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Analyzing the Relationship between Cyberbullying Victimization and Well-Being of Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of the research was to map out the relationship between the level of cyberbullying experiences and the well-being of students in higher education. A correlational research design was adopted to collect data. A stratified sampling technique was used to select the sample of 976 university students. Existing validated research tools were adopted to collect data from the students. The collected data were analyzed by performing descriptive statistics, linear regression and one sample t-test. The findings suggest that cyberbullying experiences affect the well-being of university students. As to see the gender differences, both male and female students have different level of cyberbullying victimization. The findings are in line with the existing research. The limitations were stressed and future directions were also made to prevent cyberbullying at campuses to develop a healthy and productive study environment.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Higher education, Technology, Victimization, Well-being

INTRODUCTION

The use of technology has become integral to our survival (Social, 2018). The advancements in technology have introduced revolutionary paradigms in communication. Technology is increasingly transforming our lives and with every passing day, we are becoming more dependent on it (Mishna, et al., 2011). Thus, there is a dark side to it as well. The new advancements and transformation in technology also enhance violence, victimization, harassment, and oppression among students (Palermiti, et al, 2017). Next to connecting the world through social media apps, the technology boom also gives rise to new forms of violence and destructive interactions called cyberbullying (Yildiz & Saritepeci, 2020). Today's electronic means of communication are Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and Skype. These platforms help in sharing thoughts, information, ideas, and knowledge through audio-visual interaction (Social, 2018).

Cyberbullying is a malicious activity in which an individual sends annoying or unethical information repeatedly to harm, harass, and oppress others by using social media applications (Ang & Goh, 2010). Most of the time, cyberbullies keep themselves anonymous and continuously hurt their victims. This also means that perpetrators cannot imagine the harm, fear, and damage they cause to their victims. An ample amount of research is available proving that they put their victims under stress, fear and traumas (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). As a result, as their anger and depression increase, they cannot focus on their academics. It is proved that such people cry, feel insomnia, and miss their lectures due to lack of sleep and rest. They often think negatively and plan suicidal ideations (Spears et al, 2015). This ultimately affects their well-being. A psychologically well-being individual will feel confident, self-regulate their activities, have an ability to achieve their goal, and deal with others in good manners (Palermiti et al, 2017). However, failing in all these areas means a lack of affected well-being, which will generate negative feelings, thoughts, depression, and fear. Interaction with other individuals can affect an individual's well-being positively or negatively (Chang et al, 2013). Excessive use of the internet and social media applications in a Pakistani context is not different to the rest of the world.

It has been observed that the use of these applications is equally common in Pakistani educational institutions. The students use these apps to share their emotions, feelings, ideas, knowledge, and other important info through these apps, but at the same time, the negative use of applications is also very common and create tension for the academic community (Shah, 2019). These interactions are not always positive and pleasing, because whenever there are humans, there will be conflicts, denials, and criticism. However, some individuals lead to personal attacks, abuse, and harassment in satisfaction of their desires. This affects the well-being of cyberbullying victims. Taking into account this very important issue of academia, we plan this research to study the relationship between cyberbullying and the well-being of students in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cyberbullying

The concept of bullying is as old as any school's history. What we have learned from the past is that bullying happens face-to-face. In this situation, the victim immediately reports the event to school authorities for action against it. Nowadays, cyberbullying is becoming common due to the increasing use of social media applications (Reid & Weigle, 2014). It is usually a deliberate action through which the perpetrator tries to harass or damage others through images, mails, texts, pictures and videos. Unfortunately, technology's negative use helps perpetrators to be anonymous for the harassment (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). Thus, it

