

# HETEROGENEITY AMONG YOUTH WITH ALEXITHYMIA AND INTERNET ADDICTION

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## Abstract

The study aims to investigate Alexithymia and Internet addiction to going online among youth. The sample consists of 111 participants (55 male and 56 female) of age range 17 to 28 yrs with a mean age of 23.2. Random sampling and snowball sampling methods were used. Tools used for the study were a structured self-rated questionnaire Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) by R. Michael Bagby, James D.A. Parker, and Graeme J. Taylor, and the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) by Dr. Kimberly S. Young. TAS-20 is 20 item questionnaire and has 3 subscales (a) Difficulty Describing feeling (b) Difficulty Identifying feeling (c) Externally-Oriented Thinking. IAT is 20 item questionnaire that measures characteristics and behaviors associated with compulsivity, escapism, and dependency. The objective of the present study is to analyze the relationship between Alexithymia and Internet Addiction along with the gender differences between them. An appropriate statistical analysis has been applied to analyze the result. The findings of the study state that there is a positive correlation between Alexithymia and Internet Addiction and males differ significantly on the Internet Addiction test from females. This study also confirms the similarities between genders in identifying and expression of emotions.

**Keywords-** Gender Differences, Alexithymia, Internet Addiction, Youth.

## Introduction

Alexithymia, no words for mood, is difficulty in describing an individual's emotions. It was proposed in 1970's by Shifneos (Shifneos, 1973, 1975; Shifneos, Apfel – Sabitz, & Francle, 1977). People marked as alexithymic show difficulty in differentiating and appreciating the emotion of one's and others which shows an unempathic and ineffective emotional response. Difficulty in identifying feelings, difficulty in describing feelings, and externally oriented thinking are some of the characteristics of cognitive emotional impairment in processing, settling, depicting, and communicating emotions (Oskis, Clow, Hucklebridge, Bifulco, Jacobs, and Loveday, 2013).

Internet use in our daily life is shifting the balance of power in the offline world which leads to an increase in interactivity and easy accessibility to the theme. When there is excessive use of the internet results in significant impairment in cognitive and emotional functioning in various domains of life. Internet addiction is characterized by uncontrollable and compulsive internet use, which results in poor academic and professional performance, poor sleep quality and hygiene, and relational maladjustment (Scineca Eta al., 2014). The risk of developing internet addiction is higher among university students (Frangos, Frangos, & kiohos, 2010; young, 2004). A review by Chakraborty, Basu and Kumar (2010) suggested that Internet Addiction in young adults estimated prevalence of up to 38% across a variety of population samples.

In a study titled "Gender differences in Alexithymia," a meta-analysis of the studies on Alexithymia was done to determine whether there exists empirical support for gender differences. The findings of this study revealed that men exhibit higher Alexithymia. The study also quotes its finding by Levant's (1992) "Normative Male Alexithymia" hypothesis, which suggests a pattern of restrictive emotionality in traditionally reared men (Levant, Ronald F., Hall, Rosalie J., Williams, Christine M., Hasan, Nadia T., 2009).

Internet Addiction was found to be positively correlated with Alexithymia. The "difficulty in identifying feelings" and "difficulty in describing feelings", the factors of Alexithymia, the low conscientiousness, and the high novelty-seeking dimensions of personality were associated with the severity of Internet Addiction (Ercan Dalbudak, Cuneyt Evren, Secil Aldemir, Kerem Senol Coskun, Hilal Ugurlu, and Fatma Gul Yildirim, 2010).

Addicts of the internet show a positive correlation with attachment disorders along with affect dysregulation and dissociation (Caretti, Craparo, & Schimmenti, 2010; De Berardis et al., 2009; Zanon, Bertin, Bombi, & Colombo, 2002). Caretti & Craparo (2009) considered Internet addiction as a syndromic condition that is characterized by a recurrent and repeated search for the pleasure derived from habituated behavior which is associated with abuse, craving, clinically significant stress, and compulsive dependence actions despite the bleak outcomes.

In a study by Caretti, Craparo, and Schimmenti (2010), pathological dissociative mechanisms were found to be the best predictors of Internet abuse. The results confirm a relationship between Alexithymia, dissociation, insecure attachment, and Internet addiction. One of the major findings was the role of both Alexithymia and dissociation in Internet addiction.

Non - Alexithymics revealed a lower potential risk for Internet Addiction when compared to alexithymic. So, the combination of difficulty in identifying the feelings, lowered self-esteem, higher dissociative experiences, and higher impulse dysregulation was associated with compulsive use of the Internet (De Berardis D, D'Albenzio A, Gambi F, Sepeda G, Valchera A, Conti CM, Fulcheri M, Cavuto M, Ortolani C, Salerno RM, Cerroni N, Ferro FM; 2009).

The objective of the present study is to analyze the relationship between Alexithymia and Internet Addiction along with the gender differences between them. The hypotheses framed for verification are:

1. There will be a positive correlation between Alexithymia and Internet Addiction.

2. Males and females will differ significantly on Internet Addiction.
3. There will be a significant difference in identifying and describing the feelings in males and females.

## Method

### Design:

The present study is an online survey of youth in which Alexithymia and Internet Addiction were assessed. In this, Alexithymia and Internet Addiction are independent variables whereas gender differences among youth are the dependent variable. Within-subject design is being formulated.

### Sample:

A convenience sample of 111 youths 55 males and 56 females was taken through virtual mode using Google form. Samples were taken randomly from the age range of 17 to 28 with a mean age of 23.2.

