

Tracing the Threads of Addiction: Qualitative Exploration of Psychosocial Factors Contributing Towards Internet Addiction Among University Students

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The internet as a tool for educational, services, entertainment and socializing purposes has become one of the quintessential components of today's lifestyle. Due to its excessive use students are getting highly into the garb of internet addiction. The present study employed a qualitative study to investigate internet addiction and the psychosocial factors contributing to it among university students ($N = 215$). Based on the scores of the Internet Addiction Test (Thapar, 2022), the participants were considered either for the high internet addiction group or for the low internet addiction group. To explore the contributing factors of internet addiction, 16 Focus Group Discussions were conducted, with 8 high internet addiction groups and 8 low internet addiction groups. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed contrasting trends between these two sets of groups. The study suggested various psychosocial factors which might be contributing towards internet addiction during later stages of life, from the perspective of the study, the university life of an individual. The factors contributing may start as early as childhood access to phones, a hedonistic consumption lasting for more than four hours, faulty and under skilled parental restriction on internet usage. All this gets compounded with dysfunctional family dynamics, and lack of preparedness for the social world. These factors have been discussed thoroughly in light of existing literature.

Keywords. Internet addiction, university students, psychosocial factors

In the present century, the internet has become a limitless source of information globally. It has transformed the various domains such as education system, communication system including the

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transmission of knowledge bringing up advancement in various sectors of life (Joshi et al., 2022). From basic necessities such as access to information, education and health services to something as complex as video conferencing with a friend sitting miles away, the Internet has made it all possible. Everything is just a click away. Individual's pattern of internet usage and consumption has been an area of interest (Gómez-Galán et al., 2020). Internet is posing problems in various aspects of life leading to a rise in diagnosis of various mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse and personality disorders (Cai et al., 2023; Donati et al., 2022).

The latest data retrieved in 2025 reveals that active internet users account for 67.9% approximately worldwide which makes up about 5.56 billion individuals (Petrosyan, 2025). Kenya, the country with lowest Internet Adoption has shown an increase from 33.8% to 40.8% in merely 12 months, from April 2023 to April 2024. Globally, we are witnessing a surge that seems to go beyond control in the upcoming years (Kemp, 2024; Kemp, 2023). The digital reach in India has escalated from 14% in 2014 to more than 55% in 2025 making them the second largest consumer of the internet worldwide (Basuroy, 2025). Furthermore, in Pakistan the online connectivity accounts to be 53.57% in 2025. It is expected by 2025, around 19.08 million households will have internet access at home (Statista, 2025).

Internet addiction is defined as a behavioral pattern characterized by excessive or obsessive online and offline computer use that leads to distress and impairment (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018). It involves urges and impulses to use the internet even at the expense of one's health and discomfort. The user is not able to keep track of time and gets completely lost in it. There are four components of addiction-impaired control, social problems, risky use and bad effects. Problems in sleep patterns, ignorance of responsibilities, lying to close ones, disturbed sexual orientations, relationship disturbances are some of the common problems resulting from internet addictions (Young, 2004). As Grohol (1999) has speculated, addiction is not always talked about in the context of medications or drugs, but also as behavioral addictions. The nature of internet addiction is non-chemical i.e. behavioural (Griffiths, 1995) and technological (Dhir, 2015), thereby making it a behavioural addiction. It involves human-machine interactions, and has symptoms like mood modification, relapse, withdrawal symptoms, tolerance, conflict and salience (Griffiths, 1996).

People use the internet for various purposes. Some do it for enjoyment, others for pursuing pleasure or to avoid pain (Bisen & Deshpande, 2018), whereas others are involved because of impulses.

Many times, Internet use for activities like gaming, communicating on social media platforms, talking on call, attending concerts online, watching movies, participating in competitions on the internet become rewarding and mood regulating experiences. It makes the person satisfied and motivated to explore more. Under such circumstances, dopamine plays a significant role, as it is known to lead to happy and rewarding feelings. The person is involved in repeated use of the internet. With passage of time, tolerance develops and now an even greater number of hours and internet activity is required to experience the same level of euphoria. High levels of tolerance serve as a precursor to Internet addiction. But if the individual stops after excessive use, there are considerable physical and psychological symptoms which come as a relapse, like disturbed sleep, irritability, and frustration. These frustrations surface in wrong ways, where the individual shows aggression to even normal situations and showcases exaggerated reactions. It is a form of passive coping mechanism that the user develops (Li et al., 2019). On similar grounds, Uludag (2023) highlighted that personalized video recommendation systems may do more than simply intensify user engagement; they can also heighten vulnerability to dependency signals and reinforce fascination with tempting behavioural patterns. Compensation theory (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014) posits that when individuals lack something in their social and psychological life, they resort to the internet for compensation. Young adults are in a phase of their lives where they are developing their identity, making career choices and taking important decisions in life and if they face any difficulty in these areas of life, they try to compensate for identity, self-concept by immersing themselves into the online world (Bisen & Deshpande, 2018).

