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Difficulties Social Workers Face When Working With Youth Exposed to Technology Without Parental Supervision

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

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by

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MSW, Arkansas State University, 2014

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

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Abstract

There has been a significant increase in behavioral issues in the home and school environments of youth ages 13-17 years in the state of Georgia who have constant access to technology through internet-connected devices over the past years. Due to constant evolution and advancements of technology, mental health professionals are now noticing that when youth are overly consumed with technology, it tends to correlate with problematic behaviors. The social work practice problem and purpose is understanding the difficulties social workers face when working with youth exposed to technology without parental supervision. This study is important within the context of clinical social work because it seeks to recognize the barriers in treatment and aims to develop realistic solutions that produces change. Research questions identified for this doctoral study consist of identifying strategies and interventions to use when addressing difficulties, exploring the need for parental supervision, discovering changes to be implemented to reduce dependence on technology, and defining ways to raise greater awareness. Social cognitive theory was applied within this doctoral study. An action research design with data collection via individual qualitative interviews of social workers within the state of Georgia was utilized. Themes derived from the findings were reduced focus, increased suffering, lacking parental involvement, distribution of resources, loss of fundamental skills, demands for greater advocacy, and absent screening tools. Recommendations were education and resources to parents and increased partnerships as solutions. The hope is that the findings from this study will be utilized by social workers and other mental health professionals in their practice to produce positive social change.

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Dedication

First and foremost, I want to simply say Thank You to my Lord and Savior. This capstone project is dedicated to my parents, husband, and children for always encouraging and inspiring me to finish any and every task started. Words cannot express the support and sacrifice given from my family throughout my graduate program. I am forever grateful to my extended family, friends, and colleagues for providing positive words of encouragement, sending prayers up, being a listening ear during my many rants, offering laughter, and providing motivation when it was needed the most. Thank you to my ancestors and deceased family members who paved the way for my success and continue to smile down upon me. Dorothy Mae, I know you are proud of me and are always with me, this is for you!!!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

According to the Pew Research Center (2015), computers were nonexistent three decades ago, and now it seems almost all members of society use an internet-connected device. Today, people are linked to the ever-evolving world of technology while *on the go* via smartphones and other internet-connected devices (Pew Research Center, 2018). The Pew Research Center (2018) found that 95% of Americans now own a smartphone compared to only 35% in 2011. The majority of smartphone owners use their phones for a magnitude of things including staying connected to the world through communicating with others, watching videos and news reports, listening to music, and engaging in social networking. Social networking was among the most used feature on internet connected devices, being utilized at least once per day across all age groups. Smartphone ownership is popular amongst the adult population but is especially high among non-White, lower-income young adult Americans (Pew Research Center, 2015). The new term *smartphone-dependent* has been associated with the younger population due to their increased dependency on internet-connected devices over the years (Park & Park, 2020).

Recent technological advances have redefined the way youth interact with their peers, develop relationships, learn new information, and behave in society (Pew Research Center, 2018). According to Hutchby and Moran-Ellis (2013) children have become saturated with technology by engaging in and exercising competence in various forms of technology such as computers, video games, tablets, and smartphones. The Pew Research Center (2018) reported that almost 60% of youth between the ages of 13 to 17 report

being connected online several times a day. Younger smartphone users are using their phone for two purposes; to avoid boredom (just for something to do) and to avoid interacting with people around them (Pew Research Center, 2015). According to Park and Park (2020) youth are using their smartphones to engage in solitary play more frequently for the purposes of entertainment and pleasure.

These users reported feeling smartphones and internet-connected devices were helpful, connecting, and represented freedom. Having access to technology at such a young age can have a positive as well as a negative impact on youth (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 2013). Park and Park (2020) reported trends in youth smartphone dependence is increasing their *failure of self-control* regarding smartphone use. Data results depict that smartphone users cannot go a full hour without checking their smartphones in any setting; such as lying in bed, using the bathroom, driving a motor vehicle, or during a meal with others (Hussain, Griffiths, & Sheffield, 2017).

Best, Manktelow, and Taylor (2014) reported there are now controversial debates and opposition concerning the impact technology has on the physical and mental wellbeing of youth. According to Sampasa-Kanyinga and Lewis (2015), youth are exposed to internet-connected devices daily for over two hours have more mental health symptoms, psychological distress, suicidal ideations, and poor behavior. Research is also showing how the human brain is potentially harmed by overexposure to the electromagnetic fields (EMF) created by internet-connected devices (Sage & Burgio, 2017). Long-term EMF exposure potentially causes memory, learning, behavior,

attention, and physical brain development problems in young children through adolescence age.

The cultural norm for youth is their continual presence on internet-connected devices, which creates and increases their need to belong. Strasburger et al. (2013) reported that two-thirds of the adolescent population reported not having any parental rules regarding time spent consumed in technology. Having unlimited access to the internet and its plethora of information greatly influences youth's ability to make decisions. Keijsers (2016) asserted that poor or lacking parental monitoring is likely to be associated with an increase in adolescent delinquency and problematic behaviors such as substance use, defiance, risky sexual behavior, poor school achievement, and mental issues.

Charteris, Gregory, and Masters (2016) asserted lack of parental surveillance of youth utilizing internet connected devices leads to social steganography. Social steganography is defined as the process of information being hidden in plain sight by youth who are trying to hide internet activity from their parents, teachers, and certain peers (Charteris et al., 2016). Sampasa-Kanyinga and Lewis (2015) reported parental supervision is needed to monitor and implement limits for technology usage in children and youth due to the physical and neurological problems associated with overexposure. Strasburger et al. (2013) argued it is ultimately the parent's responsibility to educate and monitor youth's activities on devices that have access to the internet.

Problem Statement

The social work practice problem which is the focus for this doctoral study is the difficulties social workers face from the absence of parental supervision of youth ages 13-17 years who are exposed to technology. This issue poses a problem both locally as well as nationally, due to the constant evolution and advancements in technology. Technology continues to advance at a rapid rate, allowing youth to be more widely exposed to technology at earlier ages than previous generations. It is simply not enough for youth to own a smartphone, but most feel compelled to have the latest or most popular phone released (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Orben and Przybylski (2019) proclaimed youth's extensive use of technology has brought forth evolving speculations regarding the negative impact technology has on youth's psychological well-being. Mental health professionals working with adolescents are now reviewing research which addresses behavioral issues related to increased exposure to technology. Within the past 10 years, there has been current, relevant, and significant evidence that demonstrates how technology consumption can be problematic for adolescent populations (Pew Research Center, 2018). Sohn, Rees, Wildridge, Kalk, and Carter (2019) believed certain patterns of smartphone-related behavior correlate with mental health issues in youth more so than the smartphone usage. Despite this being an issue for debate, identifying youth who display these patterns of overconsumption is fundamental and plays a vital role in addressing it clinically (Sohn et al., 2019). The evidence from social work practice regarding this matter includes mental health

professionals now noticing that the lack of parental supervision of youth who are overly consumed by technology correlates with impulsive behaviors, conduct issues, anxiety, depression, substance use, and sexual encounters (Best et al., 2014).

When youth are consumed by technology, they are usually isolated from their families, leaving little to no time physically interacting with their peers (Hinsch & Sheldon, 2013). Newly defined terms such as FoMo and nomophobia have been created as a result of youth's excessive dependence on technology over the recent years. The expanded meaning for FoMo is defined as *fear of missing out* (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013). According to Kuss and Griffiths (2017), youth are constantly distracted due to decreasing concentration on tasks in the school and home setting because of the pressure to follow what is going on as well as the fear of missing out when overly consumed by technology. Research has found high levels of FoMo are linked to overall lower mood, wellbeing, life satisfaction, and inappropriate and dangerous use of technology; leading to problematic behaviors and addiction to technology (Przybylski et al., 2013).

The expanded meaning for nomophobia is defined as *no mobile phone phobia* (Bragazzi & Del Puente, 2014). Due to the fear of being without one's mobile phone, researchers are now calling for this term to be added in the DSM-5. Criteria for the term includes: regular and time-consuming use, anxiety when the phone is unavailable, ringxiety (repeatedly checking one's phone for messages), constant availability, preference for mobile communication instead of face to face communication, and

financial problems as a consequence of constant use (Bragazzi & Del Puente, 2014). Turkle (2016) asserted youth are unable to engage in meaningful conversations because their social skills are impoverished and being sacrificed for constant connection due to overreliance on technology; resulting in short-term attention and a decreased ability to retain information. For many adolescents, achieving social representation and being socially desirable on social media platforms is far more important to their self-confidence as well as self-esteem (Charteris et al., 2016).

Social media platforms are among the most popular and addictive types of technology used for the adolescent population (Strasburger et al., 2013). In 2016, youth ages 13–17 years-old in the USA represented 72% Snapchat users, 68% Facebook users, and 66% Instagram users (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). The most widely used sites among youth today are Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, Youtube, Tik Tok, Twitter, and Snapchat (Pew Research Center, 2018). According to Lee and Lee (2017) the most significant type of internet-connected devices utilized of youth were phones, which were used to gain peer acceptance. Child Mind Institute (2018) stated 75% of youth state they feel obligated to respond to text messages, social media posts, and other notifications immediately. Automatic responses on internet-connected devices has raised greater awareness to the influx in harassment and bullying incidents being carried out through technology (Mitchell, Jones, Turner, Shattuck, & Wolak, 2016). According to Mitchell et al. (2016) forms of internet-based harassment and bullying tend to be more damaging and have greater harmful effects than traditional harassment/bullying because the content is more

widely and easily transmittable. Cyberbullying allows youth to have a sense of

anonymity and behave in ways they would not in person (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson,

2013).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to utilize an action research design which sought to

explore the difficulties social workers face in the school and home environment when

working with youth ages 13-17 years who are exposed to technology (internet-connected

devices) without parental supervision. To assist in identifying this social work problem,

social work professionals from multiple agencies who primarily work with youth ages

13-17 years, within the state of Georgia, were chosen to engage in this study. These

social work professionals have earned a master's degree in social work from an

accredited school and were free from any prior or current sanctions or judicial review

with any licensing board.

Research questions were developed to acquire a better understanding of the

problematic behavioral issues youth's display from their dependence on internet-

connected devices. These questions were written in clear language which was meaningful

and not misleading nor confusing for participants. Research questions identified to

address the purpose statement were:

1. What strategies and interventions can social work professionals use when
   addressing behavioral issues in youth who use technology?

2. What strategies can be incorporated by parents to effectively integrate and manage parental supervision of their youth's internet-connected devices?

3. What barriers have you encountered regarding youth's interactions with others and their environment when attempting to reduce dependence on internet-connected devices?

4. What strategies and techniques can social work professionals implement to raise greater awareness of this issue?

Key Terms and Concepts

For readers to gain clarity within this doctoral study, concise definitions of key terms were provided and explained.

Behavioral problem/issues: Emotional, behavioral, and interpersonal symptomatic expressions; personal problems or difficulties (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019). Common examples of behavioral issues include conduct issues, oppositional and defiant behaviors, impulsivity, depression, anxiety, risky sexual acting out behaviors (Dulmus & Sowers, 2012).

Smartphone: A mobile phone that performs many of the functions of a computer, typically having a touchscreen interface, Internet access, and an operating system capable of running downloaded applications (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Internet-connected devices: A device such as a tablet, computer, cellphone, video gaming system, etc. that can automatically or manually gain access to the internet.

Smartphone dependent: Persistent smartphone usage daily, failed attempts to lessen usage, preoccupation with smartphone, and usage of smartphone when experiencing unwanted feelings such as anxiety or depression (American Addiction Centers, 2019).

Failure of self-control: The inability of a user to control his or her smartphone usage despite their subjective intent to do so (Park & Park, 2020).

Social steganography: The process of information being hidden in plain sight by youth who are trying to hide internet activity from their parents, teachers, and certain peers (Charteris et al., 2016).

