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An Ethnographic Inquiry on Internet Cafés within the Context of Turkish Youth Culture

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Abstract

Contemporary studies have become interested in determining transformative effects of information and communication technologies on youngsters' social and cultural identity developments. Internet cafés are techno-social spaces where people access to digital media and interact with global cultural flows. Such interactions are profound because they fundamentally challenge diverse locality and traditional values. In this paper, we reports the findings of ethnographic research study as a part graduate thesis project about Internet cafés in Turkey. Our purpose was to find out how Internet cafés are being used by Turkish youth and how these sites affect their social, cultural, and educational experiences. We conducted intensive observations in three Internet cafés and semi-structured interviews with four college students. The results show that Internet cafés are being used mostly by male youngsters mostly for entertainment and communication purposes. Internet café usage are closely related to the emergence of techno-consumerist youth culture or lifestyle. This suggests that technology is more than a simple and neutral instrument that constitutes complex social and cultural dimensions which may involve profound alterations for people lives.

Key words: Internet cafés, Cyberspace, Global media, Youth development, Socialization

Introduction

Does the Internet threaten traditional social structures or politics? Does it undermine family relations? Does it replace other conventional youth activities or outlets? Does it change youth's life style or local cultural attachment? These are the questions and concerns that some of the nations around the world, even those that can be considered more politically open societies, have in common in the process of negotiating challenges sustained by the global diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICT). They are particularly worried about these global pressures with regards to preserving cultural heritage, traditions, national integrity, identity, sovereignty and so on. ICT plays an important role in this situation as they accelerate and foster the flows of global and foreign media, capital, culture, and ideas and make them available to society-at-large (Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 1996). The proliferation of ICT has influenced many aspects of the lives of young people through creating new social and cultural spaces that have challenged long-established ways of socialization.

Internet cafés are techno-social spaces where people access to ICT and interact with global cultural flows. Annual ICT usage surveys conducted by Turkish Statistic Institution (TUIK) have showed that Internet cafés covers about one fifth of Internet usage in Turkey (TUIK, 2010). A research study on Turkish students between the age of 12 and 18 concluded that almost three quarter of them visited Internet cafés regularly (Tahiroglu, Celik, Uzel, Ozcan, & Avci, 2008). In another study, Gurol and Sevindik (2007) found that more than half of the café patrons were teenagers. The proliferation of Internet café usage among Turkish youth has raised concerns about their identity development. Critics have complained that Turkish youth are wasting their precious time and money on some visual content and experiences that may damage their development (Andic, 2003; Yesil, 2003). Therefore, this research study focused on Internet cafés because, as places, they have become popular places for Turkish youth to socialize, acquire access to the Internet, and experience a sense of global connectedness. The study aimed to find out how Internet cafés are being used by Turkish youth and how

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these sites act as places of negotiation with global media flows and thus affect their social, cultural, and educational experiences.

The Internet Café Phenomenon

The idea of Internet café phenomena was born in the early 1990s when the first Internet café, Cyberia, opened in London. Eventually, the phenomenon has spread out to all over the world from city centers to small villages. It has been embraced as a place to catch up with the information age or link the local to a global information society, and was quickly adopted especially by young people. Internet cafés are commercial places providing Internet access to individuals for a reasonable fee. Liff and Laegran (2003) summarized a set of research studies conducted on Internet cafés in both the USA and European countries such as Norway, Finland, and UK, and concluded that these places were assessed primarily as social and cultural ventures rather than just commercial ones. Thus, Internet cafés are seen as finding innovative ways of undertaking social objectives and developing cultural spaces in both local and global communities.

Based on her observations of several Internet cafés located in the cities of England, Clyde (1999) states that Internet cafés usually provide access to web and electronic mail. Most also provide telnet, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), file transfer protocol (ftp), computer conferencing, e-mail and web accounts for users' web pages, games and other computer software. Some also offer formal courses or manuals to users who do not have Internet skills. They attract a regular clientele of teenagers from the local schools and are sometimes booked by nearby schools to work through a set of activities. Wakeford (1999) defined Internet cafés as social and material achievements combining several kinds of objects and experiences, only some of which are "cyber" or "virtual" in any straightforward way. She located the Internet café at the intersection of the three landscapes: *online landscapes* which are frequently described as "cyberspace" or "virtual" spaces in which users are involved in interactions with others; *expert landscapes* which refers to the technical expertise to set up the network and ensure compatibility of hardware and software configurations; and *translational landscapes* where the material infrastructure of the Internet is transformed into a usable interface enabling users to participate in online landscapes.

Laegran (2002) studied youth's usage of two Internet cafés located in two different villages in rural areas of Norway. She approached Internet cafés as "technospaces" produced by an intersection of human experience and technology, which entwine the technical, social and spatial. She analyzed how the Internet was interpreted and given different symbolic and utility values among youth. In the first village, the study revealed that the Internet was used as a vehicle to reach beyond the local context. The frequent type of activities by young people included (a) sending e-mail to friends living in other parts of the country or abroad, (b) joining English-language chat rooms with participants from all over the world, (c) surfing web sites often related to music, films and popular topics, and (d) getting information about schools abroad and places they would like to visit. As can be seen in these activities the Internet is primarily used for global issues. In the second village, however, youths used the Internet to extend their repertoire of identities as well as their network in the local community, and were less interested in a global reach.

Liff and Steward (2003) analyzed Internet cafés in the UK and in the wider Los Angeles area of the US by means of using Foucault's concept of "heterotopia", and theorized that the juxtaposition of the real social setting and the virtual arena that includes representations of real places and people produces distinctive opportunities that could be fully realized as long as there is an effective boundary spanning between the real social activities of the café and virtual participation in the Internet. They argue that most of the cybercafés share the characteristics of a heterotopian site, and this can be fully realized only if the café element encourages a certain type of sociality, and establishes a community of users with a shared sense of identity. They also conclude that this community is vital for the development of particular types of Internet usage since it forms communities of practice that can attract new users and support learning.

Method

Research Design and Settings

We employed ethnographic research approach within the qualitative methodology because our purpose was to gather insightful and descriptive information about youth behavior and beliefs with regards to Internet café culture in Turkey. Qualitative inquiry is an interpretive and naturalistic analysis in which the researcher can use

multiple ways to explore the phenomenon under study in its natural settings and make sense of them in terms of meanings people bring to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The study was conducted in the city of Konya that hosts a number of Internet cafés and several universities in Turkey accommodating around 80,000 students. The city is located at the center of the country (Anatolia) and one of the largest cities with a population of more than one million people.

