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Concurrent Disorders and Digital Challenges in Palestine

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Youth residing in Palestine face a high level of geographic vulnerability. There are very few venues for entertainment for youth and their movement is highly restricted due to cultural and geographical restraints (checkpoints, lack of reliable public transportation, and limited access of youth to private vehicles). Living in a highly volatile situation that is out of their control also leads to stress and uncertainty that increases desire for escapism and vulnerability to addictive patterns. This is evident in the high levels of addictive symptoms related to internet use observed in the population (Mahamid & Berte, 2019).

This special issue, titled *Concurrent Disorders and Digital Challenges in Palestine*, consists of research on various concurrent and addictive patterns in Palestine (e.g., Internet addiction, energy drinks, cyberbullying, video gaming addiction and tobacco smoking), as well as validating new Arabic language instruments to assess internet and mobile phone addiction within a Palestinian context.

Social media addiction

Social media plays a significant role in the lives of Palestinian young adults during periods of political stress and perceived threat. When feeling increased threat, populations need reliable, valid and trusted venues of information for both practical and psychological purposes. The lack of such media sources drives people to search for critical needs on unmonitored and informal networks. This is increasingly true for young people who are highly familiar and comfortable with social media without understanding its inherent limitations, which may lead to addiction (Mahamid & Berte, 2020).

In 2017, Palestine was ranked eighth among Arab countries in the percentage of the population using social media at 37%

(Concepts, 2017). The number of Palestinians using social media in January 2021 was estimated to be 3.1 million, out of the approximately 5.1 million individuals in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (DATAREPORTAL, 2021).

According to an exploratory study conducted at An-Najah National University (ANNU), more than 47% of students were engaging in addictive patterns of internet use. Social media was the highest ranked category of student internet activity, while use for academic tasks or business opportunities fell much lower (Mahamid & Berte, 2019).

Video game addiction

The factors that may lead to video game addiction among Palestinian adolescents are still unclear. To determine if life satisfaction and aggression could be predictive factors for video game addiction, Mahamid and Bdier conducted a study to explore this relationship among school students in Palestine. Findings revealed that video game addiction was negatively associated with life satisfaction, whereas they were positively associated with aggression. Both factors contributed in a statistically significant way towards explaining variance in video game addiction.

Internet addiction

The study by Agbaria and Bdier is characterized by cultural exchanges among Palestinian students who study in Israeli universities. They examined the prevalence of internet addiction and its relationship with selected demographic variables among Arab college students in Israel, and found that these students had higher than average levels of internet addiction. Moreover, they found significant relationships between internet addiction and gender, socio-economic status, age, academic achievement, and academic

degree, though none were found between internet addiction and religion or residence.

Life for youth in the occupied territories of Palestine is fraught with environmental stressors. In this situation, it is likely that vulnerability towards the easily accessible and unrestricted social networks of social media could lead to internet addiction. Based on this hypothesis, Mahamid and AbuJedi conducted a study to investigate the relationship between perceived stress, self-regulation, and internet addiction in Palestinian youth using a sample of ANNU students. They found a statistically significant positive correlation between internet addiction and perceived stress.

Rates of internet addiction among Palestinian university students have been found to be far above students of similar ages in other countries and settings. Despite this, the psychological mechanism behind addictive internet use in this unique population is unclear. Therefore, Mahamid and Berte conducted a study to provide a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between the symptoms of depression and anxiety when related to excessive and addictive internet use patterns. Using a sample of ANNU students in Nablus that reflected a normalized cross section of the population, they found that a majority of the subjects demonstrated addictive properties and excessive internet use that reached the level of addiction. Anxiety was also found to be of concern in the population, though depression was surprisingly less so. The relationship between addictive internet use, depression, and anxiety were found to be significantly correlated.

People in occupied Palestinian territory face ongoing traumatic events due to long-term political unrest and occupation, and individuals with trauma and related stressors may be more vulnerable to develop

internet addiction. Mansour and Muamar investigated the relationship between internet addiction and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among a convenience sample of school students, and found a significant positive correlation between PTSD symptoms and internet addiction, which can have a significant deleterious impact on adolescents' personal growth. Children and adolescents with PTSD symptoms require intensive follow-up and special care to prevent the development of internet addiction.

Atiq used Adler's life styles to shed light on the relationship between internet addiction and university students' life styles. Using a random sample of Palestinian university students in the West Bank, results indicated the presence of a mild degree of internet addiction among the participants. The data also showed statistically significant differences in internet addiction based on participants' place of residence: those residing in internally displaced refugee camps had higher levels of internet addiction. Atiq also found that the belonging-focused and abuser life styles were positively correlated with internet addiction.

