The Relationship Between Cyber-Obsessive Stalking and Cyberbullying Among University Students
Üniversite Öğrencilerinde Siber Obsesif Takip ile Siber Zorbalık İlişkisi

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Abstract

With the increase in digital communication, incidents of cyber-obsessive stalking and cyberbullying have been observed among students, significantly affecting individuals' psychosocial health. This study aims to examine the relationship between university students' levels of cyber obsessive stalking and cyberbullying. The study was conducted between December 2023 and June 2024, involving 369 university students enrolled at a foundation university. Data were collected face-to-face using the Information Form, the Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit Scale (COPS), and the Cyberbullying Scale (CBS). The data obtained were analyzed using SPSS 25. Among the university students participating in the study, 71.8% were female, indicating that gender is a distinguishing factor in both cyberbullying and cyber-obsessive stalking. Correlation analysis between the COPS and CBS indicated a statistically significant moderate positive relationship between cyber-obsessive stalking and cyberbullying ($r = 0.447$; $p < 0.05$). The results show a statistically significant relationship between cyber-obsessive stalking and cyberbullying. Additionally, significant differences were identified between students' sociodemographic characteristics and their levels of cyber-obsessive stalking and cyberbullying. Furthermore, statistically significant moderate positive relationships were observed among the sub-factors of the COPS (extreme intimacy, threatening, transference) and the CBS (emotional harm and humiliation, exclusion and violence). It is recommended that educational programs be developed to prevent cyber-obsessive behaviors as a means of combating cyberbullying in the university environment.

Keywords: Obsessive stalking, cyberbullying, social media

Özet

Dijital iletişimin artmasıyla birlikte öğrenciler arasında siber obsesif takip ve siber zorbalık olguları görülebilmekte ve bu durum bireylerin psikososyal sağlığı üzerinde önemli etkiler yaratmaktadır. Araştırmanın amacı, üniversite öğrencilerinin siber obsesif takip ile siber zorbalık düzeyleri arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektir. Araştırma, Aralık 2023- Haziran 2024 tarihleri arasında yapılmış olup, araştırmaya bir vakıf üniversitesinde eğitim alan 369 üniversite öğrencisi katılmıştır. Veri toplama, Bilgi Formu, Siber Obsesif Takip Ölçeği (SOTÖ) ve Siber Zorbalık Ölçeği (SZÖ) ile yüz yüze yapılmıştır. Elde edilen veriler SPSS 25 ile analiz edilmiştir. Araştırmaya katılan üniversite öğrencilerinin %71.8'i kadındır ve cinsiyetin siber zorbalık ile siber obsesif takipte belirleyici bir faktör olduğu tespit edilmiştir. SOTÖ ve SZÖ arasındaki korelasyon analizi, siber obsesif takip ile siber zorbalık arasında istatistiksel olarak orta düzeyde pozitif bir ilişki olduğunu göstermiştir ($r = 0.447$; $p < 0.05$). Araştırma sonuçları, siber obsesif takip ile siber zorbalık arasında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir ilişki olduğunu göstermektedir. Öğrencilerin sosyodemografik özellikleri ile siber obsesif takip ve siber zorbalık düzeyleri arasında da anlamlı farklılıklar bulunmuştur. Ayrıca, Siber Obsesif Takip Ölçeğinin (aşırı yakınlık, tehdit etme, aktarım) ve Siber Zorbalık Ölçeğinin (duygusal zarar görme ve aşağılanma, dışlanma ve şiddet) alt faktörleri arasında istatistiksel olarak orta düzeyde pozitif ilişkiler tespit

edilmiştir. Üniversite ortamında siber zorbalıkla mücadele etmek için siber obsesif davranışların önlenmesine yönelik eğitim programlarının geliştirilmesi önerilmektedir.

1. Introduction

With the rapid spread of digital technology, the internet and social media platforms have become an integral part of individuals' daily lives. University students use online platforms extensively not only to maintain social relationships and express themselves but also to conduct academic research. However, despite the advantages offered by digital environments, negative behaviors such as cyberbullying and obsessive cyberstalking are becoming more prevalent (Schoeler et al., 2018).

