

## Mental Health: Role of Idiot Syndrome and Socio-Demographic Contributors

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People use internet in variety of ways. One of these is to find out the health-related issues they face. The internet may or may not provide factual information. The internet searches regarding physical and mental health issues are often misleading. Even unsuspecting individuals may harm themselves and others by following what is on the internet. It can further develop into anxiety and depressive symptoms along with other mental and physical health issues. It can impact the overall well-being of individuals. It may become a barrier during treatment. The terminology "IDIOT syndrome (Internet Derived Information Obstructing Treatment)" fits in this context. The present study investigates status of mental health due to IDIOT syndrome and socio-demographic variables on a sample of 150 adults (aged between 30-40 years). Cyberchondria Severity Scale (CSS) and Mental Health Inventory-38 (MHI) were used to collect data that was further analysed using statistical tools like descriptive statistics and ANOVA. The significant differences were found in the scores of high and low levels of IDIOT syndrome on global mental health ( $F=15.00$ ,  $df=1, 142$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The implications and limitations were also discussed in this study.

**Keywords:** Mental Health, IDIOT Syndrome, Gender, Type of family

Internet usage has widely grown over the past 25 years. Everyone has witnessed a significant change in how individuals obtain everything from medical services to groceries (Pooler et al., 2017). The affordability and pervasiveness of the internet have radically altered people's personal and professional lives (Boz and Aksoy, 2011). It has both benefits and drawbacks depending on the amount of time spend on it and the use made out of it (Gupta et al., 2018). The biggest challenge of internet searching is the inability to evaluate the reliability and quality of the outcomes (Sayakhot and Carolan-Olah, 2016).

Everyone searches on the internet for medical information in this era of technology. This may result in the early detection and prevention of a dangerous condition. On the other side, it may hinder the course of

treatment. The terminology "IDIOT syndrome" fits in this context. IDIOT syndrome is an acronym used for 'Internet Derived Information Obstructing Treatment (IDIOT) syndrome'. When sufferers suddenly stop accepting medication from the medical professional, as a result of naively believing online medical information, it is known as IDIOT syndrome. It is also known as cyberchondria in medical terms (Gopinath and Shroff, 2022). Several individuals conduct web research to self-diagnose their diseases and medicate themselves prior visiting a physician (Rajaram Mohan et al., 2022). Although most individuals find it easy, convenient and common to acquire healthcare information online, in rare circumstances, when internet research seems extreme and repeated, it can develop into a maladaptive behavior characterized as cyberchondria (Maftei and Holman, 2020).

According to WHO (2018), a person is in a mentally stable condition if he or she is conscious of his/her personal capacities, able to deal with everyday struggles, capable to perform productively, and capable to pay back to their society. Some recent studies have found that females looked for somatic symptoms online more often as compared to males. But Aulia et al. (2020) found that males more frequently searched for medical symptoms online.

According to Maftai and Holman (2020), cyberchondria was found to be positively associated with neuroticism and being female. According to some other research, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, health anxiety and low levels of self-esteem are all causes for cyberchondria (Bajcar and Babiak, 2021). Dameery et al. (2020) concluded that cyberchondriasis and socio-demographic factors didn't demonstrate any significant relationship among Omanis population. It is the need of the hour to assess the level of IDIOT syndrome and its effect on mental health among individuals and further exploration is also needed if there is any effect of being male or female and type of family.

### **Objective**

- To assess the effect of IDIOT syndrome and socio-demographic determinants on mental health.

### **Hypothesis**

- There would be significant effect on mental health of participants on the basis of IDIOT syndrome and socio-demographic determinants under study.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

A 2x2x2 factorial design was adopted. Gender was the first independent variable with two levels: male and female; next independent variable was type of family which

was also varied at two levels: joint family and nuclear family; and the third independent variable was level of IDIOT syndrome which also has two levels, i.e., low and high.

### **Sample**

A sample of 200 adults with age range of 30-40 years was selected. The socio-demographics were also considered for the study.

