

Social Anxiety and Loneliness Leads to Internet Addiction

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Abstract

The study aim is to find the impact of social anxiety and loneliness on internet addiction. The study was conducted on young adults of Pakistan. Cross sectional research design was used in this study. A sample of 200 young adults with age range 17- 28 appearing for test at center participated in survey. Constructs are measured by social anxiety questionnaire scale for adults (SAQ-A) by Caballo et al., (2010), UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell et al., 1978) and Internet addiction test (IAT) (Kimberly, 1998). Results of Pearson moment correlation shows that social anxiety and internet addiction has positive correlation ($r = .89$), whereas the relationship between loneliness and internet addiction also found to be positive ($r = .84$). ANOVA test results indicate that mean difference of social anxiety, internet addiction and loneliness is high in age group (17-20). Multiple regression analysis shows that social anxiety and loneliness are positive predictors of internet addiction among young adults. It was concluded that social anxiety and loneliness are present among peoples, and it adds negative feeling in their life. Moreover, it impacts an individual's daily life functioning. Internet addiction is also associated with social anxiety and loneliness. With the increase in level of social anxiety and loneliness, internet addiction is also increased.

Keywords: *Young adults, Social Anxiety, Internet Addiction, Loneliness*

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Introduction

Humans have an inherited need of belongingness in terms of social setting. They need social connections to pursue and fill their need for belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to this concept, humans feel a sense of contentment and joy if this prime need satisfied. For example, people who have a strong desire of exploring other people feel gratified when they intermingle with new people (McAdams & Bryant, 1987). This social interaction increases positive affect on them (Watson, 2000). When social interaction is imbalanced, it brings a negative impact in daily life functioning. Social Anxiety is one of the mean to investigate and observe social functioning and abnormalities among people. Social anxiety is the condition when there are needs of belongingness in a person, but it is either hidden or disenchanting. These people desire social interactions but are incapable to express these needs effectively. This happens due to fear of humiliation (Beidel & Turner, 1998), and often describe as inner conflict of a person to approach and avoid social situations (Asendorpf, 1990).

Loneliness does not imply being literally alone, but it is the perception of people of being alone. It differs from social isolation because in social isolation people isolate themselves from social situations and meeting other people whereas, in loneliness people feel alone even when they are surrounded by many people, friends, and family. Experience of loneliness is distressful and unpleasant (Perlman & Peplau, 1979). Researchers define loneliness, as “Loneliness is a sentiment felt by a person... (experiencing) and wish for state of social interaction which is different from one presently experienced” (Lopais, 1969, p. 249-250). Another definition for loneliness is “It refers to as affective state in which individual is aware of the feeling of being apart from others, along with the experience of a vague need for other individuals” (Leiderman, 1980, p. 387). Both definitions indicate that loneliness is perception of being alone and it is a feeling that a person feels as being not the part of the group but wishes to be close and intimate.

Internet addiction has received attention in the past few years because of its rapid growth in the society (Lortie & Guitton, 2013). There is no standard definition of internet addiction present in the literature because of two reasons. First reason is that internet addiction has emerged recently as a problem and secondly, there is no proper operational definition developed to measure internet addiction. Prevalence rate of internet addiction differs in different countries and ethnic groups from 1% to 18.7%. There occurs overlap of internet addiction with traditional factors. For treating the condition, both psychological and medicinal treatment plane is needed (Pontes et al., 2015).

Relationship between Social Anxiety, Loneliness, and Internet Addiction

Socially anxious people report that they feel distress in social situations. It is dissimilar to social anhedonia. In social anhedonia people do not have any interest in social activities and interactions whereas, in social anxiety people have interest in socializing but they avoid such situations due to the fear of psychological conditions and has a negative effect (Kashdan et al., 2006). People feel more distress and social humiliation. Social anxiety has a link with a loneliness, which is the root cause of many other anxiety when they are present among strangers than the people, they are close with (Vittengl & Holt, 1998). Social anxiety causes negativity in the normal daily functioning of an individual (Shahbazirad et al., 2016).

