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**To cite this article:** Marziya Assylbekova, Indira Saikhymuratova, Taner Atmaca, Baubek Somzhurek & Tolkyn Slamkulovna Slambekova (2024) Hidden wounds: unveiling the impact of social ostracism and bullying in university life (comparison of Kazakhstan and Türkiye), Cogent Education, 11:1, 2434774, DOI: [10.1080/2331186X.2024.2434774](https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2434774)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2434774>



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Published online: 01 Dec 2024.



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## Hidden wounds: unveiling the impact of social ostracism and bullying in university life (comparison of Kazakhstan and Türkiye)

Marziya Assylbekova<sup>a</sup>, Indira Saikhymuratova<sup>a</sup>, Taner Atmaca<sup>b</sup> , Baubek Somzhurek<sup>a</sup> and Tolkyn Slamkulovna Slambekova<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Pedagogy, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Kazakhstan; <sup>b</sup>Department of Education, Düzce University Faculty of Education, Türkiye

### ABSTRACT

This study explores the pervasive issue of social ostracism and bullying among university students in Kazakhstan and Türkiye, underscored by Goffman's (1963) stigma theory. It investigates how societal norms and categorizations contribute to the marginalisation of students based on various identities, leading to 'spoiled identities' and the amplification of these behaviours through digital media. Employing a multiple case research model within a qualitative methodological tradition, the study involves 10 students from Kazakhstan and 27 from Türkiye, utilising semi-structured interviews to collect data. The findings reveal that social ostracism and bullying are multifaceted phenomena deeply rooted in differences such as religious beliefs, political orientations, and socio-economic status. Key factors contributing to these issues include the influence of social media, lack of empathy, and prevailing social hierarchies. The effects on students' academic, social, and emotional well-being are profound, leading to decreased engagement, isolation, and psychological distress. While some students are unaware of university support mechanisms, those who have accessed such services report positive outcomes, highlighting the importance of visibility and accessibility. The study calls for comprehensive strategies addressing both the immediate and underlying factors of social ostracism and bullying, advocating for policy development, supportive interventions, and a commitment to fostering inclusivity.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 May 2024  
Revised 18 October 2024  
Accepted 21 November 2024

### KEYWORDS

Social ostracism; stigma; inequality; Kazakhstan; Türkiye

### SUBJECTS

Education Policy & Politics; Higher Education; School Leadership, Management & Administration; Sociology of Education

## Introduction

Social ostracism and bullying have recently become an increasingly common problem in educational settings (Carter-Sowell et al., 2008; Symaco, 2013; Wesselmann & Willams, 2017; Williams & Nida, 2011). Researchers from different countries around the world have drawn attention to the extent to which social ostracism or bullying is a major and widespread problem in different types and levels of schools (Ouattara et al., 2023; Wölfer & Scheithauer, 2013; Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014). They have identified social ostracism and bullying as pervasive issues that not only impact individual students' well-being but also disrupt the entire educational environment (Arslan, 2021). From elementary schools to universities, no educational institution seems immune to the detrimental effects of these behaviours. Moreover, the rise of digital communication platforms has extended the reach of social ostracism and bullying beyond the confines of physical classrooms, amplifying their influence and making them even harder to detect and address (Smith et al., 2017).

The prevalence of social ostracism and bullying in certain schools can largely be attributed to factors such as a lack of awareness and education about the nature and impact of ostracism (Ramsey & Jones, 2015), insufficient or inconsistently enforced anti-bullying policies (Calabrese, 2018), and a school culture that may inadvertently prioritise competition over collaboration, thus fostering exclusionary practices (Coyle, 2008). Additionally, the expansion of social media and digital communication platforms has

**CONTACT** Taner Atmaca  [taneratmaca34@gmail.com](mailto:taneratmaca34@gmail.com)  Department of Education, Düzce University Faculty of Education, Türkiye; Indira Saikhymuratova  [indiskh@mail.ru](mailto:indiskh@mail.ru); Tolkyn Slamkulovna Slambekova  [tolkyn\\_1969@mail.ru](mailto:tolkyn_1969@mail.ru)  Department of Pedagogy, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Kazakhstan

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facilitated the extension of ostracism beyond physical spaces, creating challenges in monitoring and addressing these behaviours effectively (Allen et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2021). Peer dynamics and established social hierarchies further exacerbate these issues, particularly in environments that fail to promote diversity and inclusion (Ozer, 2022). The role of adults within the school environment is also critical, as students often emulate the behaviours modeled by teachers and staff, highlighting the need for adults to demonstrate inclusive and respectful behaviour consistently (Sibanda & Mathwasa, 2020). Furthermore, schools with limited resources may find it challenging to implement programs that support social-emotional learning and restorative practices, which are vital for mitigating ostracism.

The effects of ostracism and bullying extend far beyond immediate emotional distress, leading to significant and long-term adverse outcomes for individuals. Research underscores that individuals subjected to social ostracism and bullying experience a profound sense of low community belonging or marginalisation, which can severely impact their psychological well-being and community belonging (Barron, 2022). Uskul and Over's (2017) findings show some evidence that collectivistic cultures and high levels of social interdependence are associated with less negative responses to ostracism. Moreover, the ramifications of such exclusionary practices include increased susceptibility to substance abuse, as victims of bullying and ostracism may turn to drugs or alcohol as coping mechanisms or deviant behaviour (Chukhlantsev et al., 2022). Studies have shown a correlation between experiencing bullying and the subsequent use of substances as a form of self-medication, aiming to alleviate the psychological pain caused by social ostracism (McCrystal et al., 2007). This association highlights the critical need for interventions that address both the immediate and extended consequences of bullying and ostracism within educational settings.

The origin of social ostracism and bullying within university environments is complex and multifaceted, influenced by a variety of factors including cultural disparities, established social hierarchies, and the competitive nature of academic environments (Williams, 2007). The nature of universities differentiates significantly from other educational institutions due to their diverse populations (Umbach & Kuh, 2006) the anonymity of larger campus life (Farrell, 2010), and a distinct emphasis on personal responsibility and academic competition (Musselin, 2018). Unlike other schools, universities offer a broad spectrum of social and academic experiences, often without the closely knit community structure present in smaller schools (Machado et al., 2002). This can lead to an increased risk of isolation for students, as the vastness of university settings may dilute the sense of belonging and community (Diehl et al., 2018). Additionally, the competitive academic environment, combined with the pursuit of personal and professional development, places unique pressures on students, potentially exacerbating the impacts of social ostracism (Bauer & Rokach, 2004).

