



IMPACT OF INTERNET USAGE ON UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN SHILLONG, MEGHALAYA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the profound influence of Internet usage on the lives of undergraduate and postgraduate students in Shillong, Meghalaya. This study employed a descriptive research design. Data were collected through web questionnaires distributed across various social media platforms. The internet has undeniably become an integral part of modern life, particularly for today's youth, offering invaluable benefits such as access to information and online education. However, the research highlights the potential pitfalls, including disrupted sleep patterns and mental health concerns, stemming from excessive internet use. Furthermore, it underscores the complex impact of internet use on family relationships, emphasising the need for a balanced approach to integrating it into daily life.

KEYWORDS: *Internet Usage, Online Behaviour, Impact of Internet, Social Media Addiction, Cybercrime.*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary context, the internet has moved beyond a mere commodity to become an integral part of modern life, profoundly influencing people from all walks of life. This pervasive digital phenomenon has ushered in a myriad of transformative opportunities and conveniences, enriching lives and enabling connections on both personal and professional fronts.

Amid the myriad advantages that the internet offers, it is essential to recognise the intricate interplay between its benefits and potential drawbacks. While it serves as a portal to vast reservoirs of information and fosters efficient communication through channels like email and instant messaging, the internet also has an alluring yet potentially harmful quality: its capacity to ensnare individuals in addictive patterns of use. Research by Kuss and Griffiths (2017) explores the addictive nature of social media among young adults, highlighting that excessive use can lead to negative psychological impacts such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. This addiction is often attributed to constant availability, social validation through likes and comments, and fear of missing out (FoMO) (Andreassen et al., 2017).

For those who engage excessively with the internet, the allure of its digital expanse can lead to adverse consequences. These consequences encompass disrupted sleep patterns, the erosion of social relationships, and an array of mental and physical health challenges. Studies suggest that heavy social media use correlates with higher levels of stress and anxiety among college students (Hunt et al., 2018). The spectrum of afflictions extends from mood swings to altered behaviour, withdrawn attitudes, and pervasive feelings of loneliness, all underpinning the gravity of internet addiction.

This study examines the impact of internet use, particularly among undergraduate and postgraduate students in Shillong, Meghalaya, a cohort at the crossroads of academic pursuit and digital immersion. As this demographic straddles the threshold between academic growth and personal development, their relationship with the internet is highly relevant. Recognising the internet as an invaluable resource, this research explores its multifaceted effects on students' lives, examining the implications of its utility and overuse.

The impact of internet usage extends beyond individual well-being to familial and social relationships. Research by Mesch and Talmud (2006) indicates that extensive internet use, particularly social media, can reduce face-to-face interaction and communication within families. It also affects relationships with peers, with some studies suggesting that heavy internet users may experience social isolation or difficulty in forming meaningful offline relationships (Kraut et al., 1998).

In a world reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, the internet has grown even more prominent. With the shuttering of schools, colleges, and universities to ensure the safety of students, the internet emerged as a lifeline, a conduit through which educational institutions sustained the flow of knowledge. Online platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and others became indispensable tools, helping colleges in Meghalaya maintain continuity in the learning process.

Despite the challenges, the internet offers significant educational benefits. Online resources and educational platforms facilitate access to information and enhance learning experiences (Hew, 2016). However, maintaining a balance between educational use and recreational internet activities is crucial to avoid negative consequences on academic performance and overall well-being (Choi et al., 2012).



Within this context, this study takes on heightened significance. It endeavours to underscore the effectiveness and indispensability of the internet in students' lives, while acknowledging the nuanced challenges its use presents. Beyond mere analysis, this study seeks to elucidate the intricate web of internet-related issues and, subsequently, offer recommendations useful to educational institutions, students, teachers, parents, and society at large. Set against the backdrop of Shillong, Meghalaya, this research aims to capture the perspectives of undergraduate and postgraduate students, both male and female, from diverse colleges and universities.

In the digital era, where connectivity and information dissemination are paramount, this study seeks to illuminate a path toward balanced, harmonious coexistence with the omnipresent internet, harnessing its myriad advantages without succumbing to its potential pitfalls.

Methodology

This research study was conducted in Shillong, nestled in the scenic East Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya, a captivating region in North East India. In this evocative locale, the study focused on undergraduate and postgraduate students who form Shillong's educational tapestry. To investigate the impact of internet usage on this dynamic demographic, the study employed a descriptive research design.

This study used a descriptive research design to determine the extent of internet usage among students and its repercussions on their familial bonds and physical and psychological well-being. To achieve this, the researchers used non-probability sampling, also known as expert sampling. It allows participants to be selected with precision and deliberate intent.