Internet addiction negatively affects academic performance among university students, and this seems to be related to lower levels of motivation to study. Sayegh, Hussein and Bdier examined the relationship between internet addiction and achievement motivation among a sample of university students from ANNU, and found a statistically significant negative correlation between internet addiction and achievement motivation, supporting this idea.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying and internet addiction are serious problems that Palestinian adolescents face in this technological era. Abu Al-rob from Arab American University

conducted a study to identify the relationship between cyberbullying and internet addiction in a sample of Palestinian teens from several schools in the West Bank, and found a statistically significant positive correlation. Results also indicated that the level of internet addiction and cyberbullying in the study sample was within a moderate level.

Mobile phone addiction

Mobile phone addiction has become an increasing concern with the rapid advancement of digital technology. While addiction symptoms have been defined clearly, symptom manifestation can vary depending on context. Therefore, Abojedi, Mahamid, and Alhoyan developed the Arabic Mobile Addiction Scale (AMAS), a culturally driven, Arabic language tool to test mobile phone addiction within a Palestinian context. Data were collected from university students to test the AMAS factorial structure using confirmatory factor analysis to confirm five factors: salience/preoccupancy, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, and conflict/negative consequences. Results showed a significant statistical correlation between the AMAS and Young's Internet Addiction Test. The AMAS also showed high internal consistency for the total scale and its dimensions.

Substance use

In addition to addictions related to internet and its associated technologies, there is also a problem with substance use among Palestinian youth. It exists even in socially conservative communities, despite religious, legal and cultural constraints. These behaviors are underpinned by stress, economic hardship, repeated exposure to political violence, school closures and travel restrictions related to the Israeli occupation. These conditions have given rise to drug trafficking, drug abuse and addiction amongst Palestinian communities, with

increasing prevalence of illicit, over-the-counter, and prescription drug use among young Palestinians (Van et al., 2020). In addition to easy access to alcohol and drugs, factors contributing to such high-risk behaviors include poor social services, social and political tensions, and inability of the Palestinian law enforcement to police the influx of drugs into the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza (Massad et al., 2016).

Energy drinks and tobacco use

A cross-sectional study was conducted by Damiri, Ibrahim, Khalaily, Mohammad, and Imwas in the West Bank to examine the prevalence of and the risk factors associated with tobacco smoking and energy drinks (EDs) consumption among 10th-grade Palestinian female students. Results showed that most of the girls were knowledgeable about the danger of smoking cigarettes, but not water pipes and EDs, with a majority disagreeing with banning water pipes and EDs. Curiosity was the most frequently reported motivation for use. Girls who used EDs were more likely to smoke cigarettes and water pipe than non-users. The mean initiation age was 12.6 years for ED consumption and was associated with the initiation of cigarette smoking (13.6 years) and water pipe smoking (14.0 years).

Energy drink (ED) use is a growing problem in the West Bank, particularly among adolescents and young adults. To evaluate ED consumption and associated risk factors among Palestinian university students, Damiri, Yaish, Janini, and Sandouka from ANNU conducted a cross-sectional study in five main public universities in the West Bank using a self-administrated questionnaire distributed among the students. The findings indicated that the prevalence of ED consumption was high for lifetime users (66.4%; 83.5% males, 52.3% females) and current users (43.5%;

62.5% males, 31.4% females). Around 82.4% of users had consumed EDs regularly on a daily or weekly basis. The regular use of EDs was associated with risky behaviors, including self-reported violent behaviors, and use of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs. Factors influencing ED consumption included family and social-peer pressure, parents' education and relationships, and students' relationship with their fathers. Consumption was more prevalent among males, working students, and refugees. Common reasons for consuming EDs were to get energy, to cope with anger, to combat sleepiness, and for its taste.

Tobacco smoking poses additional risks for women, and especially pregnant women. To investigate the prevalence and pattern of maternal smoking during pregnancy, and to address specific adverse pregnancy outcomes among women in the north of the West Bank, Damiri, Thabaleh, Salah, Othman, Ishtahyeh, Abughannam, Daas, and Safarini conducted a cross-sectional study of pregnant women this region. Among the participants, 8.1% were current smokers (7.2% water pipe and 3.7% cigarettes), and 11.9% were ex-smokers (10.9% water pipe and 2.8% cigarettes). Most of the current smokers and ex-smokers smoked on daily basis. Smoker and ex-smoker pregnant women were more likely than nonsmoker to be exposed to passive smoking at home and were more likely to be a refugee. A logistic regression model revealed that current smokers during pregnancy were more likely than non-smokers to have increased gestational blood lipids and blood pressure, increased blood pressure before pregnancy, and having infants that were premature or had low birth weight.

Summary

Palestinians face unique challenges and struggles (including occupation, poverty, exposure to violence, restriction of movement, arrest, detention, relocation, lack of resources, etc.) that increase the risk of developing psychological disorders. Understanding the difficulties and challenges Palestinian society faces—as well as its resources and resiliency—will help professionals provide appropriate intervention programs that target unique groups in the Palestinian context to enhance mental health outcomes and reduce maladaptive and addictive behaviors, especially among youth.

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