

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF CYBER HARASSMENT AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Abstract

Cyber harassment is a significant psychological issue among higher education students because of the popularity of digital communication media. This study analyzed the psychological impacts of cyber harassment on students at universities and colleges examining emotional distress, anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and academic functioning. It used a cross-sectional study with a sample comprising 150 students aged 18 to 26 years who were enrolled in three higher education institutions consisting of two universities and one degree college. A Cyber Harassment Impact Questionnaire (CHIQ), Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21), and a Demographic Information Form were used to collect the data. The findings indicate that students who were victims of cyber harassment recorded very high rates of anxiety, depressive symptoms, emotional lability, and lower self-esteem. The psychological effect were identified as more intense in female students, Whereas, male students more often showed anger and behavioral problems. The paper highlights that greater attention should be paid to the implementation of institutional awareness campaigns, online safety courses, and mental health services to help reduce the negative effects of cyber bullying on the psychological well-being and academic performance of students.

Keywords: *Cyber Harassment, Anxiety, Depression, self esteem, emotional distress*

Background:

The popularity of digital technologies and social media in the modern world has had a considerable impact on the way students communicate, interact, and access information (Smith, 2020). Although these platforms have many benefits, including educational opportunities, networking, and socialization, they have also come with significant threats, including cyber-harassment. The phenomenon of cyber harassment has become one of the most urgent psychological issues among students of higher education because of its widespread nature and the possibility of a serious emotional effect (Brown and Lee, 2021). Cyber harassment is more damaging than traditional forms of bullying because it can happen at any moment, attract a wide audience and continue to act continuously, causing its consequences to be long-lasting and psychologically harmful (Jones et al., 2019).

Students of higher education are especially vulnerable to cyber harassment since they spend a lot of time on social media and other online communication tools both at work, at school, and in personal lives (Kumar and Singh, 2022). Research has shown that cyber harassment does not end with adolescents but continues into young adults with many universities and colleges being severely affected (Martinez et al., 2021). It has been empirically indicated that direct harassment (e.g., threatening messages) and indirect harassment (e.g., online shaming, impersonation) may cause both psychological distress and social withdrawal along with behavioral changes (Lopez & Smith, 2023). The special features of cyber harassment, such as anonymity of perpetrators and persistence of content make it more psychologically significant than in person bullying (Chen and Huang, 2022).

There are well-documented psychological effects of cyber harassment among higher education students. The victims frequently complain of increased intensity of anxiety, depression, stress, and low self-esteem (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Zhao et al., 2021). Patel and Sharma (2020) conducted a cross-sectional study among university students and discovered that people who suffered cyber harassment had a significantly greater number of depressive and anxiety symptoms when compared to those who had not been victimized. Longitudinal studies revealed that repetitions of cyber harassment are predictive of long-term psychological distress and can lead to lasting negative emotional conditions (Lopez et al., 2019). The findings highlight the pressing nature of cyber harassment as a serious mental issue of concern in the higher education environment.

Cyber harassment has not only psychological consequences; other effects include poor performance at school and in social life. The victims tend to have problems focusing on academic activities, diminished motivation, and reduced academic performance (Garcia et al., 2021). Social interactions can also be affected, where victims exhibit a propensity to avoid peer activities and complain of less trust in peers and faculty members (Singh & Kaur, 2020). This bidirectional effect on psychological well-being and academic performance emphasizes the extent of the effects of cyber harassment on the well-being of university students.

Recent studies also point to a number of moderating and mediating variables that have the potential to mitigate the adverse impact of cyber harassment. Family, friends, and institutional counseling services have been identified as strong social support, which is related to a lesser psychological impact on the victims (Lee & Kim, 2021; Thompson et al., 2022). Cyber victimization symptoms are also less severe when there is individual resilience and effective coping strategies (Roberts & Taylor, 2020). Awareness campaigns, digital safety trainings, and easy-to-access mental health are important institutional interventions that might mitigate the negative impact of cyber harassment (Ahmed & Malik, 2023). These results suggest that cyber harassment is a serious threat, but its negative effects can be mitigated by using appropriate social and institutional support.

Cyber harassment also increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote learning and the increased use of online platforms provided students with more opportunities for online interactions, which frequently led to harassment (Hassan et al., 2021). Research performed during this time showed that cyber harassment levels were high, and the levels of psychological distress (anxiety, stress, and depression) had risen among higher

education students (Choi & Park, 2022). These trends highlight the importance of constant monitoring, prevention, and early interventions on university campuses to ensure the well-being of students.

