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Navigating Cyber Psychology and digital dependency: Behavioral and Emotional Consequences of Internet Overuse

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Abstract--As internet usage continues to permeate every aspect of daily life, its psychological impact has become a growing concern. This study explores the multifaceted effects of excessive internet engagement, focusing specifically on social media dependency, cyber bullying, and the emotional toll of digital interaction. Through a combination of surveys, interviews, and behavioral data tracking, this research uncovers the dual nature of internet usage: while it offers connection and convenience, it also fosters feelings of isolation, anxiety, and dependency. The study emphasizes the urgent need for awareness, interventions, and ethical digital platform design to support healthier online behaviors.

Keynotes-- Cyber Psychology, Emotional Consequences of Internet overuse

I. INTRODUCTION

The internet, with its vast capabilities, has revolutionized how we communicate, learn, and entertain ourselves. However, as digital platforms become increasingly central to our lives, the psychological effects of overuse are emerging as critical concerns. Technology is transforming nearly every aspect of our modern lives, offering countless benefits. However, as these advancements reshape the way we live, they can significantly impact our mental health, often blurring the line between normal and abnormal behavior. The rise of connectivity, constant accessibility, and information overload can lead to various mental health challenges, such as stress, anxiety, depression and social isolation. As we navigate the digital age, the prevalence of psychological issues linked to excessive technology use is likely to increase, underscoring the growing need to understand its effects on mental health and overall well-being (Scott et al., 2017).

Humans are often referred to as “social beings,” so it is no surprise that the Internet has evolved from a simple information-sharing tool into a platform for social interaction and participation. Social networks are defined as online services that enable individuals to create public profiles within an established network system. Users can share a list of their connections, view others' connections, and interact with these networks. Essentially, social networks consist of interactions and relationships.

The term is also commonly used today to describe websites that facilitate user interactions, such as sharing reviews, photos, and other content. Popular examples include Face book, Twitter, MySpace, Skype, LinkedIn, and YouTube. These platforms serve as virtual communities where people can communicate and build connections (Diomiduous et al., 2016). The connection between social media usage and psychological well-being, particularly anxiety and depression has shown mixed outcomes. Some research suggests that social media can have a positive effect on well-being by promoting online social interactions and/or improving offline physical connections (Wellman, 2001).

As people interact with the world more frequently through cyber technology in various aspects of their lives, research on online behavior has grown accordingly. This research explores how behavior in cyberspace compares to face-to-face interactions and examines the connection between personality traits and diverse online activities, including social media usage, dating habits, cybersecurity practices, and cyberbullying. People may access content online, such as pornography or violent websites, or search for information like healthcare-related topics, that they might avoid exploring in person (Ancis, 2020). People tend to act differently online compared to in-person interactions. The online disinhibition effect refers to the reduction of psychological barriers in digital spaces (Joinson, 2007; Suler, 2004, 2016), leading to less restraint in behavior and a diminished sense of social boundaries in cyberspace. Factors such as the absence of eye contact and the anonymity provided online contribute to these lowered inhibitions, which in turn encourage behaviors like greater self-disclosure (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015).

The youth of the 21st century have unparalleled access to digital and media technologies, having grown up as part of a digital-native population. As a result, the variety of digital devices and media activities available to children continues to expand rapidly. With these ongoing advancements in digitalization, researchers have identified today's youth as a complex digital generation, navigating unique digital environments that differ significantly from those of previous generations (Limone and Toto, 2022).



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The potential for the Internet to be addictive has been debated since its initial formal identification by Young in 1996. There is significant disagreement regarding the most suitable diagnostic term for this phenomenon. Various terms, such as "Problematic Internet Use," "Excessive Internet Use," "Compulsive Internet Use," "Internet Use Disorder," "Internet Addiction," "Pathological Internet Use," and "Cyber Dependence," have been proposed and discussed in the literature (Chatterjee and Rai, 2023). Individuals addicted to the internet may struggle to control their excessive online activities in daily life. Another research revealed that these individuals experience impairments in decision-making, primarily due to a delay in strategy learning rather than an inability to adapt to task rules. Interestingly, their performance on a Go/no-go task was better, indicating a distinction between the processes involved in decision-making and those related to inhibiting dominant responses (Weinstein and Lejoyeux, 2010).

