

Internet Addiction and Psychological Well-Being: A Qualitative Approach among College Students

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Abstract

The Internet, the so-called new medium, is not only a revolutionized technology but also the way we live, work, and communicate. It has become an obligatory part of our routine lives, especially for college students. Besides the overloaded and wealthy information provided by the internet, which includes other opportunities for social interaction, and entertainment, it also leads to a significant challenge, Internet Addiction (IA). Similar to other forms of addiction, internet addiction also has far-reaching implications for the psychological well-being of all age groups, especially college students. This article will explore the concept of internet addiction, its prevalence, types, and its impact on the psychological well-being of college students.

Keywords

New media, internet, addiction, psychology, well-being

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Introduction

The dynamic features of the internet and the evolving technological additions make it an integral part of every individual's life across the globe. Especially with the proliferation of smartphones, digital gadgets, and affordable unlimited data plans, internet usage has skyrocketed among all age groups significantly among the youth. Although this has increased connectivity which offers numerous opportunities, it has increased concerns about internet addiction, its impact, and related factors.

Commonly, Internet addiction (IA) is referred to as Problematic Internet Use (PIU) or Pathological Internet Use (PIU). It has become one of the major growing concerns in today's digital age. Internet addiction symptoms are characterized by excessive and compulsive internet usage that leads to adverse consequences in various life domains that impact one's overall well-being threatening physical, psychological, and social problems. Research has shown that excessive internet use can have negative effects on psychological well-being, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleep disturbances, social isolation, and decreased attention span.

Factors Contributing to Internet Addiction

1. **Accessibility and Affordability:** Many participants highlighted that the increased availability of affordable smartphones and data plans had made the Internet easily accessible. This accessibility often led to excessive usage.
2. **Academic Pressure:** Academic demands were vital factors that contributed to internet addiction. Participants felt the need to use the Internet for research, online classes, and exam preparation. This often led to prolonged usage and academic stress.
3. **Social Media:** The allure of social media platforms played a crucial role in internet addiction. Participants admitted to spending several hours a day on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, seeking social validation and connection.

4. Entertainment: Online entertainment, including video streaming and gaming, captivated many participants, leading to hours of engagement and neglect of other activities.

5. Escape Mechanism: Some participants used the Internet as an escape from real-world problems and emotional distress. They found solace in virtual worlds, which led to addiction.

6. Peer Pressure: Peer influence was a common reason, with many participants using the internet for various motives and purposes because their friends were doing so. This social pressure exacerbated addiction.

Consequences of Internet Addiction

1. Academic Decline: Many participants reported a decline in academic performance due to excessive internet use. This included procrastination, inability to concentrate, and a decrease in their regular study hours.

2. Physical Health Issues: Prolonged screen time leads to physical health issues like eye strain, sleep disturbances, and sedentary lifestyles.

3. Mental Health Impacts: Several participants experienced symptoms of anxiety and depression linked to excessive internet use. The pressure to maintain an idealized online persona contributed to stress.

4. Social Isolation: Despite being connected online, some participants reported feeling isolated in the real world. Face-to-face interactions reduced as they spent more time online.

5. Neglect of Responsibilities: Everyday responsibilities, including household chores, personal hygiene, and familial duties, were often neglected due to internet addiction.

6. Financial Implications: Some participants acknowledged overspending on data plans and in-app purchases, impacting their financial stability.

In the Indian context, the prevalence of internet addiction among youth is a pressing issue that requires further exploration. This qualitative research aims

to understand the factors contributing to internet addiction, its impact on the lives of Indian youth, and potential interventions to address this growing concern.

Review of Literature

Baturay & Toker (2019) explored the causes and effects of IA among college students. Addictive behavior towards gaming, delaying, disinterest or laziness in doing daily chores, disrespect towards professors, poor academic performances and behaviors, disturbances in sleep patterns, and increased time of internet use were significantly associated with internet addiction. It was identified that the self-concepts of a person declined due to Internet addiction which also triggered loneliness (Király et al., 2014).

