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DIGITALLY DISTRACTED: UNRAVELLING THE NEXUS OF INTERNET ADDICTION AND STRESS

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Abstract

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly influenced students' academic, health and social lives, thereby creating dependence on the internet. Despite the benefits of internet use for academic purposes, excessive use may lead to detrimental psychological effects, particularly stress. This study aims to examine the relationship between Internet Addiction (IA) and stress levels among college students. In this study, a quantitative research design was adopted, and data were collected from university students. Data has been collected through a semi-structured questionnaire from 150 college students. Internet addiction was measured by using three constructs: academic performance, anonymity, and psychological aspects. The data were analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM) in SmartPLS 4.0. The findings of the study show that internet addiction has a significant impact on stress levels among college students. The study contributes to the existing literature by offering empirical evidence of the negative consequences of excessive internet usage in the academic domain.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"We are all now connected by the internet, like neurons in a giant brain." – Stephen Hawking

Just as neurons in a giant brain are interconnected, individuals across the globe are now linked through the internet. In contemporary society, daily life is increasingly dependent on internet connectivity for communication, education, and routine activities. The rapid advancement and continuous updating of digital technologies have significantly transformed the way people think and work, making the internet an inseparable part of modern life. In today's digital environment, the internet is not merely a functional tool but also a dynamic social environment that shapes human interaction and behaviour.

In the field of education, the internet plays a crucial role in facilitating learning and research activities. Its importance has grown substantially, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the adoption of online learning and increased internet usage across college campuses. Initially, students primarily used the internet for academic purposes such as learning and research (Chou et al., 2005). However, excessive use of the internet has been found to lead to internet addiction (Weinstein & Lejoyeux, 2010). Recent evidence (Jiang et al., 2023) further confirms that excessive internet usage significantly contributes to the development of internet addiction.

Beyond addiction, excessive internet usage has been identified as a significant contributor to various psychological issues, including stress, anxiety, and depression (Elhai et al., 2018; Lovibond, 1998). As a result, the impact of internet usage among adolescents and young adults has become a prominent area of research across multiple disciplines. This growing interest is driven by adolescents' strong emotional attachment to the internet (Karacic & Oreskovic, 2017) and its subsequent influence on their mental health (Liu et al., 2022) as well as academic performance (Zhang et al., 2018).

Previous literature conceptualises internet addiction using various terms such as pathological internet use, compulsive internet use, and problematic internet use (Restrepo et al., 2020). Mark D. Griffiths (1996) defines internet addiction as a form of human–machine interaction characterised by symptoms such as tolerance, withdrawal, and psychological dependence (Yoo et al., 2014). Similarly, Kimberly S. Young (1996) conceptualised internet addiction as a generalised impulse control disorder.

Despite the growing body of literature on internet addiction and its psychological consequences, several gaps remain unaddressed. Most existing studies have focused broadly on mental health outcomes such as anxiety and depression, while relatively limited attention has been given specifically to stress among university students, particularly in the post-pandemic academic environment where digital dependency has intensified. Furthermore, a large proportion of prior research has been conducted in Western contexts, thereby limiting the applicability of findings to developing countries like India, where socio-cultural and academic conditions differ significantly. Additionally, earlier studies have often examined internet addiction in isolation without sufficiently exploring its direct impact on stress within an educational setting. Given that university students are particularly vulnerable to both academic stress and excessive internet use, there is a clear need for focused empirical investigation in this context.

In response to these gaps, the present study aims to examine the relationship between internet addiction and stress levels among university students. Prior research by Demir and Kutlu (2018) indicates that internet addiction is positively associated with academic delay, negatively affects students' learning motivation, and adversely impacts their overall well-being. Building on this foundation, the current study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence on the influence of internet addiction on stress in the context of higher education. It also offers context-specific insights by focusing on students in India, thereby enhancing the generalizability of findings to developing economies. Moreover, the study provides practical implications for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals by emphasising the importance of promoting healthy internet usage habits to reduce stress and improve student well-being.

