

Ruh sağlığı uzmanlarının görüşlerine göre problemli internet kullanımını için önleyici stratejiler

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Özet

Bu çalışma, ruh sağlığı uzmanlarının bakış açısından problemli internet kullanımına yönelik önleyici stratejileri incelemektedir. Problemli internet kullanımı, genellikle psikolojik, sosyal ve eğitimle ilgili zorluklarla ilişkilendirilen, aşırı ve sağlıksız internet kullanımı olarak tanımlanmakta ve ciddi işlev bozukluklarına yol açmaktadır. Fenomenolojik bir tasarımla yürütülen çalışmada, psikologlar, psikiyatristler ve danışmanlar dahil olmak üzere 13 deneyimli uzman yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelere katılmıştır. Çalışma, önleyici stratejileri üç tema altında sınıflandırmıştır: öğrenciler, aileler ve profesyoneller için çözümler. Temel öneriler arasında öğrenciler için bilinçli internet kullanımının teşvik edilmesi, zaman yönetiminin geliştirilmesi, boş zaman aktivitelerinin desteklenmesi ve duygusal farkındalığın artırılması yer almaktadır. Aileler için sosyal becerilerin geliştirilmesi, teknolojiden arındırılmış alanların oluşturulması ve çocukların psikolojik ihtiyaçlarının karşılanması üzerinde durulmaktadır. Profesyonellerin ise bilişsel-davranışçı terapi, akran eğitimi ve sosyal beceri eğitimi gibi yöntemleri uygulamaları önerilmektedir. Bulgular, internet bağımlılığıyla başa çıkmada duygusal düzenleme ve bilişsel yaklaşımların önemine dikkat çekmekte ve bu büyüyen sorunla etkili bir şekilde mücadele etmek için kapsamlı bir perspektif sunmaktadır. Özellikle, duygusal farkındalık eğitimi ve yapılandırılmış akran liderliğindeki müdahaleler, sürdürülebilir değişim için en etkili çözümler olarak ortaya çıkmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: problematik internet kullanımı, ruh sağlığı, nitel

Preventive strategies for problematic Internet use based on the perspectives of mental health professionals

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates preventive strategies for problematic internet use from the perspectives of mental health professionals. The phenomenon of problematic internet use, often associated with psychological, social, and educational challenges, is defined as excessive and unhealthy internet use leading to significant impairments. Through phenomenological design, 13 experienced professionals participated in semi-structured interviews, including psychologists, psychiatrists, and counsellors. The study categorizes preventive strategies into three themes: solutions for students, families, and professionals. Key recommendations include fostering conscious internet use, enhancing time management, promoting leisure activities, and addressing emotional awareness among students. For families, the emphasis is on improving social skills, creating tech-free zones, and fulfilling children's psychological needs. Professionals are encouraged to implement cognitive-behavioral therapy, peer education, and social skills training. The findings highlight the importance of emotional regulation and cognitive approaches in addressing internet addiction, offering a comprehensive perspective to tackle this growing issue effectively. Specifically, emotional awareness training and structured peer-led interventions emerged as the most effective solutions for sustainable change.

Keywords: problematic internet use, mental health, qualitative

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Introduction

The Internet, where one's needs and expectations regarding entertainment, education, relationships, or achievement are satisfied (Scherer, 1997), is increasing its impact on psychology research each day (e.g. Baloğlu et al., 2018; Jolin & Weller, 2018, Livingstone et al., 2017; Seifert & Wahl, 2018). Although features such as information sharing for academic and work purposes facilitate one's life, the excessive and unhealthy use of the Internet—referred to as 'problematic use of the Internet' (PIU)—has emerged in psychology, with associations to psychological and educational issues such as loneliness (e.g. Ceyhan & Ceyhan, 2008; Kim et al., 2009; Odacı & Kalkan, 2010), social anxiety (e.g. Baloğlu et al., 2018; Caplan, 2006; Elhai et al., 2018), psychological needs (e.g. Arpacı et al., 2018; Li et al., 2016), shyness (e.g. Chak & Leung, 2004; Odacı & Celik, 2013) and attachment (e.g. Arpacı et al., 2017; Kim & Koh, 2018; Musetti et al., 2018). One significant aspect that may be thought a potential factor in developing problematic Internet use is emotions, based on one's affective responses to factors within his/her environment (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994).

