

# The influence of poor psychological toughness, existential anxiety, avoidant attachment, and the use of the internet as a defense mechanism in the emergence of digital addiction a theoretical analytical study

تأثير ضعف الصلابة النفسية، القلق الوجودي، التعلق المتجنب، واستخدام الإنترنت كآلية دفاعية في نشوء الإدمان الرقمي: دراسة تحليلية نظرية

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## Abstract

Digital addiction is a contemporary psychological phenomenon that is increasingly affecting the lives of individuals, as excessive use of the internet leads to a deterioration in psychosocial functioning. This article aims to study the impact of poor psychological toughness, existential anxiety, avoidant attachment, and the use of the internet as a defense mechanism in the emergence of digital addiction, where poor psychological toughness shows a large role in increasing stress and using the internet as an escape method. The research also deals with the relationship between existential anxiety and avoidant attachment, and how they contribute to increasing dependence on the digital space as a defense mechanism, based on the analysis of relevant psychological literature and theories, while providing an explanatory model illustrating the interaction between these factors in the emergence of digital addiction. Through this, this research aims to provide foundations for understanding the phenomenon and developing effective therapeutic strategies to deal with it.

## Keywords

psychological rigidity, existential anxiety, avoidant attachment, internet, digital addiction.

## المخلص

يُعتبر الإدمان الرقمي ظاهرة نفسية معاصرة تؤثر بشكل متزايد على حياة الأفراد، حيث

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يؤدي الاستخدام المفرط للإنترنت إلى تدهور الأداء النفسي والاجتماعي. ويهدف هذا المقال إلى دراسة تأثير ضعف الصلابة النفسية، القلق الوجودي، التعلق المتجنب، واستخدام الإنترنت كآلية دفاعية في نشوء الإدمان الرقمي، حيث يُظهر ضعف الصلابة النفسية دورًا كبيرًا في زيادة التوتر واستخدام الإنترنت كوسيلة هروب. كما يتناول البحث العلاقة بين القلق الوجودي والتعلق المتجنب، وكيف يُساهمان في زيادة الاعتماد على الفضاء الرقمي كآلية دفاعية، بالاعتماد على تحليل الأدبيات والنظريات النفسية ذات الصلة، مع تقديم نموذج تفسيري يوضح التفاعل بين هذه العوامل في نشوء الإدمان الرقمي. من خلال ذلك، يهدف هذا البحث إلى تقديم أسس لفهم الظاهرة ووضع استراتيجيات علاجية فعالة للتعامل معها.

### الكلمات المفتاحية

الصلابة النفسية، القلق الوجودي، التعلق المتجنب، الانترنت، الادمان الرقمي

#### Introduction:

In our modern time, the internet has become an integral part of everyday life, as it significantly affects all areas of personal, social, and professional life. With the increasing use of the internet all over the world, digital addiction has become an alarming psychological phenomenon, by which is meant compulsive and excessive behavior in which the dependence on the internet is excessive to such a degree that it affects various aspects of individuals' lives. This type of addiction is an increasing challenge in understanding it and identifying the psychological factors that contribute to its occurrence.

Psychological rigidity is one of the main factors that can affect an individual's ability to adapt to psychological and social stresses. Individuals with low psychological toughness are more susceptible to life stress, which may lead them to use the internet as an escape mechanism from reality. As for existential anxiety, which reflects a person's fear of the unknown and his presence in this world, studies have shown its close correlation with digital addiction, as some turn to the internet to relieve the feeling of existential emptiness.

On the other hand, avoidant attachment, which consists in the difficulty of individuals to build lasting and stable emotional relationships, can lead to attraction towards digital worlds as an alternative to real relationships. These psychological dimensions can contribute to the emergence of digital addiction, in which the internet is used to avoid painful emotional experiences or anxiety caused by interpersonal relationships.

