

Unwinding the Emotional Web: Understanding the Interplay of Alexithymia and Internet Addiction

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Abstract

In an attempt to understand the intricate emotional web that connects internet addiction with alexithymia, this review paper explores their complex relationship. Alexithymia is a condition that is marked by difficulties in identifying and expressing emotions. Maintaining optimum mental health has become crucial in today's time and it starts with basic understanding & organization of one's own emotions. This paper is hence, aimed at unravelling and investigating the complex relation between alexithymia and internet addiction through information gathered from plethora of sources like Google scholar, PubMed Central, Mendeley and Research gate. This review provides a detailed picture of the reciprocal relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction or problematic internet use by integrating findings from about fifteen research papers. The findings suggest that like a number of other addictive disorders, internet addiction has also become one of the correlates of alexithymia which might lead to mental health issues like anxiety, depression. The review provides insightful information about the complex interactions between internet addiction and alexithymia, opening up new avenues for future study and influencing comprehensive strategies for digital well-being. The results highlight the necessity of focused treatments that target emotional deficiencies, like cognitive-behavioural techniques and mindfulness-based therapies, in order to lessen internet addiction among susceptible groups.

Keywords: Alexithymia; Internet Addiction; Problematic Internet Use; Mental Health

Introduction

The American psychiatrist P. Sifneos brought the notion of "alexithymia" to the scientific community in 1973. Three Greek words were used to construct the term: thymos, which means emotion, lexis, which means word, and negating prefix -a, which means lack [1]. Alexithymia is considered as multifaceted personalities construct [2]. Alexithymia is a process involving features of somatic and proprioceptive

processes, elements of narrative and interpretation, and metacognitive elements (monitoring, characterization) [1].

The following four elements are among this construct's key characteristics

1. A difficulty or challenge in recognising and identifying feelings
2. A difficulty or challenge in differentiating between emotion and physically stimulating bodily sensations

3. Restricted fantasy, which is a sign of limited imagination
4. External oriented thinking style [3] today, majorly only three dimensions are talked about namely, difficulty in identifying emotions/feelings, difficulty in expressing the emotions and external oriented thinking style [4].

Sifneos first used the term “alexithymic” to characterise a group of individuals with psychosomatic disorders who shared a notable incapacity to articulate their emotions [5]. An individual with alexithymia has trouble verbalising their sentiments to others, comprehending their own emotions, and differentiating them from physical cues of arousal [6]. High alexithymia individuals have difficulties understanding their emotional states, which is reflected in their externally oriented thinking that concentrates on specifics and details associated with an event, omitting insight into the person's internal states. This prevents mentalization and leads to a life devoid of imagination. Instead of recalling specific occurrences that are rich in details, emotions, etc., they frequently write descriptions that are overly generic, which greatly detracts from their narration. Furthermore, there are no explicit allusions in their descriptions to the self as the object of certain emotional experiences [7]. A disruption between conscious elements of experience and perception at the mental and physical levels is the cause of alexithymia. This makes it difficult to integrate ideas, emotions, and experiences with awareness and memory, which has a detrimental impact on reflective functioning, emotion control, and awareness [8].

Alexithymia was originally associated with psychosomatic diseases, although it was later found in a variety of other conditions like, depression [9]; Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [10]; eating disorders [11,12]; Autism spectrum disorder [13]; Schizophrenia [14]; substance use and alcohol use disorders [15]. Studies have shown that people with alexithymia have less control over how they express and manage their emotions, to the point where it negatively impacts both their mental and physical health [16]. According to Lumley et al. (1996), hyperarousal is a reaction to an inability to identify, express, or appropriately respond to emotions, which may be the source of this. An externalising inclination may also lead to a reduced capacity for imaginative thought and an infatuation with external details. In fact, the ability to mentally generate emotions is lower in persons who suffer from alexithymia [8].

Alexithymia and its Impact on Mental Health

There are many different ways in which alexithymia can negatively affect mental health. Research has indicated that a number of psychiatric and psychosomatic conditions, such as substance misuse, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression, frequently coexist with alexithymia [17].

