

A Post Covid-19 Study On Internet Addiction And Loneliness Among College Students

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives thousands of people across the globe. The mental health crisis that has come with it is no less than the virus itself. The lockdown tested the social fabric where each person was on his and her own. It left no option other than surfing the internet for most people; students no exceptions. This present study is an attempt to assess the level loneliness in students who are established a higher level to internet use during lockdown. A sample of 50 college students from Guwahati who were affected by the COVID virus were taken as participants for the study. The Internet Addiction Test (IAT) and UCLA loneliness scale were used. Mann-Whitney U-test was used to test the hypothesis. The results 33 (p value) > 27 showed that the hypothesis is not accepted, which states that there will be no significant difference in the level of loneliness between the internet addicted students and non-addicted students. From the mean score of the Group A (addicted internet users) and Group B (Non addicted internet users), Group A score shows higher score on the level of loneliness as tested by the UCLA Loneliness Scale. The average score of 37.16 of the addicted internet users is higher than the average score of 34.80 of the non-addicted internet users.

Keywords: lockdown, COVID-19, internet addiction, loneliness

Introduction

The Covid-19 has brought irreparable loss to human race. People across all age groups, geographical location and socio-economic status have faced the brunt of the pandemic. The lockdown brought in a time where people were forced to live within their respective geographical boundaries but the access to internet led them to explore its contents which on normal days were left unexplored. Internet services have seen rises in usage from 40 % to 100 %, compared to pre-lockdown level (De, Pandey & Pal, 2020).

Internet overuse

Internet has become the leading tool of communication in the recent times. With a gradual increase in the public use of the Internet and widening differences in user profiles, it has become inevitable to study both the negative effects of the internet and its positive contributions, such as sharing knowledge and facilitating communication between people (Odaci and Kalkan 2010). Internet use may be beneficial when kept to 'normal' levels, however, high levels of internet use which interfere with daily life have been linked to a range of problems, which may include decreased psychosocial wellbeing, relationship breakdown and neglect of domestic, academic and work responsibilities. The concept of "problematic internet use" revealed when individual cannot control internet use. "Problematic internet use" (Beard and Wolf 2001) which is also called as "pathological Internet use" (Thatcher et.al 2008) revealed itself as spending time on the Internet more and more, not being able to stop the desire to access to the Internet and continuing to use it despite the deterioration of mental preoccupation and functioning in various areas regarding internet use.

With the growing popularity of Internet communication applications among adolescents, the Internet has become an important social context for their development. Among adolescents, the Internet has become indispensable for instrumental purposes such as school work and information gathering, as well as for communication purposes, more during the lockdown due to Covid-19. The communication applications of the Internet, such as e-mail, instant messaging, blogs, and chat rooms have entwined itself in the lives of adolescents (Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Shklovski, 2006) and the Internet has become an important social context in the lives of adolescents today. A national survey of adolescents (10- 17 years of age) in the United States revealed that 25% of Internet users had formed casual online friendships and 14% had formed close friendships or even romantic relationships (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002).

Loneliness

Loneliness is always a concern for psychologists and sociologists. There has been a widespread assumption stating that the more social interaction a person participates in, the less lonely he will be. In other words, a person's loneliness is decided by how much a person socializes with others. Lemon, Bengtson and Peterson (1972) stated that all the social

interaction variables were negatively related to loneliness. However, researchers later found that it was not necessarily the case, and there were studies even reporting some cases of positive relationship between the frequencies of a person's social activities and his feeling of loneliness (Jones, 1981).

Peplau and Perlman (1979) defined loneliness as a subjective experience in which the individual's relationships were fewer or less satisfying than desired. Young (1982) stated that loneliness was the absence or perceived absence of satisfying social relationships; loneliness was not the same as aloneness or isolation but represented feelings of dissatisfaction with current interpersonal relationships. Wheeler, Reis and Nezlek (1983) pointed out loneliness was strongly predicted by how meaningful one's interactions were, rather than just the amount of those interactions.

Researchers began to realize that loneliness was decided by two factors: the social interaction a person both desires and acquires. When a person's social interaction is inadequate, or more specifically, assumed by himself to be inadequate, so much so that it cannot meet his psychological need, feelings of loneliness will occur. Research in loneliness demonstrates numerous typologies, depending on the perspectives of each study. Underlying these diverse typologies are three major dimensions concerning how the person evaluates his or her social situation, the type of social deficit experienced, and the time perspective associated with loneliness (DeJong-Gierveld & Raadschelders, 1982).

