



Policy Journal of Social Science Review

ISSN (Online): 3006-4635

ISSN (Print): 3006-4627

<https://journalofsocialsciencereview.com/index.php/PJSSR>



Vol. 2 No. 4 ,(Fall-2024)

Policy Journal of Social Science Review



Unveiling the Digital Peril in Pakistan: Exploring
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on the Mental Health Outcomes of Young
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Unveiling the Digital Peril in Pakistan: Exploring the Pervasive Influence of Cyber-Harassment on the Mental Health Outcomes of Young Adults

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Abstract

Cyber-harassment is a growing concern worldwide, with significant implications for mental health, particularly among young adults. This study explores the impact of cyber-harassment on mental health outcomes, specifically depression, anxiety, and stress, among young adults in Pakistan. A purposive sample of 300 participants (150 males, 150 females; aged 18–25 years) from public and private universities in Lahore was recruited. Participants completed the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) and the Cyber-Victimization Scale (CYBVICS). Ethical considerations were prioritized, and individuals with pre-existing mental disorders or medical conditions were excluded to ensure the study's focus on the direct effects of cyber-harassment. Statistical analyses revealed a significant positive correlation between cyber-harassment and depression ($r = .515, p < .001$), anxiety ($r = .491, p < .001$), and stress ($r = .440, p < .001$). Regression analyses indicated that cyber-harassment significantly predicts depression ($\beta = .51, p < .001$), anxiety ($\beta = .49, p < .001$), and stress ($\beta = .44, p < .001$), with depression showing the strongest association. The findings highlight the pervasive influence of cyber-harassment on the psychological well-being of young adults, emphasizing the urgent need for preventative strategies and mental health interventions tailored to this population. This study underscores the critical role of addressing cyber-harassment as a public health issue and offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals.

Future research is recommended to explore longitudinal impacts and the effectiveness of targeted intervention programs to mitigate the adverse outcomes of cyber-harassment.

Keywords: Cyber-Harassment, Mental Health Outcomes, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress, Young Adults, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

THE PREVALENCE OF CYBER-HARASSMENT IN PAKISTAN

In recent years, Pakistan has witnessed a significant surge in digital technology adoption and internet penetration among its young adult population (Khalid & Haider, 2018). This digital revolution has brought about various opportunities for connectivity, education, and personal growth, transforming the way young adults interact and communicate in the modern age. However, alongside these benefits, there are also significant challenges that have emerged, particularly in the realm of cyber-harassment. Cyber-harassment, defined as the use of digital platforms such as social media, messaging apps, and online forums to intimidate, threaten, or abuse others, has become increasingly prevalent in Pakistan (Khan et al., 2021). This growing trend of online abuse poses a serious threat to the mental well-being of young adults in the country, as they find themselves vulnerable to a myriad of negative experiences in the digital realm. A study by Khan et al. (2021) found that approximately 60% of young adults in Pakistan reported experiencing some form of cyber-harassment at least once in their lives. The perpetrators of such harassment are often anonymous, hiding behind the screen of digital anonymity, which further complicates the process of identifying and holding them accountable (Ahmed & Raza, 2020). The anonymity and ease of access to digital platforms have emboldened harassers, leading to a rise in incidents and an alarming impact on the mental well-being of the victims.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF CYBER-HARASSMENT

The mental well-being of young adults in Pakistan is under serious threat due to the psychological impact of cyber-harassment. Victims of cyber-harassment often experience feelings of fear, helplessness, and vulnerability, as they struggle to cope with the emotional toll of online abuse (Fatima & Saeed, 2019). The persistent nature of cyber-harassment, where digital content can remain accessible and re-shared indefinitely, exacerbates the trauma experienced by the victims (Rasool & Qureshi, 2022). This has led to an increase in cases of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation among young adults subjected to sustained cyber-harassment (Malik et al., 2020).

