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Research Paper

Alexithymia as a Psychological Risk Factor for Internet Addiction among University Students

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ABSTRACT

With the growing awareness about mental health, people in today's day and age have become very conscious and careful about their emotions and their mental peace. And to maintain an optimal mental health understanding about one's own self and emotions are crucial, and with the rapid advancement in technology people's personalities have been impacted to a large extent, hence current research work is zeroed on understanding the interplay between alexithymia which is characterized with difficulty in understanding and expressing emotions, and problematic internet use or internet addiction in the young adults. Participants were administered with standardized tools to assess the studied variables namely internet addiction and alexithymia. The findings of the study emphasizes on a positive link among the studied variables which is very important to address so as to control or rather prevent any negative effects on an individual's health. The findings also, underscores the importance of incorporating emotional awareness and regulation strategies as a part of intervention in order to avoid or prevent any detrimental impact on mental health.

Keywords: *Alexithymia, Internet Addiction, Problematic Internet Use, University Students*

Internet has become a crucial and imperative part of our lives today. From education to shopping to careers everything has become online. Our life seems incomplete without internet which has created a dependency on the internet. Some use internet to escape from the real world and some use it to facilitate their lives. But like everything is beneficial only in certain conditions, it is same for internet as well otherwise it takes the form of addiction unknown to the most.

Plethora of psychological issues like stress, anxiety, loneliness, depression, alexithymia have been seen to be positively linked to internet addiction (Kumari et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2023). In the recent times, some studies are reporting the underlying origin, cause and the role of alexithymia in addictive behaviors (Luo et al., 2022; Rogier et al., 2022). 'Internet addiction (IA)', can be defined as an uncontrollable and compulsive need to search for and use the internet for lengthy periods of time, which can result in a number of issues like poor sleep, poor hygiene, and poor academic and professional performance, is characterized by an (Scimeca et al., 2014).

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Alexithymia is often regarded as a complex or multifaceted personality trait (Huang et al., 2022), a Greek word derived from three words namely, 'thymos' implying emotion; 'lexis' signifying word and the prefix of 'a' which means lack (Skotalczyk et al., 2024). Alexithymia can be defined as a "cluster of clinically observable characteristics including difficulty identifying and describing subjective feelings, a restricted fantasy life, and an externally oriented thinking style" (Taylor & Bagby, 2013). In simpler terms, it is known as no words for emotions. There are three major components of alexithymia which are primarily used for screening for alexithymia, 'difficulties in identifying feelings or emotions', 'difficulties in describing emotions','external oriented thinking style' (Taylor et al., 2016).

Studies demonstrate that alexithymia has a detrimental effect on health, especially mental health, and is linked to an increased risk of internet addiction. According to Li et al. (2023), Luo et al. (2022), and Soranidou & Papastylianou (2018), people with elevated alexithymia frequently use the internet excessively and as an excuse to avoid any problems they may be having. Alexithymia is a significant risk factor for Internet addiction, as evidenced by comparative studies showing that those with the condition score much higher on tests of Internet addiction than those without it (Mahapatra & Sharma, 2018; Taylor et al., 2014).

Utkarsh and Kanwar (2025) in their study on emerging adults reported that internet addiction is positively linked to alexithymia and it is directly or indirectly influenced by alexithymia. The pandemic also have impacted everyone in different ways especially psychologically, in a meta-analysis carried out by Karaçam et al. (2025), suggested that students showed a greater increase in the internet addiction and alexithymia past the pandemic, also reflected a positive association of alexithymia with internet addiction which is facilitated by other individual and psychological factors.

Similar results were emphasized by Mondal et al. (2025) through their meta-analysis, reaffirming the positive link between alexithymia and internet addiction. Lyvers et al. (2022); Rana et al. (2024), Skotalczyk et al., (2024) in their respective studies also emphasized on the strong association shared by internet addiction with alexithymia.

Since alexithymia is said to be a sign of mental health issues as mentioned above, the dynamic interaction between it and internet addiction needs to be considered because it negatively impacts a person's mental health (Dwarakanath & R, 2020). Therefore, the goal of the current study is to comprehend how alexithymia and internet addiction are related.

METHOD

The current study intends to investigate the connection between university students' internet addiction and alexithymia.

Objective:

1. To examine the relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction.
2. To determine the extent to which alexithymia predicts internet addiction.

Hypotheses:

- **H_1:** Alexithymia will positively correlate with Internet addiction.
- **H_2:** Alexithymia will significantly predict internet addiction.

Materials and Tools:
The following standardized psychometric tools were used in the present study:

1. To measure 'Alexithymia', self-developed tool was used consisting of 36 items, measuring three components namely, 'difficulty in identifying feelings', 'difficulty in describing feelings' and 'external oriented thinking style'. Satisfactory reliability and validity was reported for the questionnaire.
2. For measuring 'Internet Addiction' among the participants, 'Internet Addiction Test' developed by Young (1996) was used. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items, that are to be scored on a continuum of 5point likert scale. The questionnaire is reported to have good psychometric properties.

