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The Digitization of Harassment: How It Affects Turkish Female Journalists?

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ABSTRACT

Online harassment, is a real problem in daily life with offline effects. While harassment is not a new phenomenon in journalism, it continues to increase in intensity every day and is predominantly digital. Today, online harassment, especially against female journalists, has become a global threat to press freedom. This study, which adopts a qualitative research method, aims to analyze the online harassment experiences of 25 female journalists through in-depth interviews. According to the findings of the research, online harassment negatively affects Turkish female journalists. Female journalists face difficulties in both their professional and social lives. Due to online harassment, female journalists feel anxious when choosing news topics and sometimes practice self-censorship. Furthermore, female journalists receive threats of assault, rape, and death, and sometimes these threats extend to family members. This causes female journalists to feel fear and anxiety in their daily routines. Moreover, the normalization of online harassment by some female journalists may bring with it a risk factor that reduces awareness of online harassment.

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Introduction

Technological innovations have also led to the digitalization of harassment, perhaps making it easier than ever before in history. Especially journalists with high social status and who are visible on the screen are exposed to online harassment intensely. There are studies in the literature showing that especially female journalists are more easily and intensely exposed to online harassment.

In general terms, harassment can be defined as “interpersonal behavior that intentionally aims to harm another person”. At its most extreme, harassment can include physical assault and even murder, but more common, minor examples include obscene gestures, dirty looks, threats, shouting, silence and belittling (Bowling and Beehr 2006, 998). In the private setting of the workplace, harassment can range from “verbal threats, ridicule and name-calling to belittling an individual or subjecting them to false accusations or rumors” (Deery, Walsh, and Guest 2011, 744). Online harassment is defined as unwanted contact initiated through digital means that creates an intimidating and hostile environment for victims through direct harassment, invasion of privacy and/or denial of access (Lenhart,

Ybarra, and Price-Feeney 2016). Goyal, Park, and Vasserman (2022) define online harassment as the use of language by an individual/group of perpetrators targeting an individual and causing the target to participate less in online conversations. Online threats and criticisms, which are almost the opposite of physical and corrosive face-to-face harassment, can be just as harmful, although they are not physical or face-to-face. Baloğlu (2023a) argues that the widespread use of the Internet and the increase in interaction on popular social media platforms have led to an increase in online harassment incidents and sexist attitudes and sexual harassment, especially against women, have become a more common problem. Thus, online harassment has taken its place in the literature as an emerging social problem with the widespread use of online internet worldwide and the ease of communicating with people.

The public and sometimes “controversial” nature of journalists’ profession leads to a high propensity to face online harassment (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019; Chen et al. 2020; Holton et al. 2023; Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020; Obermaier 2023). Both online harassment and the resulting coping strategies affect journalistic routines and have broader implications for journalists’ mental health and routines (Shah et al. 2024).

Different studies in the literature show an increase in online and offline harassment of journalists by the audiences they serve. Harassment is often based on group characteristics such as occupation, religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or politics and is particularly prevalent among female journalists (Chen, Pain, and Zhang 2018; Edström 2016; Koirala 2020; Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016; Luqiu 2022; Miller and Lewis 2022). This situation leads to direct and indirect forms of violence preventing the practice of journalism, creating a deterrent effect on journalists and ultimately limiting press freedom and the right to information (Brambila and Hughes 2019).

This article reports the results of an in-depth study on online harassment experienced by female journalists in Türkiye. By focusing on the Turkish context, the study aims to contribute to research on the wider implications of online harassment of female journalists internationally. Based on in-depth interviews with 25 female journalists, it finds that online harassment is alarmingly prevalent in Türkiye and has alarming consequences.

Online Harassment of Female Journalist

Online harassment has become the new frontline of journalistic safety, with female journalists at the center of the risk (Posetti et al. 2021). Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington (2020, 1047) found that online harassment of journalists disproportionately affects young women and those who are more personally visible in the news, and that “women face a greater burden in deciding whether and how to respond to online harassment”. Based on this finding, this study focuses on the online harassment faced by female journalists.

Journalists may face multiple forms of harassment. Harassers contact journalists directly via work phone, personal e-mail or social media channels. Harassment can also extend to public spaces where journalists are verbally attacked or stalked or otherwise aggressively approached. Harassment is often personal and includes veiled (e.g., warnings about walking alone at night) or explicit threats of violence (e.g., death threats) (Kantola and Harju 2023).