In a qualitative research study, the selection of a suitable qualitative methodological tool is quite a difficult task and hardly straightforward, as opposed to quantitative techniques (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Nevertheless, we have developed a plan that guided data gathering and analysis process due to the time and budget limitations. In ethnography, the investigator needs to become a part of the phenomenon in question because it cannot be observed from outside of the context within which it exists. S/he also makes conversations with knowledgeable informants. Therefore, we visited several internet cafés, made observations, took notes, and talked to voluntary users about how and why they use these places, and sought to understand their feelings and opinions regarding how Internet café use may affect their social, cultural and educational experiences. All data were collected in 2006. The observations and interviews were conducted in Turkish language by the first author. Such a data triangulation increased the probability of producing credible findings and thus contributed to the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Internet Café Observations

Prior to conducting any observations, a total of 20 Internet cafés located in the commercial and rural areas were visited. Among these, two in the commercial areas and one in a rural area were selected for intensive observation to get the most diverse information possible. To ensure confidentiality, these cafés will be identified as Internet Café A, B and C respectively in the following chapters. Observations were conducted after getting permission from the café owners or managers. Each café was observed in the morning, afternoon and evening on each day of the week over a period of two months. We spent sufficient time on intensive observations to increase the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The observations lasted from one to two hours and were executed and guided by using the Internet Café Observation Template (see Appendix A). This template helped us to organize the observation but did not restrict what to observe. The first author visited the cafes like a customer, used one of the computer stations, observed the cafe community, and took field notes by using the html-form version of the template.

During the observation, detailed information was gathered in the following areas: (a) physical information such as, location and surroundings, light and smell, ambient sound or music, types of program on TV or video if exist, decoration, furniture arrangements, cultural icons related popular/western or traditional culture etc., (b) services including internet access fee, working hours, type of advertisement, type of food or drink available, and other business or socio-cultural activities, (c) technical aspects such as, number of computer stations, available hardware and software, connection speed and technical support, (d) user characteristics regarding number of users, gender distribution, age range, occupation, and ownership of other technology at present, (e) usage patterns including educational/informational, communication, entertainment, business use of the Internet as well as other social activities if exist. While observing these issues, we also gave attention to any appropriation of western or hybrid cultural forms and expressions to capture the aesthetic sensibility or cultural signifiers that may indicate a shift from traditional cultural codes to more popular/western ones.

In-depth Interviews with College Students

We conducted semi-structured interviews as a part of data collection. The interviewees were four college students, three male and one female, who indicated their willingness to participate in this interview protocol while completing a questionnaire in our thesis project. Table 1 summarizes general demographic information about the interviewees. In order to protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of real names.

Table 1. Characteristics of interviewees

Name	Gender	Age	Major	Status
Mehmet	Male	17	Math Education	Freshman
Fatih	Male	18	Social Studies Education	Sophomore
Ahmet	Male	20	Science Education	Senior
Fatma	Female	18	Elementary Education	Sophomore

The first participant was Mehmet. He was 17 and had just graduated from high school and started his undergraduate education in Math Education. Mehmet was a resident of Konya living with his parents in their own apartment. He mentioned that Internet cafés were his favorite places where he goes several times a week for a weekly total of seven to ten hours. He had also a computer with an Internet connection at home.

The second interviewee was Fatih. He was 18 years old and a second-year college student majoring in Social Studies Education. Fatih was originally from Central Anatolian region and was staying in the dormitory in the city of Konya. Fatih visited Internet cafés several times a week and spent at least five hours per week. He had a computer at home but no Internet connection.

The third interviewee was Ahmet. He was 20 years old and a senior in Science Education. Ahmet's hometown was in the Mediterranean region. In the city of Konya, he was staying with two friends in a private apartment. He had a part time job in a restaurant to help his parents pay for his educational expenses. He visited Internet cafés at least once a week and spent three hours per week in them. Ahmet, and his roommates, recently bought a computer and have been planning to subscribe to the Internet.

The last, and only female participant, was Fatma. She was 18 and sophomore in the Elementary Education Department. Fatma's hometown was located in the Aegean region. Since her parents had retired from their jobs, they were able to move to Konya to accompany their daughter during her undergraduate study. Going to an Internet café was not a regular activity for Fatma. Whenever she needed to use the Internet, she visited these places and spent at least two hours at a time.

Although we moderated the conversations toward the scope of the research by using predetermined Interview Guiding Questions Form (see Appendix B), participants were given the opportunity to share anything they think was important and helpful. This allowed them to expand on different issues and recount pertinent experiences. Therefore, question sequence, language used, and exact question formulation varied among respondents. In addition, other relevant questions also emerged during the interview. The conversations were carried out as a one-on-one dialogue. Each interview was carried out in an unoccupied classroom at the college and took between 30 minutes and one hour. Written consent forms were given to participants so that their voluntary consent was assured before the interview starts. There were no other persons in the interview room to make the interviewees feel comfortable and unrestricted while expressing their thoughts in a friendly atmosphere.

Interviews were face-to-face and audiotaped with participants' permissions. We also took detailed notes during the interviews. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), note taking enables interviewees to review what has been written so far and later allows the researcher to share emerging findings with the informants (e.g., member check). Note taking is also not affected by environmental and physical factors such as ambient sound (e.g. voices in neighboring rooms or heavy outside traffic) which is important for electronic recording. Furthermore, it enables the researcher to capture visual aspects of the situation including the facial and bodily expression of the participants, which is not quite possible in the case of audiotaping (Kvale, 1996). Therefore, both electronic recording and note taking techniques were employed to supplement each other.

Data Analysis Process

We wrote summaries and annotations every night or soon after the interview conversations and observations had been conducted. In this particular study, we decided that such a process would be more efficient than coding and transcribing the data and analyzing it later because this approach would (a) help us easily remember and interpret the dialogues, interactions, descriptions of participants' characteristics, body language, and overall mood during the interview on a specific day, (b) enable us to look at the themes that emerged from previous data and therefore set up guiding questions to explore them in depth during subsequent discussions, (c) foster the explanation and interpretation of the values and perceptions rooted in a particular social and cultural context and feelings that may not be gained at a later time, and (d) eliminate the difficulties in word-for-word transcription and translation into English which is not always possible due to the different uses and meanings of words and idioms in different languages.

