Adolescent digital profiles: A process-based typology of highly engaged internet users

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A B S T R A C T

High online engagement is common among adolescents. Besides concerns, not all highly involved adolescents online develop maladaptive patterns of use. The focus of the present qualitative study was to explore the experiences of highly engaged adolescents with signs of internet addictive behaviors. We aimed to uncover the processes differentiating high online engagement, and formulate a typology of users. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 72 adolescents (M age = 15.7 years; SD = 0.6) living in Greece, Spain, Iceland and Poland. Interviews were analyzed using grounded theory. A typology of highly engaged adolescents emerged based on three processes: satisfying needs across contexts (online-offline), experiencing personal gains and losses and self-regulating use. Four distinct user profiles emerged, ranging from adaptive (Juggling it All, Coming Full Cycle) to maladaptive (Stuck Online, Killing Boredom). The developed typology can help parents, teachers and professionals better understand the ways high engagement is experienced within a developmental context. Such knowledge can inform the development of prevention and supportive services. Implications for assessment and intervention are discussed for each profile.

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1. Introduction

Adolescents are early and enthusiastic adopters of new technologies and many are highly engaged online. Accordingly, there is public concern over potential adverse impact that internet use may have on youth health, well-being and development. Relatively, there is less research on the gains (i.e. rich get richer hypothesis/social enhancement hypothesis; Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a; Israelashvili, Kim, & Bukobza, 2012) and the respective protective factors associated with adaptive use patterns (Bessiere, Kiesler, Kraut, & Boneva, 2008; Kuss, Louws, & Wiers, 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b). Although extensive research has been conducted for over 20 years on “internet addiction”, internet overuse or problematic internet use (PIU), there is still no consensus to date on the conceptualization of internet overuse and its operationalization (cf. meta-syntheses by Byun et al., 2009; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Sim, Gentile, Bricolo, Serpelloni, & Gulamoydeen, 2012). Further, there is no recognized clinical entity/diagnosis, even in the most recently updated DSM-5 although Internet Gaming Disorder was identified in Section 3 as a condition warranting more clinical research (APA, 2013). As a result, the current screening instruments lack a theoretical basis, and existing assessment tools and procedures fail to consider the complex underlying processes linked to high online engagement. Accordingly, there is scarcity of evidence-based PIU therapy protocols (van Rooij, Zinn, Schoenmakers, & van de Mheen, 2012) and practice recommendations, none of which are tailored for adolescents. The latter is especially troubling because internet use needs to be contextualized in modern-day adolescent functioning and in adolescent-specific developmental tasks before assessing its maladaptive nature.

1.1. What is adaptive and what is maladaptive internet use in adolescence?

Although excessive use is a symptom of PIU and a criterion in
remarkable across participants and countries, suggesting that SNS use (70% of adolescents) and the extensive time spent in them is associated with moderate SNS use (Tsitsika et al., 2014), the ubiquity of membership in social networking sites (SNS; 70% of adolescents) and the extensive time spent in them is remarkable across participants and countries, suggesting that "heavier" SNS use (>2 h/day) is evolving to a normative adolescent practice. Previous studies indicate that heavier use is related to pursuit of positive developmental goals (Israelashvili et al., 2012) and has a positive impact on psychological functioning (Leung, 2007). Additionally, self-reported social competence was higher among older adolescents with heavier SNS use—compared to those with moderate SNS use (Tsitsika et al., 2014). Thus, the criterion of time spent online may be insufficient given the pervasiveness and functional utility of some online applications. Overall, there is increased recognition of the tendency to overpathologize certain excessive behavioral patterns, such as conceptualizing high online engagement as a behavioral addiction, and to follow an atheoretical and confirmatory approach in the exploration of these behaviors (Billieux, Schimmell, Khazaal, Maurage, & Heeren, 2015). Alternatively, an open exploration of high online engagement can be fruitful in understanding the processes underlying adolescent use and in tailoring interventions as needed.

