



Addictive behaviors and psychological distress among adolescents and emerging adults: A mediating role of peer group identification

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Research suggests the sense of belonging to primary groups functions as an important social resource for youth well-being, but it can be compromised among those dealing with addiction. The current study examined how adolescents' and emerging adults' identification with a primary peer group consisting of friends, mediates the relationship between addictive behaviors and psychological distress.

Method: The study utilized demographically balanced survey data on 1200 Finnish participants aged 15 to 25 (mean age 21.29, 50% female). Measures were included for psychological distress, excessive drinking, excessive drug use, excessive gambling, excessive Internet use, and peer group identification.

Results: All forms of addictive behaviors had a significant direct relationship with higher psychological distress. Excessive drug use, gambling and Internet use were associated with a weaker identification with a peer group, which predicted higher psychological distress. Contrary to the above findings, excessive drinking was linked to stronger peer group identification, mediating psychological distress downwards.

Conclusions: These findings support past research and provide a mediation model explanation onto how weaker social relations add to negative well-being consequences in different addictive behaviors, thus underlining the importance of expanding our understanding of social group outcomes among young individuals.

1. Introduction

Adolescents' and emerging adults' psychological well-being and overall health are a continuous concern world-wide (Arnett, 2005; Salam, Das, Lassi, & Bhutta, 2016; Torikka, Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Marttunen, Luukkaala, and Rimpelä, 2014). These are critical time-periods in human development as many harmful and often-times life-long behavior patterns stem during them (Mawson, Best, Beckwith, Dingle, & Lubman, 2015; Merikangas & McClair, 2012). Research has consistently shown that adolescents and emerging adults engage in detrimental and health-threatening behaviors, which inevitably influence their psychological well-being. These behaviors include alcohol and drug use, unsafe sex, poor diet choices, and even delinquent acts characterized by peer influence and heightened risk-taking (Balogh, Mayes, & Potenza, 2013; Salam et al., 2016).

Addictive behaviors of the youth are a particular cause for significant negative outcomes, as they may develop into long lasting habits and have detrimental effects on individuals' physical health (Balogh et al., 2013), social relationships (Yao & Zhong, 2014; Dhir, Chen, & Nieminen, 2015) and financial status (Canale, Griffiths, Vieno, Siciliano, & Molinaro, 2016). Well-being, defined through a set of

psychological features, including personal relationships and lack of distress (Ryff & Singer, 1996; Sagone & De Caroli, 2014), is vital to positive human functioning but highly susceptible to addictive behaviors. Additional challenge in supporting youths' well-being arises as addictions and addictive behaviors can occur in many forms. Although addiction is commonly associated with substance misuse, there exists a wide range of objects and activities one can become addicted to (West, 2006; Jorgenson, Hsiao, & Yen, 2016; Orford, 2001a, 2001b).

In this study, we attempt to provide a supplementary explanation onto how addictive behaviors and psychological well-being fluctuate among adolescents and emerging adults, when social identification with a primary peer group functions as a mediator. We focus on examining four types of addictions: alcohol, drugs, gambling, and the Internet. Here, addictions are discussed in terms of excessive behaviors, as suggested by Orford (2001a, 2001b). Next, we explain briefly why these four addiction types were chosen and why examining social identification's mediating role in addiction is important.

1.1. Excessive drinking

Excessive drinking, particularly among youth, is a long-prevailing

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global issue (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2016; World Health Organization, 2014). In the United States, for instance, alcohol is the most frequently used and misused substance among youth, with an 18% prevalence rate in monthly binge drinking. For males, this typically equals five or more drinks and, for females, four or more drinks within approximately two hours (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016; CDC, 2017). Additionally, heaviest episodic alcohol consumption is taking place among youths between 15 and 19 years-old (Jernigan, Noel, Landon, Thornton, & Lobstein, 2017). Similarly, in Finland, 37% of adolescents reported they had experienced with alcohol (i.e., been drunk) at least once during their lifetime, and 7% reported drinking on a weekly basis with the intention of getting drunk (Raitasalo, Huhtanen, & Miekka, 2016).

Excessive drinking of alcohol in any age group is a serious public health concern, but especially among young people during important developmental stages. As past research has shown, it can impact brain development, lead to intoxication, accidents, infectious diseases, or even death (Mitchell, Gryczynski, O'Grady, & Schwartz, 2013; Rosenquist, Murabito, Fowler, & Christakis, 2010).

1.2. Excessive drug use

Drugs characterize another group of substances that has an immense potential to seriously impact the health and well-being of the individual and society alike (MacLeod et al., 2004; Mitchell et al., 2013; Nutt, King, & Phillips, 2010). Past research has consistently shown that drug use and misuse are often at their highest during emerging adulthood, which may lead to a heightened risk of substance use disorders later in life (Arnett, 2005; Moss, Chen, & Yi, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2013). In Finland, to illustrate, the overall drug supply and use have increased during the past two decades and statistics indicate that drugs are most often offered to youngsters in the 15–24 age-group: 13% reported having been offered drugs during the past year (Karjalainen, Savonen, & Hakkarainen, 2016). At the same time, people's collective attitudes towards drugs have become more lenient and are particularly liberal towards experimentation with cannabis (Raitasalo et al., 2016; Hakkarainen, Karjalainen, Raitasalo, & Sorvala, 2015). A partial reason for this attitudinal shift is believed to be attributable to an observed increase in the amount of social relationships general people have with individuals who regularly sell or use drugs. It is suggested that personal affiliations with drug users may lessen the fear and concern typically associated with drugs and drug use (Hakkarainen, Karjalainen, Ojajarvi, & Salasuo, 2015; Karjalainen et al., 2016).

