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## Addictive Behaviors



## Short Communication

# The impact of early parenting bonding on young adults' Internet addiction, through the mediation effects of negative relating to others and sadness

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The Greek-translated Internet Addiction Test is a three-dimensional instrument.
- A small proportion of the young adults (1%) were severely addicted to Internet.
- Negative relating mediates the path from father's parenting to Internet addiction.
- Sadness mediates the path from mother's parenting to Internet addiction.

## ARTICLE INFO

Available online xxxx

## Keywords:

Parental rearing styles  
Interpersonal relating  
Problematic Internet use  
Loneliness  
Anxiety  
Structural Equation Modeling

## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is the investigation of the potential role of negative relating to others, perceived loneliness, sadness, and anxiety, as mediators of the association between early parental bonding and adult Internet Addiction (IA). The factorial structure of the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) and the prevalence rates of it in a Greek sample will also be investigated. A total of 774 participants were recruited from a Technological Education Institute (mean age = 20.2,  $SD = 2.8$ ) and from high school technical schools (mean age = 19.9,  $SD = 7.4$ ). The IAT was used to measure the degree of problematic Internet use behaviors; the Parental Bonding Instrument was used to assess one's recalled parenting experiences during the first 16 years of life; the shortened Person's Relating to Others Questionnaire was used to assess one's negative (i.e. maladaptive) relating to others (NRO). Both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses confirmed the three-factor structure of the IAT. Only 1.0% of the sample was severely addicted to the Internet. The mediated effects of only the NRO and sadness were confirmed. Negative relating to others was found to fully mediate the effect of both the father's optimal parenting and affectionless control on IA, whereas sadness was found to fully mediate the effect of the mother's optimal parenting on IA. Overall, the results suggest that parenting style has an indirect impact on IA, through the mediating role of negative relating to others or sadness in later life. Both family-based and individual-based prevention and intervention efforts may reduce the incidence of IA.

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## 1. Introduction

Internet addiction (IA) has emerged as a rapidly growing problem in young people. Although official diagnostic criteria do not exist yet, IA can be defined as the excessive, obsessive-compulsive, uncontrollable, tolerance-causing use of the Internet, which also causes significant distress and impairments in daily functioning (Young, 1998, 1999).

Adolescents and young adults (e.g., college/university students) have been shown to be at risk of IA (Tsai & Lin, 2003). European

prevalence estimates of IA vary widely in both adolescents (1% to 11%; Floros, Fisoun, & Siomos, 2010) and college students (6% to 35%; Frangos, Frangos, & Sotiropoulos, 2011; Ni, Yan, Chen, & Liu, 2009). Greek literature also lacks consensus; rates range from 1.5% (Kormas, Critselis, Janikian, Kafetzis, & Tsitsika, 2011) to 8.2% (Siomos, Dafouli, Braimiotis, Mouzas, & Angelopoulos, 2008). Internationally young addicts are predominantly male (Stavropoulos, Alexandraki, and Motti-Stefanidi, 2013; Widianto & Griffiths, 2006).

The interpersonal factors that are associated with IA have received a fair amount of attention in the scholarly literature. The social skill model of problematic Internet use proposes that preference for online social interaction, rather than traditional face to face interaction, is a consequence of one's self-perception of social incompetence (Caplan, 2005). Studies have shown that a poor quality of interpersonal relationships may predispose adolescents to an increased risk of problematic Internet use (Milani, Osualdella, & Di Blasio, 2009). A positive association has

*Abbreviations:* IAT, Internet Addiction Test; IA, Internet addiction; NRO, negative relating to others; PBI, Parental Bonding Instrument; PROQ3, the shortened Person's Relating to Others Questionnaire.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2013.12.002>

Please cite this article as: Kalaitzaki, A.E., & Birtchnell, J., The impact of early parenting bonding on young adults' Internet addiction, through the mediation effects of negative relating to o..., *Addictive Behaviors* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2013.12.002>

also been found between IA and social withdrawal/isolation (Douglas et al., 2008), low social self-efficacy (Iskender & Akin, 2010), and loneliness (Bozoglan, Demirer, & Sahin, 2013; Xiuqin et al., 2010). Anxiety (e.g., Shepherd & Edelman, 2005) and depression have also been positively correlated with problematic Internet use (Dalbudak et al., 2013).

