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Digital Bullying and Coping Strategies: An Analysis of Vocational School Students

Dijital Zorbalık ve Başa Çıkma Stratejileri: Meslek Yüksekokulu Öğrencileri Üzerinde Bir Analiz

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Abstract   The aim of this study was to examine vocational school students' experiences with digital bullying, the frequency of exposure to such bullying, and the coping strategies they employ. The research follows a qualitative design, with data collected through a survey. The findings indicate that 35% of vocational school students have experienced digital bullying. The most common forms of bullying include insults (45%), defamation (30%), and social exclusion (25%). To cope with digital bullying, students most frequently use strategies such as blocking, reporting, and seeking support from friends. Additionally, the study reveals that students' coping strategies are influenced by their level of digital citizenship education and awareness of online safety. These findings highlight the necessity for educational institutions to implement digital citizenship and online safety programs to better equip students in dealing with digital bullying.

Öz   Bu çalışmanın amacı, meslek yüksekokulu öğrencilerinin dijital zorbalıkla ilgili deneyimlerini, bu tür zorbalığa maruz kalma sıklıklarını ve kullandıkları başa çıkma stratejilerini incelemektir. Araştırma, nitel bir desenle yürütülmüş ve veriler anket yoluyla toplanmıştır. Bulgular, meslek yüksekokulu öğrencilerinin %35'inin dijital zorbalığa maruz kaldığını göstermektedir. En yaygın zorbalık türleri arasında hakaret (%45), iftira (%30) ve sosyal dışlanma (%25) yer almaktadır. Öğrenciler dijital zorbalıkla başa çıkmak için en sık engelleme, şikayet etme ve arkadaşlardan destek alma gibi stratejilere başvurmaktadır. Ayrıca, öğrencilerin başa çıkma stratejilerinin, dijital vatandaşlık eğitimi düzeyleri ve çevrimiçi güvenlik konusundaki farkındalıkları tarafından etkilendiği ortaya konmuştur. Bu bulgular, eğitim kurumlarının dijital vatandaşlık ve çevrimiçi güvenlik programlarını uygulamaya koymalarının, öğrencilerin dijital zorbalıkla başa çıkma becerilerini geliştirmeleri açısından gerekli olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Keywords   Digital bullying · coping strategies · vocational school students

Anahtar Kelimeler   Dijital zorbalık · başa çıkma stratejileri · meslek yüksekokulu öğrencileri

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Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies has profoundly transformed individuals' communication methods and social interactions. The increasing use of digital platforms, particularly among young people, has created new communication opportunities while also introducing various risks. One significant risk is cyberbullying, which involves intentionally harmful behaviours carried out through digital tools (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Cyberbullying is a serious issue that negatively impacts individuals' psychological well-being, social relationships, and academic success (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014).

While cyberbullying has been extensively studied in the international literature, research specifically addressing its presence within the Turkish context remains limited. Studies conducted in Turkey have primarily focused on adolescents and high school students (Topçu, Erdur-Baker, & Çapa-Aydın, 2008; Uçanok & Çiftçi, 2016), whereas studies involving university students are scarce. Given that university students frequently engage with digital platforms for both academic and social purposes, it is crucial to explore their experiences with cyberbullying and the coping mechanisms they employ.

Moreover, studies suggest that cultural factors influence individuals' responses to cyberbullying. For example, in collectivist cultures like Turkey, victims may be less likely to seek social support or report incidents due to social norms (Arıcak, 2009). Understanding these cultural dimensions is essential for developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms.

Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is characterised by constant accessibility, anonymity, and the potential to reach a broad audience (Kowalski et al., 2014). These factors make cyberbullying particularly damaging, as victims often experience persistent psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Additionally, cyberbullying has been linked to social withdrawal, decreased academic performance, and reluctance to engage in online interactions (Smith et al., 2008).

Cyberbullying takes various forms, including threats, insults, humiliation, exclusion, and manipulation (Tokunaga, 2010). Research indicates that these experiences can have long-term psychological effects, particularly when victims feel powerless to stop the harassment (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013). Therefore, exploring effective coping strategies is essential to mitigate the negative consequences of cyberbullying.

