A study on social impact of internet usage on students of state university in Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

Internet today is widely recognized not only as a means of communication but also as a powerful tool. It is seen as the most influential and the most important technology in this sense (Lievrouw 2001: 22-23, Dickson 2000). Internet usage among university students involves not only the use of leisure time, but also their community involvement and social networking. Student communities are now facing major social issues like isolation, thus pulling down their cultural values by accessing the virtual sites as well as pornography sites. This study explores not only the impact of the frequent use of internet for non-academic purpose by the students of state universities in Tamil Nadu, India but also its effect on the psychological aspects such as mental depression, isolation from the society and addiction. The data has been collected through questionnaire and focus group discussion.

Keywords: Internet usage, Isolation, Survey Method, Focus Group Discussion.

Introduction

Internet today is widely recognized not only as a means of communication but also as a power. It is becoming one of the major sources for collecting and sharing information, education and training, commerce, governance and so on. With only a click of the mouse, the internet allows individuals to access information on almost any topic they care to research, and to communicate with or learn about future romantic partners, prospective employees, long-last friends, or family members (Davis 2007; Kraut et al., 2002; Teske, 2002; White, 2007).

India is now world's third largest internet user after US and China[1]. The i-Cube report titled, 'Internet in Rural India' stated that the number of active internet users has seen 58% growth since June 2012[2]. Computer access and use among university students have grown exponentially over the past decade. Internet usage among university students involves not only use of leisure time, but also their community involvement and social networks. It can be said that the excess use of internet can affect traditional ways of interpersonal interaction. However, one cannot also rule out the fact that technology could make new and refreshed ways for interaction and the increased number of social contacts we have. Students spend most of their valuable time focusing on irrelevant information because of its availability.

Most of the students use internet for sending email, chat with their friends, using search engines to collect information and study materials, researching products and services, social networking and for entertainment. As a consequence, students spend more time online. Over 50% of teens possess more than one e-mail address or screen name, which they can use to send private messages to friends or to participate anonymously in online forums, such as chat rooms (Lenhart et at., 2005). Students do create fake identities to enter into the world of internet. Creating fake identities deters from 'real life' social situations as it allows individuals to create any image of themselves with little or no social repercussions. These social anxious teens may have a tendency to resort to computer communication as a substitute for real life interactions (Subrahmanyam et al., 2000). However, there are students who use internet for downloading study materials, playing online games, streaming video and audio, downloading audio files, movies and pornography stuff, developing and displaying photographs, seeking dates and so on. Students are now facing more social issues like isolation and pull down of cultural values by accessing the virtual sites as well as the pornography sites. Most of the students are using P2P concept to download applications, music, movies, pornography video and like the same. The rapid growth of the internet makes it very difficult to understand its current impact.

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[1] http://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/technology/internet/india-is-now-worlds-third-largest-internet-user-after-us-china/article5053115.ece

[2] http://beforeitsnews.com/science-and-technology/2013/10/rural-india-internet-users-to-touch-68-million-by-end-of-october-2013-iamai-report-2646472.html

A survey conducted by Morgan and Cotton (2003) of 287 college freshmen specifying their internet usage, attitudes towards internet usage and sources of social support and wellbeing indicated that increased use of internet for e-mail and chat room are associated with decreased depressive symptoms, while increased internet hours for shopping, playing games, or research is associated with increased depressive symptoms. Kraut et al., (1998) found that greater internet use is associated with reduced psychological wellbeing, reduced social support, increased loneliness and depression.

Many researchers have expressed their concern that because of frequent use of internet, people might spend more time alone, chatting online with an outsider, or forming superficial 'drive by' relationships, at the expense of deeper one-on-one discussion and companionship with friends and family (Putnam, 2000). Further even if people use the internet to talk with close ties, these online discussions might displace higher quality interpersonal and telephone conversation (Cummings, Butler and Kraut, 2002).

