

## Review Article

# Community Response to Internet Addiction among Minors: An Overview, Findings, Challenges

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The article aims to explore the nature and characteristics of minors' Internet addiction behavior, and analyze the comprehensive factors as well as the diverse effects based on the deviant behavior theory. The deviant behavior theory, integrating misconduct with sociocultural concepts, social values, and norms, can provide new insight into the existing theoretical research on this issue. Another aim of the article is to review the empirical research data on the community's collaborative response to minors who are addicted to the virtual world, highlight challenges, and provide recommendations to aid effective practice.

**Methodology:** Six case studies are discussed and one semi-structured interview is conducted in the H community of S city in China to illustrate the nature and characteristics, factors as well as community response to the Internet addiction issues.

**Findings:** Although the small sample size undermines the purpose of the research, the article may offer unique insights into similarities and differences in Minors' Internet addiction behavior. These complicated behaviors and mechanisms are attributed to both subjective and objective influencing factors, which are interwoven. Despite this, it is mainly attributed to minors' weak ability to bear and manage pressure, lack of life goals and drive, and the external environment, including parents' failure to understand, support, and meet children's emotional and individual needs. Also, the community is usually passive in paying attention to those misbehaving minors. Overall, the awareness and attention toward Internet addiction in the community are not enough, and there are certain limitations for the community in measures. However, it is still essential for the community to take

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appropriate actions to help youngsters avoid Internet addiction. At the same time, the community must raise awareness, and mobile resources, and strengthen collaboration with both public and private forces to respond to this potential social risk.

**Keywords:** Community collaborative practice; Deviant behavior; Minors' Internet addiction

### Introduction

According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), there is a growing trend of youngsters using the Internet in China, and the proportion of preschool students accessing the Internet continues to increase. In 2022, the number of minor netizens in China reached 193 million, according to the 5<sup>th</sup> National Survey Report on Minors' Internet Use by the China Internet Network Information Center. Specifically, 97.2 percent of minors and 97.5 percent of minors in the urban areas had access to the Internet. In the meantime, the Internet penetration rate reached 95.1 percent, and except for primary school students, the Internet penetration rate of all other school age groups exceeded 99 percent [1].

The Internet has been fully integrated into all aspects of minors' lives. While delivering a large amount of information, bringing convenience to life, and broadening horizons, Internet inevitably brings some adverse effects and even some risks to people, younger ones in particular. The 5<sup>th</sup> National Minors' Internet Use Survey Report in China shows that 20.2% of minors think they are very dependent on the Internet or relatively dependent on the Internet.

Internet addiction among minors has increasingly become a social issue. The South Korean government claims to be one of the first countries to formulate a national policy to address the Internet addiction problem [2]. South Korea's comprehensive mental health strategy is a noteworthy initiative. The strategy classifies gaming addiction as a disease like drug and alcohol addiction after the World Health Organization (WHO) labels video game addiction as an Internet gaming disorder [3]. It is reported that elementary, middle, and high schools in South Korea have started to check online and mobile game addiction, and contacted addiction management and treatment centers to treat high-risk minors [4]. The Chinese government has also paid great attention to prevention and treatment of Internet addiction since the 2000s [5]. In terms of legal protection, China defines Internet addiction as misconduct in Article 28 Chapter III of the Law on the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency. Chinese society, including public and private forces, is also concerned about a healthier way of Internet usage and participated in helping teenagers alleviate their dependence on the Internet. In the top-down policy implementation in China, the community is more likely to play an important role in preventing and managing minors' Internet addiction. This is because the Chinese community always has advantages in terms of coordinating multi-actors, mobilizing local resources, and building a strong sense of personal and collective identity.

Therefore, the article attempts to interpret the current situation of Internet addiction among minors in China from the perspective of governance at the community level rather than the government one. Then, based on the deviant behavior theory and empirical data from one community in China, the research tries to provide possible answers to the following three questions. First of all, what factors are attributed to the excessive screen time among minors in China? Secondly, what is the role of the community on adolescents below the age of 18 who have confessed their heavy dependence on the Internet? The third research question refers to the status of those Internet-addictive minors who have received community attention and intervention.

