

Internet Addiction Motivations among Chinese Young People: A Qualitative Analysis

Yanshu Sun, Beijing Normal University, Hong Kong Baptist University United
International College, China

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the internet use pattern and the possible internet addiction motivations among Chinese young people, such as personality, self-esteem, familial situation, and friendship. A total of 20 addictive young people were recruited and three focus group and eight deep interviews were conducted. The findings indicate that personality traits of Introvert, Neuroticism, Psychoticism and Cold are associated with internet addiction. Low self-esteem, problematic parenting style, non-close parent-child relation, low familial functions, and poor friendship play an important role in internet addiction. Friendship moderates the relation between personality and internet addiction. People who failed to draw others' attentions in real life prefer to enjoy pseudo internet world and express a better self. The findings may develop a better understanding of youth research, treatment of internet addiction and new media studies.

Keywords: internet addiction, personality, self-esteem, friendship

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Introduction

The internet is thought the most outstanding breakthrough for interpersonal communication changes in contemporary era (Cecilia et al., 2013). The overuse of internet have produced numerous negative effects, for example, users' psychological health (Kuss, Griffiths & Binder, 2013), a variety of behavioral problems (Bozkurt et al., 2013), different emotional matters (Dong, Hu & Lin, 2013), personal relationship (Lemmens, Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), and societal involvement (John, Naumann & Soto, 2008). The concept of internet addiction is proposed as an explanation for overuse and compared with other addictions (e.g. Keith & Eve, 2004) and disorders (e.g. Ko et al., 2009). According to prior studies, about 3%-13% of adolescents put up symptoms of internet addiction (Lin, Ko & Wu, 2011), and the obsessive-compulsive symptom is mostly related to internet addicts (Chou, Condrón & Belland, 2005; Kim et al. 2006).

Individual factors are a well-concerning focus of internet addiction studies. Prior studies find that personality traits, such as introversion, neuroticism and psychoticism, are closely related to internet addiction (e.g. Tsai et al., 2009). People with negative sentiments and intrinsic character are more susceptible to overuse of the internet (Yao et al., 2014). Furthermore, they are easily able to create more multidimensional relations on the internet (Roberts et al., 2000).

Self-esteem is another factor emphasized by a number of existing studies. That is, individual's perception of self-worth is associated with internet overuse (Ko et al., 2007; Yang & Tung, 2007), and how they perceive themselves might be an important predictor of Internet addiction.

Besides individuals' internal factors, familial situation is worthy of special attention. Given a family-centered cultural background, Chinese people attach a great importance to parents-children relation. The state of the relation influences person's usage mood of internet (Huang et al., 2010). More broadly, family ties in Asian cultures are connected with internet addiction (Yao et al., 2014).

This study aims to investigate internal and social factors' influence on internet addiction. The younger segment of the population in China is the research target. Concentrating on the specific Chinese cultural context, the author elaborates the conceptual model and raises a set research questions: What are some of the major antecedents of internet addiction? What is the relationship between personality, self-esteem and internet addiction? What is the relationship between parenting styles, family relationship and internet addiction?

Conceptualization

Internet Addiction

Internet addiction is called internet addiction disorder or pathological internet use (Huang et al., 2010). Young (1996) describes internet addiction as an impulse-control disorder and involves excessive person-machine interaction. Gorse and Lejoyeux (2011) define internet addiction as a behavioral disorder. Petry and O'Brien (2013) propose internet addiction and usage disorder as a non-substance related addiction. Internet addiction includes five addiction types: overloading or compulsively surfing information, overplaying programs or games; compulsions to online auctions, gambling or trading, and addicting to cyber-sexual relation (Young, 1998).

Most existing studies find that internet addiction negatively affects individual's psychological, social and cognitive development (Chou, Condron & Belland, 2005). Internet addicts share the characteristics as salience, mood changing, tolerance, conflict, and relapse etc. (Hollander & Stein, 2006), accompany with high level of psychological problems, such as low self-worth, depression, compulsiveness etc. (Kim et al., 2006; Young, 1998), and hold an enhance risk of preoccupation with the Internet (Cho et al., 2008).

