

Mental Health and Emotional Intelligence of Internet Users and Non-Users

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Since its introduction, internet has changed the way humans are relating with their environment. Few are using internet as a leisure time activity (for developing and maintaining social connections, shopping, entertainments, etc.) and also getting benefitted with its use. Nowadays, people striving for constructing, developing and enhancing their 'Digital Identity' which increased their dependences on internet. Thus, it become the need of time to study the effects of internet use on the mental health and emotional intelligence of its users. **Method:** The aim of this study was to identify and explain differences, if any, among internet users and non-users on (i) mental health parameters such as Anxiety, Deression and Stress; and (ii) emotional intelligences components; namely, intra-personal awareness, inter-personal awareness, intra-personal management and inter-personal management. The study was carried on 102 undergraduate students selected through purposive sampling method using three standardized psychological tools – (a) Internet Addiction Test by Young, (b) Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale, and (c) Emotional Intelligence Scale by Mangal and Mangal. **Results & Discussion:** The results revealed that internet users differ from non-internet users on three mental health variables - Depression, Anxiety and Stress – where the mean score of internet users was lower than mean score on non-users. Similarly, differences among the internet users and nonusers was also noted in terms of inter-personal management. Whereas no differences was found on emotional intelligence measures of intra-personal awareness, inter-personal awareness, and intra-personal management. **Conclusions:** Healthy internet use not only improves the mental health by reducing the anxiety, depression and stress but also promote the inter-personal management skills.

Keywords: *Internet use, Mental Health, Emotional Intelligence, Anxiety, Depression, Stress, Undergraduate students.*

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Internet use was rapidly increasing across the world (Byun, Ruffini, Mills, et al., 2009; Czincz & Hechanova, 2009) and especially among adolescents (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), there were 389 million mobile user in India as on December 2016 (Agarwal, 2017). Since its introduction, internet has changed the way humans are relating with their environment; human interactions through instant messaging services such as WhatsApp, Facebook messenger, etc. is an example (Deloitte, 2014). Using internet has become one of the most popular leisure-time activities (Van Rooij and Van den Eijnden, 2007), important source of information and entertainment (Chou & Peng, 2007). The use of internet - in terms of frequency and purpose - varies from person to person, based on gender, age, professional, academic and personal needs. Internet use among people may range from healthy and occasional use to unhealthy and excessive use. However, most of the studies focused on effects of excessive use of internet on various mental health indices and different concepts were used to explain excessive internet use such as 'internet addiction' (Young, 1998), 'Internet related addictive behavior' (Brenner, 1997), 'Internet related problems, (Widyanto et al., 2008), 'Compulsive internet use' (Meerkerk, Van Den Eijnden, Vermulst, et al., 2009), Pathological internet use (Davis, 2001) and 'the one minute more syndrome (Luciana, 2010)'.

The review of the findings of earlier studies on effect of internet use on mental health showed mixed results. Few researchers observed internet use improves the psychological wellbeing by expanding social networks (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007; Campbell, Cumming, & Hughes, 2006, Shaw & Gant, 2002) and social connectedness (Kraut et al., 2002). Bessière, Kiesler, Kraut, and Boneva (2008) and Valkenburg and Peter (2007a, 2007b) reported that positive benefits of internet use are more likely to be evident only when it is used maintain existing friendships rather than new relationships with strangers.

On the other hand, group of researchers agreed that excessive unhealthy use of internet can lead to negative consequences in daily life by increasing emotional disturbances such as depression (Gentile, Choo, Liau, et al., 2011; Meerkerk, van den Eijnden, Vermulst, & Garretsen, 2009; Van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, & Engels, 2008; Young, 1998), social phobia, and anxiety (Gentile, et al., 2011). Negative consequences of internet use on overall wellbeing are attributed to superficial nature of online relationships (lack feelings of affection and commitment), reduce the quality of existing friendships (Caplan, 2003, Nie, 2001; Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2002), reduce involvement in face-to-face relationships with significant others and impairment in meaningful daily activities (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, et al., 1998; Lin & Tsai, 2002; Van den Eijnden, et al., 2008).

