

## VULNERABLE ONLINE: THE EMOTIONAL COST OF CYBERBULLYING

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### Abstract

*Cyberbullying is a type of cybercrime that has proliferated through common use of social media platforms. Privacy interference is terrifying regardless of the method used, security measures, and government compliance. Cyberbullying has become prevalent as a widespread menace to teenager well-being, social isolation, causing emotional distress and long-term psychological harm. Practical and effective measures are urgently needed to reduce this growing concern. The main aim of this study was the cyberbullying and its psychological impact on vulnerable age groups. A cross-sectional survey of 608 participants (52.4% females, 47.6% males) revealed that 35% (n = 213) experienced cyberbullying, with females (61%) being more likely to be victimized than males (38%). Significant relationships were found between cyberbullying and each age group (p = 0.0209), residential area and education level (p = 0.0001), and decreased self-harm, self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts among victims. The results of the study emphasize on teenagers 13-19 years old (46.5%) are more suffer to facing cyberbullying due to more likely to have social media accounts, making them vulnerable to online harassment. Moreover, urban areas (33%) and college/university students (20.5%) are more prone to cyberbullying due to higher internet accessibility and online activity. These results illustrate the urgent need for tailored approach to reduce the emotionally overwhelming effects of cyberbullying among vulnerable populations. Cyberbullying presents a serious and major concern to the mental health and safety of a person, particularly teenagers. Addressing cyberbullying requires a comprehensive and integrated approach to reduce and prevent its harmful effects. By adopting global best practices and tackling local challenges, Pakistan can develop a stronger and more effective system to address cyberbullying.*

**Keywords:** Cybercrime, Security measures, Self-esteem, Urban areas, Vulnerable populations

### Introduction:

The internet and digital communication technologies grew in popularity, cyberbullying started to appear. The possibility of online harassment increased in the late 1990s as internet usage increased and online communication tools like chat rooms and emails gained popularity. In 1999, Canadian educator Bill Belsey first used the term "cyberbullying" to describe the practice of bullying someone online, usually by sending them intimidating or threatening messages (Mahmud et al., 2023). Additionally, cyberbullying took on new dimensions with the emergence of social media platforms in the early 2000s, like Face book (2004) and MySpace (2003), which made it simpler for people especially teenagers to abuse others in widely visible public settings. Because digital communication is continuous and frequently anonymous, cyberbullying is especially harmful because it allows victims to be tormented around the clock and can reach a larger audience (Donegan, n.d.). Furthermore, In the 2010s, social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter became widespread, and new forms of cyber bullying, including harassment via these

platforms, continued to emerge (Vaillancourt et al., 2017). The anonymity provided by the internet, along with the ease of spreading content, made cyberbullying more pervasive. Efforts to combat it through legislation, education, and social media platform policies have increased in response to the widespread harm caused by cyberbullying. A review of foundational and contemporary studies is necessary to understand the historical trajectory of bullying, its transition into the digital sphere, and its psychological, social, and legal implications. Bullying, a form of repeated aggressive behavior intended to harm or dominate others, has been a persistent issue across cultures and eras. Traditionally occurring in schools, workplaces, and social settings, bullying has evolved with the rise of technology (Tokunaga, 2010). Cyberbullying, defined as bullying through electronic means such as social media, messaging platforms, and gaming, has added a new dimension to this age-old problem. This article offers a thorough analysis of both traditional bullying and the rise of cyber bullying, going into their respective histories, legal considerations, and preventative measures (Thomas et al., 2015). Cyber bullying is a type of bullying that takes place via electronic channels like social media, the internet, mobile devices, and other digital communication tools. It entails the deliberate and persistent harming of a person via a variety of digital venues, frequently taking advantage of the anonymity, these platforms offer. Because it may happen anywhere and at any time, cyber bullying is widespread and frequently more difficult for victims to avoid than more conventional types of bullying. Frequent use of social media emails or texts to make cruel, disrespectful, or threatening remarks or messages. This may entail threats, verbal abuse, or insults directed at the victim's character or personal qualities. This entails posing as someone else online in an effort to harm their connections or reputation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). For instance, a bully may publish offensive or deceptive content purporting to be from the victim on a phony social media account (Dennehy et al., 2020). Publishing someone else embarrassing or private photos or information without that person permission. To humiliate or disgrace the victim in front of others, this may involve sharing private information or delicate photos. The deliberate removal of a person from a chat room, internet group, or activity. Because it entails purposefully excluding someone from online contacts or social circles, this type of bullying is frequently more subtle but can still be emotionally upsetting. Persistent, focused cyber bullying that makes the victim feel afraid or intimidated. Cyber bullying victims are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. Cyber bullying is more isolating for the victim because it may be carried out anonymously and widely shared, unlike traditional bullying, which friends may observe. It is possible that adolescents lack the coping skills necessary to control these strong emotions, making them susceptible to the long-term consequences of cyber bullying (Elsaesser et al., 2017). Both victims and offenders are impacted by the serious and frequently severe psychological effects of cyber bullying. Cyber bullying, as opposed to traditional bullying, can happen at any time and offers the victim little to no break from the abuse. Long-term behavioral, psychological, and emotional effects may result from this continuous exposure. The main psychological repercussions for victims and the broader effects of cyberbullying are listed below. Extreme emotional and psychological suffering, including sadness, rage, anxiety, depression, and terror, is common among victims of cyber bullying (Evangelio et al., 2022). Because of the anonymity provided by the internet, bullies can act harmfully without being confronted directly, which exacerbates the victim's emotional suffering. These consequences are made worse by the inability to flee the harassment, which results in a persistent feeling of vulnerability and fear. Research indicates that individuals who are the targets of cyberbullying suffer more emotional distress than those who are the targets of traditional bullying. Significant mental health issues, including anxiety and sadness,