To the authors' knowledge, few studies as yet have assessed the role of self-perceived parenting style with IA (Floros & Siomos, 2013; Floros, Siomos, Fisoun, Dafouli, & Geroukalis, 2013; Xiuqin et al., 2010). Siomos et al. (2012) showed that parental bonding variables were the best predictors for IA. A widely-held assumption is that the early attachment patterns tend to be stable over time and predictive of an adult's interpersonal relationships with others (Bowlby, 1988; Phillips et al., 2013). In other words, an anxiously attached child will continue to have the same attachment style throughout life. The affectionless control (low care and high protection) is the most dysfunctional and harmful parenting style, which is likely to bring about interpersonal incompetencies in adult life (Bowlby, 1988).

Equally important to note is the association of a parental rearing style with symptoms of anxiety or depression (Meites, Ingram, & Siegle, 2012). In all, based upon these previous findings, it would be reasonable to assume that early parenting bonding is likely to predispose an individual to negative relating to others (NRO) in later life, self-perceived loneliness, sadness, and anxiety, which, in turn, may lead to the development of IA. To the authors' knowledge, no one study to date has tried to examine such a link before.

The present study first aims to test (1) the unidimensionality of the IAT, (2) the participants' Internet use prevalence rates, and (3) the impact of parenting bonding upon the IA, through the mediating role of NRO, loneliness, sadness, and anxiety. It is hypothesized that there is a negative indirect relationship between maternal and paternal optimal parenting styles and a positive indirect relationship between the maternal and paternal adverse parenting styles (i.e., affectionless control) and IA that is mediated by NRO, loneliness, sadness, and anxiety.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

Overall 774 participants were recruited: of these 62.9% were undergraduate students from the Technological Education Institute of Crete (27.5% were men and 72.5% were women; the mean age was 20.2,  $SD = 2.8$ ). The remaining 37.1% were high school students from technical education schools (32.7% were men and 67.3% were women; their mean age was 19.9,  $SD = 7.4$ ). Significantly more university students reported self-perceived loneliness compared with high-school students (31.1% vs. 23.8%,  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.79$ ,  $p = .032$ ). Internet addiction scores were also marginally higher for the university students ( $M = 41.2$ ,  $SD = 12.5$ ) compared with the high-school students ( $M = 39.3$ ,  $SD = 13.6$ ;  $t = 1.961$ ,  $p = .050$ ), but the percentage of mild, moderate, or severe users did not differ across the two samples. No other differences between the two samples were found.

Questionnaires were administered during regularly scheduled classes by the senior author. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their rights (i.e., anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation). The response rate was 97.4% for the University students and 98.6% for the high school students. There was no compensation for participation.

### 2.2. Measures

The demographics included questions on sex, age, and feelings of self-perceived loneliness ("Do you feel lonely?"), sadness ("Do you frequently feel sad?"), and anxiety ("Do you feel that you are more stressed than your peers?").

The Internet Addiction Test (IAT; Young, 1998) consists of 20 self-reported items, rated on a 5-item Likert scale, to determine the degree

of problematic Internet use behaviors. Scores were classified into mild (20–49), moderate (50–79), and severe (80–100) levels of IA (Young, 1998b). The Greek translation, which has good psychometric properties, was used (Siomos, Floros, Mouzas, & Angelopoulos, 2009). In the current study, the Cronbach alpha was .91.

The Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) is a 25 item self-report measure, rated on a 4-item Likert scale, of one's recalled parenting experiences during the first 16 years of life. Four types of bonding can be extracted: Optimal parenting (high care and low protection), neglectful parenting (low care and low protection), affectionate constraint (high care and high protection), and affectionless control (low care and high protection). Care reflects parental warmth and affection versus indifference and rejection and control reflects parental control and intrusion versus encouragement of autonomy and independence. The Greek-validated PBI, which has good psychometric properties (Avagianou & Zafropoulou, 2008), was used. In the present study, the Cronbach alphas for the maternal and paternal care were .84 and .85, respectively and for the protection were .68 and .67, respectively.

The shortened Person's Relating to Others Questionnaire (PROQ3; Birtchnell, Hammond, Horn, De Jong, & Kalaitzaki, 2013) is a 48-item measure, rated on a 4-item Likert scale, of negative (i.e. maladaptive/dysfunctional) relating to others (NRO). NRO reflects one's inability to establish and maintain mutually satisfying relationships with others. Higher scores represent more relating deficits. The Greek translation has been found to be psychometrically sound (Birtchnell, Hammond, Horn, De Jong, & Kalaitzaki, 2013). In the current study the Cronbach alpha was .84.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Factor structure of the IAT

An exploratory factor analysis, using the principal axis extraction method followed by a varimax orthogonal rotation, yielded three factors, accounting for 48.9% of the variance. The first factor ( $\alpha = .85$ ) was labeled "withdrawal and social problems" (item nos. 3, 4, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20), the second one ( $\alpha = .81$ ) "time management and performance" (item nos. 5, 6, 8, 9, 17, 18), and the third ( $\alpha = .61$ ) "excessive use" (item nos. 1, 2, 7, 14). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to test the fit of the three-factor model (Model I) compared with the unidimensional one (Model II). The fit indices of both models are shown in Table 1. The incorporation of the error covariances between items 6–8 and 3–19 substantially improved both models' fit. The three-factor model (Ib) provided better fit, compared to the unidimensional (IIb).

