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Traumatic experiences, alexithymia, and Internet addiction symptoms among late adolescents: A moderated mediation analysis

Adriano Schimmenti^{a,*}, Alessia Passanisi^a, Vincenzo Caretti^b, Luana La Marca^a, Antonella Granieri^c, Calogero Iacolino^a, Alessia M. Gervasi^a, Noemi R. Maganuco^a, Joël Billieux^d

^a Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, UKE — Kore University of Enna, Cittadella Universitaria, 94100 Enna, Italy

^b Department of Human Sciences, LUMSA University of Rome, Piazza delle Vaschette 101, 00193 Rome, Italy

^c Department of Psychology, University of Turin, Via Po 14, 10123 Turin, Italy

^d Laboratory for Experimental Psychopathology, Psychological Sciences Research Institute, Université Catholique de Louvain, Place du Cardinal Mercier 10, B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

HIGHLIGHTS

- Internet addiction (IA) symptoms were investigated in 358 late adolescents.
- The relationship between trauma, alexithymia, and IA symptoms was explored.
- Alexithymia partially mediated the association between trauma and IA symptoms.
- Gender had differential effects on the relationship between trauma, alexithymia, and IA symptoms.
- Tailored treatment plans for late adolescents suffering from IA are suggested.

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ABSTRACT

The association between traumatic experiences, alexithymia, and substance abuse is well established. Less is known about the role of traumatic experiences and alexithymia in the onset and maintenance of Internet-related disorders. In the present study, self-report measures on traumatic experiences, alexithymia, and problematic Internet use were administered to 358 high school students (57% females) aged 18–19 years old, to test whether alexithymic traits mediated the relationship between traumatic experiences and Internet addiction symptoms, and whether gender moderated the proposed mediation in the sample. While partial mediation occurred in the entire sample, gender directly affected the relationship between the investigated constructs: Internet addiction symptoms were independently related to traumatic experiences among males, and to alexithymic traits among females. Therefore, the results of this study suggest that trauma memories among males, and problems with affect regulation among females, may increase the risk of problematic Internet use during late adolescence. Such findings might have relevant implications to inform any treatment plan for late adolescent students who are overinvolved with online activities, pointing out that tailored approaches to their problems and difficulties are particularly needed in clinical practice.

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1. Introduction

It is well-known that people suffering from substance addiction have been often exposed to severe traumatic experiences and frequently display emotion regulation problems (Banducci, Hoffman, Lejuez, & Koenen, 2014; Evren, Evren, Dalbudak, Ozcelik, & Oncu, 2009; Oyefeso, Brown, Chiang, & Clancy, 2008). Even though it is now established that research on trauma and affect dysregulation may effectively inform the treatment of addictive behaviors (Darke, 2013;

Evren et al., 2013; Weiss, Tull, Anestis, & Gratz, 2013), only a few studies have focused on the relationship between traumatic experiences, affect dysregulation, and Internet addiction symptoms (Dalbudak, Evren, Aldemir, & Evren, 2014; Dalbudak et al., 2013; Schimmenti, Passanisi, Gervasi, Manzella, & Famà, 2014; Yates, Gregor, & Haviland, 2012). Internet addiction can be defined as an excessive preoccupation with the Internet and its applications, causing impairments and distress in the personal, social, and professional lives of individuals (Young, 1998). Notably, the excessive involvement in online activities, often referred to as Internet addiction or problematic Internet use, can result in negative effects on psychological, psychosocial, and physical health of the individuals (Aboujade, 2010; Kuss, Griffiths, Karila, & Billieux, 2014). Accordingly, there is an impetus to conduct studies aiming to better

* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, UKE — Kore University of Enna, Cittadella Universitaria, 94100, R. 14, Enna, Italy.

E-mail address: adriano.schimmenti@unikore.it (A. Schimmenti).

understand the relationship between trauma and affect dysregulation in the onset of Internet addiction symptoms, in order to improve both its prevention and treatment (Yates et al., 2012), especially during late adolescence.

In fact, developmental research has consistently supported the view that late adolescence is a critical life stage, in which the psychological distress is often ubiquitous due to the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Pace, Cacioppo, & Schimmenti, 2012). Also, there is substantial evidence that addictive behaviors emerging in late adolescence often continue into adulthood (Englund et al., 2013). Therefore, it could be critical to investigate whether Internet addiction symptoms are associated with traumatic experiences and affect dysregulation in late adolescence. Also, it could be important to conceptualize the relationships between these constructs within a comprehensive framework, in which the interactions between developmental risk factors, individuals' ways of processing thoughts and feelings, and current symptoms are considered (Billieux, Schimmenti, Khazaal, Maurage & Heeren, 2015; Schimmenti et al., 2014). In this context, research on affect development and affect regulation has highlighted the detrimental effect of emotional dysregulation resulting from traumatic experiences in the onset and maintenance of psychiatric disorders (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002). So, research in this field might be effectively used to improve the preventative actions designed to reduce the risk of problematic Internet use, and might help clinicians to develop tailored treatment plans for youth who already suffer from impairing Internet addiction symptoms.

