Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPULSIVE INTERNET USE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG UDERGRADUATE COUNSELLING STUDENTS

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPULSIVE INTERNET USE

AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG

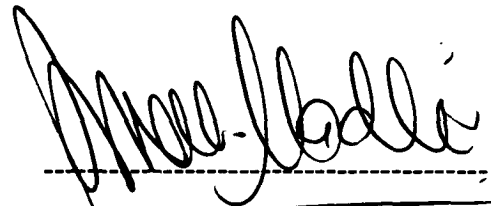# UNDERGRADUATE COUNSELLING STUDENTS

DAYANG KHAIRUNISA BINTI JOHARI

This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Bachelor of
Counselling with Honours

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The project entitled "Relationship between Compulsive Internet Use and Psychological Distress Among Undergraduate Counselling Students" was prepared by Dayang Khairunisa binti Johari and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Counselling with Honour.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between compulsive internet use and psychological distress. Sample of the study is undergraduate counselling students. There are five components under compulsive internet use which include loss of control, preoccupation, withdrawal symptoms, coping strategies and conflict. Quantitative research design is implemented in this study by applying survey method. Questionnaires were distributed to counselling students from Year 1 until Year 3. A total of 120 counselling students participated in the study where for each year of study 40 students represented their class. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to analyse the hypotheses. The results from the data analysis shows that all components of compulsive internet use; loss of control, preoccupation, withdrawal symptoms, coping strategies and conflict has a significant relationship with psychological distress. The findings from this study can spark an awareness among mental health practitioners to take better care of their psychological well-being to ensure they are qualified to counsel their clients.

Keywords: Compulsive Internet Use, Psychological Distress, Counselling Students,
University

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini dijalankan adalah untuk mengkaji hubungan antara penggunaan internet kompulsif dan kemurungan psikologi. Sampel kajian adalah pelajar prasiswazah kaunseling. Terdapat lima komponen dalam penggunaan internet kompulsif termasuklah hilang kawalan, keasyikan, simptom pengasingan, strategi mengatasi dan konflik. Kaedah kuantitatif telah diaplikasikan dalam kajian ini melalui penggunaan kaedah kaji selidik. Borang soal selidik telah diedarkan kepada pelajar kaunseling dari Tahun 1 sehingga Tahun 3. Sejumlah 120 orang pelajar kaunseling mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini dimana bagi setiap kumpulan 40 pelajar mewakili kelas mereka. Korelasi Pearson Product Moment telah digunakan untuk menganalisis hipotesis. Keputusan daripada analisis data menunjukkan bahawa semua komponen penggunaan internet kompulsif; hilang kawalan, keasyikan, simptom pengasingan, strategi mengatasi dan konflik mempunyai hubungan yang signifikan dengan kemurungan psikologi. Dapatan kajian daripada kajian ini dapat menimbulkan kesedaran dalam kalangan pengamal kesihatan mental agar menjaga dengan baik kesejahteraan psikologi mereka untuk memastikan mereka layak memberi khidmat perundingan kepada klien mereka.

Kata kunci: Penggunaan Internet yang Kompulsif, Kemurungan Psikologi, Pelajar Kaunseling, Universiti

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

This chapter discusses about background of study, statement of problems, research objectives, research hypotheses, conceptual framework, definitions of terms, significance of study and research limitation.

1.2   Background of Study

The use of internet has increase rapidly since it has been introduced in the early 1980s. Internet has become part of human life as it enables us to share information from anywhere and everywhere. It is a source of information in education settings, it helps to spread news about a certain event much faster and it can be used for communication to be much easier. Life without the internet would be slow and it is unimaginable to live without the internet. According to Department of Statistics Malaysia, as of 2017, the main purposes people access the internet include (a) participating in social networks (86.3%), (b) downloading images, movies, videos or music; playing or downloading games (81.2%), (c) finding information about goods or services (80.4%), (d) downloading software or applications (74.5%) and (e) sending or receiving email (70.4%). The above statistics show that Malaysian citizen are exposed towards the internet in various aspects. This makes us become more prone towards uncontrolled internet usage.

Compulsive internet use is also known as uncontrolled use of the internet, pathological internet use and internet addiction. According to Pezoa-Jares, Espinoza-Luna and Vasquez-Medina (2012), the term addiction has been controversial which allows the emergence of other terminologies that described about the same issue.

