



## Internet use and developmental tasks: Adolescents' point of view



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### ABSTRACT

This study explored adolescents' opinions about how Internet use supports the achievement of their developmental tasks. Qualitative data were collected in focus groups interviews with 127 Italian Internet users (11–20) attending middle and high schools. Discussions were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using content analysis. Results showed that the Internet plays important functions in identity formation, personal autonomy, and relationships outside the family. It allows teens to develop their own interests, to identify with others and, at the same time, differentiate from others. The Internet is also an arena in which adolescents develop and practice autonomy. The Internet can be a source of conflict with parents, because of parents' concerns about Internet use. However, the Internet can also be a meeting ground with parents. Finally, participants indicated the Internet is used to form close relationships with peers. Gender and age differences are discussed. Although the study is cross-sectional and relies only on adolescent report, findings illustrate how the conceptual framework of developmental goals may be helpful for understanding how the Internet can affect adolescents' lives.

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### 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a period of many biological, psychological and social changes. Adolescents have to learn to adjust to their changing bodies and emerging needs as well as their new skills, roles and responsibilities (Christie & Viner, 2005). They face developmental tasks mainly related to pubertal changes, identity construction and to the redefinition of relationships with adults and peers (Adams & Berzonsky, 2008). For modern adolescents, “online” environments are a significant space of experience in their growth process. Internet usage has considerably increased in adolescence over the past decade (Purcell, 2012). An estimated 95% of American teens ages 12–17 years and 89% of Italian teens between 15 and 19 years surf the Internet (Istat, 2013; Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). The popularity of Internet in adolescence triggered a wide spectrum of research on the reasons for Internet use among adolescents. Boys and girls spend most of their online time in private communication (e.g., email, instant messaging) with persons they know in their offline lives (Gross, 2004; Tsitsika et al., 2014), seeking information and entertainment, and

sometimes to avoid boredom (Lin & Yu, 2008). Adolescent girls spend more time on social networking sites (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) and use them to reinforce pre-existing friendships, whereas adolescent boys use them to flirt and make new friends (Lenhart & Madden, 2007) and to compensate for social anxiety and learning (Barker, 2009; Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010).

Internet-related functions have become increasingly integrated into people's daily lives, and, with the rapid proliferation of users, evidence has begun to emerge suggesting that Internet use may fulfill different developmental needs. Teens use new forms of technology to develop close and meaningful relationships (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Tzavela et al., 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009b), explore their identity (Israelashvili & Bukobza, 2012; Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006), sexuality (Suzuky & Calzo, 2004) and intimacy (Smahel & Subrahmanyam, 2007), and find information about developmentally sensitive issues (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009a). They can find academic support and learn (Chen & Fu, 2009), strengthen their online communication skills and knowledge (Koutamanis, Vossen, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), gain positive feelings of mastery and competence (Schmitt, Dayanim, & Matthias, 2008), learn from their peers about communication norms and cultures (Lusk, 2010), increase the feeling of connection (Utz, 2015), and the sense of community (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015).

Although research has identified multiple ways in which adolescents use the Internet, these studies have some limitations. First, most studies focused on motives for Internet use by

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adolescents (Barker, 2009; Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010; Lenhart & Madden, 2007), but only a few of them embed these motives in a developmental theoretical prospective. Moreover, it is not clear whether these findings are applicable to Italian adolescents. Second, researches have mainly stressed the role of social network sites (SNS) in two specific developmental tasks: building and maintaining relationships with peers and partners and identity construction (García-Martín & García-Sánchez, 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). However, several developmental tasks typical of adolescence are still little explored, such as the redefinition of parental relationships, the processes of identification and differentiation in order to achieve psychosocial autonomy (Steinberg, 2008). Furthermore, developmental tasks may be accomplished not only through SNS use, but also through other activities on the Internet (playing games, searching for information in order to cultivate own interests, etc.). Third, there is little theoretically driven research on adolescents' perspectives about the role of Internet in their lives. Tzavela et al. (2015), based on an adolescent-centered perspective, found that adolescents consistently connected specific online applications to adolescent-typical needs. However, their participants were adolescents reporting signs of Internet addictive behaviors and findings might be different in a normative sample. Fourth, to our knowledge, there is a lack of research that explores adolescents' opinion on how the Internet may be used to face developmental tasks in an Italian context. The current study addresses all these gaps. Our aim is to explore adolescents' opinions about how Internet use may support their achievement of goals identified as important in a developmental perspective. We use qualitative data obtained by focus-group interviews in an Italian context to elucidate the developmental goal-related functions of adolescents' Internet use. This research takes into account gender and age differences in adolescent reasons for Internet use and online activities.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Internet use and developmental tasks

