



## Depression, loneliness and Internet addiction: How important is low self-control?



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 15 March 2014

#### Keywords:

Depression  
Loneliness  
Internet addiction  
Self-control

### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore both the direct and indirect relationships between depression, loneliness, low self-control, and Internet addiction in a sample of Turkish youth, based on a cognitive-behavioral model of generalized problematic Internet use. Data for the present study were collected from 648 undergraduate students with a mean age of 22.46 years ( $SD = 2.45$ ). Participants completed scales for depression, loneliness, self-control and Internet addiction. Structural equation modeling was used to test the model in which depression and loneliness predicted Internet addiction through low self-control. The findings revealed that of the two factors, only loneliness was related to Internet addiction through low self-control. The results are discussed in terms of the cognitive-behavioral model of generalized problematic Internet use, and implications for practice are considered.

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### 1. Introduction

Internet usage rates in Turkey have increased significantly in recent years. The rate of Internet use for the 16–24-year-old age group increased from 50.4% in 2007 to 65.8% in 2011 (TurkStat, 2011). This rapid increase has inevitably led to issues such as problematic Internet use (Kim & Davis, 2009) and Internet addiction (Block, 2008). The rate of risk for Internet addiction is thought to be between 8.68% and 18.4% (Whang, Lee, & Chang, 2003). In a recent study in Turkey, Cömert and Ögel (2009) found that 4.5% of participants (96.4% of the sample were below the age of 16, 3.6% were aged 17 and above) could be diagnosed as Internet addicts.

In the literature, there is no clear agreement on which term to use for Internet-use-related problems. Current terms in use include Internet addiction (Block, 2008), Internet dependence (Scherer, 1997), compulsive use (Meerkerk, Van den Eijnden, & Garretsen, 2006), problematic Internet use (Shapira, Goldsmith, Keck, Khosla, & Mcelroy, 2000), pathological Internet use (Davis, 2001), and unregulated Internet usage (LaRose, Lin, & Eastin, 2003). Although the debate over the conceptualization of this issue continues, numerous studies have concluded that problems with Internet use are associated with impairments in psychological and social functioning (Canan, Ataoglu, Ozcetin, & Icmeli, 2012; Ko, Yen, Liu,

Huang, & Yen, 2009; Young, 1998). Furthermore, recent findings have documented associations between loneliness, depression and Internet addiction (Caplan, 2007; Gámez-Guadix, Villa-George, & Calvete, 2012; Muñoz-Rivas, Fernández, & Gámez-Guadix, 2010; Odacı & Kalkan, 2010). However, it is not clear in which ways or by which mechanism loneliness and depression are associated with addiction in general and Internet addiction in particular. The purposes of this research are therefore to examine the relationships between depression, loneliness, low self-control and Internet addiction and to investigate the mediator role of low self-control as the link between depression, loneliness and Internet addiction.

#### 1.1. Depression, loneliness and Internet addiction

Previous research identified psychological problems such as loneliness and depression as risk factors for addiction in general (Sinha, 2007; Witkiewitz & Villarroel, 2009) and for Internet addiction in particular (Caplan, 2007; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2012; LaRose et al., 2003; Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2010; Odacı & Kalkan, 2010). Some other studies focused specifically on the link between loneliness and Internet addiction (e.g., Casale & Fioravanti, 2011).

There is also a theoretical basis for the links between loneliness, depression and Internet addiction (Caplan, 2003; Davis, 2001). Influenced by Davis' (2001) cognitive-behavioral model of generalized problematic Internet use, Caplan (2003) argued that people with psychological problems would prefer online interaction to face-to-face communication because it is easier to compensate

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for their social skill deficiencies. Other studies have provided support for the view that some individuals use the Internet to cope with negative feelings such as sadness, anxiousness, or loneliness (Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2010; Scherer, 1997) or to escape psychological problems (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000). However, when Internet use provides relief for the problems of stress, loneliness, depression, or anxiety, it is likely to become addictive (LaRose et al., 2003). Caplan (2003) also suggested that individuals who choose online interaction are more vulnerable to Internet addiction. Furthermore, both theoretically (Caplan, 2010) and empirically, low self-control has been proposed as a significant predictor of Internet addiction (Montag, Jurkiewicz, & Reuter, 2010; Niemz, Griffiths, & Banyard, 2005).

