

Original Research Article

Prevalence of internet addiction in south Indian chat rooms

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ABSTRACT

Background: There are various reasons for internet addiction. In the recent covid and post covid era people have taken up chatting as a pastime. Many spend time chatting with strangers for various reasons. This study was conducted to see the prevalence of internet addiction in south Indian chat rooms and the reasons leading to it

Methods: After doing a pilot study, many chat room users were administered an online questionnaire. Of the 1763 people approached only 700 of them agreed to participate in this study

Results: Of the seven hundred participants, two hundred and sixteen suffered from internet addiction. Of those with Internet addiction, 85% of the chat room users agreed that they drink alcohol when they chat, 63.9% cited individual factors as a reason, 62% of the chat room users said they visit chat rooms to game with their friends, 31% stated cyber relation addiction as a cause, 7.4% said lack of a steady job made them get online and chat and 2.3% of the chat users said they frequented chat sites for want of cyber sex

Conclusions: People should understand that it's a virtual world and not real. They should start stepping out and decrease spending time online. Chat rooms should be on a strict vigilance and steps should be taken to screen the chat room users.

Keywords: Chat rooms, Internet addiction, South Indian

INTRODUCTION

Internet is a boon. It has made life easier. Online shopping and overnight deliveries have made us comfortable. Especially during covid lock down, it's the internet that has helped us to be sane. Lots of social apps have enabled families to keep in touch. It was easy to circulate information about precautionary measures. During covid era, social distancing was advised. Meetings, weddings, social gatherings were avoided. Social connections play an essential role in mental wellbeing. So, most of the working time and free time started taking place over the internet. As per the results of a survey on the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on media usage across India, there was a spike in usage of VOIP chat applications in the first phase of a

nation-wide lockdown.¹ Voice over internet protocol (VoIP), is a technology that allows you to make voice calls using a broadband Internet connection instead of a regular (or analog) phone line. Many chat apps emerged and people found it easier to contact their near and dear from the safety of their home. The media in-home consumption increased particularly strongly in the area of news (67%), streaming services (51%), television (45%), and mobile instant messaging (MIM) services (45%).² As lock down continued only way to stay socially connected was through the internet. Digital technology was the saviour. As a result, there has been a tremendous increase in screen time.³ While mindful (and regulated) use of digital devices is linked with well-being, excessive screen time is reported to be associated with a range of negative mental health outcomes such as psychological problems,

low emotional stability, and greater risk for depression or anxiety.⁴ Now as the restrictions have been relaxed it is easy to interact with people face to face. Yet there are many who still involve in chatting online, not only in using messaging apps like WhatsApp, Telegram etc, but indulging in chat rooms. Interaction occurring on-line, either written down in text form or can occur through audio and video. Such communication is also called chatting, and can happen in a one-to-one basis or many-to-many, as in the Internet-based chat rooms.⁵ It has been noted that it not only consumes time, but it also leads to various problems from work to family. With the recent evil, online gambling taking a toll on many, chat rooms also have included many games in their apps. Internet addiction has been on the rise. Gone are the days when you needed a desktop and a decent internet connection to chat in the regular chat rooms like yahoo chat, AOL chat etc. These day with the entry of Mobile phones with faster random-access memory (RAM) and high-speed internet, the Google play store is filled with chat sites that can be downloaded and accessed. Most of the studies done in chat rooms involved either younger adults or teenagers and most of the studies are a decade old. Taking this into consideration, a study was proposed to estimate the prevalence of internet addiction in south Indian chat rooms. A pre tested questionnaire consisting of Youngs internet addiction test, beck's depression inventory and smart phone compulsion test (Dr. David Greenfield, Centre for internet and technology addiction).⁶

METHODS

After obtaining clearance from university's ethical committee on December 2020, the study commenced on February 2021. It was completed on May 2022. In the total of one year and three months of study period, ten south Indian chat sites were visited. A pilot study consisting of fifteen chat users was conducted in an online chat room after getting permission from the chat room owner. After the pilot study all the fifteen volunteers were asked to visit various chat rooms and interview other chat users who were willing to participate in this study. It's a cross sectional study. All those who are between the ages of 18 and 60, agree to participate in the study were included. Chat users with multiple chat ids were excluded from this study. Once a volunteer has finished questioning a chat user, the answers will be checked by the chief investigator and finalised. As there were many instances when the same chat user was approached more than once as there is an option to change the chat user name, care was taken not to do the same. All those who were willing to participate in the study were taken in for the study. For this study 10 south Indian chat rooms from various chat sites were surveyed. Of the 1763 chat user who were approached only 700 agreed to participate in the study. Numbers of participants who agreed to participate in the ten chat sites were 47, 44, 45, 48, 45, 44, 123, 82, 113, and 109. There were many instances when various chat users refused to answer all the questions in the questionnaire. So only chat users who answered to all the

questions were included in the study. The descriptive variables used to identify the factors leading to internet addiction in south Indian chat rooms were alcoholism individual factors, internet gaming, cyber relationship addiction, lack of a steady job and cyber-sex. Numbers and codes were assigned to each variable. data entry was done in Excel spread sheet (Microsoft Office 2010). Data was later transformed to SPSS (statistical package for social sciences) this study (version 21.0). Descriptive statistics was used to present the data. Data was analysed and was expressed as proportion. Chi-square was used to find out the association, p value was also calculated.