Socio emotional model (Caplan, 2003) suggests that some individuals have difficulty in their social lives. They do not find it easy to establish bonds with others, and social life becomes a source of negative feelings for them. In extreme situations, they also face social anxiety. When an individual experiences depression, anxiety or stress, there is an increased tendency for the person to become an internet addict (Chen et al., 2013). To ward off these troubling emotions, the individual begins to use the internet, as it does not involve any social interactions, thus providing the mind enough stimulation to feel better. With time, the duration of internet addiction increases, and individuals fall for internet addiction (Savci & Aysan, 2017). However, momentary escapes do not provide any long-term solution. Moreover, the individual does not learn how to handle various situations of life effectively. It also reduces the positive psychological emotions, like inner-will to combat the hardships,

understanding self and others in social situations ([Longstreet et al., 2019](#)).

Research in South Korea brought a murder case to light because of compulsive, excessive online gaming in a cafe. The murder incident indicates poor self-control among users with pathological internet use ([Yau et al., 2012](#)). Seeing the hazardous consequences, the government of China had put restrictions on the internet usage time to only 3 hours in a day ([Block, 2008](#)). Differences are found in university students belonging to different streams, with respect to internet addiction. The disciplines like economics and administrative sciences ([Orsal et al., 2013](#)) have more such content where students have to stay regularly updated, for which they require regular use of the internet. Similarly, students from vocational high schools are found to have higher internet addiction ([Yang & Tung, 2007](#)). Internet addiction is on the rise since there are no proper guidelines on the amount of internet consumption that does not pose any risks to the user.

Rationale

With an ever-increasing advancement in the field of technology, consumption of internet and gadgets, internet addiction is going to increase manifold. It is therefore imperative to be aware of the antecedents causing internet addiction so that timely and effective interventions are made in advance. This study endeavors to know those factors leading to it. In the contemporary era, human lives are bombarded with the internet and gadgets. Most of the stimuli for our brain is now coming from online information. We are more mentally aroused while watching reels, than walking in the garden. It is also true that the internet has now become a compulsive activity, from which we can't even think of separating. We have devoted a major portion of our lives to internet-based activities.

In the past few decades, both the number of internet users and those who are addicted to the internet have seen a substantial rise. The trend of internet usage is alarming and needs to be investigated. There are many side-effects of this excessive internet addiction, both physically and psychologically. With an ever-increasing advancement in the field of technology, consumption of internet and gadgets, internet addiction is going to increase manifold, especially for university students. This makes it inevitable to be aware of what consequences it has on students. The present study would aid university students in becoming aware of the detrimental effects of internet addiction so as to keep a close eye on their internet usage.

Method

Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative research design in which Focus Group Discussions were conducted. It aimed to study the psychosocial factors contributing towards internet addiction among university students.

Sample

Sample for the present study consisted of university students ($N = 215$) which were selected randomly from four universities of Punjab (India). The number of male participants were 108, and female participants were 107 respectively. The age of the sample ranges from 19-25 years ($M = 22.8$ years).

Measures

The following measure was used.

Internet Addiction Test

The Internet Addiction Test (Young, 1998) is a 20 item 5-point Likert scale. A score of 100 points is the maximum. This scale is based on the criteria set by DSM-IV for pathological gambling, and measures various problems associated with internet addiction like disturbed sleeping patterns, social life problems and personal life routine deteriorations (Thapar, 2022). Total scores between 0 and 30 represent a normal level of Internet usage, whereas values between 31 and 49 show that a mild level of Internet addiction is present, scores between 50 and 79 show a moderate level, while scores between 80 and 100 show a severe addiction of the Internet. Participants, who score above 20, fall into the category of Internet Addicts. The scale has showcased strong psychometric properties, with internal consistency ($\alpha = .90-.93$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .85$) (Chang & Law, 2008; Widyanto & McMurran, 2004).

