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Exploring the Long-Term Psychological Consequences of Cybervictimization Among University Youth in Lahore

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Abstract

Cyberbullying and online harassment have emerged as critical threats to youth mental health in the digital age. While much research focuses on immediate psychological harm, this study investigates the long-term psychological consequences of cyberbullying among university students in Lahore, Pakistan. Using a phenomenological qualitative design, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 students from three universities (one public and two private) who had experienced cyberbullying. Thematic analysis revealed persistent emotional trauma, chronic anxiety, depression, eroded self-worth, academic disengagement and long-lasting social withdrawal. Institutional shortcomings, particularly the lack of trauma-informed mental health services and ineffective reporting mechanisms, were found to intensify these outcomes. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive support structures, including long-term counseling, student-led peer networks and enforceable university policies aimed at countering the prolonged impact of cyberbullying and online harassment.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, online harassment, psychological trauma, long-term effects, higher education, mental health, Lahore

1. Introduction

The advent of digital communication has profoundly reshaped how individuals interact, share information and construct social identities. While these technological advances offer numerous benefits, they have also given rise to cyberbullying, a form of psychological aggression executed through electronic means such as social media, email and messaging platforms (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Cyberbullying is distinct from traditional bullying

due to its anonymity, 24/7 accessibility and potential for viral dissemination, making it especially damaging and difficult to escape (Slonje, Smith, & Frisé, 2013; Tokunaga, 2010).

University students are particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying as they spend a significant portion of their time engaged with digital platforms for both academic and social purposes. According to Kowalski et al. (2014), emerging adults in higher education face elevated risks of victimization due to complex social dynamics, identity development and peer pressures in virtual environments. In developing countries like Pakistan, where digital literacy is rising but institutional protections and mental health support systems remain inadequate, this problem is even more pronounced (Digital Rights Foundation [DRF], 2021).

Moreover, Pakistani universities often lack robust reporting mechanisms, trauma-informed counseling and awareness campaigns to address cyberbullying (Ali, 2020). Cultural taboos surrounding mental health and gender norms also contribute to underreporting and the silencing of victims (Saeed & Zafar, 2019). This leads to prolonged suffering, as many students continue to grapple with emotional and psychological wounds in isolation.

Although considerable research has documented the immediate psychological consequences of cyberbullying such as stress, anger and academic disruption (Mishna et al., 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2018), there is limited understanding of the long-term psychological outcomes, especially in non-Western higher education contexts. This study fills this critical gap by exploring the enduring emotional, academic and social consequences of cyberbullying and online harassment among university students in Lahore. Specifically, it seeks to understand how these experiences persist over time and shape the victims' mental health, sense of identity, academic motivation and interpersonal relationships.

2. Review of the Literature

Cyberbullying has emerged as a global psychological and educational concern, with numerous studies confirming its detrimental impact on the mental health of young people (Kowalski et al., 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). It is often associated with emotional instability, sleep disturbances, suicidal ideation and persistent anxiety, which may last long after the bullying ends (van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014). In their meta-analysis, Elgar et al. (2014) found that victims of cyberbullying reported high levels of internalized distress and depressive symptoms that continued into later adolescence and adulthood.

Schenk and Fremouw (2012) further argue that long-term effects of cyberbullying among university students include emotional detachment, chronic low self-esteem, academic disengagement and avoidance of social interaction. Victims frequently internalize the abuse, leading to altered self-concepts and cognitive distortions related to personal worth, identity and trust (Machmutow et al., 2012). In extreme cases, long-term victimization is linked to post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTS), emotional numbness and social phobia (Campbell et al., 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Digital victimization also interferes with academic success. Studies have shown that students targeted online often experience difficulties with concentration, avoidance of classroom participation and reduced academic performance (Perren et al., 2012; Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2011). In a longitudinal study, Wright (2018) emphasized that victims tend to disengage from learning environments over time due to persistent emotional instability and fear of exposure or further ridicule.

