



INTERNET ADDICTION AS A RISK FACTOR FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEPRESSION: PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS AND PREVENTIVE APPROACHES

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Abstract. *This paper examines internet addiction as a potential risk factor for the development of depressive symptoms, focusing on the psychological mechanisms underlying problematic internet use and emotional disturbances. Particular attention is given to cognitive distortions, emotional dysregulation, social isolation, reduced self-control and maladaptive coping strategies. Internet addiction is considered a multidimensional behavioural problem characterised by impaired control over online activities and persistent engagement despite negative consequences. The study analyses the relationship between excessive internet involvement and depressive manifestations, including emotional exhaustion, decreased motivation, negative self-evaluation and reduced psychological well-being. It is argued that the relationship should not be interpreted as exclusively causal or unidirectional, and that prevention requires a comprehensive approach addressing cognitive characteristics, emotional needs, interpersonal relationships and patterns of digital engagement.*

Keywords: *internet addiction, depression, problematic internet use, psychological risk factors, emotional dysregulation, cognitive distortions, social isolation, psychological well-being, behavioural addiction, prevention.*

INTRODUCTION

The widespread integration of digital technologies into everyday life has fundamentally transformed communication, education, professional activities and interpersonal relationships. Internet resources provide extensive opportunities for acquiring information, maintaining social connections and participating in various forms of intellectual and recreational activity. However, the uncontrolled and psychologically dependent use of online platforms may be associated with significant difficulties in emotional regulation, interpersonal functioning and psychological well-being. Internet addiction has therefore become an important subject of contemporary psychological research, particularly in relation to depressive symptoms and other emotional disturbances (Anderson, Steen & Stavropoulos, 2017:430-454).



Problematic internet use is commonly characterised by difficulties in controlling online behaviour, excessive psychological involvement in digital activities and continued internet engagement despite negative consequences for everyday functioning. It is important to distinguish problematic use from frequent but purposeful internet activity, since the amount of time spent online does not independently determine the presence of addictive behavioural patterns (Anderson, Steen & Stavropoulos, 2017:435). The psychological significance of internet addiction is primarily associated with impaired behavioural control, emotional dependence upon online experiences and interference with social, educational and personal responsibilities (Lau et al., 2018:633-643).

The aim of the present paper is accordingly to examine the psychological mechanisms through which problematic internet use may be associated with depressive symptoms, and to determine the directions of preventive work that follow from the existing longitudinal evidence (Villanueva-Blasco, García-Guerra & Rial-Boubeta, 2026:108561).

MAIN PART

The relationship between internet addiction and depression represents a complex psychological problem involving several interacting mechanisms. Depressive symptoms may include persistent sadness, reduced interest in previously enjoyable activities, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, difficulties in concentrating and disturbances of sleep or of daily functioning. Individuals experiencing such emotional difficulties may increasingly rely upon online activities in order to avoid unpleasant experiences, to reduce loneliness or to obtain temporary emotional satisfaction (Yi et al., 2021:12869).

At the same time, problematic internet involvement may contribute to circumstances associated with depressive symptoms, including disrupted sleep, reduced participation in meaningful offline activities, interpersonal conflicts and difficulties in maintaining everyday responsibilities. Longitudinal research provides evidence of associations in both directions, although the strength and direction of these relationships vary across studies. Lau and colleagues, in a prospective investigation involving adolescents, found that internet addiction predicted subsequent probable depression, while depressive symptoms also predicted later internet addiction (Lau et al., 2018:633-643). More recent longitudinal evidence similarly indicates that emotional distress and problematic internet use may reinforce one another over time (Villanueva-Blasco, García-Guerra & Rial-Boubeta, 2026:108561).



Cognitive mechanisms occupy an important position in explaining the relationship between internet addiction and depressive manifestations. Individuals who demonstrate problematic internet behaviour may develop unrealistic expectations regarding online communication, digital achievements and social recognition. Repeated comparison with idealised representations of other people's lives may contribute to negative self-evaluation and to dissatisfaction with personal circumstances, particularly when individuals interpret online information without sufficient critical assessment (Anderson, Steen & Stavropoulos, 2017:442).

Jabbor, in his research on the essence of cognitive methods in psychological research, examines the methodological significance of cognitive approaches to understanding psychological processes (Jabbor, 2020:28-31). This perspective can be applied to investigating the cognitive characteristics associated with problematic internet use, including selective attention to emotionally significant online information, maladaptive interpretations of social feedback and difficulties in evaluating the consequences of digital behaviour. Cognitive distortions may influence both the persistence of problematic internet engagement and the development of negative emotional experiences. Consequently, the analysis of cognitive information processing provides a relevant methodological foundation for understanding the psychological vulnerability associated with internet addiction.

