

Alexithymia, Internet Addiction and Coping Styles in Youth Post COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Alexithymia is a phenomenon that is marked by difficulties in recognizing and expressing emotions, which is found to be a precursor for many mental health problems like anxiety, depression and even addictions. Therefore, the present study is focused to gain better understanding about the relationship of alexithymia with internet addiction and coping strategies used by individuals to regulate and guide their behaviour post COVID-19. A total number of 238 participants, from diverse academic disciplines were administered with standardized questionnaires to assess alexithymia, internet addiction, and coping styles. Statistical analyses, including correlation and regression, unveiled the dynamic relation between these variables. The findings suggest a significant relationship of alexithymia with internet addiction and different dimensions of coping styles. The findings of this research are essential for developing targeted treatments and support strategies that address the specific psychological needs.

Keywords: *Alexithymia, Internet Addiction, Coping styles*

Today, people deal with a plethora of challenges in different aspects of their life ranging from physical health issues, employment challenges to relationship issues and many more. Of all these challenges psychological challenges are amongst the major and growing concern in today's modern age. (Bagheri et al.,2020) During COVID-19 when individuals were forced to be at home and not participate in activities led to a lot of issues related to loneliness and Mental Health. This period has also affected the social interaction and had increased dependency on virtual interactions. (Luo et al.,2022) These changing patterns of interaction influences the emotions and its regulation of the individual. (Marzilli et al.,2022; Çelik et al.,2022; Ballarotto et al.,2021; Skotalczyk et al.,2024)

Some people struggle to recognise, understand, and express their feelings and this phenomenon is known as Alexithymia (Nahar, R. N., & Kakulte, A. 2022) The multifaceted concept of alexithymia constitutes core facets like; difficulties in recognising emotions and differentiating between emotions and bodily sensations; difficulties in communicating emotions to people around; externally oriented thinking style; and constrained imagination capacity (Taylor& Bagby, 2000; as cited in Luminet, et al., 2006).

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Apart from being a trait of personality, alexithymia has also been linked to certain mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, addictions, schizophrenia and is also related to suicidal tendencies. (Matias et al.,2023; Samur et. al., 2013)

Furthermore, it is reported that people with alexithymia struggle to recognise, express, and communicate their feelings. As a result, they may turn to the internet as a social tool to help them better control their emotions and meet their social requirements. (Matias et al.,2023)

A strong association between alexithymia and internet usage has been found in several research. (Gori, A., & Topino, E., 2023; Luo, H., et al.,2022; Liu, Y., et al., 2022; Rogier, G., et al.,2022; Lyvers, M., 2022). The relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction appears to be mediated by themes of boredom proneness and body image problems. Additionally, it has been shown that alexithymia and cognitive emotion management are specifically related to internet addiction. Further support for alexithymia's role in internet addiction comes from its association with problems with emotion regulation and impaired self-monitoring skills such as emotional awareness. These findings suggest that alexithymia may both directly and indirectly predict internet addiction through a range of psychological processes.

To create specialised interventions, it is essential to comprehend the coping strategies used by college students with alexithymia and problematic internet use. The term "coping" refers to the modified attitudes and actions used to deal with external and internal stressful conditions (Folkman S, Moskowitz JT, 2004) Studies have reported that alexithymia is negatively related to emotion and problem focused types of coping style, while it shares a positive relationship with avoidance dimension of coping style. (Gießelmann, K. 2019)

Baykan, H., & Can, M. Ş.,2023; in their work of people with generalized anxiety disorder reported that people with alexithymia tend to avoid adapting to emotion-focused and problem-solving strategies. Similarly, a study done by Polloni et al.,2017 reveals that people with alexithymia tend to adapt avoidance coping strategy in comparison to other strategies to efficiently manage situations in their lives. Bowen, M. E., et al.,2023; in context to post traumatic disorder, reported that avoidant coping strategy has a stronger relationship with alexithymia as compared to other coping strategies.

The dynamic interaction between alexithymia, internet addiction, and coping mechanisms must be understood in order to emphasise the need of understanding and managing emotions and to avert potential mental health problems. Thus, the purpose of this research is to better understand how alexithymia relates to internet addiction and coping styles.

METHOD

The current study aims to explore the relation between alexithymia, internet addiction, and coping styles in University students post COVID-19.

Objectives:

1. To study the relationship between Internet Addiction and Alexithymia.
2. To assess the relation between Coping style and Alexithymia.
3. To understand the effect of Alexithymia on Internet addiction.
4. To assess the effect of Alexithymia on Coping style.

Hypotheses:

- H₀₁: There will be a significant relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction.
- H₀₂: There will be a significant relationship of alexithymia and problem focused coping style.
- H₀₃: There will be no significant relationship between alexithymia and emotion focused coping style.
- H₀₄: There will be a significant relationship between alexithymia and avoidant coping style.
- H₀₅: Alexithymia has a significant effect on internet addiction.
- H₀₆: Alexithymia has an effect on types of Coping styles

Sample:

A sample of 238 university students were employed using convenient sampling method and data was collected using standardized tools. The age ranging from 20-25 years. The sample was collected from a semi-urban city in Haryana. The complete sample consists of students residing in the University hostels.