Despite these findings, most existing research has been conducted in Western or high-income countries. In Pakistan, although awareness of cyberbullying is increasing, empirical work focusing on its prolonged psychological implications remains limited. The Digital Rights Foundation (2021) reports that university students, particularly women, face rising cases of online harassment, often involving body shaming, blackmail and threats. However, institutional responses remain inconsistent and largely reactive. Victims frequently lack access to formal support systems, resulting in prolonged suffering and unprocessed trauma (Saeed & Zafar, 2019).

Further, Pakistani culture places a strong emphasis on family honor and reputation, particularly for female students, which can intensify the shame associated with cyberbullying and discourage victims from seeking help (Huang & Chou, 2010). As noted by Cassidy, Faucher and Jackson (2013), this cultural barrier significantly hinders open dialogue and limits institutional accountability.

Consequently, there is a compelling need for context-specific research that examines the long-term psychological impact of cyberbullying within Pakistani higher education. This study contributes to the literature by foregrounding the voices of student victims, identifying enduring mental health consequences and uncovering gaps in institutional and social support systems. It adopts a phenomenological approach to document how trauma persists long after the initial incidents, often aggravated by cultural taboos, peer silence and ineffective university policies. In doing so, the study not only extends global discourse into a South Asian context but also underscores

the importance of trauma-informed, culturally responsive interventions and the need for inclusive policy reforms in Pakistani universities.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a **qualitative phenomenological design** to explore the long-term psychological consequences of cyberbullying through the lived experiences of university students in Lahore. The research targeted students from three universities, including one public-sector and two private-sector institutions. A total of 20 participants with firsthand experiences of cyberbullying were purposively selected.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had directly experienced cyberbullying or online harassment. A short screening form circulated through university groups and peer networks identified eligible individuals. Only those who confirmed prior victimization were invited for interviews. Diversity in gender, academic field and year of study was maintained to enrich the data.

Semi-structured interviews, lasting 30–60 minutes, were conducted in confidential settings. Open-ended questions explored emotional impact, academic disruptions, social consequences and coping mechanisms over time. Data were analyzed using **Braun and Clarke's (2006)** six-step **thematic analysis** method. Transcripts were manually coded to identify recurring patterns and core themes related to long-term psychological outcomes.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage and were provided with post-interview access to psychological support resources.

4. Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 20 university students who experienced cyberbullying and online harassment revealed **six central themes** that collectively illustrate the long-term psychological, academic and social consequences of digital victimization. These themes are grounded in participants' lived experiences and highlight how cyberbullying continues to affect their well-being long after the initial incidents.

4.1 Persistent Emotional Distress

A majority of participants (18 out of 20) reported experiencing long-lasting emotional symptoms such as anxiety, sadness, panic attacks, flashbacks, irritability and sleep disturbances.

“Even after months, I still panic whenever I hear a message alert. It’s like my body remembers the fear before my mind does.” (Participant 3)

“Some nights I can’t sleep at all. I keep checking my phone to make sure no one’s targeting me again.” (Participant 6)

These experiences resonate with Wright (2018) and Sampasa-Kanyinga and Hamilton (2015), who found that cyberbullying is strongly associated with sustained emotional dysregulation. Unlike physical bullying, digital harassment may occur unpredictably and without boundaries, prolonging distress.

4.2 Erosion of Self-Worth and Identity

Several participants described how online abuse deeply impacted their self-perception and personal identity. They internalized negative labels, resulting in long-term issues with self-esteem and self-worth.

“They called me ugly and shameless. I started believing it. Even now, I hesitate to post a selfie or speak in class.” (Participant 8)

“I began questioning my worth—not just online, but as a person. I felt defective.” (Participant 10)

These insights support Hinduja and Patchin’s (2010) assertion that cyberbullying can distort identity and foster internalized shame. The permanence and reach of digital attacks often reinforce these psychological wounds.

4.3 Academic Decline and Avoidant Behaviors

Twelve participants reported significant academic setbacks as a result of emotional exhaustion and anxiety. Avoidance behaviors such as skipping classes, avoiding presentations and withdrawing from academic engagement were common.