While analyzing the data and writing the summaries of the individual observations and interviews, we initially clarified the salient issues that had emerged from the conversations. Then, we identified and categorized key patterns and themes by identifying any similarities and differences that had emerged amongst the various data sources. Finally, we wrote a report that addressed the mean of such patterns and themes in relation to the intent and purpose of the study. Special attention was given to understand the participants' experiences in their lived

contexts and beliefs to make sense of the world since the most important concern in qualitative data analysis is regarding social values and beliefs that can manipulate which issues, perspectives and ideas that the researcher consider important enough to illuminate (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Earlier experience in the given social and cultural background enabled us to successfully address this concern. While reporting our findings in the following sections, we provided the thickest description of the data possible in order to make transferability judgments possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results and Discussion

Observations in Internet Café A

Internet Café A had followed the recent national trend of giving an English name to its business. Its logo, @, prominently signified that the place was technically-oriented and therefore offered sophisticated technical apparatus. Anybody seeing this image would understand that he or she could access technology and connect to the outside world in this place. In fact, this idea was explicitly stated through its slogan, "The Window Opening from Anatolia onto the World", which was written on the front window. Another advertisement on the window let people know that the place had the newest games and the necessary technical equipment to get the most audiovisual satisfaction possible. It looked like a black box from the outside due to the colored glass installed in the windows. It was very difficult to see what was happening inside from the outside.

Café A was located right in the center (downtown) of the city. Although the campus was fairly far away from this location, college students usually came there to hang out with their friends. It was on a street that had been closed to vehicular traffic by the municipality due to the mass of people wandering around. Within walking distance, there were a few elementary (grade 1 to 8) and high schools, and places offering privately-funded educational and development courses including: foreign languages courses, driving courses, and ones devoted to preparation for the nationwide university entrance exam. As a result, this area was crowded with youth most of the day but not at night.

Café A housed over 70 computer stations with a 2048 Kb/s speed ADSL internet connection which was the fastest one offered by the Internet Service Providers (ISP) in the city at that time. The cost for using the stations was 1.5 TL per hour (1.8 TL=1 USD). The minimum time requirement was half an hour. All machines were equipped with the latest hardware components. A typical setup consisted of at least a 2.4 GHz processor, 512MB memory, 80 GB hard drive, a CD burner and a high quality video card. Monitors were flat screens with high resolution capabilities. In addition, all machines had high quality earphones. Almost a quarter of them had video conferencing facilities with a digital camera installed on the monitors. Apart from the Internet connection, there were also other technical peripherals such as: a color printer, a scanner, a photocopy machine, and a fax machine. All these extra services had been advertised on the front window. In addition, both hot and cold beverages and food were served. A combination of traditional food products and Western based fast food was apparent. The menu was easily accessible and an order could be placed from any computer.

The sound inside the café was a mixture of English-language foreign pop music and constant mouse and keyboard clicks. During all observations conducted in this place, the background music was always on and it was playing current popular Western songs. There was also a posting on the front window announcing an upcoming rock music concert to be held at the campus. The central decoration on the largest wall was a big engraved image of Spider-Man, one of the most popular fictional superheroes. The Western cultural icons in the atmosphere and decoration of the café reinforced the sense of being in a place that was far different from traditional Turkish places for socialization. The café was the size of a duplex apartment and was filled with comfortable and adjustable fabric chairs and computer desks lined up against the walls. There was at least a one-meter space between the desks, but no form of separation between the monitors. The place was vast and breezy with a high blue ceiling illuminated by blue and yellow colored dim spot lights.

Café A opened at 8am in the morning and closed at midnight seven days a week, and was almost full in the evenings and weekends. The majority of the users were teenagers between the ages of 14 and 19, and a few were in their early twenties. Most of them were presumably high school students. This was very apparent during mornings and afternoons since some of them still wore their school uniforms. This indicated that they had stopped by either before the beginning of their classes or after the end of the classes. Or, perhaps, they may have missed school that day. It was very difficult to verify this, though. In any case, the Internet café seemed to be one of their main activities and a place that they frequently visited. In the evenings and weekends, there were also young people who were not currently students and had decided not to continue their higher education but to

work in various areas of the marketplace. This indicated that Internet cafés and what they offer seemed to be attractive to young people regardless of their educational backgrounds. This also showed that they may have learned how to use the Internet not only in the schools, but also in Internet cafés on their own, or through interaction with friends. Although 30% of the patrons were females in the mornings and afternoons, it was almost impossible to see any female users in the evenings (after 8pm). On the weekends, however, the gender ratio increased to around 2:5 female/male.

The majority were playing games and chatting online. Patrons were not observed while they were doing class assignments or conducting academic activities. Although their school bags were present, none of them were using notebooks or books. Some were doing information research about their hobbies by surfing web sites. Observation of their screens indicated that these sites were generally web sites related to soccer, music and movies, news, celebrities, and cell phones. Some of those chatting online were using video cameras to see each other. However, they did not use any types of microphones for voice conversation; instead, they wrote what they want to say to other party on the chat screens. The person on the other side was usually a member of the opposite gender and joining the chat section in an Internet café as well. A frequently used application for this purpose was MSN Messenger which supports both audiovisual interaction and synchronous communication. Those users playing games were usually males and playing shoot-them-up games involving guns, weapons, blood, terrorists, visual killing and non-human visual characters. The most frequently played game in this category was the internationally popular Counter-Strike, commonly called *savas oyunu* (war game) by Turkish youth. A small proportion was playing soccer and auto racing games. On the other hand, a few female game players were playing solitaire, online backgammon or cards. The majority of female users were interested in online chatting, surfing the Internet by checking out web sites related to their hobbies, and reading information from the Net.

