

Internet Addiction and Marital Satisfaction among Urban Couples

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Abstract

Introduction: The present study focused on measuring the relationship between internet addiction and marital satisfaction among couples residing in Urban Bangalore. Internet addiction has attracted increasing attention in the popular media and among researchers.

Method: A mixed method study was conducted among 104 couples residing in Urban Bangalore identified through convenient and purposive sampling. In phase 1, The Young's Internet Addiction Test and ENRICH Marital satisfaction scale were administered on couples to measure marital satisfaction and internet addiction. In phase 2, interviews were conducted based on open ended questions developed by the researchers to identify the role of internet in relationship values, communication and happiness.

Results: Pearson's product moment Correlation was used for Phase 1 and thematic and content analysis for Phase 2. The findings from Phase 1 revealed a weak correlation between marital satisfaction and Internet addiction among couples, weak negative correlation between marital satisfaction and Internet addiction in the case of wives and weak correlation between marital satisfaction and Internet addiction in husbands. The thematic analysis showed positive and negative effects of the Internet on relationship values, communication and happiness among couples.

Conclusion: The present study helps to understand whether a relationship exists between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction and reflects on how Internet has affected relationship values, communication and happiness among urban married couples.

Keywords: Internet Addiction, Marital Satisfaction, Urban Couples, Correlation

Introduction

The technology of the Internet is growing rapidly with people using it for work, education as well as for entertainment. More than three billion people worldwide make use of the Internet on a daily basis with youngsters being the most common users [1].

Internet addiction is characterized by excessive or poorly controlled obsessions, needs or behaviors regarding computer use and internet access that lead to deficiency or distress [2]. Efforts to understand this phenomenon in totality and offer solutions have continued since the 21st century. It was Kimberly Young who first proposed that problematic Internet use meets the criteria for an addiction and hence it should be included in the next iteration of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), 4th edition [3]. The behavior is characterized by many hours spent in non-work technology related computer/internet/video game activities. Research shows that Internet addiction disorder can lead to neurological disturbances, social complications and psychological disturbances. Other seen accompanying symptoms are changes in mood, preoccupation with the Internet and digital media, the inability to control the amount of time spent interfacing with digital technology, the need for more time or a new game to achieve a desired mood, withdrawal symptoms when not engaged, and a continuation of the behavior despite family conflict, a diminishing social life and adverse work or academic consequences.

Marital satisfaction is a mental state that reflects the perceived benefits and costs of marriage to a particular person. The satisfaction that partners experience in their relationships is one of the critical aspects of marital life and dissatisfaction between the couples driven by serious and repeated disagreements, which, if not resolved, seriously threatens marital stability [4]. Several variables have been identified to contribute to marital satisfaction [5]. These include gender, age, duration of marriage, religiosity, and the number of children [6-10].

From its inception in 1983, the Internet established a negative effect on some couples' relationships, sometimes resulting in their separation or divorce [11]. For couples who embrace a traditional monogamous marriage, the negative effect of Internet addiction on a couple's relationship is a devastating problem. When discovery or disclosure of Internet addiction occurs in a marital relationship, the injured party (i.e., the spouse who is not involved in Internet addiction) might be affected by feelings of rage, abandonment, betrayal, depression, anger, humiliation and loneliness [12]. Not every couple is well informed about the addictive nature of the Internet, and the possibility of recovery when spouses' use the Internet becomes excessive may be problematic for couples. Internet addiction is a growing, though unexplored problem among married couples today.

A number of studies have been conducted by researchers to understand how Internet addiction affects the various facets of life. In a study conducted by Aziz et al., investigations were done in order to understand the relationship between marital intimacy, communication and internet addiction among Malaysian men and women between the ages of 21 and 56. Findings revealed that there is a tendency for male users to be addicted to the Internet than female users when they spent long hours online [13]. While examining the social consequences of internet use, Nie and Erbring found that heavy Internet users spent less time with friends and family, shopping in stores and watching television [14]. The study of Mesch and Talmud also supported the fact that the time spent online is positively related to family conflict particularly when the Internet is used for social purposes; for instance, chatting with friends online and playing games online [15]. When it comes to examining the relationship between marital satisfaction and emotional divorce and Internet addiction and use of Facebook among married university students, a significant negative correlation was found between Internet addiction or the use of Facebook and marital satisfaction whereas a significant positive correlation was found between Internet addiction or the use of Facebook and emotional divorce [16]. Internet addiction was also found to affect social participation, integration as well as individual's personal well-being in couples. According to Kraut et al. problematic Internet use was found to cart off the attention, time and interest that users would invest in their partner, thus decreasing not only the Internet user's relationship quality but also his or her partner's quality of relationship as well [17]. This may happen because the partner feels neglected and not cared for when users choose to be online rather than spending

the time with him or her. All these symptoms may lead to family relationship conflict, a diminishing social life, and adverse work or academic consequences [18].