This research seeks to explore these impacts comprehensively, shedding light on the behavioral patterns that contribute to digital dependency and offering insights into potential solutions.

II. METHODOLOGY

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the psychological impacts of internet overuse, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of participants' behaviors and emotions while providing a robust statistical framework for identifying patterns and correlations.

2.1 Participant Recruitment

The study sample consisted of 77 participants, carefully selected using stratified sampling to ensure a broad representation of gender, age, education level, and digital behavior. This diverse sample provides insights into how different demographic groups engage with the internet and experience its psychological effects.

2.2 Data Collection

The study was designed to examine the psychological and behavioral effects of internet usage among individuals.

A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from participants, including demographic details such as name, age, gender, education, and state of residence.

The survey explored participants' perceptions, behaviours, and emotional responses related to internet and social media usage through questions such as:

- *Usage and Dependence:* Whether WhatsApp is considered an integral part of life and if they feel disconnected without Instagram.
- *Consultation:* The frequency of consulting the internet for personal or health-related issues.
- *Emotional and Behavioral Responses:* Feelings of irritation, depression, or isolation due to the inability to access social media, as well as mood swings, boredom, or anxiety resulting from social media disconnection.
- *Social Comparison and Feedback:* Experiences of comparing oneself with others based on posts, feeling isolated when receiving no comments, or expressing genuine reactions to friends' posts.
- *Psychological Impacts:* Incidences of bullying in online groups, FOMO (fear of missing out), and overuse leading to potential psychological concerns.
- *Self-Reflection:* Participants' perspectives on their potential internet addiction and the advantages of social media for reconnecting with lost or old friends.

The data collected aims to provide insights into the emotional, social, and psychological consequences of internet and social media overuse, contributing to the understanding of cyber psychology and its implications

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Demographics

The demographic breakdown revealed a largely balanced gender distribution, with 58% of participants identifying as female and 42% as male. The majority of participants (40%) were aged between 18-25, an age group particularly vulnerable to the psychological effects of social media and digital engagement. Educationally, 48% of the respondents held a Master's degree, which suggests a population that is both intellectually capable and likely exposed to the pressures of high-stakes professional environments (Chart-1 to 3).

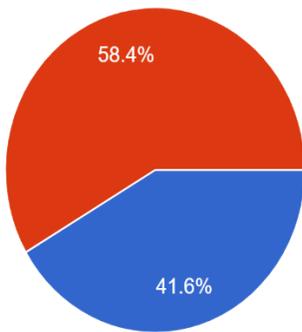


Chart-1: Gender

● Male
 ● Female

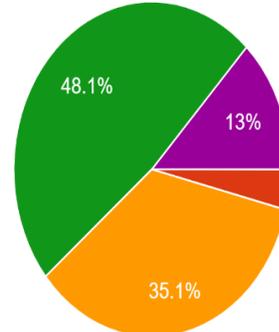


Chart-2: Education

● 10th
 ● 12th
 ● Bachelor's degree
 ● Master's degree
 ● Ph.D. or higher

Age

77 responses

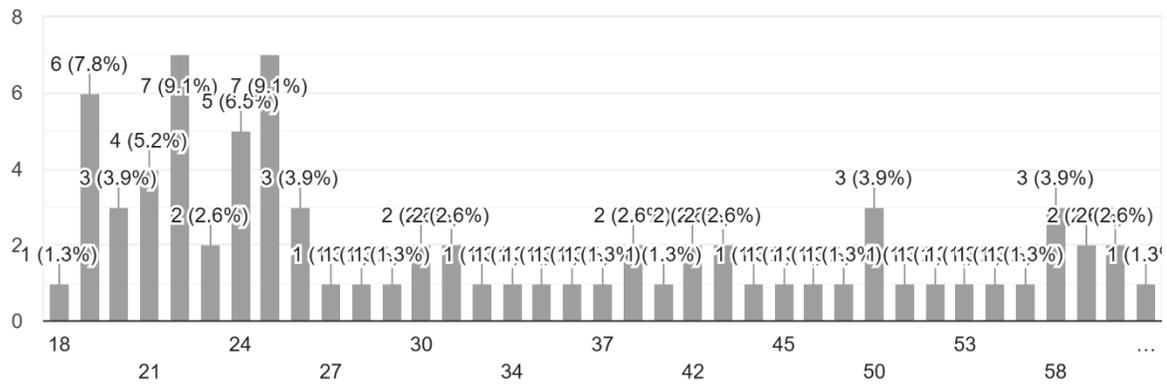


Chart-3

3.2 Behavioral Insights

- *The Role of WhatsApp and social media (Chart-4):* 67% of participants reported that WhatsApp was integral to their daily lives, serving as a primary tool for communication.

