

## Internet Addiction: A Study of its Relevant Correlates – Narcissism, Alexithymia and General Health

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper aims to examine if the use of social networking sites, over the Internet, has any impact on the General Health status, as well as the Narcissistic or Alexithymic tendencies among Internet users within the age-range of 16-35 years. The two main objectives are: a) To find whether there is any significant relation between an individual's innate propensities of Narcissism and Alexithymia and his/her use of the Internet; b) To understand the extent to which the Internet use is responsible for aggravating these psychological issues. The research design included administering of questionnaires to a sample of 326 subjects. According to the results, all the aforementioned variables positively correlated with each other. Our conclusion, therefore, is buttressed by the finding that Internet addiction is positively correlated with variables like narcissism, alexithymia and general health in various degrees.*

**Keywords:** *Internet, Narcissism, Alexithymia, General Health, Mental Health*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most important developments of recent times has been the emergence of the Internet, which has touched millions of lives due to its widespread access and usability. With the development of the Internet, another modern day phenomenon came into existence, the Social Media. According to experts, Social Media has been defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content”. (Lower, 2013)

There seems to be a general consensus among psychologists regarding the negative effects of social media usage on the general health status of its users. Researchers from the University of Michigan assessed Facebook usage over a fortnight and found that the more people used it, the more negativity they experienced concerning their day-to-day activities, as well as over time, incurring higher levels of dissatisfaction with their life overall. Increase in serious issues such as Cyberbullying, Hacking, and comparison with social media ‘friends’, instead of promoting positive health, seems to be having a negative effect on users’ health. Reports have found that there is a close association between longer time spent on social websites and the incidence of mental health problems-such as

Narcissism and Alexithymia. Millennials, aged from 18 to 33, are hyper-connected, but typically exhibit little awareness of or concern for others except as an audience, according to a study by San Diego State University professor Twenge, which shows that Narcissism levels have risen steadily during the past few decades, making the Millennial Generation, also known as “Generation Me,” more selfish and self-absorbed than any other previous generation (Firestone, 2012). Social networking sites give narcissistic individuals the chance to keep the focus of their profile’s content specifically on themselves. In doing this, they post status updates, comments and pictures that depict only themselves, and not others, perpetuating their self-interested nature (Aboujaoude, 2011). Again, according to Suliveres (2014) social media can have catastrophic effects on humans as social creatures if used to replace rather than enhance, provoking false senses of connection, psychological changes to how people approach relationships and negative emotional responses to these types of communications. These connections devoid of any genuine contact between so-called friends seem to promote Alexithymia. There is mounting evidence to show a link between social media and Narcissism and, also, the inability to perceive emotions as well as the discrepancies in responding in accordance; with the emotional

demands of the situation, which can be broadly be classified as Alexithymia. (Campbell, 2008; Zerach, 2014; Wastell and Booth, 2003).

### METHODOLOGY

#### Study Design

##### *Aims and Objectives*

The broad aims of this investigation are -

- To determine whether a presence of Narcissistic and Alexithymic traits indicates a preoccupation with the Internet among people, specifically pertaining to the age bracket of 16 – 35 years.
- To find out the interrelationship, if any, amongst the variables of Internet Addiction, Narcissism and Alexithymia, or apathy.

##### *Sample*

The sample consisted of 326 individuals within the age range of 16-35 years. For the sake of comparison and grouping, the age range was divided into two age groups of 16-25 years and 26-35 years - consisting of 254 and 72 individuals respectively. A total of 132 males participated, while the total number of female participants was 194.

##### *Criteria for Selection*

###### *Inclusion Criteria*

- Subjects who fall within the age range of 16 – 35 years.
- The minimum level of education to be fixed at Standard X to aid in assessment.
- Individuals from a socio-economic background of middle class and above.
- Individuals who dedicate at least one hour a day to social media usage and participation.

###### *Exclusion Criteria*

- Subjects with any history of psychological disorders will be excluded
- Subjects with current serious/ acute/ chronic mental illness diagnosed by a treating physician
- Subjects with any history of developmental disorders
- Subjects with neurological condition
- Subjects with no active account on at least one of the following sites : Face book, Twitter, Whats app and Instagram

##### *Tools Used*

- Internet Addiction Test by Kimberly S. Young (2009)
- Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI- 16) by Ames, Daniel R., Rose, Paul, and Anderson, Cameron P. (2006).
- Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) by R. Michael Bagby, James D. A. Parker and Graeme J. Taylor (1994)
- General Health Questionnaire (GHQ – 28) by Goldberg (1978)

##### *Procedure*

Data was collected individually from 326 subjects who were administered the IAT, NPI-16, TAS-20, and GHQ-28, respectively. Statistical analysis was done following the 3 domains-

- Mean, standard deviation, and Pearson's product moment correlation was done on the scores of the IAT, NPI, TAS, and GHQ.
- Mean, standard deviation, and t-test was done between the two age groups, i.e., ages 16-25 (N=254) and 26-35 (N=72).
- Mean, standard deviation, and t-test was done between the two sex groups of the sample. (Male N=132, Female N=194)

### RESULTS

From the statistical treatment of the data, it could be inferred that-

- There is a signification difference between the IAT scores of the two age groups. The score is significantly higher for the age group of 16-25 years.
- There is a significant difference between the NPI and TAS scores between the two age groups with the 16-25 age bracket scoring significantly lower than the 26-35 age bracket.
- In both age groups, males score higher on the IAT, thus leading to higher scores on the NPI, TAS, and GHQ than their female counterparts.
- Correlation analysis done by computing the Pearson's product moment correlation between scores obtained on the IAT and those obtained on the NPI, TAS, and GHQ revealed that the relationship between the IAT scores and those on the other tests are significant at 0.01 level, indicating the

relationship is positive and genuine, and not occurring by chance. In terms of probability, correlation between these scores can be expected in 99 out of 100 cases in India.

