The Dynamics of Digital Violence Among University Students: Prevalence, Risk Factors, and Ways to Protect Against It

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ABSTRACT

Digital violence is defined as a type of violence perpetrated using technological tools on online, internet-based platforms. Family-related factors including lack of love, parental irresponsibility, failure to support autonomy, constant punishment, ineffective communication, and insufficient support can lead children to become technologically dependent and subsequently emerge as digital bullies or victims. Digital violence, also referred to as cyber violence, involves individuals who perpetrate such acts (cyber bullies) and those exposed to them (cyber victims). For a situation to be considered cyber violence, it must involve harmful or potentially harmful behaviors such as threats, persistent stalking, sexually explicit messages, invasion of privacy, unauthorized acquisition of personal information, blackmail, abuse, identity fraud, and disclosure of private photos and videos.The increasing rates of social media usage among university students highlight technological dependency and partner control as prominent risk factors. The presence of serious psychological trauma in bullies who perpetrate digital violence and the occurrence of significant psychological disorders in students exposed to digital violence reveal that psychological factors represent the most critical risk dimension for digital violence. This study aims to examine, based on the literature, the risk situations created by digital violence among university students, the psychological, physical, and social effects of bullying experienced by victims, the various types of bullying, and the legal criteria for considering such acts as crimes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital violence can be defined as intentional psychological, physical, and social attacks carried out using technological devices and internet-based platforms with the aim of causing harm [1]. Violence has been a constant reality in our lives since ancient times, but before technology became so intertwined with our lives, ugly behaviour, guilt, compassion, and conscience came into play, and people felt hesitant. Nowadays, with relationships becoming virtual, the phenomenon of violence has also become virtual, leading to the disappearance of compassion, conscience, and guilt from the past and a change in cultural values. Digital violence has become a pleasurable phenomenon, and killing or dying, torturing, or using physical violence no longer creates any fear in individuals. Virtual violence and real violence have become intertwined, and human values have begun to diminish [2].

In previous years, when we were faced with traditional peer violence, namely physical and verbal abuse, today, with the advent of technology in our lives, we have moved from the concept of hooliganism to that of digital bullying, which has brought many new challenges to our lives and become more uncontrollable [3]. The internet has become an indispensable part of our lives and has established itself as an authority that guides us in every area. While it provides young people with convenience in areas such as information, education, communication, and social interaction, it also brings with it certain threats and risks. Technology and the internet, when used for purposes other than their intended ones, also bring negative aspects such as pornography, cyberbullying, stalking, harassment, and threats to the fore [4].

Among internet-based platforms, social media platforms are the most widely used, and people of all ages have endeavoured to learn and

use social media tools in order to stay informed about what is happening around them, to avoid standing out from others, and to avoid feeling excluded. Although this situation is positive, it also leads to negative consequences [5]. According to the 2025 data from the Household Information Technology Usage Survey, internet usage prevalence was observed to be 94% among men and 89% among women. Of these, 76% used the internet to benefit from e-government services, 56% to shop online, 18% to acquire information and learn, and 88% to use WhatsApp [6]. According to research conducted by the Statista Research Team, based on October 2024 data, approximately 74% of the world's population, or 6 billion people, use the internet, and 69% use social media. Northern Europe ranks first in terms of internet usage worldwide, with approximately 99% of the population in the Netherlands, Norway, and Saudi Arabia using the internet. North Korea is the country with the lowest internet usage worldwide, while East Asia has been identified as the region with the most online users [7].

2. THE CONCEPT OF DIGITAL VIOLENCE

The concept of violence is a phenomenon that spans from the earliest ages of history to the present day. Over the centuries, it has been applied from human to human, human to animal, human to plant, and to all kinds of living beings, and at the root of violence lies humanity. While violence in the past was carried out socially, psychologically, and physically as a display of power, today a new type of violence, digital violence, has been added to these types. Digital violence has a greater psychological and social impact on people. The continuity of the internet, the prevalence of social media platforms, the anonymity of identity, and the rise of keyboard warriors have led to the emergence of digital bullying and the misuse of technology [8].