Female journalists face more inequality and harassment than their male colleagues (Antunovic 2019; Harris, Mosdell, and Griffiths 2016; Holton et al. 2023; Jane 2014; Kantola and Harju 2023; Lee and Park 2024; Miller 2023; North 2016a, 2016b; Sarikakis et al. 2023). Especially in online environments, women face more security issues than men (Gever et al. 2023). Male journalists also receive harassing messages, but those directed at females tend to be more malicious and personal. This is because there is a widespread tendency to focus more on females' gender, while males are harassed more for their opinions or professional shortcomings (Binns 2017; Li et al. 2025). Thus, female journalists described more aggressive and serious forms of harassment, sometimes lasting months or even years (Kantola and Harju 2023).

Online harassment targeting women is inherently different from harassment targeting men; while men are harassed because of their political views, women are often harassed because of their gender (Baloğlu 2023a; Vogels 2021). Female journalists are often subjected to the most severe forms of online harassment, including "rape threats, death threats and hate speech" (Ferrier and Garud-Patkar 2018, 323; Oreoluwa et al. 2024).

Digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook Live have become a haven where attackers can remain anonymous and form online "smart mobs", "troll farms" to attack women, people of color and traditionally marginalized groups with criticism, taunts and inflammatory messages (Ferrier and Garud-Patkar 2018, 317; Kinoshian 2022). Indeed, the rise of mob censorship can be largely attributed to the rise of digital media platforms that allow citizens to access journalists more easily than ever before (Waisbord 2020). On the other hand, with the ubiquity of digital networks today, media workers are increasingly positioning themselves in the public sphere in ways that were not possible in previous media eras (Siapera 2019).

Online harassment negatively affects journalists. Ferrier and Garud-Patkar (2018) explicitly mention the chilling effect of online harassment. They note widespread effects such as avoiding online content, reducing media content production, and even withdrawing from reporting, social media or other work-related endeavors altogether. As described by interviewees in another study, the effects of this harassment are felt in their personal lives: It leads to mental fatigue, self-doubt, getting used to it and taking additional security measures in one's personal life (Le Vu Phung 2020). Female journalists who are attacked often find it difficult to follow certain stories and as a result reduce their online visibility, withdraw from online interaction with audiences and even quit their jobs (Ferrier 2018).

Based on 22 interviews with Finnish journalists, Kantola and Harju (2023) identify elements that can be effective in combating harassment and propose three categories of solutions: the supportive bond between journalist and editor, shared collegial practices between colleagues in newsrooms, and emotional bonding between colleagues outside the newsroom. According to Kantola and Harju, all three categories illustrate how journalists as a community of practice develop new practices through dynamic processes of innovation, improvisation, trial and error, mutual learning and mutual participation. Importantly, emotional labor is an important dimension of these practices as journalists collectively address and overcome the emotional effects of harassment.

This research examines how female journalists perceive the consequences of online harassment on their personal and professional lives and the various coping mechanisms

they use to overcome online harassment in Türkiye, where violence and intimidation against reporters is already widespread.

Main Problems Experienced by Female Journalists in the Turkish Media Sector

Women in Türkiye are subjected to gender-based discrimination in many areas of social life (UNDP 2017). According to the World Economic Forum's Gender Inequality Report, Türkiye ranks 127th out of 146 countries in terms of gender equality (WEF 2024). One of the business sectors where women experience gender inequality the most is the media (CEİD 2020; TGC 2016).

Data on gender distribution and working conditions in the media sector in Türkiye reveal serious inequalities between male and female employes (İçten and Erduran 2020). Challenges faced by female journalists in the media industry include sexual harassment, glass ceiling, discrimination and mobbing, lack of legal rights, wage inequality, struggle against male language in newsrooms, and peer bullying (Melek 2024).

When we look at the Turkish media structure in general, male hegemony stands out. In the research conducted, it is noteworthy that women are featured less than men in the imprints of media organizations (Tanrıöver 2000). Although years have passed, a similar result was found in another study. Nineteen percent of newspaper mastheads are composed of women, while 81 percent are composed of men. When the editorial directors of 30 national newspapers are analyzed, it is seen that only 3 of them have female managers (Tahaoğlu 2014). Again, in a study conducted in 21 national newspapers, it was concluded that 14 percent of their employes were women and 86 percent were men (Sarışın 2020). This situation shows that female journalists are not sufficiently involved in decision-making positions in Turkish media. This is because female journalists are prevented from climbing the career ladder through promotion (Tanrıöver, Vitrinel, and Sözeri 2009). Dursun (2018) also conducted interviews with more than 120 female journalists working in local and national television channels and found that gender-based discrimination and inequalities are prevalent in newsrooms. Especially in political discussion programs, women stand at the anchor/moderator desks while men sit in the guest seats. In these programs, the lower the ratio of female guests compared to men, the higher the ratio of female anchors/moderators. Twenty of the 27 news discussion programs followed during this two-week period were hosted by women, while the remaining seven were hosted by men (Ertuna 2018).