Sample: The sample comprises of 366 university going students.

***Inclusion criteria*:** University students with a regular mode of teaching falling in the age range of 18years to 25 years, basic understanding of English, and participants without any history of mental health issue for the past six months were included in the study.

Exclusion criteria: Participants falling beyond or below the age range were excluded along with the non-university going students.

Procedure:
The data was collected from university going students from three districts of Haryana. The students were approached for the study and a rapport was established. The students were given a brief about the study and instructions were given to fill the questionnaire with genuineness. The participants were assured about the confidentiality of their responses. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, informed consent was obtained. SPSS 25.0 was used to do the analysis following data collection.

RESULTS

Demographics, regression, and correlation were calculated to investigate the association between alexithymia and internet addiction.

Table 1 Characteristics of the participants

		Male	Female	Total	%
Number of the participants	366	184	182	366	-
Age	Mean	21.34	21.49	21.41	-
	(S.D.)	2.04	2.11	2.07	-
	Range	18-25	18-25	18-25	-
Education	UG	75	85	160	43.71%
	PG	93	89	182	49.72%
	Diploma	16	8	24	6.55%
Religion	Hindu	168	165	333	90.98%
	Muslim	13	10	23	6.28%
	Christian	1	4	5	1.36%
	Others	2	3	5	1.36%

The parameters of the participants are shown in Table 1. The total number of participants were 366 including 184 males and 182 females of an average age of males being 21.34 and

21.41 for females. The sample consist of around 160 undergraduate students with 75 males and 85 females; 182 from postgraduate with 93 males and 89 females and 24 students from diploma with 16 males and 8 females. The sample consists of about 366 Hindus; 23 Muslims; 5 Christians and 5 from other category.

Table 2 Correlation between the studied variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1.'Difficulty in identifying feelings'	-				
2. 'Difficulty in describing feelings'	.82**	-			
3. 'External thinking style'	.81**	.78**	-		
4. 'Total Alexithymia'	.94**	.92**	.92**	-	
5. 'Internet Addiction'	.80**	.76**	.76**	.83**	-

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*
*** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

The relationship between internet addiction and alexithymia ('difficulty identifying feelings', 'difficulty in expressing feelings' and 'externally oriented thinking style') is seen in the above Table 2. The findings show a substantial correlation between internet addiction and alexithymia (r=.83, p<.01). The three aspects of alexithymia—'difficulty in expressing emotions' (r=.76, p<.01), 'difficulty identifying emotions' (r=.80, p<.01), and 'externally oriented thinking style' (r=.76, p<.01)—are also said to exhibit a significant correlation with internet addiction.

Table 3 Simple linear regression for the predictor variable Alexithymia and the criterion variable Internet Addiction

	Unstandardized coefficient		**Standardized coefficient**			
Model	B	SE	β	t	p-value	R^2
Alexithymia						
Internet Addiction	.50	0.017	.83**	28.68**	< .01	.69

Note. SE=Standardized Error; R^2= Explained Variance; **p<0.1, *p<.05.

Table 3, reflects positive relationship of alexithymia with internet addiction. In accordance to table 3, the R2 value shows that, when it comes to understanding internet addiction, alexithymia accounts for almost 69% of the variance. The study's findings showed that alexithymia was a strong and favorable predictor of internet addiction (β=.83**, p<.01). The regression coefficient was found to be significant, B = .50, indicating that with an increase in every one unit in alexithymia, internet addiction scores also increase proportionally by 0.5 units.

DISCUSSION

When carefully analyzed, the data indicate a significant positive association between alexithymia and internet addiction. The three main types of alexithymia—"difficulty in identifying emotions," "difficulty in describing emotions," and "external oriented thinking style"—were also found to have significant positive correlations with internet addiction, indicating that as alexithymia rises, so does internet addiction.

This suggests that those who struggle to understand and communicate their emotions or who rely on outside cognitive processes—presumably in order to understand and cope with their

feelings—are more likely to engage in obsessive online behaviors (Rana et al., 2024). The hypothesis of alexithymia processing states that alexithymics over-control themselves to make up for their lack of awareness and seek out stimuli to make up for the absence of affective input (Frawley et al., 2001). These compensatory processes may make internet addiction and other addictive behaviors worse (Wachs et al., 2020). The findings of the present research are consistent with those of previous studies by Terzioğlu and Büber (2024), Liu et al. (2024), and Rana et al. (2024) which also emphasizes on the similar pattern shared between people exhibiting signs of alexithymia and signs of problematic internet use.

CONCLUSION

The current research looked at the connection between university students' Internet addiction and alexithymia. The results show a substantial correlation between increased propensity for internet addiction and higher levels of alexithymia. These findings imply that maladaptive online behavior may be a result of emotional awareness deficiencies, perhaps as a coping mechanism for discomfort.

The study's overall findings emphasize the importance of alexithymia as a psychological correlate of internet addiction and the necessity of integrating awareness-based therapies and emotional regulation into preventative and treatment strategies. It is advised that future studies employ longitudinal designs in order to elucidate causal pathways.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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