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FAMILY SUPPORT, PARENTS EMPLOYMENT AND INTERNALIZING PROBLEMS AT SCHOOL AGED CHILDREN IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Abstract: The well-being of young people, especially teenagers, is one of the phenomena that affects not only their individual lives in the future, but also societies as a whole. Family support appears as a very important factor in the psychosocial adjustment but also in the mental health of adolescents. More specifically, the more parents communicate with their children, the less the youth express externalizing problems.

The purpose of this study is to predict internalizing problems in school-aged youth in the Republic of North Macedonia based on social media use and family support as well as parental employment.

A total of 4481 teenagers aged 11, 13, and 15 years participated in this study, young people who learn in the two dominant languages in Macedonia, respectively, 70% of young people who learn in the Macedonian language of instruction and 30% who learn in Albanian language of instruction. Also, 50.4% of the subjects were male and 49.6% were female. The data presented are part of the cross-sectional study "Health and Behavior of School-aged Youth", collected during 2018.

The results of the research showed that family support and the use of social media predict internalizing problems in adolescents. Also, the data show differences in the employment of parents and the use of social media between Albanian and Macedonian youth.

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Keywords: *Internalizing problems, family support, social media*

Introduction

The specific problem addressed in this study is important as it deals with very current issues such as the internalization of mental health among young people who learn in Macedonian and Albanian languages in the Republic of North Macedonia based on its risk potentials such as: communication with parents, addiction to social networks and parental employment.

In addition to the many studies that talk about the many risks that threaten the mental health of young people, this study aims to include the need to resolve any discrepancies from the results of past work related to the mental health (internalizing) of young people by solving in this way also many social problems and controversial issues for the context where the research was carried out and at the same time to expand the scope and theoretical scientific contribution.

The mental health of young people is related to many different factors, one of the important factors is their communication with the family. Based on the Circle Model, communication within the family is characterized as one of the most important dimensions, where according to the model in question, this type of communication should not appear in a rigid form, but not too tolerant.¹ Communication within the family, respectively communication between parents and children means their focus on listening effectively, possessing the skills to communicate, clarity during communication and mutual respect.²

Different researchers share similar thoughts about family communication, identifying it as an act that means sharing information through words, gestures and various expressions,^{3 4} but this is not enough, during communication it is not enough only conveying messages, but also being sensitive and giving support to find alternatives regarding the preoccupation of young people. One of the goals of the act of communication should be to influence the behavior of the other while simultaneously solving the disturbing

¹ Olson, D.H., Russell, C.S. & Sprenkle, D.H. (1989). Circumplex Model: Systemic assessment and treatment of families. New York: Haworth Press

² J. Olson H. David. (1999). Circumplex Model of Marital & Family Systems. Journal of Family Therapy, p.5 Tabak et al. 23

³ Buck, R. (1984). The communications of emotion. New York, NY: Guilford

⁴ Galvin, K. M., & Brommel, B. J. (1982). Family communication: cohesion and change. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman

problem.⁵ Also, positive communication means exchanging clear messages that contain empathy, provide support and show an effective ability to solve problems.⁶

Communication between children and parents changes as the child grows. Parent-child relationships evolve from an asymmetric relationship (which is characteristic of childhood) to a more symmetrical adolescent/parent relationship.⁷ ⁸It should always be taken into account that this change in communication between teenagers and parents is a consequence of the critical thinking of teenagers, where discussions and negotiations between them are already very present. Optimal parent-adolescent communication methods should provide youth with a sense of acceptance and emotional support, but only to the extent that this does not interfere with their need for autonomy.⁹

Patterns that constitute developmental changes in young adolescents (such as the development of logical, critical thinking), in particular, discussion and negotiation, become the most effective forms of communication. Optimal parent-adolescent communication methods should provide youth with a sense of acceptance and emotional support, but only to the extent that this does not interfere with their need for autonomy.