A survey on loneliness was conducted by Rubenstein, a newspaper company. They asked from a sample of 25000 participants about loneliness and their perception on their own loneliness. It was observed that 79% of people intermittently felt lonely, 5% felt lonely most or all the time, and 6% said they never felt lonely (Shaver & Peplau, 1979). Moreover, it is common belief that loneliness occurs or develops during old age of people, but it was seen that loneliness more frequently occurs during early development age of an individual (Peplau et al., 1999). This can be explained by the changes that occur in the body of individual while jumping from childhood to adolescent, and then adolescent to adulthood. Hormonal changes that take place during this development bring many emotions, and loneliness can be one of these emotions depending upon the environment of individual.

It is important to study loneliness is that it has become common problem of today's society. It has widespread among adults, young people, and even adolescents. Every person feels loneliness at some point of his or her lives even for short period. It is, therefore, necessary to find out its reason to prevent its prevalence from spreading. Moreover, it is unpleasant and unhealthy emotion, which cause negative effect on person's life and can have dangerous consequences if not treated. Loneliness is a social phenomenon that questions the structure and health of the society. It is a self-experience and self-awareness that involves a break in the foundation of the relational network (Audy et al., 1980).

Loneliness as a feeling and as an experience is not new, it ages as old as human history, but it is prevailing society with fast pace. According to Mijuskovik (1979), those who view loneliness as the result or product of modern society and technology are wrong.

Internet addiction is recently included in the category of disorder (Block, 2008) that has received attention by many researchers and psychologists due to its increased prevalence (FU et al., 2010). Internet is the lack of control people has on themselves to stop themselves from excessive and abnormal use of internet. It leads to distress in daily life functioning causing functional impairment. Therefore, it is significant to study the phenomena to develop strategies to counter and cure this new rising problem (Shapira et al., 2003). Internet addiction is related with many other factors affecting our life in so many areas of life such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, and loneliness. How these factors are affected by internet addiction. Low self-esteem causes negative effects on one's personality as a result, affecting overall health. This is also related to life satisfaction, which leads to negative effects on relationships. Loneliness is majorly affected by internet addiction or vice versa. Too much use of internet is considered abnormal today it leads to addiction of internet that causes many problems and it can be caused by different mental conditions of a human being (Bozoglan et al., 2013). It is reported that in the last decade internet users have increased double by its number (Laconi et al., 2014).

Problematic internet use or internet addiction is associated with social

anxiety. It is also linked with depression and generalized social anxiety disorder. There exists a positive correlation between social anxiety and internet addiction (Weinstein et al., 2015).

Methodology

Research Design

Cross-sectional research design was used to explore the relationship among study variables

Objectives

1. To find the relationship between social anxiety and internet addiction
2. To find the relationship between loneliness and internet addiction
3. To find out does social anxiety and loneliness leads towards internet addiction.

Hypotheses

1. There would be positive relationship between social anxiety and internet addiction.
2. There would be a positive relationship between loneliness and internet addiction.
3. Social anxiety would be positive predictor of internet addiction among young adults.
4. Loneliness would be positive predictor of internet addiction among young adults.

Participants

The participants were 200 young adults ranging from age 17 to 28 that is the age range of average college/ university students. The participants include 85% intermediate students, 15% graduate/ postgraduate students. All the participants for the research were Pakistani and lived in the different cities of Punjab and Sindh. The study was conducted under the premises of inter services selection board. Majority of the participants lies in age ranging from 17-22 that makes 75% of the participants.

Instruments

The data collection was carried out with the help of scientific scales, which are questionnaires that measure each variable scientifically, according to the previously decided operational definitions. The following scales were used in this study to measure our research variables.

Demographic Information Sheet

A demographic information sheet was created to get information of the participants like age, education, and the place they live.

Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adults (SAQ-A30)

The scale was developed by Caballo and his Research Team in 2010. Scale used in the study is the final revision and short version of the original scale. SAS-A30 contains 30 descriptive self-statements following Likert response format with five number of responses (1 = not at all/very slight, 5 = all the time/very high). Social Anxiety Scale for Adults (SAQ A-30) showed an internal consistency of 0.91 and concurrent validity of 0.66, when it was developed and applied on the sample (Annette, Greca, & Lopez, 1997).

