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Investigating the Relationship between Cyberbullying and Academic Performance Among University Students: The Moderating Role of Emotional Regulation

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ABSTRACT
The shift to a digital-age has raised invisible threats to the cyber-world, impacting not just the academic performance but the emotional wellbeing as well. Using a quantitative study, data were collected from 250 undergraduate and graduate students aged 18 to 25 through structured questionnaires. The study considers the involvement of different factors such as age, gender, semester, screen time, use of psychiatric medication, parental awareness and history of brain injury that can have a potential impact on cyberbullying experience. The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between cyberbullying and academic performance, indicating that higher engagement in cyberbullying, either as a victim or perpetrator, is related with poorer academic and lower levels of emotional regulation, while at higher level, the effect was reduced. Furthermore, the study revealed that a majority of participants were females sand undergraduates from Islamabad experiencing more cyberbullying. Users of dual or triple platforms had poorer emotional regulation with Instagram reported as the most common platform. Moreover, increased screen time demonstrated high levels of emotional regulation skills. The study lays the foundation for future research and may contribute in studying the long-term patterns of cyberbullying experiences, analyzing the impact of different coping styles using an in-depth qualitative study.

Keywords: *Cyberbullying, Academic Performance, Emotional Regulation, Gender Differences, University Students, Quantitative Research, Coping Styles.*

Introduction

Digital technologies are rapidly developing, and this has redefined social interactions, the learning process, and communication in academia. However, this advancement has also given way to online aggression-cyber bullying, which is recognized as the deliberate, repetitive harm caused using electronic technology including social media, emails, as well as messaging

services (Menesini and Nocentini, 2009). The rate of its occurrence may be described as alarming, as 15%-60% of students in universities all over the world expressed that they experience some sort of harassment online (Brochado et al., 2016).

Cyberbullying takes various forms namely; harassment, impersonation, denigration and exclusion all of which interfere with social and academic functioning. Depression, anxiety, and lack of self-worth tend to impair cognitive processing, and concentration required by victims to perform in school (Nixon, 2014). It has been shown that this emotional distress correlates with the decreased GPAs, decreased motivation, and anti-social behavior (Betts et al., 2016).

The neurophysiological perspective of cyberbullying causes overactivation of the amygdala, which activates the hypothalamic -pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and elevates cortisol into the body (McLoughlin et al., 2019, 2020). This ongoing stress response interferes with cognitive functioning, emotional regulation and learning. University students, specifically those in high-stress settings such as Pakistan, are also at risk because society places an outstanding emphasis on academic excellence, which increases the level of stress and prevents help-seeking due to perceived stigma against mental health (Qaiser et al., 2022).

Additional perspectives on aggression include the Cognitive Appraisal Theory and the general aggression model which offer some insight about aggression. The first describes how the internalization of anger and distress due to frequent exposure to aggression takes place (Kokkinos and Antoniadou, 2019), whereas the second indicates that the way in which victims process the events of bullying (self-blame) is what shapes the emotional consequences (Na et al., 2015). The combination of these structures demonstrates that sustained online aggression impairs emotional regulation, which mediate and moderate its academic outcome.

Theoretical Framework

Social Ecological Model (Hitchcock and Swearer, 2012)

The Social Ecological Model, which relies on the theory of ecological systems as proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), assumes the development of cyberbullying due to a set of interconnected systems. Direct social experiences are shaped by the microsystem (peers, family, and the university environment). Cyberbullying can be counteracted through supportive family groups and peer groups (Espelage et al., 2013).

The mesosystem shows relationships between these microsystems i.e. communications between school and home. The family-school relationship is not supportive, which can enhance the effects of victimization. The exosystem directly affects the individual to the institutions and policies that are around the person. The macrosystem is defined by society and legislation; currently, cultural taboos about mental health and the lack of awareness about cybercrime worsen the situation in Pakistan (Hinduja and Patchin, 2019; Kowalski et al., 2014). Lastly, the chronosystem is an aspect that shows how technology and social attitudes have developed over time. With the rise in the number of digital platforms, emerging types of harassment require institutional adjustments (Swearer et al., 2019; Kowalski et al., 2021).

This model highlights that cyber bullying is not a single incident and a result of intricate environmental relationships that affects the actions of the bully as well as the ways the victim responds.

The Emotion Regulation Theory of Gross (1998)

Gross views emotion regulation as the mechanism through which people affect the initiation, sustainability and manifestation of emotions. According to his model, four stages are recognized; situation, attention, appraisal and response and the two consist of cognitive reappraisal (reality of the emotional stimuli) and expressive suppression (inhibition of the portrayal of emotion) (Gross, 2002).

