

Exploring Correlations Between Psychological Well-Being and Cyberchondria During the Covid-19 Pandemic- A Study on Undergraduate Students in Delhi NCR

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ABSTRACT

Cyberchondria is a relatively new field of research that has gained added relevance due to the recent pandemic. It is conceptualised as a condition wherein exposure to the medical information on the internet leads to excessive worry about one's health and well-being. The condition has been repeatedly observed to have a direct effect on psychological well-being. Despite this the topic has not received the desired attention in empirical studies and the need for micro level studies is apparent. Against this backdrop, the present study examined the correlation between cyberchondria and psychological well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic. For this purpose, the Psychological Well-being Scale (PWB) and the Cyberchondria Severity Scale-12 (CSS-12) were administered to 324 participants currently pursuing undergraduate courses in Delhi NCR. Purposive sampling was used to select participants (age group: 17-22) from the target population most evidently presumed to be vulnerable to negative consequences of internet use. After processing and editing the data, 16 responses were discarded (n= 308) and the remaining were scored and analysed using Pearson's product-moment correlation. Results show a mean PWB score of 43.6 and a mean CSS-12 score of 31.5, which further indicates a negative correlation ($r = -0.11$). However, correlation between the two variables was not significant at 0.05 level.

Keywords: *Cyberchondria, Psychological Well-Being, Internet Use, Covid-19*

The worldwide health impact of the Coronavirus pandemic has been devastating. Adjusting to lifestyle changes and concerns about an illness, such as fear of contracting the disease, transmitting it to friends and families, and protecting the

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family's vulnerable members, is a difficult and stressful undertaking (Singh, Bajpai, and Kaswan, 2021; Alfawaz et al., 2021).

Prevalence of all sorts of stress, particularly mental stress over contracting the virus has been observed to be higher (Rawat, 2021; Jungmann and Whitthoft, 2020). An increase in health anxiety, notably cyberchondria, has been reported in studies all around the world and has become a new area of concern. This can be attributed to a notable change in internet use patterns. Cyberchondria is conceptualized as a medical condition in which people have excessive worry about their physical health as a result of recurrent Internet searches for medical information (Mathes et al., 2018). It refers to an unjustified rise in concerns about general symptomatology based on Internet search results (White & Horvitz., 2009).

The condition is found to have close correlates with hypochondria. The two constructs overlap in terms of specific behaviours i.e., excessive health information seeking, persistent health-related checking and/or reassurance (seeking), negative emotional state (health anxiety or distress), the persistence of problematic behaviours despite negative consequences (compulsivity), and interference with functioning. While cyberchondria can develop in persons who have high levels of health anxiety, it has also been observed in the absence of high levels of health concern (Starcevic, 2017). Lack of certainty, a heightened perception of threat and fear of a previously unrecognized and incompletely understood disease, difficulty in coping with pandemic-induced changes are some of the major stressors identified in relation with this condition. Further a lack of credible and trustworthy sources of relevant health information; information overload and asymmetry; increased availability of information online coupled with a rise in internet usage have been found to serve as catalysts to the increase in cyberchondria (Starcevic et al., 2020). These variables compounded with a tendency for self-diagnosis and treatment, lack of medical expertise often makes browsing the internet for health-related information hazardous and deceptive (Benigeri, Pluye, 2003). Increased internet usage has been observed to have positive correlations with an increase in cyberchondria and health anxiety levels (Kruker and Erdogan, 2021; Jungmann and Whitthoft, 2020). In the Indian context, sleep difficulties and paranoia over contracting the Covid-19 infection due to social media use were reported by 12.5% and 37.8% of the total 662 participants, in a study conducted on residents of Uttar Pradesh, India (Roy et al., 2020). Király et al., 2020, found that during the Covid-19 pandemic children and young people particularly, continue to engage in problematic internet use as a way of coping with imposed sedentary norms.