### **Tools**

*Cyberchondria Severity Scale (CSS-33)*– CSS-33 (Cronbach's alpha = 0.95) was administered in this study to get scores for two levels of IDIOT syndrome or cyberchondria, i.e., low level and high level as per norms. It included 33 items that uses 5-point Likert-scale (Oniszczenko, 2021).

*Mental Health Inventory (MHI-38)* – It consisted of 38 items (Cronbach's alpha = .89). Each item scored on a 6-point scale and only item 9 and 28 scored on a 5-point scale. It included 6 subscales, i.e., anxiety ( $\alpha=.79$ ), depression ( $\alpha=.77$ ), loss of behavioural control ( $\alpha=.81$ ), general positive affect ( $\alpha=.68$ ), emotional ties ( $\alpha=.82$ ) and life satisfaction ( $\alpha=N.A.$ ); and two global subscales, i.e., psychological distress ( $\alpha=.92$ ) and psychological well-being ( $\alpha=.86$ ).

### **Procedure**

The data was collected by keeping in mind the moral and ethical concern. The informed consent was taken from the participants and they were ensured about the confidentiality of the information they have shared. After collection of data, the obtained scores were arranged and analyzed by using SPSS software.

## **Results and Discussion**

This research emphasized on the effect of IDIOT syndrome and various socio-demographic determinants, i.e., gender, type of family on mental health. To get the results, participants were split on the basis of their

gender (male and female), family type (joint and nuclear) and their level of IDIOT syndrome (low and high). MHI-38 incorporated various subscales: depression, loss of behavioural control, anxiety, life satisfaction, general positive affect and emotional ties. These subscales were clubbed under two global subscales: psychological well-being and psychological distress; and the summation of these global subscales indicated the overall index of mental health.

### **Anxiety**

The non-significant effect of gender ( $F=0.02$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) was found on anxiety subscale of mental health which represented that no distinguishable differences were seen between female ( $M=24.68$ ) and male ( $M=24.53$ ) participants. However, a study lead by Burani and Nelson (2020) stated that females had experienced more symptoms of anxiety as compared to males. The obtained results for effect of type of family ( $F=1.72$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) were also discovered to be non-significant between participants who live in joint ( $M=25.27$ ) and nuclear families ( $M=23.94$ ). These results were supported by a study conducted on women living in joint and nuclear families which stated that they do not differ significantly (Kumar, 2015). The significant effect of IDIOT syndrome was observed on anxiety subscale of mental health ( $F=83.48$ ,  $df=1$ , 192;  $p<0.01$ ) between participants with low level ( $M=19.98$ ) and high level ( $M=29.23$ ). These outcomes are consistent with the study conducted by Muse et al. (2012) and Sreedhar & Shaji (2017). It mentioned that the higher degrees of health anxiety were associated with more recurrent and prolonged online search of information.

### **Depression**

The non-significant effect of gender ( $F=2.18$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) was found on depression subscale of mental health which represented that no significant differences were seen

between female ( $M=10.95$ ) and male ( $M=10.24$ ) participants. A study conducted by Salk et al. (2017) had given contradictory results which mentioned that higher gender disparities were seen for major depression. The obtained results for effect of type of family ( $F=0.59$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) was also found to be non-significant between people who live in joint ( $M=10.41$ ) and nuclear families ( $M=10.78$ ). A significant effect of IDIOT syndrome ( $F=26.82$ ,  $df=1$ , 192;  $p<0.01$ ) was found on depression between participants with low level ( $M=9.35$ ) and high level ( $M=11.84$ ) of IDIOT syndrome. A study done by Han et al. (2021) supported the obtained results by stating that depression is mediated by cyberchondria.

