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Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Psikolojik Sıkıntı Düzeyleri ve Sosyal Ağlardan Sosyal Destek Beklentileri

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ÖZET

Üniversite yaşamında karşılaşılan zorluklar, bireylerin psikolojik dayanıklılığını azaltarak, çevrelerinden yardım arama davranışlarına yönlendirebilmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, üniversite öğrencilerinin yaşadıkları psikolojik sıkıntı düzeyleri ile sosyal ağlardan sosyal destek beklenti düzeylerini belirlemek ve arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmaktır. Bu tanımlayıcı ve ilişki arayıcı çalışmanın örneklemini bir üniversitenin sağlık bilimleri fakültesinde öğrenim gören öğrenciler (n=340) oluşturmaktadır. Veriler Katılımcı Bilgi Formu, Kessler Psikolojik Sıkıntı Ölçeği ve Sosyal Ağlardan Sosyal Destek Beklentisi Ölçeği kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Üniversite öğrencilerinin psikolojik sıkıntı düzeyleri 33,37±7,97, sosyal ağlardan sosyal destek beklenti düzeyleri ise 33,36±10,10 olarak bulunmuştur. Öğrencilerin psikolojik sıkıntı düzeyleri ile sosyal ağlardan sosyal destek beklenti düzeyleri arasında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı, pozitif yönlü ve düşük düzeyli bir ilişki vardır ($p<0.05$). Çalışmada, üniversite öğrencilerinin psikolojik sıkıntı düzeyleri arttıkça sosyal ağlardan sosyal destek beklentileri artmaktadır. Üniversitelerin öğrencilerine yönelik sosyal medya okuryazarlığı eğitimlerini arttırması ve stresle baş etme, psikolojik dayanıklılık ile sosyal destek konularında seminer ve psikoeğitim çalışmalarının düzenlenmesi önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Psikolojik sıkıntı, ruhsal sıkıntı, sosyal ağ, sosyal destek, üniversite öğrencisi*

University Students' Levels of Psychological Distress and Expectations of Social Support From Social Networks

ABSTRACT

Difficulties encountered in university life can reduce individuals' psychological resilience and lead them to seek help from their surroundings. The purpose of this study was to determine the psychological distress levels experienced by university students and the levels of social support expectations from social networks, and to investigate the relationship between them. This descriptive and correlational study sample consisted of 340 students studying at a university's Faculty of Health Sciences (n=340). Data were collected using the Participant Information Form, Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, and Social Support Expectation in Social Networks Scale. The psychological distress levels of university students were found to be 33.37±7.97, and the social support expectation levels from social networks were found to be 33.36±10.10. There was a statistically significant, positive, and low-level relationship between the psychological distress levels of students and social support expectation levels from social networks ($p<0.05$). As the psychological distress levels of university students increased, their social support expectations from social networks increased. It is recommended that universities increase social media literacy training for students and organize seminars and psychoeducational programs focusing on stress coping strategies, psychological resilience and social support.

Keywords: *Psychological distress, mental distress, social network, social support, university student*

I. INTRODUCTION

University life, coinciding with the transition to adulthood, requires rapid adaptation and is often considered to be a period of high stress and psychological distress for many students. Psychological distress can be defined as a disturbing emotional state that begins with a person's perception that they cannot cope with stressors, resulting in temporary or permanent harm to themselves (Ridner, 2004).