Cyberstalking is defined as the persistent, nonconsensual monitoring of a person's online activities and digital footprints. This behavior typically occurs through social media platforms and causes anxiety, discomfort, and psychological stress for the victim. It can stem from individual psychological factors such as jealousy, insecurity, and a need for control (Cho et al., 2022). Cyberbullying, by contrast, refers to deliberate aggressive behaviors that individuals experience in the digital environment and is considered a form of traditional bullying adapted to online platforms. It often arises due to the advantage of anonymity and appears in various forms, including threats, insults, ridicule, and reputational damage. Cyberbullying can have significant psychological effects on victims (Watts et al., 2017).

Cyberbullying takes various forms. "Personal attacks" involve negative content targeting the victim's physical appearance, personal characteristics, or lifestyle. "Reputation bullying" aims to damage an individual's social standing. "Isolation bullying" consists of behaviors intended to separate the victim from their social circle. "Blackmail and threats" create psychological pressure by threatening to disclose an individual's private information (Savage & Tokunaga, 2017).

Cyberbullying and cyberstalking occur in various digital environments, including social media platforms, messaging apps, forums, blogs, and online games. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram present a high risk for the spread of harmful content, while messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Snapchat increase threats to individuals' private spaces. Similarly, forums and online games, by offering anonymity and access to a wider audience, facilitate the increased prevalence of cyberbullying (Davison & Stein, 2014).

Cyberbullying and obsessive stalking have serious psychological and social effects on victims. Victims may experience stress, anxiety, and depression due to the constant sense of being attacked, which can negatively affect their daily lives, academic performance, and social relationships. These negative experiences can also increase the risk of suicide (Carvalho et al., 2021). Legal regulations are therefore critical in protecting victims. In Turkey, cyberbullying falls under the Turkish Penal Code as crimes such as "insult," "threat," and "illegal collection or dissemination of personal data." To protect victims' rights, digital evidence must be preserved, and awareness activities about legal processes

should be conducted (Tezcan et al., 2020). Strategies to prevent cyberstalking and cyberbullying include raising individual awareness, developing educational programs, and strengthening psychological support systems. Strong encryption, effective use of privacy settings, and awareness campaigns are among the effective methods for preventing these behaviors (Choi et al., 2019). Nurses and other healthcare professionals can also play a crucial role in protecting individuals from digital risks by developing early intervention strategies (Carpenter & Hubbard, 2014).

2. Method

The research was conducted at a foundation university in Istanbul between December 2023 and June 2024. The study is descriptive and was designed within the scope of a quantitative research approach.

2.1. The Purpose of the Study

The aim of the research is to examine the relationship between cyber-obsessive stalking and cyberbullying levels among university students.

2.2. Research Questions

- Is there a significant relationship between cyber obsessive-stalking behaviors and cyberbullying tendencies among university students?

2.3. Study Population

The research population included approximately 3,000 university students enrolled in first, second, third, and fourth-year undergraduate programs at the relevant university during the specified period. The sample comprised 369 students representing the population, accounting for 12.3% of the total population.

2.4. Data Collection and Instruments

Data collection was conducted face-to-face using a Personal Information Form, the Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit Scale (COPS), and the Cyberbullying Scale (CBS).

The Personal Information Form was developed by the researcher and includes questions about participants' demographic characteristics (age, gender, income level, family structure, and social media use). The form also contains 11 items regarding social media usage habits, most frequently used platforms, and stalking behavior.

The Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit Scale (COPS) was developed to determine individuals' level of exposure to cyber-obsessive stalking behavior. The scale was adapted into Turkish by Uğur et al. (2022). This fifteen-item scale uses a 5-point Likert-type format (1 = Never, 5 = More than 5) and includes three subscales: Extreme intimacy (Items 1–4), Threatening (Items 5–10), and Transference (Items 11–15). A higher total score indicates a higher level of exposure to cyber-obsessive stalking behaviors.

The Cyberbullying Scale (CBS) was developed by Stewart et al. (2014) to measure cyberbullying levels in university students and was adapted into Turkish by Küçük et al. (2017). The scale consists of 16 items, two of which are multiple-choice. Fourteen items use a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 =

Never, 2 = Almost never, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Almost always, 5 = Always). The scale has two subscales: Emotional Harm and Humiliation (Items 3–7, 12) and Exclusion and Violence (Items 8–16). Higher scores indicate a higher level of exposure to cyberbullying.

