The effect of mobbing behaviors on students' burnout: Empirical results from a Higher Educational Institution

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the effect of instructor-induced mobbing behavior on students' burnout. The data were obtained from undergraduate students studying at a university's faculty of sports sciences. Two scales were used in the study. To measure mobbing, the Negative Acts Questionnaire–Student (NAQ–S) was used. NAQ–S has two sub-dimensions named academic mobbing and non-academic mobbing. To measure students' burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI–SS) was used. MBI–SS has three sub-dimensions named exhaustion, cynicism and efficacy. The results showed that academic mobbing only significantly affected students' exhaustion, while non-academic mobbing significantly influences students' cynicism and efficacy. In conclusion, school administrators should be aware that mobbing behaviors affect student burnout. It should take into account the possibility of such negative behaviors occurring and make efforts to prevent them.

Keywords: Mobbing, burnout, student, higher educational institution.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mobbing and burnout issues have gained a lot of attention in the health literature. The reason for this is that both cases create serious health problems on individuals and cause negative effects such as low productivity. Although research on mobbing and burnout is mostly done on individuals in working life, students have recently been included in these studies. In the literature, mobbing is expressed as an aggressive behavior produced to deliberately harm and disturb another person (Leymann, 1996), while burnout is expressed as a psychological syndrome caused by excessive and chronic stress (Maslach, 2003).

Regarding the conceptualization process, Lorenz (1963) was the first to mention mobbing. He used this concept as "a group of animals targeting a single animal in various ways, causing harm to it". Later, Heinemann (1972) used this concept when examining group behaviors related to the harm of one group of children to another group of children. Later, Leymann (1996) conducted a series of studies on the negative psychological effects of mobbing on individuals in the

context of the organization. Leymann classified 45 different mobbing behaviors in five groups according to their characteristics. These behaviors are grouped under the following headings: an attack on the dignity of the person, attacks on performance, attacks on communication, attacks on social conditions, and threat of physical attack. In this context, Leymann expressed mobbing as "hostile or immoral behaviors that one or more people generally systematically target to one person". There is a lot of evidence in the literature regarding negative effects of mobbing on individuals, such as low performance (Josipovic-Jelic et al., 2005), absenteeism (Depedro et al., 2014), organizational citizenship (Yildiz, 2016), turnover intention (Zapf, 1999), and burnout (Yildiz, 2015). Studies related to mobbing on employees in the service sector have gained momentum. Specifically, researchers have begun to study both instructors and students in educational institutions. Yildiz (2020) carried out a new study recently and examined the effect of instructor-induced mobbing behavior with academic and non-academic mobbing dimensions on

students. *Academic mobbing* refers to the negative behavior of the instructor associated with lessons, while *non-academic mobbing* refers to the negative personal behavior of the instructor towards the student. The results of the study showed that both academic mobbing and non-academic mobbing significantly and positively affect students' burnout.

Burnout is defined as a psychological response to job stress. Burnout is a chronic tension caused by incompatibility between work and the individual (Maslach, 2003). In other words, significant disharmonies between job nature and the job owner's nature lead to burnout (Maslach and Leiter, 2005). Individuals experiencing burnout are faced with situations such as low energy, unmotivated, and avoiding interpersonal interaction. In the context of education, students' participation in classes, assignments, and exams are accepted as a job, therefore, the phenomenon of burnout seen in the work environment can also be seen on students in the educational environment (Yildiz, 2020). Schaufeli et al. (2002) examined burnout on students in higher education and discussed it in three dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy. *Exhaustion* is a decrease in the emotional resources of the individual due to fatigue and stress. *Cynicism* generally refers to having a distant or indifferent attitude towards work. *Efficacy* means having social and professional achievements.

