

The protective role of mindfulness in the cyberhate experience

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Abstract

In today's world, widespread and uncontrolled access to social media channels, along with the possibility for individuals to hide their identities or use pseudonyms, can turn the internet, especially the social media environment, into a tool for violence for women due to many potential situations.

The purpose of this article is to inform about a study conducted with the participation of ten women actively involved in the Kars/Sarıkamış cooperative, focusing on the impact of mindfulness method on coping with the various short and long-term negative effects of cyberviolence on women. The research flow includes introducing the concepts discussed in the study and their relationships, the purpose of the research, the methodology, results, and future steps that can be taken. The aim of the research on the role of mindfulness in the experience of cyberviolence is to understand the effects of cyberviolence on women from the perspective of ten women participants actively involved in the Kars/Sarıkamış women's cooperative and the impact of mindfulness on women in coping with these effects. This study is of a qualitative nature, and survey research and focus group discussions have been preferred as the methods. The research results show that participants acknowledged the short and long-term negative psychological, physiological, and social effects of cyberviolence on individuals, but it also emerged that by strengthening solidarity among women and increasing the availability of methods such as mindfulness, the negative effects of cyberviolence can be reduced.

Keywords: Internet, mindfulness, cyberviolence, women, solidarity

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of technology and globalization, communities from different countries, cultures, and religions can communicate with each other through technology without time and space constraints (Cirban and Güneri 2021: 363). In today's world, the evolving and rapidly spreading information technologies have brought certain risks along with the convenience and ease they provide to individuals. Technological developments have enabled people to socialize in digital environments known as "social media" platforms, accommodating individuals of all ages, religions, and races (Siddiqui and Singh 2016: 75). Furthermore, on social networks, individuals can express emotions, thoughts, and attitudes they do not typically share in their daily lives without the obligation to disclose their real identities, in other words, anonymously. In virtual environments where the chance of remaining anonymous and the lack of surveillance are more prevalent, the likelihood of individuals engaging in violence, aggressive behavior, and attitudes increases (Mondal, Correa, and Benevenuto, 2020). Violence is a significant problem that exists in daily life, threatening individuals from various segments of society in different forms and degrees, without discrimination (Morales, 2023). Understanding the extent of violence as a problem requires addressing not only the act of violence itself but also the harm it causes to both victims and perpetrators. Therefore, comprehending and managing violence requires a multifaceted approach (Polat 2017: 325). Violence, which is prevalent in almost every aspect of life, continues to exist as a danger that steadily grows and negatively affects physical and mental health, regardless of race, language, religion, or gender (Cihan & Karakaya, 2017). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), violence is defined as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation" (WHO 2002: 5). The Turkish Language Association (TDK)

defines violence as "the degree of an action or power, superiority, hardness, using rough force against those with opposing views" (TDK, 2023).

With the development of technology, the concept of violence has taken on a new dimension. Cyberviolence encompasses harmful behaviors such as targeting, threatening, intimidating, humiliating, manipulating, controlling, exposing to hate speech, damaging reputation, and more, carried out by an individual or group using technology against another individual or group (UNFPA, 2021; Council of Europe, 2019). While cyberviolence has existed for years, the classification of different types of cyberviolence and the effectiveness of these types have only recently begun to be studied (Şener & Abınık, 2021; Council of Europe, 2019). Many countries still struggle to define the negative effects of cyberviolence on individuals and to enact legal measures to protect their citizens from these effects, even though cyberviolence has become a global problem with undeniable consequences (West, 2014; Council of Europe, 2019). Cyber violence can include various forms of harassment, privacy violations, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, and discriminatory behaviors targeting specific social groups and communities. Additionally, cyberviolence can encompass direct threats and/or verbal harassment, as well as various potential cyber crimes (Amnesty International, 2017; Council of Europe, 2019; UN Women, 2020). It is important to note that examples of cyberviolence types can overlap or be interconnected, and not all forms or examples of cyberviolence are equally severe or necessarily require a criminal law solution; they can be addressed with a specific approach and a combination of preventive, educational, protective, and other measures.