The study was divided into two phases. These were:

Phase 1: Screening Phase

The first step of this study was to identify participants for high and low internet addiction. Abiding by the ethical guidelines, the

participants who gave consent were administered the Internet Addiction Test. The participants who scored high on this test, i.e., those whose scores fall into a severe and moderate ranges of addiction, were considered for the high internet addiction group (high IA group). Whereas the participants who scored lower on this test, i.e., those whose scores fall into mild and normal ranges of addiction, were considered for low internet addiction group (low IA group).

Phase 2: Focus Group Discussions

Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with participants who agreed to participate in the further stage of study. A total of 16 groups were made, that is 8 groups were the high IA groups and 8 were low IA groups. Each group consisted of 7-12 participants. After a gap of 1 week, post collection of responses from participants on the questionnaires, FGDs were conducted. To make the structure of Focused Group Discussions systematic, thorough guidelines provided by [Krueger \(2002\)](#) were followed. The approach followed 'questioning route' starting with:

Introductory Questions

From a generalized introductory beginning, the moderator put forward some introductory questions to pave a way for discussion on the theme of the study and make it more contextualized. Introductory questions surrounded participants' interaction with the internet, their favorite social media, and online networking.

Transitory Questions

In the transitional phase, the moderator had put forth some ice-breaking questions that surrounded internet use, such as participants' media involvement, preoccupation with the internet activities and their feelings towards the possibility of losing internet accessibility. These questions served as a bridge between introductory and key questions of the FGDs.

Key Questions

Key questions explore the main topic in depth, since only the transcripts from these questions were to be analyzed. Through an extensive search on databases like Scopus, Web of Sciences, Science direct, following key questions were framed and were asked by

participants, such as when did you first get access to the internet? For how many hours, on average, do you use Internet? What is your favourite activity or purpose of using the Internet? Do you have the freedom to use internet unrestrictedly at home? Have your parents interfered with your internet usage or activities? Did they ever check your browsing history or search engines? Has excessive use (if present) impacted your interpersonal relationships? Do you spend more hours online or with offline connections? Have you ever found yourself mindlessly scrolling through internet just to numb your disturbing thoughts and emotions?

Procedure

On average, amongst the 16 FGD's, each FGD went on for around 40 minutes. No forced choice or dichotomous questions were asked from the participants; rather the focus was on questions which would invite detailed, open-ended responses. At the end of each individual FGD, participants were thanked for their participation and were freed from the study. Through participants' verbatim, repetitive and major themes were extracted for analysis. To make sense of the data gathered through FGDs, thematic analysis was done. Permission to conduct this study was taken from the concerned authorities.

After brief information about the nature and aim of the study, informed consent was taken from all participants of the study. They were informed that they are allowed to leave the study at any point they are uncomfortable. It was made sure that no participant was harmed during the study. All the responses were kept strictly anonymous, confidential and were used for the purpose of this study only. Participants' queries were also answered.

Results

For the qualitative analysis, the responses from the participants were transcribed. The transcriptions were then analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Overall, the process involved following steps; that is coding (involved identifying data segments that were recurring), initial themes (that involved clustering related codes together), defining and naming for final themes (involving an iterative process where initial themes were combined, refined or even discarded, and then creatively naming or labelling in such a way that gave rise to a concise summary for each initial theme).

Table 1: *Summary of The Thematic Analysis of High IA Participants*

FGD Questions	Codes	Initial Themes
Q1. When did you first get access to the Internet?	Working parents; Children's access to others' phone; Liberal parents; Parental way of keeping children occupied during childhood; Through peer interaction in schools; During childhood	Childhood access
Q2. For how many hours, on an average, do you use Internet?	4-6 hours; 6-7 hours; 7-8 hours	More than 4 hours
Q3. What is your favorite activity on the Internet?	Gaming; Dance; Music; Reality shows; Movies; Social media; Fitness/ beauty videos; Online books; Meme sharing	Leisure and enjoyment
Q4. Purpose of using the internet	Using artificial intelligence for assignments; Book cab; Order food; Online shopping; Online gaming; Romantic relationships	Convenience; Immediate gratification; Habituation
Q5. Do you have the freedom to use internet unrestrictedly at your homes?	Unrestricted access; parents put verbal restrictions and often don't supervise much; Parents do not trust children's internet usage; parents put restrictions on certain types of content;	Either Unrestricted access without supervision; or certain types of Content Restriction;
Q6. Have your parents interfered with your internet usage or activities? Did they ever check your browsing history or search engines?	Parents try to put restrictions but parents are not technology savvy; Unable to interfere; Parents are overly strict and use harsh measures to investigate internet consumption	Parents' want to, but lack technological skills; Parents are overly strict

Continued...

