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Exploring the Correlation Between Internet Addiction, Anxiety and Achievement Test Among Iranian Male Senior High School EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of internet usage among adolescents has raised concerns about its psychological and academic impacts. Internet addiction, characterized by excessive and uncontrolled online behavior, is increasingly linked to mental health issues such as anxiety, which may also influence academic performance. Despite growing attention globally, limited research has focused on this issue among high school EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in Iran. This study investigates the relationships between internet addiction, anxiety, and academic achievement among Iranian male senior high school EFL students. A sample of 70 students was randomly selected from two public high schools. Data were collected using the Zung Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (SAS, 1971), the Internet Addiction Test (IAT, Young, 1996), and a standardized academic achievement test administered by Iran's Ministry of Education. Results revealed a significant positive correlation between internet addiction and anxiety, suggesting that higher internet use is associated with elevated anxiety levels. Additionally, both internet addiction and anxiety were negatively correlated with students' academic achievement scores. These findings underscore the importance of monitoring students' internet usage and addressing their mental health needs. The study contributes to the existing literature by examining this triadic relationship in a less-explored educational and cultural context.

INTRODUCTION

The prominent role of IT (Information Technology) and the overwhelming domination of colorful social media platforms are two of the most controversial phenomena of the modern communities worldwide with the majority of users are adolescents and young people (Berner, Rennemark, Jogréus & Berglund, 2012). According to Haque et al (2016), the Internet is integrated to our daily life and its rapid progress has provided lots of opportunities for communication, information exchange, and social interactions in the simplest way. Internet has been able to enter in the realm of human beings as an essential tool of daily life with its arrival, while the elimination of it is an inevitable affair for most of the users (Farshbaf, 2009).

Internet as an influential mass media can meet the needs of human beings and expose them in every dimension of their lifelong. However, its negative consequences especially in cultural, educational and social fields should not be denied. The fundamental cause of these unfavorable impacts of the internet on family communications, and emotional health is the lack of control people have over their use of this emerging technology (Lin & Tsai, 2000). This phenomenon is known as internet addiction and is considered one of the forms of behavioral addictions in all the societies. Ivan Goldberg first described Internet Addiction Disorder in 1959. People who spend more than 38 hours per week online, are labelled to have an addiction to Internet (Ko et al, 2007). The study of the negative side of Internet should not be seen as an attempt to discredit it, but rather to recognize that the Internet has both positive and negative implications. Essentially, the Internet functions like a double-edged sword; it can be used positively with proper education and guidelines in place. Without these, individuals may find themselves struggling in the darkest depths of internet addiction.

American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) has announced that there would be different types of internet addiction; web surfing, pornography, chatting and video games characterized by dry eyes, headache, sleep disturbance, neglect of family, problems with school or job etc. (Kampman & Jarvis, 2015). Since Internet addiction creates a behavioral dependency to the Internet, the increasing demand in unpleasant disorders associated with Internet addiction has led to a rise in other behavioral and mental addictions (Hamidian, 2000). Internet addiction disorder is characterized by excessive internet usage, leading to obvious symptoms such as anger, tension, and anxiety (Goldberg, 1996). Young (1998), outlined criteria for diagnosing internet addiction (IA), identifying core symptoms like withdrawal, poor planning skills, tolerance, preoccupation, impaired control, and significant time spent online.

Globally observation indicates that there is an 82 percent increase in 2009 with an average of 5 and half hours spend on internet and other social networks (Nielsen, 2012). To this end, The American Psychiatric Association defines internet addiction as a pattern of internet use leading to behavioral impairment and unpleasant internal states over a regular two-month timespan. It identifies seven criteria for diagnosis of internet addiction (at least three must be present over two months): 1. Tolerance or reduced pleasure from repeated internet use. 2. Withdrawal symptoms upon reducing prolonged internet use. 3. Using the internet for longer periods than initially intended. 4. Persistent desire to control internet use. 5. Significant time spent on internet-related activities. 6. Reduction in social, occupational, or recreational activities due to internet use. 7. Continued use despite awareness of its negative effects.

Miscellaneous fields of study have addressed internet addiction from different points of view and stated different theories to fill this debating gap over the past century. Biomedical theorists highlight genetic influences, along with chemical changes in the brain (Ferris, 2003). Social-cultural theories suggest that addiction varies based on demographics (Davis, 2001). Cognitive theories attribute internet addiction to faulty cognitive processes, suggesting treatment should focus on correcting these processes Cudo & Zabielska-Mendyk, 2019). In Iranian society, social problems and internet addiction are linked to a lack of collective commitment, resulting in issues like anxiety (Musa and Vahedi, 2014).