Repeated use of illicit -or even certain legally allowed drugs, can become detrimental to their users and have many negative consequences: on top of being destructive to health, they increase the likelihood of accidents and involvement in criminal activities (DeLisi, Angton, Behnken, & Kusow, 2015; Orford, 2001b), and can damage people's social relationships and financial situation (Arria et al., 2013; Degenhardt, Coffey, Moran, Carlin, & Patton, 2007). Excessive drug use can lead to further problems, such as poor decision making and additional addictions, due to the possible altering of the functions of the motivational circuitry of the brain (Balogh et al., 2013). Moreover, drug use issues that begin in adolescence are more likely to persist into adulthood (Merikangas & McClair, 2012).

1.3. Excessive gambling

Like other addictive behaviors, excessive gambling can have extensive harmful impacts both on individual and societal level (Salonen & Raisamo, 2015; St-Pierre & Derevensky, 2016). Even though various gaming activities are illegal for youths under 18 years old in many countries, gambling is a popular activity among adolescents and emerging adults worldwide (Blinn-Pike, Worthy, & Jonkman, 2010; Canale et al., 2016; Calado, Alexandre, & Griffiths, 2017). As a result, youth problem gambling is a growing international concern (Elton-

Marshall, Leatherdale, & Turner, 2016; Kristiansen, Reith, & Trabjerg, 2017; Volberg, Gupta, Griffiths, Ólason, & Delfabbro, 2010). Excessive gambling is an evolving issue also due to the advances in technology; as multiple new forms of gaming activities are now taking place online, they become easier and faster for young people to access (Elton-Marshall et al., 2016).

According to the Finnish National Institute of Health and Wellbeing (THL), gambling activities start typically at the age of 16. Risky gambling behavior has increased during the past years and it is most common among individuals between 18 and 24 years of age (Salonen & Raisamo, 2015). When excessive, gambling can induce emotional distress, cause serious financial issues, facilitate other risky behaviors, such as illicit substance use, and strain social relationships (Calado et al., 2017; Raisamo, Halme, Murto, & Lintonen, 2013; Splevins, Mireskandari, Clayton, & Blaszczynski, 2010).

1.4. Excessive Internet use

In a relatively short amount of time, the Internet has become an inseparable part of people's lives. It is estimated that about 40% of the world population has Internet connection (Kuss, Griffiths, Karila, & Billieux, 2014). However, because modern portable devices (e.g., smartphones, tablets, and laptops) include Internet, the percentage might be even higher. Yao and Zhong (2014) estimate that an average Internet user spends an equal or a greater amount of time online as offline. While the Internet has many benefits, its use has brought within new types of problems and challenges, especially in terms of adolescent psychosocial development (Durkee et al., 2016; Kuss, Van Rooij, Shorter, Griffiths, & van de Mheen, 2013). Like substance use and gambling behavior, Internet use can become excessive and start to interfere normal functioning (Yau, Potenza, & White, 2012).

Past research has investigated excessive Internet use under many terms, including *Internet addiction*, *compulsive*, *excessive*, and *pathological Internet use*, yet regardless of the term used, heavy Internet use and its addictive properties have been relatively difficult to measure. Multiple studies (e.g., Durkee et al., 2016; Dhir et al., 2015; Kuss et al., 2014; Cheng & Li, 2014; Sinkkonen, Puhakka, & Meriläinen, 2014) have attempted to map how common pathological Internet use (PIU), or Internet addiction (IA), is, and what types of people are more likely to use the Internet compulsively. The studies consistently found that adolescents were more likely to both engage in compulsive Internet use and even become addicted to it -they were also more vulnerable to its negative effects. Cheng and Li (2014) estimate that the global prevalence rate for pathological Internet use is approximately 6%. A youth study in Finland found that 22.9% of adolescent participants used the Internet excessively and 1.3% were identified as PIUs (Sinkkonen et al., 2014). Internet addiction, as discussed in past research, is highly problematic and can lead to poor eating and sleeping habits, lower academic performances, and lessen traditional face-to-face interactions with friends and family (Durkee et al., 2016; Balogh et al., 2013; Kuss et al., 2014; Yao & Zhong, 2014).

1.5. The role of social relationships

Social relationships are a major determinant of well-being for people at large (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Thoits, 2011), but especially for young people (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014; Lavy & Sand, 2012). One possible linkage between social relationships and subsequent well-being is social identification, often operationalized as a subjective sense of belonging to a certain group (Cruwys, Steffens, Haslam, Haslam, Jetten, & Dingle, 2017; Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, Dingle, & Jones, 2014; Buckingham, Frings, & Albery, 2013). Social identification refers to a process in which individuals' identity is partly determined by the connectedness to certain social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These 'in-groups', and social support derived from them, have been shown to have significant outcomes in terms of psychological

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