Within the purview of this study, the researchers handpicked undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in colleges and universities across Shillong. This purposeful selection ensured a diverse cross-section of the Shillong academic landscape, illuminating the multifaceted aspects of the research inquiries. As the researchers engaged with their chosen respondents, they noted the respondents' ability to access web questionnaires and express their experiences and opinions with eloquence, lucidity, and introspection.

The data collection methodology relied on the voluntary participation of these students, all of whom participated enthusiastically. The sample size, a robust contingent of 565 undergraduate and postgraduate students from various colleges and universities in Shillong, was carefully determined to yield meaningful insights.

The data-gathering process centred on a comprehensive questionnaire. This instrument allowed the researchers to collect primary data directly from students, forming the bedrock of the research. To further enrich the study, the researchers supplemented the primary data with secondary sources from books, journals, and newspapers, thereby underscoring the rigour and depth of the inquiry.

Data collection took place with precision, commencing on 6 November 2021 and concluding on 16 November 2021. Throughout this period, students were receptive and eager to contribute to the study.

The major findings of this research study are discussed below:

a. Demographic Characteristics

This research included 565 respondents, most of whom were female. More than half of the respondents were between 18 and 22 years of age. Most respondents' parents were government employees, and the average family income exceeded 30,000 rupees per month. More than half of the respondents lived with their parents. They represented various colleges and universities based in Shillong city, such as St. Edmund's College, St. Anthony's College, Shillong College, Synod College, St. Mary's College, Lady Kane College, Sankar Dev College, Women's College, Umshyrpi College, KL Bajoria College, Seng Khasi College, Raid Laban College, BBS College, North Eastern Hill University, and Martin Luther Christian University. Most respondents were undergraduate students, primarily from departments such as BA, BAC, B.Sc., B.Ed., B. Com, BSW, MA, MSW, MSc, BCA, BTM, BBA, M. Com, MCA, BMLT, LLB, B. Tech, MBA, and BMLT. Most respondents in this study were first-year students.

b. Time Spent Online

This study found that most respondents used the internet for more than 4-6 hours a day. Nearly half of the respondents said internet usage increased during the pandemic for online learning, as colleges/universities had to adapt to the new normal of digital classes. However, students used the internet for more than educational purposes. Most respondents felt they needed to use the Internet every day, and most admitted they could not live without it. Most of the respondents spent more than 500 rupees monthly on recharging their internet data.

c. Most Visited Sites

Most respondents used Google as their preferred search engine, while some used other social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Yahoo, and Bing. More than half of respondents mainly used YouTube while online. Most respondents relied on WhatsApp for communication. However, one-fourth of the respondents still preferred basic phone calls. Nearly one-third of the respondents had access to websites with sexual content, while almost two-thirds denied having access to these sites.

**d. Purpose of Using the Internet**

The majority of the respondents used the Internet for various purposes, including games, music, news, Korean/Turkish movies, tutorial videos for cooking, makeup, craft works, education, social networking, online shopping, online businesses, blogs, and entertainment such as scrolling through social media, watching reels, movies, and videos, etc. Only a few of the respondents used the internet solely for education.

e. Experience of Cybercrime

The study provides information about respondents' experiences with cybercrime. Cybercrime, also known as computer crime, involves using a computer for illegal purposes, such as fraud, identity theft, or privacy violations. Today, many electronic assets are stored in digital wallets, and cyber thieves try to steal them. According to the study, some respondents engaged in bullying others, while almost one-fourth experienced someone else creating a fake account pretending to be them. Some respondents admitted to pretending to be someone else online, and almost half of the respondents experienced cyberbullying. Although nearly half of the respondents experienced cybercrime, more than one-fourth of them did not report incidents of cyberbullying, and very few filed a report after being cyberbullied.

Fig. No. 1 Respondents' experience of cyberbullying

Respondents' experience of cyberbullying	Frequency	Percentage
Being bullied	75	13.3
Cyber-bullied someone else	18	3.2
Someone else pretended to be you online	120	21.3
You pretended to be someone else online	76	13.5
Other	275	48.8
Total	564	100.0

f. Changing Patterns While Using the Internet: Sleeping, Eating, House Chores, Studying

More than half of the respondents admitted that their studying, sleeping, and eating habits had changed as a result of their Internet usage. They also admitted to occasionally missing home responsibilities because of their internet use. Most respondents carried their mobile devices into every room and regularly checked their phones while spending time with their families.

