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Internet Addiction and the Risk of Falling into Cybercrime

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Abstract:

Internet addiction transcends psychological distress by acting as a primary criminological catalyst for both victimization and digital deviance. Driven by a breakdown in self-regulation and constant digital exposure, addicted individuals frequently engage in risky online behaviors—such as excessive self-disclosure and interaction with deviant communities—that align with the "Routine Activities Theory." This creates a dual-risk scenario where the user becomes a highly accessible target for fraud and stalking while simultaneously lowering their own psychological barriers toward committing offenses like cyberbullying or hacking. Ultimately, the study positions internet addiction as a critical predictor of cybercrime, marking it as a significant threat to modern digital security.

Keywords: Internet Addiction, Cybercrime, Digital Victimization, Risky Online Behavior, Cyberbullying.

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Introduction:

The rapid development in information technology has led to the expansion of internet use across various fields of daily life, making it an essential tool for communication, learning, and work. However, excessive use of this technology has led to the emergence of new psychological and behavioral phenomena, most notably internet addiction, which has become a significant subject in psychological and social studies. Conversely, cybercrime has emerged as one of the contemporary challenges associated with digital space, where multiple forms of crimes such as electronic fraud, hacking, and digital identity theft are committed via information networks. In this context, this study seeks to shed light on the relationship between internet addiction and the risk of falling into cybercrime by presenting the most important theoretical approaches and studies that have addressed this phenomenon.

I-Problem Statement:

During recent decades, the world has witnessed rapid development in information and communication technology, leading to the expansion of internet use in various areas of daily life. Despite the many benefits of this technology, excessive use has led to the emergence of new psychological and behavioral phenomena, most notably internet addiction, which has gained increasing attention from researchers in the fields of psychology and social sciences. **(Kuss & Griffiths (2012))**

In parallel, cybercrime has emerged as one of the contemporary security challenges associated with the spread of digital space, where digital networks have become an environment that can be exploited to commit multiple forms of crimes such as electronic fraud, hacking, and digital identity theft **(Wall, (2007)).**

In this context, some studies indicate that addictive use of the internet may increase the likelihood of engaging in risky digital behaviors or exposure to electronic environments that may encourage criminal behavior, which raises questions about the nature of the relationship between internet addiction and the risk of falling into cybercrime.

Based on this, the problem of this study is represented in the following primary question:

-To what extent can internet addiction contribute to increasing the likelihood of falling into cybercrime, whether as a victim or as a participant in certain deviant digital behaviors?

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II-Concept of Internet Addiction

The concept of internet addiction is one of the concepts that emerged with the global spread of network use, and several researchers have attempted to define its meaning and boundaries from a psychological and behavioral perspective.

Kimberly Young defined internet addiction as an impulse control disorder characterized by excessive and uncontrolled use of the internet, leading to a significant deterioration in the individual's social, professional, or academic performance. (Young, (1998))

Davis believes that internet addiction represents a pattern of pathological internet use based on cognitive and behavioral imbalances that drive the individual toward excessive reliance on online activities, resulting in various psychological and social problems. (Davis, (2001))

Griffiths defined internet addiction within the framework of behavioral addictions, considering it a pattern of compulsive behavior characterized by traditional addiction traits such as salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, and conflict with daily life. (Griffiths, (2005)).

For their part, Shaw and Black believe that internet addiction refers to uncontrolled and excessive use of the internet, leading to significant distress or impairment in the psychological, social, and functional aspects of the individual. (Shaw & Black, (2008)).

Furthermore, Turel and Qahri-Saremi indicate that problematic internet use represents a state of behavioral dependence on digital activities, where the individual loses the ability to regulate their internet use despite the resulting negative effects (Turel & Qahri-Saremi, (2016)).

III-The Difference Between Normal Use, Intensive Use, and Internet Addiction

1. Normal Internet Use:

Normal internet use refers to the functional and balanced use of the network to achieve specific goals such as learning, work, or communication, without leading to negative impacts on the individual's daily life. In this pattern, the individual retains the ability to control the duration of their internet use and does not experience any defect in their social or professional performance as a result of this use. (Young, (1998)).

Davis also sees that normal internet use is characterized by being a complementary activity to daily life, where the individual remains able to organize their time and distinguish between real-life activities and digital activities without excessive psychological reliance on the internet (Davis, (2001)).

