ROLE OF OBJECT RELATIONS IN PREDICTING INTERNET ADDICTION AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

Internet addiction has emerged as a significant psychological concern among adolescents with implications for emotional, social, and behavioural functioning. Exploring internal relational patterns may help explain individuals' vulnerability to excessive internet use. Therefore, the present study investigated the role of object relations in predicting internet addiction. For this, the sample included 180 adolescents (90 male and 90 female adolescents) chosen through convenience sampling method, ranging in the age 13 to 18 years old from different CBSE schools running in Ambedkar Nagar district of Uttar Pradesh. All the participants filled the questionnaire on internet addiction test and bell relationship inventory for adolescents. The results of multiple regression analysis indicated that object relations variables significantly predicted internet addiction, accounting for 28.9% of the variance (R^2=.29, F (5, 174) =14.16, p<.001). Insecure attachment and egocentricity emerged as significant positive predictors of internet addiction, while positive attachment, alienation, and social incompetence were non-significant predictors. It can be concluded that insecure attachment and egocentricity can significantly predict internet addiction and therefore need to be taken care of and worked on in treatment plans and preventive measures.

Keywords: **Internet Addiction, Object Relations, Adolescents**

Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period marked by rapid biological maturation, identity formation, emotional reorganization, and evolving interpersonal relationships. During this period, individuals increasingly rely on external environments for emotional regulation, social validation, and self-definition. In recent decades, adolescents now use the internet as a major platform for connection, satisfaction, and escape. Many adolescents spend a significant amount of their waking hours on the internet due to proliferation of smartphones, easy access to high-speed connectivity, and the growing importance of online communication and entertainment. While the internet offers educational social, and entertainment benefits, excessive and uncontrolled use has raised concern about maladaptive patterns of internet use (Chahal, 2015). This behavioural pattern, commonly referred to as internet addiction or problematic internet use (Young, 1998; Kardefelt-Winther et al., 2017), was first identified by Goldberg in 1996. He drew upon the substance addiction criteria outlined in the *DSM-IV* (APA, 1994) to explain how excessive Internet use can lead to serious disruptions in daily functioning, marked by signs such as increasing tolerance and withdrawal-like symptoms. Building on this, Young (1998) conceptualized Internet addiction as an impulse control disorder marked by obsession, tolerance, and diminished interest in other daily activities. Despite ongoing debate and inconsistent definitions (Mitchell, 2000), Internet addiction is widely conceptualized as a pattern of excessive and poorly controlled online behaviour associated with significant impairment or distress (Young, 1998; Kuss & Griffiths, 2012).

Adolescents are considered especially vulnerable due to ongoing neurodevelopment, heightened emotional sensitivity, and still-maturing self-regulatory capacities (Casey et al., 2008). In India, the growing penetration of internet and digital technologies has intensified adolescents' online engagement, leading to increasing reports of excessive and problematic internet use among school-going populations (Kumar et al., 2019; Vadher et al., 2019, Goel et al., 2013). Recent evidence suggests that nearly one-fifth of Indian school-going adolescents are at risk of problematic internet use (Joseph et al., 2022).

While earlier research has largely focused on behavioural, cognitive, and psychosocial correlates of internet addiction—such as impulsivity, sensation seeking, loneliness, and depression, recent studies emphasize the

importance of early relational experiences and internalized object relations in understanding maladaptive internet behaviours (Schimmenti & Caretti, 2017). From a psychodynamic and object relations perspective, excessive internet use may represent an attempt to compensate for unmet emotional needs, insecure attachment patterns, and difficulties in maintaining stable interpersonal relationships.

According to object relations theory (Kernberg, 1976; Fairbairn, 1952), early interactions with caregivers are internalized as mental representations (objects) that influence an individual's sense of self, affect regulation, and relational functioning across the lifespan. Key aspects of disturbed object relations such as insecure attachment, alienation, egocentricity, and social incompetence, may predispose adolescents to seek emotional fulfilment and control through the virtual world, where relationships are perceived as less threatening and more manageable. Despite the growing theoretical relevance of object relations, empirical research examining their predictive role in adolescent internet addiction remains limited, especially in the Indian context.

So, in order to contribute to a deeper psychodynamic understanding of internet addiction during a vulnerable developmental stage, the current study attempts to predict internet addiction in adolescents using object relations.

Method

Objective

To determine the role of object relations in predicting internet addiction.

Hypothesis

H1: Positive attachment will negatively predict internet addiction among adolescents.

H2: Alienation will positively predict internet addiction among adolescents.

H3: Insecure attachment will positively predict internet addiction among adolescents.

H4: Egocentricity will positively predict internet addiction among adolescents.

H5: Social Incompetence will significantly and positively predict internet addiction among adolescents.