is hard to trace such people. Patchin et al (2006) state that anonymity unlawfully helps culprits to do such activities because they may do so without fear of consequences. Moreover, Bickham and Rich (2009) highlight that the bully is well aware of the fact that there will be no face-to-face interaction with the victim, so they cannot be abused or feel the pain of the victim. The investigators conclude that cyberbullying involves insults, name search, stealing passwords, threats, sharing personal photos, and information in most cases (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Thus, cyberbullying has proved the most dangerous form of bullying which can harm a large number of the audience within a short period of time (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Direct and indirect are the two main types of cyberbullying (Langos, 2012). Direct cyberbullying means when a bully makes a direct connection with the victim. This connection can be through a call, a message, and an email or through other electronic means. In this case, the victim is usually aware of the bully's action. Indirect bullying means when the perpetrator is not in direct connection with the victim. In this type of cyberbullying, the perpetrator posts the information using any online platform such as YouTube, blogs, Vlogs, or social media apps, for example, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In such cases, the victim can hardly know about the bully. It can have a serious effect on the victim. For example, it is difficult to remove/hide information from social media applications, difficult to take action against the bullies, and the victim cannot show his/her reaction to the bully. Thus, this can leave detrimental effects on them (Barlett, 2015). Other than these two main types of cyberbullying, there are the following types as well: flaming, denigration, impersonation, outing, harassment, cyber threats and cyber stalking.

Effects of Cyberbullying

In traditional types of bullying, a bully can only harm his/her victim during school time, but in this new form of bullying, a bully can harass his or her victim by different means anytime and anywhere (Watts et al, 2017). This new form of bullying poses various challenges to the educational community (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009). In this situation, a victim can experience a range of psychological effects (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006). Fauman (2008) and Ybarra (2004) have identified a wide range of emotional and psychological effects of cyberbullying, for example, anxiety, suicidal ideation, depression, and impaired attention.

Furthermore, Varghese and Pistole (2017) have found other effects, like fear, school refusal, hate, scares, embarrassment, lack of self-esteem, and social instability. The above-mentioned negative feelings are likely to coerce the well-being of the victims and lead to psychological disorders (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). In adult cyberbullying, the victims usually have behavioral issues. They start taking alcohol, cigarettes and consequently cannot focus on their studies (Mason, 2008). Furthermore, Sourander et al (2010) explore more effects of cyberbullying on adults at universities, like headache, stomach pain, and insomnia. In addition, Privitera and Campbell (2009) find that cyberbullying is linked with negative psychological sickness, disturbance in family relations, poor work performance, and dissatisfaction with everything.

Predictors of Cyberbullying

Next, by mentioning the above key predictors of cyberbullying, there are certain demographic predictors which play their role in it, like age, gender, locality, income, personality measures, and previous experiences. Considering age as the predictor of cyberbullying, Smith et al, (2008) have observed the power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrators. Usually, the victim is younger in age than the bully leaving an edge to the bullies to harm the victim.

As to the gender, society's norms, values, and traditions expect its inhabitants to respect each other's feelings and emotions. However, when the element of respect is missing in society, it leads to distress and disrespect. In the case of cyberbullying, Agatston, Kowalski, and Limber, (2007) have found that usually the male are more involved in such activities than the female. Similarly, Akbaba-altun and Erdur Baker, (2010) have also found the male more aggressive than the other gender. However, Rice et al, (2015) and Beckman, Hagquist, and Hellström (2013) identify that women are more likely to commit cyberbullying than men are.

Well-being

Well-being is generally a state or experience of happiness, satisfaction in life, feeling free from mental stress, and prosperity (Diener & Chan, 2011). There are a variety of definitions of well-being. For example, some authors establish a link with well-being if a person is psychologically stable and happy and feels contended (Khramtsova et al, 2007). Others relate well-being with a state of happiness or feeling healthy (Salami, 2010). Psychological well-being is dependent on many important factors to maintain the well-being of individuals. Such people try to recognize themselves with a purpose, self-development, positivity, and trust (Ryff & Singer, 2006). The socioeconomic status of individuals also contributes to the state of well-being

(Keyes & Shapiro, 2004).

Link Between Cyberbullying and Well-being

As mentioned above, the relationship between cyberbullying and well-being is very clear and developed. A higher the level of cyberbullying leads to a reduction of well-being. Cyberbullying, either direct or indirect, causes high levels of stress and frustration among the victims (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). It generates anxiety, low self-esteem, and social isolation among the victims which affect their well-being (Ntoumanis & Standage, 2009). Moreover, it also affects well-being and health (Moore, Huebner, & Hills, 2012).

