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Original Research Article

A Study of Internet Dependency and Emotional Maturity: Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract: The rapid expansion of the Internet has transformed the way individuals learn, communicate, entertain themselves, and manage everyday life. However, when Internet use becomes excessive and difficult to control, it may develop into Internet dependency, which can affect emotional balance, relationships, and personal adjustment. This paper examines Internet dependency and emotional maturity from a theoretical perspective. It explains how emotional maturity, self-regulation, and the ability to cope with emotions may influence the way individuals use the Internet. The paper also discusses major theories, including Uses and Gratifications Theory, Cognitive-Behavioural Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and behavioural addiction perspectives. Theoretically, the study suggests that individuals with lower emotional maturity may depend more on the Internet to escape negative feelings, seek approval, or satisfy unmet social needs.

Keywords: Internet dependency, emotional maturity, emotional regulation, problematic Internet use, theoretical perspective.

Introduction

The Internet has become an essential part of modern life. Students use it for education, individuals use it for communication, and families use it for information, entertainment, and social connection. Yet, the same medium that supports learning and connection can also become a source of dependency when a person loses control over the time and purpose of its use.

Internet dependency refers to a pattern of excessive, compulsive, or poorly regulated Internet use that interferes with daily functioning, academic performance, work, sleep, or interpersonal relationships. Young described problematic Internet use as an impulse-control difficulty marked by preoccupation with being online, tolerance, withdrawal-like discomfort, and inability to reduce use despite negative consequences.

Emotional maturity, on the other hand, is the capacity to understand, accept, and manage one's emotions in a balanced manner. It includes patience, self-control, responsibility, empathy, and the ability to cope with frustration. When emotional maturity is low, a person may find it difficult to tolerate boredom, loneliness, anxiety, or failure. In such situations, the Internet cprovide immediate relief through games, social media, videos, or online interaction.

This paper explores the theoretical relationship between Internet dependency and emotional maturity. It does not claim that every heavy Internet user is dependent, nor that emotional immaturity alone causes dependency. Instead, it argues that emotional maturity may act as an important protective factor, while emotional difficulties may increase vulnerability to problematic Internet use.

Literature Review

The literature on Internet dependency and emotional maturity shows a consistent concern: when individuals experience difficulty in understanding and managing emotions, they may use the Internet as a way to escape stress, loneliness, boredom, or anxiety. At the same time, excessive and uncontrolled Internet use may further weaken emotional adjustment, creating a cycle of dependency and emotional imbalance.

Internet Dependency: Earlier Research

The concept of Internet dependency emerged in the mid-1990s through the work of Griffiths and Young. Young conceptualised problematic Internet use as an impulse-control problem, similar in some respects to pathological gambling, because the user experiences preoccupation, loss of control, tolerance, and negative consequences despite continued use.

Young later identified different forms of Internet-related dependency, such as cyber-relationship addiction, information overload, net compulsions, computer-game addiction, and cyber sexual addiction. This classification is important because it shows that dependency is not simply a matter of total screen time. A person may spend several hours online for academic work without becoming dependent, while another person may become dependent through compulsive gaming, social media checking, or online relationship-seeking.

Kandell defined Internet addiction as psychological dependence on the Internet, irrespective of the specific online activity. This definition highlights that the problem lies in the compulsive and maladaptive relationship with the Internet rather than in the technology itself. Similarly, research describes Internet addiction as uncontrolled and damaging use of the Internet that interferes with everyday life and social interaction.

Emotional Maturity and Emotional Regulation

Emotional maturity is closely connected with emotional regulation. A mature individual can identify emotions, tolerate discomfort, delay impulsive reactions, and choose appropriate ways of coping. In contrast, emotional dysregulation involves difficulty in controlling emotional responses, managing distress, and maintaining balanced behaviour.

A review by Gioia, Rega, and Boursier examined studies conducted between 2010 and 2020 among young people aged 13 to 25 years. The review found a strong association between emotional dysregulation and problematic Internet use as well as problematic social networking. It concluded that problematic Internet use may function as a coping strategy to compensate for deficits in emotional regulation.

