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ON ERASMUS+ AS A TOOL TO DETECT AND SOLVE INTERNET ADDICTION

Apostolos Syropoulos[1i], Lilija Dailidaitė[2], Esmeralda Cruz[3], Corina Ionescu[4], Aylin Kirişçi Sarıkaya[5], Renate Wachter[6]

[1]Greek Molecular Computing Group, Xanthi, Greece
[2]Alytaus profesinio rengimo centras, Alytus, Lithuania
[3]Instituto de Almalaguês, Almalaguês, Portugal
[4]Şcoala Gimnazială Specială nr. 2, Bucureşti, Romania
[5]Ahmet Cuhadaroğlu Ortaokulu, Kağıthane/İstanbul, Turkey
[6]Bundeshandelsakademie, Laa an der Thaya, Austria

Abstract:
Although Internet Addiction is not listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, it is an increasingly prevalent problem that affects a lot of people, including pupils. Erasmus+ Strategic partnerships, which are co-funded by the Erasmus+ Program of the European Union, allow schools to form partnerships that work on projects that are usually not covered by curricula. A group of six schools formed such a partnership to study the responsible use of the Internet. Quite naturally, one of the goals of the project was to see if pupils are addicted to Internet and if they are to help them with all possible ways. Indeed, we have found that some pupils suffer from Internet addiction and we helped the general population to become less addicted to Internet.

Keywords: internet addiction, Erasmus+ strategic partnerships, out-of-school learning

Introduction

The Erasmus+ Program gives the opportunity to schools, from EU countries and a few non-EU countries that participate in the program, to form *strategic partnerships* whose purpose is to present and study subjects that are usually not covered by curricula. Naturally, these subjects have to fall within the broad scope of this EU program. Such

[i] Correspondence: email asyropoulos@yahoo.com

subjects include new pedagogical methods, the Internet and its ramifications on modern society, sex equality, etc.

Six schools from Austria, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, and Turkey have participated in EU co-funded project entitled *Responsible European Digital Citizens* (REDIC for short). The aim of this project was to first examine what is a responsible use of the Internet and then to teach pupils how to become responsible Internet users. In addition, pupils should learn how to avoid traps and pitfalls. It turns out that only a user who is not addicted to Internet can be or become a responsible user. Thus it is necessary to conduct a survey to see to what extend pupils are addicted. Then one can design a strategy to combat Internet addiction (e.g., see [1, 2]). Clearly, at the end one should repeat the Internet addiction survey and compare the findings in order to see if the "remedy" had any effect. Unfortunately, these EU projects do not provide funds to directly affect a big number of pupils. Typically, the effects are indirect. Also, in many cases pupils that initially participated in the project finish school before the completion of the project. Thus, it is next to impossible to measure the effects of such a remedy to the general school population. Although it is out of question to provide quantitative results still one can provide qualitative results. For example, one can notice if there are any changes in certain practices (e.g., whether pupils reveal their passwords more easily than before or whether they are more cautious when posting things on social media, etc.).

Plan of the paper

In what follows, we first present our findings regarding Internet addiction. Next, we discuss what we did to combat Internet addition and what where the results of this endeavor.