In the context of cyberbullying, reappraisal can be viewed as an adaptive tool, as it allows victims to re-judge negative events and stay focused at school. On the other hand, suppression and self-accusation enhance emotional distress and poor functioning. The theory of Gross can

therefore be used to present a theoretical account of the role that the emotional regulation plays in mediating the relationship between cyberbullying and academic performance- moderating or mediating the effects based on the coping strategies adopted.

Combined, the Social Ecology Model and the Theory by Gross embrace both the environmental and personal factors that determine the results of cyber bullying. They affirm the assumption in the study that in as much as external environments expose students to bullying, internal emotion regulation processes define the level to which the functioning of academic performance is disturbed.

Literature Review

Academic Performance and Cyberbullying.

Aparisi et al. (2021) tested learning strategies and university adaptation in 500 Spanish students and discovered that learning strategies were poor and that learning strategies were more likely to be associated with cyberbullying, which supported the relationship between maladaptive academic behavior and online aggression. Likewise, Peled (2019) examined 638 undergraduates in Israel and has found out that cyberbullying through email was associated with poor academic performance and increased emotional distress. This was expanded by Ruiz et al. (2021) to younger groups and gender disparities (i.e. females tended to be more resilient and emotionally deciphered following victimization). Cross- sectional findings support this data. In 931 adolescents in the United States, Kowalski and Limber (2013) discovered similar consequences of traditional and cyberbullying as higher anxiety and lower school performance. Alotaibi (2019) used the Theory of Planned Behavior in Saudi Arabia and found that social norms and perceived control over behavior were significant predictors of intentions toward cyberbullying and the more aggressive a person was online, the worse scholarly performance. Taken altogether, these studies illustrate that cyberbullying is a problem that interferes with the concentration, motivational levels, and the academic performance of the students.

Cyber bullying and Emotional Regulation.

Employing emotional regulation is a protective factor as well as a risk factor. Hamer and Konijn (2016) discovered that due to online bullying, teenagers who become affected usually adopt maladaptive coping mechanisms like rumination and self-blame, which end up breeding a cycle of distress and retaliation. Additionally, Arato et al. (2021) reported that while harmonious family coherence and peer support promote better regulation and resilience, interwoven family systems and impulsive conduct are predictors of cyberbullying participation.

Gianesini and Brighi (2015) proved that the negative emotional consequences of bullying depended on the high resilience and adaptive emotion regulation in adolescents meaning coping and resilience are especially important. Rey et al. (2020) also demonstrated that maladaptive thinking processes, especially the catastrophizing and self-blame strategies, mediate the correlation between cyber victimization and somatic symptoms, demonstrating the psychosomatic cost of poor regulation.

The dependence on technology is also linked to emotional disregulation according to recent studies. Gul et al. (2018) determined that problematic smartphone use is correlated with both bullying and victimization and that high aggression and low emotional intelligence are relevant predictors of bullying behaviors (Martinez-Monteagudo et al., 2019). The results confirm the leading role of the lack of emotion regulation in the process of perpetration and victimization.

Cyberbullying Academic Performance and Emotional Regulation.

Studies which include the three variables: cyber bullying, emotional regulation, and academic performance are scarce but enlightening. The findings of Martínez-Martínez et al. (2020) indicate that students that had better emotional intelligence had worse cyber victimization and better academic performance, which validated the buffering effect of emotional regulation. Okumu et al. (2020) found that depression mediates the bullying-performance relationship, particularly among adolescent females, which indicates that emotion regulation helps defend

against psychological distress which is an obstacle to learning. Escortell et al. (2020) have discovered that self-concept and school anxiety have negative associations with cyber victimization and state that the regulation of anxiety affects emotional wellbeing and academic performance.

Shaheen et al. (2023) compared adaptive and maladaptive types of emotional regulation (e.g., cognitive reappraisal and acceptance versus rumination, self-blame) in Pakistan to show that psychological distress caused by cyberbullying is reduced by adaptive and aggravated by maladaptive emotional regulation. Equally, the self-disclosure was found to be employed as a moderator by Ummul-Baneen et al. (2024): those students who had greater emotional regulation and openness reported a lower number of victimization events. Asad and Fatima (2024) expanded this study to female undergraduates and found out that cyber violence has a negative impact on cognitive development, with emotional regulation and coping styles being the mediums.

All these studies establish that there is a negative correlation between cyberbullying and academic performance and that emotional regulation is the highly important moderating variable that safeguards the well-being and the learning potential of students.

