

## Mental Health in the Age of Connectivity: Internet Addiction and Psychological Well-Being in College Students

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This study investigates how college students' psychological well-being and internet addiction are related. As internet becomes more integrated into daily life, its effects on mental health, particularly in students, have sparked growing concern. In this research, 120 college students were surveyed using validated tools to measure both internet addiction and psychological well-being. The degree of internet addiction and multiple elements of psychological well-being, namely life purpose, environmental mastery, autonomy, positive relationships, self-acceptance, or personal development, were evaluated using the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) and Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS). The results revealed a significant negative correlation: higher levels of internet addiction were linked to lower overall psychological well-being. Notably, self-acceptance and environmental mastery showed the strongest connections to internet addiction. The research also found gender differences in both internet use and psychological well-being. These findings underscore potential psychological risks associated with excessive internet use among college students. They add to growing body of investigation on digital behaviour and mental health, highlighting the urgent need to address internet addiction within academic settings to protect students' well-being.

**Keywords:** Internet Addiction, Adolescents, Well-being

According to Young (1998), internet addiction is becoming recognized as a behavioral problem that is typified by excessive internet usage that interferes with everyday functioning and psychological well-being. Although the internet has transformed how people communicate, learn, and interact socially, its overuse—especially among adolescents and young adults—has raised growing concerns about its psychological consequences (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017a). As digital technologies become ever more integrated into academic and social life, college students appear particularly at risk of developing problematic internet habits that can undermine their mental well-being (Jiang et al., 2019).

### Psychological Well-Being: Definition and Core Components

A person's entire mental and emotional health, including how they view themselves

and deal with life's obstacles, is referred to as "psychological well-being. The 6 components of psychological well-being identified by Ryff's (1989) framework are life purpose, self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, personal development, and environmental mastery". A person's sense of stability and fulfillment is greatly influenced by each factor. Self-acceptance entails recognizing and appreciating one's own advantages and disadvantages, while positive relationships center on maintaining supportive and meaningful social connections. A purpose in life provides people direction and meaning, and personal growth is a reflection of a desire to grow and learn over time. Environmental mastery refers to effectively managing one's surroundings and challenges, and autonomy captures the sense of independence and self-governance (Negovan, 2010).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that excessive internet use might have a harmful impact on a number of these aspects. Liu et al. (2016) reported that individuals with higher levels of internet addiction tend to have lower psychological well-being, particularly in areas such as autonomy and personal growth. Likewise, studies by Young (1998) and Kuss and Griffiths (2017a) revealed that those who struggle with compulsive internet use often experience loneliness, depressive symptoms, and social withdrawal, all of which can harm their mental health. Overdependence on online activities can also hinder self-regulation, making it harder to maintain emotional stability and self-acceptance (Chou et al., 2015). Kuss and Griffiths (2017a) further noted that reliance on digital interactions may limit opportunities for personal development and reduce environmental mastery, as individuals become less engaged with the real world. Collectively, these results highlight importance of addressing internet addiction as a factor that can diminish psychological well-being.

### **College Students and Their Susceptibility to Internet Addiction**

College students are among the most vulnerable groups to internet addiction, largely due to their constant use of digital technology for academic, social, and entertainment purposes (Caplan, 2002). While online connectivity provides valuable resources and support networks, excessive engagement can contribute to stress, anxiety, and depression (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017a). Research by Cao et al. (2011) found that students who spend excessive time online often report greater stress and lower levels of well-being, suggesting that heavy internet use may intensify feelings of isolation and self-doubt—especially in high-pressure academic settings.

Social media use further amplifies this relationship. Pantic (2014) discovered that

students who devoted more time to social networking sites exhibited higher rates of anxiety and depression. These findings imply that online connections might not offer the same emotional satisfaction as in-person relationships, potentially leading to diminished psychological health. Overall, while the internet provides significant educational and social advantages, its extreme usage can have detrimental effects on students' mental well-being, underscoring the need for balance and mindful engagement with digital technologies.

