



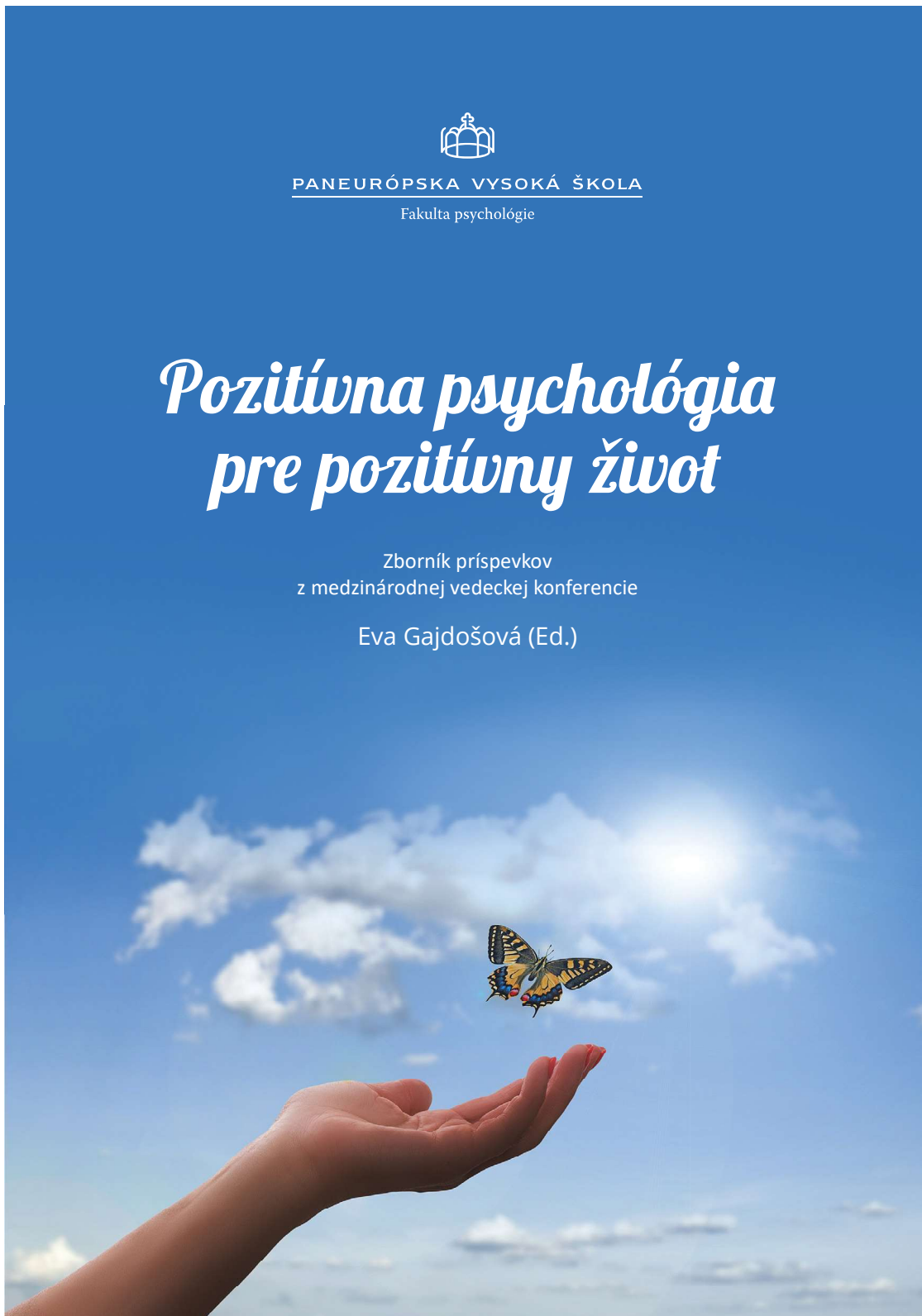
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Eva Gajdošová (Ed.)



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Eva Gajdošová (ed.)

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HYPER-CONNECTIVITY AND INTERNET ADDICTION: PROMOTING DIGITAL WELL-BEING IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This work illustrates the concept of well-being and digital well-being linking it to developments in positive psychology. The research on hyper-connectivity and internet addiction is then illustrated, also describing how to intervene to promote digital well-being in schools.

