



# An investigation of problematic internet use among adolescents in terms of self-injurious and risk-taking behavior



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine problematic internet use in terms of self-injurious behavior and risk-taking behavior. This study was performed with 736 high school students, 328 females and 408 males studying at various high schools in Trabzon (in Turkey). The Problematic Internet Use Scale was used to measure students' problematic internet use levels, the inventory of statements about self injury to measure self-injurious behavior and the Adolescent Risk-Taking Questionnaire to measure risk-taking behavior. According to the results of the study, a positive and significant relationship was found between risk-taking behavior and problematic internet use ( $r = .39, p < 0.01$ ), and it was determined that self-injurious behavior and risk-taking behavior significantly predict problematic internet use ( $F = 86.94, p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, it was found that problematic internet use displays variation according to self-injurious behavior ( $F_{(1, 732)} = 32.32, p < 0.01$ ). The findings have been discussed in relation to the existing literature.

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## 1. Introduction

Internet use for accessing knowledge has become increasingly indispensable in our lives and this condition has noticeably increased in the past decade. While the increasing utilization of the internet has affected people's lives positively, it has also brought about some drawbacks. Some users tend to spend an excess of time on the internet or use it to the extent that it causes them to neglect, postpone or even cancel their day to day activities. These users start to face more problems and psychological disorders in their lives because of unhealthy internet use (Park et al., 2013).

There is not a standard definition for problematic internet use and it has also become to be called as internet addiction (Moreno, Jelenchick, & Christakis, 2013). Therefore, in this present study, the terms internet addiction and problematic internet use have been used synonymously. Problematic internet use is a new and growing health problem especially for adolescents and young adults and adolescents are seen as the population under risk in the development of this problem (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickhur, 2010; Leung, 2007). Regardless of whether the definition is made as internet addiction or problematic internet use, it has been revealed by a large number of studies that this behavior has harmful psychosocial and physical effects on adolescents. Studies carried out with adolescents have found that problematic internet use has such consequences as low academic success, engagement in risky activities (Tsitsika, Critselis, Louizou, et al., 2011), poor dietary habits (Kim et al., 2010) and self-injurious behavior (Lam, Peng, Mai, & Jing, 2009).

### 1.1. Study variables

#### 1.1.1. Self-injurious behavior

Self-injurious behavior (SIB); is defined as the individual giving physical harm to his own body intentionally and repetitiously (wounding, cutting the skin, burning etc.) without the purposes of suicide attempt or social approval (Brausch, Decker, & Hadley, 2011; Tresno, Ito, & Mearns, 2012). Self-injurious behavior typically starts in the adolescence period and is observed frequently. It is seen in adolescents and young adults more than the adult age group (Claassen, Trivedi, Shimizu, et al., 2006).

The most important characteristics of self-injurious behavior emphasized in its definitions are that it is intentional, distinct from suicide and is not dependent on social approval. Deiter, Nicholls, and Pearlman (2000) classify self-injurious behavior into two broad categories which are direct or indirect. Examples of direct self-injury are cutting, biting, severing, burning and hitting and examples of indirect self-injury include overeating and substance abuse (Yates, 2004). It has been stated that these types of SIB are used by many teenagers in combination (Plener, Libal, Keller, Fegert, & Muehlenkamp, 2009).

Studies on SIB have noticeably focused on the high rates of SIB among adolescents (Makikyro et al., 2004; Timson, Priest, & Clark-Carter, 2012). In the adolescent community samplings BID rates observed a range between 12% and 23% (Brausch & Gutierrez, 2010; Jacobson & Gould, 2007) while this rate increases up to 68% in the clinical adolescent sampling (Makikyro et al., 2004; Nixon, Cloutier, & Aggarwal, 2002). UK has been reported to have the highest population-based prevalence of self-injurious behavior among European countries and the self-reported lifetime prevalence ranges from 2% to 9% (Morey, Corcoran, Arensman, et al., 2008).

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SIB has been predominantly explained in models through the use of emotion regulation and tension reduction theories. Data from existing research showing that SIB acts are preceded by negative, high arousal emotions and tension supports these theories (Muehlenkamp, Brausch, Quigley, & Whitlock, 2013). Certain levels of success have been attained by therapies that incorporate cognitive and emotion regulation skill acquisition to reduce SIB (Brausch & Girresch, 2012; Klonsky, Muehlenkamp, Lewis, & Walsh, 2011). SIB has also been seen as an addictive behavior. Many other self-injurious behaviors have been described as addictive due to their common characteristics of being “coercive” and “relieving” (Victor, Glenn, & Klonsky, 2012). Faye (1995) emphasized the similarity between aversive withdrawal symptoms experienced by drug users and the increase in negative emotions preceding SIB while offering a theoretical rationale for conceptualizing SIB as an addictive behavior. Given evidence for both important similarities and differences between SIB and addictive behaviors, one of the aims of the present study is to explore the relationship between problematic internet use and SIB which has not been studied in the literature to a great extent.