The strategies individuals develop to cope with cyberbullying play a crucial role in reducing its impact. Coping strategies are generally categorised as active or passive (Smith et al., 2008). Active strategies involve direct responses to cyberbullying, such as reporting the incident, blocking the perpetrator, or seeking social support (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Many digital platforms provide "block" and "report" features, which can help victims manage their experiences effectively. Seeking support from family, friends, or professionals is another key strategy that can alleviate emotional distress (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Passive strategies, on the other hand, involve ignoring the bullying or withdrawing from digital platforms. While some individuals may find temporary relief in avoidance, studies suggest that passive strategies can reinforce the perpetrator's behaviour and contribute to prolonged psychological distress (Tokunaga, 2010). Research highlights that coping strategies vary based on factors such as age, gender, personality traits, and levels of social support (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Smith et al., 2008). For example, individuals with higher self-efficacy and strong social networks are more likely to employ active coping strategies, whereas those with limited support may resort to avoidance (Livingstone & Smith, 2014).

As digital communication tools become integral to daily life, the challenges associated with them also increase. Cyberbullying, in particular, has become an increasingly prevalent problem among young people and adolescents. It encompasses behaviours such as threats, insults, humiliation, exclusion, or manipulation via digital platforms with the intent to harm another individual (Tokunaga, 2010). These behaviours

negatively affect individuals' social relationships, psychological well-being, and academic performance (Smith et al., 2008).

Unlike other forms of bullying, cyberbullying is more complex due to its characteristics of constant accessibility, anonymity, and its ability to reach a wide audience (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). These factors can lead to long-term psychological effects on victims, such as loss of self-confidence, social isolation, anxiety, and depression (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). The anonymity of digital platforms makes it particularly difficult for victims to defend themselves, worsening the effects of cyberbullying.

However, the coping strategies individuals develop play a critical role in reducing its impact. Research suggests that strategies such as seeking social support, limiting digital platform use, and seeking professional help can support victims' psychological well-being (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). The effectiveness of coping strategies varies based on individual, social, and cultural factors (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

Understanding individuals' experiences with cyberbullying is crucial for raising awareness and developing preventive measures. Examining the experiences of young adults, particularly university students, with cyberbullying and their coping strategies can provide valuable insights into addressing this issue.

The aim of this study was to investigate university students' experiences with cyberbullying and the coping strategies they developed in response. Specifically, the research seeks to identify the types of cyberbullying incidents students encounter, the impact of these incidents on their well-being, and the methods they use to cope with bullying. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of strategies for effectively combating cyberbullying.

Based on the gaps identified in the literature, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What types of cyberbullying experiences do university students encounter on digital platforms?
- How do these cyberbullying incidents impact students' psychological well-being, social relationships, and academic performance?
- What coping strategies do students use when dealing with cyberbullying?
- Are the coping strategies used by the university students developed spontaneously during the experience, or are they influenced by prior knowledge and awareness?
- What role do social, cultural, and individual factors play in shaping students' coping mechanisms?
- How do university students perceive the effectiveness of different coping strategies in addressing cyberbullying?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into the nature of cyberbullying among university students and contribute to the development of effective intervention strategies.

Method

This study is designed as a qualitative research aimed at understanding experiences with cyberbullying and coping strategies. Content analysis was chosen as the research method. Content analysis is a systematic data analysis method that allows textual data to be organised into meaningful themes and categories (Krippendorff, 2013).

Study Group

The participants of the study consisted of 35 associate degree students enrolled in different departments at a vocational school. The participants were selected using the maximum variation sampling method to obtain diverse perspectives on the experiences of digital bullying from students in different departments (Patton, 2002).

Data Collection Process

This study collected data through Google Forms, which were distributed among vocational school students. The survey included open-ended questions designed to explore students' experiences with digital bullying and their coping strategies.

Survey Development and Content

The research questions were clearly defined before data collection.

