

Excessive internet
usage and symptoms
of depression
psychology essay



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The purpose of this research is to study the relationship between excessive internet usage and symptoms of depression in university students. Sample size is 300 university students of Karachi. Internet Addiction Test (IAT) by Dr. Kimberly S. Young is the scale used to measure the internet usage and level of depression is measured using the Depression Test (Revised) by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies. Participants will be asked to fill out questionnaires for both the tests and the relationship will be evaluated using the results of these questionnaires.

Internet is what they call 'a tool from the devil'. It is different from telephone or radio as the web can give out information to millions of people at once. It was once thought that the 'internet would take over the human world'. This idea was not given much attention maybe 20 years ago, but now, many psychologists have come up with a disorder known as 'Internet Addiction' or 'Internet Abuse'. So like any other addiction in this world be it drug abuse or shopping addiction, excessive usage of internet also comes with several negative impacts on one's life.

When earlier in the 70s it was predicted that the internet would eventually take over the world, people really did not think it was true. However, if we just take a moment to look around us we will see a world heavily dependent on the internet. From e-shopping, e-banking, emailing, social media, streaming, etc the world of internet has so much to offer that people often struggle with curtailing its usage.

This research aims to evaluate the relationship between excessive internet usage and symptoms of depression which has been observed by many

researchers. Firstly, what is internet addiction? Internet addiction is characterized by excessive or poorly controlled preoccupations, urges or behaviors regarding computer use and internet access that lead to impairment or distress (Shaw and Black, 2008). Depression refers to feeling sad for weeks or months and not just a passing blue mood. It includes feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem, lack of energy, lack of interest in activities that one enjoyed in the past, and other symptoms that prevail for two weeks straight (John M. and Grohol, 2012). What this study aims is to find is the link between excessive internet usage (which may not be a full-fledged internet addiction disorder) and symptoms of depression (again, this may not be full-blown depression but symptoms of depression). This study will evaluate the relationship that exists between these two variables with internet usage being the independent variable and symptoms of depression being the dependent variable.

Dr. Catriona Morrison, an author, says:

“ The internet now plays a huge part in modern life, but its benefits are accompanied by a darker side. While many of us use the internet to pay bills, shop and send e-mails, there is a small subset of the population who find it hard to control how much time they spend online, to the point where it interferes with their daily activities.”

According to a research conducted by Dr. Morrison’s team, it was found out that the internet addicts were significantly more depressed than the non-addicted group, with a depression score five times higher. This questionnaire-based research conducted by Leeds University had a total of

1319 participants of which 18 or 1.2% were addicted to the internet and were found to be depressed as well. The mode was an online questionnaire asking people how they used the internet, duration and some questions related to depression (Morrison and Gore, 2010).

A team of Swedish researchers have also found links between internet usage and depression. However, what is still unclear to many researchers is that does internet addiction cause depression or does depression drive a person to use internet excessively? (CBS Charlotte, 2012).

Studies have also been conducted on how different patterns of internet usage can be linked with depression among individuals. Chat rooms, heavy emailing, sending files, playing games online and gambling are a few activities which turn into compulsive behavior in individuals.

According to Adrian F. Ward (2012), a doctoral candidate in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University, depressive tendencies can be identified early in individuals by tracking their internet usage through interventions. This can allow treating a serious illness like depression more effectively and way earlier before it turns into a full blown clinical disorder.

The internet has therefore developed into a kind of a 'social technology'. The effects of this kind of technology on different aspects of social life are being researched all over the world (Kraut et al, 1998). The excessive usage of internet has found to be leading to neglecting academic or office work, disruption of personal relationships and social isolation or loneliness (Griffiths, 2000). Increased levels of internet use can lead to clinical

depression (Young and Rodgers, 1998). This is because internet use also
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contributes to some kind of anxiety and stress (Yu, 2001). It is not possible to carry on a normal social life along with internet addiction (Breedon, 2009). Students who are addicted to the internet are therefore more vulnerable to depression and stress (Aken and Iskander, 2011).

Aken and Iskander (2011) conducted a study on 300 Sakarya University undergraduate students using the Online Cognition Scale to measure internet usage and a Turkish modified version of the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS). This study found a positive relationship between internet addiction and levels of depression, anxiety and stress. This is a direct study because it measures the level of internet usage along with the levels of anxiety, depression and stress and then observes the relationship that exists between them. This study is the most relevant one to this research as it follows the same sample size that is taken up for this study. Not just sample size, the participants are also undergraduate university students. So Aken and Iskander's study on Sakarya University students can be compared to this study that is conducted on 300 SZABIST students in Karachi.