2.0 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION: ACE MODEL OF INTERNET ADDICTION

The theoretical understanding of internet addiction can be effectively explained through the ACE model proposed by Kimberly S. Young (2000). The ACE model suggests that the addictive potential of the internet is primarily driven by three key characteristics: anonymity, convenience, and escape. Anonymity refers to the ability of individuals to conceal their identity while interacting in the online environment. This lack of accountability enables users to engage more freely in activities that they might otherwise avoid in real-life settings, thereby increasing the likelihood of excessive and uncontrolled internet use. Convenience, another important component, highlights the ease of access provided by the internet, allowing users to perform various activities such as shopping, communication, and entertainment without physical effort. While convenience enhances efficiency, it also encourages prolonged usage, potentially leading to dependency. The third component, escape, is particularly relevant in understanding the psychological dimension of internet addiction. The internet provides a virtual environment where individuals can temporarily avoid real-life stressors, emotional discomfort, and academic pressures. This escapism reinforces repeated usage, as individuals increasingly rely on online platforms as a coping mechanism. Although the ACE model was initially developed to explain internet pornography addiction, it has since been extended to broader forms of Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD). In the context of students, the escape dimension is especially significant, as individuals experiencing academic or personal stress may turn to the internet for relief, which in turn increases the risk of addiction. This cyclical process suggests that internet addiction not only emerges as a coping response to stress but may also further intensify stress levels due to negative academic and

psychological consequences. Thus, the ACE model provides a strong theoretical basis for understanding how internet addiction develops and how it may contribute to increased stress among students, supporting the proposed relationship in the present study.

3.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Stress among students has been widely recognised as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by academic, financial, social, and environmental factors. Several studies have identified academic pressure as a primary source of stress. For instance, Joshua Oluwasuji et al. (2018) and Leethu L.T. et al. (2021) reported that examinations, assignments, language barriers, and financial constraints significantly contribute to heightened stress levels among students. Similarly, Md. Kamrul Hossain et al. (2022) emphasised that financial stress adversely affects not only students' academic performance but also their social engagement, with factors such as financial instability, lack of family support, and dependence on educational loans intensifying stress.

In addition to financial and academic pressures, psychological and socio-cultural factors also play a crucial role. Saba Javed and Khadeeja Munawar (2021) highlighted that genetic predispositions, family environment, and socioeconomic conditions are significant determinants of extreme outcomes such as student suicides. Likewise, Sibnath Deb et al. (2014) found that parental expectations for high academic achievement, combined with limited time due to extracurricular commitments, further exacerbate stress levels among students.

Stress levels are particularly pronounced among students in professional courses. For example, Sonam Gupta et al. (2015) observed that medical students experience heightened stress due to examination anxiety, peer pressure, and language barriers. The lack of effective communication between teachers and students also contributes to increased stress. Similarly, Vivek B. Waghachavare et al. (2013) identified variations in stress levels across disciplines, with healthcare students reporting higher stress compared to their counterparts in engineering fields. Supporting these findings, Narasappa Kumarasamy (2012) and Sidra Afzal and Mahira Afzal (2021) emphasised that academic workload, social transitions, and family expectations significantly contribute to anxiety and stress among students.

Environmental and situational factors have also been identified as contributors to student stress. Yihan Saho et al. (2023) highlighted that online teaching modalities, including course duration, subject load, and lack of interaction, significantly increase academic stress. Additionally, Alfara Dhita Amelia et al. (2023) pointed out that external factors such as traffic congestion can further aggravate stress levels. Peer-related dynamics also play an important role, as studies by Saira Maqsood et al. (2022) and Khizra Iqbal et al. (2016) indicate that peer pressure influences students' psychological adjustment and stress, both positively and negatively.

In recent years, internet addiction has emerged as a critical factor affecting students' mental health. A growing body of literature suggests that excessive internet use is associated with a range of psychological problems, including stress, anxiety, depression, and social isolation. Studies by Feng et al. (2019), Reed et al. (2015), Santoso et al. (2018), Tang et al. (2014), and Yadav et al. (2013) consistently demonstrate a strong association between internet addiction and adverse psychological outcomes among students.

Moreover, internet addiction has been found to intensify existing mental health issues. Lyrakos et al. (2014) argued that while moderate use of social networking platforms may not initially lead to negative emotional outcomes, excessive and addictive usage can exacerbate underlying psychological problems. Similarly, Rabadi et al. (2017) highlighted the bidirectional relationship between internet addiction and psychological distress, suggesting that stress may both contribute to and result from problematic internet use.

The above literature indicates that student stress is influenced by a wide range of factors, including academic workload, financial constraints, family expectations, peer pressure, and environmental conditions. At the same time, internet addiction has emerged as a significant psychological and behavioural issue that further complicates students' mental well-being. While previous studies have independently examined stress and internet addiction, limited research has integrated these two constructs to understand their direct relationship, particularly in the context of university students.