Few other researchers have observed that people with poor mental health such as depression (Ceyhan & Ceyhan, 2008; Cho, Sung, Shin, Lim, & Shin, 2013; Young & Rogers, 1998), phobia (Ko, Yen, Liu, et al., 2009), low self-esteem (Ko, Yen, Yen, et al. 2007), anxiety and social withdrawal (Cho, et al., 2013), obsession (Yu, 2009) and impulsiveness (Lee, Choi, Cho, et al, 2006) are more likely to have pathological internet use. Orzack, and Orzack, (1999) reported that people who are easily bored, lonely, shy, depressed and suffering from

Mental Health and Emotional Intelligence of Internet Users and Non-Users

other addictions are more likely to have pathological use of internet. Young (1998) had also identified seven reasons for the pathological internet use which includes anxiety, insecurity, financial problems, marital discontent, work related stress, struggle in life, and limited social life. The possible explanation could be that internet provides an opportunity to escape painful thoughts and feelings (Ko et al., 2012; Pies, 2009).

Bèlanger and colleagues (2011) found 'U shape' relationship between internet use and depression; i.e. high internet users and non-internet users are more likely to suffer from depression.

Thus, it could be inferred that the relationship between pathological internet use and mental health is not so clear (Carli, Durkee, Wasserman, et al., 2013; Ko, et al., 2012) and it can be influenced by other intervening variables such as age, gender, individual needs (intellectual, social, emotional, etc.).

Most of the research studying the relationship between emotional intelligence and internet use had either carried on the people with internet addiction or failed to control the effect of internet addiction. In one such study conducted by Sharma and Sharma (2017) on 120 adolescents from Jammu found that overall emotional intelligence was related with the internet use and the components of emotional intelligence failed to show any relationship with Internet use. However, in their study the effect of internet addiction was not controlled. Similarly, Mesgarani, Shafiee, Ahmadi and Zare (2013) in their study of 129 people from Zahedan and Zanjan Cities also didn't found any relationship between internet addiction and emotional intelligence.

On a contrary, researchers have also reported significant relationship between emotional intelligence and internet addiction. For example, Khoshakhlagh and Faramarzi (2012) found that emotional intelligence can be a predictors of internet addiction. Whereas, Ibrahim, Akel, Abd El Fatah, and Abudari (2016), in their study of 80 nursing students from Egypt, found negative relationship between emotional intelligence and internet addictions. In another study, Engelberg and Sjoberg (2004) compared emotional intelligence of high and low internet users and observed that high internet users tend to lack emotional competence characteristics of high emotional intelligence. They attributed this findings to less use of internet and more use of face-to-face interaction among people with high emotional intelligence which increase their sensitivity to others emotion.

In the light of above reviewed literature, the need was felt to explore the differences among internet users and non-users in terms of their mental health and emotional intelligence; particularly in Indian students. Most of the studies in the area of internet use focused excessive, pathological and addictive internet users which consist of less than 10% internet users. Most people are using internet without any adverse effect on their life; however, the effect of internet use on these healthy users was explored. Further, it was observed that

Mental Health and Emotional Intelligence of Internet Users and Non-Users

differences among internet users and non-users were less explored with regard to components of emotional intelligence and in many cases the findings were not consistent.

Thus, it was decided to carry out research with purpose – (i) identifying the differences, if any, among the internet users and non-users on mental health and emotional intelligence measures among Indian population; and (ii) to explain the findings in the light of existing theories and in context of findings of earlier researches in the similar areas.

Hypotheses:

- 1) Internet users and non-users will not differ in terms of their score on mental health variables such as Depression, Anxiety and Stress.
- 2) Internet users and non-users will not differ in terms of their score on emotional intelligence domains of intra-personal awareness, inter-personal awareness, intra-personal management and inter-personal management.

METHOD:

Sample:

The participants of this study were 102 undergraduate students studying in colleges affiliated to Shivaji University, Kolhapur. All participants were selected through purposive sampling method. The age range was 18 to 23 years. Out of 102 students 62 were using internet and 40 were non-users of internet. The consent was obtained from the participants before they were enrolled for this research. The rapport was established and confidentiality was ensured to the participants to increase the reliability of obtained information. Along with the personal data sheet following measurements were used for collecting the information about their internet use, mental health and emotional intelligence of the participants. These tests were administered in small groups ranging from 5 to 20 participants.

Variables:

Independent variable: Internet Use

(1) Internet Users:

Inclusive criterion: Those who are using internet daily for some time since last six months.

Exclusive criterion: Pathological use of internet based on the 80 and above score obtained on internet addiction scale.