## Literature Review

Internet addiction has been a subject of increasing interest and concern in academia. The definition, characteristics, multi-factor formation, and consequences of the condition are primarily studied in the fields of social construction [6], psychology [7], and pathological behavior [8]. The definition and concept of Internet addiction have not yet been unified in both clinical practice and academic research. Some researchers define Internet addiction as a pathological use of the Internet that leads to significant cognitive impairment in daily life [9], while others focus on specific behaviors or psychological symptoms associated with Internet addiction [9]. Young, an American psychologist, defines prolonged and uncontrolled use of the Internet as one of the disorders, which has negative effects on human's mental, physical, cognitive and real life [10]. Hall and Parsons put forward the concept of Internet Behavior Dependence (IBD) by highlighting that poor cognition may lead to dependent behavior [11]. In this context, Internet addiction can be intervened and corrected through cognitive behavior [12]. The lack of a unified definition makes it difficult to compare and synthesize the identification and diagnosis of Internet addiction. In practice, the criteria for diagnosing Internet behavior dependence varies considerably, and there are even some controversies.

Internet addiction, as defined in the "Core Information and Interpretation of Health Education for Chinese Adolescents 2018 Edition" released by the National Health Commission of China, refers to a compulsion to use the Internet that is not influenced by addictive substances. Those adolescents are more likely to have various negative consequences such as school dropout, poor academic performance, cognitive and social impairment. According to the above report, the recognition of Internet addiction in China often involves three key elements: impulsivity, duration of screen time and impairment.

Impulsivity is one of the key characteristics of Internet addiction. It means web junkies always lack self-control and find themselves helpless to be off-grid. Duration of screen time is another significant characteristics of Internet addiction. However, different country has different views on the criteria for the duration. This can be attributed to various factors such as cultural differences, social norms, educational systems, and availability of technology. Thus, in some contexts, surfing the Internet for more than 12 hours is only seen as a phenomenon, but in China 12 hours on the Internet for more than 6 months can be considered as a problem or even misconduct. The third key characteristics related to the recognition of Internet addiction is the negative impact on individuals, teenagers in particular. It is common to see that Internet addiction is closely related to poor academic performance, psychological issues such as anxiety or depression, physical discomforts such as obesity, myopia, or insomnia, and troubled interpersonal relationships [13].

The study on the multi-factor formation of Internet addiction mainly focuses on the external environment and internal factors. The external environment including the family, school, and social factors, plays a significant role in shaping an individual's Internet use habits and addiction risk. For instance, family dynamics, parenting styles, and social support can influence an individual's vulnerability to Internet addiction. Similarly, school environment and peer influence can also contribute to the development of Internet addiction. On the other hand, the internal factors emphasize physiological characteristics, brain structure, genetics and so on [14]. Research has shown that there may be differences in the structure and function of certain brain regions among Internet addicts compared to non-addicts [15]. For instance, studies have found altered brain connectivity and functionality in Internet addicts, indicating that addiction may be associated with neurobiological changes [16]. Additionally, genetic studies have identified several genes that may be associated with Internet addiction risk, further highlighting the role of internal factors [17]. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a widely used clinical psychological intervention for treating Internet addiction.

The above studies have made some conclusions in the psychological, clinical, social and behavioral aspects. Inevitably, they have some limitations. First of all, the existing studies can incorporate an interdisciplinary perspective because Internet addiction is a complex phenomenon. Secondly, current empirical research predominately focuses on the diagnosis and early identification of Internet addiction. However, there needs a longitudinal study that tracks the progress and recovery of addicts over time, especially after they receive the intervention. Thirdly, considering that Internet addiction may manifest differently across different cultures and social contexts. There is a need for more research that explores the role of cultural and contextual factors in the development and manifestation of Internet addiction.

Therefore, the article proposes to study Internet addiction based on the deviant behavior theory. Deviant behavior refers to wording and deeds that deviate from or violate social norms, moral codes, or legal provisions. That is to say, this theory focuses on the deviation of social norms and expectations and the potential effect of such wording and deeds on the possible motive of crime in the future [18]. Based on deviant behavior theory, Internet addiction may manifest differently across different cultures and contexts. For instance, the way individuals use the Internet and the impact it has on their lives may vary depending on factors like age, gender, education, and social norms. More specifically, the deviant behavior theory incorporates the two perspectives of norms and situations, and can more comprehensively explore the problem of minors' Internet addiction. Considering this circumstance, this article selects minors who are treated as Internet addicts in the H community of S City from China as the research object. The community and its workers as well as volunteers have been committed to intervening in Internet addiction among minors for a short period. But their initiative is encouraging and has a positive impact. So, it is important to assess its impact and learn from the experience.

