

Relational identity in adolescence: between loneliness and sense of personal uniqueness

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Abstract. The construction of identity is considered a main task in adolescence especially via the exploration/consolidation of relational interactions. Moreover, adolescents are focused on their personal perception of their place in the world, building on adults and peers' feedbacks, personal attitude or fear of being alone and the ambiguous feelings about identification and belonging (e.i. personal uniqueness). This latter is an element that can makes adolescents particularly prone to behaviors strongly exploratory and / or at risk. It is, therefore, particularly relevant to examine the novelties that intervene in the relational contexts of adolescents - relationships mediated by digital tools (social-network) - to understand their connections with the processes of understanding and defining themselves. The research explored, through a subject-based study, the relationship between identity functions, sense of personal uniqueness, traditional/virtual relational experiences, and perceived loneliness, in order to define risk profiles and identify intervention strategies.

Participants were 250 students attending the last two years of high school (age m.: 16.5). The measures used were: Functions of Identity; Adolescent Personal Uniqueness Scale; Louvain Loneliness Scale for Children and Adolescents; Generalized Problematic Internet Use Scale 2. The analysis shows significant associations between the dimensions examined and an interrelationship between identity functions, the perception of loneliness by significant others and problematic use of the internet.

Keywords: Functions of Identity, Loneliness, Personal Uniqueness, Use of Internet.

1 Introduction

Developing a stable and coherent identity is what Erikson [1, 2] points out as the central task of each individual's life. Identity, understood as a psychosocial construct, has been theorized to have functions of self-regulation, in this perspective Adams and Marshall [3] have proposed a model of five identity functions. A *Structure* that collects information relevant to the self; *Harmony* between the beliefs, values and commitments of

the individual; *Future* in terms of choices and identity possibilities; *Goals* to be pursued starting from the choices and commitments made; *Personal Control* in terms of active self-regulation with regard to personal objectives and choices, commitments made and plans for the future [4].

Based on the assumption that an individual is characterized by a social nature and the need to interact with others [5], some researches have explored the negative and positive consequences of experiences of loneliness, especially during adolescence.

Several researches [6-9] have highlighted the association between the different dimensions of loneliness and internalizing disorders such as depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, significant levels of anxiety and stress, and externalizing disorders in terms of problematic and/or risky behaviors.

The multidimensional perspective of loneliness theorizes that it can take different forms. Goossens and Marcoen's model [10] proposes a distinction between four forms of loneliness: perceived loneliness in the relationship with peers, perceived loneliness in family relationships, propensity to loneliness (in terms of positive attitude) and aversion to loneliness.

The sense of personal uniqueness represents one of the three dimensions (sense of uniqueness, invulnerability, omnipotence) of the "personal fairy tale" through which a peculiar form of adolescents' intellectual egocentricity is manifested [11-13].

From this perspective, the sense of uniqueness coincides with "intense internal perceptions of self" [14], and supports adolescents in developing assertion and individuation, through an active focus on self and in re-establishing the boundaries of the Ego, weakened by the second process of separation and individuation [13], to undertake a psychological separation motivated by parents and to provide them with resources to explore new ideas, new roles and new identity tasks.

The construct of Personal Uniqueness, that is, the way in which adolescents experience perceived experiences so special that they cannot really be understood by those who do not experience their own way of perceiving and seeing the world, is articulated in two factors defined as being the same - being similar to others - and being understood [15, 16].

In the analysis of relational interactions of adolescents, it cannot be possible not to consider digital contexts. The phenomenon of the digitization of communication and interpersonal relations has prompted in-depth analysis of the risks and resources associated with mediated communication/relation.

Various researches [17] have shown that Internet, even though it appears to be a facilitator of communication, at the same time reduces and impoverishes relations in "real" life. Other researches [18], instead, have shown that it can be a useful relational tool.

Further research [19-22], deepening the relationship between the use of the internet and internalizing and externalizing symptoms, have highlighted how a problematic use of the internet is significantly associated with different psychopathological disorders.