### 3.2. Prevalence rates of IA

Overall, 25.6% of the respondents were involved in normal use, 51.0% were involved in mild Internet use, 22.4% in moderate use, and 1.0% in severe (addictive) use. Males had significantly higher overall IAT score (43.1) than females (39.4;  $t_{(760)} = 3.611$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Significantly more men (1.8%) than women (0.6%) were severely addicted ( $\chi^2_{(3)} = 14.960$ ,  $p = .002$ ).

### 3.3. A mediation analysis of the impact of parenting bonding on IA

Siomos et al. (2012) have shown that affectionate control and optimal parenting were associated with higher and lower IA scores. For this reason, they were selected as the independent variables. The hypothesized effects of the independent variables on IA through the role of the mediators (NRO, loneliness, sadness, and anxiety) were examined through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Two alternative models were compared with the Robust Maximum Likelihood (RML) estimation method. In Model Ia, parental and maternal optimal parenting and affectionate control were assumed to have a direct effect on IA and an indirect

**Table 1**  
Summary goodness-of-fit statistics of the one-dimensional and three-dimensional models of the IA.

	CMIN/DF	SRMSR	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Model Ia	3.467	0.040	0.902	0.914	0.060
Model Ib (err6 → err8)	2.789	0.037	0.929	0.938	0.051
Model Ic (err3 → err19)	2.533	0.035	0.939	0.947	0.047
Model IIa	4.506	0.046	0.860	0.875	0.071
Model IIb (err6 → err8)	3.554	0.043	0.898	0.910	0.061
Model IIc (err3 → err19)	3.277	0.041	0.909	0.920	0.058

Note. Models Ia to Ic: three-dimensional models; Models IIa to IIc: one-dimensional models. The  $\chi^2$ /degrees of freedom ratio (CMIN/DF) below 3 (Kline, 2005), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMSR) between 0.06 and 0.08 or less, the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and the comparative fit index (CFI) between 0.90 and 0.95, the coefficient of determination (CD) above 0.90, and finally the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) no greater than 0.06 suggest good model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

effect through the mediators (partially mediated model). In Model IIa, the effects of parental and maternal optimal parenting and affectionate control were assumed to have only an indirect effect on IA through the mediators (complete mediated model).

The paths from both anxiety and loneliness to IA were non-significant, and were left out in the second step of the analysis. After the incorporation of the error covariances between items 6–8 and 3–19, both models (Models Ib and IIb) adequately fitted the data, with Model Ib being slightly better ( $\chi^2$ /d.f. = 2.471, SRMR = 0.042, CFI = 0.913, RMSEA = 0.048) than the complete mediation model ( $\chi^2$ /d.f. = 2.466, SRMR = 0.047, CFI = 0.912, RMSEA = 0.048). The paths from father's affectionless control and optimal parenting to NRO, and the path from NRO to IA, were significant, whereas the paths from father's affectionless control and optimal parenting to IA were not. The paths from mother's optimal parenting to sadness and the path from sadness to IA were significant, whereas the path from mother's optimal parenting to IA was non-significant. Fig. 1 shows the path diagram with the estimated standardized beta coefficients of Model IIb.

#### 4. Discussion

The dimensionality of the Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT) still causes much debate. In this study a three-factor model provided better fit than the one-factor model. The majority of the studies have supported the multidimensionality of the IAT, ranging from two factors (e.g., Watters, Keefer, Kloosterman, Summerfeldt, & Parker, 2013) to as many as seven (Caplan, 2002). Although Siomos, Floros, Mouzas, and Angelopoulos (2009) found four factors in a Greek sample, they always used it as unidimensional in their studies (Floros & Siomos, 2013; Floros, Siomos, Fisoun,