The concept of developmental tasks, introduced by Havighurst (1972), assumes that human development in modern societies is characterized by an increasingly difficult series of tasks that individuals must complete throughout their lives. They represent internalized links between individual needs and societal claims that gain high subjective relevance, guide motivation and behavior, and show context-specific differences between cultures and historical periods (Adams & Berzonsky, 2008). The major task for western modern adolescents is to create a stable identity and become complete and productive adults (Steinberg, 2008). They take on this major task adjusting to pubertal changes, achieving a new level of closeness and trust with peers, attaining independence from parents, developing of a sense of personal identity, and achieving autonomy in the larger world (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Kirchler, Palmonari, & Pombeni, 1993).

A lot of research on adolescent Internet use has focused primarily on its adverse effects on adolescent well-being; for example adolescent Internet use has been linked with social isolation (Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000), poor school performance (Wainer et al., 2008), loneliness and depression (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003), ill-being (Rosen et al., 2014), cyberbullying and harassment (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009; Raskauskas & Stolz, 2007). However, the Internet can also be beneficial for youth and help them to attain relevant developmental tasks. Most prior research has focused on the effect of the Internet, in most cases in terms of SNS usage, on identity construction and peer and romantic relationships (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014).

Online identity exploration takes place within environments such as multi-user domains, virtual games, chat and instant messaging systems (Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003). The anonymity afforded to teens within virtual worlds allows adolescents more flexibility in exploring their identity (Calvert, 2002; Lancini & Turani, 2009). Online exploration of identity can take several forms, including the name or avatar assumed, and the types of information that are revealed. Online, adolescents can be whoever they choose to be and can slide in and out of various possible selves. This allows them to experience different aspects of their identity and learn to adjust to their maturing bodies. Adolescents, especially girls, may pretend to be someone older (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). Identity is developed and defined partly in relation to other people (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001) and social media provide adolescents opportunities to compare themselves with others. Playing games is also a way to fulfill self-affirmation need, typical of adolescence (Hellström, Nilsson, Leppert, & Åslund, 2012). Observing other people and searching for their acceptance or validation in social networks are also important parts of developing individual and group identities and can influence adolescent well-being and self-esteem (Jackson, von Eye, Fitzgerald, Zhao, & Witt, 2010; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006).

At the same time, many adolescents use the Internet to connect with friends, reinforce existing relationships, support others and receive social support, cultivate emotional ties and form new relationships (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). The Internet may be useful for adolescents who are still learning to negotiate interactions with members of the same sex and the opposite sex (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). This context allows users to interact with a much larger number of people than they can offline and to remain in frequent contact with friends (Livingstone, 2008; Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012). Thus, teens can experience inclusion and support on the web where they may not find it in the offline world (Frison & Eggermont, 2015). Online anonymity decreases self-consciousness and social anxiety, making it easier for teens to form relationships (Greenfield et al., 2006; Mesch & Talmud, 2006). This may be especially true for romantic relationships (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004; Wolak, Michell, & Finkelhor, 2003). Smahel and Subrahmanyam (2007), analyzing over 12,000 utterances in chat rooms, found out that the search for partners is ubiquitous in adolescents' online haunts, just as it is in their offline lives, especially for older adolescents.

Research suggests that Internet use has large positive effects on teens' peer relationships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009a). For example, Italian adolescents with a rich social life spent more time on the Internet, used the Internet to make or maintain friends, communicate feelings and emotions more than adolescents with a poorer social life (Baiocco, Laghi, Carotenuto, & Del Miglio, 2011). Similarly, social media involving direct interactions (such as instant messaging) increased adolescents' intimacy, trust and communication with their best friends one year later (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008). However, this same study also found that less social activities or use of anonymous platforms (such as chat rooms) were related with increased alienation and conflict and decreased intimacy over time in relationships with peers and romantic partners.

The Internet may also serve as a context in which the developmental process of separation-individuation and the renegotiation of parental relationships takes place. However, only a few studies have focused on this issue. While adolescents express their autonomy online by making their own choices about their activities and engaging in private communications with others, parents want to protect children from online dangers and excessive Internet use that can interfere with offline life (Rosen, Cheever, & Carrier, 2008; Sorbring, 2014; Turow & Nir, 2000). A study has shown that

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