

INTERNET ADDICTION AMONG UNDERGRADUATES: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

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Abstract

The internet, sometimes called “the net” is a worldwide system of computer networks in which its users with authorization can disseminate information or talk directly irrespective of their geographical location. Today, internet is globally accessible, easy to use and affordable and used by many institutions globally including students. Students use internet to get vital and updated information and knowledge in their various fields which help them to learn more effectively and without wasting time. Numerous studies have shown that students get addicted to internet, with attendant excessive use of internet for gaming, blogging, email, internet pornography or internet shopping, consequently affecting their school work and performance, interpersonal relationship, physical health and mental well-being. Internet addiction is prevalent across the globe, and if the raging tide is not stemmed, danger looms in the horizon. Hence University authorities should formulate policies on internet use on campuses, including the introduction of internet abuse awareness and prevention into orientation course. Counsellors should find a way of organising regular seminar and workshops during departmental and faculty students’ weeks to create awareness on the consequences of internet addiction, and also provide counselling services to students. The role of parents can also not be emphasized. Awareness can be created to parents to better control their children’s internet access such as cutting the budget for broadband allowance and continuous monitoring when they are at home for holiday.

Introduction

Students use internet to get vital and updated information and knowledge in their various fields which help them to learn more effectively and without wasting time. There is no limit to what the users can do online. Through the internet, users find it easy to communicate, source for information, carry out shopping activities, listen to music, watch videos and do much more. Hence, internet has been an unavoidable part of day-to-day life activities. With the increase in the dependence of internet, people especially students are getting addicted.

Dr. Ivan Goldberg, a psychiatrist in New York, coined the phrase "internet addiction" in 1995 after observing people using the internet inappropriately. In the same year, Dr Kimberly Young, a psychologist carried out research on 500 heavy internet users and compared their behaviour to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental disorders (DSM IV) criteria for pathological gambling. (Caroline, 2010).

Internet addiction is the excessive and inappropriate use of the internet that interferes with the normal daily activities and functioning of the addict.

According to Khazaic et al. (2023), the use of internet more than 38 hours per week is termed internet addiction. An individual with internet addiction surfs for information uncontrollably or gets

in to other online activities such as gaming, social media or online gambling in a way that it disrupts their daily routines, relationships or school performance.

Abdulsalam et al. (2019) defined internet addiction disorder as an excessive use of computer that contradicts daily activities in ways detrimental to daily functioning. Like other addicts, compulsive internet usage dictates a person's life, organise the principles or the way of life of such individuals to the point in which the internet becomes more important than family, friends and work.

Eksi and Ciftici (2017) stated that internet addiction is an intense desire to use the internet, feelings of anger and depression in cases of not having access to the internet and not being able to control the duration of using the internet. Simcharoen et al. (2017) posited that internet addiction is the inability of a person to stop using the internet despite the negative effects on their physical, mental and psycho-social health. This is due to the benefits the users get, not minding the long-term negative impact on their total well-being.

Furthermore, internet addiction is viewed as an uncontrollable desire to use internet, the devaluation of time spent without connecting to the internet, intense nervousness and aggression in the case of denial and progressive deterioration of social and family life (Ezeh et al., 2021). Addicts struggle to control their behaviour causing a sense of despair, leading them to dive further in their addictive pattern. After sometimes they become dependent on cyberspace to feel normal.

Types of internet addiction

Ahmed (2023) identified 5 categories of internet addiction as thus:

- a. **Cybersex addiction:** It is the obsessive and the compulsive watching of pornography and often associated with excessive masturbation. Cybersex addiction involves the use of digital platforms such as chat rooms, online forums or explicit websites for sexual interactions and arousal. Individuals with cybersex addiction may spend significant amounts of time on virtual sexual activities resulting in negative consequences on their academic performance and other real-life activities in general.
- b. **Net Compulsion:** It involves active online interactive activities which can be extremely harmful, such as online gambling, trading stocks, online auctions (e.g. eBay) and compulsive online shopping. Due to a sense of community and social interactions that create virtual environment and reward system associated with net compulsion, individuals may feel a sense of belonging and pleasure which can contribute to addiction.
- c. **Cyber (online) Relationship Addiction:** Cyber relationship addicts are deeply involved with finding and maintaining relationships on- line, often forgetting and neglecting real-life family and friends.
- d. **Compulsive gaming addiction:** It involves spending excessive amount of time playing games. Some of the reasons people get addicted to gaming are built in rewards, hidden features and side quests. E.g. every time an individual completes a level, beats a boss or kills an opponent, this increases an individual's dopamine level, resulting in gaming –induced pleasure.