Also, parental unemployment can be negatively related to the mental health of young people. Some of the researchers emphasize that younger children can be affected by their parents' unemployment, if the family is affected and shows it,¹⁰ while in late adolescence children from low-income

⁵ Blechman, E. A. (1990). A new look at emotions and the family: A model of effective family Communications. In E. A. Blechman (Ed.), *Emotions and the family: For the better or for worse* (pp. 201-224). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum

⁶ Olson, D. H., Russell, C. S., & Sprenkle, D. H. (1983). Circumplex model of marital and family system: VI theoretical update. *Family Process*, 22, 69-83

⁷ Anderson, S. A., & Sabatelli, R. M. (1990). Differentiating, differentiation and individuation: Conceptual and operational challenges. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 18, 32-50. doi:10.1080/01926189008250790

⁸ Collins, W. A. (1995). Relationships and development: Family adaptation to individual change. In S. Shulman (Eds.), *Close relationships and socio-emotional development* (pp. 128-155). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

⁹ Tabak, I., Mazur, J., Granado-Alcon, M.C., Orkenyj, A., Aasvee, Z.K. & Moreno, C (2012). Examining Trends in Parent-Child Communication in Europe Over 12 Years. [The Journal of Early Adolescence](#) 32(1):26-54. DOI:[10.1177/0272431611419509](#)

¹⁰ Conger, R. D., Conger, K. J., Elder, G. H., Lorenz, F. O., Simons, R. L., & Whitbeck, L. B. (1993). Family economic stress and adjustment of early adolescent girls. *Developmental Psychology*, 29(2), 206–219. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.29.2.206>

families show depression. The results of the study of some other authors¹¹, have gone even beyond the unemployment of the parents, by highlighting that although adolescents are in transition between childhood and adulthood, they can be independently affected by high national unemployment, due to worries about their family or their future, and this can further burden their mental health.

Research shows significant use of the Internet by young people, but differs in finding gender differences. In this regard, the data are inconsistent. Some researchers report that there are no significant differences in the use of the Internet between girls and boys¹², while others report a greater use of the Internet in favor of boys^{13 14}. Regarding the addiction of young people to the use of social networks, the results of a study showed that children who spent most of their free time on the Internet are children of those families who communicate very little with their children and negligent parents in managing their children's Internet use time. The results of this study support the idea that easy access to the Internet that is influenced by family attitudes and communications increases the time spent on Internet and all of this increases Internet addiction and risk for a psychological well-being¹⁵. Researchers argue that using the Internet five or more hours a day is one of the risk factors for depression in late adolescence¹⁶.

In order to address the issues arising from the theory and arguments of the aforementioned studies, the study in question aims to predict the internalization of problems among school-age youth in the Republic of North Macedonia based on the dependence of social networks, family support, parental employment, gender as well as the language in which they learn.

¹¹ Frasquilho D, de Matos MG, Gaspar T, Caldas de Almeida JM. (2016). Young people's well-being and the economic crisis: How does parental unemployment and family wealth affect the downturn experience? *Child Youth Serv Rev*; 69(Supplement C):219–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2016.08.018>

¹² Dereli. F., Yilmaz, M., (2016) Determination of Internet Addiction and the Attitudes of Children's Families. *IOSR Journal of Nursing and Health Science (IOSR-JNHS)* e-ISSN: 2320–1959.p- ISSN: 2320–1940 Volume 5, Issue 5 Ver. VI (Sep. - Oct. 2016), 51-58 www.iosrjournals.org

¹³ Ibid 18, 19

¹⁴ Ibid 18, 19

¹⁵ Ibid 12

¹⁶ Ibid 13

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The 2018 study on the healthy behaviors of school-aged youth (HBSC) in North Macedonia was conducted with the participation of 4,481 youth as a national sample (49.6% of them female and 50.4% male). The pooled sample is categorized by age of 11, 13 and 15 years, the selection of which is made according to weighted probability methods to obtain a balanced representation of the characteristics of the school population, such as province/territory, type of public school (general/professional), the language of instruction, where specifically the two most represented teaching languages, Macedonian and Albanian, were taken. As for the sample that studies in the Macedonian language of instruction, a total of 68.5% of them are at the age of 11, 69.1% at the age of 13 and 71.5% at the age of 15. As for the language of instruction in Albanian, 31.5% of the sample are at the age of 11, 30.9% at the age of 13 and 28.5% at the age of 15.

