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**FAMILY FUNCTIONING, PERCEPTION OF RISKY BEHAVIOR
AND INTERNET ADDICTION IN ITALIAN ADOLESCENTS**

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Abstract

Literature has demonstrated the adaptive influence of family functioning toward manifestation of problem behaviors in adolescence. These dimensions act on both internalizing and externalizing symptoms. During adolescence, crucial phase in the developmental process, family must be able to combine the need of independence with the creation of a solid family climate capable of containing adolescent uncertainties. The research goal is to investigate the influence of family functioning on the perception of risky behaviors and the possible presence of a psychopathological use of the Internet in a group of Sicilian adolescents.

The research involved 100 high school students, aged between 15 and 18 ($M = 16.14$; $S.D = 0.49$), who completed following instruments: the *Family Assessment Device* to measure family functioning, the *Cognitive Appraisal of Risky Events* to investigate the perception of risky behaviors, and the *Internet Addiction Test* to evaluate the possible presence of the psychopathological Internet use.

Data show that the behavioral control, perceived within the family context, determines a more realistic perception of risk behaviors; furthermore, a greater problem-solving capacity and family communication lead to reduce the internet use in adolescents participating in the research.

Family represents the favored context of learning beliefs and patterns, that affect the broader regulatory social environment, for this reason, it is considered the privileged context on which to intervene to reduce the adolescents' behavior problems. Some aspects of family functioning, such as poor supervision, discipline and inconsistent communication, seem to influence the adoption of risky behaviors among Sicilian adolescents.

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Keywords: Adolescence, family functioning, risk, internet addiction



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1. Introduction

Adolescence is considered a critical and decisive phase in the developmental process of a person, that begins at about 12 years of age with puberty and ends at about the age of 22 with identity consciousness and social identification (Pellerone, 2015; Dunkel, 2000). During this phase, adolescents face daily uncertainties, fragility and instability. Without adequate support and an adaptive functioning family, adolescents risk manifesting antisocial behaviors that may compromise their social integration.

Today, having a wide range of options could constitute an obstacle to the construction of identity, and the exploration phase could be long and confused (Pellerone, Spinello, Sidoti, & Miccichè, 2015).

Current investigations seem to be the direct consequence of the social changes that led to the emergence of a new phase of development between adolescence and young adulthood, characterized by a postponement of many areas of development, including identity (Alsaker & Kroger, 2006; Arnett, 2000). In this transition-phase, the family is asked to identify the needs of greater independence of children, through the creation of a solid family environment which is capable of containing the uncertainties and fragility typical in adolescence (Iacolino, Pellerone, Pace, Ramaci & Castorina, 2016; Pellerone, Formica, Hernandez Lopez, Migliorisi & Granà, 2017). This instability, which can be linked to influence by deviant groups, could lead to an adolescent assuming risky behavior.

1.1. Identity development

In scientific works, Erikson's Paradigm (1950) and Marcia's Model (1989) represent two psychosocial approach as which interpret individual development as a process that involves the resolution of a range of developmental tasks. The first Model underlines the existence of specific and developmental tasks which is manifested when there is an exchange between personal (biological and psychological) characteristics with the social and cultural demands of the environment that causes a crisis. This crisis offers the subject three different opportunities for resolution: *development*, *regression* and/ or *stasis* (Erikson, 1950). According to the author, the process of identity construction includes eight phases that occur throughout the entire life span and correspond to different developmental tasks (Erikson, 1959;1968): Trust vs. Mistrust Hope (0 - 1½ years), Autonomy vs. Shame Will (1½ - 3 years), Initiative vs. Guilt Purpose (3 - 5 years), Industry vs. Inferiority Competency (5 - 12 years), Identity vs. Role Confusion Fidelity (12 - 18 years), Intimacy vs. Isolation Love (18 - 40 years), Generativity vs. Stagnation Care (40 - 65 years) and Ego Integrity vs. Despair (over 65 years).

Marcia's Model improves on Erikson's model and develops the theory of "states of identity", which can be defined as the styles through which to challenge identity problems in adolescence. Specifically, the failure of this transition leads to diffusion identity, in which the adolescent seems to be lost and without future plans (Luyckx, Goossens & Soenens, 2006; Pellerone, Passanisi & Bellomo, 2015). Furthermore, the literature has highlighted how this identity can be connected to disorderly behaviors, impulsivity and lower abilities to cope with stress (Ramaci, Pellerone & Iacolino, 2017; Ramaci, Pellerone, Ledda & Rapisarda 2017; Specchiale et al., 2013; Sprinthall & Collins, 1995).

