

## How Turkish Middle School Students Use the Internet to Study Social Studies\*

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### Abstract

*The Internet has become one of the most common educational tools used by teachers and students in social studies education worldwide. Although there are extensive studies on how the Internet is used by teachers as an instructional tool in social studies classes, less work has been done to explain how students themselves use and interact with Internet sources to study for social studies classes. The purpose of this research is to investigate how Turkish middle school students use the Internet to study and do their social studies homework. Fifty-seven middle school students completed an open ended questionnaire in one of Northern Turkey's larger cities. The results show that this group of Turkish middle school students use the Internet extensively, both to gather information for their homework and for non-academic purposes such as playing games, using social media and downloading music and films.*

### Introduction

The tremendous growth in Internet technologies has brought email, web pages, online services, specialized electronic networks, and software and global information resources to our homes as well as to schools (Bennett, Bishop, Dalgarno, Waycott, & Kennedy, 2012; Friedman & Heafner, 2008; Rice & Wilson, 1999; Rose & Fernlund, 1997; Vanfossen & Shiveley, 2003; Zhang & Quintana, 2012). PEW Research Center's Internet & American Life Project's data shows that 80 % of American adults currently have Internet access either at home or on smartphones (Zickuhr & Smith, 2013). Similarly, there is a steady increase in the number of Turkish households with Internet access, with 50% reporting connection to the Internet (Turkish Statistical Agency, 2013). Accordingly, Internet access in schools has increased greatly in recent years. Virtually all schools in the United States (Wells & Lewis, 2006) and 93 % of computers located in the classroom have Internet access (Gray, Thomas, & Lewis, 2010). According to data provided by the Turkish Ministry of National Education, all high schools and 98% of elementary schools in Turkey have high-speed Internet access somewhere in their buildings (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2012).

The increasing availability of the Internet in schools has triggered the curiosity of scholars studying the role of the Internet's potential role in developing more constructive and student-centered models of social studies education (Saye, 2002). Interacting with a wide variety of resources with diverse qualities and authenticities promotes students' critical thinking, problem solving, authentic experiences, and decision making about real social problems (Ehman, 2002; Saye, 2002; White, 2002). While leading social studies education

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journals such as *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *Social Education*, and *Social Studies and Young Learner* have published technology themed issues in recent years (Friedman & VanFossen, 2010; Mason Bolick, 2002), very little research explores the actual use of the Internet by students in the social studies classroom. Instead, the early literature on this issue mostly focuses on convincing teachers about the value of the Internet and how teachers can use it in the social studies classroom (Friedman & VanFossen, 2010).

These studies gave few details on the methods students use to gather and process information from the Internet to complete their social studies homework or projects, leaving a gap in the literature on the use of the Internet in the social studies classroom and the Internet's effectiveness as an instructional tool (Friedman & Heafner, 2008; Friedman & VanFossen, 2010; VanFossen & Shiveley, 2003). Consequently, this research focuses on students' use of the Internet, both in class, and for homework, in social studies. Homework usually refers to students' assigned essays, which can be on wide variety of topics such as biographies or investigating various global events and issues (i.e. earthquakes, global warming) in a social studies class in Turkey.

## **Literature Review**

### **How the Internet is Used in Social Studies Education**

The literature on Internet use in social studies education mostly focuses on introducing and evaluating various websites that are potentially useful in the social studies classroom (Berson, Berson, Desai, Falls, & Fenaughty, 2008; Berson, Cruz, Duplass, & Johnston, 2007; Bisland & Fraboni, 2007; Friedman & VanFossen, 2010) and the advantages and importance of data gathering activities in social studies education (Mason Bolick, 2002; Vanfossen & Shiveley, 2003; Whitworth & Berson, 2003).