Personality

Personality, including psychoticism, introvert and neuroticism variables, is one of the factors mostly associated with internet addiction (Ko et al., 2010). Psychoticism is defined as "impulsivity, interpersonal hostility and sensation seeking" (Yao et al., 2014, p. 104). Introvert type is characterized by more inward thinking, higher social anxiety and less encouragement and reward on other people. Neuroticism shows the characters of emotional liability and expression of negative effect, such as depression, jealousy etc. (Yao et al., 2014).

Introversion and social withdrawal are related to computer games addicting (Griffiths & Dancaaster, 1995). Introverts prefer to explore self value through internet (Yair, Galit, & Shaul, 2004). Internet has distinctive characters in compare to traditional means, such as anonymity, absence of social cues, free revision before verbalizing etc. (Bargh et al., 2002). Internet enhances the possibility of relationship, self-confidence, social ability and societal support (Campbell et al., 2006). That is, internet may enable individuals to broaden their social network and have more channels to express themselves. Introverts are suggested to "be highly attracted to features of the Internet that improve their social capabilities where they struggle offline" (Yao et al., 2014, p. 104). However, introverts have less positive outcomes of using internet (Kraut et al., 2002). Besides introversion, aggression and poor self-control are connected with overplaying online games (Kim et al., 2008), while neuroticism significantly predicts

internet addiction (Kuss, Griffiths, & Binder, 2013; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Mottram & Fleming, 2009).

Notably, scholars have not agreed with each other for the relation between personality and internet addiction. Montag, Jurkiewicz, & Reuter (2010) show no correlation between introversion and internet addiction in their study. Rahmani and Lavasani (2011) find no significant relationship between personality and internet addiction (IA). As such, this study re-examines the association between personality traits and internet addiction through a qualitative method.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to the attitudes individuals hold of one's self-worth (Rosenberg, 1989). Self-esteem is an important determinant of internet addiction (e.g. Chen, Chen & Yang, 2008; Stieger & Burger, 2010). How an individual looks upon one's self-worth decides the level of abusing internet. Internet addicts are more likely to be found with lower self-esteem (Armstrong, Phillips & Saling, 2000; Ko et al., 2007; Yang & Tung, 2007). Low self-esteem is associated with depression, poor social skills, negative speaking quality, and not interested in other people (Joiner & Timmons, 2002). People with low self-esteem find a harbor on the internet because they may promote their self-expression and satisfy themselves (Kandell, 1998).

On the other hand, some studies argue that low self-esteem might be the result of internet addiction (e.g. Craig, 1995). Another opinion is that self-esteem and internet addiction seem like a cyclical pattern (Ma, Chan & Chu, 2011; Niemz, Griffiths & Banyard, 2005). Individuals with mental illness, such as low self-esteem or depression, are likely to express a better oneself online and know more others with the similar difficulties. Meanwhile, internet addiction lowers individuals' self-esteem as well (Ma et al., 2011). As such, it is important to find out the relation pattern between self-esteem and internet addiction.

Familial Situation

Parental relations and questionable family issues are correlated to internet addiction (Huang et al., 2010). Low family functioning may predict internet addiction (Ko et al., 2007). Growing up in a single-parent family is relevant to internet addiction disorder (Ni et al., 2009). Over-involved, rejecting and neglecting parental styles are associated with high internet employment (Huang et al., 2010). Inversely, high parental care and less over protection are connected with low internet usage (Siomos et al., 2012).

The family-related factors are significant for internet addicts in Asian cultures. Namely, familial relationship is associated with internet addiction in the social context with collectivist cultures (Yao et al., 2014). For example, family cohesion, family

violence exposure, parenting attitudes and stability take effect on internet addiction in Korea families (Park, Kim & Cho, 2008). The relationship between individuals and their parents play a role on intensive internet usage in China (Huang et al., 2010). Immersed in Confucian culture, Chinese people regard family as a life center and pay more attention to the interpersonal relations, social network and hierarchy (Chan, 2008; Triandis, 1980). This study concerns on parent-child relation, parenting styles and their influence on young addicts.