Another problem is that female journalists are paid less than their male colleagues. The main reason for this is that their male colleagues do not see them as female journalists but as women-journalists (Tekvar 2016). In addition, female journalists are subjected to discrimination in the media sector directly because of their gender (Özdemir 2024). In general, the employment rate of women in the Turkish media lags far behind that of men. The fact that working women are paid less than their male counterparts is a serious problem. In addition, the rate and frequency of women's participation as experts in the media also lags behind men.

Genç (2014) argues that female journalists are pushed out of the public sphere by political institutions and government officials with influence in the media. One of the first examples of this is Sabiha Sertel. Sabiha Sertel is among the first Turkish female journalists

to be arrested and exiled for her politically-oriented publications (Sertel 2019). Similar situations occurred in subsequent years. For instance, in 2008, many journalists were arrested for their political writings as part of the Ergenekon investigations (Martin 2020). It is also known that female journalists are being pushed out of the profession by newspaper editors and opinion leaders (Genç 2014). This situation reveals patriarchal newsroom hierarchies. “Sexist jokes, swearing, boys’ club rituals, and even privileged spatial uses of the newsroom are the primary masculine indicators of the hegemonic newsroom culture that led women to develop a number of bargaining mechanisms” (Alankus 2024, 2789).

Another problem faced by female journalists is online harassment. Female journalists are frequently subjected to gender-based physical, sexual, economic and digital violence (İçten and Erduran 2020). Especially online harassment continues to increase day by day. Ceylan Yeğinsu, the New York Times correspondent in Türkiye, received numerous death threats via email and Twitter messages on the day she was labeled a traitor by some newspapers (Genç 2014). Demir and Ayhan (2022) found that female sports journalists in Türkiye are frequently subjected to online harassment on Twitter. Similarly, Baloğlu (2023b) found that Turkish women political journalists are subjected to online harassment on Twitter. This research, on the other hand, aims to reveal the reflections of online harassment at the local and national scale based on direct interviews with female journalists.

Methodology

In the study, online harassment is generally defined as unwanted behaviors of a sexual, abusive, sexist and offensive nature. It was found that female journalists are subjected to online harassment through their personal social media accounts, the sites where they publish content, e-mail and other means of communication.

This research paper explores the following research questions:

RQ1: How do female journalists perceive the personal and professional consequences of online harassment for them?

RQ2: How do female journalists interpret and make sense of the online harassment they experience?

RQ3: What emotional reactions do female journalists have when they experience online harassment from viewers, readers or strangers?

RQ4: What personal coping strategies do female journalists use to deal with online harassment against them?

In short, the study asks why female journalists think online harassment occurs, whether they believe it affects them, and if so, what they usually do to respond or protect themselves. This study therefore explores the causes and experiences of online harassment through interviews with twenty-five female journalists in Türkiye about online harassment in their work routines.

This study adopted a qualitative research design, and data collection was conducted using a semi-structured interview technique. Despite predefined questions, the semi-structured approach allowed participants to develop key points and interviewers to follow specific questions. Therefore, open-ended questions were asked to the

participants. Open-ended questions are structured without predetermining which emotional, cognitive, or experiential dimension the participant will highlight and without directing the response process. Such questions allow the interviewee to select and express the themes that are most meaningful to them from a possible repertoire of responses. In the context of qualitative research, the fundamental aim of this approach is to reveal which conceptual dimensions, thematic frameworks, and images individuals prefer in their own linguistic repertoire to describe their experiences, feelings, and thoughts (Patton 2002).

To investigate these questions, a broad list was compiled by looking at news sites related to female journalists working in media organizations. The snowball sampling method was used to find reporters from rural and urban areas in order to benefit from their different experiences and working environments. This sample made it easier for female journalists to reach female journalists at other media organizations. The participants were verified by looking at their profile information on social media networks and through the news stories they produced on relevant news sites. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 female journalists working in various regions of Türkiye for this study (Table 1).

The 25 female journalists interviewed were coded using a numerical system. Thirteen of the participants work as national journalists, seven as local journalists, and five as freelance journalists. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and online. Participants were asked 9 questions; the shortest interview lasted 50 min and the longest lasted 94 min. The interviews lasted an average of 68 min. The online interviews were recorded. In the face-to-face interviews, audio recordings were made with the participants' permission. The statements of journalists who did not want audio recordings were noted

Table 1. Detailed information about the participants.

