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Impact of Internet Addiction and Short Form Videos on Attention Span

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ABSTRACT

Due to increased usage of the digital medium by university students, there is growing concern about the effect that could have been caused on their cognitive processes like the span of attention. This study was conducted to examine the impact of internet addiction and short form videos on attention span among university students. The data was collected from 600 university students using the Internet addiction Questionnaire (IAQ), Short Form Video Addiction, and the already designed experiment for measuring the attention span. Results indicated a significant positive association between internet addiction and short-form video addiction. Attention span was found to be not significantly associated with internet addiction and short-form video addiction. Results also revealed gender differences in internet addiction where males are more addicted to internet. This research has demonstrated the increasing need to explore the phenomenon of digital addiction in relation to university students and has added valuable knowledge to the discipline of digital psychology using a non-Western sample. Further studies are encouraged to adopt longitudinal and experimental methodologies in order to provide more insight into the problem.



Introduction

Digital technology's evolution has transformed almost every facet of modern life, from communication and learning to entertainment and socializing. Digital media has become ubiquitous in the daily lives of young adults, including college and university students, as they have access to smartphones and cheap internet everywhere. This access, however, comes with a

host of benefits, but also some harmful risks to mental health and cognitive functioning have been identified by an increasing number of studies (Tereshchenko, 2023).

One of the areas that have been most extensively researched as a result of this change is the internet addiction. It is widely recognized as the excessive and irresponsible use of Internet-based information that persists despite its harmful effects in the areas of academic achievement, mental health, and interactions with others. People with internet addiction usually spend excessive time online, find it difficult to stop or significantly reduce their Internet use, and have begun to rely on the Internet for stimulation and emotional management. The prevalence rates are also inconsistent between countries and populations, and in Pakistan various studies have shown rates of less than 10% in older samples to more than 20% for university students in recent samples; in Pakistan socioeconomic status, lifestyle factors, and smoking were identified as associated variables (Zahra et al., 2024).

In addition to internet addiction, there is another new and ever expanding behavioral issue called short-form video addiction. Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts are designed to grab attention with short, engaging video snippets. However, features such as infinite scroll, autoplay, algorithmic personalization, and the speed of the scenes, make it hard to be disengaged, and seem to foster compulsive viewing habits (Alfatih et al., 2024). Increasing evidence has correlated excessive consumption of short-form video with a measurable decrease in attentional control. For example, Haliti-Sylaj and Sadiku (2024) found that frequent short-form reels users had significantly smaller capacities of maintaining attention than moderate users, and Zhang et al. (2023) found a moderate negative correlation between short-form video addiction and attentional focus, as well as a smaller negative correlation with attentional shifting among college students. Beginning to understand the potential mechanisms, Yan et al. (2024) have reported that people with addictive short-form video behaviors had less theta brainwave activity in the prefrontal cortex, an area strongly linked to focused attention and executive function.

A short attention span is a fundamental cognitive function which allows a person to focus on given tasks, process information effectively, and maintain attention. For the students, sufficient attention is the basis for doing important academic tasks like study, memorization, and problem solving. But the hectic, intensive world of digital technology seems to be in conflict with the ability to stay focused. Switching between applications, frequent social media checking and extended short video playing have all been linked to heightened distractibility and lower attention control (Xie et al., 2023), with negative consequences for academic engagement and procrastination (Ning & Inan, 2024).

There are a number of psychological theories that can be used to account for why digital media use may be distracting in this way. The dopamine reward system is one account: Online activities that involve variable and unpredictable rewards; such as seeing "likes," accessing entertaining content, or interacting socially, activate the dopamine system, which is associated with greater likelihood of continued use and can, over time, rewire the neural pathways of reward (Tereshchenko, 2023). Complementary explanations can be found in Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) which posits that working memory has a limited capacity which can be overloaded if the stimulation is too great

or inadequately structured to support memory, which will lead to difficulties in concentration and in remembering. Along with this, there is attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, 1995) which proposes that environments that require constant involuntary attention, such as digital environments, do not afford the opportunity for directed attention to be restored over time, potentially impairing it.