Several theories have been proposed to understand the impact of social ostracism. The Temporal Need-Threat Model of Ostracism (Williams, 2009) posits that the effects of ostracism unfold in sequential stages: immediate pain, coping, and long-term consequences, such as increased susceptibility to conformity, diminished self-esteem, and the development of antisocial behaviours. Additionally, the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that ostracism threatens individuals' sense of belonging and identity within a group, potentially leading to negative self-perception and emotional distress. Also, Goffman's theory of Stigmatization (1963) helps us to understand how individuals are labeled and ostracized by others in social and daily life due to certain characteristics.

The problem of social ostracism and bullying among university youth can be profoundly understood through the lens of Erving Goffman's stigma theory, which elucidates the mechanisms through which individuals are marginalised based on characteristics that lead to a 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963). In university environments, where the formation and negotiation of social identity are critical, stigmatised individuals—identified by attributes such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, or physical appearance—often find themselves targets of exclusion and aggression. Goffman's conceptualisation provides a foundational framework for examining how these stigmas contribute to social ostracism and bullying, highlighting the processes of stereotyping, categorisation, and the enforcement of social norms that underpin these dynamics (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). The application of Goffman's theory in this context not only aids in identifying the root causes of such social challenges but also emphasises the importance of addressing stigma to mitigate the adverse effects of social ostracism and bullying within the university setting, advocating for a more inclusive and supportive academic community.

In this study, we tried to address the social ostracism and bullying experienced by university students in Kazakhstan and Türkiye within Goffman's perspective.

Despite the extensive research on the prevalence and effects of social ostracism and bullying in educational settings globally (Ahmed et al, 2023; Tang & Duan, 2023), there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning specific cultural and regional dynamics that influence these phenomena. This is particularly true for universities in Kazakhstan and Türkiye, where unique socio-political and cultural factors may shape the experiences of social ostracism and bullying in distinct ways. Existing studies often adopt a broad approach, overlooking the nuanced ways in which cultural contexts influence the manifestation and impact of these behaviours on university campuses. Moreover, there is a lack of focused research on the practical strategies that can effectively address and mitigate these issues within the specific educational landscapes of Kazakhstan and Türkiye.

Kazakhstan and Türkiye offer contrasting yet insightful cultural contexts that shape the nature of social ostracism and bullying within their university settings. In Kazakhstan, the cultural backdrop is deeply influenced by its history as a former Soviet republic and its diverse ethnic composition. Traditional values like collectivism, respect for elders, and maintaining social harmony play a significant role in social interactions (Binici, 2022). These cultural norms can both mitigate and exacerbate ostracism, as the emphasis on community may discourage exclusion, but strict adherence to social conformity can marginalise those who do not fit the norm. In contrast, Türkiye's cultural fabric, influenced by its Ottoman-Islamic heritage and secular modernisation, emphasises both community loyalty and social reputation (Ongur, 2015). These elements contribute to a social structure where exclusion may be more pronounced for individuals who fall outside established societal expectations. Moreover, both countries share a collectivist orientation, where group dynamics are crucial, but the ways in which these manifest in educational settings can differ based on regional, historical, and socio-political factors (Yaylacı & Islam, 2013). Understanding these cultural distinctions is essential for exploring how bullying and ostracism are experienced and addressed in Kazakhstan and Türkiye, providing a more nuanced analysis of the impact of socio-cultural factors on these behaviours.

This study is particularly important for the cultural settings of Kazakhstan and Türkiye due to the unique socio-cultural dynamics in these countries. Both nations are experiencing rapid social, political, and economic transformations, which directly impact their educational environments. In Kazakhstan, the blending of traditional values with modern influences creates a context where social conformity is highly valued, potentially intensifying the effects of ostracism for those who do not fit established norms. In Türkiye, the intersection of communal loyalty and evolving social structures highlights the tension between tradition and modernity, making exclusion and bullying a complex issue. By exploring these behaviours within these distinct cultural contexts, this study not only fills a gap in the literature but also provides critical insights for developing culturally sensitive interventions to foster more inclusive university environments in both countries.

The main problem of this research is to reveal the causes and effects of social ostracism and bullying among university students and to reveal them within the socio-cultural factors specific to both Kazakhstan and Türkiye. At the same time, the similarities and differences between the two countries regarding this phenomenon can be identified. Depending on this main problem, the following sub-problems were sought in this research.

- What are the main reasons that university students in Kazakhstan and Türkiye experience social ostracism and bullying?
- How social ostracism and bullying affect Kazakh and Turkish university students academic and social life?
- What kind of support do university students who experience social ostracism and bullying receive?
- What measures can be taken to prevent social ostracism and bullying in the university environment?

### **Social ostracism among youth**

Social ostracism constitutes a critical and distressing phenomenon, characterised by an individual's experience of being deliberately excluded or overlooked by one or more persons or groups,

precipitating a complex array of psychological ramifications (Williams, 2007). This exclusionary behaviour transcends specific environments, manifesting across diverse settings pivotal to a young person's daily experiences and social development. Notably, educational organisations emerge as primary arenas for such interactions, where the frequency and intensity of peer engagement are significant, and the emotional stakes are high (Gaviria & Raphael, 2001). Furthermore, the digital realm, particularly online social networks, has become a ubiquitous extension of adolescent social spheres, significantly influencing identity formation and peer relationships (Mikami et al., 2010). Familial contexts also serve as critical environments for social development, where exclusion can manifest in subtler forms such as neglect or differential treatment, with profound implications for the affected youth (Sanders et al., 2015).

The developmental stage of adolescence is marked by significant social and psychological growth, during which the formation of identity and the establishment of meaningful interpersonal relationships take precedence. The intrinsic human need for belonging and acceptance is especially pronounced during this period, rendering social connections critically important for emotional and psychological well-being (Jose et al., 2012; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Adolescents who experience social ostracism often exhibit diminished prosocial behaviour, with this effect being more pronounced in those with an 'open' personality (Coyne et al., 2011). Furthermore, the impact of ostracism on the basic psychological needs of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence is more pronounced in younger age groups, including adolescents (Pharo et al., 2011).

