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What Do Post-Pandemic Graduate Theses Reveal About Behavioral and Digital Addictions? A Bibliometric Analysis

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Main Points

- The number of addiction-related graduate theses in Türkiye has significantly increased after the pandemic, reflecting a growing academic focus on the issue.
- Digital addictions, particularly social media and gaming, are the most frequently studied topics, likely due to their high prevalence and accessibility.
- Addiction-themed theses span various fields, including psychology, sports, education, medicine, and social services, highlighting the need for cross-disciplinary research.
- While studies on gambling addiction have increased, research on online gambling, betting, and pornography addiction remains scarce, likely due to legal and social factors.
- Research findings should inform social policies that focus on prevention, regulation, and public awareness, particularly for emerging addictions like digital and online gambling.

Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine theses on addiction conducted in Türkiye. For this purpose, graduate theses related to addiction, covering the post-pandemic period from 2021 to 2024 and available in the National Thesis Center, were analyzed. Titles and contents containing the term "addiction" were identified using the keyword "bağımlı*." A total of 1299 master's theses, 178 medical specialization theses, and 126 doctoral theses were retrieved. After applying exclusion criteria to 195 theses with restricted access, 1604 studies were included in the evaluation. Using the document analysis method, data such as thesis numbers, authors, publication years, topics, sample age ranges, group sizes, types of addiction, and subcategories of addiction were entered into an Excel document and subsequently analyzed. Some key findings from the study are as follows: In 2018, there were 229 theses on addiction, which increased to 452 in 2019. During the pandemic year of 2020, the number dropped to 274 but rose again to 440 in 2021. In the following years, the number of theses on addiction was recorded as 398 in 2022, 463 in 2023, and 498 in 2024. The study examined substance-related, behavioral/digital, and other types of addictions, while non-psychological or non-psychiatric terms (e.g., addiction to educational materials) were excluded from the analysis. The findings indicate that the number of addiction-related theses increased after the pandemic, with a particularly notable rise in theses focusing on behavioral and digital addictions. This trend suggests that contemporary problem areas are reflected in academic research and investigated in theses required for specialization. The most common disciplines for addiction-related theses were identified as psychology, sports, education and instruction, family medicine, nursing, and psychiatry. Among addiction types, digital addictions were the most frequently studied, followed by substance-related addictions. Many addiction-related theses were at the master's, doctoral, and medical specialization levels, whereas proficiency in arts theses paid significantly less attention to this topic.

Keywords: Addiction, behavioral addiction, bibliometric analysis, dependency, digital addiction

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Introduction

The etymology of the word "addiction" traces back to the Latin term addictus. This term refers to a voluntarily established relationship that, over time, enslaves the individual and leads to its continuous perpetuation (Arslan, 2015). The first characteristic that comes to mind when defining addiction is an individual's irresistible attraction to a substance or behavior, persisting in it despite recognizing or accepting its harmful consequences and repeatedly engaging in the behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). From another perspective, addiction is a chronic neurobiological disorder influenced by environmental, psychosocial, and genetic factors (Gül, 2023).

In addition to its persistent nature, addiction is characterized by relapses, which complicate its treatment (Ögel et al., 2012). Therefore, multidimensional assessments are recommended to better understand addictions. The biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977; Griffiths, 2005), a widely accepted framework in health sciences, can be used to conceptualize addiction. According to this model, the biological component of addiction involves physiological and genetic processes. Genetic predispositions, increased impulsive behavior, risky decision-making, heightened sensation-seeking, increased compulsivity, and reward sensitivity are key risk factors in this domain (Çakmak & Tamam, 2018). Indeed, the literature often conceptualizes addiction as a brain disease, highlighting the medical aspects of addiction over other perspectives (Acar & Şaşman Kaylı, 2021). This perspective is particularly significant for substance-related disorders. However, all forms of addiction also have psychological and social causes and sustaining factors. For instance, Bahar (2018) conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with 24 drug users during police interrogations. The study identified multiple reasons for initiating drug use, including family dynamics, identification with role models, peer influence, social deterioration, recreational use, curiosity, medical excuses, and easy access through social media and the internet. These first-hand findings indicate that addiction can stem from developmental curiosity, social cognitive learning through role modeling, and social factors such as social deterioration (Masiak, 2013).