are frequently linked to the effects of cyberbullying. Persistent dejection and hopelessness can plague victims, frequently resulting in sleep issues and difficulty focusing at work or school (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2022). Being targeted online all the time can have a negative emotional impact and make it harder for a person to go about their everyday life normally. Studies have indicated a clear correlation between cyber bullying and a higher risk of depression, especially in teenagers. A decline in self-esteem is one of the major psychological effects of cyberbully. Being the victim of cyberbully can make people feel inadequate, irrelevant, or worthless. Constantly hearing disparaging remarks, taunts, and humiliation causes victims to frequently doubt their own value, which can have long-term consequences. Teens' sense of self is still developing, making them especially susceptible to these alterations (Voggeser et al., 2018). The main aim of this study was the cyberbullying and its psychological impact on vulnerable age groups.

### **Materials and Methods:**

A sample of 608 participants (47.6% male, 52.4% female) completed the questionnaires of this study. The age range was 13 to 19 years which was further divided into subcategory of age range from 13-15 (years) and 16-19 (years). In first age group of 13-15 years total 37 participants were males and 23 were females. In second age group of 16-19 years total 252 participants were males and 296 were females. All participants are from same country Pakistan of these participants, 127 males and 235 females belong to urban residential area. And 59 males and 35 females belong to suburban area while 89 males and 67 female participants were belonging to rural areas. Out of 608 participants 20 males and 19 females were from middle schools and 59 male and 37 female participants from High schools. Other 199 male and 284 female participants were from college/university. All participant were students that have different education levels. Firstly, all participants were asked either they are feeling safe or comfortable sharing their experience in the survey. So, all 608 participants considered it safe and comfortable. Additionally, participants were asked about their personal perspective and awareness about cyberbullying with "Yes" or "No" criteria. Out of 608 participants a total of 574 participants think that cyberbullying is a serious issue by responding to "Yes" while 41 participants respond to "No". Moreover, 153 participants think that social media is taking satisfactory actions to prevent cyberbullying while 462 participants think that social platform is not taking adequate measures to prevent cases of cyberbullying. A total of 326 participants chose "Yes" that they have knowledge about reporting cyberbullying incidents while 289 participants respond to "no". On the other hand, out of 608 total participants only 218 participants have knowledge about laws related to cyberbullying. Total of 283 participants also share that they know someone who is affected by cyberbullying. Participants were defined as victims by admitting that have experienced cyberbullying behaviors. For that participants were asked about their own experience in cyberbullying. In males of age group 13-15 year a total of 13 respond to "Yes" while 25 respond to "No". In age group of 16-19 years in males a total of 31 participants respond to "Yes" while 40 respond to "No". On the other hand, in case of females of age group 13-15 years a total of 11 respond to "Yes" while 10 respond to "No". In age group of 16-19 years in females a total of 27 participants respond to "Yes" while 38 respond to "No". Total 213 participants experienced cyberbullying which are main target of study. According to the exclusion criteria, the participants that have no experience of cyberbullying are not further studied for mental impact and performance in academic and social life. Out of total 111 participants respond that cyberbullying has decreased their self-esteem, 69 respond that there is no effect of cyberbullying on their self-esteem and 30 participants respond that cyberbullying

has increased their self-esteem. Participants were asked either they had thoughts of self-harm or suicide as a result of cyberbullying in “Yes” or “No” scale so out of total participants that have experienced cyberbullying 75 participants respond to Yes and 136 participants respond to No. Participant with cyberbullying experienced asked about effect on their academic performance either cyberbullying effected their academic performance or not in “Yes” or “No” criteria, where 134 participants respond to Yes while 79 participants respond to No. Additionally, total 160 participants respond that their social relationships are also effected by cyberbullying while 54 participants had no social impact on their mental health by cyberbullying.

### **Measures**

#### ***Questionnaire on demographics:***

Participants provided demographic information about their gender, age, education level (e.g., Middle, High school, college and university), residential area (e.g., Urban, Suburban and rural area).

