

## Original Research Article

# Internet addiction among adolescents: prevalence, risk factors and impact on mental health

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**Received:** 10 February 2026

**Accepted:** 10 March 2026

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Internet addiction (IA) is defined as compulsive use of internet resulting in significant impairment to the user. We conducted this study to understand the prevalence of IA and its impact on mental health of adolescents.

**Methods:** In this prospective cross-sectional study, school and college going students of age group 14-19 years were enrolled. They administered a pre-structured questionnaire to assess the pattern of internet use, level of IA and impact of internet on their mental health.

**Results:** Overall, 445 eligible students were enrolled in the study. Majority participants were in the age group of 16-17 years (83.2%). The prevalence of moderate to severe IA was 23.8%. Internet use for more than 4.5 hours a day and use of social media platforms were significant risk factors for development of IA. There was a significant correlation between IA and stress, depression or anxiety

**Conclusions:** About one-fourth of adolescents have IA. There is a need to reduce the use of social media and limit the duration of internet use to prevent the development of addiction.

**Keywords:** Internet addiction, Internet use, Adolescent, Adolescent health, Mental health, Adolescent students

## INTRODUCTION

Internet is a global system of interconnected computer network that has become an important tool for education, entertainment and communication. Globally, internet user population has increased from 360 million in December 2000 to 5.18 billion in April 2023, which is 64.6% of global population.<sup>1</sup> Excessive use of internet may lead to IA. Particularly, adolescents are at enhanced risk for developing such behavioral patterns because of increased level of impulsivity during this transition phase.<sup>2</sup> IA may negatively affect their academic performance, family relationships, psychological and emotional development of adolescents.<sup>3</sup>

Researchers believe that like other addictions, IA often masks other problems such as depression, low self-esteem, and social anxiety and may even act as surrogate for other addictions.<sup>3</sup> In 5<sup>th</sup> edition of DSM (Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders), IA has been equated with addiction to internet games.<sup>4</sup>

There has been a lot of research on the issue of IA world over as well as from India.<sup>5-22</sup> A recent meta-analysis from India estimated the pooled prevalence of problematic internet use (PIU) among school going adolescents during the period from 2010-2020.<sup>15</sup> However, there have been discrepancies in screening instruments and criteria for diagnosing IA.<sup>15</sup> Also, we

don't have much information regarding pattern of internet use and risk factors for IA from North India.

A few studies from India have commented on psychological impact of IA in adolescents in terms of depression, anxiety and stress.<sup>16-18</sup> However, majority of them included college students. except Kumar et al who evaluated the psychopathology associated with internet overuse in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> class students.<sup>19</sup>

Hence, we conducted this study to estimate the prevalence, risk factors and psychological impact of IA in school and college adolescents.

## METHODS

This cross-sectional observational study was conducted in Delhi. We enrolled students from three schools and one college. Study protocol was approved by the institutional research and ethics committee. We first discussed the protocol with the school principal. After their assent, a written informed consent was obtained from parents and assent taken from the students.

### *Inclusion criteria*

School or college going adolescents of age 14 to 19 years, who assented for the study and whose parents gave consent, were included in the study.

### *Exclusion criteria*

Students with learning disabilities/chronic illness or not willing to participate in study were excluded from study.

The students were given a semi-structured proforma. The questionnaire includes the questions pertaining to Young's internet addiction test (YIAT) and DASS score.<sup>23,24</sup> YIAT instrument was translated in Hindi for administration to adolescents and then translated back in English for analysis.

Pilot study was done on 25 subjects using both Hindi and English forms. Wherever the Students reported any difficulty, the issue was discussed with the experts and appropriate change was made to keep the language closest possible to the original scale.

YIAT consists of 20 items that measure the level of IA. Each question has six options on Likert scale (0) Does not apply, (1) Rarely, (2) Occasionally, (3) Frequently, (4) Often, (5) Always.

