

INFLUENCE OF INTERNET ON SOCIAL AND CULTURAL VALUES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF YOUTH IN OMAN AND INDIA

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Abstract

This is a comparative study that examines the influence of internet on social and cultural values of youth in Oman and India. Random method of sampling was used and 60 young people in the age group between 18 and 28 years were selected from Oman and similarly another 60 were chosen from India. A questionnaire was used as a tool for data collection. The study is descriptive in nature. The findings revealed that most of the respondents spend more hours on internet for activities other than academic purpose. It was also found that these internet users suffer from physical and psychological disorders. The study presents few suggestions that could be implemented by individuals, families, academics and the society in general.

Key Words: internet usage, socializing, social-cultural values, problems

1. Introduction

Technological advancement has revolutionized educational, cultural and psychological domains of the world. Internet usage has created a new culture that goes global. New advancements are on rise but age-old traditions are collapsing all over the world. Internet as network of networks has raised the level of awareness to unknown levels. It has given rise to creativity, knowledge development, networking, sharing best practices etc. People enjoy using the freeware available over the Internet.

But this technological revolution has its own drawbacks. As people are becoming more connected to this virtual world, they are slowly losing contact with reality. As Internet addiction is rising higher and higher, people are finding face-to-face communication difficult and awkward. Excessive information has resulted in the cluttering of the brain with useless facts and figures. The dawn of extensive use of the internet in the 1990s brought with it both fear and enthusiasm regarding the potential impact on social relationships and psychological well-being (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). (Kraut et al. 1998) found that use of the internet increased loneliness, depression, and stress among youth. According to him, "Internet Paradox" theoretically would increase communication but have negative social and psychological effects. The studies on college students differ in terms of whether they measure Internet addiction or simply Internet use that results into psychological disorders. The results are mixed – some studies find negative relationships (e.g., Morahan-Martin & Schumaker, 2000; Morahan-Martin & Schumaker, 2003), some positive relationships (e.g., Morgan & Cotton, 2003), and others no relationships (e.g., Anderson, 2001).

This study intends to investigate the influence of internet on social and cultural values of youth in India and Oman. The authors wanted to study the extent and purpose of internet use among youth (18 to 28 years of age). Some measures are suggested to maintain the social and cultural identity among youth.

2. Literature Review

The present day youth cannot survive without internet. They get into habit of using internet from very young age. Schools and colleges encourage students to use e-libraries, and encourage research using internet sources. Government policies in developing countries like India and Oman support the use of internet in their educational institutions. Youth among these countries are very active on Social media that keeps them connected with each other around the world. They also have their own groups with whom they chat on regular basis. Boyd and Ellison (2007), states that Social Network Sites on the Internet have created a new socio-technical revolution. All human activities take place on the internet from personal interaction to business, to work, to culture, to communication, to social movements, and to politics.

The excessive emphasis on use of internet throughout the world has raised many questions like relationship between cultures and usage of computers (Holmes, 1998). It is the feeling of many authors that the relationship between culture and computers is unidirectional. Davies (1988), states that ‘the creation of technology does not exist in a compartment but engulfs entire social and cultural phenomena’ (p.163). Layton (1994) feels that the machines and tools reflect the values of the culture in which they are designed. Weizenbaum, (1984, p.84) states that these studies indicate that internet is instrumental in spreading Western Culture and is not free of cultural context. Slowly, Internet will make the world culturally homogeneous. This will have an impact on the original culture of the countries.

This “network society” is a product of the digital revolution and some major sociocultural changes (Castells 2001; Castells et al. 2007; Rainie and Wellman 2012; Center for the Digital Future et al.2012) Internet, through networking mechanism was able to bring social change (Cardoso et al.2009). Internet is already a second skin for young people, yet it continues to feed the fears of those who are still in charge of a society that they barely understand. (Boyd et al.2007) Paradoxically, the virtual life is more social than the physical life (Castells 1996). Castell, further supports, “people do not live a virtual reality, indeed it is a real virtuality, since social practices, sharing, mixing, and living in society is facilitated in the virtuality”.