### **Loss of behavioural control**

It was ascertained that there was noticeable effect of gender ( $F=4.64$ ,  $df=1$ , 192;  $p<0.05$ ) on loss of behavioural control subscale of mental health. The female participants ( $M=22.07$ ) had higher scores as compared to male participants ( $M=19.91$ ). The results of this contemporary study are favoured by a research study which mentioned that compared to male participants, female participants displayed stronger activation in regions that are typically linked to emotions during the interaction of emotional and cognitive processing (Koch et al., 2007). A study conducted by Piercy et al. (2001) opposed the obtained results by stating that females who have worked as sales manager demonstrated higher control on behaviour than male representatives. The derived results for effect of type of family ( $F=.73$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) on loss of behavioural control subscale of mental health were found to be non-significant between people who live in joint ( $M=20.56$ ) and nuclear families ( $M=21.42$ ). It was found that there was a significant effect of IDIOT syndrome on loss of behavioural control ( $F=28.37$ ,  $df=1$ , 192;  $p<0.01$ ) between individuals with low level

(M=18.32) and high level (M=23.66) of IDIOT syndrome. The first order interaction effect between gender and type of family was also found to be significant ( $F=5.35$ ,  $df = 1$ , 192;  $p<0.05$ ).

### **General positive affect**

It was deduced that there were no significant differences in individuals on the basis of gender ( $F=0.01$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) and type of family ( $F=1.29$ ,  $df=1$ , 192). These results represented no significant differences between female (M=40.72) and male (M=40.76) participants; and the participants living in joint (M=41.40) and nuclear families (M=40.08). The significant differences were observed in the low (M=43.59) and high level (M=37.89) of IDIOT syndrome ( $F=24.22$ ,  $df=1$ , 192;  $p<0.01$ ) when assessed on the subscale of general positive affect of mental health. However, contradictory results were given in a study conducted by Shamim & Muazzam (2018) which stated that the way men and women perceive, comprehend and experience positive emotions differs significantly.

### **Emotional ties**

It was determined that effect of gender ( $F=0.46$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) was non-significant on emotional ties subscale of mental health between female (M=8.45) and male (M=8.64) participants. The obtained results for effect of type of family ( $F=12.51$ ,  $df=1$ , 192;  $p<0.01$ ) on emotional ties were found to be significant. These results depicted that participants living in joint families (M=9.04) had higher scores as compared to those who live in nuclear families (M=8.05). A significant effect of IDIOT syndrome was found on emotional ties subscale of mental health ( $F=15.72$ ,  $df=1$ , 192;  $p<0.01$ ) between participants with low level (M=9.10) and high level (M=7.99) of IDIOT syndrome. The second order interaction effect among IDIOT syndrome, gender and type of family was also

observed to be significant ( $F=11.52$ ,  $df=1$ , 192;  $p<0.01$ ).

### **Life satisfaction**

It was demonstrated that there was non-significant effect of gender ( $F=.04$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) on life satisfaction subscale of mental health which represented negligible significant differences between female (M=3.79) and male (M=3.82) participants. A study by Bibi et al. (2015) supported the obtained results of this contemporary study by saying that no differences have been found between males and females in terms of life satisfaction. However, Joshanloo and Jovanovic (2020) discovered that women were content within their life than men. The obtained results for effect of type of family ( $F=2.51$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) on life satisfaction was also found to be non-significant. These outcomes depicted non-significant differences between people who live in joint (M=3.69) and nuclear families (M=3.92). But according to Lodhi et al. (2019), people who are part of a joint family reported higher levels of satisfaction than those who are a part of nuclear family. It was found that there was significant effect of IDIOT syndrome on life satisfaction ( $F=8.00$ ,  $df = 1$ , 192;  $p<0.01$ ). These results represented those individuals with low level (M=4.01) of IDIOT syndrome had somewhat higher scores for life satisfaction as compared to those who had high level (M=3.60) of IDIOT syndrome. Mahamid et al. (2021) had also reported that contentment with life was inversely related with problematic usage of internet.

