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The Relationship Between Cyberbullying, Cybervictimization and Perceived Social Support in Adolescents

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Abstract: In today's rapidly digitalizing world, individuals—especially adolescents—interact across various online platforms, making the study of social perceptions in digital contexts increasingly important. Cyberbullying and cybervictimization have become key psychological concerns within these environments. This study examined adolescents' levels of cyberbullying, cybervictimization, and perceived social support using data from 321 participants. Results showed that both cyberbullying and cybervictimization levels were low, while perceived social support was moderate. Gender differences revealed that males reported higher cyberbullying, whereas females reported greater social support. High school students demonstrated significantly higher cyberbullying levels than middle school students; however, no differences were found for victimization or social support. Increased daily internet use was associated with higher cyberbullying and cybervictimization, and lower perceived social support. Correlation analyses indicated a moderate positive relationship between cyberbullying and cybervictimization, and low negative relationships between perceived social support and both variables. Overall, the findings highlight the need for awareness, educational initiatives, and support programs to foster safer and healthier online experiences for adolescents.

Keywords: cyberbullying, cybervictimization, perceived social support, adolescents.

1. Introduction

Technology continues to advance rapidly in today's world. Particularly among adolescents, the use of social media and technological devices has become highly prevalent. Through social media, online games, and messaging applications, adolescents engage in constant digital interaction with one another. Spending increasing amounts of time with technological tools also places adolescents at the center of various problems (Greydanus & Greydanus, 2012; Mei et al., 2018).

Although adolescents' interactions in the digital world can be beneficial, they may also be harmful at times, bringing about new areas of concern among peers. Peer bullying was initially defined through physical, verbal, and relational forms; however, with technological advances, the execution of bullying behaviors in electronic environments has led to a new concept known as cyberbullying (Campbell, 2005; Kowalski et al., 2019). In today's rapidly evolving digital environment—especially among adolescents—cyberbullying has gained significant importance due to its impact on young people's mental health and safety. Cyberbullying is considered one of the problematic behaviors that negatively affect adolescents' psychological well-being through the harmful use of the internet (Şenyiğit, 2018).

Cyberbullying consists of aggressive behaviors that originate from traditional bullying yet differ in several aspects and have become increasingly widespread (Baştürk Akca et al., 2014). Although aggressive behaviors in traditional peer bullying are also found in cyberbullying, these actions occur within digital settings.

Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is more widespread and easier to commit. Because incidents occur in digital spaces, perpetrators can conceal their identities or create anonymous profiles, making it easier for them to engage in bullying behavior (Baştürk Akca & Sayımer, 2017). Cyberbullying includes the use of digital tools intentionally, maliciously, and repeatedly to harm others (Ayas & Horzum, 2010; Çetin et al., 2011). It involves harming individuals' personal rights through information and communication technologies (Arıcak et al., 2012). In short, cyberbullying refers to harming others in online or virtual environments through inappropriate behaviors (Gürhan, 2017).

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Alongside the increase in cyberbullies due to technological developments, the number of individuals affected by these behaviors—cybervictims—has also grown. Cybervictimization refers to being harmed as a result of cyberbullying perpetrated by others (Karaca et al., 2021). It involves individuals or groups being subjected to harmful actions via technological tools, resulting in emotional or material damage (Juvonen & Graham, 2014).

Cyberbullies often target individuals who are introverted, quiet, or submissive—similar to traditional peer bullying. In Turkey, since social media is used more frequently by young people, cyberbullying and cybervictimization are more commonly experienced by adolescents (Çiftçi, 2018).

The concept of social support refers to the psychological and social assistance individuals receive from their surroundings. Social support is particularly important during adolescence; an adolescent with high perceived social support is less likely to exhibit undesirable or harmful behaviors. Therefore, social support plays a significant role in coping with challenges and overcoming negative circumstances. Through support from friends, teachers, and family members, adolescents can develop more functional behaviors (Traş & Arslan, 2013).

One of the primary functions of social support is to help individuals cope more effectively with daily problems through the love, care, and help they receive from their environment. Higher levels of social support are associated with increased problem-solving ability, resilience to negative experiences, and overall coping capacity (Çarkıt & Bacanlı, 2020).