There was no apparent in-café socialization going on among the users in Café A except for those conversations among game players. These dialogues were nothing more than announcements of winners, losers or dead persons in the game, for example: "I won", "I killed you", "I ran out of weapons", "You are finally dead", and so on. Consequently, most of the interaction in this place happened between the users within the cyberspace generated by the electronic media, not in the physical space of the café itself. It was almost impossible to see the conventional *sohbet*, *yarenlik*, or *hasbihal* (face-to-face friendly conversations), social networks and interactions that take place at traditional cafés via informal discussion of local affairs, politics, commerce, and so on. Many users were coming in and out, but it was quite doubtful that they knew anything about each other. This evidence suggested that the Internet appeared to change the definition and art of conversation in youths' lives. Emotions and body language used in face-to-face interactions in traditional hangout places had been replaced by mediated form of communication via text messages on the screens located in the Internet cafés. It was apparent that the emerging cyber culture was challenging long-established traditions of socialization. Decoration, arrangements and patrons' activities in Internet cafés seemed to produce a sense of "cyberness" and "individuality" whereas the emphasis in traditional cafés appears to be in "socialization" and "collectivity".

Perhaps, brief information about the history of traditional cafés and their importance to Turkish culture and social networks may help to elaborate the findings related to Internet cafés. Traditional cafés are commonly called "*kahve, kahvahane, cay ocagi*" and more recently "*kafeterya*" in Turkey. Today, hundreds of thousands of cafés are all over the country, from small villages to big cities. The essence of coffee for Turkish people is not the drink itself but rather good conversation and abiding friendship. As one famous Turkish proverb, "a cup of coffee is remembered for forty years", indicates, it is traditionally believed that drinking coffee together results in long lasting relationships. In this sense, the most important function of these public places is to make a contribution to social and cultural life by offering a congregation place to socialize, converse, read, write, discuss political and economic issues, and entertain in small local groups. In fact, they are the only social setting in most of the small villages and rural areas. They were also used in the past for exhibition and mass communication purposes such as folk performing, election campaigns, and political propaganda. As Habermas (1989) describes, traditional cafés served as a public sphere in which public opinion, civic participation and political consciousness were developed. However, in these days, it seems that they are losing their popularity over to Internet cafés due to the accelerating pace of social transformations sustained by global flows and exchange of information, capital, and cultural communication. As Castells (1996) states, this transformation is happening in every sector of the society by constructing a network society organized around the electronic media.

Observations in Internet Café B

Like Café A, Internet Café B was situated in the center of the city among other stores such as restaurants, pharmacies, groceries, and bookstores. However, this region was not as crowded as the one in which Café A was located. It faced the main public transportation terminals where people were going in or out of buses or tramways on the way to their houses, schools, offices, and so on. Both elderly and young people could be seen in this area at anytime of the day although there were several high schools and privately-funded preparation and development courses nearby.

It was very similar to Café A in terms of the technological and seating equipment. However, the inside decoration differentiated it from Café A. The place was bright as it was illuminated by big fluorescent lamps. The walls had been painted a soft yellow color and decorated with some paintings of country scenes, locally designed handicrafts, and other objects psychologically associated with the historical and traditional Turkish cultural context. This hybrid combination of Western-based technology and traditional icons was also represented in the café's logo on the front window: A computer image on the left and an image of cup of coffee on the right. Between the two was Turkish name of the café.

Café B distinguished itself by featuring some aesthetic aspects of more traditional cafés. There was, for instance, a small room, just like a small *cay ocagi*, opening from the main salon. This room had a television, two round tables in the center with daily newspapers on them, and a few chairs around them. No music or movie was playing on the TV at any time of the day. Rather, it was usually tuned to the channels that showed local, national and international news, sports, finance, and discussions about these subjects. On Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings, however, the sports channel that showed live broadcasts of soccer matches was featured. People in this room watched television, read newspapers, discussed news with others, had coffee or tea, or waited for a PC to access the Internet. Whenever there was background music in this café, it was always softly playing Turkish songs. There were two posters for local happenings plastered on the front window: One was related to a future chess tournament held at the university campus, and the other one was about an upcoming knowledge contest amongst local high schools.

In contrast to Café A, it was possible to see individuals other than students and youngsters in Café B. In the early mornings and at noon, there were a few local business people or staff checking their emails, financial and marketing news, and reading newspapers online. On average about 40% of the users were female and 60% were male. Occasionally, people in their forties or fifties who seemed to be illiterate about the Internet came to this place and asked the café owners to check their health and social insurance status regarding how much time they needed to work until they were eligible for retirement payments. Some also came to receive or print out their identification numbers and their tax identification numbers from government web sites. In the evenings, there were occasionally parents chatting with their children who were temporally residing in other cities or countries either for education or military service. In these cases, the Internet café was a place that supported users gathering information, retrieving relevant documents from the Internet, and meeting with their relatives in a virtual environment.

The predominant activities in this café were chatting online and surfing the Net for information and fun. Some were surfing the local university's web site, some were reading news or magazines, and others were checking online forums. Most of the users chatting online were using the video camera and conversing with the other party, who was usually a member of opposite gender, via text messages. A small number joined chat rooms where more than two people could contribute to the online discussion. Playing games was not as popular as in Café A, and the games were often different: online backgammon, chess, card games, auto racing and soccer were played more often than action games. From the observations undertaken in both Café A and Café B, it became apparent that the younger the users were, the more likely they were to engage in playing action-games. None of the female users were observed playing any type of game in this café. They were interested in mostly chatting or surfing the Internet.

On one of the walls, where everyone could clearly see it, was a big sign that said, "Any access to harmful and illegal content that threatens national security, integrity and sovereignty, and damages general values and morals of the community is strictly forbidden". Another sign near the main entrance said, "Children under the age of 12 cannot enter". These signs indicated that Café B seemed to enforce the legislation established by the state government which has been particularly concerned about the power of the Internet to endanger national identity, security, and morality. Internet filtering and blocking software had been installed on all the terminals. However, this was not the case in Café A. The function of this program was to quickly scan the content of every single web page and instant messaging program before it was downloaded onto the browser. It checked the whole page

and blocked it out if it contained any obscene words or was in the predefined and updated database of restricted web pages. It seemed to be effective in what it promised to do because it blocked my email account which had several incoming scam messages. Unfortunately, it also blocked all the web pages containing a specific English word that in the Turkish language has an obscene meaning even though those pages had no sexual or pornographic content. However, if this was a problem, users could contact the café manager who could disable the program from the main server for their particular terminal.