The first dimension is reflected in discussion of positive and negative functions of loneliness. Despite the present and popular recognition that loneliness is an unpleasant and depressive experience, early German philosophers emphasized the positive side of the "Einsamkeit" (loneliness) experience. It can help human beings have self-reflection and realize the strength of spirit (de Jong-Gierveld & Raadschelders, 1982). Moustakas (1989) pointed out that loneliness was part of human nature and universal among individuals, involving periods of self-confrontation and providing an avenue for self-growth.

The second dimension can be seen from Weiss's (1973) distinction between social and emotional loneliness based on social provision theory. According to this theory, different social relations have different meanings to an individual. Certain social relationships meet particular needs and they are not replaceable in terms of specific function (Saklofske & Yackulic, 1989).

Weiss (1974) proposed six basic "provisions" offered by social relationships, including social integration, attachment, reliable alliance, reassurance of worth, guidance, and opportunity for nurturance.

Similarly, Bowlby (1969) proposed that an attachment figure becomes unique to an individual to foster feeling of security and deal with emotional loneliness, and this function could not be easily taken over by other social contacts. Weiss further elaborated this theory by proposing two types of loneliness: emotional and social loneliness. *Emotional loneliness* results from the deficit of a psychological attachment to intimate others, such parents, spouses, and children. An example of emotional loneliness would be a teenager just leaving his/her parents and going to college, a woman who recently lost her husband, or an elderly person whose children live far away. Its' typical symptoms are anxiety and apprehension as the attachment with intimate others mainly provides a sense of security. In contrast, *social loneliness* is caused by deficit of the perceived belongingness to a general social network/community. A kid feeling excluded by other children in the neighborhood, a housewife just moving into a new place with her husband, or an elderly person who cannot participate in community activities due to physical disabilities would likely experience this type of loneliness. It usually takes the forms of boredom and feelings of exclusion as peer engagement generally offers a sense of social integration.

Due to his theoretical contribution, Weiss is regarded as the pioneer of modern loneliness research and is cited in most of the loneliness studies (Anderson, 1999).

Although loneliness has always been part of human existence, it has a relatively short psychological history. John Bowlby's attachment theory emphasized the importance of a good attachment bond between the infant and caregiver, and this theory was a forerunner to theories of loneliness. From this perspective, loneliness is the result of insecure attachment patterns that lead children to behave in ways that result in being rejected by their peers. Rejection experiences hinder the development of social skills and increase distrust of other people, thereby fostering ongoing loneliness.

Loneliness is typically defined in terms of feeling states. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term loneliness encompasses two related phenomena: (1) the physical absence of a companion, and (2) sadness because one is alone or dejection because of a lack of friends or company. Developmental psychologists tend to focus on the emotional experience of loneliness, working backwards from the feelings associated with loneliness to posit its origins and risk factors.

Review of literature

In studies reporting Internet use associated with negative psychological well-being, the extent of Internet usage was generally found to be unrelated to negative psychological well-being. Gross et.al. (2004) found that the time spent online was not related to depression, loneliness, anxiety or perceived friendship. However, the perceived closeness of online communication partners, especially instant messenger communication partners, was found to be associated with daily social anxiety and loneliness at school.

In contrast to those researchers examining the Internet use from a quantitative perspective, Kubey, Lavin and Barrows (2001) took a more qualitative approach by pointing out that the extent of dependency on the Internet was related to the

psychological well-being. Through similar methods by identifying and comparing Internet dependent users and non-Internet dependent users, researchers found Internet dependents demonstrated more shyness, more social loneliness, and more dissociation than did non-Internet dependents.

Weiser (2001) examined the social and psychological effects of Internet use on users' motives for using the communication technology. Results showed that people used the Internet mainly for Socio-Affective Regulation (SAR) purpose and Goods-and-Information Acquisition (GIA) purpose. The former purpose was a social or affiliating orientation toward Internet use, while the latter one reflected a utilitarian or practical orientation. Furthermore, Internet use driven by SAR negatively influenced psychological well-being (e.g., loneliness, depression, and perceived satisfaction with life) through reducing social involvement. However, Internet use motivated principally by GIA shows positive effect on psychological well-being through increasing social integration.

