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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON FACTORS AND EFFECTS OF INTERNET ADDICTION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: *This study investigates the factors contributing to internet addiction among university students, and its effects on their academic, social, and psychological well-being. Seven undergraduate students aged 20 to 26 participated in in-depth interviews. The findings revealed three key factors: academic pressures, social connection, and psychological distress. Academic pressures, driven by overwhelming coursework and academic excellence, led students to turn to the internet as a temporary escape. Social isolation, particularly during late-night study sessions, compelled students to seek virtual companionship through social media platforms. Psychological distress, including stress and anxiety, further fuelled internet addiction. The study highlights the need for tailored interventions and support systems, focusing on stress and time management, promoting offline social interactions, and addressing mental health needs. Future research should consider longitudinal studies, comparative analyses across different academic majors, and evaluating intervention effectiveness.*

Keywords: *phenomenological study, internet addiction, university students, social factor, psychological factor*

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Introduction

The internet has become an essential component of modern society, significantly transforming various aspects of our daily routines, including employment, education, and social interactions. For university students, the internet provides a wide range of chances for academic enrichment, social contact, and psychological development, which are considered essential aspects of personal and academic growth. Nonetheless, it also presents a distinctive risk - the risk of internet addiction. The phenomenon of internet addiction is characterised by individuals experiencing difficulties in regulating their online activities, which subsequently results in disruptions across multiple domains of their lives (Shek, et.al., 2023; Zhang, et.al., 2018). University students, due to their dynamic and frequently demanding schedules, are especially prone to experiencing this phenomenon.

The motivation for this study is from the growing body of evidence that emphasises the negative impact of excessive internet usage on the well-being and academic performance of students (Kumar et al., 2018; Javeed et al., 2020; Zakaria et al., 2023). The phenomenon of internet addiction, which is marked by its correlation with many psychosocial problems such as depression, anxiety, and academic underperformance, requires more investigation (Baturay & Toker, 2019; Seki, et.al., 2019; Ostovar, et.al., 2016; Akhter, 2013). In addition, the increased availability of smartphones and the growing popularity of social media platforms have contributed to increased accessibility and convenience of internet usage, hence intensifying one's vulnerability to addiction (Seki, et.al., 2019). Understanding the factors contributing to internet addiction, its multifaceted effects, and the strategies students employ to cope with it is essential for designing effective interventions and support systems.

With this context in mind, this research has two primary goals. First, this study intends to identify the causes of internet addiction among university students. This entails investigating the academic, social, and psychological factors that contribute to excessive Internet usage. Second, this study aims to illuminate the various academic, social, and psychological consequences of internet addiction on the lives of students. By employing a phenomenological approach, this study aspires to provide a comprehensive comprehension of internet addiction within the university context. This research may inform evidence-based interventions and support systems, fostering a healthier relationship between university students and the digital domain.

Methodology

The study used in-depth interviews as the primary data gathering method to investigate the phenomena of internet addiction among undergraduate university students. The participants in this study were chosen based on the findings of a preliminary investigation involving 320 undergraduate students. To assess their level of internet addiction, students were given Kimberly Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT). The Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT) is a well-known diagnostic tool used to determine the extent of Internet addiction. To make it more accessible to Malay-speaking participants, a Malay version of IAT, translated by Guan and colleagues (2015) was used in this preliminary investigation. According to the results of this preliminary investigation, thirteen (13) students have a high level of internet addiction; however, only seven (7) of them have agreed and gave consent to engage in this phenomenological study.

The primary data collection method utilized in this research was semi-structured in-depth interviews. An interview protocol, based on a comprehensive review of the existing literature

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(Baturay & Toker, 2019; Erol & Cirak, 2019; Rakhamawati, et.al., 2021; Zhang, et.al. 2021) was developed to facilitate the exploration of respondents' experiences with internet addiction. This protocol consisted of a series of open-ended questions designed to probe the factors contributing to internet addiction, and its effects on their daily lives. The recruitment process involved identifying eligible respondents based on their IAT scores, inviting them to participate, and obtaining informed consent. The interviews were conducted individually in a therapeutic and comfortable setting, allowing respondents to express their experiences openly. All interviews were audio-recorded with respondents' consent to ensure accurate data capture.