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Research shows that psychological distress is more common and felt more intensely in students who start university compared to adults in the general population or individuals of the same age who do not attend university (Sharp & Theiler, 2018). A study conducted with university students in Norway in 2010, 2014, and 2018 highlighted that both the levels of psychological distress among students and the increase in these levels over time were concerning (Knapstad et. al. 2021). In a similar study conducted with university students in recent years, 69.5% of students experienced serious psychological distress (Al-Tammemi et. al. 2020). The difficulties encountered in university life can reduce the psychological resilience of individuals and lead them to seek help from their environment (Wadman et. al. 2017). In recent years, the use of social networking sites has also greatly changed the way social support is provided (McCloskey et. al. 2015). Social networking sites are also used today as sources of interpersonal communication and social support (Gilmour et. al. 2020). While social support plays a protective role in individuals' stress-coping processes, social support received through social networks has positive effects on psychological well-being (Clark et. al. 2018). Tammemi et al. found that 70.6% of university students use social media platforms to cope with psychological distress (Al-Tammemi et. al. 2020). Al-Asibong et al. indicated that psychological distress is seen at a high level among university students and that psychological distress is more common in those who use social networking sites less (Al-Asibong et. al. 2020). Social media platforms, which are widely used, especially among young adults, are used not only for sharing information but also for regulating their psychological states (Al-Asibong et. al. 2020). This situation necessitates questioning the extent to which social networks are effective in meeting individuals' psychological needs. In this context, further research is needed to better understand university students' expectations of support obtained through online platforms when experiencing psychological distress. This study contributes to the literature by advancing the understanding of young adults' help-seeking behaviors in the digital age and the influence of social media. Accordingly, the present study aimed to examine the relationship between university students' psychological distress and their expectations of support derived from online networks.

For this purpose, the following questions were asked:

1. What are the psychological distress levels of university students?
2. What are students' expectations of support from online networks?
3. Is there a relationship between students' psychological distress and their expectations of support from online networks?

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research Design

This was a descriptive correlational study.

Population and Sample

The study consisted of 2.295 students enrolled in the Faculty of Health Sciences of a public university during the April–June 2023 academic period. The sample size was calculated using the sample size formula for a known population in a single-sample design ($n = Nt^2pq / d^2(N-1) + t^2pq$) (Yıldız, 2017). Based on this calculation, a minimum of 330 students was required at a 95% confidence level, with a margin of error of 0.05 and a statistical power of 80%. To account for potential data loss, a total of 340 students were included in the study.

Inclusion Criteria

Students enrolled in the Faculty of Health Sciences were eligible to participate.

Exclusion Criteria

Four students who declined to participate were excluded from this study.

Data Collection

Before data collection, all the students were informed of the research purpose and confidentiality. Those who agreed to participate completed the data collection forms. Each participant took 13 min to fill out the forms.

Data Collection Instruments

The study data were obtained using the "Participant Information Form," "Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10-PDS)," and "Social Support Expectation in Social Networks Scale (SSESNS)."

Participant Information Form

This form included five questions about university students' age, gender, social media usage time, purpose of using social media, and the most frequently used social media application.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10-PDS)

The scale was originally developed by Kessler et al. (Kessler et. al. 2002), and its Turkish validity and reliability were established by Altun et al. (Altun et. al. 2019). The scale assesses symptoms including irritability, hopelessness, sadness, worthlessness, and fatigue in individuals. The scale is a five-point Likert-type scale (from 1 (never) to 5 (always)) and consists of 10 questions. Score on the scale range form10 (lowest) to 50 (highest). The Cronbach's alpha value of the scale was 0.95(Altun et. al. 2019). The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient in the study was found to be α=0.89.

Social Support Expectation in Social Networks Scale (SSESNS)

The scale, the validity and reliability of which were assessed by Uzakgiden and Erozkan in 2019 [13], has a total of 14 items. The scale was scored on a four-point Likert scale (1= never, 2= rarely, 3= frequently, 4= always). The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 14, and the highest score is 56. Increasing scores on the scale indicate that individuals' expectations of social support from social networks increase, while decreasing scores indicate that their expectations of social support decrease. The total Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of the scale is stated as α=0.85 (Uzakgiden & Erozkan, 2019). In this study, Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was 0.94.

Variables of the Study

The dependent variables were the average scores on the K10-PSD and the SSESNS. The independent variable in the study was the descriptive characteristics questionnaire (age, sex, duration of social media use, purpose of social media use, and the most frequently used social media application).

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of a University (TÜTF-GOBAEK 2022/441- Date 09.01.2023 and No: 01/38). Permission was obtained from the Faculty of Health Sciences of a public university. Informed consent was obtained from all the students. This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Permissions for the use of the scale were obtained from researchers who tested the validity and reliability of the scales in Turkish.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences for Windows, version 21 (SPSS 21). The normality of the data distribution was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test in combination with skewness and kurtosis (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965). Skewness and kurtosis coefficients within the range of ±1.5 were considered indicative of an approximately normal distribution of the data. Descriptive statistics, including the arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and median values, were calculated for ordinal variables, whereas frequencies and percentages were used for nominal variables. Pearson's correlation analysis was used to determine the relationships between ordinal variables that met the normality (Schober et. al. 2018). Statistical significance was set at $p<0.05$.