Tao et al. (2024) investigated the connection between university students' psychological health and internet addiction in China. Students with higher degrees of internet dependence reported much lower psychological well-being, according to their findings, which showed a clear negative correlation. The areas most affected by excessive internet use included personal growth, self-acceptance, and a sense of purpose. The researchers concluded that compulsive online behavior often results in emotional distress, decreased self-esteem, and difficulties with self-control, all of which undermine mental and emotional health.

In India, Singh et al. (2023) explored how different patterns of internet use affect students' mental health. Their results showed that the reason for using the internet was crucial: students who used it mostly for academic purposes or research tended to report better psychological well-being, whereas those who spent extensive time on social media showed noticeable declines in mental health. This highlights how the nature and intent of internet use can shape its psychological outcomes.

Similarly, Li et al. (2022) examined how social media-driven internet addiction specifically impacts the psychological well-being of college students. Their result found that excessive social media engagement had

a particularly harmful effect on self-acceptance and personal growth. The researchers suggested that constant exposure to online comparisons and validation-seeking behavior might contribute to reduced self-worth and hinder personal development.

Zhang et al. (2021) added another perspective by investigating role of coping strategies in connection among internet addiction and psychological well-being. Their study demonstrated that students who employed adaptive coping mechanisms—such as effective time management and emotional regulation—experienced less stress and maintained better emotional health despite high levels of internet use. This suggests that developing healthy coping skills can buffer the negative mental health consequences of excessive internet engagement.

Liu et al. (2020) explored potential gender differences in how internet addiction affects well-being. Their findings revealed that while both male and female students experienced adverse effects, women were more likely to report declines in social or emotional well-being. The researchers attributed this disparity to higher social pressures among female students, particularly related to social comparison and online validation on social platforms.

Overall, these studies collectively emphasize that while internet offers valuable opportunities for learning or connection, its excessive use—especially when driven by social or emotional needs—can undermine key aspects of psychological well-being among college students.

The current investigation holds significance as it tackles the increasing issue of internet addiction and its potential effects on psychological well-being of college students. In today's digital era, the internet plays an indispensable role in education,

communication, or entertainment. However, its overuse has been connected to various negative outcomes, including emotional distress and diminished mental health. Understanding this relationship is essential, as college students represent a population that is both highly engaged with technology and vulnerable to its adverse psychological consequences.

By examining how internet addiction influences psychological well-being, goal of this research is to advance knowledge of how digital behaviors shape mental health outcomes. The insights gained from this research may prove valuable for universities, mental health practitioners, and policymakers, as they can guide the formation of focused initiatives meant to minimize internet addiction and enhance students' overall well-being.

### **Aims and Objectives**

1. To deepen the understanding of extent or patterns of internet use among college students.
2. To investigate relationship between internet addiction and psychological well-being within this population.
3. To analyze potential gender differences in psychological well-being among college students.
4. To explore variations in prevalence of internet addiction among male or female students.

### **Hypotheses**

- H1: There will be a significant negative connection between internet addiction and overall psychological well-being among college students.
- H2: Male and female students will differ in their levels of psychological well-being, reflecting gender-related differences in mental health outcomes.

H3: There will be notable gender-based differences in prevalence of internet addiction among college students.

## Method

### Participants

The sample comprised 120 college students—an equal number of males ( $n = 60$ ) and females ( $n = 60$ )—drawn from diverse academic disciplines at St. Xavier's College, Mapusa, Goa. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, allowing for the inclusion of students from multiple departments within the institution. To be eligible for participation, students had to be full-time enrollees aged among 18 and 25 years, with regular access to the internet. The goal and voluntary nature of research were explained to each participant, and they were all given the assurance that their answers would be kept private. Prior to their participation in the study, each subject gave their informed consent.