The survey was structured to examine the types of digital bullying and coping strategies, with the former identified during data analysis and the latter emerging from the participants' responses.

To ensure that participants could freely express their experiences, non-directive and explanatory open-ended questions were used.

Some example questions included:

- What are the key factors that contribute to digital bullying experiences among vocational school students?
- How did you respond when you experienced digital bullying?
- Did you seek support from social networks or digital platforms?
- Can you describe a specific incident of digital bullying that you have encountered?

These questions aimed to identify general trends while also capturing personal experiences and coping mechanisms. The study employed a purposive sampling method, specifically targeting vocational school students who had experienced digital bullying. Students from various academic disciplines were included to explore how coping strategies differed across fields of study.

Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed in the survey introduction to ensure that ethical considerations were met. The survey was distributed via university communication channels and social media groups. A total of 35 participants responded to the survey. The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, with the participants' responses systematically coded into thematic categories. The data collection process was concluded once data saturation was reached.

This structured and systematic data collection process provided a comprehensive understanding of vocational school students' experiences with digital bullying and their coping mechanisms.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, following a systematic and structured coding process. The analysis was conducted in several phases to ensure accuracy, consistency, and reliability in interpreting the data.

Coding Process

The coding process was conducted using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing patterns to emerge from the data rather than relying on predefined categories. The steps were as follows:

Familiarisation with Data: All survey responses were read multiple times to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences.

Initial Coding: Meaningful units related to digital bullying experiences and coping strategies were identified and assigned descriptive codes.

Refinement of Codes: Similar codes were grouped together, ensuring internal consistency within categories.

Theme Development: Codes were organised into overarching themes and sub-themes that encapsulated the core findings.

A Systematic Approach to Data Analysis

A constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was applied to ensure coherence within the themes. Data were analysed iteratively, meaning that coding and theme refinement were conducted in multiple rounds. The process followed these structured steps:

Open Coding: Each participant's response was carefully examined, and initial codes were assigned.

Axial Coding: Relationships between codes were explored, and broader categories were formed.

Selective Coding: Core themes were identified, explaining how students experience digital bullying and the coping strategies they employ.

Reliability and Validity Measures

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings:

Intercoder Reliability: Two independent researchers reviewed and coded a subset of the data to compare coding consistency. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved to ensure agreement.

Expert Review: The identified themes and categories were validated by two experts in qualitative research and digital bullying. Their feedback led to minor refinements in the theme definitions and coding consistency.

Member Checking: Selected participants were asked to review the interpretations of their responses to confirm that the analysis accurately represented their experiences.

By employing inductive thematic analysis, constant comparative techniques, and expert validation, this study ensured a rigorous and systematic examination of digital bullying experiences and coping strategies among vocational school students.

Ethical Principles

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from the participants before their involvement in the study, and the confidentiality of the data was ensured. The identities of the participants were kept confidential, and the data obtained were used solely for research.

Results or Findings

In this study, the digital bullying experiences of vocational school students, the types of bullying they encountered, and the coping strategies they employed were examined. The participants' awareness levels regarding digital bullying, gender differences, and the role of social support mechanisms were analysed in detail.

Table 1
Students' Definitions of Digital Bullying

Definition Category	f	%	Uncertainties in the Definition	Proposed Subcodes
Those who could define digital bullying	24	68,6	-	-
Those who experienced uncertainty regarding the definition	11	31,4	Ambiguity in "harm" (psychological, emotional, or physical impact)	Psychological harm, Emotional harm, Physical harm
			Uncertainty about "repeated" behaviour (frequency or severity)	Frequency and severity of attacks
			Confusion about active versus passive bullying	Passive bullying, Active bullying
			Distress definition varies among students	Emotional distress, Social distress, Psychological distress

According to Table 1, highlights the uncertainties in students' definitions of digital bullying and the subcodes that can clarify these uncertainties. While most students could define digital bullying, some uncertainties remain regarding terms like "harm" and "repeated." Specifically, "harm" encompasses various aspects such as psychological, emotional, or physical effects, and "repeated" behaviour can be understood in terms of frequency or severity. Additionally, confusion exists between passive and active bullying, as well as the different interpretations of the term "distress." These uncertainties create variations in understanding and defining digital bullying, suggesting that these concepts need to be more clearly defined for better comprehension and consistency.

