

Self-Regulation and Behavioral Addiction in Adolescents: Understanding the Pathway from Digital Use to Psychological Well-Being

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Abstract:

The rapid expansion of smartphones, social media, online gaming, and other digital technologies has transformed adolescent social and recreational experiences while raising concerns regarding problematic and addictive patterns of digital use. Adolescence is also a critical developmental period for the maturation of self-regulatory capacities, including impulse control, emotional regulation, delayed gratification, and goal-directed behavior. Difficulties in these regulatory processes may increase vulnerability to compulsive digital engagement and may have implications for psychological well-being.

The present review examines the relationship between self-regulation and behavioral addiction in adolescents, with particular emphasis on the pathways linking problematic digital use with emotional and psychological well-being. Existing evidence indicates that difficulties in self-regulation, emotion regulation, self-control, and impulsivity are associated with greater severity of problematic social media, smartphone, internet, and gaming use. A systematic review of regulatory processes and problematic social media use found a consistent negative relationship between regulatory capacities and problematic use, while regulation may also mediate associations between problematic digital use and psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. Similarly, a systematic review focusing specifically on adolescents identified a positive association between emotion dysregulation and problematic technology use across 39 studies.

The evidence suggests a potentially reciprocal relationship in which reduced self-regulatory capacity may increase susceptibility to excessive digital engagement, while problematic digital use may further interfere with emotional regulation and psychological functioning. Recent longitudinal evidence indicates that emotional distress and problematic internet use may mutually reinforce one another, with low self-esteem and maladaptive emotion-regulation strategies emerging as important mechanisms.

From a psychological perspective, self-regulation may therefore represent an important potentially modifiable protective factor. Strengthening self-control, emotional awareness, adaptive coping, goal-directed behavior, and healthy digital habits may have potential implications for prevention and early intervention. The review highlights the need for longitudinal and intervention-based research to clarify causal pathways and to determine whether self-regulation-focused interventions can reduce behavioral addiction and improve psychological well-being among adolescents.

Keywords:

Adolescents, behavioral addiction, digital addiction, self-regulation, emotion regulation, problematic technology use, psychological well-being.