FGD Questions	Codes	Initial Themes
Q7. Has excessive use (in present) impacted your interpersonal relationships?	Highly distanced; Not affected; Broken relationships; Inability to control social distancing; Already dysfunctional families; Lack of face-to-face conversation	In dysfunctional families, internet consumption adds fuel.
Q8. Do you spend more hours online or with offline connections?	Don't understand the etiquettes and mannerism of real-world communication; Online communication seems easier.	Preference for online; Lack skills to communicate in real world; Habit formation for online communication
Q9. Have you ever found yourself mindlessly scrolling through internet just to numb your disturbing thoughts and emotions?	Spending hours mindlessly; Distractions to emotions; Escape-avoidance; Vague booking	Absence of healthy relationships; Escape-Avoidance Strategies Emotion-focused coping

From the verbatims of the participants, initial themes were extracted. It was inferred that the participants who had high IA shared a common set of themes. Likewise, the participants who scored low on IA shared comparable experiences and similar themes emerged through their transcript verbatims. After this the final themes were identified from the initial themes of both the groups.

Table 2: *Summary of the Thematic Analysis of Low IA Participants That Led to the Initial Themes of Investigation*

FGD Questions	Codes	Initial Themes
Q1. When did you first get access to the Internet?	Minimal access during childhood; Restricted access till adulthood	Denied childhood access
Q2. For how many hours, on an average, do you use Internet?	Less than 2 hours; 2-4 hours; 4 hours	Less than 4 hours.

Continued...

FGD Questions	Codes	Initial Themes
Q3. What is your favorite activity on the Internet?	Online education; Awareness about events; Information about world; Video calls	Knowledge and Education; Maintaining bonds
Q4. Purpose of using the internet	Book cab; Order food; Online shopping; News and information; Online coaching; Online courses; Romantic relationships; Maintaining Friendships, family and relatives; Support groups	Learning and education; Self-growth and improvement; Recent updates about world; Maintaining long distance friendships and relationships
Q5. Do you have the freedom to use internet unrestrictedly at your homes?	Parents trust children's usage, but monitor for timing.	Unrestricted access with supervision
Q6. Have your parents interfered with your internet usage or activities? Did they ever check your browsing history or search engines?	Interfere with constant online preoccupation; Parents have trust; Offline connections outweigh spending time in online world	Parents trust and children maintain the online boundaries; Interfere when time limits are crossed; Healthy relationships leading to adequate usage only
Q7. Has excessive use (in present) impacted your interpersonal relationships?	Prioritizing offline connections	Healthy families have less issues
Q8. Do you spend more hours online or with offline connections?	Internet is a means to stay in touch with far-away connections; Offline	Preference for offline connections; Possess social skills
Q9. Have you ever found yourself mindlessly scrolling through internet just to numb your disturbing thoughts and emotions?	No innate need; Mindful in internet consumption	Not required if there are other healthy relationships

Table 3: *Showing the Final Themes of Study That Emerged From the Initial Themes for High IA and Low IA Focused Group Discussions*

Questions	High IA	Low IA	Final Themes
Q1. When did you first get access to the Internet?	Childhood access	Denied childhood access	Childhood access Versus Denied access
Q2. For how many hours, on an average, do you use Internet?	More than 4 hours	Less than 4 hours	More than 4 hours Versus less than four hours
Q3. What is your favorite activity on the Internet?	Leisure and enjoyment	Knowledge and Education; Maintaining bonds	Hedonic pleasure Versus Eudaimonic pleasure (Same theme for Q3 & Q4)
Q4. Purpose of using the internet.	Convenience; Immediate gratification; Habituation	Learning and education; Self-growth and improvement; Recent updates about world; Maintaining long distance friendships and relationships	
Q5. Do you have the freedom to use internet unrestrictedly at your homes?	Unrestricted access without supervision; Restricted access with failed attempts in supervision; Content restriction	Unrestricted access with supervision; Restricted access	Customized/Inadequate restriction Versus Adequate restriction
Q6. Have your parents interfered with your internet usage or activities? Did they ever check	Parents' want to, but lack technological skills; Parents are unaffected; Parents are overly strict while interfering	Parents trust and children maintain online boundaries; Interfere when time limits are crossed; Healthy relationships	Under skilled/distant interference Versus Mutual interference

Continued...

