

# Chapter 15

## Problematic Linkages in Adolescents: Italian Adaptation of a Measure for Internet–Related Problems

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### ABSTRACT

*Internet usage represents a risky opportunity for the youngest. Due to its social, communicative and emotional function in adolescents' lives, it may provide benefits and facilitations to their relationships. On the other hand, the excessive use of the Internet can harmfully affect their daily routines, with negative effects on their psychological state. Considering the widespread use of the Internet in everyday life during this developmental stage, the authors question the applicability of the concept of "addiction" and provide empirical data about the adaption of a useful instrument to measure problematic relationships with the Internet. The establishment of a cut-off procedure is proposed for screening purpose to identify at risk and problematic users. Moreover, differences by gender and age are explored and discussed. A comprehensive model of the Problematic Relationships with the Internet is presented and analyzed in comparison with the main perspectives and measures in literature.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Internet has become an essential part of our daily life. Compared to 2015, the number of *e-users* has increased by 10%, accounting more than 3 billion people in the world, around 39 million in Italy (We are social SRL, 2017). Particularly, the young users dominate the Internet usage: 95% of teenagers and 99% of young adults are web users (Online Safety Site, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2017). In Italy, more than 91% of people aged between 15 and 24 years are *e-users* (We Are Social SRL, 2017), and often they

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are *always on*, or rather, connected all day long. Thus, the number of Internet young users is constantly increasing, providing them *risky opportunities* (Livingstone, 2008): on one hand, the web certainly may improve educational and social communication among adolescents, by enabling easier connections with friends, or by facilitating new relationships (Kraut et al., 2002; Van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, & Engels, 2008). On the other hand, the excessive use of the Internet can negatively affect their daily routines, such as homework or revision, eating and family time, sporting activities, sleep patterns, and school attendance itself (Leung, 2006; Tam, 2016). Considering the widespread use of the Internet in everyday life and taking in account the specificity of the adolescence, as a stage of life during which the border between sanity and pathology is complex to define, the authors question the large applicability of the concept of “addiction” to the Internet misuse. In the authors’ view, the problematic use needs a clearer definition, as it is not strictly related to a pathological behavior. Moreover, the need to distinguish a normal web usage from an addicted or problematic one lets the authors to provide empirical data about the adaption of a useful instrument to measure problematic relationships with the Internet especially among adolescents and preadolescents.

## BACKGROUND

In the framework of psychopathology, several studies are concordant in identifying new forms of addictions, mostly behavioural (without substances). As noted by Bianchi & Phillips (2005), «the traditional concept of addiction was based on a medical model and referred to dependence associated with the ingestion of a substance, either drugs or alcohol. Lately, researchers have begun to question this medical model of addiction as the definitive model and have stated that the concept of addiction needs to cover a broader range of behaviors. Many researchers have thus argued for the validity of a behavioral addiction model» (p.40). Likely, among the non-chemical addictions (Marks, 1990), the Internet addiction is the most discussed.

According to Douglas and colleagues (2008), over the brief academic history on the Internet addiction, one of the most challenging tasks has been to get a unique definition of the concept. Researchers in the field have been unable to find a comprehensive term to describe the Internet overuse or abuse. Indeed, a standard and consensual definition of Internet addiction is still lacking (Laconi, Rodgers, & Chabrol, 2014; Spada, 2014) whilst various terms have been used to name the general “Problematic Internet Use” condition (Kuss, Griffiths, Karila, & Billieux, 2014; Tokunaga, & Rains, 2016). Among them, we can include: Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) (Young, 1998b), Pathological Internet Use (Davis, 2001), Problematic Internet Use (Morahan-Martin, & Schumacher, 2000; Caplan, 2002), Excessive Internet Use (Widyanto, & Griffiths, 2006), and Compulsive Internet (or Computer) Use (Chou, & Hsiao, 2000; Johansson, & Götestam, 2004; Van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, & Engels, 2008; Kuss, Griffiths, Karila, & Billieux, 2014).

The term “Internet Addiction” was provocatively proposed by Goldberg (1995) to describe an excessive and uncontrolled use of specific online applications (Müller et al., 2016), and gradually, attention has been increasingly focused on the potentially addictive features of the web.

Empirical evidence showed the web-related risks (Young, 1996; Brenner, 1997; Ferraro, Caci, D’amico, & Blasi, 2006; Byun et al., 2009; Kuss, Van Rooij, Shorter, Griffiths, & van de Mheen, 2013; Leung, 2014), until the American Psychological Association (APA), in 2013 included the Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) in Section III (the research appendix) of the DSM-5. The inclusion of the IGD officialised

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