Similarly, Baumeister (1988) argues that historical changes in the cultural and social context can cause changes in the style of personal identity construction, describing identity as a mechanism of

adaptation between the individual and the context emphasizing the importance of culture that, through rules and values, offers the direction in which personal identities must be directed.

Cotè (1996) introduced the concept of “identity capital” which refers to the quality and quantity of investments, that are the set of personal and environmental resources that a person makes regarding the construction of his own identity (Ramaci 2017). According to Côté, identity can be defined as the combination of psychological resources and the learned social passport that allows people to manage their behavior and their lives in an adaptive way in relation to the context in which they live.

Furthermore, Berzonsky and Kuh (2000) deal with the issue of identity building from a cognitive-constructivist perspective. According to the authors, each individual can have a distinct way of analyzing the themes concerning the construction of the Self and the relationship with his own domain; the ways in which individuals deal with the process of identity construction are defined in terms of "styles", to underline the fact that the personal approach to changes can differentiate one individual to such an extent that it is necessary to implement a real cognitive strategy, which is configured as a dynamic process of social problem-solving, focusing mainly on individual differences regarding personal experiences of coding, representation and social action that precede every occasion in which the adolescent is pushed to take an important decision (Pellerone, Ramaci, Herrera Lopez & Craparo, 2017).

Finally, Kunnen and Bosma (2012), following Marcia’s Model, proposed a dynamic model based on the psychosocial perspective of identity. Their model focuses on the study of the structure and process of adolescent identity formation and notes a change in the strength of commitment and the level of exploration during late adolescence. It is also highlighted that individuals differ from each other, in readiness to engage in exploration after perceiving conflicts between events and identities, depending on their openness to experience. In their model, Kunnen and Bosma (2012) specified the direction and type of connections between these elements, suggesting that interactions would be activated by events that, depending on the importance of the domain, would have an endorsing or contradictory effect, which would respectively negatively or positively affect the *exploration in breadth* which, in turn, would have a negative effect on the strength of commitment, or if the strength of the commitment remains high, taking into account the level of openness to experience, a conflicting perception of the event could have a positive influence on *exploration in depth*, which, in turn, will affect future results.

2. Problem Statement

Jessor's problematical behavior theory (Jessor, Turbin, & Costa, 1998) provides a clear and explicative vision of the role of risk and protection factors at an individual, interpersonal and social level, influencing their risky behaviors. According to this theory, protection factors decrease the probability of assuming problematic behaviors, by providing positive social action models and a certain degree of self-control and monitoring on the conduct within a supportive social context; risk factors, on the contrary, increase the possibility of becoming involved in dysfunctional behaviors due to greater individual vulnerability and exposure to social models of deviant behavior, also based on contextual opportunities to assume problematic conduct.

When the protection factors are elevated, the possibility that problematic behaviors arise is poor, because the presence of risk factors, which may compromise the development and adaptation of the

subject, is neutralized. The research conducted on the basis of the theoretical model of Jessor and colleagues (1995) showed strong relationships between protection and risk factors, identified by the theory and, different addictive behavior (such as use of substances, antisocial behavior and unprotected sex) in males and females, of different ages, and coming from different socio-cultural contexts (Costa, Jessor, & Turbin, 2005).

Among the personal variables that fall within the protection factors, two take on particular importance: risk awareness (although the children are aware of the physical consequences of problematic behaviors such as cigarette smoking, they tend to underestimate them), and the values (i.e. the parameters adopted by the subject to evaluate something as socially or personally desirable). The literature on risky factors in adolescence also highlights how disapproval of deviance, and the importance attributed to school experience and religion, represent the important individual protective factors that can affect the choices of adolescents (Pellerone, Ramaci, Granà, & Craparo, 2017; Pellerone, Tolini, & Polopoli, 2016; Santisi, Magnano, & Ramaci, 2018).

3. Research Questions

Adolescence is a critical phase not only for the adolescent, who in this phase is perceived as an active agent and able to make choices about his own life, but for the whole family system of which he is a part (Pellerone, Ramaci, Parrello, Guariglia, & Giaimo, 2017). The delicate task of integrating the legitimate need for children's independence and autonomy, with the cohesion of affection and with the negotiation of new rules of relationship, belongs to the family.