This finding is especially relevant to the present study. It suggests that individuals who lack emotional maturity may turn to the Internet for immediate relief. For example, a student experiencing examination stress may repeatedly watch videos or use social media rather than facing the task directly. Although this reduces anxiety temporarily, it may increase dependency over time.

Emotional Regulation and Problematic Internet Use

Several studies have directly examined the relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and problematic Internet use. A large study of 5,916 adolescents found a highly significant correlation between problematic Internet use and difficulties in emotional regulation. The study also found that family attitudes towards Internet use were associated with adolescents' problematic use.

Another study of 380 adolescent students found that emotion regulation was negatively correlated with problematic Internet use, while certain metacognitive beliefs were positively correlated with it. The researchers concluded that both emotion regulation and metacognition are relevant factors in problematic Internet use among adolescents.

Similarly, a study involving 2,357 adolescents found that difficulties in emotion regulation were consistently associated with problematic digital media use and its negative outcomes across sex and academic-year groups. These findings strengthen the theoretical assumption that emotional maturity may act as a protective factor against Internet dependency.

Internet Use as Mood Regulation

A major theme in the literature is the use of the Internet for mood regulation. People often use online activities to change unpleasant emotional states. Social media, gaming, streaming, and online browsing can provide distraction, pleasure, social contact, and temporary relief from negative feelings.

A longitudinal study of 699 adolescents found that depressive symptoms predicted an increase in preference for online relationships, mood-regulation use of the Internet, and negative outcomes one year later. In turn, negative outcomes associated with Internet use predicted an increase in depressive symptoms at the later stage. This indicates a reciprocal relationship: emotional distress may encourage problematic use, while problematic use may worsen emotional well-being.

A more recent study of 1,550 adolescents found that depression and anxiety symptoms were the strongest predictors of problematic Internet use. The study noted that the "mood regulation" dimension showed the strongest relationship with psychological distress, suggesting that online activity may be used as a compensatory behaviour to reduce negative affect.

Bidirectional Relationship

Recent longitudinal evidence suggests that the relationship between emotional difficulties and problematic Internet use is often bidirectional. A systematic review of 31 longitudinal studies found that emotional distress and problematic Internet use tend to reinforce each other over time. It also identified low self-esteem and maladaptive emotional regulation strategies as important mediators.

This means that emotional immaturity may lead to Internet dependency, but dependency may also reduce opportunities for developing emotional maturity. For instance, excessive online interaction may reduce face-to-face communication, physical activity, sleep, and real-life problem-solving. These losses can make a person more emotionally reactive and less capable of handling everyday challenges.

Emotional Intelligence and Behavioural Addictions

Research on emotional intelligence also supports the connection between emotional maturity and Internet dependency. A review of 43 studies found that emotional intelligence is generally negatively correlated with behavioural addictions, including technology-related addictions. It also found that emotional intelligence may moderate or mediate the relationship between behavioural addictions and negative outcomes such as depression, rumination, fear of missing out, and suicidal ideation.

However, not all studies report the same direction of relationship. One study of 400 medical students found an unexpected positive correlation between emotional intelligence and Internet addiction, indicating that the relationship may be influenced by the measurement tool, sample characteristics, and the type of Internet activity involved. This inconsistency shows the need for further research, particularly in different educational and cultural settings.

Family, Social Support, and Emotional Maturity

The literature also emphasises the role of family and social support. A study of 325 school students found that emotional regulation difficulties and problematic Internet use significantly predicted cyberbullying behaviour. The researchers recommended larger samples, longitudinal designs, and multiple methods of data collection for future research.

Another study found that problematic Internet use indirectly affected aggressive behaviour through emotional regulation difficulties, while family closeness moderated this relationship. This suggests that emotional maturity does not develop in isolation. Supportive family relationships, healthy peer groups, and positive school environments can strengthen emotional regulation and reduce the risk of Internet dependency.

Similarly, research has found that lack of social support and poor parent–adolescent relationships may negatively affect emotional regulation, which in turn increases the risk of problematic Internet use. Therefore, emotional maturity should be understood not only as an individual trait but also as a capacity shaped by social and relational experiences.

Research Gap

Although many studies have examined Internet addiction, problematic Internet use, emotional regulation, and emotional intelligence separately, fewer studies have directly focused on "Internet dependency and emotional maturity as a combined theoretical relationship", especially among students in the Indian educational context.

