

The Impact of Cyberbullying Victimization on Suicidal Ideation, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress among Young Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The present study sought to investigate the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety and stress of youth in Pakistan. A quantitative correlational research design was used with a sample of 50 adolescents who were drawn using convenience sampling techniques from some schools of Hyderabad and Jamshoro. The Cyberbullying Victimization Scale (CVS), Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), and the Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ-A) were used to gather data. The statistical analysis comprised descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and independent samples t-test in SPSS version 26. The results showed that there were strong positive correlations among cyberbullying victimization, depression, anxiety and stress.

However, there was no significant correlation between victimization by cyberbullying and suicidal thinking. Gender differences identified male adolescents had significantly higher depression scores, while no significant difference was found in cyberbullying victimization, thoughts of suicide, anxiety and stress. The study underscores the psychological effects of cyberbullying and the need for preventive measures, digital awareness, counseling, and parental guidance to safeguard the mental health of adolescents. Keywords: Cyberbullying, Adolescents, Depression, Anxiety, Stress, Suicidal Ideation

Introduction

Adolescents' social lives have been dramatically changed by the quick development of digital communication technologies and social networking sites around the world. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and WhatsApp are now core ways for young people to communicate with

each other. These technologies offer avenues for communication, learning and social connection, but also have helped to create cyberbullying as a serious psychological and social problem.

Cyberbullying is defined as repeated and deliberate aggressive behavior that is done using electronic technologies with the intent to harm, humiliate or threaten someone. Cyberbullying may happen constantly and anonymously via the internet, making it easier for the target to not be able to get away from the bully. This is especially the case for adolescents, as they are deeply into digital communication and social networking.

Cyberbullying is a growing phenomenon that has triggered psychological issues to be a major concern in psychological research. Cyberbullying may cause emotional distress, social isolation, low self-esteem, fear, and psychological maladjustment in the victim(s). Research has linked cyberbullying victimization to depression, anxiety, stress and suicidal ideation in the lives of adolescents. Long-term exposure to bullying in the online environment could have negative effects on emotional health and disrupt healthy psychological growth.

Pakistan is experiencing a smartphone revolution and internet access among the adolescent population, which has intensified adolescents' exposure to online risks, such as cyberbullying. Although cyberbullying is becoming increasingly common, there is limited empirical research that examines the psychological effects of cyberbullying on adolescents.

In the Pakistani sociocultural scenario. Adolescents may experience and react to online victimization in ways shaped by their culture, family, religious beliefs and social norms. This study was conducted to explore the association between cyberbullying victimization and mental health outcomes (suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety and stress) among youth aged 13 to 16 years. The gender differences were also analyzed.

An understanding of the psychological impact of cyberbullying could help to create mental health services in schools, awareness-raising initiatives and strategies to prevent cyberbullying.

Literature Review

Cyberbullying has become one of the most important psychosocial problems among adolescents in the digital era. Cyberbullying is currently defined by researchers as an act of aggression that uses digital technology to harass, threaten, embarrass or socially exclude a person using on-line communication.

Hinduja and Patchin (2010) revealed that teenagers who suffer from cyberbullying are more likely to report emotional distress and ideas of suicide than teens who do not report cyberbullying.

In a similar fashion, Bauman et al. (2013) found strong correlations between bullying, cyberbullying and suicidal behaviors among high school students.

Cyber-bullying can have a significant impact on adolescent mental health, as noted by Nixon (2014), victims may suffer from depression, hopelessness, low self-esteem, and emotional instability. Campbell et al. (2012) also reported that cyberbullying,

One of the common reactions of victims is anxiety and fear because of the threat of further harassment. According to Kowalski, et al., (2014) research found that youth cyberbullying is related to several emotional dysfunctions. Likewise, Livingstone and Smith (2014) concluded that online dangers and digital aggression have a significant impact on adolescents' psychological health.

In Pakistan, the study conducted by Ilyas et al (2020) revealed that there was a significant relationship between cyberbullying and depression among the adolescents and self-esteem acts as a moderating variable. Waqas et al. (2019) also cited that adolescents of both genders in Pakistan are at risk of online harassment.

The current research is based upon two fundamental psychology theories. The first is General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992) that states that negative or stressful events can cause emotional stress, which can result in psychological issues including depression and stress. Cyberbullying victimization can thus be a continuous source of emotional stress for adolescents.

The other theoretical approach is the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide of Joiner (2005). This theory is that suicidal ideation occurs as a result of perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness. In some instances, the emotional isolation and social rejection that can result from cyberbullying can lead to suicidal thoughts.