(2) Non-internet Users:

Inclusive criterion: Those who have not used internet since last six months.

Exclusive criterion: Those who have used internet in any form (through internet cafe, smartphone of their family members or friends, etc)

Dependent Variables:

Mental Health: Anxiety, Depression, Stress

Emotional Intelligence: Intra-personal awareness, Inter-personal awareness, Intra-personal management and Inter-personal management

Tools:

i) Internet Addiction Test by Young (1996):

Young's Internet Addiction Test is most widely used and valid instrument for assessing the pathological use of internet. This test consists of 20 statements with 5-points Likert Scale; 1 = rarely, 2 = occasionally, 3 = frequently, 4 = often, and 5 = always. This test measures productivity, social behaviour, emotional connection and general pattern of internet use among the test takers. The score on this test ranges from 20 to 100 higher score indicates greater internet addiction. Best on the scores three groups of internet user can be identified; namely, individual showing no symptoms (score less than 49), individual showing limited symptoms (score 50 - 79) and individual with internet addictions (scores higher than 80). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the original test is 0.94. The score on this test was used rule out the pathological use of internet.

ii) Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale:

Mental health of the participants was measured using Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995). This scale consists of 21 items; seven items each measuring the depression, anxiety and stress. The scores are summed up for each of these seven items to get the score of each of these subscales. On this 4-point Likert scale the responses were recorded from '0' to '3' where '0' indicates 'don't apply at all' to '3' apply to me very much. The reliability coefficient of this scale was 0.94 for 'Depression', 0.87 for 'Anxiety' and 0.91 for 'Stress'. High score on this scale indicates more severe problems. Marathi translation of this scale developed by the authors of this paper was used for the data collection.

iii) Emotional Intelligence Scale:

The scale developed by Mangal and Mangal (2004) was used to assessment emotional intelligence of the participants. This 100 item scale measures four components of emotional intelligence namely; intra-personal awareness, inter-personal awareness, intra-personal management and inter-personal management. The Split-half reliability of this scale is 0.89 and the test-retest reliability is 0.92. The reliability calculated through K-R formula is 0.90. The Hindi version of this test was used

RESULTS:

The SPSS version 20 was used for the data analysis of this research. The descriptive statistics such as mean and SD was calculated for mental health variables (such as Depression, Anxiety and Stress) and components of emotional intelligence (intra-awareness, inter-awareness, intra-management and inter-management) among the internet users and non-users. The data was tested for normality and found to be normally distributed. One-way ANOVA was used to test hypotheses.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics such as Mean, SD and Number for Mental Health and Emotional Intelligence variables among the Internet users and Internet non-users.

Factors		Internet users	Internet non-users
Depression	Mean	9.2000	16.6667
	SD	8.39855	7.72284
	N	60	42

Mental Health and Emotional Intelligence of Internet Users and Non-Users

Factors		Internet users	Internet non-users
Anxiety	Mean	10.2000	13.8571
	SD	8.87350	8.82781
	N	60	42
Stress	Mean	15.1000	19.0000
	SD	9.36944	7.89257
	N	60	42
Total Mental Health	Mean	33.1000	49.7619
	SD	21.79854	20.71503
	N	60	42
Intra-awareness	Mean	15.0667	14.0476
	SD	4.59870	3.15419
	N	60	42
Inter-awareness	Mean	14.6000	14.7381
	SD	3.74256	3.89534
	N	60	42
Intra-management	Mean	18.0667	17.8333
	SD	3.71833	2.80171
	N	60	42
Inter- management	Mean	17.5500	2.83695
	SD	16.0476	3.30522
	N	60	42

Table 2: Results of One-way ANOVA for Mental Health Variables among Internet Users and Non-users.

Mental Health Variables	Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Square
Anxiety	BG	1377.380	1	1377.380	20.847	.000	.173
	WG	6606.933	100	66.069			
	Total	7984.314	101				
Depression	BG	330.434	1	330.434	4.214	.043	0.04
	WG	7840.743	100	78.407			
	Total	8171.176	101				
Stress	BG	375.776	1	375.776	4.859	.030	0.046
	WG	7733.400	100	77.334			
	Total	8109.176	101				

BG = Between Group, WG = Within Group

The results of this study revealed that the first hypothesis stating that ‘Internet users and non-users will not differ in terms of their score on mental health variables such as Depression, Anxiety and Stress’ was not supported. Table number two showed significant difference on mental health measure of anxiety among internet users and non-users ($F = 20.847, p = 0.001$). It was observed that 17.3% variance in anxiety was explained by the healthy use of internet. The mean score revealed that the anxiety was higher among internet non-users ($M = 10.20$)

Mental Health and Emotional Intelligence of Internet Users and Non-Users

than users ($M = 13.86$). These findings are in contrast with the results reported by Gentile, et al., (2011).