Questions	High IA	Low IA	Final Themes
your browsing history or search engines?	and checking search histories.	leading to adequate usage only	
Q7. Has excessive use (in present) impacted your interpersonal relationships?	In dysfunctional families, internet consumption is adding fuel.	Healthy families have less issues	Dysfunctional family dynamics Versus Healthy family dynamics
Q8. Do you spend more hours online or offline connections?	Preference for online connection; Lack skills to communicate in real world; Habit formation for online communication	Preference for offline connections; Possess social skills	Untrained for social world Versus Proficient for social world
Q9. Have you ever found yourself mindlessly scrolling through internet just to numb your disturbing thoughts and emotions?	Absence of healthy relationships; Escape-Avoidance strategies; Emotion-focused coping	Not required if there are other healthy relationships	Emotional-outlet surfing Versus Mindful surfing

Discussion

The present study was conducted with the objective to examine the differences that exist across levels of internet addiction, and to discern qualitatively the factors that could be leading towards internet addiction, on the sample of university students. Through Focused Group Discussions, the factors contributing to internet addiction and its associated consequences were investigated comprehensively. Through the process, certain themes emerged which were majorly contributing to a thorough understanding of internet addiction, in a sample of university students.

Theme 1. Access to the Internet: Childhood Access Versus Denied Access

The phase of life at which the individual is exposed to the internet is very likely to play a crucial role in them becoming internet addicted. Through analysis of the verbatim of the participants, it was observed that the university students who got early access, i.e during childhood, to the internet reported high internet addiction. On the contrary, university students for whom restrictions existed till adulthood had reported low internet addiction. For instance, a participant who reported low internet addiction shared,

“I got it at 18 as my parents thought that children should be exposed to the internet when they are mature enough to distinguish between good and bad.” (participant 6, age 23 years)

The participants from high IA groups reported to most have parents who either were most of the times preoccupied in busy lives, or were laissez-faire with the access of the internet to them even at early childhood years. Quite the opposite, low internet addicted university students shared that they either had minimal access to the internet during childhood or had restricted access till adulthood. However, existing literature sets forth that individuals who get late access or minimal exposure to the internet and other related digital technologies have a decreased self-accomplishment in the prerequisite of socio-economic well-being (Oyedemi, 2011). In the early years of life, children do not understand what is right and wrong for them. They cannot think of the future and are just involved in activities which make them feel good in the present moment. Hedonic motives have also been found to be higher in children aged 7 to 12 years (Gentzler et al., 2021).

Theme 2. Average Time Spent on the Internet: More Than 4 Hours Versus Less Than Four Hours

It was analyzed through transcriptions that participants who had low internet addiction generally spent less than 4 hours in a day on the internet. Whereas participants with high internet addiction spent more than 4 hours on the internet on a daily basis, this consumption has reached even up to 8 hours in a day for some of them. One of the participants with high internet addiction, shared:

“Online gaming is my weakness. I'm so addicted to it that if I don't spend 6-7 hours daily, I start to feel restless.”
(Participant 28, age 24 years)

Findings suggest that university students do use the Internet for their academics (Ersun, et al., 2012) however some studies reported that it's not always the case (Nath, et al., 2016). For instance, a participant shared:

“Oh God! Don't ask me. My day starts and ends with it.” (Participant 37, age 21 years)

Some students also shared that it was because of academic purposes that they had to use the internet for long hours. Studies have also shown that long internet usage causes academic-related problems and internet addiction (Prasad et al., 2017).

Theme 3. Preferred Activities and Purpose of Using the Internet: Hedonic Pleasure Versus Eudaimonic Pleasure

The purposes for which university students use the internet are numerous. Some students use the internet without any predetermined purpose. Such university students who use the internet majorly for leisure and enjoyment purposes were found to have high internet addiction. One of the participants with high internet addiction shared,

“I can't sleep without YouTube... even after I have slept.. songs run in background” (participant 32, age 25 years)

“Me and my friends share at least 50 memes in a day.”
(participant 36, age 19 years)

Statements like these are indicative of the obsessive use of the internet by the users. Whereas, students who have low internet addiction had goals and objectives for which they began to use the internet. Such students were found to use the internet primarily for knowledge and education purposes. Having an objective helps the individual to stay on track. Students who had a high internet addiction used the internet to make their tasks easier and to automate important tasks. As reported by the participants of this study, the activities in which such participants were majorly involved are summarized in figure 1

