



Who are problematic internet users? An investigation of the correlations between problematic internet use and shyness, loneliness, narcissism, aggression and self-perception



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated correlations between university students' problematic internet use behaviors and shyness, narcissism, loneliness, aggression and self-perception. The participants were 424 students attending seven different faculties of a public university in Turkey; 215 were female and 209 male. Student's ages ranged between 17 and 23, with a mean of 18.69. The Problematic Internet Use Scale, Shyness Scale, Narcissistic Personality Inventory, UCLA Loneliness Scale, Aggression Questionnaire, Social Comparison Scale and a Personal Data Form were used for data collection. Correlation analysis results showed positive associations between problematic internet use and shyness and aggression. No statistically significant correlation was determined between problematic internet use and narcissism, loneliness or self-perception. The results demonstrate that individuals who are problematic users are shier and more aggressive. Shyness and aggression emerged as significant antecedent variables of problematic internet use. Suggestions are made for further studies in the light of these findings.

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1. Introduction

The foundations of the internet, one of the most important mass communication tools of the present age, were laid in America in the 1960s. Internet use has seen a rapid increase over the last 50 years, and has become a vital tool for information-sharing. For example, while Turkey had 7,270,000 internet users in 2005, the figure had reached some 35 million by the second half of 2010 (Internet World Stats, 2012). A great many internet users in Turkey are students aged 16–24 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2012). While the internet is a most beneficial and useful tool, excessive use entails a number of negative consequences. Researchers have described excessive internet use by individuals using concepts such as pathological internet use (Davis, 2001; Lin & Tsai, 2002), internet dependency (Ko, Yen, Chen, Chen, & Yen, 2005; Wang, 2001), internet addiction (Hall & Parsons, 2001) and problematic internet use (PIU) (Davis, Flett, & Beser, 2002; Young, 1998).

There are studies indicating that PIU affects university students directly or indirectly in terms of their academic success and social and emotional development. This research has shown that PIU is correlated with such variables as depression, loneliness and social withdrawal (Kraut et al., 1998), low self-esteem and low satisfaction with life (Ko et al., 2005), problematic family relations (Arm-

strong, Phillips, & Saling, 2000), academic procrastination and academic self-efficacy (Odacı, 2011, 2013), loneliness and dating anxiety (Odacı & Kalkan, 2010), shyness (Chak & Leung, 2004), social anxiety (Caplan, 2007) and attempted suicide (Kim et al., 2006). Identification of the effects of personal and psychological factors associated with PIU is important in terms of prevention of such use and of the development of preventive and therapeutic techniques. Correlations between university students' PIU and various personality characteristics were therefore investigated in this study.

1.1. What is problematic internet use?

PIU is defined as individual experiencing problems in psychological, social, school or working life as a result of insufficient control of internet use (Davis, 2001). Young (1998), on the other hand, described PIU as a type of disorder involving symptoms such as restlessness or irritability when not online or feeling the need to spend more time online. Mittal, Tessner, and Walker (2007) evaluate excessive internet use as a non-functional way of avoiding social relations in the real world. Caplan (2005) considered PIU as a multi-dimensional syndrome with cognitive and behavioral symptoms leading to negative academic/professional outcomes.

Some studies have revealed that PIU is associated with individual and social variables, such as gender (Mottram & Fleming, 2009; Odacı, 2011, 2013), interpersonal communication

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problems (Weinstein & Lejoyeux, 2010; Young, 1998), duration of internet use (Brenner, 1997; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Odacı & Kalkan, 2010), purpose of internet use (Çelik & Odacı, 2012a, 2013; Batıgün & Hasta, 2010) and a high level of loneliness and stress (Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2002). In addition, studies involving different sample groups report that young people in particular prefer to establish communication on social networking sites rather than face-to-face in the real world (Caplan, 2005; Ceyhan, Ceyhan, & Gürcan, 2007).

1.2. Problematic internet use and personality characteristics

Studies show that excessive/problematic/pathological internet use is correlated with such personality characteristics as depression, loneliness, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, shyness and social anxiety. These studies also suggest that various psychosocial problems or difficulties are closely correlated with PIU and that personality differences may make a significant contribution to this (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Kraut et al., 2002). The literature shows that two main views predominate in studies examining correlations between PIU and personality characteristics. The “Social Networking Hypothesis” suggests that personality characteristics determine motivation and behavior in social interaction. It also proposes that extroverted individuals use the internet more, because they enjoy initiating social interaction in a virtual environment, have a greater need for social sharing than introverted individuals and are more successful in this area than introverts. Neurotic individuals, however, are unable to achieve success in social relations since they are excessively emotional and constantly anxious (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Kraut et al., 2002).

