

Alexithymia, Personality, Internet Addiction, and Interpersonal Relationships [†]

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Abstract: This article delves into an explanatory model of interpersonal behavior based on alexithymia and internet dependence, demonstrating how these factors affect interpersonal relationships in a sample of university students. Alexithymia refers to a persistent difficulty in identifying, describing, and expressing emotions, which can hinder emotional connection with others. Internet addiction can lead to a neglect of interactions and social isolation, thereby reducing interpersonal relationships. The results of this study suggest that both alexithymia and internet addiction can have a negative impact on interpersonal relationships by interfering with the expression of emotions, communication and social engagement.

Keywords: alexithymia; internet dependency; personality; interpersonal relationships



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1. Introduction

Alexithymia is a clinical concept used to describe people who have significant difficulty, or even inability, to express their emotions and intentions. [1]. Studies suggest that alexithymia is a multifactorial personality trait associated with deficits in cognitive–emotional processing; it is often observed in various disorders involving difficulties in identifying, verbalizing, and experiencing emotional situations [2]. Personality is described by a hierarchical model called the Big Five (neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness). This plays an important role in the lives of subjects who have different personalities, and thus experience their emotions differently. A positive association was found between alexithymia and neuroticism, the latter being considered the greatest predictor of alexithymia. A negative association was found between alexithymia and extraversion, openness to experience and conscientiousness [3]. These domains, along with agreeableness, are associated with lower levels of alexithymia. Openness to experience is, after neuroticism, the greatest predictor of alexithymia [4]. Some authors suggest that alexithymia may play a critical role in the pathogenesis of internet dependency disorders, among others [5]. Existing literature also shows that individuals with alexithymia have difficulty in identifying, expressing, and communicating emotions, and they may use the internet as a tool for social interaction to better regulate their emotions and fulfill their social needs. It is common for individuals with alexithymia to engage in addictive behaviors as a form of escape from their real lives and the negative emotions underlying their condition. Thus, individuals with alexithymia are more likely to be addicted to the internet than individuals without alexithymia, as they use it as a tool for emotional expressing. Online addiction behaviors may impact the way emotions are regulated by enhancing emotion control, gaining validation online, and compensating for disadvantages in real life [6]. It is

becoming essential to study the relationship between the two variables, and how internet use is perceived by individuals with alexithymia. The causal relationship is not yet clear due to the interaction of numerous other variables that may influence this relationship (e.g., environment and family). Alexithymia is related to behavioral dependence and lack of assertiveness, which suggests that individuals with difficulty expressing their emotions assertively become unable to adequately cope with negative emotions and stressful situations. Other research [3,4] has also shown that subjects with high levels of alexithymia tend to have difficulty expressing emotions and understanding the emotions of others, which can negatively affect their interpersonal behaviors. This can include difficulty in showing affection and facing problems communicating with others. Therefore, in interpersonal relationship behaviors, alexithymia can have a significant effect. Thus, difficulties in recognizing and expressing emotions can lead to inadequate communication and less ability to emotionally connect with others. Internet addiction refers to the excessive or uncontrolled use of the internet, which has negative psychological and social effects [7]. This dependency can negatively affect interpersonal relationships as individuals may prioritize virtual interactions over face-to-face contact, resulting in social isolation, decreased social interactions, and difficulties in face-to-face communication. We also know that excessive internet use seriously affects academic development, physical and mental health, and interpersonal relationships. There are studies indicating that factors affecting internet addiction include personality traits, emotions, and knowledge. When analyzing the relationship between internet dependence and personality, specifically related to alexithymia, the main findings indicate that more neurotic, extrovert, less agreeable and less conscientious individuals have a higher degree of internet addiction [8,9]. However, the literature has not yet reached a consensus on the association between neuroticism and excessive internet use. This article aims to study an explanatory model for interpersonal behaviors based on alexithymia, personality, and internet dependency. This research contributes to the development of prevention programs and strategies for training social skills in young adults, considering individual differences and the challenges of the internet use.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Participants

The sample consists of 491 young university students, of whom 119 are male (24.2%), and 372 are female (85.8%).