RESULTS

For this study 10 south Indian chat rooms from various chat sites were surveyed. Numbers of participants who agreed to participate in the ten chat sites were 47, 44, 45, 48, 45, 44, 123, 82, 113, and 109. All the participants in the age group of eighteen to sixty from these ten chat sites were included in this study. Thus, a total of seven hundred participants participated in this study. Majority of participants in our study were in the age group of 41 to 50 years (Figure 1).

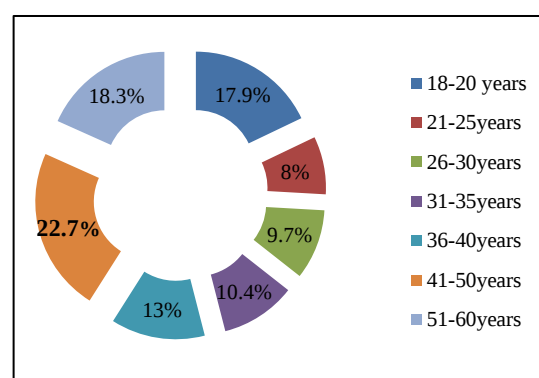


Figure 1: Age wise distribution (years).

In our study 52% of the participants were males. Regarding the literacy status of the parents, the female chatters lagged behind in literacy when compared with the males (Table 1).

Table 1: Literacy status of chat users.

Education	Male N (%)	Female N (%)
Primary School (till 5th Std.)	119 (32.7)	110 (32.9)
Mid School (till 9th Std.)	142 (39.14)	104 (30.9)
Higher secondary school and college	26 (7.15)	5 (1.57)
Working	77 (21)	117 (34.7)
Total	364	336

Total 34.71% of the female chatters have a steady job when compared with the 21% of the male chat users. Though the literacy status is almost equal in the primary

school and mid school level, a decline was noted (1.57%) in the higher secondary and college level in females. In our study 95 (13.6%) of the participants use both mobiles and laptops to access chat rooms. In our study only 28 (4%) participants agreed that they always keep visiting multiple chat sites. In this study out of the 700 participants 382 (54.6%) of them agreed to frequent chat rooms very regularly. Among them 294 (77%) had minimum visits of 2 days a week in a span of two months (Table 3).

Table 2: Heard or know about internet addiction.

Heard about internet addiction	N (%)
Yes	94 (13.4)
No	606 (86.6)
Total	700

Table 3: frequenting chat rooms.

Frequenting chat rooms	N (%)
Two days a week	294 (77)
Four days a week	56 (14.6)
More Than Four days a week	32 (8.4)
Total	382 (100)

Table 4: History of losing sleep.

History of losing sleep	N (%)
Present	68 (9.7)
Absent	632 (90.3)
Total	700

Only 68 (9.7%) of the participants have lost sleep because of chatting in internet chat rooms (Table 4). Among the study subjects 575 (81.4%) have said that they drink while chatting. Among the chat users, 393 (56.1%) admit that they do it every Saturday. In our study 42 (6%) of the chat users have recharged their chat user ids in which only 13 users (30.9%) recharge the ids regularly so they can give virtual gifts to all the chatters to increase their popularity (Table 5).

Table 5: Paying money to get their chat ids a recognition.

Paying money to get their chat ids higher levels	N (%)
Yes	42 (6)
No	658 (94)
Total	700

Out of 700 people who participated in this study, 484 (69.1%) of them chat for the fun of it and 216 (30.9%) suffered from Internet addiction. Of the 700 Chat users who participated in this study Internet addiction was more in the age group of 26 to 30 years followed by the age group of 31 to 35 years (Table 6). Among the participants with Internet addiction, the occurrence was equal among both sexes. History of smart phone addiction was more 51

(23.6%) among the participants with Internet addiction when compared with participants without Internet addiction. It is statistically significant (Table 7). Usage of multiple ids to access chat sites was more 48 (22.2%) among the participants who had Internet addiction and less 32 (6.6%) among participants without internet addiction which is statistically significant (Table 8). The history losing sleep was more 42 (19.4%) in participants with Internet addiction when compared to participants without addiction. It is statistically significant (Table 9).

Table 6: Age wise distribution of participants with internet addiction.