While this fosters a sense of connection, the over-reliance on such platforms often leads to dependency. Interruptions in access can provoke feelings of isolation or anxiety, especially when notifications go unanswered, or when participants feel pressured to respond immediately.

Do you feel Whatsapp is an integral part of your life?

77 responses

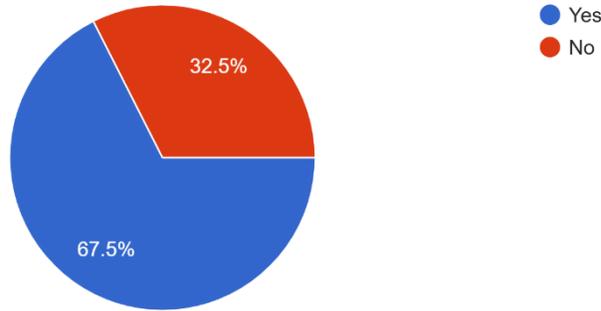


Chart-4

- *Health-Related Internet Use (Chart-5&6):*48% of participants indicated using the internet for personal concerns, while 52% reported using it for health-related concerns. While the internet democratizes access to information, this behavior can also contribute

to a phenomenon known as “cyberchondria,” where individuals self-diagnose based on unreliable sources, leading to unnecessary anxiety and stress. The lack of human empathy in online problem-solving further exacerbates this issue, creating a sense of detachment from real-world social interactions (Hullur,2020).

Do you Consult internet for your personal issues ?

77 responses

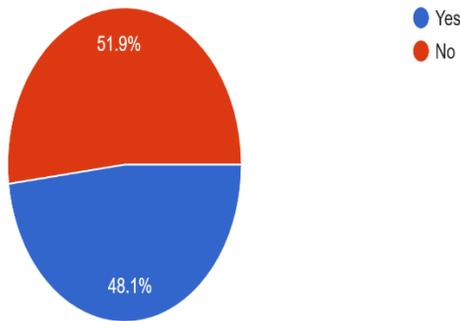


Chart-5

Do you Consult internet for your health issues ?

77 responses

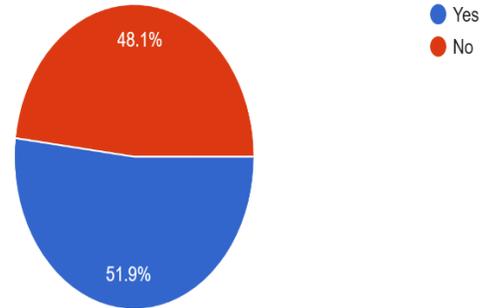


Chart-6

3.3 Psychological Impacts

- *FOMO and Social Media Disconnection (Chart-7 to9):*80% of participants indicated they did not experience feelings of disconnection when without Instagram, suggesting that some individuals maintain healthier boundaries with social media.

However, some of the participants admitted to experiencing FOMO, a clear indication of emotional attachment to online validation and the constant need to stay updated. This group is more likely to engage in compulsive checking behaviors, which may lead to heightened anxiety and stress (Elhai, 2020).

Is it true you have FOMO(fear of missing out) if you don't check your social net working sites regularly ?

77 responses

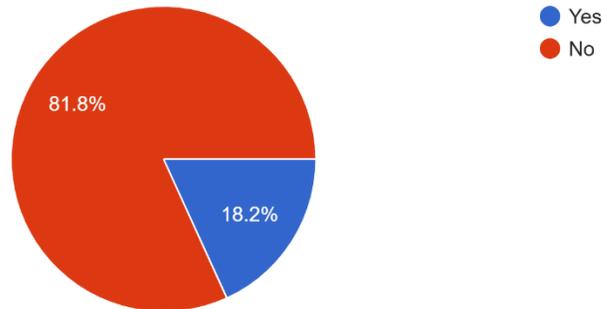


Chart-7

Do you feel disconnected with social life if you don't use instagram ?