In the psychopathological classification of addiction, notable changes have occurred over time in the symptoms and diagnostic criteria, particularly regarding withdrawal, tolerance, and compulsive use (Yılmaz, 2019). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022) categorizes addictions into two main groups: substance-related and addictive disorders, and non-substance-related disorders. Substance-related and addictive disorders include alcohol-related disorders, caffeine-related disorders, cannabis-related disorders, hallucinogen-related disorders, inhalant-related disorders, opioid-related disorders, sedative, hypnotic, or anxiolytic-related disorders, stimulant-related disorders, tobacco-related disorders, and other substance use disorders. Disorders related to chemical substances involve intoxication and withdrawal symptoms, as well as patterns of problematic use.

Non-substance-related disorders include gambling disorder, which is the only formally recognized behavioral addiction in this category. While not an official diagnosis, internet gaming disorder is listed in the DSM-5-TR under conditions for further study, covering both behavioral and digital addictions (APA, 2022). Due to technological advancements and increased prevalence across developmental stages, internet gaming disorder is now considered a public health concern. It has also been officially included in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) (Rumpf et al., 2018; Arıcak et al., 2018). The classification of these disorders in major diagnostic manuals facilitates epidemiological research and enables the development of effective treatment approaches (Dinç, 2017).

Within the scope of behavioral addictions, certain behaviors characterized by excessive engagement and loss of control have been the subject of research for a long time, despite not being officially included in the DSM-5-TR due to insufficient empirical evidence. Studies have focused on conditions such as exercise addiction (Berczik et al., 2012), shopping addiction (Yılmaz et al., 2022), food addiction (Liu et al., 2010), and pornography addiction (Bőthe et al., 2018). With the increasing prevalence of digital applications and tools, behavioral addictions have also extended to the online realm. As a result, internet addiction (Demetrovics et al., 2008), online gambling addiction (Arıcak, 2019), and social media addiction (Andreassen et al., 2016) have gained attention as areas of concern and research interest.

Preventing addiction and ensuring effective treatment requires not only protecting individuals from stigmatization and social exclusion but also integrating them into society (Derin & Tapan, 2017). For this, it is crucial to evaluate the cumulative scientific knowledge on addiction within a contemporary framework. Global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to quarantine measures and social restrictions, have significantly influenced current conditions (Bekaroğlu & Yılmaz, 2020). For instance, the restrictive and unpredictable nature of the pandemic created stress and uncertainty, leading individuals to seek coping mechanisms through technology. Studies have shown that problematic internet use increased during the pandemic (Király et al., 2020).

Given that graduate theses are often independent of the file drawer effect, bibliometric analysis of addiction-related theses in Türkiye can provide valuable insights into the current state of addiction research. Without imposing restrictions on specific types of addiction or research areas, this study aims to examine the types, numbers, and focus areas of graduate theses written, successfully defended, and approved in Türkiye after the pandemic. This will allow for an observation of how bibliometric trends in addiction studies have evolved over the years.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of addiction-related research conducted in Türkiye during the post-pandemic period by analyzing graduate theses from 2021 to 2024. The underlying assumption is that the pandemic has influenced not only behavioral patterns but also academic interests and priorities. Therefore, it was hypothesized that digital and behavioral addictions have gained increased attention in the post-pandemic academic environment. By focusing on publicly available graduate theses—which are often less influenced by publication bias—this study contributes to the literature by revealing research trends and gaps in addiction studies. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study in Türkiye to examine post-pandemic

graduate theses on addiction through a bibliometric approach, with a particular emphasis on behavioral and digital addictions. It also offers insights into the interdisciplinary nature of addiction research in Türkiye and highlights underexplored areas that may benefit from further empirical investigation.

Material and Methods

This section provides information about the research model, data collection, and analysis methods.

