

CYBERBULLYING, LONELINESS AND USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The rapid development of social media has changed the communication trends among college students but the overuse of it can bring some negative psychological consequences like cyberbullying and feelings of loneliness. The current research has investigated the interdependence between social media usage, cyberbullying and loneliness in Pakistani college students. It involved a population of 320 students (18-25) in this quantitative correlational study. The subjects were subjected to self-report questionnaires such as the Social Media Use Questionnaire, Cyberbullying Scale, and the UCLA Loneliness Scale. The proposed hypotheses were tested using Pearson correlation and Multiple Regression. The findings showed that there were strong positive relationships between social media use, victimization by cyberbullying, and loneliness. The use of social media has turned out to be a strong predictor of cyberbullying, whereas cyberbullying has a strong predictive capacity on loneliness. The results provide an understanding of the psychological danger of overindulgence in social media and emphasize cyber bullying as one of the arbitrators of loneliness development among college students. The work offers empirical data to help in the creation of specific interventions, such as digital literacy, cyberbullying prevention, and peer-support programs that can be used to create safer online spaces and enhance the psychological well-being of the students.

Keywords: *Social media use, cyberbullying, loneliness, college students, digital engagement*

Introduction

Unlike the traditional mode of communication that relied on geographical boundaries, the rapid growth of digital technology and the accessibility of internet-enabled gadgets have revolutionized the patterns of communication and social interactions across the globe. Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Tik Tok are the examples of social media that are now deeply integrated into the lives of a typical person, especially college students, who are one of the largest groups of users of these social media sites. Academic collaboration, entertainment, identity formation, and preservation of interpersonal relationships are the common uses of social media. In spite of the fact that these platforms bring both benefits in connection and the exchange of information, increasing evidence indicates that the improper or un-adaptive use can have both negative psychological effects, such as cyberbullying and loneliness (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Primack et al., 2017).

Cyberbullying can be defined as purposeful, repeated aggressive actions directed at other persons using electronic tools, with the difference that they are unable to protect themselves. Cyberbullying is more pervasive and intrusive unlike traditional bullying which is limited by physical space and also can occur at any time. Anonymity and large reach that comes with online platforms contribute to the negative impact of cyberbullying. Online harassment, rumor spreading, exclusion, impersonation, and sharing of personal or embarrassing information against will are some of the forms of cyberbullying. It has always been found that cyberbullying is linked to emotional distress, anxiety, depressive feelings, and poorer psychological well-being in young adults (Smith et al., 2008; Kowalski et al., 2014).

College students are especially susceptible to cyberbullying as they spend a lot of time on social media and face the developmental problems of the new adulthood. This is the stage of life that is characterized by identity exploration, emotional sensitivity, and a greater dependency on peer response which can make them vulnerable to online victimization. The stress to portray a perfect self-image and get likes, comments and followers further expose individuals to bad online experiences. It has been shown that cyberbullying at this age may play an important role in damaging self-esteem and lead to mental issues (Arnett, 2015; Patchin & Hinduja, 2018).

Loneliness is one of the mental health issues that have become eminent among college students across the globe. Loneliness is an emotional condition, which is subjective and comes about due to perceived mismatch between the relationships that one wants and the one that they have. Notably, loneliness is not always associated with social isolation but the lack of satisfaction with the level of interpersonal relationships. Loneliness often arises as a result of transitions in college students to leave home, academic stress and inability to establish meaningful relationships in new situations. Constant loneliness has been identified to have various adverse effects among them being depression, anxiety, and low life satisfaction (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

Social media use is closely connected with loneliness in both directions. On the positive side, social media will be able to assist students to preserve their social connections and emotional support, especially those students who develop social uneasiness or are separated by a long distance. Conversely, too much or passive use of social media has been linked with feelings of loneliness, social comparison, mental health issues, the fear of missing out, and dissatisfaction with life (Adeeb et al., 2020; Noor et al., 2025). The perception of ideal lives of other people can develop the sense of insufficiency and social rejection, a phenomenon that further contributes to loneliness, not to eliminate it (Vogel et al., 2014; Nowland et al., 2018).

