

The Relationship Between Appearance Anxiety and Internet Addiction among College Students

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ABSTRACT

The increasing commonness of internet addiction has raised concerns about its psychological effects, particularly its association with social anxiety. Individuals experiencing social anxiety frequently rely on excessive internet usage as a means of avoiding real-world social interactions, which, in turn, increases their dependence on digital platforms. Internet addiction, characterized by excessive and compulsive internet use leading to negative consequences, has become a growing concern among young adults. While Appearance anxiety refers to the fear or apprehension of being judged or evaluated based on one's physical appearance, is also a recurring issue among college students. This study investigates the correlation between internet addiction and appearance anxiety in a sample of male and female college students, A quantitative approach was employed, using the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) and Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI) to collect data from 126 participants, consisting of 80 females and 46 male college students. The results revealed a significant positive correlation between internet addiction and appearance anxiety in both males ($r = 0.43127$, $p = 0.00276$) and females ($r = 0.519003$, $p = 8.13E-07$), with a stronger correlation observed in females. These findings suggest that excessive internet use may contribute to increased appearance anxiety, particularly in females. This study contributes to our understanding of the psychological effects of internet addiction and has implications for the development of interventions targeting appearance anxiety and internet use.

Keywords: *Social Anxiety, Internet Addiction, Appearance Anxiety, Gender Differences, College students*

Excessive or poorly controlled preoccupations, urges, or behaviors related to computer use and internet access that result in impairment or distress define internet addiction. The condition has received more attention in both popular media and academic research, with this focus aligning with the rise in computer (and Internet) accessibility. (Shaw,2012) There are several key symptoms associated with internet addiction as identified by research carried out by Tao et al. (2023). “Anticipation” in which people cannot wait for their next online session, “Stay online longer” in which people spend too much time doing things on the internet and decline in job performance/productivity among others. It is

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important to note that these symptoms are interconnected and form a network that enhances the negative consequences of prolonged online engagement.

Moreover, more general signs of internet addiction are given by The Psychiatry Clinic of Neuroscience during 2008. These include increased isolation wherein individuals cut themselves off from social interactions to engage in online activities, neglecting responsibilities whereby people prioritize their online involvement over what they should be doing, irritability when offline or frustration with no access to the internet and using the internet as an escape mechanism from real-life challenges. Among college students who already face stressors such as academic pressures and mental health concerns, these indications become more alarming.

The prevalence of internet addiction among college students is increasing, primarily due to their unique psychosocial and environmental traits, unrestricted internet access, and autonomous time management. (Chaudhari, 2015)

Anxiety is a subjective feeling of unease, discomfort, apprehension, or fearful concern accompanied by a host of autonomic and somatic manifestations. Anxiety is a normal, emotional, reasonable and expected response to real or potential danger. However, if the symptoms of anxiety are prolonged, irrational, disproportionate and/or severe; occur in the absence of stressful events or stimuli; or interfere with everyday activities, then, these are called Anxiety, Disorders (DSM IV-TR, 2000)

Anxiety is a common response to pressure. In certain circumstances, mild anxiety levels can even be advantageous. It can warn us of impending risks and assist us in being attentive and ready. Excessive dread or anxiety is a feature of anxiety disorders, which are distinct from typical emotions of anxiety or anxiety. Among mental problems, anxiety disorders are the most prevalent. Almost thirty percent of adults experience them at some point throughout their lives. Nonetheless, a variety of psychotherapy interventions can be used to treat anxiety problems. Most people benefit from treatment and have regular, productive lives. (Giulio Perrotta, 2019).