The marking for this questionnaire ranges from 0 to 100. It is then interpreted as mild, moderate and severe addiction with score 20-49, 50-79 and 80-100 respectively (23).

In DASS, each item is indicated by the letters D (Depression), A (Anxiety) and S (Stress). The rating

scale is as follows: (0) Did not apply to me at all-Never, (1) Applied to me to some degree or sometimes-Sometimes, (2) Applied to me to a considerable degree, or a good part of time-Often, (3) Applied to me very much, or most of the time-Almost Always (22).

Depression was defined according to DASS 21 scale as mild (score 10-13); moderate (14-20), severe (21-27) and extremely severe (28 and above). Anxiety was defined as mild (score between 8 and 9), moderate (10-14), severe (15-19) and extremely severe (20 and above). Stress was defined according to DASS 21 scale as mild (score 15-18), moderate (19 -25), severe (26-33) and extremely severe (34 and above).

Effect of internet use on academic performance was also estimated by grades in the school in correlation to YIAT score.

### *Sample size calculation*

Keeping a population size of 20,000 and response distribution of 50%, with 5% margin of error and confidence level of 95%, the calculated sample size came out to be 377. We chose a sample of convenience of 400.

### *Statistical analysis*

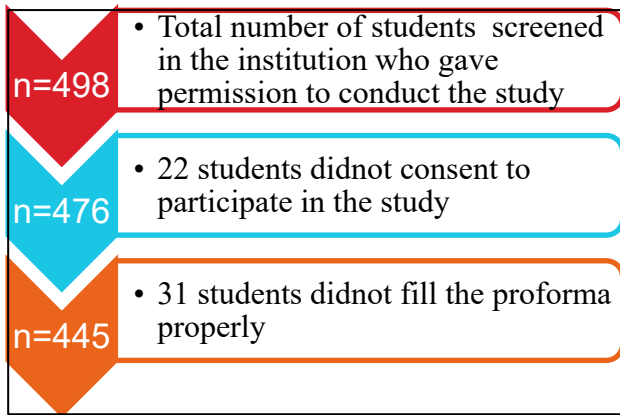
Continuous variables were presented with mean and standard deviations, while categorical variables were presented with absolute and relative frequencies. For the comparisons of proportions, Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests were used. Student's t test was used for the comparison of mean values. Stepwise, multivariate logistic regression analysis was applied in order to evaluate the risk factors for IA.  $P < 0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

## RESULTS

In this prospective study, 498 students were screened out of which 22 students did not provide consent. The proforma was not filled properly by 31 and were excluded. Hence, evaluation was done on the basis of data obtained from 445 subjects (Figure 1). Table 1 shows baseline demographic characteristics and patterns of internet use among adolescents. Male to female ratio was 2.3:1. Majority children (83.2%) were in the age group 16-17 years with a mean age of  $16.3 \pm 0.8$  years. The 267 (60%) children belonged to nuclear families.

Smartphone was the most used gadget, used by 420 (94.4%) students, followed by laptop used by 293(65%) adolescents. Tablet was least common, used by 112 (25.2%) students.

The maximum number of students, 113 (25.4%) were first exposed to internet while in class VIII, followed by 106 (23.8%) students in class VII. The mean duration of internet use per day was  $3.1 \pm 1.5$  hours (Table 1).

