

Online Addiction in Relation to Stress, Pressure, And Loneliness Among Married Women: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Background

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has contributed to growing concerns regarding problematic internet and social media use, particularly among married women who experience unique psychosocial stressors.

Objectives

This narrative review aims to synthesize empirical evidence on the association between online addiction and key psychological factors—stress, emotional pressure, and loneliness—within this population.

Methodology

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar, covering studies published between 2010 and 2024. A total of 42 studies met the inclusion criteria and were analysed using a narrative approach.

Results

The findings reveal consistent and bidirectional relationships between online addiction and psychosocial distress. Perceived and work-related stress emerged as the strongest predictors of excessive internet and social media use. Factors such as emotional pressure that arise out of marital expectations, parenting responsibilities, and social comparison further contributed to increased problematic engagement with digital platforms. Loneliness, particularly emotional and marital loneliness, was identified as both an antecedent and consequence of online addiction, indicating a self-reinforcing cycle. Moderating factors such as social support, marital satisfaction, coping strategies, age, employment status, and cultural context significantly influenced these relationships. Strong social and relational support systems were found to buffer the impact of stress and reduce reliance on online coping mechanisms.

Suggestion

The findings underscore the need for integrated interventions, including mental health support, marital counselling, and digital well-being policies, to address this emerging concern.

Conclusion

The review concludes that online addiction among married women is a complex psychosocial phenomenon shaped by the interaction of individual, relational, and structural factors.

Keywords: Online addiction, social media addiction, stress, loneliness, married women, narrative review

1. Introduction

Background and Rationale

The rapid development internet-enabled devices and social networking platforms over the past few decades have fundamentally altered patterns of human communication, information consumption, and leisure. While digital connectivity offers demonstrable benefits including access to information, social connection, and economic opportunity. It has also given rise to a spectrum of maladaptive usage patterns collectively termed 'online addiction,' encompassing both internet addiction disorder (IAD) and social media addiction (SMA).

Among the diverse populations studied in this domain, married women constitute a group whose psychosocial circumstances render them particularly susceptible yet chronically underrepresented in empirical research. Married women frequently inhabit intersecting role domains—spouse, parent, professional, caregiver, and household manager—each accompanied by distinct stressors, performance pressures, and relational demands. These accumulated burdens may generate conditions ripe for escapist or compensatory digital behavior (Larose et al., 2010; Turel et al., 2011). Research indicates that psychosocial factors such as stress, emotional pressure, and loneliness play a crucial role in the development of online addiction (Hou et al., 2019). Studies also suggest that individuals with poor social support and low-quality interpersonal relationships are more vulnerable to addictive behaviours, as they often seek alternative forms of emotional fulfilment through online platforms (Cheng et al., 2015; Hou et al., 2019) and also that individuals who experience unmet emotional needs within the marriage can lead to increased reliance on digital interaction for validation and connections. According to Self – Determination Theory proposed by Richard M Ryan and Edward L. Deci, the unmet psychological needs particularly relatedness can lead to manipulative coping behaviours such as online addiction (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Similarly the need to belong emphasises lack of emotional bonding results in loneliness, anxiety and depression, which further reinforces behaviours (Baumeister & Leary, 2017)

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated a strong association between online addiction and psychological distress including stress and loneliness (Kar & Arun, 2021) and online platform give temporary relief from the stress; however, excessive use can worsen emotional instability and reduce real-life social interaction (Hou et al., 2019). This creates a cyclical pattern where loneliness leads to increased online engagement, which in turn deepens social isolation. The studies have also indicated that unrealistic emotional connections formed in virtual environments can negatively impact mental health. Such interactions are associated with low self-esteem, depression, and interpersonal difficulties,

ultimately weakening real-life relationships (Chak & Leung, 2004; Morahan-Martin & Schumaker, 2000). The concept of addiction progression also suggests that individuals gradually move from social use to dependency and eventual withdrawal, driven largely by unmet emotional and relational needs (Tam et al., 2018; Kaviyani et al., 2023). In this context, online addiction can function as a psychological substitute for lacking intimacy and support, reinforcing continued engagement despite negative consequences. Problematic online use is characterized by preoccupation with internet activities, loss of control over usage, tolerance, withdrawal, and functional impairment (Young, 1998; Griffiths, 2005; Brand et al., 2019).