A number of factors that cause student burnout are mentioned in the literature. For instance, low self-efficacy (Rahmati, 2015) and high workload (Jacobs and Dodd, 2003) may be the antecedents of student burnout. In addition, negative student-teacher relationships (Fives et al., 2007) may also be the antecedent of student burnout. Studies conducted in higher education in recent years showed that mobbing caused by instructors may be the antecedents of student burnout (Goodboy et al., 2015; Yildiz, 2020).

During their education, students both participate in teaching activities and interact with instructors. On the one hand, students make efforts to overcome the workload created by the lessons, and on the other hand, they can sometimes be bullied by instructors (Hickson and Roebuck, 2009). "The instructor forces students to do work (homework, research projects, etc.) above their level of academic competence" and "the instructor ignores students' academic ideas" can be given as examples of bullying (Yildiz, 2020). As a result, both workload and mistreatment have serious effects on student burnout, which may result in failure and then withdrawal from education (Yildiz, 2020).

Mobbing in schools (Serinkan et al., 2013) and student burnout (Alarcon et al., 2011) are a constantly evolving phenomena. Hoover et al. (1992) reported that more than half of graduate students faced different types of mobbing behavior throughout school life. Examples of these are behaviors such as giving too much workload to students by instructors and disregarding students' opinions. A

study by Yamada et al. (2014) on graduate students revealed that more than 20% of students were exposed to mobbing by their advisors. The study of these researchers showed three types of bullying behavior towards students: threatening–dismissive, passive-aggressive interpersonal, and work–management. However, in the literature, research investigating the relationship between mobbing and burnout on higher education students is very limited. For example, Yildiz (2020) examined the relationship between mobbing and burnout on undergraduate students, while Goodboy et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between mobbing and burnout on graduate students. In both studies, significant and positive relationships were found between the variables.

In order to contribute to the clarification of this limited subject, this study focused on undergraduate students, and in this context, it was aimed to examine the effect of instructor-induced mobbing behavior on student burnout. Therefore, the following hypotheses were developed:

H_1. Academic mobbing has a significant and positive effect on students' exhaustion.
H_2. Non-academic mobbing has a significant and positive effect on students' exhaustion.
H_3. Academic mobbing has a significant and positive effect on students' cynicism.
H_4. Non-academic mobbing has a significant and positive effect on students' cynicism.
H_5. Academic mobbing has a significant and negative effect on students' efficacy.
H_6. Non-academic mobbing has a significant and negative effect on students' efficacy.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The sample was obtained from the students of a faculty of sports sciences of a university, in Turkey. First, an invitation message was sent to students explaining the purpose and procedure of the study via electronic communication tools. Then, 282 questionnaire forms were sent to the students who responded positively and they were given one week to complete. After one week was 266 questionnaires were completed and returned.

Instruments

The Negative Acts Questionnaire–Student (NAQ–S) developed by Yildiz (2020) was used to measure mobbing. This scale consists of 12 items and two sub-dimensions (academic mobbing and non-academic mobbing). This scale includes statements such as "your instructor forces you to do work (homework, research

projects, etc.) above your level of academic competence" and "your mistakes or errors are constantly reminded by your instructor".

To measure student burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI–SS) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002) was used. This scale consists of 15 items and three sub-dimensions (exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy). This scale includes statements such as "I feel emotionally drained by my studies", "I have become less enthusiastic about my studies", and "I can effectively solve the problems that arise in my studies (R)."

The statements on both scales were measured with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Every time).

Statistical analysis

Demographic characteristics of the participants were determined with descriptive statistics. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to determine the validity; Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to determine reliability of the scales. Independent samples t-test was used to compare the gender variable, and one-way ANOVA was used to compare the age variable. Regression analysis was used to determine the effect of independent variables on the dependent variables. In regression analysis, mobbing and sub-dimensions were considered as independent variables, burnout and sub-dimensions as dependent variables. Some important issues are taken into account when interpreting the regression analysis results. The R^2 value in the regression analysis table shows the power of the independent variable to explain

the dependent variable. The value of β in the coefficients table enables observation of the extent to which said variable is affected by the affected variable (Yildiz, 2011).