The literature has been consistently associated with the use of the internet and the negative consequences of using it on concentration, distractibility, and attentional control, along with the related deficits in academic and executive functioning. Notwithstanding this increasing body of evidence, there are a number of gaps in knowledge. Although short-form video addiction is a popular phenomenon among college and university students (Al-Leimon et al., 2025), previous research has focused on the study of internet addiction as a general concept. Furthermore, many of the previously published studies have used self-report questionnaires to assess attention instead of experimental tasks, so the implications of the findings of these studies for actual attentional performance remain limited. Lastly, there is a limited amount of research specifically conducted on non-western and especially Pakistani samples (Zahra et al., 2024). Based on these gaps, the current study wants to explore the relationship of internet addiction with short videos addiction and attention span of the college and university students. The other goal is to determine if there are measurable differences in attentional performance related to high or low levels of engagement with digital media, using both self-report and an objective attention task. This study will further build upon the literature of the digital psychology and use a questionnaire-based and experimental approach, with a sample of Pakistani university students, to fill in some of the gaps mentioned above in the literature.

Research Gap

There is already extensive research on the phenomenon of Internet addiction and the consumption of digital media, but there are still several areas that are not explored. Studies on the Internet addiction that have been published in the literature have focused primarily on Internet addiction as a general concept rather than short-form video addiction, which has been gaining increasing popularity among the college and university student population in recent years (Alfatih et al., 2024; Pranathi & Jacob, 2025). Second, most previous studies have used only self-report questionnaires to measure attention and concentration, and not objective experimental measures that are directly capturing attention performance. Third, although the use of smartphones and social media is widespread in the region and in Pakistan, in particular, studies examining these relationships in non-Western populations is still limited (Zahra et al., 2024). The present study aims to fill these gaps by focusing specifically on short-form video addiction, considering general internet addiction, using an objective attention experiment and sampling from the students of College and University in Pakistan.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design to examine the relationships among internet addiction, short-form video addiction, and attention span in college and university students. A correlational design was considered appropriate given the study's aim of identifying associations among these variables at a single point in time, consistent with similar recent designs used in this area of research (Zhang et al., 2023).

Participants

The target population comprised college and university students who actively use the internet and digital media platforms. A total sample of 600 participants was recruited from multiple colleges and universities, including both male and female students. University students were selected as the target population because young adults represent the largest consumer group for internet services, social media, and short-form video content, making them a particularly relevant population for examining internet addiction, short-form video addiction, and attention span (Alfatih et al., 2024; Zahra et al., 2024).

Research Instruments

Internet Addiction Questionnaire (IAQ). The IAQ was used to assess problematic patterns of internet use (Suganya et al., 2024). The scale consisted of 17 items measuring problematic internet-related behaviors, dependence, and difficulty controlling internet use. A cutoff of 16 and above showed internet addiction.

Short-Form Video Addiction Scale (SVA). The SVA scale assessed addictive engagement with short-form video platforms, including TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. The scale comprised 15 items measuring excessive scrolling behavior, viewing patterns, and overall engagement with these applications, consistent with instruments used in recent short-form video addiction research (Pranathi & Jacob, 2025).

Attention Span Experiment. Attention span was assessed using an objective behavioral task in addition to self-report measures, addressing a key limitation identified in prior literature that has relied predominantly on subjective measures (Zhang et al., 2023). The task used 12 cards, each displaying letters positioned at varying spatial locations. Each card was presented for one second, after which participants were asked to reproduce the letters and their spatial positions from memory.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection began after obtaining informed consent from participants. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. They first completed a demographic questionnaire, followed by the IAQ and SVA scales, and then completed

the attention span experiment. Completed responses were reviewed, coded, and entered into SPSS for statistical analysis.