Moreover, several researches have deepened the relationship between the use of the Internet, and in particular of social networks and M.U.V.E. [23], and the processes of identity building in terms of risks and resources.

2 The present study

In line with the literature analyzed, the present study aimed to explore the relationship between identity functions [4], sense of personal uniqueness [24], traditional/virtual relational experiences, and perceived loneliness [6], in order to define risk profiles and identify intervention strategies.

Method

Participants

The research was carried out by 250 Italian students attending the last two years of high school (70% female; Mage: 16.5).

Procedure

It was contacted the principals of the high schools and to obtain permission to administer questionnaires. For late adolescents younger than 18, parental consent was obtained. Approximately 99% of the approached students chose to take part in to the study. They completed self-report questionnaires in compliance with anonymity and privacy.

Measures

To assess Functions of identity – FIS [4] it was used the Italian version by Crocetti and colleagues [25] and it was asked to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale how well each of the FIS statements described the participants from “completely untrue” to “completely true”.

To evaluate the problematic use of the Internet, it was used the Italian Version [26] of Generalized Problematic Internet Use Scale 2 -GIPIUS_2 [27] articulated in the dimensions named Preference for online interaction, mood regulation, deficient self-regulation, negative outcome. The statements were on an 8-point Likert scale from “definitely disagree” to “definitely agree”.

To evaluate the sense of loneliness it was used the Louvain Loneliness Scale for Children and Adolescents-LLCA [28] in the Italian version by Melotti and colleagues [29]. The questionnaire is articulated in four sub-scales (perceived loneliness in the relationship with parents, perceived loneliness in the relationship with peers, aversion to loneliness and propensity to loneliness). The respondents answered how often the statement described them on a 4-point Likert scale from never to often.

Finally, to evaluate the sense of personal uniqueness, it was used the Italian Version [30] of Adolescent Personal Uniqueness Scale-APUS [31]. The respondents indicated for each statements their agreement on a 5-points Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Results

Descriptive analysis

In order to explore the associations between the variables considered in this study, data correlation analyses were carried out.

As far as the identity functions are concerned, the sub-dimension related to the Structure correlates negatively with both the sub-dimensions of the perception of personal uniqueness ($r=-.427$; $r=-.250$) with the perceived loneliness in relationships with parents ($r=-.496$) and peers ($r=-.351$) and with the attitude to loneliness ($r=-.208$), and finally with the preference for online relationships ($r=-.227$) and mood regulation ($r=-.231$); Harmony dimension correlates negatively with the dimension being the same ($r=-.189$) of the perception of personal uniqueness, with the loneliness perceived in the relationship with peers ($r=-.137$) and parents ($r=-.304$) and with the positive attitude to loneliness ($r=-.142$), with all the dimension of the use of the internet ($r=-.214$; $r=-.317$; $r=-.314$; $r=-.233$); with the latter dimensions correlate negatively also the dimension of Functions of identity such as Goals ($r=-.264$; $r=-.222$; $r=-.253$; $r=-.188$), and Personal Control ($r=-.273$; $r=-.225$; $r=-.283$; $r=-.159$). Goals, Future, and Personal Control, moreover, correlate negatively with the loneliness perceived with the parents ($r=-.245$; $r=-.285$; $r=-.172$). Furthermore, the Future identity function also has negative correlations with being understood ($r=-.140$) and a positive attitude to loneliness ($r=-.148$), while the Personal Control with the solitude perceived with peers ($r=-.159$).

Within the dimensions of the sense of personal uniqueness, both being the same and being understood correlate positively with the perceived loneliness in the relationship with parents ($r=.395$; $r=.168$) and peers ($r=.458$; $r=.286$) and with the positive attitude to loneliness ($r=.478$; $r=.264$). But only the first sub-dimension also correlates with the preference for online interactions ($r=.217$), with mood regulation ($r=.304$) and with negative outcomes ($r=.149$), all sub-dimensions of the problematic use of the internet.