Students spending more time in surfing, were less successful in finding relevant information, and were more likely to report feeling a souring of affect over the period of their sessions. Their negative reactions reflected not the Internet experience per se but the frustration and sense of impotence of the inexperienced user without immediate access to social support (Neuman et al 1996).

The use of internet services is neither related to loneliness, neuroticism, or extraversion for men. However, for women, loneliness is significantly related to both neuroticism and the use of social services in the internet. It is possible that the use of the internet social services is a result, and not a cause, of the increased loneliness of neurotic women, so that neuroticism increases, at least in the sense of negative affectivity, the feeling of loneliness, driving the individual to seek alternative social relationships through the internet (Y.Amichai-Hamburger, E. Ben-Artzi, 2003).

A study conducted at Carnegie Mellon in 1998 originally reported that increased internet use was correlated with an increase in reports of loneliness and depression; however, the follow-up study conducted four years later found that there was no correlation between internet use and depression (Kraut et al., 1998, 2002, Sanders et al., 2000, Niemz et al, 2005).

A study on the relationship between internet communication and depression reported over the course of four to eight weeks, college students chatting anonymously on the internet were more likely to report fewer feelings of loneliness and depression than they had before the study began (Shaw & Gant, 2002). Based on the scant psychological

literature, it appears that the amount of time spent online does not have impact on the levels of depression, but other aspects of internet usage do have.

A study carried out by Morgan and Cotton (2003) revealed that the type of activity engaged in the internet was implicated on levels of depression among college students, and that when the internet was utilized for communication, levels of depressive symptoms decreased, particularly for male respondents. However, when the internet was utilized for non-communication oriented activities such as shopping or research, levels of depressive symptoms increased. Another study reported that, rather than the type of activity, or the amount of time spent on the internet, depressive symptoms were eight times more by males who also had experienced harassment on the internet (Ybarra, 2004)

Aim of this study

The aim of this study is to analyze the impact of frequent use of internet for non-academic purposes by the students of state universities in Tamil Nadu, India. There are positive as well as negative impacts on social participation and relationship, commitment to social norms and to the community, on students who use internet frequently. Though the internet permits social contact across time, distance and personal circumstances, and allows the users to connect with distant as well as local family friends, co-workers and strangers, it brings down personal contacts and social participation.

Another important area of the study is the effect of heavy usage of internet on psychological aspects such as mental depression, isolation from the society and addiction. 'Internet addicts' spent proportionately more time on browsing sexually gratifying websites, online gaming sites and online communities. The increased internet usage leads to decreased family communication, reduced size of local social circle, loneliness and depression.

Objective

The main objectives of this study are to analyze the following problems of university students who are frequent users of internet for non-academic purpose.

- Effect on social outcomes
- Effect on interpersonal involvement
- Effect on academic achievements
- Effect on cultural relationship with fellow students.

Methodology

This study was conducted among the students of the university departments and research scholars in various state universities of Tamil Nadu, India. The descriptive survey method consisting of a structured questionnaire was used to collect the necessary data for this study. It was mentioned in the covering letter to all the universtiy Vice-Chancellors that the data collected would be strictly handled in consideration of issues of anonymity and confidentiality. The questionnaires were distributed randomly to the individuals and the filled-in questionnaire were collected from them. The process of data collection was spread over two months. Focus Group Discussion were carried out to get further data for this study.

Analysis and Interpretation

Survey method

Out of the various 53 state universities in Tamil Nadu, India, it was identified that 55% of their students access internet on a daily basis. It was found that students logged in to internet not only to collect study materials for academic purposes but also to check emails, spend time in social networking sites, audio-video streaming and downloading and so on. 86% of students said that they signed in to access emails at least once every day. Another 76% of students claimed that they logged out immediately after checking mails and other updates.

