ALL OF A SUDDEN

Research on digital violence against
LGBTQI+ communities in Turkiye

KAOS GL
eşcinsellerin kurtuluşu
heteroseksüelleri de
özgürleştirecektir

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Table of contents

1.
Executive summary

All of a sudden, I found myself encountering a journalist whose existence was totally unknown to me until that moment, and the audience they mobilised. It was upon the advocacy and training activities I conducted, and the materials I produced, that this targeting started. It is a state of bafflement, full of panic, fearfulness and anxiety, apart from much anger. I was subject to harsh insults by the journalist who started this whole process of targeting and violence, and by the audience she invited to use the hateful discourse against me. In addition to insults, words such as "perverts, deviants, and paedophiles", the violent threats were intense in private messages and comments made under the posts I had shared before. These included threats of physical violence and sexual violence in particular. I cut my social media visibility for a while. Screenshots of the photos I once shared were taken before I protected my online accounts. These were also disseminated online. Then I got threatening phone calls. They also made the process extra hurtful for me. I felt like they were over my shoulders. I even wondered if I was safe at home.

These words are from our interview with an LGBTQI+ activist after they were subject to a smear campaign by a journalist who organised the homophobic campaign. She organised many Islamist groups, and this campaign even led to a court case against an NGO with which our interviewee was working off and on. The hate campaign started on Twitter but quickly spiralled into phone threats and an attempted physical attack.

The interviewee's phrasing, "all of a sudden", lent itself to name our research on digital violence against LGBTQI+ communities in Türkiye. The research, supported by the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN), seeks to expose the extent and effects of digital violence targeting LGBTQI+ communities in the country. To this end, we have used literature review, survey, in-depth interview and focus group interview methods together.

According to ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Trans and Intersex Association) Europe Rainbow Map and Index 2022[1], the umbrella organisation of more than 600 LGBTQI+ organisations from Europe and Central Asia, Türkiye is the second worst country in the region when it comes to LGBTQI+ rights.

The absence of legislation in Türkiye to prohibit discrimination against LGBTQI+ people and promote equality, leaves the community legally vulnerable in accessing basic human rights such as employment, access to goods and services, education, health, travel and freedom of settlement. State institutions established to ensure equality have no programmes or public policy regarding protection of LGBTQI+ communities.

Likewise, the lack of regulation of hate crimes that LGBTQI+ people are severely, systematically and constantly exposed to prevents them enjoying their basic human rights, including the right to life.

Since hate speech has been originating directly from public authorities in the last three years, hate crimes and discourse against LGBTQI+ communities by society and public officials have also increased systematically.

In civil society, the right to assembly and demonstration, and many collective activities and events for LGBTQI+ people, have been systematically and unlawfully prevented for many years, and new prohibitions put into effect despite the courts intervening in these unlawful practices. In this way, even if each ban on events is annulled, new ones take their place. Events cannot be organised until the court decides, so events are blocked, and a policy of intimidation is put into place.

So, when state authorities themselves orchestrate hate speeches and ban LGBTQI+ Pride Parades and events, what is the situation in online spaces? That was our main question, and through our research, we have witnessed that online spaces are two-sided mirrors that reflect hate and discrimination and cause more hatred in physical spaces.

In our research, we explored hate speech and crimes in the digital space as part of digital violence. However, we wanted to delve into hate speech and crimes separately because of the prevalence of both these acts of violence against the LGBTQI+ community.

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1   ILGA Europe. (2022). *Rainbow Map and Index 2022*. https://rainbow-europe.org/annual-review

In 2019 in Türkiye, a vast majority of the hate crimes triggered by homophobia and transphobia were committed in schools, homes and neighbourhoods, public transportation or stops, at the cafés and bars, and on the streets and other public places.[2] On average, each victim experienced violation of rights more than two times: 117 respondents cited 267 types of violation of rights. Generally, hate speech based on sexual orientation and sexual identity, and threats of excessive violence (torture) were accompanied by "more severe" violations. Physical violence was the second most frequent. In three of five cases, perpetrators consisted of two or more people. In 32 of 117 cases, there were more than three perpetrators. In a nutshell, it would not be an exaggeration to say that hate crimes targeting the LGBTQI+ community in Türkiye mostly manifest as lynching attempts.

The study showed us that the violence against LGBTQI+ individuals on the internet begins with insults and swearing. It escalates to threats, blackmail, harassment, persistent stalking, using names assigned at birth, sharing personal information and images without consent, restriction of internet access, and hate campaigns. The person is often subject to digital violence more than once. Targeting and hate campaigns that start all of a sudden become widespread very rapidly through the common involvement of perpetrators with diverse affiliations, acquiring a dimension that threatens even the physical safety of the target.

The most striking result of our research is that nine out of every 10 LGBTQI+ persons are subject to digital violence and they witness hate speech almost on a daily basis on the internet.

According to Türkiye Digital Violence Research by the Common Knowledge and Communication Association in 2021, one out of every five people in Türkiye is subject to digital violence.[3] Even though the methodology and the markers of the research differ from ours, they give us a sense of the scale of digital violence where sexual orientation and gender identity are involved. Our own results indicate that nine out of 10 LGBTQI+ persons are victims of digital violence. All in all, it is fair to say that digital violence rates increase when the victims belong to LGBTQI+ communities.

During the interviews and the survey, participants repeatedly described pro-government agencies as perpetrators. Those unfamiliar with the erosion of LGBTQI+ rights in Türkiye may find it surprising. However, since 2015, the government has a clear position on the matter: banning LGBTQI+ events, police attacks on Pride Marches and a defamation campaign targeting the LGBTQI+ community. The high rate and the characteristic of the digital violence can be interpreted as a reflection of government policies. The authorities' rhetoric translates to public policies that discriminate against LGBTQI+ communities.

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2   Kaos GL. (2019). *Hate Crimes Report*.
     https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/2020nefret-suclari-raporu-2019-kucuk.pdf
3   Common Knowledge and Communication Association. (2021). *Türkiye Digital Violence Research*.

During an in-depth interview, interviewee AAA (34), a bisexual, cis woman living in Ankara, explained how organised hate attacks led to her prosecution. The case she referred to was one of many hate-mongering campaigns targeting the LGBTQI+ community. April 23 is a national holiday in Türkiye dedicated to children. In 2020, LGBTQI+ people organised an online campaign to defend children's rights. They shared their childhood photos with empowering messages. The backlash was swift. Pro-government media and political actors started targeting LGBTQI+ people. In her own words, because she said "there are LGBTQI+ children", they labelled our interviewee as a "child abuser" and "pervert":

> Following my drawing named "LGBTQI+ children exist", I have been subject to explicit hate speech. There were overt threats. A citizen complained to the Presidency's Communication Centre (CİMER) about my drawing and I had to go to give a statement. The complaint included these sentences: "Whatever you do, remove this pervert person from the society, annihilate her", and the prosecutor's office considered this complaint as worthy to be investigated. Such a shame that the subject of the investigation is "child sexual abuse". This crime can only be brought as part of the investigation in cases of real sexual abuse in the Turkish Penal Code (TPC). It is very sad that my drawing and the artistic freedom of expression becomes worthy of investigation for this. In addition, several individuals and institutions who shared my drawing have also been investigated.

When asked about the perpetrators of violence on social media, 239 participants answered, "People unknown to me." Based on the responses to this question in which multiple answers were allowed, the perpetrators consist of troll accounts (160 cases), bot accounts (70 cases), friends (64 cases), someone from school (56 cases), partner or ex-partner (54), politicians (54 cases), journalists (41 cases), academics (30 cases), corporate accounts of media organisations (30 cases), corporate accounts of political parties (27 cases), social media influencers (26 cases), relatives (25 cases) and public administrators (22 cases). The reason we have allowed multiple answers stems is because in most cases, the perpetrators were more than one person and their identities were diverse.

These results can be interpreted as follows: the online perpetrators of violence against LGBTQI+ people are mostly unidentified. Similarly, the report prepared following a forum, Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence, stated that most of the digital violence is carried out by using anonymous accounts or accounts containing pseudonyms or fake names, thereby making it difficult to identify the perpetrators.[4]

In cases where the identity is known to the target, a significant percentage of the perpetrators consists of politicians, journalists and academics, and also people from their social circles such as friends, family and partners.

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4   IGF. (2015). *Internet Governance Forum-Best Practice Forum on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women.*

Participants' responses to our open-ended question, "Who were the groups organising the hate campaigns?" indicate the diversity of the perpetrators. Among the most recurring responses are: politicians affiliated with the ruling party, pro-government newspapers and journalists, political Islamists, ultra-nationalists, nationalists, right-wingers, religious communities, the minister of interior affairs and the Directorate of Religious Affairs. The responses reveal that, unlike digital violence in a general sense, in the case of hate speech and hate crimes, the perpetrators' identities and credentials are explicit and there is often a political motive. To wrap it up:

- Nine out of 10 LGBTQI+ persons are subject to digital violence.

- The violence they are subject to on the internet begins with insults and swearing. It escalates to threats, blackmail, harassment, persistent stalking, using names assigned at birth, sharing of personal information and images without consent, restriction of internet access and hate campaigns.

- A person is often subject to digital violence more than once.

- Digital violence and hate campaigns are not limited to the virtual environment; they escalate to physical and judicial violence against LGBTQI+ people.

- Perpetrators of violence against LGBTQI+ individuals on the internet are mostly anonymous. In cases where their identities are known, a significant percentage comprises people from the target's social circles such as friends, family and partners, as well as politicians, journalists and academics. The perpetrators can be broadly categorised as: political parties, politicians, media organisations, journalists, and academics.

- According to our research, digital violence against LGBTQI+ communities mostly occurs on Twitter and Instagram.

- Research findings also show that digital violence damages the mental health of LGBTQI+ people.

- To counter such digital violence, given their mistrust of current redressal mechanisms, the targets can do little but give up their own freedom of expression, resort to self-censorship, and close or protect their accounts.

- LGBTQI+ individuals witness hate speech almost on a daily basis on the internet. Consequently, they experience anger, unhappiness and feeling threatened and unsafe, leading to loneliness and loss of self-worth.

- Hate campaigns targeting LGBTQI+ organisations also create such feelings among LGBTQI+ people.

- Targeting and hate campaigns that start all of a sudden spread very rapidly through the common involvement of perpetrators with diverse affiliations, acquiring a dimension that threatens even the physical safety of the targeted persons.

- The most common reason cited for shutting down the social media accounts of LGBTQI+ persons is "Community Rules" while no explanation was provided for a third of account shutdowns.

2.
Theoretical framework and research methodology

This research was formulated to answer the following questions: what forms of discrimination and exclusion do LGBTQI+ people encounter because of social, economic and political changes driven by the internet; how do these digital violence practices (cyberbullying, disclosure of identity, hate speech, threats, etc.) affect the LGBTQI+ community; and what are the ways in which they are addressed or challenged by infrastructure we build, and the movements, spaces and networks that we occupy?

By asking these questions, we aim to understand the dynamics behind the digital violence practices and to measure their effects on the LGBTQI+ community in Türkiye. We aim to develop a fact-based report, and to use/refer it in related advocacy actions in order to raise awareness on digital gender-based violence (GBV) and to build a safe digital environment for whoever is exposed to GBV.

In this framework we define "gender" in line with Kaos GL's Gender Equality and Diversity policy paper as follows:

> The concept of gender is a very comprehensive concept with broad implications. It tells us that the experiences of "femininity" and "masculinity", defined at opposite poles (or opposites) from a cis-heteronormative and binary sexist perspective, are socially established and learned patterns. These patterns differ according to the place of residence, family situation, economic situation and such factors. Gender cannot simply be reduced to "women's issues", nor does it define the relations between men and women as mere oppression/oppression relations. On the contrary, it looks at all social relations in terms of gender relations, not just the relations between men and women. Gender is both an analytical category – it offers a way of thinking about how identities are constructed – and a political idea that deals with the distribution of power in society.

> Therefore, when we refer to gender-sensitive studies, we do not mean only "include women" and it is essential that various sexual orientation, gender identity, expression and characteristics are considered and discriminatory attitudes towards them are taken into account in these studies. Kaos GL Association refuses to deal with gender equality discussions over the duality of "women" and "men". It aims to operate a strategy that covers all gender identities or non-gender expressions outside of the binary gender understanding.[5]

Relying on this perspective, we used intersectional feminism as a standpoint from the lens of LGBTQI+ people in Türkiye to criticise the existing power relations in the research process. The reasons why we chose intersectionality are that (I) intersectionality allows us to account for the differences and unique experiences between individuals; (II) as a result of the diverse applicability of intersectionality, it has been embraced by various strands of feminist theory, providing a means of cooperation between scholars who have differing theoretical stances."[6]

The theory of intersectionality also holds that the expressions that lead to multiple forms of disadvantage often reinforce each other, thus strengthening systemic oppression. That means if religious prejudice exists in a society, factors such as social class, gender and ethnicity will further reinforce the system, leading to institutionalised oppression of religious minorities.[7]

In our perspective, we are also aware that we cannot talk about LGBTQI+ identities as a homogeneous group and there are many intersectionalities (people living with HIV, the elderly, the youth, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, etc.) within the community. This can be considered as the main reason why we chose to proceed with an intersectional perspective and taking people's unique experiences as a standpoint for our further studies and advocacy actions.

We know that the main reasons for the inequality, discrimination and oppression that LGBTQI+ people face are patriarchy, heteronormativity and the binary gender system. Besides, there are also cultural differences that impact the subjects in different ways as well as the influence of religion in countries like Türkiye. In this regard, those power structures and thought or belief systems will be problematised and questioned with feminism's critical perspective by using the following research methods to better analyse the dynamics behind the problematic social attitudes towards LGBTQI+ communities.

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5   https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/kaos-gl-toplumsal-cinsiyet-anlayis-i.pdf

6   Maj, J. (2013). *The Significance of Intersectionality for Feminist Political Theory*. https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/43895

7   Mohsin, M., & Nazir, S. (2021). *The Internal Outsiders: A Standpoint and Intersectional Perspective on Gender and Power in Organisations. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics*. https://ideas.repec.org/p/pid/wpaper/202110.html

Methodological choices

In our research, we wanted to reveal the dimensions and effects of digital violence LGBTQI+ people face. Because this topic is multi-dimensional and needs to be researched with a mixed-method, including qualitative and quantitative, we benefitted from literature review, online survey, semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group meetings with the stakeholders.