Analysis Techniques

Several statistical techniques were used to analyze the collected data. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed for all study variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships among internet addiction, short-form video addiction, and attention span. Independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to examine differences in study variables across gender, and duration of internet usage respectively.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to standard ethical research practices throughout. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality of personal information and individual responses was maintained throughout, with data used exclusively for academic purposes. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variables	M	SD	F	%age
Gender				
Male			254	42.3
Female			346	57.7
Age	21.05	3.21		
Attention Span	49.07	4.67	34	60
Internet Addiction	42.59	7.36	17	61
Short Video Addiction	43.11	8.66	15	68

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Descriptive statistics were computed to provide information on the average scores, standard deviation scores, minimum scores, and maximum scores in terms of attention span, internet addiction, and short-form video addiction.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
Internet Addiction Questionnaire (IAQ)	.817
Short-Form Video Addiction Scale (SVA)	.838

Reliability analysis was computed using Cronbach's alpha to determine the reliability of the research tools. It is important to state that Internet Addiction Questionnaire (IAQ) had a Cronbach's alpha of .817. This suggests that IAQ is consistent with itself. Likewise, it was established that SVA has a Cronbach's alpha of .838, which demonstrates high reliability.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation among Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1. Attention Span	-	-.045	.017
2. Internet Addiction		-	.645**
3. Short Video Addiction			-

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01.

Pearson product-moment correlation was used to establish the existence of any relationship between internet addiction, short-form video addiction, and attention span. From the findings, there was found a significant positive relationship between internet addiction and short-form video addiction ($r = .645$, $p < .01$). It means that participants who were more addicted to using the internet were equally addicted to short-form videos. However, attention span showed no significant relationship with internet addiction ($r = -.045$) and short-form video addiction ($r = .017$). It was clear from the results that despite showing positive relationships with each other, digital addiction was not significantly related to attention span in this research study.

Differences According to the Duration of Internet Usage and Education Level

Table 4: Independent Samples t-Test for Gender Differences

Variables	Male M(SD)	Female M(SD)	T(598)	p	95% CI	Cohen's d
Attention Span	48.75 (4.41)	49.39 (4.89)	-1.69	.092	[-1.37, 0.10]	-.14
Internet Addiction	43.20 (7.17)	42.00 (7.51)	2.01	.045	[0.03, 2.37]	.16
Short Video Addiction	43.70 (8.01)	42.54 (9.23)	1.65	.100	[-0.23, 2.55]	.13

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 4 presents gender differences in attention span, internet addiction, and short video addiction. The findings revealed a significant gender difference in internet addiction, indicating that males reported slightly higher internet addiction scores than females. No significant gender differences were found for attention span and short video addiction.

Table 5: One-Way ANOVA for Internet Usage Groups

Variables	<2 Hours M(SD)	2–4 Hours M(SD)	4–6 Hours M(SD)	6–8 Hours M(SD)	>8 Hours M(SD)	F	p
Attention Span	50.63 (4.86)	49.54 (4.22)	48.99 (4.90)	48.72 (4.80)	48.59 (4.33)	2.11	.078
Internet Addiction	38.98 (5.96)	39.29 (7.55)	43.00 (7.33)	43.32 (6.94)	45.83 (6.55)	15.44	.000

Short	Video	38.72	40.27	44.72	42.83	45.86	10.86	.000
Addiction		(7.77)	(8.95)	(8.43)	(8.98)	(6.87)		

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 5 presents the mean differences among internet usage groups on attention span, internet addiction, and short video addiction. The findings revealed significant differences among internet usage groups on internet addiction and short video addiction. Participants with greater internet usage demonstrated higher addiction scores. However, attention span did not significantly differ across internet usage groups.