The role of cyberbullying in the connection between the social media use and loneliness of college students cannot be underestimated. Cyberbullying victims tend to feel embarrassed, scared and withdrawn, and this could cause them to shun online and face to face interactions. This isolation diminishes chances of social support and strengthens isolation. According to the empirical evidence, victims of cyberbullying show much more loneliness and social isolation than the non-victimization (Nesi et al., 2018; Wright, 2017).

There were a number of theoretical frameworks that can be used to explain the relationships between cyberbullying, loneliness, and social media use. According to Social Comparison Theory, a person measures themselves in relation to those that they think look better, those who are better than they are and those who are less successful than them. Social media sites enhance upward social comparisons by showing users highly edited and idealized content which may adversely affect self-esteem and social satisfaction. Together with the experience of cyberbullying, such

comparisons can enhance the sense of rejection and loneliness (Festinger, 1954; Vogel et al., 2014).

Moreover, there is the Displacement hypothesis, which indicates that overusing the Internet activities can substitute the real face-to-face communication resulting in social bonds and feelings of loneliness. Although moderate social media use can be used to supplement offline relationships, excessive use may supersede time spent in face-to-face interactions thus diminishing emotional intimacy and social connectedness. This is a displacement effect that has been noticeable among the young adults who are highly dependent on digital communication (Kraut et al., 1998; Twenge et al., 2018).

The Stress-Vulnerability Model also justifies the role of cyberbullying as a psychosocial stressor that leads to serious negative effects on the current emotional vulnerabilities. Cyberbullying can also have a strong impact on college students who have low self-esteem, low coping abilities or lack social skills, and put them at risk of feeling lonely and distraught. Social media can work either as a stress reliever or a source of additional stress in this situation, forming a loop of more Internet and psychological troubles (Monroe & Simons, 1991; Hinduja & Patchin, 2019).

Despite the fact that globally, the problem of cyberbullying and its psychological effects has been extensively studied, there is little literature on the subject that concentrates on college students in developing nations. Other contributing factors to increased vulnerability of students to cyberbullying and loneliness can be cultural, quick digitalization, and lack of awareness of online security. In nations like Pakistan, where even the use of social media has shot up among the young population, there is an urgent need to understand these problems in the local context so that to inform culturally sensitive interventions and institutional policies (Saleem et al., 2021).

Considering these factors, the given study will focus on investigating the correlations between cyberbullying, feelings of loneliness, and social media usage among college students. Through examining the interaction of these variables, the research aims to contribute more to the existing knowledge on the psychosocial risks of digital engagement in the emerging adulthood. The results will be relevant to the literature and offer practical implications to the field of educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers to create effective approaches toward safer online settings and enhance the psychological well-being of students (Kowalski et al., 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2018).

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To test whether there is an association between cyberbullying, loneliness, and the use of social media among college students.
2. To examine how social media use can be used to predict cyberbullying experiences in college students.
3. To examine how loneliness can be used to predict cyberbullying experiences in college students.

Hypotheses

Based on the evidences, the present research hypothesizes that:

1. There would be significant relationship between the use of social media, cyberbullying, and loneliness among college students.
2. Social media use would be a significant predictor of cyberbullying among college students.
3. Loneliness would be a significant predictor of cyberbullying among college students.

Rationale of the Study

The growing and more frequent use of social media in the life of students has brought about growing concern on the psychological and social effects. Being one of the regular users of social networking sites, college students are especially exposed to the online dangers, including cyberbullying, which can have a negative impact on their mental and social health. Loneliness is an issue that appears to be frequent in the period of emerging adulthood and becomes even more severe with a negative experience on the Internet and diminished quality of interpersonal communication. Although there is an increasing amount of international literature focused on cyberbullying and loneliness, there is a lack of empirical findings that would focus on these two factors at the same time in the context of college students, especially in developing nations. It is necessary to know how the use of social media leads to cyberbullying and how cyberbullying, in its turn, affects loneliness to develop preventive measures and specific interventions. This gap is proposed to be addressed by the current research, which presents empirical evidence that can assist educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers in fostering safer online communities and increasing the psychological well-being of students.

