



SANJAY AHLAWAT

cost her around ₹8,000.

If you are not willing to splurge that kind of money for a 'perfect shot', a new category of professionals—photo editors—might fulfil your aspirations. Besides making you look slimmer, taller or fairer, they can even help you appear with a celebrity or in a sought-after foreign location with the help of photo editing tools.

Seeking appreciation and recognition is human nature. The internet is an easy way to achieve this as a person can control the conditions. That makes it addictive, says Sanjay Mehta, founder of social media management agency Social Wavelength. According to Nidhi Prakash, assistant professor of psychology in Delhi University, the screen of a computer or phone gives its user the absolute power and boosts his

## SOCIAL IMPACT

# In the digital age, artificial will become real

BY DR JAGDISH N. SHETH

With millions of smartphones in the country, digital addiction among the youth will rise dramatically in 2015 when the national rollout of the 4G network becomes mandatory.

Addiction is as old as civilisation. Whether it is tobacco, alcohol or drug addiction, we know the dangers that addicts face in their personal and social lives. What we do not know are the dangers of digital addiction.

Excessive digital dependency is a mental addiction, like gambling, and we do not know how to fix this problem. Psychiatry is still finding its feet in the treatment of mental disorders such as depression, anxiety and suicidal tendencies. The recent loss of actor Robin Williams is an saddening example.

In an interview on the news show CBS *This Morning* on January 13, 2012, author and physician Deepak Chopra made the following observation on digital addiction: "Addictive behaviour means you are compulsively repeating that behaviour at the cost of everything else in your life. You cannot sleep, you miss out on relationships, social interactions, health and well-being."

While all information and communication technologies, including the telephone, radio and television, have generated side effects, what is unique about digital addiction is that it is contagious, especially with the growth of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. The addiction starts much before the brain develops cognitive and reasoning capability.

In my view, there will be four significant consequences of cyber addiction. First, we will all become part of a "roommate family", where each person is occupied in his or her own world. I have taken photos of families where the members are sitting together but are not talking to each other. Each person is lost in a smartphone, tablet or laptop.

In other words, the nuclear family will be further split into an atomistic family, which will be highly individualistic and impulsive.

The tradition of passing on family values from one generation to the next is about to die. Kinship will be replaced by friendship on the internet. And, those cyber friends will be everywhere except physically next to the individual.

Second, artificial will become real in the digital age. In fact, I co-authored an academic paper where we observed individuals who were more involved with virtual communities, such as Second Life and Farmville, and would rather talk to digital avatars than real people. They also love possessing digital artifacts more than physical objects. This imaginary and idealistic world has precedents in romance novels and Bollywood movies. But, it is important that the person knows it is imaginary.

Third, it will be epidemic. Digital addiction is self-perpetuating and will be more widespread than cholera or typhoid.

Finally, there will be no public versus private life. You will not be able to hide in a gated community. So much information about you will be recorded and stored (both good and bad) that it will impact your future decisions and life events. In fact, if I want to know what I did yesterday, I ask Google! It knows and has more information stored about me than I have.

My advice to the youth in India is that prevention is better than cure. And, while the internet is probably the most influential technology ever, it has equally powerful side effects. Mindful consumption will give you the efficacy without the pitfalls. In short, self-regulation in consumption will not just be a nice thing to do, but will become a necessity. And, as they say in *Star Wars*, "May the force be with you, you will need it".

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