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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### INTERNET DEPENDENCY AMONG EMPLOYEES IN KERALA

<sup>1,\*</sup>Ansiem George and <sup>2</sup>Dr. Pramod, S.K.

<sup>1</sup>Vels University, Chennai, Tamilnadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Loyola College of Social Sciences, Trivandrum, Tamilnadu, India

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#### ABSTRACT

Internet is now a necessity, an affordable and easily accessible technology used by millions of people. At work place internet applications are widely used and almost all transactions are carried out with the support of internet. Even though internet can be used productively, it's addictive nature and tempting possibilities often derails the employee's mindset in fulfilling the responsibilities at work place. The problem of internet addiction among employees is a matter of ethical and legal concern that requires the attention of the employers and the entire organization. The present research analyses the extent of internet dependency among employees in government and private sector in Kerala. The result reveals that majority of the employees are using internet without having much psychological issues, whereas thirty five percent are having moderate to high addictive patterns of internet use that usually disrupt their day today functioning. There exists significant difference among government and private employees in their level of internet dependency. Since the chance for utilizing internet facilities for entertainment and personal purposes at work place are increasing, there should be concern from the organization to take active steps in controlling the irresponsible internet activities at work place.

**Key words:** Internet, Internet Dependency, Employees.

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#### INTRODUCTION

All over the world, people use internet to learn, communicate and entertain themselves. The medium of internet facilitates social networking, online gaming, shopping, job related transfer of information via emails and searching for information. The fine line between healthy use and problematic use of internet is getting imprecise these days. Most of the job requires the use of internet to fulfill the estimated goals. Even though the internet is now an affordable, necessary and easily accessible technology used by millions of people, the problem of internet dependency (Problematic Internet use) among employees is a matter of ethical and legal concern that requires the attention of the scientific community. Internet dependency exhibits core elements of substance abuse, such as withdrawal phenomenon, mood modification, tolerance, and negative repercussions and relapse (Pies, 2009, cited in Aboujaoude, 2010). The uniqueness of the internet identified by Cooper (1998) as the Triple A Engine model - Accessibility, Anonymity, Affordability -increases the potential for people of all ages to access internet and become dependent on it. The productive use can later become disruptive behavioral patterns if not handled properly. According to Young (1998), the signs of internet dependency are loss of interest in activities other than internet use;

preoccupation with the internet; spending more time online; risking jobs, works and home works for online activities; avoiding or neglecting responsibilities and using the internet as a means for escape from daily stress. Internet dependent individuals experience withdrawal symptoms while trying to reduce or cut down the rate of online activities. The withdrawal symptoms include depression, mood swings, restlessness, irritability and fatigue. The opportunity to use internet and its applications is now a demand all over the world, especially in the work sector. Internet has changed the workplace beyond recognition as it provides instantaneous and ever-present access to information, constant connection with consumers, workforce, business partners and all other stakeholders. It provides an efficient means for research, communication, marketing and collaboration. Internet connectivity at the workplace, whether via a personal computer or mobile device, is universally accepted with an intention to improve and enhance employee performance and productivity. Employees are compelled to use internet applications to fulfill their job tasks on time. Nevertheless, internet has also brought about several negative aspects to the workplace; one of which is problematic internet use otherwise called as internet addiction or internet dependency. The tempting opportunities available in internet often make the employees to lose track of time and resources and thus ending up with a kind of dependency to internet. Dependency is a normal, bio-behavioral human process that may lead to maladaptive dependency behavior in certain individuals. It is an excessive,

\*Corresponding author: Ansiem George,  
Vels University, Chennai, Tamilnadu, India.