## Research Methods

Case studies and semi-structured interviews are adopted in the paper. The six cases, drawn from the H community in S city, China, are analyzed and provide a window into the lived experiences of those affected by Internet addiction. Complementing the case study, the semi-structured interview with the H community worker Mr Zhang

responsible for dealing with Internet-addicted minors gains insights into individual’s perspectives and experience as well as the practice employed in addressing the issue at the community level. In addition, community work records and media reports, as secondary data sources, provide additional contextual information and perspectives. Thus, these three approaches not only enhance the validity and reliability of the research findings but also contribute to the development of more targeted and effective interventions to address this social problem (Appendix 1).

### Ethical Considerations

Both the primary and secondary data obtained in this study were used for the study of Internet addiction among minors, to standardize and improve the quality and effectiveness of community responses. Provided by H Community worker Mr Zhang. Although the community work records data did not obtain the ethical approval of 6 minors with Internet addiction, the author of the article has obtained the approval of the head of H community in S City, China, and has been willingly provided by the community. To ensure the confidentiality of the data, the names and identities of these minors have been anonymized during the study.

### Results of the Case Study

Table 1 illustrates key characteristics of the six participants, including the duration of intervention, gender, family dynamics, type of Internet addiction, and its impact. First of all, the six participants are male, aged between 13 and 18. Secondly, three participants had received intervention for less than 1 year, while the remaining three for more than 2 years. Only one participant had been intervened for more than 3 years. Thirdly, the family backgrounds of the participants vary significantly. Some participants come from divorced families and live with either their mother or grandma, experiencing varying levels of family tension and interaction. Four participants come from normal families, but still experiencing different degree of negative family interaction. This suggests that family dynamics may play a role in Internet addiction. Fourthly, all the participants are addicted to video game while two of them are also addicted to social media. One participant is also addicted to pornography. Lastly, the impact of Internet addiction on the participants’ lives is significant. All participants experienced poor academic performance, with some experiencing additional issues such as rebellion, bad temperament, unwillingness to communicate, emotional instability and school dropout. This underscores the negative consequences of Internet addiction on minors’ well-being and academic performance.

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6
Participant	Li	Wu	Zhang	LiL	Qian	Chen
Age	12	16	16	14	17	18
Duration of Intervention	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year	Less than 1 year	More than 2 years	More than 2 years	More than 3 years
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male

Family Dynamics	Parents divorced, Live with mother, Tension	Normal family, Tension	Normal family, Extremely tension	Parents divorced, Live with grandma, Less family interaction	Normal Family, Family conflicts	Normal family, Normal
Type of Internet Addiction	Gaming	Gaming	Gaming, social media	Gaming, social media	Gaming, porn	Gaming
Impact	Poor academic performance	Poor academic performance	Rebellion, bad temperament, unwillingness to communicate, emotional instability	Poor academic performance, school dropout	Poor academic performance	Poor academic performance

**Table 1:** Basic information of 6 Internet-addicted minors in the H community.

The semi-structured interview with Mr. Zhang, the H community’s responder to Internet addiction, exhibits Mr. Zhang’s observations and understanding of Internet addictions among minors and reveals several results regarding minors’ Internet addiction behavior, reasons for it, community’s approaches to intervention and its effectiveness. First of all, Mr. Zhang reveals that Internet addiction behaviors among minors have both commonalities and differences. As for the commonalities, all the addicted minors have a significant dependency on online gaming. The dependency means these online gaming minors may have obsessive or compulsive disorder, and their addictive behaviors may be also capriciousness. That is to say, in despite of the off-gird, gaming-addictive minors are more likely to get return to their virtual world. It is common to notice that Internet-addictive behavior is consistent with social function impairments such as failure in the school, disobedience, or rebellion. Over time, these impairments escalate, leading to social alienation, and psychological disorders and even juvenile delinquency. In addition to the commonalities, each Internet-addictive minor has its unique characteristics. Four of the participants have recognized the wrongfulness of their Internet addiction. They have admitted that they made efforts to control their online gaming behavior, but failed to overcome the bad habit. Conversely, the other two minors do not perceive their Internet use as inappropriate and lack the urge to self-regulate. Regardless of their awareness, all of them struggle with weak self-control and fail to balance their screen time effectively.