Signs and symptoms of internet addiction

Stephanie (2020) categorized the signs of internet addiction into 4:

- a. Behavioural symptoms include; loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, spending most waking hours online, angry or agitated if asked to step away from device, lying about internet use and concealing internet use.
- b. Physical symptoms include; Fatigue, insomnia, aches and pains from lack of movement, digestive problems, change in physical appearance (no longer paying attention to grooming or hygiene and unintended weight gain or weight loss).
- c. Mental symptoms include; attention deficit and memory impairments.
- d. Social symptoms include; irritable moods, social isolation, employment problems, strained interpersonal relationships.

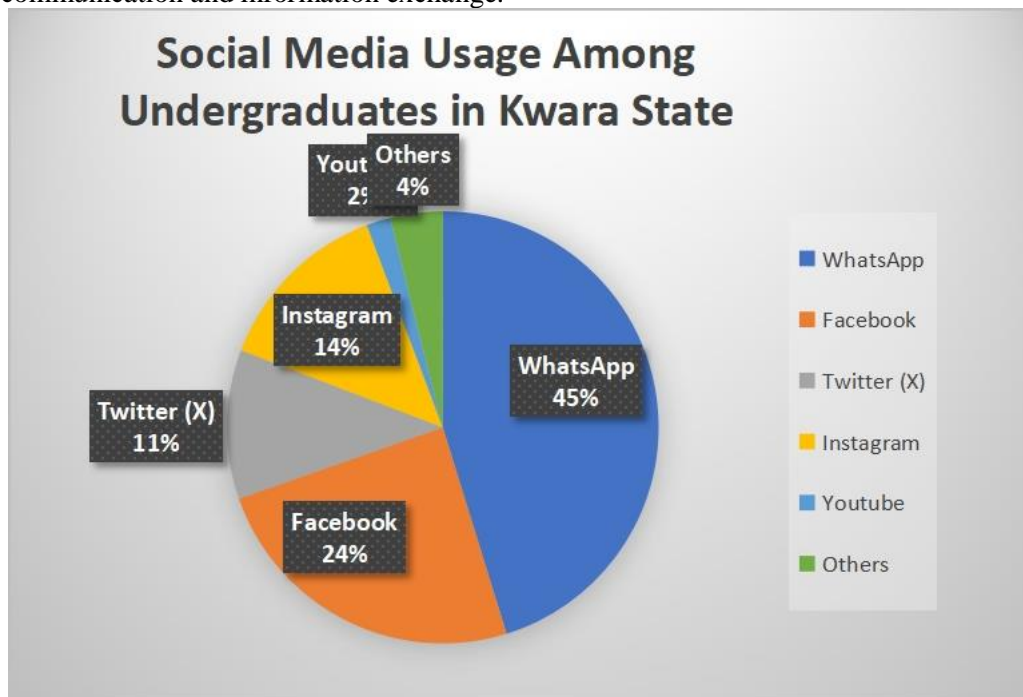
Internet addiction among undergraduates

Recently, internet addiction has become a major challenge across the globe especially among students, and Nigeria is not exempted. According to Duarte (2024), Nigeria ranked 7th among the top 25 countries that use the internet in the world. Saifaddin (2024) reported that as of January 2024, Nigeria had more than 103 million internet users, the highest number reported in Africa. Ani (2023)

stated that as of 2022, the rate at which internet is being used was higher among individuals between 15 and 24 years of age than among the older generations in all regions worldwide. Candace et al. (2023) explained that individual between age group 15 and 24 falls between the middle and the late adolescence stages. Adolescence is a period of transition between childhood and adulthood. Adolescents at this stage, experience rapid physical, cognitive, emotional and social growth. This affects how they feel, think, make decisions and interact with the world around them. According to Trumello et al. (2018), adolescence is a vital stage in human development involving a wide range of physical and psychological changes and formation of personality. During this process, technologies play a crucial role which attract young people as a means of socialization and to explore a whole new world (Baiocce, et al., 2011). Furthermore, Anderson et al. (2016) stated that internet addiction can occur among all age groups but most common among the youths, this is due to mental, emotional and social development associated with this period of development

Adolescents (15-19 years) and emerging adults (20-29) use internet more than any other age groups and undertake a higher risk of over use of internet, hence the problem of internet addiction disorder is most common to young people. (Anderson et al., 2017). Omoyemiju and Popoola (2020) posited that problematic internet use is a prevailing problem among adolescents. Adolescents, especially university undergraduates get addicted to internet due to availability of free time, lack of monitoring because of being away from parents, ease of use and at times a means of escape from school stress. (Young & Rogers, 1998).