Research has shown that cyberbullying and cybervictimization are related to perceived social support. Cyberbullying perpetration and victimization vary depending on the level of perceived social support (Akman, 2022). Previous studies exploring gender and school level have found that cyberbullying behaviors occur more frequently among males, whereas victimization is more common among females. Additionally, students attending private schools experience more cyberbullying than those attending public schools (Bingöl & Tanrıkulu, 2014). Studies also highlight a significant relationship between perceived social support and both cyberbullying and cybervictimization (Hellfeldt et al., 2019).

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between adolescents' experiences of cyberbullying and cybervictimization and their perceived social support. In addition, this study aims to determine whether cyberbullying, cybervictimization, and perceived social support differ according to variables such as gender, school level, and daily internet usage time. The sub-problems of the study are presented below:

1. What are adolescents' levels of cyberbullying, cybervictimization, and perceived social support?
2. Do adolescents' levels of cyberbullying, cybervictimization, and perceived social support differ according to:
    - Gender,
    - School level (middle school–high school),
    - Daily internet usage time?
3. Is there a significant relationship between adolescents' levels of cyberbullying, cybervictimization, and perceived social support?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study was designed using a descriptive and correlational survey model. According to Karasar (2011), the correlational survey model aims to determine the degree of relationship and the pattern of change between two or more variables. This research is a quantitative study conducted to identify the relationship between secondary and high school students' levels of cyberbullying, cybervictimization, and perceived social support. Differences in these variables across school level, gender, and daily internet usage time were also examined.

2.2. Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of secondary and high school students aged 12–18 from various provinces in Turkey. Since the population is broad and direct access would be difficult in terms of time and cost, a representative sample was formed that reflected diverse backgrounds in age, demographics, and school settings (Büyüköztürk et al., 2015). The study included 321 students from different schools. Demographic information regarding the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variable	Categories	n	%
Gender	Female	101	31,5
	Male	220	68,5
School Level	Middle School	218	67,9
	High School	103	32,1
Daily Average Internet Use	1 hour or less	64	19,9
	1–2 hours	106	33,0
	3 hours or more	151	47,0
Total		321	100

Upon examining Table 1, it is observed that the majority of the 321 participants were male (68.5% male; 31.5% female). Regarding school level, 67.9% of the participants were middle school students and 32.1% were high school students. As for daily internet usage, a substantial proportion of students were online for extended periods; 47% reported using the internet for 3 hours or more daily, 33% for 1–2 hours, and 19.9% for one hour or less. Overall, these distributions indicate that the adolescents in this study spend significant amounts of time online.

2.3. Data Collection and Instruments

Before administering the scales, permission was obtained from the authors of the scales. Additionally, since the study group consisted of students under the age of 18 who were enrolled in middle and high schools, parental consent forms were collected. During the implementation phase, voluntary students from different regions participated in the research.

2.3.1. Personal Information Form

The personal information form used in this study was developed by the researchers. The form was designed to collect various demographic data from participants, such as age, school level, and daily internet usage duration.

2.3.2. Cyber Victim and Bullying Scale (CVBS)

This scale was developed by Çetin, Yaman, and Peker (2011) to measure adolescents' levels of cybervictimization and cyberbullying. The scale consists of two subscales, each containing 22 items. The "Done to Me" section measures cybervictimization, while the "I Did It" section measures cyberbullying, both using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always).

The Cybervictimization Scale includes three factors: Cyber Forgery, Cyber Verbal Bullying, Identity Concealment.

The Cyberbullying Scale consists of the same three factors. The total possible score for each subscale ranges from 22 to 110.

2.3.3. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

Originally developed by Zimet et al. (1988) and adapted into Turkish by Eker, Arkar and Yaldız (2001), this scale measures individuals' perceived social support from different sources. It consists of three subscales: Family, Friends, Significant Others.

Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The MSPSS has demonstrated high validity and reliability and is widely used in psychological and social research. Total scores range from 12 to 84.

2.4. Data Analysis

Before the analysis, participants were informed about the purpose and significance of the study, and participation was voluntary. Students were assured that their responses would remain confidential. The scales and personal information form were administered face-to-face to ensure accurate completion.

Normality tests were conducted before analysis. Skewness and kurtosis values were found to fall within the acceptable range of –1 to +1, indicating a normal distribution. Therefore, parametric statistical methods were used.