Friendship

Friendship is give-and-take, and individuals share feelings, trust, commit to, and expose the true self to friends (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Friends provide personal support in the whole life (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Friendship may increase better adjustment ability (Chou, 2000; Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996) and develop positive self-esteem (Zarabany, Conley, & Pepper, 2004). Friendship counts a great deal for adolescents and young adults (Sharabany, Yohanan & Caesar, 2008). Prior studies find that young individuals without close friends are more difficult to adapt to around environment (Hussong, 2000; Parker & Asher, 1993), more easily to experience victimization (Hodges et al., 1999), and more often to have negative emotions, such as nervous and depressive mood (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003).

Friendship inclines to comply with social guidelines and specific cultural values (Bigelow, Tesson, & Lewko, 1996). In this study, the author examines twofold: 1) how friendship influences addicts in Confucian culture; 2) moderation effect between friendship, personality and internet addiction.

As the literature suggested, personality, self-esteem, familial situation and friendship may predict internet addiction. The following research questions are raised up:

- RQ1. What is the influence of personality traits on Chinese young adults' internet addiction?
- RQ2: What is the influence of self-esteem on Chinese young adults' internet addiction?
- RQ3: What familial factors may develop internet addiction disorder among Chinese young adults?
- RQ4: What is the influence of friendship on Chinese young adults' internet addiction? Whether friendship moderates the relation between personality and internet addiction?
- RQ5: What do these Chinese young addicts look for from Internet?

Method

Sampling

In this study, three focus groups and eight deep interviews were conducted in December 2015. Focus groups were directed by a moderator and deep interviews were conducted by two trained interviewers. All the group and individual interviews were recorded and transcribed in full and verbatim.

Pilot study did before doing interviews, using 20-item questionnaire developed from Kimberly (2009) to test the addiction degree of target respondents. 5-point Likert-scale item (1 = never and 5 = always) was used. The sample questions were “How often do you find yourself staying longer on the internet than what you planned to?”; “How often do you neglect your work and spend more time on the internet?” etc. All scores were added for each respondent. Total score below 40 meant no internet addiction, scores between 40 to 70 meant light internet addiction, and scores above 70 meant a heavy disorder (Kimberly, 2009). Finally, total twenty internet addicts (heavy users) and two parents were recruited. (Details see Table 1).

Table 1:

Samples		
Collge	No.	Gender
Year 4	5	Males
Year 3	5	4 Males +1 Female
Year 2	3	Males
Year 1	3	2 Males + 1 Female
High School		
Year 3	2	Males
Middle School		
Year 2	1	Female
Year 1	1	Female

Coding and Analyzing

This study followed a qualitative methodology of content analysis and applied the computer software Nvivo-11 as an essential element for coding and analyzing. Previous studies mention that Nvivo provides a systematic process in research and increases both the validity and reliability (e.g. Zapata-Sepúlveda, López-Sánchez & Sánchez-Gómez, 2012). The author developed a preconceived scheme based on literature reviews and theories. All transcriptions were encoded on the basis of gender, age, name etc. Then, they were processed generated 5 general categories, which were familial situations, personality, self-esteem, friendship and reasons to overuse internet. Under each general category, there were different detailed sub-categories and units.

For example, familial situations included parenting style, which comprised 9 sub-categories, such as “always think their children are right”, “compare their children with others”, and “over-worry about their children” etc. All categories were used in content analysis.

Findings

The Influence of Personality on Internet Addiction

After coding all transcriptions, there was a trend to link the internet overuse with problematic offline relationship and communication problems, such as shy, long time not contact with others, or disjoint with real life etc. More than half interviewees admitted that they felt pressure in communicating with others and tried to avoid eye contact when talking with people.

“I will feel pressure and try to avoid seeing the other’s eyes.”

“I am shy and I dare not to look at other person’s eyes.”

“There is a wall in my heart. Especially, I feel I am a bit gauche when talking to others.”

“I am not used to speaking with other people face to face. I don’t like to stare at their eyes.”

“I feel that I am more introverted.”

“I feel lonely actually. But I often ignore some others. I am very contradictory.”

“I feel more pressure when sitting with a crowd of people.”

“Yes, I have a little bit social phobia.”

“I don’t talk to anyone.”

“I have offensive feeling if I stare at other’s eyes.”

“I haven’t contacted with others for a period of time. Then when I have to talk to someone, I avoid looking at their eyes or faces.”

“I have my mind stuffed with internet games and feel out of touch with the real life.”