The implications of experiencing ostracism in these formative years are multifaceted, extending beyond transient emotional distress to potentially impeding the development of essential social competencies and emotional resilience (Wölfer & Scheithauer, 2013). Given the critical role of social integration in adolescent development, the experience of social ostracism poses significant threats to psychological health and well-being. Research indicates that ostracised individuals may face increased risks of loneliness, depression, anxiety, and a host of other negative psychological outcomes (Rudert et al., 2021; Williams & Nida, 2022). Moreover, the lack of social inclusion can hinder the development of a coherent sense of self and impair the acquisition of vital social skills, further exacerbating the individual's vulnerability to future social rejection (Wu et al., 2015).

Empirical studies have substantiated the adverse outcomes associated with youth ostracism. For instance, Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010) found that ostracised individuals exhibit heightened levels of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Furthermore, research by Twenge et al. (2001) demonstrated that even brief episodes of ostracism can lead to reduced feelings of belonging, lowered self-esteem, increased anger, and a diminished sense of control. These emotional and psychological consequences can, in turn, affect academic performance, peer relationships, and physical health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

## Bullying among youth

Bullying among youth is a pervasive issue with significant global impact, particularly in schools. It can take various forms, including physical, verbal, and relational aggression (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). Bullying represents a pervasive and complex challenge that significantly undermines the social fabric of adolescent communities, manifesting through behaviours aimed at damaging an individual's social standing or relationships. This form of bullying, characterised by the deliberate spread of rumours, exclusion from groups, and public humiliation, not only impairs the immediate well-being of victims but also has long-term implications for their psychological and emotional health (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Olweus, 1993). Educational settings, notably schools, serve as critical contexts where bullying frequently occurs, given their role in facilitating peer interactions and socialisation (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). The advent of digital technology and online platforms has extended the reach of bullying, allowing for the perpetuation of harmful behaviours beyond the physical confines of schools, thereby complicating efforts to monitor and intervene (Smith et al., 2008).

The impact of bullying on adolescent development is profound. Adolescents, being at a crucial stage of identity formation and social development, are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of bullying, which can lead to feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety (Nansel et al., 2001). The experience

of being bullied socially can disrupt the process of establishing healthy interpersonal relationships and undermine the development of a positive self-concept (Olweus, 1993).

Addressing the challenge of bullying requires a holistic approach that encompasses educational initiatives aimed at fostering a culture of respect and empathy within schools, as well as the implementation of policies that explicitly address and sanction bullying behaviours (Swearer et al., 2017). Moreover, the role of digital literacy education in equipping youth with the skills to navigate online interactions responsibly and safely cannot be overstated, particularly in an era where online social networks play a significant role in adolescents' lives (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Parental and community involvement is also crucial in combating bullying. Supportive family environments and community programs can offer essential resources for bullied youth, providing them with coping mechanisms and alternative social outlets (Holt et al., 2008). Furthermore, empowering youth to take an active stance against bullying, through peer-led initiatives and bystander intervention programs, has been shown to be effective in mitigating the incidence and impact of bullying behaviours (Polanin et al., 2012).

### **Erving Goffman's stigmatization theory**

Erving Goffman's seminal work, 'Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity' (1963), provides a profound exploration of how individuals with certain characteristics that deviate from societal norms experience devaluation and ostracism. Goffman, a Canadian sociologist, introduces stigma as an attribute that significantly reduces an individual's status in the eyes of society, effectively disqualifying them from full social acceptance (Goffman, 1963). His analysis examines into the mechanisms through which society categorises individuals, designating what it perceives as 'natural' or 'normal' attributes for each category. Consequently, stigma emerges as a negative label that adheres to individuals due to their perceived differences, be they in appearance, behaviour, or association, thereby discrediting them in the social sphere.

Goffman distinguishes between various sources of stigma, including physical impairments, mental disabilities, and social discrepancies, such as a history of incarceration or association with negatively viewed groups (Pescosolido, 2015). He further categorises stigma as either ascribed, where an individual is stigmatised due to factors beyond their control, or achieved, stemming from their actions or decisions (Goffman, 1963).

Goffman's stigma theory (1963) has far-reaching implications, offering a lens through which to examine the societal mechanisms that perpetuate ostracism and discrimination. It provides a framework for understanding the challenges faced by stigmatised individuals and the complex interplay between societal perception and self-identity. Furthermore, Goffman's work prompts a critical examination of how societal norms and values contribute to the marginalisation of certain groups, calling for a more inclusive approach to social acceptance and identity validation (Smith, 2011).

### **The current study**

The current research focus on the intricate phenomena of social ostracism and bullying among university students in Kazakhstan and Türkiye, areas that, despite their critical importance, have remained relatively underexplored within the extant literature. Drawing on the foundational principles of Erving Goffman's Stigma Theory (1963), this study aims to shed light on the ways in which societal categorisation, the attribution of negative labels, and the ensuing 'spoiled identities' contribute to the prevalence of social ostracism and bullying within these unique cultural and educational contexts. Through a comparative analysis, this investigation seeks not only to identify the root causes and manifestations of these detrimental social behaviours but also to evaluate the socio-cultural dynamics specific to Kazakhstan and Türkiye that may exacerbate or mitigate their impact.

Recognizing the multifaceted nature of social ostracism and bullying, the study addresses several critical sub-problems, including the primary reasons behind the vulnerability of university students to these experiences, the role of campus life in exacerbating or alleviating such issues, and the reflection of these phenomena in the academic and social lives of the students. Furthermore, it explores the support

mechanisms available to students who face social ostracism and bullying, alongside proposing actionable measures to foster a more inclusive and empathetic university environment. By situating the research within Goffman's theoretical framework, this study not only contributes to the academic discourse on social ostracism and bullying but also underscores the significance of addressing stigma as a core element in combatting these social issues. The anticipated findings aim to inform policymakers, educators, and university administrators in Kazakhstan and Türkiye, offering evidence-based strategies to counteract social ostracism and bullying effectively.

## Materials and method

Since we focused on the experiences of social ostracism and bullying of university students in Kazakhstan and Türkiye, we used a multiple case model within the qualitative methodological tradition. The multiple case research model, often referred to as a multiple case study approach, is a methodology within the qualitative research tradition that involves the in-depth exploration and analysis of more than one case within a real-world context (Yin, 2013). This approach is particularly valued for its potential to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation across different settings or instances. According to Creswell (2013) a multiple-case design explores a real-life multiple bounded system through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information.

