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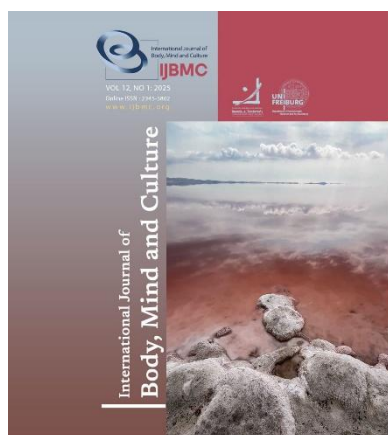
Interpersonal Functioning Mediates the Link Between Psychological Distress, Internet Addiction, and Cyberbullying in Gifted and Non-Gifted Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examines the direct and indirect effects of psychological distress on internet addiction and cyberbullying, with interpersonal functioning as a mediator, among gifted and non-gifted adolescent girls.

Methods and Materials: This descriptive-correlational study included 310 female high school students (152 non-gifted, 158 gifted) from Tehran, selected through cluster sampling. Data were collected using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-42), Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT), the Cyberbullying Scale, and the Interpersonal Functioning Scale (Ryff, 1995). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted in AMOS 24, alongside ANOVA for group comparisons.

Findings: Psychological distress was positively associated with both internet addiction (β= 0.334, p< 0.01) and cyberbullying (β = 0.244, p<0.01). Interpersonal functioning significantly mediated these relationships, reducing the impact of distress on internet addiction (β= 0.119, p<0.01) and cyberbullying (β= 0.113, p<0.01). Gifted students reported lower psychological distress and internet addiction compared to non-gifted students (p<0.05).

Conclusion: Psychological distress contributes to higher internet addiction and cyberbullying, with interpersonal functioning partially buffering these effects. Intervention programs should focus on enhancing social skills and emotional resilience to mitigate problematic internet behaviors among adolescents.

Keywords: Psychological distress, internet addiction, cyberbullying, interpersonal functioning, gifted students, adolescent.

Introduction

Gifted students represent a distinct group within the population, exhibiting unique cognitive, social, and emotional characteristics (Ercan et al., 2025; Şakar & Tan, 2025; Yağbasanlar & Балоглу, 2025). Since the early studies of Terman, understanding the attributes of gifted children and adolescents has been a primary research objective. Terman emphasized that identifying the origins of intellectual talent could lead to the development of effective educational methods to nurture gifted students. He stated that a better understanding of

the physical, mental, and behavioral traits of gifted students could enhance educational success (Çiftçi, 2025; Elias et al., 2025).

Quinn (2006) defines gifted and talented children as individuals who exhibit exceptional abilities and have the potential for high achievement in areas such as intelligence, creativity, and the arts. These individuals also possess leadership skills that differentiate them from their non-gifted peers and demonstrate superior academic performance in specific domains. Similarly, Hart describes giftedness as a hidden or apparent capacity in cognitive and personality skills, leading to personal and social growth (Çiftçi, 2025).

Giftedness encompasses both cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions, requiring comprehensive studies to understand and cultivate these characteristics. Environmental factors and opportunities play a crucial role in developing gifted potential. Recent research suggests that gifted girls often adapt better to peer interactions, align with group goals, and exhibit greater flexibility in assuming various social roles, such as asking about others' interests, assertiveness, emotional expression, and forming interpersonal bonds (Winner & Martino, 2024; Yağbasanlar & Балоглу, 2025) One of the key factors contributing to the development of social roles is the use of social networks and the internet.

Young (1998) argues that the term "addiction" applies to internet users, as the symptoms of internet addiction resemble those of substance abuse, smoking, and alcoholism (Widjanto & McMurran, 2004; Ghasemzadeh, Shahraray & Moradi, 2008). Similar to other forms of addiction, internet addiction is characterized by dependency, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, lack of control, and impulsive use (Shokri & Sanaeepour, 2016).

Psychological well-being is crucial for maintaining physical and mental health, enhancing self-esteem, and fostering talent development. It contributes to positive self-perception and life satisfaction, ultimately enhancing psychological resilience. Psychological well-being encompasses positive emotions and general satisfaction across various life domains, including family, education, and career. Individuals with high psychological well-being experience more positive emotions and evaluate life events more optimistically. Conversely, those with low psychological well-being tend to perceive life situations negatively, experiencing

higher levels of anxiety, depression, and anger (Bakhtiyarovich et al., 2023).