Cyberviolence affects people of all age groups, professions, and genders. Women, who are often subjected to societal pressure and violence, experience various forms of cyberviolence in online environments (Öksüzoğlu, 2021). The type of cyberviolence experienced by women varies according to their religion, race, ethnicity, and sexual preferences. If women belong to minority groups in terms of sexual

orientation and race, the continuity and severity of cyberviolence increases. According to the UNFPA (2021) Digital Violence Research in Turkey, one out of every five people in Turkey has experienced cyberviolence. The report reveals that women claim to experience more cyberviolence due to their gender and physical appearance. Approximately 51% of women receive written, verbal, or visual harassment messages in the digital environment, and 46% are subject to persistent stalking. According to the data, individuals in Turkey are most exposed to cyberviolence from unknown individuals and trolls. In Turkey, cyberviolence actions mostly occur through social media channels. According to the 2021 UNFPA report, the most common social media channels for cyberviolence actions are Instagram (53%), Facebook (35%), and Twitter (19%).

1.1. Mindfulness

Mindfulness, known as “*bilinçli farkındalık*” in Turkish, represents a mechanism of thought and existence where life unfolds by focusing on the present moment (Kabat-Zinn 2003: 146). With a history dating back approximately 2,500 years, this method has recently attracted the attention of many researchers (Kang and Whittingham 2011 :161 ; Aktepe & Tolan, 2020: 534). In the fast-paced flow of daily life, we often find ourselves performing routine actions that our minds have become accustomed to without noticing. Kabat-Zinn (2003) describes this state of mind as the “*automatic pilot.*” In contrast, mindfulness advocates shifting one’s attention toward the present moment, regardless of the judgments the mind is accustomed to hearing, and noticing the benefits of that moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2012). According to the Turkish Language Association (TDK, 2023), mindfulness is defined as “*being aware of things that need to be seen or known, paying attention to something that needs to be understood.*” Research has shown that mindfulness has benefits in self-regulation, cognitive flexibility, behavioral flexibility, and emotional well-being (Carmody et al., 2009). Mindfulness practices can vary. These practices can include mindfulness-based body exercises (yoga, tai chi, etc.) performed alongside simple

breathing exercises. Depending on individual preferences and conditions, practices can include only breathing exercises, visualization, and meditation (Tsang et al. 2008: 303).

1.2. Mindfulness Studies in Turkey

There has been an increase in mindfulness studies in Turkey in recent years. Şehidoğlu (2014) observed that regular mindfulness practices among adolescents aged 15-19 who actively use the internet led to a significant decrease in problematic internet use levels. In a study conducted by Dönmez (2018) with participants aged 12-55, it was found that as mindfulness increased, online gaming addiction decreased. Similarly, research examining the relationship between mindfulness and mobile phone addiction found that individuals with high levels of mindfulness had lower daily mobile phone usage (Güneri 2019: 367).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Group

The research aims to investigate the impact of cyberviolence on women and the effectiveness of mindfulness in combating cyberviolence. The research group consists of adult women actively involved in the Women’s Cooperative in Sarıkamış Kars. This study was conducted with a total of 10 participants, who were selected from among the members of the women’s cooperative who volunteered to participate. All participants are women, and their ages range from 19 to 51. Specifically, 20% of the participants are 20 years old, 20% are 48 years old, 20% are 49 years old, 30% are 50 years old, and 10% are 46 years old. When examining the educational backgrounds of the participants, it is observed that 20% are university graduates, 70% are high school graduates, and 10% are primary school graduates.

Looking at the occupations of the participants, the majority are homemakers (60%). The research group also includes participants with direct professions such as social worker/businesswoman (10%), retirees (10%), and students (20%). When examining the participants’ social media usage, it is found that

the average usage duration is four hours. The longest usage duration extends to eight hours, while the shortest usage duration mentioned by the participants is two hours. 60% of the participants are married, while the remaining 40% are single. The most commonly used social media channel is Instagram (40%). Other social media channels used by the participants include WhatsApp (10%), Facebook (20%), TikTok (10%), and Twitter (20%).