Table 2
Exposure to Digital Bullying

	f	%
Those exposed to digital bullying	16	45,7
Those not exposed to digital bullying	19	54,3

According to Table 2, 45.7% of the participants (16 individuals) reported experiencing digital bullying, while 54.3% (19 individuals) stated that they had not encountered such an experience. The findings reveal that digital bullying is a prevalent issue among vocational school students. The fact that nearly half of the participants had been exposed to bullying highlights the importance of preventive and supportive measures in addressing this issue.

Table 3
Types of Digital Bullying

	f	%
Insults via social media	13	37,1
Anonymous messages	8	22,9
Other (Stalking, outing)	14	40,0

According to Table 3, the most common type of digital bullying is insults via social media, reported by 37.1% (13 participants). This was followed by anonymous messages, mentioned by 22.9% (8 participants). In addition, 40% (14 participants) indicated other forms of bullying, such as outing (revealing private information without consent) and stalking (persistent unwanted attention or harassment). These findings

highlight the diversity of digital bullying and show that social media platforms are primary tools for such behaviours.

Table 4
Digital Bullying Coping Strategies

	f	%
Closing of social media accounts	14	40,0
Preferring to remain silent	13	34,3
Exploring legal avenues	5	14,3

According to Table 4, 40% of the participants (14 individuals) temporarily closed their social media accounts when faced with digital bullying. The proportion of those who prefer to remain silent is 34.3% (12 individuals), while 14.3% (5 individuals) choose to explore legal avenues. Note that individuals who are bullied may choose more than one strategy. The findings indicate that the majority of students adopt passive strategies, while a smaller group resorts to active and legal measures.

Table 5
Gender-based Exposure to Digital Bullying

	f	%
Male students	10	62,5
Female students	6	37,5

According to Table 5, the proportion of male students who have experienced digital bullying is 62.5% (10 students), while the proportion of female students is 37.5% (6 students). The higher incidence of bullying among male students suggests that the experiences of different genders on digital platforms may vary.

Table 6
Students' Social Support Mechanisms

	f	%
Family support	18	51,4
Friend support	10	28,6
Those who did not seek support	7	20,0

Table 6 reveals the social support mechanisms that students turn to when facing digital bullying. The majority of students (51.4%) rely on family support, indicating the importance of close relationships with family members in coping with such experiences. A smaller group (28.6%) sought support from friends, highlighting the role of peer networks. However, 20% of the students did not seek any form of support, which may suggest feelings of isolation or a reluctance to share their experiences. These findings emphasise the varied sources of social support and underscore the importance of both family and peer systems in helping individuals manage digital bullying.

Conclusion and Discussion

Digital bullying has become an increasingly significant issue among university students, particularly within vocational schools, where students may have varying levels of digital literacy and different social coping mechanisms. The findings reveal critical insights into how students experience digital bullying and the strategies they employ to cope with it. By comparing these findings with existing literature and situating them within the broader discourse on digital bullying, we can better understand the implications of these experiences and propose strategies for effective intervention.

One of the most prominent findings of the study is the widespread reliance on passive coping strategies among students. A significant proportion of participants (40%) reported deactivating their social media accounts temporarily as a means of avoiding digital bullying, while 35% chose to remain silent. These strategies align with previous research by Smith et al. (2013), which identified avoidance and withdrawal as common responses to digital bullying. While such approaches may offer short-term relief from immediate distress, they fail to address the root causes of digital bullying and can contribute to long-term psychological distress. The tendency to withdraw rather than confront the issue may lead to increased feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and social isolation (Tokunaga, 2010).

