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Internet addiction, dissociation, and alexithymia

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Abstract

Objective: The aim of this research was to study the association between dissociation, alexithymia, adult attachment, and Internet addiction. **Methods:** A group of 335 students aged between 18 and 21 years (151 boys, 184 girls) were investigated. Alexithymia, dissociation, attachment styles, and Internet addiction were assessed using the Toronto Alexithymia Scale-20 Items, Dissociation Experiences Scale, Relational Questionnaire, and Internet Use, Abuse, Dependence. **Results:** Significant correlations exist between IUAD, alexithymia, and dissociation. In addition, both non-alexithymia and non-dissociation were related more often with secure attachment style. **Conclusions:** Internet addiction could represent a psychic retreat necessary to modulate the painful emotions in subject with an insecure attachment.

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Keywords: Internet addiction, dissociation, alexithymia, attachment styles

1. Introduction

With the term *Internet addiction*, we refer to the problematic use of Internet. It is a broad term covering a wide variety of maladaptive behaviors: *online compulsive gambling, cyber sexual addiction, cyber relationship addiction, online role-playing addiction, information overload, online compulsive trading, and online shopping addiction*.

Goldberg has been the first to coin the term *Internet Addiction Disorder*, borrowing from DSM-IV the criteria for substance abuse/dependence and pathological gambling.

Adopting the criteria for pathological gambling, Kimberley Young (1998) defined the pathological use of Internet as *Problematic Internet Use*.

The diagnosis of PIU is indicated by five or more of the following symptoms: preoccupation with the Internet; increased amount of time needed on the Internet to achieve satisfaction; repeated unsuccessful attempts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use; feeling restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down/control use; staying online for longer than originally intended; jeopardizing or risking the loss of a significant relationship, job, education, or career opportunity because of the Internet; lying to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet; and using the Internet as a means of escaping problems or relieving dysphoric mood.

In the diagnostic criteria of Kimberley Young, Internet addiction is considered an impulse-control disorder.

These diagnostic criteria do not consider the last studies about the difficulty for the addict to regulate the affects (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1997). In a previous study (Caretti, Craparo, & Schimmenti, 2010), we found a correlation between Internet addiction, affect dysregulation, and dissociation. In Internet addicts, the dissociation

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has the purpose to modulate traumatic affective states. Through the dissociation, the subject may build up a parallel and more favorable reality, an easy shelter.

In Internet addicts, both affect dysregulation and dissociation are correlated to attachment disorders (Caretti, Craparo, & Schimmenti, 2010; De Berardis et al., 2009; Zanon, Bertin, Bombi, & Colombo, 2002).

Caretti & Craparo (2009) consider Internet addiction as a syndromic condition characterized by a recurrent and reiterated search for pleasure derived from dependence behavior, associated with abuse, craving, clinically significant stress, and compulsive dependence actions despite the possible negative consequences.

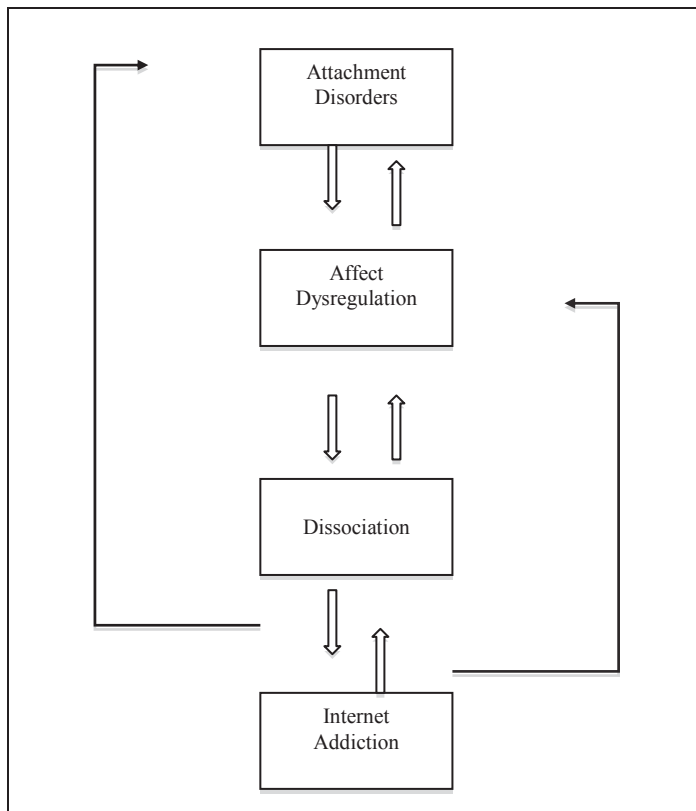


Figure 1. Psychopathological factors of Internet addiction

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

In this study, has been investigated the relationship between Internet addiction, dissociation, alexithymia, and adult attachment styles. The sample consisted of 335 subjects of the normal population of Enna aged between 18 and 21 years ($M = 18.2$; $SD = .50$). The difference between groups (male = 151, 45%; female, = 184, 55%) was not statistically significant with respect to age ($t = ns$).