Excessive dependence on internet will lead to sharing of values, as cultures learn from one another. Hongladarom, (nd) mentioned in his article, “ On the Internet and Cultural Differences” that there will clearly be continual adaptation and dynamism in the list of cultural values . Mesch (nd) states that Internet has an innovative force that has profound influence on children and youth. Prensky, (2001) describes this generation as “Net-generation,” the “millennium generation,” and “digital natives.” Bimber, (1994) is of

opinion that technology exercises causal influence on social practices, and technological change induce changes in society and culture regardless of the social desirability of the change.

Thus, present day youth that is operating within an online community may be from different countries and experiencing different hours of the day, but they share similar interests, virtual space and rules, activities and a common sense of belonging expresses Hine(2005). John et al (2004) feels that being online not only detaches individuals from the constraints imposed by location, but also frees them from the constraints associated with their offline personalities and social roles. Turkle (1999) explains that youth have an opportunity to express online their “real” or inner selves, using the relative anonymity of the internet not bothering about cultural taboos and pose to be the person they want to be, experimenting with their identity itself. Plant (1996) states that the internet is often used to express unexplored aspects of the self and to create a virtual persona. Thus, internet plays an important role in youth’s life as a cultural relic and a culture in itself.

It is seen form the above studies that internet usage has both positive and negative impact on youth. If it is not used carefully, without doubt it will lead to various problems.

3. Objectives

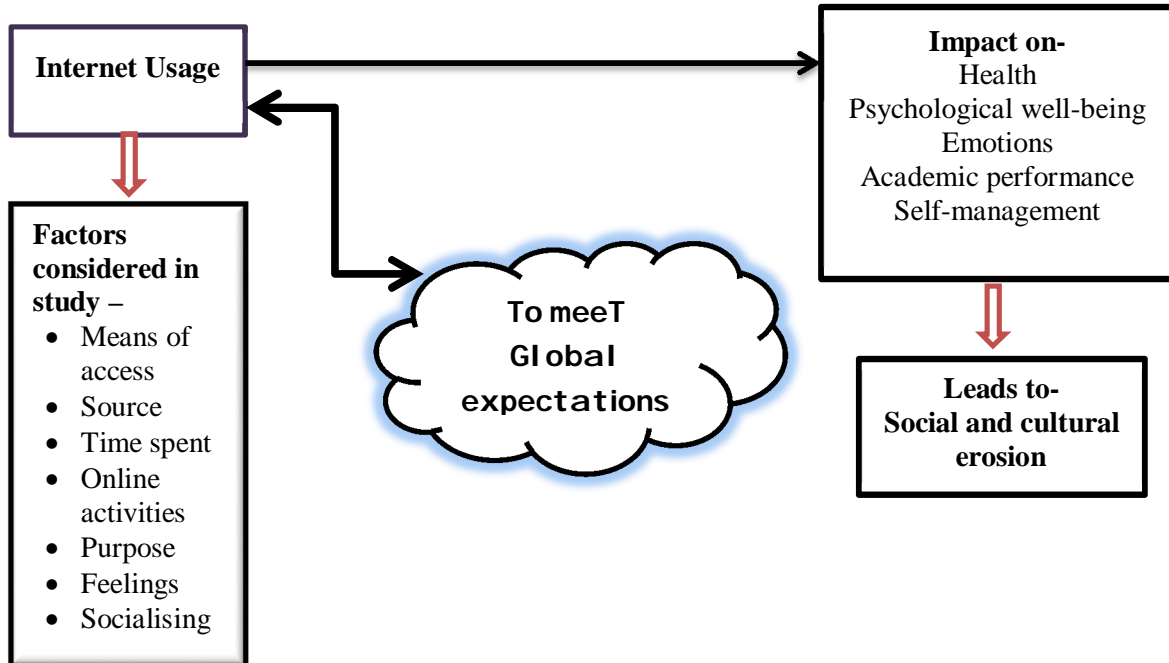
- To present the extent and purpose of internet usage among youth in Oman and India
- To study their online access patterns and preferences
- To find out the effects of internet usage among youth
- To suggest measures to maintain social and cultural identity among youth