Variables

Predictor Variable: Positive attachment, alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence

Criterion Variable: Internet addiction

Research Design

The present study employed non-experimental i.e. predictive correlational research design to examine the predictive relationship between object relations and Internet addiction.

Sample

The present study included 180 adolescent (90 Males and 90 Females) students studying in 9th to 12th standard. They were selected through convenience sampling from different CBSE schools running in Ambedkar Nagar district of UP.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Only students who provided informed consent, were enrolled in CBSE-affiliated schools, demonstrated adequate understanding of English, and had access to internet-enabled devices were included in the study. Students with any significant physical or psychological impairments were excluded.

Measures

The following measures were employed to gather information from adolescent students.

Internet Addiction Test (IAT) – Kimberley Young (1998): The Internet Addiction Test (IAT) is a 20-item self-report measure designed to evaluate the severity of internet addiction. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (rarely) to 5 (always), yielding total scores between 0 and 100, with higher scores reflecting greater levels of problematic internet use. The IAT has shown good psychometric properties,

including excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's α ranging from .90 to .93), strong test–retest reliability (ρ = .83), and satisfactory convergent (r = .62–.84) as well as construct validity across varied populations (Moon et al., 2018).

Bell Relationship Inventory for Adolescents-Revised (BRIA-R)- Morris Bell (2020): The BRIA-R is a 30-item self-report inventory with yes/no type response options that assesses deficits in the object relations of adolescents. It measures object relations via five dimensions i.e. positive attachment, alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence. Higher scores on alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence and lower score on positive attachment indicate poor object relations. The Bell Relationship Inventory for Adolescents shows acceptable reliability (α ≈ .69–.77) and satisfactory construct and concurrent validity (Bell, 2005).

Statistical Analysis

In analysing data, Excel and IBM SPSS (Version 20) were used. Descriptive statistics was used to summarize sample characteristics, and Spearman's rank difference correlation was used to examine associations among internet addiction and five dimensions of BRIA, with significance set at $p < .05$. Further, Multiple regression analysis was employed to predict internet addiction through object relations.

Procedure

The researcher visited the schools and obtained formal permission from the school administration to conduct the tests. Informed consent was taken from students, as well as from their parents, prior to data collection. Participants were provided with clear instructions regarding the administration of the tests and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. After the completion of the assessments, the tests were collected, and the students were thanked for their cooperation and participation in the study.

Results

The results of the study are discussed below. Initially, descriptive statistics and relationships among the study variables were analysed. Multiple regression analysis was then performed to assess the predictive role of object relations in internet addiction.

Table-1 *Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (N=180)*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	90	50%
	Female	90	50%
Age	13-15	103	57.22%
	16-18	77	42.78%
Education	9th – 10th	106	58.89%
	11th -12th	74	41.11%
Religion	Hindu	174	96.67%
	Muslim	6	3.33%
	Others	0	0%
Locality	Urban	36	20%
	Rural	115	63.89%
	Semi-urban	29	16.11%
Note: Percentages are based on the total sample size.			

In the present study, the sample consisted of 180 participants, with equal representation of male (50%) and female (50%) adolescents. Most participants were aged 13–15 years (57.22%), studying in Grades 9–10 (58.89%), identified as Hindu (96.67%), and belonged to rural areas (63.89%).

Table-2 *Frequency and level of Internet addiction among adolescents*

Level	Male f	Male Percentage	Female f	Female Percentage	Total f	Total Percentage
Normal	21	23.33%	46	51.11%	67	37.22%
Mild	46	51.11%	26	28.89%	72	40%
Moderate	22	24.44%	18	20%	40	22.22%
Severe	1	1.11%	0	0%	1	0.56%
Total	90	100%	90	100%	180	100%

Note: Percentages are based on columns total.

Table-2 shows distribution of adolescents across different levels of internet addiction. Most adolescents (40%) were mildly addicted to the internet, followed by 37.22% normal, 22.22% moderate and 0.56% severe internet users. Gender-wise analysis revealed that 51.11% males were mildly addicted followed by 24.44% moderate, 23.33% normal and 1.11% severe while females showed 51.11% normal uses followed by 28.89% mild, and 20% moderate use. Overall, the males exhibited higher proportions of mild and moderate use, whereas females were frequently represented in the normal use category.

Table-3
Correlation coefficient between internet addiction and different dimensions of object relations.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. IAT						
2. PosAt	-.08					
3. ALN	.00	-.32**				
4. InAt	.45**	-.18*	-.07			
5. EGC	.52**	-.09	-.01	.49**		
6. SocIn	-.02	-.17*	.10	.17*	.05	

*Note: ** p<.01 & * p<.05*

In preliminary analysis (Table-3), correlation between internet addiction and components of object relations was calculated. Results revealed that Internet Addiction was significantly and positively correlated with Insecure Attachment (ρ= .45, p<.01) and Egocentricity (ρ= .52, p<.01). This indicates that higher Internet Addiction scores were associated with greater levels of insecure attachment and egocentricity. Further, positive attachment (ρ= -.08), alienation (ρ= -.00), and social incompetence (ρ= -.02) had very weak and non-significant correlation with internet addiction.