g. The Internet Affects Family Relationships

Most students are preoccupied with the internet, which has negatively affected their relationships with their families. Regarding students and family relationships, the study found that their enthusiasm for the internet led them to neglect their families and household chores. Most respondents admitted that they constantly had their gadgets (specifically smartphones) with them, both indoors and outdoors, which had led to complaints and accusations from their families. Excessive social media and internet use has significantly reduced family interactions and social communication. Internet use affected students to the extent that a small percentage reported reacting violently to family members and peers when interrupted while using the internet. Although most respondents did not intend to lie about their internet usage, a small percentage did, likely because of their urge to use social media, entertainment, or gaming.

h. Internet Addiction

The majority of the respondents logged in and out occasionally during the day, and more than one-fourth of them were always online due to internet addiction. Nearly half of the respondents believed internet use might harm them. At the same time, almost one-fourth acknowledged being negatively affected because they could not manage their time or control their internet browsing habits. They struggled to set time limits or boundaries on internet use. Most respondents felt they needed to use the Internet every day. More than one-fourth of them felt moody without using the internet, and some even experienced feelings of depression, frustration, and restlessness in its absence. A few respondents admitted to lying to their families to extend their internet usage time.

DISCUSSION

As the major findings indicate, most students use the Internet mainly for social networking and entertainment rather than educational purposes. YouTube, in particular, stands out as the main entertainment platform. This heavy involvement in social media activities can lead to internet addiction, emphasising the need for students to limit their internet usage. Encouragingly, the internet can be a valuable tool for gaining knowledge, accessing information, reading the latest news, and upskilling professionally. Students should strive to balance leisure and educational internet use.

Nearly one-third of respondents reported accessing websites with sexual content, while almost two-thirds denied such access. It is important to sensitise students about the potential consequences of addiction to such websites, which can blur the line between reality and fantasy, potentially harming relationships and promoting harmful behaviour.



About half of the respondents acknowledged that their internet usage created problems in their lives. They often stay up late due to internet engagement, leading to changes in study and eating patterns. Educating youth about the internet's positive and negative impacts, the importance of sleep, maintaining a healthy diet, and establishing daily routines can improve their well-being.

Many respondents formed new relationships with online acquaintances, but this is not always safe, given the potential for scams and cyberbullying. Moreover, most respondents felt that online socialising did not make them happier compared to face-to-face communication. The internet also negatively affects family relationships, with respondents admitting they ignore family members while using it. Neglecting household chores and the constant presence of mobile devices have further strained family interactions.

Educational institutions should play a crucial role in raising awareness of the negative consequences of excessive internet and mobile phone use, as many youths are unaware of the potential risks, including an unhealthy lifestyle, procrastination, susceptibility to cybercrime, and fraud. Students active on social networking sites should be cautious about privacy settings, limit sharing personal information, and be careful when interacting with strangers online. It is equally important to promote healthy family relationships and instil good family values in students.

While nearly half of respondents experienced cybercrime, a significant proportion did not report cyberbullying incidents. Students should be made aware of their rights and empowered to report such incidents, ensuring their protection and well-being. Furthermore, a quarter of the students admitted to pretending to be someone else online, highlighting the need to address peer pressure and the desire for social acceptance. Encouraging authenticity and emphasising the potential consequences of adopting fake identities is crucial for fostering a safer online environment.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a concerning trend: students spend more time immersed in their online lives than engaging with their immediate surroundings. This phenomenon has, in turn, negatively impacted family relationships, peer interactions, and other social activities. Most respondents appear to prioritise their online lives over connecting with their families, disrupting their eating and sleeping patterns.

Another noteworthy aspect uncovered in this research is students' lack of awareness of the detrimental consequences of excessive mobile phone and internet use. Such behaviours can result in an unhealthy lifestyle, procrastination, increased susceptibility to cybercrime and fraud, and other related risks. Thus, educational institutions must play an active role in educating students about the potential negative impacts of unrestricted internet usage.

This study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the advantages and disadvantages associated with internet use and its multifaceted effects on individuals' lives. Internet overuse among students in Shillong, Meghalaya, presents a critical issue that demands immediate attention from parents, universities, colleges, and government authorities. Recognising signs of internet addiction among college students is crucial, as it represents a serious concern that requires concerted efforts to reduce and prevent cybercrimes among adults. The collaborative efforts of individuals and government institutions hold the key to mitigating the adverse effects of internet addiction.

The results of this study further emphasise the significant associations between Internet addiction and various parameters of sleep quality, including subjective sleep quality, sleep latency, sleep duration, sleep disturbance, and daytime dysfunction. These findings point to a poorer quality of sleep among those with moderate and severe Internet addiction compared to normal internet users and those with mild internet dependency. Addressing this sleep-related issue is crucial for promoting the overall well-being of students and mitigating the adverse effects of internet addiction.

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