

Role of Escapism in Behavioural Addiction and Substance Addiction: A Systematic Research Review

Ankeeta Borah^{1*}, Dr. Garima Singh²

ABSTRACT

The term escapism gained popularity in the early 20th century. It refers to the tendency of distracting oneself from facing the realities of life. It helps a person avoid unpleasant feelings or situations by engaging in other activities that may harm them both physically and mentally. In many instances Escapism can be an acceptable way of dealing with life situations but excessive escapism can be a problem, especially when escapism includes substance abuse. Behavioural Addiction and Substance Addiction are two very common problems in today's society, as it affects individuals, families and communities to a great extent. These has led to the rise of several health issues along with various social and economic conflicts. In order to overcome these problems, it is very crucial to understand the motivation behind their occurrence. This study is concerned with examining the role of escapism in substance and behavioural addiction, emphasizing how people prefer addiction as a way of coping with life's difficulties.

Keywords: *Escapism, Behavioural Addiction, Substance Addiction, Stress, Addiction, Coping Mechanism*

Escapism

Escapism by no means is a phenomena unique to the modern era. The simplest definition of escapism is the attempt to escape from awareness of oneself, one's opinions, or the frequently disturbing nature of the current surroundings. It is the mental detachment from reality that occurs when an individual seeks comfort in some very healthy and some very unhealthy pursuits in order to eliminate tension, difficulties, or uncomfortable feelings. The psychology of escapism takes into account the important fact that the desire to flee may be a deliberate reaction to emotional survival or a reaction to a stressor such as danger, stress, or difficulty. "In psychology, escapism is generally defined as a desire or behaviour to ignore, evade, or avoid reality," Carla Marie Manly, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, tells WebMD. "During traumatic experiences, many individuals naturally 'escape' the situation mentally in order to avoid further distress and psychological harm." Escapism can be both healthy and unhealthy, healthy escapism is used as a way to self-care and recharge, while unhealthy escapism may cause detachment from reality.

¹M.A. Student, Dept. of Psychology, Shri Guru Ram Rai University, Dehradun

²Assistant Professor, Dept. of Psychology, Shri Guru Ram Rai University, Dehradun

*Corresponding Author

Received: March 16, 2025; Revision Received: June 26, 2025; Accepted: June 30, 2025

Addiction

The word addiction comes from the Latin word 'addicere', which means "bound to" or "enslaved by". Addiction refers to an individual's compulsive tendency to perform an activity or use a substance, even after knowing that it may lead to harmful results. It is a chronic condition that can be treated with proper treatment plans. Addiction is a widespread issue both nationally and internationally. The growing impact of addiction in today's society is a major threat for the upcoming future. It can have a great impact on both physical and mental development of an individual. Also, it leads to unhealthy professional and personal relationships. The two most dominant types of addiction are Behavioural Addiction and Substance Addiction.

Behavioural Addiction: The term 'behavioural addiction' refers to the phenomena where a person is compelled to perform some specific actions or activities even after being aware of negative impacts on their lives. In this particular process, certain actions or habits can turn into compulsive and destructive patterns. Some common examples of behavioural addiction include gambling addiction, social media or internet addiction, gaming addiction, sex addiction etc.

Substance Addiction: Substance Addiction refers to the act of using alcohol, prescribed medications, and other legal or illegal substances in an inappropriate way. It is a major problem that can be seen in individuals right from the age of 12 years. It can lead to various health issues and can also lead to many unethical behavioural changes. Every year, millions of people are impacted by substance abuse. The different types of substance abuse includes alcohol, different drugs like heroin, cocaine, marijuana etc.

Causes of Addiction

I. Biological Causes

- a) **Hereditary Predisposition:** Addiction is highly impacted by genetics. Numerous studies show that individuals with a family history of addiction are more prone to partake in similar behaviours, particularly when it comes to substance abuse. This is possibly carried on by brain chemistry that makes people prone to substance Addiction.
- b) **Variation in Dopamine Receptors:** Some individuals are more inclined towards addiction than other due to genetic differences in the way their brain releases dopamine. Dopamine is the chemical that rewards behaviour. In order to experience pleasure, individuals with less functional dopamine receptors may use different behavioural or substance addictions.