### **Psychological distress**

It was clear that there was non-significant effect of gender ( $F=3.63$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) on psychological distress global subscale of mental health which represented that negligible significant differences were identified between female (M=62.62) and male (M=58.10) participants. A study conducted by Matud et al. (2015) had given

opposite results which revealed that psychological distress was higher in females than males. The obtained results for effect of type of family ( $F=.07$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) was also found to be non-significant between people who live in joint ( $M=60.69$ ) and nuclear families ( $M=60.03$ ). Research conducted by Khaliq et al. (2022) had given contradictory results by mentioning that those who were raised in nuclear families expressed higher distress than those who were raised in joint families. It was found that significant effect of IDIOT syndrome was recognized on psychological distress global subscale of mental health ( $F=65.36$ ,  $df = 1$ , 192;  $p<0.01$ ). These results represented those individuals with low level ( $M=50.77$ ) of IDIOT syndrome had lower scores for psychological distress as compared to those who had high level ( $M=69.95$ ) of IDIOT syndrome. Islam and Hossin (2016); and Mamun et al. (2020) conducted a study in which the results displayed that psychological distress and problematic internet use are closely associated.

### **Psychological well-being**

It was identified that there was non-significant effect of gender ( $F=0.00$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) on psychological well-being between female ( $M=58.28$ ) and male ( $M=58.39$ ) participants. But according to Gomez-Baya et al. (2018), females had poor psychological well-being as compared to males. The obtained results for effect of type of family ( $F=3.16$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) were also found to be non-significant between people who live in joint ( $M=59.62$ ) and nuclear families ( $M=57.05$ ) when analysed on psychological well-being global subscale of mental health. A study done by Prajapati (2013) supported the obtained results by stating that nuclear and joint families do not differ significantly. A significant effect of IDIOT syndrome was noticed on psychological well-being ( $F=19.91$ ,  $df = 1$ , 192;  $p<0.01$ ) between

participants with low level ( $M=61.56$ ) high level ( $M=55.11$ ) of IDIOT syndrome.

### **Mental health index**

There was non-significant effect of gender ( $F=.00$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) on overall mental health index which represented that no significant differences were seen between female ( $M=161.68$ ) and male ( $M=161.70$ ) participants. The contradictory results were mentioned by Afifi et al. (2009) which stated that gender disparities show that compared to men, women have a broader spectrum of negative mental health effects. The obtained results for effect of type of family ( $F=0.57$ ,  $df=1$ , 192) was also found to be non-significant between participants who live in joint ( $M=163.03$ ) and nuclear families ( $M=160.35$ ). It was found that significant influence of IDIOT syndrome was observed on overall mental health index ( $F=54.25$ ,  $df=1$ , 192;  $p<0.01$ ). These results represented that participants with low level ( $M=174.71$ ) of IDIOT syndrome had higher scores on overall mental health index as compared to those who had high level ( $M=148.67$ ) of IDIOT syndrome. The results of this present study go in line with the study conducted by Makarla et al. (2019) which revealed that cyberchondria have a negative relationship with overall mental health. A research lead by Malik et al. (2019) stood contradictory with the obtained results of the present study by indicating that there was no correlation found between online searching for health information and overall mental health.

It can be said that the hypothesis that was made during the initiation of this research was partially verified for the mentioned variables, i.e., IDIOT syndrome, family type and gender. The hypothesis was verified for anxiety, depression, loss of behavioural control, general positive affect, emotional ties, life satisfaction, psychological well-being, psychological distress and index of mental

health. There were significant differences found between individuals with low and high level of IDIOT syndrome when measured on the aforesaid subscales, global subscales and mental health index. The obtained results depicted that individuals with low level of IDIOT syndrome had lower anxiety, depression, loss of behavior control and psychological distress when compared with individuals who had high level of IDIOT syndrome. The individuals with high level of IDIOT syndrome had diminished contentment with life, general positive affect, emotional ties, psychological well-being and poor mental health as compared to those individuals who had low level of IDIOT syndrome. The results portrayed that people with high level of IDIOT syndrome are probably not able to manage the stress of life that might come from surfing the internet for health concerns. There might be the exposure to the unpleasant social settings, sleep deprivation, poor choices and harmful health behavior. It can be said that IDIOT syndrome is a contributing factor for various aspects of mental health. The probable reasons could be that individuals with high level of IDIOT syndrome are not able to manage their behavior appropriately. It is obvious that people experience positive emotions at different times and there are differences in their experiences too. They become anxious for their own health and for the health of their loved ones as well because of the strong connections they feel with the people around them.

