

PARENT’S VIEWS ON INTERNET USE

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“The Internet is here to stay. So is the family”
Joseph Turow

ABSTRACT: Children’s effective use of Internet relies heavily on the factors surrounding them, thus parents’ views and attitudes are crucial for elementary children’s productive use of Internet. Besides, parental awareness on Internet helps parents to reflect to the related issues of Internet. This study tries to reveal the elementary school children’s parents’ views on Internet. A questionnaire consisting of 17 items regarding financial, social, educational and safety aspects of Internet were used to collect the data. Carried out with 94 parents; the survey indicates that the parents observe Internet as an economical media, rather unaware of the safety issues, believe that Internet enhances the academic achievement and is a necessity of contemporary life. Another highlight of the study is that parents do not believe that Internet use effects family relations negatively

Keywords: internet use, children, parents

İNTERNET KULLANIMINA İLİŞKİN AİLE GÖRÜŞLERİ

ÖZET: Çocukların etkili İnternet kullanımında, çevresel faktörlerin etkisi büyüktür. Bu nedenle, ailelerin görüşleri ve tutumları, ilköğretim düzeyindeki çocukların etkili İnternet kullanımları için oldukça önemlidir. Ayrıca, İnternet hakkında ailesel farkındalık, ailelerin İnternet’le ilişkili konular üzerinde düşüncelerine yardımcı olur. Bu araştırmada, İnternet’le ilgili ilköğretim düzeyindeki çocukların ailelerinin görüşlerini ortaya koymaya çalışılmaktadır. Araştırmada, veri toplamak için, İnternet’in mali, sosyal, eğitim ve güvenlik boyutlarıyla ilişkili 17 maddeden oluşan bir anket kullanılmıştır. Anket, 94 aileye uygulanmıştır. Anket, ailelerin güvenlik konusundan habersiz olmaktan çok İnternet’i ekonomik bir ortam olarak gördüğüne ve İnternet’in akademik başarıyı artırdığına ve çağdaş yaşamın bir gerekliliği olduğuna inandıklarına işaret etmektedir. Araştırmanın bir diğer önemli bulgusu, ailelerin İnternet’in aile ilişkilerini olumsuz etkilediğine inanmadıklarıdır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: internet kullanımı, çocuklar, aileler.

1. BACKGROUND

“Just as the hearth acted as the focal point for the American family in 19 th century, and television was in the 20 th century, computer units are rapidly becoming the centerpiece for the American family in 21st century” says Tortorello, one of the authors of a survey on computing and the American family (Lexmark.com). Now the world being a global village the situation is neither different nor less effective in Turkey. Arriving with the computers, the most recent technological issue in Turkey is the Internet. Internet is considered very attractive both education and entertainmentwise in Turkey (Odabaşı, 2002). The diffusion of Internet to Turkey has been late and slow, however, considering the little number of Internet users, Turkey has a chance to give training to more people on Internet use and make them gain awareness on different aspects of Internet. It is no doubt that Internet is growing like a snowball, and the related issues will keep on gaining attention. These issues can vary according to the fields of interest and this study will concentrate on the parental side of Internet issue. However, it may be appropriate to start with Internet in Turkey to form an introduction to the study.

1. 2. Internet In Turkey

Turkey’s first experience with Internet started in 1990 with EARN (European Academic and Research Network). With this first attempt, Ege University had connections internationally with Pisa and Montpellier Universities. The first national connection Ege University realized was with Anadolu and Yıldız Technical Universities. The second attempt was realized in 1993 via Middle East Technical University. This connection was used for a long time, until the universities started to provide their connections via ULAKNET, an academical initiative, in 1997. It is only after ULAKNET, that a speeder and a commercial connection TNet started to give service to larger populations. The number of users was 600 thousand in 1997 whereas it reached 2 million in 2000 (Gökçöl, 2001) and the estimated population is 3 million regarding 2001 (Odabaşı, 2002). A recent research (Superonline.com, 2003) shows the profile of Internet users as given in figures below.

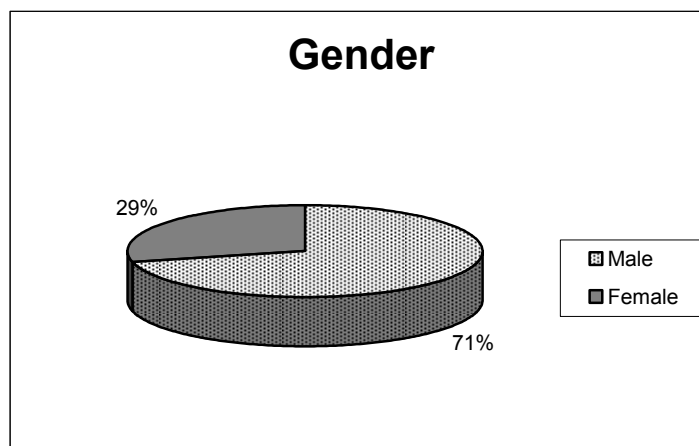


Figure 1. The Genders of Internet Users in Turkey

As can be seen in Figure 1, the number of the male users is quite more than female users. This situation shows consistency with other literature from the world which claims that gender always makes difference in computing (Shashaani 1994).