#### ***Questionnaire about experiences:***

This questionnaire was designed specifically for this study's purpose. This measure's distinctiveness and diversity meant that its validity and dependability had never been proven before. It incorporated aspects of multiple surveys from earlier research on cyberbullying. The questionnaire designed with some sections including the personal perspective of the participants and awareness in people about cyberbullying with subsections addressing: knowledge about reporting incidence of cyberbullying, knowledge about laws related to cyberbullying, their perspective about cyberbullying issue. The other section includes the experience of cyberbullying that participants either experienced cyberbullying by their own or not. This section also includes the questions like: type of experience and platform where cyberbullying occurs (e.g., “What type of cyberbullying have you experienced?”), (e.g., “On which platform cyberbullying occur?”). Being a victim is divided further by the various kinds of cyberbullying (messaging, online, picture/video communications and calling), the overall experiences of cyberbullying, and the effects and mechanisms for coping. In other section, some responses on the Impact on Metal health were responded in a various methods and forms. In this category participants were asked that, “How they feel after being cyberbullied?”. The other questions are: “Did they feel any mental effect?” (e.g., difficulty in sleeping, loss of interest in activities, fatigue and feeling isolated). The participants were asked that cyberbullying have affected their self-esteem or not and did they have thoughts of self-harm or suicide as a result of cyberbullying. The next section includes the questions based on academic performance and social impact of cyberbullying (e.g., “Has cyberbullying affected your academic performance?”), (e.g., “Has cyberbullying affected your relationships?”). The last section includes questions based on coping mechanism that how participants respond to cyberbullying and who did they turn to for support. Participants were also asked that either they know someone who is affected by cyberbullying or not.

A survey was conducted with total 608 participants including male and female. The survey was based on cyberbullying impact on mental health regarding to different age groups. This was web-based as well as In-person based belongs to different age group and different residential areas. All participants that filled survey were considered for personal perspective and awareness about cyberbullying but according to exclusion criteria the participants that had no experience of cyberbullying were not considered for mental health, academic, social affect. Participants that respond first thoroughly read the first consent question in which participants gave their consent for



participation. The next part is then to complete the questionnaire on demographics. The data was collected and then analyzed. All analyses were conducted using Graph Pad Prism 10.

### Results:

Impact of Victimization by Cyberbully was measured by the usable sample of 608 participants was consist of 319 female participants (52.4%) and 289 male participants (47.6%). Among the participant sample, 213 (35%) of the participants fulfilled the criteria that can be considered as victims of cyberbullying; 131 females (61% of the entire sample that experienced cyberbullying) and 82 males (38% of the entire sample that experienced cyberbullying).

Chi-Square analysis for Age group and gender was analyzed among participants (Total participants: n) where n=608. Among total participants 319 females (52.4%) and 289 were males (47.6%). The participants were divided into two different age groups: (13-15, 16-19 years). In age group of (13-15) years total number of female participants was 23 and among (16-19) year females were 296. On other hand, for (13-15) year age group the number of males was 37 and for age group of (16-19) year male participants were 252. By using Graph Pad Prism 10, the data was analyzed between demographic feature (e.g., age group and gender) which gives significant P-value of 0.0209. The P-value < 0.05 is showing a significant statistical result value which is shown in table 1. The P-value for other demographic feature including gender relevant to residential area as well as education level is calculated which is also showing highly significant result showing P-value = 0.0001 < 0.05.