We, firstly, carried out a comprehensive literature review covering academic research and reports on digital GBV in both English and in Turkish publications. This literature review gave us insight about the gaps to be filled in the field, especially in Turkish literature, and the needs that such inclusive research face. After reviewing the literature on digital violence in both languages, and identifying the gaps, we created our survey content consisting of several question sets. While developing the scope and questions for the survey, we realised that we should not take a narrow view of digital violence. Recognising that LGBTQI+ communities are subject to a farrago of violence strategies, we created the survey questions to cover these strategies. In addition to the usual questions regarding digital violence examples, we added opt-in questions that would allow us to measure violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

What we learned from the literature review and its contributions to the research:

1. While conducting any research on digital violence, it is also necessary to carry out awareness studies on what digital violence is, what it covers, and what problems it creates in which areas. In this context, we produced a series of materials to be shared on social media during the research.

   The following questions are answered in these materials.

- What is digital violence?

- Why is digital space important?

- What do LGBTQI+ individuals encounter on the internet?

- An example of digital violence: as LGBTQI+ persons are criminalised, scammers target them more.

- Who are the perpetrators?

- Violence against LGBTQI+ people on the internet: sneaking in conspiracy theories into the narrative against them.

- Data security, algorithm censorship, hate speech, censorship.

- The effects of hate speech.

- Examples of solidarity against hatred and violence.

2. While creating the range and questions for the survey, we realised that we should not limit the concept of digital violence. Knowing that LGBTQI+ communities are exposed to violence other than the usual digital violence practices, we created survey questions to cover this. The survey was announced on Kaos GL's website and on social media channels on 17 July 2022, and more than 100 LGBTQI+ people participated in it in a single day. In our survey, some of the questions that differ from other survey studies are listed below.

* **In addition to the common questions in digital violence examples, options to measure violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity have been added.**

- I've been insulted.
- I was threatened.
- I was blackmailed.
- Threatened to reveal my sexual orientation, gender identity or characteristics.
- Blackmailed over my sexual orientation, gender identity or characteristics.
- I have received text, audio or video harassment messages.
- I was constantly followed by someone against my will (stalked).
- Fake account or accounts created in my name.
- My email or social media accounts have been hacked.
- My sexual orientation, gender identity or characteristics were shared on social media without my permission.
- My photos/videos were shared on social media without my permission.
- My photos in the dating app were shared on other media without my permission.
- My private images were shared on social media without my permission.
- My personal information was shared on social media without my consent.
- My internet access is restricted by my family.
- My internet access is restricted by my partner or ex-partner.
- My internet access is restricted by the dormitory and/or the school I am a student/employee.
- Shares' comments were made with my assigned name instead of the name I used.
- I've been exposed to a hate campaign that targets me directly.
- I have been subject to a hate campaign targeting the organisation or institution I am a part of.
- My work in the field of LGBTQI+ rights was targeted.
- Other (Specify): ………………

The online survey, which entailed 305 participants, took place from 17 July 2022 to 17 September 2022. In addition to the KaosGL.org online newspaper and Kaos GL social media accounts, we posted the survey link on digital communication platforms that include LGBTQI+ organisations.

While the survey study was in progress, we also conducted in-depth interviews with 10 LGBTQI+ persons. These were chosen from the activists in Kaos GL's network. Our team's brainstorming entailed the potential digital LGBTQI+ activists or who were dealing with online gender-based violence previously. The interviews were mostly face-to-face, and took approximately one hour. During these interviews, we queried the participants on how digital violence occurs as well as its effects.

During the process, we ensured the following ethical standards: informed consent; voluntary participation; confidentiality; physical safety; no harm from research participation; provision of crisis intervention, and mechanisms to attend to researcher needs, including vicarious trauma.

 The interviews were on a voluntary basis. We informed the participants about the purpose and expected results of the research/report. Also, we took a signed approval from each participant that we would not share their information with third parties and would only use it for research purposes. During the information and consent process, we also respected the confidentiality of the participants (we actually get the consent of individuals at every event that we organise in order to reduce potential physical threats or risks). To ensure our interview partners' security, we coded their names and personal data while decoding the voice records. We have not taken any photo or video of the interviews.

Protection of personal data is an ethical issue in the scope of the project. In order to eliminate any kind of ethical problem, we implemented the terms and regulations of Personal Data Protection Law of Türkiye (KVKK). For the participants' data protection, we wrote an informative text about the aim and outputs of the survey, and how we would use this data. As we do in every Kaos GL activity, we got their approval in line with KVKK.

In keeping with our code of conduct, workers' right policy and gender equality policy, we also considered the well-being of the researcher. We were ready to provide any flexibility and resources for them to not get affected negatively during the research process.

Our researcher who conducted the semi-structured, in-depth interviews is also an open, transwoman activist who has been involved in the LGBTQI+ human rights movement and HIV awareness movement for years. They were also previously exposed to horrendous attacks on social media by TERFs[8] and the general public over HIV+ awareness discussions and transgender rights. Therefore, the insider position of the researcher

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8   Trans-exclusionary radical feminists.

as serendipitous in that (I) participants were more open to communication and were comfortable revealing their personal stories, (II) the researcher could elaborate on the semi-structured interview questions to have a better understanding of the topic by benefiting from their own experiences.

Furthermore, we enhanced the research methodology by conducting focus groups with organisations working in the field of digital violence, and also LGBTQI+ organisations and activists exposed to digital GBV. The focus group meetings helped us formulate our questions and methodology. The meetings with organisations working on digital violence helped us learn more about the research strategies in Türkiye and understand the current situation from a broader perspective. Also, the meetings confirmed our literature review results showing there is wide disparity regarding the digital violence targeting LGBTQI+ community and others. The meetings with LGBTQI+ organisations helped us understand the smear campaigns targeting LGBTQI+ activism. And also, the organisations helped us disseminate our survey to the LGBTQI+ community.

Finally, in the survey study and in-depth interviews, we asked LGBTQI+ persons to describe in their own words the digital violence they experienced. In this report, we share some of these accounts as quotations in relevant places. In this way, we wanted to make the digital violence evident through numbers and stories.

3.
Background

According to Kaos GL's LGBTQI+ Human Rights Report of 2021,[9] that was the year in which LGBTQI+ people's freedom of expression was violated to the highest degree, comprising almost 30% of all types of violations. Kaos GL reported eight hate murders in 2021. However, it is thought that this number is an underestimation and most were not reported in the media. Many times in 2021, the police flouted their own rules that prohibited torture and ill-treatment, especially during or after LGBTQI+ meetings and demonstrations. Such violation took place in at least seven incidents in Aydın, Çanakkale, Ankara, İstanbul and İzmir, against at least 12 people. Neither the police headquarters nor the Ministry of Interior provided relevant information when judicial or administrative investigations were brought against the guilty police personnel. Ill-treatment, which became widespread during the Boğaziçi University demonstrations, escalated into torture against LGBTQI+ activists thanks to harsh state interventions against the right to congregate and demonstrate. Hundreds of LGBTQI+ people were denied their right to freedom and security and taken into custody for activities ranging from the Boğaziçi demonstrations, Women's Day marches on March 8, protests against the İstanbul Convention, and Pride Marches. Even as curfews were imposed citing the COVID-19 pandemic, and LGBTQI+ activists put under house arrest, public institutions and followers of the parties comprising the coalition government were free to participate in collective activities. It later emerged that the LGBTQI+ activists who participated in the dormitory protests were blacklisted by the Interior Minister himself. Musicians were slapped with stage bans on the grounds of being LGBTQI+ in Konya, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep and Bursa. A good many LGBTQI+ rights organisations, which were established before 2020, were audited without any justification and some had to pay administrative fines. Our report evaluated all this as follows:

> The failure of the state, with all persons and institutions, to provide an access to any right for LGBTQI+ communities by turning them into a target; its efforts to wipe out opportunities, and actions and speech targeting LGBTQI+ communities' existence directly, are the most important signs of the steady erosion of rights.

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9   Dikmen, K. (2022). *Her Şeye Rağmen LGBTİ+'ların İnsan Hakları Raporu 2021*. Kaos GL.
     https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/lgbti-larin-i-nsan-haklari-raporu-2021-web.pdf

Despite this all-out attack, it is seen that LGBTQI+ communities, as part of public dissent, are the most dynamic group in the field of human rights and are insistent on exercising their rights, especially freedom of expression, without acceding to pressure.

The 7 June 2015 elections in Türkiye seemed to be a milestone for the Turkish political opposition as the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), which supports LGBTQI+ rights, was represented in the parliament for the first time. The election was a huge disappointment for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) as its votes decreased in huge numbers. Prior to those elections, in its campaigns at Beyoğlu, a very progressive region in Istanbul, AKP shared photos of the LGBTQI+ Pride March, trying to give the impression of a hands-off policy on any lifestyle in Turkey. Not getting what it hoped for in the elections, the ruling party immediately changed gear and attacked the LGBTQI+ community.

The attacks were to become even more explicit after AKP formed a coalition with the ultra-nationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party) in the ensuing years. Joining forces, the Islamist AKP and the MHP whipped up a hostile discourse against the queer community by labelling them as "perverts", "enemies of the sacred family union", "a project from the West", "bad examples for the youth", etc.

This anti-LGBTQI+ propaganda manifests itself in the answers of our survey participants. There are four main claims forming the basis of the political parties' hostile attitudes: the first is that the queer community has come together to destroy the concept of the family. The second is their joining forces with the increasing global anti-LGBTQI+ propaganda. The third, hampering the opposition from committing itself to progressive politics. The last, and the most important, slowing down the queer and feminist activism, which stands out as the most powerful opposition force against the government.

Examining the Turkish political context, the right wing has an intersectional stance embodying conservative, Islamist and nationalist teachings. Among its national values, protection of the normative family stands out. As a result, queer identities are under massive attack from Turkish nationalists.

Overall situation in Türkiye[10] - Yasemin Öz, attorney
Türkiye, as a country that is part of the European Council, has been part of the ILGA Europe index evaluation. This umbrella organisation of more than 600 LGBTQI+ organisations from Europe and Central Asia, publishes a legal-political index evaluation that shows the state of LGBTQI+ rights. In these maps, countries are evaluated on the human rights standards demanded by the LGBTQI+ Movement.

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10   This section of the report has been prepared by the attorney Yasemin Öz, a member of UN Women LGBTI Informal Reference Group. She is also one of the early members of Kaos GL and has been an LGBTQI+ activist and feminist since the early 1990s.

In these indexes, which also include Türkiye, data on Türkiye are prepared with the contribution of Kaos GL. When ILGA Europe Rainbow Map and Index 2022[11] are examined, it can be seen that Türkiye is far behind the developing global standards on human rights.

As can be understood, the absence of legislation in Türkiye that prohibits discrimination against LGBTQI+ people and to promote equality leaves them legally vulnerable to discrimination in accessing basic human rights such as employment, access to goods and services, education, health, travel and freedom of settlement. State institutions established to ensure equality have no programme or public policy regarding LGBTQI+ communities.

Apart from not legally recognising the civil unions of LGBTQI+ people, current legal regulations restrict these unions to make them impossible. Non-recognition of such civil unions results in depriving many couples of their social rights. Likewise, lack of regulation of hate crimes that LGBTQI+ individuals are severely, systematically and constantly exposed to prevents them enjoying their basic human rights, including the right to life. Since public authorities themselves have been engendering hate speech in the last three years, hate crimes and discourse against LGBTQI+ communities by society and public officials have also increased systematically.

While there are legally limited ways of gender reconciliation procedures, name change and the regulation of personal data according to the new identity for public recognition of bodily integrity and gender identity, there is no uniformity in practice and there are often obstacles. In addition, the gender affirmation process is subject to many conditions, including the medical process.

When it comes to civil society, the right to assembly and demonstration, and many collective activities and events for LGBTQI+ communities have been systematically and unlawfully prevented for many years, and new prohibitions put into effect despite intervention of courts against these unlawful practices. In this way, even if one ban decision is annulled, new ban decisions are taken and events cannot be organised until the court decides. This way, events are blocked and a policy of intimidation is put in place.

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11   ILGA Europe. (2022). Op. cit.

A.   *Equality and non-discrimination*

1. **Equality in the Constitution**
   Article 10 of the Constitution, which deals with the principle of equality, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), does not give any special protection to LGBTQI+ citizens. In this regard, all attempts by civil society and opposition parties to give the community Constitutional protection have been inconclusive.

2. **Employment**
   SOGIESC-based discrimination is not included in Article 5 of the Labour Law regulating the prohibition of discrimination.

3. **Access to goods and services**
   SOGIESC-based discrimination is also not included in Article 122 of the Turkish Penal Code, which deals with prohibition of discrimination.

4. **Education**
   There is no regulation regarding SOGIESC-based discrimination in the field of education.

5. **Health**
   There is no regulation regarding discrimination based on SOGIESC in the field of health either. Also, the so-called conversion therapies are not prohibited.

6. **Freedom of travel and settlement**
   While the freedom of movement and residence is not legally restricted, the homes of transwomen especially are sealed arbitrarily on the grounds of "intermediating in prostitution" and they can be de facto prevented from staying in their residences.

7. **Equality institution**
   In the law regulating the duties of TİHEK (Turkish Institution for Human Rights), there is no regulation regarding the prohibition of SOGIESC-based discrimination. Hence TİHEK rejects applications based on SOGIESC.

8. **Equality action plan**
   There are no equality action plans covering public policies that address the human rights of LGBTQI+ citizens.

9. **Legal regulations regarding sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics**
   Gender affirmation process is regulated in Article 40 of the Civil Code. The process that includes surgery, medical approval and court approval comes under this.

10. **Blood donation**
    It is forbidden to donate blood for those in same-sex relationships due to the stigmatisation of HIV/AIDS, which is directly linked with same-sex relations in the Turkish context.

B. *Family*

11. **Right to marriage**
    There is no right to marriage.

12. **Civil partnership**
    There is no right to have a registered partnership (civil partnership).

13. **Living together**
    There is no legal regulation of the right to live together.

14. **Restrictive definition of marriage in the Constitution**
    Since the Constitution says that marriage is between men and women, LGBTQI+ people's equal right to marriage is restricted.

15. **Joint custody**
    Since there is no right of marriage and related custody, LGBTQI+ citizens have no right of joint custody.

16. **Custody right of the other parent**
    The other parent does not have custody right.

17. **Other parent's right of automatic custody**
    The other parent is not entitled to have automatic custody.

18. **Medically assisted artificial insemination for couples**
    There is no right to medically assisted artificial insemination.