Stress activates neurobiological reward pathways that heighten vulnerability to addictive behavior, pressure engenders cognitive overload that reduces impulse regulation, and loneliness motivates the pursuit of online social substitutes. The confluence of these constructs within the lived experience of married women is therefore theoretically compelling and clinically significant. The literature highlights that online addiction among married women is deeply intertwined with stress, emotional pressure, and loneliness. Sociocultural expectations, gender roles, and relational dynamics further intensify vulnerability.

Addressing this issue requires interventions focusing on improving marital relationships, enhancing social support systems, and promoting healthy coping strategies. Despite a growing body of research on internet and social media use among women generally, no prior systematic review has specifically synthesized the literature at this convergence point—online addiction, stress, pressure, and loneliness, as they jointly manifest in married women. This review addresses that gap.

2. Objectives

This narrative review aims to:

1. To critically review and synthesize empirical studies on online addiction (internet and social media) and its association with psychological factors such as stress, emotional pressure, and loneliness among married women.
2. To examine the nature of relationships and influencing factors, including moderating variables (e.g., social support, marital satisfaction, coping strategies)

3. Theoretical Framework

The present review draws on five theories and models to explain how and why married women develop problematic internet and social media use in the context of stress, pressure, and loneliness.

Compensatory Internet Use Theory (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014)

According to Compensatory Internet Use Theory, internet addiction is better understood as a contextually motivated, compensatory coping strategy rather than a primary pathological condition. The individuals engage in excessive internet use specifically to compensate for unmet needs or aversive offline experiences. The problems like elevated stress arises due to marital conflict, financial pressures motivate them to use of online entertainment and social platforms as a relief mechanism. The others reasons may be unfulfilled needs for autonomy, stimulation, and social validation within the marital or domestic environment drive escalating engagement with digital spaces that offer these rewards at low

cost and also Loneliness and emotional under-nourishment in the marriage create a specific unmet need — for intimate connection and belonging — that social media platforms (with their parasocial relationships, community groups, and validation through 'likes') are uniquely positioned to temporarily satisfy. Online addiction in married women is primarily a compensatory response to offline deficits — stress, pressure, and loneliness generate unmet needs that digital environments temporarily fulfil, sustaining the addictive cycle. A critical insight of the theory emphasizes that it can be predicted that online addiction will diminish when the offline stressors and unmet needs are resolved. For intervention with married women the effective intervention must target the marital, domestic and social context generating the compensatory motivation.

The I-PACE Model — Interaction of Person-Affect-Cognition-Execution (Brand et al., 2019)

The I-PACE model (Brand et al., 2019) is the most comprehensive and neurobiologically grounded framework for understanding specific internet use disorders. The model proposes that online addiction emerges from a dynamic interaction across four levels: that is person, affect, cognition and execution. The person (P) component deals with predisposing factors such as personality traits, attachment styles and existing psychological conditions. Married women with anxious attachment, low self-esteem, or prior anxiety and depression may be more susceptible to online addiction due to unmet needs and needs within marital roles. The Affect (A) component refers to the emotional states like stress, loneliness and negative mood which drive individual to use online platforms as reliefs. In the context of married women, marital stress, role overload and postpartum emotional challenges pushes them towards digital engagement as a coping mechanism. The Cognition (C) component involves maladaptive beliefs and attention biases that reinforce excessive internet use. Thoughts like fear of missing out (FOMO), along with constant attention to notification, sustain addictive patterns despite negative consequences. Finally the Execution (E) component refers to deficits in self-regulation and inhibitory control. The cognitive fatigue from domestic responsibilities and emotional labour along with sleep deprivation can affect the decision making and reducing the ability to regulate internet use effectively. On the whole, all this interacting components explain how the psychological, emotional and cognitive factors contribute to online addiction among married women.

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) posits that human beings have three universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. When these needs are chronically frustrated in one domain, individuals seek need satisfaction in alternative domains. Social media and internet environments, by contrast, offer abundant opportunities for need satisfaction: users feel autonomous in curating their profiles and choosing their communities; they can achieve competence through gaming, creative platforms, or online learning; and they can experience relatedness through online friendships, parenting forums, or fan communities. The SDT framework thus explains why married women turn to online platforms but also why it compels them to do and also why they find it difficult to control them.