This study examines the relationship between psychological distress (depression, anxiety, and stress) and psychological well-being (interpersonal functioning). Psychological distress refers to negative emotional states, such as anxiety, depression, and stress, which significantly impact an individual's mental health and behavior (Afshar et al., 2015; Dargahi-Kafshgari et al., 2022; Timajchi et al., 2025). One of the major contributing factors to psychological distress is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is a widespread issue in many schools worldwide, particularly in the United States, affecting nearly one-third of White and African-American students in grades 6 to 10. Due to its numerous negative consequences, cyberbullying should not be considered a normal part of adolescent development. Early interventions are crucial in preventing the development of aggressive and antisocial behaviors (Baldry, 2003; Batty & Mortensen, 2005).

Recent studies have reported cyberbullying incidents in 16 European countries, the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as in developing countries. These findings suggest that cyberbullying is a universal phenomenon occurring in various school settings. The increasing awareness of school bullying prevalence has prompted schools, parents, and policymakers to take proactive measures to address and mitigate cyberbullying (Lovgrove & Cornell, 2012).

Although numerous studies have examined the individual variables related to psychological distress, internet addiction, and cyberbullying, there is a lack of research exploring the combined impact of these factors in both gifted and non-gifted students. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research question: How does the relationship between psychological distress and internet usage behavior (internet addiction and cyberbullying) differ between gifted and non-gifted adolescent girls, considering the mediating role of interpersonal functioning?

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive-correlational design to examine the mediating role of interpersonal

functioning in the relationship between psychological distress, internet addiction, and cyberbullying among gifted and non-gifted female adolescents. Given the comparative nature of the research, a cross-sectional survey approach was adopted, and data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) and ANOVA to assess both group differences and mediating effects.

The statistical population included all female high school students in Tehran's District 13 during the 2016–2017 academic year, aged between 13 and 18 years. A multi-stage cluster sampling method was used to ensure diversity while maintaining feasibility. Initially, one district was randomly selected, followed by the random selection of schools within the district. To ensure representation of both gifted and non-gifted students, two educational institutions were chosen: one for gifted students and one for non-gifted students. A total of 310 students participated, with 152 non-gifted and 158 gifted students, ensuring a balanced sample for group comparisons.

The sample size was determined using Cochran's formula, ensuring adequate power for statistical analysis. The parameters used for the sample size calculation included a 95% confidence level, a margin of error of 5%, and an estimated response distribution of 50%, which allows for maximum variance. To account for potential missing data and incomplete responses, additional questionnaires were distributed.

While cluster sampling facilitated data collection, stratified random sampling might have been more appropriate for comparing gifted and non-gifted students, as it would have ensured equal representation across various demographic characteristics. Additionally, the study was limited to a single district, which may have restricted the generalizability of the findings to students in other regions or educational settings.

Following the approval of the research proposal, a formal request was submitted to the Tehran Department of Education to conduct the study in selected schools. A random cluster sampling method was employed: first, a district was randomly selected; second, the Department of Education of the selected district approved the study; and third, specific schools within the selected district were randomly chosen. Once school approvals were obtained, the questionnaires were distributed to students during the final month of the second academic semester (2016-2017). To ensure random selection, students from different grade levels were chosen, and the research objectives were explained to them. They were informed that the study aimed to improve student well-being and online safety. Upon obtaining informed consent, the questionnaires were administered in a classroom setting. The administration sequence of the questionnaires was as follows: DASS-42 (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale), Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT), Interpersonal Functioning Subscale (from Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale), and Cyberbullying Scale (Patchin & Hinduja, 2011).

Instruments

Interpersonal Functioning Scale (Ryff, 1995): The Interpersonal Functioning Scale is one of the dimensions of Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale, which was initially designed to assess various aspects of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1995). This scale was first introduced in 1980 and later expanded into an 84-item questionnaire (1989). Due to its length, shorter versions, including the 54-item and 18-item versions, were developed. The 54-item version of Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale comprises six subscales, each consisting of nine items, assessing Self-Acceptance, Positive Relationships with Others, Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, and Personal Growth. Participants respond on a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). A study conducted on 145 university students (96 females, 49 males) at Islamic Azad University of Azadshahr found that the test-retest reliability of the overall scale was 0.82. In contrast, the reliability of the subscales ranged from 0.70 to 0.78, all of which were statistically significant. Correlations with the Life Satisfaction Scale, Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale were 0.47, 0.58, and 0.46, respectively, confirming the validity and reliability of Ryff's scale for assessing psychological well-being in Iranian students.

Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-42): The Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-42) was used to assess psychological distress. This scale, developed by Lovibond & Lovibond (1995), consists of 42 items that measure three psychological constructs: Depression (14 items), Anxiety (14 items), and Stress (14 items). A shortened 21-item version is also available, validated for the Iranian population by Sahibi et al.