RESULTS

Sample characteristics

Demographic analysis of the data showed that 161 (60.5%) of the students participating in the study are male and 105 (39.5%) are female. 48 (18%) of the students are under 20 years old, 189 (71.1%) are between 21-25 years old, 20 (7.5%) are between 26-30 years old, and 9 (3.4%) are over 31 years old.

Test for validity and reliability

To test the validity of both NAQ-S and MBI–SS, we used a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). CFA results provided strong model fit indices for both scales (Table 1). The reliability analysis using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient showed a high-reliability score of 0.854 for the NAQ-S, and 0.722 for the MBI-SS.

Independent samples t-test results of gender

Mobbing and burnout variables were compared by gender, and as a result, a significant difference was found only in the mobbing variable. Accordingly, men's perception of mobbing was higher than women (Table 2).

Table 1. Results of the validity of the scales.

Scale	χ^2	df	GFI	AGFI	CFI	RMSEA
NAQ-S	131.6	53	.914	.874	.938	.075
MBI-SS	196.6	87	.906	.870	.945	.069

Table 2. Comparison of mobbing and burnout in terms of gender variable.

Scale	Gender	X	Sd	t	P
NAQ-S	Male	1.91	.64	2.749	.006*
	Female	1.73	.42		
MBI-SS	Male	2.74	.54	1.105	.270
	Female	2.67	.46		

* p < 0.01.

One-way ANOVA results of age

Mobbing and burnout variables were compared by age,

and as a result, a significant difference was found only in the mobbing variable (Table 3).

Tukey test was applied to understand from which group

Table 3. Comparison of mobbing and burnout in terms of age variable.

Scale		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
	Between Groups	3.896	3	1.299		
NAQ-S	Within Groups	82.673	262	.316	4.116	.007*
	Total	86.569	265			
	Between Groups	.731	3	.244		
MBI-SS	Within Groups	68.817	262	.263	.928	.428
	Total	69.548	265			

* $p < 0.01$.

the difference originated. The significant difference was found to be between "under 20 years old" and "21-25 years old" (Table 4).

Regression analysis

Regression analysis showed that both academic mobbing and non-academic mobbing had a significant and positive effect on student exhaustion. Accordingly, hypotheses 1 and 2 were accepted (Table 5).

According to the regression analysis, academic mobbing had no significant effect on student cynicism, whereas non-academic mobbing had a significant and positive effect on students' cynicism. Accordingly, hypothesis 3 was rejected and hypothesis 4 was accepted (Table 6).

Regression analysis indicated that academic mobbing had no significant effect on students' efficacy, whereas non-academic mobbing had a significant and negative effect on students' efficacy. Accordingly, hypothesis 5 was rejected and hypothesis 6 was accepted (Table 7).

Table 4. Post-hoc tests results of mobbing.

(I) Age	(J) Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	21–25	-.29519*	.09079	.007	-.5299	-.0604
Under 20 years	26–30	-.06250	.14950	.975	-.4491	.3241
	Over 31years	-.18981	.20405	.789	-.7174	.3378
	Under 20 years	.29519*	.09079	.007	.0604	.5299
21–25	26–30	.23269	.13209	.294	-.1088	.5742
	Over 31 years	.10538	.19165	.947	-.3902	.6009
	Under 20 years	.06250	.14950	.975	-.3241	.4491
26–30	21–25	-.23269	.13209	.294	-.5742	.1088
	Over 31 years	-.12731	.22547	.942	-.7103	.4557
	Under 20 years	.18981	.20405	.789	-.3378	.7174
Over 31 years	21–25	-.10538	.19165	.947	-.6009	.3902
	26–30	.12731	.22547	.942	-.4557	.7103

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 5. Results of the regression analysis with exhaustion as dependent variable.

