Adolescence and Internet Addiction: Social versus Emotional Loneliness

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OBJECTIVE

Around the world, there has been increasing concern about the ways in which heavy Internet usage may negatively affect people’s lives, especially youngsters and adolescent students [1-8]. Indeed, since the 1990s researchers have accumulated a large amount of empirical evidence of what may be termed Internet Addiction [9-14]. Despite the lack of consensus on terminology and definition, Internet Addiction can be understood as excessive and non-controlled preoccupations or thoughts, cravings or behaviours related to computer and Internet usage that one may have, and the way those behaviours and cognitions lead impairments and distress in one’s life [15]. As a behavioural addiction [16], Internet Addiction has been linked in several studies with many forms of social and emotional impairments and psychopathology, such as specific personality traits [17], impairments in everyday life activities [18], social isolation [19-21], low social openness [22-23], depressive traits [24-27] and low self-esteem [28-30].

Generally, loneliness is a key indicator of an individual’s social well-being [31] and can be usefully considered in terms of both emotional loneliness (i.e., absence of a close relationship or an emotional attachment) and social loneliness (i.e., absence of a bigger group of contacts or an engaging social network) [32].

Internet usage may present a paradox: linking people with others (virtually) but simultaneously isolating them, resulting in less and poorer social involvement [33]. In light of this, we propose to assess the level of Internet Addiction in a sample of Portuguese primary school students and to test whether there is a relationship between the measures of loneliness (social and emotional) and Internet Addiction.

METHOD

The instruments used in this study were:

- Socio-demographic Questionnaire (Patrão, Rita & Pontes, 2013)
- Internet Addiction Test (Young, 1998), Portuguese short version (Pontes & Patrão, 2013)
- Jong Loneliness Scale 6-item Version for Overall, Emotional and Social Loneliness (De Jong & Van Tilburg, 2006).

The sample was selected by convenience, making it a non-probabilistic sample. A total of 131 students participated in the study, comprising 63 males (48.1%) and 68 females (51.9%). Ages ranged from 12 to 19 years (M=14.3; SD=1.389) and males had a slightly higher mean age (p=0.004; M=14.63;SD=1.348) than females (M=13.97;SD=1.360). Regarding participant’s school year, 15 (11.5%) were from 7th grade, 57 (43.5%) from 8th grade and 59 (45%) from the 9th grade.

This is a correlational study that is aimed to describe statistically significant correlations between the variables.

RESULTS

1) IAT higher scores showed a significant positive correlation with Loneliness (R=0.247; p=0.004) and Social Loneliness (R=0.273; p=0.002), but not with Emotional Loneliness.

2) Participants who possessed mobile Internet access had significant higher scores in IAT than those who hadn't mobile access to the Internet (Rpb=0.195;p=0.025).

3) Higher scores in IAT were significantly correlated with Bullying (R=0.192;p=0.028) and also Cyberbullying victims (R=0.295;p=0.001).

4) Students who reported having more disturbed behaviours in the classroom, had significant higher scores in IAT (R=0.242;p=0.005) as opposed to the students who reported a more balanced behaviour within the classroom. Additionally, the IAT means were different among students who reported a more balanced behaviour in the classroom vs. a bit balanced behaviour (I-J=7.874;p=0.008) and a bit disturbed (I-J=9.413;p=0.019).

5) Higher scores in IAT were also correlated with alcohol and tobacco consumption among the students (R=0.226;p=0.009).

6) At last and not surprisingly, higher weekly Internet usage were positive correlated with higher IAT scores (R=0.392;p=0.000).

CONCLUSION

As hypothesized by the authors, results suggested a link between Internet Addiction and Loneliness among the students. Additionally, it appears that Internet Addiction accounts for 6.10% of the total variance in Loneliness. Also, Internet Addiction explained 7.45% of the total variance in Social Loneliness. This result suggests, as observed in other studies, [27,33] that Internet Addiction may keep up with social impairments resulting in severe isolation. The lack of associations between Internet Addiction and Emotional Loneliness may be explained by the rewards individuals get from online interactive applications.

In the present study, we found that 86.3% (N=113) of the total sample had their Internet Addiction levels between Moderated and Severe. On the other hand, 22.1% (N=29) of the students suffered from severe to very severe loneliness.

In recent years, the use and the abuse of Internet has interfere in family dynamics and communication patterns, becoming a recurrent theme in clinical contexts. The use of internet has implications for the family communication, evident in the perception of greater isolation. This calls the attention of educational practitioners and parents to take into account class and peer-related behaviours (e.g., bullying/cyberbullying) and also substance consumption habits. At last, parents should watch closely for patterns of isolation behaviours and disproportionate time spent in the Internet.

REFERENCES


Figure 1: Main findings of the present study showed by the figure above the relationships between Internet Addiction, Loneliness and Social Loneliness.