Cyberbullying in Pakistani Educational Institutions

Like other countries, Pakistan is also facing the negative effects of the use of technology. The age of most of the internet users in Pakistan is between 18 and 29 including the females who are likely to fall prey to this social vulnerability (Bandial, 2015). The PEW research report (2014) has identified that 4 out of 10 young children in Pakistan are being harassed online. This shows the increasing risk of cyberbullying in the society. These adults are not properly educated about the manners of using the internet and social media applications, thus they react to information abruptly and often face serious consequences. Sometimes, they get struck by social and religious issues which cause anger and hate and end up in violence (Magsi, Agha, & Magsi, 2017).

On the other hand, if the females are leading such discussions, they have to face serious consequences (Zaman & Zia, 2012). In a patriarchal society like Pakistan, men enjoy a social domination causing women's harassment due to poor use of liberty and privilege (Kanwal, & Jami, 2019). These young students, mostly females, have been experiencing cyberbullying, but feel scared about reporting these events. They do not even want to share with their family and friends. Sometimes, this ruins their lives, disturbs their academic performance and well-being and makes them unable to cope with the difficulty of tech-driven communication's criminalization.

Research Objectives

The following research objectives were designed to carry out the research:

- To identify the level of cyberbullying victimization of students in higher education;
- To analyze the relationship between cyberbullying and the well-being of students in higher education;
- To assess the difference between male and female students as to their level of cyberbullying victimization in higher education.
- To investigate the difference between urban and rural students as to their level of cyberbullying victimization in higher education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Procedure

The main objective of the research was to analyze the relationship between students' cyberbullying experience and well-being in higher education. A correlational research design was adopted to conduct the study. Stratified sampling technique was adopted to invite the participants in the research. Data collection was limited to a public sector university. The data were collected through existing research instruments on cyberbullying and well-being. An informed consent taken from all the respective departments was included in the sample. All the collected data were entered into SPSS for analysis. Next to descriptive statistics, linear regression and a t-test were also performed to conclude the study findings. The ethical considerations were ensured in view of data collection and reporting.

Population and Sample

The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. To consider the presence, mobility and resources allocated for the study, it was limited to a public sector university. Thus, the study's population was based on all the available students of Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan. There were 11 faculties at the University, out of these, three faculties were chosen on convenient basis considering the available resources and time for the study. The sample was scrutinized from the following three main faculties: (a) faculties of arts and social sciences; (b) faculty of sciences; and (c) faculty of commerce and business administration. A stratified sampling technique was adopted to select the sample. Each faculty was considered as a stratum. All the available students of BS programs were selected as a sample within each one.

Research Instruments

To measure the research variables, a number of available research tools were examined to see the suitability, reliability, and validity of the instruments. Considering the research's nature, the tools were carefully reviewed to fit in the local context and to gauge the actual state of cyberbullying and its effect on well-being. Thus, we ended up our research by selecting the Revised Cyberbullying Inventory (RCBI) developed by Topcu and Erdur-Baker (2010). This inventory is based on a 0-4 scale from never to more than three times. There are two parts of the inventory. First, is cyber bullying with me, and the second is cyber bullying with others (victim scale). One part of the inventory 'cyberbullying with others' was selected for the study. The inventory is based on 14-items. The reported reliability of this scale is .92.

As to measure the students' well-being, an in-depth search was made to select a tool to measure their well-being. Finally, the scale of Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ) developed by Goodman (1999) was selected. This questionnaire is based on 25 items with a reported reliability .77. The questionnaire has the five following dimensions: (i) emotional disorders, (ii) conduct issues, (iii) hyperactivity (iv) peer issues, and (v) pro-social attitude on the following scale, not true=0 to certainly true=2. Next to these variables, some demographic information was also added to the questionnaire in line with the research objectives to see the differences on the basis of gender and locality in view of cyberbullying victimization of students in higher education.

Data Collection

The data were collected from the students studying in various BS programs in the above mentioned three faculties of Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan. An informed consent was obtained from all the respective heads and deans of the departments. Later, the concerned teachers were asked to facilitate in data collection by gathering their students in classrooms. The investigators gave the questionnaires to all students to fill them up. Certain directions were also given to the students to ensure their interest and attention. The researchers were there to help them in case of any confusion and facilitation. The average age of the students ranged between 19-23 years. They were studying in second, fourth, sixth, and eight semesters of their BS programs. Considering the nature of the research, the confidentiality of data and anonymity of the participants were strictly ensured.