Keywords: Hyper-connectivity, internet addiction, digital well-being, positive psychology, school-wide interventions

1. Introduction

The widespread use of new digital technologies, specifically smartphones, represents great potential but also risks. This work wants to explain the contribution of positive psychology applied to the construction and use of new digital technologies. It will move on to illustrate the phenomenon of hyper-connectivity and the associated dangerous consequences on a physical, psychological, and psychoneurological level. An entire paragraph is then dedicated to internet addiction, a phenomenon that has aroused great interest in recent times but is still debated. Finally, it faces how to promote effective preventive interventions of digital well-being in schools.

2. The construct of well-being in positive psychology.

The concept of well-being has been at the center of interest in the field of positive psychology. According to Seligman (2011), positive psychology involves well-being and has as its main purpose to promote optimal functioning and flourishing. He proposes a theory of well-being that contains 5 components: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment (PERMA). Positive emotion refers to the hedonic feelings of happiness, as pleasure, fun, joy and life satisfaction. Engagement refers to experiences that completely absorb the individual, as in the case of flow

experience. Relationships refers to the others as resources and to the importance of doing things in company rather than alone. Meaning refers to the feeling of having a purpose in life and serving a greater cause that goes beyond of ourselves. Accomplishment refers to a persistent push to pursue personal goals and devote one's life to doing things for the pleasure in itself of making them, for example, to win for the sake of winning or to devote oneself to economic climbing.

What can be the impact of positive psychology for psychologists working in schools? As Gilman et al (2014) note, the quality of school experiences plays an important role in key aspects such as identity development, health, well-being and academic success. Longitudinal studies, in fact, show that students who report more positive school experiences also report higher levels of mental and physical health and a lower inclination to engage in risky behaviors such as alcohol abuse (Gilman et al 2014). The lack of attention paid so far to the factors that contribute to an optimal school experience may be partly linked to the prevalence of approaches focused on identifying "problems", and therefore oriented to "repairing what is broken", rather than on practices aimed at advancing a positive health agenda. A review of the scientific literature shows that studies investigating pathology-based constructs such as anxiety, depression, mental illness, and problem behaviors outperform studies investigating aspects such as self-esteem, school satisfaction, hope, and personal values.

As a reaction to this excessive emphasis on weaknesses and problems, positive psychology has emerged, establishing itself over the past 20 years as a scientific study of what "is good in life" and what "makes life worth living". Positive psychology aims to investigate the causes and correlates of optimal human functioning. Although the majority of studies in this area have involved adults and the elderly, some research efforts have involved children; and this for at least two reasons. Firstly, in young people as in adults it became clear that "mental illness" and "mental health" are two distinct dimensions: a low level of psychological suffering does not necessarily mean a high level of well-being. Second, for many people it appears relevant to study the factors that contribute to optimal functioning; in fact, even if parents are asked what they want for their children, they generally report the goal of promoting a productive life on the part of their children, rather than preventing psychopathology. Schools can contribute to character education and promote psychological resources (Gilman et al 2014).

As Renshaw et al (2014) note, studies on the influence of strengths and resources on youth development followed three phases. In the first, positive psychology sought to identify isolated traits, such as gratitude and hope, by studying the relationship between them and with other psychological aspects in the course of development. In the second

phase, the research was dedicated to testing some interventions to increase specific traits (for example, the exercise of blessings to increase gratitude). In the third phase, evaluation and intervention tools were developed aimed at evaluating a set of resources in the field of positive psychology. An example is the one, seen above, offered by Seligman (2011) who showed the importance of a combination of positive emotions (PERMA model) as a foundation for optimal functioning (flourishing).

The formulation of the construct of “covitality” goes in the same direction. As Renshaw et al (2014) note, the concept of covitality represents the counterpart of comorbidity and can be described as the synergistic effect of positive mental health that derives from the interaction between different components based on positive psychology. Studies have confirmed that the metacostruct “covitality” is more predictive of the results of scholastic adaptation than the single constructs that compose it. In the covitality model for the adolescent, 12 lower-level constructs are distinguished that contribute to four domains: belief-in-self, belief-in-others, emotional competence, and engaged living.