19. **The right of unmarried persons to artificial insemination**
    Unmarried persons do not have the right to artificial insemination.

20. **The right of trans people to be registered as parents**
    Trans people do not have the right to be registered as parents.

21. **Custody rights of non-binary persons**
    Non-binary persons are not entitled to custody.

C.   Hate crimes and hate speech

22. Hate crimes law
There is no hate crime law that protects LGBTQI+ people.

23. Hate speech law
There is no hate speech law that protects LGBTQI+ people.

24. Anti-hate policy
There is no anti-hate policy.

D.   Legal recognition of physical integrity and gender identity

25. Existence of legal regulations
Gender affirmation surgeries are regulated in Article 40 of the Civil Code, but the process is not compatible with European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) standards.

26. Administrative procedures
Some personal data may be regulated depending on gender affirmation surgeries, but there is no fully inclusive and fully compliant legislation.

27. Name change
Name changes are at the discretion of the courts, and applications for name change without gender affirmation surgery are sometimes accepted and sometimes rejected. There is a recent positive Constitutional Court decision regarding this issue, but there appears to be no sign of its implementation.

28. Name change without age limit
There is no age limit for name change.

29. Recognition of gender identity by declaration (right to self-determination)
Gender identity is not recognised on the basis of declaration without gender affirmation surgery, medical approval and court permission.

30. Non-binary identity recognition
Not legally recognised.

31. Psychological report necessary
A psychological report is required for gender affirmation surgeries.

32. **Mandatory medical intervention**
    Due to lack of protective and inclusive measures, intersex children are exposed to forced medical interventions with their parents' approval and without their consent (while they are still minors).

33. **Mandatory surgery**
    Recognition of gender identity is conditional on gender affirmation surgery.

34. **Infertility rider**
    There is no requirement for infertility for gender affirmation surgery. However, as surgery is involved, the procedure often results in infertility.

35. **Divorce rider**
    Gender affirmation surgery necessitates the person not being married.

36. **Age limit**
    For gender affirmation surgery, the person is required to be over the age of 18.

37. **Prohibition of non-consensual medical intervention for intersex people**
    Parental consent is considered sufficient for medical intervention for intersex people.

38. **Pathologising sexuality**
    In the police and military laws, LGBTQI+ people's existence is defined as a psychosexual disorder.

E. *Civil society*

39. **Organising events and preventing meetings and demonstrations in public spaces (the last three years)**
    Many indoor and outdoor events and all demonstration marches are prohibited.

40. **Organising public events and ensuring adequate protection (the last three years)**
    Events in the public sphere were either prohibited or organised without protection.

41. **Organisational activities, freedom of association ban (the last three years)**
    There is no ban on LGBTQI+ organisations. However, in the last three years, the organisations have been subject to frequent state control (audits) and subject to hate speech by senior public officials.

42. **Risks faced by LGBTQI+ rights defenders**
LGBTQI+ organisations and activists are subject to systematic hate speech and targeted by public authorities and the media.

43. **Foreign funds**
Foreign funds are not curbed but have to be notified.

44. **Restriction of freedom of expression**
The "public morality, obscenity" and similar criteria mentioned in the Constitution and other laws are applied against the freedom of expression of LGBTQI+ communities.

F.   *Asylum*

45. **Legal regulations**
There is no legal regulation for LGBTQI+ refugees.

46. **Policy and other positive measures**
There are no policies or positive measures for LGBTQI+ refugees.

4.
Literature review

Digital violence was included in gender-based violence (GBV) literature with growing interest of researchers in the recent decade. Implying a similar meaning or sub-categories of digital GBV, the term has also been used in different forms such as "online violence"[12], "online abuse"[13], "cyber violence"[14], "online and technology-facilitated (sexual) violence"[15], "online and information and communications technology (ICT)-facilitated violence"[16], etc. We will use the term digital GBV.

As a broader definition, what we mean by digital violence covers the following digital practices: "trolling, verbal abuse, sextortion, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, the manipulation of photos, cyberstalking, doxing, hacking, damage to intellectual property, and DDoS (distributed denial of service) attacks."[17]

According to Council of Europe's report, Protecting Women and Girls from Violence In The Digital Age (2021)[18], digital GBV "occurs on a variety of platforms: mostly social media and their countless features and spaces, but also on web pages and forums, search engines, messaging apps, blogs, dating websites and apps, media comment sections, chat rooms of online video games, streaming platforms, video game apps, virtual and augmented reality tools, chat apps, videoconferencing tools, professional apps and websites, etc."

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12   Simonovic, D. (2019). *UN Human Rights Council. Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls, its Causes and its Consequences*. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3865936?ln=en

13   Gosse, C. (2021). "Not the Real World": Exploring Experiences of Online Abuse, Digital Dualism, and Ontological Labor. In J. Bailey, A. Flynn &N. Henry. (Eds.) *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse*. Emerald Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83982-848-520211003

14   Lomba, N., Navarra, C., & Fernandes, M. (2021). *Combating gender-based violence: Cyber violence*. European Parliamentary Research Service. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU(2021)662621_EN.pdf; see also: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/cyber-violence-against-women

15   Henry, N., & Powell, A. (2018). Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence: A Literature Review of Empirical Research. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 19*(2), 195-208. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838016650189

16   UNDP Serbia. (2021, 25 November). Online violence has real life consequences #ItIsMyBusiness. https://www.undp.org/serbia/news/online-violence-has-real-life-consequences-itismybusines

17   Ging D., & Siapera, E. (2018). "Special issue on online misogyny", in Feminist Media Studies, available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447345

18   In the report, digital gender-based violence is explained in detail, as well as monitoring mechanisms and instruments in the scope of the Istanbul Convention and other international treaties aiming to end gender-based violence: https://rm.coe.int/the-relevance-of-the-ic-and-the-budapest-convention-on-cybercrime-in-a/1680a5eba3

While researching digital violence in Türkiye, we went to the official website of the Council of Higher Education and examined the disciplines of sociology, journalism, psychology and biostatistics. Academic studies carried out in sociology focus on digital violence against women and their coping mechanisms,[19] and gender roles and digital violence practices in dating apps.[20]

Studies carried out in the journalism faculty analyse digitalised media and digital violence,[21] virulent attacks on social media from the perspective of the youth,[22] and violence in social media from the perspective of communication psychology.[23] In the field of psychology, Temur analyses gender-based cyber violence.[24] In biostatistics, Meydaneri analyses digital violence practices against women in the Çorum province as field research.[25] In all these studies, digital violence has been analysed from a binary gender perspective and only focus on women and girls, without diverse sexual orientation and gender identity intersections. Not surprisingly, a majority of the studies was carried out during/after the COVID-19 pandemic period when the lockdowns increased digitalisation and internet usage world over.

In addition to academic research on digital violence, this phenomenon is particularly prominent in research, reports and translations of the relevant institutions of the United Nations. Among the studies on digital violence, those that consider gender as one of the main axes are limited in number. Except for EuroMed Rights' report on digital violence,[26] which also covers the situation from the perspective of LGBTQI+ communities, there are no direct references to LGBTQI+ rights in these studies, and sexual orientation and gender identity are listed only when citing the grounds of discrimination.

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19   Yıldırım, E. (2019). *Sosyal medyada kadınlara yönelik dijital şiddet*. Istanbul Universitesi – Kadın Çalışmaları Ana Bilim Dalı.

20   Ertoy, F. (2021). *Belirsizlikle ilişkilenme: Arkadaşlık uygulamalarında partner seçimi, motivasyonlar ve şiddet*. Ankara Üniversitesi – Kadın Çalışmaları Ana Bilim Dalı.

21   Barındık, G. (2021). Dijitalleşen medya ve yarattığı yeni şiddet alanı: Dijital şiddet. Akdeniz Üniversitesi – Gazetecilik Ana Bilim Dalı.

22   Okur, A. (2021). *Sosyal medyada linç olgusu: Gençler üzerine bir araştırma*. Kocaeli Üniversitesi – Gazetecilik Ana Bilim Dalı.

23   Gezginci, G. (2022). İletişim psikolojisi açısından yeni medyada şiddet. İstanbul Üniversitesi – Gazetecilik Bilim Dalı.

24   Temur, N. (2018). Toplumsal Cinsiyete Dayalı Şiddetin Başka Bir Biçimi: Siber Şiddet. Çağ Üniversitesi – Psikoloji Ana Bilim Dalı.

25   Meydaneri, T. Y. (2021). *Kadına yönelik dijital şiddet ve sosyal medyanın kadına yönelik şiddet üzerindeki etkisi: Çorum ilinde bir alan araştırması*. Hitit Üniversitesi – Adli Bilimler Ana Bilim Dalı.

26   EuroMed Rights. (2021). *Online Violence Against Women and Girls: The Scenario in the MENA Region.* http://7xb.7d4.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Online-Gender-Violence-Report.pdf

Two of the first informative materials published on digital violence and coping mechanisms in Türkiye is European Women's Lobby's *#KadınınİnternetiKadınınHakkı* resource package (2017)[27] and *Haberiniz Var mı*?[28] The study, prepared with the support of Google, consists of translating the #HerNetHerRights campaign contents into Turkish. It lists the tactics and ways of combating digital abusers targeting girls and women, but LGBTQI+ persons are not mentioned at all. Consequently, it deals with gender from a heteronormative and binary gender perspective.

Another important resource is the Social Information and Communication Association (TBİD) and the Alternative Informatics Association's Guide to Combating Sexist Digital Violence[29] published in 2019. The guide, one of the most detailed studies carried out in Türkiye at the intersection of binary gender and digital violence, stands out with its descriptions as well as detailing and exemplifying the types of violence (i.e. cyber stalking, cyber assault, cyber exploitation, targeted acts towards communities, etc.). The difference from similar studies carried out – so far – is that it abandons the victim narrative, and aims for women's empowerment. Digital security recommendations are also comprehensively conveyed. However, in this study, the digital violence that LGBTQI+ people are exposed to is not addressed at all under the digital violence definitions or categories; it is only conveyed within the scope of intersectional discrimination with the following sentences:

> Women may be at risk of exposure to a variety of digitally violent behaviours because of their education, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation or relationship status. In the report "Gender-Based Violence and Online / Online Abuse", there is the output that women who are prominent in online or offline environments may be exposed to more abuse online. LBTQ+ women, women journalists (including bloggers), women active in the tech industry, well-known women (artists, writers, etc.), women politicians, women academics and feminist activists can also become open targets of perpetrators of digital violence from time to time.

Although the Turkish version of the recommendations of the Take Back the Tech! campaign,[30] shared among feminist activists on combating digital violence, offers an inclusive approach to the steps that can be taken against violence, they lack in supporting these recommendations with local data.

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27   https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/_hernetherrights_resource_pack_-_turkish.pdf

28   https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/137pqopZgCbPAeKWCX2LHP9RSz5t1L3XB

29   https://www.stgm.org.tr/e-kutuphane/cinsiyetci-dijital-siddetle-mucadele-rehberi

30   https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/137pqopZgCbPAeKWCX2LHP9RSz5t1L3XB

The Gender-Based Cyber Violence Guide of the e-Saygı (e-Respect) Association,[31] established in 2018 to create an environment of universal interpersonal respect and trust in cyberspace, UN Women's Guide to Gender-Based Cyber Violence (2020),[32] and Filiz Yildiz and Zeynep Özarslan's article[33] are among the resources as pioneering work in the field. However, even those studies also cannot provide a comprehensive perspective on LGBTQI+ communities and digital violence because there were no direct reference or examples of LGBTQI+ people's experiences on the issue.

The Digital Violence Research in Türkiye 2021, under the aegis of the Social Information and Communication Association (TBID), with the financial support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to increase social awareness, has no data on the digital violence experiences of LGBTQI+ communities in Türkiye. The Galop Association, which fights for LGBTQI+ rights in the UK, is trying to fill this gap with the data provided from the 2021 Hate Crime Report.

Alternative Informatics Association's Hate Speech on Social Media Report during the Covid-19 Pandemic (2020)[34] reveals that during the pandemic, hate speech was particularly savage against LGBTQI+ persons and individuals over the age of 65.

Focusing on the digital violence against LGBTQI+ communities, the most comprehensive studies in Turkish literature came from the Kaos GL Association, which works for their rights.

Its annual research reports on hate speech against LGBTQI+ communities in social media,[35] produced in partnership with the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), are pioneering studies in the field from the perspective of LGBTQI+ individuals. The reports reveal the intensity of hate speech towards them in social media which can be considered as digital violence. However, since the reports are written from a rights-based perspective, they have limitations in that they do not cover the digital violence practices, how the users experience the violence, and the coping mechanisms/methods.

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31   https://www.sivilsayfalar.org/raporlar/siber-saygi-dernegi-toplumsal-cinsiyete-dayali-siber-siddet-rehberi/

32   https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/137pqopZgCbPAeKWCX2LHP9RSz5t1L3XB

33   Özarslan, Z. (2022). *Looking at Digital Flirt Violence from Women's Experiences.* https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/1969361

34   https://docplayer.biz.tr/201710686-Covid-19-pandemi-surecinde-sosyal-medyada-nefret-soylemi-raporu.html

35   https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/2019nefretsoylemi-internet-e-brosur-web.pdf; https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/2019-nefretsoylemi-internet-e-brosur-2.pdf; https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/2020-sosyalmedya-nefretso-ylemi-raporu.pdf

The shortcomings we identified following the literature review

• Turkish literature on digital gender-based violence (GBV) mainly progresses on the UN axis. This means that the UN's limited approach, focussing only on digital violence against "girls and women", is the dominant narrative.

• Research-based data produced in the field is sketchy, and does not say anything about LGBTQI+ experiences in Türkiye.

• Digital violence is handled individually and personally, mainly in the context of dating/partner violence. However, widespread hate campaigns, attacks on activists via bot and troll accounts, and the role of politics in triggering digital violence is underestimated.

• Digital security guides are also lacking in advocacy.

5.
Research results

Participants

In total, 305 LGBTQI+ persons participated in the online survey that lasted for two months. We adopted the online approach to reach a more diverse sample and get a more accurate picture of the current situation.

To learn about the participants' sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and gender, we asked one open-ended question instead of multiple-choice questions with predetermined answer options. Accordingly, 78 gay, 48 bisexual, 44 trans, 38 non-binary, 29 lesbian, 21 pansexual, 18 homosexual, 16 queer, 15 bi+, 14 trans women and 6 trans men participated in the online survey (the numbers do not tally due to the overlapping identities).Additionally, among the participants, there were people who identified themselves as intersex, demisexual, genderqueer, panromantic, asexual, trans-masculine and/or omnisexual.