2.2. Instruments

The survey consists of five scales: (a) a sociodemographic questionnaire, aimed at complementing and contextualizing the collected information; (b) the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) by Taylor, Ryan, and Bagby (1985), translated and validated in Portuguese by Prazeres, Parker, and Taylor, 2000); (c) the Internet Addiction Test (IAT, Young, 1998); (d) the Neo-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI, Costa, and McCrae, 1989), (e) the Interpersonal Behavior Scale—Reduced Version (ECIr-translation and adaptation by Vagos, Pereira, and Arrindell, 2014).

3. Results

The results of the TAS scale indicate that the sample presents low scores in all three test subscales, indicating a generally low level of alexithymia. The results obtained via the scale of internet addiction show that 65.2% of students present a low level of severity of internet use and 34.2% a moderate level of severity of internet use. The analysis of the relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction showed low/moderate, positive, and significant correlations between alexithymia subscales and the internet addiction general score (Table 1).

Table 1. Correlations between the indicators of *alexithymia* (TAS) and *internet addiction* (IAT) ($N = 491$).

	TAS-Difficulty in Describing Feelings and Emotions	TAS-Difficulty in Identifying Feelings and Emotions	TAS-Outward-Oriented Thinking Style
(IAT) Internet addiction	0.483 **	0.344 **	0.162 **

** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2 indicates that there is a significant, low/moderate and positive correlation between all alexithymia subscales and neuroticism. On the other hand, moderate negative correlations were observed between alexithymia (difficulty in describing and identifying feelings and emotions) and personality dimensions, agreeableness, and conscientiousness.

Table 2. Correlations between the indicators of *alexithymia* (TAS) and *personality* (NEOFFI) ($N = 491$).

	Neuroticism	Openness to Experience	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness
TAS-Difficulty describing feelings and emotions	0.435 **	−0.351 **		−0.232 **	−0.263 **
TAS-Difficulty identifying feelings and emotions	0.566 **	−0.241 **		−0.181 **	−0.296 **
TAS-Outward-Oriented Thinking Style	0.138 **		0.140 **		

** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3 shows low/moderate correlations between all alexithymia subscales and those of the Interpersonal Behaviors scale, which assesses the intensity of discomfort felt in social events that trigger an assertive response.

Table 3. Correlations between the indicators of *alexithymia* (TAS) and the *Interpersonal Behavior Scale* (IBS) ($N = 491$).

	IBS-Negative Assertiveness-Discomfort	IBS-Management Expression-Discomfort	IBS-Assertiveness Initiative-Discomfort	IBS-Positive Assertiveness-Discomfort
TAS-Difficulty describing feelings and emotions	0.255 **	0.238 **	0.307 **	0.297 **
TAS-Difficulty identifying feelings and emotions	0.294 **	0.302 **	0.327 **	0.262 **
TAS-Outward-Oriented Thinking Style	0.157 **	0.134 **	0.165 **	0.168 **

** $p < 0.01$.

4. Discussion

Based on the presented research, alexithymia and internet dependency can be negatively associated with interpersonal relationships since they disrupt emotional expression, communication, and social engagement. Also, the association between alexithymia, internet addiction with the personality indicates that more neurotic, less agreeable and less conscientious individuals reveal a higher degree of internet addiction and Alexithymia. The obtained results confirm the data already presented in the literature. Gathering more data and an analysis of gender differences are the next stages of research. Promoting the development of prevention programs and social skills strategies for young adults considering individual differences and the challenges of internet use is the main contribution of this project.

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Informed Consent Statement: We rigorously adhered to the highest ethical standards, including the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration. Furthermore, we obtained informed consent from all participants, ensuring their autonomy and well-being throughout the scientific study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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