According to the data it was found that 95% state university students in Tamil Nadu, India accessed internet on a weekly to daily basis, out of which 72.3% used it daily. Of the urban students, most of them had accessed internet at their home whereas 60% of rural students mainly used internet at commercial cyber cafes or mobile internet. It also revealed that at least one out of 10 students stayed awake every night for being active on the internet to catch up with others and the fear of missing out on many things. 90% of the students spent more time on chatting and surfing while doing their assignments. However, 86% of students claim that they access internet for knowledge and education and that it helps the quality of education.

However, it was found that 54% of the students used internet to express their hate and anger towards a specific person or group. These students often tend to fear facing a real person and were comfortable expressing their hate and anger hiding behind a computer screen. These students also accepted that they preferred avoiding public appearances and public speeches. They also took advantage of the fact that others might not know that they were online.

It was also found out that 80% of students felt frustrated and lonely when they could not access internet. As a result, students who spent an average of 19 hours per week on internet felt that they were isolated from the society and spent less time with their friends and families. Some of them also engaged in high levels of pornography and cyber sex, which again led to loneliness, depression and an instance of seeing women, especially their classmates and friends, as mere 'sex objects'.

There was also a distinction in the usage of internet among rural and urban students. Urban based students used internet more than rural students while rural students used it more for other educational purposes. Likewise, rural students do not have much internet facilities like urban students, and they depend heavily on mobile internet.

Focus Group Discussion

Focus group discussion was carried out in two groups, rural and urban. Each group had 8 participants. It was understood from the discussion that, those students depending too much on internet were limited to their own world. They even stopped thinking out of the world. Students who had access to internet also tend to socialize less with their friends and relatives in person and rather spend time chatting with friends on the social networking sites or switch on to internet games.

Most of them also felt that they were able to connect with a lot of people with the help of internet and maintained contact for professional purposes, this helped them to have interpersonal communication with people of different cultures and that benefitted them in understanding the issues faced by all of them.

However, these students did not prefer much to go out for shopping and other purposes. They prefered to do online shopping and were only comfortable meeting people online. They liked reading things online rather than downloading and reading it. Students living in hostels chat online with their friends in their next room rather than visiting their rooms and interacting face-to-face. They also tend to get angry and go out of control when they did not get the intended reply during chats.

Most of the students accepted the fact that too much access to internet affected their creativity, especially while doing their assignments. They would copy and paste most details rather than thinking and writing it in their own words. As a result, they tend to blindly trust the information they obtained from internet. However, everybody strongly said that it helped them to boost their performance in academics.

Another issue was that the students who spent too much time on the internet slept very late in the night and felt that life would be boring without the internet. They rarely went out of their rooms and met anyone. This sort of addiction also led to frustration and crime. Their only means of interaction with friends was to discuss porn. This also brought about a change in their behavior towards the opposite sex. They showed no respect to the opposite sex and even misinterpreted conversations with them. In certain cases, this also resulted in a change of friends circle and led to isolation and depression.

Findings and Conclusion

From the data analysis carried out on the data collected, it is seen that majority of the state university students are using internet more regularly than rural students. Rural students access internet through mobile and commercial cyber whereas urban students have the opportunity to access from their homes. Almost all the respondents used internet for accessing emails and social network sites like facebook followed by collecting general information and study materials. Students spending more time in surfing were less successful in finding relevant information and even few lonely students might prefer social interaction in virtual environment that lead them to problematic situations.

As the state university students in Tamil Nadu, India, are restricting themselves with the virtual world, their social life is badly affected. The interpersonal relation of these students starting and ending with medio (Communication with the help of electronic gadgets). The real interpersonal communication skills are not developed amongst the students which may later lead to the psychological problems.

As the students progress through their curriculum the use of computer for entertainment is declining and use for general information and thesis/research work is rising. It can be said that internet's usage is found to be useful in improving the students performance. The students who are active in social networking were much interested in intercultural interaction. This creates a world view amongst the students to understand the social issues

Students who spent longer hours on the internet, lost sleep due to late night log-in and felt life would be boring without the internet. Heavy usage of internet may lead to decline in visiting friends and family.

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