Akinola and Daramola (2017) found that the commonly used social media platform were WhatsApp (45%), followed by Facebook (24.3%), twitter (11.1%), Instagram (13.4%) Youtube (1.8%) and others (4.4%). The commonly used social media platforms usually, are easy to use for communication and information exchange.



Akinola and Daramola (2017)

Doris (2023) posited that social media usage in Nigeria has been on the rise in recent years, WhatsApp is the most used social media platform as at third quarter of 2022; WhatsApp (94.9 %), Facebook (88.8%), FB Messenger (69.9%), Instagram (69.4%), Twitter (61.2%), Tiktok (57.4%), Telegram (53.9%), Snapchat (52.6%), LinkedIn (26%), Pinterest (21%) and Skype (9.6%), WeChat (8.4%), Badoo (8.1%), iMessage (5.5%) and Discord (3.6%).

Consequences of Internet Addiction among Undergraduates

The rate of Internet addiction among undergraduates is at a worrisome level (Musarrat et al., 2014). This could alter the life of the addict in the same way that drugs and alcohol would do (Bisen & Deshpande, 2018). Some studies have shown that internet addiction alters students' time management, sleep patterns, exercises routines resulting in weakened immune system (Rosen et al., 2016.), interferes with their interpersonal relationships (Tsitsika et al., 2014).

According to Carli et al. (2016), students who spend extremely long hours (20-80 hours) in a week on the internet may experience some psychological disorders such as despair, social isolation, low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. In addition, they may suffer from poor sleeping habits, low physical activity (Durkey et al., 2016), attention deficit and low emotional intelligence (Oskenbay et al., 2015).

Aderinto (2022) posited that aside from mental health disorders, internet addiction has negative impacts on the physical health which includes stiffness in arms and joints, dry and strained eyes, back pain, neck pain resulting in headache, sleeping disorder, decrease in hygiene, eating disorders and bad posture.

In addition, Global Internet Access (2016) lists one of the negative effects of internet as cyber bullying, which refers to the use of electronic communication to harass, intimidate, threaten, embarrass or target another person typically through text messages, social media or online platforms. Cyberbullying can have serious consequences for the victims, including psychological stress, academic problems, social isolation and even suicidal thoughts.

Theoretical Review

According to Thaddeus (2019), ACE Model was initially used by Dr Cooper in the year 2000 to explain how pornography addiction operates. Later adopted by Dr Kimberly Young to describe the mechanisms underlying the whole forms of internet addiction. ACE model is based on the characteristics of internet. **A** stands for Anonymity, **C** stands for Convenience, and **E** stands for Escapism.

Anonymity is the ability of the users to hide their true identity and remain anonymous while using the internet, hence free to do whatever they desire on the internet. Anonymity can lead to disinhibition, where individuals may behave impulsively or engage in activities like watching of porn and masturbation, making sexual comments which they would not offline, thereby leading into internet addiction.

Convenience describes the benefits of internet as people can do certain things such as
I. Gaming and Gambling: Online Gaming and Gambling platforms provides convenience and accessibility, allowing individuals to engage in these activities anytime and anywhere leading to addiction due to the thrill of winning.

II. Communication: Platforms like WhatsApp, telegram face book, make it effortless to stay connected with friends and family. However, this constant connectivity can lead to addiction as individuals feel compelled to constantly check for messages and updates.

III. Online Shopping: The convenience of shopping online without leaving comfort zones allows individuals to make purchases anytime, anywhere. However, this convenience can lead to compulsive buying behaviour and addiction due to the thrill of acquiring new items.

Escapism is the ability of the users to find comfort and relax during difficult or distress time because internet offers a free virtual environment that entices people away from the real world. Engaging in online activities like gaming and gambling can become a coping mechanism for individuals to escape from real life stressors, problems or challenges faced in relationships and academics leading individuals to spend excessive amount of time to access online games and gambling platforms, hence becoming addicted.