In addition, the use of the internet as a defense mechanism is a common behavior among individuals facing psychological stress or internal conflicts, as they rely on the internet as a way to escape from feelings of anxiety and stress. So these factors

can interfere with each other, which promotes the development of digital addiction and makes it difficult to treat it.

The study of these four psychological factors( poor psychological toughness, existential anxiety, avoidant attachment, and the use of the internet as a defense mechanism) is an important step towards a deeper understanding of the psychological phenomenon of digital addiction and its impact on individuals' lives.

Therefore, this research aims to provide a comprehensive theoretical analysis of these factors and explain their overlaps and possible effects on the emergence of digital addiction, which will contribute to the development of effective treatment strategies to address this phenomenon.

### **1-problematic:**

The internet has become an essential part of everyday life, whether at work, education, entertainment, or socializing. With the rapid spread of digital technology, digital addiction has become a common issue of concern among psychology professionals, as studies show that more than 6% of the world's population suffers from internet addiction.(Kuss & Griffiths, 2017)

With the increasing dependence on the internet under the conditions of contemporary life, such as distance education and remote work, the phenomenon of internet addiction is becoming more and more obvious and challenging. There are increasing reports that young people are the most vulnerable group to this type of addiction, which threatens their psychological and social health. Therefore, it has become necessary to study the various psychological factors that contribute to the emergence of this phenomenon in order to better understand it and offer effective strategies to deal with it.

Digital addiction, also known as internet addiction, is one of the contemporary psychological phenomena that has shown an increasing impact on the lives of individuals, both on a psychological and social level, which means compulsive and excessive use of the internet and digital devices to a degree that affects the individual's daily life, social relationships, and psychological well-being. This addiction is characterized by the inability to control the duration of internet use, which leads to a deterioration in job performance, academic, and personal relationships. (Kuss, Griffiths, & Pontes, 2017)

Digital addiction is a behavioral disorder that manifests itself in an individual's intense attachment to virtual worlds, such as social networks, electronic games, or even constant surfing the web, which enhances the feeling of social isolation and psychological stress. (Young, 1998) and although this addiction does not include narcotic substances, it carries several characteristics that make it a behavioral addiction that can disrupt the psychological and social functions of an individual.

Therefore, this research aims to study the impact of poor psychological toughness, existential anxiety, avoidant attachment, and the use of the internet as a defense mechanism in the emergence of digital addiction, as individuals with poor

psychological toughness are more prone to internet addiction, as they have a weakened ability to adapt to life pressures, prompting them to rely on the internet as a means of escape from reality (Bartone, 2006). On the other hand, existential anxiety is one of the pivotal factors that may promote the trend towards digital addiction, as individuals suffering from existential anxiety tend to use the internet as a way to alleviate their feeling of helplessness or meaninglessness in their lives. (Yalom, 1980)

Avoidant attachment, which usually appears in individuals who have difficulty forming healthy emotional relationships, has been shown to have a significant impact on the increase in digital addiction. These individuals prefer online interaction rather than real-life relationships because of their fear of emotional closeness (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007).

Finally, the use of the internet as a defense mechanism is one of the behaviors that contribute to the consolidation of digital addiction, as individuals turn to the digital world to avoid feelings of anxiety and distress, which leads to excessive and uncontrolled use. (LaRose, 2004)

Therefore, all these variables can contribute significantly to the development of digital addiction, and therefore understanding these factors is important to provide effective psychological interventions to deal with the phenomenon.

## **2-Define the terms: psychological rigidity, existential anxiety, avoidant attachment, use of the internet as a defense mechanism, digital addiction**

### **2.1. Psychological rigidity:**

Psychological hardness is a concept introduced by Suzanne Kobasa-Suzanne Kobasa (1979)), which shows that individuals who possess psychological hardness suffer from fewer effects of life tensions, psychological hardness consists of three basic characteristics:

- \* Commitment :it is the feeling that an individual has a goal or goal in life and seeks to achieve it.
- \* Control: it is the belief in a person's ability to influence and direct the events of his life.
- \* Challenge : it is a positive attitude towards change, where challenges are perceived as opportunities for personal growth.