Research Model

This study examines addiction-related theses completed between 2021 and 2024, which are available in the Turkish Council of Higher Education Thesis Center (YÖK-Tez) and have granted access permission. A bibliometric method was employed for this comprehensive literature review, utilizing document analysis as a qualitative research method and incorporating content analysis. In this model, existing documents, cases, and other sources are systematically compiled, reviewed, and analyzed (Sak et al., 2021).

Search Strategy and Sample

The search strategy was conducted using the advanced search feature in the YÖK-Tez database with the keyword "bağımlı*" (addict*) in thesis titles. The Boolean operator (*) was used to capture all variations of the word "bağımlılık" (addiction). The inclusion criteria were: (a) theses completed between 2021 and 2024, (b) availability of open access, and (c) relevance to addiction in a psychological or psychiatric context. Exclusion criteria included: (a) theses with restricted access, (b) non-human subject studies (e.g., on rats or mice), and (c) uses of "addiction" unrelated to psychological or behavioral content (e.g., economic dependency, international relations). After applying these criteria, a total of 1604 graduate theses were included, comprising 1299 master's theses, 178 medical specialization theses, and 125 doctoral theses. This process followed a purposive sampling approach, where all accessible and relevant theses in the population were reviewed.

Data Collection

The research data were obtained through the examination of documents, and this information was compiled in an Excel file. The compiled Excel document includes the thesis number, year, author names, the English and Turkish titles of the theses, their types and subheadings, their categories, and their distribution across different fields. The compiled Excel document can be accessed from the supplementary files section. The data collection process began in November 2024 and was finalized on January 10, 2025, when the final search and verification of entries were conducted.

Procedure

After identifying the theses using the specified keyword, the authors reviewed each title and abstract to determine relevance based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Eligible theses were downloaded and coded into a shared Excel document. The data entry included thesis number, title, discipline, year, type of addiction, and other categorical features. Two authors independently checked the database entries for accuracy. In cases of disagreement regarding the classification of a thesis or its inclusion, a consensus was reached through discussion. This collaborative process ensured the reliability of the data and minimized classification bias.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the research were subjected to content analysis in accordance with bibliometric evaluation criteria. The authors completed the data collection process after the YÖK-Tez database search and cross-checked their findings. In cases where they had differing opinions on whether a thesis should be included in the study, they engaged in discussions and reached a decision regarding its inclusion in the research.

Ethical Approvals of the Study

Since this study was conducted using a bibliometric database search method, it did not require approval from an ethics committee. Access was granted to theses already published by YÖK-Tez, which were in compliance with ethical permissions. All rules highlighted in the "Regulation on Scientific Research and Publication Ethics of Higher Education Institutions" were strictly followed.

Results

The annual data obtained from the database is as follows: In 2018, there were 229 theses focusing on addiction; in 2019, the number increased to 452, and in 2020, during the pandemic period, 274 theses were focused on addiction topics. The bibliometrically analyzed data in this study show that in 2021, the number of theses on addiction rose again to 440. In 2022, 2023, and 2024, the number of theses was 398, 463, and 498, respectively. Since 2021, the number of theses related to addiction has increased across all types of graduate theses. When examining the annual changes in graduate theses after the pandemic, it is noticeable that the increasing trend did not reflect in 2022 (Table 1).

When analyzing theses by their types, it can be observed that the highest frequency is in master's theses, followed by specialty theses in medicine and doctoral theses. Theses in dentistry specialization and art proficiency are the types in which the topic of addiction has been studied less frequently. Over the past 4 years, only one thesis from each of these two categories has been published (Table 2).

When an analysis of the areas of expertise for all theses over the 4 years is conducted, it is observed that many fields have produced theses within the framework of addiction. However, the fields with the highest frequency are as follows: psychology, sports, education and teaching, family medicine, nursing, psychiatry, public health, social services, sociology, and nutrition and dietetics (Table 3). Although the frequency is very low, it is also observed that theses on addiction have been produced in various other disciplines (e.g., civil aviation, linguistics, labor economics).