II. Social Causes

- a) **Peer Pressure:** Peer Pressure plays a very significant role in addiction. Individuals may engage in behavioural or substance addictions in order to fit in, win over or please others or to prevent rejection by people around them.
- b) **Family Environment and Cultural Norms:** The risk of addiction rises, when an individual grows up in a family where addiction of any type is common. A family where the dynamics among the family members is dysfunctional can cause emotional stress, as a result of which people opt addiction to escape or avoid the stress. Similarly, addiction may be more common societies where excessive drinking, substance use, or harmful behaviours is accepted or glorified through popular culture, music, or television.

- c) **Socio-economic Factor:** Some individuals turn to substance addiction as a means of escaping the stress and lack of opportunity caused by poverty, unemployment, and restricted access to healthcare and education.

III. Psychological Causes

- a) **Psychosocial Causes:** The psychosocial causes of addiction include factors like emotional trauma, chronic stress, poor social support, attachment issues etc. These factors leave an everlasting imprint on an individual's mind. Individuals suffering from these factors may engage in different types of addictions in order to escape them. They tend to use addiction as a coping mechanism to avoid or escape the realities of life.
- b) **Mental Health Causes:** Addiction can also be the result of certain mental health issues, such as co-occurring disorders, low self esteem, poor decision making, emotional regulation difficulties etc. In many instances, individuals who are into different addictions, are also suffering from some mental health disorders like anxiety, depression etc. In order to overcome these issues, individuals engage in addictions. Low self esteem, along with poor decision making and emotional regulation difficulties also serve as a major factor responsible for addiction.

Relationship of Escapism with Behavioural Addiction and Substance Addiction

Escapism is closely associated with addiction. It is a major factor in both behavioural and substance addiction because individuals use these as an expression to get rid or escape the negative feelings or circumstances. When an individual uses gaming, gambling, or social media excessively as a diversion, it might lead to behavioural addiction. When people repeatedly turn to these behaviours to help themselves deal with the difficulties of life, it can eventually become an addiction that causes them to lose control and put their behaviour above important obligations. This type of escape turns into a means of avoiding to deal with underlying problems like despair, anxiety, unsolved trauma.

Similar to the above, those who are addicted to substances may use drugs or alcohol as a way to cope with stress, uncomfortable feelings, or personal difficulties. At first, substance use offers a momentary reprieve or "escape" from reality but prolonged usage can result in psychological and physical dependence. Escapism is used as a coping strategy in both situations.

Purpose

To systematically review existing research on the relationship of escapism with behavioural addiction and substance addiction, and finding the research gaps.

METHODOLOGY

Search Strategy

The databases Google Scholar, PubMed, ResearchGate and Sciencedirect were systematically searched from 2014.

Data Extraction

Every study collected from the databases was assembled. After duplicates were eliminated, screening was carried out to confirm that the studies satisfied qualifying conditions. Three phases of screening were used for the research: first, on the basis of their title and abstract; second, on the basis of their whole content; and third, a systematic extraction of key

information relevant to the study. These key information included the name of the authors, publication date, place of origin, study design, sample size, results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hagström, et.al, 2014, clarified the idea of escapism using a well-established, fundamental learning theory and investigated its relationship to problematic gaming, psychological discomfort, and life satisfaction among massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) players. The study found that escapism is best described as strictly “negative escapism,” which translates to playing being negatively rewarded as a means of avoiding daily inconveniences and distress, and that positive parts of escapism are theoretically and empirically unstable. Compared to other factors and other more constructive reasons to play, negative escapism was more strongly associated with life satisfaction, psychological suffering, and indicators of Internet addiction.

Killeen, et.al, (2015) investigated the relationship between substance use frequency and severity and ED symptoms in a group of women receiving treatment for SUD who had a DSM IV diagnostic of current SUD and PTSD. The results of this study were exploratory; however, they suggest that eating disorder symptoms, particularly those related to weight and shape concerns in women with comorbid PTSD and substance use disorder, maybe associated with the severity of addiction and the use of specific substances.