Data Analyses

All the collected data were entered into SPSS to perform certain analyses. The data were cleaned from missing values and ambiguities, data file was prepared for analysis by calculating the descriptive statistics, and later the tests for linear regression and independent sample t-test were applied to reach the study findings.

Results

The research intends to map out the relationship between cyberbullying and the students' well-being in higher education. Multiple data analyses strategies, descriptive statistics, linear regression, and t-tests were applied to analyze the collected data. The following Table 1 presents the results of demographic variables of research:

Table 1
Frequencies and percentages of demographic variables

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
	Gender	
Male	499	51.9
Female	477	48.1
	Locality	
Urban	699	71.6
Rural	277	28.4
N	976	

Table 1 presents the demographic variables of research. In total, N=976 students participated in this

research. Out of the total sample size (N=976), there were (51.9%) male and (n=477) female students. Another key demographic variable was locality of the students, which is based on two options; urban and rural. It is identified that most students belong to urban areas (71.6%) while the remaining (28.4%) to rural ones.

Descriptive Statistics

Our second research question was designed to measure the level of cyberbullying victimization of students in higher education. To achieve this research objective, descriptive statistics and percentages of each item were calculated to identify the level of cyberbullying victimization of the students. The following values were calculated on the basis of cyberbullying scale. Table 2 presents the results of descriptive statistics of each item:

Table 2
Frequencies and percentages of cyberbullying inventory

	Never	Once	Twice-three times	More than three times	Mean	SD
Someone stole my personal information from my computer (like files, email addresses, pictures, Instagram, or Facebook info)	57.4%	27.6%	11.2%	3.9%	.62	.83
Someone stole my computer nicknames or screen names	59.9%	24.7%	10.8%	4.6%	.60	.85
Someone threaten in online forums (like chatrooms, Facebook, Instagram or twitter)	56.7%	20.4%	15.7%	7.3%	.74	.97
Someone insulted me in online forums (like chatrooms, Instagram, Facebook, or twitter)	55.4%	20.6%	10.1%	13.8%	.82	1.08
Someone excluded me in online forums by blocking my comments or removing them	60.5%	22.6%	11.9%	5.0%	.61	.88
Someone posted my photos on internet	52.0%	25.3%	12.1%	10.6%	.81	1.01
Someone shared my private internet conversation without the my knowledge (such as chatting with a friend or Skype with other(s) in room)	63.9%	18.5%	12.1%	5.4%	.59	.90
Someone made fun of my comments in online forums (such as Facebook)	50.3%	24.1%	14.5%	11.15	.86	1.0
Someone sent me threatening or hurtful comments through email	63.8%	18.0%	13.5%	4.6%	.59	.88
Someone stole my email access (user name and password) and blocked my access	65.3%	19.2%	12.0%	3.6%	.54	.84
Someone stole my email access and read my personal messages	65.1%	19.5%	11.3%	4.2%	.55	.85
Someone sent me threatening and/or hurtful text messages	57.5%	20.0%	13.9%	8.6%	.74	.99
Someone misled me by pretending to be other gender (male/female)	56.9%	23.0%	13.2%	7.0%	.70	.95
Someone published online my embarrassing photos without my permission	63.2%	15.3%	15.0%	6.6%	.65	.96

Table 2 presents the percentages, mean, and standard deviation of each item of cyberbullying inventory. The items which have high percentage and mean scores (13.8%) are also presented in it. The majority of the participants reported that someone insulted them in online forums (like chatroom, Instagram, Facebook or Twitter) more than three times. Moreover, many respondents (11.15%) reported that people made fun of their comments in online forums (such as Facebook) more than three times. Similarly, many respondents (10.6%) revealed that people posted their photos on the internet more than three times. Few respondents (8.6%) shared that someone sent them threatening messages and/or harmful text messages more than three times. A few people (7.0%) also reported that people misled them by pretending to be another gender (male/female). Others also reported sharing pictures/videos, stolen passwords and nicks and personal information more than three times. On the other hand, there are also people who reported the same events more than twice in their lives. For example, the highest percentage reported that people stole their nicks and shared their photos/videos with others (15.7%) and (15.0%). The percentages of all items against "twice-three times" were higher than "more than three times", which showed respondents had been victimized by cyberbullying. Similarly, the majority of the respondents shared that they had been victimized by cyberbullying once in their whole experience. They mainly reported on their stolen information, e.g., personal information from computers, email, files, addresses, pictures, Instagram and Facebook info. Out of 14 items, (50%) participants shared that they had never faced cyberbullying.