compulsive use of a substance or performance of a behavior that is uncontrolled and resource consuming, and is continued despite adverse consequences are associated with use. The dependency behavior may stem from biological and sociocultural/environmental factors (Samson & Files, 1998; Strauss, 1988). The central components of this definition are object-seeking behavior, which includes reinforcement, tolerance, uncontrolled use, relapse, withdrawal, adverse consequences associated with use, biological and genetic factors underlying use, environmental and socio-cultural factors underlying use. Most of the literature claims that problematic internet use results from a dependency on the internet (Beard, 2005; Beard & Wolf, 2001; Young, 1998). According to Grover, Chakraborty, and Basu (2010) Internet use across people of various professions increase day by day and it impacts their personal, social, and occupational life. The mean duration of internet use was 73.43 months. Two-thirds (65.38%) of them were using internet on a regular basis for a period of more than 1 year, the mean duration of daily internet use was 39.13 months. The average time spent on the internet was 2.13 hours every day. More than half (56.73%) of the sample was using internet for at least 2 hours every day. The most common purpose of internet use was educational (62.5%). The five most commonly endorsed items were as follows: The need to use internet everyday (53.8%). Internet use to overcome bad moods (50%), staying online longer than one originally intends to (43.3%), eating while surfing (24%), and physical activity going down since one has started using the internet (22.1%). Computerization and networking in government and private offices in Kerala has made internet a necessary medium to operate official tasks. The spread of low priced internet connections, the widespread use of smart phones has invaded the Kerala society. To what extent it affects work settings are yet to be found out. There is a need to explore non-work related pattern of internet use at the workplace as well as the associated dysfunction in the Kerala context. It will have an implication in terms of developing psycho-educational programs for the promotion of healthy use of technology. Very few studies have been conducted to identify the extent of internet addiction among employees in Kerala.

The main objectives of the present study are:

- To examine whether Internet addiction exists among employees? If so ...
- To understand the extent and nature of internet dependency
- To understand whether government employees differ from private employees in their Internet dependency
- To understand whether gender difference exist among the employees in their Internet dependency

## METHODS

The plan and procedure for the investigation is presented under various headings. The study follows a cross-sectional research design.

**Sample:** For the purpose of the study a sample of 120 employees, from both government (n=60) and private (n=60) sector, was conveniently selected from the Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala, India. The age of the respondents ranged from 20 to 40 years.

**Tools:** The following tools were used to procure the necessary information regarding the different variables under study: (1) Problematic internet Use questionnaire (2) Internet use pattern schedule.

1. **Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire:** Developed by Pramod and Raju (2008), measure the extent of psychological problems associated with internet use. It provides a measure of how much a person is obsessed with or influenced with internet activities. The three dimensions measured are obsession, neglect and control issues. Higher scores indicate internet addiction, or internet dependency. This questionnaire is having good reliability and validity. The reliability of the test is 0.87. The tool is having a good validity with a correlation coefficient of 0.82 yielded when correlated with PIUQ (problematic internet use questionnaire) of Zsolt Demetrovics, Beatrix Szeredi, and Sandor Rozsa (2008).
2. **Internet Use Pattern Schedule:** Helps to gather personal information regarding the subject's age, sex, and various aspects regarding internet use.

**Procedure:** Data was collected through survey method. The participants were contacted individually, informed that the purpose of this study was to examine some of the characteristics of their internet use. Then they were supplied with the tools and later collected back. After that the data was consolidated for further statistical analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected were subjected to different statistical analyses and the results obtained are discussed here. Among the government employees, 6.7% are having high level of Internet dependency, where as 28.3% are moderate users and 65% are low users of internet (Figure 1). Based on the interview with those having high scores for internet dependency clearly indicates the depth of the problem that requires mental health care. They are preoccupied with the internet applications and are guided by the thoughts of staying online as much as possible- no matter how much responsibilities they have to fulfil at their work palace. They often find distress in managing their craving behavior, had fatigue, desperation due to the increased use of internet, thought of not going for work and even had a history of frequent absenteeism. They always tried to maintain a secrecy about their private world in internet and most of the time during night, they stream through the internet to get more satisfaction. Even though personal internet access through smartphone is available (n = 36) employees use office internet to access internet during work hours. Employees reported that they often make use of internet during office hours for visiting social networking sites like facebook (n = 54), WhatsApp (n=56) twitter (n = 8), hangouts (n =2), and IMO (n = 12). The average time spent on the internet for personal interest is 1.45 hours every day, and more than half (n= 35) of the participants were using internet for at least 2 hours every day apart from work. Idle time spent in internet for activities other than work, resulted in a loss in employee productivity, give rise to potential liabilities and security breaches at organization, increased distractions and cause loss of focus on more important work related activities (Pee et al., 2008; Clayburgh and Nazareth, 2009; Weatherbee, 2009 cited in Griffiths, 2010).