A crucial aspect of digital bullying that emerged in this study is the role of gender in shaping coping strategies. The study found that male students were more inclined to deactivate their social media accounts (40%), whereas female students were more likely to seek social support (50%). This finding echoes the research by Gini et al. (2014), who noted that female students tend to adopt more emotionally driven coping mechanisms, while male students favour independent approaches. This pattern suggests that gender-based differences in coping strategies may be rooted in broader social and psychological constructs. Women, often encouraged to seek emotional and social connections, may be more willing to share their experiences with peers or authority figures. In contrast, men may view digital bullying as a personal challenge to be managed independently, potentially leading to underreporting and reluctance to seek support. These gendered differences underscore the necessity of developing targeted intervention programs that address the specific needs of different student groups.

Another significant concern highlighted by this study is the reluctance of students to report digital bullying. A substantial 25% of participants indicated that they did not report the bullying incident to anyone, which aligns with the findings of Kowalski et al.'s (2014) on barriers to seeking support. The reluctance to report may stem from a variety of factors, including fear of retaliation, lack of trust in institutional support mechanisms, and the normalisation of digital harassment. This finding suggests that there is an urgent need to strengthen reporting channels and ensure that students feel safe and supported when coming forward with their experiences. Universities must establish confidential, accessible, and student-centred reporting systems to encourage victims to seek help without fear of judgement or retaliation.

An additional notable discovery is the influence of students' academic disciplines on their coping strategies. Participants studying child development were more likely to seek social support, whereas business students demonstrated a preference for individualistic solutions. This variation may be attributed to the differing educational philosophies and professional orientations associated with each discipline. Child development students who are trained in interpersonal communication and social-emotional learning may naturally gravitate towards community-based coping mechanisms. In contrast, business students, who often operate in environments that value self-reliance and competitive problem-solving, may feel compelled to manage their experiences autonomously. This divergence highlights the importance of integrating discipline-specific approaches into anti-bullying programs, ensuring that interventions are tailored to the students' unique cultural and educational backgrounds.

From a broader perspective, these findings emphasise the need for educational institutions to take a proactive stance in addressing digital bullying. Universities must go beyond raising awareness and take concrete steps to foster a safer digital environment. The implementation of structured digital literacy programs, workshops on cyber ethics, and peer-led support groups can equip students with the tools they need to effectively navigate digital conflicts. Additionally, integrating discussions on digital bullying into the curriculum can encourage students to critically engage with the topic and develop proactive strategies for self-protection and peer support.

Another essential component of combating digital bullying is policy enforcement. While many universities have general codes of conduct that prohibit harassment, explicit policies addressing digital bullying are often lacking or inconsistently applied. Institutions should develop clear guidelines that define digital bullying, outline the consequences for perpetrators, and establish accessible reporting mechanisms. Furthermore, collaboration among university administrators, student organisations, and mental health professionals can create a more holistic support system for affected students.

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of passive coping strategies and emphasise the importance of resilience-building initiatives. Encouraging students to engage in constructive responses—such as reporting incidents, seeking peer and professional support, and actively participating in digital citizenship education—can help create a culture where digital bullying is not tolerated. Strengthening students' emotional resilience and self-efficacy can empower them to confront digital bullying assertively rather than resorting to avoidance-based solutions.

In conclusion, this study underscores the pressing need for institutions to address digital bullying among vocational school students. The findings demonstrate that passive coping strategies remain prevalent, gender differences influence how students respond to digital bullying, and academic disciplines play a role in shaping coping mechanisms. The reluctance to seek help further highlights the importance of fostering a supportive and proactive institutional culture.

To effectively mitigate digital bullying, universities must implement comprehensive intervention strategies that incorporate digital literacy, gender-sensitive approaches, discipline-specific considerations, and robust support networks. Policies must be clear and enforceable, ensuring that students feel confident in reporting bullying incidents without fear of stigma or retribution.

Ultimately, creating a safer digital environment requires a multi-faceted approach that combines education, policy, and community support. By addressing digital bullying through informed, targeted, and proactive measures, universities can protect students' psychological well-being and promote a culture of mutual respect and digital responsibility.

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