The problematic or pathologic use of the Internet has drawn considerable attention in recent years (e.g. Anderson et al., 2017; Castellacci & Tveito, 2018; Mazur et al., 2018; Özteke-Kozan, et al., 2017) and this issue has maintained its popularity across several disciplines such as psychology (e.g. Andangsari et al., 2018; Öksüz et al., 2018), and psychiatry (e.g., de Vries et al., 2018; Jolin & Weller, 2018). The term problematic internet use has for years been given different meanings in the literature, such as “Pathological”, “Unhealthy”, or “Addiction”. However, one of the most common definitions was proposed by Kimberley Young (1997): an impulse-control disorder that causes significant impairment in one's social, work and personal life. Beard (2005) defines this term similarly to Young (1997), as excessive use causing academic, emotional and social difficulties in one's life. As for Scherer (1997), he emphasizes psychological needs and defines the Internet as a place where one's needs are satisfied. Also, Suler (1999) states the needs that cause pathological internet use, such as sex, achievement, belonging, relationships, and self-actualization. In particular, those who experience difficulties in face-to-face communication might prefer online communications to structure new relationships (Bonebrake, 2002); this may create specific problems in preferring to engage in online relations rather than real ones.

Even though problematic internet use has broadly been handled in a young sample, the roles of professionals (e.g. Wells et al., 2006) and treatment strategies (e.g. Twohig & Crosby, 2010) have not been considered very often. Moreover, these studies were conducted with a quantitative approach. The primary aim is to articulate evidence-based recommendations and provide a clearer understanding of PIU's underlying causes and solutions. Furthermore, this study positions itself as a distinctive contribution by employing a qualitative approach to explore the issue in depth, unlike the predominantly quantitative studies in the field.

Method

A qualitative study revealed the views of professionals and disclosed preventive strategies for problematic internet use. A phenomenological design was used to achieve the research's aim. "The problematic internet use" was the phenomenon of the current study.

Study Group

Thirteen participants with at least five years of experience were included in the study. Of the participants, five were women and eight were men; five were psychological counsellors, five were psychiatrists, and three were psychologists. Their work experience ranged between 7 to 15 years, and their ages ranged from 37 to 52 years. A criterion sampling method was used to select the participants, wherein a minimum of five years of work experience and a specialization in internet-related behavioural problems were determined as selection criteria. In this sampling, people, events or units which meet the criteria are included (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç-Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2016).

The Development of Instrument

A semi-structured interview form was used to collect data. For the reliability of the instrument, the literature was revised, and questions were prepared. After the literature review, three professionals with doctoral degrees in Counseling Psychology revised the questions, and in line with their recommendations, the last version of the questions was completed. During the interviews, probe questions were asked to participants in addition to the main questions set out below:

1. What must students do to avoid using the Internet problematically? What are your recommendations for students?
2. How must parents prevent their children's problematic and unhealthy internet use? What are the cautions for families?
3. What must professionals (school counsellors, psychologists, and other health workers) do to cope with students' problematic internet use? What are the best solutions you may recommend?

Data Collection and Analysis

Before the interviews, participants signed a consent form explaining their rights and the privacy of the data collection process by providing study details. Due to ethical issues, the participants' names were not given in the recording or data analysis. Codes were assigned to the participants, and the interviews lasted approximately 50 to 70 minutes. To increase the study's internal validity, the findings were sent to participants via electronic mail to correct any errors or omissions. Patton (2002) also suggests participants examine the results to increase the internal validity of the qualitative research.

Both thematic and content analysis were used in the data analysis process. First, transcripts were made of the recordings, and thematic analysis was used based on the literature to determine the themes. Content analysis was used to create categories. Because of the privacy policy, participants' names were not given; female and male participants were coded as "F" and "M" in statements. After the codes and themes were determined by the researcher, using both descriptive and content analysis, two professionals (with doctoral degrees in counselling psychology and experience in qualitative studies) examined the data collection and analyzing process to increase validity and reliability. Yıldırım and Şimşek (2006) emphasize the

importance of examination of research by professionals to get feedback and see the effects of the study.

Findings

In this section, the themes, categories, and statements of the participants are given. Three themes were created via descriptive analysis: solution offers for students, families, and professionals. Sample statements were given in each category by participant code. Below, the themes and categories are presented.

Theme 1. Solutions offered for students

Participants were asked to offer solutions for students to prevent problematic internet use, and eight categories were created using content analysis. These categories are conscious internet management, practical study, leisure activities, internet notebooks, external stoppers, reminder cards, and emotional awareness. Seven participants recommended "Conscious use of the Internet," and F1 reported:

"The most important part of internet-related problems is not using it consciously. Teenagers especially do not know why the Internet is important and what purpose they use it for. If they know the Internet of their internet use and use it consciously in advance, we speak about these problems that much more."

For the same category, M8 reported that:

"People, especially the young generation, are very good at using the Internet more than any other generation. However, they are not aware of why they use it, their aim, or their purpose. The first thing that the students should do is to increase their awareness about internet use."