To combat cyber-harassment effectively, it is crucial to understand the perpetuating factors contributing to its prevalence. Research has shown that the digital divide, where access to technology and digital literacy is unevenly distributed, can exacerbate the vulnerability of certain segments of the young adult population (Khalid & Haider, 2018). Additionally, the lack of comprehensive legislation and awareness about cyber-harassment in Pakistan has made it challenging to address the issue adequately (Hussain & Rizvi, 2019). Moreover, toxic online cultures, trolling, and mob mentality on social media platforms can further perpetuate the cycle of cyber-harassment (Bukhari & Iqbal, 2021). Identifying and understanding these factors are essential steps in formulating targeted interventions to protect the mental well-being of young adults.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the pervasive influence of cyber-harassment on the mental health of young adults within the context of Pakistani culture. With the increasing adoption of digital technology and internet usage in Pakistan, cyber-harassment has emerged as a pressing concern for the well-being of young individuals. This research aims to unveil the unique cultural factors that may contribute to cyber-harassment and its impact on the mental health of young adults in Pakistan. By understanding these intricate relationships, the study seeks to raise awareness about the digital peril and provide insights for developing culturally sensitive interventions to address cyber-harassment and promote better mental health outcomes among young adults in Pakistan. This study was carried out with the objectives to (a) assess the types of cyber-harassment experienced by young adult victims, (b) examine the mental health status of young adults, including levels of depression, stress, and anxiety, (c) investigate the association between cyber-harassment and mental health outcomes (depression, stress, and anxiety) among young adults victims, and (d) determine if cyber-harassment acts as a predictor of depression, stress, and anxiety levels in young adults. On the basis of literature review it was hypothesized that “Young adult victims in Pakistan will experience various types of cyber-harassment”, “Cyber-harassment will be positively associated with stress, depression and anxiety levels in young adults” and “Cyber-harassment will act as a significant predictor of depression, stress, and anxiety levels in young adults, with higher levels of cyber-harassment predicting more adverse mental health outcomes”.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The study included a total of 300 cyber harassment victims, of which 150 were men (n=150) and 150 were women (n=150). The participants' age ranged from 18 to 25 years, with a mean age of 21.19 (SD=1.93). The sample was selected from different public and private universities in

Lahore, Pakistan, using purposive sampling. Only those participants were included in the sample who (a) self-identified as victims of cyber-harassment, (b) had experienced at least one incident of cyber-harassment, (c) were enrolled as students in the selected universities at the time of data collection, and (d) who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and provided informed consent. Those participants were excluded from the sample who: (a) have been diagnosed with any pre-existing mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety disorders, or any other psychiatric condition. Excluding individuals with pre-existing mental disorders helps ensure that the study focuses specifically on the impact of cyber-harassment on mental health among young adults without the influence of pre-existing psychological conditions. Participants with pre-existing mental disorders may have varied mental health responses to cyber-harassment, and including them in the analysis could introduce additional confounding factors that may obscure the true association between cyber-harassment and mental health outcomes. (b) Participants who report any medical illness or physical disability that may significantly impact their mental health or limit their ability to respond to the questionnaires accurately will be excluded from the study. Excluding individuals with medical illnesses or physical disabilities ensured that the study focuses on the mental health impact of cyber-harassment among young adults without potential interference from underlying health conditions. Medical illnesses or physical disabilities could introduce additional variables that might affect the participants' mental health responses and obscure the specific influence of cyber-harassment.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of study participants (N=300)

Demographic Variables	f	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	150	50 %
Female	150	50 %
Education Level		
Undergraduate	275	91.7 %
Graduate	25	8.3 %
Family Setup		
Nuclear	222	74 %
Joint	78	26 %
Marital Status		
Married	13	4.3 %
Single	287	95.7 %
Religion		

Muslim	297	99 %
Christian	3	0.7 %
Agnostic	1	0.3 %
Type of Cyber-Harassment		
Hate Speech	123	41 %
Pornographic	13	4.3 %
Self-Harm	3	1 %
Intellectual Property Protection	4	1.3 %
Identity Theft	16	5.3 %
Mixed Type	98	32.7 %
Others	43	14.3 %

MEASURE

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

In the document of informed consent, the primary objective of the research was comprehensively elucidated to the prospective participant, affording them a clear understanding of the study's intent. Subsequently, a solicitous request was extended, entreating the individual's voluntary involvement in the said inquiry. Furthermore, an unequivocal demonstration of their unwavering concurrence to partake in the study was duly manifested through the inscription of their scripted endorsement upon this instrument.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

The demographic information form included all the basic details of the participants. It encompassed optional fields, such as the participant's name, age, gender, educational qualification, years of experience in their profession, marital status, family system, socioeconomic status, birth order, and any disclosed presence of physical illnesses, if applicable.