In most of the observations conducted in Café B, there was a physically handicapped boy aged about 16. He was unable to move his feet, hands, and all fingers and was using a wheelchair. He could use the mouse, but not the keyboard. Somebody, either his parents, or some other older relative, brought him to the café, left him there for some time, and then returned to take him back. Some regular users and the café owner knew him personally, as they sometimes chatted with him and helped him use the equipment. Whenever he needed to write something, take the headphone on or off, eject the CDROM, or manage other physical movements, he called either the café owner or one of his friends to help him. Observation of his screen and informal interviews with the café manager revealed that he was very enthusiastic about digital media and was making his own digital library. He used the Internet to find new mp3 music files, or movie clips and downloaded them to his mp3 player, or burned them on a blank CD to play on his DVD/VCR player at home. This evidence suggested that Internet cafés could bridge the potential digital divide between disabled people and those without disabilities and also enable those who are physically isolated to have greater contact with larger sphere of people.

Observations in Internet Café C

Internet Café C was located in the suburban area of the city in which the residents' economic status was lower than those in other parts of the city. It was on the first floor of a 4-floor building on the main street. Adjacent was a small grocery store selling a variety of daily family necessities. There was an elementary school (grades 1 to 8) nearby. Café C was open between 10am in the morning and midnight seven days a week. This café catered to neighborhood school age youth. Especially on the weekends, several children were observed waiting outside in the morning before opening time. They seemed to be impatient and were thrilled at the prospect of getting inside and playing with the computers. Informal conversation with the café owner revealed that some children came to the café as soon as they got out of bed without even having breakfast. Thus, the café seemed to be a highly popular place for children.

Café C was a tiny place; hence the computer stations were arranged next to each other. One could easily see what was happening on the next monitor. The seats were neither comfortable nor adjustable according to one's height. The ratio between the height of chairs and tables did not seem to be ergonomic and healthy for small-size individuals as they needed to stretch their necks to look at the monitors on the tables. In short, the first impression was that the café had been poorly designed as far as the technological equipment goes. The café was also very poor in terms of decoration and creating aesthetic settings. There were no posters or images on the walls. There was rarely background music in the evenings playing Turkish-language pop songs. There was no television or any separate place or furniture for sitting other than computing.

The place consisted of around 30 computer terminals all of which were arranged in columns and rows. The quality of the hardware was not as good as in Café A and Café B. There was no additional technical equipment such as printers, scanners or copy machines. It was also interesting that the café did not serve any snacks or beverages. The speed of the Internet connection was very slow when compared to other cafés. It was only 64 Kb/s, just a little bit faster than a dial-up connection. The cost for one-hour usage was .75 YTL, half of the rate in Café A and Café B. There was also no minimum time requirement unlike the other cafés. It was observed that the children brought whatever amount of money they had and asked the café owner to log them into the computers for as long as their money allowed. The computers automatically turned off when they ran out of time.

Café C was busy most times of the day, but not in the evenings. There were no female users present at this place. The main clientele consisted of male children between the ages of 8 and 14 in the mornings and afternoons, and older teens in the evenings. The atmosphere was very noisy in the mornings and afternoons since the children were speaking loudly to each other. It was increasingly apparent in the observations that they were very excited about what they were doing in the café.

The main, and almost the only, pattern of usage was watching the latest movies and playing action games, like Counter-Strike, Half-Life and so on. There were sometimes two or three children clustered around one

computer. While one of them was playing the game, others were watching, or trying to learn how to play it. Almost none of the children were using the Internet in the mornings and afternoons. Only a few teens were surfing the Internet in the evenings or joining online chat rooms, typically after 7pm. Hence, this Internet café was predominantly used as an entertainment facility, just like a video game arcade.

Findings from the Interviews

Activity Patterns in Internet Cafés

Interviewees had a variety of reasons to go to the Internet cafés. The most common pattern of activities engaged in the Internet cafés included communication, entertainment, schoolwork, and information searches. Specifically, how they used the Internet cafés depended on what they thought the Internet was and what they believed the Internet was offering to their lives. For example, Fatma reported that the Internet was a social place where she could meet with her friends and relatives in her hometown. The ability to communicate with loved ones in a relatively economical way seemed to be significant enough for her to go to the Internet cafés. It was also information and learning source where she could research her hobbies, interests, and school assignments.

> The main reason for me to go to the Internet café is to communicate with my friends and relatives in my hometown. I want to know how they are doing. Chatting is much cheaper than making a long distance call these days. In fact, you can see each other on the screen, which telephone communication lacks…I think it [the Internet] is a huge newspaper, a magazine, or a journal where you can find the information interesting to you. I usually go the Internet cafés to find the information I need for my assignments. There are several blogs I frequently visit, which offer great recipes posted by professional cooks and fitness and dietary information. (Fatma)

The use of Internet cafés for the purpose of chatting and email appeared to be an important element of participants' Internet activities. Similarly, Ahmet emphasized the role of the Internet in communicating with others and speeding up the process of finding necessary information. He thought that the Internet was revolutionizing and enhancing the way we as humans communicate both locally and around the world, especially since it enables building relationships between geographically separated individuals. He described the Internet as "a network of all the computers, therefore every house with an Internet connection, connected to each other". Ahmet's primary purpose for going to Internet cafés was to check his email, chat with his online friends from around the country, and meet new people. He was also looking for job announcements from both government and private employers as he would be graduating soon.

> When I am at the café, I first check my email if there is any new messages or if I need to send one. Then, I log in to my favorite chat channel and speak with my friends online. I do not chat one-on-one basis very much, rather with several people at the same time. Internet makes the world so small. All my friends are from different cities but we can meet online regardless of the distance among us… I read almost all newspapers online and make inquiries whether there are any job announcements at the ministry's and other privately owned institutions' web sites. This is one of the most powerful and efficient aspects of the Internet for me: I can easily obtain the information I need at a reasonable cost and time. (Ahmet)

Furthermore, he explained how the low level of Internet usage in Turkey was due to high connection prices, insufficient telecommunication infrastructure, and the unaffordable cost of computer technology. He particularly cited poverty as a major barrier to the use of the Internet, because the Internet was a luxury for most people. In this situation Internet cafés, according to him, filled the digital gap between haves and have-nots by providing individuals with an opportunity to become familiar with the Internet. "Relatively few Turkish families can afford a home PC and Internet connection, so they go online in these places and enjoy the low cost." said Ahmet. This comment indicated that Internet cafés were playing a mediator role for inclusion of youth without computer ownership and Internet connection in the information society.

