The Prevalence of Problematic Internet Use in Malta Among Young Persons Aged 13-16 Years: A Quantitative Study

# Details

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## Topics

* Literacy and skills
* Content-related issues
* Wellbeing
* Risks and harms
* Digital and socio-cultural environment

## Sample

869 students between the ages of 13 and 15 years recruited from secondary schools.

## Implications For Parents About

Other

## Other Parent Implication

Physical exercise as a replacement for Internet use

## Implications For Educators About

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Other

## Other PolicyMaker Implication

adult education, lifelong learning, community-based non-formal educational interventions

# Abstract

This research study investigated the prevalence of problematic Internet use among 13-16 year-olds in Malta and Gozo, with special attention to this age cohort’s engagement with Internet for entertainment. A total of 869 students of Years 9, 10 and 11 (Forms 3, 4 and 5) from a total of eighteen (18) schools that comprised of fifteen (15) State schools from the ten (10) different State colleges, two (2) Church schools and one (1) Independent school, participated in this study between November 2016 and January 2017, by submitting their response to the quantitative Problematic Internet Entertainment Use Scale for Adolescents (PIEUSA). The PIEUSA was previously used in similar studies in Spain and Britain.
The results enabled the identification of a four-tiered Internet for entertainment user
categorisation: occasional users (13.9%), habitual users (65.5%), at risk users (15.4%) and problematic users (5.2%). Overall similarities in size of the user categories between Malta, Spain and Britain show that ubiquity of Internet for entertainment transcends cultural contexts, at least in Western European countries. Moreover, similar to findings of the National Centre for Freedom from Addictions’ (NCFA) study on problematic Internet use (PIU) among 18-30 year olds, there was a prevalence of one of the younger cohorts under investigation (14 year olds) among problematic users identified in this study. Problematic users reported experiences of withdrawal, preoccupation and loss of control. The identification of these experiences provides a more comprehensive understanding of their experience of problematic use of Internet for entertainment. It also informs the debate concerning recognition of problematic Internet use and broader behavioural addiction as official disorders. Findings from this study support policy development of targeted adult education and lifelong learning, as well as enhanced media literacy. Recommendations for practice include investment in community-based non-formal educational interventions that
combine online and offline interactions. When including sports, these interventions would capitalize on empirical evidence supporting physical exercise as a replacement for online activity that maintains dopamine levels. Future research should account for a more sophisticated pilot study design to allow the testing and retesting of quantitative data, as well as consider the use of mixed-methods research to include qualitative investigation, particularly of home dynamics.In sum, this study foregrounds the NCFA in the scholarly debate on conceptual disjunctures as regards to what comprises ‘Internet for entertainment’ and what is (if there is such thing as) ‘problematic Internet use’ in general, and - more specifically - ‘problematic use of Internet for entertainment’. The NCFA’s contribution is grounded in the broader debate between those who seek to pathologise and / or medicalise the phenomena under study and those who focus on the big data that is generated by use of Internet for entertainment. Both positions may be fuelled by financial gain and may generate analyses that omit the nuances in the narratives of respective users. The NCFA’s outlook is also informed by the need to question potential bias induced by the necessity to justify one’s discipline in today’s globalised, networked, yet increasingly fragmented plethora of knowledge sciences.

# Outcome

"The identification of a four-tiered Internet for entertainment user categorisation: occasional users (13.9%), habitual users (65.5%), at risk users (15.4%) and problematic users (5.2%). Overall similarities in size of the user categories between Malta, Spain and Britain show that ubiquity of Internet for entertainment transcends cultural contexts, at least in Western European countries." (NCFA, 2017; p. 3).
"There was a prevalence of one of the younger cohorts under investigation (14 year olds) among problematic users identified in this study. " (NCFA, 2017; p. 3).
"The occasional users identified in this study associated their use of Internet for entertainment primarily with meeting new people and making new friends... The habitual users identified in this study expressed difficulties when having to quit use of the Internet for entertainment, and who were in receipt of negative feedback from others in this regard." (NCFA, 2017; p. 85).
"The at risk users identified in this study stated that their main entertainment involves online video games (OVGs) or engagement with social networking sites (SNS), which to them are by and large a preferred alternative to traditional human contact... The problematic users identified in this study reported forgetfulness and lack of sleep in relation to their use of Internet for entertainment purposes. They also declared experiences of withdrawal, preoccupation, and loss of control." (NCFA, 2017; p. 86).