Vanfossen and Shiveley's (2003) study shows that 80% of the National Council for Social Studies conference sessions devoted to the Internet between 1995 and 2002 addressed an overview of Internet use, teaching strategies utilizing the Internet, or the introduction of new websites. The study indicates that only slightly more than four percent of the presentations were research studies on Internet use in the social studies classroom. In their review of 325 articles about technology use in social studies education, Whitworth and Berson (2003) found that only eight of the articles were research based. The rest consisted of lists of websites, reviews of websites, and lesson plans or general lesson ideas, with Internet access" and "accessing information from the Web" as the most common uses of technology in social studies education.

The Pew Internet and American Life (Purcell, et al, 2012) reports reveal that teens use online sources extensively when doing research in this digital age. Search engines such as Google and online encyclopedias such as Wikipedia are the most popular online sources, used by an overwhelming majority of students (Purcell, et al., 2012). Other studies show that students prefer to use certain resources such as Wikipedia and Answers.com, and that they are wary of using other sources (Friedman & Heafner, 2008). Students tend to use Internet sources to access information without proper reading, analyzing and synthesizing (Zhang & Quintana, 2012), especially those students given little time by the teachers to engage with the available online texts (Walker, 2010). Other studies provide disturbing findings that students only use Internet sources to plagiarize information for their projects and homework (Cranmer, 2006; Garrison & Bromley, 2004). Purcell, Buchanan, and Friedrich (2013) state that "with so much material available publicly in digital form, the temptation for students to copy and paste others' work into their own is a concern for many teachers..." (p. 42). A more troubling

point is that most of these students were unaware that copying and pasting information is considered cheating (Cranmer, 2006).

Students use the Internet mostly to play games, chat online with friends, and share photos rather than for academic purposes (Tally, 2007). Although Tally acknowledged the fluency of students using computer and other digital technologies in this era, he complains about the lack of academic uses by students. Kafai and Sutton (1999) found that, among the elementary students they studied, a predominant use of computers was for “game playing”, and that the most frequent Internet activity was “net-surfing” followed by “information retrieval” and “e-mail uses”. The authors conclude that, “. . . the results of this survey reconfirm the findings of studies conducted in the ‘80s. While the number of computers at home has changed significantly over the past ten years, children’s academic home computing as such has not changed in substantial ways” (p. 354).

In their study with 236 middle and secondary school social studies teachers in Indiana, VanFossen and Waterson (2008) found low levels of higher order thinking by participants in their educational use of the Internet. Only a few participant teachers (9 %) occasionally or frequently “have students compare/contrast information from websites with different points of view” and “have students complete inquiry oriented WebQuests”. Only 20.4 % of the teachers “have students analyze webpages for bias and accuracy”, while 73.2% never did (Vanfossen & Waterson, 2008).

These findings raise the issue of the credibility of Internet sources. Many people can easily upload any information onto the web, and this information can be inaccurate or misguided (Braun, 1997; Bruce, 2000; Kiili, Laurinen, & Marttunen, 2008). Braun (1997) notes that “students now have much freer access to sources of information, and unless they are prepared to make use of critical thinking skills as they download data, they can easily be manipulated or persuaded into accepting information that is misleading and erroneous” (p.153). Teachers must help students to develop abilities to analyze the authenticity of information gathered from the Internet. For example, Bruce (2000) suggests that teachers need to help students engage in “dialectic reading” – evaluating, reflecting and comparing – as a necessary skill when retrieving information from the web.

### **The Use of the Internet in Social Studies Education in Turkey**

Recently, Internet access has been increasing in Turkey (Turkish Statistical Agency, 2013). Although there are no general restrictions for the use of the Internet, use of websites with content such as child pornography can be restricted by court order in Turkey. As stated above, Internet access in schools has also been increasing rapidly (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2012). The Internet in schools is mostly made available for administrators and teachers rather than for students. Students are only allowed Internet access during their weekly, two hour computer lessons. The school computer labs are usually not available for the use of other courses such as social studies. Students who want or need the Internet for their social studies homework or projects must therefore use computers and Internet connections outside of their schools.