Alzougool, 2018, investigated how Jordanian regular users’ motivations for using Facebook affected their likelihood of developing a Facebook addiction. The findings indicated that 38.5% of the individuals had a Facebook addiction. In this case, six motives were strongly linked to Facebook addiction. Of these six, the three that best predicted Facebook addiction were escapism and passing the time, exhibitionism and friendship, and maintaining relationships.

Cain, et.al, 2020, taking into account job satisfaction and job escapism, investigated the association between working in the foodservice sector and an increased risk of alcohol intake. The findings of this study showed that high alcohol use among foodservice workers is associated with job discontent and job escapism, and that foodservice workers have lower levels of job satisfaction than non-foodservice workers.

Kalmár, 2020, in his study argues that it is important to look at movies that deal with addiction as windows onto more complex social and cultural issues. It rejects the widespread belief that addiction results only from personal shortcomings, psychopathology, heredity, and moral deficiency. Rather, the author believes that addiction is a reaction to psychological pain and emphasizes how it is linked to more general social issues. The way society views “normality”. Three European movies that present different perspectives on addiction and escapism- Billy Elliot, T2 Trainspotting, and Kills on Wheels- are covered in this chapter.

Jouhki, et.al, 2022, in their study, examined whether escapism is consistently linked to various addictive behaviours. They investigated whether escapism moderates the relationship between problem drinking and life satisfaction, as well as the degree to which escapism is associated with alcohol intake, smoking, drug use, and gambling. Escapism was linked to drug use, alcohol usage, and smoking, but not to gambling, the research showed. Additionally, they discovered that the relationship between problematic alcohol use and life happiness was attenuated by escapism, suggesting that problematic drinking for escapist

Role of Escapism in Behavioural Addiction and Substance Addiction: A Systematic Research Review

reasons predicts lower life satisfaction than problematic alcohol use alone. They came to the conclusion that escapism is a particularly good indicator of alcohol usage and has a consistent relationship with substance use. Additionally, it came to the conclusion that escapism can act as an initial motivator, a reinforcer, and an amplifier of behaviours that are addictive.

Another study was carried out by **Marques et al. in 2023** to look into the results about the relationship between escapism and playing virtual games like video games and e-sports. The evidence that escapist motivation in virtual games is associated with poor mental health and non-adaptive social behaviour was reaffirmed by this review. It also stated that one of the primary reasons people play virtual games is for escapist purposes.

Thai Ha, 2023, examined the addiction to short-form videos (SFVs) using the stress-coping theory. According to this study, escapism and social interaction indirectly impacted SFVs addiction through SFVs usage behaviour, underscores their role as coping mechanisms within stress-coping framework.

In 2024, Barakat investigated how smartphone addiction might act as a mediator in the relationship between university students' psychological escape and self-efficacy. The study's findings showed that psychological escapism, self-efficacy, and smartphone addiction were all moderately prevalent. Furthermore, when smartphone addiction was present as a mediating variable, the percentage of explained variance in the degree of psychological escapism attributable to self-efficacy increased significantly (31%), as opposed to 22% when this mediating variable was absent. While the demographic factors examined showed no correlation with college students' self-efficacy or smartphone addiction, gender and academic year had a substantial impact on psychological escapism.

In 2024, Jouhki et al. carried out a study in order to determine the traits that individuals who engage in escapist behaviour have in common and to determine the degree to which excessive gaming and gambling are predicted by the combination of escapism and basic psychological need dissatisfaction. They came to the conclusion that escapism was associated with male gender, impulsivity, openness, autonomy frustration, competence frustration, and having a significant other with a gambling issue. Excessive gaming was also predicted by escapism, and this relationship was mitigated by competence and autonomy frustration.