Conceptual Model

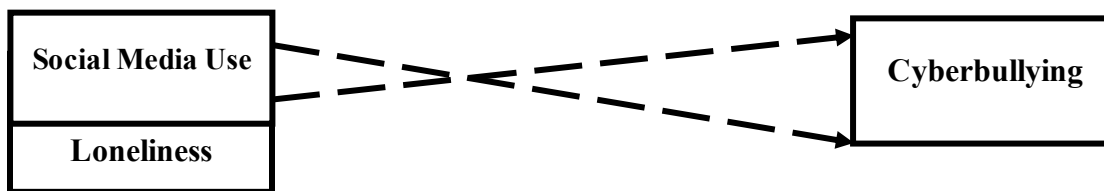


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Research

METHODS

Sample

The present study followed a quantitative correlational research design. The sample population was college students of the age group 18-25 years old, recruited from different colleges of Pakistan (public and private). The participants were chosen through the convenience sampling method. The study included both male and female students who indicated to be active users of social media platforms.

Instruments

Demographic Sheet. The demographic sheet was obtained from respondents with their age, gender, education, socioeconomic status and residence.

Social Media Use Questionnaire (SMUQ) (Kircaburun et al., 2020). The Social Media Use Questionnaire is a self-reporting questionnaire which aims to determine the frequency, duration and patterns of social media use among college students. It is a 15-item Likert scale (five points) with the response options between 1 (Never) and 5 (Very Often). The higher the score, the more engaged and the more the use of social media platform. It is a well-internalized scale with a high Cronbach α (= 0.88).

The Cyberbullying Scale (CBS) (Topcu and Erdur-Baker, 2010). The Cyberbullying Scale is a self-report questionnaire comprising of 19 items created to determine the experiences of cyberbullying, both as a victim and as a perpetrator. The respondents will rate the items on a four-point Likert scale with 0 (Never) to 3 (Often), where the higher the point, the larger the engagement in cyberbullying behaviors. The CBS has proven to be very reliable and valid with Cronbach α =0.91 to victimization and α =0.89 to perpetration in adolescent and college populations.

UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) (Russell, 1996). The UCLA Loneliness Scale is a popular self-reported questionnaire that is used to evaluate subjective loneliness and social isolation. The scale will include 20 items measured on four-point Likert scale, where 1 (Never) to 4 (Often) with high scores reflecting more loneliness. The scale exhibits a high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Procedure

Direct approach to students in educational institutions after obtaining permission from relevant authorities. The participants received information concerning the study purpose being and were guaranteed of confidentiality and anonymity. The involvement was voluntary, and the informed consent was provided before the data were collected. The questionnaires were conducted through the classroom environment and participants were appointed about 15-20 time to fill the measures. The researcher responded to any questions that the participants had. Questionnaires were filled and examined to ensure completeness and then stored safely to be analyzed.

RESULTS

Table 1

Demographics Profile (N=320)

Respondent's Characteristics		N	%	M (SD)
Age				20.68 (1.84)
Gender	Male	138	43.1	
	Female	182	56.9	
University Type	Public	176	55.0	
	Private	144	45.0	
Daily Social Media Use	1-2 hours	70	21.9	
	3-4 hours	108	33.8	
	5+ hours	142	44.3	
Residence	Rural	98	30.6	
	Urban	222	69.4	

Table 1 indicates that the mean age of the participants was 20.68 years (SD=1.84). The female students (56.9) were slightly more than the male students (43.1). The sample sizes were nearly even with 55.0 percent in the public and 45.0 percent in the private universities. In terms of the use of social media every day 44.3% said they used social media 5 or more hours per day which suggests they are very active. The majority of the participants lived in cities (69.4%) and rural areas (30.6%).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis (N=320)