III. RESULTS

The average age of the students participating in the study is 20.60±1.67 (min: 18, max: 26). Of the students, 82.4% were female. When the answers given by the students to the questions about their social media usage were evaluated, it was determined that 50.6% of the students used social media for 4-6 hours, used social media mostly for communication with family, friends, and other social circles, and used the social media application Instagram the most (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

Variables			
	Mean±Sd		
Age	20.60±1.67 (minimum:18-maximum:26)		
		n	**%**
Gender	Female	280	82.4
	Male	60	17.6
Social media usage time	Less than 1 hour	9	2.6
	1-3 hours	117	34.4
	4-6 hours	172	50.6
	7 hours and above	42	12.4
Purpose of using social media*	Entertainment/games	211*	62.1
	Communication with family, friends and other social circles	286	84.1
	Getting news	232	68.2
	Getting information	247	72.6
	Personal sharing (sharing personal photos, videos, pictures, ideas)	194	57.1
Most frequently used social media application*	Facebook	4	1.2
	Instagram	220	64.7
	Snapchat	27	7.9
	Twitter	53	15.6
	Youtube	76	22.4
	WhatsApp	143	42.1
	Tiktok	7	2.1

SD: Standart deviation; *: Since more than one marking was made, n was multiplied.

The mean K10-PSD score of the students was 33.37±7.97, and the mean SSESNS score was 33.36±10.10. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' total K10-PSD and SSESNS score averages

	X±Sd	**Scale min-max.**
K10-PSD Total	33.37±7.97	10-50
SSESNS Total	33.36±10.10	14-56

X: Mean; SD: Standart deviation; Min: minimum; Max: Maximum

According to the Pearson Correlation analysis in Table 3, a significant positive correlation was found between students' K10-PSD and SSESNS total scores (r = .119, p<0.05).

Table 3. The relationship between K10-PSD and SSESNS

K10-PSD Total		
SSESNS	r	.119*
Total	p	.028

r: Pearson's correlation; p: p<0.05

IV. DISCUSSION

This study is important because it examines the relationship between university students' psychological distress and their expectations of support from social networks. It also contributes to a better understanding of how students experiencing psychological distress seek support through these platforms. Three important findings were obtained in this study. The first finding was that the psychological distress levels of university students were above average, whereas the second important finding was that the social support expectations of students from social networks were below average. The third important finding was that as students' psychological distress increased, their expectations of social support from social networks also increased. Psychological distress refers to a concept that describes students' psychological well-being. The increasing prevalence of mental health problems among university students has become a significant concern. In our study, it was determined that the psychological distress levels of the students were above average.

Previous studies have consistently indicated a high prevalence of psychological distress among university students across different countries and academic contexts. For instance, Knapstad et al. Emphasized the growing concern regarding increased self-reported psychological distress among Norwegian students in higher education (Knapstad et. Al. 2021). Similarly, research conducted in China revealed that at least 40.7% of university students experienced one or more symptoms of psychological distress (Tang et. Al. 2018). Comparable prevalence rates have been reported in other regions, including Saudi Arabia, where approximately 31% of undergraduate students at Jazan University were found to be psychologically distressed, and Spain, where 27.1% of first-year university students reported psychological distress (Hakami, 2018; March-Amengual et. Al. 2022). Notably, some studies have documented substantially higher levels of distress. For example, Salvarani et al. Reported that 70.9% of university students experienced psychological distress, whereas Pehlivan et al. Found that 78.2% of Turkish university students reported stress (Salvarani et. Al. 2020; Pehlivan et. Al. 2021). Furthermore, studies conducted among university students in Europe have reported high levels of psychological distress, stress, and burnout, highlighting the widespread 230ort h of this issue across higher-education populations (Ramon-Arbues et. Al. 2023; Collin et. Al. 2020).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that psychological distress is a widespread and significant issue among university students globally, although prevalence rates vary considerably depending on cultural context, academic discipline, and methodological differences between studies.