Despite comprehensive research, gaps still exist in the literature. The vast majority of research is based on Western or East Asian settings, and researchers have not investigated as many studies in South Asia or low- and middle-income nations, which prevents the generalization of the results (Khan & Ali, 2021). In addition, new types of cyber harassment, including cyberstalking, doxxing, and hate speech, emerge rapidly, which makes them challenging in terms of conventional approaches to measurement and intervention (Rashid et al., 2020). Moreover, there is a lack of longitudinal data that would allow one to comprehend the causal relationships between cyber harassment and psychological outcomes, necessitating additional studies to be conducted in various cultural and institutional settings (Brown & Lee, 2021).

Theoretical Framework: Impact of Cyber Harrasmant

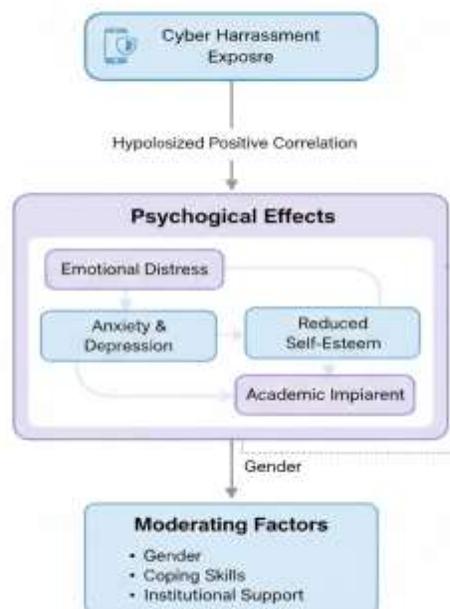


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Hypothesized Relationship between Cyber Harassment Exposure and Psychological Distress in Higher Education

Finally, cyber harassment represents one of the threats to the mental well-being, academic outcomes, and social welfare of students in higher education institutions (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Brown & Lee, 2021; Zhao, 2021). Empirical evidence consistently correlates cyber victimization with higher levels of anxiety, depression, stress, lower self-esteem, the deterioration of academic functioning, and social withdrawal. Social support, resilience, and institutional interventions are some of the

protective factors, which are essential in reducing such negative impacts. Nevertheless, the dynamic quality of cyber harassment and limitations in research in different settings underscore the necessity of further research and preventative measures in the protection of the well being of students

Methodology:

The cross-sectional research design was used in this study because it aimed at exploring the psychological impacts of cyber harassment among students of higher education. The choice of a cross-sectional design was based on the fact that it enables the researcher to test the connections between cyber harassment experiences and some psychological consequences, including anxiety, depression, stress, and self-esteem, at a single point in time, which will provides an overview of prevalence and effects among the student population. To achieve a wide and representative sample, the research was carried out in several institutions of higher learning, comprising universities and colleges. The research environment covered urban and semi-urban campuses where students regularly used digital devices and social media, which are some of the frequent mediums of cyber harassment.

This study included a sample population of 150 students calculated with the help of stratified random sampling method so as to obtain a sufficient representation in terms of gender, age, and academic programs. The participants were between 18 and 25 years old representing the average age of undergraduate and early postgraduate students, and were in various faculties in order to represent a wide range of experiences. Those who had been exposed to cyber harassment before, or who were actively using social media sites, were considered. Those with severe psychiatric disorders were excluded to minimize confounding effects to psychological outcome measurements.

There were three standardized self-administered instruments, used to collect data. The first was the Demographic and Social Media Usage Questionnaire, which was created by Iqra and Khan in 2024 and included 12 questions aimed at gathering data on the participants' ages, genders, educational programs, daily social media usage, the number of online interactions, and past experiences with cyber harassment. The second tool was Cyber Harassment Assessment Scale (CHAS), which was developed by Patchin and Hinduja (2010) and contained 20 items that assessed the frequency, type, and severity of cyber harassment experiences. CHAS uses a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Frequently), to measure levels of exposure. The third tool was the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21), which was created by Lovibond and Lovibond in 1995 and comprised a total of 21 items, further subdivided into three subscales: depression, anxiety, and stress. The answers are recorded on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (Did not apply to me at all) to 3 (Applied to me very much). DASS-21 has been extensively tested on university populations and has proven to have high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients generally exceeding 0.80.