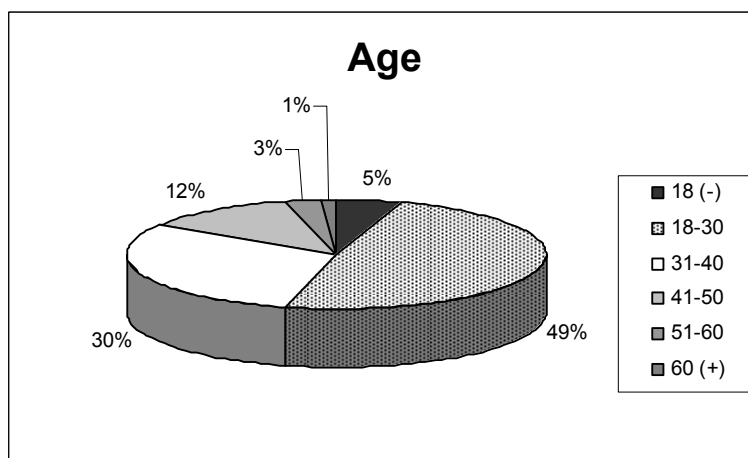


Figure 2. The Ages of Internet Users in Turkey

The age profile given in Figure 2 shows that highest percentage (49%) of Internet users are between the ages 18-30. This might be due to that you are legally free on age 18 in Turkey and establish a life standart already by 30 which makes Internet use accessible for career issues without considering financial issues.

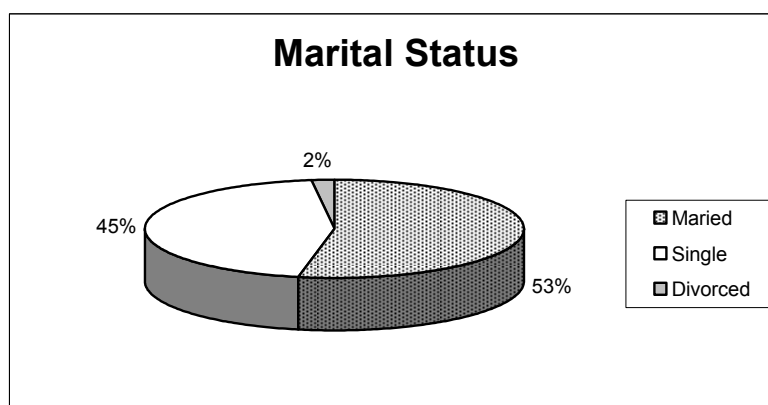


Figure 3. The Marital Status of Internet Users in Turkey

As for the marital status, Figure 3, the number of married users is in the highest rate (53%). This might be again due to the settlement which comes with age and career. Infact, the employment position presents a familiar situation as can be seen in Figure 4.

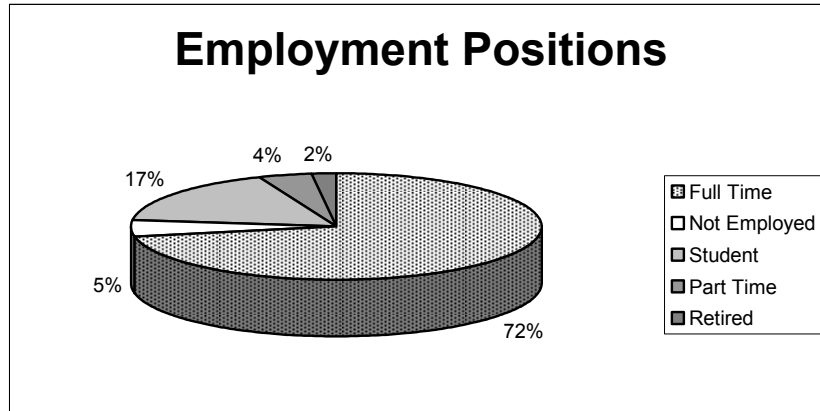


Figure 4. The Employment Position of Internet Users in Turkey

The numbers of full-time workers come first in the number of the Internet users. This result may also give clue about that residential use of Internet is little in Turkey and that most of the access is from work places. In fact, because computer itself and the Internet connection are financial burdens for most of the Turkish people, there seems not much choice except Internet Cafes, private enterprises, to access Internet (Odabaşı, 2003). The number of Internet cafes by 2002 is 4573 as registered but the estimated unregistered ones are around 10 000.

