

Behind the Screen: Exploring Cyber Harassment, Self-Esteem, and Emotional Strain among College Students in District Haripur

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between cyber harassment victimization, self-esteem, and psychological distress among college students in district Haripur. A cross-sectional survey was conducted using convenient sampling, with data collected from 300 students (150 males and 150 females) from different colleges of District Haripur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The participants completed three standardized instruments: the Cyber Harassment Assessment Scale (Pereira et al., 2016), the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2003), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Independent sample t-test results showed that female students reported higher levels of cyber harassment and psychological distress, whereas male students reported higher levels of self-esteem. Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive association between cyber harassment and psychological distress, and significant negative associations between cyber harassment and self-esteem, as well as between psychological distress and self-esteem. These findings highlight the psychological vulnerabilities associated with cyber harassment and underscore the need for targeted interventions among students.

Keywords: *Cyber Harassment Victimization, Psychological Distress, Self-Esteem, Haripur, Vulnerabilities*

INTRODUCTION

The internet and digital technologies have become integral to modern life, offering numerous benefits across all age groups. However, alongside these advantages comes the growing threat of cyber harassment a pervasive and harmful phenomenon. Often used interchangeably with cyberbullying, cyber harassment refers to the repeated and deliberate use of digital platforms such as smartphones, email, messaging apps, and websites to inflict harm on others.

While traditional forms of harassment and stalking have long been linked to severe mental health consequences including anxiety, depression, nightmares, low self-esteem, flashbacks, and suicidal ideation emerging evidence suggests that online harassment may carry similar, if not

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greater, psychological risks. Although existing research has extensively explored the impact of cyberbullying on adolescents and school-aged children, there remains a significant gap in understanding how cyber harassment affects adults. It is crucial to continually reflect on current findings and address these research limitations within the field of cyber-psychology.

Engaging in online activities and interactions can intensify emotional responses, often leading to misinterpretations and confusion in digital communication. Finn (2004) noted that the internet may distort intentions and create a false sense of connection between individuals. Furthermore the victims of bullying frequently internalize the abuse, blaming themselves and believing they somehow deserve the harassment whether it occurs in school or online. Such self-blame contributes significantly to diminished self-esteem. Students with low self-esteem often struggle to form friendships, experience social withdrawal, and report feelings of isolation and loneliness within the school environment. These individuals may appear unconfident, emotionally unstable, and are frequently overlooked by peers. It is also found that there is a consistent negative relationship between experiences of cyberbullying and victims' self-esteem. These findings highlight the profound emotional toll of online harassment and the urgent need to address its psychological impact.

Researchers like Lei et al.(2020) and Zhang et al. (2020) have conducted studies on the correlation between self-esteem, cyberbullying, and psychological distress among students, particularly adolescents. They used various scales and surveys to collect data and found that cyberbullying had a negative impact on self-esteem and a significant positive relationship with psychological distress.

Tomasz et al. (2018) conducted a study examining the relationship between cyberbullying, depression, and self-esteem among adolescents. Using different standardized scales and survey instruments, the researcher found a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and experiences of cyber-harassment.

Zhang et al. (2020) conducted a study on cyberbullying involvement and psychological distress among Chinese adolescents. The primary objective was to examine the relationship between cyberbullying and psychological distress in this population. A quantitative survey research design was employed. The sampling technique used was purposive convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Cyberbullying Scale and the Psychological Distress Scale. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between cyberbullying involvement and psychological distress among adolescents.

Livazovic and Ham (2019) conducted a study examining cyberbullying and emotional distress among adolescent students. The research employed a quantitative survey design with purposive convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Bullying Scale and the Emotional Distress Scale. The results indicated that male students exhibited higher levels of cyberbullying behavior, while female students were more likely to be victims of cyberbullying.

Additionally, Matud et al. (2014) studied gender differences in psychological distress and found that females exhibited higher levels compared to males. The consequences of cyberbullying

can result in depression, anxiety, and negative self-perception, leading to various detrimental outcomes such as violence, substance abuse, and suicidal behaviors. The victims of cyberbullying often experience feelings of loneliness, humiliation, and low self-esteem, contributing to feelings of hopelessness and withdrawal.

Talwar (2022) conducted a study investigating potential socio-demographic predictors of cyberbullying behavior among university students. The research employed a quantitative survey design selected using a convenience sampling method. The instruments used in the study included the Cyber Victim & Bullying Scale and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The findings revealed that male students exhibited higher levels of cyberbullying behaviors compared to female students, while female students experienced higher levels of cyber victimization.

While cyber harassment and its psychological effects have been examined in various urban regions of Pakistan, there is a lack of empirical research focusing on students in semi-urban districts like Haripur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The unique socio-cultural and educational context of this region remains underexplored, especially in terms of how cyber harassment affects self-esteem and psychological well-being. This study addresses this gap by investigating these variables among students in Haripur, providing localized insights to inform targeted prevention and intervention efforts. Moreover, students in semi-urban and rural settings may face distinct challenges, such as limited digital literacy, lower access to mental health resources, and stronger cultural taboos surrounding psychological distress, which may further intensify the consequences of cyber harassment. By focusing on this underrepresented population, the study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of the digital threats faced by youth across diverse socio-geographic backgrounds in Pakistan.