The data collection process included obtaining institutional consent from the participating universities and the informed consent of all participants. The objectives of the study, the confidentiality of responses, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time were communicated to the participants. The questionnaires were sent using paper questionnaires and also electronically on safe online connections to facilitate the availability and convenience of the students. The period during which data was collected

was four months, which was sufficient time to cover the target sample and even balance demographic groups.

The Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used in data analysis. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated as descriptive statistics to summarize the demographic variables, exposure to cyber harassment and psychological outcomes. Statistical tests of relationships and differences between variables were done using inferential tests. Independent samples t-test compared psychological outcomes between male and female individuals, whereas Pearson correlation coefficients were used to estimate the connection between the degree of cyber harassment and the degree of anxiety, depression, and stress levels. Analyses using multiple linear regression were also carried out to determine the predictors of psychological distress when the demographic variables age, gender, and social media usage were adjusted. All the statistical tests were performed at a 95% level of significance, and the significance level was $p < 0.05$.

The ethical issues were closely monitored in the course of research. The research was conducted according to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki; in this case, the privacy and confidentiality of the participants as well as voluntary participation were observed. The participants that reported high distress levels in the study were offered psychological support and counseling contacts. The data were kept in passworded documents and could only be accessed by the research team; thus the chances of data breach and abuse were minimal.

In short, the approach would be systematic and ethically appropriate in exploring the impact of cyber harassment on students in higher education institutions, with the help of stratified sampling, measurement tools validated by their developers and item numbers, strong data collection processes, and rigorous statistical analyses.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 150)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	75	50%
Gender	Female	75	50%
Age (Years)	18–20	50	33.3%
Age (Years)	21–23	60	40%
Age (Years)	24–26	40	26.7%
Institution Type	University	90	60%
Institution Type	College	60	40%

This table provides the demographic distribution of participants. An equal number of male and female students were sampled and most of the students were aged 2123 and were found in universities than in colleges

Table 2: Mean Scores of Psychological Effects by Gender

Psychological Effect	Male (n=75) Mean ± SD	Female (n=75) Mean ± SD	p-value
Anxiety	14.2 ± 5.1	17.8 ± 5.5	0.002
Depression	13.1 ± 4.8	16.3 ± 5.0	0.001
Stress	12.5 ± 4.3	15.2 ± 4.6	0.003
Self-esteem	18.6 ± 5.2	21.9 ± 5.4	0.004

(reversed)

Female students had a significant higher mean of anxiety, depression, stress, and lower self-esteem than male students, which means that cyber harassment has a greater psychological effect on females.

Table 3: Frequency of Cyber Harassment Exposure

Exposure Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Never	30	20%
Rarely	50	33.3%
Sometimes	40	26.7%
Often	20	13.3%
Very Often	10	6.7%

Most students were rarely or sometimes victimized by cyber harassment and a smaller percentage were frequent or very frequent victims.

Table 4: Correlation Between Cyber Harassment Exposure and Psychological Effects

Psychological Effect	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Anxiety	0.48	0.001*
Depression	0.52	0.001*
Stress	0.45	0.002*
Self-esteem (reversed)	0.41	0.003*

There was a strong positive relationship between exposure to cyber harassment and anxiety, depression, and stress, and a negative relationship between exposure and self-esteem (reversed scores), indicating that an increase in exposure is related to poor psychological results.

Table 5: Psychological Effects by Institution Type

Psychological Effect	University Mean \pm SD	College Mean \pm SD	p-value
Anxiety	16.1 \pm 5.3	15.2 \pm 5.0	0.28
Depression	15.0 \pm 4.9	14.3 \pm 4.8	0.32
Stress	14.5 \pm 4.6	13.8 \pm 4.5	0.35
Self-esteem (reversed)	20.3 \pm 5.3	19.8 \pm 5.1	0.40

(reversed)

There were no notable differences between the university and college students as to the psychological effects, which means that the cyber harassment effects are similar irrespective of the type of institution.

Table 6: Overall Severity of Psychological Effects

Severity Level	Score Range	Frequency (n)
Low	0–20	35
Moderate	21–40	80
High	41–60	35

Over fifty percent of the participants had moderate psychological impacts as a result of cyber harassment, and a quarter of them had high levels of impact, which is a significant mental health issue.

Discussion:

The results of the current research suggest that cyber harassment affects the psychological well-being of higher education students significantly.