2.2. Materials

The following measures were used in this study:

1. The alexithymia has been measured using the Toronto Alexithymia Scales–20 Items (TAS-20; Bagby, Taylor, & Parker, 1994), a self-report instrument composed of three subscales: difficulty identifying feelings (F1), difficulty describing feelings (F2), and externally oriented thinking (F3). The TAS-20 uses cut-off scoring: equal to or less than 51 = not alexithymic patient, equal to or greater than 51 = borderline patient, and equal to or greater than 61 = alexithymic patient.

2. The dissociation has been measured using the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES; Carlson, & Putnam, 1993), a self-report instrument to value dissociative symptoms. A cut-off score of 30 has been used to classify subjects with dissociative experiences.

3. The Internet Addiction has been measured using the Internet Use, Abuse, Dependence (IUAD; Talli, D’Andrea, & Cantelmi, 1998; Cantelmi, Toro, & Talli, 2010), a self-report instrument. The test is composed of five subscales:

– *Compensatory escape* (CE): the tendency to escape from the everyday difficulties throughout Internet;

– *Dissociation* (DIS): the appearance of bizarre sensory experiences;

– *Impact on the real life* (IMP): the appearance of consequences in the real life, change of habits, moods, and social relationships;

– *Experimentation* (SPE): the tendency to use Internet to experiment parts of the Oneself and/or look for new emotions.

– *Addiction* (ADD): the appearance of addiction signs, such as the progressive increase of time spent logged on, compulsivity, and excessive involvement (Cantelmi, & Talli, 2009, pp. 28-29).

The cutoff score for all subscale is equal to or greater than 70.

4. The adult attachment has been measured using the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), a self-report instrument to value the attachment styles (Figure 2).

		MODEL OF SELF (DEPENDENCE)	
		Positive	Negative
MODEL OF OTHER (AVOIDANCE)	Positive	CELL I <i>SECURE</i> Comfortable with intimacy and autonomy	CELL II <i>PREOCCUPIED</i> Preoccupied with relationships
	Negative	CELL IV <i>DISMISSING</i> Dismissing of intimacy Counterdependent	CELL V <i>FEARFUL</i> Fearful of intimacy Socially avoidant

Figure 2. Model of adult attachment (Bartholomew, Horowitz, 1991)

