

From Social Exclusion to Digital Escape: The Relationship of Ostracism and Problematic Internet Use among young adults in Pakistan

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Abstract: *This study explored the link of ostracism and problematic internet usage (PIU) among young adults. A cross-sectional study approach was adopted. Convenience sampling was used to identify 300 university students (150 men and 150 women) between the ages of 18 and 25. Data were obtained using the Ostracism Experience Scale, and Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire along with a demographic sheet; all scales exhibited satisfactory reliability. The results of the Pearson correlation showed a strong positive association between PIU and ostracism. The connection was considerably positive among all sub scales of ostracism and problematic internet use.*

Keywords: Ostracism, Problematic internet use, young adults

Introduction

In this modern world, the way of our interaction with the society and our own perception has become complicated. Ostracism started in ancient Greece where even influential political person can be excluded from the city for ten years. A process which used ostraca (bits of clay) was used to exclude individuals who were felt like a threat to governance. In a nutshell, ostracism has been constantly occurring in the past and ancient times but the research based term is introduced in this digital world.

Ostracism includes the experience of being socially excluded and ignorance from others which is a cause of psychological pain for the person (Holte et al., 2022). Generally, ostracism is different from the concept of bullying and harassment (Williams & Nida, 2011). Ostracism includes the absence of positive behavior and attitude; it does not specifically include presence of negative behavior or attitude but is more of absence of a positive attitude (Rajchert & Winiewski, 2016). By observing this digital world, our interaction with others and perception

of the world has become more complex. Ostracism is defined as the experience of being socially excluded or ignored from others (Holte et al., 2022).

Internet and social media have been on rise in the world and young adults are the top users of it due to a constant need to be connected with the world (Kaye et al., 2025). But this problematic internet use has long lasting and detrimental outcomes on the mental well-being of young adults (Kaye et al., 2025). The prevalence of problematic internet use among Pakistani population was found to be 27.3 % in research and most of them were from age 20 to 24 (Lakhtdir et al., 2022). Findings show that amid 200 individuals 42 percent were men and 58 percent were women (Lakhtdir et al., 2022). This also included almost half of the participants with percentage of 47.5% in between age 13–15 years (Lakhtdir et al., 2022). In another research most of the persons have their own mobile device that nearly equal fifty seven percent (Raza et al., 2025). In addition to this 47.5 percent people have their laptop (Raza et al., 2025).

Since time when the internet revolution began in case of work life, social life, leisure part and the communications hence it has been encountered with both the optimistic/ hopeful part and also the concerns related to its use (Dahl & Bergmark, 2020). Usually individuals face difficulty in minimizing the use of it and effects their life in negative (Dahl & Bergmark, 2020). Due to this a wide field of research has emerged across the world that includes psychology, sociology and also neurobiology (Dahl & Bergmark, 2020). Multiple names have been used to explain the problem and the concerns a portion of which include internet addiction (IA), problematic internet use (PIU) and gaming disorder and they are the most common (Dahl & Bergmark, 2020).

The quick transformation of digital devices, technologies and social networking websites has surprisingly shaped human interaction and communications (Anderson et al., 2021). Thus it has made online interactions a central aspect of our daily life that is particularly among the age group of young adults (Anderson et al., 2021). This modification has also caused comparable rise in (PIU). This construct is increasingly identified as a behavioral addiction that is associated with emergence of psychological distress, lessened well-being, and impaired functioning (Casale & Banchi, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

While ostracism has been widely studied in social psychology context but its direct link with problematic internet use had remained underexplored, especially if we talk about the contemporary digital environments (Carone et al., 2023). Many researches have focused on the traditional offline exclusion rather than on cyber-ostracism or perceived social exclusion in online spaces (Montag et al., 2021).