Secondly, Mr Zhang claims that the reasons for those six minors’ Internet are indeed intricate, encompassing both subjective and objective factors. Subjectively, participants who are sensitive or closed-off or rebellious turn to the virtual world to hide their shortcomings or escape from real-life challenges. Additionally, all the participants have experienced some extent of pressure, anxiety and a sense of helplessness and frustration within their school, family, and peer environment. Objectively, the constantly changing needs of teenagers play a role. During the intervention, Mr. Zhang finds out that some participants seek recognition, while others desire respect or freedom. As minors tend to form strong social bonds with their peers and often

model their behaviors after them, Mr. Zhang points out that the peer effect indeed plays another crucial role in Internet addiction. At least three participants once confessed in the counseling that peer pressure and the desire to fit into the group could make them feel challenged to decline online game invitations from schoolmates.

Thirdly, Mr. Zhang emphasizes that the community takes multi-dimensional intervention approaches to help Internet-addictive minors curb the impulsivity. This involves a combination of educational programs, psychological counseling and parental guidance. For example, the community invites community police officers to educate minors with excessive screen time about online crime. Education programs aim to raise awareness among minors about the potential risks both in the virtual world and from their online conducts, which may prevent them from committing criminal crime. Minors usually show respect toward police, and educations from community police officials are more likely to encourage these problematic minors to make responsible decisions for themselves and by themselves. Also, the community invites professional psychological counselors to serve as volunteers and provide counseling sessions to minors with some negative psychological conditions such as anxiety or depression. These counselors work with the minors to identify the underlying causes of their addiction and provide them with strategies to cope with their problems. Obviously, the counseling sessions aim to help minors feel less pressured and develop a healthy mechanism to overcome the addiction. In order to guide parents, the community organizes workshops and seminars. The specialized goals of these workshops and seminars are to provide knowledge and skills to help parents effectively develop healthy Internet habits for themselves and interaction mechanisms with their children. Topics of these workshops cover the recognition of Internet addiction symptoms and warning signs, setting boundaries and creating a balancing screen time plan for the entire family, fostering active listening habits, and promoting healthy Internet habits.

According to Mr. Zhang's observations and interpretations recorded in the community work documents, the community's intervention approaches appears to have a beneficial effect on the addicts minors. Two of the participants would actively go to the community worker or police officer to share their confusion or problems after community workers and police officers establish trust and rapport with minors by foster a supportive and non-judgmental environment. Participants from case No.3 and No.4 who have participated in counseling report a decrease in their internet usage, particularly during evening and late-night hours. This indicates that counseling can be effective in help minors control their behavior impulsivity. Additionally, the community's educational workshop can improve family dynamics to some extents. Parents who have attended the workshops report feeling more confident and equipped to handle their children's internet usage habits. This results in more open and effective communication between parents and children, enabling families to address issues and concerns promptly. Overall, these intervention approaches do work and are crucial to foster a sense of community support and unity. Because of this, Mr. Zhang believe in that the community can do its part to guide Internet addicts minors take ownership of their recovery process and make positive changes.

## Findings

The six cases, one semi-structured interview with Mr. Zhang, and community work records all have revealed several key findings regarding the recognition of minors with excessive screen time, the role of the community, its intervention's effectiveness, and challenges.

Such feedback is crucial to making necessary adjustments to improve its effectiveness.

First of all, the community seems to be passive in recognizing Internet-addictive minors and receiving relevant information on this issue. This is mainly because that community, as a semi-autonomous organization, might not have the necessary means to proactive monitor and manage Internet use among minors, leaving them reliant on external triggers to take action. For example, most of the six cases are found as the helpless parents seek assistance from the police or the community. In most circumstances where the police were involved, it is due to the severity of the conflicts between parents and participants. The reactive approach suggests a need for more proactive measures within the community to identify and address Internet addiction among minors.

Secondly, the community can play the role of advocating and participating in the whole process of "prevention-intervention-tracking". In the prevention stage, regular and irregular publicity and education activities led by the community are essential to raise awareness among parents and minors about the potential harms of Internet addiction. In the intervention stage, inviting volunteer psychological counselors and community police officers to provide professional guidance and counseling services is a great way to ensure that minors receive the necessary support. Additionally, some offline activities organized by the community are not only designed for Internet addicts minors but also for all the adolescents in the community. These cultural and sports activities during the weekends and holidays can serve as the alternative activities for minors with Internet addiction as well as the starting point of human interaction. In the tracking stage, regularly checking in with minors who have received intervention can help identify any lingering issues or relapses early on. This follow-up care ensures that the community's efforts are sustainable and responsive to the changing needs of the minors involved.

