

College Students Perceived Stress and Internet Addiction during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to assess the relationship between perceived stress and internet addiction among college students during the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants of the study include college students of different courses that were selected using purposive sampling. The sample includes a total of 90 students. Responses were gathered with the help of a Google form via an online survey. The tools used include the Internet Addiction Test and the Perceived Stress Scale. Pearson's correlation was used in the present study. Findings suggest that, a majority of the college students experienced mild levels of stress and internet addiction during the course of the pandemic. A significant relationship between college students perceived stress and internet addiction was found.

Keywords: *Perceived stress, Internet addiction, Covid-19 pandemic, College students*

The World Health Organization (2020) describes the novel Coronavirus as an infectious disease that contributes to other respiratory illnesses. Since the primary mode of transmission of the virus is via droplets of saliva, through coughing or sneezing is it very important for individuals to practice covid appropriate behaviors and respiratory etiquette. The Covid-19 Coronavirus outbreak swept across the entire world in a matter of months and the whole world came to a standstill. The internet however enabled us to keep in touch with each other as well as with what was happening around us. There's no doubt that we are able to gain access to a lot of information via the internet, but continuous curiosity regarding the progression of the disease in society and inability to move freely due to various lockdowns and curfews imposed, schools, colleges and workplaces being shut down, led to people in particular students being hooked on to the internet for long hours. While several studies have found that working from home has several benefits, the downside of it can also lead to increased stress and anxiety. Students today are becoming increasingly dependent on the internet for a multitude of things ranging from academic work, online internships to other sources of entertainment and leisure activities. Griffiths (2009) argues that there are certain features that are common across all kinds of addictions which include salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict and relapse. Studies have also shown that the outbreak of the virus and implementation of various control

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measures has caused immense fear and social isolation and the lack of knowledge of the disease has caused a lot of panic and among the population at large. The virus has also led several individuals to become victims of enormous amounts of stress due to the unpredictability and uncertainty of the current scenario as well as future situations. The pandemic has mostly impacted the ones that are quarantined alone and those individuals that aren't able to have face-to-face interactions with others on a frequent basis (Zhang, 2020).

Perceived Stress

The term 'Stress' was first coined by Hans Selye in the year 1936. He defined stress as, "the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change". Stress is experienced by almost every human being in their day to day lives. A decent amount of stress can be of great help to us and it also has the ability to enhance our performance but when it gets too much it can cause a lot of distress, sometimes leading to unhealthy styles of coping. 'Perceived stress' refers to an individual's evaluation of the number of stressful thoughts and experiences they are going through at a given period of time or across a specific time period. It is also referred to as a response to threatening stimuli in the environment after cognitive evaluation and can be manifested as physical and mental tension, as well as loss of control (Cohen et al., 1983). An event is perceived as stressful when it causes a disturbance in the level of homeostasis in an individual. AlAteeq (2020) found that stress levels in university students were increasing because they were trying to be independent, explore their identity as well as try out different roles in society and see which one is best suited for themselves. Stress levels were also connected to distance learning, handling of various online applications, internet connectivity issues and examinations.

Internet Addiction

The term 'Internet Addiction' was first used by Ivan Goldberg. Internet addiction has been a topic of debate since a very long time. Some like to place internet addiction under the bracket of addictive disorders whereas the others like to place it under the bracket of obsessive-compulsive-disorders. (Shaw, 2008) Internet addiction is characterized by excessive or poorly controlled preoccupations, urges or behaviors regarding computer use and internet access that leads to impairment or distress. Internet addiction is a behavioral addiction which is becoming extremely common today with the shift in education as well as with the concept of work from home as students and elders alike are spending end number of hours working or taking classes. Internet addiction is a relatively new form of addiction and there are various negative effects of internet addiction (Khazaei et al., 2017). Internet addiction is also a result of coping mechanisms that are often used to deal with negative life events and stressors. Internet addiction involves several uncontrollable obsessions and other negative behaviours that are related to use of the internet that can cause potential harm and cause conflicts in an individual's life. (Ndasauka, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

The Aim of the Study: This study aims to assess the relationship between perceived stress and internet addiction among college students during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Hypothesis

H₁: There will be a significant relationship between perceived stress and internet addiction among college students.

Sample: The participants of the study include students belonging to various colleges/universities in Goa and Bengaluru. The students were part of various professional

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courses across different streams. A total number of 90 individuals were collected as the sample for the study. (N=90)

Sampling technique

Participants for the research study were selected using the purposive sampling method.

Research design

This study follows a correlational research design to find the relationship between perceived stress and internet addiction.

Data analysis

The data collected was analyzed using the SPSS 27.0 software.

Statistical Analysis

The statistical method of Pearson's correlation (Pearson's r) was used to find the relationship between perceived stress and internet addiction. The mean (M) and Standard deviation (SD) were calculated as part of descriptive statistics.

Measures

- 1. Perceived Stress Scale:** The perceived stress scale consisting of 10 items by Sheldon Cohen (1983) was used to measure the level of perceived stress in college students. The test comprises of a total of 10 questions. The responses on the test are scored on a 4-point Likert scale where with questions 4,5,7 and 8 scored in reverse. Individual scores on the test can range from 0-40, with a high score signifying high levels of perceived stress. Test-retest reliability of $>.70$.
- 2. Internet Addiction Test:** The Internet Addiction Test by K. S. Young was used to assess the level of internet addiction in college students. The test is comprised of 20 questions that are scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The total score that can be achieved on the test is 100. High scores on the test represent higher levels of internet addiction. The IAT has strong internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.90-0.93$) and good test-retest reliability ($r = 0.85$).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Table showing scores of Perceived Stress and Internet Addiction among college students

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Perceived Stress	20.10	4.823
Internet Addiction	38.70	16.704

Table 1 shows us the mean scores and SD on the tests of internet addiction and perceived stress among college students. The mean score for perceived stress in college students was found to be 20.10 which is indicative of students experiencing a mild level of stress and the mean score for internet addiction in college students was found to be 38.70 which is also indicative of a mild level of internet addiction.