Caplan (2005) pointed out that not only excessive time spent online, but also perceived online benefits, perceived social control on the Internet, withdrawal from social life, and some other factors constitute criteria to “diagnose” the Internet addiction. Based on these criteria, a series of scales, including Pathological Internet Use Scale (PIUS) and Generalized Problematic Internet Use Scale (GPIUS), were developed to identify those who use the Internet compulsively and lacked self control. They found that those who were identified as “addictive users”, in contrast to those who were not, showed higher level of loneliness, anxiety, depression, stress and lower social support and perceived self-esteem. The difference of psychological well-being was consistently found between addictive Internet users and non-addictive Internet users (Pawlak,2005).

When explaining the mechanism of Internet addiction and negative psychological well-being, it is worth noticing as Caplan (2002) has pointed out that those who already suffer from psychological problems show more preference for Internet use as an alternative to face-to-face communication, as the challenges and difficulties they encounter in a face-to-face context, such as perceived lack of social competence, are greatly reduced in online context. They regard cyberspace as a less threatening and more effective place for information change and self-disclosure. Therefore, they are more vulnerable to excessive and compulsive Internet use, more likely to develop Internet addiction and worsen their problems.

Nie and Erbring's (2002) survey revealed that Internet use heavily influenced people's social life as well as other activities. Specifically, the more time people spent online, the more likely it was that they spent less time with family and friends, talking with family and friends on the phone, attending events outside home.

In addition, the Internet competed with traditional media, as the more time people spent online, the less time they spent on TV, radio and newspaper. Research has shown that for an average Internet user, who spent 3 hours a day online, the time of face-to-face communication with families decreased by 70 minutes, and the time to watch TV decreased by half an hour.

Need for the study

In the recent times the use of various Internet enabled electronic devices (cell phones, laptops, computers, tablets) have played a vital role in communication across the globe, the use was more pervasive during the lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. People in different parts of the world are consumed in technological revolution. People of today's generation cannot imagine their life without such technological advancements and this dependency was vivid during the lockdown.

It is undeniable that a person's lifestyle has changed remarkably giving way to stress and emotional trauma people could not have imagined a few years back. The increasing competition has paved the way for stress, unhappiness and feelings of isolation. As the reviews of literature have suggested psychological impact for the better or worse can result out of internet addiction.

Nowadays it is impossible to find a student who does not have access to internet usage. With the increasing social media applications, the usage is on the rise. People are living in a virtual world and as a result are losing touch with real world. Virtual friendships, virtual romantic relationships are taking over real time relations. The present study intends to study the level of perceived loneliness in students who have established high internet usage during lockdown phase. The study can be treated as a pilot research work.

Objectives

1. To study if excessive use internet causes serious feelings of loneliness.
2. To study the level of loneliness in internet addicted students.

Hypothesis

There will be no significant difference in the level of loneliness between the internet addicted students and non-internet addicted students.

Methodology

Sample

The data collected for the study includes 50 students who were infected with the COVID-19 virus in the age group of 20-22 years who possess a smart phone through random sampling technique.

For this study students who scored high/severe in the internet addiction test were considered to be internet addicted and those students who scored low/mild were considered to be non addicted to internet. The data consisted of 25 internet addicted students (group A) and 25 non internet addicted students (group B).

Tools/ scales used.

1. Internet Addiction Test (IAT) by Dr. Kimberly Young. Internet Addiction Test (IAT) is a reliable and valid measure of addictive use of Internet, developed by Dr. Kimberly Young. It consists of 20 items that measures mild, moderate and severe level of Internet Addiction. Questions like: How often do you find that you stay on-line longer than you intended? How often do you neglect household chores to spend more time on-line? etc. are asked to be marked on a 5 point Likert scale, with minimum score of 0 and maximum score of 5 in an item. A total up the scores for each item forms the score. The higher the score, the greater is the level of addiction. Scores between 20 – 49 points indicate an average on-line user. It implies that one may surf the Web a bit too long at times, but has control over the usage. Scores between 50 – 79 points indicate occasional or frequent problems because of the Internet. And scores between 80 – 100 points high/severe Internet usage.
2. UCLA Loneliness Scale is one of the most popular scales of measuring perceived loneliness. It is a 20-item scale designed to measure one's subjective feelings of loneliness as well as feelings of social isolation. Participants rate each item as either O ("I often feel this way"), S ("I sometimes feel this way"), R ("I rarely feel this way"), N ("I never feel this way") with a score of 3 for the O, 2 points for S, 1 point for R and 0 points for N. The scale consists of statements like : I have nobody to talk to; My interests and ideas are not shared by those around me; People are around me but not with me, etc. The maximum score is 60 and minimum score is 0. A score of 40 -60 is considered to be in the highest level of loneliness, a score of 20-40 indicates average level of loneliness and a score of 0-20 indicates low level of loneliness.