Cyberchondria in students in India during the pandemic has been a recent topic of interest to researchers. A study by Shetty et al. 2020 on cyberchondria during the pandemic in dentistry students found that 98.7% of the students were impacted by one of the cyberchondria constructs, such as "excessiveness" (93.7%), "distress" (84.3%), and "reassurance"-seeking behaviour (83.7%). Another interesting study by Sravani et al. 2021 on undergraduate medical students found that Anxiety connected to the Coronavirus was seen in 55% of the respondents. Cyberchondria was found in 39% of the students and 50% of the respondents, respectively. The majority of the participants in this study spent more than two hours viewing or reading Covid-19 news. The discovery of exercise as a negative predictor of cyberchondria in this study points to preventive actions.

The present study has attempted to link internet usage to another variable considered in this research i.e., psychological well-being. Psychological well-being is concerned with "lives

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going well" and is characterised as a combination of feeling good (regarding happiness, contentment, interest, engagement, affection, etc) and functioning well (particularly concerning one's potential, autonomy, sense of purpose, and meaningful relationships, among other things (Huppert, 2009). A meta-analysis by Huang (2010) observed that research on the effect of internet usage and psychological well-being has produced two broad areas of results. One position holds that internet provides a means for interpersonal interaction and improves psychological wellness of the user. Contrary to this position, internet usage has been found to be detrimental to psychological well-being as a result of factors like time spent away from close relations like family and friends, which weaken interpersonal and community bonds. Caplan (2003), examined the relationships between online social contact, depression, loneliness, problematic Internet use, and unfavourable outcomes associated to Internet use among 386 college students. Findings indicated that lonely and depressed participants preferred online social connection, which was linked to problematic Internet utilization. Similar findings in other studies report that internet overuse has been connected to depressive affect, joylessness, loneliness, unfulfilling relationships (Young, 1999; Rogers et al., 1998)

The latter position of internet usage being detrimental to psychological well-being is relevant to the pandemic situation. In a study in the UK on the impact of time use on mental during the Covid-19 pandemic, increased time spend on the internet was observed to be linked to declines in mental health and well-being (Bu et al., 2021). A theoretical formulation by Young et al. (2014) proposed that excessive Internet usage may compensate for negative events in life. Mental health concerns were highly prevalent during the pandemic and for young adults in a period of changes in social roles and responsibilities, e-device usage was presented as a repetitive pattern of behavioural engagement. In a Chinese study on university students, Xie et al. (2021) reported a significant association between problematic Internet use and PTSD, depressive, and anxiety symptoms.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine correlations between cyberchondria and psychological well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic. A relatively new area of study, cyberchondria has gained increased relevance due to the pandemic and related lifestyle changes. The interconnections between cyberchondria and psychological well-being require a joint exploration of these variables in light of pandemic induced changes. The youth of the nation are the most impressionable section of the society. They form the target population for various social media platforms and are in constant contact with the internet world. The sample selected for the present study, is evidently the most vulnerable to the negative consequences of internet usage. To the best of our knowledge, there exists a paucity of studies on cyberchondria in Indian undergraduate students. In consonance with the above stated scope and rationale of the present study the specific objective(s) of the present study are to understand the prevalence of cyberchondria during Covid-19 in the present sample using CSS-12; to understand the pattern of psychological well-being during Covid-19 in the present sample; to explore correlations between cyberchondria and psychological well-being during Covid-19.

METHODOLOGY

Study design and participant demographics

The study followed a correlational design and employed Pearson's product-moment correlation method to explore the associations between cyberchondria and psychological well-being. Purposive sampling was used to select 324 participants out of which 16 incomplete responses were not included in the final data set. Students presently pursuing undergraduate degrees in Delhi NCR was the criteria for inclusion

Measures

Two measures Psychological Well-being Scale (Diner and Biswas-Diner, 2009) abbreviated as PWB and Cyberchondria Severity Scale 12 abbreviated as CSS-12 were used in combination to measure cyberchondria and psychological well-being respectively. Both measures used were self-administrable.