Journalists	Age	Interview	Time	Date	Employment Status
Journalist 1	34	Face to face	67 min	11.12.2023	National Media
Journalist 2	29	Online	74 min	14.12.2023	National Media
Journalist 3	38	Online	61 min	16.12.2023	Freelance
Journalist 4	27	Online	50 min	18.12.2023	National Media
Journalist 5	23	Online	60 min	18.12.2023	National Media
Journalist 6	43	Face to face	94 min	24.12.2023	Freelance
Journalist 7	35	Online	70 min	26.12.2023	National Media
Journalist 8	28	Online	58 min	04.01.2024	Local Newspaper
Journalist 9	31	Online	63 min	05.01.2024	Freelance
Journalist 10	26	Face to face	69 min	06.01.2024	Local Newspaper
Journalist 11	24	Face to face	65 min	15.01.2024	Local Newspaper
Journalist 12	33	Online	75 min	18.01.2024	National Media
Journalist 13	26	Face to face	64 min	20.01.2024	Local Newspaper
Journalist 14	38	Online	81 min	21.01.2024	Freelance
Journalist 15	39	Online	69 min	22.01.2024	National Media
Journalist 16	26	Online	75 min	24.01.2024	Freelance
Journalist 17	24	Face to face	59 min	26.01.2024	National Media
Journalist 18	30	Face to face	76 min	29.01.2024	Local Newspaper
Journalist 19	30	Face to face	66 min	03.02.2024	National Media
Journalist 20	41	Online	72 min	06.02.2024	National Media
Journalist 21	36	Face to face	65 min	08.02.2024	National Media
Journalist 22	35	Face to face	74 min	14.02.2024	Local Newspaper
Journalist 23	38	Online	58 min	16.02.2024	National Media
Journalist 24	26	Face to face	62 min	17.02.2024	Local Newspaper
Journalist 25	24	Online	73 min	18.02.2024	National Media

during the interview. All interviews were transferred to Word files. Striking statements by participants were included as direct quotations. The statements of participants expressing a common view were grouped into a single paragraph. This was done to highlight the views and issues on which there was agreement.

Participants' names and organizations were kept anonymous. In this way, it was both guaranteed that the participants expressed themselves more comfortably and prevented them from encountering a new problem due to their explanations. The youngest participant is 23 years old, and the most experienced participant is 43 years old. The participants' professional experience ranged from 1 year to 15 years or more in journalism. The transcripts were reviewed several times and 5 sub-themes were identified in the light of key concepts. Two academics in the field of journalism supported the identification of these themes. In addition, a peer debriefing of the themes was conducted with an expert in the field of communication.

Findings and Discussion

Reflection of Online Harassment on Social Life

Online harassment reinforces patriarchal norms and manifests as violence and misogyny in offline environments. In this sense, online harassment reinforces misogynistic reactions and places female journalists in the position of victims and victimizers. Therefore, female journalists are also the targets of physical harassment and attacks related to online harassment. For this reason, the first theme to be explored in this study was the impact of online harassment on the social life of journalists. According to Baloch et al. (2024), all journalists face risks and challenges when expressing their views on controversial issues such as security, law and order, corruption, counter-terrorism, foreign policy, disputes between political parties, and criticism of institutions. For instance, *Journalist 4: I was threatened by the perpetrator because of a story I did on violence against women. Journalist 12: The moment I report on refugees, I am threatened in a horrible way, I hear unspeakable swear words. Sometimes I think, "Will they find my home address and come and rape me?"*

Journalist 9: rape threats have increased recently. My cell phone number was shared on some social media platforms. Sharing my number, especially on a platform used for "dating", led to an increase in sexually explicit messages. A similar situation was also found in the research conducted by Lee and Park (2024) and it was determined that journalists' private information was shared online. Again, in the study conducted by Bhat (2024), a female journalist mentioned that she was called a "prostitute" after she shared the phone numbers of her opponents on social media due to her political reporting.

Journalists 2, 3, 5, 7, 14, 19, and 22 pointed out that they were subjected to intense harassment, threats, and insults on social media platforms because of their sexual identities, physical appearances, ideological views, and professional identities. They have been confronted with sexually explicit messages, fantasies about physical characteristics, racist and sexist rhetoric, profanity, and ideological targeting.

