

Research Article

Impact of Internet Addiction on Mental Health Amongst Undergraduates in Nigeria

Aderinto Nicholas^{1*}, Ilelaboye Ayodeji O¹, Amao Oluwatimilehin O¹

¹ Department of Medicine and Surgery, Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Oyo State, Nigeria.

***Corresponding Author:** Aderinto Nicholas, Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Oyo State, Nigeria, USA, Tel: +1 501-331-5000; Fax: +1 501-331-5000

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Abstract

Internet addiction is one of the fastest-growing addictive behaviors, and it is a significant public health issue that affects millions of individuals throughout the world. More than three billion people use the internet daily worldwide, with young people being the most frequent users. Excessive internet use among university students in Nigeria raises the danger of internet addiction and the dire repercussions that come with it. Internet addiction is a recurring problem among university students. It has a detrimental impact on cognitive enjoyment of the internet, academic performance, and participation in risky behaviors, resulting in anxiety and stress.

Keyword: *Internet Addiction, Mental Health, Nigeria.*

Introduction

Several terms have been proposed to describe excessive computer use, including internet addiction, cyberspace addiction, internet addiction disorder, online addiction, net addiction, internet-addicted disorder, pathological internet use, high internet dependency, problematic internet use, and others (1). The term "addiction" was used previously to describe psychoactive substances that crossed the blood-brain barrier and temporarily altered the brain's chemical balance.

However, in recent times, a growing number of psychologists, social scientists, and health care professionals have argued that psychological dependency, such as that associated with gambling, sex, the

internet, work, exercise, and other activities, should be considered addictions as well because it can result in feelings of guilt, shame, hopelessness, despair, failure, rejection, anxiety, and humiliation.

It has a detrimental influence on identity formation; it alters the structure of the growing brain by compromising grey and white matter integrity in the orbitofrontal cortex of the prefrontal regions of the brain, and it causes changes in the structure of the developing brain (2). Poor cognitive functioning, poor academic achievement, participation in dangerous activities, poor food habits, poor interpersonal relationships, and self-injurious behaviour are all consequences. The prevalence of IA in undergraduate is 3.3% in Nigeria (3).

Because of the benefits connected with internet usage, such as access to timely and required information, international access to news, events, and interpersonal connection through email, Internet adaptation has become a vital tool in these modern times. Despite the internet's spectacular expansion and use, academics have expressed worries about the hazards connected with excessive internet use (4).

Impact On Mental Health

Man's mental health is hinged on a number of factors, and these factors can either pose a risk to or protect his mental health and well-being. These factors that contribute to one's mental health, however, have a complex association. It involves genetics and an interplay of environmental and lifestyle choices. As much as genetics have been shown to be a major factor in mental health, as evidenced by mental illness runs in the family, no single gene has been solely responsible for a mental disorder. This shows the complex correlation associated with mental illness (4). One of the environmental factors that have been associated with a mental disorder is the internet.

The internet has become an integral part of human life with an importance that cannot be overemphasised. It gives access to timely, accurate and relevant information. The use of the internet has increased drastically in recent years. The number of active internet users globally increased from 413 million in 2000 to over 3.4 million in 2016 (5).

In Nigeria, the National communication commission in 2019 shared on its webpage that the number of active internet users in Nigeria is 122 million majorities of whom are young people (6). The percentage of internet users in Nigeria is 33% making it one of the top 20 countries and thereby at risk of immense consequences. Due to the impulsive way young people, especially undergraduates, use the internet for various purposes, they are at risk of getting addicted to it and its many consequences on mental health.

Internet addiction is associated with many mental disorders, including low self-esteem, impulsiveness, poor sleep, mood disorders, depression, and suicide (7). A strong correlation has been established between mental health, quality of life and the level of Internet addiction. The idea that internet addiction significantly impacts ones mental health has been universally embraced since Young first described it. Aside from mental health, internet addiction has a massive effect on physical health, the common ones being pain, stiffness in arms and joints, dry and strained eyes, back-pain, neck-pain leading to headache, sleeping disorder, extreme hyperactivity, excessive talkativeness, decreases in hygiene, and eating disorders, all of which have further impacts ones mental health deleteriously. Poor academic performance is known to be one of the significant contributors to mental illness among undergraduates. Internet addiction on the other hand, internet addiction has been shown to cause poor time management, leading to poor academic performance.

Hence it goes without saying that Internet addiction can cause poor mental health status via poor academic performance.

In the Nigeria context, a study done by Okwaraji et al. 1 showed that 59.2% of undergraduates were addicted to the internet, and 24.5% had some form of depression. It also showed a strong correlation between internet addiction and depression (8). With the aid of sophisticated neuroimaging modalities, it has been shown that internet addiction is associated with some structural and functional alteration in the human brain, especially in the region of the brain associated with emotional decision making and cognitive function. This is evidenced clinically by the increased prevalence of impulsiveness, depression, mood disorders and suicide (9). Lin et al. found that internet-addicted patients have widespread deficits in white matter integrity, which perhaps manifests demyelination. Internet addiction is also associated with significant grey matter atrophy in the right orbitofrontal cortex, bilateral insula and right supplementary motor area. It has also been associated with reduced cortical thickness, larger hippocampus and amygdala volume, reduced spatial dopamine D2 receptor, and significant abnormalities in the dopaminergic neural system (10).

Recommendation

Internet use in school, spending more time on the internet per day, and utilising the internet for social networking were all linked to internet addiction (16). The school administration should improve the accessibility, dependability, and regulation of campus internet services to help students learn and be more productive in the classroom. We recommend that the school administration raise awareness of Internet Addiction and its potential risks among university students; this could be included in the curriculum implementation support program for students' foundation courses. Students should be given ample opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities and socialise with their peers. Also, students, overburdened with studies and long posting schedules, should have access to therapists for emotional and mental assistance. More research is needed to determine the prevalence and implications of mental, psychological, and social disorders related to internet addiction in high-risk populations. In addition, there is a need to expand research on mental health concerns in Nigeria to influence policy decisions and interventions.

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