Among the multiple forms of anxiety, Appearance Anxiety (AA) has emerged as a significant psychological concern, particularly in a society increasingly focused on physical attractiveness and idealized images. Appearance anxiety refers to a preoccupation with one's physical appearance, often accompanied by significant distress, fear of negative evaluation, and self-consciousness related to perceived flaws or imperfections. This anxiety can range from mild self-consciousness to severe body image disturbances, as seen in conditions like Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), where individuals become obsessively preoccupied with imagined or slight defects in their appearance. Previous research has found that appearance anxiety, a unique construct highly associated with social anxiety, is one of the important risk factors for social anxiety in college students (Jieying Liao, 2023) Individuals who are dissatisfied with their appearance may be more introverted, pessimistic, insecure, and uncomfortable in social situations (Horne, 2021).

More direct evidence shows that dissatisfaction with appearance can significantly affect social interactions and increase social anxiety (Sedova, 2021).

Recent research conducted by the American Psychological Association revealed that teenagers in high school who feel anxious about their appearance are more likely to face

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difficulties in focusing on their studies and have lower self-confidence compared to their peers who are more comfortable with their looks. Consequently, these students may become less interested in their academic pursuits and may also isolate themselves socially, as they tend to avoid situations where they feel inadequate.

"Studies have shown that appearance anxiety can have a significant impact on students' academic performance and social relationships. Furthermore, appearance anxiety can lead to the development of eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and other serious mental health issues" (American Psychological Association, 2019).

The definition of appearance anxiety is a preoccupation with one's looks accompanied by a fear that others will judge one's appearance (weight, height, and shape of the body and face) negatively (Hart, 2008)

One of the subclinical signs of body anxiety disorder is appearance anxiety, an intrusive psychological condition marked by obsessive thoughts about real or imagined appearance imperfections and recurrent actions like grooming, checking, and comparing oneself to others to deal with these worries (Williams, 2023)

Research has indicated that appearance anxiety is highly prevalent among college students. Specifically, self-reported appearance anxiety prevalence among international college students ranged from 1.20 to 13.00%. (Veale, 2016)

The symptoms of appearance anxiety can manifest in various ways. Individuals may constantly compare their appearance to others, engage in excessive self-checking (e.g., frequently looking in mirrors, touching perceived flaws, or taking excessive photos), or conversely, avoid reflective surfaces and situations where their appearance might be scrutinized. There's often a tendency to brood over past events related to their appearance or to obsessively think about ways to camouflage or alter perceived imperfections. This preoccupation can lead to social avoidance, where individuals withdraw from social situations or people due to concerns about their looks. In severe cases, it can significantly impair social functioning, academic performance, and overall quality of life.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

1. To study the relationship between Appearance anxiety and internet addiction in male and female.
2. To compare the levels of internet addiction and appearance anxiety between males and females.

Hypothesis

- There will be a relationship between Internet Addiction and Appearance anxiety in Females.
- There will be a relationship between Internet Addiction and Appearance anxiety in Males.
- There will be a difference between female appearance anxiety and male appearance anxiety.
- There will be a difference between female Internet Addiction and male Internet addiction.

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Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative, correlational research design to examine the relationship between Internet Addiction and Appearance Anxiety.

Participants

The participants for this study comprised a total of 126 college students, consisting of 80 female students and 46 male students. The age range of the participants was 18 to 24 years. Participants were selected through a convenient sampling method, which involved approaching students who were readily accessible and willing to participate.

Materials (Measures/Tools)

Tools used

1. Young's Internet Addiction Test

A popular tool for evaluating internet addiction in people is the Young's Internet Addiction Scale (YIAS). Kimberly Young, a psychotherapist, created it to assess the degree to which people may be having problems with excessive or problematic internet use. The scale consists of a series of inquiries designed to assess multiple aspects of a person's online behavior and its potential effects on their life. On a Likert scale, the responses to the questions typically range from "Never" to "Very Often."

Validity: 0.86

Test-retest reliability: 0.92

2. Veale's Appearance Anxiety Inventory

The Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI) is a 10 question self-report scale that measures the cognitive and behavioral aspects of body image anxiety in general, and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) in particular. Appropriate for use with adults and adolescents as young as thirteen, the brief nature of the AAI can provide a quick snapshot of symptom severity to assist in the initial assessment and to monitor treatment progress over time.