Both scales have high internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the COPS was 0.865, and the reliability values of its subscales were above 0.80. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the CBS was 0.909, and the reliability values of its subscales ranged from 0.798 to 0.891. These results indicate that both scales are valid and reliable measurement tools.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participant confidentiality was strictly maintained. Ethics committee approval was obtained from the Istanbul XX University Science, Social, and Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee on January 8, 2024, with decision number 2024/01-1171. Permission to use the COPS was granted to the researcher via email on November 5, 2023, and for the CBS on December 20, 2023. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants using an informed consent form.

2.6. Study Limitations

The research results are limited to first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year undergraduate students at a foundation university in Istanbul and cannot be generalized.

2.7. Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS 25. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the reliability of the scales used in the study. The data were found to be normally distributed. Independent Samples t-Test and One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to identify differences between groups. Pearson Correlation Analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the scales. Additionally, the frequency values of all statements and variables were analyzed.

3. Results

Of the participants, 71.8% were female, and 59.3% stated that their income was equal to their expenses. A total of 82.7% had a nuclear family structure, and 80.8% lived with their parents. Additionally, 65.6% had spent most of their lives in provincial settlements. Regarding social media use, 40.9% had been using social media for 4–7 years, 69.9% most frequently used Instagram, and 49.1% used social media primarily to pass the time. Furthermore, 83.2% reported that they "stalked" on social media, and 39% indicated that they mostly stalked their friends. The mean age of the participants was 21.39±2.64 years.

The level of cyber-obsessional pursuit among participants was generally low ($\bar{X} = 1.76 \pm 0.64$). The subscale means were: extreme intimacy $\bar{X} = 2.39 \pm 1.09$, threatening $\bar{X} = 1.50 \pm 0.67$, and transference $\bar{X} = 1.56 \pm 0.74$. Similarly, the level of cyberbullying was also low ($\bar{X} = 1.67 \pm 0.64$). The sub-dimension scores of the cyberbullying scale were $\bar{X} = 1.78 \pm 0.71$ for emotional harm and humiliation, and $\bar{X} = 1.59 \pm 0.67$ for exclusion and violence.

According to the analysis results presented in Table 1, statistically significant differences were found between levels of cyber-obsessional pursuit and the variables of gender, income level, family structure, living with family, purpose of social media use, stalking status, and type of person stalked ($p < 0.05$). The findings indicate that male participants had higher levels of cyber-obsessional pursuit than female participants. Those living in nuclear families had higher cyber-obsessional pursuit scores than those living in extended families, and those living with family had higher scores than those not living with family. Additionally, participants who engaged in social media stalking had higher levels of COPS than those who did not.

Post hoc (Tukey) analyses revealed that participants with higher income levels exhibited higher levels of cyber-obsessive stalking than those with equal income and expenses, and those who used social media to make new friends exhibited higher levels of cyber-obsessive stalking than those who followed current events. Additionally, participants who stalked strangers had higher levels of cyber-obsessive stalking than those who had never stalked (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of Participants' Cyber-Obsessive Pursuit Levels by Demographic Characteristics

Variables		X̄	SD	t/F	p
Gender	Female	1.67	.57	-	**.000**
	Male	1.97	.74	4.029	
Income level	Income higher than expenses	1.91	.67	4.095	**.017**
	Income equal to expenses	1.69	.59		
	Income lower than expenses	1.79	.72		
Family structure	Nuclear	1.79	.64	2.234	**.026**
	Extended	1.60	.58		
Living with family	Yes	1.71	.60	-	**.003**
	No	1.96	.75	2.942	
Place where lived the longest	Province (City)	1.73	.63	1.162	.314
	District	1.79	.61		
	Village / town	1.95	.83		
Social media usage time (hours/day)	1-3	1.70	.65	2.797	.062
	4-7	1.69	.60		
	7 and above	1.85	.66		
Most frequently used social media platform	Other	1.89	.76	1.757	.155
	Instagram	1.71	.58		
	Twitter	1.92	.71		
	YouTube	1.80	.75		
Purpose of social media use	To make new friends	2.25	.75	5.724	**.001**
	To spend time	1.78	.65		
	To follow friends / current events	1.62	.57		
	To share posts (upload photos, videos, etc.)	1.79	.59		
Status of stalking on social media	Yes	1.79	.64	2.014	**.045**
	No	1.61	.60		
People most frequently stalked on social media	My circle of friends	1.80	.65	3.242	**.022**
	Famous people	1.67	.58		
	Strangers	1.91	.67		
	I do not stalk	1.61	.60		