Significance of the Study

Main target of this research to investigate the effect of ostracism on problematic internet use with reference to young adults, with a special focus on the underlying psychological phenomenon and boundary conditions that shape this relationship (Williams, 2009; Casale & Banchi, 2020). This study's particular target is to examine how experiences related to ostracism, defined as perceived social exclusion or being ignored by other individuals contributes to the dysfunctional patterns of internet engagement that also includes excessive, compulsive, and irresistible online behaviors (Williams, 2009; Carone et al., 2023).

Literature review

Social connections are essential part of human life and they are important for our physical and mental health (Chen, 2024). However when our social connections are affected then we feel psychological pain (Chen, 2024). Ostracism is a unique form of social ostracism which Scott defines in his writing as having four features. These features are visibility (contains physical, social and cyber forms e.g. internet and online interactions based), motive (which can include not being ostracizing, being role prescribed, unitive, defensive and oblivious), quantity (that range from low to high) and clarity (ranging from low to high) (Scott, 2007). Even though adverse consequences of being a target of ostracism have been authenticated few studies have examined emotional toll brought by source of ostracism (Nettles, n.d.).

Ostracism appears in varied forms. In some cases it is complete ostracism and in other cases it is partial ostracism. In complete ostracism, individuals are fully brushed aside in social setting. In partial ostracism, individuals are episodically included and excluded (Williams et al., 2000). In both types of ostracism, the four fundamental needs of individuals are being affected that are need for belongingness, feeling valued, having sense of control and finding life as meaningful (Wesselmann et al., 2012). By forcing people to concurrently receive conflicting signals of inclusion and exclusion, partial ostracism can present a fundamentally different psychological task than complete ostracism and it also leads to cognitive confusion and emotional responses (Dvir, 2025).

The insurgency of smart, digital devices, and smart items has drastically improved the utilizability of the Internet around the globe (Hassan, 2021). Since few years and decades, we have seen such a dynamic and dramatically uprising the Internet trend (Hassan, 2021). The uprising use of the Internet now a days has drafted a crucial role in the compulsive use of the Internet (Hassan, 2021). This change can alter and affect the educational, psychological, medical, and social well-being of the masses (Hassan, 2021).

Generally internet restrictions in the developing countries for example Pakistan are becoming more severe, and the public is not fully aware of the Internet usage (Hassan, 2021). Lockdown during COVID 19 have further raised the level of the Internet constraint in the developing countries like Pakistan (Hassan, 2021). The mentioned research has explored existing literature review, social issues, and problematic Internet use in Pakistan (Hassan, 2021). A person's lack of ability to control the urge of using internet that is accompanied by significant distress and functional impairment is referred as PIU (Beard & Wolf, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework/ model of the present study can be explained by Need Threat Model of Ostracism (Williams, 2009). This theory shows how the phenomenon of social exclusion can intrude fundamental psychological needs of a person (Williams, 2009). This model states that the variable of ostracism can threaten four core needs of a person that are belongingness, self-esteem, meaningful existence, and control (Williams, 2009).

When people experience ostracism, they suffer psychological pain due to the unmet needs of belongings and that also drives the compensatory behaviors (Williams, 2009). As a result people can move and shift toward online environments to bring back these threatened needs

and that causes the phenomenon of problematic internet use as a maladaptive and maladjusted coping mechanism (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014).

2.7 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the study

Research Hypothesis

- There will be significantly positive relationship between ostracism and problematic internet use

Methodology

Research Design

The research design for this study will be cross sectional design and will determine the impact of ostracism on PIU. Cross sectional research design is a type of research design that is used to collect data at a single and specific point in time (Wang & Cheng, 2020). Moderating role of self-control will also be used to determine. The data will be collected through survey research approach method. Convenience sampling technique will be used to collect data for the study from young adults.

The reason to select cross sectional design was that it is relatively in expensive to conduct and data is collected at one point in time (Wang & Cheng, 2020). They are suitable for generating hypothesis. Cross sectional study design also provides information about the prevalence of the outcomes and exposures that help to guide other study designs (Wang & Cheng, 2020). The data record will be collected from single point in time that will be a quick source of gaining information in a short span of time (Wang & Cheng, 2020). This research design is effective as compared to especially longitudinal research method as it requires less sources and time (Wang & Cheng, 2020).