While discussion continues from various positions about the use of the Internet in social studies education, the literature in Turkey on this issue is still quite young. Most of the studies in the Turkish social studies literature are limited to quantitative studies that do not go beyond listing the ways that students use the Internet. According to these studies, Turkish students at K-12 levels use the Internet to “gather information for homework” (Akdağ & Çoklar, 2009; Yalçınalp & Aşkar, 2003), “play games” and “communicate” (Orhan &

Akkoyunlu, 2004; Sakarya, Tercan, & Çoklar, 2011). Google has been identified as the most common research tool used by Turkish students to gather information from the Internet (Sakarya et al., 2011).

Very few studies in Turkey focus on investigating the attitudes of students towards Internet use for homework and study. Altun's (2008) study examined middle school students' attitudes toward online homework sites, while Arıkan and Altun's (2007) study focuses on the pre-service (preschool and elementary) teachers' attitudes toward these sites. The researchers in these follow-up studies (Arıkan & Altun, 2007; Altun, 2008) used the same survey instrument. The instrument, developed by Arıkan and Altun (2007) has two types of response protocols. These protocols require the participants to check their responses (either "yes", "no" or "strongly agree", "agree", "no idea", "disagree", and "strongly disagree") to pre-stated prompts. Both of these studies conducted on Turkish middle school students (n=737) and pre-service teachers (n=219) provide similar results. The vast majority (nearly 90%) of the participants in both studies report "saving time while doing homework" as the most significant advantage of these sites. Additionally, both groups find using online homework sites "enjoyable", while middle school students (70%) (Altun, 2008) find the studying process more pleasant than pre-service teachers (47%) when online homework websites used (Arıkan & Altun, 2007). While both groups are in favour of these sites, they also expressed some suggestions to improve the quality of online homework sites. More than 85% of the participants in both studies agreed that "the content of online homework sites should be examined by experts". A majority of the participants (students= 72 %; pre-service teachers= 84%) recommended that online homework sites should direct students to sources rather than present the finished homework itself ready for submission to the teacher (Altun, 2008; Arıkan & Altun, 2007). Sixty-five percent of students and 87% of pre-service teachers reported that teachers should encourage the use of resource centers and libraries in order to prevent students from using online homework sites so much (Altun, 2008; Arıkan & Altun, 2007).

In conclusion, there are few studies in Turkey focusing on students' use of the Internet for homework and education. The existing studies are primarily quantitative, and are therefore not particularly informative about the students' working process while using Internet sources for their homework. The focus of this research is to investigate how students use Internet sources to study social studies or do their homework.

## **Methodology**

### **Settings and Participants**

Data was collected in one middle school in a large city in the Northern region of Turkey. Located in a central neighborhood of the city, there are 1378 students (657 girls and 721 boys) and 37 teachers. The school has elementary and middle school sections in two different buildings, with 17 classrooms, a counseling room, a sports room, a library, a computer lab, and a conference room. The general population of the school is characterized as middle class or lower middle class.

Fifty-seven (29 girls and 28 boys) 7<sup>th</sup> grade students voluntarily participated in the study. As Turkish students take general social studies courses from 4<sup>th</sup> through 7<sup>th</sup> grade, the 7<sup>th</sup> grade was selected because it is the last level at which students take social studies courses. After this grade, students can only take discipline-based courses such as history, geography or sociology. Seventh grade was also deemed the most appropriate level because they have already had numerous experiences using the Internet throughout their previous 3 years of

social studies courses. The students and their teacher were informed about the purpose of the research, and were told that responding to the questionnaire would help the researcher to understand how students used the Internet to study social studies. All participating students were given an open-ended questionnaire. Six selected students among them were interviewed.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through an anonymous, open-ended questionnaire developed by the researcher (see Appendix). It included basic demographic information about the students, six questions to evaluate the participants as Internet users, their frequency of Internet use, and how they use the Internet when they study social studies or do their social studies homework. Two other educators reviewed the questionnaire (one university professor and one teacher), and the questionnaire was then modified according to their suggestions and recommendations. Data was collected in the spring semester of 2012. Students were given instructions for completing the questionnaire, and the participants completed it in approximately 20 minutes. Teachers were then asked to identify 6 students of varying achievement levels (low, middle, and high) to be interviewed. Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix, question 6) were conducted to acquire deeper understanding of the students' use of the Internet. Audio-recorded interviews lasted between five and ten minutes, and were transcribed verbatim.