4. Significance of the Study

The authors are of the view that the increased trend in internet usage has led to global recognition of social and cultural aspects. On one hand, youth of today rely excessively on internet and on the other hand, there is an information overload on the internet. Both these factors have actually resulted in the youth of today following other people’s cultures and practices in various arenas such as fashion, food, social interaction, career, and life styles. The youth of today are losing interest in their own cultural values. They tend to keep up with the global trends and in the process lose sight of their responsibilities towards their communities and country. This has ultimately led to various social, behavioural, physical and emotional problems. The authors wish to establish the fact that though internet usage has its benefits, it has led to multiple problems in real life. This belief is supported in this paper through conducting a study on internet practices and preferences among youth in two different countries – Oman and India. The paper presents the facts as collected from the respondents and suggests measures for maintaining the cultural identity of the respective countries under discussion. The study adds to the existing knowledge by presenting the negative factors associated with

internet usage which will help to take the issue more seriously, especially among youth and take proactive steps to preserve the social and cultural values that are a trademark for every country.

Figure 1-Study Context



5. Method

The study used descriptive research design and it presents the inferences by using simple frequency. The study was conducted among youth in the age group of 18 – 28 years. A questionnaire was designed covering various factors such as means of internet access, frequency of internet access, hours spent online, favorite online activities, reasons for visiting online communities, feelings when internet access is not available, cyberspace socializing and responses were invited from youths drawn from Oman and India. The personal profiles of the respondents such as age, income, gender, level of study etc were also collected. Data was collected from 60 respondents in Oman and 60 from India. Simple random sampling method was used for collecting data. Inferences drawn are presented in the factual form and discussion and suggestions are given.

6. Findings & Discussion

The study was conducted among 40 male and 20 female youth in Oman and 28 male and 32 female youth in India in the age range of 18 – 28 years.

Majority of the respondents (63.4%) in India accessed internet at home whereas only 28.3% in Oman accessed it at home. Most respondents in Oman (33%) accessed internet in college, and 11.7% of them

accessed it in browsing centers. (Table 2). In Oman, most of the colleges have free browsing facilities and this is one of the reasons for higher percentage of internet usage in college. Al Harrasi & Al Badi, 2014, are of opinion that although internet facility gets interrupted in interiors of Oman but the major cities are well connected with this facility, therefore the usage of internet is also very high. The Government of Oman supports latest technology in educational institutions in Oman. Youth can access internet from anywhere from college premises to free w.fi providing coffee shops in these cities.

In Oman, 50% of the respondents use their mobiles for accessing internet and 38.3% use their laptops, whereas in India 75% use their mobiles and 21.67% use their laptops. Few others use other tools such as tabs and computers to access internet. (Table 3). It is observed that most respondents use their mobiles for internet access as this has become the most convenient way to communicate and to browse. Further, mobiles are now handled even by school children and therefore the mobile usage has increased in the recent past. Al Harrasi & Al Badi, 2014, conducted a study to find out influence of smart phones on college students in Oman. and their findings suggested that students are spending most of their quality time on their mobile phones

The results show that a high percentage of the youth (56.7%) and 47.67% of respondents in India spend more than 4 hours per day during the weekdays online, whereas during the weekends 63.33% of the youth in Oman spend only 2 hours online. However, in India 75% of them spend more than 4 hours per day online even during weekends. (Table 4). In Oman, the youth spend relatively lesser time online during weekends, because they have several other entertainment and social activities such as going to their villages, meeting families and friends, going for movies, desert rides & picnics, shopping etc. However, the percentage of Indian youth spending time online during weekends is high probably because they are engaged in academic pursuits such as research, completing projects and assignments, chatting with friends and relatives, etc.