Students with high internet addiction received immediate gratification from internet use and continued the activities for hours. Research also suggests that people with high internet addiction will

use the internet for stress relief, as a habit, craving, escapism as a defense mechanism, and for entertainment (Akar, 2015; Hashemi et al., 2022). For university students with low internet addiction, they conceived the internet as an ocean of opportunities and strength that could contribute to their self-growth and improvement. Literature is consistent with these findings as it suggests research, communication, entertainment, learning, and personal development as key purposes for which individuals with low internet addiction use the internet (Arora et al., 2021; Anand et al., 2018; Kumar & Mondal, 2018). Overall, it could be concluded that high IA students use the internet mainly for hedonic pleasure and the convenience and immediate gratification has made them habituated to overuse. Hedonic pleasure seekers aim to maximize pleasure, prioritize enjoyable experiences, and value short-term gratification over long-term goals as they seek to avoid the feelings of displeasure, pain and boredom at all costs (Schaffner, 2024). On the other hand, the low IA students use the internet for eudaimonic pleasure. Eudaimonic pleasure seekers aim for self-fulfillment, prioritize value-oriented living and value long-term goals (Schaffner, 2024).

Theme 4. Restrictions to Use Internet at Home: Customized / Inadequate Restriction Versus Adequate Restriction

Three trends were found for students with high IA. One was that either they had unrestricted access to the internet with no parental supervision; secondly the restriction was only over the content of the internet; and thirdly, the parents tried to put restrictions but were not technologically advanced to implement those. For instance, a participant shared:

“Same here, my parents either don’t mind me using the internet or if once in a while they feel like saying something they can’t do much. They don’t know how these things work” (Participant 36, age 22 years)

On the other hand, the students from low IA groups were found to have parents who either were putting restrictions or would continue to supervise in case the access was restricted. The major kind of restriction was the restriction on time spent on the internet. The participants from high IA groups revealed that they continued to use the internet in disguise but never stopped the usage. Since the restrictions were coming from outside, these did not inculcate any sense of personal responsibility among the users. Since a goal which is obstructive becomes even more attractive (Lewin, 1951), university

students who were restricted, have shown higher levels of proneness to internet addiction. On the contrary, the students who were under surveillance but without any restrictions had a more positive outlook to the internet. Content restriction plays a major role in determining the level of internet use among university students. Through analysis of the transcriptions, it came to light that when students are restricted from some web content, they feel even more stimulated or provoked to find ways to get the restricted content. For this, they spend long hours on torrent websites and proxy links, as shared by a participant,

“The shared Wi-Fi for students has so many restrictions. Daily, I have to search on proxy websites for that correct link to download my content” (Participant 32, age 24 years)

Students feel that there are many ways to get the content they want, and there is not sufficient surveillance to stop them. Rather, they felt that surveillance is not required as they are always doing what they want. It increases one more problem, the burden of data recharge on university students. On the contrary, discussions with university students who were low on internet addiction revealed that they were not regularly checked upon for content that they consumed on the internet. Rather, they used to have healthy discussions on the topics which were trending on the internet.

Theme 5. Parental Interference and Control Over Browsing: Under Skilled/Distant Interference Versus Mutual Interference

Parents are the primary authority figure which keeps surveillance on the actions of their children, to save them from any harm. But as children grow up, the dynamics of parent-child relationships change. As internet users, the grown-up university students want full freedom of activities on the internet, social media accounts and duration of internet use. When parents put restrictions, it is not taken by the university students in a positive light. Rather it is conceived as if their freedom and privacy is being snatched. As they expressed,

“There is a rule in our family to sleep by 12, after that nobody is allowed to use phone or laptop.” (Participant 19, age 23 years)

Parents can control the observable behaviors, like duration of internet use, late-night use, obsession with gadgets, etc. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the parents would be able to track what activities and search engines their children are involved in. For instance, the parents are involved in checking browsing history, peeping for passwords, and tracking activities on the internet. Even a female participant reported-

“My parents want to have total control on whatever I do on computers. How frustrating this is!! It's better to use it when they have slept” (Participant 33, age 23 years)