### **Data Analysis**

Initially, the quantitative section of the questionnaire was analyzed using basic statistical methods such as frequency count and mean count. The first five questions in the survey aimed to acquire information about students' self-reported proficiencies as Internet users, and their frequency and manner of Internet use. Thus, students' responses for these questions are presented in separate tables (see tables 1-4), including the frequency counts and percentiles.

The qualitative parts of the questionnaire and interview transcripts were analyzed, starting with initial readings and exploring the data corpus (Creswell, 2005). Accordingly, I read all the questionnaires and interview transcripts as the first step of analyzing the data, wrote memos and highlighted the possible key quotes. An inductive analysis approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) was used in order to create the coding categories that emerged from the questionnaires and interview transcripts. After the initial analysis coding categories, subcategories, such as "typing homework title on a search engine", "Google", "Wikipedia", "how homework is written (combine, summarize, copy-paste, compare)" emerged from the data.

I used a triangulation analysis strategy to increase reliability (Patton, 2002), wherein another professor from an educational field also analyzed the data. The codes and categories created by each researcher were then compared and negotiated to reach a consensus. The triangulation method was also employed to ensure the accuracy of frequency counts for each category. Selected quotes from the questionnaires and interview transcripts were translated from Turkish to English, and are presented and discussed.

## **Findings**

### **Participants' Internet Use**

Initial questions from the survey were about students' Internet availability at home and their habits of Internet use. These questions aim to acquire information about the length of time students spend on the Internet, their proficiencies as Internet users, and their manner of Internet use. The data analysis indicates that more than two-thirds (n=38, 66.5%) of the total participants had an Internet connection in their homes. More than a quarter of the participants (n=15, 26%) did not have any Internet access in their homes. Four students did not answer this question.

Students were also asked about the average length of time they spent on the Internet every day. As can be seen from table 1, the majority of the students (86%) used the Internet every day, although the length of time spent varied. Only eight students (14%) reported that they did not use the Internet.

Table 1

*Length of time spent on the Internet per day by participants.*

Length of time per day	Frequency	Ratio (%)
None	8	14
0-1 Hours	31	54.5
2-3 Hours	15	26.5
3 or more Hours	3	5

Participants were also asked about their competency of Internet use. As can be seen from table 2, more than three quarters of the total participants rated themselves as "very good" (n= 17, 30%) or "good" (n= 26, 45.5%) Internet users, and almost a quarter of the (n=13, 23%) participants saw themselves as "moderate" users. Only one participant labeled himself/herself as a "bad" Internet user. None of the participants labeled themselves as a "very bad" Internet user. As all of these responses are self-reported, the responses to this question may not represent completely the actual levels of their proficiency as Internet users. Based on their responses as a whole, however, it can be assumed majority of the participants can at least navigate on the Internet, and find and download information in various forms.

The majority of the participants believe they are proficient Internet users. This is an interesting finding, as a considerable number (n=15, 26%) of the participants did not have Internet access at their homes. Thus, it is likely that these participants have become proficient users by interacting with the Internet in different places such as in schools, Internet cafes, or the private homes of friends or relatives. In fact, a few students indicated that they usually went to Internet cafes or a friend's house to do their homework in their responses to the questionnaire.

Table 2

*Self-reported Internet competency of the participants.*

Internet competency of the participants	Frequency	Ratio (%)
Very good	17	30
Good	26	45.5
Moderate	13	23
Bad	1	1.5
Very Bad	0	0

After establishing the participants' frequency and proficiency with Internet use, the ways they use the Internet were analyzed. Participants were given a list of methods of Internet use (see Appendix question 4), and were asked to indicate their reasons for such use. Participants were allowed to check more than one reason for Internet use for this question. The participants were also asked to list their top three most common motives for Internet use in a follow-up question on the questionnaire. The data gathered from these questions are presented in table 3 and table 4.