Table 6: Tukey Post Hoc Analysis for Internet Usage Groups

Variables	Group I	Group J	Mean Difference	p
Internet Addiction	<2 Hours	4–6 Hours	-4.02*	.006
Internet Addiction	<2 Hours	6–8 Hours	-4.34*	.002
Internet Addiction	<2 Hours	>8 Hours	-6.85*	.000
Short Video Addiction	<2 Hours	4–6 Hours	-6.01*	.000
Short Video Addiction	<2 Hours	6–8 Hours	-4.11*	.028
Short Video Addiction	<2 Hours	>8 Hours	-7.14*	.000

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 6 presents the Tukey post hoc analysis among internet usage groups. The results showed that participants spending less than two hours on the internet significantly differed from participants spending four or more hours online on internet addiction and short video addiction scores.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the relationships among internet addiction, short-form video addiction and attention span among 600 college and university students, as well as to determine whether internet heavy use is associated with any measurable attentional difference. The findings present a more nuanced picture than a straightforward one of "too much screen time, too little attention." There was a strong correlation between internet addictions and short-form video addictions, and duration was correlated with both of them in a stepwise fashion, and a small but real gender difference in internet addictions. But attention span was separate from it all. It wasn't remotely correlated with either type of addiction to digital devices, and was only tangentially correlated with how many hours per day participants spent online. The sentences that follow will work through each of these patterns one at a time, attempt to explain the one that didn't occur as it was hoped, and reflect on what all this may signify in terms of thinking, learning, and using digital media in a Pakistani university community.

It is important to briefly note all descriptive and reliability results before moving on to substantive findings, which will describe the sample itself. Both measures were reliable with alpha values above 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency, and thus the pattern of any findings that follows can be accepted as a reliable indication that these measures were functioning as they were designed to do. No significant differences in digital addiction scores were found, and the mean scores on both addiction measures were relatively near the center of their respective ranges, indicating that this sample was not comprised of extreme cases of digital addiction, but rather the type of moderate, commonplace problematic use that is most commonly observed in most universities rather than a clinical population (Parry & le Roux, 2020). The reason the null attention results below are not to be interpreted as a comparison between extremes of addicted and non-addicted users, but rather a study of the average heavy user, and what effects one may expect to find.

The results that are most interesting and intuitive here is the significant positive correlation between the short-form video addiction and internet addiction. There was also a significant correlation between the amount that students reported using the internet compulsively overall, and their compulsive use of the TikTok-style short video content. This aligns with a larger trend in the literature: short-form video use is not an addiction in its own right, but rather it accompanies other forms of problematic Internet use. Why? is best understood with reference to the Interaction of Person-Affect-Cognition-Execution (I-PACE) model (Brand et al., 2016). The model suggests that the various forms of Internet-use disorders can be subsumed under a similar underlying architecture: situational cues, which are psychological and neurobiological vulnerabilities for Internet-use, combine to produce a compulsive use of the Internet, no matter what type of application or platform is involved. It's a feature, not a bug: short-form video apps may just be an especially effective way to vent a flaw not inherent to their platform itself. If this reading is correct, the high degree of correlation here is not two addictions co-occurring; it's two channels of badly-managed digital engagement, both of which serve the same pattern.

However, the .645 coefficient is good, but not strong enough to imply that the two scales are merely measuring the same phenomenon twice. This common core is still accompanied by scale-specific, unshared variance, as consistent across the two scales with regard to the content being measured, one of which focused on Internet use in general and the other on one type of content. This is not something that should be overlooked: self-report addiction scales included in this literature have been criticised for being highly overlapping in what they actually measure; a scale written by the name of a technology might actually measure a similar underlying dimension; such

as compulsive use and negative outcomes; regardless of its specific name (Parry & le Roux, 2020). Some of this common variance may be real (as it is in the case of true behavioral overlap) and some may simply be due to the fact that two self-report scales asking similarly worded questions in the areas of 'time spent', 'difficulty stopping', and 'interference with responsibilities' will correlate to a large extent by construction. This study design does not provide a separation of these two explanations, both of which seem quite reasonable.