Numerous studies have shown that individuals with psychological toughness have a greater ability to adapt to stress, and are also better able to overcome crises more effectively than those who lack this trait. (Kobasa, 1979)

### **2.2. Existential anxiety:**

Existential anxiety is one of the psychological phenomena that has received great attention in the fields of psychology and philosophy, and is defined as a type of anxiety resulting from a person's confrontation with major questions related to his existence, such as the meaning of Life, Death, freedom, and isolation. This type of anxiety is different from the normal anxiety associated with everyday situations and concrete challenges; existential anxiety reflects existential fears that relate to the world as a whole and the individual in its broader context.

This anxiety can directly affect the mental health of individuals, as it can lead to mental disorders if not handled properly. In this context, existential anxiety is associated with many mental disorders such as depression, generalized anxiety, a feeling of emptiness, and may contribute to the emergence of constant internal conflicts about the human purpose in life.

Initially, the concept of existential anxiety was associated with the existential philosophy put forward by thinkers such as Saring, Nietzsche and Heidegger who considered existential anxiety as a natural response to the awareness of the mortal and limited human existence in time and space. In other words, existential anxiety expresses the individual's awareness of the limitations of his existence, generating a feeling of loss and helplessness before the greatness of the universe and death.

With the development of Psychology, psychologists adopted this concept and began to study the impact of existential anxiety on mental health, and Yalom, one of the pioneers in this field, saw that existential anxiety includes four main axes that affect human life:

- \* Death: fear of mortality and uncertainty about life after death.
- \* Freedom: the realization of full responsibility for a person's decisions and life.
- \* Isolation: feeling of complete loneliness and isolation from others at a deep existential level.

Meaninglessness: the feeling that life may lack purpose and deep meaning.

### **2.3. Avoidant attachment:**

Avoidant attachment is a pattern in which individuals show disinterest in deep emotional or intimate relationships. The behavior of such individuals is that they tend to avoid dependence on others, they may show an inability to emotionally communicate or prefer to maintain an emotional distance from others. This pattern may translate into difficulty opening their hearts to others or building a strong and trusting relationship. Avoidant attachment can be the result of previous experiences in childhood, in which a person may have grown up in an environment that does not provide adequate emotional support, which leads to the formation of a defense mechanism of moving away from emotional relationships. (2023 .Raypole, C)

### **2.4. Using the internet as a defense mechanism:**

In this digital age, the internet has become an integral part of our daily lives, it provides us with many opportunities for communication, entertainment, and work, as well as offers spaces for learning and development. With the increasing dependence on the internet, the idea has emerged that individuals may use the internet not only as a functional tool but also as a defense mechanism to cope with psychological stress and emotional challenges. The use of the internet as a defense mechanism refers to the way individuals resort to digital activities (such as browsing, gaming, or social networking) as a way to escape from negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression, or internal conflicts.

So that this use is, in many cases, a strategy to relieve stress, but sometimes it can develop into a digital addiction, the internet becoming an essential way to avoid facing their inner feelings. Therefore .

**\* Theory of defense mechanisms:**

Defense mechanisms are defined as unconscious psychological strategies that individuals use to protect themselves from anxiety and stress caused by internal or external threats. These mechanisms may be positive in some cases as they help a person to adapt to difficult situations, but when they become excessive or maladaptive, they can lead to mental health problems.

According to Freud (Freud, 1936), defense mechanisms were an essential part of the psychological transformation process that contributes to the adaptation of individuals to anxiety or stress. Then Anna Freud (Anna Freud, 1966) came up with an extension of this idea, linking defensive mechanisms with unconscious interactions that allow individuals to avoid anxiety caused by psychological conflicts. The most prominent defense mechanisms are denial, diversion, and cognitive distortion.

And in the context of the internet, excessive use of digital tools can be considered as a defense mechanism when an individual becomes overly dependent on the internet to escape from reality or to relieve negative emotions.