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2. Intensive Internet Use

Intensive use refers to spending long periods on the internet; however, this use does not necessarily reach the level of addiction, as it may be related to the nature of work, study, or professional activities that require constant connection to the network. Nonetheless, intensive use may represent a transitional stage that could develop into problematic use if not accompanied by sufficient self-regulation. (Griffiths, (2005))

Some studies indicate that intensive use may be associated with a higher probability of exposure to psychological or social problems if accompanied by weak time-management skills or an increasing reliance on digital interaction instead of real-life relationships. (Shaw & Black, (2008))

3. Internet Addiction:

As for internet addiction, it represents a more severe stage where the individual loses the ability to control their network use and continues despite negative consequences that may affect their personal, social, or professional life. This pattern is characterized by features similar to behavioral addictions, such as loss of control, constant preoccupation with the internet, and withdrawal symptoms when stopping use. (Young, (1998))

Griffiths emphasizes that internet addiction falls under behavioral addictions, characterized by several essential components such as the dominance of the behavior over the individual's thinking, mood changes associated with use, increased tolerance over time, in addition to conflict with daily life due to excessive use. (Griffiths, (2005))

Turel and Qahri-Saremi also point out that problematic internet use is characterized by behavioral dependence and loss of the ability to regulate use, where the individual continues to use the internet despite realizing the negative effects caused by this behavior (Turel & Qahri-Saremi (2016)).

IV-Characteristics of an Internet Addict:

Several researchers indicate that internet addiction is a form of behavioral addiction characterized by a group of psychological and behavioral symptoms similar to those appearing in traditional addictions. Griffiths presented a theoretical model known as the "Components Model of Addiction," which identifies a set of basic characteristics that distinguish addictive behavior, including internet addiction (Griffiths (2005)).

Salience: The first characteristic is dominance or salience, where internet use becomes the most important activity in the individual's life, preoccupying their thoughts and attention at the expense of other activities (Griffiths (2005)).

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Mood Modification: The second characteristic is mood modification, where the individual uses the internet as a means to escape negative emotions or to relieve stress and anxiety, making them rely on it to achieve a temporary state of psychological relief. (Kuss et al (2014))

Tolerance: The third characteristic is tolerance, where the individual needs to spend more time on the internet to obtain the same level of pleasure or satisfaction previously achieved. (Young, (1998))

Withdrawal Symptoms: Addicts also display withdrawal symptoms, which are uncomfortable feelings such as anxiety, tension, or irritability when trying to reduce internet use or stop it. (Shaw & Black (2008))

Conflict: The characteristic of conflict also appears, where excessive internet use leads to problems in social relationships or in academic and professional performance due to constant preoccupation with digital activities. (Griffiths (2005))

Relapse: Finally, the concept of relapse refers to the individual's return to excessive internet use after previous attempts to reduce or control it, which is one of the primary indicators of addictive behavior. (Kuss et al (2014))

V-Psychological Factors Associated with Internet Addiction:

Psychological literature indicates that internet addiction is linked to several psychological factors that contribute to the emergence and continuation of this behavior. Studies have focused on variables such as impulsivity, weak self-control, social isolation, as well as depression and anxiety as factors that increase individuals' susceptibility to excessive internet use.

1. Impulsivity:

Impulsivity is an important psychological factor associated with internet addiction, referring to the individual's tendency to take decisions or perform behaviors without sufficient thought about their consequences. Numerous studies have shown a positive relationship between impulsivity and problematic internet use, as individuals with high levels of impulsivity tend to engage in excessive network use due to their weak ability to regulate their behavior. (Ko et al (2009))

Some studies also indicate that impulsivity is linked to a weak ability to control the desire to use the internet, leading to difficulty in reducing the time spent on the network despite awareness of the negative effects (Billieux et al. (2015)).

2. Weak Self-Control:

Self-control is a fundamental concept in explaining addictive behaviors, referring to the individual's ability to regulate their behavior and control their impulses. Studies have shown that a low level of self-control is associated with an

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increased likelihood of problematic internet use, as individuals suffering from weak behavioral control tend to engage in digital activities excessively. (LaRose et al. (2003)

Some studies also indicate that weak self-control may lead to difficulty in controlling the time spent on the internet, increasing the chances of intensive use developing into an addictive pattern. (Caplan (2005))

3. Social Isolation

Research indicates that social isolation represents an important factor in the emergence of internet addiction, as individuals suffering from social interaction difficulties may resort to the internet as a means of compensating for real-life social relationships. Some researchers have found that individuals suffering from feelings of loneliness tend to use the internet excessively to obtain social support or escape feelings of isolation (Caplan (2007))

Some studies have also concluded that excessive internet use may, in turn, lead to an increase in the feeling of social isolation due to reduced direct interaction with others, creating a vicious cycle that reinforces the continuation of addictive behavior. (Kuss & Griffiths (2012))

4. Depression and Anxiety

Emotional disorders such as depression and anxiety are factors associated with internet addiction, as some individuals may use the network as a means of escaping negative feelings or alleviating psychological stress. Several studies have shown a positive relationship between depressive symptoms and problematic internet use (Yen et al. (2007)).