Five participants suggested time-management regulations in the "Time management" category, and M2 reported that:

"Students especially waste their time on the Internet, and when they are always on the Internet, there is not much time for family, friends or studying. So, they need to learn time management abilities; otherwise, they would have certain difficulties with their friends, families or grades."

Five participants also indicated the importance of practical study for students in preventing problematic internet use. For example, F4 reported

"When we look at the scientific research, we mostly see that internet addicts are in trouble for academic achievement. Because they are online all the time, they only study for exams on the last nights, which makes them fail. Thus, they need to learn effective study techniques, such as comparing the units or studying by short breaks."

Six participants recommended focusing on leisure time activities for students. Regarding this category, F5 stated that:

"They need to find leisure activities to fill the time they waste on the internet."

Two participants also suggested internet notebooks for students to prevent internet addiction. For example, M6 reported related to this category:

"Internet notebooks are good solutions for students. Like diaries, they may keep notebooks in which they write about when they are online, why they use the Internet, and which Internet sites or Internet media tools they use for which hours. That will also increase their awareness about internet use, which is also one of our ways of preventing internet-related addictions."

One participant suggested "External stoppers" to avoid excessive internet use. M3 indicated that:

"Students use external stoppers such as alarm clocks to warn them about excessive use. When they wind the alarm clock, for example, for an hour, this clock would warn them that their time is over. When adolescents and other emerging adults are generally online, they forget how time passes. Thus, this would help them to avoid problems related to the Internet and social media."

One alternative solution for students was "Reminder cards", which one of the participants suggested. F2 suggested that:

"If students suffer from long hours of being online, they may use reminder cards in their homes, such as in their rooms, or the kitchen or bathroom that remind them of the devastations of excessive internet use. Hereby, they can keep it in their minds." (F2)

Participants especially stated the importance of emotional coping and awareness in dealing with internet addiction. Five participants suggested improving emotional awareness, and F4 reported that:

"When we look at internet addicts, we certainly see that they suffer from emotional problems such as ineffective emotional coping, irrational emotional schemas or insufficient emotion regulation strategies. To overcome these emotional insufficiencies, students use the Internet excessively. Thus, they need to learn the right emotional coping strategies, focus their emotional awareness more, and get help to regulate their emotions correctly." (F1)

Theme 2. Solutions Offered for Families

For the second theme, participants were asked for solutions for families to prevent problematic and unhealthy internet use. The categories created were social skills, conscious Internet use, activity participation, tech-free times, psychological needs, and emotional development. In the "Social skills" category, six participants offered improvement of children's social skills such as self-esteem, assertiveness, communication skills and empathy to families in preventing internet-related psychological problems. For instance, F2 indicated that:

"Studies in the field of the Internet show that common problems arise from inefficient social skills, such as low self-esteem, body image, communication problems, social anxiety and so on. Thus, we need to turn families back to that point. Families must focus on their children's social skills such as empathy, communication or self-esteem."

Similar to F2, M7 emphasized the development of children's social skills and suggested that families improve their children's social skills.

"I have worked with several adolescents and emerging adults who have psychological problems related to problematic internet use, and deduced from my experiences; I certainly suggest families improve their children's social skills because when you work with an internet-addicted adolescent, you certainly observe low self-esteem or social anxiety. Thus, if we cope with problems like communication, assertiveness, or self-esteem, they will also solve problems related to the Internet. So, families need to focus on developing social skills for their children."

Similar to the first theme, six participants suggested families a conscious internet use, and F4 indicated that:

"Families must teach their children aware of the internet."

F3 also reported that:

"Teenagers use the Internet without an aim or for different purposes such as cyberbullying or dangerous games, and families are not aware of this danger. Children shut their doors, and families do not know what their children are doing. They must follow their children and teach them the conscious use of the Internet."

Participation in activities with the family is one of the most important categories in this theme. Seven participants emphasized the importance of spending time with family – especially outdoor activities – in preventing problematic internet use. For instance, M6 reported that:

"I generally work with families whose children have internet-related problems, and when they come to me with this problem, I see the broken family relationships. In these families, the only leisure activity for children is the Internet. I especially cannot get any answer when I ask them which ac Internet they participate in together. On that point, children turn to the Internet in their spare time and the Internet to several online addictions. Thus, families must spend time – especially outdoor activities or outside the home – with their children because going out for a good time will also keep them far from computers. However, they must also be careful to leave their mobile phones at home or use them minimally."

Likewise, M1 underlined the importance of spare time activities with the family by saying:

"They should go out to the cinema, shopping or walking with their children. When the time they spend together increases, their children's mental and psychological well-being will increase".