## Participants

A total of 10 students from Kazakhstan and 27 students from Türkiye participated in this study, all of whom either experienced or witnessed social ostracism or bullying during their university life. The sample was selected using purposive sampling to ensure that the participants had direct or indirect exposure to the phenomena under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently enrolled university students, with firsthand experiences of ostracism or bullying, either as victims or witnesses. Exclusion criteria involved students who had no such experiences or were unwilling to discuss these topics. The decision to include both those who experienced and those who witnessed ostracism and bullying was intentional, as witnesses often play a crucial role in perpetuating or mitigating such behaviours, offering valuable insights into group dynamics. This broader perspective enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how ostracism and bullying function within the social structure of university life.

In terms of recruitment, 35 students were initially approached, but 2 declined participation due to personal reasons, resulting in a final sample of 10 participants from Kazakhstan and 27 from Türkiye. The diverse backgrounds of the participants, particularly in the Turkish sample, where students from 6 different state universities were included, ensured that the findings were reflective of a broader range of university environments. All students in the Kazakhstan study group were female and enrolled in the same university. The age of the students ranged between 19-21 years. Three of the students were in the second year and seven of them were in the third year. Demographic characteristics of the students in Kazakhstan are presented in [Table 1](#).

Demographic characteristics of the students in Türkiye are presented in [Table 2](#).

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of university students in Kazakhstan.

Code	Gender	Age	Class	University	Department
KZ1	Female	19	3	University 1-State	Social Pedagogy
KZ2	Female	19	2	University 1-State	Social Pedagogy
KZ3	Female	20	2	University 1-State	Social Pedagogy
KZ4	Female	21	2	University 1-State	Social Pedagogy
KZ5	Female	21	3	University 1-State	Social Pedagogy
KZ6	Female	20	3	University 1-State	Social Pedagogy
KZ7	Female	22	3	University 1-State	Social Pedagogy
KZ8	Female	21	3	University 1-State	Social Pedagogy
KZ9	Female	21	3	University 1-State	Social Pedagogy
KZ10	Female	21	3	University 1-State	Social Pedagogy

\*KZ represents Kazakh university students.

**Table 2.** Demographic characteristics of university students in Türkiye.

Code	Gender	Age	Class	University	Department
TR1	Female	20	3	University 1-State	Turkish Language Teaching
TR2	Female	18	1	University 1-State	Math Teaching
TR3	Male	24	4	University 2-State	Physical Education Teaching
TR4	Male	26	4	University 2-State	Physical Education Teaching
TR5	Female	20	1	University 1-State	Math Teaching
TR6	Female	28	4	University 3-State	Primary School Teaching
TR7	Female	22	2	University 1-State	English Language Teaching
TR8	Female	19	2	University 1-State	Primary School Teaching
TR9	Female	20	3	University 1-State	Primary School Teaching
TR10	Male	23	4	University 2-State	Physical Education Teaching
TR11	Female	34	4	University 3-State	Primary School Teaching
TR12	Female	20	2	University 1-State	English Language Teaching
TR13	Female	18	1	University 1-State	Math Teaching
TR14	Female	22	2	University 3-State	Primary School Teaching
TR15	Male	25	4	University 3-State	Primary School Teaching
TR16	Female	22	3	University 1-State	Primary School Teaching
TR17	Female	21	3	University 4-State	Music Education
TR18	Female	20	2	University 1-State	English Language Teaching
TR19	Female	21	2	University 1-State	Math Teaching
TR20	Female	21	2	University 1-State	Primary School Teaching
TR21	Male	21	2	University 1-State	Primary School Teaching
TR22	Female	34	4	University 1-State	Primary School Teaching
TR23	Male	27	1	University 1-State	Special Education Teaching
TR24	Female	20	3	University 5-State	Politic Sciences
TR25	Female	20	3	University 1-State	Primary School Teaching
TR26	Female	21	3	University 1-State	Psychological Counselling
TR27	Female	25	4	University 6-State	Sociology

\*TR represents Turkish university students.

Of the study group in Turkey, 6 were male and 21 were female. Their ages ranged between 18–34 years. There are students in 6 different state universities. Students are studying in 9 different undergraduate programmes in total.

### Data collection tool and process

The data of the study were collected in the autumn and spring semesters of the 2023–2024 academic year with semi-structured interview questions in line with the suggestions of Yin (2013) and Creswell (2013). Students were asked a total of 8 main questions and related probing questions. Sample questions included '*Can you share any personal experiences or observations about social ostracism or bullying in campus? (Example: Your identity, belief, gender, appearance or similar situations)*'. All of the data of the research in Kazakhstan were collected face-to-face and recorded. Some of the data in Türkiye were collected face-to-face and some of them were collected online and recorded (from students in universities far away from the researcher). Students in both Türkiye and Kazakhstan were assured that their identities would be kept anonymous and that they could withdraw if they did not want to answer the questions at any stage of the research. While most of the students participating in the study experienced social ostracism or bullying, some of them experienced these phenomena by observing them in their university life.

The data collection for this study was conducted following ethical guidelines, and ethical approval was obtained from Düzce University in Türkiye. Informed consent was acquired from all participants before the interviews, ensuring that they understood the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Semi-structured interviews were utilised to gather in-depth insights into participants' experiences with social ostracism and bullying. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, allowing participants ample time to share their stories and perspectives. The interviews were conducted in a supportive environment, fostering open communication and encouraging participants to discuss their experiences freely. Additionally, all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis for this study was conducted using qualitative analysis software, specifically MAXQDA, which facilitated the organization and coding of the interview transcripts. The analysis used a thematic approach, which allowed the researchers to identify, analyze and report on patterns or themes within the data. A total of 5 researchers were involved in the analysis process. Initially, 2 researchers (one from

**Table 3.** Example of coding process.

Keyword	Code	Category
'Yes, I have personally witnessed instances of social ostracism and bullying on campus. There have been cases where certain groups or individuals are excluded or treated poorly based on their appearance, interests, or background. In my opinion, social ostracism or bullying is quite prevalent among university students here, although it may not always be openly acknowledged or discussed.'	Witnessing ostracism and discriminatory behaviors	Ostracism practices, student interactions, social dynamics

Türkiye, another from Kazakhstan) independently reviewed a subset of the transcripts to develop initial codes. This collaborative coding ensured a comprehensive understanding of the data and helped to increase the reliability of the findings. After coding the initial transcripts, the researchers met (on the internet) to discuss their findings, reconcile any discrepancies and finalize the coding framework. The remaining transcripts were then coded using the established themes, allowing for a systematic examination of participants' experiences of social exclusion and bullying. The iterative nature of this process allowed for continuous refinement of the themes as more data was analyzed, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected the views and experiences of the participants.