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The aim of the research is to learn about women's experiences of cyberviolence in their daily lives, the various effects of cyberviolence on women, women's coping methods with cyberviolence, and the opinions, thoughts, and experiences of women regarding the effectiveness of mindfulness practice in combating cyberviolence. The goal is to understand this process from the perspective of women. The reason for selecting Sarıkamış Women's Cooperative as the research participants is the sense of non-judgment and the environment where women feel free to express themselves and their thoughts, in short, the existence of women's solidarity.

Women Cooperatives provide an opportunity for local women mostly with low literacy rates to be empowered as members of consumer cooperatives. Women's cooperatives are also social constructions. Duguid and his colleagues (2015) highlight that healthy interpersonal relations are formed among women to provide the best operational capacity in many Turkish Women Cooperatives.

As a small local organization, Kars/Sarıkamış Women Cooperative consists of women from a range of age groups who have been actively using social media and are not hesitant to share their opinions and experiences about cyber sexual harassment of women and hate language in social media despite the prevalent view of regarding violence against women as a taboo in the region. According to a recent study, Kars is one of the cities where violence against women is significantly high, more than %40 (Utkan,2021).

The sub-objectives of the research are as follows:

- 1) This research attempts to determine the participants' awareness and knowledge of cyber violence.
- 2) The research aims to uncover the short-term and long-term effects of cyberviolence on the participants.
- 3) The study seeks to gather the opinions and thoughts of the participants about mindfulness as a method for coping with the negative effects of cyberviolence.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in Sarıkamış district of Kars province, Turkey. Different data collection techniques were used for different research questions. The research employed a questionnaire survey and focus group discussions as research methods.

Before moving on to the first stage of the research, which is the questionnaire survey, the participants were introduced to the subject and purpose of the research. In the second stage of the research, focus group discussions were conducted to delve deeper into the participants' answers to the questionnaire questions without restrictions, allowing participants to express their own experiences, opinions, and feelings.

4.1. Survey Questions

The survey questions were adapted from questionnaire items used in previous studies by Şincek et al., 2017: 100) and Carp et al.(2022) and they were shared with the participants by the researcher. The survey questions were prepared taking into account demographic characteristics such as the participants' education levels and socio-economic status. In the first phase of the research, participants were asked to complete a written questionnaire consisting of a total of 27 open-ended questions. All participants completed both the survey questions and the focus group discussion questions.

The survey questions are divided into three sections. The completion time for the survey was approximately thirty minutes. The design of open-ended survey questions aimed to encourage participants to answer without feeling

limited by their thoughts and emotions.

In the first section of the survey, participants' demographic characteristics, including age, occupation, and education level, were asked. In addition to demographic questions, questions about participants' daily internet usage durations and social media usage durations were included in the survey to gather information about the participants. The survey then addressed the concept of cyberviolence. Participants were asked whether they had experienced cyber violence at any point in their lives, to describe the person who engaged in cyberviolence if they had experienced it, and to specify their reactions and preferred coping methods when facing cyberviolence. The third part of the survey aimed to understand the impact of cyberviolence on the participants and the effects they observed in individuals who experienced cyberviolence in their close circles. To ensure objectivity in the survey responses, participants were asked to complete the survey forms anonymously.

4.2. Focus Group Discussion

Before implementing the focus group discussion method in our research, a conceptual framework related to the topic was established. This framework included decisions about whom to interview, why those individuals were selected, what common characteristics the selected individuals should have, which topics should be discussed during the interviews, and the order in which questions should be asked. The focus group discussion was conducted once and lasted approximately ninety minutes. The time and location of the focus group discussion were communicated to the participants by the Cooperative President one week before the discussion day, providing them with information about the topic. All participants attended the meeting on the designated day and time at their own discretion.