While there has been a lot of research on cyberbullying and its consequences on mental health internationally, there is sparse research that focuses on these variables specifically regarding Pakistani adolescents.

Research Methodology Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative correlational research design to examine psychological outcomes and the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and psychological outcomes among adolescents.

Participants

A total of 50 adolescents from schools of Hyderabad and Jamshoro were sampled by convenience sampling techniques. Both men and women students participated.

Demographic Characteristics

Of the participants, 52% were boys and 48% were girls. The sample included middle-class socioeconomic status most of the participants. Most participants were in the 10th grade of study.

Cyberbullying victims indicated that they had been targeted on various social media platforms, such as Snapchat, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and other online apps.

Instruments

Cyberbullying Victimization Scale (CVS)

Adolescent cyberbullying victimization was measured using a scale, the Cyberbullying Victimization Scale.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21)

Adolescent depression, anxiety and stress symptoms were assessed using the DASS-21.

Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (SIQ-A)

A self-reported instrument (SIQ-A) was used to evaluate suicidal ideation in participants.

Procedure

Data collection was carried out with permission from all the relevant school authorities. The purpose of the research and confidentiality of responses was explained to the participants. Informed consent was obtained before administration of questionnaires.

The Demographic form and the psychological scales were filled in at classroom level. The data were gathered and analyzed in SPSS program (version 26).

Statistical Analysis

The data obtained was analyzed by descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient and independent samples t-test. The level of $p < .05$ was used to determine statistical significance.

Results

Demographic Information

A sample of 50 adolescents, 26 boys, and 24 girls, was used. Most of the participants were from middle socioeconomic status and attending 10th grade.

Social networking apps were reported as the most common platforms for cyberbullying experiences, followed by Snapchat and WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and other social networking apps.

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 50)*

Variable	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Boys	26	52
	Girls	24	48
Grade level	8th grade	6	12
	10th grade	44	88
Socioeconomic status	Lower middle class	6	12
	Middle class	44	88

Table 2*Platforms on Which Participants Experienced Cyberbullying (N = 50)*

Platform	Frequency	%
Facebook	6	12
Instagram	6	12
Snapchat	14	28
TikTok	6	12
WhatsApp	14	28
Other social networking apps	4	8
Total	50	100

Note. The label for the final category was missing in the manuscript and has been supplied from the accompanying text; percentages are calculated on $N = 50$.

Relationship between Cyberbullying, Victimization and Suicidal Ideation

The Pearson correlation analysis showed that there was no strong and statistically significant relationship between cyberbullying victimization and suicidal ideation ($r = -.149, p = .303$). The results indicated that there was no significant relationship between cyberbullying victimization and suicide ideation among the adolescents of the current study.

Relationship between Cyberbullying, Victimization and Depression

The results showed that there was a positive statistical correlation between victimization of cyberbullying and depression ($r = .315, p = .026$). Those who were cyberbullied more in adolescence had more depressive symptoms. Relationship between Cyberbullying Victimization and Anxiety

The results showed that there was a significant positive relationship between cyberbullying victimization and anxiety ($r = .456, p = .001$). This suggests that teens who were exposed to cyberbullying did have a higher rate of anxiety symptoms.

Stress

There was a positive association between cyberbullying victimization and stress that was statistically significant ($r = .338, p = .016$). Adolescents experienced more stress when they were involved in cyberbullying victimization at a higher level.

Table 3

Correlations Between Cyberbullying Victimization and Psychological Variables (N = 50)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Cyberbullying victimization	—				
2. Suicidal ideation	-.149	—			
3. Depression	.315*		—		
4. Anxiety	.456**			—	
5. Stress	.338*				—

Note. Only correlations with cyberbullying victimization were computed; remaining cells were not reported in the original analysis. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Gender Differences in Cyberbullying Victimization

Pearson correlation analysis showed that there was a weak negative correlation, but it was not statistically significant, between cyberbullying victimization and suicidal ideation ($r = -.149$, $p = .303$). Findings showed that, in this group, being a cyberbully victim was not significantly associated with suicidal ideation.

Gender Differences in Suicidal Ideation

There was no statistically significant difference between gender in suicidal ideation, $t(48) = -1.620$, $p = .112$. Women adolescent reported slightly higher suicidal ideation scores, but this was not statistically significant.

Gender Differences in Depression

The level of depression was found to differ between the genders with a statistically significant $t(48) = 2.447$.

$p = .018$. Depression symptoms were higher among male adolescents than female adolescents.