(2005). The test-retest reliability of DASS-42 was 0.81 for stress, 0.79 for anxiety, and 0.71 for depression. Additionally, correlations with Beck's Depression and Anxiety Inventories were 0.81 and 0.74, respectively. Participants respond to items on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (Never) to 3 (Always), to assess their experiences over the past week. Higher scores indicate greater levels of psychological distress.

Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT, 1988): The Internet Addiction Test (IAT) was developed by Kimberly Young (1988) and is one of the most widely used tools for measuring internet addiction. It consists of 20 items, designed based on the DSM-IV-TR criteria for pathological gambling, as internet addiction is believed to share similarities with compulsive gambling disorder. Participants respond using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Rarely, 2 = Occasionally, 3 = Often, 4 = Frequently, 5 = Always). Previous studies have reported high reliability for this scale, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.90. The Persian version of the IAT has also been validated, with Cronbach's alpha scores of 0.81 (Nasti Zayi) and 0.88.

Cyberbullying Scale (Patchin & Hinduja, 2011): The Cyberbullying Scale was developed by Patchin & Hinduja (2006, 2009) to measure cyberbullying and online harassment. The cyberbullying scale consists of 14 to 18 items, while the cyber-victimization scale includes items 1-6 and 9-11. The Likert-type response scale ranges from 0 (Never) to 4 (Every day). The total cyber-victimization score ranges from 0 to 36. The total cyberbullying score ranges from 0 to 20. Cronbach's alpha reliability for this scale was 0.74 for cyber-

victimization and 0.76 for cyberbullying. In a study conducted by Abdollahi (2015), Cronbach's alpha for the Persian version was 0.83, confirming its reliability for Iranian students.

Data Analysis

Means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis were examined for normality. All variables fell within the acceptable range of ±2, justifying the use of parametric analyses. ANOVA was conducted to compare gifted and non-gifted students in terms of psychological distress, internet addiction, and cyberbullying. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine relationships between key variables. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed to test the mediation model and assess both direct and indirect effects.

Given the intercorrelations among psychological distress, internet addiction, and cyberbullying, multicollinearity diagnostics were conducted. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were below 2.5, indicating no severe multicollinearity. Model fit was evaluated using CFI, RMSEA, GFI, and SRMR, with all indices falling within acceptable thresholds (CFI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08), confirming a good model fit. Data were analyzed using SPSS 24 and AMOS 24. The analyses were conducted at both descriptive and inferential levels.

Findings and Results

The descriptive statistics for psychological distress, internet addiction, and cyberbullying among gifted and non-gifted students are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Psychological Distress by Group

Variable	Non-Gifted Mean (SD)	Gifted Mean (SD)	p-value
Depression	7.98 (5.24)	5.99 (4.48)	<0.01*
Anxiety	6.32 (4.00)	4.76 (3.91)	<0.01*
Stress	8.28 (4.79)	6.23 (4.44)	<0.01*
Psychological Distress	22.41 (12.96)	17.17 (11.40)	<0.01*

Results indicate that non-gifted students report significantly higher levels of psychological distress

across all three dimensions (depression, anxiety, and stress) compared to gifted students (p < 0.01).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Internet Addiction by Group

Group	Sample Size	Min Score	Max Score	Mean Score (SD)	p-value

Non-Gifted	152	20	99	47.03 (1.68)	<0.01*
Gifted	158	20	86	38.70 (1.23)	<0.01*

Non-gifted students exhibited higher levels of internet addiction than gifted students ($p<0.01$), confirming a significant difference between the two groups (Table 2).

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Cyberbullying by Group

Group	Sample Size	Min Score	Max Score	Mean Score (SD)	p-value
Non-Gifted	152	17	67	24.98 (8.76)	0.04*
Gifted	158	6	51	22.16 (6.71)	0.04*

The results reveal that non-gifted students report significantly higher cyberbullying tendencies than gifted students ($p = 0.04$), though the effect size is moderate (Table 3). Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among key study variables.