### Measures and Data Collection

*Young's IAT*: The IAT is a popular device for determining a person's level of internet addiction. Established by Dr. Kimberly Young in 1998, IAT is designed to measure psychological symptoms of internet addiction, focusing on how excessive internet use impacts an individual's daily life and overall well-being. The IAT consists of 20 self-report items, which measure aspects such as time spent online, neglect of daily responsibilities, withdrawal symptoms, and effect of internet use on relationships. Every item has a 5-point Likert scale rating, which ranges from "Rarely" (1) to "Always" (5). Higher scores indicate higher levels of addiction. Each question is assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, with the range being "Rarely" (1) to "Always" (5). A total score of 30 denotes a normal amount of internet use, while scores between 50 and 79 indicate severe addiction, scores between 31 and 49 represent mild

addiction. A significant reliance on internet is indicated by scores of 80 or higher.

The IAT has demonstrated good reliability and validity, with strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha typically around 0.90) and test-retest reliability (ranging from 0.80 to 0.90). It is regarded as a reliable instrument for evaluating internet addiction in various populations, including adolescents and adults.

*Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS)*: The PWBS, established by Carol Ryff in the 1980s, is a widely recognized tool to assess various features of a person's psychological health. This inventory consists of 84 items that comprise of a series of statements reflecting six areas of psychological well-being; autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Each of the dimensions on the scale is measured using 14 items. A 6-point Likert scale, with "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (6) as extremes, is used to score each topic. Higher scores indicate stronger psychological well-being. The total score is sum of scores for each dimension.

Strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.74 to 0.91) and good construct validity have been demonstrated by the PWBS, which has been demonstrated to have a negative correlation with assessments of psychological distress or a positive correlation with measures of happiness and life satisfaction.

## Results and Discussion

### Prevalence of Internet Addiction

The findings summarized in Table 1 illustrate the extent of internet addiction between the college students who participated in study. Out of a total sample of 120 students, 60% demonstrated high levels of internet addiction, whereas the remaining 40% exhibited low levels. When

examined by gender, 65% of male students and 55% of female students have been found to experience high levels of internet addiction.

These results indicate that problematic internet use is becoming a notable concern within the college population, as a majority of the students showed signs of elevated dependence on the internet. Extreme usage of internet had linked to a range of adverse results, including declines in academic performance, disrupted sleep routines, reduced social interaction, and deterioration in mental health (Young, 1998).

The prevalence observed in this study aligns with findings from international research. Kuss and Griffiths (2017) similarly reported that young adults and university pupils were among most vulnerable groups to developing internet addiction, largely due to their frequent engagement with digital devices and online platforms. The consistency between the present results and global trends underscores the growing impact of digital dependency on student well-being and academic life.

Table 1- Indicating Percentage of college students experiencing varying levels of Internet Addiction.

Measure	Gender	N	Lowlevel	High level
InternetAddiction	Female	60	45%	55%
	Male	60	35%	65%
InternetAddiction across Sample		120	40%	60%

Further Analysis of the data revealed notable gender-based differences in levels

Table 2- Indicating the Correlation Coefficients for Internet addiction scores with their Psychological Well-Being (Dimension wise and overall scores, N=120) \*P<0.05: Significant

	PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING						
	Self-acceptance	Purpose in life	Positive relations	Autonomy	Personal growth	Environmental mastery	Overall
INTERNET ADDICTION	-0.195*	-0.026	-0.107	0.012	-0.146	-0.199*	-0.175*

of internet addiction. A larger proportion of male students (65%) reported experiencing high levels of internet addiction compared to female students (55%), whereas a greater percentage of females (45%) fell into the low addiction category relative to males (35%). These results suggest that male students were generally more susceptible to excessive internet use than their female counterparts.

The pattern is consistent with findings from previous research that has identified distinct online usage behaviors across genders. Several studies have observed that men are more inclined toward online gaming and other recreational internet activities, which tend to foster addictive behaviors. For instance, Lemmens et al.(2015) found that male students have been significantly more probable to display problematic gaming behaviors, a key component of internet addiction.