The age distribution in the survey study follows as:

17 years: 23 participants[36]
18-25: 103 participants
26-35: 112 participants
36-45: 48 participants
46-55: 14 participants
56-65: 3 participants
65+: 1 participant
One participant did not want to specify their age.

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36   The survey was online and open to anyone who could access our website. They were only part of the online survey but not interviewed. The age of consent in Türkiye is 18. However, there were 23 people who said they were 17 and victims of digital violence. As the survey was anonymous, we wanted to not exclude these 23, due to younger generations of the LGBTQI+ community being targeted and vulnerable to bullying on social media. However, there is still a need to conduct more research on minor LGBTQI+ people and digital violence. Considering the bullies targeting the youth could be their families themselves, there is an ethical dilemma regarding the issue, especially in countries like Türkiye, where there are no LGBTQI+ rights and official institutions have a strong history of discrimination against the community.

When it comes to city distribution, 112 participants were living in Istanbul, 76 in Ankara and 34 were living in Izmir during the survey period. In each of the following cities that are provided in alphabetical order, there were fewer than 10 people who participated in the survey: Adana, Adıyaman, Afyon, Antalya, Antep, Aydın, Balıkesir, Diyarbakır, Bursa, Edirne, Elazığ, Eskişehir, Isparta, Kocaeli, Kastamonu, Kayseri, Konya, Mardin, Mersin, Muğla, Niğde, Tekirdağ, Van and Yozgat. In total, LGBTQI+ individuals from 27 cities in Türkiye participated in the research. There were also participants outside of Türkiye, specifically from Germany, Poland and Northern Cyprus. Participants outside of the country were originally from Türkiye and were mostly using their social media accounts in Turkish. That is why we have not excluded them from the sample.

In the survey, respondents were also asked whether they identified themselves as LGBTQI+ activists. To this question, 63.3% (193 participants) answered "Yes", 20.3% (62 participants) answered "No", and 16.4% (50 participants) opted for "I don't know". This shows that although the majority of the participants are rights defenders and activists, the study could reach LGBTQI+ persons outside the LGBTQI+ movement (36.7%). The reason why activists comprise the majority of the sample could be related to Kaos GL's and other LGBTQI+ organisations' reach. It could be also due to the vigorous and extensive LGBTQI+ activism in Türkiye. There are 11 registered LGBTQI+ associations in the country apart from more than 30 unregistered organisations, creating a very vibrant and diverse activism scene. However, it is still a fact that the data we have collected is limited in the sense of reaching members of the LGBTQI+ community not involved in activism. This limited sample has also affected the types of digital violence which we will examine in the upcoming pages.

In addition to the survey, we conducted in-depth interviews with 10 LGBTQI+ individuals. Demographic information about the interviewees is provided in the table below.

Interviewee	Sexual orientation, gender identity	Age	City	Social media platforms used by the interviewee
ÖSB	Pansexual, non-binary	34	Bursa	Twitter, Instagram
SSİ	Heterosexual, transwoman	42	İstanbul	Twitter
TSA	Lesbian	43	Ankara	Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Tinder, Wapa, OkCupid
TYA	Non-binary	32	Ankara	Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Hornet, Tinder
KJA	Heterosexual, transwoman	35	Ankara	Instagram, Twitter, Youtube, Hornet, PlanetRomeo, ShemaleTurk
SÖİ	Bisexual transman	31	İzmir	Instagram, Twitter
SEİ	Prefers not to identify	43	İstanbul	Twitter, Instagram
YOİ	Gay cis man	27	İstanbul	Twitter, Instagram Facebook, Hornet, Tinder
GDA	Pansexual transwoman	27	Ankara	Instagram, Twitter, Bumble, Hornet, Tinder, LinkedIn, OkCupid, Facebook
AAA	Bisexual cis woman	34	Ankara	Twitter, Youtube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok

Experiences of digital violence

Have you ever been subjected to violence in online spaces?

- I don't know | 4
- No | 33
- Yes | 268
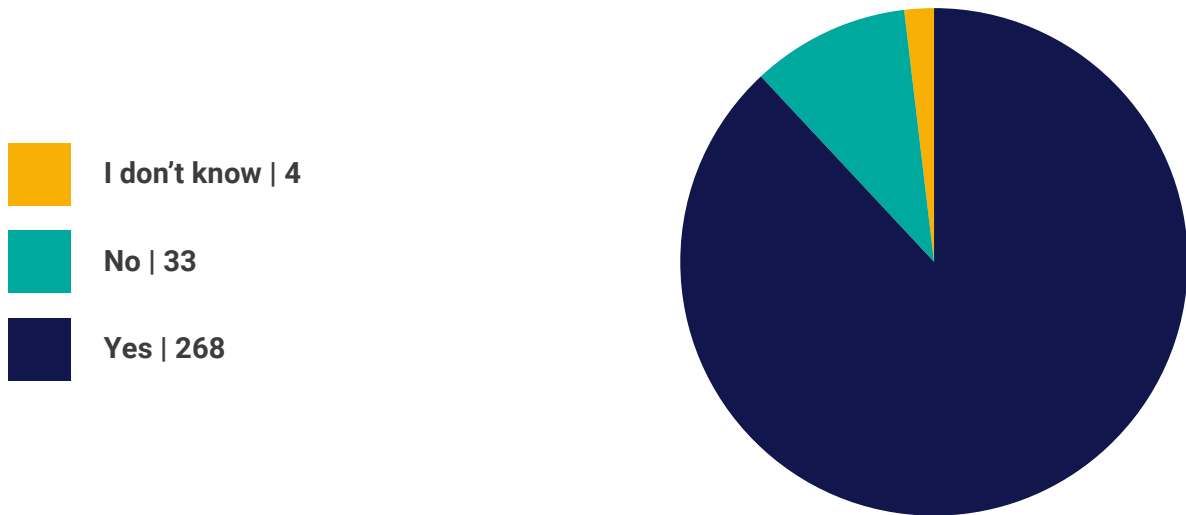
As much as 87.9% (268 people) of the participants stated that they were subject to violence or bullying on online spaces; 10.8% (33 people) reported not being subject to digital violence, and 1.3% (4) said they had no idea.

Based on the results of Türkiye Digital Violence Research in 2021 by the Common Knowledge and Communication Association, one out of every five people in Türkiye is subject to digital violence.[37] Even though the methodology and the markers of the research differ from ours, it gives us a sense of the scale of digital violence when sexual orientation and gender identity involved. Based on our research, when it comes to LGBTQI+ communities, the results indicate that nine out of every 10 LGBTQI+ individuals are victims of digital violence. It is fair to say that digital violence rates increase when the victims are LGBTQI+ persons.

The high prevalence of digital violence targeting them is alarming: 87.9% is a huge rate and needs to be understood thoroughly. You will find more detailed analysis on this rate and the reasons behind the results in the following pages.

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37   Common Knowledge and Communication Association. (2021). *Türkiye Digital Violence Research*. Op. cit.

During the interviews and the survey, participants repeatedly spoke about pro-government media agencies as being the perpetrators. Those not accustomed to the recent situation regarding LGBTQI+ rights in Türkiye, this can be surprising. However, since 2015, the government has a clear position on LGBTQI+ rights in Türkiye: Banning LGBTQI+ events, police attacks to Pride Marches and a defamation campaign targeting the community. The high rate of digital violence and also the characteristic of such violence can be seen as a reflection of government policies.

We have entered into a new era in sense of LGBTQI+ rights with the ban against the Istanbul LGBTQI+ Pride March in 2015;[38] the police attack and then the incitement of hatred against LGBTQI+ communities by politicians which turned into a call for massacre; a group calling itself the Young Islamic Defence[39] putting up posters calling for the murder of LGBTQI+ individuals on the streets of Ankara; ISIS threats against Kaos GL in 2016;[40] banning the March Against Homophobia and Transphobia in Ankara;[41] banning Istanbul Pride March once again; and increasing hate attacks and murders, smear campaigns against LGBTQI+ persons that became systemic due to the efforts of media and politicians in Turkey. The year 2015 was a turning point for LGBTQI+ rights and movement in Türkiye. The police attacked the Pride Parade with plastic bullets, pepper gas and water cannons, and many were injured.

Matters worsened the next year, 2016, when where ISIS sent threats to Kaos GL, the March Against Homophobia and Transphobia in Ankara was banned as was the İstanbul Pride Parade. In 2017, such hostility became an official government policy with the Governorate of Ankara's indefinite ban on LGBTQI+ activities throughout the city.[42] In fact, there were two separate, indefinite bans on LGBTQI+ communities and associations defending their rights in Ankara, one declared during the state of emergency and the other declared during the so-called post-state of emergency period. During the state of emergency period, Kaos GL Association won the case against the ban. In April 2019, the Regional Administrative Court stated that the ban declared during the state of emergency was not in accordance with the law,

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38   Demir, Y. E. (2022, 22 February). Report card of AKP on İstanbul Pride March: 8 bans, at least 103 custodies. *Kaos GL*.
      https://kaosgl.org/en/single-news/report-card-of-akp-on-istanbul-pride-march-8-bans-at-least-103-custodies

39   Kaos GL. (2015, 7 July). The AKP's hate politics has turned into a massacre call.
      https://kaosgl.org/en/single-news/the-akprsquos-hate-politics-has-turned-into-a-massacre-call

40   Kaos GL. (2016, 12 April).
      Turkish intelligence document: ISIS targets Kaos GL.
      https://kaosgl.org/en/single-news/turkish-intelligence-document-isis-targets-kaos-gl

41   Tar, Y. (2018, 14 March). Ban on IDAHOT March is brought to Constitutional Court. *Kaos GL*.
      https://kaosgl.org/en/single-news/ban-on-idahot-march-is-brought-to-constitutional-court

42   Kaos GL. (2017, 12 June). Chronology of LGBTI+ bans in Turkey.
      https://kaosgl.org/en/single-news/chronology-of-lgbti-bans-in-turkey

stating that instead of banning, law enforcement measures should be taken if there was a threat to the activities. The ban ordinance was revoked. On the other hand, despite the lifting of the state of emergency, the judicial process for the decision of the Ankara Governorship's Legal Affairs Branch sent to the Provincial Police Department on 3 October 2018 has continued. The second ban was lifted following a verdict in the late hours of 23 March 2020. Thus, the ban on LGBTQI+ events in Ankara came to an end.[43]

While anti-LGBTQI+ agenda is one of the core platforms of the AKP government, the state's reaction to the questions coming from the international community is one of denial. In January 2020, the deputy minister of foreign affairs responded to recommendations and criticisms of 16 member states regarding LGBTQI+ rights at the United Nations (UN).[44] The recommendations were directed at Türkiye's Universal Periodic Review meeting. Deputy Minister Faruk Kaymakçı claimed that LGBTQI+ communities in Türkiye were free to hold meetings and demonstrations, despite the two-year ban on the Pride Parade in İstanbul, Pride Week in Mersin, Izmir and Antalya, and on Queer Olympix sports events in Istanbul.

"Regarding the freedom of meetings and demonstrations, LGBTI people had 97 activities in 2017 [and] 20,000 people attended them. 119 people were detained for violence. There is no systematic ban," he said, ignoring the fact that even the application for permit for the LGBTQI+ Pride March at Bakırköy, which is one of the governorate's designated demonstration fields, elicited this response: "Galatasaray Square is a tourist zone; therefore demonstrations of Saturday Mothers and the LGBT community cannot be allowed." Kaymakçı defended the legislation with these words: "[The]10th Article of our Constitution says, 'Everyone is equal before the law without distinction as to language, race, colour, sex, political opinion, philosophical belief, religion, and sect, or any such grounds.' The phrase 'any such grounds' here covers sexual orientation and gender identity. Therefore, sexual orientation and gender identity do not need to be included in other laws."

On the other hand, the UN, EU, CoE (Council of Europe) and many human rights organisations underline the importance and necessity of explicit inclusion of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics in the Constitution and laws for the use of human rights. The government also claimed that the state report was discussed with "all stakeholders" in the preparation and Human Rights Action Plan process,

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43   Tar, Y. (2020, 24 March). The second blanket ban on LGBTI+ events in Ankara has also been lifted! *Kaos GL*. https://kaosgl.org/en/single-news/the-second-blanket-ban-on-lgbti-events-in-ankara-has-also-been-lifted

44   Tar, Y. (2020, 3 February). Oppressor in Turkey denier in the UN! *Kaos GL*. https://kaosgl.org/en/single-news/oppressor-in-turkey-denier-in-the-un

but no communication was established with LGBTQI+ organisations in these processes. Kaymakçı said that the legislation regarding hate crimes was formulated in 2014 and "since then they have been fighting hate crimes." On the other hand, according to the criteria of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), there is no primary legislation or secondary legislation regarding hate crimes in Turkey. The legislation implied by the deputy minister does not include statements of sexual orientation and gender identity. Although he claims to be actively fighting discrimination and hate crimes, the legislation of the Turkish Human Rights and Equality Institution (TİHEK), which is tasked with combating discrimination, does not include expressions of sexual orientation and gender identity. There is no "any such grounds" among protected categories. Applications of LGBTQI+ persons are being rejected. TİHEK officials are systematically issuing statements against LGBTQI+ communities. The ombudsperson, responsible for the fight against discrimination, is also spreading hate speech against LGBTQI+ individuals.

As mentioned before, there is no regulation or public policy in the Turkish legal system that protects LGBTQI+ individuals. Policymakers and practitioners themselves could increasingly well become perpetrators of the violations. The state resorting to discriminatory rhetoric is reflected in public policies in the form of a rise in unfair practices against LGBTQI+ communities.

The vicious circle of hate and discrimination on online spaces

Non-binary interviewee TYA (32) living in Ankara explains how diverse perpetrators co-organised violence against them after expressing their views on social media:

> If I write something about HIV and trans rights on Twitter, I suddenly see that many accounts simultaneously insult me, threaten me, and distort what I wrote. This remains a common theme. I was wondering whether my account was shared with different groups, [in] that it was not explicitly targeted by one account. Indeed, I understood that was the case when I read the tweets. My tweets are frequently disseminated in WhatsApp and Telegram groups and they write, "Let's attack this faggot."