**Table 1. Age group concerning different categories with P-value < 0.05 (\*) where n=608**

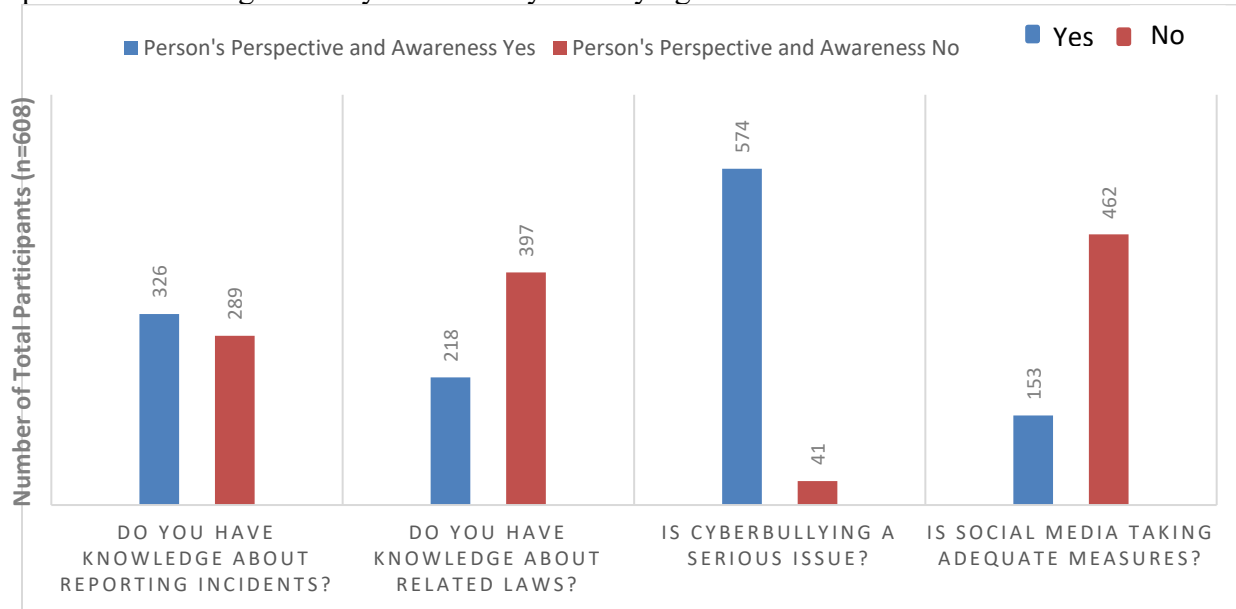
Category	Subcategory	Males (n=289)	Females (n=319)	P-Value
Age group	13-15 years	37	23	0.0209
	16-19 years	252	296	
Residential Area	Urban	127	235	0.0001
	Suburban	59	35	
	Rural	89	67	
Education Level	Middle school	20	19	
	High School	59	37	
	College/University	199	284	

P-value < 0.05 showing highly significant value.

Among total participants n=608 the personal perspective and awareness was measured with different categories (e.g., perspective about issue of cyberbullying and knowledge about social media that it is taking adequate measures to prevent it or not, as well as awareness about reporting incidents and laws related to cyberbullying). Chi-square test was performed to analyze the P-value by using Graph Pad prism 10 which is showing significant result (P-value = 0.0001) P-value < 0.05. This outcome indicated that these parameters are highly related.

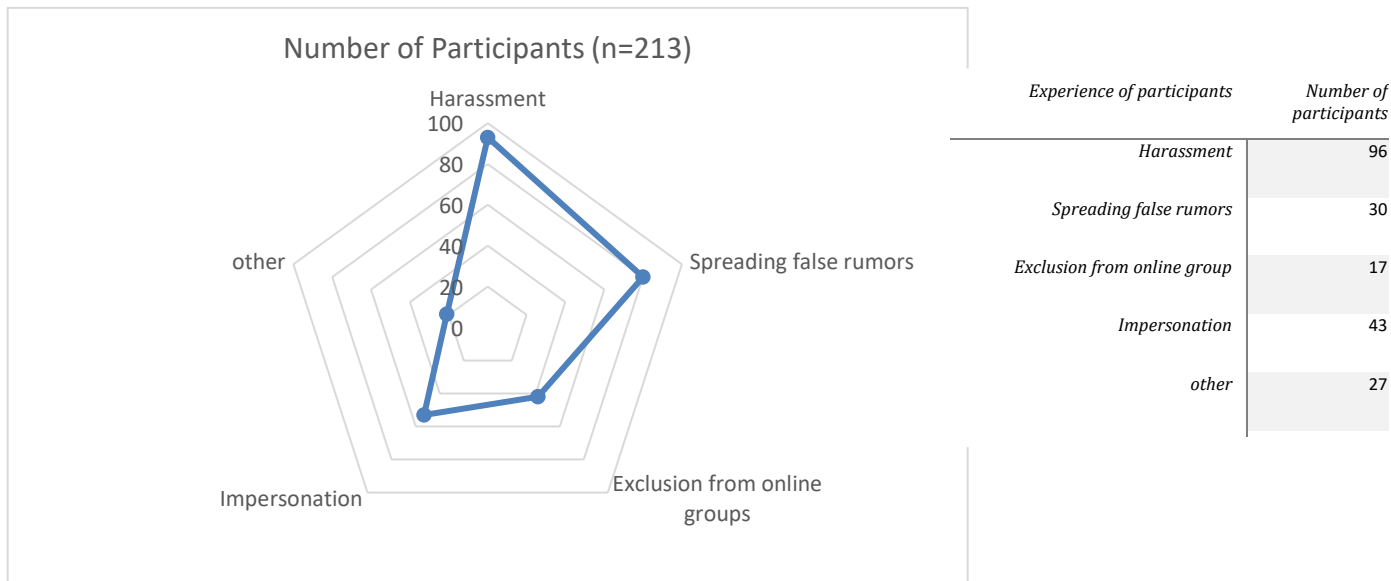
People are well concern about cyberbullying issue because 574 participants out of total thinks that cyberbullying is a very serious issue and only 153 participants out of total (n=608) thinks that social media is taking some preventive measures to prevent cyberbullying and other

462 participants think that social media is not doing well to prevent cyberbullying cases as shown in fig 1. Among total participants 326 participants know how to report cyberbullying incidents on social media and 218 people out of total know laws related to cyberbullying. So, these awareness parameters are significantly related to cyberbullying.