3. Digital well-being

The ubiquity of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the growing influence of new technologies on the lives of individuals leads as a consequence to the fact that our daily experiences are immersed in a new reality in which the distinction between reality and virtuality becomes blurred (Levin & Mamlok 2021). The ever wider access to information and opportunities for interaction, thanks to the developments of new digital technologies, makes a new dimension of digital skills central: managing the overabundance of information, so to achieve one’s goals and subjective well-being. Gui et al (2017) distinguish two aspects of the problem: digital overconsumption and multi-tasking. The digital overconsumption involves the fact that we often spend more time on the internet than we want, both at work and in personal life; with the risk of neglecting more important things, or not completing the scheduled tasks on time. The multi-tasking involves the fragmentation of attention, linked to at least two reasons: the possibility of opening many windows, which leads us to get lost between the different programs, and the frequent interruptions, linked for example to the arrival of notifications. In this way, we risk carrying out the activities in a superficial way, as we do not have the time to focus attention on a specific activity, to carry it out in depth.

Gui et al (2017) propose a definition of “digital well-being skills” which refers to two dimensions: one linked to individual skills and the other to the socio-cultural level. As for the individual level, they define “digital well-being skills” as “a set of

skills needed to manage the side effects of digital communication overabundance. In particular, digital well-being skills can be identified as the skills to achieve strategic attention focusing in daily life and to avoid the stress caused by the overwhelming flow of information, minimizing wastes of time and attention on irrelevant activities in the subject's perception. To do this, digital stimuli should be managed to that they can be i) efficiently filtered and ii) finalized towards personal goals and well-being"(p. 163). As for social dimension, it involves the social responsibility of those who design online learning environments, the social values involved in the use of digital media (for example, "privacy" or "visibility") and the socio-cultural meaning of "well-being", with reference to traditions, norms and values.

At least three different approaches have proposed using the Positive Psychology (PP) framework to suggest a use of new technologies that foster positive experiences and behaviors: Positive Technology, Positive Computing and Positive Design.

Positive Technology approach (Botella et al 2012; Riva et al 2012) has been defined as "the scientific and applied approach for improving the quality of our personal experience with the goal of increasing wellness, and generating strengths and resilience in individuals, organizations, and society."(Botella et al 2012, p. 78). The authors propose to use technology to improve three features of our experience: emotions, engagement and connectedness; and thereby promote adaptive behaviors and positive functioning. As reported by Riva et al (2012) "The final aim is to use technology to manipulate and enhance the features of our personal experience with the goal of increasing wellness, and generating strengths and resilience in individuals, organizations, and society" (p. 70). Positive technology involves the use of ICT tools at three distinct levels: hedonic, eudaimonic and social & interpersonal. At the hedonic level, technology is used to produce pleasant experiences (the enjoying self), at the eudaimonic level to promote experiences of engagement and self-actualization (the growing self), at the social & interpersonal level to improve social integration and connectedness (the shared self) (Botella et al 2012). Experience can be manipulated in three distinct ways: a) by structuring it, through a goal, rules and a feedback system; b) augmenting it, through the integration of multisensory experiences; c) replacing it with a synthetic world, as in the case of virtual reality (Riva et al 2012).

A second approach, "Positive Computing" (Calvo & Peters 2014) involves the design and development of technology to support psychological wellbeing and human potential, proposing the use of new technologies not only to increase productivity but also to increase the well-being and happiness of individuals. The technology and software design cycle should incorporate psychological well-being. The findings of

positive psychology should be used in the design of interactive technologies. Interaction planners and researchers in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) should consider well-being factors such as autonomy, competence, relatedness and engagement in their work. Calvo and Peters (2014) describe four positive computing strategies, to describe how well-being can be integrated into technology design: a) not positive design; b) dedicated integration; c) preventative integration; d) active integration. The first strategy “not positive design” involves designing applications without taking wellbeing into account. In this case, engineers and computer scientists mainly consider aspects such as productivity and speed. The second strategy, “dedicated integration”, is aimed designing software that supports a specific factor of well-being, for example a specific emotion. In the third strategy, digital environments are designed to promote or hinder specific behaviors, such as removing anonymity to avoid abuse by users. The fourth strategy, “active integration”, involves a design that integrates components that promote well-being in an application that has a different goal, as in the case of affective computing techniques, which involve the use of interfaces that detect the emotions of the users.

More recently, Peters et al (2018) propose the model METUX (Motivation, Engagement and Thriving in User Experience) that take into account the psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) as mediators for engagement and well-being to support designers in the field of human-computer interaction (HCI).

The third approach, “Positive Design” (Desmet & Pohlmeier, 2013) is based on the concept of “Positive Design” that is “an umbrella term for all forms of design, design research and design intention in which explicit attention is paid to the effects of design on the subjective well-being of individuals and communities.” (p. 6).; based on the idea that “if products function as resources that address meaningful goals, then they can contribute to users’ happiness: It is not the products nor their material value, but what we do with products that can make us happy.” (pp 5-6).