2.1. Definition of Digital Violence

Digital violence is defined as violence that causes harm or leads to harm by deliberately and consciously harming individuals or groups through actions such as belittling, humiliating, threatening or harassing them using technological tools and internet-based platforms [9]. The Council of Europe defines cyber violence as "the use of technological tools to cause harm, provoke individuals, or threaten/harass individuals, creating or potentially creating harmful or painful situations, and manipulating individuals' emotions" [10].

2.2. Types of digital violence

Willard (2007) summarises the types of digital violence under seven headings. These are:

2.2.1. Provocation

Deliberate and planned actions such as inciting, inflaming, or angering individuals or groups to bully each other, the country and the state, or a group or community.

2.2.2. Harassment

Violence committed with the intent to cause distress. It is the act of deliberately causing distress to the other party sexually, racially, gender-based, psychologically, religiously, and politically by persistently repeating stalking, sending messages and content.

2.2.3. Belittling

Actions such as publishing false information that is demeaning, embarrassing, and disturbing about others, or spreading rumours, based on a person's perception of their own superiority.

2.2.4. Exposure

The act of deceiving a person or maliciously publishing and disseminating their private information, images, and videos.

2.2.5. Impersonation

This is the act of creating a fake account in someone's name, taking their place, behaving like them, and publishing content that damages their status.

2.2.6. Exclusion

These are deliberate actions taken to ignore the existence of a person or group, remove them from online platforms, or block them.

2.2.7. Threat

This is a type of action deliberately carried out to create fear and panic in individuals or groups by persistently sending messages/comments on online platforms [11].

2.3. Differences Between Digital Violence And Direct Violence

Digital violence is characterised by a strong relationship between bullying and victimisation, with more reciprocal behaviours than in bullying attempts in earlier periods. Therefore, this situation must be taken into account when developing protective measures against digital violence. Young people who have experienced physical violence are more likely to become victims of cyber violence, and those who have perpetrated physical bullying are more likely to become cyber bullies [12].

3. THE PREVALENCE OF DIGITAL VIOLENCE AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WORLDWIDE AND IN TURKEY

When digital violence is considered globally, digital victims range from 14% to 58%, and the rate

of perpetrating digital bullying varies from 6% to 47%. Among these, the most common actions are humiliation, threats, intimidation, fake news, sexual harassment, and aggression, which also raise many issues in terms of personal data privacy, security, and crime [13]. According to a study conducted in seven countries around the world, the highest rates of students exposed to cyberbullying were in Romania (38%), Greece (27%), Germany (22%) and Poland (22%), while the lowest rates were in the Netherlands, Iceland and Spain (13%) [14].

3.1. Research on Digital Violence in the World and Turkey

According to a study conducted in the United States, internet-based platforms significantly increase violence. Among these, political debates account for 20%, social media platforms account for 75%, and 41% of online harassment data involves serious harassment, while 25% involves more serious harassment. The most common types of violence identified were: name-calling (32%), physical threats (14%), prolonged harassment (11%), stalking (12%), shaming (28%), and sexual harassment (12%). The factors influencing these were identified as gender (33%), sexual orientation (16%), politics (50%), religion (19%), and race/ethnicity (29%) [15]. According to a study conducted in Saudi Arabia, the prevalence of digital violence is around 43%, while internet usage rates are around 57% for men and 47% for women. The rates of using technological tools for more than 2 hours range from approximately 25% to 78%, the rate of those who have previously been exposed to digital violence ranges from 35% to 65%, the rate of victims who know the bully ranges from 30% to 70%, and the rate of those who are victimised by strangers ranges from 40% to 65%. Encountering bullying affects victims' academic performance, makes them consider dropping out of school, makes them want to stop using technological devices, makes them consider harming themselves, and makes them reluctant to ask for help [16].

According to research conducted in Turkey, the most common forms of digital victimisation are: harassment via email or text message (80%), political and religious messages (64%), invitations to visit obscene websites or applications (64%), exposure to insults and profanity on chat platforms (62%), pornographic or sexually explicit emails (62%), and encountering fake accounts with unknown identities (62%). Among university students, the reasons for bullying each other are listed as harbouring resentment towards the other party (36%), causing harm for no reason (20%), provoking and angering (17%), seeking revenge (10%), and religious and political coercion (4%)

[17]. A study jointly published by Oxford University and the Human Development Foundation found that one in five people in Turkey perpetrate digital violence, while one in three are subjected to it [18].