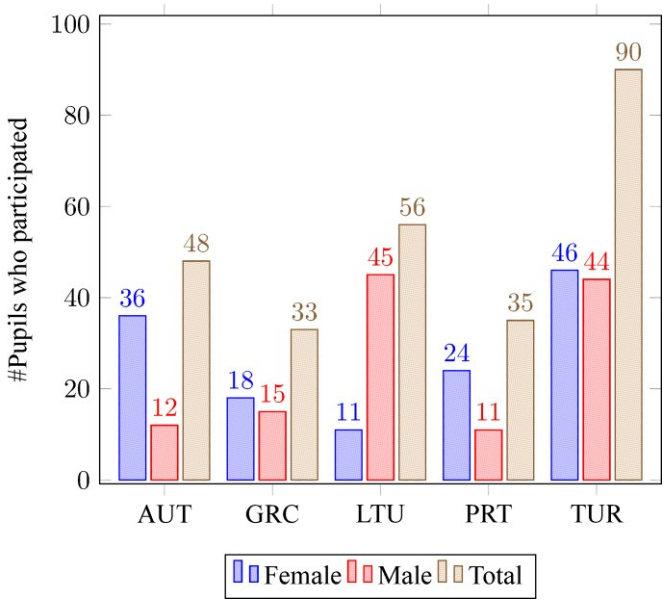

Figure 1: The number of pupils that participated in the survey from each school

Our Survey and its Results

In order to conduct a survey that would produce reliable results, we avoided to improvise and we had used the *Internet Addiction Test* [3]. Teachers from the participating school handed translated questionnaires to a number of pupils. The exact number of pupils depended on the total number of pupils of each participating school. In all questionnaires, pupils had to write down only their age and sex. For unknown reasons, some pupils did not answer to all questions of the questionnaire, so these questionnaires have been ignored. Also, we tried to convince pupils to be sincere. This was an important exercise since young people are afraid to reveal things about themselves because they think they would be stigmatized. Figure 1 shows the number of pupils that participated in the survey. Note that pupils from Romania did not participate since they are kids with various disabilities and for them being able to use the Internet is some sort of achievement.

It is known that a score above 50 is something that should make anyone to worry. Thus, it was particularly worrisome that a good number of students scored above 50 (see Figure 2). It is more worrisome that pupils from the Lithuanian and the Turkish schools reported particularly big scores (see Figure 3).