However, Griffiths (1999) mention that internet is not an addictive medium, but the users are using the internet as a medium to fulfil their specific addictions or intentions. An individual with internet addiction could have behavioural alterations, loss of control, academic failures, social isolation and family conflict (Tonioni, D'Alessandris, Lai, Martinelli, Corvino, Vasale, Fanella, Aceto & Bria, 2012; Holtz & Appel, 2011). This shows that uncontrolled internet use could affect daily life of an individual.

Based on past research by Young (1996), a healthy person may develop an internet addiction and mental health problems as a consequences of spending hours on porn sites, online shopping sites, computer games and chat rooms. They may also develop depression because of social isolation caused by excessive use of the internet (Tsai & Lin, 2003). A study by Yang and Tung (2007), found that the population of university students has the tendency to develop problematic or excessive usage of the internet.

1.3   Statement of Problems

People spend most of their time using smartphone from the moment they wake up until the time they went to sleep. In an article posted on New Straits Times (2018), Datuk Seri Dr Uzir Mahidin stated that computer and mobile phone access in Malaysia has increase to 74.1 percent and 98.1 percent respectively. Most citizens of Malaysia also prefer to access the internet from their mobile phone or tablet because of its convenience. Nowadays, people often carry their mobile phone at all times for various purposes.

There are pros and cons when internet access is made available. However, people are abusing its use which could done harm towards themselves. Based on a study by Young (2004), an individual may develop an uncontrollable urge to use the internet

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accompanied by loss of control, preoccupation with internet and remain using the internet despite its negative consequences. Past research has found that increase in virtual interaction could reduce face-to-face interaction and this could lead to social isolation and depression (Nie, Hillygus & Erbring, 2002). There is lack of research in Malaysia about the relationship between compulsive internet use and psychological distress especially among counselling students. Most research focus specifically on depression despite the fact that mental health problems cover more than depression.

The issue of compulsive internet use and mental well-being especially among university students should be taken seriously. This is because the number of people suffering from mental illness has been increasing in the past year. According to Orsal, Orsal, Unsal and Ozalp (2013), there is a positive correlation between internet addiction and depression among university students. In another study by American Psychological Association (2010) about mental health practitioner and their state of well-being, it is found that 18% of mental health practitioner are found to have suicidal ideation. Both of the statement had motivated this study among undergraduate counselling students. This is because they are considered as university students and they would also carry the same responsibility as a mental health practitioner in the future. This could lead to a stressful life as a student and their credibility in providing the best counselling service to others is questionable.

1.4 Research Objectives

There are two types of objectives for this study which are general objective and specific objectives.

1.4.1 General Objective

The general objective of the study is to assess the relationship between compulsive internet use and psychological distress among undergraduate counselling students.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are as stated below:

1) To assess the relationship between loss of control and psychological distress;

2) To assess the relationship between preoccupation and psychological distress;

3) To assess the relationship between withdrawal symptoms and psychological distress;

4) To assess the relationship between coping strategies and psychological distress; and

5) To assess the relationship between conflict and psychological distress.

1.5 Research Hypotheses

The research hypotheses are identified as follow:

H_01: There is no significant relationship between compulsive internet use and psychological distress.

H_02: There is no significant relationship between loss of control and psychological distress.

H_03: There is no significant relationship between preoccupation and psychological distress.

H_04: There is no significant relationship between withdrawal symptoms and psychological distress.

H_05: There is no significant relationship between coping strategies and psychological distress.

H_06: There is no significant relationship between conflict and psychological distress.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

The foundation of the study is based on Meerkerk, Eijnden, Vermulst and Garretsen (2009) compulsive internet use. Meerkerk et al. introduced five core criteria in compulsive internet use which are loss of control, preoccupation, withdrawal symptoms, coping strategies and conflict. The instrument develop by Meerkerk et al. has been used by many researchers and translated into different languages. Furthermore, it is also known that uncontrolled internet use may results in mental health problems. Hence, the instrument of Kessler Psychological Distress Scale that is developed by Kessler (1996) are used to measure the appearance of distress in an individual.

The conceptual framework (refer to Figure 1.1) consists of two variables which are independent variable and dependent variable. The independent variable is the components of compulsive internet use. Compulsive internet use has five components which include loss of control, preoccupation, withdrawal symptoms, coping strategies and conflict. The dependent variable is psychological distress.

Figure 1.2 shows the theoretical framework that amended Uses and Gratification theory by Katz (1973) as a basis for this study. The theory emphasized on how users utilized the use of media and the power users have over their media usage. There are two main factors in the theory; media attributes and context of use. Both of these factors have an impact towards the satisfaction of a user.