During the process of collecting data, particular attention was placed on the notion of data saturation. The assessment of data saturation was conducted by means of continuous data analysis, wherein the research team consistently examined interview transcripts to identify repeating themes and gain insights. The process of data collecting was terminated upon the realisation that further interviews no longer provided any substantial new insights, hence demonstrating the attainment of theoretical saturation. The utilization of this methodology ensured the attainment of a comprehensive dataset that could be afterward analysed.

The researchers utilised NVivo, a software designed for qualitative data analysis, to effectively organise and analyse the data collected from the interviews. The initial step involved the importation of interview transcripts into NVivo software to facilitate systematic organisation. The process of coding was conducted via NVivo software. Initially, an open coding approach was employed to find and extract essential concepts. Subsequently, these concepts were organised into distinct categories, hence facilitating the identification of overarching themes. The functionalities of NVivo were employed to visually represent the relationships between codes and enhance collaborative discussions within the team. Furthermore, the analysis incorporated participant feedback by means of member checking. The constant comparative method was utilised in NVivo software to iteratively improve and validate themes over the entire dataset. The utilisation of this methodology facilitated the construction of a coherent and exhaustive account of the internet addiction experiences among university students, encompassing both its underlying factors and subsequent effects. The utilisation of NVivo was crucial in facilitating a methodical and rigorous examination of the qualitative data, as highlighted by Feng and Behar-Horenstein (2019).

Results

Research Respondents' Demography

The demographic characteristics of the respondents in this phenomenological study provided valuable insights into the composition of the sample. The study included a total of seven (7) undergraduate university students, aged between 20 and 26, representing diverse academic programs such as Business Administration, Finance, Law, Human Resources, Counseling, and Communication. Their reported daily internet usage ranged from 8 to 13 hours, primarily for the purposes of; (i) conducting academic activities (such as studying and conducting research), (ii) engaging in social networking such as streaming TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, and (iii) engaging in online gaming. These characteristics provided a well-rounded profile of the respondents and offered a basis for understanding their experiences with internet addiction within the university context. Table 1 presents a summary of the participant demographics and internet usage while Table 2 represents the demographics characteristics and internet usage for each respondent of this study.

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Table 1: Summary of Respondents' Demographics and Internet Usage

Characteristics	Description
Age	20 to 26 years old
Academic program	Business Administration, Finance, Law, Human Resources, Counseling, Communication
Daily Internet Usage	8 to 13 hours
Internet Usage Purpose	Academic, Online Gaming, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram
Internet Usage Devices	Smartphone, Laptop, Computer Desktop, Tablet

Table 2: Demographics Characteristics and Internet Usage for Each Respondent

Respondent	Age	Gender	Academic Program	Internet Usage (Hours/day)	Internet Usage Purpose	Internet Usage Devices
R1	24	Female	Business Administration	10	Study, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram,	Smartphone Laptop
R2	22	Male	Finance	12	Study, Online Gaming, YouTube, TikTok	Smartphone Desktop
R3	20	Female	Counseling	9	Study, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube	Smartphone, Laptop
R4	23	Male	Business Administration	13	Study, Facebook, TikTok, Online Gaming	Laptop, Smartphone
R5	21	Female	Communication	11	Study, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok	Smartphone, Tablet
R6	22	Male	Law	8	Study, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube	Smartphone, Laptop
R7	26	Male	Human Resources	12	Study, Online Gaming, TikTok, YouTube	Tablet Smartphone Laptop

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The demographic profile of the participants in this study provides valuable insights into the heterogeneous makeup of the sample and serves as a basis for comprehending their encounters with internet addiction in the university setting. The participants, comprising a total of seven individuals, exhibited a range of ages between 20 and 26 years, indicating a cohort of undergraduate students characterised by youth and dynamism. The age range in question aligns with the conventional demographic profile of individuals enrolled in universities, thereby emphasizing the relevance of their experiences inside the context of higher education.