Table 3

*Participants' reasons for Internet use.*

Methods of Internet use	Frequency	Ratio (%)
Gathering information for coursework	53	93
Playing games	44	77
Social media (Facebook, Twitter)	36	63
Gathering visuals for coursework	29	51
Downloading music/films	27	47
Aimless Internet surfing	4	7
Other	3	5

As can be seen from these tables, "gathering information for coursework" was the most common reason for Internet use reported by the participants. An overwhelming majority of the participants (n=53, 93%) indicated that they used the Internet to gather information related to their courses. In addition, more than half of the participants indicated that "playing games" and interacting with "social media" were other common reasons for Internet use. "Downloading music/films" and "gathering visuals for coursework" were less common reasons. Few students indicated that they surf on the Internet aimlessly, and that they read magazines for leisure and work on programming.

As can be seen from tables 3 and 4, the order and calculated frequency for each reason for Internet use has not been changed much. It is natural to see the frequencies becoming lower in table 4 as the data presented here was based on the participants' top three

Table 4

*Participants' self-reported most common reasons for Internet use.*

Reason for Internet use	Frequency	Ratio (%)
Gathering information for coursework	49	86
Playing games	35	61
Social media (Facebook, Twitter)	31	54
Downloading music/films	21	37
Gathering visuals for coursework	17	30
Aimless Internet surfing	3	5
Other	2	3.5

reasons for Internet use. On the other hand, the data presented in table 3 was not only limited to three choices. Since the participants were allowed to make as many choices as they liked, the frequencies for each reason for Internet use were higher in table 3. The order of the frequency of each item in both tables has not been changed except for "downloading music/films" and "gathering visuals for coursework". As can be seen from table 3 and 4, these two items' order has been reversed.

Although there were minor differences between the frequencies and orders of the items presented in these tables, it is clear that these participants used the Internet extensively to gather information and visuals for their courses, play games, use social media, and download music and films. The next section focuses on the participants' use of the Internet to study social studies.

### **How the Participants Used the Internet to do Social Studies Homework**

Participants were asked in both the questionnaire and interview sessions to explain how they completed social studies homework using Internet sources. The purpose of this question was to understand the ways that students gather and process information from the Internet to complete their social studies homework or projects. Analysis of the responses to this question indicated that students used a typical searching method to find information on the Internet. The vast majority of the participants (n=52, 91%) indicated that, when they had a social studies assignment, they typed their homework title on a search engine and generally completed their homework based on only one Internet source located (n=41, 72%). There were several responses from the participants about this issue.

I did my homework using Google. I wrote it [homework] from the first website, and the information was correct. (P. # 26)

First, I write it [homework title] on Google. Second, I read the websites I selected. Third, I find the one most appropriate for my homework and save it on Word and write it down. When I need it again, I find it from the Word document. (P. #56)

First, I wrote the topic of my homework on Google. Then, I selected the most appropriate website for my homework. If I cannot find it from Google, I search in the websites I know. (P. #49)

First I enter the topic of the homework on Google; I select one of the websites [from the search results] and find a picture appropriate for it [homework]. (P. #38)

As can be understood from the responses, the most frequently used search engine by the participants was Google. Forty-two respondents (74%) cited *Google* as their primary search engine, which is notable because students were not asked to specify any search engine they used when they were doing Internet searches. Nevertheless, a majority of the participants named Google as the search engine they used frequently. The participants also cited *Vikipedi*, which is the Turkish version of Wikipedia, as the most common and trusted Internet source (n=27, 47%) used for their homework. Below are the selected responses about this issue.