On the other hand, both Mehmet and Fatih described how the Internet and Internet cafés function more like a source of entertainment. People go to these places for a variety of reasons, but they believed people were there mostly to play online multiplayer games, watch movies, and listen to music. Mehmet stated that Internet cafés initially emerged to provide Internet access but they eventually became gaming centers in response to the fast growing popularity of online gaming. Fatih proclaimed a replacement of the television as a Turkish

entertainment option by ICTs and referred to the media's techno-consumerist narration dedicated to encouraging people to use the Internet.

> In my opinion, the Internet is offering new forms of communication and leisure to people, and I think it will be replacing the Television in this regard. Just like the TV is now at the heart of the family, it will eventually become the central point in our houses…I usually go to Internet cafés to download popular music to my MP3 player, check to see if there are new movies available and watch movie trailers…I like to visit web sites related to new technology like cell phones, iPods, computers and so on…Occasionally, I login to online games such as billiard and cards. (Fatih)

Mehmet pointed out that the sole educational use of Internet cafés was nothing more than registering for classes at the beginning of each semester and checking grades at the end of the school year. Fatih mentioned that some college students used email for submitting assignments to their instructors. Like others, Mehmet and Fatih also acknowledged the potential of the Internet for dissemination of information and learning new things. For example, Fatih pointed out that searching for information on the Internet was more convenient than doing it in the physical library due to the ease and speed of searching for and connecting to information from different sources. However, he also agreed that the volume of information in Turkish domains was not sufficient and this was one of the vital areas that needed to be improved.

> Admittedly, the most important reason for going to the Internet café for me is to amuse myself. I have been playing games since I was twelve years old. This was one of the reasons to have my father buy a computer for myself. However, he does not want me to spend my time on playing games. And, my computer does not support the new games because of low-end hardware and slow dial-up speed. It is not fun to play action games on your own. Hence, I go to the Internet cafés and play with my friends…To be honest with you; most of the students only check their grades or register for classes as far as the educational usage goes. (Mehmet)

> Yeah, the Internet is a big electronic library and it is more convenient to find what you need on the Internet than at a library. Nevertheless, there are not many Turkish websites offering valuable information or study materials other than universities and some educational associations…Turkish domains are full of entertainment because we, as Turkish people, like to extract as much fun as possible from any means…It is inevitable. We are all being bombarded with entertainment by the media. Internet cafés are everywhere, even if you try to escape; they will eventually find you because they have made this leisure so attractive to you. (Fatih)

Misuse of Internet Cafés by Youth

There was an apparent disappointment among the interviewees about the use of Internet cafés by young people. One of the concerns underlying this feeling among the participants was a fear of being left behind as a society due to improper usage of technology. They consistently agreed that youth would be at a disadvantage if they grew up without knowing how to use the Internet effectively because the world had entered into the information age. They believed the benefits of the Internet could only be achieved by using Internet cafés for mainly educational and informational purposes to increase people's level of knowledge and productivity. However, they thought that this was not what was actually happening. Fatma stated, "The Internet is very valuable, like a jewel, for a person who knows how to get the benefits of it; but, it is not that efficient in Turkey since the Internet cafés are used mostly for chatting and gaming". She believed that chatting or gaming should not be the primary function of Internet cafés. "That is one of the reasons why the Internet cafés' public image is really bad here" added Fatma.

Ahmet also agreed that these places were often used for entertainment purposes and that this behavior had to be changed. As Mehmet warned, "Internet cafés should not be transformed into video game salons. We, as youth, need to establish a balance among our Internet activities though I accept that this is a big challenge". This statement suggests that some youths have difficulty in controlling the type of usage of Internet technology. This factor may be associated with their views about ICT, specifically, how they construct ICT as mainly an entertainment medium. As Fatih pointed out earlier, "Turkish domains are full of entertainment because we, as Turkish people, like to extract as much fun as possible from any means". This statement suggests that Turkish society's views about a given form of technology fits in with established norms, specifically extracting "as much fun as possible from any means" including ICT. Entertainment seemed to be the dominant purpose of the Internet cafés for Turkish youth even though, paradoxically, this was not the proper usage according to

participants. An entertainment based motivation for the adoption of ICT is also a main characteristic of world-wide popular youth culture because using the Internet for entertainment has become a global trend. In this sense, use of ICT, specifically Internet cafés, in Turkey as mainly an entertainment medium is aligned with a globalized norm in adoption patterns.

Fatma criticized another type of misuse of Internet cafés. Referring specifically to the preparation of a semester assignment among high school and elementary school (grade 6 to 8) students, she indicated that some cafés subscribed to homework web sites that offer many essays or term papers about a wide variety of subjects written by professionals or students. Some students bring their topics to café owners and have them search in the database and print out the most appropriate paper to submit to their teachers. The students never explore the topic on the Internet, or in the physical library, and never do their own research, which is the real purpose of the assignment. She said, "This is nothing more than cheating and those who make use of these sites are becoming lazy students and illiterate about researching and writing". It seemed that even though the Internet made the process of finding information so easy and simple, it was also easily misused to plagiarize, which leads to significant legal and moral issues.

Perceived Negative Impacts of Internet Cafés on Children

The second common theme found among the interviewees was anxiety about the content available at the Internet cafés and its potential negative impacts on young children. All the participants interviewed were consistent in their beliefs that children were somewhat vulnerable at Internet cafés. Fatma articulated her concern about the absence of hesitation in accepting new technology among Turkish people and the transition from human-to-human interaction to human-to-machine interaction due to the popularity, and thereby excessive usage, of ICT technology. It was her contention that children had become less well socialized because they had been neglecting socializing activities and human relationships necessary for their social and physical growth and construction of interpersonal skills. She explained as follows:

> People here do not mind jumping into technology, and neither do their children. I see children at the Internet cafés spending a considerable amount of time and energy on playing games…This really makes me sad. These young children must engage in other equally important activities necessary for their development, like socializing with their friends…Children today no longer play the games we played in our childhood, such as *saklambac* (hide and seek), *uzun essek* (leapfrog), and *bezirgan basi* (head of the grasping trader), which helped us gain the feelings of collaboration, responsibility and mutual respect. Unfortunately, these days, computers are becoming their toys and close friends. (Fatma)

Mehmet emphasized the possible negative effects of excessive game playing and watching violence-based movies that children could face at Internet cafés. He thought that such content could augment children's aggression and hostility, which might lead to unexpected results for society. "Even though I am already 17 and recognize that it is just a game, I sometimes feel extremely aggressive for a short period of time…as if I would like to fight someone who interferes with me on the street", said Mehmet. This observation by Mehmet suggests that he experienced an association between playing violent games and increased aggressive behavior. The relationship also appeared to be independent of the person's age as in Mehmet's case. He described and saw himself as a person who had already grown up and who was able to understand that the contents of the games were "just scenarios", but on the other hand, could not prevent himself from feeling their effects.