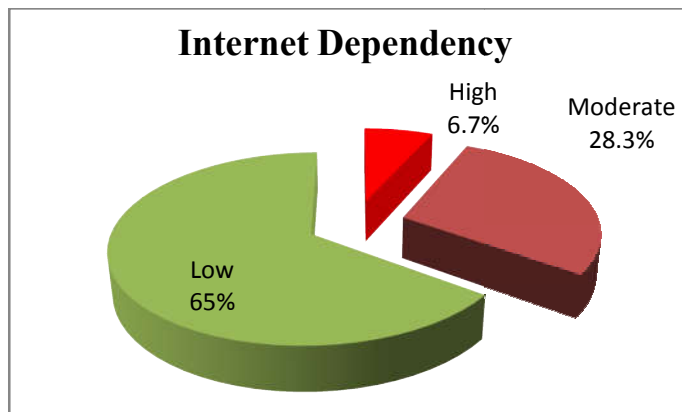


Figure 1.

It was once unusual for employees to spend time on various non-work activities during office hours, for example reading online magazines, and playing games via mobile phones. But now scenario has changed to the increased use of internet applications using official desktops or personal Smartphone during official duty hours. Employees do find happiness by engaging in entertainment like watching movies (n=2), videos (n=17), hearing songs online (n=7). Apart from that employees reported of using internet for online shopping (n=19), online gaming (n=3), personal use (n=49) like net banking and so on, watching pornography (n=3), searching for information apart from work (n=32), professional use (n=53), and other uses (n=29). A few employees reported about postponing work due to internet use (n=15), lack of attention to work responsibilities (n=19), and changes in productivity (n=18). Disturbance in interpersonal relationship at work place (n=8) arise because of in appropriate internet use. There are times when they postponed meals (n=5), postponed interaction with family and other important people around (n=4), postponed sleep (n=7), and experienced criticism (n=3) from coworkers /supervisors. Most of the participants (n=55) reported that the internet helped them a lot to overcome the stress related to work. To understand whether the government employees differ from private employees in their internet dependency, t test was done and the results are provided in Table 1:

**Table 1. Results of t- test between private and government employees on Internet dependency**

Variable	Sample	N	Mean	S.D	t-value
Internet dependency	Private Employees	60	37.5167	15.10808	2.49*
	Govt. Employees	60	45.2167	18.59204	

Note: \* indicates that the t-value is significant at 0.05 levels.

The results clearly indicate that there exists a significant difference among government and private employees in their Internet dependency. Private sectors are more firm in controlling their employees to get things done on time. They have proper monitoring and immediate feedback mechanisms. Even if they provide internet connectivity they are monitored and distributed with screening mechanisms to control the use. Time bounded works are assigned to ensure the achievement of organizational goals on time. In government sectors, a more linear approach is visible. Employees often have more freedom to choose what they want and when to work. They often find more rest times than that of private employees. Many employees utilize the facilities provided from the office for personal use. There is limited monitoring or feedback mechanisms to control the employee behavior. Whatever they do, they are provided with salary every month and the job security is very high when compared to private sectors. This