77 responses

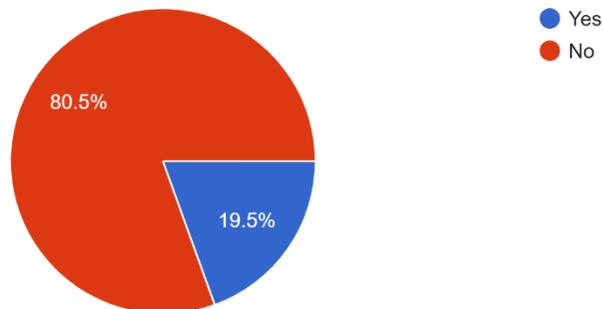


Chart-8

Do you feel isolated if no one comments on your post ?

77 responses

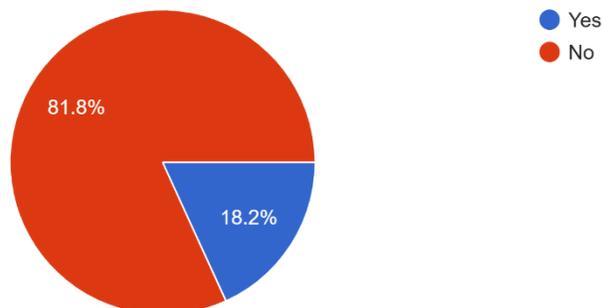


Chart-9

- *Mood Swings and Anxiety (Chart-10 to 12):* Some of the participants reported experiencing mood swings or anxiety when disconnected from social media for prolonged periods.

This suggests a psychological dependency, wherein individuals have become conditioned to the dopamine rewards associated with likes, shares, and online validation. When deprived of these stimuli, they exhibit symptoms similar to withdrawal, including irritability and unease.

Do you get irritated if you are unable to access your social media like whatsapp or instagram ?

77 responses

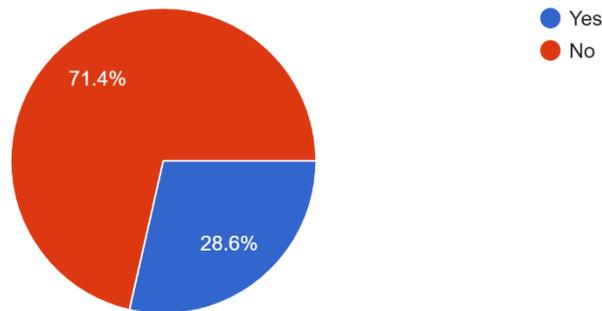


Chart-10

Will you get bored or suffer anxiety attacks if you are not able to connect your Social media for few days ?

77 responses

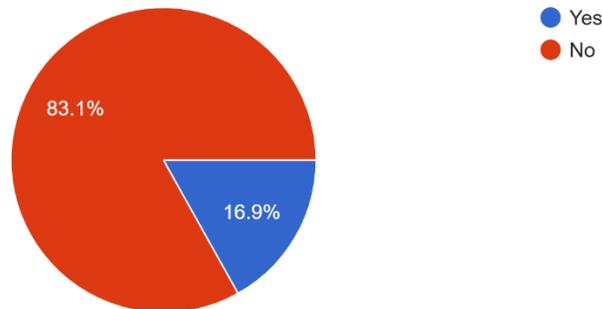


Chart-11

Do you feel any mood swings if you are away from your Social media?