3.2. Research Conducted by Gender

Studies on digital violence indicate that male university students engage in digital bullying more frequently than female students. Consequently, boys are more likely to be victims of digital bullying than girls [19]. Digital violence has reached primary school levels [20], and intensive internet use and spending long hours playing digital games among adolescents increase their likelihood of experiencing cyberbullying [21]. Students who experience cyberbullying tend not to take it seriously, thinking that their peers are just joking with them [22]. Consequently, students who experience digital victimisation are more likely to engage in digital bullying themselves [23].

3.3. Common Types of Digital Violence

According to research conducted in Turkey, dating violence among university students ranges from approximately 30% to 70%. It is stated that a large proportion of dating violence is perpetrated through digital means [24]. According to the Cyberbullying Survey conducted by IPSOS in 28 countries in 2018, approximately 73% of respondents had experienced digital bullying, with Latin America ranking first at 76%, North America at 67%, Europe at 65%, the Middle East and Africa at 61%, and Turkey at around 60%. Furthermore, approximately 40% of participants in Turkey were found to be unaware of digital bullying [25].

4. THE DYNAMICS OF DIGITAL VIOLENCE

As social media platforms foster a sense of community and social mobility, individuals feel an increasing obligation to participate in these platforms in order to fit in and due to social pressure. However, the anonymity of social media also increases the likelihood of individuals engaging in more bullying on these platforms. In social media environments, the establishment of extensive networks to fit in with the environment, the formation of friend groups and communities, increases the likelihood of individuals bullying and being bullied to a high degree. Furthermore, these behaviours are normalised and become part of everyday life [26].

4.1. Social Media Platforms

49% of women using social media experience digital violence, while 31% of male users experience digital violence. Among the most commonly used

social media platforms, the rates of exposure to digital violence are approximately as follows: Instagram 79%, Facebook 19%, WhatsApp 24%, Twitter (X) 49%, YouTube 3%, digital games 11%, and dating apps 9% [27]. While 92% of students using social media platforms are male, 99% of women use these platforms. While 89% of women and 90% of men use Facebook, 46% of women use X, 75% use Instagram, 31% use Swarm, 37% use Snapchat, and 84% use WhatsApp. while 55% of men use X, 75% use Instagram, 46% use Swarm, 30% use Snapchat, and 78% use WhatsApp. Furthermore, 77% of men and 82% of women acknowledge that these platforms influence their daily lives [28].

4.2. Anonymity and Lack of Oversight

Living in the age of technology and communication, where the internet and technological tools are used in every aspect of our lives, the lack of oversight in the digital world and the environment of anonymity increase the likelihood of individuals engaging in cyberbullying. In this situation, it has been observed that victims of bullying are increasingly exposed to threats, blackmail, insults, and profanity on social media platforms, personal accounts, or internet-based technological tools [29].

4.3. Digital Privacy

The introduction of technology into our lives at a very young age and the new generation born with this technology has brought the reality of digital privacy to the forefront. While families are concerned about the amount of time their children spend on the internet, they also provide technological tools to their children themselves, considering their contribution to their development. This inconsistency leads to technology addiction in children. Therefore, families and children should be taught not only how to use technological tools but also how to protect digital privacy [30]. Digital privacy can be classified under three headings. The first is personal privacy, the second is regional privacy, i.e. the place where the person lives, the region, the scope of power, the possibility of intervention, and the third is information privacy, i.e. the protection of personal data. These three classifications of privacy should be included in the scope of security through rights and laws [31].

4.4. Peer Influence

Cyberbullying has brought another dimension of violence to the fore. Just as physically strong individuals are bullies in peer bullying, those with advanced knowledge of technological tools and internet usage have the potential to engage in cyberbullying. Digital violence requires technological power rather than physical strength and causes people to witness bullying while hiding their identity [32].