flexibility is visible in the use of internet at work place. Sometimes employees engage inappropriate use of internet, delaying work and responsibilities. Highly dependent employees use internet all the day and have sleep issues (n = 7). This disrupted sleep pattern leads to tiredness and impairment in effective functioning. Employees spent at least an average of 45 minutes on non-work-related activities especially internet on any working day for personal reasons. Heavy users reported as, always thoughtful about internet throughout the day during work time a (n=3) and find possible means to use internet without being caught by the authority (n = 2). These preoccupations often compel them to get unlimited internet facilities with better speed and thus they spent a lot of monetary resources per month for the purpose. They spent most of their time in the virtual world and lose interest in real world social interactions. Their life styles are often odd when compared to non-addictive users. They experienced difficulty in paying attention to conversations with others due to engagement in Internet activities, and others complained about the lack of time because of their engagement with Internet activities. Problematic Internet use may have more negative consequences for the employer than the employee due to loss of productivity. Research indicates that if 1000 employees spend at least an hour a day on the internet for non-work related activities, it can cost a standard business loss up to \$35 million a year (BBC News, 2002).

**Table 2. Results of t- test Internet dependency on the basis of Gender**

Variable	Sample	N	Mean	S.D	t-value
Problematic Internet Use	Males	60	38.1000	15.82087	.297#
	Females	60	36.9333	14.60735	

Note: # indicates that the t-value is not significant at 0.01 levels.

There exists no significant difference between male and female employees in their internet dependency. The opportunities to use internet is now almost similar and hence they all do use it in a similar way. Male employees used the internet at work for non-work related purposes compared to female employees and were more likely to engage in counterproductive workplace behaviors than females. Males use internet mainly for purposes related to entertainment and leisure – watching videos and listening to music and surfing without any intentions, whereas women use it primarily for interpersonal communication using WhatsApp and information gathering. Earlier, Researchers have found male employees to have higher score of personal internet use compared to their female counterparts (Vitak, Crouse and LaRose, 2011). Female employees have been found to exhibit higher internet anxiety than male employees. Female employees tend to be more ethical compared to males (Ibrahim, Angelidis and Tomic, 2009).

## Recommendations

The existence of problematic internet use, especially internet dependency among the employees is evident in this study. Adequate steps should be taken to prevent the organization from decreased productivity due to work force internet misuse. Mental health care including counselling and psychotherapy should be provided to those who are seriously addicted to internet. Proper feedback about internet use, will help to get insight about what is required from an employee in an organizational setting. Numerous organizations apply employee internet monitoring services with specialized features, such as key stroke monitoring, desktop screenshots,

detailed conversation logs, and access to employee emails, helps the employers to control employee internet usage. Griffiths (2003) supports that employers need to take a serious stance against misuse of internet. Awareness regarding the risks and consequences of internet dependency and misuse should be taught and an internet usage policy should be implemented. Also, even though it is hard to identify internet abuser, employers need to support employees who might be having troubles to control their use and approach them with sympathetic attitude (like in the case of many addictions) rather than outright dismissal or strict penalties (Griffiths, 2003). The policy relating to internet use at work should be developed in consultation and collaboration with the staff, so that it can be widely accepted and understood. The policy must clearly elucidate acceptable and unacceptable practices on the internet, which should be well known and understood within the organization. Employees should be made aware about which online data is being monitored?, Why?, How? And by whom? It is further suggested that potential penalties that may be applicable in case of a breach of policy be acknowledged as well. Consequently, employees may feel more accountable for their actions online whilst at work and take more responsibility. Since providing unregulated internet access in the workplace can transform some employees into "Internet junkies" (Stanton, 2002), in other words it can make them addicted to the internet. Many people who excessively use the internet are not always addicts of internet. Internet addiction does undeniably exist but it doesn't affect a vast majority of users (Widyanto, cited in Griffiths, 2010). The population affected by internet addiction is indeed small and identifying them is a complex procedure. No such causal relationship has been identified between excessive use of internet and internet addiction at the workplace. Even then, if we rule out the possibility that misuse of internet at workplace can cause employees to become internet addicts, we can't ignore the large amount of research findings – "excessive internet use can have harmful consequences".

## Conclusion

The existence of various issues and challenges regarding internet misuse and dependency in the workplace is evident in this research. It is potentially a serious cause of concern for employers and organizations in the State. Even though internet is an unavoidable necessity, internet addiction and misuse without dependency is harmful for everyone in an organization and thus appropriate steps need to be taken for the greater good of the organization.

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