

The Digital Problem of Leisure: The Relationship Between Loneliness and Internet Gambling Addiction

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: While leisure activities represent positive experiences in terms of outcomes, technology's impact on human life has also made negative experiences accessible. Individuals in emerging adulthood, who are in contact with these impacts in every aspect of life, are discussed in the literature within different age groups. This study aims to examine the relationship between loneliness and internet gambling addiction in emerging adults aged 18-25.

Method: The study utilized a correlational survey model from quantitative research methods. 104 female and 115 male participants aged 18-25 were included in the study using convenience sampling. A large majority of the participants (76.7%) were found to have a good income level.

Results: The research findings show that gender does not create a significant difference in the loneliness dimension among emerging adult participants. However, the motivation and commitment dimensions of internet gambling addiction show a significant difference in favor of male participants. Income level did not create a significant difference in terms of loneliness and internet gambling addiction for emerging adults.

Conclusion: In conclusion, a low-level positive correlation was found between loneliness and internet gambling addiction in emerging adults. However, loneliness affects the motivation, addiction, and negative emotions that characterize internet gambling addiction.

Keywords: Leisure, loneliness, internet gambling addiction.

ÖZET

Serbest Zamanın Dijital Problemi: Yalnızlık ve İnternet Kumar Bağımlılığı İlişkisi

Amaç: Serbest zaman aktiviteleri çıktıkları açısından olumlu deneyimleri ifade etse de teknolojinin insan yaşamına olan etkileri doğrultusunda olumsuz deneyimleri de ulaşılabilir hale getirmiştir. Bu etkilerle yaşamın her alanında ilişki içerisinde olan beliren yetişkinlik dönemindeki bireyler literatürde farklı yaş grupları içerisinde ele alınmaktadır. Bu çalışmada ise 18-25 yaş aralığında beliren yetişkin dönemindeki bireylerde yalnızlık ve internet kumar bağımlılığı ilişkisinin incelenmesi amaç olarak belirlenmiştir.

Yöntem: Çalışmada nicel araştırma yöntemlerinden ilişkisel tarama modelinden yararlanılmıştır. Yaşları 18-25 yaş aralığında olan 104 kadın ve 115 erkek katılımcı kolayda örnekleme yöntemiyle çalışmaya dahil edilmiştir. Araştırma katılımcılarının büyük bir çoğunluğunun (%76,7) gelir durumunun iyi olduğu tespit edilmiştir.

Bulgular: Araştırma bulguları beliren yetişkinlik dönemindeki katılımcıların, cinsiyet değişkeni açısından yalnızlık boyutunda anlamlı farklılık yaratmadığını göstermektedir. Ancak internet kumar bağımlılığı motivasyon ve bağlılık boyutları ise erkek katılımcılar lehine anlamlı farklılık içermektedir. Gelir durumu değişkeni ise beliren yetişkin dönemindeki bireyler için yalnızlık ve internet kumar bağımlılığı açısından anlamlı farklılık yaratmamıştır.

Sonuç: Sonuç olarak beliren yetişkin dönemindeki bireylerin yalnızlık ve internet kumar bağımlılığı arasında pozitif yönde düşük düzeyde ilişki tespit edilmiştir. Bununla birlikte yalnızlık durumu, internet kumar bağımlılığı boyutlarını ifade eden motivasyon, bağımlılık ve olumsuz duyguları etkilemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Serbest zaman, yalnızlık, internet kumar bağımlılığı.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Yeşilay, an independent non-governmental organization, in detailed report prepared in our country regarding gambling behavior, the age range for starting gambling is determined as 15-24 years old with a rate of 71.4% (Turkey Gambling Report, 2025). In another report which prepared World Health Organization, 1.2% of the world's population is classified as gambling addicts. Sector analysts predict that smartphone usage in low- and middle-income countries will increase this rate by 2028 and significantly trigger growth (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). Gambling addiction, according to DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5) criteria, is defined as an individual frequently engaging in gambling for a period of 12 months, and being preoccupied with thoughts such as reliving past gambling experiences, making predictions, planning future gambling attempts, or considering ways to obtain money for gambling. This condition leads to clinical impairment in the individual and demonstrates persistent and recurrent gambling behavior (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013).