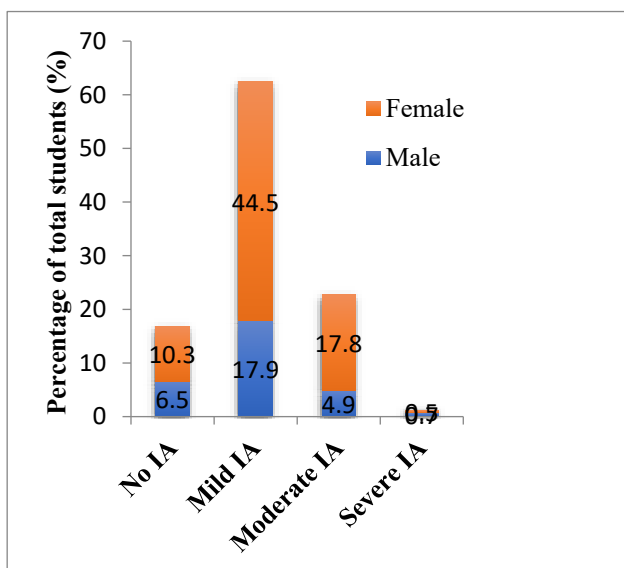


**Figure 1: Flowchart of participant selection.**

In total, 394 (88.5%) children used internet to communicate with friends and family via email, WhatsApp or Facebook messenger. Nearly half of them (42.7%) were using social networking handles and 151(33.9%) were using internet for gaming in addition to other purposes. Facebook was the most used application (74.6%) followed by WhatsApp (69%) and Instagram (33.5%) as shown in Table 1.

**IA**

Table 2 and Figure 2 show distribution of YIAT score among the adolescents. The mean YIAT score was 37.2±16.6. Only 61(13.7%) students had no addiction to internet (YIAT<20). When we considered YIAT score of less than 50 as normal, excluding mild addiction, 23.8% had IA (moderate or severe addiction). More number of males (26.1%) were internet addicted than females (18.7%), although the difference was statistically insignificant (p=0.09).



**Figure 2: Severity of internet addiction among students based on YIAT score.**

\*YIAT: Young’s internet addiction test. IA: Internet addiction

**Risk factors for IA**

Demographically, fathers doing private job (p<0.005), family income of more than 5 lakhs/year (p<0.001), and living in a nuclear family (p=0.002) were identified as a significant risk factor for development of moderate to severe IA. Also, internet use is more than 2 hours per day (p<0.001), availability of personal smartphones to the teen (p=0.01), internet use for social networking (p=0.04) were significant risk factors for the development of IA in adolescents. Among the applications used, Twitter (p=0.04), Instagram (p=0.001), WhatsApp (p=0.04) and Snapchat (p=0.001) were found to be significantly addicting.

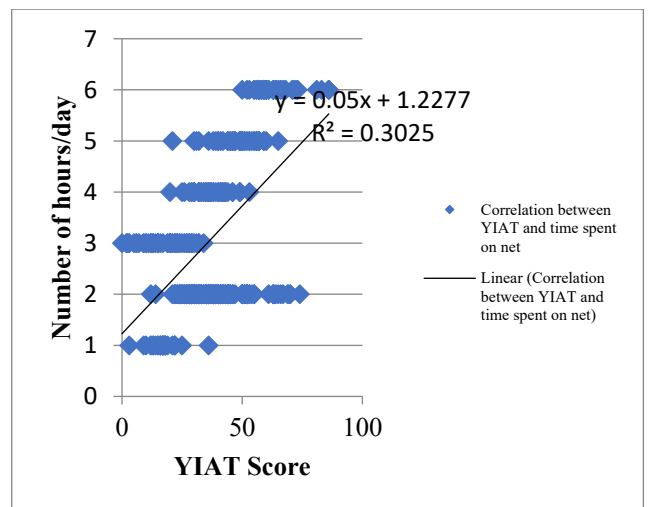
On logistic regression analysis, we found a strong correlation (r=0.6; p<0.001) between number of hours spent on internet and YIAT score. ≥4.5 hours/day internet use was found to cause moderate to severe IA (Figure 3).

Based on DASS, the prevalence of moderate to severe depression was 5.6% (25 students) and 139 (31.2%) students had moderate to severe anxiety. They had either no (430; 96.6%) or mild (15; 3.4%) stress (Table 4).

None of the students were extremely affected with severe depression, anxiety and stress. However, the scores for depression, anxiety and stress were definitely higher in internet addicted group.

On regression analysis, we identified a significant correlation but weak association between YIAT score and DASS D (r=0.4; p<0.001), DASS A (r=0.4; p<0.001) and DASS S (r=0.4; p<0.001) scores.