**\* The internet as a defense mechanism:**

The internet is used as a defense mechanism in many ways, and this depends on the person and the reason for using the internet. Here are some ways individuals may use the internet as a defense mechanism:

How to escape from negative emotions: many individuals turn to the internet as a way to escape from feelings such as anxiety, depression, or stress. The internet may help create a virtual world in which disturbing reality can be avoided, whether by watching entertaining videos, playing video games for long periods, or interacting with others via social media platforms.

The cognitive avoidance problem: individuals can use the internet as a way to avoid thinking about their psychological problems or the challenges they are facing. This includes immersion in distracting digital activities, such as constant browsing of social networks or interaction in online forums.

The problem of finding a place for emotional escape: many people with difficulties in emotional or social relationships may turn to the internet to compensate for these emotional deficiencies. For example, they may use social media sites to interact with others in an emotionally non-threatening environment, or they may be attracted to chat rooms and virtual communities where they feel comfortable expressing themselves.

The concept of virtual interaction as an alternative to reality: the internet provides a virtual environment in which individuals can express themselves more freely than in reality. People who experience feelings of loneliness or isolation may feel that they have a wider arena for interaction in the digital space, where they can fill the emotional and human void in ways that may be difficult in the real world.

**\* Psychological effects of using the internet as a defense mechanism:**

While the internet can provide a temporary way out for some individuals to escape from emotional and psychological difficulties, there are potential negative effects of this prolonged use:

Related to internet addiction: excessive use of the internet may lead to digital addiction, where the internet becomes a major means of escape from reality. Digital addiction is a condition of excessive dependence on online activities, which negatively affects social, family, or professional functioning.

A worsening of anxiety and depression: relying on the internet to escape negative emotions may worsen anxiety and depression. While the internet may offer a temporary way out, returning to reality may become more difficult over time, leading to an individual feeling disconnected from the real world.

The cause of social isolation: although the internet can provide a social communication environment, over-reliance on it can lead to social isolation. People who spend too much time interacting digitally may lose interpersonal skills, increasing their sense of isolation.

The problem of cognitive confusion: by using the internet as a defense mechanism, it can be difficult for an individual to face internal conflicts or think critically about his feelings and thoughts. This can lead to cognitive confusion, in which the individual embodies an escape from reality instead of consciously confronting it.

**2.5. digital addiction:**

In our digital age, the use of the internet as a defense mechanism has become popular in the face of psychological and emotional challenges. And although the internet may provide temporary calm, relying on it excessively can lead to mental health problems such as digital addiction and social isolation. By deeply understanding this behavior and applying healthy strategies, individuals can deal with their emotions in a more adaptive way.

Digital addiction is one of the growing phenomena in modern times as a result of the widespread spread of digital devices and the internet, and it refers to the excessive use of digital technology, such as smartphones, computers, or electronic games, in a way that negatively affects the psychological, social, and professional aspects of an individual's life.

Digital addiction is defined as "compulsive behavior that a person cannot control and is related to the use of the internet or digital devices, which leads to disturbances in daily functioning and social relationships" (Young, 1998). This type of addiction is not related to a chemical, but it causes effects similar to those associated with traditional addictions such as anxiety, depression, and detachment from reality.

Studies show that excessive use of digital technology is associated with a decrease in sleep quality, increased stress levels, and reduced real social interaction, especially among young people and adolescents (Kuss & Griffiths, 2015). Social media addiction is also one of the most prominent forms of digital addiction, as the user

constantly seeks to get likes and comments, which leads to the formation of psychological dependence on these platforms.

### **3-Literature review:**

#### **3.1. The relationship of psychological rigidity with psychological flexibility:**

Psychological toughness and psychological flexibility are fundamental concepts in psychology that are closely related to the ability of individuals to cope with stresses and challenges. And although these two concepts share some characteristics, they differ in the way they affect individuals in life stress contexts.