- 1. The Psychological Well-Being scale (Diner & Biswas-Diener, 2009)** is made up of eight items that describe fundamental components of human functioning, such as positive relationships, feelings of competence, and having a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Each item is graded on a scale of 1–7, with Strong Disagreement being the highest and Strong Agreement being the lowest. Every item. Scores range from 8 (strong agreement with all items) to 56 (strong disagreement with all items). High scores indicate that respondents have a very positive opinion of themselves in a variety of areas.
- 2. The Cyberchondria Severity Scale-12 (McElroy & Shevlin, 2014)** consists of 12 items that measure Cyberchondria. The original scale consisted of 33 items which were divided into 5 subscales (compulsion, distress, excessiveness, reassurance and lack of trust in medical professionals/ mistrust). The CSS-12 is a shorter version which does not take into account the mistrust dimension. The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (varying from 1 to 5, representing "never" to "always" respectively). The total score can be obtained by adding all 12 items together. The CSS-12 scores were found to correlate well with Short Health Anxiety Inventory ($r = 0.53$) and Generalised Anxiety Disorder Inventory ($r = 0.30$) (McElroy et al., 2019).

Data Analysis

Data collected were scored based on pre-determined norms given for both CSS-12 and PWB. Jamovi version 2.2 was used for all analyses. Associations between participants' CSS-12 and PWB scores were assessed using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient.

RESULTS

Table 1 Descriptives: total CSS-12 and PWB scores

Descriptives	CSS-12	PWB
Mean	31.5	43.6
Standard Deviation	8.4	6.72
Minimum	13	16
Maximum	51	56

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Table 2 Descriptives: CSS-12 subscales

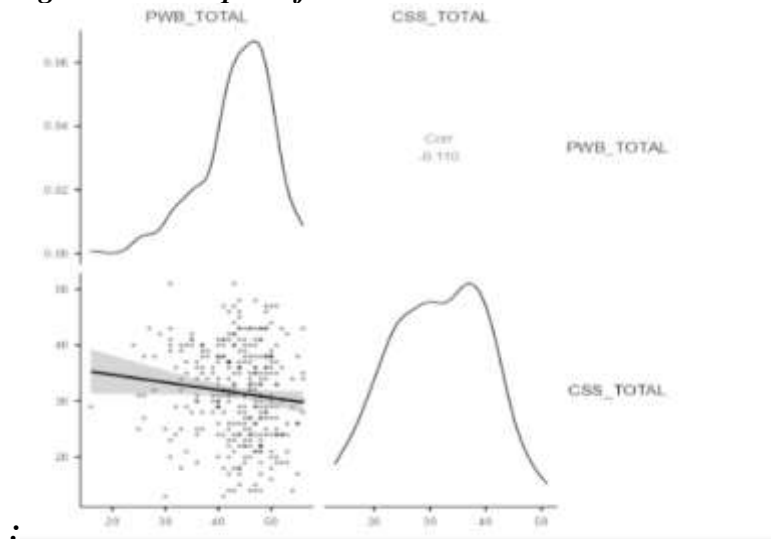
	Compulsion	Distress	Excessiveness	Reassurance
<i>Mean</i>	6.50	8.39	9.23	7.13
<i>Standard Deviation</i>	2.81	2.80	2.65	2.78
<i>Minimum</i>	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
<i>Maximum</i>	15.0	15.0	15.0	15.0

Table 3 Correlations between cyberchondria and psychological well-being

Variables	1	2
1. PWB	-	-
2. CSS	-0.11	-

n= 308

Figure 1 Scatterplot of correlation between CSS-12 and PWB



DISCUSSION

As mentioned above the present study aimed to explore correlations between cyberchondria and psychological well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic in undergraduate students in Delhi NCR.

Results obtained from correlational and descriptive analyses indicate that the two variables in the present study (cyberchondria and psychological well-being) have a negative association ($r = -0.11$). The outcomes imply an inverse relationship; however, these results. However, this relationship turned out to be insignificant at 95% level of significance. Descriptive analyses of the CSS-12 subscales demonstrate mean scores of 6.50, 8.39, 9.23, and 7.13 on compulsion, distress, excessiveness, and reassurance respectively. An aggregate PWB score of 43.6 indicates above-average psychological well-being.