Table 1.
Distribution of the Frequency of Theses Published in YÖK-Tez by Year

Years	Included Theses	Excluded Theses	Annual Total Number of Theses
2024	459	39	498
2023	405	58	463
2022	354	44	398
2021	386	54	440
Total	1604	195	1799

Table 2.
Distribution of the Frequency of Thesis Types Published in YÖK-Tez by Year

Type of theses	2024	2023	2022	2021	Total
Master's	365	316	283	335	1299
Ph.D.	41	35	32	18	125
Specialty theses in medicine	53	53	39	33	178
Specialty theses in dentistry	0	0	0	0	0
Proficiency in Art	0	1	0	0	1
Included Theses Total	**459**	**405**	**354**	**386**	**1604**
Master's	25	32	30	38	125
Ph.D.	12	20	12	13	57
Specialty theses in medicine	2	6	2	2	12
Specialty theses in dentistry	0	0	0	1	1
Proficiency in art	0	0	0	0	0
Excluded Theses Total	**39**	**58**	**44**	**54**	**195**
Total	498	463	398	440	1799

After applying the exclusion criteria, the types of addictions in the obtained data were examined. Due to the large number of these addiction types, a grouping process was carried out by considering the relationships between these types. Accordingly, classification was made under four main categories: behavioral, substance-related, organizational/institutional, and other. The most frequent thesis works were conducted on behavioral, substance-related, other, and organizational/institutional addictions in that order. When focusing on the most frequently recurring addiction types in each main category, it was found that in the behavioral addiction category, social media was the most common; in substance-related addictions, alcohol was the most common; and in other addictions, physical/care/bed addiction was the most prevalent (Table 4).

Discussion

In this study, the bibliometric analysis and examination of graduate theses on the topic of addiction in Türkiye (2021 – 2024) after the pandemic were conducted. The findings reveal that academic interest in addiction has varied over the years, with a noticeable increase in the number of theses addressing addiction following the pandemic. The distribution of theses related to addiction across different disciplines indicates a concentration in areas such as psychology, sports, education and teaching, family medicine, social services, and psychiatry. Additionally, when examining types of addiction, digital addictions, especially social media and digital gaming addictions, stand out as the most frequently studied areas. This is likely due to their high prevalence and the ease of accessing individuals who engage in these behaviors (Gainsbury, 2015). Moreover, while there has been an increase in research on gambling addiction in recent years in Türkiye, it has been found that some types of addiction, such as pornography

Table 3.
Number of Theses Published on Addiction in Different Fields

Areas	2024	2023	2022	2021
Psychology	167	158	147	203
Sports	130	90	80	70
Education and instruction	78	61	66	52
Family medicine	25	31	21	20
Nursing	31	28	17	20
Psychiatry	23	34	19	19
Publis health	14	17	8	14
Social word	21	20	2	10
Sociology	10	10	8	12
Nutrition and dietetics	12	17	13	15
Children health and diseases	7	10	3	7
Biology	0	0	2	1
Industrial engineering	0	0	0	2
Economics	1	0	2	0
Physiology	1	0	1	0
Physiotherapy and rehabilitation	6	2	3	2
Religion	3	8	6	4
Forencis medicine	2	2	3	1
Health administration	5	3	4	1
Political sciences	2	0	1	0
Public relations	6	1	3	1
Public administration	1	0	5	0
Management information systems	3	4	1	0
Business administration	0	0	0	8
Science and technology	5	4	6	5
Communication sciences	0	0	33	13
Linguistics	0	0	1	0
Law	0	1	1	0
General surgery	1	0	0	0
Electrical and electronics engineering	1	0	0	0
Neurology	2	0	3	3
Pharmacy	0	1	0	0
Civil aviation	0	0	1	0
Midwifery	1	0		0
Drug addiction and alcoholism	7	3	8	11
Labor economics	1	0	1	0
Food hygiene	1	0	0	0

(*Continued*)

Table 3.
Number of Theses Published on Addiction in Different Fields (Continued)

Areas	2024	2023	2022	2021
Cardiology	1	0	0	0
Allergy and immunology	1	0	0	0
Journalism	2	0	6	0
Genetics	1	0	2	1
Aerospace engineering	0	0	0	0
Chemistry	1	3	1	0
Emergency medicine	1	0	0	0
Home economics	1	0	0	0
Health care management	1	0	3	0
Ophthalmology	1	0	0	0
Ergotherapy	1	0	1	0
Bioengineering	0	0	0	1
Pharmaceutical toxicology	0	0	1	1

addiction, are less frequently addressed in academic research (Dinçer, 2022). This situation provides an important opportunity to understand the trends in addiction research and to develop recommendations for underexplored areas.