The significant difference in mental health due to gender and family type was observed on the subscale of loss of behavioural control and emotional ties, respectively. It can be concluded on the basis of the obtained results that females were more inclined towards losing behavioural control as compared to males. As it is observed that women are more interactive and supposed

to share more about their overwhelming emotions and thoughts, that may be the reason for the outcomes of the present research that depicted a significant difference between female and male individuals on loss of behavioural control. It was also noticed in the context of type of family that the individuals residing in joint families have robust emotional connections for the other members of the family as compared to those individuals who live in nuclear families. The non-significant differences that we have discovered in the present study in mental health on the basis of gender was observed for the subscales of depression, anxiety, life satisfaction, emotional ties, general positive affect, psychological well-being, psychological distress, and index of mental health. The results of the present study signify that both the gender, be it male or female, counter same situations in their day-to-day lives, whether the house chores or the professional tasks which gives them exposure to experience similar life scenarios. The issues both males and females have are of same magnitude in this modern age. So, no significant differences were found in the present study. The non-significant differences observed in mental health on the basis of type of family were for the subscales of depression, anxiety, loss of behavioural control, life satisfaction, general positive affect, psychological well-being, psychological distress, and mental health index. The families with large number of members in it sort out the conflicts and issues by giving support to each other while the nuclear families have less members in it so there are less chances of conflicts among them. As of now, almost both types of families have similar lifestyle and they share same functions of socialization which could be a probable reason for the non-significant differences.

### Implications

The usage of internet has been progressing frequently. In order for people to live a healthy and balanced life, it is crucial to discriminate between appropriate and irrelevant information that is gathered through internet browsing, and to do this, suitable management should be implemented. It is imperative to prevent the usage of internet for acquiring health information from impairing mental health. The difficulties people experience after developing IDIOT syndrome are highlighted in this study as a critical problem. The difficulties encountered include the possibility of developing anxiety, depression, losing control on behavior, poor mental health and feeling more concerned than before while looking for health information. The results of the current study will help in better understanding of the notion of IDIOT syndrome, its impact on humankind and will aid in improving more effective strategies of managing mental health.

### Limitations

This contemporary study has included people under the age group of 30-40 years. The results cannot be generalized on older adults and adolescents. The time duration for online health information searching was not considered.

### Conclusion

This contemporary study aimed at assessing the effect of IDIOT syndrome and socio-demographic determinants (gender and type of family) on mental health. According to the findings, it could be substantiated that the effect of low and high level of IDIOT syndrome was seen for anxiety, depression, loss of behavioural control, general positive affect, emotional ties, satisfaction with life, psychological well-being, psychological distress and overall mental health. The results demonstrated that

high level of IDIOT syndrome leads to anxiety, depression, loss of behavioural control, psychological distress and poor mental health whereas low level of IDIOT syndrome leads to greater satisfaction with life, warm emotional connections, general positive affect, psychological well-being and better mental health. The gender (female and male) differences and furthermore the differences in the type of family (joint and nuclear) were seen for loss of behavioral control and emotional ties, respectively. The findings displayed that females lack behavioral control as compared to males; and people in joint families feel more emotionally associated with others in contrast to people in nuclear families. The first order interaction effect was identified between gender and type of family for loss of behavioural control. The second order interaction effect was identified among gender, type of family and levels of IDIOT syndrome for emotional ties.

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