This gap highlights the need for a focused empirical investigation into how internet addiction contributes to stress among students. Understanding this relationship is crucial for developing effective interventions aimed at improving students' mental health and promoting balanced digital behaviour.

4.0 DEVELOPMENT OF A HYPOTHESIS

The internet has become an indispensable part of modern life, playing a vital role not only in personal activities but also in professional and academic domains. In the field of education, it serves as a critical tool for accessing information, conducting research, and enhancing knowledge. Students widely rely on search engines and digital platforms to resolve academic queries and support their learning processes. However, despite its numerous benefits, excessive use of the internet has introduced several psychological and behavioural challenges.

Empirical evidence suggests that increased internet usage is associated with a higher likelihood of internet addiction. For instance, Feng et al. (2019) reported that the prevalence of internet addiction tends to increase with academic grade levels, indicating a gradual intensification of dependence. The study also established a positive relationship between internet addiction and stress among students, suggesting that excessive internet use

contributes to elevated stress levels. At the same time, some studies indicate that moderate and controlled use of the internet may not initially result in negative psychological outcomes. For example, Lyrakos et al. (2014) argued that individuals who use the internet in a balanced manner do not necessarily experience adverse emotional effects. However, prolonged and excessive usage can lead to various psychosocial issues. Tang et al. (2014) highlighted that interpersonal conflicts and academic-related problems are significant predictors of internet addiction, while Santoso et al. (2018) identified loneliness as a key risk factor contributing to excessive internet use. In addition to internet addiction, several other factors have been found to influence students' stress levels. Academic-related pressures, such as examinations and assessments (Joshua Oluwasuji et al., 2018), financial difficulties (Md. Kamrul Hossain et al., 2022), and involvement in extracurricular activities (Sibnath Deb et al., 2014) significantly contribute to stress among students. Furthermore, demographic and socio-cultural variables, including gender, family background, and socioeconomic status, have also been identified as important determinants of stress (Leethu L.T. et al., 2021; Saba Javed & Khadeeja Munawar, 2021; Vivek B. Waghachavare et al., 2013).
Overall, the literature indicates that while the internet plays a crucial role in students' academic and personal lives, excessive and uncontrolled usage can lead to internet addiction, which in turn contributes to increased stress levels. This highlights the need to examine the direct relationship between internet addiction and stress among students in a more focused and empirical manner.

H1: There is a significant relationship between internet addiction and the stress level of students.

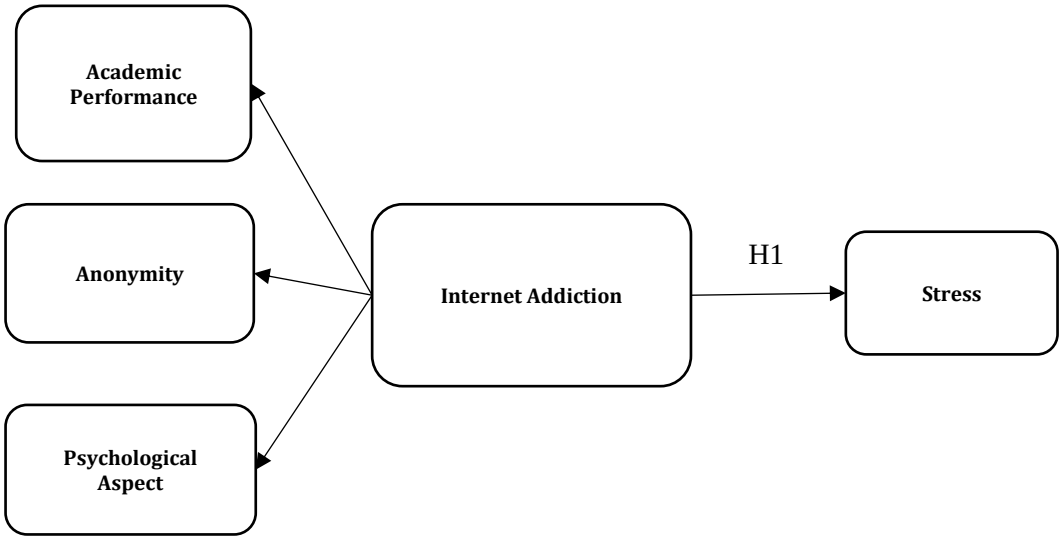

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

5.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

The present study adopted a non-probability sampling approach. We conducted the study among students from various colleges by using a convenience sampling method. It used convenience sampling to gather data; this method was chosen because of practicality and efficiency. The participants encompass a wide range of majors, including marketing, human resource management, business, finance, and technology. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 150 valid responses were obtained, resulting in a response rate of 75%. Research indicates that at least 100 respondents are essential to meet the minimum sample size needed for structural equation modelling and to prevent non-convergence issues (Hair et al., 2017). The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