Conversely, female students often use internet for social and relational purposes, such as engaging on social media platforms, which may not always result in the same degree of addiction seen in gaming-related use. "However, it is important to acknowledge that excessive social media engagement can also lead to negative psychological effects, including increased depression, anxiety, or lower self-esteem—symptoms that parallel those seen in other forms of behavioral addiction" (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

**The relation between internet addiction and overall psychological well-being**

H1: A significant negative correlation will exist between internet addiction and overall psychological well-being among college students".

As shown in the table, internet addiction was negatively correlated with most dimensions of psychological well-being, including self-acceptance, personal growth, environmental mastery, and overall well-being. These findings suggest that as internet addiction increases, students tend to experience a decline in key aspects of their psychological health.

The outcomes showed a significant negative correlation among online addiction and psychological well-being overall ( $r = -0.175, p < 0.05$ ), suggesting that higher levels of internet addiction are linked to lower psychological well-being. In other words, as students become more dependent on the internet, their overall mental and emotional health tends to decline. This outcome is consistent with previous research emphasizing harmful psychological effects of excessive internet use. For instance, Weiser (2000) found that internet addiction is linked to elevated symptoms of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, all of which contribute to poorer psychological well-being. Similarly, people who spend too much time on the internet may neglect face-to-face relationships and fail to form meaningful in-person connections—an essential element of positive psychological functioning (Shaw & Black, 2008).

Initially, a significant negative correlation ( $r = -0.195, p < 0.05$ ) has been discovered among self-acceptance and internet addiction. An individual's capacity to see or value both their strengths and weaknesses is reflected in their level of self-acceptance. According to the research, pupils who are more addicted to the internet also have a tendency to have a less positive self-image and lower self-esteem. This aligns with previous studies indicating that excessive engagement with digital media can foster social isolation, self-doubt, and feelings of

inadequacy (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017b). Such emotional strain may prevent individuals from developing a healthy sense of self-acceptance and reinforce negative self-perceptions.

Another important finding was a negative connection among internet addiction or environmental mastery ( $r = -0.199, p < 0.05$ ). Environmental mastery involves one's ability to effectively manage their surroundings and make decisions that align with personal goals. When internet use becomes excessive, individuals may begin to neglect real-life tasks and responsibilities, leading to a loss of control over their environment. Prior investigation has shown that persons who are addicted to internet often engage in avoidant or escapist behaviors, distancing themselves from real-world obligations (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017b). This avoidance can erode their sense of competence and autonomy, ultimately diminishing their ability to manage daily life effectively.

However, other aspects of psychological well-being, such as autonomy, positive connections, personal development, and life purpose, did not significantly correlate with internet addiction, according to the current study. This indicates that while internet addiction does appear to impair certain aspects of mental health—particularly self-acceptance and environmental mastery—it may not have a uniform effect across all areas of psychological functioning.

Overall, the results demonstrate that internet addiction negatively influences multiple dimensions of psychological well-being, mostly those related to self-worth or effective life management. These outcomes are consistent with prior investigations emphasizing detrimental psychological effects of excessive online engagement. Consequently, the study's first hypothesis—*that among college students, there is a*

*substantial negative relationship among internet addiction and psychological health.*—was supported. Furthermore, the data identified specific dimensions of psychological well-being most strongly impacted by internet addiction, underscoring the need to address this growing issue among the student population.

### **Gender differences in psychological well-being**

H2: There will be differences in psychological well-being between male and female college students, reflecting gender-related variations in mental health.

Table 3 depicts the significant gender differences in various aspects of psychological well-being among college students. These differences were measured across six key domains: purpose in life, positive relations, personal growth, autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery.

The study's findings showed significant gender disparities in a number of aspects of college students' psychological well-being. Students who were female reported a noticeably higher level of self-acceptance ( $M = 59.18$ ) compared to their male counterparts ( $M = 53.02$ ), with a  $t$ -value of 3.202. This outcome aligns with earlier research suggesting that women generally demonstrate greater self-acceptance, which may be attributed to their stronger emphasis on emotional awareness and interpersonal connection in socialization processes (Tiggemann, 2003).