Statistical Techniques Used: Frequency and percentage for demographic data, Minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation to determine levels of cybervictimization, cyberbullying, and perceived social support, Independent samples t-test to examine differences by gender and school level, One-way ANOVA to examine differences by daily internet usage, Pearson correlation coefficient to determine relationships between cyberbullying, cybervictimization, and perceived social support, The significance level was set at .05. Interpretation Ranges For Cyberbullying and Cybervictimization (range = 22–110): 22–51.33: Low. 51.34–80.66: Moderate. 80.67–110: High

For Perceived Social Support (range = 12–84): 12–36: Low 37–60: Moderate, 61–84: High.

3. Findings and Interpretation

The findings obtained from the study conducted with 321 adolescents are presented below in accordance with the research questions.

3.1. Adolescents' Levels of Cybervictimization, Cyberbullying, and Perceived Social Support

To determine adolescents' cybervictimization, cyberbullying, and perceived social support levels, arithmetic mean scores were examined. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Adolescents' Cybervictimization, Cyberbullying, and Perceived Social Support Scores

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Level
Cybervictimization	321	14,0	94,0	33,8	11,67	Low
Cyberbullying	321	21,0	78,0	33,5	11,72	Low
Perceived Social Support	321	12,0	84,0	57,9	15,07	Modarete

According to Table 2, the adolescents' average cybervictimization score was low (M = 33.8, SD = 11.67). Similarly, their mean cyberbullying score was also low (M = 33.5, SD = 11.72). In contrast, their mean perceived social support level was moderate (M = 57.9, SD = 15.07). These findings suggest that adolescents in the sample generally exhibit low levels of engaging in or experiencing cyberbullying, while reporting moderate levels of social support.

3.2. Differences in Cybervictimization, Cyberbullying, and Perceived Social Support by Gender

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to determine whether cybervictimization, cyberbullying, and perceived social support differed by gender. Results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Differences in Cybervictimization, Cyberbullying, and Perceived Social Support by Gender

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Cybervictimization	Female	101	33,4	9,939	-,362	319	,717
	Male	220	34,0	12,41			
Cyberbullying	Female	101	31,4	9,25	-2,161	319	,031*
	Male	220	34,4	12,60			
Perceived Social Support	Female	101	60,5	14,9	2,102	319	,036*
	Male	220	56,7	15,02			

* p<.05

According to Table 3, female (M = 33.4, SD = 9.94) and male adolescents (M = 34.0, SD = 12.41) do not significantly differ in cybervictimization, as reflected by the non-significant t-test result ($t(319) = -0.362$, $p = .717$). However, males report significantly higher cyberbullying levels (M = 34.4, SD = 12.60) than females (M = 31.4, SD = 9.25), with the difference reaching statistical significance ($t(319) = -2.161$, $p = .031$). In contrast, females exhibit significantly higher perceived social support (M = 60.5, SD = 14.9) compared to males (M = 56.7, SD = 15.02), as indicated by the significant t-value ($t(319) = 2.102$, $p = .036$). Overall, these statistics show that while cybervictimization is similar across genders, males engage more in cyberbullying, and females perceive stronger social support.

3.3. Differences in Cybervictimization, Cyberbullying, and Perceived by School Level

Independent samples t-tests were used to examine whether cybervictimization, cyberbullying, and perceived social support differed between middle and high school students. Results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Differences in Cybervictimization, Cyberbullying, and Perceived Social Support by School Level

Variable	School Level	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Cybervictimization	Middle School	218	33,7	10,85	-,123	319	,902
	High School	103	33,9	13,30			
Cyberbullying	Middle School	218	32,3	10,16	-2,492	319	,013*
	High School	103	35,8	14,24			
Perceived Social Support	Middle School	218	58,9	15,08	1,771	319	,077
	High School	103	55,7	14,89			

* p<.05

According to Table 4, cybervictimization levels do not significantly differ between middle school students (M = 33.7, SD = 10.85) and high school students (M = 33.9, SD = 13.30), as indicated by a non-significant t-test result (t(319) = –0.123, p = .902). Similarly, perceived social support scores also show no meaningful difference between middle school (M = 58.9, SD = 15.08) and high school students (M = 55.7, SD = 14.89), with the difference falling short of statistical significance (t(319) = 1.771, p = .077). However, cyberbullying scores differ significantly by school level (t(319) = –2.492, p = .013), with high school students (M = 35.8, SD = 14.24) reporting higher levels of cyberbullying than middle school students (M = 32.3, SD = 10.16). This suggests that cyberbullying behaviors become more prevalent at the high school level, whereas victimization and perceived social support remain relatively stable across school stages.

