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CYBERBULLYING AND MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES AMONG FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the situation of cyberbullying among women in universities and students of the University of Okara, Pakistan, and how it is affecting their psychology and performance. By using the mixed-methods approach, 367 single female students of different academic years were surveyed, with 40.1 percent of them having had the experience of being bullied online, most frequently using the social media (61.2 percent) and messaging apps (20.4 percent). Most frequent types of cyberbullying consisted of harassment (19.1%) and defamation (8.2%). The statistical tests, namely, chi-square tests, t-tests, and regression analysis, showed that any cyberbullying was related to a statistically significant deterioration in adverse mental health outcomes, i.e., depression ($p = 0.021$), anxiety ($p = 0.039$), social withdrawal ($p = 0.016$), and low self-esteem ($p = 0.008$). Academic grades and ability to concentrate also greatly decreased ($p = 0.009$), as well as missed assignments ($p = 0.027$) and the contemplation of dropping out ($p = 0.002$). The study is also a lesson on the underreporting of cases of cyberbullying where 61.2 per cent of the victims did not report because they felt it was trivial or they feared retaliation or they were not aware of where to report. These results highlight the fact that safe use of the internet is crucial when it comes to digital literacy initiatives, more strict implementation of cyberbullying regulations, the ease of accessibility of mental health services, and policies that would promote a secure online experience among students. Approaches such as the inclusion of cyber safety lessons in university curriculums, the enhancement of report systems, and the understanding of the concept of positive digital citizenship to overcome the harmful implications of cyberbullying on students and their performance are suggested.

Background

Cyberbullying has become a significant public health issue within educational institutions, especially universities. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying allows perpetrators to inflict psychological harm remotely and often anonymously, with the potential for prolonged and repeated abuse (Smith et al., 2008). University students are particularly vulnerable due to their heavy reliance on digital communication platforms, making them easy targets for online harassment. This exposure has been linked to increased emotional distress and poor academic outcomes (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010).

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Mental and Academic Impact of Cyberbullying:

Social media and instant messaging apps have made it easier for students to engage in harmful online behaviors, including harassment, exclusion, and verbal abuse. Research highlights that cyberbullying can lead to serious mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and self-harming thoughts (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). These emotional struggles negatively influence students' academic engagement and performance, leading to reduced participation and lower grades (Wright & Wachs, 2019).

Global Relevance and Need for Research

Cyberbullying affects students worldwide, crossing cultural and geographic boundaries. Studies show that between 20% and 40% of university students report experiencing cyberbullying during their academic years (Kowalski et al., 2014). Victims often show decreased academic motivation and weaker academic performance (Beran & Li, 2007). This study aims to explore the relationship between cyberbullying, mental health, and academic success, providing insights that can support the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies for educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers.

Cyberbullying has become a widespread issue affecting university students across the globe, regardless of cultural or socioeconomic background. Research from various countries highlights the damaging psychological and academic consequences of online harassment. In the United States, Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) found that 30% of young internet users reported online harassment, leading to emotional distress and poor academic performance. Similar trends are observed in the UK and Germany, where cyberbullying significantly impacts students' mental health (Smith, 2019). In South Korea, studies show a strong link between excessive internet use, cyber victimization, and symptoms of depression and social withdrawal (Jung et al., 2014). Research in India and China also reveals decreased academic motivation and increased anxiety among cyberbullying victims (Gupta & Sharma, 2018). In Latin America, students face psychological stress and academic decline due to online abuse (Rodriguez & Perez, 2020). Countries like Australia and Canada have responded with cyber safety policies and legal protections, yet the issue persists. These global findings emphasize the urgent need for enhanced awareness, prevention strategies, and policy reforms to mitigate the long-term effects of cyberbullying in higher education.

Status of Cyberbullying in Pakistan

In Pakistan, the increasing reliance of university students on digital platforms has intensified the problem of cyberbullying, particularly among the youth. With the widespread use of smartphones and social media, incidents of online harassment, cyberstalking, and digital abuse have risen sharply (Javed & Bhatti, 2021). Research by Yasin and Khalid (2020) indicates that nearly 30% of Pakistani university students are at risk of cyberbullying, which is linked to mental health issues and a decline in academic performance. Studies also highlight that cyberbullying leads to reduced self-esteem and motivation, especially among female students (Khan et al., 2022). However, cultural stigma and inadequate legal protection discourage many victims from reporting such incidents (Hassan & Raza, 2019). Although the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 was enacted to combat cyber harassment, its enforcement remains weak and public awareness is limited (Shah & Farooq, 2023). In

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response, universities have introduced awareness campaigns and digital literacy initiatives, yet a stronger legal framework, improved support systems, and nationwide educational efforts are urgently needed to address the growing impact of cyberbullying on students' mental health and academic success

This study investigates the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students, aiming to uncover the psychological impact it has on their mental well-being. It further examines the extent to which cyberbullying affects students' academic performance. Additionally, the research includes a critical assessment of existing policies and institutional measures, evaluating their effectiveness in addressing and managing incidents of cyberbullying.

Research Objective:

- This study investigates the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students, aiming to uncover the psychological impact it has on their mental well-being.

