 1998), social isolation (Kraut et al., 1998), and might impede adolescent’s achievement of psychosocial developmental tasks (Mitchell 2000).

Users who spend a significant amount of time online often experience academic, relationship, financial, and occupational difficulties, as well as physical impairments (Chou, 2001). Some researchers (Brenner, 1997; Nie & Erbring, 2000) have even linked internet use with an increase in psychological difficulties such as depression and loneliness.

No one today disputes that the Internet is likely to have a significant impact on social life; but there remains substantial disagreement as to the nature and value of this impact. Several scholars have contended that internet communication is an impoverished and sterile form of social exchange compared to traditional face-to-face interactions, and will therefore produce negative outcomes (loneliness and depression) for its users as well as weaken neighborhood and community ties. The internet most definitely has a bright side to it like the new world of knowledge its provided , support groups , mode of trust , barring racism and prejudice , covering stigmatized identities , creating a community and many more such positive effects. But the other side of the coin gives a terrifying image of the damage it has caused mankind and
their relationships. The social and psychological wellbeing has been marred tremendously due to the unethical internet usage.

In today’s fast world where time and tide wait for no man it made me wonder and look back retrospectively the reason behind this hardcore machine world. It did not take long to come to an understanding that it is the whirlpool of internet which has caused this speed with which people have forgotten and nearly lost basic values need to relate and bond.

Sadly, it is noticed that in every walk of life people are no longer ‘social animals’ but have transformed into ‘social isolates’. It is indeed the use of internet which over the past years has taken over mankind and we individuals have forgotten that the very basic need with which we invented this ‘internet’ is forgotten. The initial purpose to make life better and world a better place to live in is somehow lost and disappeared.

The internet usage has largely had an impact on the social and psychological wellbeing. Therefore there was an inevitable need to study this area in order to highlight, create awareness on our negative way of life as well as overcome this addictive pattern of living. Thus, there is a need to bring down internet usage and elevate our social and psychological wellbeing.

An increase in the amount of time spent in front of the computer would generally cause the adolescent to spend less time on other important activities such as schoolwork (Suhail & Bargees 2006). Individuals who used the internet more showed declines in face to face communication with family, smaller social circles, and higher levels of loneliness, stress and depressive symptoms. The internet use can displace valuable time spent with family and friends (Nie & Erbring, 2000).

The influence of internet usage on the psychosocial development of children is profound. Children and young people are already the leading users of the Internet and mobile phones across the world. They are the future of the country. By safeguarding their future we secure the future of the nation. India is facing a transition in its culture
with many families opting nuclear families and adapting western culture. During this period the youth may be at risk as the numerous problems they could face due to chatting, pornography site and other unlimited use of internet.

More over very little has been done on the effect of internet use on adolescent in India. There remains a dearth of research on what exactly internet use does to the psycho-social wellbeing of the adolescent/college students. Therefore, it is important to understand the influence of internet usage on their psychosocial well being.

Thus it is important to conduct an intervention program aiming to discuss and provide guidance to the adolescents/college students on the appropriate use of the internet to improve social interaction and reduce loneliness among high internet users.

1.2 AIM OF THE STUDY

To determine the effect of psycho-social intervention on Internet usage among college students in Chennai city.

1.3 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the present study were,

1. To assess the internet usage and dependency among college students with respect to the frequency of usage.

2. To identify the influence of socio-economic factors on internet use among the college students.

3. To examine the effect of internet use on the general well being and loneliness among college students.

4. To study the influence of internet use on the social factors namely social interaction and communication skills.
5. To identify high internet users with symptoms of loneliness and poor social communication among college students.

6. To design a psycho-social intervention to reduce loneliness and improve social communication among high internet users.

7. To study the effect of psycho-social intervention on internet usage and dependency among the college students.

8. To study the effect of psycho-social intervention on the well being, loneliness, social interaction and communication among the college students.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Computers can be valuable tools in higher-level learning. Students develop skills to use word processors, simple spreadsheets, and databases. They learn how to log on to the Internet and search for a topic, much like students of ten years ago learned how to search encyclopedias and reference books. Some students learn to create multimedia presentations of their work. In adulthood, today’s adolescents will be highly immersed in changes caused by computer technology. Many of them will be part of the unfolding of new ways of guiding, protecting, and improving our quality of life. Those young people who are familiar with computer systems and who are confident in their own knowledge and skills will be more likely to pursue degrees and careers in computer-related fields. As today’s adolescents take their places in adult life, computer technology will be a key to their futures (Robbins 2001).

As the adolescents stand at the threshold of adulthood, they need authentic knowledge that helps them to understand the process of growing up in particular reference to their psycho-social well being, so that they are well equipped to cope with the problems they confront during the transitional phase. They need guidance, education as well as opportunities to explore life for them in order to attain a level of maturity required to make responsible decisions.
As the Internet is becoming increasingly influential for many people, it seems that there is no aspect of life that the Internet does not touch. It is probably the recognition of the predominance of the Internet that has led psychologists to focus on this phenomenon (Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003). Observers have noted that heavy Internet users seem to be alienated from normal social contacts and may even cut these off as the Internet becomes the predominant social factor in their lives (Beard 2002; Weiser 2001; Widyanto & McMurran, 2004; Young, 1996).

Although there are a lot of, yet partly unknown, factors concerning negative effects of the internet, two main factors are especially relevant for the presented study: first there is a displacement of social activities where the individual ends up spending so much time online that he or she is unable to participate in face to face social activities. The second is the displacement of “strong ties.” That is, the quality of online relationships is of a lower quality than face to face relationships. When one engages in a large number of online relationships, these may replace the stronger face to face ones (Kraut et al., 1998; Moody, 2001).

Kraut et al. (1998) claimed that greater use of the Internet was associated with negative effects on individuals, such as a diminishing social circle, and increasing depression and loneliness. Also, many quantitative studies confirmed that loneliness was associated with increased Internet use (Kraut et al., 1998; Lavin, Marvin, McLarney, Nola & Scott, 1999; Nie & Erbring, 2000; Stoll, 1995; Turkle, 1996). Internet use may be beneficial when kept to normal levels, however high levels of internet use which interfere with daily life have been linked to a range of problems, including decreased psychosocial well-being, relationship breakdown (Widyanto & McMurran 2004; Yao-Guo, Lin-Yan & Feng-Lin 2006; Whitty & McLaughlin, 2007).

Hamburger and Ben-Artzi (2003) demonstrated that Internet use, as a function of trait variables, can decrease loneliness among users. Many studies have focused on this alternative view to examine whether lonely people access the Internet to improve their psychological well-being. Shaw and Gant (2002), for instance, found that increased Internet usage was associated with decreased levels of loneliness and
depression and increased levels of social support and self-esteem. Internet activities are also known to provide support, information and opportunities for social connection to marginalized and socially isolated groups such as same-sex attracted young people (Hillier & Harrison 2007), parents of disabled children (Blackburn & Read 2005), people with social anxiety (Campbell, Cumming & Hughes 2006). More recently, Oldfield and Howitt (2004) found that those who spent more time on Internet were less likely to be lonely.

This study is designed to explore the internet usage, the frequency of internet usage, the social interaction among their peers and the wellbeing and loneliness of college students (males and females, age: 17-21 years). An attempt is also made to study the effect of internet use on the social factors namely social interaction and communication skills. Based on the information gathered, an intervention program was also designed to promote healthy use of internet, improve the communication and reduce the loneliness among the college students.

To attain the solution of the above stated problem, it was decided to study the effect of psycho-social intervention on Internet usage among college students in Chennai city”.