Excessive use of internet also effects the academic achievements of students. Students addicted to internet are more involved in it than their studies. So they have poor academic performance in school setting (Siraj et al, 2015). There should be a campaign to inform parents,

teachers and officials about the dangers of internet (Young, 2009). One of the worst yet common effects of internet addiction is anxiety, stress and depression. According to World Health Organization (WHO), psychological disorders are one of the disability causes in the world (Noorbala, Yazdi, Yasamy & Mohammad, 2004). Mental health problems include depression, anxiety and stress. Each one of them is considered a threat to the public health and academic performance especially in the young population. Generally, anxiety is defined as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear" (Scovel, 1978, p. 134) while Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) defined anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (p.125). Anxiety is seen as both a psychological and a physiological state as it affects the brain, physical activity, emotions, and behavior. Increase in using internet makes some problems that one of them is internet anxiety. Moreover, there exists a positive and significant correlation between the level of anxiety and internet addiction (Azher et al, 2014).

The researchers also hypothesize that problematic internet use negatively affects high school students’ performance across various academic subjects. This hypothesis underscores the significance of the study. As noted by Esen and Siyez (2011), much of the existing literature on internet addiction involves university students and adults, despite evidence showing that adolescents are more frequent internet users (Öztürk, Odabaşıoğlu, Eraslan, Genç, & Kalyoncu, 2007).

To frame this investigation theoretically, the study draws on **Cognitive-Behavioral Theory (CBT)**, which suggests that individuals' behaviors are influenced by cognitive distortions and maladaptive thought patterns. In the context of internet addiction, CBT posits that problematic online behaviors may serve as coping mechanisms for negative emotional states such as anxiety, ultimately interfering with real-life obligations including academic tasks. This theory provides a useful lens to understand how anxiety and excessive internet use may interact to undermine students’ academic performance and overall psychological well-being

Social networking—which is used for spending time, keeping up with the latest news, and playing games—is becoming an indispensable part of our daily life. Cengizhan (2005) stated that excessive use of the Internet by school-age young people may negatively influence them psychologically, physically and socially and this may affect their academic success negatively. Internet addiction researchers particularly focus on time spent on the Internet (Kubey et al. 2001). The studies show that Internet addicts cannot control the time they spend on the Internet, they spend more time on the Internet than those people who are not Internet addicts, and there is a clear relationship between the time spent on the Internet and Internet addiction (Günüç 2009).

Akini and Iskender (2011) by studying Turkish students reported that depression and anxiety are significant predictors of Internet addiction. Studies show that excessive internet use has negative psychological consequences such as depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety, leading to negative emotions. Consequently, this issue increases addictive behaviors to reduce symptoms and negative emotions, disrupting overall psychological health (Shayegh, 2009). Seifi et al (2014) by studying 330 students reported that anxiety is a significant predictor of Internet addiction. Ko et al (2007) stated that Internet addiction relates to psychological variables such as shyness, loneliness, anxiety, depression, and interpersonal relations. Moreover, Jafari and Fathizade (2012) in a study showed that there is a significant positive relationship between Internet addiction and each of the clinical variables of depression, anxiety, stress and social

phobia. The recent studies show that anxiety significantly predicts internet addiction in different levels of dependency.

The excessive use of the Internet restricts the time that students should spend on social interactions and religious as well as recreational activities, which could provide them with social support and make them feel competent (1). In a study on 1572 participant Turkish high-school students in 2021, Ozturk, & Ayaz-Alkaya, showed that here was a positive correlation between internet addiction and psychosocial problem mean scores.

Some researchers advocate totally opposite effects of internet addiction on man's mental and physical health. Online wellbeing interventions can effectively enhance wellbeing and can help to reduce anxiety and depression symptoms (Bolier et al, 2013). It is argued that "chat" users who are socially fearful may be using the internet as a form of low risk social approach and an opportunity to rehearse social behavior and communication skills, which may help them to improve interaction with offline, face to face, social environment (Campbell, Cumming, & Hughes, 2006)

Students are a critical and vulnerable group in society, and their mental health significantly affects the well-being and future productivity of their communities. With the proliferation of digital technologies, psychological disorders such as internet addiction have become more widespread, especially among adolescents (Gholamian et al., 2017). Several studies have reported significant associations between internet addiction and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress in adolescent and university populations (Seifi et al., 2014; Musa & Vahedi, 2014). Gholamian et al. (2017) found that high school students with internet addiction scored significantly higher in anxiety and stress than their peers. Similarly, Seifi et al. (2014) observed that internet addiction could predict approximately 20% of the variance in anxiety among university students. Cai et al. (2021) further explored the relationship between internet addiction and anxiety using network analysis, but their study focused on nursing students in higher education rather than school-aged EFL learners.