Students from private schools, special needs schools and schools for young people in detention were excluded. In order to respect the ethical procedures of the research, permission was first obtained from the schools through the relevant institutions and then the consent form of the parents was distributed to all the students as well as the willingness of the young people to participate.

2.2 Methods and procedures

The HBSC survey was administered in classroom settings. The questionnaire measured sociodemographic information and various health behaviors, taking approximately 45 minutes to complete. There are a total of 20 questions taken from the cross-sectional study: Health and behavior of school-aged youth in 2018 (Table 1).

Seven items measure mental health, respectively internalizing mental health problems (e.g. During the last 6 months how often do you experience the conditions: low mood...; $\alpha=.82$.) Temporal frequencies were summed on a scale from 1 (Almost every day) to 5 (Rarely or never). Also, young people's communication with their parents was measured by four items (e.g. For each statement, mark how much you agree or disagree: with my family I can talk about my problems... $\alpha=.84$) Frequencies ranged from 1 (Completely disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). Addiction to the use of social networks was measured with nine items (e.g. During the past year, did it happen to you... not thinking about anything except when you go online... $\alpha=.73$), the answers ranged from yes and no.

Also, the employment of the parents, in particular for the father and the mother, was measured with the question: Is your mother/father employed? Answer options ranged from yes and no.

Table 1. Questions taken from the cross-sectional study: Health and behavior of school-age youth in 2018, conducted in the Republic of North Macedonia

a. Internalizing problems
1. During the last 6 months, how often do you experience the conditions: Headache (a)
2. During the last 6 months, how often do you experience the conditions: Abdominal pain (a)
3. During the last 6 months, how often do you experience the conditions: Back pain (a)
4. During the last 6 months, how often do you experience the conditions: Bad mood (a)
5. During the last 6 months, how often do you experience the conditions: Irritation (a)
6. During the last 6 months, how often do you experience the conditions: Nervous/Tension/Anxiety(a)
7. During the last 6 months, how often do you experience the following conditions: difficulties to sleep(a)
b. Communication with parents
1. My family really tries to help me (b)
2. I get help from my family and the emotional support I need (b)
3. I can talk with my family about my problems (b)
4. My family will help me make decisions (b)
c. Addiction to social networks
1. during the past year, have you...realized that you regularly can't think about anything other than when you're going to use social media again (c)
2. ...felt regularly dissatisfaction because you wanted to spend more time on social media (c)
3. ...felt often negative emotions when you can't use social media (c)
4. ...tried to spend less time on social media, but without success (c)
5. ...regularly neglected other activities (e.g. hobbies, sports) because you wanted to you use social media (c)

6. ...regularly had quarrels with others due to the use of social media (c)
7. ...regularly lied to parents or friends for the amount of time spent on social media (c)
8. ...often used social media to escape negative feelings (c)
9. ...had serious conflicts with your parents, brothers or sisters due to the use of social media (c)
d. Employment of parents
1. Is your mother/father employed?(d)

HBSC - Health Behavior in School-aged Children.

- a. Response options: 1 = Almost every day; 2 = More than once a week; 3 = Almost every week; 4 = Almost every month; 5 = Rarely or never
- b. Response options: 1 = Completely disagree...7 = Completely agree
- c. Response options: 1 = No; 2 = Yes
- d. Response options: 1 = No; 2 = Yes

2.3 Data analysis

The SPSS statistical package, version 23, was used for the data analysis, first the averages of the variables were presented and then the correlation of the variables was carried out, while the prediction of the effects of communication between parents and children, employment of parents, dependence on social networks in internalizing mental problems were tested using multiple linear regression analysis.