Beyond frequency of use, the adaptive or maladaptive nature of use can be evaluated on the basis of adolescent online experiences, personal meanings, motives for use and self-perceived consequences (Israelashvili et al., 2012; Marino et al., 2016; Shen & Williams, 2011). Although the behavioral pattern of high online engagement from childhood onwards is ubiquitous, the underlying motives for use and conditions—developmental, familial and technological—are highly variable especially through adolescence. As has long been recognized in developmental psychopathology, similar processes do not necessarily lead to similar developmental outcomes, in line with the construct of multi-finality (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996). Consistent with the developmental approach, an online behavioral pattern can be considered adaptive when it promotes adolescent development and skills acquisition, and helps the adolescent to meet demands of modern living. Accordingly, a recent large-scale qualitative study in seven European countries (Tzavela et al., 2015) found that motivational, experiential and regulatory processes differentiated adaptive from maladaptive highly engaged adolescents online.

1.2. Typologies of highly engaged adolescent users

Further delineation of this broad classification into discrete profiles of highly engaged adolescents online, can be useful in shaping assessment and clinical design as needed. Although typologies are often used in the social sciences to discern behavioral patterns and have been previously developed for internet users (i.e., Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; for a review see Brandtzaeg, 2010), neither do they target adolescent populations nor are they linked to interventions. Moreover, most typologies developed in media research have typically been based on survey responses, following a confirmatory approach, and do not provide a more in-depth knowledge on how user types behave and develop over time (Brandtzaeg, 2010). A qualitative in depth exploration of typologies can offer new insights which can facilitate self-assessment, inform formal assessment procedures and guide referral decisions, for school counselors, parents, and teachers. Although the Internet Addiction Test (IAT), is a useful screening instrument for internet overuse or PIU/internet addiction, it does not yield information on areas of dysfunction or underlying motives for use. Clinical experience has shown that adolescents, who are referred based on their moderate to high IAT scores make up a heterogeneous group of problematic users, in terms of functional impairment and underlying mechanisms. Thus, supplementary information is necessary for this sizeable group, amounting to 13% of adolescents attending secondary school (Tsitsika et al., 2013). The present study can contribute to the development of thematic areas that need to be addressed during clinical assessment or screening interview, and inform the development of adolescent-sensitive supportive services.

1.3. Objectives

The aim of the study was to develop an adolescent typology of high online engagement by further exploring the processes which distinguish subgroups of adaptive and maladaptive internet user. The focus was on the identification of underlying behavioral, cognitive and contextual mechanisms which can meaningfully categorize highly engaged adolescents and inform clinical decision-making. Towards this aim, we employed an adolescent-centered idiosyncratic and in-depth approach, examining the detailed stories of adolescents highly engaged online and at risk for problematic online behavior.

2. Methods

2.1. Study context

The present study is based on the EU NET ADB mixed-methods collaborative project on the experiences of adolescents with signs of internet addictive behaviors, recruited from seven European countries: Germany, Greece, Iceland, Poland, Romania, Spain and the Netherlands.

2.2. Participants

This study builds on and extends the qualitative findings of Tzavela et al. (2015), utilizing the part of dataset corresponding to national samples recruited from secondary schools only. Specifically, adolescents recruited from sport clubs, Internet forums, Internet cafes, youth clubs, and mental health settings were excluded to remove any possible differences on their characteristics with school-based samples. In total, 72 adolescents (Mage = 15.7 years; SD = 0.6) from four European countries (Greece, Iceland, Poland, and Spain) were individually interviewed in school premises (see Table 1). Eligible participants were between 14 and 17 years old with self-reported signs of addictive behavior based on Young’s Internet Addiction Test (IAT; Young, 1998; range 0—100). During Phase 1, adolescents with an IAT score >40 were eligible to participate in interviews, and at subsequent stages (Phases 2—3) the IAT criterion score was lowered to 31. The decision to include adolescents at moderate range of problematic use (31—49; see Young, 2011) was grounded on preliminary analyses and on the scope to make recommendation applicable to a wider population of highly engaged adolescents. Our sample fell at the upper mild range of internet addiction (Total M_{IAT} = 48.1, SD = 12.8), and performance did not vary by gender (Boys M_{IAT} = 47.8, SD = 12.2, Girls M_{IAT} = 48.5, SD = 13.7; t(70) = 0.25, p = 0.80 > 0.05).

2.3. Procedure

After receiving approval from the relevant state agencies, Ministries of Education or other Ethics committees, each country’s research team conducted the recruitment and the interviews. Written parental informed consent and adolescent assent were obtained, based on local requirements. Interviews were conducted...
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