However, despite this growing body of research, most studies have concentrated on university-level samples or general adolescent populations. Very few have investigated the specific intersection of internet addiction, anxiety, and academic achievement—particularly among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) high school students in Iran, who face additional academic and linguistic pressures. To address this gap, the present study examines **the relationships between internet addiction, anxiety, and standardized achievement test scores among senior male high school students in the Khesht and Konartakhteh districts of Fars Province, Iran, in 2024.**

METHODS

This study investigates the relationships between internet addiction, anxiety, and academic achievement among Iranian male senior high school EFL students. The participants in this study was conducted among male high school students in grades 10 to 12 from two public schools in the Khesht and Konartakhteh districts of Fars Province, Iran. After obtaining the necessary permissions from school departments and the Bureau of Education, a total of 70 students voluntarily participated. The mean age of the participants was 17 years (range: 15 to 19). All students had sufficient proficiency in English to complete the original versions of the instruments used.

This study also uses some instruments such as:

a) Internet Addiction Test (IAT)

It developed by Kimberly Young (1996), the IAT is a 20-item self-report questionnaire based on DSM-IV criteria. Each item is scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = always), assessing the severity of internet addiction from mild to severe.

b) Zung Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (SAS)

This Instrument created by Zung (1971), the SAS includes 20 items scored on a 4-point scale. It measures the presence and severity of anxiety symptoms in individuals. It is simple, quick to complete, and commonly used in clinical and research settings.

c) Standard English Achievement Test

This official, nationally standardized test is developed annually by Iran's Ministry of Education and evaluates students' English proficiency. It comprises five sections: Vocabulary (6 points), Listening (9), Grammar (7), Reading Comprehension (10), and Writing (8). The total raw score is out of 40 and is converted to a final score out of 20. The test duration is 120 minutes: 20 minutes for listening, and 100 minutes for the remaining sections.

The data of this study were collected over one month. Students completed the instruments during a single group-testing session in their classrooms (approx. 30 minutes). Prior to participation, the study's purpose and instructions were explained. The researcher was present during data collection to clarify questions and ensure consistency. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. All questionnaires were completed in one session to minimize response bias. Instruments were counterbalanced across sessions to reduce order effects.

The descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients were used to analyze the relationships between internet addiction, anxiety, and achievement test scores. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 13.0.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics of internet addiction test (IAT)

The IAT total score is the sum of the ratings given by the examinee for the 20 item responses. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 to 5. The maximum score is 100 points. The higher the score is, the higher is the severity of your problem. Total scores that range from 0 to 30 points are considered to reflect a normal level of Internet usage; scores of 31 to 49 indicate the presence of a mild level of Internet addiction; 50 to 79 reflect the presence of a moderate level; and scores of 80 to 100 indicate a severe dependence upon the Internet. Note that if two choices seem to apply equally well, they should circle the choice that best represents how they feel most of the time during the past month.

Table 1. Mean score of participants for Internet Addiction Test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Internet Addiction Test	70	22	85	47.91	14	196.02
Valid N (listwise)	70					

The Internet addiction scores ranged from 22 to 85, with a mean of 47.91. This represents that the participants recorded mild level of internet addiction. In summary, the findings indicate that the students exhibited a mild level of internet addiction, which may still have

implications for their academic and psychological well-being, especially considering its significant correlation with anxiety.

Descriptive Statistics of Anxiety Scale (S.A.S)

The SAS test is self-administered, with each response using a 4-point scale, from 'none of the time" to "most of the time." There are 20 questions with 15 increasing anxiety level questions and 5 decreasing anxiety questions. By addressing a broad spectrum of anxiety manifestations, the SAS provides a comprehensive overview of an individual's anxiety level. The scoring system aggregates the responses to give a total score that indicates the severity of anxiety, with higher scores representing more severe anxiety symptoms. The total score individual records range from 25 to 80; which 25 to 40 specifies normal level of axiety,45 to 59 is moderate, 60 to 74 is high and 75 or higher is intense level of anxiety.