Results

The statistical descriptions of the variables as well as the correlation between them are presented in Table 2. The reported average of internalization is 15.87 (Min=7, Max=35, SD=6.77), lower than the expected average, communication with family has an average 25.99 (Min=4, Max=28, SD=4.16), which is a higher average than expected, while the average dependence is 2.41 (Min=0, Max=9, SD=2.16), lower than expected. Also, the following table shows a significant but weak relationship with a negative direction between internalization and communication with parents ($r=-.328$), medium relationship with addiction to networks ($r=.415$). Addiction also has a significant, but weak, negative relationship with communication with parents ($r=-.267$).

Table 2. Means of variables and correlation between them

variables	Mean	SD	Max	Min	Correlations		
					1	2	3
Internalization	15.87	6.769	35	7	-		
Communication with parents	25.99	4.165	28.00	4.00	-.328**	-	
Addiction to networks	2.41	2.164	9	0	.415**	-.267**	-

All correlations significant ($p < .01$).

Max=maximum; Min=minimum; SE= standard deviation

Frequencies of mother's employment show statistically significant differences between young people learning in Macedonian and Albanian language of instruction. The frequency of unemployed mothers among young people learning in the Macedonian language is 19.9%, while for young people learning in the Albanian language it is 74.1%, obvious differences are also observed among employed mothers, 80.1% of them are mothers of young people who learn in the Macedonian language of instruction, while 25.9% of young people who learn in Albanian language of instruction have employed mothers.

As for the father's employment frequencies, there are no statistically significant differences between young people who learn in Macedonian and Albanian. About 7.6% of young people learning in Macedonian language of instruction and 8.9% in Albanian language of instruction have unemployed fathers, while most of them, including 92.4% of young people learning in Macedonian language and 91.1% in Albanian language, have fathers employed.

As for the dependence on social networks among young people who learn in Macedonian and Albanian languages of instruction, from the data in Table 3 it can be seen that there are differences and that this dependence is more pronounced among young Albanians even in the four moments presented (they often felt bad when they did not use the Internet, often neglected activities other than using social networks, regularly got busy with others because of using social networks, and regularly lied to parents about the time spent on social networks).

Table 3. Addiction to social networks among young people learning in Macedonian and Albanian

		Macedonian language.	Albanian language
You have often felt bad when you did not use the Internet	num. NO	2128 71.7%	763 59.2%
	num. YES	838 28.3%	525 40.8%
Often you have neglected other activities just to use social networks	num. NO	2273 77.6%	827 65.3%
	num. YES	657 22.4%	440 34.7%
You are regularly busy with others due to the use of social networks	num. NO	2485 84.7%	1010 79.4%
	num. YES	448 15.3%	262 20.6%
You regularly lied to your parents about the time you spent on social networks	num. NO	2628 89.5%	1079 84.4%
	num. YES	308 10.5%	200 15.6%

Based on the analysis of rank means and Mann-Whitney U for mother's and father's employment, the findings showed that the rank means of employed mothers (MR=2192.29) provide more support and communicate more with their children than unemployed mothers. (MR=2104.10), (U=-2.609,p=.009). The rank averages show that young people with unemployed fathers (MR=2170.06) express greater dependence on networks than those with employed fathers (MR=1990.11), (U=-2.621, p=.009).

The data in this study show no statistically significant differences in social networking addiction by gender. Boys (MR=2091.72), and girls

(MR=2062.31), (U=-.801, p=.423) do not differ in addiction to social networks.

Multiple linear regression was used to predict internalizing problems based on social network dependency, communication with parents, parental employment, language of instruction, and gender (Table 4). This analysis found that predictors of internalization are addiction to the use of social networks (b= .33, t= 12.56, p<.001), communication with parents (b= -.224, t= - 8.593, p<.001) and gender (b= .160, t= - 6.211, p<.001) with a statistically significant pattern [F(6, 117)=64.187, p<.001, with R²=.246].