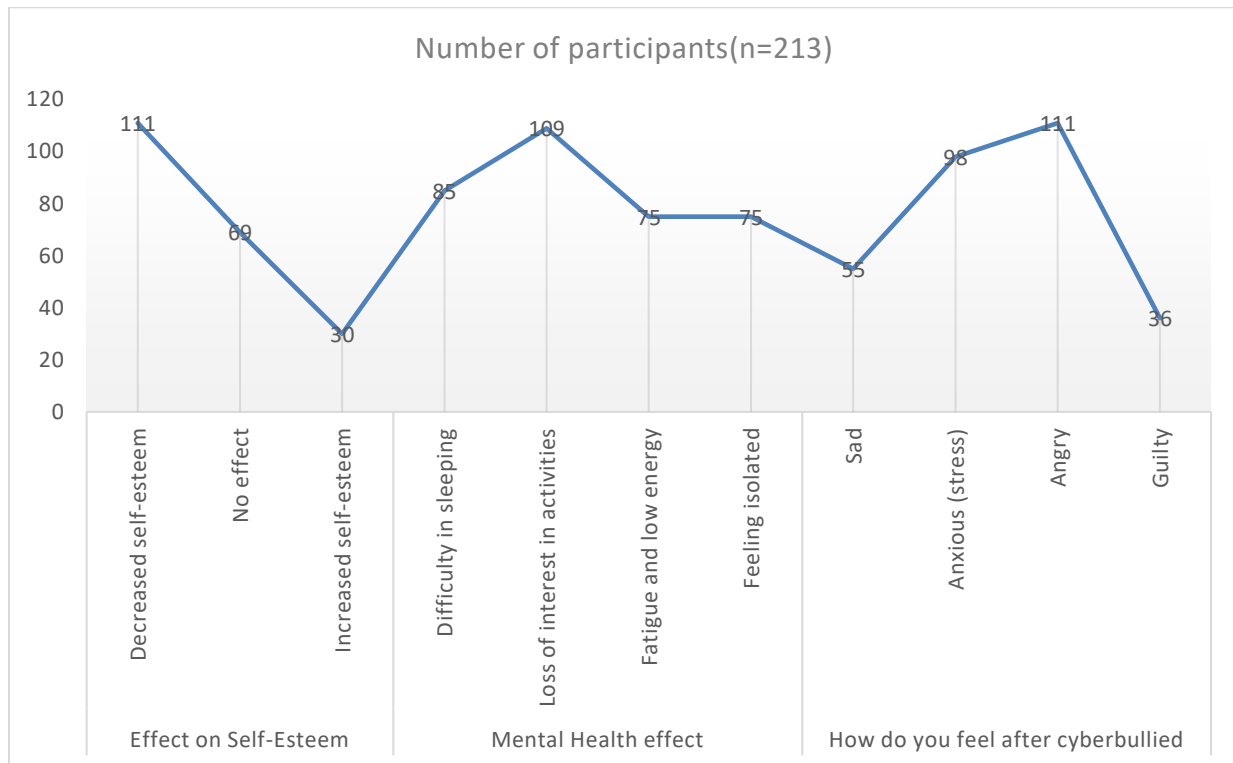
**Fig.1 Personal Perspective and awareness showing significant relation with cyberbullying.**  
**Cyberbullying Experience:**

Participants that experienced cyberbullying were 213 out of total (n=608). These participants were further studied for their experience that which type of cyberbullying experience they faced and which platform more responsible for such incidents. By using Graph Pad Prism, a fraction analysis of cyberbullying experience is indicated as part of whole where fractions show the type of cyberbullying incidents and type of platform where cyberbullying occurs as shown in Fig 2. According to the fraction analysis Harassment cases on social media platform (25%) (e.g., Instagram, Facebook etc.) are main platform where cyberbullying cases occurs.