Gambling behavior is prevalent in many cultures and, in recent decades, has undergone a cultural shift with technological advancements, becoming more accessible and dangerous for individuals (Griffith, 2007). Conceptually, online gambling refers to betting and gaming activities conducted through internet-enabled devices such as computers, mobile phones, smartphones, tablets, and digital televisions. Increased internet access and easier access to internet-enabled devices due to technological advancements have given rise to this form of gambling. However, internet gambling addiction is not considered a separate type of gambling (Gainsbury, 2015). Individuals who gamble use the accessible environment of the internet to facilitate their addiction. These individuals are not internet addicts; rather, the behavior they are addicted to is gambling (Griffiths & Parke, 2008). To diagnose addiction to gambling behavior, an individual must meet five or more of the following criteria: preoccupation, tolerance, relapse, withdrawal symptoms, escapism, chasing, concealment, illegal acts, jeopardizing occupational, educational and/or relational life, and financial problems (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012).

Studies on internet gambling addiction appear to focus on understanding and preventing this behavior (Choliz et al., 2016; Trivedi & Teichert, 2018; Giménez Lozano et al., 2022; Serna et al., 2023; Zhong et al., 2024). Internet gambling addiction is associated with various behaviors and concepts. The easy accessibility of the internet through technological advancements is one of the most important factors influencing and spreading internet gambling addiction (Drakeford & Hudson-Smith, 2015). Gainsbury et al. (2014) argue that the role of chance and skill, as well as the possibility of economic gain, are among the factors influencing internet gambling addiction. Churchill & Farrell (2018) found that internet gambling addiction has become a widespread and significant mental health problem and is associated with depression. Other mental health issues such as impulsivity, anxiety, and stress are also associated with internet gambling addiction (Villalba-García et al., 2025).

Loneliness is one of the factors that can influence online gambling behavior (Sirola et al., 2019). In today's world, where technological life increasingly replaces social interaction in daily life, the feeling of loneliness significantly affects different types of addiction, such as

internet gambling addiction (Savolainen et al., 2020). According to Heinrich & Gullone (2006), loneliness is quite important for satisfying social relationships and mental and physical health. However, loneliness, as a lack of social relationships, should be considered separately from depression and other mental health problems. Humans, being a social species, become more vulnerable in the face of loneliness and seek to alleviate it by forming different connections. This situation has several effects on physical and mental health (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Yanguas et al. (2018) state that loneliness is a widespread and global problem for the adult world population. Associated with serious and fatal physical illnesses, loneliness is an indicator of significant mental health problems such as depression, psychological stress, and anxiety.

Studies on loneliness and online gambling addiction reinforce assumptions about the relationship or influence between these concepts. Loneliness, associated with many physical and mental health problems, allows individuals to engage in negative behaviors. In this situation, individuals can easily access online gambling sites thanks to the accessibility offered by the digital world. The emerging adulthood period, which encompasses transformative behaviors after adolescence, facilitates online gambling addiction in a world where individuals are increasingly isolated, thanks to easy digital access. In this study, the behavioral disorder assumed to be associated with and influenced by loneliness is internet gambling addiction. In this direction, the aim of this study was determined as examining the relationship between loneliness and internet gambling addiction in individuals aged 18-25 who are in emerging adulthood. The hypotheses of the study are as follows:

H1: Loneliness and internet gambling addiction differ according to gender in individuals of emerging adults.

H2: Loneliness and internet gambling addiction differ according to income status in individuals of emerging adults.

H3: There is a positive correlation between loneliness and internet gambling addiction in emerging adults.

H4: In emerging adults, loneliness predicts internet gambling addiction.

METHODS

Research Design

This study was designed using a correlational survey model, a quantitative research method. The correlational survey model was used to answer descriptive questions, questions about the relationships between variables, and questions about predictive relationships between variables over time (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2021).

Participants

The study was conducted with individuals aged 18-25 in the emerging adulthood period. Emerging adulthood refers to a developmental understanding that focuses on the 18-25 age range, encompassing the period from late adolescence to the 20s (Arnett, 2000). According to the theory, the transition to adulthood is not merely a transitional period, but a distinct phase of life. The characteristics that differentiate this period are categorized as an age of identity exploration, instability, egocentrism, ambivalence, and possibilities (Arnett, 2004). The study

group consisted of 219 participants aged 18-25 in emerging adulthood. The participants comprised 104 women (47.5%) and 115 men (52.5%). The study showed that the vast majority of participants (76.8%) had a good income, while a relatively smaller percentage (23.3%) had a low income. In normality tests of the data, Skewness and Kurtosis values of +1.5 / -1.5 were used as reference (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Table 1. Results Regarding the Demographic Information of the Study Group

Variable		X	S.d.
Age (18-25)		20,56	1,95
		F	%
Gender	Female	104	47,5
	Male	115	52,5
Income Status	Good	168	76,7
	Bad	51	23,3

Data Collection Methods and Tools

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Istanbul Aydın University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee with meeting decision number 2026/02. Data were collected online and in person using convenience sampling.