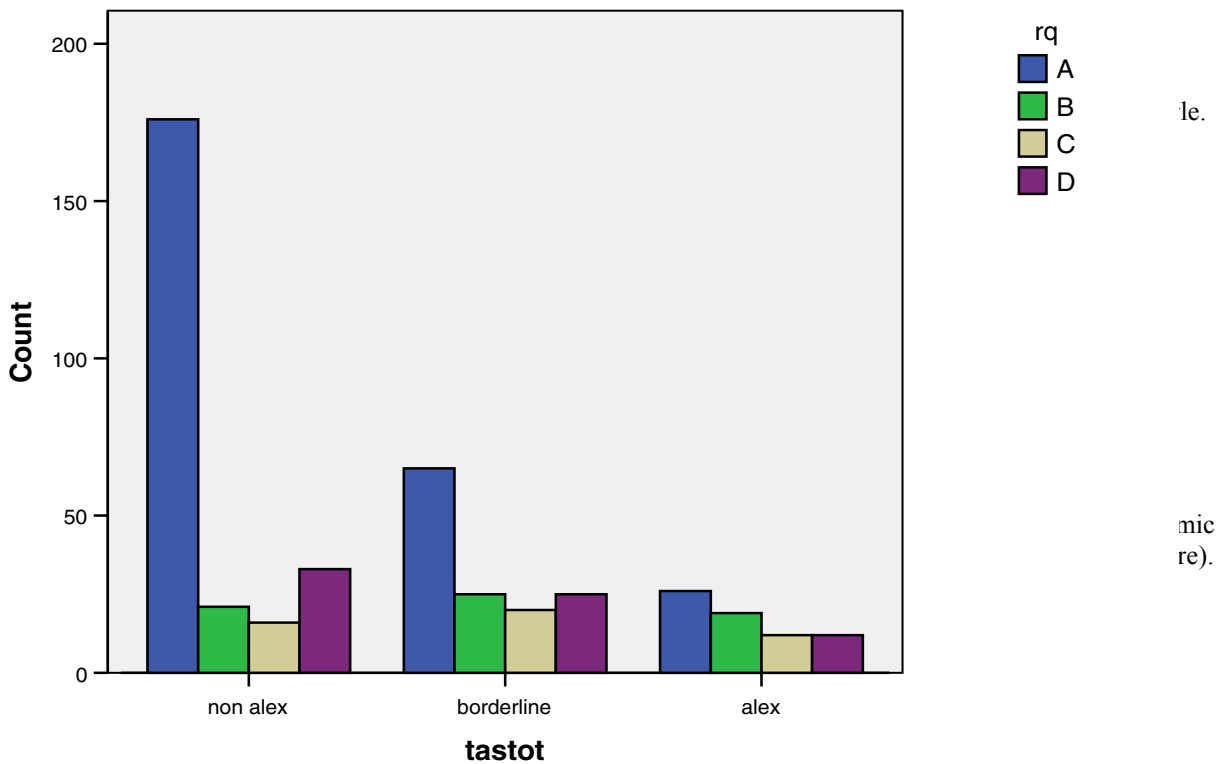
3. Results

Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviation, and clinical cut-off score on the measures of TAS-20, DES, IUAD, and RQ. Nobody student’s response achieved problematic scores: the mean scores are under the clinical cut-off for each self-report instrument.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Mean	S.D.	Cut-off

Bar Chart



Total	204	47	35	49	335
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$\chi^2 (6, N = 335) = 31.41, p < .01$

Table 4. Cross tabulation—Adult Attachment and Dissociation

	Secure	Fearful	Preoccupied	Dismissing	Total
Non-dissociation	143	31	25	29	228
Dissociation	61	16	10	20	107
Total	204	47	35	49	335

$\chi^2 (3, N = 335) = 24.44, p = .485$

Table 5 presents the (Pearson) correlation analysis. All correlations were significant between IUAD, alexithymia, and dissociation. The difficulty of identifying feelings seemed to play an important role on students' dissociative experiences. Another interesting data were found regarding the significant correlation between ADD and the first factor of TAS-20. These data confirm the Internet Addiction Model (Caretti, Craparo, & Schimmenti, 2010) on the dissociative nature of Internet Addiction.

Table 5. Correlations between IUAD, TAS-20, and DES

	CE	DIS	IMP	SPE	ADD	DES	TAS	F1	F2	F3
CE	1									
DIS	,713**	1								
IMP	,410**	,426**	1							
SPE	,622**	,576**	,314**	1						
ADD	,727**	,637**	,447**	,547**	1					
DES	,310**	,329**	,175**	,257**	,357**	1				
TAS	,246**	,274**	,152**	,284**	,238**	,295**	1			
F1	,391**	,407**	,236**	,350**	,392**	,427**	,720**	1		
F2	,156**	,195**	,131*	,245**	,194**	,161**	,657**	,478**	1	
F3	,074	,043	,114*	,109*	,012	,039	,396**	,077	,132*	1

**p ≤ .01, *p ≤ .05

4. Discussion and conclusion

The results of this research confirm a relationship between alexithymia, dissociation, insecure attachment, and Internet addiction. An interesting aspect is the role of both alexithymia and dissociation in Internet addiction. In a previous study, Caretti, Craparo and Schimmenti (2010) verified that the pathological dissociative mechanisms are the best predictors of Internet abuse (Beta = .392; Adj Rsq = .149; p < .01).

The dissociation is usually defined as a deficit of the integrative functions of memory, consciousness, and identity and often is related to traumatic experiences and memories (Liotti, 1999, 2004).

Another important aspect is the association between attachment in childhood and adulthood. For instance, Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that adults who were secure in their romantic relationships were more likely to recall their childhood relationships with parents as being affectionate, caring, and accepting. Several studies have demonstrated an association of the insecure attachment in childhood and adulthood (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999).

Using this theoretical perspective, Internet addiction could represent a psychic retreat necessary to modulate the painful emotions in a subject with an insecure attachment.

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