1.1. Traumatic experiences and problematic Internet use

Traumatic experiences are significantly associated with psychopathology in every life stage (Frewen & Lanius, 2006), and this also applies for problematic Internet use (Dalbudak et al., 2014; Rafla, Carson, & De Jong, 2014; Schimmenti & Caretti, 2010; Schimmenti, Guglielmucci, Barbasio, & Granieri, 2012). For what concerns late adolescents, Schimmenti et al. (2014) found that child sexual abuse increased the odds of suffering from significant Internet addiction symptoms in a sample of 310 students aged 18–19 years old by over 7 times. Similarly, Yates et al. (2012) found that college students who were maltreated during childhood were at disproportionate risk for excessive Internet use. However, despite the emerging evidences in this field, studies on the relationship between exposure to traumatic experiences and Internet addiction symptoms are still lacking. Further research is needed, as a huge literature suggests that many types of trauma, not only child abuse, can increase the risk of addictive behaviors (da Silva, Diehl, Cherpitel, & Figlie, 2015; Keyser-Marcus et al., 2015; Mason et al., 2014; Ullman, Relyea, Peter-Hagene, & Vasquez, 2013).

1.2. Alexithymia and problematic Internet use

Alexithymia is a psychological construct closely connected to affect dysregulation and difficulties using feelings as a guide for one's own behavior (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). It refers to a difficulty identifying feelings and distinguishing them from bodily sensations, a difficulty describing feelings to others, a pragmatic, externally oriented, cognitive style, and restricted imagination marked by paucity of fantasies, dreams, and daydreaming (Taylor & Bagby, 2013). Even though alexithymia is a personality trait normally distributed in the community (Parker, Keefer, Taylor, & Bagby, 2008), there are convincing evidences that stressful events may temporarily increase the alexithymic responses (Wise, Mann, Mitchell, Hryvniak, & Hill, 1990), as per the construct of secondary alexithymia (Nemiah, Freyberger, & Sifneos, 1976). Such alexithymic responses may persist if not adequately assessed and treated (Fukunishi, Kikuchi, Wogan, & Takubo, 1997; Honkalampi, Hintikka, Laukkanen, Lehtonen, & Viinamäki, 2001). The relationship between traumatic experiences and alexithymia is well documented (Eichhorn, Brähler, Franz,

Friedrich, & Glaesmer, 2014; Kooiman et al., 2004). Likewise, research shows that alexithymia is consistently associated with Internet addiction symptoms (Dalbudak et al., 2013; Kandri, Bonotis, Floros, & Zafropoulou, 2014; Scimeca et al., 2014). For instance, Scimeca et al. (2014) found in a sample of 600 high school students aged 13 to 22 years that a high level of alexithymia was associated with more severe symptoms of Internet addiction, including compromised quality of life, compromised academic career, compromised time control, and compensatory Internet usage. In the only study examining the role of alexithymia in the relationship between traumatic experiences and Internet addiction symptoms, Yates et al. (2012) found that alexithymia partially mediated the relationship between traumatic experiences and Internet addiction scores. However, the study by Yates et al. restricted its focus on child maltreatment, and did not consider other types of traumatic experiences (e.g., being exposed to a natural disaster, loss of a family member, serious bodily injury).

1.3. Gender differences

Since Internet addiction was proposed as a potential psychiatric diagnosis (Young, 1998), gender differences in the use and misuse of the Internet have been frequently reported in the literature (Greenberg, Lewis, & Dodd, 1999). The majority of the available studies suggests that Internet addiction symptoms are more common among males (Bakken, Wenzel, Götestam, Johansson, & Oren, 2009; Kormas, Critselis, Janikian, Kafetzis, & Tsitsika, 2011). For example, a study by Durkee et al. (2012) on a sample of 11,956 adolescents from 11 European countries showed that the prevalence of Internet-related disorders was higher among males than females (5.2% versus 3.8%). Moreover, gender differences were frequently observed in research on psychological trauma, with females being more exposed to direct victimization and assaultive violence than males (Asscher, Van der Put, & Stams, 2015; Breslau, 2002; Dube et al., 2005), and were consistently observed in research on alexithymia, with males being more likely than females to present significant alexithymic traits (Levant, Hall, Williams, & Hasan, 2009), perhaps because of socio-cultural factors, such as gender socialization (Levant et al., 2003).

1.4. The present study

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between traumatic experiences, alexithymia, and Internet addiction symptoms in a sample of late adolescents attending the last year of high school. A moderated mediation model was tested, in which alexithymia scores mediated the relationship between trauma scores and Internet addiction scores, and gender moderated the relationships between trauma scores and alexithymia scores, and between trauma scores and Internet addiction scores. The conceptual model configuring the investigated variables in a moderated-mediation relationship is depicted in Fig. 1.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

The study involved 358 late adolescents (154 males, 43%; 204 females, 57%) aged 18 to 19 years old ($M = 18.36$, $SD = .48$) attending their last year of high school. Students were recruited within six public high schools specialized in different subjects, i.e. teacher training, science, accountancy, languages, tourism and hotel management, and industrial engineering. The schools were located in Enna, a relatively small urban area (about 170,000 citizens) in Italy. There was no significant association between gender and age of participants ($t_{(356)} = .46$, $p = .65$, n.s.).

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