The focus group discussion questions consisted of open-ended questions designed to facilitate discussion and provide detailed insights. During the focus group discussion, the participants were guided to discuss the central concepts or topics, attention was paid to group dynamics,

and the importance of participants expressing their opinions rather than stating facts was emphasized. Throughout the meeting, minimal intervention was made to allow participants to interact with each other as much as possible. The conversations during the ninety-minute meeting were noted by the researcher, and a final conclusion was reached. After the discussion, short notes were taken by the observer, considering the characteristics of the group's social environment. Additionally, some interesting sentences related to the topic were collected from the participants and incorporated into the study report.

During the focus group discussion, questioning and summarization techniques were used to reveal individuals' thoughts and experiences. By analyzing the data, the evaluations, concerns, and opinions expressed by the participants were synthesized to understand the inner dimensions of the participants' thoughts, perceptions, and attitudes.

The focus group discussion at the Sarıkamış Women's Cooperative consisted of three sessions in total. These sessions covered topics related to women's experiences of cyberviolence, the effects of cyberviolence on women, and the methods women use to combat cyberhate, particularly focusing on mindfulness. The purpose of the focus group discussion was to obtain in-depth and multidimensional qualitative information about the participants' thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and attitudes related to cyberviolence.

The discussion was held around a round table, ensuring communication flow between the participants and the researcher. This seating arrangement allowed for everyone to have eye contact with each other and contributed to equal opportunities for self-expression. During the focus group discussion, both the topics addressed in the survey questions were discussed in more depth, and participants were provided with opportunities to express themselves verbally on specific subjects. Unlike the survey, during the focus group discussion, the researcher answered participants' questions only to clarify the questions; the researcher

refrained from expressing their own opinions as much as possible.

Participants were requested to keep their phones or various technological devices at a distance and refrain from discussing among themselves during both the survey and the focus group discussion. This created an environment where each participant could objectively answer the questions and freely express their own opinions.

5. FINDINGS

In this study, conducted through both a survey and focus group discussions, an investigation was carried out to learn about the experiences of participants and women in their close circles regarding cyberviolence, the short and long-term consequences of cyberviolence, how women cope when faced with cyberviolence, and their thoughts on mindfulness as a coping method.

Through the survey questions, participants expressed that they primarily use their daily internet usage for keeping up with current events and communication through social media. All participants were social media users and reported experiencing cyberviolence through social media channels. The majority of participants stated that they had been exposed to cyberviolence. More than half of the participants mentioned that cyberviolence perpetrators were anonymous. Some participants even noted that even if the identities of the cyberviolence perpetrators were not anonymous, they tended to judge directly rather than listen and understand, based on a comment they wrote on social media. It was also indicated by the participants that known cyberviolence perpetrators were male, and they repeated their violent comments and criticisms in digital media more than once, and these repetitions could continue until the victims took action.

When examining the reasons for exposure to cyberviolence, it was prominent that expressing political views freely on social media as a woman played a role. Furthermore, topics such as gender equality and its reflection on marital relationships, female stereotypes presented in Turkish television series in the context of gender roles, pressure and aggressive comments applied

through social media on family issues, criticism of women's clothing preferences, criticism of women's sexual identities, beliefs, and critical and disturbing attitudes towards their children were discussed.

All participants believe that those who are generally perceived as vulnerable by society are the ones mostly exposed to cyberviolence, and women are initially included in this group. Therefore, participants unanimously agree that they should increase their awareness of cyberviolence and take necessary measures in order to defend themselves effectively in the digital environment and prevent it.

The most preferred method for combating cyberviolence among participants is directly blocking the cyberviolence perpetrator on social media channels. This method is followed by reporting the cyberviolence perpetrator to the relevant authorities, engaging in written arguments on mutual social media channels, and doing nothing at all.

5.1. Results of Focus Group Discussion

During the discussion, it was observed that participants influenced each other just as they do in real life. Open-ended questions were asked by the researcher to encourage discussion, allowing individuals to provide detailed information about their thoughts, observations, and experiences. To prevent misunderstandings, what was said during the discussion was repeated, and care was taken to ensure that everyone participated in the discussions. Additionally, the researcher did not express personal opinions, and in cases where some participants were not willing to speak and others did not want to stop talking, an effort was made to include everyone's views and balance the participants.