Table 2. Mean score of participants for Anxiety Scale

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Anxiety Scale (S.A.S)	70	23	80	46.02	10.84	117.50
Valid N (listwise)	70					

The anxiety scores ranged from 23 to 80, with a mean of 46.02. This represents that the participants recorded moderate level of anxiety. Overall, students reported a moderate moderate level of anxiety. Overall, students reported a moderate level of anxiety, suggesting that emotional stress is a prevalent issue within this population, and potentially linked to their online behavior and academic pressures.

Descriptive Statistics of Achievement Test Scores

Table 3. Mean score of participants for Anxiety Scale

		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Achievement Test Scores	70	3	20	13	4.86	23.63
Valid N (listwise)	70					

The achievement test scores ranged from 3 to 20, with a mean of 13. It can be assumed that participants were unable to perform appropriately in their final achievement test. The average achievement score of 13 out of 20 suggests a moderate academic performance, which provides a basis for analyzing how it may relate to students' internet use and anxiety levels.

Pearson Correlation Coefficient

Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to explore the relationships between anxiety, Internet addiction, and academic performance among students. Pearson correlation is a statistical measure that assesses the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two continuous variables. By using this test, we aim to determine whether there are significant correlations between the levels of anxiety, Internet addiction, and students' academic performance, which can provide valuable insights into how these factors influence each other.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Internet Addiction, Anxiety and Achievement Test Scores

		Anxiety	Internet Addiction	Achievement Test Scores
Anxiety	Pearson Correlation	1	.627**	-.143
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	.000	.236
	N	70	70	70
Internet	Pearson Correlation	.627**	1	-.242*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.044
	N	70	70	70
Scores	Pearson Correlation	-.143	-.242*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.236	.044	-
	N	70	70	70

Anxiety and Internet Addiction: The Pearson correlation coefficient between anxiety and Internet addiction is 0.627, indicating a strong positive correlation. This means that higher levels of anxiety are associated with higher levels of Internet addiction. - The correlation is statistically significant, as indicated by the significance level ($p < 0.001$).

Anxiety and Achievement Test Scores: The correlation coefficient between anxiety and academic performance (scores) is -0.143. There is a slight negative correlation, suggesting that higher anxiety levels may be weakly associated with lower academic performance. However, this correlation is not statistically significant ($p = 0.236$).

Internet Addiction and Achievement Test Scores: The Pearson correlation coefficient between Internet addiction and academic performance is -0.242, indicating a slight negative correlation. Higher levels of Internet addiction are associated with lower academic performance. - This correlation is statistically significant ($p = 0.044$), suggesting a meaningful relationship between Internet addiction and academic performance.

In conclusion, the results revealed a strong positive correlation between anxiety and internet addiction, a significant negative correlation between internet addiction and academic performance, and no significant relationship between anxiety and academic performance. These findings highlight the complex interplay of psychological and behavioral factors influencing student outcomes. level of anxiety, suggesting that emotional stress is a prevalent issue within this population, and potentially linked to their online behavior and academic pressures.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationships between internet addiction, anxiety, and academic achievement among Iranian male senior high school EFL students. Findings indicated that participants exhibited mild internet addiction and moderate anxiety. A strong positive correlation was observed between internet addiction and anxiety, while a statistically significant but weak negative correlation was found between internet addiction and academic performance. No significant correlation was found between anxiety and academic scores.

These results support the assumptions of Cognitive-Behavioral Theory, which posits that individuals may use the internet as a maladaptive coping mechanism to manage negative emotions such as anxiety (Davis, 2001; Cudo & Zabielska-Mendyk, 2019). The observed correlation between internet addiction and anxiety aligns with prior research by Seifi et al. (2014) and Akini & Iskender (2011), who identified anxiety as a key predictor of internet dependency among students. Furthermore, the negative link between internet use and academic performance reinforces the findings of Siraj et al. (2015), indicating that excessive internet use may impair students' academic success.

In light of these findings, it is crucial for educators, parents, and policymakers to monitor students' digital behaviors and promote healthy internet use. Implementing school-based training programs that emphasize time management, emotional regulation, and responsible online behavior could help reduce the adverse impacts of internet addiction. Future research may consider broader sample populations and longitudinal designs to better understand causal relationships between psychological variables and academic outcomes.

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