Age (years)	No internet addiction N (%)	Internet addiction N (%)	Total N (%)
18-20	82 (65.6)	43 (34.4)	125 (100)
21-25	44 (78.6)	12 (21.4)	56 (100)
26-30	40 (58.8)	28 (41.2)	68 (100)
31-35	47 (64.4)	26 (35.6)	73 (100)
36-40	63 (69.2)	28 (30.8)	91 (100)
40-50	120 (75.5)	39 (24.5)	159 (100)
51-60	88 (68.8)	40 (31.3)	128 (100)
Total	484 (69.1)	216 (30.9)	700 (100)

Table 7: Internet addiction and Smart phone addiction.

History of smart phone addiction	Internet addiction (%)	No internet addiction (%)	Total
Yes	51 (23.6)	33 (6.8)	84
No	165 (76.4)	451 (93.2)	616
Total	216 (100)	484 (100)	700

*Chi square-39.883, df-1, p<0.001.

Table 8: Internet addiction and usage of multiple IDS online.

History of creating multiple IDS online	Internet addiction N (%)	No internet addiction N (%)	Total
Yes	48 (22.2)	32 (6.6)	80
No	168 (77.8)	452 (93.4)	620
Total	216 (100)	484 (100)	700

Chi square-35.955, df-1, p<0.001.

Table 9: Internet addiction and losing sleep.

History of losing sleep	Internet addiction N (%)	No Internet Addiction N (%)	Total
Yes	42 (19.4)	26 (5.4)	68
No	174 (80.6)	458 (94.6)	632
Total	216 (100)	484 (100)	700

Chi square-33.722a, df-1, p<0.001.

DISCUSSION

Anyone can access a chat room. It's not important that one should take part in a conversation. People just keep listening until they feel that they can contribute or take part. Most of the chatters take their own time to be a part of a chat room. Most importantly it's the familiarity principle that comes into play.⁷ This principle suggests that we find people who we are familiar with nicer, more friendly, and more trustworthy. The familiarity effect does not necessarily involve direct interaction, people can find in online chats a means to satisfy their need for social contacts with friendly people, at least at the beginning of the interaction.⁸ Most of the studies were conducted in young adults and teenagers. Hence in this study it was decided to take all age groups into account. It was found that there was an increase in chatter in the age group of 41 years to 50 years. Younger women are more likely than younger men to be online; older men are more likely than older women to be online: 86% of women ages 18-29 are online, compared with 80% of men that age. On the other hand, 34% of men 65 and older use the internet, compared with 21% of women that age.⁹ In this study there was a marginal increase of male chat users (52%) when compared to female chat users. The female chat users lagged behind in literacy when compared with the male chatters. Though internet addiction has not yet been recognised as an addictive disorder, several leading experts in the world of field of behavioral addiction have contributed to Internet addiction. Internet addiction consists of five main components, excessive use of internet, tolerance, withdrawal effects and negative repercussion.¹⁰ When questioned only 13.4% of the chat users have heard about internet addiction. This could be because many psychologists still argue that excessive internet usage should be treated as any other type of addiction and several factors play a role for a person's internet addiction which vary from person to person.¹¹ In this study only 95 of the 700 chat users use both laptop and mobiles to chat. The rest use only their mobile phones. Using mobile phones to chat has become common these days. There are many chat sites in Google Play store that can be accessed only through mobile. All you need is a functioning Google mail id or phone number or Facebook account to access these various chat sites. Now these mail ids/Facebook ids can be fake too. So some sort of limitations should be there to limit the creation of fake mail/Facebook ids. Limiting the number of ids that can be linked to a phone number to one, limiting the number of accounts to a IP address as one, limiting the number of accounts that can be linked to a Gmail account as one, linking Aadhar or passport or driver's licence to chat ids as age verification can be a few of the methods that can be used to streamline. 4% of the chat user admitted to have visited more than one chat site using multiple chat ids. 22.2% of chat users who had internet addiction admitted to have visited multiple chat sites under multiple chat names. Reasons being that the chat user has had a bad experience in one chat site, doesn't want to quit the chat site, but in the meantime logs into