Positive design is based on three ingredients: design for pleasure, design for personal significance, and design for virtue. Each ingredient independently contributes to subjective well-being; but all three ingredients are important in allowing people to thrive. Design for pleasure sees happiness as linked to the pleasure of the moment, for example, the experience of relaxing or having fun. Design for personal significance sees happiness as linked to the personal meaning, for example, obtaining a diploma or participating in a running competition. In this case, short-term and long-term personal aspirations are more important than momentary experience. Design for virtue see happiness as linked to virtuous behaviors. In this case, the realization of personal goals is not at stake but the expression of values such as altruism and philanthropy. Since

all three ingredients contribute to well-being, they can be summarized in the concept of “Design for flourishing”, promoting a design that favors personal pleasure, the realization of one’s potential and at the same time serves the interests of society.

4. Hyper-connectivity

The widespread diffusion of cell phone has led to the phenomenon of hyper-connectivity (or hyperconnectivity) which translates into a state of availability for communications in any place and at any time. The concept of hyper-connectivity was first proposed by Quan-Haase and Wellman (2005), in the context of the CMC (Computer Mediated Communication), to refer to the use of multiple means of communication, such as email and instant messaging. According to the authors: “Although hyperconnectivity creates new opportunities for exchange and collaboration leading to denser networks, it also creates challenges. At times, hyperconnectivity has negative effects on work processes. Each employee must deal with a large number of requests that add up on a day-to-day basis “(p. 17.)

A subsequent work takes up the theme of hyper-connectivity with reference to the constant connection between young people thanks to smartphones (Standlee, 2016). Hyper-connectivity involves social expectations and behavioral norms according to which people should make themselves available at all times and in any case for social relationships. The project involves interviews with a sample of university students. The results highlight the reciprocal nature of the relationship between technology and interactions, in the sense that if on the one hand the technology shapes the interactions, on the other hand the interactions change the meaning of the technology.

Several researches have investigated the possible consequences of hyper connectivity. In the following, we will consider four possible consequences: screen time increase, technostress, academic procrastination and problems in identity construction.

A first consequence of hyper-connectivity can be the excessive time spent using digital media, and the difficulty in separating from it. A recent review by Lissak (2018) investigated the negative consequences of excessive exposure to digital media. The author has distinguished three effects that screen time can have on children and adolescents: physical health effects, psychological effects and psychoneurological effects. Among the physical health effects: sleep problems, risk factors for cardiovascular diseases, obesity, vision damage and reduced bone density. Among the psychological effects, research has reported internalized and externalizing behavior problems, depressive

symptoms and suicide attempts. Finally, among psychoneurological effects, the review reports a decrease of social coping and craving behavior and brain structural changes related to cognitive control and emotional regulation; similarly to what happens for the substance dependence behavior.

A second negative consequence of hyper-connectivity can be linked to the phenomenon of “Techno-stress” which involves the inability to interact in a healthy way with digital technologies. Techno-stress manifests itself with symptoms such as panic, anxiety, resistance or intolerance in the face of new technologies and can also involve physical symptoms such as cramps, headaches and joint pain (La Torre et al 2019).

A third negative consequence of hyper-connectivity, even if specific studies are lacking at the moment, could be the tendency to academic procrastination (Steel & Klingsieck 2016). In other words, it is reasonable to think that students could be overwhelmed by the information load related to hyper-connectivity, and for this reason they might tend to postpone academic commitments, as they never feel sure that they have gathered all the information possible to carry out the task assigned to them in the best possible way.

A fourth negative consequence can be linked to the difficulty of young people and adolescents in building an identity in a hyper-connected world. Torrijos-Fincias et al (2021) emphasizes the fact that the massive use of digital tools influences the definition of identity, and this poses risks especially in the adolescent phase, during which the identity of the individual is still in the process of being defined. They may find it difficult to manage the multiple identities that can be developed digitally. At this stage of development, the effect of hyper connectivity can be particularly intense.

5. Internet addiction

In today’s digital world, we all spend many hours online, and it looks hard not to use our smartphone to send a message or check social media, but that does not automatically mean we are addicted to it. The term “addiction” typically indicates a psychological need that pushes people to go in search of the object of their dependence. Internet addiction commonly refers to the problematic use of cyberspace. Excessive internet use can cause psychological and social upheaval leading to clinically significant impairment or distress (Cash et al., 2012).