3.4. Differences in Cybervictimization, Cyberbullying, and Perceived Daily Internet Use

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether cybervictimization, cyberbullying, and perceived social support differed by daily internet usage time. Means are shown in Table 5, and ANOVA results in Table 6.

Table 5. Cybervictimization, Cyberbullying, and Perceived Social Support Scores by Daily Internet Use

Variable	Daily Internet Use	N	Mean	SD
Cybervictimization	A – 1 hour or less	64	30,8	8,86
	B – 1–2 hours	106	32,6	10,74
	C – 3 hours or more	151	35,9	12,95
Cyberbullying	A – 1 hour or less	64	29,1	8,61
	B – 1–2 hours	106	30,5	8,31
	C – 3 hours or more	151	37,3	13,58
Perceived Social Support	A – 1 hour or less	64	62,5	14,96
	B – 1–2 hours	106	57,9	15,04
	C – 3 hours or more	151	55,9	14,81

Table 6. ANOVA Results for Cybervictimization, Cyberbullying, and Perceived Social Support by Daily Internet Use

Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p	Differences
Cybervictimization	Betw.Groups	1402,653	2	701,327	5,280	,006*	A -C
	Within.Groups	42239,558	318	132,829			
	Total	43642,212	320				
Cyberbullying	Betw.Groups	4370,958	2	2185,479	17,549	,000*	A-B, A-C
	Within.Groups	39603,254	318	124,539			
	Total	43974,212	320				
Perceived Social Support	Betw.Groups	1958,067	2	979,034	4,399	,013*	A -C
	Within.Groups	70773,285	318	222,557			
	Total	72731,352	320				

Tables 5 and 6 show that cybervictimization differs significantly by daily internet usage duration (F(2,318) = 5.280, p = .006), with adolescents using the internet for 3 hours or more (M = 35.9, SD = 12.95) reporting higher victimization levels than those using it for 1 hour or less (M = 30.8, SD = 8.86). Cyberbullying also varies significantly across usage groups ($F(2,318) = 17.549$, $p < .001$), where both the 1–2 hour group ($M = 30.5$, $SD = 8.31$) and the 3+ hour group ($M = 37.3$, $SD = 13.58$) display significantly higher cyberbullying compared to the 1-hour-or-less group ($M = 29.1$, $SD = 8.61$). Perceived social support shows a significant difference as well ($F(2,318) = 4.399$, $p = .013$), with adolescents using the internet for 1 hour or less ($M = 62.5$, $SD = 14.96$) reporting higher support than those using it for 3 hours or more ($M = 55.9$, $SD = 14.81$). These results collectively suggest that increased internet use is associated with higher levels of both cyberbullying and cybervictimization, and lower levels of perceived social support.

3.5. Relationship Between Adolescents' Cyberbullying, Cybervictimization, and Perceived Social Support

In this section, the relationships among cybervictimization, cyberbullying, and perceived social support were examined using Pearson correlation coefficients. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Correlation Levels Among Cybervictimization, Cyberbullying, and Perceived Social Support (N = 321)

		Cybervictimization	Cyberbullying	Perceived Social Support
Cybervictimization	Pearson Correlation (r)	1	,410**	-,163**
Cyberbullying	Pearson Correlation (r)	,410**	1	-,097
Perceived Social Support	Pearson Correlation (r)	-,163**	-,097	1

**. P<.01

According to Table 7, there is a moderate, positive relationship between cybervictimization and cyberbullying ($r = .410$, $p < .01$). This finding indicates that as adolescents' levels of cybervictimization increase, their likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying behaviors also increases. There is a low, negative relationship between perceived social support and cybervictimization ($r = –.163$, $p < .01$), suggesting that adolescents who perceive higher levels of social support experience lower levels of cybervictimization. Additionally, perceived social support shows a low, negative relationship with cyberbullying ($r = –.097$, $p < .01$), meaning that adolescents with stronger perceived social support are less likely to engage in cyberbullying behaviors.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

According to the findings of the study, adolescents' levels of cybervictimization and cyberbullying were found to be low. This result partially contradicts studies reporting high levels of cyberbullying and victimization in an increasingly digital world (Duman & Bridge, 2019; Semerci, 2017; Slonje & Smith, 2008). The low levels observed in the present research may be explained by the possibility that adolescents live in more protective environments, use the internet more cautiously, and receive relatively high levels of social support. Therefore, it can be suggested that social support may mitigate both cyberbullying and cybervictimization.