Thirdly, these community's efforts are just beginning and have some limitations, still requiring continued improvements. A key limitation is the knowledge and understanding of community workers and volunteers. As Mr. Zhang admits, his expertise lies in social work, and lack of expertise with video games is not conducive to effective measures and intervention strategies. Moreover, the community faces resource constraints if it will to extend the scope and complexity of intervention measures. The current approach, known as the "bend-over communication model", focuses on establishing trustful relationships with troubled minors through equal and acceptable communication. Although this model works well, the community has to design and launch more effective measures as the Internet addiction becomes more of a social problem. More specifically, the community currently only meets with six cases, so Mr. Zhang has ample time and energy to deal with them. However, as the caseload expands, he may be unable to cope with it and encounter more challenges.

Finally, it is important to note that while the intervention has had some successful outcomes, it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Each individual's case is unique, and its consequence or impact is different as well. Thus, some may require more intensive support or professional intervention. Meanwhile, having recognized that recovery from internet addiction is a continuous process, the community's responder remains have many unknowns to be explored the developed in their daily practice.



## Conclusions and Recommendations

Internet addiction among minors remains complex and controversial issues in terms of its definition, diagnosis criteria and recovery standard. To some extents, lack of standardization hinders the development of effective intervention strategies both employed by the government and the community. Nevertheless, the community must remain engaged and proactive in addressing Internet addiction, recognizing its potential in the governance of public issues in the Chinese society.

Particularly, the Chinese community, adhering to Confucian philosophy, has strong individual, organizational, relational, and informal institutional capacities, which enables it to take a leading role in enhancing collaboration for Internet addiction issues. This collaboration highlights the need for joint preventive measures, surveillance mechanisms, follow-up assessments, and personalized intervention programs.

First of all, in order to improve its passive position in recognizing web junkies, the community may make an effort to conduct diverse publicity campaigns on prevention. Measures such as regulating minors' Internet activities and monitoring their responsible usage, should be introduced by the community. Also, Parents may be educated on how to foster their healthy Internet habits and to guide their children towards these good habits, including setting clear rules, boundaries and the specific period of time.

Secondly, considering the complexity of detection and diagnosis, multi-actors such as community workers, volunteers, teachers, and parents need to establish a surveillance mechanism to identify abnormal Internet usage patterns among minors. For example, community workers can collaborate with Internet cafes to obtain updated registration information. Teachers should monitor students' academic performance and refer those with significant declines for further assessment. Parents should be educated on the signs of Internet addiction and encouraged to report concerns.

Thirdly, it should be noted that Internet addiction is a relatively new phenomenon, and it may evolve as technology. Moreover, given the relapsed nature of addictive behaviors even after recovery, it is crucial to enhance its continuous collaboration with various stakeholders. To achieve this, the community can take an initiative to establish regular communication channels with multi-actors to share information and best practices. Meanwhile, the community can leverage its resources to establish a system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of its intervention programs. This will allow for timely adjustments and improvement, ensuring that the program remain relevant and effective over time.

Last but not least, personalized intervention measures should be implemented with utmost respect for the rights and dignity of minors. Discrimination based on Internet addiction status must be avoided, and minors should be treated with compassion and understanding.

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## Appendix 1

Questionnaires for the Semi-Conducted Interview.

1. Could you please provide a brief overview of your experience with Internet addiction among minors, either personally or within your community? How has this experience shaped your views on the issue and its impact on minors?
2. How do you define Internet addiction, and how do you recognize it among minors?
3. In your opinion, what are the most effective ways for the community to collaborate and address Internet addiction?
4. Could you share some successful examples of collaboration that you have witnessed or been involved in?
5. Can you brief more information about the 6 six case from community governance perspective?
6. What factors do you believe should be considered when developing Internet-addictive intervene programs?
7. What are the main challenges in ensuring sustained recovery from Internet addiction, especially about relapse?
8. How can the community provide ongoing support to minors who have recovered from Internet addiction to prevent relapses?
9. What role do you think education and prevention play in addressing Internet addiction among minors?
10. How should the community prepare and adapt to these future trends to continue effectively addressing Internet addiction?



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