The current situation of Internet in Turkey can be best described as promising in many fields as education, work and home. The results will of course heavily depend on the components such as educators, policy makers and family.

1. 3. Parents, Children and Computers

Digital technology is increasingly penetrating the home environment, providing a point of convergence for computer and communications technology and other leisure and entertainment media (Sutherland et. al., 2000). The advent of computer and the Internet has had a wide variety of influences upon the character of various institutions and human associations, from large scale businesses to small groups (Oravec, 2000). Therefore, parents as well should be the concern of many studies when talking about Internet. The contexts surrounding young people’s use of digital technologies are considered to be not only artefactual but discursive, including the attitudes, motives and opinions of family members and the children themselves towards computer use in the home (Sutherland, Facer, Furlong and Furlong 2000). Thinking about educational settings brings mind a triangle with student-school-home corners. However, studies and trainings usually concentrate on student and school corners, neglecting home.

While we acknowledge that schools and families are contextualized in social, political and economic forces, the very context of home and family is often ignored (Fleming and Pain, 1995). Thus our knowledge of how young individuals engage with computers mainly drives from studies in educational settings. In fact, what parents believe about the effects of new technologies, whether they regard them favourably or unfavourably, what they consider to be the role of computers in children’s lives, in short their expectations influence the changes that are taking place (Vryzas and Tsitouridou, 2002). Besides, studies reveal that the residential connection is the mostly used one on children’s behalf (Safe & Smart, 2000). As put by Davidson and Ritchie (1994), parental support is an effective factor in the educational innovation brought by computers. Moreover what Papert (1998) defines as a subversive force, the demands for change in the school coming from children who had rich learning experiences with computers in home already, is formed by thoughtful parents who have the necessary donations for such a progress. However a survey in USA revealed that parents were not aware of the existence or educational context of educational-informational programs (Woodard, 2000) The results would be same if a similar study was carried out in Turkey since parents have always been the neglected corner of the parents-school-student triangle. In fact research shows that an appropriate training or aproach could help parents to solve their problems in computer issues (Kersh, 1999; Davidson and Ritchie, 1994). Therefore more studies should be carried out to involve the parents in the process. This study focuses on parents’ views on Internet use and the research questions include: what are the opininons of parents on;

- financial,
- safety,
- educational, and
- social aspects of Internet?

The information gathered for this study is neither exhaustive nor highly statistical. This research is planned as the first step of a wider study intended to open a new window of inquiry on parental awareness on Internet in Turkey and being a pioneer study, the author wants to raise it on national and intercultural basis.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. The Sample

To explore the issue, the sample was recruited through three demographically and geographically diverse cities in Turkey, as Eskişehir, Bursa and Kütahya. As the current study is a kind of pilot research for a nationwide study, the sample was organized to present the country in some way. As a first step, two elementary schools in each of these cities were chosen randomly. To conduct the study the students with residential Internet connection were sought. This was preferred as the parents would be familiar with Internet. After the students were determined, information slips were sent home with children asking parents whether they would be willing to participate in the study. After consentments were provided, the questionnaires were sent home again via students. The parents were asked to fill in the the questionnaires together. The questionnaires were collected through students after a week each as signed by both parents.

The number of families reached was 94, so, 94 mothers and fathers were involved in the study. The number of families with residential connection may seem few in number; however this is an expected situation considering the financial burden of owning a computer and getting Internet connection in Turkey. The profile of the respondents is as in Table 1.

Table1. Respondents' Profile

Age	Mother		Father	
	f	%	f	%
25-30 yrs	15	16	10	10.6
31-35 yrs	35	37	43	45.7
41-45 yrs	38	40.4	36	38.3
45-over	6	6.6	5	5.4
Educational Background (Graduation)				
Primary	19	20	1	1.1
Secondary	6	6	8	8.5
High School	26	28	24	25.4
University	43	46	61	65

As can be seen in Table 1, the distribution of ages heavily pile up on the ages between 31-35 and 41-45 years. Considering that the elementary education covers the children between ages 7-15, and the average marrying age, this is an expected distribution.

As for the educational background, most of the parents are either high school or university graduates. Research reveals that the educational level of parents have effects on the children's use of new technologies (Shashaani, 1994; Vryzas and Tsitouridou, 2002; Healy and Schilmoeller, 1985), so this situation of educational background might reflect on parents' views on Internet as well.