In present study, students with YIAT more than 50 (moderate to severe addiction) were found to have poor academic grades (X<sup>2</sup>=9.8; p=0.02), thus emphasizing the negative impact of IA on school performance.



**Figure 3: Correlation between YIAT score and number of hours spent on internet (r=0.6; p<0.001).**

\*YIAT: Young’s Internet addiction test

**Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of study population and their pattern of internet use, (n=445).**

Characteristics	N	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	311	69.9%
Female	134	30.1%
<b>Age group (in years)</b>		
14-15	53	11.9%
16-17	370	83.2%
18-19	22	4.9%
<b>Parent's education</b>		
Father: UG, G, PG	110, 138, 197	24.7%, 31.0%, 44.3%
Mother: UG, G, PG	176, 180, 89	39.6%, 40.4%, 20.0%
<b>Parent's occupation</b>		
Father: Gov, Private	200, 245	44.9%, 55.1%
Mother: Gov, Private, house wife	39, 110, 296	8.7%, 24.7%, 66.6%
<b>Family income</b>		
<2 L/year	59	13.3%
2-5 L/year	47	10.6%
>5 L/year	171	38.4%
Don't know	168	37.8%
<b>Family type</b>		
Nuclear	267	60%
Joint	178	40%
<b>Gadgets</b>		
Laptop	293	65.0%
Desktop	192	43.1%
Smartphone	420	94.4%
Tablet	112	25.2%
<b>First exposure to internet</b>		
Class 1-5	77	17.3%
Class 6-10	361	81.1%
After class 10	7	1.6%
<b>Duration of internet use/ day</b>		
<2 hours	227	51.0%
>2 hours	228	49.0%
<b>Purpose of internet use</b>		
No purpose	28	6.3%
Social networking	190	42.7%
Gaming	151	33.9%
Shopping	87	19.6%
Communication	394	88.5%
Listening to music	188	42.2%
<b>Application used</b>		
Facebook	332	74.6%
WhatsApp	307	69%
GooglePlus	255	57.3%
Instagram	149	33.5%
Snapchat	86	19.3%
Twitter	34	7.6%

**Table 2: Prevalence of IA among study subjects according to YIAT, (n=445).**

YIAT score	N	Percentage (%)	Mean YIAT score
<b>0-19 (No addiction)</b>	61	13.7	12.2±5.4
<b>20-49 (Mild addiction)</b>	278	62.5	33.9±7.6
<b>50-79 (Moderate addiction)</b>	101	22.7	58.8±6.8
<b>80-100 (Severe addiction)</b>	5	1.1	84.4±2.3

