Interpersonal Relationships, Coping Strategies and Problematic Internet Use in Adolescence: An Italian Study

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Abstract. In a few years the Internet has become one of the most relevant means of socialization and entertainment for Italian adolescents. Studies have established a correlation between poor interpersonal relationship, poor cognitive coping strategies and Problematic Internet Use. The aim of the research was to study the characteristics and correlates of Problematic Internet Use in an Italian sample of adolescents. 98 Italian adolescents aged 14-19 were administered checklists assessing Problematic Internet Use, quality of interpersonal relationships, and cognitive-driven coping strategies. Of the participants, 36.7% are characterized by Problematic Internet Use. This subsample showed poorer interpersonal relationships and cognitive coping strategies compared to the non-problematic subsample. Overall quality of interpersonal relationships and cognitive coping strategies were found to be predictors of the level of Internet Problematic Use.

Keywords. Internet addiction, adolescence, interpersonal relationships

Introduction

In a few years the Internet has become one of the most relevant means of socialization and entertainment for Italian adolescents. Internet enable young people to “experiment” with identities and interact with others while maintaining anonymity. This can lead to a sense of belonging that could be very addictive to those who have difficulties in socializing offline. The “normal” use of the Web could therefore be changed into an addictive behavior (literature estimates the prevalence of Problematic Internet Use ranging from 7.5% \([1]\) to 70% \([2]\)).

Studies seem to have established a correlation between poor interpersonal relationship and Problematic Internet Use \([1-3]\).

There is a substantial lack of studies that assessed the prevalence and correlates of Problematic Internet Use in a sample of Italian adolescents, and is therefore of particular interest to further study the reciprocal influence between Problematic Internet Use, a weak interpersonal environment and dysfunctional cognitive strategies.

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1. Aim

The aim of the research is to assess the relationship between Problematic Internet Use, overall quality of interpersonal relationships and cognitive-driven coping strategies of adolescents.

2. Sample and Method

98 adolescents aged 14-19 years old (mean=16.28), recruited in a Milan high school. 46 participants are males (mean age=16.59), 52 are females (mean age=16.00). Participants were administered the following checklists:

- IAT - Internet Addiction Test
- TRI – Interpersonal relations Test
- CCSC - Children’s Coping Strategies Checklist
- Internet usage questionnaire
- CBCL - Child Behavior Checklist

3. Results and Conclusions

No gender differences were found in any of the checklists administered. Participants were divided in “problematic Internet users” and “non problematic Internet users” on the basis of the cutoff suggested by IAT for problematic use of the Web. 36.7% of the participants (N=36) turned out to be characterized by Problematic Internet Use.

Compared to non-problematic adolescents, this subsample showed a significantly higher weekly Internet usage time (21.05 hours vs. 8.89; t=4.2; p<.001), a significantly higher mean score on the CCSC Avoidance scale (2.44 vs. 2.20; t=3.30; p<.01), and worse social relationships mean score on the TRI (90.31 vs. 94.80; t=1.97; p<.05).

The variables measured were inserted as predictors in a linear regression, and the IAT score was used as an outcome. A significant 3-predictor model emerged (F=6,590; p<.01; R²=.270; N= 98). The TRI score of overall quality of interpersonal relations was a first significant negative predictor of IAT score (β = -.337; p<.05).

Avoidance Coping score on TSCC was a second predictor of IAT score (β = .380; p<.01), and Active Coping score on TSCC was the third predictor of IAT score (β = .225; p<.05).

Results confirm literature data in this Italian sample of adolescents. Young people that have poor interpersonal relationships are at risk of developing Problematic Internet Use. The intertwine of this result with the cognitive elaboration strategies show that adolescents that are more eager to use Avoidance strategies are at increased risk of developing difficulties interacting with the Web.

References