Validity: 0.58

Cronbach Alpha reliability: 0.86

Statistical tools

1: Spearman's rank correlation coefficient

Spearman's Rho, denoted as (ρ), is a measure of rank-order correlation that assesses how well the relationship between two variables can be described using a monotonic function. Statisticians report correlations of ordinal data, such as ranks and Likert scale items, using Spearman's rho. Strongly positive Spearman's correlations indicate that high ranks of one variable tend to coincide with high ranks of the other variable.

2: Shapiro-Wilk Test

The Shapiro-Wilk test is a statistical test used to determine if a dataset follows a normal distribution. It's a powerful tool for assessing normality, especially for smaller datasets. The test calculates a statistic called W, which measures the correlation between the data and the expected order statistics from a normal distribution.

The W statistic ranges from 0 (not normal) to 1 (perfectly normal). A high W value indicates that the data is likely normally distributed, while a low W value suggests non-normality. The test also calculates a p-value, which indicates the probability of observing the W statistic (or a more extreme value) assuming the data is normally distributed.

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3: Wilcoxon rank-sum test

Wilcoxon rank-sum test or Mann-Whitney U test is a non-parametric statistical test used to compare two independent groups or samples. It's a powerful alternative to the t-test when the data doesn't meet the assumptions of normality or equal variances. The Wilcoxon test assesses whether the distributions of the two groups are identical, i.e., whether the groups have the same median or average rank.

Procedure

The study began by getting consent of the participants. We then invited college students in Lucknow, India, aged 18 to 24, to join the study, before starting, each student received clear information about what the study involved and how their privacy would be protected.

Next, participants completed two main questionnaires: Young's Internet Addiction Test and the Appearance Anxiety Inventory. These were provided through secure online systems, specifically Google Forms, and students filled them out privately to ensure honest responses. After finishing, we briefly spoke with each participant, thanked them for their time, and offered information for any future questions.

RESULTS

| | N | Mean | Sd | Minimum | Maximum | Skewness | | Shapiro Wilk | |
|-------------------------------|----|----------|--------|---------|---------|----------|--------|--------------|---------|
| | | | | | | Skewness | SE | W | P |
| Internet Addiction (Female) | 80 | 36.3125 | 17.818 | 1 | 79 | 0.279 | 1.992 | 0.97814 | 0.1871 |
| Appearance anxiety (Female) | 80 | 12.287 | 8.009 | 0 | 34 | 0.6479 | 0.8955 | 0.93591 | 0.0058 |
| Internet Addiction (Male) | 46 | 42.4361 | 18.51 | 11 | 82 | 0.6674 | 0.225 | 0.94888 | 0.04245 |
| Appearance Anxiety (Male) | 46 | 15.69565 | 9.45 | 0 | 32 | 0.533 | 0.2113 | 0.96377 | 0.1606 |

The data collected through Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT) and Veale's Appearance Anxiety Inventory (AAI) was statistically analysed using non-parametric methods due to the lack of normal distribution in the variables, as identified by the Shapiro-Wilk test.

Descriptive statistics revealed that male participants reported a higher mean score for internet addiction ($M = 42.43$) than female participants ($M = 35.31$). In contrast, females reported a lower mean score for appearance anxiety ($M = 12.29$) compared to males ($M = 15.70$). These mean differences suggest potential gender-based variations in the experience and expression of internet use and appearance-related concerns.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Internet Addiction and Appearance Anxiety by Gender

| Gender | Internet Addiction (Mean) | Appearance Anxiety (Mean) |
|--------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Female | 35.31 | 12.29 |
| Male | 42.43 | 15.70 |

To assess the strength and direction of the relationship between internet addiction and appearance anxiety, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was calculated separately for each gender group. Among female participants, a strong positive correlation was observed between internet addiction and appearance anxiety ($r = 0.519$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that as the level of appearance anxiety increases, the level of internet addiction tends to increase as well. Among male participants, a moderate positive correlation was found between the two variables ($r = 0.431$, $p = 0.003$), also statistically significant. These findings suggest that individuals, regardless of gender, may be more inclined to engage in excessive internet use

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when experiencing heightened concerns about their physical appearance, though the strength of this association is higher in females.