To ensure intercoder reliability, the researchers compared their codes after coding the initial transcripts. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, enhancing the reliability of the coding process. An intercoder reliability check was conducted by comparing the coded segments across a sample of transcripts.

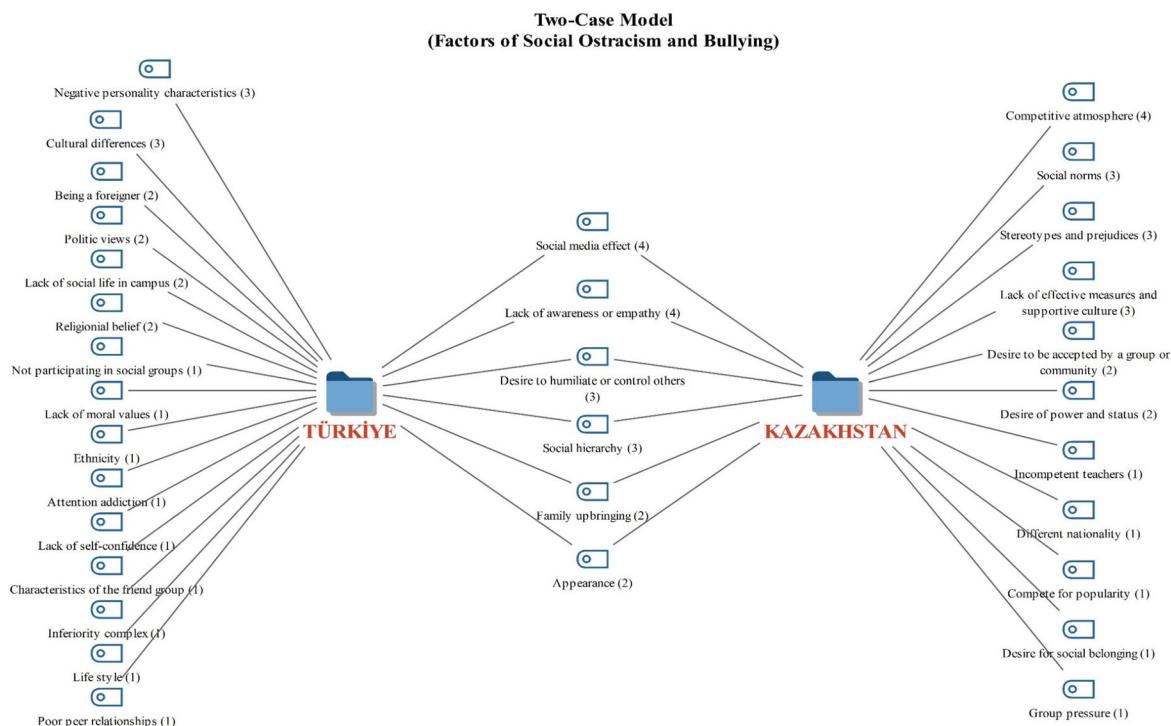
As themes emerged and differences were identified, the researchers collaboratively modified the codebook to refine definitions and categories. This iterative process involved revisiting earlier transcripts to ensure consistent application of the modified codes across the dataset. New codes were added as necessary, and existing codes were redefined based on the evolving understanding of the data. This approach ensured that the findings were grounded in the participants' narratives while maintaining rigour and coherence throughout the analysis. In this research qualitative data was analyzed using inductive content analysis. The data of the interviewed students were firstly deciphered and coded around keywords. Based on the data obtained from the questions asked to the students, themes were formed as, 'Factors Leading to Social Ostracism and Bullying', 'Effects of Social Ostracism and Bullying', 'Support Provided by Universities Against Social Ostracism and Bullying' and 'Measures to be Taken Against Social Ostracism and Bullying'. A sample coding used in the research is given in Table 3.

## Findings

### **Factors leading to social ostracism and bullying**

Many factors lead to social ostracism and bullying among university youth in Kazakhstan and Türkiye. While some of these factors are common and others are unique to both countries (see Figure 1). Key aspects under examination include personal biases and prejudices, such as those based on appearance, cultural background, socioeconomic status, or perceived social conformity, which can contribute to the marginalisation of certain individuals or groups. Additionally, the role of group dynamics and the desire for social cohesion within tightly knit circles often lead to the exclusion of those who are perceived as different or non-conforming. Among these factors and common ones, the most frequently repeated ones are the influence of social media, lack of empathy, desire to control others, social hierarchy, family upbringing and appearance. For example, KZ7 highlights the impact of many factors, see below. In addition to KZ7, TR12 also looks at the impact of social media.

Several factors contribute to the culture of ostracism or bullying in a university setting. These include a desire for power or social status, peer pressure, lack of awareness or empathy, and a competitive environment. Additionally, social media can amplify these behaviors and make it easier to engage in bullying anonymously. (KZ7)



**Figure 1.** Factors of social ostracism and bullying.

Social media has a great impact. In addition to this, the lives of phenomena, their comments and more cause stereotypes and thoughts in people. (TR12)

KZ7 highlights key drivers of social ostracism and bullying in universities, such as the quest for power, peer pressure, and competitive climates, while noting how social media exacerbates these issues by enabling anonymous bullying. TR12 points to the impactful role of social media in shaping perceptions through influencers' actions and comments, reinforcing stereotypes within university settings. Although there are some common factors between Kazakhstan and Turkey, there are other factors that stand out for both countries.