2.2. The Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used as a survey instrument. The questionnaire items were collected in a pool where 15 BA students, 10 MA students and 10 academicians from Computer and Instructional Technology Teaching Department of Anadolu University threw items that they think is relevant with Internet issues concerning parents. The items were taken into 4th year BA class and a workshop was carried out to calculate the frequencies of the forwarded items; and to separate the items into related aspects of Internet. The final drafts of 18 items were given to 10 parents for a pilot study. One item was thought to be rather underestimating the parents and was drawn out.

The final questionnaire consisted of 17 comments on Internet followed by a scale of agree neutral-disagree as given in Table 2.

Table 2. The Final Questionnaire

ITEM NO	COMMENTS	AGREE		NEUTRAL		DISAGREE		TOTAL	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1	Internet is an expensive medium								
2	Government should control the use of Internet								
3	Families should control the use of Internet								
4	Residential use is always safer								
5	Internet Cafes are not safe places for children								
6	Internet should only be used for assignments								
7	Every school should be connected to Internet								
8	Internet use increases the academic achievement of children								
9	Internet improves the children's research skills								
10	Using real names may be dangerous for children								
11	Filters must be used								
12	Internet is a necessity for contemporary life								
13	Internet use of children should be limited								
14	Internet cafes are useful places for children								
15	Internet effects child-family relations negatively								
16	School has the main responsibility for children to use Internet effectively and beneficially								
17	Family has the main responsibility for children to use Internet effectively and beneficially								

The comments covered different aspects of Internet as social, financial, educational or safety issues but they were not under these headings in the questionnaire so as not to distract attention of the respondents. The items cover global perspectives for Internet- parent issue however there are also cultural and social issues such as Internet cafes so the questionnaire is only appropriate for local use.

The data collection procedure spanned the spring of 2002. As there were no missing responses all of the questionnaires were used for data analysis. The statistics were descriptive only working with frequencies and percentages.

3. RESULTS

The results are given segmented, concerning the different aspects of Internet. Rather than overwhelming the readers with comments, the comments were attempted to be kept minimal.

3.1. Financial Issues

The first item of the questionnaire regarded the financial aspect of Internet. As can be seen from Table 3, the number of parents who think Internet is an expensive medium (43%) is nearly the same as who do not think so (41%). This might reveal that although parents could afford Internet connection, they still perceive the medium to be costly.

Table 3. The Financial Aspect Of Internet

ITEM NO	COMMENTS	AGREE		NEUTRAL		DISAGREE		TOTAL	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1	Internet is an expensive medium	40	43	15	16	39	41	94	100

3.2. Safety Issues

Items 2, 3, 4, 10 and 11 investigated how parents viewed safety issues regarding Internet (Table 4). Parents mostly believed that families should control their children's use of Internet (61%) and that residential use is much safer (77%). Parents also presented a responsibility by disagreeing that the control of Internet should be carried by the government (52%).

More than half of the parents agreed that filters are necessary for children’s Internet use (67%), however not as much concerned about that using real names on Internet may be dangerous. Only 31% of the parents agreed on this safety problem.

Table 4. The Safety Aspects

ITEMNO	COMMENTS	AGREE		NEUTRAL		DISAGREE		TOTAL	
		f	%	fi	%	F	%	f	%
2	Government should control the use of Internet	29	31	16	17	49	52	94	100
3	Families should control the use of Internet	61	65	7	7,4	26	27,6	94	100
4	Residential use is always safer	77	81,7	13	14	4	4,3	94	100
10	Using real names may be dangerous for children	31	33	37	39	26	28	94	100
11	Filters must be used	67	71	10	11	17	18	94	100

3.3. Educational Issues

As can be seen from Table 5, concerning the educational aspects (Items, 6, 8, 9, 13, 16, 17), parents mostly disagree that Internet should only be used for assignments (87%). The distribution of parents who agree that Internet enhances the academic achievement and who are neutral are the same (45%). On the other hand parents highly agree that Internet improves the research skills of children (93.6%). The reason of this high level of agreement is thought to be that the Turkish word for search is similar to the Turkish word of research and since the the Internet concept has always been associated with search on media, parent are familiar with this concept and know that Internet means search (or research)! They also mostly agree that children’s time of Internet use should be limited (69%) and as for educational control as well, families mostly, believe that they should be the mechanisms to take the responsibility (59%).