Most available studies concentrate on adolescents and use terms such as "Internet addiction" or "problematic Internet use." There is a need to examine how emotional maturity—understood as self-control, patience, responsibility, empathy, and adaptive coping—relates to different forms of Internet dependency, including social media use, gaming, online entertainment, and academic Internet use.

The present study, therefore, attempts to fill this gap by theoretically examining whether individuals with higher emotional maturity show healthier and more controlled Internet use, while those with lower emotional maturity are more vulnerable to dependency. The literature reviewed above provides a strong foundation for this assumption, as emotional regulation difficulties have repeatedly been associated with problematic Internet use and negative digital-media outcomes.

Concept of Internet Dependency

Internet dependency is often discussed under related terms such as Internet addiction, pathological Internet use, and problematic Internet use. Griffiths described it as a behavioural addiction involving human–machine interaction, where the behaviour becomes compulsive and difficult to regulate even though no chemical substance is involved.

Young classified Internet dependency into several forms, including cyber-relationship addiction, information overload, net compulsions, computer-game addiction, and cyber-sexual addiction. This shows that dependency is not only about spending long hours online; it is also about the nature of online activity and its impact on life.

Common indicators of Internet dependency include:

- Constant thinking about online activities even when offline.
- Feeling restless, irritated, or anxious when Internet access is limited.
- Needing more time online to experience the same satisfaction.
- Neglecting studies, work, sleep, family, or face-to-face relationships.
- Using the Internet mainly to escape stress, loneliness, or unpleasant emotions.
- Repeated unsuccessful attempts to reduce Internet use.

Importantly, Internet use itself is not harmful. The concern arises when use becomes uncontrolled, emotionally driven, and disruptive to everyday responsibilities.

Concept of Emotional Maturity

Emotional maturity is the ability to respond to life situations thoughtfully rather than impulsively. An emotionally mature person can recognise emotions, tolerate discomfort, express feelings appropriately, and make balanced decisions.

Emotional maturity includes several components:

- **Self-awareness**: Understanding one's own feelings and reactions.
- **Self-regulation**: Controlling anger, anxiety, excitement, or frustration.
- **Empathy**: Understanding the feelings of others.
- **Responsibility**: Accepting consequences of one's behaviour.

- **Adaptability**: Adjusting to change and coping with disappointment.
- **Healthy relationships**: Maintaining respectful and stable interpersonal connections.

Emotional maturity is closely related to emotional intelligence. Goleman's framework emphasises the perception, understanding, and regulation of one's own and others' emotions. A person with higher emotional maturity is more likely to pause before reacting, seek constructive solutions, and maintain balance between online and offline life.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that people actively use media to satisfy particular needs. These needs may include information, entertainment, relaxation, social interaction, companionship, or escape from daily problems.

From this perspective, Internet dependency may develop when a person begins to rely heavily on the Internet to meet emotional needs. For example, a student who feels lonely may use social media for companionship. A person facing academic stress may use online games or videos to escape pressure. Initially, this use may be intentional and helpful. However, when the Internet becomes the main method of emotional coping, dependency may gradually increase.

The theory suggests that both the needs a person brings to the Internet and the satisfaction received from it influence the frequency and intensity of use. Thus, emotionally immature individuals may be more vulnerable because they may seek quick emotional relief rather than developing healthier coping strategies.

Cognitive-Behavioural Perspective

The cognitive-behavioural perspective proposes that distorted thoughts and learned behaviour patterns contribute to problematic Internet use. A person may think, "I cannot relax without my phone," "Online friends understand me better than people around me," or "I must respond immediately to every notification."

Such thoughts can strengthen repeated Internet use. When online activity reduces stress temporarily, the behaviour is negatively reinforced because the person escapes unpleasant feelings. Over time, the individual may associate the Internet with emotional comfort and find it difficult to stay away from it.

For example, a student who feels anxious before examinations may repeatedly scroll through social media to avoid studying. This provides short-term relief but increases academic pressure later. The cycle of anxiety, avoidance, Internet use, and further anxiety may deepen dependency.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory states that human well-being depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to a sense of control over one's life; competence refers to feeling capable; and relatedness refers to feeling connected with others.