A notable aspect of the respondents' profiles was the diversity of academic majors represented, including Business Administration, Finance, Law, Human Resources, Counseling, and Communication. This diversity suggests that internet addiction is not confined to a specific field of study, emphasizing its universality across various academic disciplines. Furthermore, the reported daily internet usage hours, ranging from 8 to 13 hours, underscore the substantial time that university students dedicate to online activities. Their primary internet use purposes, encompassing academic-related tasks, social media engagement, online gaming, and content consumption, mirror the multifaceted nature of internet usage among this demographic. Additionally, the range of internet use devices, including laptops, smartphones, tablets, and desktop computers, highlights the versatility in accessing online resources.

Factors of Internet Addiction

Based on thematic analysis, the study revealed that internet addiction among university students is influenced by an intricate interplay of academic, social, and psychological factors as shown on Table 3.

Table 3: Factors Contributing to Internet Addiction among University Students

Factors	Theme Categories	Theme Sub-Categories
Academic Factor	Academic Pressure	• Overwhelmed by coursework. • Seeking online study resources
Social Factor	Social Connection	• Seeking social connection • Loneliness and social isolation
Psychological Factor	Daily Stress	• Escaping from daily stressors • Coping Mechanism

Academic pressure emerged as a compelling academic factor driving internet addiction among the respondents. The intense demands of university coursework, ranging from assignments to exams, often left students feeling overwhelmed. In their pursuit of academic excellence, they turned to the internet as both a source of distraction and a refuge. This sub-category highlights the complex relationship between academic stressors and internet addiction as expressed by respondents:

> "When deadlines pile up and exams are around the corner, I often find myself mindlessly scrolling through social media or watching random videos online. It's like a way to handle stress temporarily." (R5)

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> "I know I should be studying, but sometimes I feel so overwhelmed by the sheer volume of coursework. I end up procrastinating online because it offers a sense of relief, even if it's short-lived." (R6)

> "The pressure to perform well academically is immense. I often turn to online study materials, and before I know it, I'm spending hours on the internet, far beyond what I planned."(R1)

Under the social factor theme, social connection played a significant role in driving internet addiction among the respondents. Feelings of loneliness and social isolation, especially during late-night study sessions, drove them to seek virtual companionship through social media platforms. This sub-category highlights the internet's role as a means of connecting with peers, albeit in a digital realm as described by the respondents:

> "Late at night, when everyone else is asleep, I sometimes feel incredibly lonely. So, I start chatting with friends on WhatsApp or scrolling through Instagram to feel connected." (R3)

> "Studying can be isolated, and there are moments when I just want to talk to someone. Social media gives me that feeling of being with friends even when I'm alone in my room." (R2)

> "I realized that I was using social media as a way to combat loneliness. It became a habit to check notifications constantly, just to feel like I'm part of something." (R5)

The psychological factor that emerged as a compelling factor behind internet addiction in this study is the factor of stress and anxiety. Students often turn to the internet to escape from the daily stresses of academic life and personal challenges. Online games offered an immersive and distracting experience that allowed them to momentarily forget their worries as well as their temporary coping mechanism. These experiences were reported by the following respondents:

> "I often find myself turning to the internet when I'm stressed or anxious. It's like a way to escape from my problems for a while." (R7)

> "After a tough day of classes and deadlines, I just want to escape. Online games provide that escape. They transport me to a different world where I don't have to think about my problems." (R2)

> "The stress of my personal life sometimes becomes too much. I find solace in watching funny videos or memes online. It's a way to forget about my troubles, even if it's temporary." (R3)

The above finding highlights the intricate interplay between academic, social, and psychological factors contributing to internet addiction among university students. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon, where students navigate a complex digital landscape as they seek to cope with the challenges of university life.