The negative emotions were the second connection with internet addiction. Most of the respondents mentioned that they more liked to have negative emotions in their daily lives. Some of them have suffered mental illness. In the eyes of their acquaintances, they are quite different from normal people.

“I am depressive in social occasions. I have some nasty minds sometimes. I keep silence when getting on with unfamiliar people and look like a psycho when staying with friends.”

“Some people feel that I am strange. For example, I often send messages to friends at 4 or 5 am in the early morning; I often drink by myself. In my case, I have some special experiences which make me become a contradictory person. I got melancholia last year and had to suppress myself. In the four years of college, I am only interested in my own business. I am unemotional.”

“I was troublesome in the first year of middle school. Then I became nonentity in the high school. Now I am completely compromised person.”

In compare to previous studies, this study found that personality trait labeled *Cold* was significantly associated with internet addiction. Most respondents mentioned that they seldom or never joined social activities. Some of them thought they were not interested in anything or anyone. When we asked their expectations of school life, more than 40% respondents said no expectation.

“I don’t care about anything. How to evaluate myself? It is hard to say. I do something always in an unplanned and disorganized way without enthusiasm.”

“I belong to the kind of elegant indifference person. I never talk to unfamiliar people. My friends think I am angry when I keep silence.”

“I don’t participate in any activities including club events.”

“I am almost completely cut off from any activities except the compulsory one.”

“I won’t join any school activities. I don’t like group activity. No interest.”

“I seldom attend college activity. I prefer to stay in dormitory or go out with friends.”

“I only attended Japanese singing party once. No interest.”

“I took part in some college activities in the first year. Then I no longer participated in any one.”

“I was tired of attending any college organizations. I dropped all out.”

“Maybe due to my personal characters, I planned to try some group activity, but finally not in the mood to do.”

“I don’t care those college activities.”

“I don’t have many expectations of college life. The only one is that I want to have a girlfriend in college. You know it. I spend more than 3 hours in playing LOL.”

“No expectations. I failed to comprehend the lectures.”

“I am seldom seriously in studying. No much expectations of college or program.”

“I have little expectation of college life. I just want to enjoy easy life.”

Unstable emotion and interpersonal hostility also showed the relation with internet addiction disorder in this research.

“I want to devote more to college communities. However, I don’t cotton to the other members.”

“I am an extreme person. Sometimes I am not bad but sometimes I am quite sad. My good temper can be as terrifically as my bad temper.”

The Influence of Self-Esteem on Internet Addiction

Notably, low self evaluation was prominent in the reactions of these respondents. Most of respondents used the negative words to describe themselves, such as ashamed, inferior, weird, different, extreme, compromised etc. For example:

“I’m feeling inferior.”

“I feel ashamed for myself. You know it. I have spent too much time on playing games. There is big gap between me and other students. I get nothing from internet except excitement.”

“I am boring. Sometimes I am dirty inside.”

“You know it. Only on internet, I don’t look like a coward anymore.”

Only one respondent thought that he was reliable. The rest two mentioned that they were not that bad. Interestingly, when we asked the two parents to evaluate their children, their answers were not consistent with their children’s self evaluations. In the whole interviews, more than one interviewee admitted that they were inconsistent in their parents’ and other people’s eyes.

“In the eyes of my parents, I am particular well-behaved person. I suppress myself and try to be good in front of parents and teachers.”

“My parents feel that I am an easy-going and reassuring person. Actually, I am very emotional. Even if I am angry, I don’t let anyone else to see it...”

“In teachers’ eyes, I am troublemaker. In my friends’ mind, I am the person of compromise.”

“I am quite contradictory. The teachers think that I am a good student. My parents think I am a tricky and naughty guy.”

“I am reliable in my friends’ mind. My teachers don’t think so.”

“Actually I don’t know what is my own. I want to be good people in the eyes of elders. But sometimes I want to be a bad guy.”

This study produced results essentially in agree with previous studies from two angles. First, low self-esteem was associated with internet addiction (e.g. Chen et al., 2008; Ko et al., 2007; Yao et. al., 2014). Second, the relation between low self-esteem and internet addiction seems like a circle (e.g. Ma et al., 2011; Niemz et al., 2005). The following is the case matrix of self-assessment.