Strict fathers in particular play a major causal factor in the development of internet addiction (Ni et al., 2017; Lansford et al., 2013). Parental authoritarian and permissive parenting styles were found to be positively correlated with internet addiction among their adolescents (Setiawati et al., 2021; Zülfiqar & Khan, 2024). Neglecting parenting style was found to have the strongest relationship with internet addiction among children (Tur-Porcar, 2017). These over interference trends, to the extent of not trusting the child, were highly evident for the students with high IA. So, for the children from high IA groups three trends in interference and checking browsing histories emerged. These are either parents make attempts but lack technological skills, or parents are completely unaffected, iii. or parents are overly strict while interfering with and checking search histories. But for the students from low IA groups in most cases parents trust their children for their content-watching on the internet and further children reciprocate this trust by maintaining healthy online boundaries. These parents interfere only when the children cross the time limits for using the internet. Overall the healthy parent-child bond seems to intervene internet usage for such children. Overall, for high IA groups interference and checking histories by parent was found to be under-skilled or distant; and for low IA groups as mutual, where both parties participate equally in maintaining control.

Theme 6. Interpersonal Relationships: Dysfunctional Family Dynamics Versus Healthy Family Dynamics

The people who use the internet for long hours experience problems in many areas of their life. One such area is interpersonal relationships. Research suggests that internet addiction leads to impaired interpersonal relationships and social anxiety. Individuals with high internet addiction interact less in social settings. They have poor ability to understand and deal with others. For instance, a male participant shared:

“It has affected all of my relationships. My parents are not happy. I know nothing of what is going on in the lives of my siblings. My gf is often full of complaints.” (Participant 21, age 24 years)

Another dimension which emerged under this theme was that university students who have highly dysfunctional families are more

addicted to the internet. A few participants shared that as children, they used to plug in earphones to avoid fights between their parents. Research studies are consistent with the finding suggesting that there is a positive correlation between interpersonal problems/troubles and internet addiction (Hao et al., 2022). Parental ignorance was another important theme that emerged during the discussions with the participants. It means that, when the parents are busy with their respective jobs, they cannot keep up with the demands of their children, and are unable to pay attention to their children's activities. When there is no mature figure around to guide them about what is right and wrong, children feel free to use the internet unrestrictedly.

"See. Both of my parents were working, so it was necessary to keep one phone at home. That's why I got it when I was 12 years old." (Participant 36, age 22 years)

Parental ignorance and unavailability also create a sense of emotional void among children. As they grow up, university students tend to fill this void by immersing themselves into the world of the internet. As adults, they also experience a lack of sense of family support. In a home where there's a lack of feeling of warm, trust, nurturance, and support, the individual seeks comfort in internet activities (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005; Willoughby, 2008; Zhang et al., 2022) such as songs, web series, and funny videos which in turn develop into internet addiction, as they will use the internet often to seek that comfort as reported by participants-

"At home my family takes one-one corners each and uses the internet...." (participant 38, age 22 years)

On the contrary, university students with healthy familial relationships were reported to have less internet addiction. They felt more socially supported and loved.

Theme 7. Online and Offline Connections: Untrained for Social World Versus Proficient for Social World

University students who had low internet addiction preferred to interact with others in offline mode. They believed that only through face-to-face interactions, one could grasp the true meaning of others' talks. Sitting together and sharing the meals were important activities which helped them establish stronger bonds with those around them. They even preferred to stay with their families than living in hostels. One of the participants shared,

“Online connections can never replace the love and touch of your mother, father, friends. Can they?” (Participant 18, age 25 years)

On the other hand, university students who had a high internet addiction were more comfortable in interacting with others through chat, calls or video calls. They believed that online interactions were helpful in maintaining their comfort and did not require any serious efforts to meet people. However, excessive involvement with the internet may lead to less number and quality of offline interactions. Research even suggests that there's a decline in individual communication with friends and family and even a smaller social circle due to high internet usage (Kraut et al., 1998). Two reasons, behind the preference for online communication and connections, could be traced from the FGDs of high IA groups. One is getting accustomed to online communication (due to the ease of communication in the online world) to the extent of habit formation, and second is the decrease in skills for communicating in the real world. Once started, the individual gets comfortable with and accustomed to interacting online rather than in offline modes. A behaviour which is repeated and reinforced gets strengthened (here online networking or communication) and the behaviour which is not repeated weakens (offline networking or communication). This leads to the weakening of skills required in real-life interactions. The Internet is full of content, both good and bad. Some people use it for recreational purposes, whereas others use it as an escape from their troubling thoughts and emotions. One major drawback is that most of the content on the internet is to be passively processed by the user. Literature suggests that to substitute the loneliness feelings the individual engages in internet activities which leads to depression (Griffiths, 2000) or both (Bessière et al., 2008; Leung, 2003), thereby making the situation even worse. As the participants reported—

“That’s true me whenever I am off, I try to see something funny or entertaining on YouTube or Instagram and in hours pass.” (Participant 37, age 22 years)

“Everyone is doing that, my father whenever gets upset will start to watch reels. I think I got this from him” (Participant 33, age 21 years)

It is a maladaptive defense mechanism of escaping from difficult circumstances and unprocessed emotions. The internet environment has been utilized as a hallway to escape from the daily hassles of life.

