

Research Article

**Primary School Students' Encounters Against Online Risks from the Perspectives of  
Schools Counselor Teachers<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

Digital technologies bring about some online risks as they become a regular part of daily life. Online risks cover a range of threats such as cyberbullying, inappropriate communication, exposure to explicit content, and personal information theft. The individuals' chances to face with online risk increase as the digital technologies become widespread. Within the community, children are more vulnerable to online risks. In this context, the purpose of this study was to identify the children's state of facing online risks based on the perspectives of

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school counselor teachers. In doing so, the researchers contacted with 21 school counselor teachers during the seminar sessions of the 2014-2015 school year's second semester. The participating teachers answered four open-ended questions and handed in their answers in written form. The data then analyzed employing deductive analysis methods and descriptive statistics. The results indicated that the students were exposed to seven online risk groups titled sexuality, commercial interests, banning, identity theft, inappropriate communication, addiction, and violence.

**Keywords:** *online risks, internet addiction, school counselor teachers*

## Introduction

Recent studies report that the Internet has become a regular part of children's lives (Kaşıkçı, Çağıltay, Karakuş, Kurşun, & Ogan, 2014; Livingstone, Mascheroni, & Staksrud, 2017). The literature also suggests that children tend to mobilize and gain autonomy (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olafsson, 2011). In addition to opportunities such as online learning, e-commerce, self-actualization, and digital citizenship development (Smahel et al., 2012), the children who use the Internet are exposed to the risks including explicit content, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and e-fraud (Chang, 2010; Gasser, Maclay, & Palfrey, 2010). Despite often being named as digital native, new millennium learner, and net generation, children are known to be adversely affected by online risks and experience problems (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012; Livingstone, Davidson, Bryce, Hargrave, & Grove-Hills, 2012; Valcke, Bonte, De Wever, & Rots, 2010; Valcke, De Wever, Van Keer, & Schellens, 2011; Walrave, 2011). In a study conducted with 9 to 16 years old children in the European Union, it was found that one in every three children experienced online risks (Livingstone et al., 2011). The study also reported that the children ran into sexually explicit content (14%), victimized by cyberbullying (6%), made friends online (30%), and encountered disturbing content (21%). In the Turkey section of the study, it was found that one of every four children in Turkey were exposed to online risks (Kaşıkçı et al., 2014). The study also reported that Turkish children encountered online risks such as seeing sexually explicit content (13%), making friends online (14%), being victimized by cyberbullying (3%), and receiving sexually explicit messages (12%). These results indicate that the children's chances to experience online risks are too high to neglect.

The studies report that the rate of children's encounters with online risks increases in response to their internet use patterns (Livingstone et al., 2011). Besides, the children who have not attained the necessary e-literacies are more prone to harms caused by online risks (Dönmez et al., 2017). This situation increases the importance of the studies that examine online risks and develop measures for prevention. The literature on defining online risks started to emerge back in the late 1990s. In their early studies, Jantz and McMurray (1998; as cited in Chou & Peng, 2011) examined online risks within the scope of communication and sexual content. Similarly, Aftab (2000) investigated the online risks of inappropriate content, stalking, harassment, e-fraud, personal information lost, and inappropriate communication. Poftak (2002), on the other hand, utilized the titles of sexually explicit content, copyright infringements, inappropriate communication, personal information lost, and cyberbullying. Using a thematic approach to

the categorization of the risks, DeMoor et al. (2008; as cited in Valcke, De Wever, Van Keer & Schellens, 2011) listed online risk themes as content (e.g., inappropriately sexual and violent content), commercial interest (e.g., encouraging overspending or selling personal information to 3rd parties), and communication (e.g., cyberbullying and sexual harassment). Hasebrink, Livingstone, Haddon, and Olafsson (2009) investigated online risks under the titles of sexuality, violence, commercial interests, values, and ideologies. Considering all these previous efforts, the present study's significance stems from its attempts to examine the ways that children interact with the online risks. In the study, children take different roles based on their interactions with the online risks. While the children exposed to risky content take the role of the recipient; the ones exposed to risky communications become interactors, and the ones initiating risky behaviors are called actors. Twelve risk foci were generated through a cross-tabulation of the risk categories and the children's roles. For instance, the sexuality title covers risks such as seeing explicit sexual content (recipient role), receiving inappropriate proposals (interactor role), and sharing explicit content (actor role).