In the research, titled Online Harassment, Digital Abuse, and Cyberstalking in America, it is noted, "Younger internet users and those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) are most likely to witness each form of online harassment discussed in this study."[45] Echoing that finding, the responses of LGBTQI+ individuals who participated in our survey and answered our question about the types of digital violence indicate that they are subject to almost all kinds of violence on the internet. Among participants who answered that question, 87.2% reported insults and swearing, 47.4% were threatened, 44.5% received written, audio or video harassment messages, and 36.5% stated they were stalked.

Types of digital violence
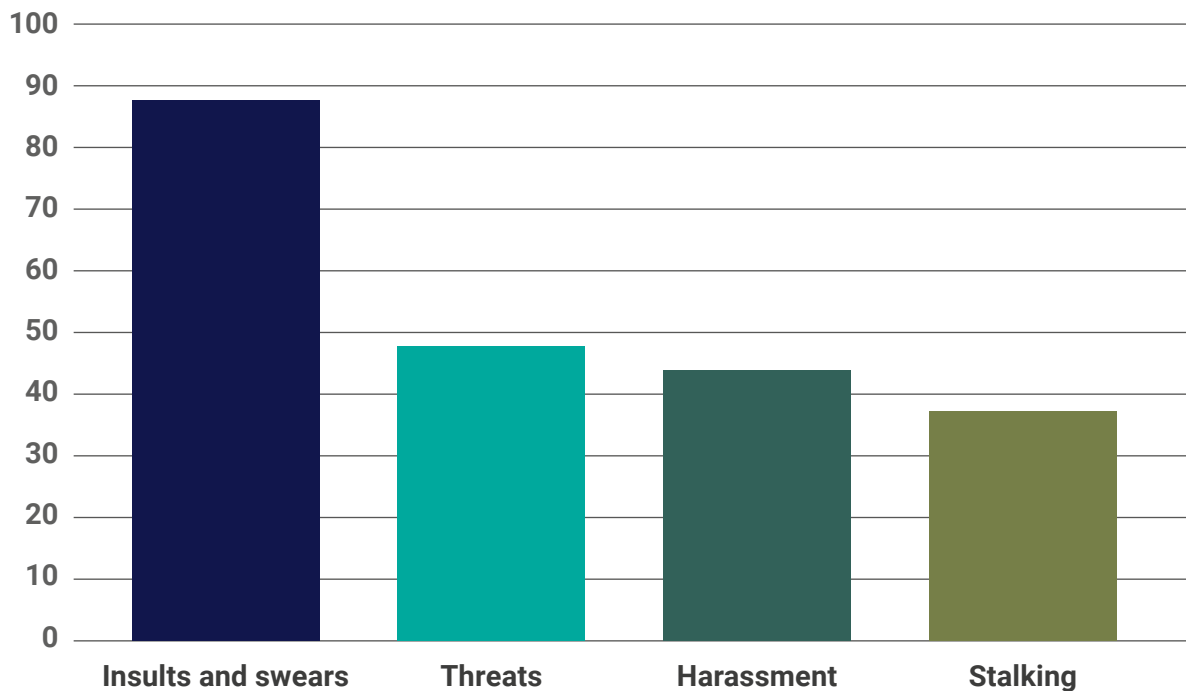
During the in-depth interview, interviewee AAA (34), who is a bisexual cis woman living in Ankara, explained to us how digital violence against LGBTQI+ individuals contains both sexual violence and hate speech, and how organised hate attacks led to her prosecution. The case that she talks about is one of many hate-mongering campaigns targeting the community in Türkiye. As mentioned before, April 23 is a national holiday in Türkiye dedicated to children. In 2020, LGBTQI+ people organised an online campaign to defend the rights of children. They shared their childhood photos with empowering messages. However, this campaign attracted a backlash. Government media and political actors started targeting LGBTQI+ people.

45   Lenhart, A., Ybarra, M., Zickuhr, K., & Price-Feeney, M. (2016). *Online Harassment, Digital Abuse, and Cyberstalking in America*. Data & Society Research Institute.

Read the deposition below keeping in mind AAA is just one example:

> There was this citizen who was stalking me… "She is a bitch. She is having sex with women too," this person wrote on Twitter because I declined to have sex with them. This being disseminated by the conservative, reactionary media, targeting me by using my name or my drawings on social media, is also digital violence. Dating apps are made unavailable in Türkiye. This too is digital violence. I could not access the kaosgl.org in the dormitory where I stayed while I was in university. And because I said, "There are LGBTQI+ children", they label me child abuser and pervert. They use "bitch" to insult me. They also label me as "fundmonger" and "imperialist". This is mostly in relation to my posts relating to veganism. I have been also threatened because of my posts that defend LGBTQI+ rights. Following the posts I shared during Eid al-Adha, they were saying things like, "Your head should be taken off like this", or "People like you shouldn't have children" and sending me photos of animal heads. I have been subject to explicit hate speech. There were overt threats. A citizen complained to the Presidency's Communication Centre (CİMER) about my drawing and I had to go there to give a statement. The complaint against me included these sentences: "Whatever you do, remove this pervert from the society, annihilate her", and the prosecutor's office considered this complaint as worthy to be investigated. Such a shame that the subject of the investigation was called Child Sexual Abuse. This crime can only be brought as part of the investigations in cases of actual sexual abuse in the Turkish Penal Code (TPC). It is very sad that my drawing and the artistic freedom have become the objects of investigation. In addition, several individuals and institutions who shared my drawing have also been investigated.

In response to the open-ended question regarding the experiences of digital violence, a non-binary survey participant (32) living in Ankara detailed the ways in which violence can lead to death threats as each perpetrator turns out to be a further potential threat when they come together as a crowd:

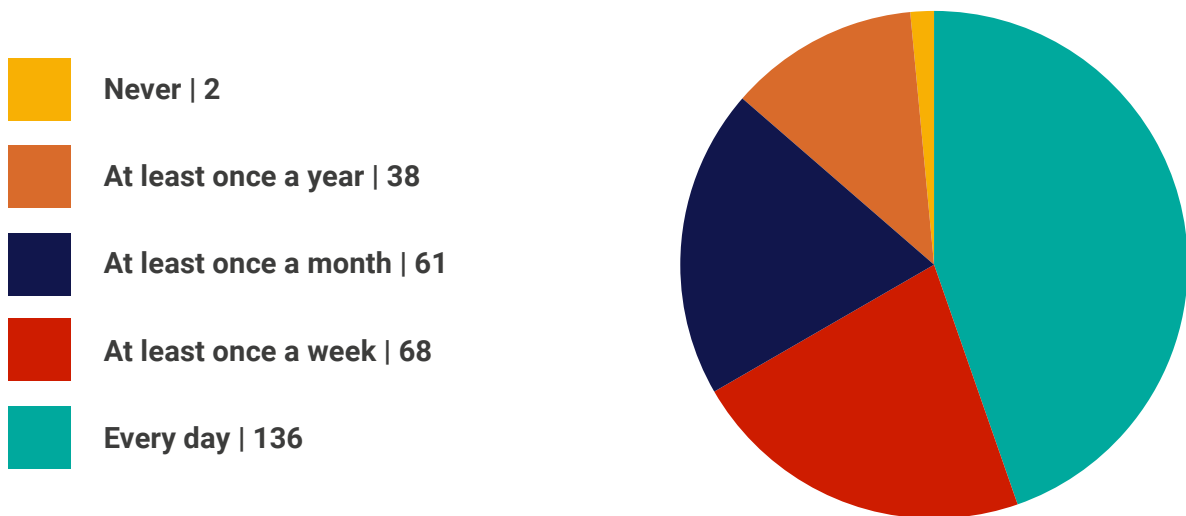I was subject to a lot of digital violence. Just to mention a few examples:

- Trans exclusionary reactionary feminists (TERFs)[46] often share posts using my name assigned at birth. I was subject to swearing and insults. There were posts that made

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46   According to prominent trans activist and academic Sema Semih, the TERF category in Türkiye appeared because of the discussions on social media in 2019 among some feminists and trans activists, including academics, on different issues such as giving trans children the right to use hormones, legally determining gender based on one's own declaration, and the inclusion of trans women into public spaces open to cis women. As transphobic approaches entered discussions, LGBTQI+ organisations have published statements criticising the attitudes of the feminists concerned. The relationship between feminism and trans people in Türkiye has followed a different course from the Anglo-American world. For example, while trans women were given the right to speak at the podium in the march against violence, which is known as the first mass action of the radical feminist movement, in the 2000s, trans-exclusionary attitudes among feminists became evident with the discussion of transfeminism. In addition to this, many events have been organised to bring together both cis feminists and trans activists on the problems experienced so far, giving priority to experience sharing. For more information: https://feministbellek.org/terf/

fun of my gender identity. Especially when I write anything about transgender rights, hundreds of accounts that I don't recognise start insulting and threatening me either by taking screenshots or quoting my posts. Pro-government accounts join these digital lynching that are initiated by TERFs.

- When I post anything on LGBTQI+ rights, I suddenly become the target of AK trolls.[47] The abuses that remain my mind are "deviant", "LGBT lobby", and "We will kill people like you". I also fear physical threat. I am exhausted.

- Once, an online account shared a gullüm[48] photo we took with my friends and the comments under it were very scary. From calling us "perverts" to making death threats … I had that post removed but it had already spread around.

- My DM box is full of death threats. I regularly receive threats from Islamist groups.

How often do you witness hate campaigns targeting LGBTQI+ people or content with hate speech on the internet and social media?

Never | 2

At least once a year | 38

At least once a month | 61

At least once a week | 68

Every day | 136

Participants' responses to the question, "How often do you witness hate campaigns targeting LGBTQI+s or contents with hate speech on the internet and social media?" indicate that hate speech targeting them on the internet occurs almost on a daily basis. Some 44.6% of the participants stated that they witness hate speech every day, while 22.3% stated they experience it at least once a week. Furthermore, only two participants (less than 1%) reported never having witnessed hate speech.

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47   A term used to describe anonymous social media commenters managed by AKP. It is assumed that the group is mainly composed of young government supporters and that they are financially supported by the government to provoke and disrupt any anti-governmental campaigns.

48   Gullüm is a word in queer slang/lexicon (i.e. lubunca) in Türkiye and it roughly translates as "campy".

In our research, we have handled hate speech and hate crimes in the digital space as part of digital violence. However, we wanted to delve into hate speech and crimes separately due to the prevalence of both kind of violence.

> According our 2021 Media Monitoring Report,[49] which was prepared by examining news, columns and interviews in print media, of the 4,011 news items published in the print media we examined, only 43% (1,707) of the reports on LGBTQI+ communities fell within the scope of rights-based journalism. Apropos of 2,273 reports, which make up more than half (57%), the fundamental rights of LGBTQI+ communities were violated with hate and/or discriminatory language used when they were not racking up prejudices. Discriminatory language; labelling LGBTQI+ identities as crime, disease, perversion, immorality or sin; hate speech; hate crime; and violation of freedom of speech and organisation were prominent in the violation of rights subcategories. LGBTQI+ people were referred to in a discriminatory language in 2,161 news items, interviews and columns in 2021. This corresponds to 54% of all reports published in 2021. Hate speech was identified in 1,249 reports, that is to say 31% of them. Hate crime was committed by targeting people, associations, institutions or organisations in 1,148 texts.
>
> Another report on hate crimes by Kaos GL, the 2017 Hate Crime Report's results are also in consonance with the media monitoring report. According to the report, that year, a vast majority of the hate crimes stemming from homophobia and transphobia were committed in schools, houses, neighbourhoods, public transportation or stops, at cafés and bars, and on the streets and other public places. Since the majority of the hate crimes occurs in public spaces, it is thought that "the visibility of the individual facilitates the committed crime". On an average, victims experienced violation of rights more than two times per case: 117 respondents cited 267 types of violation of rights. Generally, hate speech based on sexual orientation and sexual identity and threats of excessive violence (torture) were accompanied by "more severe" violations. Physical violence has been the second frequent one. In three of five cases, perpetrators consisted of two or more people. In 32 of 117 incidents, the perpetrators numbered more than three.

The prevalence and form of hate speech and hate crimes in Türkiye led us to examine the hate speech and hate crimes separately. There is a strong resemblance when we compare the situation in the physical space and online space, forming a vicious circle that threatens the community.

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49   Tar, Y. (2022). 2021 Medya İzleme Raporu. Kaos GL.
     https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/medya-i-zleme-2020-web.pdf

On the one hand, the rate of people who have been directly targeted by a hate campaign was 32.4 %. Becoming a direct target surpasses witnessing hate speech in terms of heightened feelings of being threatened. Almost all participants who were victimised thus stated they felt threatened.

On the other hand, 67% of the participants who are activists and working in an LGBTQI+ organisation affirmed that their organisation became a direct target in a hate campaign. Targeting an organisation they are a part of also creates anger, loneliness, loss of self-worth and a feeling of unsafety among LGBTQI+ people.

A lesbian interviewee, TSA (43), living in Ankara, describes how she felt unsafe after the systematic hate campaigns and had to use self-censorship:

> Both our institution and the people our institution works with are targeted. Our various events and the educators we work with during our events have been targeted. There were times when we could organise a given event 30 to 40 times in a year, and now that frequency has dropped a lot. This that hinders our work and people feel concerned about it all and stay away. After one particular event we held in a city, the local press targeted us and a large photo of me was published in a newspaper. Even though I was not in that city, I felt terrified and was affected by this targeting. Experiencing hate campaigns is draining. On Instagram, I mostly share daily chats and talks. I don't feel I can express my own opinion. I don't feel strong enough to deal with such lynching.

The following excerpts are from participants' accounts on online hate campaigns. They reveal that events and those who work for LGBTQI+ peoples' rights are targeted in cooperation with traditional and social media organisations and that these hate campaigns tantamount to physical violence:

> In 2016, Yeni Akit newspaper targeted our event to be held in Van; as a result, a hate group gathered to attack the place where the first event was to be held. They looked for our activists to catch them as in witch hunts. Still, the event was held in a different place.
>
> **Non-binary gay person (28), Van**

> Before the Pride Parade, we received death and torture threats from some nationalist-conservative groups.
>
> **Bisexual person (26), Ankara**

The cases referred in participants' accounts above indicate that, especially when it comes to LGBTQI+ rights advocacy, hate speech organised on the internet does not limit itself there and can lead to consequences such as physical violence and the violation of the freedom of association.

A lesbian interviewee, TSA (43) living in Ankara, tells how she was subject to death threats after expressing her views on LGBTQI+ rights on social media. Furthermore, her account is crucial in explaining how her partner's social media post about TSA having cheated on her turned into digital violence.