Journal of Affective Disorders published a study by a team of researchers of University of Florida which showed that 20 individuals, who used more than 30 (nonworking) hours on the web suffered from marital problems, failed in school or had lost a job and had been in debt. They also ignored family responsibilities and showed up late for work as they skipped sleep to stay on the chat rooms or to surf the web (Holliday, 2000). This shows that the problematic use of internet leads to one neglecting sleep, work or school,

and normal functioning of daily activities. These could lead a person to failed relationships and lack of performance in work or academics.

Haa et al. (2007) conducted a research on 452 Korean adolescents to evaluate the link between depression and internet addiction. The severity of internet addiction was first measured and their primary purpose for computer use was also evaluated. This was followed by measurement of correlations between internet addiction and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), depression and alcohol dependence symptoms. Lastly, biogenetic temperament was assessed by Temperament and Character Inventory. The results showed that OCD and depression symptoms were significantly linked with Internet Addiction. This research takes in account not just internet usage and depressive symptoms but also genetic temperament. This is a broad way to study this subject because it is not just limited to measuring internet usage and depression but also the part genes can play.

Lam (2010) studied students from 18 high schools in China with age group 13-18 using the Pathological Use of Internet Test to measure internet usage. He used the Zung Depression and Anxiety Scales to measure depression and anxiety. The participants were reassessed after a period of nine months. Results showed that 62% were at the baseline and 0.2% were classified as high risk. When the teens were reassessed, 8.4% now had symptoms of depression and those found at baseline now had almost three times higher rate of depression than before. This showed that teens who were involved in excessive internet usage were more likely to get depressed. However, this study cannot be completely reliable as the teens were assessed after a period of nine years and many other changes in the teens' lives could have

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taken place that could contribute to the increased levels of anxiety or depression. Changes in other facets of life could have also been included in the reassessment that was done.

A team of Swedish Researchers at the University of Gothenburg conducted a study on more than 4, 100 males and females with the age group 20-24 for a year. The purpose of this study was to check for links between excessive computer use and mobile use with stress and sleeping disorders. The results showed that there was a direct link with constant use of phone or computer with depression, stress and sleeping problems. The lead author of the study also mentions that there is what she calls a 'central link' between the use of computers and mental disorders (Thomee et al, 2012)

The researchers at the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society – SIQAA found out that out of the population that uses the internet frequently, 31 percent of the total United States population spend 1 hour ten minutes i. e. 70 minutes less daily interacting with family. This study also found that this 31 percent population spends 25 minutes less sleeping and 30 minutes less watching television (Dixon, 2005). This study shows that excessive internet usage does lead to social isolation of some sort – be it voluntary or not, it does affect a person's relationships. Too much of this social isolation may lead to one feeling lonely in extreme cases. This is a sign of depression if prevailing for weeks.

Sherry Turkle, a psychologist at MIT, says, " We are all cyborgs now. This life of continuous connection has come to seem normal, but that's not the same as saying that it's healthy or sustainable, as technology-to paraphrase the

old line about alcohol-becomes the cause of and solution to of all life's problems."

Hence, many researchers have started linking problematic use of internet to drug or alcohol abuse as they say that it has the same effect on the brain. The internet does not just make us lonelier, it also makes us anxious, obsessive-compulsive, depressed and psychotic. It makes normal people break down in sad ways (Doukopil, 2012)

An article in Newsweek (2012) tells us about how Jason Russell who uploaded the video about an African warlord Kony, gained enormous attention in a span of few days. It hit 80 million views and people all over the world were talking about it. For a person like Russell, who was a nobody on the internet it was a huge change, all of a sudden the number of 'likes' and 'comments' on his YouTube video started keeping him awake. His attachment to technology was such that he would only sleep 2 hours in 4 days. Somewhere in this process his mental health was so affected that he was diagnosed with 'reactive psychosis' a temporary form of insanity after he was caught naked slamming his fists against a wall at an intersection near his home According to the doctors his brain was fatigued from all the time had used on the internet so the transition from a nobody to someone famous did this to him. He would stay awake in front of the machine looking at the praise and the ridicule people had for him and it had started to have an impact on his life. This shows that such is the power of the internet that if used uncontrollably it can seriously damage one's psychological well-being.