In the problematic use of the internet, dimension preferences for online interactions and mood regulation correlate positively with the perceived loneliness in the relationship with peers ($r=.224$; $r=.270$) and the propensity to loneliness ($r=.229$; $r=.381$) as well as the negative dimension outcome ($r=.310$; $r=.382$).

Moreover, it was used analysis of the variance to explore possible differences in gender and school profit.

The gender factor shows differences in the studied dimensions. Females have higher scores in the functions of identity, structure ($F=5.230$, $p=.023$) and objectives ($F=4.044$, $p=.046$, in the being understood factor ($F=13,651$, $p=.000$) of the sense of personal uniqueness and in the solitude perceived with peers ($F=4.207$, $p=.042$); males, on the other hand, have higher scores in the dimensions of mood regulation ($F=.682$, $p=.010$), self-deficient regulation ($F=9.650$, $p=.002$) and negative outcome ($F=1.994$, $P=.159$) of the problematic use of the Internet.

The profit factor shows differences only with regard to identity functions. Articulated the profit on a scale from 0 to 2 (Low, Medium, Good) we have higher scores in the size structure with a low profit compared to medium and good; and higher scores in Harmony and Goals with a good profit.

Cluster Analysis

In order to identify the descriptive profiles (Fig.1), a cluster analysis was carried out in two steps [32].

A person-centered approach allowed the identification of profiles that could be defined on the basis of scores and the combination of all relational dimensions together, to define the types of interpersonal modalities.

Identity dimensions were, instead, considered as external correlates, and therefore as dimensions associated with interpersonal profiles, but not constitutive of clusters.

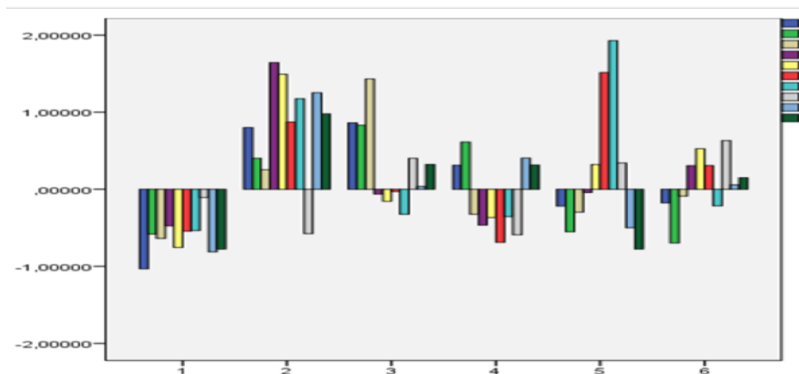


Fig. 1. Cluster solution

The cluster 1 (25%) named “well adapted” is composed by the highest number of participants with low-medium scores in all sizes; the cluster 2 (10%), named “post so I exist” is characterized by participants with high propensity to loneliness, low aversion to loneliness, high function of regulating emotions, high sense of personal uniqueness, frightened by loneliness, inclined to online relations describes subjects with high scores in all dimensions except in ANEG (aversion to loneliness). They are teenagers completely moved to the online dimension, with a clear problematic use of the internet connected to a strong sense of being different and unique, as well as alone; the cluster 3 (16%), named “I am unique and I differ” with a consistent number, describes adolescents immersed in the typical processes of differentiation and detachment from their parents, who feel a strong sense of personal uniqueness (and therefore also of incomprehension on the part of the other significant) and at the same time perceive themselves alone compared to their parents. They show an average use of the Internet as a support and relational substitute (average scores in all dimensions of the problematic use of the Internet); the large cluster 4 (22%), named “like me no one ever”, medium-low scores in all dimensions of the problematic use of the internet (preference for online interaction, mood regulation, deficient self-regulation, negative outcome) and medium-high scores of personal uniqueness (being the same and being understood, propensity to loneliness and solitude perceived in the relationship with peers; the cluster 5 (9%), with the label “externalizing use of internet”, is a cluster numerically small, but with higher scores. Subjects show high scores in the use of the internet as a negative outcome and a lack of self-regulation. It seems to be a more problematic cluster on a relational level, because it is moved directly to behavioral aspects and probably outsourced. The subjects described in this profile appear not to be inclined to reflection, do not perceive