Furthermore, some research indicates that individuals suffering from high levels of anxiety may resort to interaction via the internet because it provides an environment that is less threatening than direct social interaction (Kuss & Griffiths(2012)).

VI-Concept of Cybercrime

Cybercrime is a modern criminal phenomenon that emerged as a result of rapid development in information and communication technology. Definitions have varied according to the different legal, technical, and sociological angles from which researchers have approached it.

Wall defined cybercrime as illegal acts committed using computers or digital networks as a means or target of the crime, including a wide range of activities such as electronic fraud, data theft, and digital intrusions. (Wall (2007))

Gordon and Ford believe that cybercrime refers to any criminal activity that uses a computer or network as a primary tool to execute the crime or as its target,

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where information systems or electronic networks are exploited to commit illegal acts (**Gordon & Ford (2006)**).

Holt defined cybercrime as crimes committed in digital space using computer and internet technologies, including multiple patterns such as electronic piracy, identity theft, and online fraud. (**Holt (2016)**)

Clough and Jeremy indicate that cybercrime consists of criminal acts that depend on the use of information and communication technology, whether this technology is a means of executing the crime or a direct target of it. (**Clough (2015)**)

Europol defines cybercrime as any illegal activity committed using information systems or computer networks, including attacks on information systems, electronic fraud, and theft of personal data. (**Europol (2020)**)

VII-Characteristics of Cybercrime

Cybercrime is characterized by a set of features that distinguish it from traditional crimes, resulting from its reliance on information and communication technology, which makes it more complex in terms of detection and prevention.

Transnational Nature: Cybercrime is a transnational crime, as the perpetrator can commit the crime from one country while the victim is in another, creating legal challenges regarding jurisdiction and international cooperation in law enforcement. (**Wall (2007)**)

Difficulty of Detection: A prominent characteristic of cybercrime is the difficulty of its detection compared to traditional crimes, as perpetrators can hide their identities using various technical means such as hiding their IP address or using proxy servers. (**Clough (2015)**)

Speed and Broad Spread: Cybercrime is characterized by the speed of its execution and the broad spread of its effects, as an attack or fraud process can be carried out in a very short time with the possibility of targeting a large number of victims simultaneously via digital networks. (**Holt(2016)**)

Reliance on Technical Knowledge: Cybercrime often requires a certain level of technical knowledge or information skills, as perpetrators rely on using computer programs and networks to execute attacks or penetrate information systems. (**Wall 2007))**

Difficulty of Collecting Evidence: Cybercrime is also characterized by the difficulty of collecting forensic evidence, as evidence is mostly digital and can be deleted or altered easily, requiring the use of advanced techniques in digital forensic investigation. (**Clough, (2015)**)

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➤ **Types of Cybercrime:**

Cybercrime takes multiple forms depending on the nature of the criminal act, execution methods, and the goals of the perpetrators. It can be primarily classified into the following types:

Cyber Fraud: Includes using the internet or computer to commit fraudulent acts aimed at seizing funds, personal data, or financial information from victims. Prominent forms include email fraud, fake auction sites, and bank card deception. (Wall (2007))

Hacking (Digital Intrusion): Refers to unauthorized access to computer systems or networks to steal data or disrupt services. Perpetrators often use special programs or security vulnerabilities to access digital systems. (Clough (2015))

Identity Theft: Relies on using other people's personal information online for financial fraud or committing crimes in the victim's name. It can include stealing passwords, ID numbers, and bank cards. (Gordon & Ford (2006))

Cyber Extortion: The perpetrator extorts the victim using the internet, such as threatening to publish sensitive information or cause digital harm if a sum of money is not paid. Common examples include email extortion or the use of ransomware. (Holt (2016))

Publishing and Promoting Illegal Content: This type includes crimes of publishing or circulating content protected by copyright, offensive content, or content aiming to incite violence, or pornography, especially related to minors. (Wall 2007)

Malware & Virus-Related Crimes: Consists of developing and using malicious programs to disrupt systems or steal data, including viruses, worms, spyware, and ransomware. (Clough (2015))

VIII-The Relationship Between Internet Addiction and the Risk of Falling into Cybercrime

Many recent studies indicate a relationship between addictive internet use and certain forms of deviant or dangerous behavior in digital space, including cybercrime or participation in aggressive electronic behaviors such as cyberbullying, hacking, and digital fraud. This is attributed to a set of psychological and behavioral factors such as impulsivity, weak self-control, and increased exposure to criminal digital environments.