Table 4

Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variables	Depression	Anxiety	Stress	Psychological Distress	Internet Addiction	Cyberbullying
Depression	1.00					
Anxiety	0.757**	1.00				
Stress	0.830**	0.797**	1.00			
Psychological Distress	0.932**	0.887**	0.936**	1.00		
Internet Addiction	0.528**	0.463**	0.554**	0.557**	1.00	
Cyberbullying	0.386**	0.409**	0.388**	0.444**	0.578**	1.00

$p < 0.01$, indicating strong and statistically significant relationships among psychological distress, internet addiction, and cyberbullying. To test the mediating role of interpersonal functioning, SEM was conducted. The standardized path coefficients are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

SEM Path Analysis Results

Pathway	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient (β)	t-value	p-value
Psychological Distress → Depression	1.000	0.828	-	-
Psychological Distress → Anxiety	0.408	0.664	13.62	<0.01*
Psychological Distress → Stress	0.387	0.717	14.94	<0.01*
Psychological Distress → Interpersonal Functioning	0.629	0.378	7.62	<0.01*
Psychological Distress → Internet Addiction	0.608	0.334	6.87	<0.01*
Psychological Distress → Cyberbullying	0.361	0.244	4.25	<0.01*
Interpersonal Functioning → Internet Addiction	0.479	0.315	5.27	<0.01*
Interpersonal Functioning → Cyberbullying	0.411	0.298	4.78	<0.01*

The SEM model exhibited a good model fit, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Acceptable Range	Observed Value
χ^2/df	≤3	2.34
GFI	>0.90	0.925

NFI	>0.90	0.923
RMSEA	<0.08	0.058
CFI	>0.90	0.954
RFI	>0.90	0.908
IFI	>0.90	0.954
SRMR	<0.08	0.048

All indices fall within acceptable thresholds, indicating a well-fitted model. Mediation effects were tested using bootstrapped confidence intervals, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Mediation Analysis Results

Mediated Pathway	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient (β)	p-value
Psychological Distress → Interpersonal Functioning → Internet Addiction	0.301	0.119	<0.01*
Psychological Distress → Interpersonal Functioning → Cyberbullying	0.258	0.113	<0.01*

Results confirm that interpersonal functioning significantly mediates the relationship between psychological distress and both internet addiction and cyberbullying. Psychological distress significantly predicts internet addiction and cyberbullying (p<0.01). Gifted students show lower distress, internet addiction, and cyberbullying tendencies than non-gifted students. Interpersonal functioning acts as a partial mediator, buffering the effects of distress on problematic online behaviors. The SEM model exhibits a strong fit, supporting the hypothesized relationships.

Discussion and Conclusion

Addiction, in general, refers to the condition in which individuals develop physical and psychological dependence on a particular substance, especially narcotics. Many researchers also use the concept of addiction to explain certain suspicious behaviors since the signs and findings of addiction can also be observed in these cases. Non-substance addictions are classified as behavioral addictions, and internet addiction is considered one of these behavioral addictions (Hassanzadeh, 2007).

The results obtained from this research align with those of several other studies, including Huang and Zhou's (2010) study, which focused on internet addiction and the personal and social harms associated with excessive internet use. Sometimes, this condition is referred to as "virtual addiction," and cyberbullying, compared to traditional bullying, can have much stronger effects. Furthermore, the findings of this research are consistent with the prior studies (Asadi, 2003; Moradi, 2002; Nadimi, 2004).

However, although cyberbullying is a major concern for parents, some reports suggest that adolescents experience more bullying in school environments than in the virtual world (Lapidot-Lefler et al., 2014). In a meta-analysis study conducted by Modki et al. (2014), the prevalence of traditional bullying was reported to be twice that of cyberbullying (Modki, 2014). For instance, in the study by Egan, Daly, and Delaney (2016), psychological distress was characterized by symptoms such as low mood, anxiety, depression, and other psychiatric conditions (Egan et al., 2016).

Findings showed that a direct and significant relationship exists between psychological distress, internet addiction, and cyberbullying among both gifted and non-gifted students. Individuals with higher psychological distress levels also exhibit higher internet addiction and cyberbullying tendencies. Stockbridge, Wilson, and Pagan (2014) stated in their research that increased psychological distress is associated with more severe symptoms and a higher likelihood of developing mental disorders (Stockbridge et al., 2014). In explaining this finding, it can be stated that the virtual world of the internet, filled with imagination and stimulating emotions, as mentioned by Wallace, Thompson, and Murray (2011), offers a new identity to adolescents that involuntarily shapes their lives in space and time (Wallace et al., 2011). The interaction between the virtual world and reality constantly influences the user's psychological balance and exerts pressures that are not

merely "virtual," even though they originate from the online world.

The nature of chat rooms, email communication, and video interactions is entirely concealed and encrypted, making it unclear what values, perspectives, or content are being transmitted. Observing cybersexual content, for example, may have profound effects on the nervous and endocrine systems, eliciting particular reactions. Internet addiction may result in depression due to the sense of helplessness caused by excessive interaction with an imagined world. Many internet users may be unaware of their depression and social withdrawal, or even if they are aware, they might deny it.