4.5. Digital Violence Among Couples

According to a study conducted at the University of Spain, approximately 11% of respondents experienced partner harassment, 12% had their social media accounts controlled, 19% had their feelings and emotions exploited, 7% were slandered, 15% were encouraged to become socially isolated, and 21% were subjected to domination and superiority in dating violence. Dating violence encompasses all acts of psychological harm perpetrated by a partner using technological tools on internet-based platforms to bully the victimised partner, such as pressuring them, violating their privacy, monitoring and controlling them, and engaging in disturbing behaviour and sharing [33].

5. RISK FACTORS FOR DIGITAL VIOLENCE

Bullies who perpetrate digital violence are more likely to be aggressive due to psychological trauma experienced in the past, inability to control anger, and narcissistic personality disorder. However, some bullies are able to resolve problems they cannot solve internally by projecting them externally. Individuals who have experienced exclusion, humiliation, embarrassment, or belittlement in their past due to the influence of their social environment are highly likely to become cyberbullies driven by feelings of resentment and revenge. Individuals who feel powerful and cannot control their anger due to technological device addiction, internet addiction, low self-esteem, or socio-economic status are prone to both physical and digital violence, and this is a conscious choice. Just as no form of violence can be justified as accidental or as an excuse for harming someone, every act of bullying is considered to be deliberate and conscious [34].

5.1. Individual risk factors

Technology and the internet have opened the door to digital violence. The inability to identify individuals on social media platforms, the lack of distance, and the absence of face-to-face interaction make it easier for bullies to operate, while causing serious psychological trauma, loss of self-confidence, academic failure, depression, withdrawal, breakdowns in family relationships, and alienation from friends for victims [35]. Time spent on social media increases the risk of exposure

to cyberbullying and creates addictive behaviours [36].

5.2. Family Risk Factors

Situations such as university students not being loved by their families in the past or present, being neglected, having their needs unmet, or being exposed to domestic violence make young people prone to digital bullying [37]. Parental lack of control, lack of supervision, permissiveness, inconsistent behaviour, failure to set boundaries, or being either overly strict or overly permissive regarding the use of the internet and technological tools are also factors that increase young people's risk of becoming cyberbullies [38].

5.3. Social and Environmental Risk Factors

Students who experience cyberbullying may experience negative emotions, psychological trauma, a decline in their academic performance, and burnout syndrome. As a result, they may withdraw from their family and social circle, cut off communication, and become prone to self-harm. Cyberbullying is not only unfair and unethical behaviour, but it also has more severe effects than physical violence [39].

5.4. Risk Factors Related to Technology Use

Although digital violence takes place on internet-based social media platforms, these platforms are merely a tool for bullies. The scale of violence is growing, manifesting itself in different forms such as humiliation, threats, harassment, death threats, and demotion. While the transience of a comment, post, or message on social platforms may diminish its perceived significance, it is noteworthy that the greatest destruction and damage actually result from these transient behaviours and attitudes [40].

6. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS OF DIGITAL VİOLENCE

Digital violence can mean individuals being constantly subjected to cyberbullying on internet-based social media platforms using technological tools. Being subjected to bullying can lead to psychological problems such as loss of self-confidence, depression, anxiety and suicide. Misinformation and misdirection accelerate the spread of bullying behaviour, while its use for purposes such as humiliating victims, spreading false news, lowering their status, and defamation also negatively affects social life [41].

6.1. Depression and Anxiety

In the short term, students exposed to digital bullying experience negative effects such as anger, sadness, fear, helplessness, self-blame, and crying. In the long term, it causes psychological effects such as constant arguing, disappointment, aggression, anxiety, and depression, along with metabolic conditions such as sleep disorders, headaches, nausea, vomiting, stomach aches, and loss of appetite [42].

6.2. Social Isolation

Cyberbullying, whether indirect or direct, involves deliberate and covert actions aimed at the victim, such as gossip, false news, rumours, exposure, and exclusion, with the intent to isolate and marginalise the victim [43]. Similarly, mocking, humiliating, ridiculing, manipulating, making fun of, and laughing at the victim causes feelings of shame, sadness, and exclusion in the victim, leading to social isolation. All bullying actions described here are deliberate, intentional, and conscious acts of bullying that cause social isolation in the victim [44].