feelings of loneliness and do not fear it, they feel only slightly alone compared to their parents. Then, they have a poor sense of personal uniqueness. Finally, the cluster 6 (18%), with the label “internet with regulatory function, describes adolescents with scores tending to average in almost all sizes. With scores that differ slightly in terms of size, propensity for online interactions, mainly with the function of regulating emotions, and in the presence of a low capacity for self-regulation. Finally, they seem to have a sense of aversion to loneliness.

Considering Functions of Identity as outcome (fig. 2), the cluster 1 shows high scores in all functions of identity; the adolescents described in the cluster 2, labelled as having moved to online relationships, show that they have not yet formed their identity, that they are neither structured, nor self-consistent, nor future-oriented. It is plausible to assume that the subjects of this profile are only immersed in the online world; the profile 3 of the unique and differentiated shows low scores in identity functions, especially in structure and future orientation; teenagers described as unique and prone to loneliness show medium to high scores in identity functions; the teenagers who seem to use the Internet externally also show high scores in identity functions, structure and orientation to the future, and medium-low in harmony, goals and personal control; finally, the profile of participants using the Internet with a regulation and containment function of difficult relational dimensions, shows medium-low scores in all identity functions.

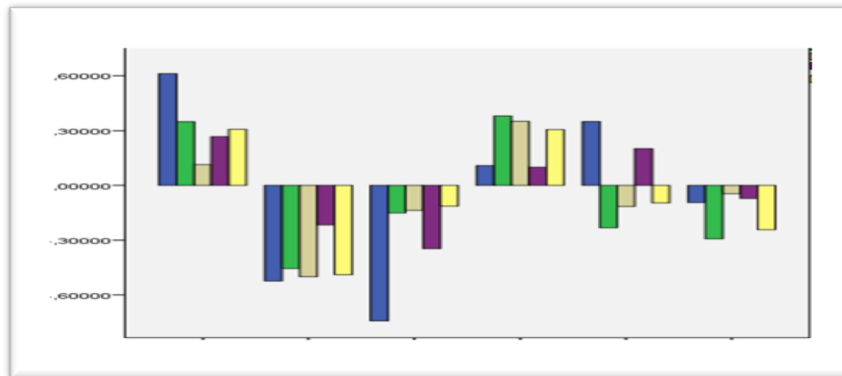


Fig. 2 Cluster solution considering identity functions

Discussion and Conclusion

The relationship between problematic use of the Internet, with compensatory and regulatory functions, and the perception of loneliness in the real context of life is confirmed. This relationship even configures clear modalities (clusters) of interrelation that describe specific relational profiles.

A complementary relationship emerges between loneliness, problematic use of the Internet and identity functions. In particular, it seems that when identity functions are well structured, adolescents feel less alone and use the Internet in a less problematic

way. When, on the contrary, as in this case, the work on identity typical of the adolescent phase has not been done, the use of the Internet ends up becoming problematic and associated with a strong sense and propensity to loneliness.

The relational profiles are associated with identity functions in a differentiated manner. Specifically, they show that well adapted adolescents and adolescents who are inclined to loneliness but do not make problematic use of the internet also show a more mature identity work, in terms of structure, harmony and future orientation.

Finally, a particularly interesting profile is that which describes adolescents who tend to use the Internet externally, who do not have particular relational difficulties, on the contrary feel included in the group of peers, and who have a good orientation towards the future and a consistent identity structure. Taking into consideration the scores of the dimensions such mood regulation and deficient self-regulation, it is plausible to assume that the use of the Internet has a compensatory purpose [33].

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