Like Mehmet, Ahmet also raised concern as to how computer games influence children's behavior and negotiation. Rather than limiting this affect to an increase in violent thoughts or attitudes as did Mehmet, Ahmet claimed that continuing interaction with violent content could encourage children to engage in violent acts in real life as well. He complained about the availability at Internet cafés of a high volume of violent computer games and the series of immensely popular action thriller movies including heroes, mafias, guns, and fighting that could be viewed by children although such content was rated at least age 16+. He related a recent increase in the number of violent incidents taking place at the schools to such excessive interaction with violent video games.

Likewise, Fatma thought that the increasing ownership and usage of guns among teenagers was closely tied to interactions with computer games and movies. She stated, "They are so accustomed to virtual guns like pistols and knives that they do not refrain from keeping or using in real life situations…They regret it later but that does not mean anything anymore".

Elaborating on this theme, Fatih claimed that greater exposure to movies and games could lead to a tendency among children to imitate foreign cultural traditions such as admiring or looking up to main characters in games or celebrities in the movies as role models. "Just look at youth on the street, they wear the same costumes, cut their hair in the same style, and even try to speak with the same slang that those characters do" he added. Ahmet also stated the following:

> Those games and movies available in Internet cafés contain violent content and are part of a trend that encourages kids to engage in violence these days. Almost every week, I come across violent incidents in the news that happened in the schools and ended with one or more of the kids dead or injured. We are talking about elementary or secondary school students here, and not to mention high schools. They should not be exposed to this content… Small children, usually boys, somehow get their dad's or grandfather's gun or a knife and kill their relatives or friends and then expect that those dead persons will come back because they think that what they have done is just a game. (Ahmet)

In addition, Fatih raised a concern about children's usage of games at cafés for gambling purposes. This gambling, however, was not the type of gambling offered on the Internet such as online casino games, bingo, lottery sales, and poker. Rather, the children wagered at the Internet cafés when playing multi-user computer games. The user whose avatar was killed in an action game or defeated in a sport, or auto racing game, paid the café bills, or an amount of money negotiated at the beginning of the game, to the winners. Fatih stated, "They are engaged in gambling that involves winning or losing actual money. What is worse is that they use the money that their parents give them for their school expenses including launch, transportation, course materials and so on". He maintained that the thrill and excitement of this gambling may lead to addictive misbehavior patterns and unintended habits. Fatih gave the example of a relative's son, who was 13 years old and a sixth grader at an elementary school and had a computer at home. This boy had been caught stealing money from his parents to finance his gambling debts and his bills at Internet cafés. His parents also found out that he had started spending most of the day at the cafés and was therefore having problems getting to school. It seems that for this child betting with friends over computer games was a significant motivation to go to Internet cafés even if he had a computer at home.

Precautions for Effective and Safe Usage

While expressing various forms of reservations about Internet cafés and Internet use, the interviewees also presented some guidelines and precautions to help youth benefit from these places in an effective and safe manner. Among these, parental involvement was frequently mentioned during the interviews. All the participants consistently said that parents should be dedicated to monitoring their children's usage of these places. Fatma maintained that parents should stay with their children at Internet cafés and supervise their online interaction. She said, "Just like parents want to make sure about what children are doing in the neighborhood, so should they at the Internet cafés". She went on to suggest that authorities should increase supervision at the cafés where all users should show their identification documents for age verification.

> I believe that Internet cafés may not be the right places for children under 18 to experience the Internet on their own because of the lack of parental control. Café owners claim that they have signed consent from their parents, but this does not mean that they are safe. How can one person control many at the same time? And do they really care about what children are doing? I am very doubtful about this. (Fatma)

In a similar vein, Ahmet emphasized that even those who have Internet connections at their houses may want to go to Internet cafés to visit illegal or inappropriate web sites since these places provide them with a sense of privacy without parental control. Although some of the cafés have content filtering and blocking technologies to protect children from accessing this content, he believed that most did not, and even those who had such software installed did not update it. Therefore, "filtering software should not be seen as a substitute for adequate parental supervision and responsibility", he concluded.

On the other hand, Mehmet pointed out that most of the parents were not yet aware of the challenges youth confront when they encounter harmful, illegal or controversial content online. He said, "They think that their children are going to these places to do their assignments with their friends, or in the worst case, they are told this by their children". According to Fatih, however, some parents just do not seem to mind about what their children are doing at the Internet cafés as long as they are out of their sight and do not make any problems.

"They see Internet cafés as babysitters", Fatih said. What both Mehmet and Fatih tried to point out was that parents needed to take responsibility for children's Internet café usage. This also indicated that parents did not seem to have adequate knowledge about Internet cafés and what is available in these places; therefore, they needed to be given the necessary information about both the risks and benefits children face at these places.

The interviewees all agreed that protecting youth by legally limiting or banning access to Internet cafés may not be an efficient or wise idea because their appetite for the activities in these places would most probably persist. As Mehmet pointed out, "The more restriction there is the more impulse there will be to explore". In fact, such an action could exacerbate the digital gap between those who have and have not access to the Internet at home or work. They believed that the main focus should be on teaching youngsters critical media skills and responsible behavior in the online environment and having them form the habit of using Internet cafés for more educational and informational purposes. Ahmet stated, "They should be trained in order to be conscious of safe and healthy usage of the Internet by self-regulating their online behavior". What is more important is that "this should not be done only by schools or be seen only as the schools' responsibility" added Ahmet. Both public and private institutions, as well as visual and written media, should contribute to developing such attitudes.