When the results of studies conducted with students studying in various fields and at all levels of education were evaluated, it was observed that a significant portion of university students experienced high levels of psychological distress, and these results were similar to those of our study.

Social support is a protective factor for individuals in coping with life difficulties. Social support expectations on digital platforms refer to an individual's desire for empathy, sincerity, and validation when sharing personal experiences or expressing intense emotions online. Through these interactions, users seek to reduce feelings of isolation and establish a supportive environment of trust (Uzakgiden & Erozkan, 2019). Yılmaz stated that communication established on social networks is perceived as social support by young people (Yılmaz, 2022). In the research conducted by Balcı and Kaya, it was emphasized that social networks have an important position in increasing emotional support. The same study stated that young people seek more emotional support on social networks and use social media 230ort his purpose (Balcı & Kaya, 2021). Our study found that students' social support expectations from social networks were below average, and that the most common purpose of using social networks was communication with the environment. In his thesis study, Üstündağ stated that social media is a communication tool for adolescents and concluded that there is a significant and positive relationship between adolescents' social support perception levels and their social network usage purposes (Üstündağ, 2022). In the research conducted by Ürkmez and Eskicumalı, it was stated that social 230ort his230e230e used for information sharing and socialization purposes (Ürkmez & Eskicumalı, 2021). In the research conducted by Karadaş et al. With university students, it was reported that the participants used social networks to follow the agenda, share, and as a means of entertainment and communication (Karadaş et. Al. 2021). The results obtained in the 230ort his230e review revealed the support expectations of today's young people from social networks.

As a result of our study, as students' psychological distress increases, their expectations of social support from social media also increase. Clark et al. Emphasized in their research that the positive use of social

networks supports the increase in connections for social support. Consequently, it was stated that the needs of users to belong and be accepted were met (Clark et. Al. 2018). Balcı and Kaya described social media as a tool used by the young segment of society when they feel sad and lonely or want to escape their problems (Balcı & Kaya, 2021). Shiraly et al. Concluded in their research that students with high levels of psychological distress spend more time on social media (Shiraly et. Al. 2024). Similarly, Sampasa-Kanyiga and Lewis determined in their research that students with poor mental health use social networking sites more (Sampasa-Kanyiga & Lewis, 2015). In the research conducted by Lin et al, it was stated that the rate of problematic social media use of students with low levels of psychological distress is also low (Lin et. Al. 2021). Lake Yimer concluded in his research with university students that students who use social media more often have lower levels of psychological well-being (Lake Yimer, 2023). Sun emphasized in his research that people who experience psychological problems, such as anxiety and loneliness, can use social networks as a coping mechanism by receiving social support from social networks (Sun, 2023). Pop et al. Reported in their research with young social network users that people who spend more time on social networks have higher loneliness and depression scores (Pop et. Al. 2022). Similarly, Karakuş and Tarhan observed that lonely people spend more time on social media (Karakuş & Tarhan 2023). The results obtained in line with our study and the 231ort his231e suggest that young adults see social networks as a place where they can get support when they feel lonely, stressed, and sad, and use them 231ort his purpose. The fact that the study was conducted only with students studying at the Faculty of Health Sciences of a state university and that the data were based on subjective statements prevents the generalization of the study results. It is recommended that future studies be conducted with larger samples and that students' perceived experiences of social support from social networks be examined in more depth using qualitative methods.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our study found that university students' psychological distress was above average, and their expectations of social support from social networks were below average. Our research further indicates that as students' emotional distress escalates, their perceived need for social assistance via digital platforms also rises significantly. Considering these findings, awareness of psychological distress experienced by university students should be increased, and the accessibility of psychological counselling and guidance services at universities should be increased. Students' expectations of social support from social networks increase in the face of psychological distress. Therefore, it is essential to enhance social media literacy training specifically tailored to university students. Additionally, institutions should organize seminars and psychoeducational programs focusing on stress management, psychological resilience, and identifying reliable social support sources.

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Statement of Research and Publication Ethics

The research was carried out within the scope of ethics committee approval received from Trakya University Non-Interventional Clinical Research Ethics Committee (09.01.2023, Number: 2022/441).

Authors' Contributions

The authors contributed equally to the study.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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