Cognitive-Behavioural Model of Internet Addiction (Davis, 2001)

Davis's (2001) Cognitive-Behavioural Model (CBM) of Pathological Internet Use focuses on the role of maladaptive cognitions in initiating and perpetuating problematic online behaviour. Davis distinguishes between two forms of pathological internet use: specific (addiction to a particular online activity such as

pornography or gaming) and generalised (a global overuse of the internet across activities, driven by psychosocial problems rather than the specific content of any platform). The model identifies two categories of maladaptive cognitions central to generalised pathological internet use: Negative self-appraisal cognitions: Beliefs such as 'I am only liked online,' 'I am worthless in my real life,' and 'I have no one to talk to except online friends' — which are more likely to arise in contexts of marital loneliness and low self-esteem and Generalised maladaptive cognitions: Catastrophising beliefs about the world and one's future prospects — which may be amplified by chronic stress and the perception that offline demands are unmanageable.

For married women, stress, pressure, and loneliness serve as distal causes that give rise to these maladaptive cognitions, which in turn produce proximal causes of internet addiction: ruminative thoughts about online activities, selective attention to online stimuli, and reduced engagement with offline life. The CBM framework also highlights the role of reinforcement: internet use is both negatively reinforced (by reducing negative affect associated with stress and loneliness) and positively reinforced (by the pleasurable stimulation of online engagement), creating a powerful and self-sustaining behavioural loop.

Social Compensation Hypothesis (McKenna & Bargh, 2000)

The Social Compensation Hypothesis (McKenna & Bargh, 2000) proposes that individuals who experience social anxiety, shyness, or loneliness in face-to-face environments are specifically drawn to online communication because it reduces the social risks and demands of interpersonal interaction. Online communication is asynchronous, controllable, anonymous, and free from the physical cues (appearance, voice, body language) that generate social anxiety. For married women, this hypothesis extends beyond social anxiety to encompass marital loneliness and emotional disconnection. Women in emotionally unsatisfying marriages may find online communities parenting groups, interest forums, social networking platforms to be environments where they can express themselves freely, receive social validation, form meaningful connections, and experience a sense of belonging that is absent within the marriage itself. The Social Compensation Hypothesis also elucidates a paradox central to the reviewed literature: married women are not, by most metrics, socially isolated in the traditional sense. They live with a partner and often within family networks. Yet they report significant loneliness. The Hypothesis resolves this paradox by distinguishing perceived quality of connection from mere social presence the absence of emotional intimacy within a marriage is precisely the form of social deficit that online environments are well positioned to compensate for.

These theories clearly explain the online addiction among married women as a dynamic, multi-level process shaped by structural, psychosocial, and intra-individual factors. At the macro level, structural conditions such as patriarchal norms and socioeconomic constraints create chronic pressures that manifest as stress, role-related pressure, and loneliness.

These psychosocial risks are mutually reinforcing, aligning with the interactional assumptions of the I-PACE model, where affective and cognitive processes interact continuously. At the intra-individual level, mechanisms such as negative affect, maladaptive cognitions, and impaired self-regulation translate these vulnerabilities into problematic online behaviours. This is consistent with the Cognitive-

Behavioural Model, which highlights how distorted beliefs and reinforcement cycles sustain internet addiction. Simultaneously, Self-Determination Theory explains how unmet needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in marital contexts drive individuals toward online environments for compensatory satisfaction. The model also reflects the principles of Compensatory Internet Use Theory and the Social Compensation Hypothesis, emphasizing that online engagement serves as a coping response to offline deficits, particularly emotional loneliness within marriage. Importantly, feedback loops illustrate the self-perpetuating nature of addiction, while moderating variables condition its intensity.

4. Methodology

This narrative review was conducted based on the studies collected based on the selection criteria. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major electronic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Relevant studies published between 2010 and 2025 were identified. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search. Additionally, reference lists of selected articles and review papers were manually examined to identify further relevant studies.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

- Peer-reviewed, empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods) published in English between January 2010 and December 2025.
- Studies focused on or including a sub-analysis for married women as participants.
- Studies measuring or examining at least one form of online addiction (internet addiction, social media addiction, or problematic internet/social media use).
- Studies reporting associations, correlations, or thematic relationships between online addiction and one or more of the following: stress, pressure (role pressure, marital pressure, social pressure), or loneliness.

Exclusion Criteria

- Studies focusing exclusively on adolescents or unmarried populations with no married sub-group analysis.
- Studies examining online addiction only in the context of gaming without reference to general internet or social media use.
- Review articles, editorials, opinion pieces, dissertations, theses, and conference abstracts without full-text peer-review.
- Studies not reporting any quantitative or qualitative data relating to the constructs of interest.
- Duplicate publications from the same dataset without additional analysis.