It is noteworthy that female journalists are targeted both because of the news they report and because of their gender. Female journalists are subjected to multi-layered

threats and targeting practices not only because of their news content but also because of their gender identity. This situation emerges as a result of gender-based hate speech that has become increasingly widespread in digital media. According to the statements of the participants, attacks against female journalists are often not only individualized, but also structural and systemic in nature, shaped by the intersection of gender, class, ethnicity and ideological orientation. This shows that female journalists are subjected to online harassment for many reasons.

As in other studies, this study finds that physical threats against journalists are on the rise (Bhat and Chadha 2023; Hanusch et al. 2024). Reflecting on the impact of online harassment on their personal lives, reporters have reported feeling unmotivated, indecisive, helpless and insecure, particularly because their private information is so easily circulated (Bhat 2024). For many, social media networks have become a medium for interacting with journalists in the worst possible way, removing the boundaries of online harassment. It is important to understand how dangerous online harassment is and what happens online has consequences in offline life. Similarly, Kamran's (2019) study found that widespread online harassment, bullying and threats of violence against female journalists lead to significant stress and negative psychological effects. Thus, online harassment increases female journalists' anxiety levels and negatively affects their emotional well-being (Celuch et al. 2023; Oreoluwa et al. 2024). Another division, which is quite evident in this study as well as in others, points to digital patriarchy in its most oppressive and abusive form (Siddiqua, Gong, and Aksar 2023).

Threat to Relatives of Female Journalists

Attacks on journalists have become more normalized as those who are uncomfortable with their reporting use social media, bots and "troll farms" to conduct harassment campaigns (Erkmen, Ataman, and Çoban 2023; Kinosian 2022). Scholars have described these digital attacks by organized teams as "mob censorship" aimed at silencing professional journalists (Waisbord 2020). This trend is particularly prevalent after reporting on women's rights, violence against women, and refugees.

Journalist 5: Accounts that initially threatened female journalists directly have now begun to do so simultaneously without being hidden. Naturally, such threats are not limited to me, but also extend to family members. Similarly, Journalist 25: It is worrying that my children, who use social media, can access comments and posts about me from their accounts. Family members are concerned about my safety and theirs. Journalist 9 also emphasizes that he conveyed his feelings of helplessness and insecurity to his family members.

Whether physical or digital, harassment in the field that extends to their private lives makes female journalists feel unsafe. Stalking, insults, etc., often by unknown persons, make female journalists feel threatened not only in their daily activities but also when they go home. Threats to family members also cause extra concern for female journalists. There is both pressure on the relatives of women journalists and the danger of family members becoming a tool of pressure for women journalists. In this situation, female journalists have to think about their families along with themselves. This is because it shows that digital violence creates not only individual but also family and social trauma. As a result, when female journalists are threatened because of the news they report, it

harms freedom of the press. As a result of all these situations, it becomes clear that female journalists cannot practice their profession freely and comfortably.

Female journalists are subjected to rape and death threats, public shaming, stalking, doxing and reputation assassination, especially when reporting on women's rights and political actors. As in other studies, female journalists are not safe either while gathering news or at work (Erkmen, Ataman, and Çoban 2023; Li et al. 2025; Posetti et al. 2021).

Declaring Female Journalists as Provocateurs

Female journalists are subjected to different forms of gender-based insecurity, including discrimination and sexual harassment in news gathering and production (Deavours et al. 2023; Phuong 2021; Sampaio-Dias et al. 2024; Westlund, Krøvel, and Skare Orgeret 2022). Therefore, journalists reporting on politics and gender issues face the most intense hateful reactions on social media networks.

Journalist 6 points out that he was labeled a "provocateur" for reporting on refugees, while Journalist 4 states that he was accused of being a "triggerman" by political figures when he reported on politicians. Both journalists say they have been subjected to a great deal of abuse, particularly on social media networks. Journalist 22 points out that she works for a local organization. *Journalist 22: I think where you work or the province you work in is important because there is a conflict of interest between the institution you work for and political parties, so when problems arise, you do not get enough support.*

Especially female journalists who are harassed for their reporting on political actors and political issues may question themselves due to the problems they experience and may involuntarily tend to change the way they report news. This situation harms the press's mission of being the fourth power. In this context, the public responsibility of journalists also takes a back seat.

Journalist 3 stated that she was easily targeted by certain circles because she was a female journalist, while Journalist 7 stated that her use of the words "woman" and "alimony" was sufficient grounds for her to be lynched. The statements of Journalist 3 and Journalist 7 make visible the gender-based violence and discrimination experienced by female journalists. The fact that female journalists are targeted both on the basis of their gender and the issues they cover (for example, issues that question the gender regime such as "alimony") shows that gender-based violence is a serious problem in Türkiye. The devaluation of female journalists' professional identities by "covering" them with their identities as women points to the continuation of the sexist domination of women.