UCLA Loneliness Scale

The Scale for measuring loneliness is UCLA Loneliness Scale, which consists of 20 items. In the study, third revision of the scale has been used to gain better results. The scale was developed by Russell et al. in 1978. It contains high reliability, which was measured after applying third revision of the scale on the selected sample. Internal consistency was (coefficient alpha ranging from .89 to .94). It contains Likert response format with four number of responses (1 = never, 4 = often). The scale is descriptive self-assessment scale.

Internet Addiction Test (IAT)

The last scale for our third variable, which is also dependent variable, is Internet addiction, which is titled as Internet Addiction Test (IAT) by Dr. Kimberly Young. It consists of 20 items. It follows liker response format with six number of responses (0 = does not apply, 5 = always). This is based on question format.

Procedure

The sample selected was compromised of young adults, who were assessed during their appearance on center. The participants were approached based on

convenient sampling techniques. No criteria other than age (17-28) of participants was followed during the study. The scales were distributed among the participants after completing their mandatory psychological test. Before data collection from participants, they were asked/their consent was taken, if they are willing to participate in the study and the whole process was explained to the participants to avoid any confusions and fears from participants. The sample size for this study (200 candidates) was large enough that appropriate statistical analysis can be run on it to gather accurate findings, reliability of the test can remain intact, and yet at the same time it is not so large that the data becomes difficult to handle.

Results

In the light of study objectives and hypotheses, different statistical analysis were run on the data collected, including correlation and tests of differences by using statistical package for social sciences (IBM-SPSS - 28 version).

Table 1

Descriptive and Skewness of social anxiety, loneliness, and internet addiction (N=200)

| Scales | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Score range | | Skewness |
|------------|----------|-----------|-------------|--------|----------|
| | | | Potential | Actual | |
| SA | 82.59 | 18.83 | 30-150 | 30-92 | 0.08 |
| Loneliness | 47.75 | 9.53 | 20-80 | 20-44 | -0.45 |
| IA | 47.90 | 17.56 | 0-120 | 20-83 | -0.20 |

Note: SA = social anxiety, IA= internet addiction.

It indicates that the variables of social anxiety, loneliness and internet addiction skewness is within range of +1 to -1 which shows that the data of all study variables is normally distributed and analysis can be applied.

Table 2

Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients of the social anxiety scale, loneliness scale for adults and internet addiction scale (N=200)

| Scales | No. of items | α |
|-----------------------------|--------------|----------|
| Social Anxiety Scale | 30 | 0.89 |
| Loneliness Scale for Adults | 20 | 0.84 |
| Internet Addiction scale | 20 | 0.88 |

Note. α = Chronbach's alpha

Table 2 shows alpha reliability of social anxiety scale, loneliness scale for adults and internet addiction scale. All the scales reliabilities were found to be adequate with reliabilities ranging from 0.84 to 0.89. These satisfactory alpha reliabilities indicate that social anxiety scale, loneliness scale for adults and internet addiction scale are reliable measure for assessing social anxiety and loneliness causes internet addiction among adults.

Table 3

Correlation between social anxiety, loneliness and internet addiction (N=200)

| Scales | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|--------------------|---|-------|-------|
| Social anxiety | - | .46** | .25** |
| Loneliness | | - | .15* |
| Internet addiction | | | - |

Note. 1= Social anxiety, 2=Loneliness, and 3= internet addiction. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 3 shows significant positive correlation exists between the study variables. Social anxiety and loneliness have significant positive correlation with each other. Social anxiety and loneliness have positive and significant positive correlation with internet addiction.