Materials and Tools:

The present study was conducted using three standardized tools:

- **Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS 20):** The TAS-20, or Toronto Alexithymia Scale is a 20-item tool, that measures three aspects of alexithymia i.e., difficulty or challenges in identifying, describing emotions and externally oriented thinking style. A 5-point Likert scale is used to record the responses (Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994).
- **Internet Addiction Test:** It is a 20-item self-reported questionnaire developed by Young (1996). The response is recorded on 5-point likert scale.
- **COPE Inventory (Coping Orientation to Problem Experienced):** It is a 28-item self-reported inventory developed by Carver (1997) that is used to measure three types of coping styles namely Problem-Focussed Coping; Emotion-Focussed Coping & Avoidant Coping. The responses were recorded on 4-point likert scale (Carver C. S.,1997).

Procedure:

Data collection was done after the university reopened post COVID-19 and the students physically attended the classes. The students were asked to fill up a google form which consisted of the demographics along with the three measures namely; Toronto Alexithymia scale; Internet addiction test and COPE inventory. Informed consent was taken before administering the questionnaire. After the data collection, data analysis was carried out using SPSS 25.0 version.

RESULTS

The data was subjected to correlation and regression analysis to understand the dynamic relationship among the variables (Alexithymia, Internet addiction and Coping Styles)

Table 1: Demographics of the respondents

Demographics of the Respondents (Total -238)	
Gender	Male -108
	Female -120
Education	Graduation -95
	Post Graduation -82
	Ph.D -71

Table 1 represents demographics of the respondents, including gender and education. Out of a pool of 238 respondents, 108 are males and 120 are females. And 95 respondents are pursuing graduation, 82 respondents are in post-graduation and 71 respondents are pursuing Ph.D.

Table 2: Correlation among the variables

Variables	Internet Addiction	Emotion focused	Problem focused	Avoidant
Alexithymia	.612**	-.250**	.219*	.074
Sig.(2-tailed)	.559**	-.122	.258**	.092
Difficulty in Identifying	.559**	-.122	.258**	.092
Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	.120	.007	.343
Difficulty in Describing	.508**	-.236*	.155	-.015
Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	.014	.110	.881
Externally oriented thinking	.409**	-.343**	.066	.093
Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	.000	.497	.340

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

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 indicates the relationship of alexithymia (difficulty in identifying emotions; difficulty in describing emotions & externally oriented thinking) with internet addiction and coping styles (emotion focused; problem focused & avoidant). The findings reveal that alexithymia has a moderately positive correlation with internet addiction ($r=.612^{**}$, $p<0.01$) and is also positively associated with problem focused coping style ($r=.219$, $p=0.23$). Internet addiction was found to have a strong positive correlation with difficulty in identifying emotions ($r=.559^{**}$, $p<0.01$) and difficulty in expressing emotions ($r=.508^{**}$, $p<0.01$) dimension of alexithymia. Thereby, disproving the first and second hypothesis. Whereas, a negative association was reported between alexithymia and emotion focused dimension of coping style ($r=-.250$, $p=.09$). Thereby, disproving the third hypothesis. And avoidant coping style was found to have no significant relationship with alexithymia ($r=.074$, p value $=.447$). Thereby, proving the fourth hypothesis.

Table 3: Regression results

Regression weights	β	R ²	F	P-value
Alexithymia-Internet addiction	.612	.374	63.401	.000 ^b
Alexithymia- Problem focused	.219	.048	5.336	.023 ^b
Alexithymia- Emotion focused	-.250	.063	7.088	.009 ^b
Alexithymia- Avoidant	.074	.005	.582	.447

Table 3 indicates regression results of the present study variables. The findings reveal that there is a significant positive relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction (beta =

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0.374, $p < 0.001$). For coping styles the regression reveals that, a positive relationship exists with problem focused coping style ($\beta = 0.048$, $p = 0.023$), indicating that higher alexithymia is associated with a slight increase in problem-focused coping; for emotion focused coping style a negative relationship is observed ($\beta = -0.250$, $p = 0.009$), indicating that higher alexithymia is linked to a decrease in emotion-focused coping & for avoidant coping style the relationship is not significant ($\beta = 0.005$, $p = 0.447$), suggesting that alexithymia may not strongly influence avoidant coping. There by disproving the fifth and sixth hypotheses.

DISCUSSION

This study was focused on investigating the dynamic association that lies between alexithymia, internet addiction and coping styles in university students. Findings of this investigation suggests a moderately positive correlation of alexithymia with internet addiction. Similar findings were reported by Li, Y., Yue, P., & Zhang, M., 2023; Nahar, R. N., & Kakulte, A., 2022; Lyvers, M., 2022; Esen, P. Y., et al., 2021; Soliman, E.S., et al., 2021. People with alexithymia may try to use social media or the internet to better channel and control their emotions, which could explain the positive correlation between the two. (Matias, A., et al., 2023). Additionally, the current study found that alexithymia has a negative connection with emotion-centred type of coping style and shares a good relation with problem-oriented coping style. Which are align with the findings of the previous studies reporting that there is a negative relationship between alexithymia and emotion-focused coping style. (Baykan, H., & Can, M. Ş., 2023; Bowen, M. E., et. al., 2023; Gießelmann, K. 2019)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of understanding one's own emotion in order to regulate them and behave efficiently in every situation. To maintain an optimum mental health and to prevent any mental health issues it is crucial for everyone to become better at understanding and managing our emotions. Mindfulness based interventions or practices can be tailored for people where it can be taught about how one can become in tune with their emotion and regulate them efficiently thereby promoting optimum mental health.

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Conflict of Interest

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