Variables	M	SD	Social Media Use	Cyberbullying	Loneliness
Social Media Use	25.12	6.04	-		
Cyberbullying Victimization	30.87	8.29	.53**	-	
Loneliness	43.46	9.65	.46**	.57**	-

** p < .01

Table 2 provides the Pearson correlation analysis. Findings of the correlation identified that there is a strong positive correlation between social media use and cyberbullying ($r = 0.53, p < .01$) and a strong positive correlation between social media use and loneliness ($r = 0.46, p < .01$). Also, there is a strong positive correlation between cyberbullying and loneliness ($r = 0.57, p < .01$).

Table 3

Linear Regression Analysis for Predicting Cyberbullying through Social Media Addiction among College Students (N=320)

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i>
Constant	12.41	2.98	—	4.16	.000	6.55 – 18.27
Social Media Addiction	0.73	0.07	.53	10.42	.000	0.59 – 0.87
R ²	0.28**					
ΔR^2	0.27					
F	108.62					

***p* < .01; CI for Confidence

Table 3 highlights the results of a linear regression analysis that predict cyberbullying in college students through social media addiction. The findings show that the use of social media was a strong positive predictor of cyberbullying (*B* = 0.73, *b* = .53, *p* < .001), implying that an increased use of social media is linked to increased cyberbullying. Regression model explained 28 percent of the variance in cyberbullying (*R*² = 0.28, ΔR^2 = 0.27, *F* = 108.62, *p* < .01).

Table 4

Linear Regression Analysis for Predicting Cyberbullying through Loneliness among College Students (N=320)

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i>
Constant	21.67	3.84	—	5.64	.000	14.11 – 29.23
Loneliness	0.71	0.08	.57	9.18	.000	0.55 – 0.87
R ²	0.33**					
ΔR^2	.32					
F	84.28**					

***p* < .01; CI for Confidence I

The outcome of the linear regression analysis that predict cyberbullying in college students through loneliness presented in Table 4. The findings indicate the loneliness is a significant predictor of predictor of cyberbullying (*B* = 0.71, *b* = .57, *p* < .001), implying that loneliness is linked to increased cyberbullying. Regression model explained 33 percent of the variance in cyberbullying (*R*² = 0.33, ΔR^2 = 0.32, *F* = 84.28, *p* < .01).

Discussion

The current study has analyzed interconnections between the use of social media, cyberbullying, and loneliness in college students. In line with following hypotheses, it was found that greater use of social media was closely linked with greater exposure to cyberbullying and greater loneliness. Moreover, the usage of social media became a significant predictor of cyberbullying whereas cyberbullying became a strong predictor of loneliness. The results of this study add to the body of knowledge with respect to the psychological dangers of overindulgence in digital interactions during the formation of adulthood.

According to the first hypothesis, the correlation analysis revealed that the relationships between social media use, victimization due to cyberbullying, and loneliness were positive and strong. This is in line with the findings of earlier researches that indicate that heavy use of social networking sites leads to more exposure to negative online experiences, such as harassment, trolling, and peer victimization (Kowalski et al., 2021; Wachs et al., 2022). The social media context can provide

the environment of anonymity and lowered accountability, which can promote the tendency toward criminal actions and increase the probability of cyberbullying experiences among pupils (Barlett et al., 2021). Also, social disconnection may be aggravated by constant comparison, fear of missing out, and online rejection that can further enhance loneliness (Hunt et al., 2018).