The favorite online activities scored in order of preferences showed that most of the respondents in Oman (98.3%) used it for sending e-mails, 43.3 % used for general browsing, 48.3% used it for chatting, a further 50% said they used for blogs/discussion forums and 33.3% for downloading songs, videos and software. In India, about 93.33% of them use it for sending e-mails, 75% for browsing, 45% for chatting, 50% for blogs and discussion forums, 76.67% for downloading songs/videos and software. Only a minor percentage of them are going online for sports and news events. (Table 5)

A high percentage of the respondents (75%) in Oman use internet for keeping in touch with friends, 40% for academic reasons, 51.67% for sharing information and 68.33% for chatting and socializing. Taswir, 2012, studied the digital eco system in Oman. The study suggests that 62 % of Omani youth spends time to find out academic information from the internet. In India a high percentage of the respondents (80%) use the internet

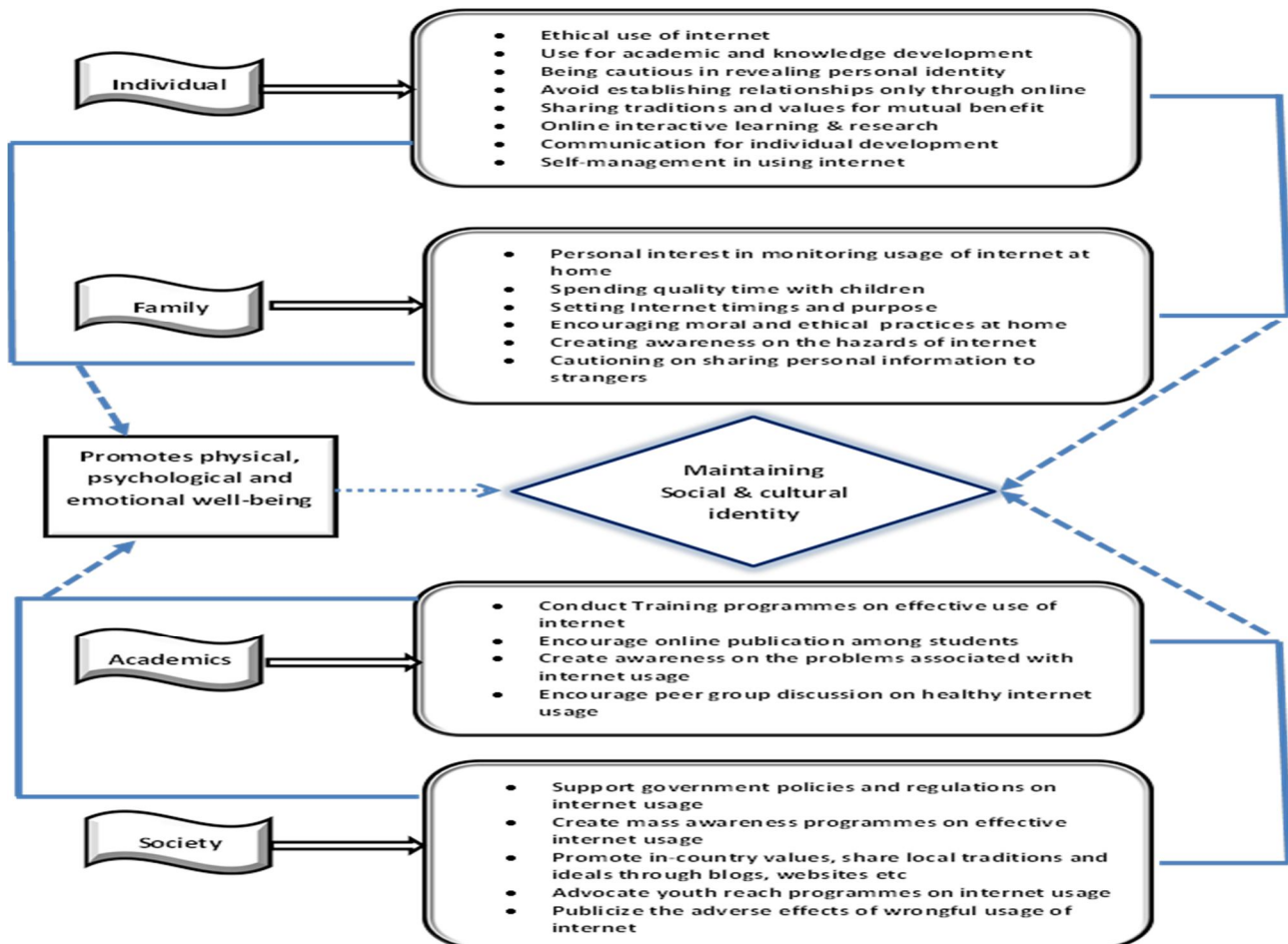
for academic reasons, 68.33% of them for sharing information and 50% for chatting and socializing. (Table 6). It is observed that in India more people use internet for academic purpose when compared to Oman.