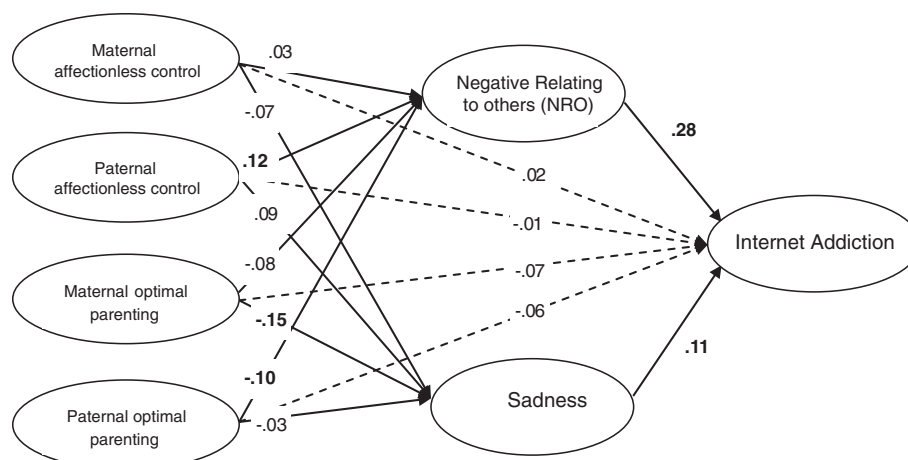
Dafouli, & Geroukalis, 2013). The controversial number of factors may be attributed to the sample selection and composition. Siomos et al. (2009) sample was younger than that of the present study and it was recruited from only two Greek towns. The study findings suggest that the IAT is a valid instrument for assessing IA in adolescents and young adults in Greece, though further research is needed.

It was a surprise to find a relatively low rate (1%) of severe or addictive Internet use. It was, however, comparable to that (1.5%) of the study by Kormas, Critselis, Janikian, Kafetzis, and Tsitsika (2011). This may be attributed to the relatively low percentage of Internet use in Greece, compared to that of the European Union (46% vs. 70%; Society of Information Observatory, 2011). Nearly one fourth of the study participants (22.4%) were involved in moderate use, which potentially may develop IA. Consistent with the expectations, more males than females were severely addicted. This may be due to the increased frequency of online gaming or visit of sex pages by males compared with females (Young, 1998).

A notable finding of this study was the impact of parental rearing styles on IA through the mediating role of NRO and sadness. Contrary to the findings by Siomos et al. (2012), affectionless control (by the father) was found to have an indirect impact on IA through NRO. Therefore, exposing a child to affectionless control in early life seems to predispose in maladaptive relationships with others in later life, which in turn, leads to IA. Consistent with the expectations (Floros & Siomos, 2013), it was found that optimal parenting has an indirect effect on IA, through either NRO (for the father) or sadness (for the mother). In all, father's affectionless control and optimal parenting on IA was entirely mediated by the NRO, whereas mother's optimal parenting on IA was entirely mediated by sadness.

There are several limitations to this study. It was cross-sectional and causal inferences need to be longitudinally verified. Prevalence rates could have been underestimated due to social desirability responding. Parental bonding was based on retrospective data. Information from other sources, such as parents, could have cross-validated self-reported data. Lastly, had the sample been recruited from other high-schools, besides the technical ones, the results may have been different.

Our study has sought to extend the understanding in the field of young adults' IA and especially of the factors influencing IA. As our findings suggest, it is imperative to recognize the antecedents of IA. The implications for both prevention and intervention programs to reduce the incidence of IA are noteworthy. Should inappropriate parental rearing styles impact IA, either directly or indirectly, professionals may take preventive actions in helping parents to improve or give up improper rearing styles. Caring and protective parents, yet respecting children's autonomy could safeguard their children from the risk of developing IA (Floros & Siomos, 2013). Having no influence to



**Fig. 1.** The path diagram with the estimated standardized beta coefficients of Model IIb. Significant coefficients are bold typed.

deviations of one's early attachment styles, efforts may focus on the NRO. Ameliorating NRO and promoting positive relating styles could buffer an individual from IA. Both family-based and individual-based preventive approaches against IA may be necessary.

#### Role of funding sources

There was no involvement of any funding source in any part of this research.

#### Contributors

A. E. Kalaitzaki designed the study, carried out the literature review, formulated the research questions, carried out the statistical analyses, and wrote the paper (draft and all revisions). J. Birtchnell assisted with the literature review and contributed in revising the paper. All authors have read and approved the manuscript.

#### Conflict of interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

#### Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the students Eleni Patedaki, Kiriaki Pigi, & Artemis-Maria Sikiotaki for their contribution in recruiting the sample.

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