Chapter 7
Socioeconomic Determinants of Internet Addiction in Adolescents: A Scoping Review

Francisco Tsz Tsun Lai
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China

Joyce Lok Yin Kwan
The Education University of Hong Kong, China

ABSTRACT
From a social epidemiological perspective, this chapter presents a new approach to conceptualizing the socioeconomic determinants of Internet Addiction (IA) in adolescents, followed by a rapid scoping review of the empirical research literature on the same topic which aims to provide an overview of the current body of knowledge. With a strict adherence to the established procedures, fifteen original research articles were retrieved for review and analysis. A wide range of socioeconomic risk factors was identified. The theoretical pathways of socioeconomic determinants suggested in the included studies were also tabulated and discussed. Finally, the chapter closes with several recommendations for future research on the potential socioeconomic determinants of IA based on the retrieved findings.

INTRODUCTION
Although researchers and psychiatrists are still in debates whether Internet Addiction (IA) should be treated as a psychiatric disorder (Pies, 2009), IA has been consistently found to be associated with numerous other mental conditions, such as anxiety disorder, alcohol dependence, and depression (Ko, Yen, Yen, Chen, & Chen, 2012). The conceptualization of IA incorporates a wide range of events associated with disturbances, or even harm, to normal life, for example, significant loss of productivity, mood modifications, and psychological conflicts (C. M. Lai et al., 2013). It is much less controversial, therefore, that IA is detrimental to adolescents’ health and should thus be prevented. There also seems

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to be little doubt that IA is mainly a problem of the youths judging from the clear majority of the current research that focuses on IA in children, adolescents, and young adults (Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016). The identification of socioeconomic determinants of IA facilitates prevention in at least three ways. First, it extends our understanding of the shaping of IA towards one of the more upstream environmental antecedents of the causal path diagram of IA, i.e. socioeconomic background. Second, it connects socioeconomic status and intermediary determinants of IA to achieve a fuller explanation, such as peers relationships, self-esteem, and academic performance (F. T. T. Lai & Kwan, 2017b; Stavropoulos, Alexandraki, & Motti-Stefanidi, 2013; Yao, He, Ko, & Pang, 2013). Third, it helps better locate the adolescents who need additional assistance in managing their own Internet use in society. Nevertheless, unlike the various psychiatric disorders that IA is associated with (Green, Leyland, Sweeting, & Benzeval, 2016; Swartz, Hariri, & Williamson, 2017; Torikka, Kaltiala-Heino, Luukkaala, & Rimpelä, 2017), research on the socioeconomic determinants of IA in adolescents is relatively scarce despite the rapid growth of the size of the literature on IA (F. T. T. Lai & Kwan, 2017a). This scarcity possibly reflects the view that socioeconomic factors may not be of equal importance than other domains of determinants. One of the major reasons for such a view may be the fact that the prerequisite of IA is the adolescents’ frequent access to the Internet through personal computers or other electronic devices, which may, to a certain extent, already suggests the absence of materialistic deprivation. This view is probably misguided. In many advanced societies in the world, the possession of devices with Internet access is not strongly associated with an upper socioeconomic position. For instance, income inequality in Hong Kong is one of the severest in the world, with the Gini coefficient estimated to be 0.540 in 2016 (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2017). However, the penetration rate of the Internet was estimated to be as high as 79.0% in the overall residential population, and 99.6% among citizens aged 10-24 years (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2016). This implies that regardless of socioeconomic status, most, especially young, citizens have access to the Internet in those societies. Moreover, even if the possession of devices with Internet access indicates the absence of deprivation, there may still be significant socioeconomic inequalities within those who possess those devices since socioeconomic status is essentially a relative concept (Kawachi, Subramanian, & Almeida-Filho, 2002). These inequalities may affect the vulnerability of adolescents to uncontrolled Internet use and IA through dictating the differing life exposures in similar ways they exert influence on other ‘behavioral addictions’ (Welte, Barnes, Tidwell, & Wieczorek, 2017).

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the current empirical research on the socioeconomic determinants of IA in adolescents through conducting a scoping review. It starts with a Background section which introduces the conceptualization of socioeconomic determinants of IA, discusses the previous efforts of synthesizing research findings on the topic, and accordingly derives the research questions to be addressed in the review. Subsequently, the methods of the literature search and screening are presented, followed by the description and interpretation of the retrieved findings. Based on these findings, the chapter closes with several recommendations on the relationship between socioeconomic status and IA in adolescents for future researchers. The overview of the literature generated from the scoping review presented in this chapter should hopefully facilitate further in-depth appraisal of the current research evidence and pave the way for more focused empirical research on the topic in the future.