Chapter 17
Internet Addiction and Self–Esteem Amid the COVID–19 Pandemic:
A Preliminary Study in Junior High School Students

Thanos Touloupis
Hellenic Open University, Greece

Antonia Armaou
Hellenic Open University, Greece

Aikaterini Vasiou
Hellenic Open University, Greece

ABSTRACT

Considering excessive internet use by early and middle adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic, the present chapter describes an original preliminary study of junior high school students' internet addiction during the pandemic period, while also examining the role of self-esteem. Overall, 235 students (60.4% girls) of the three grades of schools in Attica (Greece) completed a self-report questionnaire, which included scales on internet addiction and self-esteem. Above average/normal and excessive/addictive internet use and indicative behaviors (e.g., lack of control) seemed to concern students, especially girls. Self-esteem proved to be a statistically significant negative predictor of the students' internet addiction. The findings contribute not only theoretically but also practically, highlighting the necessity of implementing school awareness-prevention actions to strengthen early and middle adolescents' social-emotional skills and safe internet use.

INTRODUCTION

The present study investigated internet addiction among junior high school students during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, while also examining the predictive role of self-esteem. Over the last two decades, the penetration of the internet into our daily lives for entertainment, information and transactions has justified the labeling of the new generation as "digital natives" (Scolari, 2019). However, the multiple benefits that are offered by the internet, and especially the social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), can easily lead to risky online behaviors, such as internet addiction. Internet addiction is reflected in an individual's daily, long, and forced use of the internet, which negatively affects their social, psychological, and professional life (Wartberg et al., 2019). Even though internet addiction is not considered to be a clinical entity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), it shares symptoms that are indicative of pathological gambling, such as withdrawal, neglect of social life, and denial of the addictive situation (Griffiths, 1995). According to Young's (1998) internationally used Internet Addiction Test, internet users are categorized based on their time spent online into those who use the internet below average/normal limits, within average/normal limits, above average/normal limits, and excessively/addictively.

The risk of excessive/addictive internet use seems to be more pronounced during the period between early and middle adolescence (i.e., 12-15 years old), due to its accompanying developmental characteristics. Specifically, during this period adolescents tend to manifest behaviors such as lack of boundaries, experimentation, need for acceptance, pursuit of new experiences, and identity research to a greater extent when compared to late adolescents and emerging adults (i.e., 17 years old and on), whose social-emotional and sexual development gradually stabilizes (Berk, 2015; Slater & Bremner, 2017). As a result, between the ages of 12-15, individuals are considered to be more prone to use the internet to meet their developmental needs (e.g., joining online groups, dating through social networks, online gaming), often developing maladaptive patterns of online behaviors (Blakemore, 2019) such as excessive/addictive internet use. Although internet addiction has frequently been investigated in the period of adolescence, most related studies focus on late adolescents (17 years old and on) or a mixed age sample of students between 12-19 years old, which results in an unclear picture of the extent of this phenomenon among early/middle adolescents (e.g., Aydm & San, 2011; Feng et al., 2019; Gunuc & Dogan, 2013; Lam et al., 2009; Li et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2019; Shek & Yu, 2016; Touloupis & Teli, 2021). Only a limited number of studies have focused exclusively on the vulnerable period between early and middle adolescence (12-15 years old) (Avar et al., 2017; Chung et al., 2019; Tamarit et al., 2021). However, these studies have mainly investigated internet addiction in relation to the adolescent's personal and environmental factors, and do not focus on the epidemiological aspect of the phenomenon. Therefore, further investigation of the extent of early and middle adolescents' excessive/addictive internet use is needed.

The literature highlights that intrapersonal social-emotional characteristics, such as self-esteem, can play a significant and negative predictive role in the manifestation of online addictive behaviors. According to Rosenberg (1989), self-esteem (i.e., an individual's global evaluative self-perspective) is significantly influenced by their interaction with important others, and the acceptance or rejection that they receive from them. Considering the important role of peers during the vulnerable period of adolescence (Berk, 2015; Slater & Bremner, 2017), it could be stated that: adolescents with a sense of low self-esteem trying to experience peer support and acceptance (Bastiaensens et al., 2019) are likely to be prone to spend many hours not only in face to face but also in online peer interaction (e.g., through social platforms, chat rooms, video games) (Hamilton et al., 2022; Odgers et al., 2020), probably end-

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