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# The Mediating Role of Behavioral-Emotional Problems in the Relationship between Parental Psychological Control and Internet Addiction in University Students

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## Abstract

Internet addiction has become an increasing concern among university students because of its detrimental effects on psychological well-being and academic functioning. Family-related factors, particularly parental psychological control, may contribute to the development of problematic Internet use, while behavioral-emotional problems may explain the mechanisms underlying this relationship. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of behavioral-emotional problems in the relationship between parental psychological control and internet addiction among university students. This descriptive-correlational study was conducted among students of Khayyam University during the 2022–2023 academic year. Using the convenience sampling method, 244 students (180 females and 64 males) were recruited. Data were collected using Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT), the Dependency- and Achievement-Oriented Psychological Control Scale (DAPCS), and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation coefficients, and path analysis were performed using SPSS and LISREL software. The results indicated that parental psychological control was positively associated with both behavioral-emotional problems and internet addiction, while behavioral-emotional problems were also positively associated with internet addiction. Path analysis further revealed that, among the behavioral-emotional dimensions examined, only emotional problems significantly mediated the relationship between parental psychological control and internet addiction. The final model demonstrated that parental psychological control exerted both direct and indirect effects on internet addiction through emotional problems. These findings highlight the important role of parental psychological control and emotional problems in understanding internet addiction among university students. Specifically, psychologically controlling parenting may increase the risk of problematic internet use both directly and indirectly by contributing to emotional difficulties. Accordingly, interventions aimed at reducing internet addiction should not only promote healthier parent-child interactions but also focus on the early identification and management of emotional problems among university students.

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# Extended Abstract

## Introduction

Internet addiction is characterized by excessive and uncontrolled Internet use that interferes with individuals' daily functioning, psychological well-being, academic performance, and social relationships. As digital technologies continue to expand rapidly, internet addiction among university students has become a significant concern, as they increasingly depend on the Internet for educational, social, and recreational activities.

Previous studies have suggested that both family-related and individual psychological factors contribute to the development of problematic Internet use. Among family-related variables, parental psychological control has received considerable attention because it involves intrusive parenting practices, such as guilt induction, emotional manipulation, and restriction of children's psychological autonomy, all of which may negatively affect emotional adjustment. At the individual level, behavioral-emotional problems have also been associated with maladaptive coping strategies, including excessive Internet use.

Although previous research has reported significant associations among these variables, the psychological mechanisms through which parental psychological control contributes to internet addiction remain insufficiently understood. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the mediating role of behavioral-emotional problems in the relationship between parental psychological control and internet addiction among university students.

## Method

The present study employed a descriptive-correlational research design. The study population consisted of all students enrolled at Khayyam University during the 2022–2023 academic year. Following Guilford's recommendation that a sample size of approximately 200 participants is appropriate for correlational studies, 244 students (180 females and 64 males) were selected using the convenience sampling method.

Data were collected using three standardized instruments: Young's Internet Addiction Test (IAT; Young, 1999), the Dependency- and Achievement-Oriented Psychological Control Scale (DAPCS; Soenens et al., 2010), and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 2001).

After data collection, descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the participants' characteristics and study variables. Pearson's correlation coefficients were used to examine the relationships among the variables, and path analysis was conducted using SPSS and LISREL software to evaluate the proposed mediation model and estimate both the direct and indirect effects of parental psychological control on internet addiction through behavioral-emotional problems.

## Results

The results of Pearson's correlation analysis demonstrated significant positive relationships among the principal study variables. Specifically, parental psychological control was positively and significantly associated with internet addiction, suggesting that students who experienced higher levels of psychological control from their parents tended to report more problematic internet use. In addition, parental psychological control was positively associated with behavioral-emotional problems, indicating that psychologically controlling parenting may be associated with poorer psychological adjustment. Behavioral-

emotional problems were also positively associated with internet addiction, indicating that students experiencing greater emotional and behavioral difficulties were more likely to exhibit problematic patterns of Internet use.

To further examine these relationships, a path analysis model was specified with parental psychological control as the exogenous variable and internet addiction as the endogenous variable. The findings revealed that, among the behavioral-emotional dimensions included in the model, only emotional problems significantly mediated the relationship between parental psychological control and internet addiction. Accordingly, parental psychological control exerted both a direct effect on internet addiction and an indirect effect through emotional problems. However, the other behavioral-emotional dimensions did not demonstrate statistically significant mediating effects, suggesting that emotional difficulties constitute the primary psychological pathway linking parental psychological control to problematic Internet use among university students.

## Discussion

The findings of the present study highlight the importance of parental psychological control and behavioral-emotional problems in predicting internet addiction among university students. The results indicate that parental psychological control is associated with internet addiction, with emotional problems playing a significant mediating role. Specifically, psychologically controlling parenting may contribute to the development or exacerbation of internet addiction by increasing emotional difficulties among university students. The mediating role of emotional problems suggests that they represent an important psychological pathway linking family-related factors to problematic Internet use.

Accordingly, greater attention should be given to promoting healthy and supportive parent-child relationships and reducing psychologically controlling parenting practices. Moreover, the early identification and timely management of emotional problems among university students may help prevent or reduce internet addiction and improve their overall psychological well-being.

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