Problematic internet use in terms of gender, attachment styles and subjective well-being in university students ☆

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate problematic internet use in terms of gender, attachment styles and subjective well-being. This study based on a relational screening model and using a cross-sectional research protocol was conducted with 380 university students from various departments in the Karadeniz Technical University and Artvin Çoruh University faculties of education in Turkey. The Problematic Internet Use Scale, The Relationship Scale, Subjective Well-Being Scale and Personal Information Form were used in the study. Data were analyzed using the Pearson product moment correlation coefficient, two-way ANOVA, the Bonferroni test and multiple regression analysis. Results revealed significant correlations among problematic internet use, attachment styles and subjective well-being. Problematic internet use correlated positively with a dismissing attachment style and a preoccupied attachment style. Results from multiple regression analysis showed that gender, subjective well-being and dismissing and preoccupied attachment styles accounted for 19% of total problematic internet use variance. Gender, subjective well-being, and a dismissing attachment style made a significant distinctive contribution to the model. Problematic internet use differed significantly according to gender and attachment styles. Results revealed significant correlations among problematic internet use, attachment styles and subjective well-being. Problematic internet use differed significantly according to gender and attachment styles.

1. Introduction

The internet, the most significant technological advance of our day, is an important and widely used communication tool. While the internet provides significant facilities and advantages, it is excessively used without any purpose which involves various negativities. Researchers have described excessive internet use as problematic (Odaci, 2011; Odacı & Çelik, 2013), pathological (Davis, 2001; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000), compulsive or dependent (Murali & George, 2007) internet use.

Psychologists and educators have noted the negative effects of internet use, which is growing on a daily basis (Odacı, 2013; Odacı & Kalkan, 2010), and report that excessive and incorrect internet use leads to psychological and physical problems (Arısoy, 2009; Park et al., 2013). This problem, which is increasingly spreading and affecting individuals, gives rise to negative effects in many fields of life, such as the academic, financial and occupational spheres, and in social relations (Odacı, 2013). Since individuals who make intensive use of the internet have less interaction with friends and families, and set aside less time for them (Kraut et al., 1998; Shim, 2007), they experience high levels of loneliness and stress (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2002; Odaci & Kalkan, 2010; Özcan & Buzlu, 2007).

Numerous studies investigating problematic internet use have been conducted throughout the world in recent years. These include compilations, case reports, studies intended to estimate prevalence and associated psychosocial variables (Akın & İskender, 2011; Arısoy, 2009; Christakis, Moreno, Jelenchick, Myaing, & Zhou, 2011; Jang, Hwang, & Choi, 2008; Odacı & Kalkan, 2010; Velezmoro, Lacefield, & Roberti, 2010; Wang et al., 2012; Widyanto & Griffiths, 2013).

1.1. Study variables

1.1.1. Gender

Studies in the literature reveal a correlation between problematic internet use and gender in different sample groups (Kim & Davis, 2009; Odaci, 2011). Some studies have reported a significant

correlation between problematic internet use and gender, and high scores have been observed (Ceyhan, 2008; Chou & Hsiao, 2000; Kim & Davis, 2009; Odacı & Kalkan, 2010; Willoughby, 2008). Other studies, however, have reported no significant difference between males and females (Hall & Parsons, 2001; Odaci, 2011; Subrahmanyam & Lin, 2007). This study therefore included gender as a variable on the basis of the above study findings.

1.1.2. Attachment styles

Individuals with problems in establishing close relations in real social life may use the internet in an uncontrolled manner, thinking that they can make friends in virtual environments and this meet provides them with an opportunity to meet these needs (establishing close friendships) (Caplan, 2002; Lin & Tsai, 2002). Based on that idea, attachment styles were included as a variable in the study. We adopted attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, fearful and dismissive) set out in Bartholomew's Four Dimensional Model of Attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Bowlby (1980) defines attachment as the bond between the child and the primary caregiver and states that babies need to establish a secure attachment relationship with the primary caregiver. Secure attachment to family and peers affects adults' emotional and social competencies. A secure attachment style increases emotional awareness and contributes to the individual exhibiting appropriate social behavior (Laible, 2007). Individuals with a secure attachment style exhibit high self-esteem and confidence (Foster, Kernis, & Goldman, 2007), can enter more easily into social relations (Buote, Wood, & Pratt, 2009; Gore & Rogers, 2010; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996; Ye, 2007), use successful strategies for coping with stress and behave in a balanced way in relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Buote et al., 2009; Ye, 2007) and regard themselves as talented and open to discovery (Tambelli, Laghi, Odorisio, & Notari, 2012).