Youth/adolescents: Individuals who range in age from 13-17 years old. The World Health Organization (2013), states that individuals between the ages of 10-19 years were classified as adolescents.

FoMo: A pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent (Przybylski et al., 2013).

Nomophobia: The fear of being without one's mobile phone, not being able to have constant access to online social interactions (Bragazzi & Del Puente, 2014).

Competency: The process of increasing professional knowledge and skills and applying them in practice; practicing within one's area of competence, developing and enhancing one's professional expertise (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017).

Licensed master social worker (LMSW)/licensed clinical social worker

(LCSW): An individual who has earned and currently holds a master's degree in social work, and who has met all the requirements to become licensed to practice social work within their state.

Observational learning: Modeling and reproducing witnessed or observed behaviors from others (Bandura, 2014).

Parental monitoring: Increased parental awareness of youth's activities on internet-connected devices via youth's self-disclosure and parental solicitation

Reinforcement: Positive or negative internal or external responses to a person's behavior that affect the likelihood of continuing or discontinuing the behavior (Bandura, 2014).

Self-control: The ability to control oneself through self-monitoring, goal setting, feedback, self-reward, self-instruction, and enlistment of social support (Bandura, 2014).

Self-efficacy: Confidence or belief in one's ability to perform a given behavior (Bandura, 2014).

Social networking services (SNS): Social media platforms and sites that allow individuals to connect, communicate, and socialize with each other (Eleuteri, Saladino, & Verrastro, 2017).

Revenge pornography: Distribution of sexual or pornographic images of an individual without their consent. Images may have been taken without consent or images may have been taken with consent but later distributed without the consent of those in the images (Ballotpedia, 2018).

The findings from this doctoral study are needed because it can help community agencies be more knowledgeable of the challenge's mental health professionals and social workers face when working within the adolescent population. Participation from mental health professionals assisted in identifying common behavioral issues, solutions, and strategies to combat adolescents' dependence and overconsumption with technology. I sought to find techniques to reduce behavioral issues in youth that stemmed from over consumption with technology to improve behavioral outcomes for social workers and mental health professionals.

This study's original contribution may assist in advancing professional social work practice by allowing current and future social workers and mental health professionals the opportunity to be more equipped in improving treatment outcomes when addressing noted difficulties and challenges. Social workers who have experience in working with youth, were able to verbalize their experiences, perspectives, and opinions to assist and provide recommendations for effective solutions. The results can then be utilized in the social work research database as a resource for mental health professionals or for further research to be conducted. Social workers and other mental health professionals may be able to transfer the findings from this capstone project to better improve and promote social change on behalf of youth and their family systems.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

An action research design was utilized for this study to explore the difficulties social workers face in the school and home environment when working with youth ages

13-17 years who are exposed to technology (internet-connected devices) without parental supervision. Action research aligns not only with the purpose statement and research questions within this doctoral study, but it is also a fundamental component in social work research because it aligns with the values and code of ethics for social workers. Thiollent (2011) asserted that action research encourages a culture of information and knowledge sharing. According to McNiff and Whitehead (2010), action research incorporates understanding, explaining, and justifying elements put into place with the focus on looking for relevancy, effectiveness, and authenticity throughout the entire research process. Royse, Thyer, and Padgett (2016) emphasized the importance of identifying and assessing the most prevalent issues and helping to uncover realistic solutions while conducting action research. Action research was utilized to explore and identify both difficulties and solutions of behavioral issues in youth without parental supervision who are overly consumed by internet-connected devices from social workers perspective.

I conducted individual qualitative interviews of social workers who work with adolescents with behavioral issues to collect and retrieve data. McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl (2019) reported qualitative research interviews are preferable when the researcher strives to understand the interviewee's subjective perspective of a phenomenon. Participants for the individual qualitative interviews consisted of six social workers within the state of Georgia. These social workers participating in the study are individuals who have graduated from an accredited college and have earned a master's

degree in social work. Individual participants have met the requirements of their licensing board and either hold the title of a licensed master social worker (LMSW) or a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) as their professional credentials. They were also in good standing within their licensing board and had no prior nor current sanctions or disciplinary action taken upon them after becoming licensed. Social work professionals were selected based upon their relevance, ability to be honest and transparent during conversation, and ability to focus on the objectives and goals to make a meaningful and beneficial impact within the youth population. Strategies to obtain social work research participants included sending personalized invitations, making phone calls, sending emails, networking among social work professionals, and receiving contact information on public platforms and making contact virtually.

Stringer (2014) asserted research facilitators should formulate questions according to the nature and extent in which they wish to develop a more solid understanding. The research questions asked during the individual qualitative interviews were strategically planned and formatted to direct the flow of questioning as well as ensure that all questions were answered. As stated by McNiff and Whitehead (2010), ultimately there are no right or correct questions and answers; only appropriate answers and questions that move things along. Stringer (2014) argued the art of a facilitated or focused conversation is a preliminary planning strategy during action research. During the individual qualitative interviews, data collection instruments such as a recorder and notepad were utilized to capture the content and participant responses. A credibility check was

conducted to measure the stability and consistency of the research findings derived from the recordings, transcribed data, and themes of the individual interviews. Participation in this study was completely voluntary and there was no monetary compensation nor incentives provided for participation.

This doctoral study is beneficial to the social work profession by recognizing the barriers in treatment and working in partnership alongside the professionals who address these issues daily; to develop realistic solutions and bring forth change. In action research, the researcher and participants are both active components in the process (Stringer, 2014). Action research allows social workers to build connections and relationships within the community that are conducive to supporting the practice and profession. As stated by McNiff and Whitehead (2010) applying action research requires one to share their work with other entities as a means of learning and adopting ideas to be able to use for future reference.

Significance of the Study

The potential contributions of this doctoral study may advance social work practice knowledge by allowing social workers, who have experience in working with youth, to verbalize their experiences, perspectives, and opinions towards the noted problem statement. Current and future social workers and mental health professionals may have the opportunity to be better equipped when addressing noted difficulties and challenges when working with youth and their families to improve treatment outcomes. Findings of this study may be able to assist social workers in raising greater awareness

and provide realistic recommendations for effective interventions and solutions. Social work professionals who can attest to the difficulties, challenges, and barriers from the impact of technology on youth and their family systems through professional experience participated in research.

This study may hold significance within the profession of social work through the implementation of ethical practice, research, and policy. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2017) stated social workers must protect, enhance, and improve social work practice through appropriate study, research, and active discussion to promote and contribute to the development of knowledge. Findings from this doctoral study seek to advance social work practice and elicit positive change by assisting social workers and mental health professionals who are employed within the various community agencies to be more knowledgeable and better equipped to address challenges and barriers when working with the adolescent population and their families. Research shows social workers are typically the first responders in treating mental health issues such as emotional and behavioral disturbances (NASW, 2013). The results from the findings may then be utilized in the social work research database as a resource for current and future social workers and mental health professions or for further research to be conducted.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Theory is the language that allows us to move from observation to observation and make sense of similarities and differences (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The

identified theoretical framework utilized for this research project is the social cognitive

theory (SCT). SCT originally derived from the 1960 social learning theory. Albert

Bandura is the most prominent key theorist of the social learning theory. Social cognitive

theory proposes that individuals learn from within their social context, incorporating

fundamental dynamics and interactions between individuals, environments, and their

behaviors (Bandura, 2014). According to the SCT, an individual's past experiences

greatly influence and shape reinforcements, expectations, specific behavior; which

explains why individuals behave in the manner they do (Bandura, 2014). Key concept

constructs utilized within this theoretical framework include observational learning,

reinforcement, self-control, and self-efficacy.

SCT aligns with the problem statement, research questions, and purpose of the

study by allowing the researcher to explain the nature of how and why adolescents

behave in similar manners despite cultural and background differences. This theory

illustrates that individuals learn from personal experiences, interactions with others, the

environment, and behaviors. Incorporating this theory helped to better understand how

youths' interactions and experiences with others through technology impacts their

behavior and impulsivity. Utilizing the SCT also assisted in understanding problematic

behaviors of youth without parental supervision in the home, school, and community

settings. According to Coady and Lehmann (2016) social workers are accustomed to

utilizing theory and research which are preconceived ideas and potential explanations for

human problems based on intuition, induction reasoning, interpersonal and technical skills as well as theory building.

Values and Ethics

Wysocki (2007) proclaimed how researchers ground their professional and scientific work around ethics but notes what is ethical for one person might not be ethical for another, and what is considered ethical in some societies may not be ethical in others. Some individuals consider ethics as doing what is right versus what is wrong based on society's standards, the code of conduct. In every profession and organization there is a standard code of conduct or code of ethics which guides practice. Ethics are the foundation in action research and the social work profession. According to Cooper (2012), ethical issues happen in every profession and organization, it is fundamental for social workers to be mindful of the potential for ethical, legal, cultural, and sociopolitical issues to arise when conducting research. NASW code of ethics (2017) requires social workers to utilize research to gain competency, ensure confidentiality and privacy, and advocate for vulnerable populations.

Values related to the clinical social work problem of understanding the difficulties social workers face from youths exposed to technology without parental supervision is the importance of human relationships and competency. Principles include how social workers must understand and recognize the importance of human relationships as well as how social workers must practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise (NASW, 2017). Social workers should seek to

strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities (NASW, 2017). Ethical codes hold social workers responsible to continuously be aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them (NASW, 2017).

The NASW code of ethics (2017) guides clinical social work practice in the area of practice through informed consent and research. Informed consent is the process in which the participants are clearly made aware of the surveys' intended purpose and procedures, the potential risks and benefits for participation, and the option to decline participation (Groves et al., 2009). Participants were notified and given written notification on their right to refuse or withdraw from the research whenever they desired without any penalties or repercussions. Implementing informed consent ensured participants felt comfortable while engaging in the research, as they were not subjected to judgement, distress, or negative feelings. Research is essential in determining the effectiveness of this doctoral study, development of interventions, and to ensure evidenced-based practice.

Social work values for social workers or mental health professionals who work with youth ages 13-17 years within agencies and organization that align with the code of ethics for this project is the ethical responsibility of maintaining integrity for the social work profession. Ethical codes specify social workers should work towards the

maintenance and promotion of high standards of practice (NASW, 2017). The code also states social workers should contribute their time and professional expertise to activities that promote respect for the value, integrity, and competence of the social work profession. These activities may include teaching, research, consultation, service, legislative testimony, presentations in the community, and participation in their professional organizations (NASW, 2017).

This doctoral study supports the values and principles of the NASW code of ethics by making sure the researcher is abiding by the code of ethics at all times and taking part in protecting the participants from unwarranted physical or mental distress, harm, danger, or deprivation (NASW, 2017). Social work participants of the individual qualitative interviews were provided with a written informed consent and invitation detailing the purpose of the research conducted as well as the rights for participation. Protection of participants included safety, informed consent, privacy during individual interviews, debriefing information, and community resources. According to the American Psychological Association (2010), reasonable precautions must be executed in protecting confidential information obtained through or stored in any medium due to the extent and limitation of confidentiality being regulated by law or established by institutional rules or professional or scientific relationships. I adhered to every effort to protect and respect confidentiality and at best keep all personal identifying information for each participant only known by me. Individual identifying information was not printed or used within any portion of this doctoral study.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify patterns about behavioral issues and the lack of parental supervision among youth exposed to technology through internet-connected devices. The strengths and weaknesses of the literature sources were provided with comparisons and contrasts from the current methods, approaches, and findings of several authors. Lastly, an evaluation was conducted which interpreted what was known within the social work profession as well as what was lacking in terms of the gaps and barriers in research. The increase in behavioral issues in youth without parental supervision, who are exposed to technology is the problem within the social work profession. Despite efforts to address the challenges social workers face throughout mental health treatment, barriers continue to remain. The individual participants and myself explored strategies and interventions for social workers to utilize when addressing challenges and behavioral issues in youth as well as sought to understand what strategies could be incorporated by parents to effectively integrate and manage parental supervision of their youth's internet-connected devices.