**Fig.2 Web/Radar analysis showing experience of cyberbullying experienced by participants.**

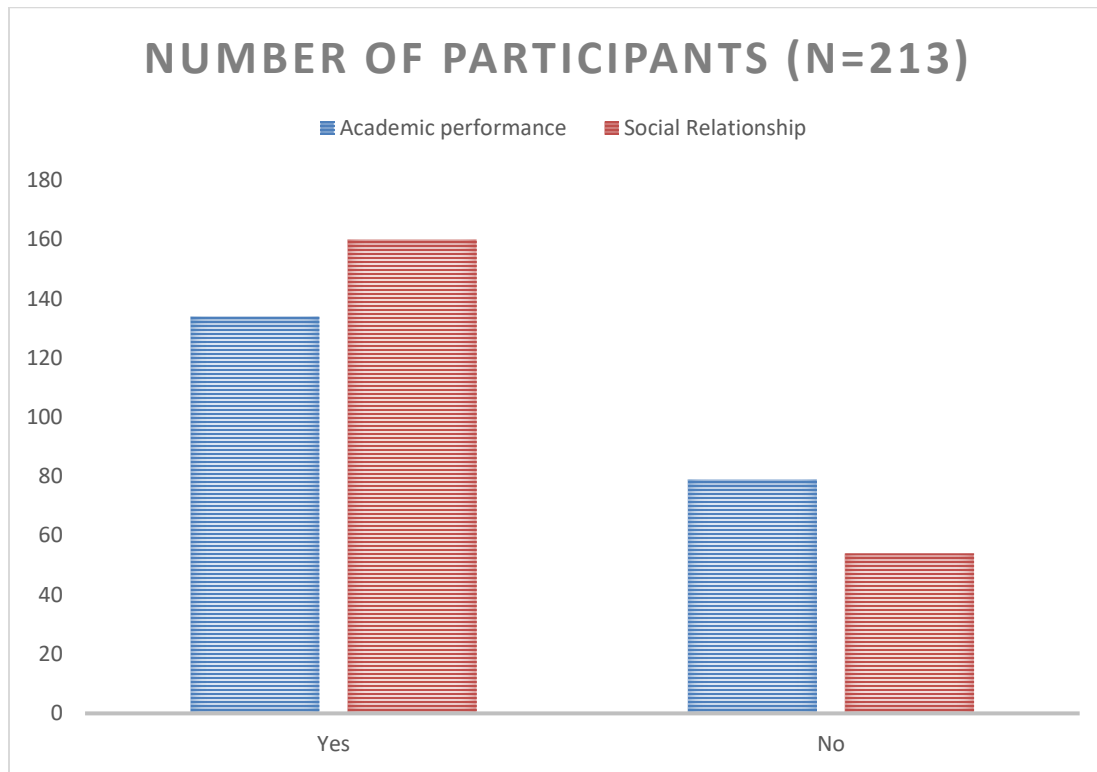
Participants that experienced cyberbullying were 213 out of total (n=608) studied for the analysis of mental health impact. These participants were further studied for their experience that how they feel after being bullied to check for the mental health effect and which health symptoms they experienced. It is analyzed that either cyberbullying experience effected their self-esteem or not. Chi-square test is applied on data to check the relationship between cyberbullying and its effect on mental health about self-harm and getting suicidal thoughts is significantly related. Out of 213 participants that experienced cyberbullying 111 participants respond that their self-esteem decreased after being cyberbullied and 75 of them had thoughts of self-harm and suicide. The P-value is 0.0001 which is  $< 0.05$  indicating that hypothesis about effect of cyberbullying on mental health is true as shown in fig 3.