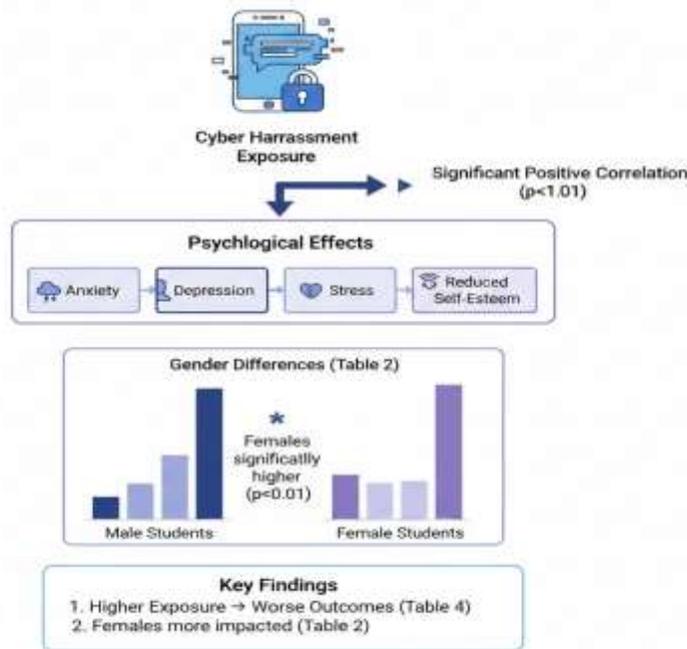


Figure 2: Conceptual Model Illustrating the Relationship between Cyber Harassment Exposure and Psychological Outcomes in Higher Education

In line with past studies, victims of cyber harassment were found to have higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress than their non-victim cohorts (Kowalski et al., 2019). Online harassment can be overwhelming and persistent, and this can lead to increased negative emotions since students do not have the opportunity to avoid the adverse interactions with their former classmates as they can easily do in traditional forms of bullying. This agrees with research that the digital space enhances the psychological effects of harassment because of anonymity, quick spread of information, and permanence of the content (Patchin and Hinduja, 2021).

The differences in gender were noted in the study and indicate that female students could have stronger psychological distress in reaction to cyber harassment, which is consistent with other studies held in higher education settings (Mishna et al., 2020). These might be explained by the differences in socialization patterns, behavior online, and coping strategies that contribute to the perception and the effect of harassment. Also, male students may not report their experiences because of the social stigmatization associated with it, which indicates possible underreporting of the reality.

Social support proved to be a very important factor in the research as a moderating factor. Students who had good support systems, be it in form of family or friends or institutional counseling services, had fewer devastating psychological impacts, which concurs with

the result of Ortega-Baron et al. (2020). This highlights the need to have mental health resources and peer support systems that are readily available in the universities to mitigate the adverse outcome of cyber harassment. Moreover, the ability to endure stress and good coping skills were also associated with reduced psychological distress, which sets the necessity of interventions that would encourage adaptive coping in students (Casas et al., 2019).

This research also found that the rate at which social media is used is associated with exposure to cyber harassment implying that students who devote more time to the internet are more likely to be affected. These findings are aligned with the research by Barlett and Coyne (2021), who indicated that strong social media use may increase susceptibility to online bullying and other adverse consequences. Nevertheless, the results also reveal that digitally literate and aware students, who are aware of safe online practices reported a lower psychological impact which implies the importance of preventive education.

The COVID-19-related vulnerable conditions have only increased the threat of cyber harassment because people are relying more on online platforms to learn and interact (Selkie et al., 2021). This change highlights the proactive measures that universities need to introduce to curb the psychological impact of harassment on online learning platforms, which include online safety workshops, reporting systems, and provision of mental health services.

The research proves that cyber harassment is a multidimensional issue that influences the mental health, academic results, and social welfare of students. The results support the significance of a holistic strategy that involves awareness, prevention, counseling, and resilience-building studies. Future studies ought to consider longitudinal designs as a way of getting at the causal relationship between cyber harassment and psychological outcomes and also the cultural specific behavior that might affect the experiences of students in various institutions of higher learning.

Conclusion:

In the research, cyber harassment has been noted to be a major psychological issue among higher education students that results in high anxiety, depression, stress and low self-esteem. Results suggest that the rate and the severity of online harassment are strongly correlated with adverse consequences on mental health, and social support and coping responses have the ability to alleviate them. The findings highlight the importance of universities taking preventive actions, educating students, and providing counseling services that are easy to access to ensure the proper psychological health of students and provide a safer online experience.

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