The literature review focused on the following themes to gain a better understanding of the social work problem:

1. Background of adolescent behavioral issues

2. Evolution of advanced technology

3. Parental supervision

4. Adolescent socialization

5.   Social workers challenges

Information composed throughout the literature review came from several commonly utilized social work, counseling, and psychology databases. Data were retrieved from Google Scholar, Walden University Library, SocINDEX, PsycINFO, and Thoreau Multi-Database. To make certain that the most current and relevant research was utilized, peer-reviewed scholarly articles and journals were reviewed. The search was tailored to only produce results within the last 5 years, but it was also extended to years older than 2014 to build upon and support current research. Keyword search terms used included *social cognition in adolescence, adolescents and technology, emotional and behavioral problems among adolescent, adolescent and mental health challenges*, *parental monitoring and internet restriction among youth, Internet gratifications and adolescents, and trends in socializations for youth.*

Background of Adolescent Behavioral Issues

An extensive literature review about behavioral issues in youth exposed to technology was conducted, and the findings were similar across multiple studies. When discussing the background of adolescents and the behaviors that they display, the current findings were adolescents' chemical makeup and brain development were to fault in terms of making sound decisions. Eleuteri et al. (2017) stated adolescence is a fundamental developmental period characterized by suboptimal decision-making, emotional and social reactions, and identity exploration. During this developmental stage, researchers have found adolescents have difficulty controlling impulsive behaviors when

with their peers; which increases delinquent and at-risk behaviors caused by decreased emotion regulation abilities (Eleuteri et al., 2017).

Yurgelun-Todd (2007) suggested as adolescences transition to adulthood their cognitive development will progressively increase greater efficiency in cognitive control and affective modulation. The elements involved in good decision-making for adolescences included cognitive, psychological, social, cultural, and societal factors (Eleuteri et al., 2017). Because adolescents are connected to technology and the internet several times daily, researchers have proven this leads to undesirable behavioral changes such as reduced social interactions, isolation, disputes in social relationships, reduced academic performance, addicted and obsessive behaviors, mental health issues, low self-esteem, and behavioral problems in the school and home settings in their families (Munno et al., 2017).

Anderson et al. (2017) concluded from their study of adolescences exposure to the internet caused problematic behaviors for this population and led to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, psychological distress, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, as well as social phobias. Components analyzed by the authors of this study included personality traits, self-control/impulsivity, hostility; self-esteem, positive development/life satisfaction, and social and cognitive skills in addition to the adolescents' gender and academic disposition. Results depicted adolescents who were deemed extroverts according to their personality displayed more problematic behaviors compared to introverted adolescents (Anderson et al., 2017). The most troubling aspect is the

increased difficulty youth are having in the transition to a healthy cognitive, emotional, and social development as well as becoming independent.

Evolution of Advanced Technology

Within the last 20 years, technological advancement has expanded the internet growth tremendously; making it a frugal necessity in daily living. Individuals born before the year 1990 did not grow up with technology; especially since computers were mainly used for leisure activities and not as advanced as computers today (Pew Research Center, 2015). There was very low computer ownership within the home setting, dial-up internet connectivity, and less than daily internet usage (Dhir, Chen, & Nieminen, 2015). Evolution of the internet now provides a platform in which communication, information, and entertainment occur spontaneously, connecting work and play. Anderson et al. (2017) stated the significant usage of the internet and the development of internet addictions has created a need for greater focus on global research.

Parental Supervision

Youth have the ability to access the internet 24 hours, 7 days a week, which grants them unrestricted access and exposure to social media. Ballester-Arnal, Giménez-Garcia, Gil-Llario, and Castro-Calvo (2016) explained how increased access to the internet along with the development of sexual identity in youth ultimately leads to youth having greater exposure to pornography and explicit sexual content than adolescents in previous generations. Adolescents tend to explore their sexuality through pornography and cybersex on the internet. Studies conducted on online sexual activities among adolescents

explain how adolescents actively seek and look for sexual material on the internet due to increased curiosity and freedom to openly be vulnerable when communicating about sexually natured topics (Braun-Harvey & Vigorito, 2015). Engaging in these risky behaviors are common among adolescents due to their premature lack of control and heightened hormones (Braun-Harvey & Vigorito, 2015).

Parental supervision and monitoring have been found to significantly reduce problematic behaviors and exploitation of youth. Finding ways to protecting youth from exploitation is becoming difficult due to technology placing youth at an increased risk to become victims of child pornography, human trafficking, and crimes. When parents are involved in youth whereabouts and monitor social media presence, it reflects in a decline in behavioral issues (Eleuteri, Saladino, & Verrastro, 2017). However, when there is little parenting in the home, little communication in the family setting, lower parental education achievements, and separated/divorced family systems then the findings show an increase in behavioral issues (Eleuteri, Saladino, & Verrastro, 2017).

Adolescent Socialization

Adolescence is defined as the period between childhood and adulthood that entails the biological growth and major social role transitions (Sawyer, Azzopardi, Wickremarathne & Patton, 2018). During the adolescence stage, youth are exploring their sense of being, self-identify and trying to figure out how they fit into the world (Dulmus & Sowers, 2012). According to Erikson (1968), this stage is when the adolescent struggles with their identity and identity confusion. Sawyer et al. (2018) reported the

social world in which adolescents are growing up is more urbanized, mobile, and globally networked than ever before resulting in increased social forces such as marketing and digital media, affecting health and wellbeing of this population during these adolescence years. As a result, terms used to identify this population has evolved over the years. Sawyer et al., (2018) explains the term *child* now suggests dependency on others, the term *youth* signals independence from others, and the term *adolescence* captures the notion of the growing individual who can take responsibility; but still requires adult protection.

Detachment from parental figures and siblings and attachment to peers, is most recognized during adolescence as youth are attempting to figure out and develop their identity, emerging sexuality, physical development, and evolving relationships with others (Yurgelun-Todd, 2007). Social networking services (SNS) such as Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, Youtube, Twitter, and Snapchat are among the top sites youth use to connect and express themselves. Recognition and validation in the form of how many friends, likes, comments, and followers are imperative to the youth's identity, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Eleuteri et al., 2017). Constant or prolonged SNS usage unsurprisingly affects adolescents' relationships with peers and family while also leading to risk-taking attitudes behaviors (Eleuteri et al., 2017).

Social Workers Challenges

Hertlein and Blumer (2013), stated constant interactions on the internet affect relationships because it lowers inhibitions and produces a false sense of identity that

usually does not correspond with an accurate depiction of one's self in person. This poses

a challenge for social workers working with adolescents because of the incongruence in

their identity. The twenty-first century terms FoMo and nomophobia also create

challenges for social workers due to the addictive nature and overreliance on technology

for the youth population; making it harder to engage the attention of youth if not

connected to technology. Another challenge in reducing behavioral issues is youth are in

denial about their usage and decision-making regarding technology. Research conducted

on adolescent's feelings and attitudes surrounding if it was acceptable and appropriate to

send, receive, and forward sexually explicit photos or messages to other peers showed

half of the youth did not think twice before accepting or forwarding photos; regardless of

the consequences (Braun-Harvey & Vigorito, 2015). The internet and social network

services have increased the opportunities for youth to display more aggressive behaviors

such as revenge pornography, cyberstalking, sexual grooming (Braun-Harvey & Vigorito,

2015). Revenge pornography has become more prominent, especially among youth,

because sexually explicit photos or videos are uploaded to websites or sent via

multimedia message to embarrass the victim and without their consent (Ballotpedia,

2018). Adolescents who experience online harassment have been found to report greater

psychological distress compared to face-to-face victimization. Depressive symptoms,

suicidal ideations, and higher rates of academic disengagement and delinquency were the

most common forms of distress (Khurana, Bleakley, Jordan, & Romer, 2015).

Challenges on behalf of the lack of parental supervision that correlates with behavioral issues can be a combination of factors such as the absence of both parents in the home, parents not having work and home balance, separation of parents, parents struggling with mental health or substance use issues, and parents' false sense of safety. According to Kuss and Griffiths (2017), parents perceive having access to technology in the home is safe, normal, and healthy. Parents believe little to no harm can come to their youth from being online daily compared to the increased risk of their youth roaming the streets and hanging out with other youth committing crimes (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Findings from the literature review report there is a need for social workers to assess family dynamics, internet usage, and social media presence when gathering a clinical assessment of adolescent clients. Social workers need to be knowledgeable and have a solid understanding of the risk involved with constant and prolonged technology. It is also fundamental for social workers to utilize evidence-based practice and effective interventions when addressing dependence on technology. Lacking information from the current literature review were clinical screening instruments and tool as well as recommendations for effective techniques and interventions to be utilized that may help social workers more easily identify adolescents who consume too much technology.

Summary

This doctoral study addresses the difficulties social workers face from the absence of parental supervision of youth ages 13-17 years who are exposed to technology and to explore potential solutions for social workers to implement in practice. Analysis from the

literature review revealed adolescents did not feel as if they needed parental supervision when connected to the internet or on social network services. Their ability to be connected through their online presence provided a sense of inclusion to their peers and in the world. Parents also felt little to no need to supervise or monitor youth's online activity due to reduced perceived threat or harm.

Suggestions to assist in reducing technology related behavioral risks for adolescents, were greater focus on monitoring and providing safe boundaries for youth while using technology and increased engagement with youth while at school and home. Monitoring online activity in all settings is vital in reducing problematic behaviors of youth. Establishing a positive and accepting stance regarding youth and technology, allows social workers to support youth in their well-being both online and when disconnected. I noticed that absent clinical screening tools for prolonged exposure to technology as well as effective techniques and interventions to combat overreliance of technology lacked from the current research.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

A detailed overview of the magnitude of the social work practice problem was provided in Section 1, which developed the foundation for this doctoral study. Components addressed within the first section were the problem statement, purpose statement and research questions, key concepts, nature of the project, significance of the study, theoretical framework, values and ethics, extensive literature review, and summary. I used an action research design for this study to explore the difficulties social workers face in the school and home environment when working with youth ages 13-17 years who are exposed to technology (internet-connected devices) without parental supervision.

Research questions were developed to acquire a better understanding of the problematic behavioral issues youth's display from their dependence on internet-connected devices. Behavioral issues of youth pose a problem both locally as well as nationally, due to the constant evolution and advancements in technology. Technology continues to advance at a rapid rate, allowing youth to be more widely exposed to technology at earlier ages than previous generations. Research questions identified for this doctoral study consisted of identifying strategies and interventions to use when addressing difficulties, exploring the need for parental supervision, discovering changes to be implemented to reduce dependence on technology, and defining ways to raise greater awareness. I sought to find techniques to reduce behavioral issues in youth stemming from over consumption with technology, to improve behavioral outcomes for

social workers and mental health professionals. In Section 2, I will elaborate on the

research design and data collection including the methodology, participants, and

instrumentation. Remaining topics discussed within this doctoral study are data analysis,

ethical procedures, and a summary.

Research Design

The social work practice problem explored for this doctoral study is the

difficulties social workers face when working with youth exposed to technology without

parental supervision. Research questions developed for this doctoral study included:

What strategies and interventions can social work professionals use when addressing

behavioral issues in youth who use technology? What strategies can be incorporated by

parents to effectively integrate and manage parental supervision of their youth's internet-

connected devices? What barriers have you encountered regarding youth's interactions

with others and their environment when attempting to reduce dependence on internet-

connected devices? What strategies and techniques can social work professionals

implement to raise greater awareness of this issue?