About 43.33% of respondents in Oman and 30% of the respondents in India have problems in sleeping patterns because of using the internet. Using internet disturbs the eating patterns (35% in Oman and 18.33% in India), leads to poor health (58.33% in Oman and 56.67% in India) and causes poor personal relationship with friends (23.33% in Oman and 15% in India) (Table 7). Most respondents (51.67%) in Oman and 35% of respondents in India get irritable when there is no internet access, 20% in Oman and 21.67% in India get anxious, 28.33% in Oman and 15% in India get angry, 21.67% in Oman and 38.3% in India have a sense of loss, 38.33% in Oman and 18.33% in India feel happy when they have no internet access. (Table 8). It is generally known that getting addicted to internet have various implications such as sleeping disorders, eating habits, health problems etc. Most young people suffer from physical illness as well as emotional disturbances such as fear, anxiety, depression etc due to excessive reliance on internet. They feel insecure and lost in the absence of internet. This is supported by Chandra, 2013, A seven-year study conducted by researchers from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) reveals that approximately 70 % of people living in the capital are suffering from primary sleep disorders. Doctors and experts blame increased internet addiction and excessive use of hand held gadgets. Bhagel et al.,2012, found out that Omani youth on an average spends all their time on social networking sites. Thus over use of social networking sites and mobile technology not only affects them physically, psychologically and emotionally but also cost them their lives.

Most of the respondents (48.3%) in Oman and 41.67% in India spend more time in cyberspace than in real time socializing. (Table 9) This is because they feel cyberspace to be more positive, safer and more relaxing. But the negative aspect of this is that they do not enjoy the personal interaction in real life situations. It is common scene globally that even while dining with families or friends, people get hooked to the internet and forget the very purpose of being together. The study of Al Harrasi & Al Badi, 2014, revealed that students spend their valuable time on social networking sites. They are facing many problems in trusting and filtering all information available on these sites. Excessive use of these social networking sites has both positive and negative effect on students.

Majority of the respondents (81.67%) in Oman and 58.33% in India do not meet their online friends in real life. (Table 10). It is sad to note that with the advent of internet, people have lost the interest in meeting people in real life and prefer to keep it online and at a distance. Even college and universities have started offering numerous online courses that keeps students away from face to face learning a leading to poor relationships with peers and others.