There are well known websites like *Vikipedi*. I generally search on these sites. (P. #27 interview)

[I use] well known and objective websites like *vikipedi*. (P. #35)

I think for me and my peers *Vikipedi* is the most beneficial website... I type my homework on Google but, as I said, since *Vikipedi* is the most beneficial website for me and my peers, I do my homework from this website. (P. #18 interview)



I generally use Wikipedi... because this site explains [the topics] very well, and I get higher grades when I do my homework from Wikipedi. (P. #8 interview)

Other than Wikipedi, a few students (n=6) named Facebook, Twitter, MSN, and forum websites as the Internet sources they used. Only one student stated that s/he used an online teaching and learning platform ([www.okulistik.com](http://www.okulistik.com)) to do some social studies homework. “The website that I have signed up for is very good. Today I told my teacher and s/he liked it a lot” stated participant number 2. Only one student indicated that s/he preferred to use official government websites. S/he stated, “First I search within government websites. If there is not any information [about my homework] there, I use a search engine ...” (P. #39). Thus, it seems that, except for Google and Wikipedi, there were no other websites commonly used by the participants. In addition, these few responses clearly indicated that the majority of participants were not particularly selective about the credibility and reliability of the sources they used for their social studies homework. For instance, only one student stated that “first of all, I investigate whether the website is good and check the information in the website, then I write my homework” (P. #28).

While the participants seemed to be skillful at conducting Internet searches and reaching various sources, they were doing little to compare Internet sources with each other or analyze and synthesize the information gathered. As can be seen from table 5, more than half of the participants (n=31, 54%) pointed out that, after they had found a number of sources on the Internet, they selected “the best”, “correct”, or “appropriate” source and then wrote their homework based on this single source. Below are some selected responses from this group of participants.

After I look at all sites [retrieved from the Google search], I select the best one. (P. #34)

I typed the homework title on Google, I looked at a few websites, and I wrote [the homework from] the better one [site]. (P. #4)

After I read all sites [retrieved from Internet search], I select the most appropriate to my homework. (P. #56)

I select, the best, the most understandable and the most appropriate to my homework and I write [from this] one [source]. (P. #49)

I compared the sources with each other and I wrote from the one that definitely contained correct information. (P. #47)

As can be understood from the participants’ responses, although they used such words as “the best”, “correct”, or “appropriate” to define the quality of the sources they selected, they did not explain what these words meant. It is possible that these participants were unaware of how they could filter or eliminate information gathered from the Internet. Correspondingly, when the participants were asked to cite the number of Internet sources they used for social studies homework, almost three quarters of the total participants (n=41, 72%) stated that, generally, they only used one source. Twelve of the participants (21%) stated that they used two sources, and only four remaining participants stated that they used three or more sources to complete

their social studies homework. Given how the majority of the participants generally used only one source to complete their social studies homework, it is unsurprising that they did little to compare and contrast sources.

Table 5

*Participants' self-reported ways of processing information gathered from the Internet to do their homework.*

Methods of information processing /doing homework	Frequency	Ratio (%)
Selecting the best /correct / appropriate source	31	54
Summarize	24	42
Compare sources	17	30
Combine	14	25
Copy –paste	13	23
Print the Web Pages	2	3.5

Less than one third (n= 17, 30%) of the total participants stated that they compared Internet sources with each other and/or other sources. Only four participants within this group indicated that they compared Internet sources with print sources before writing their homework: “First, I collect information from an encyclopedia, then I do an Internet search ... by reading and checking information from different sources” stated participant number 29. Only a couple of students indicated that they compared the information they gathered from the Internet with various sources and their teachers before using it: “In order to find the most correct information, I enter various websites and ask my teachers” stated participant number 27. However, participant number 39 had a more sophisticated way of comparing information: “I compare [information from the Internet] by asking the teacher. If the information I find is not from a government website, I compare the information with the government website.” While a few students were checking the reliability of the information they gathered from the Internet, the vast majority of the participants simply did not care about the quality of the information they gathered. This may suggest that they have not been instructed about how to check the reliability of Internet sources and filter information from the web.

After completing the researching of sources and reviewing the information they found on the Internet, a few participants pointed out different ways of writing their social studies homework. The most common approach was summarizing. A considerable number of the participants (n=24, 42%) stated that they “summarize” information they had gathered from the Internet in order to write their homework. Below are some selected responses of the participants.