### 1.1.2. Risk-taking behavior

Risk-taking as another variable included in the study is generally defined as engagement in life and health threatening activities with negative outcomes (Alexander et al., 1990). Adolescence is a period when excitement-seeking and risk-taking behaviors are observed at a high rate and this can impede the development process of the adolescent (Gullone, Moore, Moss, & Boyd, 2000). It is a developmental period when desire for adventure, preference for risk-taking and passion for excitement and novelty normally reach high levels (Dahl, 2004). Risk-taking behavior generally involves activities which are dangerous for the individual's health and life. Behaviors which can be regarded risky include drug use, driving fast, excessive alcohol and cigarette use, carelessly chosen sexual partners and behavior based on violence toward others (Steinberg, 2004).

As a risk behavior prevalent among youth, self-injury is usually expected to be observed in conjunction with other risk behaviors including alcohol, substance use, suicide, shoplifting and skipping school (Lieberman, 2004). When it is considered that during adolescence preferences for risk-taking increase, and adolescents tend to have characteristics such as putting others' and their own health under danger, it is expected that there is a relationship between risk-taking behavior and problematic internet use. Depending on all of these justifications, in the present study, the relationship between problematic internet use, self-injurious behavior and risk-taking behavior has been investigated.

### 1.2. Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study was to examine problematic internet use in terms of self-injurious behavior and risk-taking behavior. The hypotheses of the study were:

**Hypothesis 1.** There is a significant correlation between adolescents' problematic internet use, self-injurious behavior and risk-taking behavior.

**Hypothesis 2.** Self-injurious behavior and risk-taking behavior are significant predictors of problematic internet use.

**Hypothesis 3.** Problematic internet use varies depending on self-injurious behavior and risk-taking behavior.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. 1. Model

This was a descriptive study inquiring into the current status. It was performed to investigate the relationships between problematic

internet use and self-injurious behavior and risk-taking behavior on the basis of a relational screening model. Data were obtained from adolescents and a sectional model was employed.

### 2.2. Participants

This study was performed with 736 high school students, 328 females (% 44,6) and 408 males (% 51,4) studying at various high schools in Trabzon (in Turkey). Students' ages ranged from 15 to 18, with a mean of 16.83 (std. deviation = 1.11).

### 2.3. Data collection tools

The Problematic Internet Use Scale was used to measure students' problematic internet use levels, the inventory of statements about self-injury to measure self-injurious behavior and the Adolescent Risk-taking Questionnaire to measure risk-taking behavior.

#### 2.3.1. Problematic Internet Use Scale

The Problematic Internet Use Scale developed by Ceyhan, Ceyhan, and Gürçan (2007) is a dimensional, quantitative scale based on individual self-assessment showing a spectrum of internet use from normal to pathological to measure problematic internet use levels among university students. Possible scores that can be obtained from the 33 item scale range from 33 to 165, higher scores are an indication of increasingly unhealthy internet use with a negative effect on the individual which may lead to a tendency to pathology, such as internet dependence. Three sub-factors were yielded by the scale factor analysis: “negative consequences of the internet,” “social benefit/social comfort” and “excessive use” which together account for 48.96% of the total variance. Internal consistency coefficient for the scale was ( $\alpha$ ) 0.94. The internal consistency coefficient of the scale regarding the data collected from our study group was ( $\alpha$ ) 0.93, while those of the three factors constituting the scale were 0.93, 0.84 and 0.73, respectively (Ceyhan et al., 2007).

#### 2.3.2. The inventory of statements about self injury (ISAS)

The main function of the inventory is to evaluate self-injurious behavior without “suicide intention” extensively. Not only the functions of these behaviors but also 12 types of SIB can be evaluated through the inventory. The measure which consists of two sections has been developed by Klonsky and Glenn (2009) and transcribed into Turkish by Bildik, Somer, Kabukçu Başay, Başay, and Özbaran (2012). The first section (Behaviors) questions the lifelong frequency of 12 types of “non-suicidal and deliberate” SIB. The participants who indicate at least one SIB in the first section of measure are directed to answer the second section of measure (Functions). This section examines 13 SIB functions with a total of 39 questions under two separate dimensions (Autonomic and Social Functions). Reliability studies of the section I point out a high internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0,79$ ) considering self-injurious behaviors examined in the first section of inventory collectively. Section I displays expected level and direction in terms of validity when construct validity is evaluated in the framework of validity studies, and the validity of the first section of inventory is supported by the findings. Reliability studies of section II yielded a total internal consistency score of  $\alpha = 0,93$  for total functions. In test–retest reliability study of inventory, the correlation between two applications was found to be  $r = 0,64$  for total function score. The relationships of ISAS Functions total and sub-dimension scores with the measures which evaluate the expected clinical features were found quite strong in validity studies of section II. When considered as a whole, in the context of construct validity, research findings indicate that the use of ISAS in the examination of self-injurious behaviors and in the clarification of its functions for Turkish adolescent samplings would lead to valid and reliable results (Bildik et al., 2012).

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