The Internet environment provides a comforting and stimulating environment to individuals whose defense mechanism is escape,

primarily, because it allows the users to enjoy the benefit of an anonymous identity and standard of living in the digital world. However, when this coping of escapism is employed against emotional and mental issues, users retreat from their life problems and begin to use the internet without any limits (McNicol & Thorsteinsson, 2017). So overall what appears is that students, who are high on IA, seem to be using the internet to get distracted from the stressors of real life. They might be indulging in escape (when they learn to terminate an unpleasant stressor by engaging in internet activities) or avoidance (when they indulge in distractions provided by internet) behaviors. This means the internet could be a kind of emotion-focused coping for these students, where the focus is on managing the emotional response to a situation (sometimes through distractions) instead of trying to solve the problem itself (Ben-Zur, 2020). Emotion-focused coping was found to mediate the relationship between impulsivity and internet addiction (Li et al., 2019). Problematic internet users had higher scores on emotion and avoidance coping responses, where avoidance coping responses mediated the relationship between psychological distress and internet addiction (McNicol & Thorteinsson, 2017). The other set of students who had low scores on IA indulges in mindful surfing over the internet, which could be characterized by being watchful by self for the time, content and purpose of using the internet. The previous themes too are suggestive of this group being mindful when it comes to internet consumption, which suggests these students are fully conscious of what, when and why of their internet consumption. The focused group discussions have provided a rich understanding of the factors that contribute to high internet addiction among university students. A comparison of transcription from low IA and High IA FGDs have been extremely useful in comprehending the distinctions that make up the difference between low internet addiction and high internet addiction among university students.

Limitations and Future Suggestions

There were certain limitations which can be addressed in future studies. The sample size was small, limiting generalizability and the participants were not selected through random sampling, limiting better representation of the intended population. Gender differences in internet addiction were not explored; while no participant in the sample had reported 'severe' internet addiction. Absence of extreme scores had limited the understanding of constructs under investigation and the study was conducted only in four universities, limiting understanding of cross-cultural and academic environments. The

present study helped in exploring factors which lead to high levels of internet addiction, which pave a way for directions for future research such as the main themes extracted from Focused Group Discussions can be investigated in future research. Since hedonic pleasure and eudemonic pleasure were seen as playing a major role in contributing to internet addiction, a moderation analysis of these constructs with internet addiction could be done. In the present study students from only four Universities were selected as the participants, future studies could include different universities to have a cross comparison. Sample size could be broadened so as to better generalize the result. Keeping a regular check of symptoms of internet addiction and mental health of university students could be enhanced. Awareness programs could also be conducted for individuals belonging in the vulnerable age group of 19-25 years, to better educate them of the ill-effects of excessive internet usage. Psychotherapy techniques enhancing eudemonic pleasure could be applied to keep away the maladaptive use of the internet.

Implications

This study is crucial and has applications in academic, social and family institutions. From a theoretical point of view, it aids in understanding the intricacies of internet use among university students, by comparing the group differences that exist at different levels of internet addiction. It also gives an insight into the factors contributing to high internet addiction. The study, some of the implications of this study are that the findings can be applied in educational settings to keep at bay menace of internet addiction among university students. This study also discusses the behavioural patterns of students low on internet addiction. Analyzing those factors, workshops could be conducted which help in reducing internet addiction among university students. Findings of the research also emphasize parental involvement in internet use of the children, and promoting a healthy environment at home.

Conclusion

Overall study suggests that the level of internet addiction is determined by many factors ranging from our primary exposure and level of surveillance put upon us to our individual personality characteristics and coping mechanisms. Such comprehensive study is eye opener to the social and familial factors contributing to this digital menace. All the stakeholders including family, educational institutions and of course individuals are to do their part so that we just don't remain slaves to digital means but mindfully being the master of it.

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