Table 2 Table showing the Relationship between Perceived stress and Internet Addiction

Variable		Perceived stress	Internet Addiction
Perceived stress	Pearsons	1	.422**
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	90	90
Internet Addiction	Pearsons	.422**	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	90	90

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 showcases the relationship between Perceived stress scores and the Internet addiction scores of college students. The correlation coefficient of internet addiction and perceived stress was found to be 0.442** indicating a high significant positive relationship between the scores of college students on perceived stress and internet addiction at the 0.01 level of significance. This means that scores of one variable are directly proportional to the scores of another variable and vice versa. In this case, if scores on the internet addiction test are high, scores on the perceived stress scale will also be high and vice versa. Possible causes of this could be the shift from offline to the online mode of learning, phones and other gadgets being used for academic as well as for leisure activities, online internships, boredom, inability to go out freely and socialise with others, lack of face-to-face interactions and many such reasons. These can contribute to both, prolonged use of the internet as well as increase in the levels of stress because of the sudden shift. (Li, 2015) Many participants reported that boredom triggered their desire to use the Internet. Students discussed the Internet as their primary strategy for coping with boredom. Boredom could be a result of the various control measures employed by the various governments which resulted in a lot of change in the lives of students.

The findings above are supported by (Gong, Wang & Wang, 2021) wherein they found that perceived stress levels in college students were significantly related to internet addiction scores. This was a result of students indulging in maladaptive methods of coping with perceived stress causing them to get addicted to the internet. In a study conducted by Alateeq et. al. (2020) university students were found to be more prone to experiencing stress compared to other students because they are emerging adults who pursue identity exploration, work toward independence, and have different roles in their lives to fulfil. The other contributors to stressors in students can be the curriculum, examinations, test evaluations, assignments, parental pressure, loneliness and worries about the future. Son et. al. (2020) in their study revealed that college student's anxiety levels have increased during the pandemic and that they are also vulnerable to various other mental problems and maladaptive lifestyle patterns, such as overuse of smartphones, laptops and other gadgets which contributes to the pathological use of the internet in order to reduce stress induced by the pandemic. Along with academic pressure, students also live in the fear of contracting the virus as well as worry about their families which also contributes to an increase in the levels of perceived stress. Gupta, et al. (2020) in a study conducted on internet addiction and perceived stress during the lockdown in India also found that internet use in students has increased to a great extent as well as stress levels were found to be higher than otherwise. A positive correlation was found between internet addiction and perceived stress in students. (Parvathy & Smitha, 2021) in a cross-sectional study conducted also discovered that a positive relationship existed between internet addiction and perceived stress. It was also

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found that increased perceived stress levels led to a sharp decline in emotional intelligence and led to an increase in the levels of internet addiction in students. (Feng, Ma, & Zhong, 2019) in a study explored the relationship between stress and internet addiction among adolescents and found that they both go hand in hand. This study also stresses on a student's ability to delve into unhealthy behaviours and deal with negative emotions by texting friends, video-calls and online gaming that in turn contributes to an increased use of the internet. The easy availability of mobile phones and the access to the world wide web has also makes it very easy for anybody to gain access to the internet at any time. D'Souza et al. (2018) Found that a majority of the students had moderate to high levels of internet addiction and academic stress and that as the academic stress increased, internet addiction also increased significantly. Another study conducted by Bijulakshmi, et al. (2020) on perceived stress of students during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown ascertained that the students experienced moderate to high levels of stress due to being away from their families and friends, worry regarding their education and future job prospects as well.

CONCLUSION

The study was aimed at assessing the relationship between perceived stress and the internet addiction of college students during the Covid-19 pandemic. After analysis of the data, it was observed that there was in fact a significant relationship between internet addiction and perceived stress signifying that they are directly proportional to each other. Research studies in the past have found that internet addiction could arise because of several reasons, like (Li, 2015) Sadness and depression, boredom, and stress. Since the pandemic has resulted in an increase in the overall levels of stress individuals often turn to various maladaptive methods of coping, one of which is excessive use of the mobile phones for, browsing, gaming, social media use and other related activities. This study is centred around college students only but studies on other individuals such as the working class could also yield interesting results as they too could be going through immense stress and burnout due to increased screen time for work and other related activities. The internet, phones, laptops, tabs and other electronic devices have become increasingly popular today in almost every household, therefore efforts must be made to reap benefits out of them without letting them take control over our lives. Several intervention strategies can be planned and implemented to cope with the stress and internet addiction. Interventions can include mindfulness techniques, yoga, relaxation techniques, self-awareness, coping to deal with stress effectively. Individuals can also use alerts on their devices when screen-time gets too much so that they can then take a break for a while. Awareness programmes can be held to help individuals understand the problems of prolonged internet use and screen time on physical as well as mental health. Physical activities are another way by which stress levels can be reduced. Individuals must also be encouraged to approach appropriate people or organizations for help, especially in these troubled times.

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Conflict of Interest

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