Objectives

Objectives of the present research are:

1. To examine the relationship between cyber harassment victimization, psychological distress, and self-esteem among college students.
2. To assess gender differences in the levels of cyber harassment, psychological distress, and self-esteem among male and female students.

Hypothesis

1. There will be significant negative relationship of cyber harassment with self-esteem and significant positive relationship with psychological distress.
2. There will be significant difference in level of cyber harassment, psychological distress and self-esteem across gender.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In current study cross sectional survey design was employed to collect data from graduate students for exploring the level of cyber harassment, self-esteem and psychological distress.

Sample

The sample of this study was male and female students of colleges of Haripur. The sample was selected on voluntary basis. Total sample size in this study was N=300 students. Among this N=300 (n=150) were male students and (n=150) were female students.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants included were male and female graduate level students belonging to different colleges of district Haripur.

Exclusion Criteria

Participants were not taken outside from Haripur, school going, working and non-working students were excluded.

Instruments

Cyber Harassment Assessment Scale (Pereira et al., 2016). The Cyber-Harassment Assessment Scale (Pereira et al., 2016) was developed for a study examining the prevalence of cyber-victimization. The 18-item scale was adapted from Spitzberg and Hoobler (2002). All items are answered using 5-point Likert scale (from 0 = never to 5 = five or more times). The reliability of this scale is 0.90.

Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). A 10-item survey that gauges one's overall sense of worth by accounting for both positive and negative self-perceptions. It is thought that the scale is one-dimensional. A 4-point Likert scale, spanning from strongly agree to strongly disagree, is used for all item responses. The scale's reliability is 0.92.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2003). The K10 is a brief, simple, and reliable instrument to detect mental health conditions in the population. The K10 scale involves 10 questions about emotional states each with a five-level response scale. The reliability of the scale is 0.88

Procedure

Data collection commenced following the approval of the research topic titled "Behind the Screen: Exploring Cyber Harassment, Self-Esteem, and Emotional Strain Among College Students in District Haripur." An official letter of authorization was obtained from the Department of Psychology, confirming the researcher's institutional affiliation and stating that the study was conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Science degree in

Psychology. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained. Participants were then requested to complete the questionnaires honestly. Upon completion, a brief debriefing was provided. All necessary measures were taken to maintain participant anonymity. The collected data were entered and analyzed using SPSS version 20.

RESULTS

Table 1

Pearson Correlation between Cyber Harassment, Psychological Distress and Self-Esteem

Variables	1	2	3
Cyber harassment	-		
Psychological Distress	.248**	-	
Self-esteem	-.214**	-.305**	

** $p < 0.01$

Table 1 shows Pearson Correlation among study variables. Findings indicate that cyber harassment has significant positive correlation with psychological distress ($r=.248, p < 0.01$) and negative Correlation with self-esteem ($r=-.214, p < 0.01$). Psychological Distress has negative Correlation with Self-esteem ($r=-.305, p < 0.01$). Findings support alternative hypothesis therefor it is accepted.

Table 2

Mean Comparison of Cyber Harassment, Psychological Distress & Self Esteem across Gender

		Males			Females			<i>t</i> (298)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Variables		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>S</i>			
HS	C	8.03	4.34	4.25	5.10	9.45	5.9	5.45	.000	.62
PDS	K	6.48	2.88	2.94	2.64	6.20	5.6	5.20	.000	.57
SES	R	4.38	2.91	3.71	2.36	3.59	1.3	1.59	.000	.18

Note. Cyber harassment assessment scale (CHS), psychological distress scale (KPDS), Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSES), *M*=Mean, *SD*= Standard deviation, *p*=level of significance

****p* < .001

Table 2 shows that Mean, Standard Deviation and *t*-value for males (*n*=150) and females (*n*=150) on Cyber Harassment Assessment Scale, Kessler's Psychological Distress Scale and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale. Results indicate that there is significant mean difference on cyber harassment across gender with *t* (298) =5.45, *p* < .001. The finding shows that females (*M*=52.5, *p* < .001) significantly score higher on cyber harassment assessment scale (CHS) as compared to males (*M*=48.03, *p* < .001). The value of Cohen's *d* is 0.62(<.70) which indicates medium size effect. Results revealed that there is significant mean difference on psychological distress across gender with *t* (298) =5.20, *p* < .001. the finding shows that females (*M*=29.40, *p* < .001) significantly score higher on psychological distress scale (PDS) as compared to males (*M*=26.5, *p* < .001). The value of Cohen's *d* is 0.57(<.60) which indicates medium size effect. Results show that there is significant mean difference on self-esteem scale across gender with *t* (298) =1.59, *p* < .001. The findings show that females (*M*=23.71, *p* < .001) significantly score lower on self-esteem (RSES) as compared to males (*M*=24.4, *p* < .001). the value of Cohen's *d* is 0.18(<.20) which indicates small size effect. Findings support alternative hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of the present study is to exploring cyber harassment, self-esteem, and emotional strain among college students in district haripur. This investigation not only seeks to assess the gender differences of these variables but also aims to examine the inter relationships between them. In this context, cyber harassment is defined as any unwelcoming behavior conducted via digital platforms, which may include threatening messages, harassing emails, or any online actions intended to distress or torment an individual. Psychological distress refers to a range of emotional suffering that encompasses general symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, while self-esteem is understood as an individual's overall evaluation of their personal worth or value.