5.2 QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

A five-point Likert scale, ranging from "1" (strongly disagree) to "5" (strongly agree), served as the basis for the questionnaire. The questionnaire contains two components: section 1 includes a demographic profile, and section 2 includes items related to internet addiction and stress. The construct of internet addiction is measured using the Young Internet Addiction scale developed by Young (1998), and stress is measured through items adapted from DASS 21 scale inventory (Lovibond, 1998).

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

	N	%
Gender		
Male	79	52.7

Female	71	47.3
Course		
UG	55	36.7
PG	57	38
PhD	12	8
Other	26	17.3
Age		
18-22	45	30
23-26	91	60.67
27-30	6	4

5.3 DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULT

The data was analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. PLS-SEM is an effective approach, as it analyses small sample sizes and does not necessarily require that the dataset meet the assumption of normality. PLS-SEM utilise two stage approach. Firstly, the reliability and validity of data are tested using a measurement model, and after that, hypotheses are tested using a structural model. This study includes higher-order constructs of the reflective-reflective dimension of internet addiction.

5.4 MEASUREMENT MODEL

The measurement model was thoroughly evaluated by looking at indicator reliability, multicollinearity, internal consistency, and construct validity according to established PLS-SEM guidelines (Table 2). Indicator reliability was confirmed since all factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50. This shows that the observed variables adequately represent their respective latent constructs (Joseph F. Hair Jr. et al., 2010).

Multicollinearity diagnostics, assessed through the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, showed no collinearity issues. All values were below the conservative threshold of 5 (Hair et al., 2016). Internal consistency reliability was established using both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. All constructs exceeded the recommended level of 0.70, which indicates satisfactory reliability (Wasko & Faraj, 2005).

Additionally, construct validity was evaluated through both convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was supported as the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs exceeded the threshold of 0.50, indicating a sufficient level of shared variance among indicators (Hair et al., 2016). Discriminant validity was established using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Table 3). The square root of AVE for each construct was greater than its inter-construct correlations, confirming that the constructs are distinct. Overall, these results provide strong evidence of the measurement model's adequacy and rigour.

TABLE 2:
FACTOR LOADING AND VIF VALUES OF THE ITEMS

Items	Factor loading	VIF	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Anonymity			0.72	0.813	0.525
A1	0.777	1.434			
A2	0.832	1.34			
A3	0.628	1.392			
A4	0.64	1.341			
Academic Performance			0.711	0.817	0.528
AP1	0.8	1.319			
AP2	0.669	1.386			
AP3	0.728	1.317			
AP4	0.703	1.322			
Psychological Aspect			0.708	0.801	0.508
PA1	0.561	1.288			
PA2	0.708	1.317			
PA3	0.885	1.371			
PA4	0.658	1.417			
Stress			0.879	0.904	0.542
S1	0.745	1.832			
S2	0.726	1.776			
S3	0.744	1.818			
S4	0.772	1.922			
S5	0.642	1.5			
S6	0.761	1.794			
S7	0.743	1.862			
S8	0.748	1.789			

Table 3: Fornell and Lacker Criterion

	A	AP	PA	S
A	0.724			
AP	0.297	0.727		
PA	0.201	0.49	0.713	
S	0.198	0.285	0.375	0.736

5.5 HIGHER-ORDER CONSTRUCT ASSESSMENT

Internet Addiction (IA) is seen as a higher-order construct (HOC) made up of three lower-order constructs (LOCs): Academic Performance (AP), Anonymity (A), and Psychological Aspects (PA). To assess the validity of the higher-order construct, we used the repeated indicator approach in PLS-SEM. We looked at outer weights, outer loadings, and multicollinearity diagnostics. The results in Table 4 show that all outer weights are significant, showing how each lower-order construct contributes to the higher-order construct. Furthermore, the outer loadings of all LOCs are above the recommended threshold of 0.50, confirming that the indicators are reliable (Joseph F. Hair Jr. et al., 2010). We checked multicollinearity using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, which were below the critical threshold of 5. This indicates that there are no collinearity issues (Hair et al., 2016). Together, these findings provide strong evidence that supports modelling Internet Addiction as a higher-order construct.

