High School Students' Fears Based on Social Environment and Social Media in the Context of Risk Society: The Case of Balıkesir[*]

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Abstract: The risks of the modern world closely affect individuals' daily lives within the social structure at all times and in all areas. The perception of a world full of dangers is the reason to have the decisions taken in life evaluated under the theme of risks. Youths who take measures to avoid any faced risk have formed a culture of fear in a way that with time will also impact their social perceptions and practices. This study aims to obtain new findings on the issue of high school students' social fears in the context of risk society. In this study, the types of social fears and their effects on daily life have been examined in the conceptual framework of the changing perception of risk, risk society, fear culture, and trust. A total of 45 students, 24 girls and 21 boys, have been interviewed in the scope of the research. The research data has been obtained by performing in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview form. This article will discuss high school students' fears based on social environments and social media in the context of risk society.

Keywords: risk society • social fears • social media • social environment • high school students

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Today's society has a rapidly changing and evolving structure. This transformation has not been experienced in just one area but also includes many areas such as health, economy, politics, and technological and scientific innovations. In the face of these changes, which will directly or indirectly affect individuals' daily lives, many things have reached a transformation different from the past. Social structure, under the influence of the past, attempts to adapt to today's reality and exhibits precautionary behavioral structures towards possibilities about the future. Individuals have obtained a position within society for themselves under the influence of the events experienced within daily life and have shaped their social relations on the axis of these situations. In particular, fearful narrations about recent new dangers have caused the effect of *social fears* impacting individual lives to increase. Modern social order has set new rules for itself on the axis of risks, dangers, and social fears. Participating in the social order has also been shaped in connection with this. This article will address high school students' fears based on social media and social environments in the context of risk perceptions, risk society, and fear culture, which have undergone changes in the contemporary social order. This study aims to have sociologists, psychologists, architects, economists, police, and state administration become aware of these social fears in the communal structure and to raise awareness on this issue through preventive works, not by reinforcing it.

This study, which aims to identify the types of social fears high school youths have and to discover how it affects their lifestyles, intends to present new findings about social fears to the literature in the context of risk society. Being as social fears have not been previously addressed on a major scale and examining the issue from a different perspective academically differentiates the research from studies performed in the field. The basic feature of this study that separates it from others done in this field is that it aims to acquire broader knowledge about which aspects of social fears affect the lives of youths and the ways to avoid risks. Theoretical studies have been performed in Turkey in the context of risk society and fear culture, particularly on the near term. Master's theses and doctoral dissertations titled *A Theoretical Discussion on the Relationship between Fear Culture and Cities*, *Ulrich Beck's Risk Society Theory*, *Risk Society and Food Safety*, and *Risk Society and Religion*. Apart from these, a limited number of studies are also found on fear of crime, which occurs in the contents of social fears. Doctoral dissertations such as *Constructing Fear of Crime in Society*, *Perceptions of Victim Risk and Fear of Crime: An Application Directed at Middle Eastern Technical University Students*, and *Studying Fear of Crime in Two of Ankara's Districts* have been performed. However, social fears have been addressed generally through the quantitative dimension in these studies; generalizations related to the topic have been set forth.

This article attempts to reveal on which topics social fears are effective in young peoples' lives within the social order through a dimension that sociologists have yet

to address. Aside from the topic being addressed on the macro-scale, addressing it qualitatively represents that the research differs from others in that it has been performed in the field. The research has the quality of being a resource for other studies to be done on this topic because the topic offers a broad perspective. Due to the research time being limited and the conditions being insufficient, the sampling has been limited to Balıkesir and has been constructed using a specific age group. Alongside this, not interviewing with the students' families in this study has narrowed the scope of the research. This situation allows the students to focus on their ideas about social fears. In this context, the research can be expanded by centering on different types of social fear with different age groups or by discussing the social order where children live from the families' perspectives. Thus other studies can assess communities' social fears in the context of social media and their effects on daily life through different dimensions.

Method

Research Goal

This study, which has been performed on the fears about social environments and social media of high school students living in Balıkesir, has been prepared using a phenomenological approach in order to be able to understand individuals' social worlds and the concepts they form within everyday life, as well as to be able to observe the local conditions of their worlds of meaning. According to Kümbetoğlu (2012, p. 28), the phenomenological approach in the social sciences asserts that individuals form "these meanings" within the social environment they live and the relationships they establish; it asserts the need to evaluate individuals as the re-creators of their social worlds using their own subjectivity. The social world is a world formed naturally through meanings; therefore, the meanings that individuals place on it is more important than its objectivity.

