

Chapter 19

An Empirical Study of Problematic Internet Use and Self-Esteem

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has alluded to the existence of a relationship between self-esteem and problematic Internet use. The main aim of the study was to examine the relationship between problematic Internet use and a number of distinct demographic, behavioural, and psychosocial variables. Using an online survey, a self-selected sample comprising 1,467 Internet users participated in the study. The survey comprised 50 questions including validated scales for both self-esteem (Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale) and problematic Internet use (Internet Related Problem Scale; IRPS) in addition to demographic information. Based on previous literature, it was hypothesized that problematic Internet users were more likely than non-problematic Internet users to post low self-esteem scores. Results showed that self-esteem was strongly and negatively associated with IRPS. Also, for those with high IRPS scores, participation in online forums was the primary online activity followed by online gaming and chatting. Although the study comprised a self-selecting sample and utilized self-report, the results appear to provide robust evidence of an association between self-esteem and problematic Internet use mirroring prior research in the area.

INTRODUCTION

Research into problematic Internet use, Internet addiction, and addictions on the Internet has increased over the last decade (Widyanto & Griffiths, 2009). The research literature has no consistent definition of problematic Internet use although all researchers appear to agree that problematic Internet use is associated with negative detrimental effects on behavior and compromises one or more aspects of a person's life

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including their personal relationships, health, psychological well-being, job, education, and/or personal hobbies (Griffiths, 2008). Research into various forms of problematic Internet use has examined its relationship to psychosocial health, psychosocial risk factors, and self-esteem/psychological wellbeing.

Problematic Internet Use and Psychosocial Health

There is evidence that those who are social isolates tend to have higher levels of Internet use and problematic outcomes. Caplan has carried out a number of studies in this area. One early study (Caplan, 2002) suggested that a person's preference for computer-mediated social interaction (as opposed to face-to-face interaction) played a role in the etiology, development, and outcomes of generalized problematic Internet use. Another study (Caplan, 2003) highlighted that psychosocial health predicted levels of preference for online social interaction that also predicted negative outcomes associated with problematic Internet use. The results also indicated that the influence of psychosocial distress on negative outcomes due to Internet use was mediated by preference for online socialization and other symptoms of problematic Internet use. More recently, Caplan (2007) reported that the relationship between loneliness and preference for online social interaction is spurious, and that social anxiety is the confounding variable.

Problematic Internet Use and Psychosocial Risk Factors

Lam, Peng, Mai, and Jing (2009) examined factors associated with Internet addiction in adolescents aged 13 to 18 years ($n=1,560$) using the Internet Addiction Test (IAT). Results showed that males were more likely than females to be addicted to the Internet, and that potential risk factors for Internet addiction included drinking behavior, family dissatisfaction, and experience of recent stressful events. A study by Milani, Osualdella, and Di Blasio (2009) examined the relationship between problematic Internet use (also using the IAT), the quality of interpersonal relationships, and the cognitive strategies in 98 Italian adolescents aged 14 to 19 years. Their findings indicated that those with problematic Internet use (37%) used the Internet heavily, utilized dysfunctional coping strategies, and displayed worse interpersonal relations than those without problematic Internet use.

Mitchell, Sabina, Finkelhor, and Wells (2009) recently developed the Index of Problematic Online Experiences (I-POE). Using data from 563 American college students, results indicated that the I-POE correlated with depression, anger/irritability, tension-reduction behavior, sexual concerns, and dysfunctional sexual behavior. Mottram and Fleming (2009) investigated predictors of problematic Internet use among 272 American undergraduate students. Problematic Internet use was predicted by higher frequency of use, lack of perseverance (an aspect of impulsivity), and online group membership (e.g., being a gamer as part of an online clan or guild). Ni, Yan, Chen, and Liu (2009) investigated the factors associated with Internet addiction (using the IAT) among Chinese freshmen college students ($n=3,557$). Just over 6% of the sample was classed as addicted to the Internet. The students with Internet addiction had higher depression and anxiety scores compared to those without Internet addiction. Multiple regression analyses indicated that Internet addiction was associated with those who came from a single-parent family, the age of first exposure to Internet use, the age of the student, city residence, and homesickness. A study by Suh and Choi (2006) examined Internet addiction (using the IAT), self-esteem and loneliness in 486 adolescents. Results indicated that 34% were addicted to the Internet and that Internet addicts were more likely to have low self-esteem and be lonely. Kim and Davis (2009) carried out two studies examining the relationship between problematic Internet use and self-esteem. In the first study of 315 students (39%

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