77 responses

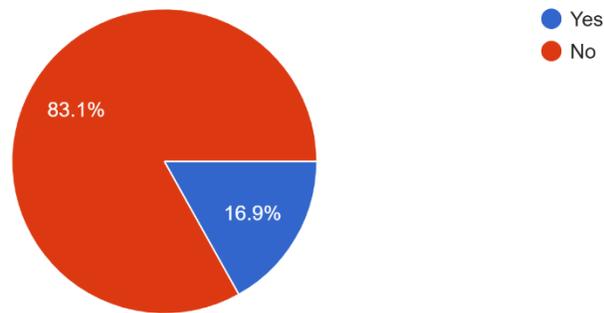


Chart-12

- *Cyberbullying and Social Comparison (Chart-13 to 15):* 16% of participants acknowledged experiencing cyberbullying and also some of the participants reported feeling inferior when comparing themselves to others curated online lifestyles. These findings underscore the harmful psychological effects of social comparison in the digital age.

Social media often presents an idealized version of reality, leading to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. The "highlight reel" effect of online personas fosters unrealistic expectations about success, happiness, and personal achievement (Diomiduous et al., 2016).

Do you Sometimes get bullied in your online groups?

77 responses

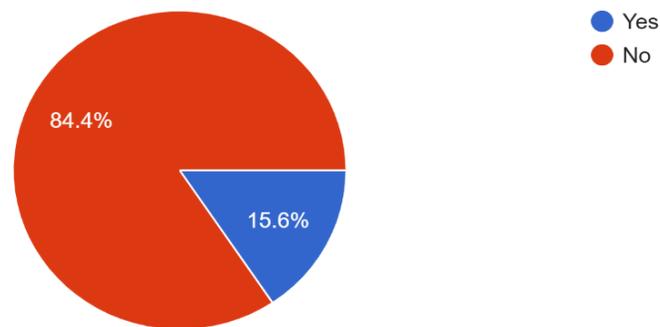


Chart-13

Do you compare and feel unlucky seeing your friends posting their vacations, luxurious life etc online?

77 responses

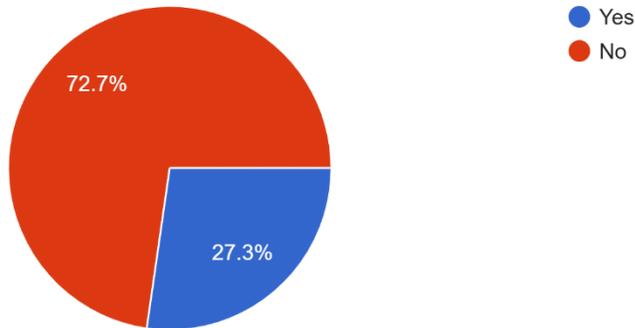


Chart-14

Do you compare and feel unlucky seeing your friends posting their vacations, luxurious life etc online?

77 responses

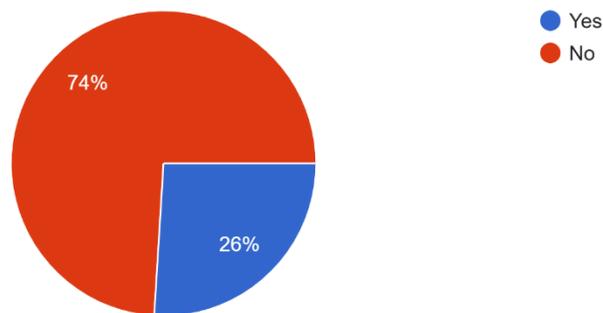


Chart-15

3.4 Broader Trends and Associations

- *Addiction and Overuse (Chart-16):* While 66% of participants did not view themselves as addicted to the internet, 34% acknowledged that overuse leads to psychological issues.

This disparity points to a lack of self-awareness regarding the potential for digital addiction, even though participants recognize the detrimental effects of excessive internet engagement on their mental health.

Do you consider you are addicted to internet?
 77 responses

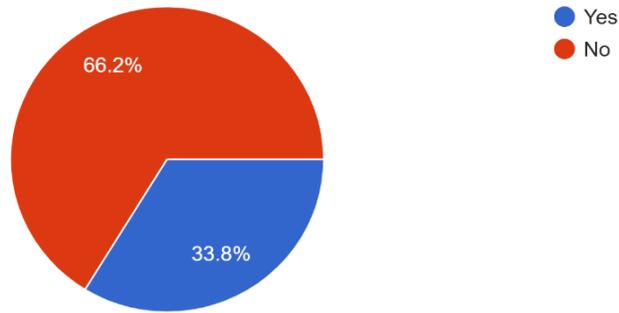


Chart-16

- *The Reconnective Role of social media (Chart-17):* 78% of participants expressed gratitude for social media’s role in reconnecting with old or lost friends.