When these needs are not fulfilled in real life, individuals may turn to the Internet for validation, achievement, or social connection. Online games may provide a sense of competence through levels and rewards. Social media may provide relatedness through likes, comments, and messages. Online platforms may also give a feeling of autonomy because users can choose what to view, whom to follow, and how to present themselves.

However, online satisfaction may be temporary. If a person depends only on digital approval or virtual achievement, emotional maturity may not develop fully. The person may struggle to handle real-life criticism, failure, loneliness, or conflict.

Behavioural Addiction Perspective

Griffiths viewed Internet dependency as a form of behavioural addiction, similar in some ways to compulsive gambling. The Internet provides immediate rewards, such as entertainment, social approval, novelty, and escape. These rewards can reinforce repeated use.

Young also compared problematic Internet use with impulse-control disorders, noting symptoms such as tolerance, withdrawal, loss of control, and interference with normal life. From this viewpoint, emotional maturity becomes important because self-control is central to resisting immediate gratification.

An emotionally mature person may still enjoy online entertainment, but can set limits and return to responsibilities. A person with weaker emotional regulation may continue using the Internet despite knowing its harmful consequences.

Psychosocial Development Perspective

Erikson's psychosocial framework can also be applied to understand Internet dependency, especially among adolescents and young adults. During these stages, individuals try to develop identity, independence, intimacy, and social belonging. The Internet may support these processes by offering spaces for self-expression and connection.

However, research using this framework found that Internet dependency is multifaceted and may not always be directly linked with psychosocial maturity or self-efficacy. This suggests that the relationship between Internet dependency and emotional maturity is complex. It may depend on the purpose of use, personality, family environment, peer influence, and the availability of offline support.

Relationship Between Internet Dependency and Emotional Maturity

The relationship between Internet dependency and emotional maturity can be understood as a two-way process.

First, low emotional maturity may contribute to Internet dependency. Individuals who cannot manage loneliness, boredom, anger, or anxiety may use the Internet as an emotional escape. Online platforms provide instant gratification, social validation, and distraction from reality, which can reinforce dependency.

Second, Internet dependency may weaken emotional maturity. Excessive online engagement can reduce face-to-face interaction, sleep, physical activity, and opportunities to practise real-life emotional coping. A person may become more impatient, emotionally reactive, or dependent on external validation.

The possible relationship may be presented as follows:

Emotional maturity level	Likely Internet-use pattern	Possible outcome
High emotional maturity	Purposeful and controlled use	Learning, communication, recreation, and balance
Moderate emotional maturity	Occasional excessive use during stress	Temporary distraction, usually manageable
Low emotional maturity	Emotion-driven, impulsive, and escape-based use	Temporary distraction, usually manageable

This table does not describe fixed categories. Rather, it shows a theoretical pattern in which emotional regulation and purposeful use may reduce the risk of dependency.

Educational and Social Implications

For students, teachers, and parents, the theoretical connection between Internet dependency and emotional maturity has practical importance. Educational institutions should not only restrict Internet use but also help learners develop emotional skills.

Schools and colleges can promote:

- Digital-literacy programmes that teach responsible Internet use.
- Counselling services for stress, anxiety, loneliness, and academic pressure.
- Activities that develop empathy, patience, teamwork, and self-control.

- Awareness about the difference between healthy use and dependency.
- Offline opportunities for friendship, creativity, sports, and community participation.

Parents and teachers can also encourage open discussion about emotions. When children and adolescents feel heard and supported offline, they may be less likely to depend on online spaces for emotional comfort.

Conclusion

From a theoretical perspective, Internet dependency and emotional maturity are closely connected through the processes of emotional regulation, need satisfaction, reinforcement, and coping. Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that individuals may use the Internet to meet emotional and social needs. Cognitive-behavioural and behavioural addiction perspectives explain how temporary relief from negative emotions can strengthen compulsive use. Self-Determination Theory further suggests that unmet needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness may push individuals towards online validation and escape.

The central argument of this paper is that emotional maturity may protect individuals from Internet dependency by helping them manage emotions, tolerate discomfort, and use technology in a balanced way. Future research can empirically examine this relationship among students, adolescents, and young adults using standardised measures of Internet dependency and emotional maturity

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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