Users have the ability to choose any source of media which is suitable for them and they could fulfil their needs from the usage of the media. There are five distinct categories of need that could be fulfilled by media which include cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative and tension-free needs. Individual that are not satisfy with their media usage could develop compulsive internet use or problematic internet use. According to Brand et al. (2016), gratification leads to reinforcement in the context of internet use which makes it difficult for an individual to exert inhibitory control over their internet use. This could further enhance dysfunctional psychological distress as individual's internet use have interfere with their daily activities. Thus, the whole study is based on the conceptual framework and theoretical framework illustrated in Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2.
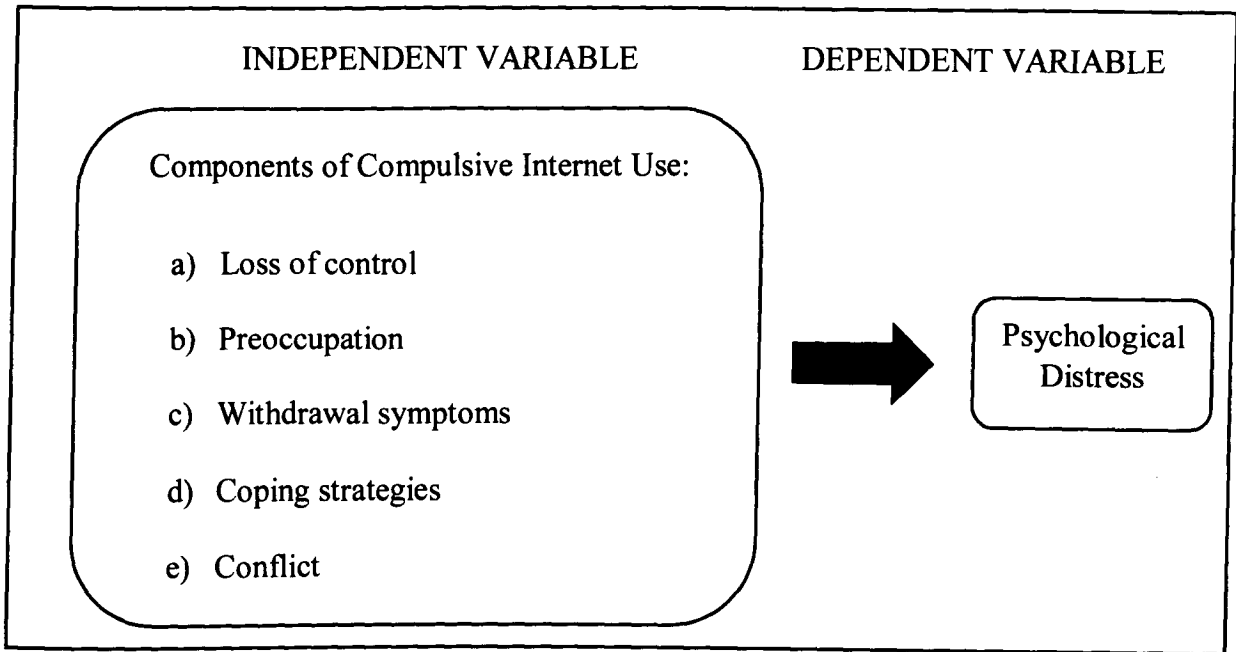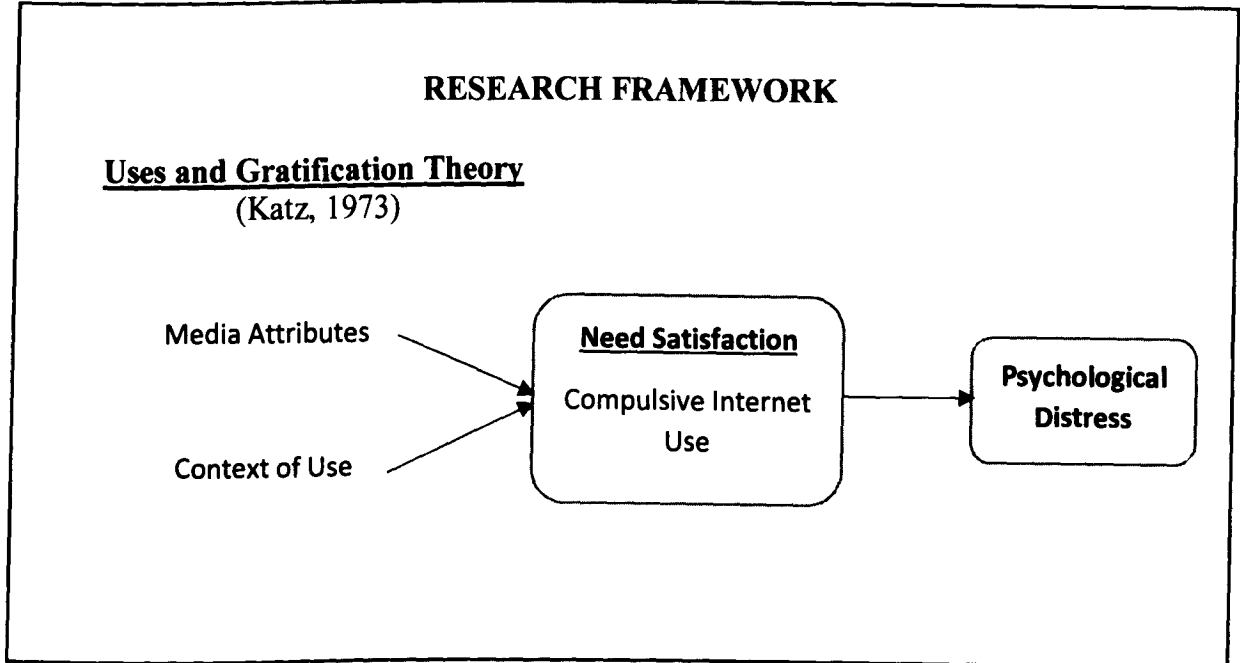
Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework of Study