I printed it [website] out from the Internet, then I read and summarized. (P. #36)

First, I read it [website], then I summarize. (P. #16)

I got a print out from a few websites, and I wrote [my homework] by summarizing. (P. # 19)

First, I enter Google and type my homework; then I find information about the [homework] topic; I click on these [websites] and summarize the information. (P. #43 interview)

A quarter of the total participants (n=14, 25 %) used the word “combine” to explain how they wrote their homework after gathering information from the Internet. Basically, this group obtained some information from each website they had found and added one to another when they wrote their homework. Below are some selected responses of these participants.

After I have checked the trustworthiness of information, I combined [it]. (P. #24)

I searched from different [Internet] sources and add the information on the one that did not contain [this specific information]. (P. #1)

I got a little information from each website, then I downloaded them to my computer and combined them in the computer (P. #2) ... For instance I write the introduction [of my homework] from Wikipeđi, I write the body from another website and combine these two sources by adding short sentences (interview)

Some participants (n=13, 23%) indicated that they “copied and pasted” the information they gathered from the Internet and submitted their homework in this form: “I copied from Google to Word, then I wrote [my homework]” said participant number 13. Similarly, participant number 56 stated that “I saved it as Word document, then I wrote [my homework]”. Two students even admitted that they just print out the related information directly from websites and submitted the homework in this form. Participant number 23 stated, “I did not write at all, I just got a print out”. Likewise participant number 20 notes that “When the teacher wants the homework in handwriting, I do it this way. But sometimes we only get prints [of websites]”.

In conclusion, it is clear that these groups of Turkish middle school students frequently used the Internet to gather information to do their social studies homework, but they tended to use the information without critical thinking, proper analysis, or synthesis. Although scholars, teachers, and students accept the Internet as a vital resource in social studies, members of each group appear to overlook its irresponsible uses, such as when students use unreliable sources unquestioningly, or when they just cut, copy and paste information.

### **Discussion**

The vast majority of the participants stated that they used the Internet as a research tool to collect information and visuals for their coursework. This was an expected finding as computer and Internet availability have been growing tremendously in schools and homes (Bennett et al., 2012). Earlier studies conducted with Turkish students also showed that students use the Internet as a primary research tool for their classes (Akdağ & Çoklar, 2009; Orhan & Akkoyunlu, 2004; Sakarya et al., 2011; Yalçınalp & Aşkar, 2003).

On the other hand, the data showed that the participants tended to use the information gathered from the Internet without critical thinking, proper analysis or synthesis. As the data indicates, almost three quarters of the participants used only one Internet source for their homework, and less than one third of the participants compared the information gathered from the Internet with other sources. The majority of participants typically summarized, combined, or even copied and pasted information from the Internet for their homework. This is congruent with Friedman and Heafner’s (2008) findings, which showed that students are not building higher order thinking when using Internet sources. Rather, students use the Internet to search for information and copy and paste text and images without comparing and

analyzing information (Cranmer, 2006; Garrison & Bromley, 2004), sometimes not realizing that copy and pasting information constitutes cheating (Cranmer, 2006).

This study also confirmed that students generally preferred to use only a few search engines and common websites such as Google and Wikipedia when searching on the Internet. An earlier study conducted in Turkey showed that Google was a very common (94%) search engine among elementary students (Sakarya et al., 2011). This study also showed that almost half of the participants (n=27, 47%) cited Vikipedi (the Turkish version of Wikipedia) as a primary and trusted Internet source for their homework. This finding indicates that Turkish and American students named the same website as a main source for Internet searches.