Table 4:
MEASUREMENT MODEL OF SECOND-ORDER CONSTRUCT

HOC	LOC	T statistics	P values	VIF	Outer Loadings	Outer Weight
IA	A	3.823	0	1.101	0.546	0.302
	AP	12.623	0	1.391	0.806	0.437
	PA	16.82	0	1.322	0.846	0.571

5.6 STRUCTURAL MODEL ASSESSMENT

The structural model was assessed to examine the hypothesised relationships among the constructs in accordance with established PLS-SEM procedures. A bootstrapping method was used to assess the significance of the path relationships, and path coefficients were interpreted in conjunction with their corresponding standard errors, t-values, and p-values. The results reveal that (Table 5) Internet Addiction (IA) exerts a positive and statistically significant influence on Stress ($\beta = 0.398$, SD = 0.066, $t = 6.043$, $p < 0.001$). The observed t-value substantially exceeds the critical threshold of 1.96, thereby confirming the significance of the relationship at the 5% level. This indicates that an increase in Internet Addiction is associated with a corresponding increase in stress levels among respondents. Accordingly, Hypothesis H1 is empirically supported (Figure 2).

TABLE 5:
HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Path Coefficient	SD	t value	p value	Remarks
IA -> SM 0.398	0.066	6.043	0	Accepted

6.0 DISCUSSION

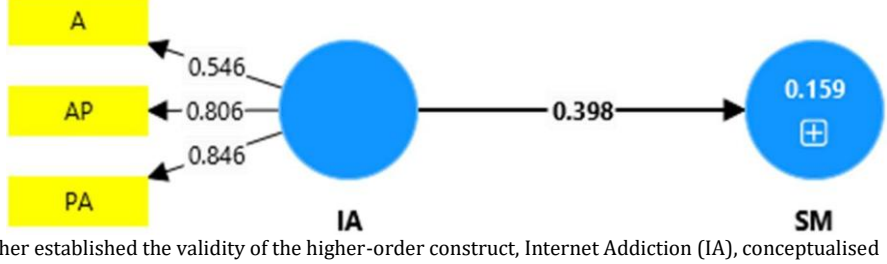

Figure 2: Result of PLS SEM

The study further established the validity of the higher-order construct, Internet Addiction (IA), conceptualised through Academic Performance, Anonymity, and Psychological Aspects. The evaluation of outer weights and outer loadings demonstrated their statistical significance and adequacy, while VIF values remained within acceptable limits, thereby confirming the robustness and appropriateness of the higher-order construct specification.

Subsequently, the structural model assessment provided empirical support for the proposed hypothesis. The

findings indicate that Internet Addiction (IA) has a positive and statistically significant effect on Stress ($\beta = 0.398$, $p < 0.05$), thereby supporting Hypothesis H1. This suggests that increased levels of internet addiction are associated with heightened stress among college students. The result aligns with prior theoretical and empirical evidence, indicating that excessive internet use can lead to psychological strain, reduced academic focus, and emotional imbalance. Overall, the findings contribute to the growing body of literature by highlighting the detrimental impact of internet addiction on students'well-being and emphasising the need for interventions aimed at promoting balanced digital usage.

7.0 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes by reinforcing the argument that technology-related behaviours must be examined through integrative frameworks rather than isolated constructs. It also implicitly supports perspectives from stress and coping theory, suggesting that maladaptive digital behaviours function as stressors rather than coping mechanisms in the long run.
Practically, the findings signal the need for educational institutions and policymakers to move beyond simplistic awareness campaigns and instead adopt multidimensional intervention strategies. Programs aimed at digital well-being should address not only usage time but also the underlying motivations, anonymity-driven behaviours, and psychological dependencies associated with internet use.

8.0 CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the significant impact of Internet Addiction on Stress among college students. The measurement model exhibited strong reliability and validity, indicating that the constructs were accurately measured. The absence of multicollinearity and satisfactory reliability and validity metrics strengthens the robustness of the analysis. The results suggest that interventions targeting Internet Addiction may help alleviate stress levels among college students. Understanding and addressing the factors contributing to Internet Addiction can potentially lead to improved mental well-being among this demographic. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the impact of Internet Addiction on psychological well-being, particularly among college students. Further research could explore additional factors influencing Internet Addiction and its effects on various aspects of students' lives.

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