ADDRESSING SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT ON YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH IN A COMPREHENSIVE FOCUS-GROUP BASED RESEARCH APPROACH

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Abstract: *This paper examines the psychological health effects of excessive social media use among teens, addressing the increasingly concerning issue of internet addiction as a global health threat. Specifically, the focus group research study explores the psychosocial effects, revealing that adolescents frequently immerse themselves in social media and use it as an escape mechanism. The findings highlight the pressing need for tailored interventions to mitigate the potential emotional negative effects and to provide integrated service solutions to support safer and healthier online habits among youth.*

Key words: *youth, psychological health, internet addiction, healthier online habits.*

1. Introduction

One of the most important characteristics of modern society is the increasing impact of online communication tools, especially the internet on people (Cüceloğlu, 2007). The rapidly increasing use of smartphones, tablets, and computers has made the internet an indispensable part of modern society. The negative impact of excessive, inappropriate or addictive use of the internet has attracted much attention from researchers. Internet addiction (IAD) has become a major global public health problem and has led to a dramatic proliferation of research in this area. IAD is defined as a pathological pattern of internet use, found under various labels such as - surfing the internet without self-control, compulsive internet use, problematic internet use, internet abuse or pathological internet use. The user cannot control internet use, which leads to significant impairments in school, work, health, or interpersonal relationships. They find it difficult to give up using the Internet because of its anonymity, the convenience of its ease of accessibility, and use to escape from reality. Furthermore, Lukoff (2004) has carefully studied the factors that increase adolescents' propensity towards the Internet and identified that the desire to be free, to communicate easily, to create an identity,

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and to develop meaningful personal relationships are reasons that make youth stay in the online realm excessively. The types of activities involved in internet addiction include online gaming, social networking, online gambling, online shopping, virtual sex, and information overload.

2. Internet Addiction among Adolescents

Analysis of the literature reveals that addiction is a disorder of thought, emotion, and behavior resulting from a natural adaptation that occurs in the brain. Addiction is a consequence of functioning normally in the brain and is sustained by learning and remembering. Grissel (2019) stated that addicts do not consume because they are addicted, but it is their regular and heavy consumption that makes them addicts. Some people consume addictive stimulants (alcohol, cigarettes, gambling) occasionally, in so-called social contexts, and for them the addiction will be almost impossible to detect. Here too, the brain will adapt, so addiction will set in, but on a much lower scale, because the pattern of consumption is irregular and in small quantities. We can, therefore, conclude that in the case of addiction, an important characteristic is quantity, in conjunction with regularity of consumption. The lack of moderation is a defining element for addicts. They know that if they want to give up an addictive stimulus, the only solution is abstinence, not moderate consumption because the latter will not bring any form of pleasure. Excitement occurs in large, unexpected amounts, which the brain is not yet used to. While spending a 10-minute scrolling may have no effect, spending hours in a world of stimuli can capture me and distract me from the daily unpleasantness (negative reinforcement). Drug consumption (whatever its nature, including excessive internet use or video games) occurs because of the positive effects it generates. Drugs are associated with pleasure, and we call this positive reinforcement. But people don't only consume things for the positivity of the experience but also out of a desire to escape unpleasantness, and we call this negative reinforcement. Playing half vs playing until I win. Drug consumption (and excessive internet use or gaming) exists because of the positive effects it produces. But people don't only consume things for the enjoyment of the experience but also out of a desire to escape unpleasantness, and we call this negative reinforcement.

Young (1998) defined internet addiction as an impulse control disorder. Online addiction is commonly characterized by the inability to have control over time spent on the internet and it involves excessive use or online browsing until the person's functionality is impaired (Young & Abreu, 2011). Examples of behaviors affected by excessive internet use are lack of sleep, poor nutrition (because the individual spends too much time in front of the device), undermining family relationships, or conflicts with family (the person is no longer willing to spend time with close contacts), losing interest in school/service or spending time online at the expense of school.

Internet addiction in young people is particularly well-recognized as a social problem. Previous epidemiological studies using community self-report surveys have reported that the prevalence of Internet addiction (IAD) in adolescents' ranges from 38% to 90%. This wide range of prevalence rates can be accounted for by reasons related to different

study designs, diverse assessment measures, varying diagnostic criteria, different cultural contexts, and distinct study samples. Conceptualizing and defining IAD as an independent and specific psychiatric disorder is still a matter of controversy among health professionals. One of the main arguments and at the same time counterargument is the fact that IAD has often been found comorbid with other mental health conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Gundogar et al., 2012), depression (Yang et al., 2014), anxiety disorders (Dalbudak et al., 2013), low self-esteem (Aydm, 2011) impulsivity (Lee et al., 2012), social anxiety (Dalbudak et al., 2013) and suicide risk (Lin et al., 2014).