**Fig.3 Analysis of Impact of Cyberbullying on Mental Health of participants experienced cyberbullying (n=213)**

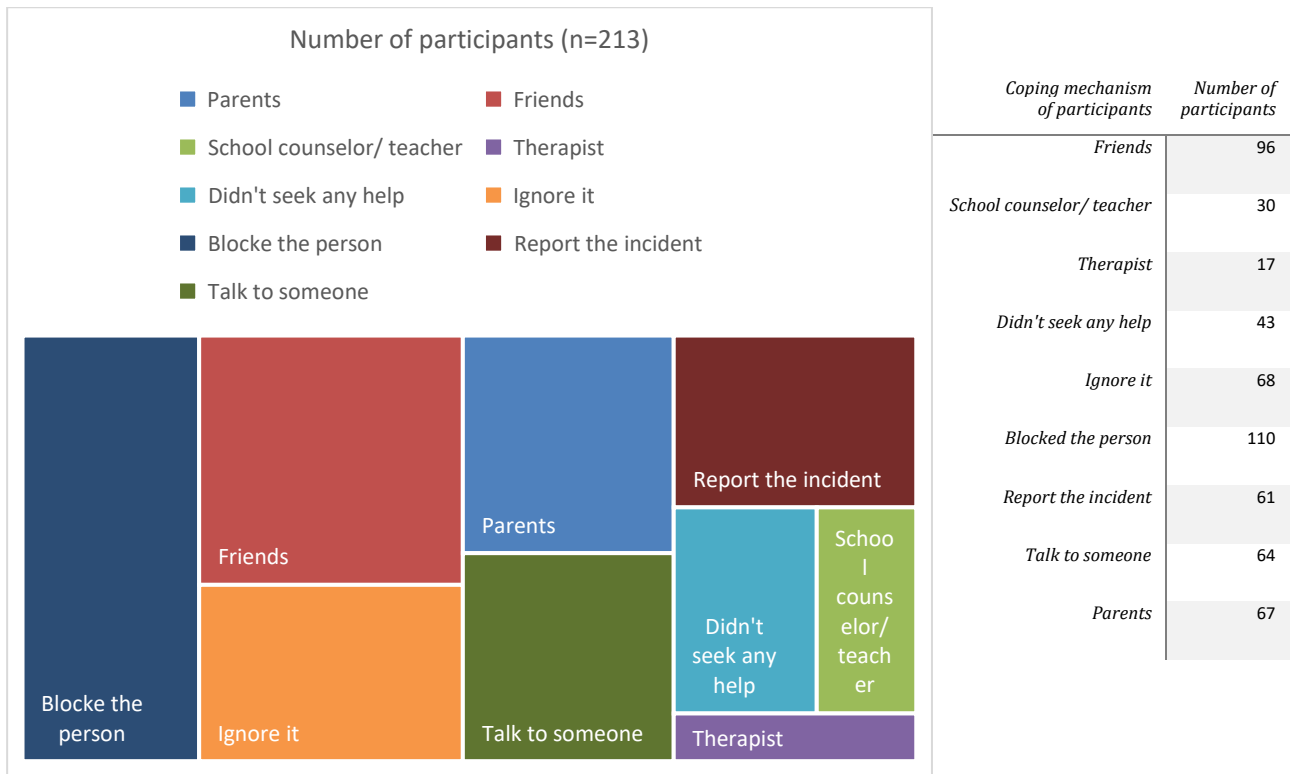
According to hypothesis cyberbullying effect the social relationships and academic performance and to check this hypothesis Chi-square test is applied which shows the significant result between cyberbullying experience and effect of cyberbullying on academic performance and social relationships. Out of total which experienced cyberbullying (n=213), 134 participants experienced negative impact on their academic performance and 160 participants have impacted their social relationships due to cyberbullying experience as shown in fig 4. The P-value result is 0.0082 ( $P\text{-value} < 0.05$ ) which shows a highly significant relationship between cyberbullying and its impact on social behavior as well as academic performance.





**Fig.4 Significant Impact of Cyberbullying on Academic performance and social relationships**

It is important to figure out that either persons that are experiencing cyberbullying are showing which type of attitude that either they sharing their experience with others or reporting the incident. As previous results showed that participants that experienced cyberbullying have significantly affecting their academic performance and their relationships as well as they are facing many mental health problems. So, it is important to know that how those participants are coping with cyberbullying experience for future perspectives as shown in fig 5. According to graph it is clear that most of the participants (110 participants out of total 213) blocked the persons that bullied them and participants prefer friends to share their problems. Among total participants (n=608), 286 (47%) participants respond that they know someone that is affected by cyberbullying and out of total 322 (53%) participants respond that they don't know anyone who is affected by cyberbullying.



**Fig. 5 Tree map showing the coping mechanism of participants that how they are dealing with cyberbullying experience.**

### Discussion:

The outcomes and the results of the study emphasizes on teen agers 13-19 years old facing cyberbullying while using digital technologies and social platforms. Teen years of any individual is development stage that transit them to adulthood from childhood. These years serves as a crucial period in developing the personality and mindset of a person. The findings of this hypothesis gives an insight on awareness, experiences, and impacts of cyberbullying among Pakistani teenagers including its effects on mental health, academic performance, and social relationships, as well as the coping mechanisms adopted by victims (Husky et al., 2020). The study showed that 35% of participants (n=213) reported experiencing cyberbullying, with a higher proportion of females (61%) than males (38%). It strongly matches with global trends showing that female's proportion is higher to experience cyberbullying, potentially due to their higher engagement on social media platforms.. The statistically notable relationship between demographic factors, such as age, gender, residential district, and education level, indicates varying factors in experiencing cyberbullying (Baier et al., 2019). Only 153 participants out of 608 thinks that social media platforms are taking good steps or measures in preventing cyber bullying. 326 participants are aware how to report cyberbullying while using digital platforms and only 218 participants out of 608 knows about the laws and legal actions taken by Government of Pakistan against cyber bullying (Agustiningsih et al., 2024). Pakistan has laws under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016 that provides legal structure against cybercrimes but unfortunately its enforcement and awareness is limited. Cyber Crime Wing of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) provides a platform to report cyberbullying cases through its online complaint portal for victims (von Humboldt et al., 2025). There is a high time to break stigma because people hesitate sharing the issues bothering