This shows the positive potential of digital platforms, but also emphasizes that these renewed connections might come with emotional baggage, making the overall experience more complicated(Wellman, 2001).

Do you feel we are fortunate to have social media sites where we are able to connect to our lost/ old friends?
 77 responses

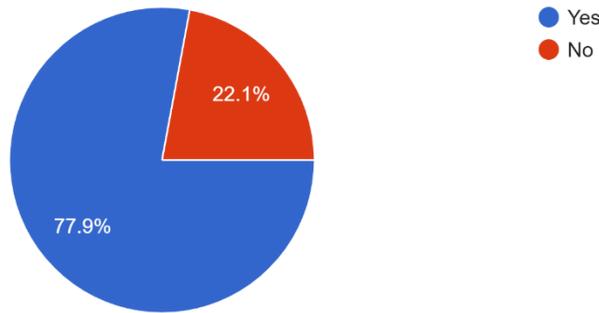


Chart-17

3.5 Psychological Problems Due to Overuse

- *Psychological Strain from Overuse (Chart-18& 19):* 90% of participants linked social media overuse to psychological problems, with 66% indicating they felt humiliated by online criticism.

This underscores the vulnerability created by sharing personal content in the public domain. The tendency to internalize external validation, such as likes or comments, amplifies feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, and depression.

Do you think over use of social media leads to psychological problems?

77 responses

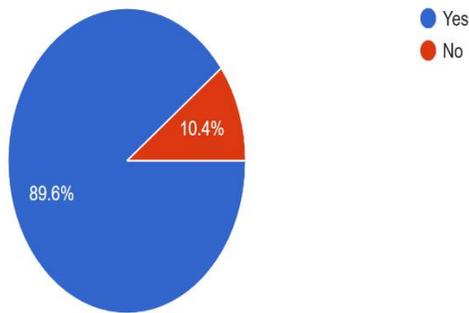


Chart-18

Do you feel humiliated if someone uses wrong words about you ?

77 responses

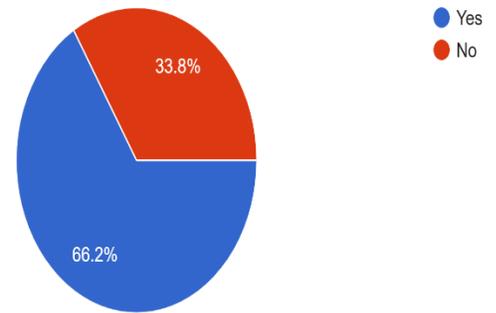


Chart-19

- *Digital Fatigue and Overstimulation (Chart-20):* Some of the participants (30%) reported spending the majority of their day online.

Prolonged digital engagement leads to “digital fatigue,” a state of emotional burnout marked by reduced attention spans, impaired emotional regulation, and general exhaustion.

Do you spend most of your day online?

77 responses

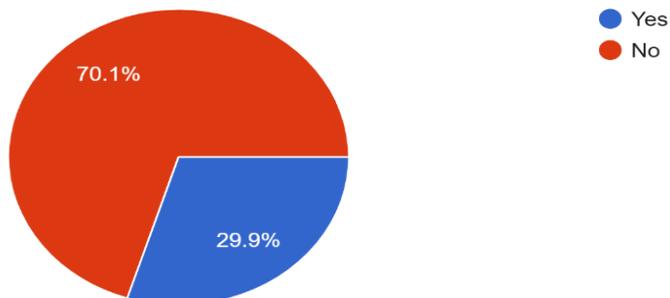


Chart-20

IV. DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal a complex and multifaceted relationship between internet use and mental health. While digital platforms offer unparalleled opportunities for communication and learning, excessive use can have significant negative consequences on psychological well-being. The findings suggest that internet overuse often leads to emotional dependency, heightened stress, and a diminished sense of self-worth. Importantly, the study highlights the growing awareness of these issues among participants, yet also underscores the need for more robust interventions and educational programs to help individuals manage their digital engagement.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

5.1 Technological Implications

Future studies could explore how artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning can be harnessed to support mental health. For example, AI-driven digital detox programs or virtual therapists could offer personalized interventions to address addiction and emotional stress resulting from internet use.