Sample

The study consists of 300 participants. Data was collected from both gender i.e., men and women, through convenient sampling technique. The sample age range is from 18 to 25 years, young adults age group classified by WHO (2025). Data collection was done from multiple universities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

Sampling is an important step in research that helps the delivery of findings and ensure quality research (Golzar et al. 2022). Convenience sampling technique is kind of non-probability sampling technique (Golzar et al. 2022). In convenience sampling technique researcher conducts their study on population that is available close (Golzar et al. 2022). Convenience sampling technique is useful in the sense that it is low cost and require less

resources (Golzar et al. 2022). Research work is also completed within a short span of time as the researcher has clear idea from where to access the target population (Golzar et al. 2022).

Inclusion Criteria

Following is the inclusion criteria for the participants of this study

1. Participant must have attended university or is a university student
2. Age of the participant must be between 18 to 25 years

Exclusion Criteria

Following is the exclusion criteria for the participants of this study

1. Participant who has not attended university student
2. Participant who is less than 18 years of age or more than 25 years of age

Instruments

Demographic form

Demographic form included age, gender, qualification, monthly income, marital status, family system, total family members, employment status and no of hours of internet use. Demographics sheets was given along with the rest of the instruments of variables being used in the study. These demographic variables are important in order to know the background factors being impacting the study.

Ostracism Experience Scale (OES)

Ostracism Experience Scale is a self- assessment instrument used to measure whether a person is ostracized or not (Shahzad et al., 2021). The scale consists of 15 items and has two sub scales i.e., 1) ostracism experience and 2) psychological effect. Items for ostracism experience scale range from 1-10 and psychological effect scale range from 11-15, a 5-point likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). No reverse items are present in the scale. The scale shows good estimation of alpha reliability $\alpha = .97$ (Richman & Leary, 2009).

Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire (PIUQ-18)

Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire is 18 item self-report questionnaire that is used to evaluate the maladaptive patterns of internet use that can affect psychological and social functioning of an individual (Demetrovics et al., 2008).

This scale consists of three sub scales that evaluate obsession, neglect and control disorder. Obsession sub scale consists of 6 items and measures obsession with internet activities. Neglect sub scale contains six items and measures neglecting non-internet activities. Control disorder consists of 6 items and measures difficult being stopping internet use.

Respondents rate on a five point likert scale extending from 1 point that means Never to 5 that means Always. High scores indicate great levels of problematic internet use. It has a good reliability and validity of $\alpha = .87$ and $.82$ respectively (Demetrovics et al., 2008).

Procedure

After receiving the approval from university ethics committee, the process of data collection began. Participants were approached individually for data collection. They got evident information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Voluntary participation was made sure. Furthermore, confidentiality, and importance of their participation was explained and a written informed consent was acquired.

Data was collected in a quiet and comfortable sitting area to avoid distractions and ensure their comfort. A demographic form was given following the psychometric tools which were the standardized instruments used to collect data. All the data collected was and will be kept confidential and stored safely.

3.6 Analysis

For the purpose of analysis, statistical package for social sciences (SPSS-27) was used. Data that was collected was entered and then cleaned. Further the data was analyzed for possible missing value. In the same way descriptive and inferential analysis were performed on sample. In descriptive statistics, distribution of data was estimated through frequencies analysis, percentages, mean, median, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis. Reliability analysis of scales and subscales was measured using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (α). Furthermore analysis was also done using correlation analysis.

Ethical considerations

The research was performed according to the ethical considerations and guidelines. Before we start the process of data collection, an approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and relevant departmental ethics committee. It includes informed consent of the participants before data collection, confidentiality, right to withdraw, debriefing and data storage. The study made sure the privacy of participants and privacy of data. Data was collected from different universities of Islamabad. After the data collection process, the data was analyzed according to the required analysis procedures. Then results were reported and the final write up was made.