1. Internet Addiction and Increased Exposure to Digital Criminal Environments:

A number of researchers indicate that intensive internet use increases the likelihood of exposure to illegal activities via digital networks. The more time an

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individual spends on the internet, the greater the chances of interacting with digital content or communities that may include criminal activities such as piracy or electronic fraud (Herrero et al (2021))

The study by Herrero et al. (2021) presented a model linking smartphone addiction and cybercrime victimization based on Routine Activities Theory and Self-Control Theory, showing that individuals with high levels of digital addiction are more prone to engaging in risky digital behaviors, increasing the likelihood of becoming victims or participants in cybercrime.

2. The Relationship Between Internet Addiction and Cyberbullying:

Cyberbullying is one of the most prominent forms of crime or digital violence associated with internet addiction. Several studies have shown a positive relationship between levels of internet addiction and practicing or being exposed to cyberbullying.

In a study conducted by Şimşek et al. (2019) on a large sample of 2,422 high school students, using the Young Internet Addiction Test and a cyberbullying scale, the results showed a statistically significant relationship between internet addiction and both practicing and being exposed to cyberbullying.

Another study found a positive relationship between internet addiction scores and cyberbullying scale scores among adolescents, indicating that addictive use of digital networks may increase the likelihood of engaging in aggressive behaviors online (Akkurt et al., 2022).

3. Internet Addiction and Digital Aggressive Behavior:

Some studies indicate that internet addiction may be associated with high levels of aggression and violent behaviors in the digital environment.

A study by Zhang et al. (2022) conducted on adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic found a positive relationship between internet addiction and aggressive behavior, with anxiety playing a mediating role in this relationship. These results suggest that excessive internet use may contribute to increased aggressive behaviors appearing in digital space, such as electronic harassment or molestation.

Other studies have also shown a relationship between internet addiction and violence tendencies among adolescents, finding that high levels of addiction are linked to a higher inclination toward internet violence tendency (Özarıcı & Cangöl Sögüt, (2022)).

4. Risky Digital Behaviors as a Mediator Between Addiction and Cybercrime

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Some studies indicate that the relationship between internet addiction and cybercrime may be indirect, mediated by what is known as "Risky Online Behaviors."

A recent study conducted on university students showed that intensive use of social media, excessive sharing of personal information, and engaging in unsafe digital interactions are factors that increase the likelihood of exposure to cybercrimes such as electronic extortion or cyberstalking. (Al Quds University Study (2024))

Furthermore, some studies indicate that excessive disclosure of personal information on social networks increases the likelihood of exposure to cyberstalking or digital exploitation. (Welsh & Lavoie (2012))

IX-Explanatory Model of the Relationship Between Internet Addiction and Cybercrime:

Many studies have attempted to explain the relationship between internet addiction and digital criminal behaviors through a number of psychological and criminological theories.

1. Self-Control Theory:

Self-Control Theory, presented by Gottfredson and Hirschi, is one of the most used theories in explaining criminal behavior. This theory posits that individuals suffering from low levels of self-control are more inclined to engage in risky or deviant behaviors. (Gottfredson & Hirschi (1990))

Studies have indicated that internet addiction is associated with a low degree of self-control, as addicted individuals face difficulty regulating their behavior or controlling time spent online, which may increase the likelihood of engaging in illegal digital behaviors such as hacking or electronic fraud. (LaRose et al., 2003)

2. Routine Activities Theory:

Presented by Cohen and Felson, this theory assumes that a crime occurs when three basic elements are present: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. (Cohen & Felson, (1979))

In the context of digital space, researchers indicate that intensive internet use increases individuals' exposure to criminal opportunities online. The more time an individual spends on the internet, the more likely they are to interact with digital environments that may include illegal or risky activities. (Holt, (2016))

3. Social Learning Theory:

The social learning theory developed by Bandura indicates that human behavior is learned through observation and interaction with others (Bandura, (1977)).

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In the digital environment, individuals spending long periods online can be exposed to digital content or communities that encourage illegal behaviors like hacking or electronic fraud. Over time, some users may learn these behaviors through imitation or interaction with deviant digital groups. (Holt, Bossler, & Seigfried-Spellar (2015)

4. Risky Online Behavior Model

Recent studies suggest that the relationship between internet addiction and cybercrime can be explained through risky digital behaviors, such as excessive disclosure of personal information, interacting with strangers online, or visiting unsafe sites.

“Welsh and Lavoie” (2012) showed that excessive disclosure of personal information online increases the likelihood of exposure to crimes like cyberstalking.

- Conclusion:

It is evident that internet addiction represents a psychological and behavioral phenomenon that may be linked to certain risky digital behaviors, especially given the virtual environment that provides multiple opportunities for interaction and engagement in illegal activities. Studies indicate that excessive internet use may increase the likelihood of exposure to cybercrime or engagement in some of its patterns. Therefore, understanding this relationship is of great importance in the field of criminal psychology, contributing to the development of preventive strategies that promote the safe and responsible use of digital space.

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