In the Turkish sample, factors such as negative personality traits, cultural differences, being a foreigner, political views, lack of social life on campus stand out (see [Figure 1](#)). Some students' views on these factors are given below:

[Social ostracism] occurs because everyone comes from different cultures. Not everyone is used to differences. And they may think that those who are not like them are the 'other'. Maybe this is an instinctive feeling. But I think everyone should be open-minded. (TR 17)

Differences in ethnic origin, political views and different political organisations can lead to implicit social exclusion and conflict through their attempts to spread their ideas. The same can be said about members of different religious references and the reactions against these structures, which are not direct but are shown through different physical and verbal behaviours. (TR23)

In Türkiye's diverse cultural and complex political landscape, the observations of TR17 and TR23 highlight the underlying causes of social ostracism and bullying in universities. TR17's point about the struggle with cultural differences mirrors Türkiye's broader challenge of integrating its diverse ethnic and cultural identities within academic settings, emphasising the need for openness and celebration of diversity. TR23's note on the impact of differing ethnic, political, and religious backgrounds underscores the reflection of Türkiye's societal tensions in university life, pointing toward the need for dialogue and understanding.

In the Kazakh sample, different factors come to the fore (see [Figure 1](#)). These include a highly competitive atmosphere within the university, different social norms, stereotypes and prejudices, ineffective policies and inadequate professional support, and a desire for power. The following are some of the more notable and prominent opinions:

I believe that the culture of isolation and bullying in the university environment is caused by several factors. One of them is the competitive atmosphere where some students try to suppress others in order to stand out. The stereotypes and prejudices that permeate the university environment can also be a source of problems. (KZ2)

A culture of social ostracism or bullying in a university environment can be caused by several factors, including competition for achievement, desire to belong to a particular social group, or stereotypes among students. It can also be influenced by external factors, such as family upbringing or social stereotypes. (KZ9)

KZ2 and KZ9 identify competitive atmospheres, stereotypes, and the desire for social belonging as key factors contributing to social ostracism and bullying in universities. KZ2 emphasises competition and stereotypes within the university, while KZ9 notes the role of external influences like family and societal stereotypes.

### ***Effects of social ostracism and bullying***

Social ostracism and bullying have profound effects on university students' academic, social, and emotional development, significantly hindering their growth and success within the academic environment. Academically, these negative experiences can lead to decreased concentration, lower academic engagement, and diminished motivation, resulting in poorer academic performance and, in some cases, increased absenteeism or dropout rates. The stress and distraction caused by ostracism and bullying can impair students' ability to focus on their studies, participate in class, or engage with academic content effectively. As evidence of these situations, some of the interviewees' statements are presented below:

Researcher: What are your observations about the effects of this phenomenon on your peers who experience social ostracism?

Interviewee: *[According to my observations of university students who are subject to social ostracism.]* They feel obliged to hide their ethnic identity from their social and academic environment and to hide from people the culture and beliefs they believe in or were brought up with. Or, on the contrary, they may be hostile to communities or individuals outside their ethnic identity. In the long run, I think they may experience conflict with their own thoughts and lives based on the identities they have, feel and hide. (TR22)

Researcher: How did you feel when you experienced social ostracization? How did this situation affect you?

Interviewee: *[When I was subjected to social ostracism]* I became psychologically exhausted and began to feel that I did not belong in the place where I was living. (TR25)

TR22 highlights a concerning impact of social ostracism on university students, noting that those affected often feel compelled to conceal their ethnic identities and cultural beliefs to fit into their social and academic circles. TR25 shares a personal account of the emotional toll of experiencing social ostracism, describing feelings of psychological exhaustion and a diminished sense of belonging. Also, KZ9's observations on effects of ostracism experiences are very important:

I believe that experiences of social ostracism or harassment can have a serious impact on a student's academic and social life. These experiences lead to mental health problems, low self-esteem and poor academic performance. In the long term, these experiences can lead to problems in forming relationships, negative perceptions of one's personality and deterioration in the student's mental health. (KZ9)

KZ9's reflection brings to light the significant and multifaceted impact of social ostracism and harassment on university students. The immediate consequences, such as mental health issues, diminished self-esteem, and faltering academic achievement, are profound. Beyond these immediate effects, KZ9 underscores the long-term repercussions, including difficulties in establishing meaningful relationships, negative self-perception, and a continued decline in mental well-being.

### ***Support provided by universities against social ostracism and bullying***

Support from universities against social ostracism and bullying is crucial for creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive academic environment. These negative behaviours significantly impair students' academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being. When universities actively implement support systems and policies, they not only address the immediate impacts of such experiences but also

demonstrate a commitment to fostering a community where all students feel valued and respected. This proactive stance is essential for promoting a positive campus culture, enhancing student retention, and ensuring equitable educational outcomes. Furthermore, university support plays a vital role in equipping students with the resilience and resources to navigate challenges, contributing to their personal and professional development. Essentially, the support provided against social ostracism and bullying underscores the university's role in nurturing not just academic excellence but holistic student development. However, both in the Turkish sample and in Kazakhstan, the majority of students are not aware of such a policy or practice in universities, or if there are such units, they think that they are not functional.

For example, TR3's '*I think our university is insensitive to this, and I don't know if there's a system set up to help.*' or TR11's '*No, unfortunately, I am not aware of any study on the type of ostracizations I am talking about.*' and TR16's '*I mean, I don't have complete information on this subject, but I think there is definitely a unit at the university that deals with it*' sentences prove that some students are not aware of the support units related to social exclusion or bullying in universities. Also, similar experiences are valid for Kazakhstan. For example, KZ6's '*I cannot say that I am familiar with the resources or support systems available at university for students who experience social ostracism or feel abused. However, I think these resources can be effective if they offer confidential and professional support.*' views suggest that in Kazakhstan, too, the existing units for such phenomena are inadequate or unrecognized. On the other hand, students who have applied to and benefitted from such units before are aware of the support offered by universities and consider them useful. For example, KZ7's and TR23's experiences are very important in this context.