**Table 3: Association between pattern of internet use and moderate to severe IA.**

Parameters	YIAT 0-49, (No to mild addiction)	YIAT 50-100, (Moderate to severe addiction)	X <sup>2</sup>	P value
<b>First exposure</b>				
Before class 5, (n=77)	59 (76.6%)	18 (23.4%)	4.4	0.1
Class 6 to 10, (n=361)	277 (76.7%)	84 (23.3%)		
After class 10, (n=7)	3 (42.8%)	4 (57.2%)		
<b>Duration of internet use</b>				
<2 hours/day, (n=227)	183 (80.6%)	34 (14.9%)	15.5	<0.001
>2 hours/day, (n=228)	156 (68.4%)	72 (31.6%)		
<b>Gadget (Shared)</b>				
Laptop, (n=293)	222 (75.8%)	71 (24.2%)	0.08	0.7
Desktop*, (n=192)	155 (80.7%)	37 (19.3%)	3.8	0.05
Smartphone, (n=195)	149 (76.4%)	46 (23.5%)	0.01	0.9
Tablet, (n=112)	82 (73.2%)	30 (26.8%)	0.7	0.4
<b>Gadget used personally</b>				
Laptop, (n=11)	8 (72.7%)	3 (27.3%)	0.07	0.7
Desktop, (n=11)	7 (63.6%)	4 (36.4%)	0.9	0.3
Smartphone, (n=420)	325 (77.4%)	95 (22.6%)	5.9	0.01
Tablet, (n=6)	4 (66.7%)	2 (33.3%)	0.9	0.6
<b>Purpose of internet use</b>				
Listening to music, (n=188)	148 (78.7%)	40 (21.3%)	1.2	0.3
Communication, (n=394)	301 (76.4%)	93 (23.6%)	0.09	0.7
Shopping, (n=87)	71 (81.6%)	16 (18.4%)	1.8	0.2
Online gaming, (n=151)	113 (74.8%)	38 (25.2%)	0.6	0.7
Social networking, (n=191)	153 (80.1%)	38 (19.9%)	6.2	0.04
<b>Social media used</b>				
Facebook, (n=332)	256 (77.1%)	76 (22.9%)	1.0	0.6
Twitter, (n=34)	30 (88.2%)	4 (11.8%)	6.0	0.04
Instagram, (n=149)	128 (85.9%)	21 (14.1%)	11.7	0.001
WhatsApp, (n=308)	245(79.5%)	63 (20.5%)	6.5	0.04
Snapchat, (n=85)	76 (89.4%)	9 (10.6%)	13.1	0.001

**Table 4: Effects of IA on mental health.**

Effects	YIAT 0-49	YIAT >50	X <sup>2</sup>	P value
<b>Depression</b>				
0-9 (No)	223 (65.8%)	87 (82%)	0.2	0.2
0-13 (No to mild)	317 (93.5%)	103 (97.1%)		
10+ (Any depression)	116 (34.2%)	19 (17.9%)		
14-27 (moderate to severe)	22 (6.5%)	3 (2.8%)		
<b>Anxiety</b>				
0-7 (No)	167 (49.3%)	49 (46.2%)	0.9	0.3
0-9 (No to mild)	229 (67.6%)	77 (72.6%)		
8+ (Any anxiety)	172 (50.7%)	57 (53.8%)		
10-19 (moderate to severe)	110 (32.4%)	29 (27.4%)		
<b>Stress</b>				
0-14 (No)	329 (97.1%)	101 (95.2%)	0.8	0.4
0-18 (No to mild)	339 (100%)	106 (100%)		
15+ (Any anxiety)	10 (2.9%)	5 (4.7%)		
19-33 (moderate to severe)	0	0		

**DISCUSSION**

Excessive internet use may negatively affect mental and psychosocial health, academic performance and family

relationships of an individual. Particularly, adolescents are at an enhanced risk of harms of internet overuse since they are exposed to internet without having fully developed critical thinking.

In this study we have tried to look at the prevalence rate and risk factors for non-gaming IA and its psychological impact among school and college going adolescents. We studied the role of family demographics and pattern of internet use (reason for accessing internet, type of device used, and number of hours spent on internet) in increasing the risk of IA.

We used YIAT as the instrument to detect IA because it is most widely used multidimensional validated tool all over world.<sup>23</sup> In our study, prevalence of IA was 23.8% based on YIAT cut off of 50 for moderate to severe IA. This is comparable to meta-analysis by Joseph et al who reported a pooled prevalence of problematic internet use (PIU) as 21.8% among school going Indian adolescents using same cut off of YIAT score (>50).<sup>15</sup> A survey among Malaysian school students using Malay version of YIAT also reported similar prevalence of IA (29%).<sup>6</sup> Croatian study by Cernja and colleagues found that more than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> adolescents had moderate to severe addiction.<sup>5</sup> However, they used lower YIAT cut off of >40.

Sulania et al reported a lower prevalence of IA (15%) using YIAT cut off of >50.<sup>22</sup> However, their participants were from medical background only and slightly older with mean age of 20years. Hassan and co-researchers also found that IA is more prevalent among younger age group.<sup>7</sup>

Males were more likely to be addicted than females as observed by most of the previous researchers too.<sup>9,15,19,22</sup> This may be because boys are more likely to be attracted to internet games than girls. Higher proportion of males than females in the study population might also explain this difference.