Statistical Technique

The statistical technique used for the present study is Mann Whitney U Test. This test is non-parametric alternative test to the independent sample t-test. It is a non parametric test that is used to compare two samples means that comes from the same population and used to test when the assumptions of the t test are not met.

Since it is a non parametric test, so it does not assume any assumptions related to the normal distribution of scores. There are however some assumptions that are assumed:

- a) The sample drawn from the population is random.
- b) Independence within the samples and mutual independence is assumed. That means, that an observation is in one group or the other (it cannot be both).

Procedure

The sample collection was concluded in two phases. The participants who consented to be a part of the study were asked about their internet usage. In the first stage the IAT was distributed among 92 students and 25 students who scored high and 25 students who scored low in the test were included in the study. The questionnaires were distributed through Google forms and students who scored high (80-100) in the test were categorized as addicted internet users and the other students who scored average (20-49) were categorized as non addicted internet users.

Both these groups of students were given the UCLA Loneliness Scale. After they finished filling out their responses, the total scores for both the groups were calculated.

Results:

1. Scores on UCLA Loneliness Scale of the two groups of students :

Serial no.	Addicted Internet Users(25)	Non addicted Internet Users(25)
1	42	30
2	36	32
3	33	28
4	40	28

5	54	40
6	48	44
7	38	38
8	38	32
9	40	24
10	26	38
11	42	42
12	38	36
13	32	22
14	32	50
15	32	34
16	48	32
17	52	38
18	30	30
19	32	22
20	42	44
21	40	40
22	36	32
23	34	36
24	38	40
25	38	38
	Mean score :37.16	Mean score : 34.80

2. The data obtained from both the groups on UCLA Loneliness Scale was manually calculated for the Mann Whitney U test, by the formula :

$$U1 = \frac{n1n2 + n1(n1+1) - R1}{2}, \text{ obtained } U1 = 67$$

$$U2 = \frac{n1n2 + n2(n2+1) - R2}{2}, \text{ obtained } U2 = 33$$

Here n = sample size and R = rank scores for both the groups respectively. After consulting the N table applicable for the Mann Whitney U Test, it was found that $p > 27$ (table value), thereby not accepting the hypothesis.

Discussion:

The result from the N table shows $33 (p \text{ value}) > 27$ which indicates that the hypothesis is not accepted, which states that there will be no significant difference in the level of loneliness between the internet addicted students and non-addicted students.

From the mean score of the Group A (addicted internet users) and Group B (Non addicted internet users), Group A score shows higher score on the level of loneliness as tested by the UCLA Loneliness Scale. The average score of 37.16 of the addicted internet users is higher than the average score of 34.80 of the non-addicted internet users.

The difference in the scores somewhat justifies the numerous researches done in this area which implies that psychological setbacks can be a common problem with people addicted to the internet. Nowadays the virtual friendship over the internet has consumed much of the real time of people. People have become inefficient in facing the real social scene. Spending more time on the internet for whatever the reason, reduces the time spent with people around the individual virtually. All the social media apps are defunctional without the internet. Due to the purposes of internet use such as gambling, gaming, chatting and so forth individuals may spend more time when online, and this may result in the rise of the feeling of being lonely.

Recent studies on the Internet mainly focus on psychosocial wellness and Internet use, which particularly emphasized the correlation between problematic internet use and depression, social support and interpersonal distortion at university students (Hardie and Yi-Tee 2007). Psychosocial problems, such as loneliness and depression, are the precursors of problematic internet use.

The findings of the present study also support the numerous researches that have been done to establish the relation between high internet use and perceived loneliness. Students may use the internet not only for virtual social engagements but also for academic purposes. But the time spent on the internet is addictive which does not allow sufficient time to them to engage in real life activities thus leading them towards a lonely life. It is also important to consider that individual differences exist among the students and may not be generalized for all.

Suggestions and Limitations:

This study was a small effort in studying the internet addiction of students in relation to loneliness post the COVID-19 pandemic. It has a lot of scope for further research that could be useful in studying the internet usage behavior of students and its perceived psychological effect. Other psychological states such as anxiety, depression, self concept, problematic behavior etc. can serve as effective variables for research. Nevertheless, the present study suffers from limitations such as:

- The sample size was very small.
- Time for the study was limited.
- Only age group of 20 to 22 years students were taken into account.
- Attrition of subjects was present.
- Basic statistical techniques were used for data analysis.
- The study lacks rigorous scientific treatment and therefore cannot be generalized.

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