Furthermore, some researchers have proposed to focus on addiction to 'activities' on the internet rather than on addiction to the 'internet' itself. In this direction, the American Psychiatric Association proposed "Internet Gaming Disorder" in 2013 as a health condition for further study (DSM-5) (APA, 2013).

3. Objectives and Method

The main aim of the qualitative, exploratory research was to identify adolescents' perceptions and attitudes towards prolonged online use and its impact on interpersonal relationships, motivation, academic performance, and general well-being, as well as to identify solutions to improve the mental health of children and adolescents.

The target group included adolescents who use social networks for more than 6 hours a day, outside of school tasks. The selection was based on a recruitment questionnaire. The methods were focus group and individual in-depth interviews. The focus group, conducted with 12 participants, allowed a broad exploration of the phenomenon under study through the interaction between the subjects, generating a large amount of information and filtering out marginal opinions.

Data collected through this method were analysed using content analysis, aiming to identify patterns of reporting on states of affairs, opinions, and attitudes, without statistical representativeness. The structure of the focus group guides addressed topics such as digital routines, their impact on social and emotional life, awareness of the effects of online use, and possible behavioral changes. The research was conducted in Bucharest, providing valuable qualitative insights into the effects of online use on adolescents.

4. Results

Concerning cell phone and social media use, teens in the focus group stated that they spend a significant amount of time on their cell phones, ranging from 6 hours per day during the school week and up to 9,25 hours on the weekend. Most of this time is dedicated to social media, 70%-95%. However, at weekends, some respondents report more diversified use of the phone, including entertainment apps such as games: "*In a school day I spend about 7 hours on my phone, 90% on social media and 10% on school-related things.*" (student, 16 years old), "*In weekends, I spend somewhere around 8 hours, and I think 6 hours I spend on social media and the rest I play games*" (student, 15

years old).

The most frequently used social media platforms are Instagram and WhatsApp, followed by TikTok. Top activities include scrolling, watching videos, replying to messages, and interacting with friends. Most participants prefer Instagram for social interactions and content consumption: "*Scrolling and maybe I still look at other people's posts, even my own*" (student, 16 years old).

Regarding motivation for using social media, social media attracts teenagers through the diverse and accessible nature of the content. The short, interactive, and varied videos are the main features that maintain the engagement of 67% of youngsters. 37% of respondents value the opportunity to socialize and follow topics of personal interest, such as travel vlogs or creative activities. They associate social media with being a source of quick and engaging entertainment: "*I'm attracted only to 5-second videos that grab your attention. You can see so much content in such a short time*" (student, 15 years old).

Two respondents mention the creative aspect of social media, such as creating content or following travel vlogs: "*Content creation appeals to me, especially the field I work in, manicuring*" (student, 15 years old).

Perceptions of social pressure vary among participants, 83% of the participants feel pressured to be active on platforms to stay connected with friends or to avoid feeling excluded. Others (17%) perceive social media use as a personal choice and do not feel this pressure. However, phone and social media addiction is a recurring theme. Teenagers acknowledge the difficulty in reducing time spent on the phone, despite their efforts to adopt healthier habits. For example: "*Being younger, I am much more drawn to social media. I saw my friends always online and somehow it influenced me to always be there*" (student, 16 years old).

In contrast, another teenager stated: "*For me, social media is a very individual experience. I never felt pressure to use certain platforms*" (student, 17 years old). However, many acknowledge the difficulties of addiction and the impact on everyday behavior: "*I can't be without my phone at any time because I always have to scroll*" (student, 16 years old).

Social media use has both positive and negative effects on social relationships and emotions. 83% of the participants mention that social media gives them opportunities to connect and access useful information. On the other hand, 25% of respondents feel that it affects their ability to concentrate, decreases their productivity, and increases their anxiety. In addition, social media addiction can reduce the time devoted to hobbies or face-to-face interactions: "*It has affected my attention span negatively; I find it much harder to concentrate if I have to learn multiple subjects*" (student, 16 years old).

In addition, social media addiction affects face-to-face interactions and time spent on productive activities: "*It's kind of addictive for me, I'm always talking to my friends instead of doing something productive*" (student, 17 years old).

Almost 58% of the participants are aware of the time spent on their phones and have tried to reduce it by using features such as screen time or apps that block access to certain platforms. However, the success of these methods is limited, with most teenagers admitting that they frequently return to old habits. "*I set my limits, but I*

always gave ignore. Now I get annoyed when I see I have 3 hours and suddenly it jumps to 4 hours" (student, 16 years old). 17% of youngers resorted to creative solutions to reduce time spent on their phones: "*I installed the Forest app. It plants real trees and motivates me to stay off my phone*" (student, 17 years old).