Our university offers several resources and support systems for students who experience ostracism or bullying. These include counselling services, student support centres and anonymous reporting mechanisms. However, the effectiveness of these resources may vary depending on the individual's willingness to seek help and the university's actions to address the issue promptly and effectively. (KZ7)

I know that there are counselling services at universities. I know that it is possible to join different communities and take part in their activities, and I think that makes me feel good. I also see friendship towards students in the vast majority of academics in the departments. I have even seen that there are academics who constantly make suggestions such as 'come to us if you have any problems, we will solve them, we will do our best'. I think these are very effective in terms of my friends who are experiencing exclusion or bullying not feeling completely helpless and excluded, and knowing that they can get support whenever they want. (TR23)

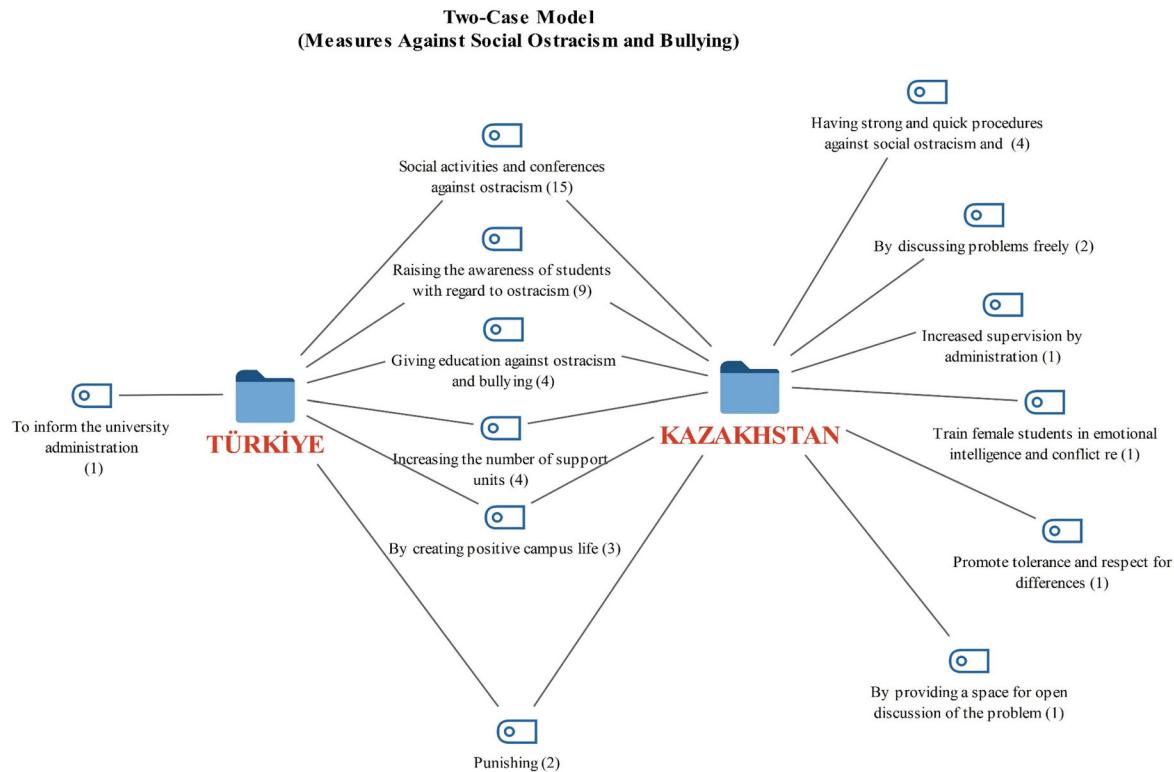
KZ7 notes that while universities offer support such as counseling and anonymous reporting to combat ostracism and bullying, their effectiveness often depends on students' willingness to seek help and the institution's prompt response. TR23 emphasizes the positive impact of accessible counseling, community engagement and supportive faculty, highlighting the importance of a proactive and reassuring approach by academics in making students feel supported and not isolated.

### ***Measures to be taken against social ostracism and bullying***

Implementing effective policies to tackle social ostracism and bullying is essential for universities to maintain a safe and inclusive environment, which is vital for the mental, academic and social well-being of students. Such measures not only address immediate problems but also prevent long-term harm by fostering a campus culture of respect, diversity and inclusivity. These steps underscore a university's commitment to supporting students and contributing to the broader educational mission of developing well-rounded, empathetic individuals. Students in Türkiye and Kazakhstan jointly highlighted (see Figure 2) the most common measures that could be taken against social exclusion and bullying, such as more social activities and conferences, more awareness-raising and education against exclusion and bullying, more support units, a positive campus culture and punishments for bullies and excluders. Students' some important views are given below:

Researcher: What measures do you recommend to prevent social ostracism and bullying at university?

Interviewee: I would also recommend conducting training and workshops for university teachers and staff to improve their knowledge and skills in preventing and dealing with bullying. A possible solution could also be the creation of a mentoring programme where older students or alumni would help new students. (KZ8)



**Figure 2.** Measures against social ostracism and bullying.

Researcher: What would be your recommendations for the prevention of social ostracism and bullying at university?

Interviewee: I believe that psychological support should be provided. Counselling can be provided on certain days and at certain times by a psychologist who is easily accessible to students. It can also be supported by seminars or meetings. (TR11)

KZ8 recommends practical measures such as training workshops for university staff to improve their ability to prevent and respond to bullying, and a mentoring programme that pairs new students with seniors or alumni for guidance and support. These strategies emphasize the importance of proactive education and peer support in creating a more inclusive university environment. The student coded TR11 emphasizes the importance of accessible mental health support, suggesting regular counseling sessions and informative seminars as key components of a comprehensive approach to tackling social ostracism and bullying. Among the other recommendations for precautionary measures that came to the fore in the Kazakh sample, it was recommended that universities should have procedures to create a quick reflex for such negative phenomena, to provide a structure for free discussion of such situations in universities, and to provide effective supervision. For example, KZ5's '*The university must also have clear policies and procedures that ensure prompt and fair responses to incidents of exclusion and bullying.*' and KZ9's '*To develop an early warning and response system for cases of social ostracism or bullying*' 'views are important.'

## Discussion and recommendations

Findings on social ostracism and bullying in university settings in Kazakhstan and Turkey reveal complex dynamics between individual identities and societal norms. Using Goffman's (1963) stigma theory as a conceptual framework, it is important to distinguish between ostracism and bullying, while acknowledging that they may overlap in certain contexts. Social ostracism refers to the exclusion or ignoring of individuals or groups, often related to perceived differences such as religious beliefs, political views, or socio-economic status. Bullying, on the other hand, involves more direct, repeated aggressive behavior,

which may include ostracism as a tactic but is generally characterized by an intent to harm or dominate. Both phenomena are supported by Crocker et al. (1998), who explore the impact of stigmatization on individuals' self-esteem and social identity, demonstrating the psychological toll of being marked as deviant or different.