The scope of online risks appears to extend as developments in online technologies take place. While the focus of the early studies was mostly on inappropriate online contents, recent studies have emphasized some new communication-related risks due to the rise of technologies like social networks. This situation has also increased the importance of sustaining the studies on identifying online risks. Various stakeholder groups should take part in the investigations of the current state of child-internet relationships and emerging risk factors should be identified early on. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the child-internet relationships from the perspectives of school counselor teachers.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

It is desired to reach the guidance teachers working at the primary and secondary education level schools in Eskisehir. However, not all of the teachers wanted to participate in the research. Therefore the participants of the study were 21 school counselor teachers the researchers contacted during the seminar sessions of the 2014-2015 school year's second semester.

## **Data Collection**

The participating school counselor teachers were asked to provide written answers to some open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are frequently used in qualitative studies to obtain the participants' opinions, and they can be utilized without referencing the literature or a specific theory (Creswell, 2013).

The participants wrote their answers to the following questions and handed them to the researchers:

- What are the internet-related questions the children ask you?
- What do you think are the individual factors that determine the children's experiences with internet-related problems?
- What do you think are the social factors that determine the children's experiences with internet-related problems?
- What do you recommend in preventing harms to children due to internet-related problems?

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed through deductive analysis utilizing descriptive statistics. In the inductive analysis, researchers determine whether there exist sufficient data to support the emerging themes (Creswell, 2013). Deductive analysis provides sound results once the data regarding a theme reaches saturation. The steps taken in a deductive analysis are as follows: (a) testing and verifying the theory, (b) testing the hypotheses or research questions stem from the theory, (c) defining and operationalizing the variables derived from the theory, and (d) obtaining scores regarding the variables via a measurement tool or observation.

The evidence gathered here about the online risks were categorized based on the sexuality, commercial interests, violence, and values/ideologies dimensions of the online risks framework developed by Hasebrink, Livingstone, Haddon, and Olafsson (2009). In other words, the current study considered the aforementioned dimensions of online risks as themes. In the process, the framework was extended with other themes emerged from the data or suggested in the literature. Added themes include addiction, identity theft, inappropriate communication, and banning. Two researchers from the research team individually analyzed the data based on

the extended framework. Then, a third researcher verified the analyses and finalized the process.

## Findings

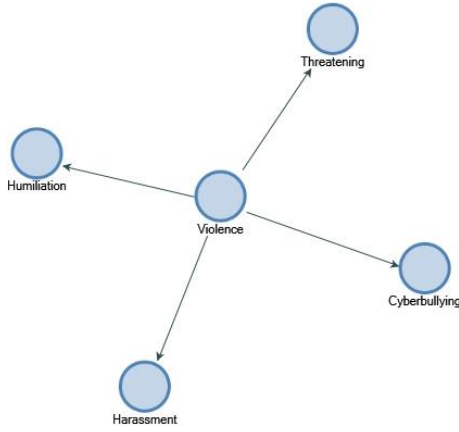
In the prescribed themes, children's roles are recipient, interactor, and actor. The child takes the role of the recipient when he or she reaches the online content independently. If somebody else initiates the communication or interaction, the child regarded as an interactor. Finally, the child takes the actor role when he or she initiates communications or interactions with others. The new structure developed through the cross-tabulation of the roles and risk factors is presented in Table 1. The observed frequencies were also provided in the table.