Furthermore, researchers strongly emphasize that excessive internet use can significantly consume an individual's time, leading to isolation both at home and in the workplace. When young individuals engage in real-world interactions, they can gain numerous real-life experiences, communicate with diverse people daily, and actively participate in various activities. However, using the internet, they cannot physically embrace others, feel their warmth, or hear their real voices. The results obtained from this study are consistent with the findings of Asadi (2003), who studied adolescents aged 15-19 in Karaj and found a significant statistical difference between the depression and social withdrawal of internet-addicted adolescents and those who were not addicted to the internet (Asadi, 2003). Contrary to this, Kim et al. (2006) found no significant co-occurring psychological symptoms related to internet addiction in their study. They reported low levels of depression and suicidal thoughts, which are inconsistent with the present study's findings (Kim et al., 2006).

Findings confirmed that psychological distress factors can significantly predict internet addiction. Among these factors, stress was found to be the strongest predictor of internet addiction. Maiedfar et al. (2007) stated that individuals exhibiting addictive behaviors toward internet use tend to feel less responsible for their communities and surroundings, are more prone to social isolation, experience greater academic and occupational failures, receive less social support, and possess lower self-worth (Maiedfar, 2007).

Additionally, in another study, Lovgrove and Cornell (2012) found that internalizing and externalizing problems increase the risk of inappropriate internet use (Lovgrove & Cornell, 2012). Similar findings were

reported by Mehroof & Griffiths (2010) and Oktan (2011). These results indicate that internet-dependent individuals often struggle with emotional and internal conflicts, have difficulty controlling emotions (especially negative emotions), exhibit impulsive behaviors, suffer from low self-esteem, struggle with self-expression, experience inadequacy, and show lower coping skills in dealing with life challenges. The reciprocal relationship between internet addiction and psychological disorders suggests that individuals addicted to the internet gradually withdraw from real-world relationships, leading to isolation and psychological distress.

The findings of this research confirm that psychological distress components significantly predict cyberbullying behaviors. Among these factors, stress was found to be the strongest predictor of cyberbullying. The results of this study align with the findings of Ekin and Eskender (2011), who examined the relationship between internet addiction, depression, and anxiety in 300 university students. Their research revealed a significant correlation between internet addiction and symptoms of depression and stress (Ekin & Eskender, 2011).

Cyberbullying is defined as deliberate and repetitive harassment through electronic communication, targeting victims who cannot defend themselves. Bullies exhibit high emotional arousal, engage in disputes during games and sports, seek dominance over others, and attempt to control others through coercion. They tend to disregard rules, exhibit aggressive behavior towards peers, teachers, parents, and siblings, and lack remorse for harming others (Lapidot-Lefler, 2014; Piller, 2006). Numerous studies have demonstrated that bullies exhibit aggressive behaviors towards various individuals in their lives (Baldry, 2003). They have a positive attitude toward violence and easily become involved in aggressive situations (Roland & Galloway, 2004). Children involved in cyberbullying are less socially accepted but possess stronger leadership skills compared to their non-involved peers. They are often part of larger social groups (Nikifor, 2013).

This study confirms the mediating role of interpersonal functioning in the relationship between psychological distress and internet addiction. Similarly, Vahdani (2004) investigated the relationship between internet addiction and students' social adaptability, concluding that internet addiction negatively impacts

social adaptability factors, including social skills, empathy, emotional self-awareness, self-control, and social intelligence (Vahdani, 2004). These results align with the findings of the present study. Niemz (2005) found that individuals with excessive internet use tend to feel less responsible for their community, experience more social isolation, face greater academic and occupational failures, receive less social support, and have lower self-esteem (Niemz et al., 2005).

Findings indicate that there are significant differences in psychological distress between gifted and non-gifted adolescents. Non-gifted students experience higher psychological distress levels than their gifted counterparts. Studies by Batty and Mortensen (2005) suggest that children's intelligence is significantly related to their psychological well-being during their developmental stages (Batty & Mortensen, 2005). Other research (Baldry, 2003; Kim et al., 2006; Mitchell, 2007) supports these findings.

This study was conducted in Tehran and cannot be generalized to other cities. Some participants showed reluctance in completing the questionnaires, which posed a limitation to the study. The findings are limited to the period of data collection and may change with varying conditions and time. Future research should be conducted with a larger sample size for better comparison. Educational institutions should provide training on responsible internet use and raise awareness about the risks of cyberbullying. Psychological counseling and educational interventions should be incorporated into schools to promote healthy internet usage.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study included the fact that participation was entirely optional.

Transparency of Data

By the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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