Impact of Cyberbullying on Students' Mental Health

Cyberbullying has emerged as a serious threat to the mental health of university students. Victims often experience heightened anxiety, depression, emotional distress, and poor sleep quality. Studies show that prolonged exposure to online harassment leads to low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and even suicidal thoughts.

Research also indicates that cyberbullying affects students' ability to concentrate, lowers their academic performance, and disrupts emotional regulation. Many victims struggle with trust issues, social isolation, and increased aggression or substance abuse as coping mechanisms. Physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, and digestive problems are also common.

The psychological toll includes PTSD-like symptoms, identity confusion, and reduced emotional resilience. In severe cases, cyberbullying has been linked to self-harm and eating disorders. Experts recommend early intervention, counseling services, peer support groups, and campus-wide awareness programs to help students manage and recover from the effects.

To create a safer academic environment, universities are urged to implement stronger anti-cyberbullying policies, mental health services, and supportive community initiatives.

Cyberbullying and Its Impact on Academic Performance

Cyberbullying affects not only students' mental health but also significantly undermines their academic performance. Victims often struggle with concentration, motivation, and class participation, leading to poor grades and academic disengagement (Thompson & Green, 2019; Adams et al., 2021). Stress and anxiety from online harassment directly interfere with students' ability to focus on studies and complete assignments.

Studies show a consistent pattern of reduced academic achievement, poor attendance, procrastination, and burnout among those exposed to cyberbullying (Clark & Green, 2022; Johnson & Carter, 2022). In particular, female students and international students are reported to suffer more intensely, both emotionally and academically (Davis & Lee, 2021; Nelson & Taylor, 2021).

Social withdrawal, sleep disturbances, and emotional distress further intensify the academic decline. Victims reported difficulties with cognitive tasks, memory, and

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emotional regulation, which ultimately impacted their learning capacity (Nguyen & Lee, 2022; Evans & Miller, 2023). Moreover, students experiencing cyberbullying were less likely to engage in group work or extracurricular activities, reducing their academic enrichment (Moore & Thompson, 2021; Foster & Cooper, 2022).

Research Design:

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to assess the prevalence of cyberbullying and its impact on the mental health of female university students at the University of Okara. A quantitative approach allows for objective measurement and statistical analysis, while the cross-sectional design ensures that data is collected at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of the current situation. The study aims to identify the extent of cyberbullying and analyze its psychological effects, including stress, anxiety, and depression, by gathering responses from participants regarding their experiences and mental well-being.

Population

The total student population at the University of Okara ranges between 12,000 to 15,000, comprising both male and female students. However, this study specifically focuses on female university students, who make up approximately 70% of the total student population. By narrowing the focus to female students, the research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of their exposure to cyberbullying and the psychological effects it may have on their mental health. The inclusion of students from various academic disciplines ensures that the findings represent a diverse set of experiences and perspectives.

Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across different departments and academic levels, which helps maintain the validity and reliability of the study findings. The stratification will be based on academic year, faculty, and department, allowing for a balanced distribution of respondents across various educational backgrounds. The study will further employ proportionate sampling to maintain fairness in representation from various disciplines, ensuring that no single department or academic level is overrepresented in the sample

Sample Size

The sample size has been determined using Cochran's formula to ensure statistical significance. Given an estimated female student population of 8,400 which is 70% of 12000 and assuming a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error, an appropriate sample size of 367 students will be selected. This sample size is considered sufficient to detect meaningful patterns in the data and provide reliable results. The selection of this sample size ensures that the study achieves a balance between statistical power and feasibility, allowing for meaningful inferences to be drawn regarding the prevalence of cyberbullying and its mental health effects.

Instrumentation

A structured self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire will consist of three sections, each designed to capture specific information relevant to the study objectives:

Demographic Information: This section will collect data on age, academic year, department, internet usage patterns, and other relevant background variables that may influence cyberbullying experiences.

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Cyberbullying Experience: This section will utilize an adapted version of validated cyberbullying scales to measure the prevalence and forms of online harassment, such as verbal abuse, social exclusion, and online threats. Respondents will be asked to indicate the frequency and nature of their experiences with cyberbullying.
Mental Health Assessment: Standardized tools such as the DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale) will be used to assess psychological effects. This section will measure participants' levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, allowing for an analysis of the correlation between cyberbullying exposure and mental health outcomes.

Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected through online surveys and paper-based questionnaires distributed within the university premises to maximize participation and accessibility. The use of both digital and physical formats will ensure that students with varying levels of internet access can participate. Informed consent will be obtained before participation, ensuring that students are aware of their rights and the voluntary nature of the study. Participants will be provided with clear instructions on how to complete the survey, and anonymity will be emphasized to encourage honest responses. The data collection process will be conducted over a period of four to six weeks to allow ample time for responses to be gathered.

Data Analysis and findings

The collected data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to ensure accurate and comprehensive statistical evaluation. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency distributions, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations, was used to assess the prevalence of cyberbullying among female students. Inferential statistical tests, including chi-square tests, t-tests, and regression analysis, was employed to examine the association between cyberbullying and mental health outcomes. Chi-square tests was used to explore relationships between categorical variables, t-tests was compare mean differences between groups, and regression analysis will help determine the predictive strength of cyberbullying on mental health indicators.