Journalist 1: I was subjected to insults and threats such as "I hope Syrians rape you" because of a post I made about Syrians. The threat expressed by the journalist shows both the extent of anti-immigrant hate speech and how the social lynch culture is directed against journalists. What is noteworthy here is the gender-based form of threat used as a result of a post on Syrians. This threat reflects not only the practice of journalism but also the tendency to send messages by turning the female body into an instrument of violence. Such expressions are examples of both hate crimes and digital violence.

The fact that female journalists are not only labeled as provocateurs but also subjected to sexual threats indicates a very dangerous situation. It is seen that discriminatory language against female journalists comes to the fore in digital networks in the form of

misogyny. Bulut and Can (2024) associate this situation with the online manosphere. Baloğlu (2023c) also found that misogynistic discourses are constructed on Twitter. Therefore, discriminatory language and hate speech against female journalists are becoming widespread. Social media users feel free to use such expressions and this is a continuation of what is happening for women on the streets and around the world. Therefore, it is noteworthy that the problems in society are a continuation of what is happening in journalism and digital media.

It is observed that female journalists are insulted, threatened and labeled as reputation assassins by politicians and certain segments of society due to their reporting on politics and gender issues. The practice of “othering” not through the content of the news, but through the identity of the journalist or the subject of the news weakens the function of the media and promotes self-censorship. For all these reasons, as seen in other studies, female journalists may refrain from reporting on related issues (Sammut, Bezzina, and Scerri 2024; Sampaio-Dias et al. 2024; Sapkota 2024; Zviyita and Mare 2024).

Is the Situation Different for Freelance Journalists?

Unfortunately, freelance journalists are more likely to face harassment because they lack the security of an organization. According to the results of a study conducted by Harris, Mosdell, and Griffiths (2016), female freelance journalists are more likely to be subjected to sexual harassment. Institutional structures can provide journalists with protective mechanisms such as legal support, security protocols and psychological counseling. Freelancers are in a more vulnerable position as they lack these institutional “shields”.

Journalists 2, 5, 14, 16, and 22 stated that whether female journalists work for an institution or freelance creates significant differences in terms of the protection and support mechanisms they have against digital violence. Journalists working within an institutional structure have more opportunities to respond to and hold accountable cases of harassment and threats, while freelancers are more vulnerable in this regard. Although some journalists indicate that they receive support from professional organizations and independent media outlets even when working freelance, in general, greater support for those working in large media organizations ensures that the attacks they face are stopped more quickly. The support of international platforms, in particular, offers these journalists both security and psychological comfort.

The fact that female journalists working for national and international news organizations feel more secure indicates a lack of security for local and freelance journalists. Freelance female journalists feel more insecure. It is pointed out that since they are not affiliated with a media organization, they are left alone for support and assistance in case of need. This situation harms alternative journalism. Therefore, strengthening the organizational capacity of freelance journalists and institutionalizing their support networks is necessary for the construction of a fairer and safer working environment in the media. Erkmen, Ataman, and Çoban (2023) also draw attention to the security problems of female journalists working for alternative media.

In the large newsrooms of mainstream channels, where female representation is much better than in smaller channels, female reporters and desk workers feel safe. However, it is undeniable that gender-based exclusion, discrimination and harassment have negative intersectional effects on many aspects of their lives (professional personal psychological).

As revealed in this study, it is also noteworthy that female journalists who freelance or work for news organizations lack institutional resources and as a result are left on their own and do not have access to support networks and mechanisms (Moore and Ramsay 2021). As noted in a similar study, many freelance female journalists also experience sexual harassment, but many are afraid to report it for fear of retaliation (Harris, Mosdell, and Griffiths 2016).

Does Online Harassment Lead to Self-Censorship?

The institutionalization of social media for reporting has made it imperative for even local journalists to maintain an online presence, as more emphasis is placed on user interaction. To manage this expectation from their institutions without coming under attack, journalists often practice “strategic retreat” and avoid publishing stories that might anger online trolls or frame conflict-prone topics differently (Binns 2017; Waisbord 2020). As most journalists develop individualized strategies to minimize the likelihood of harassment, they often respond by changing their news selection or avoiding controversial stories. Indeed, self-censorship, which has long been a journalistic response to avoid offline consequences such as violence, is also used to prevent social media violence (Bhat 2024). In this case, it is clear that online harassment has become a daily threat to journalists’ freedom of expression (Carlsson and Pöyhtäri 2017; Chen and Pain 2017).

