

Cyber Harassment on Social Media Platforms and Its Effects on Student's Mental Well-being in Dera Ghazi Khan

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Abstract

This study explored the part social media plays in cyberbullying and how it affects students' mental health. A double-stage sampling procedure was used to choose the 150 respondents (students) for this study. The findings indicate that cyber harassment is a prevalent issue among students on social media platforms, with a significant portion regularly experiencing offensive comments, bullying, or intimidation. This harassment has substantial adverse effects on students' mental health, contributing to increased anxiety, depression, and stress, as well as a decline in academic focus and self-esteem. Recommendations include implementing stricter anti-harassment policies on social media, providing mental health support to affected students, and raising awareness about the consequences of cyber harassment. Educational institutions should also foster a safer online environment through digital literacy programs and collaboration with social media platforms to curb harassment. This further highlights how critical it is to address cyberbullying to lessen its detrimental impact on kids' wellbeing. The study recommended that parents monitor and balance their children's use of their phones and the Internet.

Keywords: Cyber Harassment, Social Media, Student's Mental Health.

Introduction

Harassment is the phrase used to characterize a noticeable hostility, regardless of whether it harms the harasser. Although the phrase has not been altered, harassers have sought out new avenues to harass someone while also hiding their true identity, thanks to the development of digital technology. In its most basic form, cyber harassment is when someone uses the internet to express animosity toward another person. This might be posting disparaging images, writing on one's profile, sending emotional emails, or instant messaging. Social media has advanced in the modern world, particularly in computers and mobile devices, making it possible for social media applications to grow in popularity and audience globally (Hafeez, 2014).

The intentional and persistent use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to harass, threaten, or otherwise provoke another person is known as cyber harassment (Vale et al., 2022). It could also include negative acts conducted through digital platforms, such as cyberbullying and sexual harassment (Basu et al., 2021). These types of harassment are pitiful and

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more common among women and younger people, and they are creating environments of power and control.

The proliferation of social media, mobile phones, and the internet is encouraging many young people to engage in cyberbullying. This action is regarded as a disadvantage because of the advancement and expansion of technology in the cyber environment. Some victims of cyberbullying are those who have been engrossed with technology because of its addictive and obsessive qualities (Makori & Agufana, 2020). This is an instance of cyberbullying, a form of cyber harassment that mainly impacts youngsters in their early adolescence and members of underrepresented groups. Cyberbullying can occur in various settings, including blogs, YouTube, social networks, and email. It can include a variety of actions, such as online harassment, flame, defamation, impersonation, deception, and exclusion (Vale et al., 2022).

Cyberbullying is a form of bullying that takes place online and involves threatening, insulting, or otherwise harassing someone by text, instant chatting, or emails, banning someone from your list of friends on instant messaging or removing them from your email contacts list after sending them messages without any specific reason or provocation. Both boys and girls are victims of cyberbullying, which operates differently than it does in the real world. Boys are notorious for sending sexually graphic images and threatening to fight or hurt someone (Betts & Betts, 2016). Nowadays, social media has grown to be a vast field, and several app developers have created fun and distinctive applications like TikTok and Snapchat. In today's world, social media encompasses various terms, including blogs, vlogs, and digital content. It gives many individuals the chance to showcase their skills on it (Kuzma, 2013).

Cyber harassment can significantly affect students' psychological and emotional wellbeing, often leading to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Studies indicate that students targeted by cyber harassment report higher levels of emotional distress, which can manifest as social withdrawal, academic decline, and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation. Cyber harassment disrupts students' sense of safety, both online and offline, often impairing their focus and resilience. Research further suggests that this emotional turmoil is compounded by the persistent nature of digital harassment, which allows for continuous exposure to harmful content. Thus, cyber harassment presents a serious mental health risk, affecting not only students' current wellbeing but also their long-term emotional development (Kowalski et al., 2014).