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The results of our study stand corroborated by similar studies. The GHQ 12 scale, which measures general mental health at the population level, was used in a study of the prevalence and correlates of cyberchondria among professionals working in the information technology sector in Chennai, India. The severity of cyberchondria was found to be inversely related to general mental health. The worse the general mental health, the worse the cyberchondria (Markla et al 2019). Al Dameery et al. in 2020 demonstrated that there is a significant link between cyberchondriac experience and psychological stress in the Omani population.

Findings suggest the possibility of high psychological resilience in the sample. Higher levels of resilience have often been attributed to young adults (Allemand 2014, Hill 2016). Health anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic has been shown to be moderated by higher resilience levels. According to Pauly et al. 2021, resilience was linked to decreased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness. In the relationship between personality traits and psychological functioning, resilience plays a moderating role which is thought to be pertinent to the current pandemic situation (Kocjan et al., 2021). Patterns of internet usage further explain the inverse correlation between variables obtained. Indian college students are involved in frequent internet usage. In a cross-sectional study by Murphy et al. (2021) on internet usage by Indian college students- a comparison across the years 2014-15 and 2019-2020 both data sets indicated a high number of internet users. The findings showed that, more than 95% of youngsters used the internet. These findings were not unexpected, as Choudhary and Dasgupta (2014) found identical results in a survey of 110 postgraduate students, revealing that all of them used the internet. In a survey of 210 intern doctors from a medical college, Andurkar and Godale (2013) discovered that 95.4 % used the internet. Collecting information, education and communication were observed to be the three major reasons for using the internet.

Despite widely documented negative impact of excessive internet consumption, it has often been observed to have positive implications, specifically if used for coping. For instance, information dissemination using the internet is often helpful when there are emergencies, crimes, or accidents during which public officials inform the public via social media accounts. Interacting with like-minded persons on social media platforms helps people find interpersonal assistance (Naslund et al., 2016). These aspects of internet usage, often overlooked, are crucial for reducing the severity of depressive symptoms. Online support groups encourage members and offer emotional support to patients and their families in addition to exchanging information about doctors and therapies, creating a sense of community and reducing helplessness. Longest and Kang (2022) refer to young adults at present as digital natives with social media and internet usage being an often-inseparable part of their lives; quality of usage is deemed to be more important to mental health outcomes than the time spent accessing information on the internet. Youngsters were encouraged to use digital gadgets for school and social interaction more than ever during the epidemic, which appears likely to be advantageous to their development (Rosen et al 2021). Similar inferences can safely be deduced from the present study.

The finding of psychological well-being as a negative predictor of cyberchondria points toward possible role of preventive measures. Observations suggest a possibility of reducing cyberchondria levels by aiding increased psychological well-being.

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Limitations and future implications

Use of self-report measures to collect data presents the possibility of the inaccuracy of responses and socially desirable answers. Moreover, data collection for the present study was done online using digitised versions limiting the sample to people with English proficiency. Due to a lack of direct contact with the respondents, the researchers may not be able to describe the biases of respondents who disproportionately self-recruit. Online data collection leads to a sample that over-represents a certain characteristic. In this case, age as the majority of the respondents aged 19 and 20.

The results of this study may serve as the basis for further research on associations between psychological well-being and cyberchondria- longitudinally and cross-sectionally. A longitudinal comparison may aid an understanding of differences in cyberchondriac experience based on age. Exploring the possibility of the mediating role of resilience can provide a comprehensive understanding of associations between variables.

CONCLUSION

Outcomes indicate negative correlation between cyberchondria and psychological well-being in undergraduate students in Delhi-NCR. Despite being insignificant, results pointing to an inverse relationship are of relevance to policies and action plans aiming to reduce Covid induced cyberchondria by means of increasing psychological well-being.

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Conflict of Interest

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