Study Group and Data Collection Tool

The universe of the research consists of high school students living in Balıkesir. In forming the sample of the research, care was taken in varying students' school

Table 1

The Interviewed Students' High School Class and Gender

High School Class / Gender	Girl	Boy	Total
Freshman	8	6	**14**
Sophomore	4	6	**10**
Junior	6	5	**11**
Senior	6	4	**10**
TOTAL	**24**	**21**	**45**

levels, gender, and school type. The study group in this study, which interviewed 45 students, has 24 girls and 21 boys. According to high school class, 14 students are freshman, 10 are sophomores, 11 are juniors, and 10 are seniors.

Priority has been given to performing the study with students from prestigious schools different from one another by also taking the students' social environment into consideration while forming the sample group of schools. In this context, interviews have been conducted with students from the Anatolian High School, Science High School, Vocational High School for Girls, Vocational-Technical Anatolian High School, and Anatolian Imam Hatip High School for Boys and Girls.

The study investigates the recent daily lives, education, economy, family, and other social relations of high school youths and what their social fears are on future issues, as well as the impact on their lives within the social order. This study's data has been obtained as a result of in-depth interviews made using a semi-structured interview form. The data obtained from the interviews was encoded in accordance with the qualitative research method by analyzing the sound recordings of the interviews, which were analyzed in the context of social fears based on social environment and social media.

Findings

Social Fears That Form Based on Social Environment and Social Media

These days, social media and social environments are considered to trigger social fears. What stands out here is the impact of social environments, particularly those that support the increasing use of mass media in social life and the spreading of social fears in daily life. When considering social fears in the context of fear culture, media and environment effects being in actually present in all existing social fears draws attention. In this study on the social fears of youths in risk society, the emotions that form especially on topics such as the *danger zone* and *girls' social fears (the* Özgecan *Aslan Incident*) are seen to be directly connected to the media and environment.

The Danger Zone

In the interviews made with the high school students, 75% of the fears related to the dangerous and risky places of Balıkesir are understood to have formed over sensations received from the social environment rather than from what has been experienced. The students talked about no going into neighborhoods or on streets that were deemed the *danger zone*. Interviewee 41 (Male, Age 18) expressed his thoughts on the subject as, "There are places I've heard as the danger zone. They say the Gündoğan, Sakarya, and Gümüşçeşme neighborhoods are dangerous. So i never

go to there. Apart from these places, I think Balıkesir is a safe place." The area that was particularly mentioned in the interviews was Sakarya neighborhood. Interviewee 33 (Male, Age 16), who considers going alone to these danger zones to be risky, shared his thoughts with the words, "They generally say Sakarya and such, especially around Başçeşme cemetery. And also, they say Toygar is dangerous for its districts. But I never even go there because those districts are so forbidding to me."

Girls' Social Fear: The Özgecan Aslan Incident

Following the Özgecan Aslan Incident (February 2015), which awakened a great indignation in the community, demonstrations were done in various parts of Turkey; individual responses were also reflected at the same time on the Internet and social media. That period was reflected in the explosion of sales of protective equipment like stun guns and pepper spray. Subsequently, both girls and families introduced restrictions on their outer lives. Individual fears about harassment and rape do not occur only after events one has experienced; events that awaken great impact on society and that take place across the media trigger the formation of this fear socially. One-third of the female student interviewees expressed having social fears about harassment/rape in particular by giving the example of the Özgecan Aslan Incident.

From the answers students gave in the interviews is understood that the environment's perspective and dealings affect youths' social fears. In addition, another situation that also drew attention in the interviews was that the social fears some of the students have had increased during and after the Özgecan Aslan Incident, but with time they said their fears had diminished. Interviewee 30 (Female, Age 17) described her sensations related to this issue, saying, "I too had fear… they'd been forgotten for a time. Afterward I did something a little more, I forgot. Like it doesn't come to mind so much anymore, I'm not worried or scared like before."

Social Media's Social Fear

Social media has a great effect on the formation of social fears and on creating a global impact. However, individuals' fears about social media are found as a reflection of this. Social media accounts generally contain peoples' personal information and many cross-sections of their personal lives. Again in this context, social media represents youths' social environments, especially in the 21st century. Almost all the students I interviewed had personal accounts in many areas especially Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. In the interviews I did, more than two-thirds of the students expressed constantly following social media. Generally their daily access and use except apart from sleep time, even at meals, is consistent. Some students stated checking their accounts in the evening in general. Yet the students who stated this are seniors, and the reason for spending limited time on their social

media accounts is their need to study for the exams. Another point that additionally draws attention to this topic is the effective role family has in limiting this. Although as much as students live their own lives and make their own choices, the families' restrictions on their decisions cannot be ignored. Families' decisions and fears are seen effective in the formation of limitations in youths' social lives.

