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Title: Internet Use Among College Students in the U.S.: The Impact of COVID-19
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Brief overview: In the summer of 2021, our research team conducted an online survey to assess college students' internet use and risk for internet addiction during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This study aimed to fill an existing knowledge gap in the scientific literature, as COVID-19 remains a new phenomenon and its impact on the health of college students remains understudied.

Background: Upon the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, over 130 countries issued lock-down measures to contain the spread of infection. Such public health measures impacted the global community's reliance on the internet. Research findings suggest college students are vulnerable to pathological internet, and attributed this vulnerability to risk factors, including the psychological and developmental characteristics of late adolescence/young adulthood, easy access to the internet, and an expectation of computer and internet use (Kandell, 2009).

Significance: Internet addiction is problematic among youth. Over 92% of Americans say they believe internet addiction to be a real phenomenon (Milijic, 2021). Currently, there are few studies focusing on the toll of COVID-19 on college students' internet use and risk for internet addiction.

Purpose: This study aimed to assess internet use and risk for internet addiction among a sample of college students in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: Our research team developed an online survey informed by the most updated scientific literature. The survey, which included a combination of newly developed questions and items adapted from existing questionnaires, was piloted among a small sample of the target population (e.g., college students) and launched using Qualtrics over a three-month period. Eligibility criteria included participants who are: (a) self-identified college or graduate students; (b) living in the United States; (c) ages 18 years or older; and (d) consent to participating. Participants were eligible to enter into a raffle drawing for one of six \$25 gift cards.

Analysis: Data were downloaded in CSV format and imported and analyzed in StataMP 15. We report descriptive statistics, highlighting demographic characteristics and responses to items assessing internet use. Categorical variables were expressed as number (percentage, %) and any continuous variables were expressed as mean +/- standard deviation.

Results: 172 participants successfully completed our online survey. Of this sample, 69.19% (n=119) were female, 26.16% (n=45) were male, and 4.64% (n=8) identified with another gender identity. Nearly 47% identified as White (n=83), 22% Black (n=40), 20% Asian (n=36), and 11% mixed/other race. Over 92% and 8% of participants identified as domestic and international college students, respectively.

Of participants who responded to questions around internet use (n=163), nearly 93% said they believe that internet addiction is an ongoing phenomenon among college students. Furthermore, more than 54% said they felt the internet has both enhanced and harmed their mental health;

48.32% of participants said their mental health was “not good” most of the time or always during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, 81.13% of respondents said they spent more time on the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion: Overall, our preliminary results show that participants believe internet addiction to be an existing issue among college students. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the pandemic’s impact on the mental health of this population. Our results suggest a concerning number of participants experienced negative mental health during the pandemic and have also increased their internet use during this unprecedented time. It is imperative that college students be connected to adequate mental health support services as the pandemic continues. Given our sample involves college students, universities and colleges need to identify those at risk of or struggling with their mental health and connect them with the resources they need to recover and also succeed academically.

References

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