University students are becoming increasingly concerned about psychological violence, especially cyber harassment. Online bullying, threats, and shaming are common among adolescents and can cause severe mental anguish. The extensive use of social media and digital communication platforms has led to the prevalence of this type of harassment. Victims frequently feel alone and powerless, and they worry that if they disclose the abuse, they may be victimized much more. According to Choja and Nelson (2016), the psychological effects may include sadness, anxiety, and a drop in academic achievement. Students may experience difficulties with wellbeing, social connections, and academic achievement (Wick et al., 2020).

Many individuals are concerned that the incorporation of social media might lead to addiction, bullying, and adverse effects on pupils worldwide (Moyo & Abdullah, 2013). As a result, it causes addictions even if it may have a good impact on academic performance or enhance experiences when used consistently. The victims of cyberbullying face a variety of problems, including substance abuse, anxiety, social isolation, sadness, loneliness, and difficulty focusing. During their academic years, both victims and offenders of cyberbullying frequently experience significant levels of stress, anxiety, and despair. Due to their reluctance to disclose their experiences, many

victims of cyberbullying are more vulnerable to continued or new forms of harassment (Popovac & Leoschut, 2012).

Objectives of the Study

The study focused on following the given objectives.

1. To determine the prevalence and types of cyber harassment experienced by students on social media platforms.
2. To understand the psychological and emotional impacts of cyber harassment on students.
3. To identify coping mechanisms employed by students to deal with cyber harassment.

Review of Literature

Wang et al. (2009) concluded that relational aggressors were girls, whereas physical and verbal aggressors were boys. Furthermore, boys were more likely to engage in cyberbullying than girls, and guys were more likely to be the targets of cyberbullying than girls. While victimization was less common and only involved verbal and relational abuse, bullying among African American teens encompassed physical, verbal, and cyber abuse.

Hinduja and Patchin (2010) examined the victims; cyberbullying can have severe psychological repercussions. Anxiety, despair, and an increased sense of vulnerability and dread are common among victims. Because threats may be made online without any physical contact, victims may feel as though they are being attacked all the time due to the anonymity it provides. These psychological impacts are similar to those of conventional types of harassment. However, because cyber harassment may happen around the clock, its digital nature enables it to affect every part of a victim's life.

Lindsay and Krysik (2012) concurred that the amount of time individuals spend online and the current Internet usage pattern, which includes social networking, have led to a new risk of online harassment. The hazards of harassment that young adults experience online have received very little attention, even though this issue has been examined primarily by adolescents. It is generally acknowledged that young adults behave similarly to teenagers on the Internet.

Whittaker and Kowalski (2014) explored the prevalence of cyberbullying among college students, the locations where it occurs, mainly through social networking sites, and opinions on cyberbullying concerning the characteristics of the target, including peers, celebrities, and groups, among others. The survey found that the most common places for victims to experience cyberbullying were social media and texting.

Burke et al. (2015) took this step when they investigated how women are harassed online through social media. Most participants (58.5%) said they were enrolled in college or university at the time of the survey. Nearly 20% of people reported receiving unwelcome sexually explicit messages and/or sexual solicitations online (excluding spam for all categories). More than one-third ($n = 33$, 11.5%) reported receiving pornographic texts from an unknown sender often or more frequently. Over one-third of the students reported experiencing cyber harassment, with over half of them reporting feeling uncomfortable. One-fifth of those who reported experiencing harassment reported feeling powerless and had problems with eating and sleeping. There is discussion on the significance of health-oriented education, recommendations for more action, and ways to safeguard oneself online.

Batool et al. (2017) examined bullying on social media and its effects on young people to determine the elements that influence their mindset and level of success. This study, which used the Online Disinhibiting Effect survey research technique, verified that young people in Pakistan—

both boys and girls—get involved in and become the targets of cyberbullying. Additionally, it was established that cyberbullying has a detrimental effect on young people's mental health, affecting their performance, feelings, and interpersonal relationships. The results showed that there is a gender difference as well, with females being more affected and victimized by cyberbullying than boys.