6.3. Impact on Academic Achievement

It has been determined that university students who experience digital violence have a decrease in study time, reluctance, and a drop in success rates [45] and that victims of digital bullying experience distraction, non-attendance, absenteeism, and isolation [46].

6.4. Trauma and Sense of Security

The digital age has taken a significant place in people's lives, and almost everyone's personal data has entered this environment. The right to privacy and the protection of personal data, defined among personal rights, is being violated intentionally or unintentionally on internet-based platforms due to the inability to identify individuals and the instant, rapid and easy accessibility of such data. The theft or sharing of personal data is a legal offence, and most people are unaware of this. Bullying attempts concerning privacy and the protection of personal data can cause psychological trauma in individuals. This trauma can sometimes have more severe consequences than physical trauma [47].

7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROTECTION AGAINST DİGİTAL VIOLENCE

Personal awareness, training on digital violence, raising awareness, legal supervision and deterrent sanctions through legal regulations, and establishing digital ethics rules are among the most important protective measures. In addition, public

awareness of digital violence should be raised, awareness should be provided regarding the complaint process so that those who bully in the virtual environment can report it to the relevant authorities, and digital violence should be responded to [48].

7.1. Individual Protection Recommendations

When university students become victims of cyberbullying, they usually either delete the application or hide their information. The percentage of those who say they remove the application that bothers them is around 34% for women and 38% for men. While 54% of women hide their information, only around 30% of men do so. In addition, the percentage of those who say they would report it to the authorities is between 54% and 60%, while the percentage of those who say they would do none of these things is around 20% for men and 3% for women. This shows us that women are more exposed to digital violence and experience more discomfort [28].

7.2. Recommendations for Family Protection

Families must be very careful to ensure the safety of their young people in the online environment and to monitor their behaviour. High levels of punishment, pressure, indifference, lack of communication, lack of support for self-confidence, and control mechanisms in young people increase the likelihood of them becoming cyberbullies or cyber victims. Therefore, families should be aware of their children's tendencies and be there for them in all circumstances [49]. Educating families is crucial to prevent or minimise the likelihood of young people becoming cyberbullies. Furthermore, they should be made aware of issues such as security and managing time spent online and provided with awareness training [50].

7.3. Preventive Recommendations at Universities

At universities, preventive approaches can be established, such as digital bullying awareness training, panels on methods for dealing with bullies, the opening of psychological counselling units, and the provision of safe environments [35]. Psychosocial support units should be established within the student-faculty framework to develop ways of coping with digital bullying and digital victimisation and to provide training. Groups can be formed with students who have previously experienced cyber victimisation to create safe environments where they can share their experiences with each other. Educational programmes can be organised that emphasise the importance of upholding the criteria of superiority,

nationality, conscience, benevolence, kindness, empathetic thinking, harmony, and security in digital bullying [51].

7.4. Social and Legal Protective Recommendations

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression supports the view that "individuals have the right to freedom of thought and expression, and technological tools and internet-based platforms are means by which individuals can exercise these rights" [52]. In 2007, BTK established the "Report Web" hotline to regulate publications on the internet and combat crimes committed through these publications. This application allows for the reporting of suicide incitement, the sale of prohibited substances, child abuse, incitement to drug use and sale, gambling/betting, and crimes committed against Atatürk [53]. BTK launched a secure internet service in 2011, helping families exercise parental control, restricting access to prohibited, pornographic, gambling/betting and violent websites, and offering free protection [54]. In 2017, as part of the "Cyberbullying Awareness Project" in collaboration with BTK and Samsung Electronics, cyberbullying training was provided to families, teachers, and students [55].

7.5. Recommendations for Digital Literacy and Awareness Training

Digital literacy refers to the use and security of technological digital tools and communication networks, as well as providing protection against malicious internet-based attacks such as identity hacking and computer hacking [56]. Digital literacy education enables students to benefit from the opportunities offered by information technology and the internet, while also protecting them from digital violence [57]. Digital data security has become an issue due to the rapid development of technology and the fact that during COVID-19, people have tried to meet their needs using technology and have started to work from home. Therefore, data security issues have come to the fore. If we divide data security into three groups, the first is privacy: it should not be viewed by others; the second is integrity: it should not be altered by others; and the third is accessibility: it should be accessible and usable when needed [58].