5.2 Cultural and Demographic Considerations

Comparative research across different cultural and demographic groups would help illuminate how internet use is perceived and its psychological impact across various global contexts.



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It would be especially valuable to examine the unique challenges faced by underrepresented populations and the impact of socio-economic factors on digital behavior.

5.3 Practical Solutions

Developing digital literacy programs that teach healthy internet habits, along with promoting cognitive-behavioral strategies for managing stress and anxiety, could help mitigate the negative effects of internet overuse. Furthermore, digital platforms should be designed with user well-being in mind, implementing features that encourage mindful usage and protect mental health.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings from this study underscore the complex and dual nature of internet usage. On one hand, the internet serves as an invaluable tool, offering opportunities for connection, education, and personal growth. On the other, it harbors significant psychological risks when overused, particularly in the context of social media platforms and online communication tools. The research paints a vivid picture of the psychological impacts of excessive internet engagement, revealing patterns of emotional dependency, social comparison, and a heightened susceptibility to anxiety and depression. These outcomes are not merely byproducts of digital culture, but rather a direct consequence of the ways in which digital platforms are structured to capture and maintain user attention.

While the internet undoubtedly fosters connections and provides avenues for social interaction, it also exacerbates feelings of isolation, particularly when offline or disconnected from digital networks. The findings highlight that emotional attachment to online platforms can lead to distress during moments of disconnection, evidenced by the widespread phenomenon of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and the negative psychological consequences of being away from social media. This attachment reflects a deeper issue of social validation that, when continuously sought through online interactions, leads to emotional dependency and, ultimately, psychological distress.

Moreover, the study reveals that digital environments, especially social media, cultivate unrealistic standards through curated content, exacerbating social comparison and fostering feelings of inadequacy. Participants who engaged in regular comparison of their lives to those portrayed online reported a diminished sense of self-worth. This “highlight reel” effect of social media promotes unrealistic expectations, making it difficult for individuals to accept the imperfections of their own lives, often contributing to a cycle of envy and self-doubt.

The recognition of these psychological challenges signals a growing awareness of the harmful effects of excessive internet usage. However, awareness alone is not enough. The study suggests a clear need for actionable strategies and interventions to address these issues. Digital literacy programs must become a core component of education systems, empowering individuals to cultivate healthier relationships with technology. By teaching users how to set boundaries, recognize unhealthy digital habits, and manage their emotional responses to online content, society can prevent the negative psychological consequences of excessive internet use.

Interventions, both psychological and behavioral, should also be prioritized. Digital detox programs, mindfulness practices, and cognitive-behavioral techniques could offer valuable tools for individuals struggling with addiction or emotional distress linked to internet use. These strategies would allow individuals to break free from the compulsive cycles of online validation seeking and foster healthier coping mechanisms that do not rely on the digital realm.

Furthermore, there is an urgent need for the ethical redesign of digital platforms themselves. The current design of many social media networks, which actively promotes addictive features like endless scrolling and notifications, must evolve. Social media platforms should incorporate built-in features that encourage users to take breaks, set usage limits, and access mental health resources. Incorporating tools for emotional self-regulation, such as prompts for self-reflection or reminders to engage in offline activities, can help mitigate the negative impact of excessive internet use.

As we look to the future, interdisciplinary research will be crucial in addressing the complexity of digital dependency and its psychological consequences. Collaboration between psychologists, sociologists, technologists, and digital ethicists will be key to understanding how these platforms affect mental health across diverse populations and how they can be designed to promote well-being. Further research should explore the long-term effects of internet overuse, the potential for personalized digital wellness interventions, and the role of technology in shaping our collective psychological landscape.

Ultimately, the path forward lies in balancing the benefits of digital engagement with the need for healthy boundaries. By promoting awareness, education, and ethical design, we can create an internet that enhances, rather than diminishes, our mental and emotional well-being. The internet has the potential to be a force for good, but it is up to society, researchers, and digital platform developers to ensure that its use remains a positive influence, supporting individuals rather than contributing to their psychological distress.



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