According to the second view, the “Social Compensation Hypothesis,” the internet is more beneficial to very introverted individuals. Under this hypothesis, the internet permits the individual to conceal his identity and reduces the introvert’s fear of mockery and rejection. This, in turn, encourages individuals to make intensive use of the internet (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003; Bremer & Rauch, 1998; Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Lin & Tsai, 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). This compensatory situation established by the internet leads to young people drawing away from social relations that satisfy themselves (Young, 1982), thus confirming their loneliness and increasing individuals’ loneliness levels and leading to their turning to internet even more.

Self-perception, which is described as the manner in which the individual sees and perceives himself (Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2006; Çelik & Odacı, 2012b) may also be among the factors that increase internet dependency. While individuals with positive self-perception cope successfully under negative situations they encounter, individuals with negative self-perception have no clear perspective of themselves and may experience difficulties in increasing their self-worth (Josephs, Bosson, & Jacobs, 2003). In that context, people with negative self-perception may make a habit of internet use and think they can enhance their self-worth in this virtual environment. In complete contrast to those who perceive themselves negatively, narcissistic individuals who imagine that “everything” revolves around them are known to be compulsive internet users (Black, Belsare, & Schlosser, 1999; Mehdizadeh, 2010). Narcissistic individuals have a high level of self-confidence, do not open up to others much and do not find it as difficult to be alone as other people do (Young & Rodgers, 1998). Narcissistic individuals, who exclude themselves from society by staying alone, are able to provide considerable information about themselves on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The virtual environment in which they are able to exhibit themselves establishes a feeling of satisfaction in these individuals, and this soon turns into dependency (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010).

Shyness is one of the personality characteristics of individuals who feel better online. Shy individuals enjoy less social support in their real lives, have small groups of friends and more passive interactions, and are better able to meet their social, emotional and psychological needs online (Jones & Carpenter, 1986; Leung, 2004). Shy individuals are better able to express themselves without feeling social anxiety online, rather than in face-to-face interactions (Ebeling-Witte, Frank, & Lester, 2007). The internet provides the opportunity for engaging in various activities such as online gaming, gambling, chat rooms and adult sex sites, while concealing the individual’s identity. These activities, that allow satisfying emotions to be experienced, reduce observation of the individual and his/her self-awareness, lower anxiety over social evaluations to a minimum, weaken controls associated with shyness, guilt and fear, and permit the exhibition of socially unacceptable behavior. Aggressive behavior disapproved of by society can emerge more easily during such activities. The frequent repetition of aggression, which means damaging other individuals (Freedman, Sears, & Carlsmith, 1989) online, may make it possible for such behavior to be learned and transferred to real life (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995).

1.3. Purpose of the study

Identification of the effects of personal and psychological factors associated with PIU is important in terms of prevention of such use, which has spread rapidly across the world in recent years, and of the development of preventive and therapeutic techniques. The primary aim of this study was to determine correlations between university students’ PIU and their levels of shyness, narcissism, loneliness, aggression and self-perception. The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Is there a significant correlation between students’ PIU and levels of shyness, narcissism, loneliness, aggression and self-perception?
2. Are shyness, narcissism, loneliness, aggression, self-perception and gender significant antecedent variables of PIU?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

This study was conducted in the 2011–2012 academic year with 424 university students attending various faculties at the Karadeniz Technical University in Turkey and volunteering to take part. Two hundred fifteen (50.7%) of the participants were female and 209 (49.3%) male. Fifty-six (13.2%) of the study group were studying dentistry, 30 (7.1%) pharmacology, 123 (29%) education, 75 (17.7%) architecture, 50 (11.8%) medicine, 38 (9%) engineering and 52 (12.8%) economics and administrative sciences. Students’ ages ranged between 17 and 23, with a mean of 18.69 (SD 97). Participants’ demographic data are shown in Table 1.

2.2. Data gathering tools

The “Problematic Internet Use Scale,” “Shyness Scale,” “Narcissistic Personality Inventory,” “UCLA Loneliness Scale,” “Aggression Questionnaire,” and “Social Comparison Scale” were used for data collection. A Personal Data Form was drawn up by the authors in order to record details of participants’ genders, age and faculties attended. Scales’ psychometric characteristic data are set out below.

2.2.1. Problematic Internet Use Scale

Developed by Ceyhan et al. (2007), the scale was used in order to determine university students’ PIU levels. This was developed as

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