As a result of the group interaction and group dynamics during the focus group discussions, new ideas emerged. Another noteworthy point during the focus group discussion was that one participant would share an idea, and another participant would elaborate on it, thus providing more detailed information. This was particularly observed when discussing the short-term and long-term psychological, social, and

physiological effects of cyberviolence.

5.2. Effects of Cyberviolence

Participants stated that they unanimously agree that cyberviolence has significant harmful negative effects on victims psychologically, socially, and physiologically. Although the type of cyberviolence varies, the psychological experiences of participants who have experienced cyberviolence as victims are similar. Participants mentioned experiencing anxiety, depression, stress, and self-esteem problems during and after cyberviolence. When examining the psychological effects of cyberviolence on participants, feelings of sadness, experiencing intense stress, feeling worthless, and embarrassment about personal information being known were mentioned. Socially, participants mentioned a decrease in self-esteem, conflicts in peer relationships, a lack of trust in relationships with others, and fear of judgment in social relationships as a result of being victims of cyberviolence. Due to the psychological problems experienced, participants also expressed feeling weak and powerless.

Regarding the prevention of cyberviolence, participants believe that there should be efforts to increase the effectiveness of existing laws in Turkey. Participants also mentioned that they apply mindfulness as simple breathing exercises in their daily lives and feel that these exercises help them transition to a more accepting and calm state when experiencing negative emotions.

6. CONCLUSION

In this research, conducted through both a survey and focus group discussions, an investigation was carried out to learn about the experiences of participants and women in their close circles regarding cyberviolence, the short and long-term consequences of cyberviolence, how women cope when faced with cyberviolence, and their thoughts on mindfulness as a coping method.

In today's world, social media channels have the potential to function not only as platforms where women are exposed to cyberviolence but also as digital social environments where

their victimization and mutual support among women can occur. It should be emphasized that women should be encouraged to be aware of and express their victimization when combating cyberviolence. With the increasing number of digital platforms and social media channels, it is observed that cyberviolence against women will increase. In the research findings, it is observed that cyberviolence has negative short-term and long-term effects on women, and women support each other through the Sarıkamış Cooperative and cope with the negative effects of cyberviolence through regular mindfulness practices.

In order to prevent cyberviolence, awareness studies, informative trainings for women to recognize, distinguish, and take precautions against cyberviolence, mindfulness practices, easily accessible training and resources for women to learn how to provide necessary support to individuals exposed to cyberviolence in their close circles, and steps to be taken when they themselves are exposed to cyberviolence are recommended. Some participants mentioned that they would like to receive informative support on taking measures to avoid reflecting their emotional processes as mothers when exposed to cyberviolence.

Participants expressed that they practice mindfulness mostly as simple breathing exercises during the day. Most of the participants (80%) also mentioned that they have difficulty in practicing mindfulness regularly and complained about the busy routine of daily life. All participants stated that they consider mindfulness practice effective as it has a calming and soothing effect when dealing with cyberviolence. In this regard, the expressions of the participants are as follows:

Participant 1: "I see cyberviolence most frequently when it comes to politics and towards women. There's a lot of political opposition on social media. Criticisms of women being excessively open or excessively closed are common. This is really disturbing and restricts women's freedom."

Participant 2: "Mindfulness practice is really soothing. Whenever I feel bad, especially if it's

because of someone else's comments, I take a deep breath and calm myself down."

Participant 3: "I feel relieved when I practice mindfulness. It's a different feeling. It's nice."

Participants believe that efforts should be made to increase the effectiveness of existing laws to prevent cyberviolence in Turkey. They mentioned that they apply mindfulness as simple breathing exercises in their daily lives and feel that these exercises help them to adopt more accepting and calm state when experiencing negative emotions.

Support to individuals exposed to cyberviolence in their close circles, and steps to be taken when they themselves are exposed to cyberviolence are recommended. Some participants mentioned that they would like to receive informative support on taking measures to avoid reflecting their emotional processes as mothers when exposed to cyberviolence.

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