Brown and Mann (1990) have stressed that parents play a fundamental role in the process that leads adolescents to become independent and competent decision-makers. On the same line of thought, Pallini (2008) has shown that a relationship of secure attachment with parents allows the adolescent to experience the emotional closeness that underlies the process of internalization of parental norms and values, which will become the points of reference for his future choices. The reported literature suggests that the social and family dimensions may influence the experimentation of risky behaviors in adolescence, but the outcomes of this conditioning could be different, in relation to individual characteristics such as the development of identity and the possible presence of affecting symptoms. Specifically, the main risk factors are: poor development of identity, absence of emotional support, presence of punitive parenting behavior, parental psychological control and socio-cultural disadvantages.

The family assumes an important protective function with respect to the implication of risky behavior in adolescence. In particular, Adalbjarnardottir and Hafsteinsson (2001) examine the way in which understanding parental control and the quality of the parent-child relationship can be considered effective protective factors against the adoption of risky behaviors. Similarly, Branstetter and Furman (2013), highlight how the use of substances in adolescence is expressed by a complex interaction between intrapersonal and interpersonal risk factors. The disposition to talk about the risks related to the consumption of substances, as well as the benefits linked to a possible interruption, is strictly related to the decision by adolescents to end the consumption (Van Zundert, Van de Ven, Engels, Otten, & Van Den Eijnden, 2007).

In general, adequate supervision in a family (such as the knowledge of where the children are placed, which friends they play with, and the activities they perform during their free time) and a monitoring of the conduct of their children (through the establishment of rules, punishments, limits of action and expectations towards the conduct of children) are negatively correlated with the incursion of various risky behaviors and serve as an important factor in promoting well-being in adolescence (Pellerone, Iacolino, Mannino, Formica, & Zabbara, 2017). The protective role of the parental model is also confirmed by a series of researches (Pellerone, Formica, Hernandez Lopez, Migliorisi, & Granà, 2017; Stanton et al., 2004) on the changes in the balance between parents and children during adolescence, which is protective and is defined as having flexibility in the exercise of control over the behavior of children, which goes in the direction of granting greater space for autonomy and self-regulation of behavior as the age increases (Buist, Dekovic, Meeus, & van Aken, 2004).

As far as parenting is concerned, adolescents exposed to the psychological control of their parents seem to adopt the same strict rules proposed by their parents, which leads them to live inadequately, demonstrating the inability to achieve socially fixed and personal goals (Craparo et al., 2018; Pellerone, Craparo, & Tornabuoni, 2016).

An in-depth aspect from the literature of the relationship between parenting and antisocial behavior in adolescence (Smith & Farrington, 2004), is the intergenerational continuity of antisocial behavior and how parental models play a role in these continuities. There are very few studies of this nature (Formica et al., 2017), since the time required to carry out this research generally exceeds twenty years and there are many practical difficulties in maintaining contact and cooperation with a group of participants in this time frame.

4. Purpose of the Study

The objective of the research is to investigate the influence of family functioning on the psychopathological use of Internet and the perception of risky behaviors, in a group of Sicilian adolescents. In agreement with the literature we expected that: a) the behavioral control, perceived within the family context, could determine a reduced level of internet use in adolescents; b) the general level of adaptive family functioning could influence the perception of risky activities; c) the behavior control could influence the expected involvement in risky activities of adolescents.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Participants

The research involved 100 high school students, aged between 15 and 18 ($M = 16.14$; $S.D = 0.49$), of which 85 boys and 15 girls. The research lasted for 1 year; the group of participants involved all students attending the last 3 years of high school, through authorization of headmasters and teachers. Administration of instruments took place during school timetable.

The general group of participants consisted of 125 students. Although all subjects agreed to be part of the research, there was a mortality rate of 20%. This happened because the instruments were

administered on two different days and the possible absence of students made it difficult to complete the compilation of all protocols.

The consent of the school authorities and the students involved in the study was sought before the distribution and collection of the instruments. The questionnaires were anonymous, and the participants were informed of the aim and structure of the study. All participants provided written informed consent.

The research was approved by the Internal Review Board of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences at the “Kore” University of Enna.

5.2. Instruments

Participants completed an anamnestic questionnaire, the *Family Assessment Device* to measure the family functioning, the *Cognitive Appraisal of Risky Events* to investigate the perception of risky behaviors, and the *Internet Addiction Test* to evaluate the possible presence of the psychopathological Internet use.

Anamnestic data were collected through the administration of a questionnaire constructed ad hoc to acquire basic information, such as age, sex, and year attended.

Family function was measured with the *Family Assessment Device* (FAD) by Epstein, Baldwin, and Bishop (1983) in Italian version of Grandi et colleagues (2007). Each item consists of a statement and likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, on strongly disagree). The Family Assessment Device is based on a transactional-functional model and it contains scales measuring: problem-solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement, and behavior control.