The high level of correlation between loneliness and social media use is in line with the displacement and social comparison views. The displacement hypothesis states that overindulgent online communication can lead to the loss of meaningful face-to-face relationships, and emotional isolation will occur (Twenge et al., 2019). On its part, Social Comparison Theory implies that a person might be encouraged by seeing idealized images of peers on social media to also assess themselves negatively, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and loneliness (Festinger, 1954; Appel et al., 2019). These theoretical explanations are supported by the current results, which highlight the psychological vulnerability of the college students who use social media extensively. In favor of the second hypothesis, regression analysis showed that victimization by cyberbullying was heavily predicted by social media use. This finding can be compared to the previous studies that have shown that the individuals who use social media regularly have a greater probability of being involved in aggressive online communication because of their high visibility, extended connection networks, and extensive presence on social media (Kircaburun et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2023). The social networking sites with interactive features which include commenting, sharing, and a personal message might encourage recurring exposure to bad behaviors and hence become vulnerable to cyberbullying. What is more, there is a risk of putting the users in negative online spaces unintentionally when the exposure to content depends on algorithms, which only increases the risk (Montag et al., 2021).

One of the most vital findings of the study is the strong predictive role of cyberbullying in explaining loneliness that was determined in the third hypothesis. Victimization to cyberbullying had a significant portion of variance in loneliness, which implies the extent of emotional effects of cyberbullying among college students. The observation is consistent with earlier results according to which the concept of cyberbullying is linked to social withdrawal, emotional distress, depressive symptoms, and a lack of interpersonal trust (Nesi et al., 2018; Schunk et al., 2022). Cyberbullied participants are likely to experience rejection, stigmatization, and lack of support and this may aggravate feelings of isolation even in social places like universities.

Psychologically, the interpersonal-psychological theory can be applied to explain the association between cyberbullying and loneliness, that is, social rejection and humiliations experiences destroy the feeling of belonging among an individual (Joiner et al., 2009). Unlike the traditional bullying, cyberbullying can be continued and visible, and the victim can hardly escape and recuperate, which contributes to loneliness (Kowalski et al., 2021). The current results further apply this knowledge to the college population, in which the research on cyberbullying has not been done extensively.

Taken together, these findings point to the multi-dimensionality of the routes by which the use of social media impacts the psychological well-being of students. Although online communication and education present the possibility to connect and gain academic experience, problematic use seems to make one more susceptible to cyberbullying and isolation. The presented findings highlight the necessity of preventive measures that would affect responsible digital behavior, awareness of cyber safety, and emotional resilience among college students.

Universities and mental health professionals are recommended to think about introducing digital literacy interventions, policies on cyberbullying prevention, and peer-support programs that would help create safe online communities. Screening of the cyberbullying experiences and loneliness

might also help in counseling services received by students with emotional distress. By tackling these problems at the initial stage, one can minimize the impact of psychological effects in the long-term and improve the overall welfare of students in a progressively digital academic environment.

Conclusion

The current research examined the correlations between social media use, cyberbullying and loneliness among college students. The results indicated that over use of social media is strongly linked with greater victimization in cyberbullying and loneliness. Besides, social media use became a good predictor of cyberbullying, and cyberbullying was an important predictor of loneliness. These findings highlight the interdependence of these digital practices and psychological well-being among young adults. The study also makes significant contributions to the understanding of how greater use of social networking sites may unintentionally expose students to the negative Internet life and the latter may, in turn, lead to the development of emotional isolation. Since college years are an important developmental period that involves identity formation and integration into society, the adverse consequences of cyberbullying and loneliness may be permanent impacts on mental health and academic performance. The results emphasize the need to come up with specific interventions at institutional level. Universities must also be more focused on digital literacy, cyberbullying awareness programs and ready mental health support services that will assist students to safely navigate the online world. Reducing the psychological risks of using social media could involve encouraging moderated use of social media and creating supportive peer groups. Although the study has merits, the cross-sectional design, which does not allow causal interpretations, and use of self-report measures are weaknesses of the study. Future studies must use longitudinal designs and conduct research on the protective mechanisms, including social support, resilience, and coping. All in all, the research presents the necessity to take action to combat cyberbullying and loneliness in the digital era and make college life regarding the internet and the real world healthier.

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