A qualitative approach through action research was the overall design for this

doctoral study. Royse, Thyer, and Padgett (2016) reported qualitative studies consists of

naturalistic inquiry, reliance on the researcher as the instrument of data collection, and it

emphasizes narrative content over numbers. Individual qualitative interviews were

conducted with local social workers, within the state of Georgia, who work with

adolescents ages 13-17 years to collect and retrieve data. The nature and purpose of this

study was to apply an action research design that explored and identified both difficulties and solutions that social workers face in the school and home environment when working with youth ages 13-17 years who are exposed to technology (internet-connected devices) without parental supervision.

Methodology

Prospective Data

Individual qualitative interviews were conducted as the data collection method for this doctoral study. To assist in identifying the social work practice problem, social work professionals from multiple agencies who primarily work with youth ages 13-17 years old, within the state of Georgia, were chosen to engage in this study. Six social workers within the local communities participated in the study. Interviewing these individuals were based upon their credentials and relevance in working within the targeted population. These participants not only recognized the need for this doctoral study but also assisted by verbalizing their experiences, perspectives, and opinions to address and provide recommendations for effective solutions. I addressed every research question with participants during the individual qualitative interviews to facilitate discussion and gain clarity to the noted social work problem.

During the month of March 2020, the president of the United States declared a national emergency due to the outbreak of the respiratory disease- coronavirus (Covid-19). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identified a public health threat due to the continued widespread of the disease via person-to-person contact (CDC,

2020). A public health state of emergency and statewide shelter in place order were then issued for the state of Georgia by the current Governor Brain Kemp (Office of the Governor, 2020). Due to the national emergency and statewide shelter in place order, I was no longer able to conduct face-to-face interviews with research participants. The decision was then made to conduct the qualitative interviews with social work professionals virtually via telephone. After the Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted me approval to conduct the interviews, informed consent was obtained from participants and the exact date and time were determined later.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was the strategy used to gather participants for this doctoral study because of the characteristics and attributes of social work professionals regarding the extent to which they can offer their expertise, solutions, and produce change. Palinkas et al. (2015) proclaimed purposeful sampling is a commonly used technique in qualitative research based on the identification, selection of rich information, and intentions of attaining depth understanding. This form of sampling allowed me to identify and select individuals or groups of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). It is also important to recognize the availability and willingness of social work professionals to engage and participate in research studies. According to Palinkas et al., emphasis is often placed on recognizing saturation during qualitative research. A comprehensive understanding during the data collection process continued until no new substantive data was reported.

Social work professionals were the population chosen to participate in the individual qualitative interviews for this doctoral study. Chosen participants have graduated from an accredited college and have earned their Master of Social Work degree. Interview participants either held the credentials and title of a licensed master social worker (LMSW) or a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) within their place of employment. These social work professionals were in good standing within their licensing board and had no prior nor current sanctions or disciplinary action taken upon them after becoming licensed. Six social workers participated in the qualitative interviews; all of which were employed within various agencies or organizations and were working with youth ages 13-17 years old within the state of Georgia when interviews were conducted. Strategies to obtain social work research participants included sending personalized invitations, making phone calls, sending emails, networking among social work professionals, and receiving contact information on public platforms and making contact virtually for inclusion to the individual qualitative interviews. One of the most used networking websites for adults, *LinkedIn*, was used to assist me in finding and obtaining social work participants.

According to LinkedIn (2020), it is the world's largest professional network with over 700 million users in more than 200 countries and territories worldwide. LinkedIn's vision and mission are to create economic opportunity for every member of the global workforce by connecting professionals to make them more productive and successful (LinkedIn, 2020). Their platform allows employers to distribute current employment

opportunities, broadcast relevant news and information of various agencies, and assist job seekers in highlighting their resumes to potential employers. LinkedIn made it easier to identify local social workers who specialize in or have experience working with youth ages 13-17 years old based on reviewing their profile information.

Once approval was granted to conduct the interviews, contact was made virtually to potential social work participants; inquiring if they would be interested in engaging in the capstone research. Potential social workers were provided a formal research invitation via email and a copy of the approved informed consent form. The informed consent provided the social work participants with a clear description of what to expect during the research process. Potential social work participants were given time to review the information and ask questions prior to giving consent. Since the informed consent was provided to participants electronically, they were asked to simply reply "I Consent" to the email correspondence. Participants were also encouraged to print or save a copy of the informed consent for their records. Interview questions used for this doctoral study are included within this project (see Appendix).

The interviews were scheduled based on the availability of the participants and researcher. After a time was determined by both the participant and I, interviews were conducted by me, virtually via telephone, in a private and secure location. Participants were also asked to be in a private and secure environment during the duration of the phone interview. There was no set minimum time for the interviews, but the maximum time set was up to two and a half hours. I informed the participants they may be contacted

via phone as a follow up after the conclusion of the interview; only to gain clarification if warranted. If a follow-up was necessary, then it was expected to be less than thirty minutes but not to exceed one hour.

Instrumentation

Qualitative instrumentation tools implemented to collect the data were interview questions, audio recorder, and notepad. I chose to assign random letters and numbers to ensure confidentiality and ensure participant identities were not directly or indirectly disclosed during data collection. Royse, Thyer, and Padgett (2016) reported data collection methods and evaluation should be centered on goals and resources available for the researcher. Research questions formulated for the interviews were based on the themes produced from the literature review. There were no existing measurement instruments utilized during data collection, therefore, there was no need to seek permission from any developer to use such instruments. Rationale for using the developed interview questions for this doctoral study derived from the concept of applying open-ended questioning, which produced greater insight and meaningful discussions from the participants. Stringer (2014) asserted researchers should formulate questions according to the nature and extent of the inquiry in which they will engage to develop a more solid understanding.

Initial questions asked during the interview were basic, non-identifying, demographic information from each participant. Specific questions one through four sought to explore how long each participant has been licensed and practicing social work

within the state of Georgia within the adolescent population. These initial questions also

inquired about training, knowledge, and additional credentials acquired as well as the

percentage of clients served who are youth ages 13-17 with behavioral issues. Questions

nine through thirteen were tailored to the social work professionals who deal with

behavioral issues in youth on a consistent basis. Social work participants were asked to

provide enriched dialogue and assist in finding realistic solutions to significantly reduce

their challenges in treatment not only for them but also for other social workers or mental

health professionals working with youth and their family systems. There were no existing

data to be collected nor analyzed by the researcher regarding this doctoral study.

Data Analysis

Royse et al. (2016) proclaimed there are multiple steps of qualitative evaluators

when determining what methods are appropriate for research studies. Steps include

deciding on the unit of analysis, sampling strategies, types of data collection and analysis,

and strategies for rigor. A detailed account of the analysis process was explained within

this study. Chronological steps for the analysis process included data collection and

management, utilization of data analysis software, incorporation of quality control,

writing the report, dissemination, and advocacy.

Data Collection and Management

Open-discussion interviews and documentation in the form on field notes

conducted virtually via telephone formed the basis of data collection from the individual

qualitative interviews. Recording devices and note taking occurred during the interviews

to capture the individual responses from the participants and assist in transcribing the data. I chose to assign random letters and numbers to ensure confidentiality and ensure participant identities were not directly or indirectly disclosed during data collection. To minimize biases during the qualitative interviews, I applied reflexivity and monitoring one's self; being conscious and aware that the researcher is not a passive player in the interview but is the prime instrument of data collection (McGrath et al., 2019).

Data were stored on a recording device and notes were taken by me during the individual qualitative interviews. These strategies were developed to assist in interpreting and transcribing the data later after all the scheduled interviews were completed. I completed data transcription via audio recorder and computer software, to ensure confidentiality, all computer files and access to the computer were password protected with 2-step authentication. Additional precautions were taken to safeguard the data and restrict access to anyone other than me. Photocopies or scans of any handwritten data notes or documents uploaded into the computer system were transferred to an external password protected USB drive as a secondary precaution in the event of original documents or data being involuntarily destroyed. When the recording devices, written data, computer, USB drive, or software applications were not in use, said data and devices were placed in a locked cabinet with me only having access to retrieve the data. I will keep all data for a minimum of five consecutive years according the university policies and procedures before it will be destroyed. Disposal methods will include erasing, shredding, and/or deleting data from all sources at the expiration of the 5 years.

Data analysis software

Stringer (2014) defined data analysis as the process of distilling large quantities of information to uncover significant elements embedded in the data, a process of reflection and interpretation. Concepts and ideas produced from data analysis helped to understand the nature of the problem and gain new ways of thinking about the issues investigated more clearly. I initially planned to apply a qualitative data analysis software program to aide in the recording, storing, and analyzing of the data retrieved from participants. Royse, Thyer, and Padgett (2016) explain how the decision to incorporate a data analysis software program is solely up to the researcher as word processing programs can also assist in interpreting the data. Data analysis software programs such as ATLAS, NVIVO, and HyperRESEARCH were among the recommended programs to manipulate data more efficiently; reducing the amount of time spent for data analysis. Further explanation on how the data analysis was conducted for this doctoral study is provided in Section 3.

Quality Control

Methods used to address rigor for this doctoral study included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility referred to the qualitative research being deemed as credible or believable according to the participants' perspective (Stringer, 2014). Social work participants were expected to give honest and truthful accounts to the researcher throughout the entire interview process of sharing their experiences in working with youth ages 13-17 with behavioral issues. I implemented prolonged engagement with social work participants during the individual interviews to

keep participants engaged in the study, build rapport and trust, test for misinformation, and gather rich data. Transferability referred to if the qualitative research results can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other respondents (Stringer, 2014). While this research study may not be generalizable due to the relatively small sample size and geographical setting, it may be transferable to other communities.

Padgett (2012) defined dependability as obtaining the same results from the research if it could be observed twice. Confirmability referred to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others; through checking and rechecking the data and conducting a data audit to examine the data collection and analysis procedures (Padgett, 2012). According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), to ensure transparency, the researcher should describe the research steps taken from the beginning of the research project to the development and reporting of the findings. Trustworthiness is defined as establishing these four elements: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability to establish the research findings (Padgett, 2012). Peer debriefing was not incorporated for this study due to me completing data collection and analysis independently. However, member checking with social work participants during the interviews to seek verification and clarification was applied to ensure I remained grounded in the subjective meanings of each participants (Padgett, 2012).

Report Writing

The writing of the research report details what the research is about and why the research was studied so the reader can gain a better understanding of the noted issues. As

previously discussed, the social work practice problem focus for this doctoral study is to understand the difficulties social workers face from the absence of parental supervision of youth ages 13-17 who are exposed to technology. The finalized version of this doctoral study contains a table of contents that lists major sections and subsections within this paper. A thorough literature review, methodology results, discussion on the findings and results, and recommendation summary is also outlined within this doctoral study report.

Dissemination and Advocacy

Dissemination will occur once fully approved by all selected committee members according to the university requirements. This doctoral study will be released to the public and efforts to disseminate may include print, broadcast, or social media. According to Stringer (2014), research is best disseminated when the researcher summarizes the full research into a short synopsis to capture the reader's attention. Individuals who would benefit from this research are identified stakeholders, parents, mental health professionals, social worker practitioners, policy makers, and community agencies. Advocacy regarding this doctoral study will be based on knowledge building and reproduction to other social workers and mental health professionals working with the youth population and their family systems.

<center>**Ethical Procedures**</center>

The Institutional Review Board application was completed and submitted after the initial oral defense requirements were successfully met. After a thorough review of the application, approval was granted for me to conduct the interviews. Walden University's

approval number for this study is 05-26-20-0541990. A completed copy of the informed

consent form was provided to each social work participant for this doctoral study. The

informed consent totaled 3 pages in length; ensuring all elements were discussed and

covered.

Manti and Licari (2018) defined informed consent as a voluntary agreement to

participate in research, which is a process, in which the participants understand the

research and its risks. Procedures for the ethical compliance process and regarding

informed consent consisted of not conducting any research until officially receiving

approval. After approval, participants were contacted via personalized invitation and

provided an electronic copy of the informed consent prior to engaging in the individual

qualitative interviews via telephone. Measures such as these were taken to ensure each

participant had the opportunity to make a sound judgement regarding whether to

participate or not in the study. The informed consent advised the participants of his or her

rights, purpose of the study, procedures of the study, potential risks and benefits of

participation, and contact information of local community resources if warranted.