The *Cognitive Appraisal of Risky Events* (CARE) by Fromme, Katz and Rivet (1997), is a questionnaire developed to assess outcome expectancies for the potential consequences of involvement in risky activities, defined as those activities which could result in both negative and positive consequences. It is a questionnaire formed by 90-item, grouped in three scales: Expected Involvement (Care A, formed by 30-item), Risk (Care B, formed by 30-item), and Benefit (Care C, formed by 30-item). Each scale measures six factors, that is: risky sexual behavior, heavy drinking, illicit drug use, aggressive and illegal behaviors, irresponsible academic/work behaviors, and high risk sports.

The *Internet Addiction Test* (IAT) by Young (1998) is a self-report instrument for adolescents and adults. It comprises 20 items rated in a five-point Likert scale (from 1 - not at all, to 5 - always). On the basis of the total score obtained on the test, the individual is placed into one of three categories: average online user (from 20 to 39) who has a full control of his or her usage; experiences frequent problems because of excessive Internet use (from 40 to 69); or has significant problems because of Internet use (from 70 to 100). The instrument can be used together in assessment to obtain a well-rounded profile of the client’s Internet addiction and also to identify discrepancies amongst raters, who could benefit from psycho-education.

5.3. Data analysis

All analyses were conducted with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 23.0 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA).

In reference to preliminary data, *t*-test for independent samples was used to compare the mean between groups (males versus females).

In reference to family functioning, perception of risk and internet addiction, the univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to verify the influence of age on the dependent variables.

In order to explore the predictive variables of perception of risk and internet addiction, hierarchical regression was used, including the subscales of functioning family as predictive variables.

6. Findings

A descriptive analysis was conducted in order to investigate the family functioning, the perception of risky behaviors, and the possible presence of internet addiction, comparing the mean scores of boys and girls (Table 1).

Table 01. Descriptive statistics of dependent variables

Variables	Men		Women	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Problem-solving	2.17	0.51	2.13	0.34
Communication	2.34	0.33	2.18	0.23
Roles	2.63	0.31	2.65	0.31
Affective responsiveness	2.49	0.39	2.44	0.24
Affective involvement	2.76	0.48	3.02	0.41
Behavior control	2.79	0.31	2.87	0.28
FAD_General level	2.46	0.30	2.48	0.17
CARE A	1.47	1.13	0.93	0.55
CARE B	3.33	1.46	4.82	1.38
CARE C	2.57	1.42	1.87	0.94
IAT	2.33	0.69	2.16	0.61

In the participant group, the *t*-test shows that in the affective involvement domain, girls reported average scores significantly higher than boys ($F=.26$; $P<0.05$); boys had higher scores than girls in the expected involvement in risk activities ($F=7.33$; $P<0.01$) and the benefits of their use ($F=4.68$; $P<0.05$); furthermore, in the perception of risk, girls reported average scores significantly higher than boys ($F=.98$; $P<0.001$).

The first ANOVA, done to verify the influence of age variable on the functioning family, emphasizes the main effect of age on the general level of functioning family ($F=3.419$; $p<0.05$); breakdown of the univariate effects shows that older students got higher scores in the family dimension than younger ones.

The ANOVA done to verify the influence of age variable on the possible presence of internet addiction shows no effect due to the independent variables ($P=ns$).

Furthermore, the ANOVA done to verify the influence of age variable on the perception of risky behaviors, shows the influence of age on the expected involvement in risk activities ($F=3.06$; $P<0.05$) and on the perception of their benefits ($F=3.99$; $P<0.01$); in particular, breakdown of the univariate effects shows that older students got lower scores in both domains than younger ones.

In reference to the first hypothesis, hierarchical regression shows that predictors of the internet addiction are a low level of behavior control and a reduced general level of family functioning, explaining 14.6% of the overall variance (Table 2). The data seem to confirm the research hypothesis

Table 02. Model summary of hierarchical regression analyses that predicts the internet addiction in the group of adolescents

Variables	R ²	Adjusted R ²	SE	β	T	P
Problem-solving	0.382	0.146	.146	.092	.872	.385
Communication			.235	.033	.296	.768
Roles			.267	.021	.176	.860
Affective responsiveness			.194	-.073	-.676	.501
Affective involvement			.172	-.114	-.934	.353
Behavior control			.261	-.267	-2.265	.026
General Level			.279	-.231	-1.974	.041

Abbreviations: β , beta standardized coefficients; SE, standard error.

