

RESEARCH ARTICLE/ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

# Examination of the relationship between peer bullying and cyber violence in university students

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## Abstract

Peer bullying, encountered by individuals globally at an early age, necessitates a deep understanding of its underlying causes and associated elements for effective intervention strategies. The integration of digital technologies as tools has introduced the dimension of cyber violence to the discourse on peer bullying. This research aims to explore the relationship between peer bullying and cyber violence in a specific age group. Globally, 10-15% of children and adolescents experience peer bullying lasting over six months. Recognized as a global health issue by the World Health Organization and the United Nations, research indicates varying risks of exposure in different countries, such as 30% in Australia, 20% in Portugal, and 10% in the United States. The study investigates the connection between the violent behaviors adopted by individuals who have experienced peer bullying and their efforts to overcome the associated sense of worthlessness. Data were collected through an online survey utilizing the "Cyberbullying Scale" by Arıca et al. and the Turkish-adapted "Adolescent Peer Relationships" scale by Seçer. The sample comprises 260 university students aged 18-24. Findings reveal that 53.8% of participants scoring high on the cyberbullying scale also exhibit elevated scores on the bully form of the adolescent peer relationships scale. Notably, 10% of those scoring highest on the bully form relate to participants who scored high on the threat dimension. In conclusion, the research highlights the need for additional studies to address cyberbullying and underscores the necessity for the development of diverse strategies. This study may establish a foundational framework for future research, contributing to the formulation of more effective approaches in combating cyberbullying.

**Keywords:** Peer bullying, cyber violence, violence.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Peer bullying, a social problem that has gained increasing attention in the past century and laid the groundwork for the emergence of numerous concepts, is encountered as a social issue. Often observed in environments where peers of similar ages, such as schools, courses, and sports clubs, come together, and where possible competition is likely, peer bullying is mostly seen among individuals in the adolescent stage, commonly defined as the teenage years. The presence of peer bullying among adolescents in the transition to adulthood often results in the occurrence of various psychological, physiological, and behavioral problems in the bullied individuals or the development of a conducive process.

Peer bullying, in its broadest definition, occurs between individuals perceived as strong and weak and sometimes extends beyond the boundaries of the school, affecting everyday life. In this regard, peer bullying is not just a school-focused or within-school issue but is encountered as an issue that encompasses an individual's entire life.

With the development of cyber technologies and the easy access of individual users to these technologies, cyberbullying has become an increasingly discussed and important subtopic under the umbrella of violence. Cyberbullying is becoming more prevalent with the ease of access to cyber technologies and has led to the emergence of many bullies and victims. In this context, as seen in the literature on cyberbullying, it can be observed in conjunction with peer bullying, and cyber technologies can be a tool for bullies to engage in bullying behaviors outside of school. This situation prompts a discussion of the relationship between cyberbullying and peer bullying.

The aim of this study is to measure the relationship between peer bullying behavior among university students, who are increasingly drawn into the widespread use of cyber technologies, and cyberbullying.

Hypotheses of the Study:

H-1: Participants who score high on the

adolescent peer relationship scale in the bully form also score high on the cyberbullying scale.

H-2: There is a relationship between peer bullying and cyberbullying.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Peer Bullying

While research on aggression has a long history in the literature, studies related to the concept of bullying can be considered relatively new compared to research on aggression. Nevertheless, significant progress can be observed in studies on peer bullying conducted in schools, and in the academic literature on bullying, thanks to studies such as those by Tsaoasis (2016), Hong and Espelage (2012), and Gini and Pozzoli (2009).

Studies conducted by Olweus in the 1970s and 1980s are notable landmarks in the field of bullying research. Olweus's initial studies on bullying primarily focused on physical bullying (Olweus, 1977). However, over the years, discussions about the concept of bullying expanded beyond just physical behaviors, leading to diversified and expanded definitions of bullying (Smith & Brain, 2000).

Olweus defined bullying as a situation in which a person is exposed to negative behaviors from one or more individuals, including social exclusion, physical bullying, and verbal bullying (Olweus, 1993). Mynard and Joseph categorized bullying into four dimensions: physical, verbal, relational, and attacks on personal belongings, unlike other definitions, which included damage to personal belongings as part of bullying behavior (Mynard & Joseph, 2000).

In the general sense, bullying is defined as repeated intentional harm in interpersonal relationships where a clear power imbalance is evident (Olweus, 1993). What distinguishes bullying from other forms of aggression is the repetition of aggressive behavior. Many researchers emphasize that for a behavior to be considered bullying, it must be repetitive (Ybarra et al., 2014).

In the light of the definition of bullying, one of the

concepts that is currently being addressed and studied by various disciplines is peer bullying.