Table 1: Chi-Square Test for Mental Health Outcomes

Mental Health Indicator	χ^2	Df	p (Sig.)
Depression	9.72	2	0.021
Anxiety	8.41	2	0.039
Social Withdrawal	10.32	2	0.016
Sleep Disturbances	5.87	2	0.053
Low Self-Esteem	11.45	2	0.008

The chi square test results suggest a correlation between cyberbullying and the mental health issues of depression ($\chi^2 = 9.72$, $p = 0.021$), anxiety ($\chi^2 = 8.41$, $p = 0.039$), social withdrawal ($\chi^2 = 10.32$, $p = 0.016$), low self esteem ($\chi^2 = 11.45$, $p = 0.008$) as their p values are less than 0.05. This may imply that people, who experience cyberbullying,

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are more prone to suffer psychological distress, social isolation and reduced self worth. Although cyberbullying may contribute to sleep problems ($\chi^2 = 5.87$, $p = 0.053$), the sleep disturbances were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). As there are many mental health indicators that are highly associated with this, these results give support in accepting H_1 (Cyberbullying does have a big impact on mental health), which implies that there is a need for mental health interventions, counseling services, and awareness programs for the support of those affected.

Table 2: Independent Samples T-Test for Academic Performance Outcomes

Academic Indicator	t	df	p (Sig.)
Declining Grades	2.64	365	0.009
Difficulty Concentrating	2.11	365	0.035
Skipping Classes	1.89	365	0.059
Missed Assignments	2.22	365	0.027
Dropping Out Consideration	3.12	365	0.002

The independent samples t-test demonstrates that cyberbullying affects academic performance negatively because students experience declining grades ($t = 2.64$, $p = 0.009$) and consider dropping out ($t = 3.12$, $p = 0.002$) to the greatest extent. Students who deal with cyberbullying demonstrate higher probabilities to experience academic challenges and plan to stop attending school. Cyberbullying leads students to struggle with concentration tasks ($t = 2.11$, $p = 0.035$) and causes them to miss schoolwork assignments ($t = 2.22$, $p = 0.027$) which demonstrates its negative effect on academic productivity. The analysis shows that skipping classes ($t = 1.89$, $p = 0.059$) does not reach statistical significance ($p > 0.05$) even though cyberbullying may play a part in absenteeism. The majority of p-values less than 0.05 confirms that H_1 (Cyberbullying has a significant negative impact on academic performance) is valid thus requiring educational institutions to establish support programs for affected students.

Table 3: Regression Analysis Mental Health Outcomes

Dependent Variable	B (Unstandardized Coeff.)	SE	t	p (Sig.)	R^2
High Depression	0.400	0.0581	4.89	0.0003	0.067
High Anxiety	0.276	0.0583	3.25	0.004	0.048
High Social Withdrawal	0.342	0.0656	4.12	0.0005	0.062
Low Self-Esteem	0.296	0.0594	3.55	0.002	0.051

The results of regression analysis show cyberbullying produces substantial negative effects on mental health because depression ($B = 0.400$, $p = 0.0003$, $R^2 = 0.067$) stands as the most impacted outcome indicating severe depressive symptoms in victims. The data shows social withdrawal occurs after depression as a result of cyberbullying ($B = 0.342$, $p = 0.0005$, $R^2 = 0.062$) indicating victims tend to withdraw from social connections. The research shows that victims of cyberbullying experience both anxiety ($B = 0.276$, $p = 0.004$, $R^2 = 0.048$) and low self-esteem ($B = 0.296$, $p =$

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0.002, $R^2 = 0.051$) as significant outcomes. The R^2 values show that additional factors influence these mental health problems yet cyberbullying stands as a main contributing factor. The p-values below 0.05 support the acceptance of H_1 (Cyberbullying significantly impacts mental health) thus highlighting the importance of mental health interventions and support programs and awareness campaigns for reducing its harmful effects.

Conclusion

As this study shows, cyberbullying has a serious effect on the mental health and academic performance of university students. The results show that these individuals who experience cyberbullying do become depressed, anxious, socially withdrawn, and have low self-esteem. It is academically bad because it leads to lower grades, difficulty concentration, and high probability of considering dropping out. While some have been reported, the fact that cases are being underreported means that hence institutional policies and awareness programs should be strengthened to foster the urge to seek help among victims. To address these challenges, universities should develop a multi responsive approach that entails cyber safety measures, digital literacy training as well as mental health support services. This should indeed instill a culture where students are aware how they can report cyberbullying without the fear of retaliation and thus establish awareness campaigns and clear reporting mechanisms. Therefore, there is a need for collaboration between educational institutions and social media platforms that monitor and counteract online harassment. This will assist universities in moving towards building a safer and supportive online environment where students can learn and grow academically and emotionally. Cyberbullying is not just important in terms of protecting the well-being of individual student, but also in creating an environment of respect for both individual students and academic institutions' digital culture.

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