The Internet is particularly attractive and easy to use. It drives users through experiences as in real emotional bonds. Experiences stimulated by the content found on the Web and the quality of the interaction with the different applications may lead to specific online

behaviors, including social media addiction and online gaming disorder, which may have potential compulsive properties with detrimental effects (Kuss & Pontes, 2018).

According to Lavenia (2018), the analysis of the human behavior concerning internet technology shows a typical evolution path that can be explained through a two-phase Evolutionary Development Model explicating the ways users may approach the web. The model describes two main steps in the first phase of interaction with this technology: an observational stage (observation) and an activation stage (research). The *observational stage* represents the first analysis where the user sees what the web has to offer him but remains detached, the user shows fear of falling into the trap of this easy-to-access and attractive virtual reality. As the person acquires competence and familiarity with the internet technology, he earns more confidence and passes to the *activation stage* putting into action the knowledge gained. In this way, the user builds a relationship with technology by assimilating some modes of interaction that become the starting point from which gradually undertake new explorations and discover unknown applications and functions. The activation stage is an exploration stage of new services and applications offered, starting from stimuli that come from the web itself (hypertexts, links, search engines, and banners), from the external environment (suggestions and advertising), from personal interests. This first phase of observation and research is a passive approach where the user does not provide changes or give any contributions to the web.

A second phase, called Relational-Communicative, is when the user discovers himself connected to other people. Through social platforms, chats, forum and blogs, the user joins the virtual community. The user enters a virtual reality in which it is possible to have contacts and exchanges with others, establishing relationships and bonds of attachment that mostly remain on a virtual level which are no less intense or significant to those who experience them. Virtual interactions lose the space-time limitations of face-to-face meetings and become fluid, fast, and adaptable. They do not need physical contact in a concrete context because they are based on the sharing of narrated thoughts and moods by status, emoticons, pictures, and videos. People establish interactions by sharing their thoughts, emotions, daily life activities, news, music, articles, and various links. Acceptance and approval by others happen through responses, emoticons, and likes, and bonds can become more intense than those present in real life. In this Relational-Communicative phase, the user becomes a web creator making changes to the network by communicating himself. There is the need for many “creative users” to express themselves online as a fundamental part of their identity. The network becomes how the user seeks approval, recognition and belonging. The feeling is that if you are

not present on the net and social media, you remain isolated, and this is the equivalent of not existing.

Considering the Evolutionary Development Model (Lavenia, 2018), it is possible to identify the phase of the approach to the internet in which the user is or may have been blocked, through the observation of what he does online, what types of applications he usually uses and how he exposes himself to the web. The relationship established by the user with the network, outlines attachment profiles to the web very similar to Bowlby's (1973) internal operational models of attachment. In this perspective, the relationship with other internet users is mediated by the type of attachment the person establishes with the technology in the first instance. It is important to consider the behavioral modalities the user put in place both online and offline, along with the historical, family and social context from which the person overlooks the web.

People who show dysregulations in the first phase generally present symptoms very similar to those of behavioral addictions, such as craving (Stoeber et al., 2011), and potential tolerance and withdrawal (Lavenia, 2018). However, the concepts of tolerance - requiring multiple stimuli to achieve satisfaction or reduce anxiety-, and withdrawal - consisting in experiencing negative consequences if separated from or stop to use the technology-, ground in the substance-based approach to addiction and give weak support to the definition of "Internet addiction" (Meerkerk, 2007; Pies, 2009). Furthermore, according to Van Rooij and Prause (2014), withdrawal is rarely mentioned as occurring in gambling (Fisher, 1992) and no biological changes consistent with reported withdrawal experiences have been demonstrated in gambling or internet use. According to Lavenia (2018), the clinical manifestations associated with the first phase of the model are cognitive overload, pathological online gambling, compulsive online shopping, online porn addiction.

In the second phase (Relational-Communicative), the user is connected to other people through the web by chats, media, and games. It increases the risk of pathological use of the internet and can determine a global involvement in the person's life. The user is completely absorbed with the virtual world losing spatial-temporal and emotional-social references, even offline. In this phase risks can be addiction to virtual relationships, virtual sex, MUD, online gaming, online role-playing, hikikomori, cyberbullying, Blue Whale, Nomophobia (Lavenia, 2018).