Table 4

One way analysis of variance of social anxiety, loneliness and internet addiction on different age groups (N=200)

| Scales | 17-20 Years | | 21-25 Years | | 26-28 Years | | F | Cohens' d |
|--------|-------------|-------|-------------|-------|-------------|-------|-------|--------------|
| | n=142 | | n=32 | | n=26 | | | |
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| SA | 84.36 | 19.64 | 82.91 | 17.09 | 79.50 | 6.36 | 0.44* | 0.6 |
| LNL | 58.01 | 9.58 | 48.15 | 9.35 | 46.00 | 6.00 | 1.63* | 0.27 |
| IA | 64.97 | 18.36 | 48.87 | 14.99 | 45.50 | 12.02 | 0.96* | 0.36 |

Note. SA= social anxiety, LNL = loneliness, and IA = internet addiction. * $p < .05$

One way analysis of variance showed the mean difference on age categories of (e.g., 17-20, 21-25, and 26-28). Social anxiety mean difference is high in age category of (17-20 years). Loneliness mean difference is also high in age category of (17-20 years). Internet addiction score was found high in age category of (17-20 Years).

Table 5

Multiple regression analysis to test effects of social anxiety and loneliness on internet addiction (N=200)

| Variables | Internet addiction | |
|----------------|--------------------|-------------|
| | B | 95% CI |
| Constant | 28.89 | 13.25-44.53 |
| Social anxiety | 0.23 | 0.06-0.40 |
| Loneliness | 0.03 | 0.35-0.51 |
| R ² | 0.06 | |
| F | 4.53* | |

Note. CI = confidence interval. * $p < 0.05$,

Multiple regression analysis was computed to explore the predictive features of social anxiety scale on internet addiction scale. As shown in the table, the social anxiety ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < .05$), loneliness ($\beta = 0.03$), $p < .05$), positively predicted

internet addiction habit. The value of R^2 showed social anxiety and loneliness explained a total of 6% variance in internet addiction. Social anxiety and loneliness significantly contribute in predicting internet addiction. Hypothesis is accepted and this research results indicate that social anxiety and loneliness leads to internet addiction among young adults.

Discussion

The study was conducted to investigate relationship between social anxiety and loneliness that leads to internet addiction. The purpose of the study is to observe whether psychological problems of human beings are the source of changes in their daily life routine or not. The study focused on two psychological problems that are social anxiety and loneliness and found out their association with internet addiction. The reason for selecting social anxiety and loneliness from all other psychological problems was that both of these conditions prevail among humans in high rate, but people are not able to distinguish it. It brings negativity in their life without being able to diagnose the reason. Social anxiety and loneliness are independent variable whereas internet addiction is the dependent variable. The results have shown positive relationship among independent and dependent variables, which proves the hypothesis of the study. There is a positive relationship between Social Anxiety and Internet Addiction. There is a positive relationship between Loneliness and Internet Addiction. These hypotheses have been proved based on results. ANOVA analysis is used to compare means where a demographic variable is categorized more than two categories. This research used ANOVA analysis to check if there is a difference between independent variable in association with age category. According to the results, social anxiety is maximum in age 17-20 years with higher mean as compared to other categories. The reason behind it could be the maturity level that is low in late adolescence. Loneliness is also concentrated in age category 17-20 years and minimum level found in 26-28 years of young adults. According to results, the mean of internet addiction is maximum in adolescents (17-20) than others. Regression analysis shows beta value for social anxiety variable is 0.23 and beta value for loneliness is 0.03. The results of the study are also supported by previous evidence of occurrence of internet

addiction with high social anxiety and loneliness. The study's hypothesis is supported by previous researches. With the increase in social anxiety of an individual, internet addiction is also increased. That means there is a positive relationship between them. Another research study was conducted to observe internet addiction and its relationship with loneliness. Results showed positive correlation with internet addiction and loneliness $r = 0.19$ ($p < 0.05$) (Saleem, Tufail, Khan, & Ismail, 2015). The results of this study support the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship of social addiction and loneliness with internet addiction in young adults.

Conclusion

Social anxiety and loneliness are present among people, and it adds negative feeling in their life. Moreover, it effects an individual's daily life functioning. Internet addiction is also associated with social anxiety and loneliness. With the increase in level of social anxiety and loneliness, internet addiction is also increased.

Limitations

The study was conducted on the sample of 200 young adults. One of the limitations of the study is the sample size. Sample size of the study is small. To get more reliable results the must contain sample size of 400 people. Other than sample, size there was no fixed ratio demographic variable such as age. This study has not deal with generalizability issue as well.

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