According to Manti and Licari (2018) participants in any research study must willingly

participate and extra precautions must be in placed when studying vulnerable populations

such as: prisoners, children, pregnant women.

I took precautions to ensure ethical protection of participants by adhering to the

social work code of ethics throughout the entire research process. All participants were

informed of their right to refuse or withdraw from the study during anytime without

repercussions or penalty to confirm ethical protection and compliance on behalf of me. Data gathered during the individual qualitative interviews were kept in a private and secure location; with each participant's personal identifying information kept confidential by me. Random letters and numbers were assigned to ensure confidentiality and ensure participant identities were not directly or indirectly disclosed. Identifying information that any participating social worker disclosed outside of the individual qualitative interview will not be held against me in anyway.

Data collected throughout the research process remains to be the responsibility of me. Recording devices and note taking occurred during the interviews to capture individual responses from participants and assist in transcribing the data. Transcription of the data via audio recordings and computer software were incorporated but all computer files and access to the computer were password protected with 2-step authentication. Additional precautions were taken to safeguard the data and restrict access to anyone other than me. Photocopies or scans of any handwritten data notes or documents uploaded into the computer system were transferred to an external password protected USB drive as a secondary precaution in the event of original documents or data being involuntarily destroyed. When the recording devices, written data, computer, USB drive, or software applications were not in use, said data and devices were placed in a locked cabinet with me only having access to retrieve the data. All data will remain kept for a minimum of five consecutive years according the university policies and procedures

before it will be destroyed. Disposal methods will include erasing, shredding, and/or deleting data from all sources at the expiration of the 5 years.

Summary

Individual qualitative interviews were implemented as the qualitative method of collecting data to explore the experiences and difficulties social workers face in the school and home environment when working with youth ages 13-17 who are exposed to technology (internet-connected devices) without parental supervision. I chose purposeful sampling to identify licensed social workers who were employed through various agencies or organizations that work directly with youth ages 13-17 years old. To remain in compliance with the Walden University's IRB policies and procedures, no research was sought nor conducted prior to gaining approval. A research invitation and detailed informed consent form were provided to social work participants after being granted approval to conduct the interviews, but before the actual scheduled interviews. After completion of the data analysis, the findings were incorporated into this doctoral study. The next section of this study described and elaborated on the presentation of the findings from the individual qualitative interviews.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

An action research design exploring the difficulties social workers face in the school and home environment when working with youth ages 13-17 who are exposed to technology (internet-connected devices) without parental supervision was implemented for this doctoral study. I sought to find techniques to reduce behavioral issues in youth that stemmed from over consumption with technology to improve behavioral outcomes for social workers and mental health professionals. Questions developed for the interviews sought to gain a better understanding of the problematic behavioral issues youth's display from their dependence on internet-connected devices. Research questions identified to address the purpose statement were: What strategies and interventions can social work professionals use when addressing behavioral issues in youth who use technology? What strategies can be incorporated by parents to effectively integrate and manage parental supervision of their youth's internet-connected devices? What barriers have you encountered regarding youth's interactions with others and their environment when attempting to reduce dependence on internet-connected devices? What strategies and techniques can social work professionals implement to raise greater awareness of this issue?

Section 2 provided the readers with a detailed account of the research design and data collection methods for this doctoral study. A discussion on the overall research methodology was provided in greater detail to include prospective data, participants, and instrumentation. The data analysis section within this doctoral study emphasized the data

collection and management components, data analysis software, quality control measures, report writing techniques, dissemination, and advocacy. Lastly, details were provided on how ethical procedures and social work code of ethics were abided by throughout this study. In Section 3, I thoroughly examined the data analysis techniques and produced the research findings for the readers. A summary of the section was shared to recapture the main findings and material for the readers of this doctoral study.

Data Analysis Techniques

Timeframe

Due to the declared national emergency and Georgia statewide shelter in place order from the respiratory disease- coronavirus (Covid-19), recruitment and interview strategies for this study were modified to represent virtual interviews via telephone. Approval to conduct the interviews was granted, roughly two months after the widespread coronavirus pandemic at a time when the state of Georgia was still under the shelter in place order. CDC guidelines and governor's recommendation of maintaining social distancing, staying at least 6 ft from others, made completing face-to-face interviews impossible. The state of emergency orders required all schools from elementary through high school, within the entire state of Georgia, to be closed until further notice or the expiration of the orders (Office of the Governor, 2020). School districts, especially staff within the schools, were unprepared for the pandemic. Despite no longer being able to physically attend schools, staff was expected to conduct class via technology (Zoom and other online platforms) to finish the school year.

A national emergency of this magnitude impacted the social workers within the school systems who became displaced and had to work from home; making it difficult for them to gain access to their professional email system. To address the social work practice problem, school social workers were among the chosen participants for this doctoral study. Despite sending out roughly 30 personalized invitations via email, networking among social work professionals, and receiving contact information on public platforms and making contact virtually; there was significant delay in the responses received consenting to participate. The recruitment process until all interviews were completed lasted roughly eight weeks. Initial goals were to complete interviews with eight to twelve social workers but only six interviews were completed for this study.

Research interviews were completed with social workers who graduated from an accredited college and have earned a Master of Social Work degree. All interviewed social workers either held the credentials and title of a licensed master social worker (LMSW) or a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) within their place of employment. These social work professionals reported being in good standing within their licensing board and denied having any prior or current sanctions or disciplinary action taken upon them after becoming licensed. Every social worker interviewed reported being employed within various agencies or organizations and were working with youth ages 13-17 years old within the state of Georgia. Total length of the interviews varied among participants, but each ranged between thirty minutes to one and a half hours.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data collection from the individual qualitative interviews included open-discussion interviews using the identified research questions, audio recording devices, and writing notes during the interviews. Assigned random letters and numbers used as participant identifiers were (D1, B2, H3, P4, Z5, J6) to ensure confidentiality. I decided to independently interpret the data to develop an in-depth understanding. After the scheduled interviews were completed, data transcription was conducted using the audio recording, written notes, and a computer word processing program.

McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl (2019) identify data transcription in qualitative research as being a detailed, time-consuming activity, conducted of individual or group interviews that is generally transformed from audio to written format, word from word (verbatim). The process of transcribing the data into written format required a lot of patience and time. An extensive amount of time was spent on listening to the audio recording then typing the information and comparing written notes for alignment. These steps were constantly repeated throughout the process as only a short amount of information could be gathered at a time. Each transcribed interview took a minimum three hours to complete due to the wide range of content received.

One of the two major processes for distilling the data that were implemented during this process was coding and categorizing to summarize the experiences and perspectives of social work participants. Coding and thematic analysis were incorporated to identify phrases and words that were developed into codes and categorizes deriving

from the data which was later grouped into themes. Royse, Thyer, and Padgett (2016) emphasize the importance of the researcher using neutral codes during the coding process to reduce biased coding that is judgmental in nature. I color-coded initial codes and categories and after more thorough analysis, eliminated or merged those categories to produce the final themes and subthemes for this study. Additional research via Walden University resources, library resources, and online publications were utilized during this process to gather a solid understanding of correctly coding the data.

Validation Procedures

McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl (2019) implied responsibility falls on the researcher during action research, to explain and justify the efforts taken to improve the issue or situation while also giving a detailed account on the steps taken; showing what one has done. It is stated that as action researchers, it is one's responsibility to produce knowledge claims that are evidenced-based and to also show validity of the claim and explain why it should be viewed as being honest, true, and believed by others. McNiff (2016) proclaimed that establishing validity involves getting other people to agree on the researcher's validity claims versus the researcher simply making a claim and providing evidence to support it.

The aim for this doctoral study is to advance the social profession and other mental health professions by validating the assumptions made from the knowledge obtained. Intentions were to collaborate with other social work professionals to generate a better understanding on the difficulties they face when working with youth exposed to

technology without parental supervision; to advance individual knowing as well as collectively knowing for professionals. Throughout this process, I was mindful of personal reflections and more aware of one's positioning during the collaboration process. Applying the concept of reflexivity and monitoring one's self, I was careful not to pass judgments, bias, or transform ideas onto participants during the data collection and analysis process. Member checking techniques were applied with each social work participant during the interview to gain verification and clarification on their responses and to remain grounded in their subjective meanings. Self-validation occurred in the form of me adhering to the moral commitment taken as a social work professional in seeking to address the barriers in treatment with intentions for the research to produce realistic solutions for change. Peer debriefing was not incorporated for this study due to me completing the data collection and analysis independently.

Academic validation was also implemented throughout the entire process for this doctoral study. Committee members were consulted at different stages to review the information and provide feedback based on their professional knowledge and expertise. This doctoral study was rigorously analyzed several times among the three committee members until each member individually accepted and approved the material. As reported by McNiff (2016) to ensure that one's research is taken seriously, the researcher must be able to prove that the knowledge within the research has been through rigorous academically legitimized processes depicting how it was created and tested. I claim that the knowledge gathered within this study was derived from the assistance of social work

professionals, contributing to an original study. It is my hope that social validation will

be applied to this doctoral study after being published based on the four principles of

comprehensibility, truthfulness, authenticity, and appropriateness of this study to the

greater audience.

Limitations

Qualitative research, when correctly implemented, produces unbiased, in-depth,

valid, reliable, credible, and rigorous results (Anderson, 2010). While there are many

benefits to utilizing qualitative research, there are also some limitations that must be

considered. Limitations are present in every research, but the key is to acknowledge and

honestly report the extent of the known limitations within the study. A limitation

identified for this study pertained to social work professionals only being recruited to

engage in the study. Other mental health professionals such as licensed professional

counselors, marriage and family therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist, etc. may also

experience similar challenges and behavioral issues from the youth population related to

their technology usage. Requirements for this study did not allow me to interview other

professionals but the hope is that the information distributed can be implemented within

their practice to produce positive outcomes.

A second limitation to this study included that every social worker participant had

to possess a Master of Social Work degree, be licensed as either a LMSW or LCSW, and

not have any prior nor current sanctions or disciplinary actions. This requirement was

based on the additional training that social workers receive in their graduate programs

compared to the basic information and skills taught of undergraduate students. Being credentialed also validated that participants had a solid understanding of social work competency and skills since both credentials (LMSW and LCSW) requires that social worker successfully take and pass the national licensing exam. Another limitation noticed was the process of having to conduct virtual interviews via telephone. The initial goal was to complete face-to-face interviews with each participant but due to the coronavirus pandemic, the plan had to be modified.

Despite receiving extensive in-depth information from each interview, I lost the ability to read each participant's body language and observe their non-verbal communication during the interviews. The last limitation was the small sample size and geographical location of the participants. Six social workers participated in the individual qualitative interviews and they all were employed within various agencies or organizations working with youth ages 13-17 years old within the state of Georgia. While this research study may not be generalizable due to the relatively small sample size and geographical setting, it may be transferable to other communities.

<div align="center">

Findings

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Descriptive Statistics

Social work professionals from multiple agencies who primarily work with youth ages 13-17 years, within the state of Georgia, were chosen to engage in this study and assist in identifying the social work practice problem. Interviewing these individuals were based upon their credentials and relevance in working within the targeted population.

These participants not only recognized the need for this doctoral study but also assisted by verbalizing their experiences, perspectives, and opinions to address and provide recommendations for effective solutions.