Study Selection

All retrieved records were organized and screened systematically. After removing duplicate studies, titles and abstracts were reviewed to identify relevant literature focusing on online addiction among married women and its association with stress, pressure, and loneliness. Full-text articles of potentially relevant studies were further examined to ensure alignment with the study objectives. Any discrepancies in selection were resolved through discussion to maintain consistency and rigor.

Data Extraction

Relevant information from selected studies was extracted narratively and organized into thematic categories. A total of 4,217 records were initially identified through database searching. After removing duplicates, 2,964 records remained and were screened based on titles and abstracts. Of these, 2,701 records were excluded due to relevance to the study objectives. Subsequently, 263 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Following detailed evaluation, 221 studies were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. Finally, 42 studies were included in the narrative synthesis. This systematic selection process ensured that only relevant and high-quality studies contributed to the final analysis of online addiction among married women. . Key details included authorship, year of publication, study context, participant characteristics, research design, and major findings related to online addiction, stress, pressure, and loneliness. This process enabled a comprehensive understanding of patterns across studies. Rather than applying strict exclusion criteria based on methodological quality, studies were critically appraised to understand their strengths and limitations. This appraisal informed the interpretation of findings and helped contextualize variations across studies.

Narrative Synthesis

Given the heterogeneity in study designs, populations, and measurement tools, a narrative analysis approach was adopted. Findings were synthesized thematically around the core constructs of stress, pressure, and loneliness. Relationships between these variables and online addiction were interpreted through patterns, similarities, and divergences across studies. Moderating factors such as age, employment status, cultural background, and social support were also integrated into the analysis to provide a holistic understanding.

5. Results

The narrative synthesis of 42 empirical studies revealed consistent and interrelated patterns linking online addiction with key psychological variables among married women. Studies conducted across diverse cultural contexts demonstrated that **stress, emotional pressure, and loneliness** are central psychosocial factors associated with problematic internet and social media use. In relation to the first objective, stress emerged as the most dominant predictor of online addiction. Both perceived and role-related stress—particularly work–family conflict and domestic burden—were positively associated with excessive online engagement. The marital role expectation, parenting responsibilities and social comparison increased the emotional pressure. These factors also increase the vulnerability by increasing psychological distress and promoting maladaptive coping patterns. Loneliness, especially marital and emotional loneliness, was found to function both as an antecedent and consequence of online addiction, highlighting its cyclical nature. Addressing the second objective, the findings indicate that the relationship between online addiction and psychosocial factors is. Social support consistently acted as a protective factor, buffering the impact of stress and reducing dependence on digital platforms. Marital satisfaction played a crucial role, with emotionally fulfilling relationships mitigating loneliness-driven online engagement. Additionally, coping strategies influenced outcomes bidirectional and influenced by multiple moderating variables, as maladaptive coping (e.g., avoidance) strengthened addiction patterns, while adaptive coping reduced risk. Other moderating variables such as age, employment status, cultural context, and duration of marriage further shaped these relationships. Overall, the findings demonstrate

that online addiction among married women is a complex, context-dependent phenomenon sustained by interacting psychological and social processes.

1. Discussion

The present narrative analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between online addiction and psychosocial factors among married women, highlighting stress, pressure, and loneliness as key determinants. The findings reinforce that perceived and work-related stress are the most prominent predictors of excessive internet and social media use, suggesting that digital engagement often functions as a coping mechanism for managing emotional strain and role overload. The results are consistent with existing theoretical frameworks, particularly Compensatory Internet Use Theory and the I-PACE model, which explain how individuals turn to online platforms to alleviate negative affect and fulfil unmet psychological needs. Married women, who frequently experience dual responsibilities of domestic and professional roles, may be especially vulnerable to such compensatory behaviors. The observed bidirectional relationship further indicates that while stress and loneliness drive online addiction, excessive digital use simultaneously exacerbates these conditions, creating a self-perpetuating cycle. Emotional pressure, including marital expectations, parenting demands, and social comparison, also emerged as a significant contributing factor. In many cultural contexts, especially within collectivist societies, societal expectations intensify these pressures, increasing reliance on digital platforms for validation and escape. Loneliness, particularly emotional and marital loneliness, was identified as both a cause and consequence of online addiction, underscoring the importance of relationship quality over mere social presence. Moderating variables such as social support, marital satisfaction, and coping strategies played a crucial role in shaping these relationships. Strong social support networks and positive marital relationships acted as protective factors, reducing reliance on online engagement. In contrast, maladaptive coping strategies reinforced addictive patterns. Additionally, factors such as age, employment status, and duration of marriage influenced the nature and intensity of online addiction. Overall, the findings suggest that online addiction among married women is not merely an individual behavioral issue but a complex psychosocial phenomenon embedded within broader structural and cultural contexts. These insights highlight the need for multi-level interventions.