The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21) Lovibond, S.H. & Lovibond, P.F. (1995)

DASS-21 is 21 item scale which includes 3 self-report sub-scales. DASS-21 is basically used to measure negative emotions i.e. anxiety, stress and depression. These three sub-scales further contain 7 items each. The scores range from mild to extremely severe. The Cronbach's alpha values for the subscales of depression, anxiety and stress are 0.81, 0.89 and 0.78 respectively. This scale is very valid and reliable.

CYBER-VICTIMIZATION SCALE (CYBVICS)

The Cyber-Victimization Scale is used to assess and measure that an individual experienced cyber harassment through different platforms of social media in past 12 months. It is consisting of 18 self-reported items and can rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 which indicates never to 5 which indicates always. This self-report measure provides us the

recognition regarding cyber-harassing behavior. The scale of CYBVICS's statistical analysis shows estimate of a model of two correlated factors revealed an acceptable fit ($S-B \chi^2 = 366.45$; $df = 131$; $P < 0.001$; $CFI = 0.93$; $RMSEA = 0.03 [0.03-0.03]$), since the CFI was above 0.90, and the RMSEA below 0.05 shows that it is a good fit.

PROCEDURE

The study was conducted following ethical guidelines and obtained approval from the Department of Humanities of COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore. Ethical considerations were given paramount importance throughout the research process to protect the participants' rights and well-being. Researchers approached potential participants through university networks and social media platforms, explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before their inclusion in the study. Participants were provided with a detailed explanation of the study's objectives, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Written consent was obtained from each participant through their signature on the informed consent form. After obtaining informed consent, participants were given a demographic sheet to record basic demographic information. Subsequently, they were asked to complete two standardized questionnaires: DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale) and CYBVICS Cyber-Victimization Scale. All collected data were recorded and statistically analyzed using appropriate methods.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22. The demographic variables were analyzed through descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies, frequencies percentage, mean and standard deviation. To assess the relationship between the cyber-harassment and depression, stress and anxiety, regression analysis and bi-variate correlation was performed. The regression analysis of cyber-harassment with each of the variable of mental health were classified into two steps. In first step, the linear regression was assessed and in second step coefficient statistic was assessed for each variable of mental health as dependent variable and cyber-harassment as independent variable. And then all dependent variables (depression, anxiety, stress) correlated with the independent variable (cyber-harassment).

RESULTS

Table 2: *Relationship between cyber-harassment depression, anxiety and stress in young adults*

Measure	Depression	Anxiety	Stress
Cyber-Harassment	.515**	.491**	.440**

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), N=300.

The correlational analysis in table 2 suggests that there is a moderate positive correlation between cyber-harassment and depression ($r = .515$), anxiety ($r = .491$) and stress ($r = .440$) in young adults. Furthermore, cyber-harassment was observed significantly positively linked with all the variables.

Table 3: *Linear Regression Analysis of Cyber-Harassment as a Predictor of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress in Young Adults*

Outcome	Predictor	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	B	SE	β	t	F	p
Depression	Cyber-Harassment	.51	.27	.26	0.21	0.02	.51	10.38	107.74	<.001
Anxiety	Cyber-Harassment	.49	.24	.24	0.19	0.02	.49	9.72	94.47	<.001
Stress	Cyber-Harassment	.44	.19	.19	0.16	0.02	.44	8.45	71.42	<.001

Note: N = 300 for all analyses. R = multiple correlation coefficient, R² = coefficient of determination, Adj. R² = adjusted R², B = unstandardized coefficient, SE = standard error of B, β = standardized coefficient, t = t-statistic, F = F-statistic, p = p-value.

The analysis indicates that cyber-harassment significantly predicts depression, anxiety, and stress in young adults. The strongest relationship is observed with depression ($\beta = .515$), followed by anxiety ($\beta = .491$), and then stress ($\beta = .440$). These results highlight the psychological impact of cyber-harassment, suggesting that it contributes to increased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress in young adults. The findings emphasize the need for interventions aimed at mitigating the effects of cyber-harassment to improve mental health outcomes in this population.

DISCUSSION

The present study explores the pervasive influence of cyber-harassment on the mental health outcomes of young adults in Pakistan, revealing significant associations with depression, anxiety, and stress. The findings underscore the urgent need to address cyber-harassment as a critical public health issue, particularly given its profound psychological impact on young adults.