One of the participants stated creating time without technology at home with the saying "Tech-free time". Regarding this theme, F3 indicated that:

"Families should create technology-free times or zones at home. I read this on the Internet and applied it to my client; the results were good. They created a time, which could be at night, afternoon, or morning, and technology-free zones, like "It is forbidden to use any devices with the internet in the kitchen," as a family and home rule.

In theme 2, the "Psychological Needs" category was created using content analysis, and four participants stated the importance of families satisfying the psychological needs of children to prevent internet addiction. Related to the "Psychological needs" category, F5 reported that;

"As far as I have observed adolescents and young adults with internet-related problems, I see unsatisfied psychological needs such as love, belongingness, achievement or autonomy among these people. They use the Internet problematically to satisfy love or achievement; they try to belong somewhere on the Internet, or when they win games, the Internet is better because they have lower academic achievement at school or their families and teachers imply school deficiencies. Families need to determine their needs and satisfy these needs in real life. If families satisfy these needs, children do not need to use the Internet or play games to find a virtual Internetievementor's love on the Internet."

An "Emotional Development" was created for this theme, and five participants emphasized the importance of the emotional development of children in preventing problematic internet use. Regarding this category, M2 reported:

"I think that emotional schemas and coping strategies are important determinants in developing unhealthy internet use. Our emotional schemas and coping strategies shape our relationships, attitudes or behaviours in real life, and now, in today's world, our emotion regulation strategies or cognitive schemas also play an important role in the virtual world. Families are responsible for a child's emotional development and schemas. Thus, expressing emotions in a favourable way or positive emotion regulation is learned in the family cycle. Families must teach their children to express their emotions in healthy ways; they must give importance to the child's emotional development and academic achievement." (M2)

Theme 3. Solutions Offered for Professionals

Participants were asked to offer solutions for professionals to prevent problematic internet use, and eight categories were created: cognitive-behavioural therapy, family therapy, peer education, time management, internet addiction education, emotional awareness, and social skills education.

Six participants emphasized the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioural therapy in preventing problematic internet use. Regarding this category, M6 stated

"Numerous studies showed maladaptive cognitions and irrational thoughts were determinants of problematic internet use. Moreover, my experiences with internet-addicted clients showed that cognitive-behavioural approaches are successful in the treatment of internet-related psychological problems. Thus, I strongly recommend cognitive-behavioural therapy to other professionals dealing with problematic internet use. In particular, behavioural interventions are very effective in solving this problem."

Three participants mentioned the family therapy category, emphasizing repairing family relationships to overcome problematic internet use. In this category, F1 reported that:

"Family relationships are key factors in overcoming psychological problems for adolescents and youths, and internet addiction is one of them. Building strong and healthy family relationships will help with internet-related problems. I offer professional family therapy or include the family in the therapy. We can then see the problem from a greater perspective, undermining the factors for internet addiction or what causes unhealthy use in the family."
(F1)

The "Peer Education" category was created for this theme. Two participants stated that peer education was important to prevent problematic internet use and recommended that professionals, especially school counsellors, include peer education programs in schools. For instance, M1 reported that;

"Peer education is important in every step of intervention strategies for psychological problems. Especially nowadays, with the increase in cyberbullying in addition to internet addiction, peer education would be an important step in dealing with this problem."

In this category, four participants recommended time management regulations to professionals working with students who use the Internet problematically. M2 indicated:

"If you work with students who use the Internet unhealthily, you see that they have time management problems. They can't regulate their time because they spend all their time on the Internet. Thus, we first aim to help them regulate and manage their time accordingly in dealing with internet addiction."

Moreover, two participants offered internet addiction education in this category, not only for internet addicts but for all students to increase awareness of internet use. Concerning the "Internet addiction education" category, F3 stated that:

"We must first prioritize conferences and meetings to inform students about the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet and social media. Many internet-related uses are occurring because students are unaware of the benefits or dangers. This must be the first preventive strategy."

"Emotional awareness" was also created here, and four participants propounded the importance of emotional intelligence, emotional awareness and the development of students in dealing with problematic internet use. In this category, F4 indicated that:

"I am working with adolescents on emotions and cognitions, which works well. Professionals must work on emotions and emotional awareness. Then problems related to the Internet may be solved easily."

Participants suggested that professionals improve students' social skills in coping with problematic internet use. Related to this category, M2 reported that:

"Professionals must work on improving the social skills of students. Because self-esteem, negative body image, inefficient interpersonal communication, and empathy may cause internet-related psychological problems. When we develop their social skills with the client, problematic internet use may be resolved more easily."