While the overall rating of hate campaigns is higher in the above-mentioned statistics, when we zoom in at the organisational level, 27.4% of the participants stated witnessing a hate campaign targeting the rights organisation with which they are associated. Furthermore, 24.8% emphasised that their work within the field of LGBTQI+ rights was targeted.

These responses indicate that the mediums in which hate campaigns target LGBTQI+ organisations range from traditional media to the digital space and even to safe space digital meetings:

> Associations and organisations working on LGBTQI+ rights are insulted through social media and other media, LGBTQI+ persons are targeted in the mainstream media, associations and organisations that are known for their work in this field are targeted in the headline news in the print media.
>
> **Non-binary lesbian individual (27), İstanbul (survey participant)**

> While I was providing support in the technical team at a Zoom meeting hosted by an international LGBTQI+ association, TERFs sent transphobic messages to Zoom's Q&A box during the 90-minute webinar.
>
> **Non-binary lesbian individual (34), İstanbul (survey participant)**

Interconnection between online and offline spaces

Some of our research participants have mentioned they were exposed to digital violence after participating in LGBTQI+ protests in the street. Their descriptions indicate that digital violence intensifies after rights advocacy in both physical and digital spaces.

It is vital to acknowledge that the binary divisions between online and offline spaces is invalid when we consider the experiences of the queer community. One of the main findings of our research was the direct co-relation between online and offline. Offline discrimination, hate speech and heterosexism reflect on online spaces easily. And also, online harassment can lead to offline violence, stalking and hate crimes.

From the story below, it is easily recognisable that the online and offline spaces are intertwined to increase the vulnerability and insecurity of LGBTQI+ people. A gay cis man interviewee, YOİ (27), who lives in Istanbul, explains the way he was subject to an organised hate attack after sharing a photo of himself with his partner.

His experience details the alarming extent of violence:

> It was our first anniversary with my partner. I shared this with a congratulatory note from my account. Two million users viewed it. Screenshots of that tweet were taken and posted on Instagram. Indeed afterwards, a girl with the headscarf shared it, commenting, "How does that suit you, fruit?" And then, there was an extensive debate under that post. A group of people wrote, "You would get mad if that was done to you about your headscarf." The debate got bigger. There were lots of homophobic insults targeting both my tweet and hers. There were nice comments also, boosting my morale. Our photo spread online and its dissemination on so many platforms created fear in our family because people to whom we did not yet come out could see it. Indeed, my aunt's cousin saw it and informed her, also sending her the screenshots of my answers to CuriousCat questions. But I had already come out to my aunt who snubbed her cousin but also warned me to be cautious. Together with my partner, we changed our profile name and changed our online account to a protected one. We have anonymised our photo. We decided to vanish from public gaze for a while. We reached customer support on some platforms and had our photo removed because we were able to do so. The heat of the debate dissipated slowly. I didn't like it at all. On the one hand, there are people to whom I don't want to come out. Taking such precautions feels like being closeted again. To hide means to be ashamed, in a sense. Even if I look at the pros and cons together, I still can't get over that feeling. It was emotionally rough.

The same interviewee also explains the ways in which LGBTQI+ people were targeted during the protests in Boğaziçi University and his witnessing detentions and police violence afterwards. His account is crucial in terms of tracing the patterns of violence as well as understanding the damage caused by multiple forms of violence:

> About the Şahmeran art installation… People's houses were raided in Boğaziçi University and there were detentions. There was a tough action against the students the first night they entered the school, and afterwards too. Police were stopping and detaining them on the roads. I was at the university that night. I was also subject to violence by them. The hate campaign continued on the internet. For a while, I didn't post anything for I was afraid my house would be raided. We stayed elsewhere. Hate campaigns usually make one feel helpless. Social media posts targeting Pride Parades are also terrifying because I also went for that parade. It's very likely that [hatemongers will] do what they say on social media. It makes us feel helpless that there is no law or state that protects us, and that some parts of the society make it explicit their intolerance when they see us around. Weird things happen in a way that I question myself: "Are we going to a time where we should go back to the closet again?"

What a genderfluid survey participant (34) living in Antep wrote as an answer to the open-ended question about digital violence experiences is striking as their account indicates how the violence that started in online spaces has escalated impact their right to education, pointing out to an important fact that online violence prevails beyond online spaces and bears other consequences. The answer of this participant also draws attention to how surveillance brings offline consequences to online victimisation. Another important aspect of the case detailed below, is that some of the perpetrators are monitoring LGBTQI+ activists in online spaces to act against them in physical space. In this case, monitoring LGBTQI+ activism prevented the right to education:

> I had been threatened through Facebook messages by some right-wingers and Turkish nationalists from the university in relation to my previous involvement with (Pride) protests. Similarly, a photo of me carrying a placard during a protest has been shared on social media from then for the last nine years, and they are trying to mock me with that. Again, there had been people from the university who outed me to the lecturers. As a result, before an oral exam, I was subject to the lecturer's implicit threat and I would not pass that exam. Afterwards, I was able to pass in the supplementary exam because it was in the multiple-choice format. Recently, a new queer organisation in Antep was targeted on social media and we could not hold the event due to safety concerns. From time to time, I also come across people who are abusive on social media, but I don't care much about them.

The following testimonial from the survey response of a transmasculine, bi+ and queer participant (20) living in Ankara describes the ways through which he was exposed to digital violence after participating in LGBTQI+ protests in the street. His descriptions indicate that digital violence intensifies after rights advocacy in both physical and digital spaces:

> When I came out with the banner "I'm a trans man, I'm a subject in feminism", I was subject to transphobia from many online accounts. Although some of these people were TERFs, most of them were cishet[50] men.

> My phone was being tracked by a person who was obsessed with me, and when I texted someone, I instantly got messages like, "Don't talk to this person, don't do this."

> People sent me my nude photos from social media accounts that I don't know and they threatened me.

> The parade organised by the committee I was in was targeted by political parties' and Islamist journalists' accounts.

> I am being threatened for promoting trans activism and bipolar visibility on TikTok. Some time ago, my sexual orientation was exposed on Facebook and I was targeted in my school.

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50   The term cishet denotes people who are cisgender and heterosexual.

SSI, a heterosexual transwoman (42) interviewee living in İstanbul, tells how the threats that started on social media turned into physical stalking. She explained how this process caused her to feel "trapped":

> I no longer leave my online profiles unprotected. I protect them from unknown followers. I used unprotected accounts for a very short time and had enough. My Instagram account was disabled twice because of complaints. I have never shared sexual content on my profile. Somehow my profiles were suspended. To revoke the suspension, Instagram asks for your ID credentials assigned at birth. I couldn't keep my online presence there. I don't know why my account is locked but it's probably because I'm trans; because someone gets disturbed from my transness and they don't want to see my presence. I also received threats. I share posts on social media and Twitter: even my parkour run is known. I write how far I run, how many kilometres. I received threatening messages such as, "We know the parkour you are running on." This scared me a bit. On social media, I want to share what I feel and what I am doing. It's like my diary. First, I didn't understand why my account had received so many followers. Then I wanted to raise awareness. I wanted people to become aware of what a transwoman is doing in her life, what she is thinking, what she is dealing with. When my online account grew, I was targeted. I live alone. Outside is also not safe. Receiving messages like, "We know where your place is, we'll come" is very scary. I feel trapped. It's a horrible feeling to lose that one place you thought was safe. I was targeted by a specific group. I was subject to incredible hate by anti-trans crew. I once saw a post about the large amount of money spent on beauty supplies and I shared it with a note: "We use these not to be beautiful, but to disappear among you, to be invisible." Then someone drew an image of a freak with bad hair and beard, shared this image with a note saying, "Being invisible? Hahaha!"

Intersectionality of violence

Other forms of violence that LGBTQI+s are subject to include being blackmailed, opening of fake accounts in their names, having their email or social media accounts hacked, disclosure of information about their gender identity on social media without consent, disclosure of their photos and videos on social media posts without consent, disclosure of their dating app photos on other media platforms without consent, disclosure of their assigned at birth names in social media posts, and restriction of internet access by their family, partner or school.

LGBTQI+ persons are subject to multiple discrimination based on other states of being too such as their HIV status and gender. The quotations are also noteworthy as they show that digital bullying targets them on a wide range of issues, from their physical characteristics to their worldview. The public's lack of scientific knowledge about HIV is indeed a result of

ideological restrictions. In recent years, there has been a strong governmental inclination to protect the so-called sacred family union. Any sexual intimacy outside of marriage is denounced as "immoral and dirty". The queer community is viewed outside the norms of the family. This further fuels an HIV-related stigma based on the false belief that the virus is connected with having a queer identity:

> My HIV status is shared publicly without my consent. I am subject to threats and insults over my health status. To make me a target, my ex-companions who claim to be politically oriented used information that was not accessible to the state authorities during a political trial in which I was sentenced and as a result, I was reported to the state authorities. Nothing happens to the people who do these things while I am depressed for days together. I don't think anything will change just because I'm writing these things here but I want it to be known.
>
> **Non-binary transfemme person (28), İstanbul (survey participant)**

> I have been subject to insults by people I have never met. Again, people (students and teachers) who are from the same school but whom I don't know have exposed me and my partner to abuse and threats on social media.
>
> **Demigirl and queer person (16), İstanbul (survey participant)**

> Because I refused to shave my legs, I was excluded from the "womanhood" that I do not identify with. I've been subject to comments and messages like "Send me your location and I'll come to shave you with a blade, you're so disgusting."
>
> **Non-binary bi+ individual (21), İstanbul (survey participant)**

Frequency and effects of violence

Frequency of digital violence

No idea | 5

Always | 18

Never | 22

Often | 69
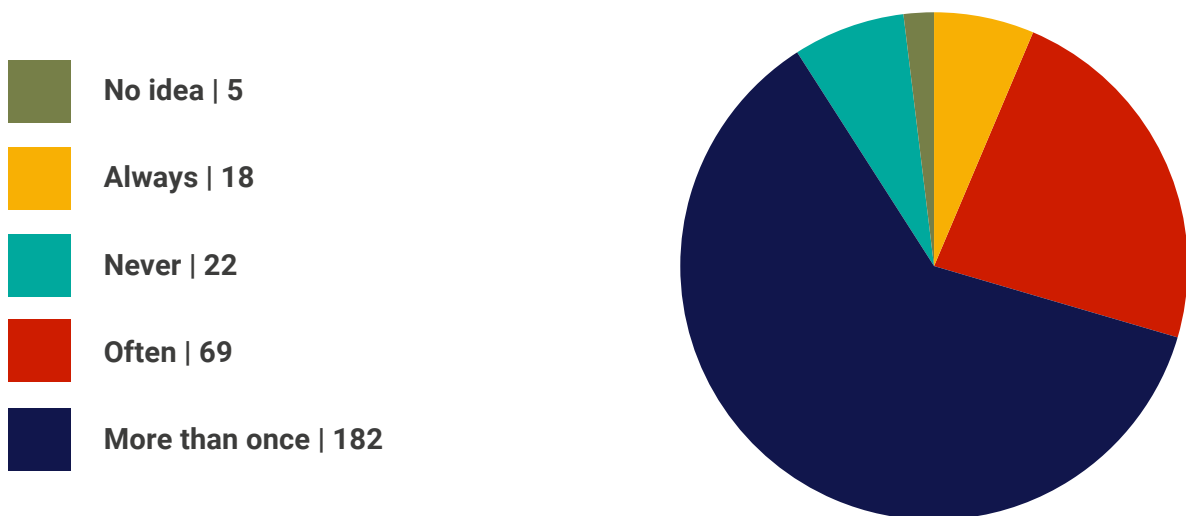
More than once | 182

Over half of the participants (61.5%) stated that they had been subject to digital violence more than once. While 23.3% selected "often" as a response to "What is the frequency of the digital violence to which you were subjected?" those who indicated they are always subject to digital violence comprised 6.1%s. These findings reveal that digital violence on the internet has become a systematic phenomenon and often targets a person more than once:

> I receive messages such as "Are you tro?"[51] from random and unknown people via DM on Instagram, anonymous penis photos on WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram. People who took my phone number from my Twitter account called me to mock, swear, insult and threaten me. Once, under the sex work announcement I shared on Twitter, an anonymous account called me by the name assigned at birth and said, "What's up dude?" I was once threatened with acid on my face on WhatsApp. Also, someone used my photo to fool other girls on WhatsApp and shared what he did with hundreds of people on Periscope live.
>
> **Heterosexual trans woman (35), Ankara**

> A hate campaign was organised against me, disclosing my name and announcing, "Give this pervert what he deserves." New hashtag campaigns targeting LGBTQI+s appear on Twitter almost every week.
>
> **Non-binary person (32), Ankara**

According to our research, the effects of violence on social media have a devastating impact on self-expression. These findings indicate that, most of the LGBTQI+ individuals who have been the target of digital violence say there was long-term damage or harm to their mental health.

A vast majority of LGBTQI+ people (82.6%) feel angry after witnessing hate speech on the internet; 69.2% said they feel threatened while 58.5% said they felt unhappy. These emotions that arise when faced with hate speech are also followed by the feelings of loneliness and loss of self-worth. Some 38.5% of the participants stated they remembered the negative incidents after experiencing hate speech.

The excerpt below reveals that digital violence also results in fatigue and self-censorship:

> You hear so many insults. People say unspeakable things about your body, your sexual orientation and gender identity, your health status; they mock you. Certain groups are united in hatred. Of course, this has a real-life consequence. What I face are kind of things that I would think twice before putting into words and refrain from saying in real life. It is draining to hear all this. Of course, time would not suffice to reply to those; you don't even know how to handle so many them. Life goes on.

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51 Tro is derogatory word used for transwomen to insult them.

I have my work, my friends, my to-do lists. I have to take precautions such as not posting online for a while and protecting my account from general access. In fact, I hardly post on Twitter these days.

From an in-depth interview with GDA (27),
a pansexual transwoman living in Ankara

Who are the perpetrators?

When asked about the perpetrators of violence on social media, 239 participants answered, "People unknown to me." Based on the responses to this question in which multiple answers were allowed, the perpetrators consist of troll accounts (160 cases), bot accounts (70 cases), friends (64 cases), someone from school (56 cases), partner or ex-partner (54), politicians (54 cases), journalists (41 cases), academics (30 cases), corporate accounts of media organisations (30 cases), corporate accounts of political parties (27 cases), social media influencers (26 cases), relatives (25 cases) and public administrators (22 cases). The reason we have allowed multiple answers stems from the fact that in most cases, the perpetrators were more than one person and their identities were diverse. This diversity is reflected in the responses and the percentages here should be seen as a way sorting the perpetrators identities or group alignments.