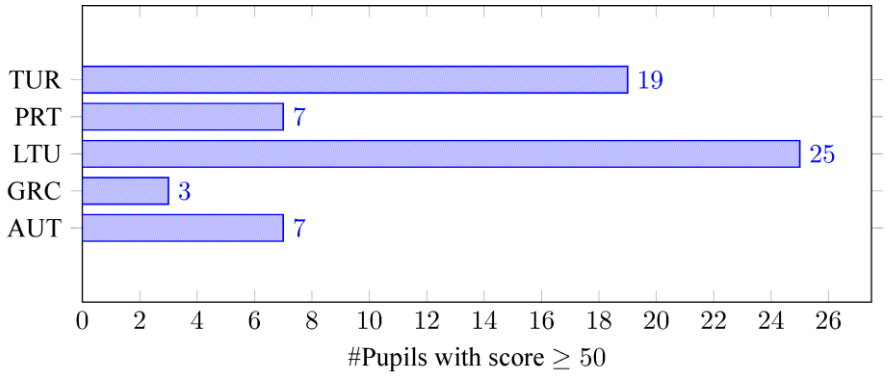

Figure 2: Number of pupils who scored more than 50 in the IAT

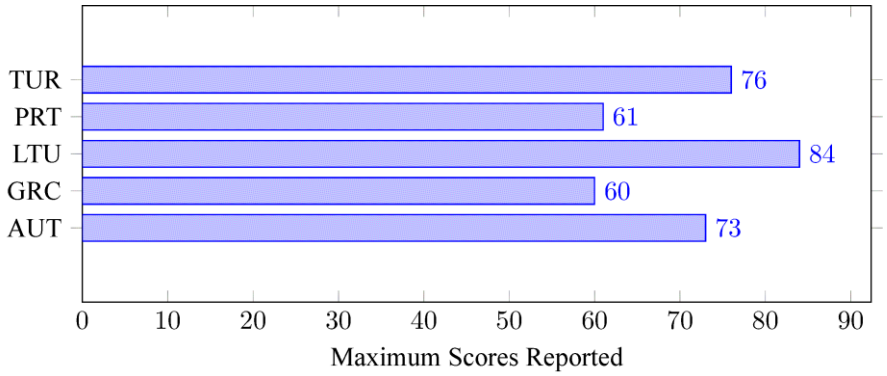

Figure 3: The maximum scores reported by each participating school

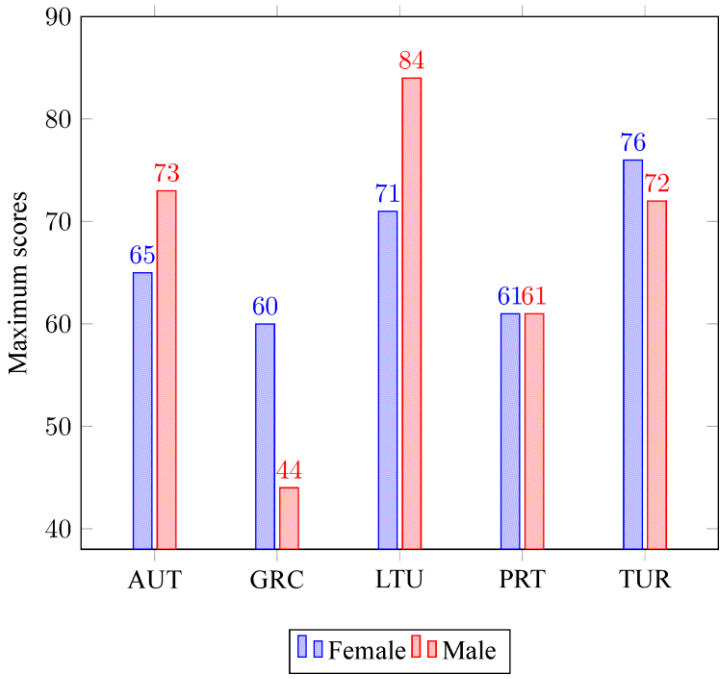

Figure 4: Maximum scores reported for males and females

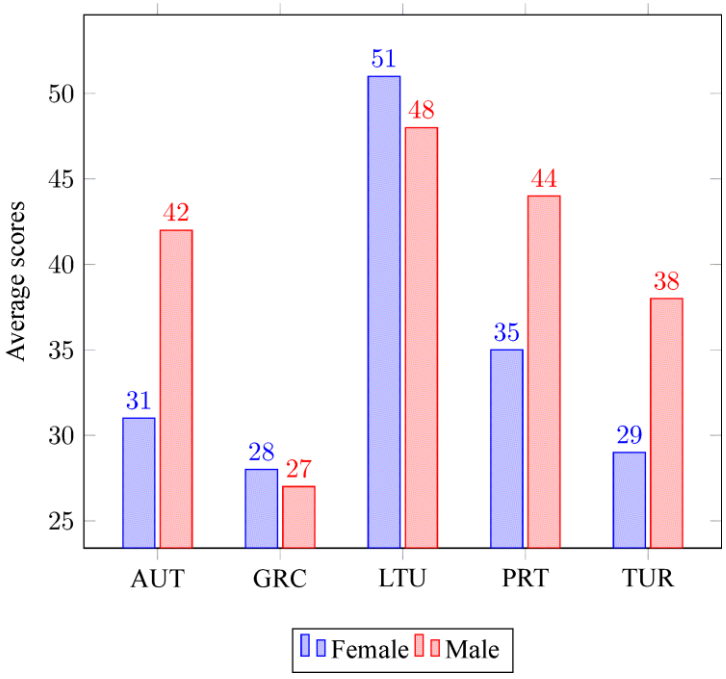

Figure 5: Average scores for reported scores for males and females

On the other hand, one can reasonably explain why this happens. For example, the Turkish school is located in Kağıthane, Istanbul, which is a very densely populated area with very few free open-air areas (e.g., parks). Therefore, most pupils have no chance to play outside with friends and schoolmates and so probably, they use the Internet as a virtual playground. Also, the pupils from Lithuania live in dormitories, since most of them are going to Alytus to study. Thus, one can say that they are hooked to the Internet because they want to be constantly in touch with family and friends. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is no problem! On the contrary, there is and

it should be faced. Figures 4 and 5 show maximum scores reported and the average scores, respectively. Also, Figures 6 and 7 show the mode of reported scores and the median scores, respectively. From these charts, one cannot easily draw any definitive conclusions; nevertheless, they have affected the activities of the project to a certain degree.

Handling the Situation

The teachers that participated in this project are neither psychologist nor psychiatrists; nevertheless, they wanted to help their pupils in all possible ways. Since not all participating schools have school psychologists, it was almost impossible to design a strategy to help pupils that are addicted to the Internet. In addition, teachers decided not to pinpoint any groups of pupils that shown signs of Internet addiction. Although participants did not have to write their name on the test, teachers knew which classes took the test. In addition, a good number of wrote their name on the test because they thought this was yet another school test. Thus, the only option left was to design activities that would educate pupils about the dangers, traps, and pitfalls of the Internet. Also, in these activities pupils learned that the Internet is a communication tool and not some alternative reality.

Pupils that directly participated in the project had the chance to take part in many activities that helped them to realize many things and so to become more responsible Internet users. However, the teachers wanted to reach as many pupils as possible so they had to organize special events in their schools. These events included talks to large group of pupils, games, design of posters, etc.