UCLA-III Loneliness Scale: The UCLA Loneliness Scale-III was developed by Russell (1996) to assess the state of loneliness. The validity and reliability study of the scale for Turkish culture was carried out by Durak & Durak (2010). The scale has a 4-point Likert type structure, with (1) never and (4) always. The scale consists of 20 items, 11 of which are reverse-coded. The internal consistency coefficient of the scale, calculated from the total score, was found to be $\alpha=.76$.

Table 2. Arithmetic Mean, Standard Deviation, and Reliability Values for the Scales

		X	S.d.	α
UCLA Loneliness Scale	Loneliness	2.28	,57	.76
	Motivation	1,26	,64	.90
Internet Gambling Addiction Scale	Addiction	1,25	,72	.93
	Negative Psychology	1,40	,78	.81

Internet Gambling Addiction Scale: The Internet Gambling Addiction Scale was developed by Karabrahimoğlu et al. (2021). The study consists of 21 items, comprising 3 sub-dimensions: motivation, addiction, and negative psychology. The scale has a 5-point Likert type structure with (5) always and (1) never. The reliability coefficients for the sub-dimensions of the scale were determined as $\alpha=.91$ for the motivation dimension, $\alpha=.70$ for addiction, and $\alpha=.71$ for negative psychology.

Data Analysis

SPSS 26 software package was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics, percentage and frequency distributions, and normality and reliability values of the measurement instruments were tested. The results showed that the data exhibited a normal distribution. An Independent Samples T-Test was used to examine differences in loneliness and internet gambling addiction based on gender and income status variables. A Pearson Correlation Test was applied to examine the existence of a relationship between loneliness and internet gambling

addiction. Furthermore, simple linear regression analysis was used to examine the effect of loneliness on the sub-dimensions of internet gambling addiction.

RESULTS

The results of the study presenting this section. Table 3 presents the results of the independent samples t-test regarding the sub-dimensions of loneliness and internet addiction in relation to the gender variable. According to the results, no significant difference was found in the loneliness sub-dimension in relation to the gender variable ($t=,763$; $p=,446$). Similarly, no significant difference was found in the negative psychology sub-dimension of internet gambling addiction in relation to the gender variable ($t=-1,444$; $p=,150$).

Table 3. Independent Samples T-Test on Loneliness and Internet Gambling Addiction in Relation to Gender

	Gender	N	\bar{X}	S.d.	Std. Error	df	F	t	p
Loneliness	Female	104	2,31	,51	,05	217	1,720	,763	,446
	Male	115	2,25	,63	,05				
Motivation	Female	104	1,09	,34	,03	157,796	46,074	-4,022	,000*
	Male	115	1,42	,80	,07				
Addiction	Female	104	1,11	,42	,04	165,995	29,757	-2,926	,004*
	Male	115	1,38	,89	,08				
Negative Psychology	Female	104	1,32	,68	,06	213,006	5,018	-1,444	,150
	Male	115	1,48	,86	,08				

$p<0.05$

In terms of gender, a significant difference was found in favor of male participants in the motivation ($t=-4.022$; $p=,000$) and addiction ($t=-2.926$; $p=,000$) sub-dimensions of internet gambling addiction.

Table 4. Independent Samples T-Test on Loneliness and Internet Gambling Addiction in Relation to Income Level Variable

	Income Status	N	\bar{X}	S.d.	Std. Error	df	F	t	p
Loneliness	Good	168	2,24	,59	,04	217	-1,618	1,047	,107
	Bad	51	2,39	,52	,07				
Motivation	Good	168	1,22	,58	,04	217	-1,519	7,920	,130
	Bad	51	1,38	,80	,11				
Addiction	Good	168	1,23	,72	,05	217	-,951	2,508	,343
	Bad	51	1,34	,72	,10				
Negative Psychology	Good	168	1,41	,80	,06	217	,370	,326	,712
	Bad	51	1,37	,71	,10				

$p<0.05$

Table 4 presents the results of the independent samples t-test with respect to the income level variable. According to the results, no significant differences were found in the sub-dimensions of loneliness ($t=1.047$; $p=0.107$) and internet gambling addiction motivation ($F=7.920$; $p=0.130$), addiction ($t=2.508$; $p=0.343$), and negative psychology ($t=0.326$; $p=0.712$) with respect to the income level variable.

