

College students' internet overuse leads families to connect and conflict, new study finds

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College students who are addicted to the Internet report positive and negative effects on their family relationships, according to new research from Georgia State University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The study is the first to show how [college students](#) in the United States diagnosed with Problematic Internet Use (PIU) perceive its role in their families.

A research team that included child welfare expert Susan Snyder of Georgia State's Andrew Young School of Policy Studies conducted a qualitative study of 27 U.S. university students who self-identified as problematic Internet users.

"We wanted to better understand students with Problematic Internet Use," Snyder said, "those who reported spending more than 25 hours a week on the Internet on non-school or non-work-related activities, and who experienced Internet-associated health or psychosocial problems. Specifically, we wanted to understand how the Internet affects students' [family relationships](#) positively and negatively."

On the plus side, these students reported their time on the Internet often improved family connectedness when they and their family were apart. However, their excessive Internet use led to increased family conflict and disconnectedness when [family](#) members were all together. And most students with PIU felt their families also overused the Internet, with parents not setting enough limits for either parent or sibling Internet use.

Young adults are at an especially high risk for behavioral addictions, Snyder and her co-authors said, and Problematic Internet Use is considered a behavioral addiction with characteristics similar to substance abuse disorders. PIU has been linked with negative mental health consequences such as depression, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, hostility, social phobia, alcohol abuse, self-injuries and sleep difficulties.

College [students](#) may be especially vulnerable to developing PIU for reasons that include free Internet access, large blocks of free time,

courses that require its use and the sudden freedom from parental control and monitoring. Estimates of PIU across the U.S. population are run as high as 15 percent.

"Our study furthers the understanding of Problematic Internet Use," Snyder said. "We believe it offers a first step toward the design of effective interventions to address PIU among the college-age population, and hope it will serve to inform clinical practice and health policy in this area."

More information: Susan M. Snyder et al. The Effect of U.S. University Students' Problematic Internet Use on Family Relationships: A Mixed-Methods Investigation, *PLOS ONE* (2015). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0144005](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0144005)

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