### 1.2. Low self-control and Internet addiction

In terms of behavioral theory, the expectation that Internet use provides relief from psychological problems could function as a reinforcement, further encouraging problematic Internet use. Behavioral theory explains the dynamics of Internet addiction in terms of conditioning; however, it fails to account for the many people who do not become addicted despite the increasing presence of media in daily life (see Bandura, 1999). Social-cognitive learning theory (Bandura, 1989) suggests the need for a more comprehensive understanding of human behavior and cognition than is provided by classical learning theory. According to Bandura (1991), the self-regulatory mechanism that determines an individual's level of self-control over behavior could also be relevant to Internet addiction. Through self-monitoring, self-control helps individuals to become aware of their behavior and its impact on themselves, others, and the environment. Furthermore, a lack of self-control is one of the key aspects of addiction (Davis, 2001; Young & Rogers, 1998), as has been noted before. Indeed, Caplan (2010) updated his cognitive-behavioral model of problematic Internet use (PIU), proposing deficient self-regulation as a salient aspect of PIU.

It has been suggested that the majority of problem behaviors are associated with low self-control (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Low self-control is characterized by behaviors including impulsiveness, enjoying risk-taking, addiction, preferring physical activities to mental ones, overeating, preferring simple tasks to complex ones, and being self-centered and short-tempered (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Kim, Namkoong, Ku, & Kim, 2008; Niemz et al., 2005; Trimmel & Kopke, 2000). Self-control theory is influential in explaining behavior problems, particularly antisocial behaviors; moreover, the theory suggests that low self-control is a major cause of a wide range of violent and risk-taking behaviors (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). According to Gottfredson and Hirschi, the behaviors of individuals who have low levels of self-control are governed primarily by immediate gratification and short-term goals. Individuals who are high on sensation-seeking and have a low level of self-control are prone to Internet addiction (Slater, 2003); this lack of control occurs because immediate gratification is important to such individuals. Thus, low self-control is related to impulsive behavior and a failure to consider the potential negative consequences of actions (Wiers et al., 2007).

In contrast, a high level of self-control is characterized by the consideration of the long-term results rather than a focus on immediate temptations (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996), and such an attitude prevents risk-taking (Rutter, 2002). Studies have revealed that a high degree of self-control was found to be associated with lower levels of aggression and criminality, as well as better psychological adjustment, academic performance, and personal relationships. A high level of self-control is also associated with fewer impulse control problems, such as eating disorders

and alcohol, nicotine, or other substance abuse problems (DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Quinn & Fromme, 2010; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004; Wiebe, 2006; Özdemir, Vazsonyi, & Çok, 2013). A high degree of self-control enables more effective planning for the future, impulse control, the ability to cope with negative thoughts, and the capacity to control behaviors (Heatherton, 2011; Hofmann, Friese, & Strack, 2009). It has been suggested that compared to people with low self-control, those with higher self-control are less likely to be affected by stressful events (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Tangney et al., 2004) and are more tolerant of painful stimuli (Schmeichel & Zell, 2007). In contrast, as stated before, individuals who have low levels of self-control may have difficulties with controlling behavior and are thus more liable to negative outcomes.

### 1.3. The role of low self-control in depression, loneliness and Internet addiction

Although all individuals have some capacity for self-control, some are more prone to losing self-control than others (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Baumeister et al., 1994). In this regard, Sinha (2009) argued that negative emotional states may result in low self-control; negative feelings may cause individuals to focus more on their emotional state, which can trigger a loss of self-control (Ward & Mann, 2000).

These arguments are well supported by theoretical work. In one approach based on the cognitive-behavioral model, it was proposed that using the Internet for “mood regulation” leads to a deficiency in self-regulation (Caplan, 2010). In another approach based on social cognitive theory, Bandura (1991) suggested that depression can result in deficient self-regulation because of negative cognitive bias; in an effort to eliminate feelings of depression and loneliness, exerting self-control may become difficult for the individual affected.

Empirical studies also provide evidence for this claim. For instance, Larose et al. (2003) found that depression was significantly related to deficient Internet self-regulation. It is also suggested that when individuals use the Internet to cope with loneliness and everyday stress, this increases the likelihood of problems with self-control (e.g., Lin, 1999). Although previous studies provide evidence for the link between negative feelings, low self-control and general or Internet addiction, only a small number of studies address the specific issue of the mediator role of low self-control/self-regulation between negative feelings and Internet addiction. In these studies, low self-regulation was found to mediate the relationship between mood regulation and negative outcomes (Caplan, 2010; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2012). Negative feelings weaken self-control (Sinha, 2009), and it has been suggested that the Internet is used to overcome negative feelings; thus, depression and loneliness are associated with pathological Internet use (Davis, 2001). Considering the associations between psychological problems (depression and loneliness) and low self-control (Caplan, 2010; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2012), as well as the link between low self-control and Internet addiction (Montag et al., 2010), we suggest that it is possible that low self-control mediates the relationships between psychological problems (depression and loneliness) and Internet addiction.

Having established the theoretical and empirical grounds for predicting (1) low self-control from depression and loneliness and (2) Internet addiction from low self-control, we propose in this study that psychological problems such as depression and loneliness relate to low self-control. In addition, we propose that these problems relate to Internet addiction directly, as well as indirectly, through low-self-control (see Fig. 1).

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