The same disconnect has been noted in several recent studies, which have employed objective, behavioural measures of attention, rather than self-reported attention difficulties. Kim et al. (2024) directly compared three groups (normal use, problematic smartphone use, and disorders with problematic smartphone use) with a battery of attention tests that included the selective attention, sustained attention, and divided attention subscale and found no group differences; meanwhile, the problematic-smartphone-use group demonstrated relationships between levels of addiction and higher impulse scores and lower mindfulness scores, though not to performance on the actual attention tests. In another cross-sectional study, involving middle school students, there were no significant differences between the performance on working memory or selective attention tasks for the children that are addicted to smartphones and those that are not addicted. Combined with the present findings, this suggests something real to consider: Self-reported digital addiction and objective measures of attentional capacity are measuring different phenomena. A person may feel distracted on a structured attention task, describe their use of the Internet as compulsive, and still perform normally on the attention task, since they may feel distracted, have a compulsive pattern of Internet use, and still be able to perform a structured attention task, but they are not the same construct.

There's also an explanation to consider that is not specific to measurements. Attention span task was adapted for this task, which involves reproducing letters from briefly presented cards at various spatial locations, in addition to sustained attention, and heavily relied on visual short-term memory and spatial encoding. A good indicator of attentional capacity, but it is not a direct measure of the type of attention that is thought to be lost with short-form video use, that is, sustained, intensive attention for a longer time period and resisting the competing stimuli. A brief, single-trial recall task may simply not be sensitive to the gradual slippage of directed attention that is described by Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, 1995) and usually thought of as building up during extended periods of digital exposure, rather than observed in a one-second recall test. It is also likely that such a compulsive use pattern (as answered in these questionnaires) may coexist

with normal cognitive competence, because the former is not necessarily a result of poor cognitive ability when specifically attending to a task, but rather is a result of the ability to regulate one's attention away from the material. Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) does not fully capture this distinction alone, since it was developed to describe instructional design contexts rather than the self-regulatory dynamics of habitual media use.

None of this should be interpreted as a full denial of the cognitive costs of heavy digital media use, as the literature is mixed, with some more sensitive or repeated measures studies showing real cognitive deficits from heavy use of short-form videos. Instead, it is a caution to not assume that there is a simple, known, and predictable relationship between the introduction and the effects, and a reason to consider the theoretical framing of the introduction as plausible mechanisms rather than explicit, universal, and replicable effects.

Table 3 compared male and female students in terms of internet addiction, which revealed that male students scored slightly higher than female students but this difference was not large and statistically insignificant. A Cohen's d of 0.16 is a realistically small effect size, and it would be incorrect to draw too strong a conclusion from it; the male and female distributions are almost identical. Nevertheless, this is in line with a large volume of previous research. A meta-analysis conducted worldwide across 34 countries also revealed that men were more prone to become Internet addicts than women, with the biggest gender difference in Internet addiction scores being present in the Asian samples (Su et al., 2019); this is a reasonable comparison point given the region under consideration here, but as noted above, caution is advised in comparing the two groups. In terms of attention span, and, in particular for short-form video addiction, no significant difference was found between the two genders, which is broadly consistent with the findings of other studies that generally show that gender differences in digital addiction are construct-specific rather than uniform; that is, males might score higher on general internet or gaming-related measures and females on social-media-specific measures, and a null finding here doesn't prove a null finding for general internet addiction, simply that the two measures are assessing a different pattern of digital use across the two genders.