Existing literature has analyzed the relationship between marital satisfaction and variables related to positive psychology and socio demography in the Indian population. These studies have underplayed the role of gender when it comes to problematic Internet usage among married couples. This study adds on to the existing literature to identify the relationship between problematic internet usage and marital satisfaction among Urban Indian couples and offers a comparison between problematic Internet usage and marital satisfaction among husbands and wives. The study takes a step ahead by exploring the role of internet in relationships' values, communication and happiness among urban Indian couples.

Thus, the purpose of the present study was to understand the relationship between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction among urban married couples. The study also intended to investigate the perception of Internet addiction among couples, and its impact on relationships' values, communication and happiness. The main objectives of this study were to study the relationship between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction among urban couples and to identify the impact of Internet on relationships' values, communication and happiness among urban couples.

Method

The present study was conducted on married couples between the age range of 30-40 years residing in urban Bangalore. The couples who were minimum three years into marriage and who had minimum qualification of graduation were considered for the study. Couples with physical and psychological disabilities, single and divorced men/women were excluded from the study. Purposive and convenient sampling technique was used to select the samples. Informed consent was taken from the participants to be a part of the study. The two variables of the study were Internet addiction and marital satisfaction.

Mixed method research design was used for the study. The mixed method included quantitative (experiments, surveys) and qualitative (ex- focused group discussions, interviews) research. This method was preferred as this integration provides a better knowledge of the research problem and objectives. It was hypothesized that there is no relationship between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction among married couples, there is no relationship between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction among wives and there is also no relationship between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction among husbands.

The tool used to assess Internet addiction was The Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT) which was developed by Kimberly Young in 1998. He created the tool to evaluate the existence and intensity of Internet addiction in a North American sample. The scale consists of 20 items which evaluate attributes and manners related

to obsessive use of the Internet that comprises escapism, compulsivity and dependency. Each item is scored on a Likert scale with values ranging from 1 to 5, options namely 'rarely', 'occasionally', 'frequently', 'often' and 'always'. The test-retest reliability of the scale is 0.82. The content and convergent validity and internal consistency is 0.88. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for internal reliability of the scale was found to be 0.91[19]. The tool used to assess marital satisfaction was ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS) which was developed by Fowers, B. J., and Olson, D. H in the year 1993. The EMS scale is a 15-item scale comprising the Idealistic Distortion (5 items) and Marital Satisfaction scales (10 items). The scale provides both dyadic and individual satisfaction scores. The scale has a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.92 and a test-retest reliability score of 0.92.

The study was executed in two phases. In phase 1, a socio demographic sheet was given to collect the details of samples. The Internet Addiction and EMS scales were administered on 104 samples chosen using convenient sampling, response was scored and analyzed. Since the population size was unknown, the sample size decided by the researchers was 200. Incomplete data was rejected and the final sample size was 104. In Phase II, 10 couples were randomly selected from phase I of the study and they were interviewed with open ended questions developed by the researchers. Responses given by the samples were noted verbatim. Responses given by husbands and wives were scored separately. The data was analyzed according to the norms given for the respective scales. Pearson's product moment correlation was computed between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction using SPSS version 16.0. Thematic and content analysis was done for the phase-2 interview. Responses given by samples were categorized into themes for better understanding and analysis.

Results

As presented in Table 1, it can be seen that the mean of the sample (N=104) for marital satisfaction is 39.62 and the SD is 11.48. The mean score for Internet addiction is 29.45 and the SD is 8.92. Hence, the mean value on marital satisfaction scale shows that couples have exhibited an average satisfaction level.

Table 1a shows that the obtained correlation coefficient r is 0.02 indicating a weak relationship between marital satisfaction and Internet addiction. The obtained p value is 0.79 which shows that the relationship between the two variables is not statistically significant. Results do not confirm the first hypothesis that "there is no relationship between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction among married couples".