These results can be interpreted as follows: the perpetrators of violence against LGBTQI+ persons on the internet are mostly unidentified. In cases where the identity is known to the survivor, a significant portion of the perpetrators consists of people from social circles such as friends, family and partners, as well as politicians, journalists and academics. Similarly, the report prepared as the output of the forum on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence states that most of the digital violence is carried out by using anonymous accounts or accounts with pseudonyms or fake names, thereby making it difficult to identify the perpetrators.[52]

Participants' responses to our open-ended questions indicate the diversity of the perpetrators. Among the most recurring responses across participants are: politicians affiliated with the ruling party, pro-government newspapers and journalists, political Islamists, ultra-nationalists, nationalists, right-wingers, tariqas, religious communities, the minister of interior affairs, the Directorate of Religious Affairs and trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). Furthermore, the responses reveal that, unlike digital violence in a general sense, in the case of hate speech and hate crimes, the perpetrators' identities and credentials are explicit and there is often a political motivation.

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52   IGF. (2015). *Internet Governance Forum Best Practice Forum on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women.*

I was subject to violence by TERFs. With liberals, conservatives, cis-hetero men getting on board, the violence spirals. In the last instance, I was subject to a weeklong, transphobic, digital lynching on March 8. All this can lead many people to close or protect their online accounts. They have been directing violence against me for a year now. I became member of a political party. By digging out my tweets from two years ago and sharing those, they targeted me saying, "You don't accept X, you take THIS to the party." On top of being anti-trans, X is also someone who talks to racist, pro-government people. The political party's rejection of X wasn't only because X was TERF. Likewise, being TERF is not a criterion when we look at the party bylaw. Then I was asked to resign. What's happening isn't just happening on social media. It affects many aspects of our lives. Although there was no formal resignation process, there were minor hold-offs. The strategy is to drive out trans people. I blocked all the hatemongers because I was losing my mental health.

Excerpt from the in-depth interview with bisexual, trans man SÖİ (28), living in Izmir

Everything happened all of a sudden. Other activist fellows, academics and non-governmental organisations were subject to similar incidents. In other words, it was like many incidents that I previously witnessed, followed, felt anger, and established solidarity against. But experiencing it directly was something else. All of a sudden, I found myself encountering a newspaper, a journalist whose existence was totally unknown to me until that moment, and the audience they mobilised. It was following the advocacy and training activities I conducted, the materials I produced, that this targeting started. I was in a state of bafflement, full of panic, fearfulness and anxiety, apart from a lot of anger. It didn't end there either. My social media accounts were open. I am not a very active user. I was subject to harsh insults by the journalist who started this whole process of targeting and violence, and by the audience he invited to pursue the hateful discourse against me. In addition to insults such as "perverts, deviants, and paedophiles", the violent threats were intense in private messages and in the comments made under the posts I shared before. These messages included threats of physical violence, sexual violence in particular. I protected my online accounts and following the advice of my rights-defender friends who experienced similar incidents before, I reduced my social media visibility for a while. Screenshots of the photos I once shared were taken before I protected my accounts. These were also disseminated online. Then I got threatening phone calls. It also made the process extra hurtful for me. I felt like they were right over my shoulders. I even wondered if I was safe at home.

Excerpt from the in-depth discussion with SEİ

Media as a tool of anti-LGBTQI+ campaigns

"You are recording it, but you do not publish it. Nobody hears our voice."

This was a cry uttered in sheer hopelessness when the police attacked the Pride Parade in Istanbul in 2015, which had been a peaceful event until then. This was how Hande Kader, along with her friend Didem Akay, sitting right next to her on the sidewalk, was calling out to the media as the two were battered by high-pressure water cannons from armoured police vehicles. Soon both Hande and Didem were taken into custody. On that day, many were injured, some even losing an eye. Photographs taken of the event were published yet we saw neither Hande's nor Didem's name in the media. It looked like it was only possible to see the LGBTQI+ stories in the media until the next Pride Parade if they were killed or targeted by the government. And that is what happened. A year after the parade, in 2016, it was discovered that a young transwoman was burned alive. That person was none other than Hande Kader. This time the media referred to her by her name. Everybody wrote about her. Then she was buried in what is heartbreakingly referred as the media's "cemetery for the unclaimed". These days Hande is one of the names cited along with those of the other slain transwomen as part of press releases issued by Turkish LGBTQI+ associations. Didem, who was sitting next to Hande on the sidewalk during the 2015 raid, did appear in the media in 2019. She had committed suicide. The media had allocated a few perfunctory lines to her while revisiting Hande Kader's murder by publishing the picture from 2016. And then, Didem, too, became a fading memory.

Results of Kaos GL's 2021 Media Monitoring Report, which was prepared by examining news, columns and interviews in print media, show the layers of invisibility in the media. While there are serious human rights violations happening, the media goes beyond invisibility and becomes one of the perpetrators. Today news, which once was objective without violating the rights of LGBTQI+ groups, now abets the violation. Moreover, news about LGBTQI+ persons makes it to the papers only if they are exposed to hatred or discrimination. There are no positive stories about LGBTQI+ groups or individuals and studies or opinions coming from the community are ignored by the media. This finding, which has remained unchanged since 2017, indicates that LGBTQI+ people find it tough to be represented in the media and their voice is silenced. It also points to their dehumanisation and they are represented as, so to speak, a "problem" instead of subjects who have lives, wills and rights.[53] According to the research, for which 4,011 reports published in the print media were examined, only 43% (1,707) of the LGBTQI+- related reports could be viewed as rights-based journalism. As for 2,273 reports, which made up more than half (57%) the fundamental rights of LGBTQI+ people were violated, and hate and/or discriminatory language used to reinforce prejudices.

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53   https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/medya-i-zleme-2021-web.pdf

Discriminatory language, portraying LGBTQI+ identities as crime, disease, perversion, immorality or sin, hate speech, hate crime, and violation of freedom of speech and organisation topped violation of rights subcategories. Discriminatory language was used in 2,161 reports, interviews and columns in 2021. This corresponds 54% of all the LGBTQI+-related reports published in 2021. Hate speech was identified in 1,249, that is to say, 31% of the reports. This situation is explained in the report as follows:

> This shows us that hate speech against LGBTQI+ communities is frequently created in the news, columns and interviews related to the İstanbul Convention and protests against appointment of trustee-rector to Boğaziçi University, in 2021. We can say that hate speech has taken place in the media through politicians, in favour of politics, in line with our researches in the past years. On the other hand, when we look at the news, interviews and columns which do not contain hate speech, we observed that "Woman and LGBTI" was the most frequently repeated word group. This indicates that while the newspapers, which internalise creating hate as an editorial policy, target LGBTQI+ persons by their full appellation, those that do try to respect rights-based journalism and LGBTQI+ rights, use the terminology in a half-hearted manner.

Among the perpetrators, journalists are accused of actively spreading hate speech, and they constitute a group that needs to be specifically examined. The media in Türkiye is one of the key areas that leads the production and dissemination of hate speech against LGBTQI+ communities. According to Kaos GL's 2021 Media Monitoring Report, discriminatory discourse against LGBTQI+ people was used in 54% of the news published throughout the year, and they were targeted with hate speech with a rate of 31%. The situation is further detailed in the report as follows:

> 2021 has been a year in which LGBTQI+ identity and existence were painted as "immorality", "disease", "perversion", "crime" and sin" in the print media. The print media frequently employed discriminatory discourse. More than half of the related reports were discriminatory. In 2021, almost half the reportage (in total 1,898) contained a call to violate LGBTQI+ people's freedom of expression and association. The smear campaigns that have been going on for years under the "Shut Down LGBTQI+ Associations" gained momentum once combined with the agenda against the protests in Boğaziçi University and the Istanbul Convention. Nearly half the reports related LGBTQI+ communities and organisations targeted the existence of LGBTQI+ people and attacked their freedom of expression. Simultaneous calls were made to shut down their associations. This shows that the anti-LGBTQI+ movement has become entrenched in the media and the hostility against LGBTQI+ communities is sustained.[54]

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54   Tar, Y. (2022). 2021 *Media Monitoring Report*. Kaos GL.

Additionally, the report stated that the media in Türkiye is divided into two camps: pro-government media and alternative media. And the former, which occupies most of the media space, is the direct perpetrator of state-sponsored hate-mongering campaigns.

When we consider these facts, it is not surprising to see that journalists also organise hate campaigns on social media, a direct consequence of news and articles targeting LGBTQI+ people. One example is the Tarlabaşı Toplum Merkezi case. Two separate lawsuits were filed against the Association for Supporting Tarlabaşı Community (TTM), which has been working to provide safe places, especially for children and women, for 15 years. The Community Centre, which has been targeted by the media for almost a year, learned about the suits filed via the media. It had organised a volunteering activity on 27 June 2021, in which the guidebook, titled How to protect LGBTQI+ students against family and school oppressors, would be discussed. However, a journalist targeted this activity in the social media and hate speech, targeting and defamation went on systematically until 9 February 2022. Following this, representatives from the Ministry of Family and Social Services Beyoğlu District Directorate, Department of Social Services, paid a visit to the association. Four days later, TTM was subject to an audit by the General Directorate of Civil Society Relations. It was neither informed about the audit's conclusions, nor of the visit. Simultaneously, the Police Department Youth Service slapped a "crime of obscenity" case on 9 July 2021. Nothing came of the investigation. As for the audit, carried out by the Association Auditors from Ministry of Interior between 26 July and 20 August 2021, resulted in a case filed against TTM. Lawyers for TTM learned there was a suit pushing for its disbanding. While this case is not very strong, it could result in administrative fine for lapses like missing ledger records, organising educative meets without receiving permission, and failure to asseverate its publications to the Office of Chief Public Prosecutor. TTM's LGBTQI+-related statements which were described as "obscenity" in an unlawful and discriminatory manner, formed the basis of the case. The indictment referred to "people known as LGBTI (gay, lesbian, bisexual, travesty, intersex) in short, who try to influence gender identity of children by normalizing their sexual orientation, in the society".

On which platforms does digital violence occur?

Among the platforms on which violence take place, Twitter accounts for a whopping 56.7%. Instagram follows with 52.4%, according to our survey respondents. Facebook, dating apps, online games and WhatsApp are among the mediums where they face violence intensely. Based on the results of Türkiye Digital Violence Research by the Common Knowledge and Communication Association, the platforms where acts of digital violence are most common are Instagram (53%) Facebook (35%) and Twitter (19%).[55] The gap between our finding of Twitter users experiencing the most violence and the other finding that comes from a non

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55   Common Knowledge and Communication Association. (2021). *Türkiye Digital Violence Research*. Op. cit.

LGBTQI+ population is noteworthy. If we reflect on this while also considering the profile of the perpetrators and the ways in which this violence is manifested, we can deduce that this gap may stem from the intensity of the attacks. Specifically, digital violence against LGBTQI+ communities in Türkiye is mostly in the form of systematic hate attacks. It is possible that the more frequent use of Twitter for daily news feed and political debates as well as the rapid spreading of hate campaigns through hashtags may have contributed to this gap.

Apart from these findings, the excerpts below also indicate that digital violence continues in online dating applications too:

> You can write your HIV status on Hornet. When I marked my status as positive, someone wrote me, "I am homophobic to HIV positives." Completely out of nowhere, since I didn't write anything to that person, nor did I look at their profile. The person is also an LGBTQI+ using that application. But living with HIV makes you such a target in society that even an LGBTQI+ person claims they can expose you to homophobia and that it is acceptable.
>
> **In-depth interview with GDA (27)**
> **who is a pansexual transwoman living in Ankara**

> I consider this as violence: a man I met on Tinder corresponds with me for weeks using someone else's photos and we decide to meet. And then, apparently, he is an older and different person than the one who was in the photos. He couldn't do any harm except for emotional abuse, as I got rid of him in a short time.
>
> **Non-binary person (27),**
> **İstanbul, (survey participant)**

> A manager whom I didn't know much from the workplace I quit, sent me a WhatsApp message and insulted me over my sexual orientation. I blocked him without replying and deleted his message. Next time, he started to write similar things under my public photos on Facebook. Again, I deleted his comments, blocked him and restricted his access to my photos. Apart from that, I also received a few anonymous and offensive messages through dating apps for gays but blocking those accounts was enough to make it stop.
>
> **Gay cisgender man (20),**
> **Bursa (survey participant)**

From our in-depth interviews, the account of a heterosexual transwoman (34) living in Ankara reveals the dimensions of sexual violence as well as how it is heightened in coordination with transphobia:

> They text me without knowing that I am transgender. First, they flirt with me. When I state that I am a transwoman or when they check my other content and

understand it, they say "bro", "sir", "I want nothing to do with you", "Kazım Bro", or they would say things that are much more insulting or explicitly objectifying. One would say, "Send me your dick". Someone I've never met would send a photo of his own penis or a video of him masturbating and ejaculating in direct message. Indeed, this means that I have been subject to sexual violence in a digital environment.

Strategies for coping with digital violence

Asked about the strategies for coping with digital violence, 82.9% of the participants stated they blocked online accounts that inflicted violence. Such a high rate reveals that LGBTQI+ people do not believe there is any mechanism that would protect them or prevent violence they are subject to. It also indicates they find their own solution by preventing the perpetrators accessing them on social media. Sharing the incident of violence with friends (58.9%) ranks second among coping strategies, and filing a complaint to the communication desk of the relevant social media or internet platform (53.2%) ranks third. A significant portion of LGBTQI+ people reported that they restrict their freedom of expression to avoid further violence. Some 32.9% stated they restricted access to their social media accounts after being subject to violence, while 17.1% closed their accounts even after opting for protected accounts. Similarly, research on cyber tracking through technology in Australia, revealed that those subject to digital violence are generally unwilling to call for help and that they think they will not be believed.[56]

The following quote from one of our research participants explains that, in addition to self-censorship, she had to move to another place after the threats she received:

> When I was targeted during the state of emergency period, I had to move. Before moving, I had to go to my friends' place and spend 15 to 20 days there. I was afraid that being personally targeted in the newspapers might turn into a physical attack. Sometimes I get angry, sometimes I laugh and let it go. Apparently, given the systematic nature of the attacks, I have normalised it. It seems normal but in fact it should not be. Being targeted so much also triggered panic attacks in me. There comes a moment when I realise that what I am experiencing is not normal.
>
> **TYA (32), a non-binary interviewee living in Ankara**

Against these rates of individual solutions, only five participants stated that they turned to the police for help when they were subject to digital violence. Furthermore, only 26 participants have tried other sorts of legal support. These results are similar to findings from other work on hate crimes targeting LGBTQI+ communities in Türkiye.