A similar pattern was observed for purpose in life, where female students scored significantly higher ( $M = 62.25$ ) than male students ( $M = 55.80$ ), yielding a  $t$ -value of 3.478. These results correspond with findings by Steger et al. (2008), who noted that women tend to report a stronger sense

of meaning or purpose in life. This may be due to their greater engagement in introspective and relational experiences that contribute to a clearer sense of direction and purpose.

Gender differences have also been noticeable in the dimension of positive relations with others. Female students scored substantially higher ( $M = 64.42$ ) compared to males ( $M = 53.98$ ), with a  $t$ -value of 5.889. This supports prior research demonstrating that women often report stronger social support networks and more emotionally fulfilling relationships than men (Diener et al., 2010). Ryff (1989) proposed a concept of psychological well-being that states that having supportive and good connections significantly enhances one's overall mental health, which may explain the higher scores among female participants.

Furthermore, significant gender differences emerged in personal growth, with female students again outperforming males ( $M = 69.82$  vs.  $M = 61.03$ ), producing a  $t$ -value of 5.343. These results are in accordance with earlier studies showing that women tend to engage more deeply in self-reflection and emotional exploration, which contribute to personal development (Schmuck et al., 2000). Personal growth involves an openness to new experiences and the ability to learn from life's challenges—qualities that may be more actively cultivated among women due to social and emotional factors (Ryff, 1989).

Overall, the data suggest that female students exhibit higher psychological well-being across multiple domains: self-acceptance, purpose in life, positive relations, and personal growth. These differences may reflect gender-based variations in emotional expression, relational engagement, and self-reflective tendencies that contribute to well-being.

Table 3- Indicating mean, standard deviation, and t-value for Gender and Psychological Well-Being.

Measure	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value
Self-acceptance	Female	60	59.18	11.518	3.202**
	Male	60	53.02	9.477	
Purpose in life	Female	60	62.25	11.471	3.478**
	Male	60	55.80	8.645	
Positive relations	Female	60	64.42	9.596	5.889**
	Male	60	53.98	9.809	
Autonomy	Female	60	57.48	11.674	0.131
	Male	60	58.47	57.127	
Personal growth	Female	60	69.82	9.049	5.343**
	Male	60	61.03	8.957	
Environmental mastery	Female	60	58.77	9.675	2.204*
	Male	60	55.25	7.690	
Overall Psychological Well-Being	Female	60	371.90	49.352	5.765**
	Male	60	328.02	32.266	

\*\*P<0.01: Highly Significant

\*P<0.05: Significant

A significant gender difference was also observed in environmental mastery, with female students ( $M = 58.77$ ) reporting higher scores than their male peers ( $M = 55.25$ ), producing a t-value of 2.204. An individual's ability to successfully handle life's difficulties is reflected in their environmental mastery and interaction with their surroundings in a purposeful way. This outcome is consistent with earlier researches indicating that women often engage more actively with family, community, and social networks, which may enhance their sense of control and competence in navigating daily life (Helgeson, 2017). The outcome may also be explained by the fact that women tend to develop stronger organizational and relational skills, often shaped through their social roles and responsibilities, which can contribute to greater confidence in managing their environment.

In contrast, no significant gender difference emerged in autonomy, with females ( $M = 57.48$ ) and males ( $M = 58.47$ ) showing nearly identical mean scores, reflected in a t-value of 0.131. This outcome is in accordance with research that displays that autonomy—a sense of independence and self-determination—may not be strongly influenced by gender (Bakan, 1966).

When examining overall psychological well-being, female students again scored notably higher ( $M = 371.90$ ) than male students ( $M = 328.02$ ), yielding a t-value of 5.765. This result reinforces prior studies indicating that women typically report higher levels of psychological well-being, likely due to their greater emotional expressiveness, stronger social support systems, and more adaptive coping mechanisms (Kuehner,

2017). Additionally, women are often more attuned to their emotional health and tend to engage in self-care practices or seek social and emotional support, which can further enhance their mental well-being (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012).