Table 2 shows that the mean of the sample (N=52) for marital satisfaction is 39.62 and SD is 11.54. The mean score for Internet addiction is 28.25, and SD is 7.33. The mean value on the marital satisfaction scale shows that wives have exhibited an average satisfaction level. On the Internet addiction scale,

the mean values have been interpreted as an average online user. Wives have expressed average in both marital satisfaction and Internet addiction.

Table 1. Total, Mean and SD of the Sample on Marital Satisfaction and Internet Addiction Scale

| | N | Mean | SD |
|----------------------|-----|-------|-------|
| Marital Satisfaction | 104 | 39.62 | 11.48 |
| Internet Addiction | 104 | 29.45 | 8.92 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 104 | | |

Table 1a. Correlation Coefficient of Marital Satisfaction and Internet Addiction (Couples)

| | Internet Addiction | |
|----------------------|---------------------|------|
| Marital Satisfaction | Pearson Correlation | 0.02 |
| | P (2-tailed) | 0.79 |
| | N | 104 |

$p \leq 0.05$ *(two-tailed)

Table 2. Total, Mean and SD of Wives on the Marital Satisfaction and Internet Addiction Scales

| | N | Mean | SD |
|----------------------|----|-------|-------|
| Marital Satisfaction | 52 | 39.62 | 11.54 |
| Internet Addiction | 52 | 28.25 | 7.33 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 52 | | |

Table 2a. Correlation Coefficient of Marital Satisfaction and Internet Addiction (Wives)

| | Internet Addiction | |
|----------------------|---------------------|-------|
| Marital Satisfaction | Pearson Correlation | -0.01 |
| | P (2-tailed) | 0.91 |
| | N | 52 |

$p \leq 0.05$ ** (two tailed)

According to Table 2a, it can be seen that the obtained correlation coefficient r is -0.15 indicating a weak negative relationship between marital satisfaction and Internet addiction. The obtained p value is 0.916 which shows that the relationship between the two variables is not statistically significant. The second hypothesis has not been accepted stating that "there is no relationship between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction among wives". Results show that wives have shown a poor relationship between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction. As the Internet has been a regular usage of urban couples, its usage might have not been affecting wife's marital satisfaction level.

According to Table 3, it can be seen that the mean of the sample (N=52) for marital satisfaction is 39.62 and SD is 11.540. The mean score for Internet addiction is 30.81 and SD is 10.21. The mean value on marital satisfaction scale shows that husbands have exhibited an average satisfaction level. On the Internet addiction scale, the mean values have been interpreted as an average online

user. Husbands have expressed average in both marital satisfaction and Internet addiction. According to Table 3a, it can be seen that the obtained correlation coefficient r is 0.58 indicating a weak relationship between marital satisfaction and Internet addiction. The obtained p value is 0.68 which shows that the relationship between the two variables is not

statistically significant. Results do not confirm the third hypothesis that "there is no relationship between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction among husbands". Men and women have been busy with work-life balance, and more so with the husbands in urban life. Husbands might have not associated Internet use with marital satisfaction.

Table 3. Total, Mean and SD of Husbands on Marital Satisfaction and Internet Addiction Scale

| | N | Mean | SD |
|----------------------|----------|-------------|-----------|
| Marital Satisfaction | 52 | 39.62 | 11.54 |
| Internet Addiction | 52 | 30.81 | 10.21 |
| Valid N (list wise) | 52 | | |

Table 3a. Correlation (Husbands)

| Marital Satisfaction | Internet Addiction | |
|----------------------|---------------------------|------|
| | Pearson Correlation | 0.05 |
| P (2-tailed) | 0.68 | |
| N | 52 | |

$p \leq 0.05^{**}$ (two-tailed)

The results from qualitative interview revealed the following three themes:

Theme 1: Role of Internet in Relationship Values

The participants expressed their views on the role of Internet in relationship values. Most of the husbands and wives felt that the Internet has affected relationships in both positive and negative ways. The Internet has become an option for couples to express their affection and love for their partner which is not done when in person. Few wives believed that they felt happy when they saw couples acknowledging each other's messages and wishes through social media. Couples also felt that the Internet has helped them to connect with people and be in touch with people all around the world, especially school and college mates. On the negative side, most of the couples felt that the Internet has reduced the warmth in relationships. People even start to form relationships online which result in spending more time on screen than with their own family. Too much gadget time, whether it be Internet or mobile phones have increased the screen time and has resulted in reducing the time spent with each other and also as a family. One of the samples expressed that "relationships were understood in a different way earlier, things are changing now". This gave rise to discussion in the group about the value given to relationships in the present generation. Few of the couples also expressed that the Internet has resulted in reducing the relationship values as generations pass by. Roles of husbands and wives were very different and at the present it is associated with many factors. Urbanization has been a major factor. The Internet is a part of urbanization. Couples from urban areas have no escape from it. Media has been showing people the importance of relationships, causes for failures and also ways to build a healthier relationship. These messages have been directly or indirectly influencing couples. One of the samples said "couples should understand the importance of marital relationship". Values given to relationships would be a key factor for happier relationships.