Discussion

The current study examined professionals' views to reveal preventive strategies for problematic internet use. Solutions were offered to students, families and other professionals to prevent problematic internet use. Three themes were created using descriptive analysis: "Solutions offered for students, families, and professionals". For the first theme – solutions offered for students – eight categories were created by using content analysis: named as the conscious use of the Internet, time management, effectInternet, leisure time activities, internet notebook, external stoppers, reminder cards, and emotional awareness. In this theme, professionals especially suggested conscious use of the Internet, time management, focusinInternetsure time activities and developing emotional awareness. In the second theme – solutions offered for families – six categories were created: social skills, conscious Internet use, participation in activities, tech-free times, psychological needs, and emotional development. For example, psychological needs were important in developing values (Kesici, 2015). This means satisfying the psychological needs of children is important for their social, moral, and emotional development. Professionals suggested that families improve their children's social skills and emotional awareness, participation in leisure time, and particularly conscious use of the Internet to prevent problematic Internet use. Lastly, for the third theme – solutions offered for professionals – six categories were created: cognitive-behavioural therapy, family therapy, peer education, time management, internet addiction education, emotional awareness, and social skills education. Cognitive-behavioral therapy, time management, and internet addiction education were all found to be important intervention strategies for professionals. Ekşi and Ümmet (2013) emphasize the importance of family support, developing social skills, and informing the young population about how to use it to prevent internet-related psychological and behavioural problems. Furthermore, Du et al. (2010) stressed the prominent role of family training and psycho-education programs in their experimental study of the treatment of problematic internet use, which aligns with current research.

Emotions were important determinants of problematic internet use in quantitative and qualitative studies; participants emphasized the significance of emotional awareness in all the themes. In converging qualitative and quantitative data, emotions were important in dealing with problematic internet use. Moreover, social skills, psychological needs, and cognitive approaches were emphasized in preventing problematic internet use by professionals in the qualitative part, in a similar vein to the quantitative part, in which cognitions and emotions were found to be significant. Pontes et al. (2015) stated that cognitive-behavioural therapy is the most effective treatment for internet-use-related problems. Przepiorka et al. (2014) argued for CBT based on shifting to positive cognitions by reducing maladaptive cognitions in the treatment of internet addiction, similar to that expounded in the interviews of professionals in the current research. Twohig and Crosby (2010) also suggested an emotional-focused therapy approach for internet-use-related problems, supporting the current study findings.

Also, younger participants had higher scores in problematic internet use in the quantitative phase, whereas the professionals emphasized the risky behaviours of adolescents and children in the qualitative phase. Young (1999) discussed the importance of emotions in treating internet addiction for professionals, and the current study's findings support this idea. Several studies have suggested cognitive-behavioural approaches (e.g., Erden & Hatun, 2015; King et al., 2012; Young, 2011), supporting the current research findings. King et al. (2012) conducted a case study with an adolescent with pathological internet use, and a cognitive-behavioural approach successfully treated this problem. Erden and Hatun (2015) worked with a 14-year-old girl to prevent internet addiction using a cognitive-behavioural approach, and the results pointed to a decrease in internet addiction. Young (2011) also suggested a model comprised of cognitive and behavioural interventions in treating internet addiction, and the results were successful in another study (Young, 2013).

Bağatarhan and Siyez (2017) stated in their systematic review that there is not much research on preventing internet addiction among adolescents, and no study is currently being conducted with professionals using a qualitative approach to preventing internet addiction. This study would, therefore, be a unique contribution to this field. In summary, using a mixed-method approach in the current study, problematic internet use among young adults was closely analyzed from different perspectives.

In the qualitative phase, the professionals mostly suggested cognitive and behavioural homework and conscious Internet use to young adults. Internet regulation and families help children develop social skills to prevent problematic Internet use. Lastly, the professionals generally emphasized cognitive-behavioural therapies, family education, and social skills development programs for their counterparts. These results also parallel the quantitative findings, revealing the effect of emotional schemas and regulation strategies; both social skills development programs and prevention strategies are based on cognitions, including emotion and cognition-based activities. This study is the first in the literature to deeply analyse the associations between emotions, cognitions and problematic internet use with different perspectives based on a mixed-method approach.

In conclusion, a holistic framework combining emotional regulation training, cognitive-behavioural interventions, family education, and peer-led initiatives represents a robust solution for mitigating problematic internet use. Future studies should focus on assessing the long-term outcomes of these interventions and exploring their adaptability to different cultural and demographic contexts. This study lays the groundwork for interdisciplinary approaches to managing and preventing problematic internet use by bridging the gap between theory and practice.

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