Case Matrix

Table 2: Self-assessment	
Tree Node	Nodes
reliable	1
not bad	1
introverted	1
inferior	1
inconsistent	6
extreme	1
exocentric	1
elegant indifference	1
different from others	1
compromised	1
cold, unemotional	1
careless, unorganized	1
boring	1
be ashamed	1

The Influence of Familial Situations on Internet Addiction

Given the difference evaluation from young respondents and their parents, one question was put out –“How is the communication or relation between internet addicts and their parents?” This study analyzed this question from the following aspects:

At first, the analyses of parents’ behaviors typically yield two dimensions, which are parents’ demandingness and responsiveness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In this study, the author disassembled the two dimensions into several aspects, such as satisfying children’s need, respecting children’s opinion and over-worried about their children etc. Thirty percent respondents said “No” when being asked whether their parents satisfied their needs.

“No. In my childhood, a lot of things I wanted were not given me.”

“No. Impossible.”

“Kid’s most requirements were not reasonable. Parents must consider their requirements depending on the situations.”

The two parents agreed with their children’s opinions for this question. One parent mentioned like this:

“I usually don’t satisfy his requirements immediately. I bring out some reasons and facts and try to let him understand.”

About 15% respondents replied “Yes” and the other 15% interviewees mentioned “Yes with conditions”.

“My parents try to satisfy my requirements.”

“My mum and dad may propose some exchange conditions. If I can meet what they required, then they will satisfy my needs.”

For the question whether their parents respect their opinions, most respondents replied in a positive way and reached agreement with their parents.

“Usually I make decision about my issues, such as go to cram school, apply for university etc.”

“Yes, we usually ask him and his sister for their opinions before we make a decision.”

Next, for the question whether the parents over-worried their children, the respondent’s opinions divided into two parts. Almost half respondents mentioned “Yes” while the other half said “No”.

“My father always worries about my security and future. Every time he calls me, he repeatedly reminds many issues, such as pay attention to electricity, not go to the sea side, not go to the crowded places etc.”

“My mum reminds me every day, such as put on more clothes, sunshine is strong, remember to take water etc.”

The results did not indicate that different parental behaviors might cause big difference in young adults’ behaviors. Namely, satisfying and non-satisfying, over-worried and non-over-worried etc. were fairly average in respondents’ answers. Most respondents agreed that their parents would like to respect them. As such, parental behaviors were not significantly associated with internet addiction in this qualitative study.

The second, parental and children-parents relationship are important to look at in collectivist social context (Yao et al., 2014). Around the relation issue, the first question was about parents’ attitude towards their children’s mistakes or family mistakes. More than 45% respondents mentioned that their parents lost temper in facing their mistakes. Two respondents admitted that their parents have treated them as an anger punching bag.

“In my childhood, when I made mistakes, my parents would beat me. When I grow up, they became reasonable a little bit.”

“If I make mistakes, my parents usually let me admit it firstly then punish me later. However, if they make some mistakes, they never care about my opinion.”

“My parents did the physical punishments when I was very young. Then they changed to shout at me in my middle school.”

“My mum often hit me after she quarreled with my father.”

“I was always beaten by my parents.”

“My parents punished me sometime for my mistakes, but sometimes only because of their bad mood.”

“No matter what happens, my parents will be angry with me.”

“My father usually shouted at me, meanwhile my mum comforted me.”

“If I made mistakes, my mother criticized me but my father didn’t.”

“If my father or mother made mistakes, the other one must keeps nagging him or her about the wrong. I never have the right to speak.”

“My parents may complain each other a little bit for the family mistakes.”

The two parents thought that they were reasonable towards their children’s mistakes. However, their children had the different opinion. One addict mentioned that their parents used “cold war” to him. The other one respondent talked that their parents adopted a passive attitude towards his mistakes.

“If I make serious mistakes, such as escaping from school, my parents will ignore and don’t talk to me.”

“My parents usually leave my mistakes unsettled. They neither have good solution nor control me. Thus, they have to go with the flow.”

Being asked their opinion about the relation with their parents, half respondents mentioned that they kept good relation with only one parent, and two respondents admitted the bad relation with their parents. The two parents thought the relation with their children were not closely.

