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Commentary

Smartphone overuse: A hidden crisis in COVID-19

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The COVID-19 has interrupted normal activities and surfaced as the most significant health and economic challenges after the 2nd World War \cite{1}. Most countries have imposed lockdown to break the chain of community transmission of this notorious virus, which has changed the way we are used to living in. Stay at home and work from home strategies are recommended worldwide as the most useful to prevent infection at both individual and community levels \cite{2}. This self-isolation has encouraged people to turn to their smartphones to stay connected increasingly.

Smartphones forge opportunities for individuals to engage more in different online activities such as participating in social network sites, playing video games, surfing the web, and so on. A recent global survey showed that about 70 percent of internet users, especially the young generation worldwide, were using their smartphones or mobile phones more as a direct result of lockdown due to the coronavirus outbreak \cite{3}. Such findings suggest that COVID-19 related lockdown policies might lead to the overuse or excessive usage of smartphones. Now, the question is whether overuse or excessive use of smartphones during the COVID period could develop particular harmful health issues and remain unchanged in the post-lockdown period. Smartphone overuse may lead to physical and psychological health, different musculoskeletal pain such as the neck, lower back, shoulder pain, depression, and anxiety \cite{4}. This may result in the problematic use of smartphone \cite{5}, which can hack the “reward system” of the brain to engage one in activities that s/he was employed during the lockdown period \cite{6}. Thus, there is a high chance that subsequent harms will persist in the form of various mental health disorders, even if the lockdown effect is withdrawn.

The overusing pattern of smartphone involves a tendency to check notifications all the time. Such behaviour pattern can induce “reassurance seeking” pathway which broadly includes symptoms such as loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety \cite{7}. This reassurance-seeking behaviour is explainable with the theoretical model of ‘problematic mobile phone use’ suggested by Bilieux and colleagues \cite{8}. Excessive use of smartphones may also affect sleep patterns by reducing rapid eye movement sleep, slow-wave sleep and consequently causing sleep deficiency. Excessive use of smartphones can potentially lead to gaming disorders and internet use disorders and eventually be considered to cause psychosocial crisis (i.e., sleep deprivation, stress, mood disorder and anxiety), which could be the aftermath of the COVID period \cite{9}.

School students are also vulnerable, as one study suggested that 61% of parents classified their children as addicted to their smart devices for doing activities \cite{10}. As educational institutions are temporarily closed, and school-children are passing their time at home or pursuing online classes, they can potentially be more exposed to using the internet and smart devices for their entertainment.

As countries are taking steps to relax lockdown, it is high time to identifying people who might have the problematic use of smartphones or other smart devices. First, we need a screening tool to identify people. Second, we require developing and implementing psychiatric intervention (e.g., establishing peer support). Third, though smartphone overuse currently is not an official diagnosis, the introduction of general health education services is required to reduce smartphone use. Therefore, health communication is required through the mass media to sensitisize people about
the problematic use of smartphone. For many users, problematic smartphone use might not pose a problem at all. Thus, without proper initiative, problematic smartphone usage can turn into an emerging public health challenge to annihilate lives by perpetuating the socio-psychological problems. It will be a crucial step to monitor smartphone overuse and take necessary action to minimise the problem through protective policies and family support during and after this COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethical approval

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Declaration of Competing Interest

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