Children with higher income (>5 lakhs a year) and those from nuclear families were more likely to be addicted to internet. This may be due to easy availability of digital devices with high-speed internet and lack of parental supervision in these cases.

The most common gadget used was smartphones, similar to other studies.<sup>7,9,12</sup> This is because of easy and cheap availability of smartphones these days. Availability of high-speed internet on mobile phones also explains this finding.

Most common purpose of internet use was social networking, as reported by previous studies too with Facebook being the most commonly used application followed by WhatsApp.<sup>7,9,10,22</sup> India has the highest number of Facebook users in the world, accounting for 314.6 million persons 13 years and above.<sup>25</sup> Higher percentage of Facebook and WhatsApp users in present study is reflecting the trend of social media usage in younger population in a metro city of India.

We found that both smartphone usage and internet use for social networking increase the risk of IA, and hence, need

to be regulated. Peris et al also observed that adolescents are highly likely to develop smartphone addiction.<sup>26</sup> Also, Kuss and Griffiths have stressed that excessive use of social networking sites might produce symptoms similar to substance use addiction.<sup>27</sup>

Most of the students started using internet between class 6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup>. This is similar to findings of Jain et al wherein majority participants had started using internet at the age of 10-15 years.<sup>11</sup> This finding implies that counselling about judicious internet use should begin by 6<sup>th</sup> standard to have maximum impact.

More number of children with IA were spending >2 hours a day on internet. We observed that internet usage of 4.5 hours/day is sufficient to develop IA. Other authors have also observed a similar correlation between time spent on internet and risk of addiction.<sup>7,10</sup> Hence, duration of daily internet use should be restricted to less than 4hours a day to avoid dependence. American academy of pediatrics has already recommended to limit non-essential screen-based media usage to less than 2 hours a day for children and adolescents.<sup>28</sup> However, it seems that much needs to be done to put these guidelines into practice.

We observed significant correlation but weak association between YIAT score and depression, anxiety and stress. Goel et al, Saikia et al from Assam and Kumari et al from Jammu also observed significantly higher DASS scores in college going adolescents with IA.<sup>16-18</sup> On the other hand, Javaeed et al found higher scores for depression and stress but normal scores for anxiety in internet addicted adolescents.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Kumar et al observed negative impact of internet overuse among the adolescents in terms of hyperactivity, conduct, emotional and peer problems.<sup>19</sup>

### **Strengths of study**

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study which included YIAT questionnaire in both Hindi and English to increase the involvement of Hindi-medium adolescents. In addition to assessing the prevalence of IA, we also evaluated the participants for pattern of internet use, risk factors for addiction and psychological impact of IA.

### **Limitations**

However, as it was a cross-sectional study, we could not show definite causal link between IA and psychological distress rather, the link is associational. Large scale studies are needed to evaluate the psychological impact of IA.

### **CONCLUSION**

Nearly, one-fourth of school and college going students were moderate to severely addicted to internet.

Smartphone use, access to social networking sites and internet use for more than 4.5 hours a day increased the risk of addiction. Internet addicted students were more likely to have depression, anxiety and stress compared to non-addicted ones. There is a need to promote early education about responsible internet use and supervision of students by family members to avoid negative consequences of IA like depression and anxiety.

As all adolescents might not be comfortable with English language questionnaires, a multi-centric trial with translation of YIAT questionnaire in vernacular languages can give a clearer picture of the scenario of IA in this culturally diverse world.

*Funding: No funding sources*

*Conflict of interest: None declared*

*Ethical approval: The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee*

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**Cite this article as:** Bansal A, Pawandeep FNU, Basu S, Ranjan T, Dubey H, Sarna T. Internet addiction among adolescents: prevalence, risk factors and impact on mental health. *Int J Contemp Pediatr* 2026;13:622-9.