Psychological resilience is a personal trait represented by the individual's ability to effectively face pressures and difficulties, while maintaining a healthy and active interaction with challenges, while psychological flexibility refers to the individual's ability to adapt and return to his normal psychological state after experiencing crises or trauma. In other words, while psychological toughness is related to the ability to resist tensions, psychological resilience is related to a person's ability to recover after suffering.

Although psychological toughness and psychological resilience are often seen as two separate abilities, many studies have shown significant overlap between the two concepts, psychological toughness can be a key component of psychological resilience, as individuals who possess psychological toughness characteristics such as control, commitment and challenge, are better able to recover after crises and life stresses. (Campbell-Sills & Stein, 2007)

Accordingly, people who are psychologically tough, possess better coping strategies that help them deal with challenges flexibly, and therefore are better able to recover from crises.

Based on this relationship between psychological toughness and psychological flexibility, these concepts can be applied in the field of digital addiction, as individuals who possess psychological toughness may be more able to resist the effects of digital addiction, as they have greater control over their behavior and effective stress management strategies. Also, these individuals may be less likely to use the internet as a defense mechanism or to escape from feelings of anxiety. Conversely, people with low psychological toughness may be more susceptible to digital addiction, turning to the internet to relieve feelings of weakness and emotional stress. (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017)

In conclusion, psychological toughness and psychological flexibility are crucial factors in understanding how individuals cope with life's stresses and crises, the relationship between these two concepts suggests that individuals with higher psychological toughness have greater psychological flexibility, which helps them to overcome life's challenges more effectively. And in the context of digital addiction.

#### **3-2-The impact of existential anxiety on mental health.**

Existential anxiety affects the mental health of an individual significantly, and this effect is manifested by many psychological and behavioral disorders, including:

\* **Depression and anxiety:** many individuals who experience existential anxiety experience a state of deep depression and a feeling of existential emptiness. This can lead to depression, as a person becomes mired in pessimistic thoughts about himself and his life. And in certain cases, existential anxiety can lead to generalized anxiety as well, which makes a person live in a state of constant stress as a result of focusing on thoughts of existence and death. (Yalom, 1980)

\* **Feeling of meaninglessness:** one of the biggest effects of existential anxiety is that a person feels lost and has no meaning to his life, so that individuals suffering from this type of anxiety can feel that their life does not carry any purpose or goal, which leads to a decrease in personal motivation and refusal to commit to any future activities or goals.

\* **Other mental disorders:** existential anxiety can be a trigger for some other mental disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, borderline personality disorder, and eating disorders. In this case, existential anxiety is perceived as a motivating factor that leads to a deterioration in mental health if it is not properly treated.

Finally, we can say that existential anxiety is part of the human experience, and it reflects the nature of human consciousness of death, Freedom, isolation, meaninglessness. By understanding existential anxiety and coping strategies, individuals can enhance their ability to deal with this anxiety healthily, which contributes to improving their psychological well-being and reducing its negative effects on their lives.

### **3.3. Attachment styles, especially avoidant attachment, and their impact on digital relationships:**

Attachment styles are one of the most prominent concepts in psychology, representing the way individuals approach their emotional and social relationships. These patterns arise in childhood in response to the child's interaction with the primary caregiver, and continue to influence how individuals form their relationships at advanced stages of their lives. And one of the important patterns is avoidant attachment, which is reflected in the difficulty of individuals to establish intimate relationships and move away from openly expressing feelings.

With the advent of digital relationships conducted via the internet, it has become necessary to understand the influence of these psychotypes on the way individuals interact in the digital space. With the increasing reliance on the internet for social communication, attachment styles, including avoidant attachment, may have significant effects on digital relationships, as the attachment style may affect the quality of interactions and the depth of communication between individuals.

According to the theory of John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1969) and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1978), attachment styles were classified into four main types:

\* **Secure attachment:** individuals who follow this Pattern have the ability to build healthy and stable relationships with others.