I distributed roughly 30 personalized invitations to social work professionals after obtaining approval to conduct the interviews. Of the 30 invitations sent, 14 social work professionals never responded, but 16 social workers responded showing interest in engaging in the study. When I made contact to the social workers showing interest, seven out of the 16 social workers did not meet the criteria. These seven social worker professionals reported that they worked with elementary students, grade level kindergarten through sixth grade, and were not currently work with youth ages 13-17 years. No further progress made with these social workers as the study specifically called for social workers presently working with youth ages 13-17 years. Three social work professionals withdrew from the study because of their inability to complete the interviews due to complexities with their personal work and home schedules. Initial plans were to complete interviews with 8 to 12 social work professionals but only six interviews were completed for this study. All social work professionals reported being licensed as either an LMSW or LCSW, actively working with youth ages 13-17, and denying any prior or current sanctions or disciplinary actions. I reviewed the Georgia secretary of state professional licensing board website to verify that each social worker license was currently active and in good standing. Participants were verbally asked about

their licensure status during the interviews and were expected to give honest and trustful responses.

Statistical Analysis Findings

Each social work professional was asked "how long have you been licensed and practicing social work in the state of Georgia with the adolescent population?" The findings depicted seven and a half years for the average time of all the social workers being licensed and practicing within the state of Georgia. Three social workers have been licensed between ten to twenty-five years and the remaining three participants have been licensed within the last three years. The social work participants were all women with variations in age, race, and ethnicity. Participants were employed within various agencies or organizations and two social worker reporting to being assigned to more than one middle and high school within their school districts.

All participants were asked "what additional training, knowledge, or credentials have you acquired post degree in social work?" The results showed that four out of the six social workers held the credentials of being a licensed master social worker (LMSW) and the remaining two professionals were licensed clinical social workers (LCSW). One of the social workers held a Doctor of Social Work (DSW) degree. Every participant reported compliance with Georgia secretary of state professional licensing board regarding the mandatory continuing education (CEU) requirements. Participants reported earning more than the 35 required continuing education hours and obtaining additional professional certifications. Some of the forms of certifications earned were: Child and

Adolescent Needs and Strength (CANS), Telemental health provider, Academy of

certified social workers (ACSW), Clinical supervisor certification (CCS), and Lean and 6

sigma green belt certification (CSSC).

Within the state Georgia, every social worker that has an active state license is

required to obtain thirty-five clock hours of continuing education biennially to renew

their license. Of the required thirty-five hours, a minimum of five hours must consist of

professional ethics. The remaining thirty hours can be a combination of fifteen core hours

(core hours must reflect social work content) and fifteen related hours (hours from a

specialty other than the one in which the license is held). Lastly, a social worker may earn

a maximum of ten hours of continuing education through online content for each two-

year renewal period (Georgia Secretary of State, 2018).

The next question asked of participants were "How often do you engage in

continuing education through workshops, seminars, or online trainings?" According to

the participants, prior to the coronavirus pandemic, they engaged in continuing education

at least once every three months but often found themselves reading social work material

or completing online trainings monthly. Since the pandemic, the professional licensing

board amended the rules to allow all required 35 continuing education hours to be

obtained online (Georgia Secretary of State, 2018). Participants reported that they had to

rotate taking time off from work with other social work colleagues to complete

workshops or trainings that required travel. Two out of the six participants mentioned that

their employers and/or assigned schools offered free continuing educations hours or professional learning trainings roughly twice yearly.

Although the overall cost to attend workshops or trainings was not reported, each participant denied that they were reimbursed by their employers for obtaining continuing education hours. Despite the individual financial contributions that is associated with earning continuing education credits, all social workers reported positive attitudes regarding attending additional trainings. Participants expressed that obtaining more knowledge allowed them to be better able to work with the youth population, spend time away from daily work to learn new skills, and allowed them to become refreshed on relevant social work content. J6 reported *"As social workers, it is fundamental that we continually feed ourselves valuable knowledge."*

The last demographic questions asked was "what percentage of your clients are youth ages 13-17 with behavioral issues?" Findings were that these six social work professionals served 61% of the youth population with behavioral issues between the ages of 13-17. This percentage was derived from the social workers only including the specific age for the study and not including their entire caseload. As previously stated, some of the social workers were assigned to more than one school within their school districts. Factors for not including their entire caseload stemmed from a percentage of their students attending middle school but were ages 11-12 years old and some high school students being older than 17 years old.

Research Questions Findings

Research questions were formulated to assist in finding techniques to reduce behavioral issues in youth that stem from over consumption with technology. Seeking to improve behavioral outcomes for social workers and mental health professionals, six social work professionals were interviewed. After an extensive and thorough analysis of the data from the perspectives of the six social work participants, seven themes were produced. The following themes included: reduced focus, increased suffering, lacking parental involvement, distribution of resources, loss of fundamental skills, demands for greater advocacy, and absent screening tools. Subthemes were also incorporated within this study to truly reflect the participants viewpoints on the research questions.

Theme 1: Reduced Focus.

Classroom Engagement. Participants were asked "In what capacity has over consumption with technology affected the youth that you work with?" Findings from the interviews showed an overall reduction in focus for youth, especially related to classroom engagement and school attendance when youth are overly consumed with technology. D1 reported, "youth appear increasingly withdrawn or uninterested; they have their phones out all the time- they act like they can't be without their phones which is a big distraction for a lot of the youth." Z5 stated, "youth are distracted and engaging with peers during class through social media or text messaging; having to be repeatedly prompted to focus or pay attention, they are so fixated on their social media accounts." H3 reported, "children have greater access to different sites and video footage that they shouldn't be

watching, and it's not age appropriate; they are exposed to too much too soon." All participants reported that youth appear unbothered by the content that they watch or share with other peers, but adults view the content they are watching as being very inappropriate. B2 states, "Tiktok videos are becoming more problematic because teachers are having to constantly prompt youth to get off their phone or the teachers will take the youth's phone which ruins the youth's entire day."

School Attendance.

P4 stated:

Some youth are not doing any schoolwork at all due to being on their phones, causing them to get behind in assignments which leads to a decrease in grades; causing youth to repeat the course to earn credits for their transcripts.

Participants verbalized that they are noticing when youth get too far behind and stop attempting to improve their grades, their parents allow them to withdraw from school. H3 reported:

In the state of Georgia, Compulsory law only applies to children and youth who are between the ages of 6 and 16; at age 16 youth can withdraw or drop out of school. I have witnessed that at this stage, youth are more prone to drop out. We have a number of parents who are tired of hearing from the school or tired of going to the school for their youth's behavioral issues, so they (parents) will allow their youth to withdraw from school or they will actually withdraw their youth.

The state of Georgia compulsory education laws mandates attendance in a public school, private school, or home school program for children between their sixth and sixteenth birthdays (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2020). When said children do not attend school, their parents then become subjected to receive penalties and/or fines or issued prison time for noncompliance. If an unemancipated minor, who has aged-out of the compulsory education requirements and has not completed all requirements for a high school diploma wishes to withdraw from school, they must have the written permission of his or her parent or legal guardian prior to withdrawing (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2020). Every local board of education within the state of Georgia, must have a policy to allow minors who exceed the age limit to voluntarily withdrawal if they so choose.

Theme 2: Increased Suffering.

Substance Abuse.

Participants were asked "What are some of the behavioral issues in the youth you serve related to technology usage?" The findings from the participants showed youth have increased suffering in the form of increased substance abuse, increased incidents of bullying, and increased suicidality because of excessive technology usage. Social workers reported that youth are experimenting with alcohol, synthetic or laced drugs, or other substances which alters their personality and mood. Experimenting with substances lead to noticing increased mental health issues and diagnoses as well as increased psychotic episodes, aggressiveness, and sexual behaviors of youth. According to the participants,

youth are not always accurate to their parents or professionals on what substances they have taken so often it is difficult to complete assessments due to inability to gather the truth and effectively intervene.

Bullying.

Every social worker interviewed, reported that the most behavioral issues when working with youth ages 13-17 stemmed from bullying. The magnitude that youth can bully has drastically changed due to the evolution of technology. All social workers communicated that youth use technology to upload harassing and harmful content which allows the drama and bullying incidents to reach a much larger audience and to last longer in both the home and school settings. Participants reported that bullying is carried out via text messages, emails, and social media platforms; Snapchat and Instagram were the most popular used accounts for youth to carry out bullying. J6 stated:

> I have witnessed bullying in the form of a youth creating a Spam Page to harass another youth. This youth made a fake profile page on Instagram of the youth being bullied and posted real pictures of the youth but added negative and threatening comments on the page. Anyone could then view and/or comment on the fake page but only the creator of the fake page could delete the page. Because the creator of the page was anonymous, it made it difficult to track this person without thorough investigation.

Suicidality.

Findings also depicted that youth are reporting suicidal ideations at an alarming rate immediately following incidents of bullying via technology. All participants reported youth verbalizing having suicidal ideations, suicidal attempts, or completing suicide within the past year. D1 stated:

Many youths report suicidal ideations and wanting to kill themselves because of constantly being bullied on social media. I have had to develop a lot of safety plans and utilize the mobile crisis team a couple of times throughout the school year.

B2 verbalized:

The number of youths reporting suicidal ideations has increased, it mainly stems from social media and popular sites of the youth. I have had several youth voice thoughts of suicide, but I haven't had any youth to attempt nor complete suicide.

H3 reported:

I have actually had a number of youth with not only suicidal ideations or suicide attempts, but also completed suicides within the past 3 years, so our staff is on guard when youth post things on social media stating that they do not want to be around any longer. This issue appears to be trending up, unfortunately.

P4 commented, "I have had one completed suicide and one attempted homicide within the past year, this worries me." Z5 stated:

There has not been any completed suicides for my youth-only suicidal threats and comments made about dying. One youth attempted via cutting as a result of drama and bullying- degrading comments made about the youth and their family. I had to call the mobile crisis unit to assess the severity of the suicidal gesture and attempt made then create a safety plan and conduct individual therapy to ensure safety.

J6 stated:

I had a youth experiencing suicidal ideations due to being bullied on social media by peers because the youth had body odor. I have also noticed that a lot of students 'play around' with suicidality when they are upset or seeking attention to get what they want, at that particular moment.

Theme 3: Parental Involvement.

Lack Thereof.

Findings from the social work participants when inquiring on the research question "What strategies and interventions can social work professionals use when addressing behavioral issues in youth who use technology?" were weak partnerships including the relationship with youth and their parents, the level of involvement from parents, and gaining parent buy-in. Participants expressed an increased desire to have more of their youth's parents be made aware of their youths' activity with technology and their online presence. It is not uncommon for parents to provide their youth with several internet connected devices such as video games, smartphones, tablets, smartwatches, etc.

without specifying any restrictions. A few participants acknowledged some parents are involved to a certain extent, but majority of their youth deny any parental involvement regarding setting limits on technology. Social workers voiced concerns due to the lack of parental involvement because youth are not being monitored nor supervised when engaging online for prolonged periods of time and they have no guidance nor structure around technology.

D1 reported, "youth have no limits on how long they can or should be online and no rules while they are online; they have open access to whatever is out there." Z5 stated, "parents have to monitor what their youth are doing online and how much time they are spending on devices because it's affecting their sleeping patterns, moods, and emotions." H3 verbalized:

> The main difficulty is trying to communicate to youth that what they say or do
> on their public social media accounts remains attached to them and can
> negatively impact them in the future, especially when their parents do not
> know what they are doing. It is common for agencies and schools to look at the
> social media profiles of potential job applicants or student recruits prior to
> selecting them, but youth are not thinking this far ahead. If their parents
> monitor their behavior online, then some of those long-term behaviors we see
> can be reduced.

B2 stated:

Youth are tech savvy and they find ways around things on the computer. They know how to block or hide things; youth have shown me how they by-pass internet restrictions at school. Parents need to be more involved because technology is ever-changing, and youth have the advantage because they are already one-step ahead.

Parent Buy-In.

