



Social relationship on problematic Internet use (PIU) among adolescents in South Korea: A moderated mediation model of self-esteem and self-control



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ABSTRACT

Despite previous research efforts on identifying the risk and protective factors of problematic Internet use (PIU), the specific mechanism among these factors are largely unknown. Thus, the present study examined the effect of adolescents' social relationships on their PIU, as well as the effect of self-esteem as a mediator and the effect of self-control as a moderator. Survey data from 750 South Korean middle and high school students in Seoul and Gyeonggi areas were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The results are as follows. First, PIU is significantly associated with relationship with peers and with mother. Second, self-esteem did not mediate the effect of communication with mother on PIU, but was found to partially mediate the effect of peer relationship on PIU. Third, adolescents' self-control significantly moderated the indirect effect of peer relationship on PIU via self-esteem. Through detailed analyses, this study identified self-esteem as a mediator and self-control as a moderator in the relationship between social relationships and PIU. Implications of these results for understanding the relationship among social relationships, self-esteem, self-control, and PIU are discussed.

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1. Introduction

With the widespread distribution of the Internet, the time spent on the Internet now makes up a large part of the total computer use. The Internet provides many benefits (e.g., conveniences in daily lives such as online learning, easy information search and shopping), but Internet overuse or abuse can cause various problems such as failure in academic performance (Ng & Wiemer-hastings, 2005), family and interpersonal problems (Young, 2007), physical weakness due to lack of sleep, or disabling illness (Young & Rogers, 1998). Such Internet-related side effects are being diagnosed as problematic Internet use (PIU; Caplan, 2002; Shapir, Goldsmith, Keck, Khosla, & McElroy, 2000), pathological Internet use (Davis, 2001), or Internet addiction (Douglas et al., 2008; Young, 1998). Research on this topic has been actively carried out in highly wired nations such as the United States and South Korea (Hawi, 2012). Having had established nationwide

Internet infrastructure early on, South Korea has 82.5% of its citizens using the Internet (Internet World Statistics, 2012). But such high Internet access rate came with various side effects. According to statistics on Internet addiction in the last three years, Internet addiction rate (sum of high-risk and at-risk percentages) among adolescents (ages 10–19) was 10.7–12.3%, more serious than any other age groups. As severe side effects of Internet use (e.g., Cardio-pulmonary-related deaths of game users, game-related murders) transpired, the Korean government initiated nationwide efforts to combat Internet addiction through exhaustive surveys on Internet overuse among children and adolescents aged 6–19, promotion of Internet addiction counseling, and training Internet addiction counselors (Block, 2008).

As Internet addiction poses great risks to adolescent well-being, studying variables related to Internet addiction proves to be an extremely important research topic. Because untreated condition of Internet addiction during adolescence may transform into addiction in adulthood (Park, 2012), many studies have attempted to identify risk and protective factors of problematic Internet use among adolescents. Consequently, extensive data has been accumulated on these factors, but the specific mechanisms among the factors are still largely unknown. In order to effectively carry out

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preventative intervention for PIU, clarifying the precise mechanism of how these factors interact in relation to PIU is vital (Li et al., 2013). Moreover, findings from mechanism studies will help when designing interventions for adolescents who are already engaging in PIU by pointing to important aspects to focus on specifically. Interventions without a focus can be very ambiguous and ineffective.

This study hypothesized adolescents' relationship with others to be the primary cause of PIU. According to psychology on interpersonal relationship (Leary, 1957; Sullivan, 1953), interpersonal problem is at the root of various psychological and characteristic problems. A leading theory on addiction mechanism, self-medication model (Khantzian, 1990; Suh, Ruffins, Robins, Albanese, & Khantzian, 2008) suggests that individuals with attachment and emotional problems tend to seek temporary self-soothing experience by indulging in an object of addiction instead of coping in healthier ways. As such, relationship variables can be expected to play a significant role in PIU. Considering that relationships with parents and with peers are known to be important predictor variables for adolescents' adjustment (Barber & Delfabbro, 2000; Field, Diego, & Sanders, 2002), this study selected the two variables to represent adolescents' interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the study hypothesized that the effect of interpersonal relationships on PIU would be mediated by self-esteem and moderated by self-control. According to previous studies, adolescents' self-esteem is an important predictor variable for PIU (Armstrong, Phillips, & Saling, 2000; Aydin & Sari, 2011; Greenberg, Lewis, & Dodd, 1999; Sobell, 2007) and is significantly affected by social relationships (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Self-control, on the other hand, has been found to act as a buffer against PIU (Li, Zhang, Li, Zhen, & Wang, 2010; Wills, Sandy, & Yaeger, 2002). Although adolescents who experience social relationship difficulties stir up various problems, self-control acts as a moderating variable. Despite the findings that demonstrated self-esteem and self-control to be important variables in the relationship between adolescents' social relationship and PIU, the exact roles of the two variables are still unknown. Therefore, this study hoped to empirically investigate the pathways and mechanisms among these variables.