X̄ (Mean), SD (Standard Deviation), t/F (Test Statistic - T value for t-test, F value for ANOVA), and p (Significance Level)

The analysis results on differences in participants' cyberbullying levels by demographic variables are presented in Table 2. Statistically significant differences were found between cyberbullying levels and variables such as gender, income level, social media platform, purpose of social media use, stalking status, and the type of person being stalked (p<0.05). Findings showed that male participants had higher levels of cyberbullying than female participants. Participants with lower income levels had higher levels of cyberbullying than those whose income and expenses were equal. Participants who used Twitter had higher levels of cyberbullying than those who used other social media platforms.

Additionally, participants who used social media to make new friends had higher levels of cyberbullying than those who used it to stay current. Participants who engaged in stalking had higher levels of cyberbullying than those who did not, and those who stalked their friends had higher levels of cyberbullying than those who never stalked (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of Participants' Cyberbullying Levels by Demographic Characteristics

Variables		$\bar{X}$	SD	t/F	p
Gender	Female	1.60	.57	-3.412	**.001**
	Male	1.85	.75		
Income level	Income higher than expenses	1.64	.62	3.706	**.026**
	Income equal to expenses	1.63	.59		
	Income lower than expenses	1.87	.78		
Family structure	Nuclear	1.69	.65	1.380	.169
	Extended	1.57	.53		
Living with family	Yes	1.64	.60	-1.918	.056
	No	1.80	.75		
Place where lived the longest	Province (City)	1.67	.65	.759	.469
	District	1.64	.56		
	Village / town	1.84	.85		
Social media usage time (hours/day)	1-3	1.64	.66	.814	.444
	4-7	1.63	.59		
	7 and above	1.72	.67		
Most frequently used social media platform	Other	1.58	.57	3.107	**.027**
	Instagram	1.71	.65		
	Twitter	1.82	.58		
	YouTube	1.44	.58		
Purpose of social media use	To make new friends	1.93	.68	3.678	**.012**
	To spend time	1.72	.67		
	To follow friends / current events	1.52	.55		
	To share posts (upload photos, videos, etc.)	1.72	.63		
Status of stalking on social media	Yes	1.70	.64	2.215	**.027**
	No	1.51	.61		
People most frequently stalked on social media	My circle of friends	1.77	.63	2.932	**.033**
	Famous people	1.60	.61		
	Strangers	1.71	.67		
	I do not stalk	1.51	.61		

$\bar{X}$ (Mean), SD (Standard Deviation), t/F (Test Statistic - t value for t-test, F value for ANOVA), and p (Significance Level)

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A correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the cyber-obsessive pursuit and cyberbullying scales. The analysis found a moderate positive correlation between cyber-obsessive pursuit and cyberbullying ($r = 0.447$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, moderate positive correlations were found between both scales and their subscales.

4. Discussion

This study examined the relationship between cyber-obsessive pursuit and cyberbullying levels among university students. Of the 369 participants, 71.8% were female. Most had a nuclear family structure (82.7%), lived with their parents (80.8%), and used Instagram most frequently (69.9%). The relatively high rate of "stalking" on social media (83.2%) suggests that this behavior is perceived as a common social media activity among young people.

The overall mean of the COPS was 1.76, indicating that students generally exhibited low levels of cyber-obsessive stalking behavior. In sub-dimension analyses, the highest mean was for the overintimacy dimension (2.39), suggesting that students' cyber-obsessive behavior is generally associated with a tendency to establish emotional closeness. This finding is consistent with the study by Chan et al. (2022), in which university students' cyber-obsessive pursuit levels were found to be below the moderate level. It is thought that the participants' low scores may be related to difficulty recognizing cyber-obsessive pursuit behaviors, perceiving these behaviors as "normal" social media interactions, or hesitating to share such experiences.