Further, it was found that the internet users had lower mean score ($M = 9.20$) on depression than internet non-users ($M = 16.67$) and the difference was statistically significant ($F = 4.214$, $p = 0.001$). It was found that 4% of variance in depression was explained by internet use. The findings were opposite to the results observed by Gentile, et al., (2011), Meerkerk, Van Den Eijnden, Vermulst, and Garretsen, (2009), Van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, and Engels, (2008) and Young, (1998). Similarly, the internet users reported lower stress ($M = 15.10$) compared to internet non-users ($M = 19.00$) and the difference was found to be statistically significant ($F = 4.859$, $p = 0.00$). It was noted that internet use explained 4.6% variance of stress. The findings of present study are in line with the findings reported by Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham, (2007), Campbell et al., (2006), Shaw and Gant, (2002).

Thus, it could be concluded that health use of internet serve as a protective factor against mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and stress. The lower score on anxiety, depression and stress among internet users could be due to use of internet based activities to distract their attentions from anxiety provoking thoughts and engaging themselves in more pleasurable activities requiring more conscious efforts such as chatting with friends and relatives for maintaining relationships (Bessière, Kiesler, Kraut, & Boneva, 2008), watching videos and movies, etc. Further, availability of required information on any theme at any time in many format through internet, support in finding partners and jobs, opportunity to seek expert opinions on various issues, opportunities for free life long learning including acquisition of skills, etc. could also reduce the chance of experiencing stress, anxiety and depression.

Table 3: Results of One-way ANOVA for the variables of Emotional Intelligence among Internet users and non-users.

Emotional Intelligence Variables	Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Square
Intra-personal awareness	BG	25.656	1	25.656	1.550	.216	0.015
	WG	1655.638	100	16.556			
	Total	1681.294	101				
Inter-personal awareness	BG	.471	1	.471	.033	.857	0.000
	WG	1448.519	100	14.485			
	Total	1448.990	101				
Intra-personal management	BG	1.345	1	1.345	.118	.732	0.001
	WG	1137.567	100	11.376			
	Total	1138.912	101				
Inter-personal management	BG	55.765	1	55.765	6.043	.016	0.057
	WG	922.755	100	9.228			
	Total	978.520	101				

BG = Between Group, WG = Within Group

Mental Health and Emotional Intelligence of Internet Users and Non-Users

The second hypothesis stating that ‘Internet users and non-users will not differ in terms of their score on emotional intelligence domains of intra-personal awareness, inter-personal awareness, intra-personal management and inter-personal management’ was partially accepted. The results in table number three revealed that the group of internet users and non-users did not differ in terms of their scores on emotional intelligence domains of intra-awareness ($F = 1.550, p = NS$), inter-personal awareness ($F = .033, p = NS$) and intra-personal management ($F = .118, p = NS$).

The only significant difference noted among the two groups was on the emotional intelligence measure on inter-personal management ($F = 6.043, p = .05$). It was noted that use of internet explained 5.7% variance of inter-personal management. It was observed that the mean score on internet users ($M = 17.55$) was higher than mean score of non-users ($M = 16.05$). The findings were in contrast with the findings reported by Engelberg and Sjoberg (2004). The differences between two groups in terms of inter-personal management could be attributed to the opportunity provided by internet based applications such as Social Networking Sites for internet users to initiate new relationships and practices maintaining the relationship in virtual world without fear of being rejected.

CONCLUSIONS:

- 1) Healthy internet use improves the mental health by reducing the anxiety, depression and stress.
- 2) Healthy internet use can support and promote the inter-personal management.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

- (1) Use of Purposive Sampling method has limited the generalization of the findings.
- (2) Effects of gender and personality might have affected the results.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY:

- The relationship between unhealthy use of internet and mental health could be better understood through longitudinal studies.

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Mental Health and Emotional Intelligence of Internet Users and Non-Users

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