Table 2. Spearman's Correlation Between Internet Addiction and Appearance Anxiety

| Gender | Spearman's Rho (r) | p-value | Strength of Correlation |
|--------|--------------------|---------|-------------------------|
| Female | 0.519 | < 0.001 | Strong |
| Male | 0.431 | 0.003 | Moderate |

Further analysis using the Wilcoxon Rank-Sum test was conducted to compare the differences in appearance anxiety and internet addiction levels between male and female participants. Results indicated a statistically significant difference in appearance anxiety scores between males and females ($W = 2257$, $p = 0.017$), with males showing higher levels. This is an intriguing finding that challenges traditional assumptions, as previous literature often suggests that females report higher appearance-related concerns. A possible explanation for this might be the increasing pressure on males in contemporary society to conform to evolving standards of masculinity and physical aesthetics promoted through media and peer influence.

For internet addiction scores, the Wilcoxon test revealed no statistically significant difference between males and females ($W = 2158$, $p = 0.054$), although the p-value approached the significance threshold. This implies that both genders are equally susceptible to problematic internet usage, potentially reflecting the pervasive role of technology in the academic and social lives of college students.

Table 3. Wilcoxon Rank-Sum Test Results

| Variable | W-Value | p-value | Significant? |
|--------------------|---------|---------|-----------------------------|
| Appearance Anxiety | 2257 | 0.017 | Yes (Females < Males) |
| Internet Addiction | 2158 | 0.054 | No (trend: Males > Females) |

Overall, the results underscore the existence of a significant relationship between appearance anxiety and internet addiction among college students, with notable gender-based variations. The higher correlation among females aligns with previous research indicating their greater susceptibility to appearance-related distress due to societal and cultural expectations. However, the higher mean appearance anxiety among males suggests an emerging trend that warrants further exploration.

DISCUSSION

This study looks at the link between internet addiction and appearance anxiety in college students, with a focus on gender differences. The findings offer useful insight into how digital habits shape self-image in young people.

A strong positive relationship was found between internet addiction and appearance anxiety in both males and females. This supports earlier research showing that people who worry more about how they look tend to use the internet more, especially in a time when social media constantly pushes unrealistic beauty standards. The connection was stronger in females, which fits existing research, but the higher average anxiety scores in males reveal that appearance-related stress is becoming more common for them too.

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There was no significant gender difference in internet addiction levels. This suggests that excessive internet use is a shared concern. As students rely more on digital platforms for learning, socializing, and entertainment, it's important to promote healthier usage across the board. Future studies should explore the personal and social reasons behind these behaviors in more depth and over longer periods of time.

The fact that males had higher appearance anxiety adds something new. It challenges the usual assumption that body image issues mainly affect women. Cultural shifts like the popularity of fitness trends, influencer-driven content, and ideal male bodies in media may be pressuring men to meet certain beauty standards. This can lead to more self-criticism and dissatisfaction with how they look.

The study also shows that internet addiction isn't just a bad habit. It often comes from deeper emotional issues like low self-esteem or a strong need for approval. Appearance anxiety can both cause and result from this cycle. People may go online to escape their insecurities, but what they see online can make those feelings worse.

These findings point to the need for better mental health support. Schools, psychologists, and policymakers should understand how digital life and mental health are connected. Programs that teach media awareness, encourage body positivity, and build emotional coping skills could help lower both appearance anxiety and internet addiction in students.

In short, the study shows a clear link between appearance anxiety and internet addiction. It also reveals that appearance-related pressure is growing for males. Since males and females may deal with these struggles in different ways, support systems need to be tailored. Future research should keep exploring this in more diverse groups to create better, more inclusive mental health strategies.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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