The etiology of internet addiction is a debated question. The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013) describes internet addiction as an Internet gaming disorder in the DSM -5 (APA, 2013). The World Health Organization (WHO) in the ICD-

11, has also included internet addiction under the voice that describes the gaming disorder. Spending many hours on the internet for no-working and no-studying may be accompanied by changes in mood, preoccupation, and the inability to control the amount of time spent interfacing with the internet technology (Van Rooij and Praus, 2014). Increasing attraction and involvement with the web may lead to psychological suffering caused by being disconnected from it. The need to lengthen online sessions or the amount of time to keep the mood high can degenerate and hinder relationships with family members and may have negative repercussions in professional or academic life (Chou et al., 2005). Mental health professionals agree that the risk of developing internet addiction is prominent in people with pre-existing psychopathologies (such as depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, anxiety disorders), who engage in risky behaviors (such as internet abuse and reduced life experiences and offline relationships), who have been subjected to unfavorable life events (such as illness, major bereavement, job loss, etc.) (Lavenia, 2018; Kratzer and Hergel, 2007).

According to Lavenia (2019 p.74), constant alert due to the high cell phone usage can cause anxiety and stress. Negative mental health symptoms may be related to excessive internet use. Time devoted to technology could take time away from social and cognitively enriching real-life activities compromising adolescents' well-being (Kraut et al., 1998). Another hypothesis suggests that young people with mental health difficulties tend to use technology as a tool to compensate for real or perceived deficits in social skills (Campbell et al., 2006). Among scientific literature, several investigations do not significantly support these hypotheses (Huang, 2017). A study conducted in North Carolina (Jensen et al., 2019) examined whether adolescent use of digital technology may be associated with mental health symptoms during early adolescence through mid-adolescence. The study does not reveal any confirmations that the amount of time spent using the internet technology is associated with mental health symptoms in young adolescents (Jensen et al., 2019). In relating mental health to internet usage, besides the time teens spend online, it is crucial to consider the quality of this time (which apps young people use or prefer) as they may be engaged in online beneficial social interactions and other online functional and positive activities.

6. Promoting digital well-being in schools

Despite the various beneficial aspects of the internet, its problematic use seems to have recently increased (Kaess et al., 2016; Kuss et al., 2013). Dysregulation in the use of this technology may be associated with less physical activity and various neurophysiological

and psychosocial problems (Griffiths et al., 2015), but also postural consequences (such as the “text neck”) (Cuéllar et al., 2017), and its intense use can potentially lead to addiction in vulnerable adolescents (Kuss et al., 2013).

The school context is increasingly a setting for prevention and health promotion interventions, aiming to improve students’ socio-emotional skills (Panayiotou et al., 2020), increase protective factors, and reinforce positive behaviors or positive aspects in the environment involving not only students but also training teachers and parents to be sensitized on adolescents’ well-being topics and to recognize the positive role of school-family partnership (Epstein, 2019). Implementing interventions at school is beneficial, offering access to large numbers of students, sustainably and cost-effectively. Nevertheless, sustainability depends on schools’ ability to develop and maintain informed and qualified staff motivated to continue providing intervention to promote well-being in ever-changing situations (Herlitz et al., 2020). Several studies demonstrate the effectiveness of universal school-based prevention programs (Goldberg et al., 2019), while the effectiveness of specific interventions remains a debated question. Following what emerges from the scientific literature (Throuvala et al., 2019) to improve safety concerning the use of the internet, possible prevention interventions may aim at promoting knowledge about internet technology abuse and its impact on psychosocial well-being, pointing out associated risks and promoting protective factors, improving digital skills and competencies. The current scientific debate and the lack of consensus for the definition and clinical classification of Internet Addiction as a disorder, as well as the different prevalence rates among the various countries that do not register the same level of risk, make it difficult at present to define specific interventions in reducing negative symptoms related to the excessive use of Internet in the school context.

7. Conclusion

Well-being is a central theme in positive psychology. It aims to theorize and promote people’s health and positive feelings. In this context, the widespread diffusion of digital technologies, which have profoundly changed our lifestyles, leads us to rethink this concept in a double direction. On the one hand, new digital technologies must be designed to promote physical and psychological well-being. On the other hand, a new space opens for psychologists, who are required to operate in promoting digital health. Digital well-being is an interdisciplinary field still in its infancy that aims to promote positive experiences with new technologies and their use that should be both effective and enjoyable. The future of new technologies presents risks and potential

dangers such as internet addiction. Although internet addiction has yet to be precisely defined, certainly the difficulties and disruptions associated with the use of new digital technologies represent a challenge for the implementation of strategies and interventions aimed at promoting digital well-being.

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