Table 5. The Educational Aspects

ITEMNO	COMMENTS	AGREE		NEUTRAL		DISAGREE		TOTAL	
		f	%	fi	%	F	%	f	%
6	Internet should only be used for assignments	3	3,4	9	9,6	82	87	94	100
8	Internet use increases the academic achievement of children	42	45	42	45	10	10	94	100
9	Internet improves the children’s research skills	88	93,6	5	5,3	1	1,1	94	100
13	Internet use of children should be limited	56	69	10	11	28	30	94	100
16	School has the main responsibility for children to use Internet effectively and beneficially	37	39	31	33	26	28	94	100
17	Family has the main responsibility for children to use Internet effectively and beneficially	59	62	25	27	10	11	94	100

3.4. Social Issues

Table 6 covers the social issues (Items, 5,7,12,14,15) . Half of the parents believe that Internet cafes are not safe places (50%). Related with the Internet cafe issue again only 10% of the parents agree that Internet cafes are useful places for children.

Parents most highly agree that Internet is a necessity of contemporary life (95.7%) and disagree that Internet effects family relations negatively (62 %).

Table 6. The Social Issues

ITEMNO	COMMENTS	AGREE		NEUTRAL		DISAGREE		TOTAL	
		f	%	fi	%	f	%	f	%
5	Internet Cafes are not safe places for children	47	50	16	17	31	33	94	100
7	Every school should be connected	87	92,6	5	5,3	2	2,1	94	100

	to Internet									
12	Internet is a necessity for contemporary life	90	95,7	3	3,2	1	1,1	94	100	
14	Internet cafes are useful places for children	14	15	28	30	52	55	94	100	
15	Internet effects child-family relations negatively	10	11	25	27	59	62	94	100	

4. DISCUSSION

Technological changes are occurring at a rapid pace, and parents’ general confusion and lack of knowledge about them may intensify their difficulties. Many of the important changes in home life related to technologies are more subtle, though no less influential and with larger public roles come broader levels of responsibility. However, computing is changing at a rapid pace, and the roles of individuals and families in regard to it have not yet stabilised (Ovarec, 2000).

Internet, as the most recent computer technology, offers children many opportunities for learning, constructive environment and personal growth, however, at the same time parents should be aware of Internet issues and thus their children’s use of Internet. This study chose parents as respondents since their role for Internet use for elementary school children is undiscussable.

The first finding of the research revealed that the parents’ ideas about the cost of Internet are neither pessimistic nor optimistic. While half of the parents believed Internet is a costly medium the other half does not think so. This finding can be a culturally biased result arising from the local circumstances. Concerning the annual income of an average Turkish family a home computer and an Internet connection is a luxury. Therefore distinction should be made clearly between if one can afford this “luxury”, does it mean the medium is cheap or is it still expensive for the rest?

Regarding the safety issues concerning Internet, parents believed that residential use is always safer and that they should control their children’s use of Internet. Infact, many parents and household heads are also dealing with issues of control as aspects of home life change in the advent of everyday computer usage, particularly as they relate to overall family interaction patterns and the behaviour of children (Ovarec, 2000). Parents showed consideration for filter use but they were not much concerned about their children using real names on Internet. This might be due to the fact that parents hear about filters both from schools and commercial media but the dangers of using real names is a more special fact which comes only after an individual experience or an awareness training.

With regard to the educational aspect of Internet, parents believe that Internet enhances the academic achievement and research skills of children. This finding is consistent with other research carried out by Vryzas and Tsitouridou (2002). The finding is also supported by the literature which suggest that parents familiar with computers have higher expectations of the educational benefits of computers (Healy and Schilmoeller, 1985; Kristiansen, 1991).

This research, carried out in three provinces of Turkey, indicates that parents have an overall positive view of Internet with regard to social life. They believe that Internet is a necessary medium for contemporary life. There are other researches supporting this finding, so far as the parents are familiar with the medium (Healy and Schilmoeller, 1985; Vryzas and Tsitouridou, 2002). As with the adoption of many ‘new technologies’ these home computers are entering an already constituted social space and that many of the patterns of these social spaces are reproduced in the engagement with new technologies in the home (Sutherland, Facer, Furlong and Furlong 2000). Parents do not indicate a pessimistic view about that Internet effects the family relations negatively. However they show consideration for Internet cafes which they they think neither useful nor safe. This might be a clue that parents give credit to their own control

An underlying force to carry out this research was to raise some awareness on parental side. The author does not believe that Turkey is unique in neglecting the parental side of the Internet issue and therefore tries to raise some questions on parents’ minds. A future study, where corelations are used, will be beneficial for parents. Bearing in mind that any kind of exposition is part of the learning process, further studies should be carried out in Turkey to investigate whether the proposed views are applied in practice Referring to the caption at the beginning of this paper, so long as Internet and the family are here, we have no choice but to enhance them.

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