8. THE ROLE OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS AND EDUCATORS

8.1. Psychological Counselling Services

Among the measures to be taken to combat digital violence, it is necessary for educators and

educational administrators to focus on developing effective communication skills for students, psychological counselling and guidance activities, and providing awareness training to parents of students who experience both digital bullying and digital victimisation [59]. Cyberbullying and cyber victimisation among university students are associated with anxiety, depression, and stress, and these individuals may be referred to psychologists/psychiatrists, and psycho-educational activities may be conducted for students in schools [60].

8.2. Guidance and Preventive Programmes

The socio-psychological effects of personality traits, coping methods, family and peer support, social relationships, and school orientation among university students on digital violence are significant. Establishing guidance or mediation units to manage the consequences of these effects would be beneficial. Early diagnosis, effective intervention, and the development of protective measures are important in dealing with digital violence. Psychologists, educators, families, and mediators should work together to raise awareness [61]. The rapid spread of technology and the internet and their high usage rates have led to an increase in the number of cyberbullies. First and foremost, people should be informed and made aware of this issue, and awareness should be raised about cyber victimisation. From an early age, education can be provided to all segments of society and people of all ages on the use of technological tools and the internet, covering topics such as data and information security, not sharing passwords, and personal responsibilities. Media literacy education can be used to create user-friendly environments and raise awareness [62].

9. Conclusions and recommendations

As a result, the high rates of digital violence among university students trigger negative psychological problems, both due to their exposure to cyberbullying and their experience of cyber victimization. Children who are not loved by their families show a tendency to become bullies and victims. While digital technology makes life easier, it also brings certain risks. The most common types of bullying among young people include threatening, mocking, humiliating, stalking, harassing, abusing, dating violence, and coercion. Students who bully others have experienced exclusion, humiliation, belittlement, neglect, or excessive punishment in their family history and social life during childhood. They are individuals who have experienced or perpetrated violence in their childhood. Students exposed to cyberbullying

experience psychological problems such as withdrawal, social isolation, cutting off interpersonal communication, anxiety, fear, depression, and even suicide. In this context, it has been observed that students are absent from school, unable to focus on their lessons, and experience academic failure. Additionally, issues such as digital stalking, controlling behavior, monitoring social media accounts, and excessive jealousy are emerging in romantic relationships. According to the studies examined, digital violence is becoming an increasingly significant problem, and because it is often invisible, it brings serious harm to the forefront. One of the biggest problems in the digital environment is that people can hide their identities. Because their identities are unknown, the tendency to commit violence increases, and they consider all kinds of bullying to be their right. For this reason, digital violence is a social problem, not an individual one.

Education on preventing digital violence should begin in childhood, and awareness should be raised on issues such as sexual abuse and digital privacy. Education within families is of great importance in this regard. State-supported education and awareness programs can be implemented to combat cyber violence. Psychological counseling and guidance units can be established at universities. Families and educators should also be made aware of digital violence and provided with educational support. Students should be educated and made aware of their digital rights, data security, and privacy principles. It is necessary to instill in students the awareness that the Turkish Penal Code contains provisions on cybercrimes and that there are criminal penalties. They should take the situation they are exposed to seriously, tell the people closest to them, and report it to the judicial authorities. More research should be conducted on digital violence. Every university should conduct at least one research study per year and develop plans based on the results obtained in collaboration with psychological support units. Studies should be conducted on young people and children in society as a whole, and the origins of violence should be examined.

Finally, digital technology has permeated every area of our lives, and we are all potential perpetrators and victims. No form of violence you witness should be ignored. Sometimes a small comment made by a perpetrator can ruin a victim's life. Even if it is short-lived, the impact of digital violence can be significant.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest is declared by tehe authors. In addition, no financial support was received.

Ethics Committee

This study is a review article and does not require ethical committee approval as it does not involve any experimental procedures, use of personal data, or direct participant involvement. The study only uses information obtained from previously published scientific sources.

Author Contributions

Study Design, TK, AEG; Data Collection, TK, AEG; Statistical Analysis, TK, AEG; Data Interpretation, TK, AEG; Manuscript Preparation, TK, AEG; Literature Search, TK, AEG. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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