In reference to the second hypothesis, hierarchical regression shows that only a reduced behavior control is predictor of the expected involvement in risky activities, explaining 10.6% of the overall variance (Table 3). The data seem to confirm the research hypothesis

Table 03. Model summary of hierarchical regression analyses that predicts of the expected involvement in the group of adolescents

Variables	R ²	Adjusted R ²	SE	β	T	P
Problem-solving	0.326	0.106	.239	.164	1.516	.033
Communication			.384	-.085	-.741	.461
Roles			.437	-.101	-.817	.416
Affective responsiveness			.317	-.009	-.083	.934
Affective involvement			.281	-.102	-.816	.417
Behavior control			.427	-.145	-1.200	.033
General Level			.457	.113	.948	.346

Abbreviations: β , beta standardized coefficients; SE, standard error.

Furthermore, the latest hierarchical regression shows that a reduced behavioral control and the poor family communication predict the perception of benefits for carrying out risky activities, explaining 10.7% of the overall variance (Table 4). The data seem to confirm the last research hypothesis

Table 04. Model summary of hierarchical regression analyses that predicts of the benefit of risky activities in the group of adolescents

Variables	R ²	Adjusted R ²	SE	B	T	P
Problem-solving	0.327	0.107	.305	.106	.982	.329
Communication			.490	-.232	-2.150	.043
Roles			.557	-.021	-.172	.864
Affective responsiveness			.404	.066	.601	.549
Affective involvement			.358	.043	.345	.731
Behavior control			.545	-.281	-2.335	.022
General Level			.582	.011	.090	.928

Abbreviations: β , beta standardized coefficients; SE, standard error.

7. Conclusion

This paper explores the influence of family functioning in internet addiction and the perception of risky activities in a group of Sicilian adolescents.

Preliminary data show that age affects the perception of problematic behaviors, in fact older adolescents, having developed a relatively stable personal identity, have a greater perception of risk. The results obtained confirm that in the last stages of adolescence, subjects acquire a greater maturity, which allow them to have a more complete view of the short and long-term consequences of their behavior.

Data show that the behavioral control, perceived within the family context, determines a reduced level of Internet use, confirming the first hypothesis and the literature, which underlines that the adaptive family functioning is related of potentially antisocial behaviors and internet dependance during adolescence. Adolescents who grow up in a positive family environment gain a strong protective factor (Jessor, 1998); in fact, they seem to assess more risks rather than the benefits they can obtain from risky behavior.

As a confirmation of the second research hypothesis a reduced behavior control is a predictor of the expected involvement in risky activities; this data confirms the literature which underlines the role of parental control as a protective factor in adolescence, compared to harmful behaviors such as substance abuse, emotional hunger and other deviant behavior; on the other hand, permissive parents allow adolescents to regulate their activities autonomously, avoiding the exercise of control and encouraging them, indirectly, not to observe the rules.

Furthermore, data show that reduced behavioral control and poor family communication predict the perception of benefits for carrying out risky activities; research data, confirming the last hypothesis, underline the role of communication as a mode that family members use to express their needs and/or feelings and, above all, to understand aspirations, hopes, fears, emotions and the reality of life in adolescents.

Based on the results described herein, it is appropriate to emphasize the limits of this work, namely, the absence of a sampling method, which prevents the presence of a representative sample, generalization of the results, and external validity. An additional limitation is the absence of a longitudinal-type study design, which is more suitable for research involving adolescents and their identity development.

Finally, the absence of a cross-sectional survey method makes it difficult to determine if the adverse relational family conditions (e.g., low support or communication) are antecedents, links, or consequences of the antisocial behavior of children.

Therefore, identification of risk factors in individuals or in their environment is not enough to predict the future development, but it is necessary to consider the way in which certain features interact with the environment, modifying it and being, in turn, influenced by it. It is necessary, in other words, to take into consideration the features of the subject, the features of the environment, and the way in which these two sets of influences interact over time.

The research data confirm the role that the use of free time can play in the decision of young people to undertake antisocial behavior (Magnano, Ramaci & Platania, 2014; Paolillo, Platania, Magnano & Ramaci, 2015). Employing part of one's free time in activities where responsibility is required within a

protected context, such as the sports group or the volunteer context, allows the adolescent to gain positive visibility (Magnano, Santisi & Ramaci, 2014; Magnano, Platania, Ramaci, Santisi & Di Nuovo, 2017; Platania, Santisi, Magnano & Ramaci, 2015).

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