Theme 2. Role of Internet in Communication

Couples shared the opinion that the Internet has made communication very easy as people find it easy to express themselves when faceless. One couple even mentioned that 'our fights are resolved through WhatsApp messages and when we meet in the evening we are a happy couple again'. Since most of the couples in this study were working, they, especially husbands mentioned that they start their day by checking e-mails which helps them ease their work load and know the work updates from all their team members around the world. Wives found it easier because this has enabled them to procure things with ease whether it be purchasing groceries online, banking and other household issues. This, according to wives has helped them spend more time with the family and reduce running around shops. However, all the couples shared the opinion that the Internet will never be able to give the pleasure and replace face to face communication. One of the samples shared an experience that "a couple are active in Facebook, always keep posting about each other and write nice words about the partner". Actually, in person expression could be difficult, especially after marriage. Messages on net would make the partner happy. Internet has become the medium of expression of their feelings in the public. At the same time, too much time on the Internet would bring uneasiness between couples. The differences would be noticed when one of the couple spends much more time on the Internet compared to the other one. In this case, the Internet would become a barrier of communication between the husband and wife.

Theme 3: Role of Internet in Happiness

Few couples felt that the Internet helps them to express their feelings, which is not done otherwise. This, especially for wives increased their happiness. Few of them mentioned that the Internet plays no role in happiness. Happiness for them comes from spending time with each other and sharing. Couples mentioned that online shopping increased happiness as it saves money, time and effort according to them. For men especially, purchasing electronic goods online helps to get better discounts and

saves money. They also find happiness playing games online. The Internet has been giving more pleasure than happiness to couples or in other words it's conflicting between pleasure and happiness. Happiness is affected by many factors, not just the Internet. Hence couples were not able to express much about happiness.

Discussion

Internet addiction is characterized by excessive or poorly controlled obsessions, needs or behaviors regarding computer use and Internet access that lead to deficiency or distress. Marital satisfaction is a mental state that reflects the perceived benefits and costs of marriage to a particular person. In today's world, the technology of Internet is rising rapidly and affecting the day-to-day lives of people more than before. It has affected socialization, marriage and marital satisfaction along with bringing in various concerns. Any kind of instability and laxity in marital satisfaction, or lack of success in a marriage not only hampers the mental relaxation of couples, but also puts the viability of the family at risk [20]. Research has shown that the rate of family members acquaintances with the Internet, amount of time spent chatting, using Internet for befriending and various ways of Internet usage has been considerably increasing in recent years [21].

The purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction among urban married couples. The study also intended to find out the perception of Internet addiction among couples, and its impact on relationship values, communication and happiness. The study revealed a weak relationship between Internet addiction and marital satisfaction. The result is in contrast with earlier findings which says that Internet usage can adversely affect marital intimacy and marital satisfaction [11, 22, 23]. This may probably be due to the regular Internet usage among urban couples mostly for work which is not amounting to an addiction. This is substantiated from our qualitative interviews with couples where the couples expressed that Internet use is vital for professional, personal and social interactions on a daily basis.

Results of the study also show that married men and women use Internet differently. With men, the use of Internet is to a large extent professional, while with women it is mostly domestic like online purchasing, banking and so on. Literature also says that men and women use Internet differently and this may be equated to the differences of their approach to the Internet [24].

Conclusion

The results of the present study shows that there is no strong correlation between marital satisfaction and Internet addiction among couples. The relationship between marital satisfaction and Internet addiction seen in the wives is weak and negative. In case of husbands though, there is a positive correlation between marital satisfaction and Internet addiction however not very strong. Internet has both positive and negative effect on relationship values. Internet eases communication according to couples, but cannot replace face to face

communication. The role of Internet in happiness also varied from couple to couple and also between husbands and wives.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

The study was conducted by the authors by getting an informed consent by the participants. Anonymity of the individuals participating in the study was ensured. All communication in relation to the research was done with honesty and transparency.

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