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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ALEXITHYMIA AND INTERNET ADDICTION IN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction in adolescents. The study was conducted on 294 adolescents. The Toronto Alexithymia Scale and Internet Addiction Scale were used as the data collection instruments. The relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction was investigated using correlation and regression analysis. As a result of the analysis, alexithymia was found to be positively associated with internet addiction. In addition, alexithymia positively predicts internet addiction. The findings of the study were discussed with regards to the relations with the literature and suggestions were made to the researcher and implementers.

Keywords: Alexithymia, internet addiction, adolescent

Ergenlerde Aleksitimi ile İnternet Bağımlılığı Arasındaki İlişki Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı ergenlerde aleksitimi ile internet bağımlılığı arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektir. Çalışma 294 ergen üzerinde yürütülmüştür. Veri toplama aracı olarak Toronto Aleksitimi Ölçeği ve İnternet Bağımlılığı Ölçeği kullanılmıştır. Aleksitimi ve internet bağımlılığı arasındaki ilişki korelasyon ve regresyon analizi kullanılarak incelenmiştir. Yapılan analiz sonucunda aleksitimi ile internet bağımlılığı arasında pozitif

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bir ilişki olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır. Ayrıca aleksitimi internet bağımlılığını pozitif yönde anlamlı düzeyde yordamaktadır. Çalışmanın bulguları literatürle ilişkiler açısından tartışılmış ve araştırmacı ve uygulayıcılara önerilerde bulunulmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Aleksitimi, internet bağımlılığı, ergen

INTRODUCTION

While alexithymia is not considered as a disorder, it is defined as a disorder in skills related to showing deficiencies in imagination skills, being unaware of emotional stimuli and recognizing emotions and identifying them (Taylor, Bagby & Parker, 1997). Studies have stated that individuals with high alexithymia levels have levels of depression, stress, sexual disorders, anxiety, alcohol consumption, diet disorders and general psychopathology disorders and have low level of self-esteem (APA, 2013; Hesse & Floyd, 2008; Hintikka, Honkalampi, Lehtonen & Viinamaki, 2001; Karukivi et al., 2010; Thorberg, Young, Sullivan & Lyvers, 2009). It is also emphasized that alexithymia has a negative relationship with the number of close relationship, relational intimacy and relationship satisfaction (Hesse & Floyd, 2011). Thus, individuals suffering from alexithymia experience problems in skills such as starting and maintaining a communication and relationship (Montebarocci, Codispoti, Baldaro & Rossi, 2004; Vanheule, Desmet, Meganck & Bogaerts, 2007). Ruscio et al. (2007) state that individuals who encounter difficulties in interpersonal relationships have anxiety concerning starting and maintaining social relationships. Individuals who undergo anxiety in social relationships are reluctant in making friendships, avoid close relationships, limit their relationships with the opposite sex and even tend to avoid marriage (Hart, Turk, Heimberg & Liebowitz, 1999; Schneier et al., 1994).

Internet addiction, which is evaluated as drive control problem (Shapira, Goldsmith, Keck, Khosla, & McElroy, 2000; Young, 1998), is defined in the literature as *internet addiction disorder* (Goldberg, 1996) and *pathological internet usage* (Davis, 2001; Morahan-Martin & Schumacker, 2000). While there is no consensus on the definition of internet addiction (Chou, Condon & Belland, 2005), it is defined as the decrease in actual social interactions and the state of being angry and nervous when failing to access the internet which occur due to spending too much time on the internet, using the internet at compulsive level, failing to manage the time spent on the internet and excessive use of the internet (Kraut et al., 1998). Adolescents represent a risk group concerning internet addiction due to the increase in the opportunities for accessing the internet (Lam, Peng, Mai & Jing, 2009). Because adolescents are not physically and psychologically developed, they are subject to the negative effects of the internet more than the individuals of other age groups (Christensen, Orzack, Babington & Patsdaughter, 2001; Oh, 2005). However, several studies emphasize that

psychiatric and depressive symptoms emerge in adolescents due to internet addiction (Ha, Kim, Bae, Lyoo & Cho, 2007; Jang, Hwang, & Choi, 2008; Kim et al., 2006; Young & Rogers, 1998). In previous studies, positive relationships were detected between internet addiction and anxiety, impulsivity, social isolation, negative emotional regulation, self-concealment and social phobia (Chak & Leung, 2004; Ercengiz & Şar, 2017; Nalwa & Anand, 2003; Park & Song, 2002).