A significant association was found between cyberbullying, cybervictimization, and perceived social support. As adolescents' perceived social support from their families and peers increases, their levels of cyberbullying and victimization decrease. This finding aligns with Bingöl and Tanrıkulu's (2014) study, which also reported that higher social support is associated with lower cyberbullying and victimization scores. Similarly, Semerci and Hacıhasanoğlu Aşılar (2020) found that risky behaviors decrease as perceived social support increases, supporting the idea that social support functions as a protective factor in adolescence.

The study revealed no significant gender difference in cybervictimization. This result is consistent with Polat and Bayraktar's (2016) findings, which also reported that male and female adolescents experience similar levels of victimization, suggesting that both genders are equally susceptible to being targeted online. However, cyberbullying levels differed significantly by gender, with male adolescents engaging in more cyberbullying behaviors than females. This pattern is consistent with research showing that boys tend to engage more frequently in cyberbullying (Özer & Şad, 2021; Erdur Baker, 2010; Slonje & Smith, 2008), possibly due to higher tendencies toward aggression in online contexts.

Regarding the relationship between gender and perceived social support, the findings indicated that female adolescents reported higher levels of social support than males. This aligns with previous research demonstrating that girls perceive greater social support (Coşkun et al., 2024; Yiğit et al., 2018). This may be attributed to the fact that girls tend to form more emotionally expressive and sensitive social relationships than boys.

The study also found no significant difference in cybervictimization or perceived social support between middle and high school students. This finding is consistent with prior studies showing that school level is not a strong determinant of victimization or social support (Bingöl & Tanrıkulu, 2014; Bayar & Uçanok, 2012). However, high school students exhibited higher cyberbullying levels compared to middle school students. This aligns with the literature indicating that cyberbullying is more prevalent in high school settings (Baştürk Akca et al., 2015; Cantone et al., 2015), possibly due to increased online activity among older adolescents.

Another important finding was that adolescents with higher internet usage had significantly higher levels of cyberbullying and cybervictimization. Those who used the internet for 3 hours or more per day showed greater involvement in cyberbullying than those who used it for shorter periods. This is consistent with studies demonstrating that increased internet exposure raises the likelihood of cyberbullying behaviors (Krešić Ćorić & Kaštelan, 2020; Türkoğlu, 2013). Excessive time spent online may also reduce face-to-face socialization, thereby increasing vulnerability to online risks. Additionally, adolescents who used the internet for shorter durations reported higher levels of perceived social support, a finding supported by research showing that high social support reduces engagement in risky online behaviors (Yağci & Yalaki, 2021).

The study also found a moderate, positive relationship between cybervictimization and cyberbullying. This aligns with previous findings suggesting that adolescents who are victimized may later engage in bullying behaviors themselves (Yaman & Peker, 2012; Süslü & Oktay, 2018), potentially as a means of self-protection or retaliation. Moreover, perceived social support was negatively associated with both cybervictimization and cyberbullying. Adolescents with higher social support were less likely to be victimized or to engage in bullying (Erbiçer, 2019; Akman, 2022). This reinforces the idea that strong social bonds act as a protective factor against risky online behaviors.

Overall, this study suggests that social support plays a protective role in reducing adolescents' involvement in cyberbullying and cybervictimization. Additionally, gender and internet usage duration appear to be influential factors, particularly in shaping cyberbullying behaviors. Based on the findings, it is recommended that educational programs be implemented to encourage adolescents to use the internet more consciously, that high school-level digital awareness programs be developed in collaboration with school counseling services and information technology teachers, that qualitative studies be conducted to better understand the underlying causes of bullying, and that mixed-method research be carried out to explore why male adolescents engage more frequently in cyberbullying.

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Conflict of Interest

It has been reported by the authors that there is no conflict of interest.

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