2. Implications for Practice

The findings of this review have significant implications for social work practice, particularly in the domains of mental health, family welfare, and community intervention.

Social workers must recognize online addiction among married women as a psychosocial concern rooted in stress, pressure, and loneliness rather than merely a behavioural issue. Routine psychosocial assessments should include screening for problematic internet and social media use, especially among women presenting with marital distress, emotional exhaustion, or social isolation.

Intervention strategies should adopt a holistic and multi-level approach.

At the individual level, social workers can employ cognitive-behavioural techniques to address maladaptive coping patterns and enhance emotional regulation.

At the family level, marital and family counselling can help improve communication, emotional intimacy, and role negotiation within households. Group work interventions, such as women's support groups, can provide safe spaces for shared experiences, reducing loneliness and fostering peer support.

Community-based interventions are equally important. Social workers can facilitate awareness programs on digital well-being, promote healthy technology use, and strengthen informal support networks. Empowerment-based approaches that enhance women's autonomy, coping skills, and access to resources can further reduce dependency on digital platforms as a coping mechanism.

8. Policy Recommendations

The review highlights the need for policy-level interventions addressing both structural and digital determinants of online addiction. Policies aimed at reducing work–family conflict, such as flexible working arrangements, paid parental leave, and access to affordable childcare, can alleviate stress among married women. Public health initiatives should incorporate digital well-being as a key component, with targeted campaigns addressing the risks of excessive social media use.

Additionally, there is a need for regulation of digital platforms to minimize addictive design features such as infinite scrolling, algorithm-driven reinforcement, and excessive notifications. Governments and institutions should collaborate with technology companies to promote ethical design practices that prioritize user well-being.

Integration of mental health services within primary healthcare and maternal health programs is also essential, particularly during vulnerable periods such as early marriage and postpartum stages. Policies should further support community-based mental health services and women's empowerment programs that address the broader psychosocial context.

9. Limitations and Future Research

Despite providing valuable insights, this review has several limitations. The predominance of cross-sectional studies limits the ability to establish causal relationships between online addiction and psychosocial variables. The heterogeneity in study designs, measurement tools, and cultural contexts reduces the comparability and generalizability of findings. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias and inflate observed associations. The category of “married women” itself is highly diverse, encompassing variations in age, socioeconomic status, cultural background, and marital quality, which were not adequately differentiated in many studies. Furthermore, the review was limited to English-language publications, potentially excluding relevant research from non-English contexts. There is also a lack of intersectional analysis addressing how factors such as ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation influence experiences of online addiction. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and experimental designs to establish causal pathways and better understand the bidirectional nature of relationships. Qualitative and mixed-method studies are needed to capture the lived experiences of married women and the subjective meanings of online engagement. Cross-cultural comparative research can provide deeper insights into contextual influences, while dyadic studies involving both partners can illuminate relational dynamics. Importantly, intervention-based research is

required to develop and evaluate evidence-based strategies for prevention and treatment. Exploring the role of digital literacy, coping mechanisms, and social support systems will be crucial in designing effective, culturally sensitive interventions.

10. Conclusion

This narrative review synthesizes compelling evidence that married women represent a distinct and clinically important subgroup in the landscape of online addiction. The convergence of psychological stress, role-related and cultural pressure, and multidimensional loneliness creates a powerful psychosocial vulnerability profile that predisposes married women to internet and social media addiction. These three constructs operate as both independent risk factors and as interlocking, mutually reinforcing elements of a complex bio-psychosocial system. Online addiction, in this context, is neither simply a recreational excess nor a moral failing; it is, in many cases, an understandable adaptive response to overwhelming offline demands and unmet social and emotional needs. Clinical and public health responses must therefore address not only the addictive behavior itself, but the underlying stressors, pressures, and relational deprivations that sustain it.

As digital technology becomes ever more deeply embedded in daily life, understanding the specific vulnerabilities of married women to online addiction—and developing culturally sensitive, evidence-based interventions—becomes an urgent priority for mental health research, clinical practice, and public policy alike.

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