Ghosh & Chatterjee (2018) identified participants with severe internet addiction and mild to moderate addiction. Factors such as gender, duration of internet use per day, and money spent on internet use were found to be significantly associated with internet addiction. Other factors like religion, residential, current place of stay, parents' occupation, educational status, and socioeconomic status were not significantly associated.

Problematic Internet use (PIU) and problematic online gaming (POG) were dual diverse conceptual and nosological entities. POG was strongly associated with the male gender. Self-esteem and PIU were less connected while depressive symptoms were related to both PIU and POG. PIU positively connected with online gaming, online chatting, and social networking. POG was associated only with online gaming. POG had abstractly dissimilar behavior from PIU. Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) and Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) are separate nosological entities (Király et al., 2014).

Kumcagiz & Gündüz (2016) investigated the relationship between university students' levels of psychological well-being and smartphone addiction seems to be significant based on this research. Factors affecting university students' levels of psychological well-being and smartphone addiction include gender, grade, parental attitudes, economic status of the family, and level of perception.

A. Preetha & D. Princy Petrishiya (2020) revealed, that male participants formed the majority and belonged to 20 years of age group. They resided in the urban community; they used mobile internet during their school days for the first time. In a day on average, they spend four hours on the internet and Rs. 300 per month including academic purposes, online shopping, WhatsApp & Facebook, and YouTube. The majority of the participants had mild levels of IA with moderate depression, while a major group of respondents had mild anxiety and mild levels of loneliness. As a result, the study proved that internet features, browsing habits, duration, frequency, and amount spent were significantly associated with internet addiction whereas browsing habits were pointedly associated with depression.

IA was significantly negatively correlated to psychological well-being (PWB) and sub-dimensions of PWB. Students with higher levels of IA had a declined PWB (Sharma & Sharma, 2018).

Methodology

A qualitative approach to learning and revising IA and PWB involves exploring an individual's definite experiences, thoughts, and feelings about their internet use. This can provide rich, in-depth insights into the psychological and emotional aspects of internet addiction. By exploring the research questions through qualitative research methodology researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the complex psychological factors involved in IA and develop more effective interventions to support individuals struggling with this problem.

This qualitative research involved focus group discussions. This sample comprises 10 Indian youth between 18-25 years representing various regions, backgrounds, and internet usage patterns. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in experiences.

Research Questions

Some potential research questions on this topic could include:

1. How do individuals experience and perceive their internet use as addictive or problematic?

2. What emotional and psychological factors contribute to excessive internet use?
3. How does internet addiction affect individuals' relationships, daily routines, and overall well-being?
4. What strategies do individuals use to manage or cope with internet use?

Findings

Individuals' experience and observation of their addictive Internet use

Individuals may experience and perceive their Internet use as addictive or problematic in various ways, including compulsive checking, loss of control, neglect of responsibilities, withdrawal symptoms, tolerance, escape or avoidance, deception, negative impact on mental and physical health, feeling anxious or uneasy when disconnected and failed attempts to quit or control use.

Factors contributing to emotional and psychological excessive Internet use

Excessive internet use, also known as internet addiction or problematic internet use, is a complex issue influenced by various emotional and psychological factors. Here are some of the key contributors included anxiety and stress relief, social connections and loneliness, depression and escapism, personality traits, dopamine, and reward system, fear of missing out (FOMO), low self-esteem and self-identity, boredom and lack of purpose, sleep deprivation and fatigue, underlying mental health conditions.

Relationships, daily routines, and overall well-being

Internet addiction can significantly impact individuals' relationships, daily routines, and overall well-being. Here are some potential effects.

Relationships: Social isolation (neglect of face-to-face relationships, feelings of loneliness and disconnection), Strained relationships (conflicts with family and friends), and online relationships replacing offline ones (preferring online relationships over in-person connections).