Cerna (2014) researched that coping mechanisms for dealing with cyber harassment among students vary widely, encompassing both active and passive strategies aimed at reducing stress and regaining control over one's online interactions. Active coping strategies include seeking social support from friends, family, or school counsellors, which has been shown to mitigate emotional distress and increase resilience against further harassment. Problem-focused coping methods, such as reporting and blocking perpetrators or adjusting privacy settings on social media, are also standard and allow students to exercise a sense of control over their online environment. According to Raskauskas and Huynh (2015), passive coping mechanisms, such as avoiding social media or suppressing emotions, are frequently reported but may be less effective in the long term, sometimes exacerbating feelings of isolation or helplessness. Additionally, research suggests that coping responses often differ by age and gender, with older students more likely to employ confrontation and reporting behaviors, while younger students tend to rely on avoidance strategies. Mindfulness and emotional regulation techniques have gained attention as coping methods that help students manage their emotional responses, improve self-awareness, and reduce anxiety triggered by cyber harassment.

Chukwuere et al. (2021) examined how Nigerian, Ghanaian, Zimbabwean, and Cameroonian students feel about cyberbullying on social media. The study found that students' psychological wellbeing is impacted by the problem of cyberbullying on social media. Additionally, some suggestions outline ways to lessen the incidence and dissemination of student cyberbullying on various social networking sites. Finally, the study showed how cyberbullying affected the students' psychological wellbeing. Therefore, the study undoubtedly contributed to the advancement of knowledge about several facets of the psychological impacts of cyberbullying on students' social media accounts as well as a prospective significant remedy for cyberbullying.

Research Methodology

A quantitative study was conducted on students enrolled in different disciplines at three Dera Ghazi Khan-based higher education institutions. In the first stage, three universities were selected conveniently, and in the second stage, university students who experienced cyber harassment on social media platforms were selected through systematic sampling. So the total sample size was (50X3=150) respondents (students). An interview schedule comprising 45 questions was developed to collect data from students. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to obtain respondents' feedback. The responses were meticulously recorded in an Excel sheet and then imported into SPSS software version 23 for further analysis. For data analysis, both bivariate and univariate statistical tests were employed. This enabled the researcher to examine relationships between variables and gain insights into the patterns and trends in the collected data. The Likert scale (1=to great extent, 2=to some extent, 3=not at all) was utilized to measure the frequency of experiences and perceptions among students. The independent variable in this study was cyber harassment on social media platforms, encompassing various forms of online bullying and harassment that students may encounter. The dependent variable was students' mental wellbeing, which was assessed through indicators such as stress levels, anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and overall mental health.

Discussion and Analysis

The demographic data reveals that the majority (53.3%) of respondents were male, with 94.7% falling within the age range of 18-27 years. Most respondents (78.7%) were enrolled in the BS (Hons.) program, and 76.7% were in their 4th to 8th semester. Regarding family background, 79.4% of respondents' fathers were employed in self-business, government, or private jobs, while 60.7% reported a monthly household income between 20,000 and 59,999 rupees. Regarding social media usage, Facebook was the most frequently used platform (52.7% always used it), followed closely by WhatsApp (54.7%). YouTube was often used sometimes (46.7%), while Instagram was rarely used (30%). TikTok was a primary platform for 44.7% of users, Snapchat was often engaged with by 45.4%, and Twitter saw minimal use, with 25.3% never engaging with it. Many students reported experiencing heightened anxiety, depression and diminished self-esteem, which in turn affected their academic performance and social interactions. The study also aligns with Bowker and Star's classification theories on labelling online abuse. It emphasizes the importance of psychosocial interventions, as those who faced cyberbullying during secondary school continued to suffer psychological consequences in university. Using an intersectional feminist lens, the data further suggests that vulnerable groups, particularly young adult women, are more likely to be targeted, highlighting the need for social media platforms to integrate protections for these users. Additionally, educators and parents must work together to create safer online spaces and develop interventions to mitigate the long-term effects of cyber harassment.