The overall mean of the Cyberbullying Scale (CBS) was 1.67, indicating that students were exposed to a low level of cyberbullying. Examination of the subscales showed that the mean for the emotional harm and humiliation dimension (1.78) was higher than for the other dimensions. This result suggests that cyberbullying is experienced more at an emotional level among university students. The findings are consistent with research by Dalmaz (2014), which also found low levels of cyberbullying among university students. This may be explained by students having difficulty recognizing their cyberbullying experiences or perceiving such behaviors as a normal part of the social media environment. Comparisons based on gender revealed that male students experience higher levels of obsessive cyberstalking than female students. The literature contains studies both supporting and contradicting this finding. Dreßing et al. (2014) reported that the prevalence of cyberstalking is 6.3% and that this phenomenon primarily targets women. This difference may result from variations in cultural and societal norms, differences in the purposes for which men and women use digital media, or men exhibiting more extroverted behaviors on social media platforms.

Similarly, male students were found to have higher levels of cyberbullying exposure ($\bar{x} = 1.85$) than female students ($\bar{x} = 1.60$). Erdur-Baker and Kavşut (2007) also reported that male students were both more exposed to cyberbullying and more likely to engage in bullying. However, some studies report that females engage in cyberbullying more than males. These contradictory results may be related to gender roles and the ways individuals express themselves online. The greater scrutiny women face in traditional social structures may lead them to use aggressive behavior in the virtual environment as a form of expression.

Participants whose incomes were lower than their expenses were more likely to experience cyberbullying. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) reported that individuals with lower socioeconomic status were 45% more likely to experience cyberbullying than those with higher socioeconomic status. Conversely, Stys (2004) found that cyberbullying behaviors increased with higher economic status. These contradictory findings may be explained by the greater vulnerability of individuals with lower socioeconomic status online, due to their lack of digital literacy, limited social support, environmental stressors, and restricted access to technology.

When evaluated in terms of social media use purposes, students who use social media to "make new friends" were found to experience higher levels of cyberbullying compared to those who use it to "follow friends or current events." Although there are limited studies on this topic in the literature, Semerci (2017) found no significant relationship between internet use purposes and cyberbullying exposure. The findings of our study suggest that meeting new people on social media may increase the likelihood of cyberbullying exposure because it introduces individuals to broader and more heterogeneous environments.

According to the correlation analysis, a moderately positive correlation was found between COPS and CBS ($r = 0.447$; $p < 0.05$). This suggests that as individuals' levels of cyber-obsessive pursuit increase, their likelihood of being exposed to or engaging in cyberbullying behavior also increases. The positive correlations between the subscales further support this finding. Significant correlations between cyberbullying and the dimensions of excessive closeness, intimidation, and transference indicate that obsessive-talking behaviors may be a core component of cyberbullying. Additionally, the associations with emotional harm, humiliation, exclusion, and violence suggest that these behaviors have detrimental psychological and social effects on individuals. These results indicate that cyber-obsessive pursuit behaviors pose risk factors not only at the individual level but also at the relational and societal levels.

5. Conclusion

This research examined the relationship between cyber-obsessive pursuit and cyberbullying among university students, demonstrating the connection between these two phenomena within the dynamics of digital interactions. The findings indicate that individuals who exhibit cyber-obsessive pursuit behavior also have higher levels of cyberbullying tendencies. This result suggests that boundary violations and aggressive behaviors in online environments can negatively impact individuals' psychological and social functioning.

The research findings emphasize the need to raise awareness of digital behavior in university settings and to develop policies to prevent cyberbullying and cyber-obsessive pursuit. In this context, conscious digital awareness training, ethical online communication programs, and preventive psychoeducation interventions can be implemented. Such programs can significantly contribute to students' ability to maintain personal boundaries in digital environments, establish healthy online relationships, and develop empathic communication skills. Furthermore, early detection and intervention in cyber-obsessive pursuit and cyber-obsessive stalking behaviors can play a critical role in protecting individuals' mental well-being. It is recommended that guidance and psychosocial support

units at universities take an active role in this regard, organize awareness campaigns, and inform students about safe digital environments.

Authors Contributions

Study conception/design: MBT and NE. Data collection and analysis: MBT and NE Statistical expertise: MBT. Drafting of the manuscript: MBT, NR. Administrative/technical/material support: MBT and NE. Supervision: MBT.

Conflict of interest

The authors have declared no conflict of interest.

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