At the head of high school students' fears about social media comes *photos being stolen and used in bad places*. Students who said they use social media consciously in general expressed hearing that some students' photographs had been used this way and were scared their own would be used like this. Interviewee 44 (Male, Age) stated his thoughts on this topic as "I used to have no fear of social media. It started to form recently. Nowadays I have fears like bad people stealing my photos and doing something, taking my photos and publishing them somewhere else," and similarly Interviewee 9 (Gender, Age) also expressed the following thoughts on this issue, "I'm scared someone will steal my face. Nowadays we often hear they are stealing peoples' faces from photographs, using Photoshop on them, and posting them as naked photos. I'm so scared of this."

Interviewee 8 (Female, Age 17), like other high school students who think they can protect their space on social media, tried to ensure her own security by using the *block/report* option on social media in an experience she lived. However, even in this case, her fears that exist about social media were continuous. In particular, the sharpness of discourse towards harassment from photos shows the perspective of life in connection with physical abuse that had been previously experienced. High school students consider the first approach for protecting from the dangers of social media is to *block* people. However, more than half the students use the private blocking method on people after encountering this rather than first restricting their personal accounts. The first reason for this is also their ideas that their social media followers will affect their popularity in their social environment. For some, having more followers is important, though they cannot explain a single reason completely for wanting to add people they haven't met. Despite the biggest fear youths have about social media being "being used badly on other sites or in videos," youths are understood to be unable to give up obtaining more followers to maintain their popularity.

The biggest fear about social media, regardless of high school level or gender, is having their photos stolen and used without permission; the second fear, which parallels this, is youths having their account stolen. Youths, who claim their accounts don't have important information, expressed their greatest reason for this fear to be "losing their followers." Students with high numbers of followers explained that forming this was not easy and they didn't want to lose it. Some students had reservations about their accounts being stolen because of using personal information.

The youths are generally have fears about social media, but this has not limited their lives. For high school youths, especially those with very high social media use, social media represents their social environment despite the dangers. As a result, the social fears the interviewed students have about social media were seen to not have a limiting effect on their lives.

Results and Discussion

The most popular fears recently for the interviewed students as related directly to social media come as "having photos stolen and used in bad places" and "having one's personal account stolen." Therefore during the interviews, whether it was these events they experienced or news that spread by word of mouth, one of the biggest happenings that students think they can undergo is "social fears based on social media." For the youths who use social media most actively, this type of fear contains a partial transience because youths who mentioned they were scared of these situations still are using social media and have not limited themselves on this issue despite this fear.

Meanwhile, in the scope of the research and in the face of events like crime, harassment, and rape, conditional social fears are seen dominant in society. Having the news occupy the agenda too much on these issues at certain times causes people to behave warily within these time frames and to take protective measures. However, society later loses its sensitivity to these fears. Only a section of the students stated remembering the news from television; these include many saying like "I was a little scared at the time." This situation shows that events presented as a social chaos by the media lose their old impact within social life after a certain time. However, performing a multi-faceted study on this issue could provide the opportunity for more accurate information. Forming the research group from high school students may be one of the basic reasons for the dominance of conditional social fears in the research. If this study had been performed on families, whether or not certain conditional social fears cause structural social fears could have been examined in more detail. Yet the issue that drew attention in the research has been the fact that the main factor that determines the formation of conditional social fears in youths and their level of impact on social life is closely related to how long and how "exaggeratedly" the media handles the event because the types of social fears, the individuals' statements, and what they shared about their lives show verbatim parallels with the news in social media during the time it was experienced.

As a result, high school students' social fears show differences in the context of risk society due to local influences, gender, and diversity in schools. Together with this, various social fears have also impacted and even constrained their choices, behaviors, and attitudes within their social lives. Certain topics have been presented from time to time in

a way that "creates panic." Social media has particularly been impossible to limit on this topic. However, social media users' becoming aware of this issue is important because one of the areas where global impact is felt the most, perhaps the most important in this period, is social media. Studies that raise awareness in terms of not transforming social fears to global social fears supply extra importance. According to the research results, the following situation arose that needs to be discussed: Do social fears in the context of individuals' social lives constitute fear society, or if not, do all these trigger the society of fearlessness. Giving a single response to this issue is difficult. In fact, the process needs to be addressed first. Social fears are known to have also existed in the past. However, nowadays social fears are connected to the momentary conditions of social life and to their effects on social relations. Therefore, saying that social fears have formed on the topics the students mentioned is possible on the basis of the perception of a world filled with risks and dangers. Predicting the extent to which this situation has formed the basis of the society of fear that has emerged within the culture of fear is difficult. Nowadays, however, social fears are seen to have great effects on issues such as lack of trust, individualization, and loss of social capital. Such an unwinding at the social level and extinction of social norms has the nature of being able to trigger the formation of a *society of fearlessness* over time. In this process, the thoughts of the individual who remains alone on the issue of trust is based on "not feeling trust," and with the unwinding of the social fabric, individuals are condemned to live alone in protective cocoons.

Acknowledgements

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