The subjective interpretation of digital information also deserves particular attention. Online communication frequently involves textual messages, comments, social evaluations and symbolic representations that may acquire different psychological meanings depending upon the individual's emotional state and previous experiences. Jabbor, in his work devoted to the psycholinguistic analysis of textual material, addresses the psychological study of the perception and interpretation of text (Zhabbor, 2019:19-21). Although this research does not directly examine internet addiction or depression, its methodological orientation is relevant to understanding how individuals perceive emotionally significant information in digital environments.

For example, ambiguous online comments may be interpreted as rejection, as criticism or as evidence of personal inadequacy by individuals who already demonstrate negative self-evaluation. Such interpretations may intensify emotional discomfort and encourage the repeated checking of online interactions in search of reassurance. The psychological



effects of digital communication therefore depend not only upon the content of online information but also upon the cognitive and emotional processes through which it is interpreted. This relationship highlights the importance of examining internet addiction within a broader framework of cognitive appraisal, emotional sensitivity and individual meaning formation (Jabbor, 2020:28-31; Zhabbor, 2019:19-21).

Emotional dysregulation constitutes another important mechanism potentially connecting problematic internet use with depressive symptoms. Individuals experiencing difficulties in managing stress, anxiety, loneliness or interpersonal disappointment may use online activities as a means of temporary emotional relief. Although digital engagement may provide short-term distraction or social support, excessive reliance upon this strategy can interfere with the development of more adaptive responses to psychological difficulties. Over time, the repeated avoidance of unpleasant emotions through internet use may become associated with reduced behavioural flexibility and with difficulties in addressing the original sources of emotional distress (Yi et al., 2021:12869).

Yi and colleagues, using longitudinal data from adolescents, identified a predictive relationship from depressive symptoms to subsequent internet addiction, while also demonstrating associations involving coping strategies (Yi et al., 2021:12869). Their findings indicate that maladaptive coping may be relevant to the coexistence of problematic internet behaviour and depressive symptoms.

Social and interpersonal factors may further influence the relationship between internet addiction and depression. Excessive involvement in online activities may reduce opportunities for face-to-face communication, for participation in meaningful social activities and for the maintenance of supportive interpersonal relationships. However, digital communication should not automatically be regarded as a source of social isolation, since online platforms may also provide valuable opportunities for emotional support and social connectedness. The psychological consequences of internet use depend upon the nature of the online activities, upon individual vulnerabilities and upon the quality of the relationships maintained both online and offline (Anderson, Steen & Stavropoulos, 2017:446).

The systematic review by Anderson, Steen and Stavropoulos emphasised the importance of individual, contextual and activity-related factors in understanding problematic internet use (Anderson, Steen & Stavropoulos, 2017:430-454). This



perspective suggests that psychological vulnerability cannot be adequately explained through internet exposure alone. Family relationships, perceived social support, emotional difficulties and patterns of digital engagement should be considered together when the risk of depressive manifestations is evaluated.

The relationship between internet addiction and depressive symptoms should also be interpreted with methodological caution. Cross-sectional associations cannot establish whether problematic internet use contributes to depression, whether depressive symptoms increase vulnerability to internet addiction, or whether both are influenced by common psychological and social factors. Longitudinal findings are not entirely consistent. A study involving Japanese adolescents, for example, reported a predictive effect of problematic internet use upon later depressive symptoms at one assessment interval («Temporal directional relationship...», 2021), whereas other longitudinal research identified depressive symptoms as a predictor of subsequent problematic internet behaviour (Yi et al., 2021:12869). A recent systematic review of the longitudinal evidence also concluded that emotional problems and problematic internet use frequently demonstrate reciprocal relationships, while emphasising the differences across study designs and psychological measures (Villanueva-Blasco, García-Guerra & Rial-Boubeta, 2026:108561).

CONCLUSION

Internet addiction represents a significant psychological concern that may be associated with increased vulnerability to depressive symptoms. The theoretical analysis indicates that problematic internet use and depression are connected through multiple psychological mechanisms, including maladaptive cognitive interpretations, emotional dysregulation, negative self-evaluation, social difficulties and ineffective coping strategies (Jabbor, 2020:28-31; Yi et al., 2021:12869). Nevertheless, the relationship should not be interpreted as exclusively causal or unidirectional, since depressive symptoms may also contribute to the development and persistence of problematic internet behaviour (Lau et al., 2018:633-643).

The prevention of depressive manifestations associated with problematic internet use requires a comprehensive psychological approach that takes into account individual cognitive characteristics, emotional needs, interpersonal relationships and patterns of digital engagement (Anderson, Steen & Stavropoulos, 2017:430-454). Particular importance should be attached to developing adaptive coping strategies, to strengthening



emotional regulation, to improving the critical evaluation of online information and to supporting balanced participation in digital and offline activities (Villanueva-Blasco, García-Guerra & Rial-Boubeta, 2026:108561).

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