RESEARCH GAP AND SIGNIFICANCE

Research Gap

The term escapism gained popularity in the early 20th century, and since then, several researchers have studied its role in different types of addictions, such as behavioural addiction and substance addiction. However, when we discuss about its role in addiction, much of the studies have focused primarily on behavioural addiction, creating a gap in understanding how escapism contributes in substance addiction. The existing researches also lack in exploring whether escapism occur similarly or differently in behavioural addiction and substance addiction. Moreover, a lot of studies exploring the relation of escapism with behavioural and substance addiction are cross-sectional studies. There is a need for longitudinal studies in this field, so that the long term impact of escapism on any type of addiction can be studied.

Significance

It is significant to study the relation between escapism and both behavioural and substance addiction as it may lead to the enhancement of various addiction treatment and preventive measures. Researchers can create more focused interventions that target the psychosocial causes of addictive behaviours, such as emotional regulation and avoidance, by understanding how escapism acts as a coping mechanism across different types of addiction. Understanding the psychological causes of addiction better, may also lead to the formation of better preventive measures, resulting a decrease in the number of addiction cases.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the above findings, we can state that escapism plays a crucial role in both behavioural and substance addiction. It is very important to understand escapism in order to understand the root causes of both the types of addiction. It is essential to understand how escapism can lead to different types of addiction, so that we can know addictive behaviours better and clear various misconceptions about their causes. Also, it will help in enhancing the present treatments for both behavioural and substance addiction. However, there are very less researches done on this topic considering its growing impact, especially in substance addiction. This study can be used as a groundwork for various upcoming studies on this topic. Thus, we can conclude that, escapism does play an important role in behavioural and substance addiction and there is a need for more studies on this topic for its better understanding.

REFERENCES

- Kalia, S. (2021). *Escapism Is a Way to Cope Under Stress. But It Can Also Be a Tool for Self-Deception*.
- Hagström, D., & Kaldo, V. (2014). Escapism among players of MMORPGs—conceptual clarification, its relation to mental health factors, and development of a new measure. *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking*, 17(1), 19-25.
- Killeen, T., Brewerton, T. D., Campbell, A., Cohen, L. R., & Hien, D. A. (2015). Exploring the relationship between eating disorder symptoms and substance use severity in women with comorbid PTSD and substance use disorders. *The American journal of drug and alcohol abuse*, 41(6), 547-552
- Alzougool, B. (2018). The impact of motives for Facebook use on Facebook addiction among ordinary users in Jordan. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 64(6), 528535.
- Cain, L., Kitterlin-Lynch, M., Cain, C., & Agrusa, J. (2020). Heavy alcohol use, job satisfaction, and job escapism drinking among foodservice employees: a comparative analysis. *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration*, 21(3), 287307.
- Kalmár, G., & Kalmár, G. (2020). Addiction and Escapism. *Post-Crisis European Cinema: White Men in Off-Modern Landscapes*, 109-147.
- Jouhki, H., & Oksanen, A. (2022). To get high or to get out? Examining the link between addictive behaviours and escapism. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 57(2), 202-211.
- Marques, L. M., Uchida, P. M., Aguiar, F. O., Kadri, G., Santos, R. I., & Barbosa, S. P. (2023). Escaping through virtual gaming—what is the association with emotional, social, and mental health? A systematic review. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 14, 1257685.
- Ha, N. T. Exploring Short-Form Videos Addiction: Understanding Influential Factors from the Perspective of The Stress-Coping Theory.

Role of Escapism in Behavioural Addiction and Substance Addiction: A Systematic Research Review

Barakat, R. (2024). Mediating Role of Smartphone Addiction on the Relationship between Self-Efficacy and Psychological Escapism among College Students: Structure Model Test. *International Education Studies*, 17(1), 48-57.

Jouhki, H., Savolainen, I., Hagfors, H., Vuorinen, I., & Oksanen, A. (2024). What are escapists made of, and what does it have to do with excessive gambling and gaming?. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 1-18.

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Borah, A. & Singh, G. (2025). Role of Escapism in Behavioural Addiction and Substance Addiction: A Systematic Research Review. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 13(2), 5058-5064. DIP:18.01.447.20251302, DOI:10.25215/1302.447