Table 1: Prevalence of Cyber harassment among students on social media platforms

Prevalence	To great extent		To some extent		Not at all		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Students frequently experience cyberbullying on social media sites.	82	54.7	64	42.6	4	2.7	150	100
They experienced target bullying or intimidation online	40	26.6	97	64.7	13	8.7	150	100
They received offensive comments or messages on social media	68	45.3	65	43.4	17	11.3	150	100
They faced identity theft or impersonation online	48	32.0	84	56.0	18	12	150	100

Table 1 shows that only 54.7% of respondents said they experience cyber harassment to great extent and 42.6% of respondents accepted that they faced cyber harassment to some extent while only 2.7% did not faced cyber harassment while using social media. As a result, the majority of respondents reported cyber harassment either to great extent or to some extent while using social media platforms suggesting that it is a major problem among students using social media. Further, the results in Table 1 presents that 26.6% of respondents reported online bullying or intimidation to great extent, 64.7% reported experiencing it to some extent while 8.7% of participants did not faced any kind of bullying or intimidation while using social media platforms. As a result, the majority of respondents report experiencing target bullying or intimidation online either to great extent or some extent. This suggests that a significant majority of users encounter these unfavorable situations on a somewhat level.

Moreover, table 1 shows that of the respondents, 45.6 % said they received violent comments or messages on social media to great extent, 43.4 % said they received unpleasant texts on social

media to some extent, while 11.3% said they never received offensive text on social media. Consequently, the majority of respondents reported seeing insulting remarks or messages on social media either to great extent or some extent, suggesting that most users encounter this frequently. Lastly, this Table shows that 32.0% of respondents reported experiencing identity theft or impersonation online to great extent, 56.0% reported experiencing these issues to some extent, 12.0% reported never experiencing these issues. Egeberg et al. (2016) align with the results also reported being the victim of identity theft or impersonation online either to great extent or some extent. This suggests that a sizable majority of people experience these problems to varied degrees.

Table 2: Negative effects of Cyber harassment on students

Effects	To great extent		To some extent		Not at all		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Cyber harassment has negative effects on their self-esteem	100	66.7	42	28.0	8	5.3	150	100
Cyber harassment leads to increased levels of anxiety among students	88	58.7	59	39.3	3	2.0	150	100
Cyber harassment contributes to feelings of depression in students	76	50.6	70	46.7	4	2.7	150	100

Table 2 reveals that 66.7% of respondents reported that cyber harassment had a negative impact on their self-esteem to great extent, while 28.0% stated it affected them negatively to some extent and 5.3% claimed it never affected them at all. Overall, the data shows that a majority of respondents experience negative effects on their self-esteem from cyber harassment either to great extent or some extent, highlighting the significant prevalence of these issues. Further, this table indicates that the largest group of students 58.7% experienced increased levels of anxiety due to cyber harassment to great extent, 39.3% reported that cyber harassment caused heightened anxiety to some extent, while only 2.0% reported never feeling anxious at all due to cyber harassment. Overall, a significant majority of students experienced elevated anxiety levels due to cyber harassment either to great extent or to some extent, underscoring its widespread impact on students' mental well-being. Moreover, 50.6% of students experienced feelings of depression due to cyber harassment to great extent, 46.7% reported that cyber harassment caused such feelings to some extent, while only 2.7% stated they never experienced depression because of it. Thorvaldsen et al. (2016) also stated that students reported that cyber harassment contributes to feelings of depression either to great extent or some extent, highlighting its considerable impact on their mental well-being.