In a study done by Volkova E (2023), the correlation between mental disorders, physical illnesses, and suicidal thoughts in patients was examined. They discovered that patients with alexithymia had a higher incidence of psychosomatic disorders, with multiple psychosis typically occurring in the same person. It was concluded that alexithymia is correlated with psychosomatic disorders. According to studies, those with high alexithymia are more susceptible to psychosomatic illnesses such headaches and central sensitization, particularly in teenagers [18]. Furthermore, it has been established that alexithymia increases the likelihood of somatizations and persistent physical problems, underscoring its importance for the mind-body connection and overall health consequences [19-21]. Additional data links the presence of alexithymia to a rise in suicidal thoughts [22,23].

Findings show that, across a range of demographic categories, alexithymia is highly correlated with feelings of melancholy and anxiety. According to studies, individuals with alexithymia are more likely to suffer from mental illnesses such anxiety, depression, and mixed anxiety-depressive disorders [24].

Additionally, a number of studies have connected alexithymia to higher than average stress, anxiety, depression, and sleeplessness levels [23,25-29].

Individuals with eating disorders, such as binge eating disorder, bulimia nervosa, and anorexia nervosa, have a significantly higher incidence of alexithymia. Research indicates that individuals with eating disorders may use their symptoms as a coping strategy for strong feelings that they find upsetting or frightening. Studies show that individuals with eating disorders who also have alexithymia typically have more severe anxiety, depression, and less secure attachment than those without the condition [12,30-33]. Alexithymia may make treatment for eating disorders more challenging because of its detrimental effects on the capacity to regulate happy feelings [31].

There is clear evidence linking alexithymia to interpersonal problems. According to studies, those who have alexithymic features usually struggle in social situations [34-37]. Additionally, alexithymia has been linked to deficits in the processing and regulation of emotions, which are often associated with diseases, related to trauma, such as dissociation and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and can exacerbate interpersonal problems [38-40]. Additionally, people who have alexithymia may exhibit impaired sensitivity to emotional cues, such as the ability to recognise furious facial expressions. This could hinder their ability to judge others and communicate socially, both of which can result in interpersonal problems [41,42].

Internet Addiction

The use of the internet has skyrocketed in developing countries like India in recent years. The general public has become an avid user of the internet, extending its reach beyond computer scientists, engineers, and technicians. Although the internet is the most essential and practical necessity for modern man, many are excessively dependent on it [43].

Since the Internet has become a necessary tool for nearly every area of life in the modern world, it is not surprising that for some people, using it is becoming more and more linked to behaviours that could be considered “harmful use” or even Internet addiction [44].

In 1995, Dr. Ivan Goldberg coined the phrase “internet addiction” to describe pathologically excessive online usage [45]. A subclass of behaviour addiction, according to Griffith, is any behaviour that satisfies the six “core components” of addiction: conflict, withdrawal, salience, tolerance, withdrawal, and relapse. (Griffiths M (2000) Young created the Internet Addiction Test and modified the DSM IV criteria to relate to internet use. She most closely associated excessive internet use with pathological gambling, a disease of impulse control [45]. She lists cyber-sexual addiction, cyber-relationship addiction, net compulsions, information overload, and computer addiction as some of the several forms of internet addiction [46].

Internet addiction (IA) is typified by overindulging in Internet use and exhibiting withdrawal symptoms when cut off from the network, such as anxiety, depression, or restlessness [46,47]. Due to excessive Internet use and the ensuing cognitive and psychological impairment(s), the symptomatology is frequently accompanied by poor sleep hygiene, relational maladjustment, and a progressive worsening of personal, family, social, and occupational/school functioning [46,47].

Internet Addiction and Mental Health

Depression, anxiety, self-esteem, stress, academic issues, interpersonal relationships

A multitude of mental health conditions, such as low self-esteem, impulsivity, insomnia, mood disorders, depression, and suicide, are linked to internet addiction [48]. Numerous psychological and mental illnesses, including anxiety, sadness, stress, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, have been linked to regular internet use, according to research [43].

Addiction to the internet has been discovered to have strong correlations with anxiety and depression in teenagers and

young adults. Research has indicated that depression is more common in those who are addicted to the internet [49,50] with anxiety playing a somewhat moderating role in this association [51]. Additionally, a higher prevalence of anxiety symptoms has been connected to internet addiction, particularly in severe cases [52-54]. There is evidence that there is a positive association between internet addiction and mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and stress, as determined by correlation studies [55,56].

Internet addiction is also found to have a positive relationship with poor sleep quality. It is reported that internet addiction has an inverse relationship with sleep quality and it affects the quality of sleep of an individual negatively [57-59].