Table 4 shows the pattern across internet usage duration groups in terms of internet addiction and short-form video addiction scores, which was more straightforward and, in a sense, reassuring from a construct-validity perspective: As the number of hours per day increased, there was a consistent increase in scores on the internet addiction and short-form video addiction scales, with a

clear stepwise increase moving from those spending fewer than 2 hours per day online to those spending 8 hours or more. This was further clarified by the Tukey post hoc comparisons (Table 5) which revealed differences between the lightest and all other groups on both measures of addiction, but fewer consistently significant differences between the heavier use groups. This dose-response pattern is what one would expect to see if these questionnaires were able to validly capture something behaviourally real, namely the frequency of use, as opposed to measuring something that has nothing to do with the actual pattern of use. In contrast, attention span demonstrated only marginal differences among usage groups barely shy of conventional levels of significance. This near-miss should be acknowledged for what it is (as opposed to attributed to either its absence or being exaggerated), either because it implies a true, but small, effect that this study was not powered to cleanly detect, or because it is simply noise noise because of the number of comparisons made. In either case, it is not strong on any side of the argument, and is compatible with the null correlation results cited above.

Taken together, these findings indicate that a more nuanced conclusion about the impact of digital addiction on attention cannot be drawn than either "digital addiction harms attention" or "digital addiction is harmless. The symptoms of Internet Addiction and Short-Form Video Addiction form a cohesive group of compulsive self-reported Internet and short-form video usage, where the number of hours spent online correlates consistently with the amount of Internet or short-form video addiction, and a small gender bias exists with more males than females, similar to trends internationally (Su et al., 2019). However, in this sample, the cluster of compulsive engagement did not correlate with worse performance on an objective attention task, which has also been reported in recent studies with similar behavioral measures (Kim et al., 2024). The most defensible argument is that, again, the theoretical mechanisms outlined above (dopamine reinforcement learning (Tereshchenko, 2023), cognitive overload (Sweller, 1988), or limited directed-attention recovery (Kaplan, 1995)) are not incorrect, but that effects on attention do not become apparent after a short attention task, and may only emerge reliably over time in longer duration attention tasks, in real-world academic tasks, in self-reported attention difficulties, or in other contexts.

The results have to be interpreted with some caution due to some limitations. Because this is a cross-sectional design, no causal statements about direction or over time can be inferred from these data. Although the attention span task was objective, it was measuring a very specific and narrow part of attentional functioning (recall of a brief presentation of visual material) which may not be representative of sustained or divided attention more likely to be involved in studying and

schoolwork. Although reliable in this study, self-report measures of internet and short-form video addiction have general validity concerns raised in this literature (Parry & le Roux, 2020), and future studies could benefit from measuring these same behaviours with objectively-logged screen time measures. Lastly, the sample was limited to students from Pakistani college and universities and the findings should be considered with caution to other cultural and educational contexts as there is a gap in the literature

Conclusion

This current study was undertaken in order to investigate the relationship between internet addiction, short-form video addiction, and attention span among college and university students. Considering the technological advances in the contemporary era along with the rise of social media sites and short-form videos, psychological concerns related to their impact on humans' minds have also become prevalent. Hence, this study was conducted in order to see whether overexposure to technology impacts students' attention span.

From the results of the study, it can be concluded that there is a very strong positive correlation between internet addiction and short-form video addiction, suggesting that people who are addicted to spending time online also tend to use short form videos available through various apps including TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube shorts more than others. However, the relationship between digital addiction and attention span was non-significant. Similarly, digital addiction factors were also non-significant predictors of attention span performance of participants

Even though the current study found no statistically significant results regarding the effects of digital addiction on attention span, the results do highlight the increasing phenomenon of internet addiction among university students. Digital overexposure has become one of the key psychological issues in the modern era.

The current paper also offers some contribution to the relatively new field of digital psychology, because it explores the topic of short-form video addiction, which remains a fairly understudied area especially among non-Western cultures such as the Pakistani culture. The inclusion of the experimental attention task to the questionnaire technique employed for researching digital addiction is also a valuable addition to the existing knowledge about the issue.

In summary, the conducted study emphasizes the need to explore the influence of modern digital media on human psychology and cognition. In the course of technological development and

penetration into all spheres of people's lives, it becomes increasingly crucial to understand the impact of technology on the functioning of our minds and behavior.

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