“The relation between me and my mum is quite good. I only call my father when I need money.”

“I have a more close relation with my mum.”

“I often talk with my dad. Just report some issues to my mother.”

“I seldom contact with my parents.”

“Our relation is not closely.”

The results showed that bad parental relation, non-closely child-parent relation, and problematic parenting styles, for example, losing temper, shouting, ignoring etc., were related to internet addiction.

The Influence of Friendship on Internet Addiction

It has been noted that these young addicts were really eager for friendship. More than 60% interviewees wanted to stay with friends. Only two interviewees preferred staying with parents and the other four would like to kill time by themselves.

“There is more fun with friends.”

“My parents always lecture me. It is much easy to stay with friends.”

“It is too lonely to stay by myself.”

“I get used to staying by myself. But if possible, I would like to stay with friends.”

Being asked what the role they played staying with friends, most of the interviewees felt that they were more like follower rather than opinion leader.

“Generally I don’t want to talk. You decide what is.”

“Usually I don’t take the initiative.”

“I am willing to be a listener.”

“I usually follow all of them.”

“I am not strong. I am the person who is easy to compromise.”

The findings indicated: one, these respondents really desired for friendship; two, when they stayed with their friends, they haven’t had the priority and took a position as a follower. Cross-analyzing all transcripts, it was obviously to link the weak personality traits with poor friendship. The respondents’ characters such as shy, unstable emotion, inconsistent image, and cold expression kept them far away from friendship. Poor friendship made them overuse internet. Therefore, friendship is an important moderator between personality and internet addiction.

Why Addict to Internet?

“Playing online games can help me escape from the real life.”

“Internet is the kind of port where I can release my emotion.”

“Studying is boring. Playing games is easy and simple.”

“I don’t like studying. Just play games to kill time.”

“It is great to find people who are on the same wavelength on internet.”

“Online games are so interesting.”

“I make friends through playing online games.”

“Internet can give me a lot of fast-food information. I don’t have to look for from books.”

“I feel so excited on internet.”

“I have to mention that internet is the best way to escape from real life. Except eating food, you don’t need to care anything in reality.”

There were different purposes for the respondents to addict to internet, such as escaping from real life, expressing their feels etc. The internet addiction disorder was apparently related to the weak will, passive lifestyle, poor friendship, and problematic situations in real life etc.

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings suggest that internet addiction is functioned by personality, low self-esteem, problematic parenting style, non-close parent-child relation, low familial functions, and poor friendship. Among the above factors, friendship moderates the

relation between personality and internet addiction.

As mentioned above, scholars do not agree with each other for the relation between introversion and internet addiction. In this study, Introvert (e.g. shy), Neuroticism (e.g. depression) and Psychoticism (e.g. unstable emotion) are significantly associated with internet addiction. This finding is in accordance with the prior studies (e.g. Roberts, Smith & Pollock, 2000), but not consistent with Montag, Jurkiewicz, & Reuter (2010). Importantly, personality of Cold is visible in association with internet addiction. In the study of *Science*, it is found that China's One Child policy has caused young adults to be more pessimistic, neurotic and selfish than those individuals who have siblings. Parents regard the one child as the family center and less like to teach them to be unselfish (Arnold, 2013). The extreme selfish trait shows that individuals do not care about anything and lose their interests in any other business.

Another point of contention is whether self-esteem leads to internet addiction or vice versa. This study shows the circular relation pattern between low self-esteem and internet addiction, which is consistent with previous studies (Ma, Chan & Chu, 2011; Niemz, Griffiths & Banyard, 2005). Addicts spend too much time on the internet, and the gap with other people makes them feel ashamed of themselves. On the other hand, internet allows them to show a better self and pretend a different image in an unreal world.

One of the limitations of this study is that gender has not been examined. Among the 20 respondents, there are only two females. Another limitation is that the parents' views are not enough. Due to *Mianzi* (face), most respondents' parents are unwilling to accept interview. The future study may consider testing the above predictors, moderation effect between friendship, personality and internet using a quantitative method. Although this study is a qualitative research and lacks the generalizability, the findings may enrich the knowledge pool of youth research, treatment of internet addiction and new media studies.

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Contact email: specialmonasun@hotmail.com