- Correlation analysis also revealed that scores of the TAS are significantly correlated with scores on the GHQ, indicating that their relationship is positive and genuine and not occurring by chance. Thus, the presence of Alexithymia as indicated by the scores of the TAS is an indicator of the status of the general health of the individual.

### DISCUSSION

According to a study done by Okwaraji, Aguwo, Onyebueke, Onyia and Shiweobi-Eze (2015), there is a high positive correlation between internet addiction in older adolescence and young adulthood and marked psychological distress. This psychological distress entails depression and social anxiety, social isolation, low self-esteem, shyness, abnormal mood swings, compulsivity, feelings of self-effacement, fear that life without internet would be boring, empty, joyless, loneliness, lack of social skills, and support (Shafi, Beranuy et al., 2009; Niemz et al. 2005; Liu, Kuo, 2007; Murali, George, 2007). This is in conjunction with the present finding that statistically establishes a high correlation between IAT and GHQ scores in the first age group than in the second age group. This implies that age is a contributory factor in developing psychological distress through internet usage. A possible explanation for this maybe the detachment that older adolescents and young adults face in the real world that they try to compensate for it by dedicating their most productive hours to the world of virtual reality, eventually leading them to develop psychological distress that becomes apparent through the scores on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ – 28).

On the flip side, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI- 16) and the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) scores of the first age group are significantly lower than the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI- 16) and Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) scores of the second age group. This signifies that while the 26-35 age bracket display moderate to stark narcissistic and alexithymic tendencies, the 16-25 age group displays the same tendencies in a mild to moderate degree. Pistole (1995) has explained the psychology of adult narcissism from the angle of attachment styles. According

to Pistole, looking at attachment through the lens of narcissism stimulates making a distinction between appropriate security needs and narcissistic use of the partner to manage self and avoid being hurt, which is most likely to happen in the 26-35 age bracket, which marks the time to settle down in life and attain a consummate whole through relationships and marriage. Although flings and relationships are more common in this age bracket (16-25 years) than the other, they are usually shallow and short-lived. Once a deeper understanding of one's personal stance, accomplishments and stability is achieved, the narcissistic traits become more apparent, as amply suggested by the present research findings.

The males of the both age groups in the current research display higher usage of the internet as compared to females in the study. Teo and Lim's (1997) study in Singapore indicated that there is a deferential access between boys and girls in terms of technology. Early research completed by Shotton (1991) concluded that addicted computer users were mainly male introverts. A number of studies found that "addicts" are predominantly male (Brenner, 1996; Chou & Hsiao, 2000; Greenberg, Lewis, & Dodd, 1999; Morahan-Martin & Schumacker, 1997; Scherer & Bost, 1997; Tsai & Lin, 2000, 2001; Thompson, 1996; Young (1998a, 1998b).

There is significant coefficient of correlation between the scores obtained on Internet Addiction Test (IAT) and the other three tests-the NPI, TAS, and GHQ. However, there is an ongoing debate about which comes first: the addiction or the co-occurring problems. The results of the studies by Buffardi & Campbell (2008) and Mehdizadeh (2010) indicate that people with high levels of Narcissism engage in frequent use of Facebook. According to those researchers, this trend is attributable to the fact that Facebook encourages users to engage in self-promoting and superficial behaviours, such as posting photos and writing status updates (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010). As Buffardi and Campbell (2008) point out, the prevalence of narcissistic individuals on Facebook may lead to a rise in narcissistic behaviour among users in general, as such behaviour may begin to be viewed as acceptable. Research on alexithymia and Internet usage conducted by Domenico De Berardis revealed that a combination of alexithymia, dissociative experiences, low self-esteem, and impulse dysregulation may be a risk factor for Internet addiction (IA). With a

combination of these factors, it is only natural that a person's overall general health will be affected in a negative manner.

### CONCLUSION

The thrust of our discussion centers on our statistical finding that Internet Addiction is positively correlated with narcissism, alexithymia, and overall general health. All these correlates manifest themselves as a multifaceted construct. They may demonstrate either as adaptive or maladaptive characteristics, depending on factors like one's self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy, etc. In our results, we find that males are relatively more addicted to the Internet, thus consequently placing higher on all the other three constructs- narcissism, alexithymia, and general health. We have also found that Internet and social media users belonging to the 26-35 age bracket are more likely to display narcissistic and alexithymic propensities than Internet and social media users of the 16-25 age bracket, which stems from their social standing in life and essentially establishes the co-morbidity between narcissism and alexithymia

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