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Test on the Relationship Between Loneliness and Internet Gambling Addiction

		Internet Gambling Addiction		
		Motivation	Addiction	Negative Psychology
Loneliness	r	,271**	,267**	,235**
	p	,000	,000	,000

** p<0.01

Table 5 shows the results of the Pearson correlation test on the relationship between loneliness and internet gambling addiction. According to the results, a low-level positive correlation was found between loneliness and internet gambling addiction motivation ($r=,271$; $p=,000$), addiction ($r=,267$; $p=,000$), and negative psychology ($r=,235$; $p=,000$).

Table 6. Results of Simple Linear Regression Analysis Regarding the Effect of Loneliness on the Motivation, Addiction, and Negative Psychology Dimensions of Internet Gambling Addiction.

Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	B	Standart Error	β	t	p	Binary r
Motivation	Constant	,576	,172		3,358		
	Loneliness	,302	,073	,271	4,148	,000	,271
<i>R= ,271^a R²=,073 Adj. R²=,069 F=17,204 p=,000</i>							
Addiction	Constant	,499	,192		2,597		
	Loneliness	,333	,082	,267	4,076	,000	,267
<i>R= ,267^a R²=,071 Adj. R²=,067 F=16,616 p=,000</i>							
Negative Psychology	Constant	,681	,210		3,239		
	Loneliness	,319	,089	,235	3,568	,000	,235
<i>R= ,235^a R²=,055 Adj. R²=,051 F=12,731 p=,000</i>							

*p<0.01

Table 6 presents the results of a simple linear regression analysis on the effect of loneliness on the sub-dimensions of internet gambling addiction: motivation, addiction, and negative psychology. Simple linear regression analysis was used to test the effect of loneliness on internet gambling addiction. According to the results, the R value indicates a relationship between the variables. On the other hand, loneliness predicts the motivation dimension of internet gambling addiction by 6.9%, the addiction dimension by 6.7%, and the negative psychology dimension by 5.1%.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to test the relationship between loneliness and internet gambling addiction in individuals aged 18-25 in emerging adulthood. The study also examined whether gender and income levels created differences in loneliness and internet gambling addiction. Furthermore, the effect of loneliness on internet gambling addiction was also tested.

In this study, it was assumed, according to hypothesis 1, that loneliness and internet gambling addiction differed according to gender. In studies on loneliness in relation to gender, Liu et al. (2020), in their longitudinal study on university students, argued that gender

significantly altered loneliness levels. They stated that the effect of social isolation and loneliness on depressive symptoms was gender-dependent. Wiseman et al. (1995), in their study examining gender differences in loneliness and depression among university students, concluded that men had higher loneliness scores than women. Karakoç and Taydaş (2013), in their study examining the relationship between internet use and loneliness, found that male university students had higher average scores than female students, showing a significant difference. Bardak and Alkar (2016), in their study on the relationship between internet addiction and loneliness levels in social network use among university students, concluded that male participants had higher scores than female participants, showing a significant difference.

Internet gambling addiction has been the subject of various studies in recent years, particularly regarding the gender variable. Çuhadar (2025), in her study on internet gambling addiction, found significant differences regarding the importance of recreational sports in preventing internet gambling addiction. In her study, she concluded that female participants scored higher than male participants in the sub-dimensions of motivation, commitment, and negative psychology, and that this difference was statistically significant. McCormack et al. (2014), in their study on gender differences in internet gambling, concluded that gender created significant differences. They found that women participated in internet gambling for shorter periods than men and had different motivations. In addition, it was stated that women experienced more guilt and shame in internet gambling. Ko et al. (2005), in their study examining gender differences and internet gambling addiction in adolescents, found gender-related differences. They concluded that male individuals had more internet gambling experiences, and that the severe addiction in this group was associated with age, low self-esteem, and low life satisfaction. Hakansson & Widinghoff (2020), in their study examining gender differences in online gambling addiction, found that female individuals experienced psychological distress, indebtedness, feelings of guilt, and a higher severity of gambling addiction. While no difference was found in the loneliness levels of participants in this study in terms of the gender variable, significant differences were found in the motivation and addiction dimensions of internet gambling addiction. Accordingly, hypothesis 1 was accepted.