Table-4
Predictors of Internet addiction

Predictors	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
(Constant)	17.33	6.71		2.58	.01	4.09	30.57
PosAt	-.03	.34	-.01	-.10	.92	-.71	.64
ALN	.28	.38	.05	.75	.46	-.46	1.03
InAt	1.06	.29	.27	3.69	.00	.49	1.62
EGC	1.50	.29	.37	5.15	.00	.93	2.08
SocIn	-.60	.39	-.10	-1.52	.13	-1.38	.18

R=.53, R^2=.29, R^2_{adj}=.27, F (5,174) =14.16, p<.00

Further, a multiple regression analysis was calculated to test if the components of object relations i.e. positive attachment, alienation, insecure attachment, egocentricity, and social incompetence significantly predicted internet addiction. The results indicated a significant model, F (5,174) =14.16, p<.00, with an R^2=.289. This means that components of object relations significantly predict internet addiction among adolescent students. Among the predictors, insecure attachment (β=1.06, p<.00) and egocentricity (β=1.50, p<.00) were significant predictors of internet addiction but, positive attachment (β=-.03, p=.92), alienation (β=.28, p=.46), and social

incompetence (β=-.60, *p*=.13) were not. This indicates that adolescents with higher levels of insecure attachment and egocentricity were more likely to engage in excessive and maladaptive Internet use.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the role of object relations in predicting internet addiction among adolescents. The findings showed that insecure attachment and egocentricity had a significant positive correlation with internet addiction and they also predicted internet addiction significantly. Thus, hypothesis-3 (i.e., Insecure attachment will positively predict internet addiction among adolescents) and hypothesis-4 (i.e., Egocentricity will positively predict internet addiction among adolescents) are accepted. The results of the study are in line with the other researches done in the past (Eichenberg et al., 2017; Naghipoor et al., 2025; Nakhoul et al., 2020). These findings support psychodynamic and attachment-based explanations of internet addiction, which conceptualize excessive internet use as a compensatory strategy for unmet emotional needs and insecure relational patterns.

Insecure attachment emerged as a significant predictor of internet addiction, indicating that adolescents who experience anxiety, fear of abandonment, or difficulty trusting others are more likely to engage in maladaptive internet use. This finding corroborates previous research demonstrating strong associations between insecure attachment styles and problematic internet behaviours (Schimmenti et al., 2014; Estévez et al., 2017). From an object relations perspective, adolescents with insecure internalized object representations may turn to the internet as a symbolic substitute for stable and reassuring interpersonal relationships.

Egocentricity also significantly predicted internet addiction, suggesting that adolescents with self-focused interpersonal orientations and limited capacity for interpersonal engagement may be more prone to excessive internet use. This is consistent with studies indicating that narcissistic and egocentric traits are associated with increased online engagement, particularly in contexts that allow self-presentation, validation, and control ((Naghipoor et al., 2025). The virtual environment may serve as a space where egocentric needs are easily gratified without the demands of reciprocal real-world relationships.

Contrary to expectations, positive attachment, alienation, and social incompetence did not emerge as significant predictors of internet addiction in the regression model. Although alienation and social incompetence have been linked to problematic internet use in some studies (Naghipoor et al., 2025), their non-significant contribution in the present study suggests that internal attachment anxiety and self-oriented relational styles may play a more central role than overt social difficulties. The non-significant role of positive attachment may indicate that secure relational experiences function more as protective factors rather than direct predictors of internet addiction. This interpretation is supported by previous findings suggesting that secure attachment buffers against, rather than directly predicts, maladaptive behaviours (Monacis et al., 2017).

Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings provide empirical support for psychodynamic and attachment-based models of internet addiction, particularly within the Indian adolescent context, where empirical research integrating object relations remains limited. Clinically, the results highlight the importance of addressing underlying attachment insecurities and self-related relational patterns in prevention and intervention programs. School-based mental health initiatives and counselling interventions may benefit from incorporating attachment-focused and relational approaches to reduce adolescents' reliance on maladaptive digital coping strategies.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inferences, and reliance on self-report measures may introduce response bias. Future research may employ longitudinal designs to examine developmental trajectories. Additionally, qualitative approaches could enrich understanding of adolescents' subjective relational experiences underlying internet use.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that insecure attachment and egocentricity are significant psychological predictors of internet addiction among adolescents, while other dimensions of object relations show limited predictive value. These findings underscore the relevance of internal relational dynamics in understanding internet addiction and emphasize the need for psychologically informed interventions targeting attachment and self-related vulnerabilities.

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