\* **Anxious attachment:** these individuals are characterized by a constant need for affirmation and reassurance from others.

\* Avoidant attachment: these individuals are characterized by staying away from intimate relationships and avoiding the expression of feelings.

\* **Mixed attachment:** it is a combination of anxiety and avoidance.

Among these patterns, this research focuses in particular on avoidant attachment, as individuals with this Pattern have difficulty building strong emotional bonds and worry that emotional ties may harm or be a burden to them.

And in the context of digital relationships, avoidant attachment may significantly affect the way individuals interact in electronic environments. An online relationship is different from a face-to-face relationship in the real world, where the digital environment can be a haven for these individuals to escape direct emotional confrontation, especially in relationships that may require deep emotional communication.

There are many effects that avoidant attachment can have in digital relationships:

\* **Digital social withdrawal:** individuals with avoidant attachment tend to avoid constant interaction or deep emotional engagement in social media platforms. They may exhibit avoidance behavior such as not responding to messages or minimizing interaction with others online.

\* **Superficial interactions:** avoidant individuals often prefer communication styles that do not require emotional commitment or intimate interaction, such as superficial texting or interacting via social media platforms without engaging in deep conversations.

\* Dependence on smartphones and digital applications: individuals with avoidant attachment avoid emotional openness, which makes them tend to use smartphones and applications as a way to get away from traditional relationships or face-to-face interactions. They may use the internet as an escape mechanism from emotional obligations, as the digital environment gives them a sense of control over relationships and interaction with others from a safe distance.

\* **Using digital relationships as an alternative to real-life relationships:** since there is a physical barrier in digital relationships, people with avoidant attachment tend to rely on these relationships as a way to maintain emotional distance with others. Instead of engaging in deep emotional relationships with others in real life, they prefer to have superficial relationships online.

\* **Fear of rejection or emotional reactivity:** due to the selective nature of digital content, individuals with avoidant attachment may avoid deep emotional interaction with others, for fear of emotional conflict or from fear of rejection.

Accordingly, many individuals who suffer from avoidant attachment show a tendency to digital addiction, as they manage to use the internet as an escape from confronting their feelings or avoiding emotional conflicts. Internet addiction can provide them with a safe alternative where they can interact with others in a superficial and specific way, away from emotional stresses. This addiction may strengthen their sense of control over how they interact with others and prevent them from forming deeper connections.

Avoidant attachment has a significant impact on digital relationships, as it reflects behaviors that may lead individuals to avoid deep emotional communication and rely on superficial interactions. Through this understanding, psychological and social support for individuals with avoidant attachment can be enhanced, especially in the context of a digital environment that may serve as an escape haven for them from direct emotional interactions.

**Conclusion:**

Digital addiction is a complex psychological phenomenon that is becoming more acute in light of accelerated technological and social transformations, and requires multidimensional treatment to understand its deep psychological mechanisms. This research, through an in-depth analytical and theoretical review, attempted to provide an explanatory model highlighting the interrelated role of poor psychological toughness, existential anxiety, avoidant attachment style, along with defensive use of the internet, in the emergence and aggravation of digital addiction.

The expected theoretical results have shown that these factors do not work in isolation, but interact with each other in a dynamic way, so that poor psychological toughness and existential anxiety lead to the adoption of insecure attachment styles, which in turn lead to resorting to the internet as a defense mechanism, increasing the likelihood of digital addiction. Such an overlap of psychological factors indicates the importance of adopting a more comprehensive therapeutic and awareness-raising approach, taking into account not only the manifested behavior, but the psychological structure underlying it.

Finally, this research calls for further theoretical and field studies that test the proposed model and deepen understanding of how psychological and existential variables interact in shaping digital addictive behavior. It is also recommended to develop preventive psychological intervention programs aimed at strengthening psychological toughness, developing the ability to adapt to existential anxiety, improving attachment styles, in order to reduce abnormal psychological dependence on digital media.

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