another site and continues. This could be because of addiction to chatting. Also some chat users admitted that the anonymity makes it easy for them to visit multiple chat sites with different chat names or same chat site in different chat ids. E-chatroom sites provide opportunities to try on alternative ways of looking and being in interaction with others, who share similar interests and who appear to take you at 'face value'; a face you can manipulate for effect without fear of detection. On the net, you are not restricted to try on different names, origins, life histories, attitudes and opinions, different ways of relating to others, different ages and genders. And you do so knowing that those you are talking with are probably doing the same.¹² This not only makes the chat user feel in control but also leads to an addiction to chatting. Whatever words get exchanged or how bad their behaviour is in one chat site, the user can have a new disguise when visiting a different chat site. And the chat user can return to the same chat room under a different name. Now that the chat user knows about the other users, it gives the chat user an advantage as he can easily manipulate the others and behave decent. In this study 8.4% of the chat users said that they visited chat sites more than 4 days a week. Urgency to check chat apps for texts from friends/strangers, feeling bad when they did not get replies and a sense of euphoria when the replies were delivered were noted. 81.4% agreed to be under the influence of alcohol when they keep chatting. Chat users feel that consuming alcohol lowers their inhibitions, makes them feel "so open" as they chat in chat rooms. It brings out hidden talents like singing and debating on multiple topics. Basically alcohol suppresses the central nervous system. It reduces GABA glutamate and hence unable to suppress anxiety, depression etc.¹³ Most of the 81.4% who said that they drink as they chat have also mentioned about black outs, i.e. after a few drinks they do not remember how they got to bed or how the chat session ended. Alcohol inhibiting their emotions could have also made them behave inappropriately in the chat rooms. Studies show that alcohol's effects on neurotransmitters deplete the production of GABA significantly enough to cause short- and long-term symptoms. These side effects can lead to physical, emotional, and mental health damage that eventually requires professional treatment.¹³ Internet addiction has been associated with dimensionally measured depression and indicators of social isolation. Psychiatric co-morbidity is common, particularly mood, anxiety, impulse control and substance use disorders.¹⁴ 42% of the chat users have admitted that they have recharged their chat ids to gift their chat mates virtually. This could be a reason for want of attention and willing to please their virtual friends. Of the 700 participants internet addiction was seen in 30.9% of them and was more prevalent in the age group of 26 years to 30 years. In the past years internet addiction was prevalent in teenagers. Now recent studies have suggested that internet addiction onset is in the age of late 20s or early 30s.¹⁴ Smartphone addiction was on the higher side in internet addicted chat users. Probably due to the fact that many chat rooms are available in Google Play store and can be

easily accessed through mobile phones. The term nomophobia is constructed on definitions described in the DSM-IV, it has been labelled as a “phobia for a particular/specific things”.¹⁵ The term nomophobia or no mobile phone phobia is used to describe a psychological condition when people have a fear of being detached from mobile phone connectivity. Nomophobia may also act as a proxy to other disorders.¹⁶ Internet addiction can also overlap with other behavioral addictions, such as work addiction, television addiction, and smartphone addiction.

History of losing sleep was more in chat users with internet addiction when compared to others

The cumulative long-term effects of sleep loss and sleep disorders have been associated with a wide range of deleterious health consequences including an increased risk of hypertension, diabetes, obesity, depression, heart attack, and stroke. After decades of research, the case can be confidently made that sleep loss and sleep disorders have profound and widespread effects on human health. Less visible consequences of sleep conditions are far more prevalent, and they take a toll on nearly every key indicator of public health: mortality, morbidity, performance, accidents and injuries, functioning and quality of life, family well-being, and health care utilization.¹⁷ One of the few symptoms of loss of sleep include depressed mood and poor memory or concentration.¹⁸ Many studies state that that sleep loss (less than 7 hours per night) may have wide-ranging effects on the cardiovascular, endocrine, immune, and nervous systems, including obesity in adults and children, diabetes and impaired glucose tolerance, cardiovascular disease and hypertension, anxiety symptoms, depressed mood and Alcohol use.¹⁷ Sleep loss in adults has lead to excess mental distress, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and alcohol use.^{18,19} Insomnia is associated with depression, acting as both a risk factor and a manifestation. A study done by Breslau et al explained how history of insomnia at baseline not only predicted new onset depression, but also other psychiatric disorders (any anxiety disorder, alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and nicotine dependence).²⁰ With some many studies done on loss of sleep, its crystal clear that it leads to many psychiatric problems and non-communicable diseases.

CONCLUSION

This study has tried to prove that internet addiction has been on the rise in chat users as people have started spending more time online. Internet addiction has to be considered seriously as it has been on the rise for the past few years. Care should be taken to curb it as early as possible. Chat room addiction has made people sedentary. Virtual world is the new style these days. There are sites that even let you earn as live streaming broadcasters through virtual coins that can be cashed. It is always better to talk to a professional when addiction sets in. Cognitive behavioral therapy is very effective in treating addictive behavior. It teaches you healthy ways

of coping with uncomfortable emotions like fear and anxiety. It also forces you to actively consider your thought patterns so you can recognize modes of thinking that lead you to online chatting. It is better to make real life connections, increase your friend circle, make new friends. And since most people have agreed to have lost sleep, it's better to go to bed early. Internet addiction is on the rise, it's the new 'Disease'. It has started spreading its branches into various fields. The sooner it's curbed the better.

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