For Journalist 1 and Journalist 21, increasing exposure to violence online reflects broader social issues:

Journalist 1: I can probably say at most half of what I want to say, because when you express an opinion that goes against the prevailing beliefs of the society at large, you become a direct target. This is actually a social problem ...

Journalist 21: I know the codes of the society and I produce news accordingly. In other words, I necessarily practice self-censorship while producing my news. Having to produce news in accordance with the society actually points to a social problem. Larsen, Fadnes, and Krovel (2020, 197) observed that “journalists avoid certain topics”. Therefore, as noted in other studies, female journalists practice self-censorship by changing news topics (Sammut, Bezzina, and Scerri 2024; Sampaio-Dias et al. 2024; Zviyita and Mare 2024). For instance, *Journalist 24: People who threaten me can come to my door. Therefore, if someone gets angry at the news I share on social media, I delete them immediately.* Female journalists are greatly demoralized by these pressures. In order to avoid harassment, female journalists tend to focus on less risky and less controversial topics, narrowing the space for their free expression. The self-censorship practices of female journalists undermine freedom of expression, but they also undermine press freedom and undermine democracy. When female journalists feel under pressure and prefer to remain silent, this harms pluralism. Naturally, discrimination against women and masculine language becomes widespread. The silencing of female journalists is a digital reflection of sexist violence.

Faced with constant online harassment, journalists may avoid writing about certain controversial topics, resulting in the marginalization of that topic in society and thus informal censorship (Lee and Park 2024). As many journalists develop individual strategies to minimize the possibility of harassment, they often respond by changing their news selection or avoiding controversial stories. Indeed, self-censorship, which has long been a

journalistic response to avoid offline consequences such as violence, is also used to prevent social media violence (Bhat 2024). As revealed in this study, many studies show that digital violence disrupts journalists' routines, affects their emotional and physical well-being, and often leads to cynicism, anger, fear, burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and professional disengagement (Kim and Shin 2022).

Analysis of interviews with news reporters showed that the main response to online trolling and abuse was strategic social media disconnection. Journalists who have experienced digital harassment have found that strategic disconnection from social media, also known as "digital minimalism" (Newport 2019), is an effective way to manage their emotional reactions to hateful comments. To clarify, strategically disconnecting does not mean abandoning social media altogether. Journalists have explained that it involves deliberately avoiding certain social media interactions to avoid negative confrontations with followers. These steps include minimizing interactions, muting and blocking abusive trolls, limiting who can respond or comment on their posts, avoiding reading comments, and sometimes taking a short break from social media for a few days (Bhat 2024). Therefore, journalists' deliberate limitation of their social media interactions stands out as a protection mechanism against digital violence and toxic content. Such practices can be considered within the scope of journalists' individual coping strategies to maintain their psychological resilience in the digital environment and to sustain their professional functioning.

Conclusion

While journalists in many parts of the world face online harassment, it is known that female journalists face it more often. According to a study by Barton and Storm, two-thirds of women working in the media reported being subjected to "intimidation, threats and abuse" in the course of their work, and more than 20 percent reported being physically harmed (Barton and Storm 2014). In Türkiye, female journalists have become the primary targets of cyberbullying and online harassment on digital platforms and there are concerns about their physical safety and mental health. Female journalists in Türkiye are at a disadvantage in terms of prestige and earnings compared to their male counterparts and have to constantly protect themselves from sexual harassment, especially when they are "young and single". Online harassment against female journalists often takes the form of hate speech and insults with a patriarchal and misogynistic tone (Baloğlu 2023b; Demir and Ayhan 2022; Dinç 2019; İçten and Erduran 2020). This study reveals how serious a problem online harassment against female journalists in Türkiye is in light of the findings from primary sources. Drawing on twenty-five interviews and focusing on national cases, the findings of the study provide a comparison with international literature and contribute to reflecting the increasing victimization of female journalists by online harassment. Online harassment of journalists is underpinned by individual sexist beliefs as well as patriarchal social norms that render women's voices and perspectives unheard.