Linear Regression

To measure the main research objectives, linear regression analysis was carried out by using the variables cyberbullying and the students' well-being. The following regression equation was found R2= .34, F (974) = 145.664, p = .000, which shows a weak but significant relationship between cyberbullying and their well-being in higher education. This means the students experienced a lower level of cyberbullying. The regression coefficients show a unit decrease in cyberbullying (.36) and consequently increasing students' well-being.

Independent Sample t-test

The t-test was applied to map out the level of cyberbullying experienced by male and female students and on a locality basis. The t-test results showed a significant difference between male and female students experiencing cyberbullying. The following significant equation was found: t (974) = 1.61, p= .002. This means both male and female students have different level of cyberbullying victimization in higher education. As to finding the differences on the basis of locality – urban and rural, no significant difference was found in the following equation t (974) = -.38, p= .44. Table 3 presents the independent sample t-test results: a locality

Table 3
Independent sample t-test

	Variables	Mean	SD	t	p	95% Confidence interval	
Gender	Male	.99	.80	1.61	.00	-.01	.19
	Female	.90	.92				
Locality	Urban	.94	.85	-.38	.44	-.14	.09
	Rural	.96	.88				

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this research was to analyze the relationship between cyberbullying and the well-being of the students. Interesting results were identified after conducting various analyses. However, we are unable to compare our findings with local research due to lack of research in this field. However, we could compare our findings with international research conducted in the field of higher education. Our key findings included that cyberbullying significantly decreases the well-being of students in higher education, which is consistent with the study results of Giumetti and Kowalski (2022), who reports that cyberbullying via social media leaves negative effects on their well-being. Although the relationship between cyberbullying and well-being was weak, but significant, which is consistent with the existing research by Giumetti and Kowalski (2022). They also identified a weak, but significant relationship. As to seeing the gender differences in view of experiencing cyberbullying, we identified that both male and female students have different level of cyberbullying victimization.

These results corroborate with the study results of Musharraf and Anis-ul-Haque (2018), who conducted research in a university setting and achieved similar findings that female students, in general, are more likely to become the victims of cyberbullying in contrast to male. Our findings are also consistent with the research results of Heiman and Olenik-Shemesh (2015), who conclude that both male and female students have difference level of cyberbullying experiences, but the females are more likely to be cyber victims than the males. As to measuring the differences on the basis of locality, we found no difference between rural and urban participants in relation to experiencing cyberbullying. These results are aligned with the research results of Saleem, Khan, and Zafar, (2021). They conducted their research in a Pakistani context and explored that there was no difference in the view of the locality of the students to experience cyberbullying among university students. The research also highlights that urban and rural students nowadays have equal opportunities for cell phone use and internet facilities. Thus, there may be equal chance of becoming the victim of cyberbullying (Park et al., 2021). This is in line with our research findings.

Limitations and Recommendations

Taking into account the nature and design of this research, several limitations have to be stressed. First, correlational research design was adopted to collect data from university students. However, realistically, people are usually reluctant when they are asked about such experiences and have courageous enough to share them. Drawing a conclusion on the basis of limited and structured quantitative results might not be sagacious in view of generalization. After getting the consent of the participants, it would have been better to take their in-depth view on cyberbullying experience to draw realistic conclusions. Next, being the victim of

cyberbullying one might face long-term consequences, for example, lack of self-esteem, poor mental health, and fear.

Future research can consider these or other related variables to dig out the effects of cyberbullying. Adding more variables in research expands the opportunities for advanced data analysis techniques, where one has leverage to explore the variance in data. We also depend on some demographic variables and can identify their role in this research. However, a balanced sample size and well-designed research could enrich the findings of the study. More universities could be added in the sample to grasp more variance in results. Future research could consider these limitations for designing better research and maximize the generalizability of the results. Future research could also focus on other effects of cyberbullying on students' achievement and self-esteem. Universities should design certain policies to tackle such types of bullying. A clear institutional policy to prevent cyberbullying is the need of the time, which would warn students about the effects and consequences of cyberbullying in higher education.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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