Table 1  
*Online risk observed by the counselor teachers*

	Sexuality	Commercial Interest	Violence	Values / Ideologies	Addiction	Identity Theft	Inappropriate Communication	Banning
Receiptent	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Interactor	2	0	12	0	0	3	4	3
Actor	0	1	9	0	6	1	2	0

As Table 1 indicates, the counselor teachers observed a variety of online risks. The risks within the violence theme were the most frequently mentioned risks. They were followed by the risks fell within the addiction and inappropriate communication themes. The teachers also observed identity theft, banning, sexuality, and commercial interest risks. On the other hand, the teachers did not report any observations regarding the values/ideologies theme.

The risks observed under the violence theme were part of threatening, humiliation, cyberbullying, and harassment subdimensions.



*Figure 1.* Incidents regarding the violence theme

A significant finding concerning the violence theme was that violent online behaviors often had reflections in the school life. For instance, threatening remarks students made online usually ended up in heated arguments and fights. Moreover, it was found that students could orchestrate complicated cyberbullying schemes. For example, students could alter their peers' photos and post them on social media or inappropriate websites. Such events were reported to emotionally affect the victims and impair their academic performance and sense of belonging. Its interactive nature distinguishes the violence dimension from the rest. In their responses, the participants stressed that students can take both interactor and actor roles in cyberbullying events.

In the addiction dimension, students often took the recipient role. The kinds of addictions observed by the counselor teachers were video game addiction, internet addiction, and computer addiction (Figure 2).

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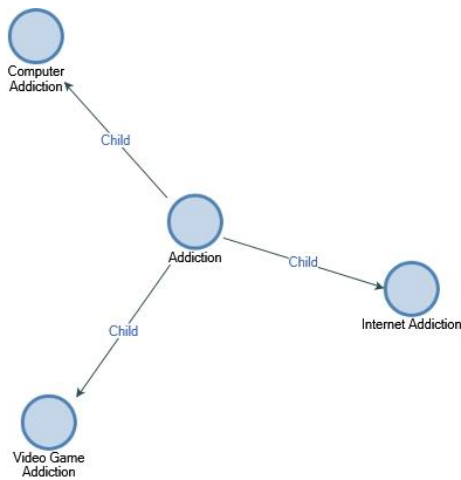


Figure 2. Incidents regarding the addiction theme

The participating teachers stated that they have observed the following addiction problems in their students:

- Students play video games on computers and they often prefer highly addictive online games.
- Internet and computer addictions are prevalent among students.
- Video game addiction has adverse effects on the students in both educational and personal lives. One of the participants associated the students' absences with game addiction.

*"I have students who have been absent for more than 40 days due to their video game addiction."*

Another participant stated that a student with game addiction tends to link everything in the natural environment with the characters and objects from video games. These indicate that game addiction can have negative psychological side effects.

- Internet addiction has detrimental effects on academic achievement as well. A participant described the situation in a students' words as:

*"I can't stop it once I start surfing. I know I should study instead, but time quickly goes by."*

In the inappropriate communication theme, the student can take roles of interactor and actor. Within this theme, offline and online communication subthemes were identified (Figure 3).



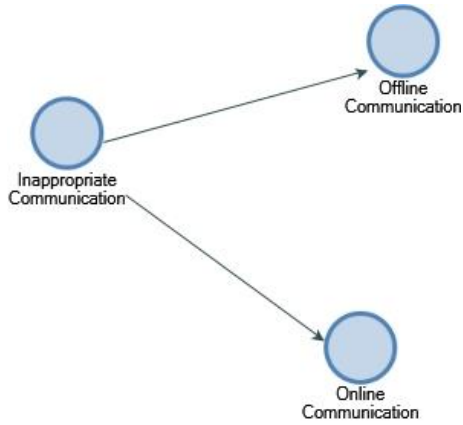


Figure 3. Incidents regarding the inappropriate communication theme

The students were known to receive friend requests from strangers on social media, communicate with older people, arrange meetings with people they have met online, and share inappropriate content when communicating with the opposite sex.

Students can also be actors or interactors in identity theft. The subdimensions identified under this theme were account theft, unauthorized use of personal pictures, and fake accounts (Figure 4).