For relaxation and entertainment, teenagers explore alternatives such as sports, creative activities, volunteering, or reading. However, most perceive being without their phone as a difficult experience, associated with anxiety about missing important opportunities or information. 25% of participants, however, recognize the benefits of a break from the phone, including increased productivity and a deeper connection with self and others: "*I need to do something dynamic, go to the park, go for a run, take pictures of people with my camera*" (student, 16 years old). A day without a phone is also seen as both a challenge and an opportunity to detox: "*I would see the mountain of things I can do other than sitting on my phone*" (student, 16 years old). They recognize the difficulties in implementing these changes: "*In an ideal world, I would like to use the phone in balance, but I'm like an alcoholic who keeps going back to the same addiction*" (student, 17 years old).

Adolescents associate social media with a range of emotions, including anxiety, stress, and joy. One participant summarized the emotional impact thus: "*Anxiety, stress, addiction, but also dopamine in the moment*" (student, 17 years old). In terms of desired changes, many would like a better balance between phone use and other activities., limiting time spent on social media to pay more attention to personal relationships, hobbies, and mental health. 17% of participants suggest using the phone for professional and educational purposes rather than excessive entertainment.

Focus group highlights a stark contrast between the perceived benefits of social media - connectivity, entertainment, opportunities - and the negative effects on concentration, productivity, and emotional state. Although teenagers are aware of the negative impact of excessive use, they find it difficult to adopt sustainable strategies to reduce the amount of time spent on the phone. This highlights the need for digital literacy programs that promote healthy technology habits.

5. Discussion, Conclusions, and Limitations

Spending an excessive amount of time on the internet, spending hours navigating in a digital space, is done at the sacrifice of offline actions which can lead to a loss of daily routine and a range of psychological and social consequences. All these types of behavior drive prolonged online presence, leading to detrimental emotional consequences in interpersonal relationships, difficulty or lack of interest in enjoying social interactions, and physical activities, maintaining the same level of motivation and academic performances, and overall well-being.

Our study results underline that adolescents use the internet excessively because it gives them entertainment, but primarily for socializing and making more friends. Most say that they sometimes feel pressured by friends or the feeling that they may lose sight of things if they are not online and so fall behind or are not up to date with what's new. Although they are aware that they are spending excessive time online and try to limit

the time spent on their phones by using monitoring features or social media apps, these measures have limited success. Some are exploring alternatives such as sports, creative activities, or volunteering, but see giving up the phone as a challenge. Despite the negative effects they experience from continuous browsing - feelings of fatigue, loss of concentration, decreased productivity, anxious experiences - and recognizing the benefits of a break from internet use, implementing change remains difficult. Adolescents aspire to a balance in their use of technology, but addiction prevents them from achieving this goal in the long term. This highlights the need for help, an adult human resource, or support groups that can guide and support them in the process. The internet-addicted individual like other people addicted to other objects/substances needs assistance, and support.

Although not yet categorized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2013), internet addiction is considered a mental disorder (Kuss, 2013) by professionals precisely because of the consequences it generates on the individual. It can influence the mental health sphere through states of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, physical through sleep disturbances, nutrition, familial by diminishing family relationships and increasing distance between family members, professional by reducing the efficiency at work, dismissal, and education by decreasing school grades (Flisher, 2010). Internet addiction among teenagers is associated with depression and insomnia (Ceung & Wong, 2011), suicidal thoughts, hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), social phobia and hostility, drug abuse, and problematic alcohol use. Te Wildt's (2007) psychiatric research reveals a significant 78% of German students who were addicted to the internet had depression and impulsivity disorder.

Also, as the phenomenon needs to be approached from all aspects of its reality, a review of the neuroscientific evidence (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012) shows that internet addiction in adolescence can harm identity development (Kim et al., 2012) and can alter the structure of the developing brain (Lin et al., 2014). In addition, it can negatively affect cognitive functioning, lead to poor academic performance and engagement in risky activities, unhealthy eating habits (Kim et al., 2010), poor quality of interpersonal relationships (Milani et al., 2009), and self-harm behaviors (Lam et al., 2009) in adolescents. From the reported negative consequences, it appears that Internet addiction may have a variety of harmful psychosocial and physical effects on adolescents that may require professional intervention (King et al., 2012).

Recent studies conducted in 2023 talk about smartphone addiction and its consequences. Particularly, excessive use of the digital world through the phone can lead to physical, and psychological, and can influence social functioning (Liu, 2023). Specifically, researchers say that sleep quality is influenced, cognitive functioning decreases, academic motivation decreases, and interest in daily activities decreases. The online environment provides the illusion of power, possibilities, and time control and can dissociate the individuals from the here and now, from their offline life.