Participants did not seem to be against existing governmental regulations about the usage of Internet cafés. However, they thought that controlling the Internet would be impossible and unsuccessful as the content on the Internet was constantly changing. Instead, they believe that youngsters and parents should be given necessary training about media literacy skills so that they can control themselves. On the other hand, all interviewees agreed with the government that there should be an age limitation regarding the Internet café usage. It is their contention that children should be accompanied by their parents when visiting Internet cafés because as Ahmet stated, "it is not appropriate for a child to share such places with grownups".

Conclusion and Recommendations

This inquiry suggests that Internet cafés have become a part of popular youth culture in Turkey and are being used mostly by male youngsters mostly for entertainment and communication purposes. These places are rarely used for academic purposes. The finding of Internet cafés as being masculine and youth spaces was indicated by prior studies as well (Gurol & Sevindik, 2007). Corroborating other studies related to Internet use (Koc & Tamer, 2011), male users are interested mostly in playing action or violent-based online games whereas female users are interested mostly in chatting online and searching information. In Internet cafés, there are more online socialization than in-café socialization like in the traditional cafés, changing the definition and art of conversation in youths' lives. This emerging cyber culture challenges long-established traditions of socialization because activities in Internet cafés produce a sense of "cyberness" and "individuality" whereas the emphasis in traditional cafés is in "socialization" and "collectivity".

While youth in this study think that the proper use of the Internet for them is to engage in academic activities, they paradoxically persist in obvious patterns of consumption-based activities in Internet cafés. One possible explanation of this contradiction could be that McLuhan's and Baudrillard's notion of "seduction of media" is quite effective on Turkish youth. Entertainment-oriented usage is definitely more appealing because it has been popularized and promoted by the visual (television) and written media for so many years. Therefore, mass media has established an electronic culture or a consumer society in which the spectacle of computer games have become the primary sources of entertainment. Further research is needed to explore other possible reasons for this contradiction.

The results of this study challenge the prevalent conceptualization of technology in contemporary society which assumes technology as a politically and culturally neutral tool that can always enhance efficiency and productivity. As this research reveals, it is more than a simple instrument that constitutes complex social and cultural dimensions which may involve profound alterations for social and cultural life. It also affects individuals' relationships to time and space, which in turn, transforms the origins of identity construction from local values and physical geography to those of global media. Gergen (2002) introduces the idea of "absent presence", which refers to a condition in which people are physically present but absorbed by technologically mediated somewhere else. In Internet cafés, youngsters were physically sharing a common place but engaged in their own individual activities that were beyond the physical surroundings. Some were playing games in a world of simulation, others were chatting online with someone from outside of the physical space. It was quite difficult to acknowledge their presence among each other. Therefore, as Castells (1996) argues, "space of flows" (network-based society) sustained by ICT has replaced the traditional "space of places". Technologies of absent presence have transformed the way of people's meaning making from local moralities to global "scapes" of

ideas and social forms (Appadurai, 1996). Such transformation can impact indigenous or local cultural practices and thus result in a global consumer culture or lifestyle.

Postman (1995) puts forward that deterministic technology integration have failed to inspire spiritual and intellectual learning in the schools and therefore technology should not be the core narrative or purpose of schooling. Like Jacques Ellul and Lewis Mumford, he argues that it is not possible to preserve traditions and social institutions while allowing uncontrolled technological developments because technological change is not additive but rather ecological. Therefore, children should be given a technology education that is not merely technical-oriented (e.g. how to use a specific technical means), that is with a neither negative nor overly optimistic but rather a critical perspective that focuses on teaching students about what technology can do for us and against us, and how it can affect our social relations, family life, and our environment. The interviews suggest that some content available at Internet cafés may be inappropriate for school children and therefore high exposure to it can negatively impact their social, physical, moral, and psychological development. Some precautions including encouraging parental involvement and educating both parents and youth about critical surfing skills should be taken to ensure youngsters use the Internet in a safe and healthy manner.

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Appendix A: Internet Café Observation Template

Date: …. /….. /….	Time:	Café Name:
Physical Environment	Location & surroundings: Estimated area of space: Light and smell: Ambient sound or music: Types of programs on TV or video if exist: Decoration, furniture arrangements, paint, etc.: Cultural icons related to popular/western or traditional:	
Services	Internet access fee: Working hours: Type of advertisement: Food and drink: Print, fax, copy: Other business or activities:	
Technical Aspects	Number of computers: Hardware quality (CPU, ram drives, monitors, etc): Available software: Connection speed: Technical support:	
User Characteristics	Number of total users: Gender distribution: Age range: Occupation (student, worker, etc.): Ownership of technology at present (cell phone, walkman):	
Usage Patterns	Educational & informational (research, writing, studying, reading, etc.): Entertainment (surfing, gaming, listening, watching): Communication (forums, internet telephoning, ICQ, MSN , Chatting): Business (selling, buying, banking, paying bills, etc): Others (sociability, meeting and talking with friends, drinking, etc.):	
General Comments		

Appendix B: Interview Guiding Questions Form

Question	Probe/Keyword
Would you please tell me a little about yourself?	Age, Economic status, Family information, Residency, Hobbies, habits etc. Friendships, Education, Media use & ownership
How do you describe your Internet café experiences?	When and why to go, Frequency, Likes/dislikes, Motivation, fashion, Alone or with someone, Café preferences, Parent's reaction
Would you please describe what kinds of activities do you usually engage in the Internet cafés?	Online, offline, Kinds of websites, Chat, why, why not, Chat with whom, gender, Identity, persona change, Research, study, Entertainment, game, What kind, w/whom, Online relationships
In what ways do you think the Internet and Internet café use reshape or influence your life and Turkish society at large, or not?	Advantages, European Union, Economical, Feelings of time-space, Traditional values, Educational, Individuality, Social & cultural, Family, parents, friends, Disadvantages, Changes in life style, Religion, language, Problems or concerns, Human rights Democracy, Global issues, Feeling independent
What do you think about the national policy and regulations regarding Internet cafés?	Awareness, Why or not, Effectiveness, Benefits, Sexual content, Children's' use, Democratic or not, why, Smoking, Gender-specific cafés, Detriments, Violent-based games
Do you have any story or event regarding your Internet activities and Internet café experiences that you cannot forget? Is there anything else that you would like to share with me that I did not ask?	