Internet addiction does not only share a negative relationship with anxiety, depression, stress, sleep quality but it is also reported to share a negative relationship with self-esteem of an individual. Numerous studies underline the complex connection between internet addiction and self-esteem. Internet addiction is found to be inversely associated with self-esteem [60,61]. Research conducted on Greek junior high school students revealed a negative correlation between internet addiction and self-esteem [62], underscoring the significance of fostering safe internet usage and improving social-emotional competencies. According to research, there is a substantial negative correlation between internet addiction and self-esteem in adult adults. Higher levels of self-esteem are associated with lower levels of addiction [63]. Furthermore, a study conducted on Chinese teenagers shown that self-esteem acted as a mediator in the interaction between the family environment and internet addiction, highlighting the significance of self-esteem in this dynamic [64].

In addition to its detrimental effects on mental health, internet addiction has a significant negative impact on physical health. Common physical health effects include pain, stiffness in the arms and joints, dry and strained eyes, back pain, neck pain that causes headaches, sleeping disorders, extreme hyperactivity, excessive talking, poor hygiene, and eating disorders [65].

Discussion

Alexithymia, has been repeatedly connected to many types of addiction, such as internet addiction [66], addiction to social media [67], addiction to mobile phones [68], and addiction to internet novel applications [69]. According to studies, alexithymia can influence traits like narcissism, anxiety, boredom proneness, and emotion control, which might increase the likelihood of engaging in addictive behaviours. These characteristics seem to modulate the link between alexithymia and internet addiction, emphasising the intricate

interaction between emotional processing deficiencies and addictive inclinations.

One of the most important conclusions from the literature is that those with high levels of alexithymia are more likely to become Internet addicts. This vulnerability stems mostly from the inability to control emotions, which is a trait of alexithymia. People who struggle to identify and express their emotions may use the Internet as a coping mechanism. There, they may find solace or distraction in activities they can't get away from. Excessive Internet use as a result of this poor coping mechanism might exacerbate emotional avoidance and impede the development of healthier coping mechanisms [69,70].

Individuals with alexithymia have trouble expressing their emotions and understanding the reasons behind other people's mood swings. According to Gross (2002) and Besharat & Shahidi (2011), this may have a negative impact on interpersonal interactions by causing insecurity and social difficulties. Because the internet is so accessible and practical for information transmission, people can rely on it. As a result, in-person social communication has been replaced by a virtual social mode [71]. Regular use of these virtual social media platforms and online resources may lead to more serious problems with internet use habits and social isolation in real life [46].

Impact on Mental Health

Several studies have clarified the intricate connection between alexithymia and internet addiction, as well as the impact both disorders have on individuals' mental health. Given the inverse association between internet addiction and mental health, it stands to reason that people who exhibit higher levels of alexithymia are also more likely to experience mental health issues. The following are a few of the outcomes that earlier research emphasised: Psychological Well-being: Alexithymia is associated with a higher risk of internet addiction and has a detrimental effect on mental health. When faced with emotional challenges, higher alexithymic people usually resort to excessive internet use as a coping mechanism [25,28,29].

Effect on Quality of Life: Studies reveal that internet addiction, which is impacted by alexithymia, is linked to a decline in overall quality of life. Overuse of the internet as a vent for emotions can lead to a reduction in a person's overall level of happiness and life satisfaction [72].

Interpersonal Challenges: When internet addiction and alexithymia coexist, interpersonal interactions may become problematic. It could be challenging for people to put their emotions into words, which could have an impact on how

they interact with people offline [25,28,29].

Effect on Mental Health: Research suggests that individuals who have difficulty expressing their emotions may be more susceptible to mental health issues caused by excessive internet use [73-84].

Conclusion

For mental health professionals, one major area of concern in the digital age is the convergence of internet addiction and alexithymia. This review has focused on the complex link between these two phenomena, namely how alexithymia may exacerbate internet addiction and vice versa. Co-occurring internet addiction and alexithymia can significantly impair daily functioning, including scholastic success, interpersonal relationships, and productivity at work. Furthermore, it can exacerbate co-occurring illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and other behavioural addictions, adding to the complexity of treatment. Considering everything, developing comprehensive treatment programmes necessitates understanding how alexithymia and internet addiction are mutually influenced.

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