In treating internet addiction, it is very important to take into account psychological factors such as self-esteem, personality type (neurotic individuals are at higher risk of finding peace in the online world) (Wu et al., 2015), attachment type (studies show that those with insecure attachment are more likely to develop AI (Wu et al., 2015),

psychological stress, psychiatric comorbidity. A meta-analysis of the personal and social factors involved in the formation of internet addiction in adolescents reveals the following (Fumero et al., 2018): internet addiction was associated with psychosocial factors in adolescents, risk factors had a greater impact on AI than protective factors, personal factors showed a stronger association with internet addiction than social factors and hostility, depression, and anxiety showed the strongest association with AI.

Environmental factors also need to be considered. An unsuitable, toxic, or emotionally charged environment can turn the digital world into a place of escape or a refuge. On the other hand, an environment bombarded with devices, where the teenager has access to many technological devices or parental models that overuse the internet, is likely to increase the risk of addiction among teenagers.

Both personal, social, and environmental factors are relevant in seeking addiction treatment. Studies and practices also recommend journals that aim to monitor daily and implicit online activity (in which the adolescent evaluates his/her emotions during online activity, goals, benefits gained, losses, and thoughts). These journals will also monitor conflicts with parents (causes, thoughts, emotions), precisely to understand the effect that excessive use of the Internet can have.

The use of behavioral strategies would be a support in modifying the problematic behavior of prolonged internet use. One suggestion would be a clock that announces after 45 minutes spent online 15 minutes to take a break or do other activities involving movement.

Cognitive reshaping is another suggestion for working with a teen who has such problematic behavior. Identifying thoughts such as I have no control over my Internet use, I am worthless without the Internet in my life to then reframe such ideas through logical arguments through clear evidence. Dini (2008) says that psychoeducation has a substantial role in how parents manage this behavior. In other words, they need to be informed that banning internet access altogether can have negative effects, can cause significant shock, and can be counterproductive in developing a trusting and supportive relationship between parent and child. Experts (Dini, 2008) also recommend establishing a clear daily schedule with and for the adolescent (e.g. time for movement, time for technology, family meals in a room other than the room where the PC is, time for friends, etc.).

Identify with the teenager lists of activities that have been abandoned since the world of the internet, activities that he or she once enjoyed, and gradually integrate them into the teenager's life. If he/she still finds pleasure in old activities, he/she may discover new pleasures and activities. If the excessive time spent on the internet is associated with other disorders - anxiety, depression, ADHD, the recommendation is that working with that disorder either takes precedence or is taken seriously, as there is often an interdependent relationship between the two moods/disorders, supporting each other.

Research suggests that internet addiction has a very low likelihood of spontaneously disappearing among adolescents; rather, an adolescent user with a pathological behavior has a very high likelihood of remaining problematic (King et al., 2012). Without intervention, symptoms of internet addiction are unlikely to subside, and in the absence of treatment, they tend to worsen the severity of symptoms in Axis I disorders, while

interfering with effective treatments for these disorders. Evidence suggests that comorbid disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) reduce the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) (Orzack et al., 2006); however, pharmacological treatments (such as methylphenidate) may be effective in reducing both ADHD and addiction symptoms in this subgroup of clients (Han et al., 2009). Involving parents and teachers in the treatment process shows promising preliminary results.

Griffiths (2008) argues that most "Internet addicts" are not addicted to the Internet per se, but use it as a medium to feed other addictions. In short, a gambling addict who uses the internet to gamble is a gambling addict, not an internet addict (Blaszczynski, 2006). The internet is merely the place where they carry out their chosen addictive behavior. Clinicians should therefore be alert to whether the problematic Internet-related behavior is indeed the client's primary psychological problem and not an unproductive coping strategy or a safety behavior stemming from another pathology (e.g., social anxiety). In addition, internet addiction appears to be comorbid with clinical disorders and premorbid symptoms. In adolescents, internet addiction has been reported to be comorbid with depression and insomnia, suicidal ideation, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, social phobia and hostility, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder aggression (drug use), and problematic alcohol use. These comorbidities might suggest a bidirectional causal relationship and similar etiology (Ko et al., 2008b), as well as an increased severity of psychopathology compared to a single mental health problem (Wu et al., 2015).

Future research could explore effective emotional regulation strategies tailored to insecure attachment styles, particularly in the context of social media use. Young people with anxious attachment may rely too much on social validation, while those with avoidant attachment may become disengaged but still feel affected by idealized context. Investigating whether ineffective coping mechanisms reinforce these patterns could inform interventions to reduce the negative impact of social media on mental health. Adolescents, for example, who spend significant time online -"*90% on social media during school days*" (16-year-old student) - could benefit from targeted strategies to promote healthier self-perceptions.

This study has several strengths but also recognizes certain limitations. One limitation of the present research, results from the fact that 17% of the total participants are women. In a future study, having a more balanced sample would make gender differences testing statistically significant. Another limitation derives from the sample size.

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