CYBER-HARASSMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

The results indicate a moderate positive correlation between cyber-harassment and mental health outcomes, with the strongest relationship observed with depression ($r = .515$), followed by anxiety ($r = .491$), and stress ($r = .440$). These findings align with existing literature that highlights the detrimental effects of cyber-harassment on mental health. For instance, researchers have documented how exposure to online harassment can lead to significant psychological distress, contributing to symptoms of depression and anxiety (Kowalski et al., 2014; Nixon, 2014). Cyber-harassment, characterized by repeated and intentional harm via digital platforms, can lead to a pervasive sense of helplessness and fear, exacerbating mental health issues (Smith et al., 2008).

The correlation between cyber-harassment and stress, although slightly weaker, is also consistent with previous studies indicating that the stress associated with managing online harassment can exacerbate feelings of burnout and emotional exhaustion (Wolak et al., 2007). The continuous nature of cyber-harassment, which can occur anytime and anywhere, poses a unique stressor that is often difficult to escape, contributing to elevated stress levels (Slonje et al., 2013).

The previous research says that cyber-harassment are associated with an increased risk of mental health problems (Fridh et al., 2015). Another study revealed that the effect of cyber-harassment is more associated with the anxiety than depression and anxiety (Musharraf & Anis-ul-Haque, 2018). This literature supports the above given results. Increased use of electronic media have using negative impacts on the mental health of young adults. The cyber-harassment is the type of harassment about which the Pakistani youth is not clearly aware of and there is no research related to cyber-harassment is performed that's why it was need of the hour to know the it's presence and effect on the psychological well being.

The students reported that they are being negatively impacted by the experience of cyber-harassment (Li, 2005). The results of study reported that young adults has been harassed on various platforms messaging apps, blogs, emails, etc and also through various ways hate comments, identity theft, pornographic content, intellectual property theft and other ways as well. According to Geach and Haralambous (2009), cyber-harassment includes a wide range of activities include sending abusive, threatening or offensive emails through mediums; stalking users on sites, impersonating another person online by creating a fake profile; or spamming a specific user repeatedly. Another study suggested that cyber-harassment included online activities such as stalking, threats, harassment, imitation, embarrassment, deception and exclusion (Feinberg & Robey, 2009).

According to Sinclair (2012), the cyber-harassment is linked with the mental health problems. The distress induces fear and imbalances the normal mental functioning of the individual. A research suggests that cyber-harassment's targets are prone to experience a sense of fear and disheartenment in the presence of stress and anxiety (Hazelwood & Koon-Magnin, 2013).

These results suggest that now the bullying has gone too far and now it's associated with online platforms and electronic media. And this is leaving marks on the mental health of young adults and causing chaos in the society. So, it's the need of the hour, which requires further research in Pakistan to explain how and why young adults in a technologically advanced society harass one another.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings can be understood through the lens of the **General Strain Theory** (Agnew, 1992), which posits that stressors such as cyber-harassment can lead to negative emotional states and subsequently result in mental health issues. The persistent nature of cyber-harassment acts as a chronic strain, disrupting the psychological equilibrium of individuals and potentially leading to depression and anxiety.

The Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) also provides insight into these findings, suggesting that the negative social interactions experienced during cyber-harassment can lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms and altered self-efficacy, further contributing to psychological distress. The public and often humiliating nature of cyber-harassment can significantly impact an individual's self-perception and mental well-being.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION

The significant predictive power of cyber-harassment on mental health outcomes underscores the need for effective interventions aimed at mitigating its effects. Educational programs targeting digital literacy and resilience among young adults could serve as a primary prevention strategy (Willard, 2007). Additionally, integrating mental health support within digital platforms can offer timely interventions for individuals experiencing cyber-harassment.

Furthermore, policymakers should consider implementing stricter regulations and policies to combat cyber-harassment, providing a safer online environment for young adults (Shariff, 2009). Collaborative efforts between educational institutions, mental health professionals, and technology companies are crucial to developing comprehensive strategies that address the root causes and consequences of cyber-harassment.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between cyber-harassment and mental health outcomes, it is not without limitations. The study design precludes the ability to establish causality. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to explore the long-

term effects of cyber-harassment on mental health. Additionally, the study's focus on a Pakistani sample limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to replicate these findings in diverse cultural contexts to enhance understanding of the global impact of cyber-harassment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant role of cyber-harassment in influencing mental health outcomes among young adults in Pakistan. The findings emphasize the need for targeted interventions and policy changes to mitigate the impact of cyber-harassment and improve mental health outcomes. By addressing this digital peril, we can create safer online spaces and foster better mental health for young adults.

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