Individuals with alexithymia tend to avoid social environments due to the characteristics of alexithymia (having difficulties in remembering words related to emotions and identifying facial expressions etc.). This causes individuals with alexithymia to spend more time on online environments. However, online environments limit face-to-face communication, prevents physical interaction and causes the authority to be at the initiative of the user. For this reason, online environments are frequently used by individuals with alexithymia (Craparo, 2011; De Berardis et al., 2009; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Similarly, Caplan (2007) emphasizes that, with regards to social interaction, online environments cause less risk when compared with real social environments. For this reason, individuals with alexithymia are considered as a risk group for internet addiction (Craparo, 2011; De Berardis et al., 2009).

In this study, the relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction was investigated in adolescents. The relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction was frequently carried out in university students. In addition, the relationship between internet addiction and alexithymia in Turkey has not been investigated. Thus, the study is considered to contribute to the literature with data accumulation and to studies on fighting against and preventing internet addiction.

METHOD

Study Model

This study, which aimed at examining the relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction in adolescents, was a descriptive study.

Participants

This study was conducted on 294 adolescents studying in different high schools in the province of Ağrı during the fall term of 2016-2017 academic period. In this study, convenience sampling method was used. 133 (45.2%) of the participants were girl and 161 (55.8%) were boy. Adolescents are between the ages of 14-18. Age average of the participants was 15.85.

Measures

Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS): TAS, which was developed by Bagby, Parker and Taylor (1994) to assess the alexithymia level of the individual and adapted into Turkish by Gulec et al. (2009), consists of 20 items and is a 5 point Likert type scale (1=Never, 5=Always). According to the confirmatory factor analysis, it consists of 3 factors, namely Difficulty Identifying Feelings, Difficulty Describing Feelings and Externally-Oriented Thinking. The fit values resulting from the confirmatory factor analysis indicate that the scale has fit indices at acceptable levels ($\chi^2= 564.09$, $df= 167$, $GFI= .87$, $AGFI= .84$, and $RMSEA= .079$). The internal consistency coefficients for the overall scale was .78, .80 for the Difficulty Identifying Feelings, .57 for the Difficulty Describing Feelings and .63 for the Externally-Oriented Thinking sub-dimensions. The corrected item-total correlations of the scale ranged between .22 and .48. The increase in the scores for each sub-dimension and for the overall scale indicates an increase in the tendency for alexithymia (Gulec et al., 2009).

Internet Addiction Scale (IAS): IAS, which was developed by Hahn and Jerusalem (2001) to assess the internet addiction level of the individual and adapted into Turkish by Sahin and Korkmaz (2011), consists of 19 items and is a 5 point Likert type scale (1=Never, 5=Always). The scale consists of three sub-scales namely Lack of Control, Desire to Stay Online Longer and Negative Experiences in Social Relationships. The confirmatory factor analysis suggests that the three-factor structure of the scale has a good fit ($\chi^2= 580.17$, $df= 149$, $RMSEA= .079$, $SRMR= .045$, $GFI=.90$, $AGFI=.85$, $CFI= .97$, $NNFI= .96$, $IFI= .95$). The item-total correlation coefficients for the Lack of Control sub-scale ranged between .72 and .83, between .82 and .90 for the Desire to Stay Online Longer sub-scale and .73 and .80 for the Negative Experiences in Social Relationships sub-scale. The internal consistency coefficients for the Lack of Control sub-scale was .90, .89 for the Desire to Stay Online Longer sub-scale, .93 for the Negative Experiences in Social Relationships sub-scale and .86 for the overall scale. There were no reversely scored items in the scale. High scores obtained from the scale indicate a high level of internet addiction.

Data Collection and Analysis

The scales were applied in the classrooms of the high schools students who volunteered to participate in the study. The scales were applied in almost 25-30 minutes. The data of the scale were analyzed through the SPSS software. Before starting the analysis, the prerequisites of the regression analysis (normality and multicollinearity problem) were examined. As a result of the analyses, the dataset met all the prerequisites. Skewness and kurtosis coefficients for latent variables varied between -1 and +1 and demonstrated that the data had a normal

distribution. Multicollinearity problems occur when the binary correlation between the variables is greater than .90. This situation prevents reliable results. However, all binary correlation coefficients of the variables were smaller than .90.