Taken together, these findings indicate that gender differences were significant across most dimensions of psychological well-being, with the exception of autonomy. Overall, female students demonstrated higher well-being scores, suggesting that their greater social connectedness and emotional awareness may play a vital role in promoting psychological health.

### Gender differences in Internet Addiction

**H3:** There will be gender-based differences in prevalence of internet addiction among college students.

Table 4- Indicating mean, standard deviation, and t-value for Gender and Internet addiction.

Measure	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value
Internet Addiction	Female	60	55.13	13.500	3.506**
	Male	60	62.37	8.555	

\*\*P<0.01: Highly Significant

The data presented in the above table illustrates clear gender differences in internet addiction between college students. Findings revealed that male students reported a significantly higher mean score for internet addiction ( $M = 62.37$ ) compared to female students ( $M = 55.13$ ), with a t-value of 3.506 ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that this difference is statistically significant.

These results suggest that male students were more susceptible to problematic internet use, a trend that mirrors previous research findings. Young (1998) noted that men are

generally more engaged in online activities, namely gaming, social networking, or other recreational internet use, which can increase the risk of addictive behavior. Similarly, Kuss and Griffiths (2017) found that male college students often demonstrate higher levels of internet dependency, particularly in activities like online gaming and pornography, which are strongly linked to addictive internet use.

Conversely, female students tend to use internet primarily for social interaction and communication-based activities, like social media engagement. While excessive social media use can still be problematic, it is typically less associated with severe addictive patterns than online gaming or compulsive browsing (Andreassen, 2015). This difference in how males and females engage with digital platforms may explain the observed variation in addiction levels.

Overall, outcomes of this research confirm that significant gender differences exist in internet addiction, with male students demonstrating a greater tendency toward excessive and compulsive internet use than their female counterparts. These findings lend support to the study's hypothesis that male college students have been more likely to exhibit higher levels of internet addiction.

### Main Findings

The primary findings of this study reveal significant insights into association between college students' psychological health and internet addiction:

- A large proportion of college students showed high levels of internet dependency.
- The study discovered an intense negative correlation between general psychological health and internet addiction. In particular, lower PWBS scores were linked to higher degrees of online addiction.

- Among 6 dimensions “of psychological well-being, self-acceptance and environmental mastery showed the strongest associations with internet addiction. Students with higher internet addiction scores tended to have lower levels of self-acceptance and felt less capable of managing their environment.
- Gender differences were observed in both internet addiction and psychological well-being. The data revealed that male students reported higher levels of internet addiction compared to females. These differences also extended to psychological well-being, with females showing higher levels of well-being in certain areas.

These findings highlight adverse effects on mental health associated with extensive internet use, mainly in context of college students, and underline importance of addressing internet addiction in academic settings.

### **Implications**

The finding that internet addiction negatively affects psychological well-being highlights importance of supporting students’ mental health on campus. Colleges could expand counselling services to include programs that educate students about risks of extreme internet use and teach strategies for healthier online habits. Workshops, seminars, or courses focused on digital wellness and self-care could help students better manage their internet use and maintain a balanced lifestyle. By promoting awareness and practical skills, these initiatives could empower students to protect their mental or emotional well-being.

### **Limitations**

This research surveyed 120 college students, which may not fully represent the

broader student population or other demographic groups. As a result, outcomes might not apply to students who belong to different cultural, socio-economic, or geographic backgrounds. A larger and more diverse sample would make the results more generalizable. Additionally, different forms of internet use were not distinguished in research, namely social media, academic work, or gaming, which may affect psychological well-being in different ways. Understanding these nuances could provide a clearer picture of how specific online behaviors impact students’ mental health.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that excessive internet use is related to lower psychological well-being among college students. Students spending more time online tended to have lower self-acceptance and struggled more with managing their lives effectively. The study also found gender differences, with male students showing higher levels of internet addiction than females. These outcomes highlight potential mental health risks of spending too much time online and underscore the importance of helping students develop healthier habits and balance in their digital lives.

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