their mental health and social behaviors particularly teen agers of Pakistan are shy enough to share the cyber bullying with their parents and teachers and neither find a need to go to therapists to combat their anxieties. To deal with such issues we need to promote open discussions about cyberbullying that breaks the stigma and encourage victims to seek help (Huang et al., 2019). Healthcare professionals are increasingly using social media as a tool for professional communication and education; the benefits and drawbacks of these platforms have been strongly debated in recent years with varying degrees of success. Social media use has increased throughout the COVID-19 epidemic to the point that it is already a commonplace component of contemporary healthcare systems. By adopting global best practices and tackling local challenges, Pakistan can develop a stronger and more effective system to address cyberbullying. The outcomes and the results of the study emphasizes on teen agers 13-19 years old facing cyberbullying while using digital technologies and social platforms. Teen years of any individual is development stage that transit them to adulthood from childhood. These years serves as a crucial period in developing the personality and mindset of a person. The findings of this hypothesis gives an insight on awareness, experiences, and impacts of cyberbullying among Pakistani teenagers including its effects on mental health, academic performance, and social relationships, as well as the coping mechanisms adopted by victims (Hutson et al., 2018). The study showed that 35% of participants (n=213) reported experiencing cyberbullying, with a higher proportion of females (61%) than males (38%). It strongly matches with global trends showing that female's proportion is higher to experience cyberbullying, potentially due to their higher engagement on social media platforms (Slonje & Smith, 2008). The statistically notable relationship between demographic factors, such as age, gender, residential district, and education level, indicates varying factors in experiencing cyberbullying. There is a high time to break stigma because people hesitate sharing the issues bothering their mental health and social behaviors particularly teen agers of Pakistan are shy enough to share the cyber bullying with their parents and teachers and neither find a need to go to therapists to combat their anxieties. To deal with such issues we need to promote open discussions about cyberbullying that breaks the stigma and encourage victims to seek help. Because of technological development, now the bullying has become the source by the technology. As cyberbullying is the practice of using technology, including Internet and the cell phones, to harass and abuse people with the purpose of harming them. Due to the fact that bullying and cyberbullying are still highly widespread and damaging forms of interpersonal violence that occur in schools across the globe, it is vital to expand information about these issues in order to eradicate them (van Geel et al., 2014). Serious consequences, such as violence, criminal behavior, and drug addiction later in life, may result from these problems. Psychological discomfort, including suicide thoughts, self-harming behaviors, and depressive symptoms, is associated to experience of cyberbullying. Therefore, cyberbullying has become an important concern regarding public health. In this study, different aspects of occurrence of psychological traits in the teenagers who are affected by cyberbullying are investigated to understand the association of cyberbullying on mental health. Still, university students that are more sensible who participated in report of cyberbullying have much higher levels of self-harm, suicide attempts, despair, anxiety, and harmful conduct than other people. Therefore, compared to teens who do not engage in cyberbullying, late teens who do so have more psychological problems (Zych et al., 2015). Adolescents who have been through a situation in which they are cyberbullied may face long-term consequences like depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Appearance based bullying and body shaming adds cherry on the top of it that causes severe psychological disorders in victims along with headache, lack of sleep,

lack of appetite, confused feelings of dissatisfaction and disapproval of themselves. Victims facing cyber bullying often report insomnia or irregular sleep patterns due to disturbance in their biological clock that is caused by fear and overthinking those results in anxieties and depression. Continuous online harassment can harm victims of this age group i.e (13 to 19) self-assurance, making it difficult for them to figure out academic goals and strengths effectively that negatively effects their educational outcomes by continuous decline in grades (Selkie et al., 2015). Victims most likely to develop introverts by losing social opportunities to interact with people around them and ultimately lose friends by isolating themselves. Parents and teachers need to gain awareness trainings and to have a keen eye on the behaviors and activities in order to detect and tackle cyber bullying. In Pakistani societies, cultural taboos and conservative thinking of people increases the prevalence of shame and cyber bullying towards female victims. Cyber bullied victims also find difficulty in trusting people around them after experiencing intimidation and treachery online through social platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and online gaming platforms. Feelings of loneliness and exclusion are developed in adolescents which is led by disconnection from social websites and platforms because they have developed a fear of being betrayed, targeted and bullied again. By empowering our young ones to share their experiences they have while using social platforms with their parents, teachers and counselors who will guide and educate them how to tackle the situation and gives them self-assurance plays a key role in eradicating issues like cyberbullying and their consequences from society (Mahmud et al., 2023).

### Conclusion

It is concluded that cyberbullying has a significant psychological impact on vulnerable age groups, notably in rural backgrounds where bullied individuals may experience greater mental anguish. The special obstacles of rural and urban environments addressed the correlation between bullying response and context, highlighting the demand for a personalized approach. A systematic strategy that involves parents, teachers, students, and administrators is required for effective antibullying. Promote kindness and empathy, and maintain clear policies and consequences to combat this issue. Parents, educators, and teachers should educate their children and their surroundings who face this issue. To effectively mitigate cyberbullying, a comprehensive strategy is needed. Individuals, particularly teenagers, must implement block and report bullies and educate online safety and education campaigns. We can create more secure and protective offline and online environments for society to address the root causes of cyberbullying and prioritize the needs of vulnerable age groups.

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