1.1. Literature review on psychosocial factors that predict PIU of adolescents

1.1.1. Parent–child relationship, peer relationship, and PIU

The fact that seeking virtual interpersonal relationship appeared to be a key motivation for PIU (Douglas et al., 2008; Kim, Kim, Park, & Lee, 2002) shows that social relationship and PIU are closely intertwined. In particular, parent–child relationship and peer relationship are known to be very important predictors of adjustment in adolescence (Barber & Delfabbro, 2000), and are also closely associated with PIU (Weinstein & Lejoyeux, 2010; Young, 1998). Among parent–child relationship related variables, communication is especially meaningful since it is an observable behavioral index (Barnes & Olson, 1982; Barnes & Olson, 1985) that is reported to be an aspect of family factor related to Internet addiction (Park, Kim, & Cho, 2008). This research selected communication with mother as the variable of interest because previous PIU studies have emphasized relationship with mother, the primary attachment figure, instead of father. For instance, Bang and Cho (2003) found that dysfunctional communication with mother, as opposed to with father, explained adolescent game addiction. Moreover, So, Myung, & Kim (2011) confirmed that problematic communication style of mother was a highly influential one among various predictor variables for adolescent Internet addiction. Further, assessing adolescents' relationship with both mother and father using identical questionnaire items can cause problem of

multicollinearity due to measurement artifacts. Peer relationship is another variable associated with Internet addiction (Jang, Hwang, & Choi, 2008; Lee, Oh, Cho, Hong, & Moon, 2001; Oh, 2003; Yang & Tung, 2007) that becomes even more important adjustment predictor (Engels & Bogt, 2001) as one enters adolescence. Thus, this study selected communication with mother and peer relationship as the two major environmental factors that affect PIU, and investigated the differences between the two factors.

1.1.2. Self-esteem as a mediator

Self-esteem is an important concept in the field of psychology as it has been found to be significantly related to emotional and behavioral problems (Adler, 1930; Maslow, 1968; Medor & Rogers, 1984), adjustment (DuBois, Bull, Sherman, & Roberts, 1998; Ullman & Tartar, 2001), and self-appraisal (Burger, 2008). An adolescent's self-esteem continues to develop according to the passage of time, context, and interpersonal relationship condition until reaching adulthood, and acts as an important predictor variable for the quality of interpersonal relationships in adulthood (Huang, 2010).

This study's research hypothesis of the moderating role of self-esteem in the relationship between adolescents' interpersonal relationship variables and PIU is based on the Sociometer Hypothesis. Sociometer Hypothesis states that self-esteem monitors reactions of others in social interactions, and determines the quality of interpersonal relationships (Leary et al., 1995). When an individual experiences problems or psychological threats in interpersonal relationships, his self-esteem is significantly threatened. When such threat is not well defended against, various emotional and behavioral problems may be generated (Leary et al., 1995). Since PIU can be seen as an emotional, behavioral problem manifested through the medium of the Internet, self-esteem can be expected to significantly mediate the effect of interpersonal problems on PIU. In fact, studies on Internet addiction (Armstrong et al., 2000; Aydin & Sari, 2011; Greenberg et al., 1999; Sobell, 2007) found that individual's level of self-esteem is a determining factor for Internet addiction. When real-life social relationships are difficult, people are more likely to form virtual relationships on the Internet in order to recover their damaged self-esteem in real life relationships (Suler, 1999). Also, adolescents who have self-esteem issues may demonstrate signs of Internet addiction during their identity exploration (Israelashvili, Kim, & Bukobza, 2012).

Since the role of self-esteem in the relationship between parent–child relationship and peer relationship and PIU has not been empirically tested, the current study sought to carry out the exploration.

1.1.3. Self-control as a moderator

Self-control refers to the ability to regulate oneself, and this concept involves problem solving and planning, dependability, attentional control, and future-oriented time perspective (Brody & Flor, 1998; Wills, Sandy, & Yaeger, 2000, 2001; Wills, Windle, & Cleary, 1998). Young (1998) asserted that PIU is fundamentally an impulse control problem. An essential symptom of impulse control disorder is the inability to resist the impulse, desire, and temptation to perform behaviors that may cause harm to others or the self. Since Internet addicts also show lack of control similar to pathological gambling addicts, self-control seems to be an important factor for Internet addiction. Davis (2001) also stated that psychological, social, academic, and work-related problems arise when individuals cannot exercise self-control when using the Internet. A few empirical studies found self-control to have greater influence on PIU than other variables (Kim, Namkoong, Ku, & Kim, 2008; Li et al., 2013); self-control seems to play a critical part in the mechanism among PIU-related variables.

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