All six social workers recognized how fundamental it is to improve the relationship with parents to earn their buy-in. When discussing ways to improve or develop relationship and get buy-in from parents, it was suggested that mental health professionals be attentive to how parents are approached. Parents must feel welcomed and the environment must be inviting compared to parents feeling forced to engage with social workers only when their youth's behavior is out of control. Identifying problematic behavior when it begins allows for early intervention to reduce the issue from spiraling out of control. J6 reported:

This involves informing parents on how to communicate with mental health professionals as well as help parents' network with other parents. However, some parents are hesitant in setting boundaries and rules around technology due to their youth becoming upset and frustrated.

P4 expressed:

Parents need to feel supported opposed to feeling reprimanded or blamed; if this approach is taking then it creates an environment for the parents to be

more open in reaching out for help. Social workers are highly equipped in

teaching these skills to make, create, and develop relationships with people.

Theme 4: Distribution of Resources.

Youth are spending excessive time engaging with their peers via technology;

making it less likely their parents are keeping a watchful eye on their online behaviors

and activities (Keijsers, 2016). Social work participants were asked "What strategies can

be incorporated by parents to effectively integrate and manage parental supervision of

their youth's internet-connected devices?" The findings depicted parents can integrate

and manage supervision of their youth via distributing education and limitations after

being provided resources.

H3 verbalized:

I've noticed that when youths are struggling in the home and school setting,

then their parents are likely struggling or have struggled as well. We must

approach parents in a non-threatening way for them to receive the advice and

support they need. Instead of telling parents what they need to do, as social

workers, we can provide them with the knowledge and tools to help parents

understand why it's important to do certain things to see a change in behaviors

or to gain the outcome that they want.

Z5 expressed, "Social workers have the ability and means to provide education on

parental supervision. Education needs to be taught surrounding some of the dangers or

drawbacks that come with being online all the time." Resources for social workers to

distribute education to parents consisted of developing attractive newsletters, flyers,

emails, or pamphlets. Participants suggest creating a *Did you know Newsletter,* sending

Here's how you… emails, or creating flyers showing how to set parental and/or time

restrictions across multiple devices and social media accounts. These sources of

information could include a range of topics to easily disperse information, such as: facts

and statistics on issues pertaining to technology or the adolescent population, pros and

cons of technology usage, recommendations on setting boundaries and rules regarding

technology, as well as suggestions on how to communicate to youth, etc.

Other strategies suggested for parents to integrate and manage parental

supervision effectively regarding their youth's internet-connected devices were to obtain

youth's usernames and passwords, encourage youth to be in centralized location in the

home while using technology, observe youths body language and mood when engaging

in technology, and limit leisure time spent using technology. Participants also mentioned

the importance for parents to have open and honest communication with their youth; to

teach youth that it is okay to use technology while also teaching the importance of respect

and boundaries when being online. It was encouraged that parents create a password on

youths' devices so they (parents) will be the only person having access to install or delete

apps or online history activity. D1 stated:

> Parents can't watch their youth all the time, but they can supervise their time
>
> spent online and monitor who they are connecting with online because youth
>
> often fall prey. Youth can download apps (to send or receive sexual pictures or

videos) on their phones which can be hidden from their parents because the

hidden apps either appear blank or as another phone icon.

Theme 5: Loss of Fundamental Skills.

Findings were that youth have an overall decline in fundamental skills,

specifically mood dysregulation and diminished life skills when asked "What barriers

have you encountered regarding youth's interactions with others and their environment

when attempting to reduce dependence on internet-connected devices?" Krieger,

Leibenluft, Stringaris, and Polanczyk (2013) assert youth are more prone to becoming

irritable and display anger as of result of them being frustrated. The National Institute of

Mental Health (2017) reports disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (DMDD) is a

condition in which children or adolescents experience ongoing irritability, anger, and

frequent, intense temper outbursts. Social workers verbalized youth become anxious,

easily frustrated, angry, aggressive (verbally and physically), rebellious, and withdrawn

when attempting to reduce their dependence on internet-connected devices. It was stated

some youth get so angry they intentionally seek revenge or to retaliate; peer pressure

further increases the desire for revenge if peers were witnesses or if the youth felt

embarrassed.

Diminished Skills.

All social work participants reported concerns regarding the diminished life skills

that are being replaced by reliance on technology. It was reported many youths are

academically and socially behind and being consumed in technology all the time, makes

problems worse. Participants cohesively verbalized technology is used either 'too much or not at all' and the problem lies with needing proper balance. While having access to technology has advanced the world, youth are not being taught and are missing those basic skills because answers or gratification are instantaneous via technology. Social workers voiced having a generation of youth who do not have signatures, who cannot correctly address an envelope, who cannot efficiently count money, who do not know how to read maps, who are not learning survival skills, and who has reduced memory recollection. Participants expressed how fundamental it is for youth to have these basic skills if technology is no longer available or during times when technology malfunctions.

Social workers reported noticing youth are unable to make friends because of the constant communication via technology and how youth are not really communicating in person anymore. Despite the increase in communication via technology, youth have little to no direct interactions with their peers or their conversations are very brief. Youths have verbalized to social work participants they (youth) feel awkward or like they do not fit in when attempting to communicate with peers in social settings compared to their online presence. Z5 reported, "some students have said that they do not know how to approach peers in person in the absence of technology." This participant also reported "youth are not able to interact as much with other students because they are so technology driven and are lacking those fundamental social skills which hinders their ability to form relationships."

Theme 6: Need for Greater Advocacy.

Research question "What strategies and techniques can social work professionals implement to raise greater awareness of this issue?" was asked of participants. Findings depicted there is a need for greater advocacy in the workplace to address the social work practice problem. Additional advocacy was needed on behalf of the social work profession overall to assist in combating those professionals who work with the youth population. Lastly, the need for advocacy in increased partnership with companies to advertise information to the youth was produced.

Workplace.

Strategies to raise greater awareness within the workplace included social workers advocating to be invited and included at Open House. Every participant denied having access to attend open houses with teachers but felt it would be effective in building rapport and developing positive relationships with the parents. J6 stated:

> We can help address issues and behaviors from all perspectives versus the teachers only discussing from the academic perspective. When teachers recognize youth are having behavioral issues, not engaged, or have been markedly absent, we can intervene early at open house and get parents to realize that we understand their viewpoint and simply want to assist in providing resources versus waiting until the end of the school year when it's too late.

Another strategy to raise awareness within the workplace was for social workers to conduct trainings, seminars, or speak at school assemblies. Participants favored these

methods as they were means of distributing education and resources to a wider audience while addressing behaviors related to excessive technology usage. Using these methods for advocacy, would allow social workers to condense the amount of information given at any one time. All participants verbalized not wanting people to lose interest and wanting to reduce people from becoming overwhelmed with a lot of information.

Profession.

It was reported social workers tend to step back and not be heard enough as a profession. Participants expressed during the declared national coronavirus pandemic there was debate if social workers are considered essential workers among other professions and society. To increase awareness, it was recommended social work professionals be encouraged to join their state social work organization for greater representation. Lobbying to have issues placed on agendas for discussion and participation in city council meetings to address prominent issues were mentioned as strategies for advocacy. Social workers also verbalized the necessity of writing or calling elected officials to voice concerns and gain support to implement change. H3 exclaimed:

> Social work professionals are often placed into a *box* by parents or others, such as being labeled as doing the job of truancy officers, reporting to the local division of family and children services (DFCS), labeled as behavioral specialist, or being the teachers assistance. People do not grasp the magnitude and truly understand the roles of social workers and how we manage every system.

J6 verbalized:

> Social workers have to not allow people to proclaim to be social workers when
> they are not. There is a social work profession for a reason and when someone
> misrepresents being a social worker and something unethical happens, then it
> reflects the profession as a whole. One cannot simply Social Work without
> having the knowledge and education to support the degree. Social workers
> need to make the loudest amount of noise regarding the issues and solutions
> that we want to see. It is our duty to force political change for everyone, as
> social workers, to bring forth change.

Advertisement.

Suggestions were for social workers to advocate and partner with major
communication companies and platforms to meet the needs of every population.
Participants expressed there is no denying technology will continue to advance, so
therefore, social workers must become more knowledgeable in learning how to
effectively utilize apps to conduct telemental health services. Strategies included
advocating for major phone companies, technology entities, and social media platforms
to partner with the social work profession to address issues and provide greater support
and resources. Advertising via social media platform could include placing education,
resources, and interventions on the most used platforms such as Google, YouTube, Social
Media, and Netflix. Recommendations to implement these strategies were through mini
ads on YouTube or music apps, that play instantly in-between videos and songs, which

cannot be skipped. Coordination with Google and other search help engines could be helpful in providing resources. Once an inquiry is made related to mental health behaviors then a noticeable link directing people to access resources or connect to a mental health provider for help can be clicked.

Theme 7: Absent Screening Instruments.

When asked "Are you currently implementing any clinical screening instruments or tools to depict excessive technology use among the youth you serve?" all social work participants reported No. One participant noted the school psychologist asks one question related to technology while conducting an assessment with youth. Despite not having a screening tool in place, participants expressed curiosity on how such instrumentation could be developed. Social workers overall expressed having a screening tool would be very beneficial, especially for early detection and prevention.

Unexpected Findings

McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl (2019) state building rapport is crucial and can be challenging when conducting qualitative interviews because there is little time in the interview to build trust to enable the participants to provide rich and detailed information. Initially there was hesitation in conducting the individual interviews via telephone due to the coronavirus pandemic because of the potential fear of not being able to capture to interview environment. To my surprise, it was very easy to build rapport and communicate with every participant. The social work professionals were very knowledgeable and provided in-depth information on every question asked. All

participants appeared relaxed, freely shared their perspectives, and remained engaged throughout the interview regardless of the time until completed. According to Novick (2008) researchers should implement whichever interview mode will be appropriate to use during their study to establish rapport and elicit comprehensive and detailed responses.

Lagging transitions from traditional learning to digital learning within the school system and social work profession was another unexpected finding. Participants reported education being taught in school has not kept up with technology. There is a high number of teachers who cannot effectively integrate technology into classroom setting. The teaching structure is the same way it was several years ago, so it becomes boring to youth as they are accustomed to receiving instant gratification, quick, or immediate rewards in this digital age. New social workers who are beginning their careers as well as social workers who have many years in the field, are finding it difficult to incorporate technology into practice. When the shelter in place order was issued, it affected many social workers because it required using telemental health services to remain connected to populations served. This worldwide pandemic changed the way many professionals conduct business and caused more people to be required to rely on technology to remain afloat.

Absence of screening tools for mental health professionals to use pertaining to technology consumption was the last unexpected finding. Due to the constant evolution in technology it is important to have assessments which assist in determining the extent

and severity of issues. Social workers use screening instruments to assist in appropriately selecting mental health diagnosis for their client systems. There are screening tools for depression, substance abuse, suicidality, and other mental health disorders. Participants expressed the need to have a screening instrument to assist in depicting technology consumption.

Summary

I used an action research design to explore the difficulties social workers face in the school and home environment when working with youth ages 13-17 who are exposed to technology (internet-connected devices) without parental supervision. Social work participants employed through various agencies or organizations that work directly with youth ages 13-17 years within the state of Georgia were purposefully chosen to engage in this study. Research questions identified for this doctoral study consist of identifying strategies and interventions to use when addressing difficulties, exploring the need for parental supervision, discovering changes to be implemented to reduce dependence on technology, and defining ways to raise greater awareness. Findings from the research produced the following themes: reduced focus, increased suffering, lacking parental involvement, distribution of resources, loss of fundamental skills, demands for greater advocacy, and absent screening tools. Detailed information on the application of professional ethics in social work practice, recommendations for social work practice, and implications for social change are discussed within the next section.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

Utilizing an action research design, research questions were developed to acquire a better understanding of the problematic behaviors social workers face when working with youth. Individual qualitative interviews with six social work professionals from multiple agencies who primarily work with youth ages 13-17 years, within the state of Georgia, were incorporated for this doctoral study. Key findings from the research questions depicted seven emerging themes: reduced focus, increased suffering, lacking parental involvement, distribution of resources, loss of fundamental skills, demands for greater advocacy, and absent screening tools. These findings inform social work practice by assisting in finding techniques to reduce behavioral issues in youth that stem from over consumption with technology. Expectations are that the findings will help improve behavioral outcomes for current and future social workers and mental health professionals.