The cases of ostracism in this study show how marginalized individuals are excluded because of non-normative attributes, a process that is often subtle but pervasive, whereas bullying can manifest itself more overtly through direct verbal, physical or online aggression. In both cases, social media exacerbate the effects by amplifying and anonymising the behavior (Link & Phelan, 2001). This distinction between ostracism and bullying is crucial as it shapes the type of intervention and support needed for the students involved.

Academically, both social ostracism and bullying negatively impact students' ability to concentrate, engage, and stay motivated, as outlined by Baumeister & Leary (1995), who highlight the fundamental human need for belonging. Socially, ostracism leads to the breakdown of students' ability to form and maintain relationships, while bullying directly disrupts social dynamics through aggressive behaviour. Socially, these experiences disrupt students' ability to form and maintain meaningful relationships and engage fully in university life, reflecting Twenge et al.'s (2001) discussion on the social impact of exclusionary behaviours. Both experiences are isolating, but bullying often involves power imbalances that lead to sustained harassment. Emotionally, both ostracism and bullying lead to anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem, but Williams (2007) specifically focuses on ostracism's unique scars of invisibility and exclusion, while the emotional wounds from bullying stem from direct attacks on one's self-worth. The findings underscore the long-lasting emotional and psychological toll of both behaviours and point to the urgent need for comprehensive support systems in universities.

The variation in students' awareness and perceptions of the support services available points to a critical gap in communication and implementation. This gap is highlighted by findings suggesting that a significant proportion of the student body remains unaware of, or skeptical about, the effectiveness of existing support mechanisms designed to address social exclusion and bullying. This disconnect can significantly undermine the potential benefits of these services, as highlighted in literature discussing the importance of visibility and accessibility of support systems in educational settings (Smith & Shu, 2000). Furthermore, the effectiveness of university support services, such as counseling, support centers, and anonymous reporting mechanisms, depends on their ability to provide timely, confidential and professional assistance. The success of these interventions is closely linked to students' willingness to seek help and the university's ability to respond promptly and appropriately (Rigby, 2002). Students who have engaged with these services often report positive outcomes, suggesting that such support, when used effectively, can play a crucial role in mitigating the effects of social ostracism and bullying (Cross et al., 2011).

Several academic researches highlight the importance of a proactive attitude on the part of faculty and staff in encouraging students to access support services and fostering an environment in which students feel empowered to seek help without fear of stigma or retaliation (Davis & Nixon, 2013). The involvement of the wider academic community in supporting affected students - through initiatives such as community-building activities and the promotion of positive faculty-student interactions - can further enhance the effectiveness of support systems, in line with Goffman's (1963) emphasis on social identity reconstruction in stigma management. In summary, while universities in Kazakhstan and Türkiye have established support systems to combat social ostracism and bullying, it is crucial to increase the visibility, accessibility, and responsiveness of these services. This is not only in line with the educational mission of promoting the holistic development of students, but also contributes to the creation of a supportive, inclusive and empathetic academic community.

The recommendations to conduct training and workshops for university staff and to establish mentoring programmes underline the importance of equipping educators with the skills to recognize and address bullying, as well as providing peer support mechanisms to facilitate the integration and well-being of new students. These proactive measures are in line with Olweus and Limber's (2010) assertion that educational and supportive interventions can significantly reduce bullying behavior in educational settings. Furthermore, the emphasis on accessible mental health support and the organization of

seminars and meetings to discuss these issues highlights the importance of mental health resources in mitigating the effects of social exclusion and bullying. This approach is supported by the work of Swearer and Hymel (2015), who advocate for the integration of mental health services within the educational framework to address the psychological needs of students. The call for clear policies, rapid response structures and effective oversight reflects an understanding that universities must have established, transparent procedures in place to deal with incidents of social exclusion and bullying promptly and fairly. Such measures are essential to creating a culture of responsibility and respect, as outlined by Smith and Brain (2000), who emphasize the role of institutional policies in shaping campus culture and student behavior.

Theoretically, the findings from Kazakhstan and Türkiye offer an opportunity to extend Goffman's (1963) stigma theory by incorporating the impact of digital media on stigmatising behaviours, adding a contemporary dimension to the understanding of social identities and interactions within universities. This necessitates an interdisciplinary approach to research, integrating insights from psychology, sociology, and education studies to enrich our understanding of social ostracism and bullying and inform the development of more effective interventions. Furthermore, the role of societal norms and cultural differences in influencing individual behaviours and perceptions within university settings highlights the need for further research into how these broader factors contribute to social ostracism and bullying, emphasising the importance of considering cultural context in stigma management strategies.

### Limitations and future research

The study highlights important findings on social exclusion and bullying at universities in Kazakhstan and Turkey but has limitations that affect its wider applicability. In particular, the Kazakh sample lacks male participants, and both samples consist only of students from state universities, excluding those from private institutions. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias. Future research should use mixed methods to more accurately represent the prevalence, causes and effects of social exclusion and bullying in different settings. Broadening the scope of the study to include different cultural and geographical areas could improve the generalizability of the findings. It's also suggested to investigate the long-term effects of support interventions on students' academic and mental well-being, and the role of digital media in social dynamics at universities. Studies should further examine institutional policies to better understand how to foster an inclusive, respectful and supportive university environment.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### About the authors



**Marziya Assylbekova** is an Associate Professor at the Eurasian National University in Kazakhstan and also Head of the department of pedagogy. Her studies focus on bullying and teachers' future competences.



**Indira Saikhymuratova** is a PhD student at Eurasian National University in Kazakhstan. Her studies focus on social pedagogy and educational issues.



**Taner Atmaca** works at Düzce University (Türkiye) Faculty of Education. His research interests include sociology of education and educational administration.



**Baubek Somzhurek** is dean of the Graduate School of Education at Eurasian National University in Kazakhstan. His academic studies focus on history, international relations and social issues.



**Tolkyn Slamkulovna Slambekova** is an Associate Professor at the Eurasian National University in Kazakhstan. Her studies focus on Professional competence of future teachers; ethno-pedagogical problems; prevention of child bullying.

## ORCID

Taner Atmaca  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9157-3100>

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