FINDINGS

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations among Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. IA - Loss of Control	1							
2. IA - Desire for Stay Online	.81**	1						
3. IA - Negation in Social Relations	.79**	.74**	1					
4. A-Difficulty Identifying Feelings	.26**	.18**	.24**	1				
5. A-Difficulty Describing Feelings	.18**	.13*	.17**	.59**	1			
6. A- Externally-Oriented Thinking	.04	.02	.11	.12*	.08	1		
7. Internet Addiction (IA) -Total	.93**	.88**	.92**	.26**	.17**	.07	1	
8. Alexithymia (A)-Total	.33**	.25**	.35**	.74**	.62**	.35**	.35**	1
Range	28	16	32	28	20	25	76	73
Mean	14.59	8.32	15.13	17.38	12.85	23.01	38.40	51.28
SD	7.78	4.99	8.36	5.78	3.82	4.08	19.48	13.18
Skewness	.862	1.01	0.987	.497	.382	-.104	.892	-.473
Kurtosis	-.174	-.140	.108	-.035	.443	.177	.018	.573

**p<.01, *p<.05

As shown in Table 1, alexithymia is positively and significantly related to internet addiction ($r = .35$, $p < .01$). The predictive relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Regression Analysis Results Related to the Prediction of Internet Addiction by Alexithymia

Dependent Variable	Predictors	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p
Internet Addiction	Constant	11.997	4.291		2.796	.006
	Alexithymia	.515	.081	.348	6.351	.000

R = .35 R² = .12

Adj R² = .12 F = 40.338, $p < .001$

As shown in Table 2, alexithymia predicts internet addiction positively and significantly ($F = 40.338$, $p < .001$). Alexithymia accounts for 12% of the total variance in internet addiction ($R = .35$ R² = .12).

CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION, AND SUGGESTIONS

In this study, the relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction was investigated in adolescents. As a result of the research, a positive and significant relationship was found between alexithymia and internet addiction. In addition, alexithymia predicts internet addiction positively and significantly.

Alexithymia is defined as the difficulty that an individual experiences in becoming aware, identifying, discriminating and describing emotions (Taylor et al., 1997). Alexithymia weakens socio-affective skills (Grynberg, Luminet, Corneille, Grèzes & Berthoz, 2010). For this reason, individuals with alexithymia avoid interacting with other people, have difficulties in coping with problems in social environments and have distant and cold behavior patterns against others (Vanheule et al., 2007). Clinical and experimental studies state that individuals with alexithymia avoid conflicts in social environments, tend to approach others with a cold, unbiased and non-empathically manner, tend to avoid intimate relationships and have avoidant and insecure attachment styles (Grabe, Spitzer & Freyberger, 2001; Guttman & Laporte, 2002; Nemiah & Sifneos, 1970; Mallinckrodt, King & Coble, 1998; Taylor et al., 1997; Taylor, 2000; Weinryb et al., 1996; Verhaeghe, 2004). With this respect, individuals with alexithymia can be considered to have difficulties in interacting with others, entering in close relationships and solving problems in social environments.

Studies suggest that individuals with alexithymia have low life satisfaction levels (Mattila et al., 2007), have difficulties in remembering words related to emotions (Luminet, Vermeulen, Demaret, Taylor & Bagby 2006), have difficulties in identifying facial expressions (Grynberg et al., 2012) and face various problems in their social lives (Vanheule et al., 2007). McKenna and Bargh (2000) emphasize that, in order not to encounter such problems in social environments, individuals with these characteristics use the internet frequently for social interaction. However, such individuals prefer online environments because they limit face-to-face communication, they partly limit physical interaction and because internet usage is under the initiative of the user (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Thus, frequent usage of the internet by individuals with alexithymia leads to internet addiction. With this respect, De Berardis et al. (2009), emphasize that alexithymia symptoms are a risk factor for internet addiction. It can be asserted that alexithymia symptoms can lead to an incidence of internet addiction. Similarly, Yates, Gregor and Haviland (2012) state that alexithymia accounts for internet addiction. Studies also suggest that there is a positive and significant relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction (Dalbudak et al., 2013; Yates et al., 2012; Craparo, 2011). Findings of these studies are similar with the results of this study.

This study is limited with adolescents. Thus, this study is suggested to be carrying out on clinical and non-clinical samples. The relationship between alexithymia and internet addiction can be analyzed by carrying out mediation studies. In this study, self-report measurement tools were used. There are various limitations in the literature concerning self-rating scales. In this study, convenience sampling method was used. In subsequent studies, this relationship can be examined using random sampling.

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