Variables		Coefficients		
Independent	Dependent	β	t	P
Academic mobbing	Exhaustion	.160*	2.321	.021
Non-academic mobbing		.217**	3.149	.002
$R = .331$; $R^2 = .110$; Adjusted $R^2 = .103$; $F = 16.221$ $P = .000$				

Standardized beta values were used, *$p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 6. Results of the regression analysis with cynicism as dependent variable.

Variables		Coefficients		
Independent	Dependent	β	t	P
Academic mobbing	Cynicism	.096	1.414	.158
Non-academic mobbing		.308**	4.544	.000
R = .369; R^2 = .136; Adjusted R^2 = .129; F = 20.705 P = .000				

Standardized beta values were used, ** p < 0.01.

Table 7. Results of the regression analysis with efficacy as dependent variable.

Variables		Coefficients		
Independent	Dependent	β	t	P
Academic mobbing	Efficacy	.037	.532	.595
Non-academic mobbing		-.332**	-4.796	.000
R = .314; R^2 = .099; Adjusted R^2 = .092; F = P = .000				

Standardized beta values were used, ** p < 0.01.

DISCUSSION

The findings of our study showed that instructor-induced mobbing behaviors increased students' burnout levels. Other previous studies have reported similar results. In studies conducted in the higher education environment, Yildiz (2020) found a significant and positive relationship between mobbing and burnout on undergraduate students. Similarly, Goodboy et al. (2015) found a significant and positive relationship between mobbing and burnout on graduate students. The findings of both studies are similar to our study. Further, in our study, a significant difference was found only in the mobbing variable when comparing mobbing and burnout variables by gender. Accordingly, men's mobbing perception was higher than in women. The perception of women being exposed to less mobbing may be due to the fact that trainers are more careful and sensitive in their behavior towards women. In addition, a significant difference was found only in the mobbing variable when comparing mobbing and burnout variables by age. Only the significant difference from age groups was found between "under 20 years old" and "21-25 years old". Accordingly, it can be said that the mobbing behavior of educators intensifies in "21-25 years old".

In addition to other work, in our study, the relationships between the dimensions of mobbing and the dimensions of burnout were examined. Both academic and non-academic mobbing contributed significantly to student burnout. Therefore, it is possible for students exposed to mobbing behavior to experience energy deficiency due to exhaustion of emotional resources due to fatigue and stress. On the other hand, the cynicism variable, which is the sub-dimension of burnout, was significantly and positively affected by non-academic mobbing, while the efficacy variable was significantly and negatively affected

by non-academic mobbing. Therefore, it can be observed that students who are exposed to non-academic mobbing are both distant and indifferent to lessons, and their personal success decreases.

The literature emphasizes that burnout from mobbing creates serious problems for students (Goodboy et al. 2015). Studies report that students experiencing burnout experience the following problems: decreased interest and seriousness towards lessons, decreased social participation, alienation towards school, and absence of belonging (Cooke et al., 1995; Daugherty & Lane, 1999). Lewis (2004) states that the education process of students may be interrupted if mobbing behaviors occur in an educational institution at any level. Nielsen and Einarsen (2012) emphasize that burnout from mobbing will have a devastating effect on students. Students who are unable to meet the workload they face due to negative situations caused by excessive demands such as homework, projects, etc. from their instructors are likely to fail in the classroom, especially if they do not eliminate the effects of mobbing.

Conclusion

The result of this study clearly showed that mobbing is an effective phenomenon on students' burnout. Mobbing and burnout are among the important issues to be considered by school administrations. An effective dialogue mechanism should be developed to investigate whether students are exposed to mobbing. It can be said that the student exposed to mobbing by the instructor in the educational environment is in a way vulnerable. Therefore, firstly the diagnosis of the situation and then the solutions must be determined by the school administrations. This context, students should be

provided with trainings that will raise awareness, and on the other hand, a message should be given to instructors who have mobbing behavior that this situation will not be welcomed well at any level. Information, psychological, and social support should be provided for students who experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a decrease in success. Thus, the individual achievements of the students will increase thanks to the reduced burnout.

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