Implications for counselling.

Since the emergence of this psychological disorder, there has not been a single therapy best suited for the treatment. However, based on the effectiveness of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) in the management of other forms of addiction, hence counselling psychologists are to adopt Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy as the best approach in managing internet addiction. REBT is one of the forms of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) developed by Albert Ellis in 1955. The goal

of REBT is to assist individuals to identify and challenge irrational thoughts, feelings to avoid negative behaviours such as uncontrollable internet usage.

According to Malak (2018) Cognitive behavioural Therapy is based on cognitive behavioural model, which holds that thoughts determine feelings hence, changing one's thoughts can help with behavioural change. Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) can be used to manage individuals addicted to internet by addressing the underlying irrational beliefs associated with the ACE Model (Anonymous, Convenient and Escapism)

Here is how REBT principles can be applied; (A)

1. Activating Events (A):

The counsellor begins by helping the client to identify the Activating Event (A) that could trigger the client's excessive internet use. These triggers might include academic stress, boredom, loneliness or other emotional states.

2. Beliefs (B):

Once the activating event is identified, the counsellor works with the client to uncover the beliefs associated with the event. These beliefs often involve irrational thoughts and attitudes. For internet addiction, beliefs might include thoughts like "being online constantly is the only way to escape stress" or "I can remain anonymous online and do whatever I desire" or "I can't handle boredom or loneliness without the internet"

3. Consequences (C): The counsellor helps the client recognise the emotional and behavioural consequences of their beliefs and behaviours related to internet use. These consequences may include increased anxiety, social isolation, poor academic performance or neglect of other responsibilities. The client learns to connect their excessive internet use with negative consequences in their life such as strained interpersonal relationship, poor academic performance.

4. Disputing (D): With the counsellor guidance, the client learns to challenge and dispute their irrational beliefs by questioning their validity and logic about internet use. For instance, "am I using internet as a healthy coping mechanism or is it merely an escape from reality" or "is it true that I can completely remain anonymous online" or "Are there alternative, more constructive and healthier ways to cope with stress or loneliness.

5. Effective New Thinking (E): Through the process of disputing irrational beliefs, the client develops Effective New Thinking patterns by replacing irrational beliefs with rational alternatives that are more aligned and promote healthier behaviours. This might involve recognizing the value of moderation, setting boundaries around internet use, developing alternative coping strategies and prioritising real life connections and activities. For instance "I can learn healthier coping mechanisms that do not rely solely on internet usage" or "while I may remain anonymous online, my actions will still have consequences" or "the internet can provide temporarily relieve, but it is not a sustainable solution for dealing with life challenges"

5. Feelings (F): As the client implements effective new thinking and behaviours, they experience new feelings (new consequences) in their life. These feelings(consequences) are typically more positive and aligned with the client's goals and values. Examples of new consequences may include improved relationships, better time management and overall well-being. Throughout this process, the counsellor provides support, guidance and reinforcement to help the client implement and maintain these changes.

Conclusion

Internet addiction is prevalent across the globe, and based on the information gathered from the literature reviewed, undergraduates are considered as the group mostly affected. This is due to mental, emotional and social development associated with adolescent. Signs associated with internet addiction include social isolation, impulsiveness, irritable mood, sleep disorder, preoccupation with the internet and strained interpersonal relationship. As internet addiction becomes a global problem, carrying out public awareness campaigns on its negative impacts and consequences may be an effective strategy to reduce its prevalence and effects.

Suggestions

1. Counsellors should find a way of organising regular seminar and workshops on campuses to create awareness on the consequences of internet addiction. Awareness should also be created during orientation programme for the freshers and during departmental week.

2. Counsellors should teach students healthy coping skills to manage stress, boredom and negative emotions without resorting to excessive internet use. This could include relaxation exercises or engaging in hobbies or activities they enjoy offline.
3. Counsellors should assist individuals addicted to internet in setting realistic goals for reducing internet use. Start with small achievable goals and gradually increase them over time. This could include setting limits on screen time or specific times of day for internet use.
4. University management and lecturers should formulate policies regarding internet use on campus by regularly monitoring network traffic to identify and address any unauthorized or excessive internet usage.
5. Awareness should be created to parents to better control their children's internet access such as cutting the budget for broadband allowance and continuous monitoring when they are at home for holiday.

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