A preoccupied attachment style is one that can be described as the need to be in relations with others (Permuy, Merino, & Fernandez-Rey, 2010). Individuals in this group have negative self-perception and positive perceptions of others. Preoccupied individuals are independent of their surroundings, have low self-confidence, submit to others' wishes and wish to be in relationships with others but fear being abandoned (Howard & Medway, 2004; Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Individuals with a preoccupied attachment style may use the internet intensively, thinking that they will experience these worries less in relations established in the online environment.

A fearful attachment style is characterized by the individual having a negative perception of him/herself and of others. Similarly to preoccupied individuals, fearful individuals need to be accepted and validated by others. Additionally, since these individuals are afraid of suffering and being abandoned or rejected, they tend to avoid establishing close proximity (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998). Individuals with a fearful attachment style experience self-confidence problems in entering into social relations in real life but feel the need for such relations due to loneliness. They may regard online communication as an opportunity to meet these needs and may spend long periods in their daily lives online.

Individuals who regard themselves positively and others negatively have dismissive attachment. Dismissively attached individuals avoid establishing proximity with others out of a fear of some negativity. The individual tends to stress his own self-worth by denying the value of establishing proximity to others (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998). Since individuals with a dismissive attachment style evaluate themselves positively while criticizing others around them, they may experience problems with regard to real social relations, and may therefore prefer online relationships.

1.1.3. Subjective well-being

Another variable included in the study is subjective well-being. This has been said to change in accordance with an individual's desires and values and to have no universal character. Studies have also stated that a person experiences subjective well-being when his needs are met and he achieves his own aims (Diener, Suh, & Smith, 1999). There are also studies that have revealed that establishing close relations with others is correlated with subjective well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). One study reported that in order to achieve a high level of satisfaction in life and to frequently experience positive feelings, a person needs to establish satisfying relations with others (Çelik & Odacı, 2013). Individuals who experience difficulties in establishing healthy social relations in real life may prefer to meet this needs in the virtual environment, and the way in which this might affect subjective well-being was regarded as worthy of investigation. The correlation between individuals' subjective well-being and internet use was therefore considered in this study.

1.2. Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study was to examine problematic internet use in terms of gender, attachment styles and subjective well-being. Seeing the correlation between problematic internet use and individuals' gender, attachment styles, subjective well-being may be of use in the preparation of preventive and interventional programs. The hypotheses of the study, based on a relational screening model and performed using a cross-sectional research protocol were:

Hypothesis 1. There is a significant correlation between students' problematic internet use and their attachment styles and subjective well-being.

Hypothesis 2. Sex, subjective well-being and attachment styles are significant predictors of problematic internet use.

Hypothesis 3. Problematic internet use varies depending on sex and attachment styles.

2. Methods

2.1. Model

This was a descriptive study enquiring into current status. It was performed to investigate the relationships between problematic internet use and gender, attachment styles and subjective well-being on the basis of a relational screening model. Data were obtained from university students and a sectional model was employed.

2.2. Participants

This study was performed with 380 university students, 228 female (60%) and 152 male (40%) studying at various departments of the Karadeniz Technical University and Artvin Çoruh University faculties of education. Students' ages ranged from 17 to 23, with a mean of 19.61 (std. deviation = 1.12).

2.3. Data collection tools

The Problematic Internet Use Scale was used to measure students' problematic internet use levels, the Relationship Scales Questionnaire to measure styles of attachment and the Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWBS) to measure subjective well-being. Students' demographic data were collected using a Personal Information Form drawn up by the authors.