

Chapter 23

Individual Differences and the Development of Internet Addiction: A Nationally Representative Study

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ABSTRACT

Internet addiction (IA) has emerged as a universal issue, but its international estimates vary due to different screening instruments and different samples. The present study aims to estimate the risk of IA in a school-based nationally representative sample of Slovenian adolescents and ascertain the interplay between IA, sociodemographic factors, free-time activities, self-control, and perceived satisfaction with life. Overall, the present study found that adolescents at greater risk for developing IA tend to be more passive in their free time, since they watch TV and play video games more than their peers, as well as chat on social media. Adolescents presenting high risk of IA displayed poorer levels of self-control in most cases and reported to be generally less satisfied with their lives in comparison to adolescents presenting low risk of IA.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The Internet is an integral part of modern life that has brought about many advantages and benefits to its users. The Internet plays a key role as an essential tool for education, entertainment, communication, and information-sharing (Poli, 2017) with recent figures showing that the numbers of users are soaring

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-8900-6.ch023

to greater heights. Currently, around 40% of the world population has Internet access (Internet Live Stats [ILS], 2017a), and from 1999 to 2013, the number of Internet users has increased tenfold during that period, with the first billion of users being reached in 2005 and the third billion in 2014 (ILS, 2017a). The use of the Internet varies across different world regions, with Asia (i.e., 48.4%), Americas (North and South) (i.e., 21.8%), and Europe (19%) presenting the largest number of users in the world. Given its ubiquity and wide applicability, alongside its evolving nature as a modern tool of society and issues surrounding its excessive and unhealthy use by a minority of individuals, Internet addiction (IA) has become an increasingly important topic for dedicated research agendas in the field of psychology, psychiatry, neuroscience, and communication studies (Pontes, Kuss, & Griffiths, 2015).

Although IA is currently not officially recognized as a *bona fide* addiction and terminological and conceptual conundrums still exist with regards to its legitimacy (Griffiths, Kuss, Billieux, & Pontes, 2015; Pies, 2009; Starcevic, 2010, 2013; Starcevic & Aboujaoude, 2016), a large body of research suggests that IA can lead to impaired psychosocial and physical health and detrimental interpersonal outcomes (M'hiri et al., 2015; Pontes, Kuss, et al., 2015). Notwithstanding the fact that conceptualization and definition of IA is not entirely consensual, several features have been suggested as being part of the experience related to IA. For instance, Starcevic (2010) suggested that IA is often described as “excessive or compulsive, along with preoccupation with and loss of control over the Internet use” (p. 92), with additional features including adverse consequences due to spending copious amount of time on the Internet, such as neglecting social activities, relationships, health and work or school-related duties, and altering sleep and eating habits in a detrimental way (Starcevic, 2010). Furtherly, Pontes and Kuss (in press) defined IA as “behavioral pattern of Internet use encompassing a dysfunctional craving for the use of the Internet for unregulated and excessive periods of time with accompanying significant psychosocial and functional impairments that are not accounted for by any other disorder.” (p. 2).

The field of IA is rapidly evolving, and the latest developments in research helped shaping the conceptualization landscape of IA and new theoretical insights were provided by emerging empirical research. Accordingly, a recent study by Pontes and Griffiths (2017) on a large sample of Internet users found that the concept of IA could be adequately captured and operationalized using the diagnostic framework for Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) that was developed by the American Psychiatric Association [APA] in the latest (fifth) edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) (APA, 2013). Based on this, the study by Pontes and Griffiths (2017) found that under these theoretical premises, the phenomenon of IA can be defined by four unique and distinct conceptual dimensions, with these being: (i) *escapism and dysfunctional emotional coping*, (ii) *withdrawal symptoms*, (iii) *impairments and dysfunctional self-regulation*, and (iv) *dysfunctional Internet-related self-control*. Additional empirical research by Pontes and Griffiths (2016) have further corroborated the validity and feasibility for conceptualizing and framing IA in light of the IGD diagnostic criteria, an approach that has been backed up by several scholars in the field (e.g., Rumpf et al., 2015).

Earlier views on the topic defined IA as an ‘umbrella term’ encompassing five specific sub-types of IA. These five sub-types of IA were described by (i) ‘*cybersexual addiction*’ (i.e., compulsive use of adult contents for sexual purposes), (ii) ‘*cyber-relationship addiction*’ (i.e., overinvolvement in online relationships), (iii) ‘*net compulsions*’ (i.e., obsessive online gambling, shopping, or online trading), (iv) ‘*information overload*’ (i.e., compulsive web surfing or database searches), and (v) ‘*computer addiction*’ (i.e., obsessive computer game playing) (Young, Pistner, O’Mara, & Buchanan, 1999). According to recent empirical research (e.g., Griffiths & Szabo, 2014; Pontes, Szabo, & Griffiths, 2015), the concept

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