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Effects of Internet Addiction

The result of this study found three main effects of Internet Addiction among university students, which include the academic, social, and psychological effects as presented on Table 4.

Table 4: The Effects of Internet Addiction among University Students

Affects	Theme Categories	Theme Sub-Categories
Academic Effects	Academic Performance	• Reduce academic performance. • Procrastination
Social Effects	Interpersonal Relationship	• Decline in face-to-face interaction. • Strained relationships
Psychological Effects	Stress and Anxiety	• Increase stress and anxiety level. • Disturb sleeping pattern.

Under the theme of academic effects, the effects of internet addiction on students' educational pursuits become apparent. Participants noted a decline in academic performance because of excessive internet use. Procrastination emerged as a significant issue, with students diverting their attention to online activities instead of focusing on their studies. These findings are supported by the following verbatim.

> "I used to be a straight-A student, but lately, my grades have been slipping. I spend so much time online that I can't concentrate on my assignments." (R6)

> "It's a vicious cycle. I procrastinate by watching videos or scrolling through social media, and then I'm left with no time to study effectively. It's affecting my grades." (R1)

> "I've missed assignment deadlines because I was engrossed in online games. It's a constant battle between studying and the internet." (R2)

Internet addiction has been found to be socially affecting university students' lives. Most of the respondents reported on how their internet addiction affects their interpersonal relationships. Many acknowledged neglecting face-to-face interactions with friends and family due to their online activities. Strained relationships emerged as a significant concern, with respondents recognizing the toll internet addiction had taken on their connections with loved ones.

> "I've cancelled plans with friends because I'd rather be online. It's like I'm choosing the internet over real-life interactions, and it's not healthy." (R5)

> "My family has expressed concern because I'm always on my phone or laptop. It's caused arguments, and I can sense the strain in our relationships." (R3)

> "I used to have a close-knit group of friends, but I've become distant because I'm so immersed in online gaming. I can feel them drifting away." (R4)

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Within the theme of psychological effect, the emotional toll of internet addiction became evident. Participants reported heightened anxiety and stress levels resulting from their excessive online activities. Furthermore, disrupted sleep patterns were a common consequence, with late-night internet use leading to sleep deprivation and further exacerbating psychological stress.

> "I get anxious when I can't check my social media or respond to messages immediately. It's like a constant need to be online, and it's affecting my mental health."

> "I stay up late watching videos or chatting online, and then I struggle to wake up for early classes. The lack of sleep adds to my stress."

> "I feel like I'm always on edge because I'm so engrossed in the internet. It's affecting my mood, and I've noticed an increase in my stress levels."

The above verbatims given by the respondents have shown how excessive internet usage affects the academic, social, and psychological well-being of university students. These findings highlight the urgent need for awareness and support mechanisms to address the challenges arising from internet addiction within this demographic. The verbatim excerpts provided illustrate the personal experiences and sentiments expressed by participants, emphasizing the real-life impact of this digital dependency.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this phenomenological investigation provide insight into the complex phenomenon of internet addiction among university students, explaining a wide range of reasons and a variety of consequences on their academic, social, and psychological wellbeing. The aforementioned ideas are useful contributions to the current body of study and include significant implications for interventions and support systems. One of the primary themes that surfaced from this study is the significance of academic stress in creating internet addiction among university students. This discovery is consistent with prior studies that have identified that young individuals are navigating a rigorous academic setting, marked by tasks, assessments, and the pursuit of high standards. In light of these abovementioned pressures and the phenomenon of academic burnout, it is common for students to resort to utilising the internet as a temporary source of relief and diversion (Tomaszek & Muchacka-Cymerman, 2019). Although utilising this particular coping method may offer temporary relief, it can unintentionally result in a pattern of procrastination and diminished academic achievement. The results of this study are consistent with prior research conducted by Baturay and Toker (2019), highlighting the importance for higher education institutions to acknowledge and tackle sources of academic stress, as well as offer appropriate stress management interventions.