Recommended solutions to address the developed themes for this doctoral study suggest more education and resources be provided to parents and others within the workplace to instill more knowledge while addressing effective techniques to reduce the noted behavioral issues of youth. A second solution is for parents to become more involved in their youth's presence online and implement supervision or monitoring in the home. Having the assistance from parents when finding ways to diminish the practice problem only reinforces and strengthens the partnership with social workers and mental health professional. A third solution is to implement better techniques to address the

correlation between bullying and suicidality. Participants reported several youths not only are having increased suicidal ideations after being bullied but a high number of youths are also attempting and completing suicide at an even alarming rate. Statistics shows half of all children who have made one suicide attempt will make another if interventions are not in place following the first attempt. Majority of youth who attempt suicide are not attention-seeking but are emotionally distressed. A final solution is for social workers to continue to advocate on this issue within the workplace, community, and social work profession to raise awareness and promote change.

Professional Ethics in Practice

The NASW code of ethics (2017) sets forth values, ethical principles, and ethical standards to which professionals aspire and by which their actions can be judged. As social work practitioners, we are obligated to be knowledgeable of and refer to the code of ethics to ensure ethical and competent practice. Applying the code of ethics is a process in which social work professionals can reason and reflect systematically on ethical issues. According to Banks (2016), applying ethics work refers to the effort individuals put into seeing ethically salient aspects of situations, developing themselves as good practitioners, working out the right course of action and justifying who they are and what they have done. NASW code of ethics (2017) requires social workers to utilize research to gain competency, ensure confidentiality and privacy, and advocate for vulnerable populations.

Social work ethical values that correlate with the clinical social work problem of understanding the difficulties social workers face from youths exposed to technology

without parental supervision were the importance of human relationships and competency.

The ethical principle of the importance of human relationships requires social workers to

understand that relationships among the client systems are important and powerful vehicles

for change (NASW, 2017). Implementing the ethical principle of competency requires social

workers to practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their

professional expertise (NASW, 2017). Within the code of ethics Social Workers' Ethical

Responsibilities to Clients 1.04 Competence (A), states that social workers should provide

services and represent themselves as competent only within the boundaries of their

education, training, license, and certification. It also goes on to say social workers should

exercise careful judgment and take responsible steps to ensure the competence of their work

and to protect clients from harm (NASW, 2017). Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities as

Professionals 4.01 Competence (B) asserts social workers should strive to become and

remain proficient in professional practice; critically examining and keeping current with

emerging knowledge relevant to social work via routinely reviewing professional literature

and participating in continuing education (NASW, 2017).

The code of ethics guided and impacted the social work practice within this study by

ensuring I always conducted myself professionally and ethically. Social work professionals

were purposefully chosen to engage in the interviews regarding the social work practice

problem due to their sound knowledge on the behavioral issues presented and ability to

assist in formulating effective and realistic solutions. Participants, being social workers, also

recognized how fundamental it is to include those most impacted within this helping process

as partners. Recommendations included developing and sustaining partnerships with individuals within the workplace, other mental health professions, and major phone companies, technology entities, and social media platforms to address noted issues and implement the findings to provide greater support and resources. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities (NASW, 2017).

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

During the process of action research, the researcher should identify the problem and issue as well as suggest plans of actions and possible solutions (Stringer, 2014). One practice level action step for clinical social work practitioners to address the difficulties they face in the school and home environment when working with youth ages 13-17 who are exposed to technology (internet-connected devices) without parental supervision was to implement education and resources to support parents in learning how to incorporate supervision or monitoring of their youth technology usage. Findings from the research uncovered efficient techniques social workers could utilize to obtain parent buy-in and distribute educational information on an ongoing basis for parental involvement. The National Institute of Mental Health (2017) reports providing parents with knowledge aims to help parents interact with their youth in ways that reduce aggression, behaviors, and improve the parent-child relationship.

A second research level action step for clinical social work practitioners to address the difficulties they face in the school and home environment when working with youth ages 13-17 who are exposed to technology (internet-connected devices) without parental supervision was to create a universal screening instrument to determine excessive technology usage. Further research will need to be conducted to determine the format of the questionnaire and measures to test for validity and reliability. Components within the screening tool will also need to include a description on the scale to be utilized when scoring the results. Additional research is needed to more thoroughly investigate the design and length of questions that will correlate with the variables being studied.

Findings from this study may impact and advance social worker practitioners by producing measurable and realistic solutions within the workplace and to parents to combat the behavioral issues observed in youth overly consumed with technology. Directly working alongside other social workers allowed the researcher to gain rich knowledge and perspectives. This research sought to address behavioral issues within the youth population through support given from their parents, school environment, and mental health professionals. As social workers, there is a duty to provide education and resources to the populations served, especially at-risk youth in the community. I gained competency and a better understanding on how to identify future issues, collect data, and analyze the findings to create successful outcomes. Many challenges, setbacks, and delays arose throughout this doctoral study but producing the finished product as an

advanced practitioner, was very rewarding. It was said that this body of research will be my foundation as a scholar.

The findings from this doctoral study can be transferred to the field of clinical social work practice because it included valuable information that current or future social workers can use in their practice. Technology continues to evolve and be necessary in our daily lives, so it is important that research continue to be completed and updated to reflect current issues. Social workers and other mental health professionals are equipped with the knowledge and skills to complete further research and advocate for the changes needed. Findings from this doctoral study are useful for the purposes of advancing social work practice and eliciting positive change with the assistance from interviewed social workers who are employed within the various community agencies. Research allows one to be more knowledgeable and better able to address difficulties and behavioral issues, in the absence of parent supervision, when working with the adolescent population and their families. As social workers, there is a need to identify and implement known community connections, resources, and networks through partnerships to create suggestions, strategies, or ideas.

Limitations

Limitations which may impact the usefulness of this study included me only interviewing social work professionals, the requirements of social workers after becoming licensed, having to complete the qualitative interviews virtually, and the small sample size and geographical location. Other mental health professionals such as

licensed professional counselors, marriage and family therapist, psychologist, psychiatrist, etc. may also experience similar challenges and behavioral issues from the youth population related to their technology usage. However, requirements for this study did not allow me to interview other professionals but the hope is the information distributed can be implemented within their practice to produce positive outcomes.

The second limitation to this study included every social worker participant had to possess a Master of Social Work degree, be licensed as either a LMSW or LCSW, and not have any prior nor current sanctions or disciplinary actions. This requirement was based on the additional training social workers receive in their graduate programs compared to the basic information and skills taught of undergraduate students. Being credentialed also validated participants had a solid understanding of social work competency and skills since both credentials (LMSW and LCSW) requires social worker successfully take and pass the national licensing exam. Another limitation noticed was the process of having to conduct virtual interviews via telephone. The initial goal was to complete face-to-face interviews with each participant but due to the coronavirus pandemic, the plan had to be modified. Despite receiving extensive in-depth information from each interview, I lost the ability to read each participant's body language and observe their non-verbal communication during the interviews. The last limitation was the small sample size and geographical location of the participants. Six social workers participated in the individual qualitative interviews and they all were employed within

various agencies or organizations working with youth ages 13-17 years within the state of Georgia.

Recommendations for further research that are grounded in the strengths and limitations of the current study will include future research being completed to address the sample size and expand the location so that the information can be generalizable. It is also recommended that more research be completed to develop and begin using screening instruments that shows the severity of technology usage among the youth population. Another recommendation for future research is to collaborate and include other mental health professionals as interview participants to gain the knowledge from a different viewpoint to improve and increase the odds for positive and successful advancements of youth and their families. Two ways to disseminate the information produced in this project to the vested stakeholders and wider audience is through distributing newsletters or conducting workshop regarding the topic. It is beneficial to provide staff within the workplace, parents, and stakeholders with main topics, statistics, solutions, and recommendations. Creating newsletters are not very time-consuming and people can also keep newsletters to reference at later times if warranted. To raise more awareness of the findings from this study, workshops or trainings can be conducting. Social workers as well as other mental health entities would be allowed to participant in the workshops to gain and receive knowledge, skills, and support. A fully approved copy of this capstone project can be easily found on Walden University website, granting access to the public.

Implications for Social Change

When collaborating with other professionals and the youth population, it is suggested to build trusting and develop genuine relationships to produce positive change. Creating genuine relationships that are non-threatening and non-judgmental help to connect with individuals. The findings from the research highlight the impacts for positive social change on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. At the micro level increased education and resources on a continuous basis for parents and others within the workplace can be implemented to gain a better understanding. It is beneficial for parents to have knowledge regarding how to incorporate boundaries or restrictions on their youth internet-connected devices. Parents are responsible for assessing the needs of their youth and providing guidance to them throughout their transition into adulthood.

At the mezzo level collaboration with community leaders, school officials, mental health professionals, and agencies or organizations can occur. Conducting school seminars, workshops for professionals, or participating in community meetings assist in having support to implement techniques that address the issues noted within this study. Including these selected individuals not only shows unity in addressing issues but it also empowers and improves communities; allowing everyone to have a voice and share the responsibility in correcting the problems within the community. Stakeholders objective is to identify and improve issues within the community by finding solutions that benefit everyone.

On the macro level advocacy to stakeholders such as state leaders, social media CEO's, and government entities can raise awareness and build partnerships. State leaders and representatives can use their influence, resources, and connections to push legislation and raise greater awareness of the social work practice problem, to get more vested stakeholders involved. Gaining support and partnership from the most popular social media platforms utilized by youth, can significantly distribute education and resources because of the amount of time youth spend on technology. According to Stringer (2014) stakeholders can assist in defining the social problem, analyze and evaluate the severity of the problem, and find obtainable solutions for the problem.

Summary

This doctoral study aimed to explore the difficulties social workers face in the school and home environment when working with youth ages 13-17 who are exposed to technology (internet-connected devices) without parental supervision. Six social workers employed through various agencies or organizations that work directly with youth ages 13-17 years within the state of Georgia participated in the individual qualitative interviews. The following seven themes emerged from the data collected: reduced focus, increased suffering, lacking parental involvement, distribution of resources, loss of fundamental skills, demands for greater advocacy, and absent screening tools.

Recommendations to address the noted behavioral issues of youth were for social workers to be more active in providing parents with education, resources, and techniques so they (parents) can be proactive in monitoring their youth's online presence and set

appropriate boundaries. Another recommendation was for increased partnerships among individuals in the workplace, community, and technology entities to target to youth population. Lastly, it was recommended that a screening instrument to depict excessive technology usage be developed and incorporated into practice with mental health professionals that work with youth. It is my hope that social workers and other mental health professionals who are experiencing similar issues from the youth population acknowledge the findings and be able to incorporate the recommendations into their practice to produce social change.

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Appendix A: Individual Interview Invitation

Hello,

My name is Dorothy Williams, and I am a LCSW in Georgia. I am currently working towards the completion of my doctoral degree program through Walden University. You are receiving this letter through referral or I have briefly reviewed your professional credentials through the public LinkedIn website. I am currently inquiring about your participation in an individual qualitative interview conducted by me as required for my capstone project. My capstone project is seeking to explore the experiences and difficulties social workers face in the school and home environment when working with youth ages 13-17 who are exposed to technology (internet-connected devices) without parental supervision. This study calls for licensed social workers (LMSW or LCSW) who work with youth ages 13-17 who exhibit behavioral issues in Georgia. Participation in this study is voluntary and there will be no discrimination against any licensed social worker participating in this study on the basis of race, religion, national origin, color or sex. Please be aware that you may refuse to participate in this study and there will be no harm nor repercussions for refusal at any time throughout the process. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Dorothy Williams, LCSW