Figure 2 - Suggestive Measures



7. Conclusion

Figure 2 presents the measures that could be taken as individuals, families, academics and society. If this is done, it will lead to physical, psychological and emotional well-being, which in turn would lead to preserving and maintaining the social and moral identity. Using the internet appropriately and effectively is an individual responsibility. Every individual needs to know the lines and limits of using the internet. However, youth and children will need the constant support of family members, academic community and the society at large to help them use the internet properly. It has to be instilled in the minds of the youth that internet is a global phenomenon, but then it is something that needs to be used cautiously. Youth need to understand that they need to maintain their personal and social values at all times. They should not be lost in the overload of information that might cloud their thinking process and rationale. Fashion, food, life style, or cultures need to be localized and cannot be borrowed from elsewhere. If they are borrowed and practiced due to global closeness through internet, they will rebound on the stable society and bring about severe repercussions.

Hence, the youth of today need to be made to understand that learning process, relationships and interactions are more mature and realistic in real life than in web life. Therefore, it takes the joint efforts of family members and every member in the society to be responsible in guiding our youth in healthy usage of internet.

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Appendices

Table 1 – Distribution of Respondents

Factor	Oman		India	
	n	%	n	%
Male	40	66.7	28	46.7
Female	20	33.3	32	53.33

Table 2 - Means of Internet Access

Factor	Oman		India	
	n	%	n	%
Home	17	28.3	59	63.4
College	28	33.0	11	11.8
Browsing center	7	11.7	6	6.5
Relative's place	0	0	4	4.3
Friend's place	0	0	11	11.8
others	8	13.3	2	3.3

Table 3 – Source for accessing Internet

	Mobile	%	Laptop	%	Others	
Oman	30	50	23	38.3	7	11.7
India	45	75	13	21.67	2	3.33

Table 4 - Hours spent Online

Factor	Oman			India		
	< 2 hrs	3 -4 hrs	>4 hrs	< 2 hr	3 – 4 hrs	>4 hrs
weekdays	11 18.3%	15 25.0%	34 56.7%	8 13.33%	24 40.00%	28 47.67%
weekends	38 63.33%	13 21.67%	9 15.0%	4 6.67 %	11 18.34%	45 75.0%

Table 5 – Favorite Activities Online

Factors	Oman		India	
	n	%	n	%
Email	59	98.3	56	93.33
Browsing	26	43.3	45	75.00
Chatting	29	48.3	27	45.00
Blogs & Discussion Forums	8	13.3	30	50.00
Downloading songs/videos/software	20	33.3	46	76.67
Sports/News	6	10	5	8.33

Table 6 - Purpose of Internet Usage

Factors	Oman		India	
	n	%	n	%
Keeping in touch with friends	45	75.0	32	53.33
Academic reasons	24	40.0	48	80.00
Sharing information	31	51.67	41	68.33
Chatting & socializing	41	68.33	30	50.00
Romance	20	33.33	23	38.33
Business motives	17	28.33	11	18.33
Others	21	35.00	12	20.00

Table 7 – Effect of Online activities

Factors	Oman		India	
	n	%	n	%
Problems in Sleeping patterns	26	43.33	18	30.00
Disturbs eating patterns	21	35.0	11	18.33
Poor health	35	58.33	34	56.67
Quality time with family	22	36.67	12	20.00
Personal relationship with friends	14	23.33	9	15.00
Creates stress and restlessness	17	28.33	13	21.67

Table 8 – Feelings when there is no Internet Access

Factors	Oman	%	India	%
Irritable	31	51.67	21	35
Anxious	12	20.00	13	21.67
Angry	17	28.33	9	15
Sense of loss	13	21.67	23	38.3
Happy	23	38.33	11	18.33
Relieved	11	18.33	6	10

Table 9 – Socializing in real space compared to Cyberspace

Oman			India		
Yes	Sometimes	No	Yes	Sometimes	No
9	22	29	5	30	25
15%	36.67%	48.3%	8.33%	50.0%	41.67%

Table 10 – Visiting online friends in real life

Oman		India	
Yes	No	Yes	No
11	49	26	34
18.33%	81.67%	43.33%	58.33%