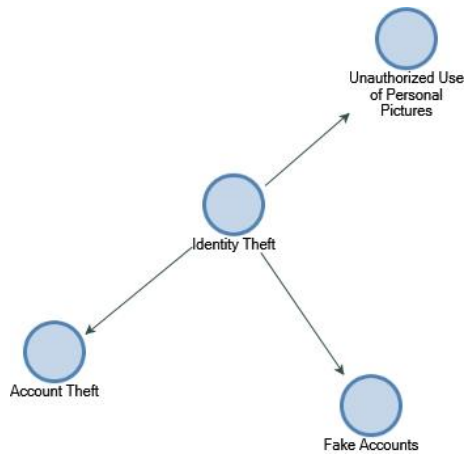


Figure 4. Incidents regarding the identity theft theme

The counselor teachers reported that students usually got their social media accounts stolen and suffered from the consequences. For instance, account thieves may establish undesired contacts with 3rd parties on the students' behalves. The situation may then escalate into fights in real life. Another aspect of identity theft is creating fake accounts using one's pictures. Similar to the stolen accounts, fake accounts may be used to contact 3rd parties on the students' behalves.

Another dimension where students take an interactor role is banning. The students consulted with their teachers when others intruded into their personal lives and did not allow them to connect to the Internet or play video games.

The least frequently observed online risk dimensions were sexuality and commercial interests. Students tend to question the validity of the advertisements with sexual content. One of the participants reported that once a student consulted with the service about meeting an older person online and receiving private photo request from him. In the commercial interest dimension, it was reported that students spent money on online games to level up and purchase in-game characters or items. It should be noted that commercial risks, by their very nature, can be considered together with other risk dimensions. The previous example of spending money on games can be investigated under the video game addiction dimension as well.

It was observed that students who were affected by online risks reached out to school consultancy service and legal processes were started as the situations required. The students were often threatened under the violence theme or had negative experiences under the sexuality theme.

### Conclusion, Discussion, and Suggestions

This study investigated child-internet relationships based on the school counselor teachers' perspectives. The online risks groups identified in the study are presented in Figure 5.



Figure 5. From school counselor teachers' perspectives, the online risks that students encounter

The risks reported by the school counselor teachers fall within seven online risks groups. While each one of banning, sexuality, and commercial interest risks constitutes a risk factor by itself, the remaining themes have multiple subdimensions. The identity theft risk group covers stolen photos, fake accounts, and account theft. The inappropriate communication risk group consists of online and offline communication. The addiction risk group includes internet addiction, computer addiction, and video game addiction. And finally, the violence risk group contains cyberbullying, humiliation, harassment, and threatening each other.

Berson, Berson, and Ferron (2002) reported that counselor teachers observed the risk groups of identity theft, inappropriate communication, and violence. In another study by Liebermann and Stashevsky (2002), commercial interests, identity theft, violence, and addiction risk factors from Figure 5 were present. In the studies conducted before the widespread adoption of digital tools, the commercial interests dimension was a significant factor (Donthu & Garcia, 1999, Introna & Pouloudi, 1999; Miyazaki & Fernandez, 2001; Park & Jun, 2003; Tan, 1999). In those studies, online risks were organized under the themes of communication and sexuality (Jantz & McMurray, 1998; as cited in Chou & Peng, 2011); inappropriate content, stalking, harassment, e-fraud, personal information lost, and inappropriate communication (Aftab, 2000); sexually explicit content, copyright infringements, inappropriate communication, personal information lost, and cyberbullying (Poftak, 2002). Figure 5 also covers all risk groups mentioned here.

Considering the rapid developments in technology and ever-increasing access to digital tools, a variety of online risks continue to occur. In a sense, increased access results in increased exposure to the online risks. As online risks take different forms in response to available digital tools, future studies can focus on identifying new risk dimensions in relation to new tools. Studies, then, can develop ways to prevent harms to children and adults exposed to those risks, and employ experimental and descriptive methods in the process.

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