Results

Table 1

Pearson Correlation for Ostracism, FOMO, Problematic Internet Use Subscales, and Self-Control (N = 300)

S. No.	Variable	OES	OES-exp	OES-psy	PIUQ-obs	PIUQ-neg	PIU-con	PIUQ18
1	OES	-	.968**	.862**	.484**	.442**	.377**	.468**
2	OES-exp		-	.709**	.440**	.380**	.305**	.405**
3	OES-psy			-	.477**	.478**	.448**	.502**

** $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

Note: OES = Ostracism Experience Scale, OES-ex = Ostracism Experience Scale (Experience), OES-psy = Ostracism Experience Scale (Psychological Effect), PIUQ-obs =

Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire (Obsession), PIUQ-neg = Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire (neglect), PIUQ-con = Problematic Internet Use Questionnaire (Conduct disorder)

Table shows the Pearson product moment correlation coefficients among ostracism and problematic internet use and self-control (n = 300). All statistically significant correlations are noted at the $p < 0.01$ level.

Total Ostracism scale scores showed a near perfect positive correlation with its experience sub scale (OES-exp, $r = 0.968$, $p < 0.01$) and also strong positive correlation with its psychological effects sub scale (OES-psy, $r = 0.862$, $p < 0.01$). Two sub scale of ostracism were also significantly and positively inter correlated ($r = 0.709$, $p < 0.01$) showing that people who reported greater experiences of ostracism also tend to have more severe psychological consequences.

Total scores of Ostracism scale was positively and significantly correlated with total scores of problematic internet use (PIUQ-18) ($r = 0.468$, $p < 0.01$) and all the three sub scales of problematic internet use. The sub scales include obsession (PIUQ-obs, $r = 0.484$, $p < 0.01$), neglect (PIUQ-neg, $r = 0.442$, $p < 0.01$) and control disorder (PIUQ-con, $r = 0.377$, $p < 0.01$). This shows moderate positive correlations such that higher levels of ostracism were associated with greater problematic internet use across all dimensions. Obsession sub scale had shown strongest association with total ostracism scale.

OES-psy sub scale had consistently shown stronger correlations with all Problematic internet use scales (PIUQ-obs: $r = .477$; PIUQ-neg: $r = .478$; PIUQ-con: $r = .448$; PIUQ-18: $r = .502$; all $p < .01$) compared to the OES-exp subscale (PIUQ-obs: $r = .440$; PIUQ-neg: $r = .380$; PIUQ-con: $r = .305$; PIUQ-18: $r = .405$; all $p < .01$).

Every inter correlation between the PIU subscales was substantial and statistically significant ($p < .01$). The subscales measuring neglect and control disorder showed the highest inter correlation ($r = .853$), followed by those measuring obsession and control disorder ($r = .737$) and obsession and neglect ($r = .795$). The great internal coherence of the PIUQ-18 as a composite measure of problematic internet use was confirmed by the extremely high correlations between all three subscales and the PIUQ-18 total score (PIUQ-obs: $r = .911$; PIUQ-neg: $r = .945$; PIUQ-con: $r = .926$; all $p < .01$).

The results are aligned with hypothesis 1 which suggests the positive relationship between ostracism and problematic internet use.

Discussion

It was proposed by hypothesis 1 that a considerable positive relationship prevail between among ostracism and PIU and through results it was supported. These results is consistent with the literature that shows that people who experience social exclusion have more chances to get involved in problematic online behaviors. According to the belongingness theory that was put forwarded by Baumeister and Leary (1995), individuals have a fundamental need to initiate and sustain the personal connections. When this need gets threatened through the phenomenon of ostracism people may seek alternative routes to restore social connection, often they turn to online platforms.

Previous studies have similarly showed that people who experience ostracism show heightened dependency on internet sources and compulsive online behaviors. For example, studies has exhibited that phenomenon of social exclusion predicts heightened ranks of internet use and online social compensation behaviors (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). The present research suggests that individuals use digital environments to handle the negative emotions that are loneliness, rejection, and distress.

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