Although using the Internet in the classroom is viewed as an opportunity to make social studies pedagogy more constructivist by a number of social studies educators (Ehman, 2002; Saye, 2002; White, 2002), the findings of this study suggest the opposite. According to these authors, students' interaction with a wide variety of resources with diverse qualities and authenticities promotes their critical thinking, problem solving, authentic experiences, and decision-making about real social problems (Ehman, 2002; Saye, 2002; White, 2002). However, the findings of this study showed that the participants' interaction with Internet sources did not build such skills. Rather, the majority of the participants used Internet sources in a superficial way only to complete their homework. This study clearly showed that, although students commonly used the Internet for academic purposes, there is an evident lack in its use to develop skills in critical thinking, analysis and synthesis.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study shows that this group of Turkish middle school students use the Internet extensively to gather information for their homework in addition to playing games, using social media and downloading music and films. However, the data shows that a great number of students use the Internet for homework uncritically lacking source comparison, analysis and synthesis. Rather, most use the information gathered from the Internet came from a single source. There could be several reasons for this shallow use of the Internet, including the hegemony of the fixed curriculum and standardized testing, or other reasons. The pressure of succeeding in standardized tests and the fixed curriculum tend to pressure students so that they may not give much importance to this type of homework. Nevertheless, I would argue that the main reason could be the habits and culture of the Internet uses of the students and teachers in Turkey. Turkish students and even some teachers tend to believe whatever they read or see on the Internet, and are seemingly less worried about the quality and reliability of the information.

Braun (1997) notes that if students do not use "critical thinking skills as they downloaded data, they can easily be manipulated or persuaded into accepting information that is misleading and erroneous" (p.153). Teachers must therefore help students to develop techniques to encourage more active interrogation of the reliability of Internet information. Accordingly, I suggest the following list of tasks for students when they are collecting information from the Internet.

**Checking the credibility of Internet sources.** Students must check the credibility of Internet sources before using them, by asking questions to analyze the trustworthiness of Internet sources. One such question is "Who is the site owner?" If it is a governmental organization's official website or a well-known NGO's website, it may be considered a trusted source. If it is another type of website, the author (if there is any) of the online text

must be checked and the following questions must be answered: “Who is the author? What is their field of expertise?” Finally, the information must be checked regarding when it was last updated. There is a vast amount of outdated information on the Internet, and students must be cautious about using this information.

**Checking the trustworthiness of information.** After filtering Internet sources, students must also check the trustworthiness of information gathered from the Internet. Students can do this by comparing the information with other Internet and print sources. This strategy allows them to eliminate erroneous and/or misleading information.

**Reflective reading and analyzing information.** Students must read and analyze information collected from the Internet reflectively and critically (Bruce, 2000) in order to make their own meanings of the information gathered.

**Synthesizing information.** Finally, students must synthesize the information collected from all sources, put it into their own words, and submit their assignments in this form.

Applying these strategies may help students to filter Internet sources and promote their reflective reading, analysis, and synthesis skills. Nonetheless, as the data in this study suggests, it seems that the participants have neither been instructed about how to check the trustworthiness of Internet sources, filtering and checking information, nor how to process it analytically and critically.

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**Appendix: How do you use the Internet for your social studies homework?**

Gender:         Female                       Male

Age :..... Grade / Class .....

1. Do you have an Internet connection at your home?    Yes                       No
  
2. How many hours do you spend on the Internet in a day (on average)?
  - a) None 0-1 hours
  - b) 2-3 hours
  - c) more than 3 hours
  
3. How do you rate yourself as an Internet user?
  - a) Very good                      b) Good                      c) Moderate                      d) Bad                      e) Very Bad
  
4. What are your purposes for Internet use? (You can check more than one item).
  - a) Gathering information for coursework
  - b) Gathering visuals for coursework.
  - c) Playing games
  - d) Using e-mail
  - e) Using social media websites / chatting (Facebook, Twitter etc.)
  - f) Downloading music and films
  - g) Aimless Internet surfing
  - h) Other. Specify .....
  
5. Please list the top three most common Internet uses among those you have checked above.
  - a) .....
  - b) .....
  - c) .....
  
6. Please give an example that tells us how you complete social studies homework using the Internet.
  - a) How did you search for and find sources on the Internet for this homework?
  - b) How many Internet sources did you use for this homework?
  - c) How did you compare the information you gathered from different Internet sources, and how did you decide which source(s) to use?
  - d) How did you complete and finalize your homework using these Internet sources?