One of the distinguishing features of this study is its focus on graduate theses—a relatively underutilized data source in bibliometric addiction research. Unlike peer-reviewed journal articles, graduate theses offer a broader view of academic priorities and often capture emerging topics that have yet to be widely published. This feature enables this study to reveal patterns and gaps that might otherwise go unnoticed in indexed literature.

Addiction is a multidimensional phenomenon that emerges as a result of the interaction between biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors, deeply impacting individuals' lives (Ewald et al., 2019; Griffiths, 2005). At the biological level, genetic predisposition (Kendler et al., 2003), changes in brain chemistry, and neurological processes play an important role in the development of addiction (Duncan, 2012; Tartar & Gobin, 2019). From a psychological perspective, factors such as personality traits (Ramirez-Castillo et al., 2019), difficulties in impulse control (Gullo & Potenza, 2014), and anxiety disorders (Lüthi & Lüscher, 2014) are directly related to addiction. On the social level, family structure, social environment, and cultural norms are key factors shaping the onset and persistence of addiction (Burke et al., 2017; Zucker et al., 2018). As a result, addiction must be studied from multiple perspectives across different disciplines in terms of its treatment and prevention.

In line with the suggestion above, the study findings indicate that addiction is addressed by many different academic disciplines. Theses on addiction are most concentrated in fields such as psychology, sports, education, family medicine, nursing, psychiatry, public health, and social services. However, addiction-themed studies are also found in disciplines like sociology, nutrition and

Table 4.
Types of Addictions Covered in Theses and Their Frequencies

	2024	2023	2022	2021
Behavioral addictions	383	321	281	319
Social media	109	89	97	97
Digital/online gaming	81	64	35	58
Internet	53	58	55	61
Digital (unspecified)	19	20	10	11
Smart phone	30	20	22	24
Exercise	24	17	21	18
Technology	23	15	9	14
Gambling	13	9	5	1
Eating/food	14	11	15	20
Screen	7	10	4	3
Work	3	0	1	1
Pornography	0	1	0	1
Relation	8	0	2	5
Brands	0	1	3	1
Interpersonal	7	9	7	3
Unspecified behavioral	1	10	5	10
Television	0	0	2	0
Cryptocurrency	0	0	1	0
Emotional	2	2	0	0
Substance-related addictions	64	101	73	70
Alcohol	14	4	5	7
Tobacco	24	17	11	24
Unspecified substance	17	32	32	28
Alcohol and other substances	10	13	5	7
Sedatives and stimulans	11	4	1	1
Shopping	8	7	2	2
Opiates	3	2	3	0
Nicotine	1	1	0	2
Metamphetamines	1	0	1	0
Depressants	1	0	0	0
Hallucinogens	1	0	0	0
Canabis	0	1	0	0
Morphine	0	0	2	0
Psychostimulants	0	1	0	0
Others	24	9	7	5
Mutual dependency	1	1	0	0
Codependency	1	0	0	0
Physical	10	9	0	3
Reward	0	0	1	0
Automobiles	1	0	0	0
Meat	2	0	0	0
Organizational	0	0	1	0

dietetics, communication sciences, law, forensic medicine, management information systems, and public administration. This broad academic interest highlights that addiction is not only an individual issue but also a multifaceted problem with causes and effects that relate to societal concerns.

The examination of addiction within the field of sports is particularly important for the scientific study of the therapeutic effects of sports, recreation programs, and exercise in the treatment of addictions. One of the most striking findings from the interviews conducted by Ertüzün and colleagues (2016) with 24 individuals undergoing treatment at AMATEM was that recreational programs are considered a key element in motivating individuals during addiction treatment. On the other hand, since exercising can also reach a level that qualifies as an addiction, studies on sports addiction are useful for identifying preventive programs (Berczik et al., 2012; Di Lodovico et al., 2019). During the pandemic, due to socialization occurring through digital games, an increase in the use of e-sports was observed, and e-sport addiction began to be addressed in academic studies (Bányai et al., 2019; Yılmaz & Özkan, 2022).