To ensure the accuracy and consistency of the findings, the study began with a thorough assessment of the reliability and validity of the research constructs. For the purpose of data collection, three well-established and psychometrically sound instruments were utilized: the Cyber Harassment Assessment Scale developed by Pereira et al. (2016), the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) designed by Kessler et al. (2003), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, originally formulated by Rosenberg in 1965. These tools were chosen due to their strong empirical foundations and proven effectiveness in measuring the constructs under investigation. Alpha reliability coefficient of CHS, PDS and RSES have reliability of 0.90, 0.88 and 0.92 respectively. Sample size was (N= 300). Sample included males (n=150) and females (n=150) that was taken from University of Haripur. To achieve the objectives of study various hypotheses on cyber harassment, psychological distress and self-esteem was formulated across demographic variables of gender. In current research correlation, t-test and regression were used. Values of t-test indicated that females score high on cyber harassment and psychological distress and males score high on self-esteem.

First hypothesis proposed that there will be significant negative relationship between cyber harassment and self-esteem. The results from table 1 showed that cyber harassment has a negative relationship with self-esteem thus alternative hypothesis is supported in the study. Lei et al. (2020) conducted research on "Relationship between self-esteem and cyber bullying. A meta-analysis of children and youth students". Results of this study indicated that cyber bullying was negatively associated with self-esteem of the students. Tomasz et al. (2018) conducted research on "Links between Cyber bullying, Depression and Self-Esteem in a Sample of Adolescents". Result of this study revealed that self-esteem and cyber bullying have significant negative relationship.

Second hypothesis proposed that there will be remarkable difference in values of cyber harassment, psychological distress and self-esteem across gender. The results from table 3 showed that level of cyber harassment, psychological distress and self-esteem is different across gender. Level of cyber harassment and psychological distress is higher among female students than male students and level of self-esteem is higher among males than females, thus alternative hypothesis is accepted. Viertio et al. (2021) conducted research on "Factors contributing to psychological distress in gender difference". Result of this study concluded that female score higher on

psychological distress scale than male. Furthermore study indicated that female have higher level of cyber victims. Sadia et al. (2013) conducted research on “The gender difference in self-esteem and life satisfaction among university students”. According to the findings men students had a far greater level of self-esteem than female counterparts.

Limitations and Suggestions

- i. The sample size of the study was $N = 300$, which, while adequate for preliminary analysis, does not meet the threshold typically required for generalizing findings to the broader population. Larger and more diverse samples would be necessary to enhance the external validity and reliability of the results.
- ii. There is a possibility that some respondents may have filled out the questionnaire in a casual or inattentive manner, which could have introduced response biases and negatively impacted the accuracy and reliability of the study’s conclusions.
- iii. The sample for this study was restricted to university students within the age range of 19 to 25 years, which limits the applicability of the findings to other age groups. Future research should include participants from a wider range of age groups and educational backgrounds to obtain more inclusive and representative data.
- iv. The study was conducted solely within Pakistan, and all participants were identified as Muslims, reflecting a relatively homogeneous cultural and religious context. As a result, it remains unclear whether the findings can be generalized to individuals from other cultural, religious, or geographical backgrounds. Cross-cultural comparative studies are recommended to assess the consistency of these findings in different societal settings.
- v. The research design relied on self-reported data, which can be prone to various biases, including social desirability bias, recall bias, or misinterpretation of questions by the participants, thereby potentially affecting the validity of the data.

Implications

The following are the implications of the study:

- i. Cyber Harassment awareness programs should be conducted to enhance the functioning of life.
- ii. Integration of programs related to self-esteem and its impression on life to bring awareness in students for their active participation in different fields of life.
- iii. Promotion of mental health policies for reducing the psychological distress and its negative effects on life.

- iv. Educational institutions, including schools and universities, should organize workshops on digital citizenship to teach students about respectful online conduct and the impact of cyber harassment.
- v. Counseling programs need to include sessions that help students develop resilience and effective coping mechanisms to deal with experiences of cyberbullying.
- vi. A cooperative effort among educators, parents, and mental health experts is essential to foster supportive environments that promote open dialogue about issues related to cyber harassment.

CONCLUSION

The current research aimed to explore cyber harassment, self-esteem, and emotional strain among college students in district Haripur. Utilizing a cross-sectional design, the findings revealed that cyber harassment is a significantly positively correlated with psychological distress and negatively associated with self-esteem. Results from the t-test further highlighted gender differences female students reported higher levels of cyber harassment and psychological distress, while male students exhibited greater self-esteem.

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