Additionally, the study uncovered the importance of social connection in internet addiction. Loneliness and social isolation, particularly during late-night study sessions, drive students to seek virtual companionship through social media platforms. Although this study has identified a relationship between loneliness, social isolation, and internet addiction, contrasting findings have been reported in earlier research. Baturay and Toker (2019) showed that online addiction may actually be a trigger for feelings of loneliness and social isolation. In this digital age, the internet has become a primary avenue for social interaction, and students often turn to it to combat feelings of isolation and loneliness (Simcharoen, et.al., 2018). However, this reliance on digital connections can come at the expense of face-to-face interactions, potentially straining

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relationships with friends and family. These findings underscore the significance of addressing social well-being and promoting a healthy balance between online and offline social interactions.

Psychological factors, such as daily stress and anxiety, were also identified as key drivers of internet addiction. The internet provides an escape from the pressures of daily life, offering a temporary reprieve from stress and anxiety. However, this escape can become a double-edged sword, as excessive internet use can further exacerbate psychological distress. This finding supports previous findings that stress and other psychological pressure can be both a predictor and consequence of internet addiction (Baturay & Toker, 2019; Simcharoen, et,al. 2018). Understanding the link between internet addiction and stress is crucial for developing targeted interventions that address the underlying emotional needs of students.

The effects of internet addiction on university students are profound and far-reaching. Academically, internet addiction can lead to reduced academic performance and procrastination. Participants in this study reported a decline in their grades and difficulties concentrating on their studies due to excessive internet use. These findings align with existing research who found that internet addiction significantly affects medical students' academic performance with 28.2% of them having severe addiction and poorly score in examination (Javaeed, et.al, 2019). This result of this study emphasizes the importance of promoting time management and study skills among students to mitigate the negative impact of internet addiction on their academic pursuits.

Socially, internet addiction can strain interpersonal relationships, as students may prioritize online interactions over face-to-face connections. The study revealed instances where respondents cancelled plans with friends, experienced arguments with family members, and felt the erosion of close friendships due to their internet addiction. These interpersonal challenges highlight the need for interventions that promote healthy offline social interactions and communication skills. Psychologically, internet addiction contributes to increased stress and anxiety levels among students. The constant need to be online, the fear of missing out, and disrupted sleep patterns can take a toll on their mental health. The emotional distress caused by internet addiction underscores the importance of mental health support services and stress management resources within university settings.

In conclusion, this phenomenological research offers a full comprehension of internet addiction among university students, explaining the variables that contribute to its formation and the wide-ranging effects it has on their lives. Internet addiction in this particular group is influenced by a variety of factors, including academic expectations, the desire for social connection, and psychological stressors. The consequences include decreased academic performance, strained interpersonal connections, and heightened levels of anxiety and stress. The findings derived from this research possess significant consequences for higher education and other educational institutions. It is essential to tailor interventions and support systems in order to effectively address the specific needs of university students. These efforts should mainly focus on stress management, time management, and the promotion of healthy offline relationships. Furthermore, it is important that mental health treatments are easily accessible in order to effectively manage the psychological effects associated with internet addiction. In order to facilitate the advancement of future research, it is imperative to include longitudinal studies that can effectively monitor the development of internet addiction over an extended duration. Furthermore, the implementation of comparison analyses across other academic areas might

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facilitate the identification of potential variations. Moreover, it is crucial to thoroughly evaluate the effectiveness of intervention measures. These activities are of utmost importance in enhancing our understanding of the contemporary situation and creating efficient strategies to address it within the context of the university setting.

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