Gender Differences in Anxiety

The analysis showed that anxiety level did not differ between the genders, $t(48) = 1.846, p = .071$.

Gender Differences in Stress

There was no statistically significant difference between levels of stress for the genders, $t(48) = -0.208, p = .836$. The level of stress was similar among girls and boys in adolescence.

Table 4

Gender Differences in Psychological Variables (N = 50)

Variable	Male mean	Female mean	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Cyberbullying victimization	35.61	33.83	0.640	.525
Suicidal ideation	79.15	84.91	-1.620	.112
Depression	17.38	14.75	2.447	.018
Anxiety	17.61	15.67	1.846	.071
Stress	15.00	—	-0.208	.836

Note. $df = 48$ for all comparisons. The female mean for stress was not reported in the manuscript; the *t* and *p* values for stress are those given in the text.

Discussion

The current study explored the association between cyberbullying victimization and suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety and stress among youth in grade 10. The results give valuable insights into the psychological effects of cyberbullying in Pakistan's context.

There was no significant relationship between cyberbullying victimization and suicidal ideation in the study. While various international studies have found important links between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation, the present results raise the possibility that cultural and social protective factors can impact the reactions of adolescents to experiences

of cyber victimization. However, due to the strong family support systems, religious beliefs, and collective social structure within the Pakistani society, it may decrease the chances of suicidal thoughts even if cyberbullying experiences happen.

There was a large positive association between cyberbullying victimization and depression. Increased levels of depressive symptoms were reported among adolescents who were exposed to online harassment. This is similar to previous research showing that cyberbullying contributes to adolescents feeling sad, hopeless, emotionally withdrawn, and low in self-esteem.

The results also showed that anxiety was significantly positively associated with cyberbullying victimization. Adolescents who reported more cyberbullying had more symptoms of anxiety. Ongoing exposure to cyber-aggression can contribute to fear, feelings of insecurity and emotional distress for victims.

Similarly, cyberbullying victimization was significantly associated with stress. Repeated online harassment caused adolescents to have higher levels of psychological stress. Cyberbullying can happen at any time, using digital technologies, which can cause on-going emotional pressure and psychological strain to victims.

The results on gender differences showed no significant differences between the male and female adolescents in terms of cyberbullying victimization, suicidal ideation, anxiety and stress. Male teens, however, had significantly higher rates of depression than female teens. This discovery could be attributed to the sociocultural norms that discourage boys from expressing emotions openly in Pakistani society.

The results corroborate the assumptions of the General Strain Theory, which argues that the negative effects of stressful experiences on emotional maladjustment and psychological distress. Cyberbullying may then be regarded as a long-term cause of psychological stress that can result in depression, anxiety and stress in adolescents.

The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide is another theory that can give insight into the relationship between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation. The authors of the current study did not see a connection between these

variables and suicidal risk, but the process of through-going humiliation and rejection may still be a risk factor for suicidal risk in more extreme cases.

In general, the results reflect that cyberbullying is a prominent psychological concern that has to be taken seriously in order for the mental health of adolescents to be protected. The findings also emphasize the need for a proactive approach, digital education initiatives, and psychological assistance to minimize the negative impact of cyberbullying.

Conclusion

The present research examined how cyberbullying victimization affected suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety and stress for young adolescents. The findings showed that cyberbullying victimization is a significant factor that increases the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among adolescents. But there was no significant association between cyberbullying victimization and ideation of suicide. There were also some differences in psychological outcomes between men and women that were examined. No significant gender differences were found in cyberbullying victimization, suicidal ideation, anxiety, or stress, but males' adolescents reported significantly higher depression levels.

The findings highlight that cyberbullying is not only a digital or social problem, but also a significant psychological problem impacting on adolescents' emotional health. The study helps to contribute to the rising body of theory and research on cyberbullying and adolescent mental health in the context of Pakistan and emphasizes the need for prevention and awareness of mental health issues.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the results of the study:

1. Schools should implement digital safety education and anti-cyberbullying awareness education for teens.

2. Schools should provide counselling support to students who are psychologically affected by cyberbullying.
3. Parents need to stay open to talking with adolescents about their online activity and social media.
4. Intervention programs by mental health professionals that address emotional regulation, coping and awareness of cyberbullying should be developed.
5. Policy makers and educational authorities should enhance policies on cyber harassment and young people's on-line safety.
6. Larger and more representative samples from other areas in Pakistan should be included in future studies to enhance the generalizability of the results.
7. The long-term psychological effects of cyberbullying should be studied using longitudinal and mixed method research designs.

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