According to the study's secondary hypothesis, loneliness and internet gambling addiction differ according to income status. Tapia-Muñoz et al. (2022), in their study on income inequality and loneliness, conducted a large-scale study on elderly people in the USA and 16 European countries. According to the study results, as income inequality increased, i.e., as income level decreased, loneliness levels increased. In another study, Chen & Chung (2007), in their research on university students, found that male students experienced general and social loneliness at higher levels than female students. Beller (2024), in her study examining the relationship between social inequality and loneliness, reported that loneliness scores were significantly higher with lower income. Egaña-Marcos et al. (2025), in their study examining the effects of loneliness, social support, and income on psychological well-being, found a relationship between the concepts. They concluded that income and social support mediate the relationship between loneliness and mental health.

Pabayo et al. (2024), in their study on income inequality and online gambling addiction in adolescents, emphasize that income status and inequality can be associated with negative mental health and online gambling. According to the study results, income inequality can lead to online gambling. Similarly, in another study conducted on adolescents, Escario et al. (2024) examined the relationship between the weekly income spent by the study group and online gambling. The results show that income spent, exposure to bullying, poor parental relationships, or conflictual relationships are associated with online gambling. Barry et al. (2007) examined recreational gambling according to income differences. They reported that as income status increased, individuals turned to different types of gambling and the duration of gambling also increased. Price (2022) reported a relationship between household income and online gambling. It is argued that online gambling negatively impacts household income and that individuals introduced to online gambling are twice as likely to become medium or high-risk gamblers.

The study's third hypothesis assumed a positive correlation between loneliness and internet gambling addiction. There is varying evidence suggesting that loneliness predicts gambling or problematic gambling behavior. McQuade & Gill (2012) found a relationship between loneliness, self-control, and problematic gambling behavior. Hagfors et al. (2025) found that loneliness is positively associated with gambling as an escape route and gambling addiction. Vuorinen et al. (2024) concluded that there is a positive relationship between loneliness and gambling addiction. In addition to these studies, there is also different evidence regarding the relationship between loneliness and gambling addiction or online gambling addiction (Trevorrow & Moore, 1998; Botterill et al., 2016; Edgren et al., 2016; John et al., 2019).

The fourth hypothesis in the study assumed that loneliness is a predictor of internet gambling addiction. Sirola et al. (2019) examined loneliness and participation in online gambling communities among social media users aged 15-25. The results showed that the level of loneliness can influence participation in online gambling communities. Similarly, Karabrahimoğlu et al. (2023), in their study on university students, reported that the level of loneliness was a predictor of online gambling addiction. In another study, Başoğlu et al. (2024) concluded that loneliness triggers the urge to gamble. These results are consistent with existing research findings.

There are no regulations worldwide regarding online gambling behavior. In addition, loneliness stands out as one of the most significant psychological problems of our time. Emerging adulthood is considered a distinct life stage for young individuals. During this period, individuals' social and emotional states determine their preferred leisure activities. Today, especially with the impact of technology on daily life, every activity on digital platforms has become accessible. Experiences are available to individuals in this age group regardless of time and place. Psychologically and emotionally, individuals in this crucial period may also engage in negative behaviors. One of the most significant of these negative behaviors in this period is internet gambling addiction. This study has shown that loneliness can influence internet gambling addiction in emerging adulthood. However, the study has certain limitations. Firstly, this study was conducted with individuals in a specific age range in emerging adulthood.

Internet gambling addiction or loneliness has become common for individuals at many stages of life, and group studies could be conducted. Secondly, the study was conducted within a specific cultural context. Economic, social, or different demographic variables can affect loneliness and internet gambling addiction. Therefore, it is recommended that studies be conducted with different generations in different cultures. Thirdly, there are trends that affect societies periodically. Today, digital trends allow individuals to participate in many activities quickly and without any reliable sources. In this context, young individuals may need different kinds of information regarding the activities they participate in, especially on digital platforms, during their leisure.

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