Daily Routines: Sleep disturbances (disrupted sleep patterns, leading to fatigue, decreased productivity, and insomnia), neglect of responsibilities (neglect of work, school, or personal responsibilities), and poor time management (Excessive internet use can lead to procrastination, decreased productivity, and poor time management skills).

Overall Well-being: Mental health concerns (depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues), physical health problems (sedentary lifestyle, leading to obesity, eye strain, and other physical health issues), decreased self-esteem (decreased self-esteem, as individuals compare their lives to curated online content), loss of interests and hobbies (decline in offline activities and hobbies) and decreased attention span (decreased attention span, making it difficult to focus on tasks or activities).

Individuals' strategies to cope with their Internet use

Individuals use various strategies to manage or cope with their internet use, including: setting boundaries (establishing specific times for internet use and sticking to those times), using website blockers (tools like freedom, self-control, or stay focussed block distracting websites during certain periods), implementing screen-free zones (designating areas or rooms as internet-free, like bedrooms or dining tables), scheduling digital detoxes (regularly taking breaks from the internet for a few hours or days), finding offline hobbies (engaging in activities that don't involve the internet, like exercise, reading or creative pursuits), setting up screen time tracking (using built-in features or apps to monitor and limit internet use), creating internet-free days (designating one day a week as an internet-free day), seeking support (sharing concerns with friends or family and asking them to hold you accountable), practicing mindfulness (being aware of internet use and recognizing when it's becoming excessive) and setting goals and rewards (encouraging yourself to stay within set internet use limits by setting small rewards).

Recommendations

The current study investigated Internet addiction concerning its implications for social behaviour, and psychological phenomenon but not in a clinical sense.

Hence, studies on Internet addiction merely concentrate on antecedents and features that may cause more addiction; however, both antecedents and consequences are not examined. Students, parents, professors and educational institutions should be aware of IA and its consequences. They should be educated about the prevention or monitoring of internet addiction.

An individual experiencing these signs should seek help from a mental health professional for consultation, guidance and support. These factors interact with each other and with environmental factors as well. Access to technology and social norms contributes to excessive internet use. It is essential to recognize the signs of internet addiction and take steps to maintain a healthy balance between internet use and offline life. These strategies help individuals manage their internet use, maintain a healthy balance, and reduce potential negative impacts on mental and physical well-being.

Interventions and Solutions

Addressing internet addiction among Indian youth requires a multi-faceted approach that considers cultural nuances and individual needs. Some potential interventions and solutions include:

1. **Educational Programs:** Schools and colleges should incorporate digital literacy programs to educate students about responsible internet usage and its potential consequences.
2. **Counselling Services:** Educational institutions and healthcare providers can offer counselling services to address the psychological impacts of internet addiction.
3. **Parental Involvement:** Parents should be informed about the signs of internet addiction and play an active role in guiding their children's internet usage.
4. **Time Management:** Teaching time management skills can help youth strike a balance between online and offline activities.
5. **Support Groups:** Creating support groups for individuals struggling with internet addiction can provide a sense of community and shared experiences.

6. Government Regulations: The government can enforce regulations to limit the marketing of addictive online games and apps and ensure child safety online.

Conclusion

Internet addiction among youth is a complex issue with far-reaching consequences for academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. This qualitative research sheds light on the contributing factors, consequences, and potential interventions. Recognizing the unique cultural context of Indian youth and their experiences with the internet is essential in developing effective strategies to combat this growing concern. By raising awareness and implementing targeted interventions, we can help Indian youth harness the benefits of the Internet while mitigating the risks of addiction.

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M. Nandha Kumar, Associate Professor, School of Architect and design, with over 15 years of experience in teaching Film and Television Media Studies, has cultivated a deep expertise in the field. His academic journey is marked by a commitment to exploring the nuances of visual storytelling, media theory, and the impact of film on culture and society. In addition to his teaching role, a proficient film festival researcher, dedicated to analysing and understanding the dynamics of film festivals globally. His research contributes to the broader discourse on cinema, shedding light on emerging trends and the evolving landscape of film festivals.