### Tools:

Tools used in this study are - the Toronto Alexithymia scale TAS – 20 by Bagby, Parker & Taylor, 1994 and Internet Addiction Test IAT by Young, 1998. TAS is a 20-item self-report scale that measures three dimensions of Alexithymia: (1) Difficulties identifying feelings (TAS A) (2) Difficulties describing feelings (TAS B) and (3) externally oriented thinking (TAS C). TAS - 20 is a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. In the present study, Cronbach's coefficients were 0.81 for the full scale, 0.77 for TAS A, 0.74 for TAS B, and 0.53 for TAS C.

The Internet Addiction Test is 20 items self-reported five-point Likert scale ranging from “does not apply” to “always” which measures mild, moderate, and severe levels of Internet Addiction. Cronbach's alpha calculated for the Internet Addiction test in the present sample was 0.91.

### Procedure

The data were collected using an online survey created by using docs.google.com. Subjects were contacted for their participation. Before administering scales ethical considerations were kept properly. An explanatory statement was read by the participants and they gave their informed consent. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any stage before the end of the questionnaire. Incomplete and biased data were excluded and appropriate statistical analysis has been done.

### Result

On the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) males scored higher 42.49 (SD= 17.14) than the female participants 39.96 (SD=18.38) and the total score of participants on the IAT is 41.22 (SD=17.74). On Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS) males scored higher 58.6 (SD=9.98) than the female participants 56.37 (SD=12.08) and the total score of participants on the TAS was 57.48 (SD= 11.10). There exists a positive correlation between Alexithymia and Internet Addiction ( $p= 0.44$ ) which is shown in Table 1. The mean obtained on Internet Addiction reveals a significant difference at 0.01 ( $df =109$ ) between both genders which are shown in Table 2. The means of males on Difficulty Identifying Feelings (DIF) is 16.64(SD= 5.57) and females 16.55(SD=6.55). The means of male participants on Difficulty Describing Feelings (DDF) is 15.11 (SD= 3.34) and for female participants is 14.34 (SD=3.64). The summative mean of both the dimensions between male and female shows a negligible difference between them, however, it shows an insignificant difference between the genders which is shown in Table 3.

**Table 1:** Result table showing mean and product-moment correlation ( $p$ ) between the scores of Alexithymia and Internet Addiction of the participants

Variables	Mean	$p$
Alexithymia	57.48 ( 17.74)	0.44
Internet Addiction	41.22 ( 11.10)	

**Table 2:** Result table showing the mean of male and female participants on the Internet Addiction Test

Participants	Mean	t-test

Males	42.49 ( 17.14)	3.15*
Females	39.96 ( 18.38)	

\*Significant at 0.01 level

**Table 3:** Result table showing mean of Difficulty Identifying Feeling (DIF) and Difficulty Describing Feeling (DDF) of male and female participants.

Participants	Mean of DIF and DDF	t-test
Males	15.87 ( 4.63)	1.02
Females	15.44 (5.39)	

### Discussion

The present study tried to analyze the relationship between Alexithymia and Internet Addiction along with the gender differences between them. Alexithymia and Internet Addiction have a positive correlation (0.44) i.e. if a person is alexithymic he will be more prone to use the internet and vice-versa. The finding is also supported by previous studies. A study states that non - Alexithymics revealed a lower potential risk for Internet Addiction when compared to alexithymic and the difficulty in the expressions of emotions leads a compulsive use of the internet (De Berardis D, D'Albenzio A, Gambi F, 2009). Thus based on this finding, it can be concluded that the first hypothesis which states that "There will be a positive correlation between Alexithymia and Internet Addiction" is accepted.

The present study also analyzes gender differences in the compulsive use of the Internet. The result showed a significant difference in the excessive use of the internet, males scored (42.49) higher than females (39.96). A previous study by Yeong Mi Ha and Won Ju Hwang states three predictors related to Internet Addiction in which subjective unhappiness and depressive symptoms are significantly found related to Internet addiction in boys and girls. So, the second hypothesis framed as "Males and females will differ significantly on Internet Addiction" is accepted.

The result obtained from the scores in the Toronto Alexithymia Scales subtest namely Difficulty Identifying Feeling (DIF) and Difficulty Describing Feeling (DDF) shows a negligible difference of 0.43; however the mean of male participants (15.87) is more than females (15.44). The difference between both the means of Difficulty Identifying Feeling and Difficulty Expressing Alexithymia and thus there is a significant difference between men and women in the identifying and describing of emotions (Levant, Ronald F., Hall, Rosalie J., Williams, Christine M., Hasan, Nadia T, 2009). Thus the third hypothesis i.e. "There will be a significant difference in identifying and describing the feelings in males and females" gets rejected.

### Conclusion

Internet addiction is one of the major concerns of youth. It has been the most explored area in the past few decades. The present study aims at studying Alexithymia and internet addiction among youth. This study will help to establish a correlation between Alexithymia and internet addiction. Also, this study's results in showing a significant difference between males and females.

### Suggestion

This study focuses on Internet addiction among youth which blocks them from expressing their emotions and substituting them somewhere. Here, only the main effect of the variables is seen, so it is suggested to explore the interaction effects too concerning internet addiction. In the future, a more extensive study is also required in this area with a large sample to strongly establish the relationship between Alexithymia and Internet addiction in another sample with a wide age range. Gender-related studies including similarities and differences between both genders concerning Alexithymia and Internet addiction can also be explored as men exhibit more Internet addiction than women.

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