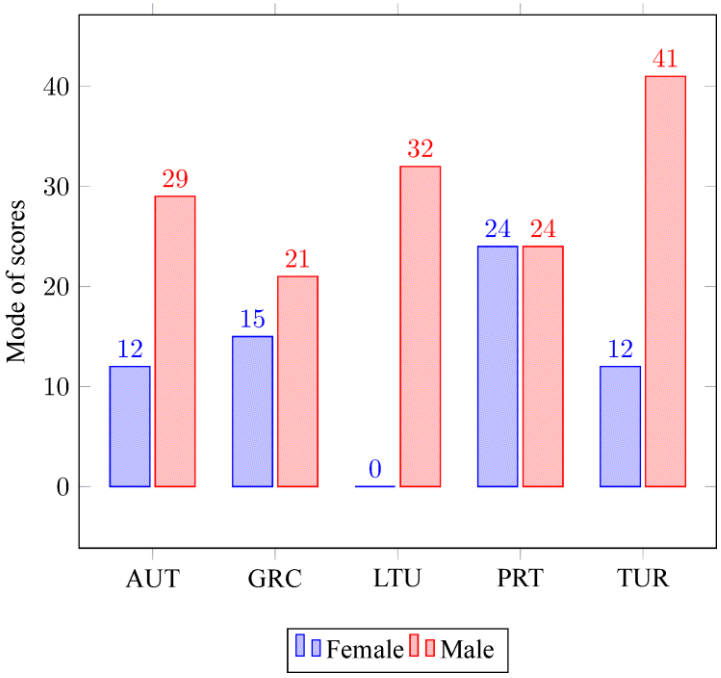

Figure 6: Mode of reported scores for males and females.

Note that the value 0 for girls from Lithuania means that corresponding value is not defined

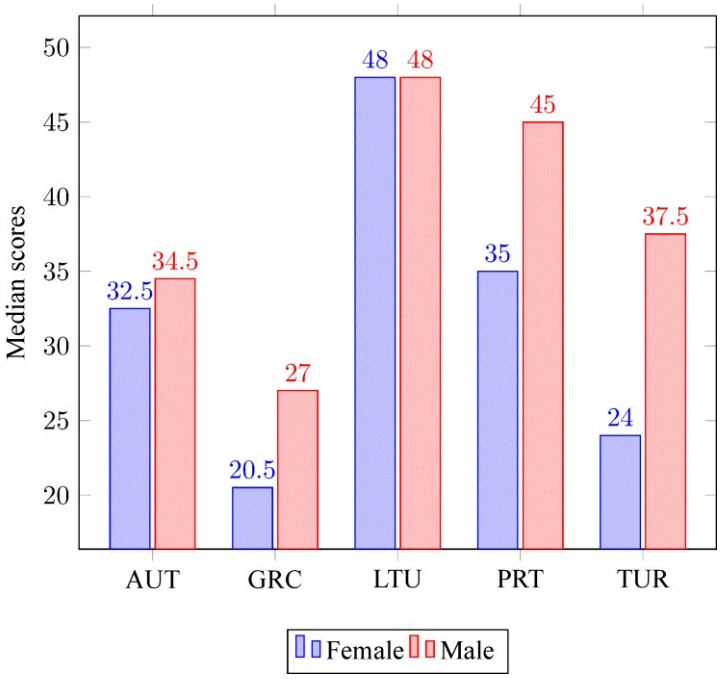

Figure 7: Median scores for reported scores for males and females

Teachers soon realized that these activities had some positive impact to the general population. For example, it was noticed that pupils became more careful with their passwords and also they became more careful with what they posted to social media. In addition, teachers explored the possibility of writing down another application for further funding activities dealing with the positive and necessary sides of the Internet. We think that taking pupils' attention away from the negative sides and putting emphasis more on the positive sides will have a very positive impact on them.

Conclusions

The Erasmus+ program gives the opportunity to schools to form strategic partnerships and work on projects that fall within the scope of the program. The EU is favoring projects that deal with new pedagogical methods, the use of technology innovation in general. The proper use of the Internet falls within the scope of the program and the schools that participated in the REDIC project had the chance to work on various aspects of Internet use including Internet addiction. The project gave us the unique opportunity to talk openly about Internet addiction and help pupils overcome this difficult addiction.

Acknowledgment

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