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56 Woodlock, D. (2017). The Abuse of Technology in Domestic Violence and Stalking. *Violence Against Women, 23*(5), 584-602. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801216646277

Based on Kaos GL Association's 2019 report on homophobia- and transphobia-based hate crimes in Türkiye, severe anxieties experienced by people who have been subject to hate crimes on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender characteristics at home or in public places, further escalates specifically by distrust and even fear of law enforcement. As a result, only a few hate crimes are reported to the police. Based on the findings of the survey conducted in 2019, only 26 out of 150 cases were reported to the police. The reasons for not reporting are mostly stated as "not believing that the appeal will work", "avoiding being outed by the police to the family or to the media" and "rejecting to experience discrimination by the police":[57]

> I was subjected to threats and attacks via WhatsApp and Instagram by the owner of the institution I used to work for. I could not file a complaint because if I did, he could have learnt where I live from the case file. However, later on, my Instagram account as well as the accounts of other people he attacked were shut down many times. While this escalated to cyberbullying and the violation of private space rights, for a long time I could not share it with anyone other than my close circle. Since I could not come out to my family, it became unbearable. I don't know if it's related to being an LGBTQI+ activist but no matter how I felt, I was not afraid. I shared the situation with my chosen family and started to get safety precautions accordingly. I either removed the accounts that I used actively on many platforms or had to protect them from general public access.
>
> **Non-binary gay person (28),**
> **İstanbul (survey participant)**

The strategies for coping with both hate speech and digital violence are generally similar. The vast majority of respondents stated that they block accounts that abuse them:

> For the past few years, I have not expressed my reaction against hate campaigns. I think it may threaten my physical safety. I don't share those so as not to take part in disseminating the hate campaign. If there is a discourse against a hate campaign or if I have something to say against it, I prefer to share those kinds of messages.
>
> **Excerpt from an in-depth interview with KJA (35),**
> **a heterosexual transwoman living in Ankara**

> It has been a year that I have been on pins and needles, even more than I had been during previous periods of my life. Before this last incident, I wouldn't say that I lived in safety and peace in this country either. However, this incident extremely escalated my feelings of fear and restlessness. I used to act very spontaneously in life; I currently feel that sometimes there comes an inner sense of control. It is as if someone is looking over my shoulder, constantly surveilling and stalking me. If someone had described this feeling to me before, I would not have understood it

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57   Kaos GL. (2019). *Report on Homophobia and Transphobia Based Hate Crimes in Türkiye.*

very well. Hence, I say that experiencing it personally is something else. Plus, this process has turned me into a much more angry person. My anger has heightened exponentially given the hatred and the violence I have been subject to as well as the pro-perpetrator stance taken by the legal mechanisms which I have resorted to against this violation of rights. Because my anger is not fully addressed at the real agents, it comes out in unexpected circumstances. I'm also on edge because understanding and regulating all these inner states became my responsibility. It's kind of like, "Why am I bothering with this?!" I was able to sort all this out gradually as I accepted all my feelings, reflected on all the hate discourse we were subject to, talked and shared those I trusted. Listening to the experiences of my rights defenders and non-governmental organisations, who have gone through similar processes, thinking together, being together, strengthening our solidarity, receiving individual therapy support, and my friends' care and compassion have been very empowering.

Excerpt from the in-depth discussion with SEİ

Restriction to freedom of expression

According to research done in Sri Lanka on gender, sexualities and sexual behaviour on the internet,[58] most people said their use of the internet was definitely or sometimes affected by their gender and sexuality. When we take these findings into consideration, censorship in the online space is also related to one's own right to express one's sexuality and gender.

Participants who indicated that their social media accounts were shut down by the online platforms constituted 30% of the sample. Among these, half reported that their social media accounts were shut down more than once. In more than half the cases, social media platforms cited "Community Rules" as the reason for shutting down LGBTQI+ people's accounts. Significantly, in these indicated cases (30%), no justification for the shutdown was provided at all:

They shut down my account twice by reporting it to Twitter. Once, Twitter stated, "The issue is not related to us." Then my account was activated again. In the second instance, Twitter said they shut down my account because of "obscenity and violation of community rules." The reason was my drawing of LGBTQI+ children. In another one, I had a drawing about masturbation. You draw stuff about masturbation and then people tag the Ministry of Interior Affairs under it. They shut my account after that.

Excerpt from the in-depth interview with AAA (34),
bisexual cis woman living in Ankara

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58   Perera, S., & Ibrahim, Z. (2021). *Somewhere Only We Know: Gender, sexualities, and sexual behaviour on the internet in Sri Lanka*. Association for Progressive Communications.
https://erotics.apc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Somewhere-only-We-Know-Online.pdf

Usually, when the things I post are reported as obscene content or my posts are evaluated as such on the social media platform I share, the platform removes the post or I get suspended. My Instagram account has been shut down many times already. I use Twitter professionally so that I find customers and create working opportunities. Even if I don't post very obscene stuff there, when I'm spammed or reported to Twitter, my accounts are shut down on the grounds of selling sexual content or prostitution. Dozens of my Twitter accounts have been shut down. My Hornet account was shut down twice for reasons of prostitution but in reality, people with whom I was messaging sent my private messages to report me. What's more, let's say I share my photo with underwear on Hornet; this will appear on the homepage and in the timeline. When men share, it is not removed at all. But when I share it, the content receives a direct warning and is removed within two or three minutes. And then I receive a message saying, "You posted a photo that violated Hornet rules." Thus, you have to share a photo in which you are fully clothed; while men can post topless photos or with slips, mine becomes a problem even if I post a photo in a bikini.

Excerpt from the in-depth interview with KJA (35),
a heterosexual transwoman living in Ankara

Among the participants, 67.2% stated that they objected formally when social media platforms shut down their accounts. Thus, a striking finding is that while participants indicated that they often do not resort to any mechanism when subject to digital violence, they prefer to seek their rights when it comes to censorship:

My mood is not stable. Sometimes these things frustrate me extremely. Other times, they sadden me deeply. Sometimes I don't care. Other times I make fun of those. And sometimes I feel desperate, as if my reality is a toy in others' hands. When a hundred people wrote the same thing, I once questioned myself, thinking, "Is that so really?" I self-censor sometimes [as] I don't want others to come down on me. I censor myself once, twice and thrice… Then on the fourth I blow up, causing a big ripple. I also censor myself because of the state and the policies of the institutions I work for. My friends' pages are being shut down because they post sex-positive contents. Even seeing their account being shut down leads me to censor myself. Exposure to digital violence is absurd. There is information out there and it needs to be disseminated. There is information that is being hindered. This information is prevented [from being disseminated] not only on social media but also in books. Censorship is already in our lives.

Excerpt from an in-depth interview with ÖSB (34),
a pansexual non-binary person living in Bursa

The following testimonies from the survey participants indicate that censorship and self-censorship have turned systemic:

> Instagram shut down my account many times, without providing me any specific response. Later, I learned that my account was targeted in troll groups and my picture was disseminated. The most recent shutting down happened after a business owner whom I once worked for, learned that I would be involved in the legal case after he abused another homosexual person at work. Both the colleague's account and mine were simultaneously shut down. We were subject to threats and my colleague had to leave İstanbul. My account was shut down twice, while my complaints were left without a solution.
>
> **Non-binary gay person (22), İstanbul**

> I can say that I have applied self-censorship upon the LGBTQI+ community's exposure to recent hate campaigns.
>
> **Lesbian person (40), İzmir**

> I don't understand why live casters get banned because of showing their chest or talking about things that are perceived as obscene on gay dating apps like Hornet.
>
> **Gay person (52), İstanbul**

Furthermore, in 2021, the censorship practices by the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), which oversees digital and analogue broadcasts, reveal that censorship, as a systemic phenomenon in addition to singular examples, threatens the freedom of expression and security of LGBTQI+s on the internet. Based on Kaos GL's Human Rights Report of 2021, as had been the case in previous years, RTÜK continued its sanctions on broadcasts that contain LGBTQI+ visibility and, in cases where sanctions were not imposed, broadcasters were intimidated by the chairman into excluding LGBTQI+ characters.[59]

What to do

Participants' responses to the question, "What do you think should be done to prevent violence, hatred and censorship against LGBTQI+ individuals on the Internet?" were distributed almost equally across the options:

- Laws and regulations should be enacted.
- Community rules of social media platforms should be updated.
- Social media platforms should take additional steps to protect LGBTQI+s.
- Social media platforms should work with LGBTQI+ organisations.

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59   Dikmen, K. (2022). *Against All Odds, LGBTQI+ Human Rights Report of 2021*. Kaos GL.

- LGBTQI+ organisations should work on censorship on the internet.
- Human rights organisations should work on censorship against LGBTQI+ communities on the internet.
- LGBTQI+ individuals should organise and fight against censorship.

The above response reveals that LGBTQI+ people consider the fight against digital violence a holistic issue and that multidimensional and extensive steps need to be taken:

We know that reporting hate and violent content and the complaint mechanism itself are insufficient. My friends and I have witnessed this ourselves. We are tired of reporting tweets, and the burden weighs on us. Plus, even though that [offensive] content is removed, the hate and the violence do not end there. Protective and preventive mechanisms that go beyond existing mechanisms should be developed. What is freedom of expression? What is abuse of freedom of expression? How does abuse affect people's lives, and to whom does it do harm? What are sanctions and are they functional or transformative? We've seen people whose accounts were suspended or shut down, get back and continue generating violence from where they left. Companies such as Twitter and Facebook need to work on all these issues and quickly remove content that fosters discrimination, violence, and calls for violence, while also making room for freedom of expression. Of course, this is not only about the regulating the [tech firms]; prosecutors must also take action against hate speech in the digital environment.

Excerpt from the in-depth discussion with SEİ

I do not approve the measures taken by the state. Any regulation resurges back as a kind of censorship. The so-called disinformation law is used for censorship purposes. The platforms do not practise the inclusivity and the diversity they claim to do. We know they don't. They need to take steps to fulfil their claims.

Excerpt from the in-depth discussion with TYA

Since we know that there is no sanction for this, it is something that can only be dealt with activities that would create awareness. Some people don't even know that what they have been exposed to is digital violence. These contents can be very devastating for an LGBTQI+ individual.

Excerpt from the in-depth discussion with the TSA

Something should be done to empower lubunyas[60] who use social media. I have been mostly subject to violence on Instagram and Twitter, but I have also been subject to sexual violence on dating apps. There were also violent comments written under the videos of the broadcast programmes in which I was a guest.

Excerpt from the in-depth interview with ÖSB

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60   "Lubunya" is a part of the queer slang/lexicon (i.e. lubunca) in Türkiye and can be roughly translated as queer.

6.

Conclusion

For LGBTQI+ individuals, who are subjected to discrimination, stigma and serious threats to their personal security, digital space is one of the crucial mediums to exercise their fundamental rights. Within the digital space, they can access critical information that is restricted or censored in the offline space, establish relatively safe communities, and organise for the progression of human rights. However, LGBTQI+ persons who actively use social media networks witness threats or comments directly, attacking their gender identity, sexual orientation, as well as their digital and physical security. Also, surveillance brings offline consequences to online victimisation.

Many survivors of digital violence face social stigma and safety risks in reporting online abuse. The types of violence and hate speech encountered in digital spaces are still perceived as "trivial events". Although the diverse forms of digital violence have severe effects on those who are exposed to them, it can be stated that this "trivialisation" and the limited support systems constitute an obstacle for LGBTQI+ individuals to use the support mechanisms.

Given the difficulty in reporting digital violence against LGBTQI+ communities and the perceptions and attitudes of most service providers to gender equality when they are supposed to provide support to the survivors, digital violence continues to be swept under the rug, remaining an issue difficult to investigate comprehensively.

Because digital violence is not fully researched and investigated, only a few perpetrators are held accountable for their actions. For many LGBTQI+ persons, social barriers, limitations in conditions for legal recourse and other factors prevent access to justice. This exacerbates the situation where reporting/appeal levels are already low, contributing to the vicious circle.

Access to the internet is becoming a necessity in daily life and is now being considered as a basic human right; it is therefore crucial to ensure that the digital space is a safe place for everyone.

One of the key findings of the research is how online and offline violence intertwines and has a symbiotic relationship. In most of the cases, violence starts online but does not stop there. It escalates into physical threats and attacks, leading to the feeling of insecurity among the LGBTQI+ community. Another finding is that offline threats can also turn into online hate campaigns easily.

When we look into the aftermath of online hate campaigns, LGBTQI+ individuals face total loneliness. The politics fuelling the hate campaigns also inhibits the survivors from filing formal complaints. When the perpetrator is affiliated with the government, the official complaint mechanisms turn useless. A striking finding is that, while participants indicated that they often do not resort to any mechanism when subject to digital violence, they preferred to seek their rights regarding censorship by raising their objection with social media platforms.

LGBTQI+ individuals do not believe there is any mechanism that would protect them or prevent violence they are subject to. They tend to find their own solution by preventing the perpetrators accessing them on social media.

The patriarchal and heterosexist power structures in the offline spaces find an echo in online spaces too. Online and offline spaces are intertwined to increase the vulnerability and insecurity among LGBTQI+ people.

When we consider the experiences of the queer community, it is crucial to understand that the binary distinction between online and offline places is false and there is a clear connection between the two. Online settings are easily affected by prejudice, hate speech and heterosexism that occurs offline. Additionally, offline violence, stalking, and even hate crimes can stem from online harassment.

The effects of violence on social media have a devastating impact on self-expression. The findings indicate that most LGBTQI+ persons targeted by digital violence reported long-term damage or harm to their mental health.

Participants frequently identified pro-government organisations as the culprits, both during the interviews and the survey. This may come as a surprise to people unfamiliar with the current state of LGBTQI+ rights in Türkiye. However, since 2015, the Turkish government has taken a hostile stance against LGBTQI+ rights, outlawing gatherings, police violence on Pride Marches, and letting loose a smear campaign against the LGBTQI+ community. Government policies can be regarded as reflecting in the high prevalence of digital violence as well as in its other manifestations.