“I stopped attending lectures for nearly a month. I couldn’t concentrate with all that fear hanging over me.” (Participant 11)

“I avoid any activity that makes me visible—presentations, competitions. I just want to disappear in the background.” (Participant 15)

These patterns align with Machmutow et al. (2012), who found that psychological distress can lead to chronic academic disengagement. The consequences are not only educational but also developmental, as students lose confidence in their abilities.

4.4 Chronic Social Withdrawal and Trust Deficits

Fifteen participants described ongoing difficulties in social interaction, both online and in person. Many expressed mistrust of peers, discomfort in digital spaces and general withdrawal from social life.

“I used to be very social. Now I avoid WhatsApp groups and decline most invites. I just don’t trust people anymore.” (Participant 13)

“It made me suspicious of everyone. Even close friends. I started thinking they might turn on me too.” (Participant 16)

This mirrors findings by Smith et al. (2008), who noted that cyber-victims often experience prolonged social anxiety and erosion of trust, leading to deeper isolation and vulnerability.

4.5 Hypervigilance and Digital Paranoia

Several participants exhibited heightened alertness in their digital behavior, constantly monitoring their online profiles, deleting posts or overanalyzing interactions to avoid future attacks.

“I overthink every post. I check who viewed it, who liked it, who didn’t... I feel unsafe online now.” (Participant 5)

“Even when nothing is happening, I keep expecting something to go wrong. It’s exhausting.” (Participant 18)

This theme extends the current literature by illustrating the emergence of digital hypervigilance as a post-trauma coping mechanism, often leading to emotional exhaustion and fear-based self-censorship.

4.6 Disillusionment with Institutional Support

Almost all participants expressed disappointment with their universities’ responses. Reports were often met with inaction, minimization or implicit victim-blaming.

“They said, ‘It’s just online. Ignore it.’ No action was taken.” (Participant 2)

“I reported it and they told me to be careful about what I post. As if it was my fault.” (Participant 14)

This aligns with Saeed and Zafar (2019), who criticized the institutional culture in Pakistan for failing to take cyber complaints seriously. The lack of support often compounded victims' psychological distress and discouraged future reporting.

The findings clearly demonstrate that cyberbullying has **deep and enduring psychological consequences** for university students in Lahore. It affects emotional well-being, identity formation, academic engagement and social trust often in ways that persist long after the initial harm. The trauma is compounded by cultural stigma and institutional neglect, which leave victims feeling isolated and unsupported.

Universities must go beyond reactive disciplinary policies and develop **proactive, trauma-informed interventions**. Comprehensive reporting mechanisms, trained counselors, awareness campaigns and inclusive digital policies are essential to mitigate long-term harm.

5. Conclusion

This study provides critical insight into the long-term psychological consequences of cyberbullying and online harassment among university students in Lahore. Through a phenomenological lens, the research captured the deeply personal and persistent nature of digital victimization, emphasizing that its effects are neither momentary nor easily dismissed. Instead, the narratives revealed enduring emotional distress, loss of self-worth, academic disengagement, hypervigilance, chronic social withdrawal and a profound sense of betrayal by institutional inaction.

The findings underscore that cyberbullying, unlike traditional forms of bullying, can invade victims' lives continuously due to the ubiquitous and anonymous nature of digital platforms. Moreover, the invisibility and permanence of online abuse often prolong the trauma, leading to identity disruption and psychological instability that can last for years. Students reported feeling abandoned by university authorities, reinforcing feelings of powerlessness and mistrust in institutional systems.

These revelations are particularly significant in the Pakistani context, where cultural taboos, fear of reputational damage and limited access to psychological support further exacerbate the harm. Victims frequently suffer in silence, internalizing blame and isolating themselves socially and academically. The resulting impact is not just personal but structural, contributing to broader educational and mental health challenges within higher education.

To break this cycle, universities must treat cyberbullying as a serious mental health crisis rather than a peripheral disciplinary concern. A multidimensional strategy is needed—one that includes trauma-informed care, policy reform, mental health resources, awareness campaigns and digital safety education. Only through such

comprehensive action can institutions create environments where students feel protected, empowered and supported in their healing journey.

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