Table 3: Hypothesis – 1: Association between the prevalence of cyber harassment on social media platforms and its role in increasing anxiety levels among students is evident

Cyber harassment occurrence	Levels of Anxiety			Total
	To great extent	To some extent	Not at all	
To great extent	44	37	1	82
To some extent	43	19	2	64
Not at all	1	3	0	4
Total	88	59	3	150

$\chi^2 = 21.566$ (p - value = .005) Degree of Freedom = 4
 $\gamma = .076$ Significant

The table 3 demonstrates a significant association between cyber harassment and increased anxiety among students using social media platforms, with a Chi-Square value of 21.566 and a p-value of .005, indicating that the results are statistically significant. The frequency of cyber harassment is associated with anxiety levels, as seen by the distribution across categories. Despite this association, the Gamma value of .076 suggests a weak positive relationship, meaning while the association exists, its strength is minimal. Alotaibi, (2019) also supports that results cyber harassment is a common occurrence and has a notable impact on students' anxiety levels.

Table 4: Hypothesis – 2: The association between the widespread occurrence of cyber harassment on social media platforms and its contribution to feelings of depression among students is significant

Cyber harassment occurrence	Feelings of Depression			Total
	To great extent	To some extent	Not at all	
To great extent	44	35	3	82
To some extent	31	32	1	64
Not at all	1	3	0	4
Total	76	70	4	150

$\chi^2 = 27.704$ (p - value = .002)
 $\gamma = .130$ Degree of Freedom = 4
Significant

Table 4 shows a significant association between the occurrence of cyber harassment on social media and its contribution to feelings of depression among students, as indicated by a Chi-Square value of 27.704 and a p-value of .002, confirming statistical significance. The Gamma value of .130 suggests a weak positive relationship between cyber harassment and depression, indicating that while there is a connection, it is not very strong. Hafeez, (2014) supports the results about cyber harassment is a common issue contributing to depression in students.

Table 5: Hypothesis – 3: The association between the use of the social media platform Facebook and the increase in stress levels among students due to cyber harassment is notable

Use of Facebook	Levels of Stress			Total
	To great extent	To some extent	Not at all	
To great extent	51	49	1	101
To some extent	22	14	2	38
Not at all	6	4	1	11
Total	79	67	4	150

$\chi^2 = 20.864$ (p - value = .004)
 $\gamma = .071$ Degree of Freedom = 4
Significant

Table 5 demonstrates a significant association between the use of the social media platform Facebook and the increase in stress levels among students due to cyber harassment. With a Chi-Square value of 20.864 and a p-value of .004, the relationship is statistically significant. The Gamma value of .071 suggests a very weak positive relationship, implying that while there is an association between Facebook use and stress caused by cyber harassment, its strength is minimal. Wick et al. (2020) also indicates that frequent Facebook use is associated with increased stress from cyber harassment among students.

Table 6: Hypothesis – 4: Self-esteem will be weaker when cyberbullying occurs more frequently. Facebook's detrimental effects on kids' self-esteem are highlighted by the link between its use and cyberbullying

Use of Facebook	Negative effects on Self-esteem			Total
	To great extent	To some extent	Not at all	
To great extent	71	27	3	101
To some extent	22	13	3	38
Not at all	7	2	2	11
Total	100	42	8	150

$\chi^2 = 24.717$ (p - value = .001) Degree of Freedom = 4
 $\gamma = .248$ Significant

Table 6 shows a significant association between the use of the social media platform Facebook and the negative effects of cyber harassment on students' self-esteem. The Chi-Square value of 24.717 with a p-value of .001 indicates a statistically significant relationship. The Gamma value of .248 suggests a moderate positive relationship between Facebook use and the negative effects of cyber harassment on self-esteem, meaning that as Facebook use increases, the negative impact on self-esteem tends to rise. Kuzma, (2013) also align the results that frequent Facebook use is linked to a decline in self-esteem due to cyber harassment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings indicate that cyber harassment is a prevalent issue among students on social media platforms, with a significant portion regularly experiencing offensive comments, bullying, or intimidation. This harassment has substantial negative effects on students' mental health, contributing to increased anxiety, depression, and stress, as well as a decline in academic focus and self-esteem. Recommendations include implementing stricter anti-harassment policies on social media, providing mental health support to affected students, and raising awareness about the consequences of cyber harassment. Educational institutions should also foster a safer online environment through digital literacy programs and collaboration with social media platforms to curb harassment.

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