Although there are studies on gambling addiction, it is noteworthy that there are no thesis works on online gambling and betting addiction. Online gambling and betting differ from traditional gambling at the casino due to their constant accessibility, ease of access, and the uninterrupted betting opportunities provided by the interactive and immersive internet environment, making them much more prevalent (Gainsbury, 2015). The use of credit cards or e-wallets in online gambling and betting, along with the use of digital currency, causes gamblers to spend more time gambling and lose more money because they do not feel they are spending real money (Wood et al., 2007). The study of gambling behavior is believed to be hindered, similar to pornography addiction, due to social desirability and legal concerns (Arıcak, 2019). When reviewing thesis works, a study on cryptocurrency addiction, which seems related to online gambling, suggests that this type of addiction, which is closely linked to self-harming outcomes like suicide, requires further investigation (Andreeva et al., 2022).

Given the multifaceted nature of addiction, it is natural that thesis studies in Türkiye come from various disciplines. The concentration of theses in fields such as psychology, medicine, social services, sports, and education provides a significant framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of addiction. Additionally, even in areas with fewer studies, such as civil aviation, linguistics, economics, and engineering, the existence of addiction-related research highlights the necessity of approaching this phenomenon from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The bibliometric analysis shows that digital addictions have become even more prominent in thesis studies following the pandemic. Considering that being born into or adapting to the digital world is as influential as defining generations (Prensky, 2001), the impact of these devices, which can be beneficial at times and are highly accessible, on human life can be better understood. One reason for the spread of digital addictions is the low cost of access and the fact that, unlike alcohol, substance, or gambling addictions, they do not require direct financial expenditure (Hawi et al., 2019). Indeed, while there is an age limit for the legal use of substances like tobacco and alcohol, the absence of age restrictions for digital devices and applications has led to the development of digital addictions in young people and children, thereby making it a subject of research (Lareki et al., 2017).

In this context, adopting an interdisciplinary and holistic approach is essential to develop effective strategies for combating addiction. Structuring academic studies on addiction in Türkiye to encourage interdisciplinary collaborations is crucial from this perspective. Particularly, the increasing number of addiction-focused master's and doctoral programs in recent years in Türkiye must have an academic structure that contributes to a more holistic understanding of addiction and the development of more effective solutions. Moreover, the incentives given for writing theses on addiction (e.g., the Yeşilay thesis scholarship) could enhance interdisciplinary or intersectoral studies in the field of addiction, encouraging the evaluation of biopsychosocial and cultural elements (Griffiths, 2005).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study provides a bibliometric analysis of addiction-related graduate theses in Türkiye from 2021 to 2024, offering valuable insights into research trends. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is limited to publicly available graduate theses, which may not capture all addiction-related research conducted in Türkiye, particularly unpublished or industry-funded studies and projects. Second, while the analysis identifies research trends and gaps, it does not assess the quality or methodological rigor of the theses reviewed. Finally, the study primarily focuses on addiction topics rather than treatment efficacy or intervention outcomes, limiting its direct applicability to clinical practice.

Future research should expand beyond graduate theses to include peer-reviewed journal articles, governmental reports, and international comparisons to provide a more comprehensive picture of addiction research trends. Additionally, qualitative analyses of methodological approaches used in addiction studies could help assess research quality and improve future studies. Finally, given the limited attention to certain addictions, such as online gambling and pornography addiction, future studies should prioritize these underexplored areas to inform policy and intervention strategies.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Ethics Committee Approval: Since this study was conducted using a bibliometric database search method, it did not require approval from an ethics committee. Access was granted to theses already published by YÖK-Tez, which were in compliance with ethical permissions.

Informed Consent: Since this study was conducted using a bibliometric database search method, it did not require informed consent.

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