Olweus, known for his definitions of bullying, defined peer bullying as a student's perception of recurring and systematic behaviors that are intentionally harmful and inflicted by other students or a student group who are perceived as more powerful (Olweus, 1993). Defining the concept of harm is not straightforward. While physically harmful behaviors and actions can be defined and classified with clear boundaries, verbal behaviors, speech, and expressions create a more ambiguous framework compared to physical behaviors. This is primarily due to cultural differences, the richness and meaning of local expressions, and the role of students' jargon and behaviors in shaping these meanings.

A word or expression that does not carry any negative meaning under normal circumstances may convey a negative, demeaning, humiliating, or injurious meaning within a specific group of friends. Similarly, a speech or expression that is normally considered destructive and insulting may have a non-destructive meaning among a group of friends. In today's context, in social media, which is an important agenda setter, many words, behaviors, or expressions can transform and correspond to meanings that are far from their original intent.

The red line here should be what the expression, behavior, or behavior means to the targeted person. Under normal circumstances, an expression whose meaning is not known within a specific group of friends may seem normal to a third person, but it can cause the targeted peer to be hurt or feel bad. Therefore, it is more beneficial and meaningful to draw a flexible boundary for the concept of harm and look at it from the perspective of the dimension perceived by the targeted person.

Within this study, peer bullying is encountered as a contemporary issue that is currently being studied, based on this dimension, among individuals who are close in age. Peer bullying is primarily defined as a persistent attitude or behavior that causes recurring discomfort to students, predominantly within the school

environment but occasionally extending beyond the school (Gürhan, 2017).

Peer bullying, a type of bullying frequently encountered among peers, is indicated in the literature. Based on the research conducted at this point, it has become possible to make a certain determination regarding the profiles of bullies and victims (Pellegrini, 1998). In peer bullying, often younger individuals who are physically weaker are designated as victims, while in physical bullying, the victims are predominantly male students (Gürhan, 2017).

Besag has defined peer-to-peer bullying as deliberately causing harm, physically, mentally, or verbally, to people who are perceived as weaker, for the sake of the interests and goals of the person or group considered strong (Besag, 1989). As can be seen from the definition, bullying is a multifaceted set of behaviors.

One of the concepts that attract attention in the literature is peer bullying, which is examined in light of the definition of bullying.

There are five theoretical approaches to peer bullying that are noted in the literature: bullying as a result of individual differences among students, bullying as a developmental process, bullying due to peer pressure in schools, bullying from the perspective of restorative justice (Gürhan, 2017).

As mentioned in the definition of bullying, Olweus's early studies initially focused on the physical dimension of bullying, but as the number of studies increased and discussions in the academic literature clarified the conceptual dimension, bullying began to be examined in many dimensions.

## 2.2. Cyber Violence and Peer Bullying

Efforts to harm others by using information technologies with the aim of causing harm to other individuals or groups, falls under the umbrella of cyberbullying or cyber violence (Türk & Şenyuva, 2021). Cyber violence, which encompasses various dimensions, such as psychological, emotional, and social, carried out using two different information technologies,

is a form of violence discussed in the literature under the category of violence (Polat, 2016).

Although peer bullying mostly occurs within institutions where peers gather, such as schools, sports clubs, and courses, it is sometimes observed that bullying transcends these institutions. The fact that many behaviors associated with peer bullying extend into the technological infrastructure of the cyber world indicates that a significant portion of behaviors related to peer bullying can also be carried out using technology (Al-Alosi, 2017).

Behaviors studied under the title of cyberbullying, which include threatening messages, electronic messages, and harmful behaviors conducted through commonly used social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Tiktok, can also be observed under the title of peer bullying (Polat, 2022).

The anonymity provided by digital technology, the easy opportunities and methods provided by social media platforms for creating user profiles (Guan et al., 2016), and the capabilities of cyber technology have made it possible for peer bullying and peer violence to extend beyond school to the world of social media (Schneider et al., 2012).

The extension of peer bullying beyond schools and educational institutions into the realm of cyber technology, and the role of cyber technologies as a means for peer bullying, prompt a discussion of the relationship between peer bullying and cyberbullying.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Sample

The sample group of this study consisted of university students aged 18-24.

Each participating participant is a member of at least one social media platform. The participants in the study spend at least 1 hour per day on one of the social media platforms.

It has been declared by the Ethics Committee of Doğuş University that there is no harm in conducting the study with the decision dated 17.01.2023 and numbered 39463.

#### 3.2. INSTRUMENTS

The study was conducted using the "Cyberbullying Scale" developed by Arıca and colleagues in 2012, and the "Adolescent Peer Relationships Scale - Bully Form," adapted into Turkish by Seęer in 2014 and developed by Parada to measure bullying and victimization in adolescents.