Female journalists report remarkable cases and the results show that their safety is inadequate. It is noteworthy that online harassment contributes to its far-reaching impact on their personal and professional lives. Another finding of the research is that female journalists in Türkiye receive threats of assault, rape and even death for their

reporting. This makes female journalists feel fearful and uneasy in their daily routines (RQ3). Overall, online harassment of female journalists is considered to be an empirical manifestation of a patriarchal power structure that perpetuates gendered hierarchies. The findings also show that female journalists are unsure how best to respond to such violence and manage its effects. They feel vulnerable and unsupported, facing problems alone or normalizing them in the context of accepting other structural inequalities (Sampaio-Dias et al. 2024). Journalist 7: “I think I’ve taken online violence for granted” is the main concern of the study and reflects the “normalization” of certain online harassment behaviors and the intimidating effect they exert (RQ2). Although research has focused on different aspects, it has shown that online harassment disrupts the functioning of the media, causes emotional and psychological harm to reporters, prevents their active participation in public debates, and leads to reduced public visibility (Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020).

Threats against female journalists target not only them but also their family members and relatives. There is both pressure on the relatives of women journalists and the danger of family members becoming a tool of pressure for women journalists. Many interviewees reported facing abusive comments and online bullying when accessing the internet and social media to express their views on political issues, including current affairs, politics, human rights, legislation and security. The journalists’ responses also shed light on the lack of support or guidance provided by commercial media outlets in dealing with the hate faced by reporters.

Examining how Turkish female journalists perceive the personal and professional consequences of online harassment discourse (RQ1) revealed that relentless harassment triggers feelings of anger, demoralization, distraction and vulnerability among reporters. On the other hand, journalists working for commercial media outlets often have to overcome challenges on their own (RQ4), resulting in journalists blocking, ignoring, closing content for feedback and ultimately resorting to self-censorship (Barão da Silva, Sbaraini Fontes, and Marques 2023; Chen et al. 2020; Ferrier 2018; Koirala 2020; Walulya and Selnes 2023). This result is one of the most widespread of the current online threats to the press and points to a generalized attack on journalism. A growing body of literature shows that online harassment remains a pervasive threat of digital life and is spreading rapidly globally. It negatively affects journalists’ autonomy, professional and daily routines and psychology.

This research shows that the practice of journalism in Türkiye is under a multi-layered threat for female journalists. Dynamics such as political polarization, social lynch culture, gender-based violence and media-politics relations prevent journalists from practicing their profession safely and independently. Online harassment against female journalists is not just a matter of individual safety; it is the digital embodiment of gender inequality and threats to press freedom. Such attacks not only prevent female journalists from doing their jobs, but also undermine public access to accurate and unbiased information. In addition, the distancing of female journalists from the profession due to such negative effects further exacerbates the existing inequality in the number of female and male employees. In particular, it may cause women to approach the journalism profession more distantly. Under these conditions, it becomes difficult for female journalists to continue their profession. This leads to the profession becoming completely male-dominated

over time. This situation can only be prevented if media organizations take a more active role, digital platforms fulfill their responsibilities and social awareness increases.

In summary, according to the findings of the study, online harassment negatively affects Turkish female journalists. Female journalists face difficulties in both their professional and social lives. Due to online harassment, female journalists feel uneasy when choosing news topics and sometimes practice self-censorship. In addition, female journalists receive threats of assault, rape and death, and sometimes these threats are extended to family members. This causes female journalists to feel fear and uneasiness in their daily routines. Some female journalists embrace this online harassment and begin to perceive it as normal. Ultimately, online harassment leads to self-censorship, psychological distress, anxiety in daily life and harm to their professional routines. Online harassment prevents female journalists from actively participating in public debates and undermines their public visibility.

Digital platforms need to address and mitigate online issues. Therefore, it is essential that online platforms develop tools to prevent online harassment (Chadha et al. 2020; Goyal, Park, and Vasserman 2022; Oreoluwa et al. 2024). Media organizations should prioritize the well-being and safety of their employees and provide adequate support and resources. In this regard, female journalists should be provided with professional help and counseling by their institutions to deal with online harassment. On the other hand, the educational aspect of this work should not be forgotten and digital media literacy courses should be added to school curricula.

The study has some limitations. In this paper, the empirical focus on Türkiye could be a limitation. The research was conducted only on female journalists and was limited to 25 female journalists. Many female journalists stated that they did not want to participate in the research. The participating journalists also had concerns about their identities being revealed. The findings cannot be used to draw definitive conclusions about the entire sector or to cover all female journalists. Nevertheless, comprehensive insight was sought by including local, national, and independent journalists in the research.

Future research could explore how male and female journalists make sense of and respond to harassment experiences through field research. Interviews should be conducted with journalists, media managers and bosses, as well as politicians, regardless of gender, on how to prevent online harassment. It should also explore the extent to which they are aware of online harassment and what they are doing to protect working conditions and help journalists cope with trauma.

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