Table 4. Correlation between internalization, dependence, employment, communication and language

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Say.
	b	std. error	beta		
(Constant)	18.431	1.590		11.594	.000
Addiction to networks	.978	.078	.334	12.565	.000
Father's employment	-.2412	.609	-.010	-.395	.693
Mother's employment	.570	.441	.040	1.293	.196
Teaching language	.353	.472	.023	.747	.455
Communication with parents	-.363	.042	-.224	-8.593	.000
gender	2.174	.350	.160	6.211	.000

Conclusions

Starting from the aim and the main hypothesis of the study that, dependence on social networks, communication with parents, parents' employment and the language in which they learn are predictors of internalizing problems in school-age youth in the Republic of North Macedonia, except significant but moderate relationship between the variables, from the multiple linear regression analysis, addiction to social networks turned out to be one of the risks of internalization among young

people. Similar results were found with the study conducted with students of the University of Bangladesh, where it was found that the higher the dependence on networks, the more internalizing problems spread among young people such as: irritation, nervousness, anger.¹⁷ In particular, the results of our study showed that the addiction to social networks is more present among young people who learn in the Albanian language than among young people who learn in the Macedonian language.

The study also found that the quality of parents' communication or support with their children was predictive of internalizing problems among school-aged youth in the Republic of North Macedonia. Even the earliest studies have confirmed that communication with parents is an important supportive indicator for youth well-being.¹⁸ In this case, young people are less likely to be part of unhealthy behaviors.¹⁹

Despite the fact that parental employment through linear regression analysis was not shown to be a significant predictor of internalizing problems in youth, data from the analysis of differences showed that employed mothers communicate and provide more support to their children in contrast from the fathers. This can be justified by the idea that employed mothers are more motivated to manage the part of time left from work by communicating with their children, in contrast to unemployed mothers. Regarding the employment of fathers, young people with unemployed fathers have expressed more addiction to the use of social networks than young people with employed fathers. This can be justified by the fact that the more dissatisfied fathers feel with their status as unemployed, the more the communication with their children fades and the more the child replaces this lack of communication with the use of the Internet. Based on other relevant studies, the work status of parents can greatly affect parent-child communication.²⁰ In addition to influencing communication, parental employment is also strongly related to

¹⁷ Ibin 13

¹⁸ Betul, A. & Oztutuncu, O. (2001). Examination of adolescents' negative thoughts, depressive mood, and family environment. *Adolescence, flight*, 36, no. 141. 77.

¹⁹ Zambon, A., Boyce, W., Cois, E., Currie, C., Lemma, P., Dalmasso, P., et al. (2006). Do welfare regimes mediate the effect of socio-economic position on health in adolescence? A cross-national comparison in Europe, North America and Israel. *International Journal of Health Services*, 36, 309–329.

²⁰ Evans, G. W. (2004). The environment of childhood poverty. *American psychologist*, 59(2), 77.

young people's addiction to social networks²¹ and all this reflects a serious mental health condition.

Interpretation of study results takes into account any potential threats that may affect its internal validity. One of the limitations of the study may be the sincerity of the subjects when completing the questionnaire. Another limitation of the study is the measurement of more internalizing mental health problems, as well as their impact from more potential risk factors besides communication with parents, dependence on social networks and parental employment. Also, from the study in question, problems that remain unsolved because the study did not address them are information on family characteristics such as: parenting practices, parental monitoring, which could vary communication with their children, addiction to social networks of their children and all this in the healthy behaviors of young people.

Strengths of the study include its large representative sample of adolescents for the Republic of North Macedonia and assessments of positive and negative aspects of mental health. The findings of the study, in addition to showing that internalizing problems or mental health have a statistically significant relationship with parental communication and addiction to social networks, the last two variables also showed that they are also predictors of internalizing problems and risky/healthy behaviors in the young people.

For all researchers and scientific contributions, the findings of the study will serve as a kind of monitoring to confirm that the internalization of mental problems in young people can be predicted by the communication of parents and the dependence of social networks.

For health care providers and practitioners, the findings of this study will encourage the development of strategies for preventing risks and maintaining mental health in young people, where through different platforms, measures can be taken to increase communication between parents and their children. in order to reduce the dependence on networks and increase the quality of mental health.

²¹ Bradley, R.H & Corwyn, R. (2022). Socioeconomic Status and Child Development. *Annual Review of Psychology* 53(1):371-99.
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