The cyberbullying scale used in this research consists of 24 items in its adolescent version. The scale is a 4-point Likert scale, where the response "never" corresponds to a score of 1, and the response "always" corresponds to a score of 4. Notably, there are no reversely scored items in the scale. The highest attainable score from the scale is 96, while the lowest score is 24.

Another scale utilized in this study is the Adolescent Peer Relationships Scale in the Bully Form, comprising 18 items. In this scale, the response "never" corresponds to a score of 1, and the response "every day" corresponds to a score of 6. Accordingly, the highest possible score from the scale is 108, and the lowest score is 18.

#### 3.3. Analysis

This study serves as a preliminary investigation for the related research, and the analysis of the study is interpreted through descriptive analysis method.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All participants involved in this research are university students aged between 18 and 24. Of the participants, 48.7% are pursuing an associate degree, while 51.3% are enrolled in a bachelor's degree program.

All participants are members of at least one social media platform. Additionally, each participant spends a minimum of one hour per day on social media applications.

According to the findings, 22.8% of the participants in the study scored high on items related to "threatening" from the cyberbullying scale, while 36.7% scored high on items related to "transfer." Additionally, 18.2% of the participants scored high on items expressing

“excessive closeness.” No significant difference in the average scores was observed for the remaining 22.3% of participants.

Among participants who scored high on items related to “threatening,” 64.6% constitute those who scored the highest on the Bully Form of the Adolescent Peer Relationships Scale. This figure represents approximately 13.4% of all participants. However, it is noteworthy that among the 29 participants who scored the lowest on the Bully Form of the Adolescent Peer Relationships Scale (about 10% of all participants), 70.2% scored high on items related to “transfer” from the cyberbullying scale.

Participants who scored high on items related to “excessive closeness” in the cyberbullying scale, 54.6% scored higher on items related to “threatening” compared to those who scored high on the Bully Form of the Adolescent Peer Relationships Scale. Conversely, participants who scored the lowest on the same scale had higher scores on items related to “transfer.”

Among the top 26 participants who scored the highest on the Bully Form of the Adolescent Peer Relationships Scale (constituting approximately 10% of all participants), 88.7% scored high on items related to “threatening” from the cyberbullying scale. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the highest-scoring 26 participants scored lower on items related to “transfer” from the cyberbullying scale.

The majority of participants who marked the highest value on the 6-point Likert scale, which is “every day,” for the statement “I made hurtful comments to some of my friends” in the cyberbullying scale, responded with “always” to the statement “I send threatening messages to other people on the internet” in the cyberbullying scale. At this point, it can be said that participants involved in peer bullying carry their bullying from school to the cyber world.

For the statement “I secretly use other people’s names to open accounts on sites like Facebook and Twitter” in peer bullying, participants who answered “every day” to this statement responded with “always” to the statement “I made jokes about some of my friends that they

wouldn’t like” in the cyberbullying scale. At this point, it can be suggested that participants who open accounts imitating others in the context of cyberbullying are primarily motivated to defame or label others.

Participants who responded “always” and “often” to the statement “I send threatening messages to other people on the internet” in the cyberbullying scale gave a parallel response of “every day” and “several times a week” to the statement “I deliberately slapped or punched some of my friends” in the peer bullying scale.

For the statement “I spread untrue rumors about some of my friends every day,” five participants who answered “every day” had higher scores in the cyberbullying scale compared to participants who gave different answers to the same statement. The same five participants also responded, “every day” and “several times a week” to the statements “I made fun of some of my friends by giving them nicknames they wouldn’t like” in the peer bullying scale and gave high scores to the statement that “I threatened other people” in the cyberbullying scale.

In contrast to these values, participants who answered “always” or “several times a week” to the statement “I tried to keep some of my friends away from me with my negative attitudes” received lower scores from the cyberbullying scale. This suggests that participants adopted such an attitude in their fight against peer bullying.

With the rapid proliferation of cyber technology from the 21st century onwards, the frequently mentioned concept of cyberbullying has given rise to the concepts of peer bullying and cyber peer bullying. This necessitates the need for studies on the relationship between peer bullying and violence. In line with this need, a preliminary study was conducted with a sample of university students, and the findings were shared.

As a result of the study, it was observed that participants who scored high in the Bully Form of the Adolescent Peer Relationships Scale also scored high in the Cyberbullying Scale.

Considering the social and psychological

effects of being exposed to peer bullying, the importance of combating peer bullying is evident in preventing the individual-level negative consequences mentioned in the literature. Moreover, the reflection of peer bullying on cyber technologies can be predicted to exacerbate the negative consequences of peer bullying at the individual level.

The relationship between peer bullying and cyberbullying highlighted in this preliminary study emphasizes the cyberbullying dimension in peer bullying. Therefore, it is evident that cyberbullying, carried out using cyber technologies, is encountered as a part of peer bullying.

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