Figure 1.2 Theoretical Framework of Study

1.7   Definitions of Terms

1.7.1   Compulsive Internet Use

Conceptual: Meerkerk *et al.* (2009) described compulsive internet use by five criteria including (a) experience of unpleasant emotions when internet use is inaccessible, (b) continue its use despite the intentions to stop, (c) internet is use as an escape from negative feelings, (d) behaviour and cognition is control by internet and (e) internet usage results in conflict with self and others.

Operational: In this study, the five components of compulsive internet use are loss of control, preoccupation, withdrawal symptoms, coping strategies and conflict.

1.7.2   Psychological Distress

Conceptual: According to Gotlib and Cane (1989), psychological distress is a non-specific syndrome that includes anxiety, depression, cognitive problems, irritability, anger or obsession-compulsion. Psychological distress can also be defined as a continuous experience of unhappiness, nervousness, irritability and problematic interpersonal relationship (Chalfant et al., 1990).

Operational: Psychological distress in this study refers to a state of well-being in which students are balanced in both emotional and cognitive aspects.

1.7.3 Undergraduate

Conceptual: The term undergraduate refers to students who have enrolled in a bachelor's degree that require about four years of study beyond high school (Academia, 2015).

Operational: In this study, undergraduate refers to counselling students that enrol in counselling program. This study involves counselling students from Year 1 until Year 3 in UNIMAS.

1.8 Significance of Study

Current study could provide awareness for counselling students to prepare themselves for the future. Spreading awareness through the research could prevent students from being addicted towards new technology specifically internet. An individual with addiction has a high tendency to develop mental health problems. Students who are taking counselling program should learn self-control so that it could decrease the likelihood they would develop mental problems. Based on Gino (2018), self-control is the ability to refuse temptations that are immediately gratifying but might not be the best choices for the person. In another word, it is also known as willpower. Counselling students should take good care of themselves so that people would not question their capability as a future mental health practitioner.

Furthermore, this study could contribute towards future research as reference and guidance for them. They could explore more about this topic by using a different method of data collection or population. This would provide an information that could be generalized towards other population based on the same topic. Other than that, this study could provide the information on the relationship between internet addiction and one's psychological health.

1.9   Research Limitation

This study has disadvantages as the population is not larger and it focuses on university students which takes counselling program. Mental health practitioner does not only comprise of counsellors, but therapist, social worker and nurses are also included in this setting. Future researcher may conduct a study about compulsive internet use among mental health practitioner and compare the results by profession. They could explore regarding the impact of uncontrolled internet use among mental health practitioner and how psychological well-being could affect their credibility as a mental health practitioner.

1.10   Summary

In conclusion, this chapter discusses about several aspects that is important about the study. This includes the problem statement, objectives, hypotheses and the conceptual framework. The main purpose for this study is to assess the relationship between compulsive internet use and psychological distress among undergraduate counselling students in UNIMAS.