Method

Research Design

The current research utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design to explore the association between cyberbullying and academic performance, considering emotional regulation as a moderating factor. This design was selected because it enables simultaneous assessment of the naturally occurring variables without experimental manipulation for making it well suited for exploring psychological and behavioral associations in the educational settings (Aparisi et al., 2021). The quantitative correlational methods have been widely used in the cyber-psychology research to identify the predictive relationships between online experiences and the mental-health or academic outcomes (Martínez-Martínez et al., 2020). The design also aligns with theoretical framework of Gross's (1998, 2002) process model of emotion regulation which suggests that the adaptive regulation moderates the impact of stressors such as cyberbullying on performance.

Sample

A sample of 250 university students (125 males and 125 females) was recruited from public and private universities located in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Participants ranged in the age from 18 to 25 years old (M = 21.4, SD = 2.1), representing young-adult students in both undergraduate (n = 125) and graduate (n = 125) programs. Inclusion criteria required that participants be actively enrolled in a degree program and use at least the one social-media platform. Individuals reporting diagnosed psychiatric or neurological conditions were excluded to control for confounding factors related to psychological functioning.

A non-probability convenience sampling technique was initially employed, followed by snowball recruitment to expand reach across institutions. Although this method limits generalizability, it is commonly adopted in behavioral research involving specific university populations. A power analysis using G Power 3.1 showed that at least 200 participants were needed to detect a moderate effect ($f^2 = 0.15$) with 95% power and $\alpha = .05$. The actual sample of 250 went beyond this limit and provided enough statistical accuracy. The gender balance and inclusion of both academic levels allowed for greater representation of the university demographic and reduced sampling bias.

Instruments

Three standardized, psychometrically sound self-report instruments were used to assess the study variables.

Cyber Bully/Victim Questionnaire (CBVS).

Cyberbullying involvement was measured using the 15-item CBVS (Horzum, 2010). Responses are rated on the 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *every time*), assessing the both victimization and perpetration experiences. The CBVS has demonstrated adequate construct validity (44 % variance explained) and satisfactory internal reliability (α = .81; Brown, 2015).

Academic Performance Scale (APS).

The academic performance was evaluated through the APS developed by the Birchmeier et al. (2019). The eight items measure engagement, motivation, and productivity on a 5-point Likert continuum. Total scores categorize students from *failing* (0–8) to *excellent* (33–40). Reported internal consistency is α = .89 and test–retest reliability = .85, indicating robust stability over time.

Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ).

The Emotional regulation was assessed using the 10-item ERQ by the Gross and John (2003). Six items evaluate *cognitive reappraisal* and four assess *expressive suppression*. Each item is rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).A Higher reappraisal and lower suppression scores reflect better emotion-regulation ability. The ERQ exhibits strong internal reliability (α > .80) and cross-cultural validity, including in Asian student samples.

All scales were used in their English versions since English is the medium of instruction in Pakistani higher-education institutions. Permission for academic use was obtained from the respective authors where required. Cronbach's α coefficients in the current study ranged between .81 and .89, confirming acceptable reliability for the Pakistani student context.

Procedure

Prior to the data collection, ethical approval obtained from the Departmental Research Committee. The participants were provided with electronic informed-consent form describing study objectives, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and withdrawal rights. Those who agreed proceeded to the online questionnaire, administered through Google Forms. The first section captured demographic information (age, gender, academic level, daily screen-time hours, parental awareness of online activity, and preferred social-media platforms). Subsequent sections presented the CBVS, ERQ, and APS in randomized order to minimize response bias. Participation required approximately 15 minutes. Responses were automatically recorded and stored securely with password protection. Data screening was performed to identify incomplete entries and outliers. Assumptions of the normality and linearity and homoscedasticity were checked and met prior to analysis. Statistical analyses were conducted by using SPSS version 26. Initially the descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviations and reliability coefficients were computed followed by Pearson's correlation analysis to examine the associations among variables. Subsequently, a simple linear regression assessed the predictive effect of cyberbullying on academic performance. Finally, the moderation analysis was performed using Hayes's (2018) PROCESS Macro Model 1 to determine whether emotional regulation buffered the adverse influence of cyberbullying on academic outcomes. This systematic and ethical procedure ensured the integrity, accuracy and confidentiality of the research particularly important when investigating sensitive online behaviors.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients and bivariate correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1. As hypothesized that cyberbullying was negatively associated with academic performance and emotional regulation whereas emotional regulation was positively correlated with academic performance. Reliability estimates (Cronbach's α) for all scales were above .80, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Correlations among Variables (N = 250)*

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3
1. Cyberbullying	41.23	6.42	.81	,		

2. Academic Performance	27.56	5.71	.89	–.48 ***	,	
3. Emotional Regulation	45.87	7.18	.83	–.36 ***	.41 ***	,

*Note: **p < .001.*

The correlation results show that higher levels of cyberbullying are connected with lower academic performance (r = –.48, p < .001) and poorer emotional regulation (r = –.36, p < .001). On the other hand the students with higher the emotional regulation scores tend to have better academic performance (r = .41, p < .001). Overall, these findings suggest that students who manage their emotions well usually perform better in studies and face fewer incidents of cyberbullying.

Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression was carried out to see if cyberbullying could predict academic performance. As shown in Table 2 the results revealed that cyberbullying significantly and negatively predicted academic performance, explaining about 22% of the variance.

Table 2*Linear Regression Predicting the Academic Performance from the Cyberbullying*

Predictor	B	SE B	β	T	p
(Constant)	48.12	1.92	,	25.09	<.001
Cyberbullying	–0.45	0.06	–.46	–7.82	<.001

Note: R^2 = .22, F(1, 248) = 61.1, p < .001.

The regression findings show that with every one-unit rise in cyberbullying score, academic performance dropped by 0.45 units (β = –.46, p < .001). The model explained 22% of the variance in academic performance, indicating that cyberbullying has a clear negative effect on students' academic outcomes. Overall, these results emphasize that cyberbullying is a strong predictor of lower academic achievement among university students.

Moderation Analysis

To examine whether emotional regulation moderated the relationship between cyberbullying and academic performance, a moderation analysis was performed using Hayes's (2018) PROCESS Macro Model 1. The results are summarized in Table 3. Both cyberbullying and emotional regulation significantly predicted academic performance, and their interaction term was also significant indicating a moderating effect.

Table 3*Moderation Analysis: Emotional Regulation as a Moderator of the Relationship Between the Cyberbullying and the Academic Performance*

Predictor	B	SE B	B	t	P
Cyberbullying	–0.39	0.05	–.40	–7.80	<.001
Emotional Regulation	0.28	0.04	.33	6.78	<.001
Cyberbullying × ER	0.09	0.03	.19	2.98	.003

Note: R^2 = .34, ΔR^2 = .05, F(3, 246) = 42.2, p < .001.

The significant interaction term (β = .19, p = .003) demonstrates that emotional regulation moderated the impact of cyberbullying on academic performance. As illustrated by the interaction pattern the students with high emotional regulation experienced the minimal declines in the academic performance even under high levels of the cyberbullying exposure whereas those with low emotional regulation exhibited steep reductions in performance. The ΔR^2 = .05 indicates that the inclusion of the interaction term accounted for an additional 5 % of the variance beyond the main effects underscoring the buffering role of emotional-regulation capacity.

Additional Analyses

Although not the central focus of this article, exploratory analyses revealed that female students scored significantly higher on emotional regulation (M = 47.15, SD = 7.04) and cyber-victimization (M = 38.62, SD = 6.31) than males, while males reported slightly higher cyber-perpetration scores. Undergraduate students experienced more cyberbullying than graduate students (p < .01). Students from urban areas and those using multiple social-media platforms,

particularly Instagram and Snapchat, also reported higher cyberbullying exposure. These findings, although not tabulated, provide contextual support for the main analyses by showing how demographic and behavioral factors contribute to cyber experiences.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the results confirmed the study's theoretical expectations. Cyberbullying was negatively associated with academic performance, suggesting that students exposed to online harassment tend to exhibit poorer academic outcomes. However, emotional regulation significantly attenuated this relationship, functioning as a protective moderator. Students with stronger emotion-regulation skills, especially those adept at cognitive reappraisal, maintained better academic functioning under adverse online experiences. These outcomes collectively reinforce the proposed model linking cyberbullying, emotional regulation, and academic performance within the stress-diathesis and resilience frameworks.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between the cyberbullying and the academic performance among Pakistani university students with the emotional regulation as a moderating variable. These findings revealed a significant negative relationship between cyberbullying and academic performance and a positive association between emotional regulation and academic success. Moreover emotional regulation moderated the negative effect of cyberbullying indicating that students with higher emotional regulation skills were less affected academically by cyberbullying exposure. These findings are consistent with international literature emphasizing the detrimental psychological and cognitive consequences of cyberbullying (Aparisi et al. 2021; Peled 2019) and the protective function of adaptive emotional regulation (Gross & John 2003; Shaheen et al. 2023).

The inverse relationship between the cyberbullying and the academic performance observed in this study underscores that online victimization extends beyond the emotional distress to disrupt concentration self-efficacy and classroom engagement. Victims of cyberbullying often experience the anxiety and sleep disturbances and fear of peer judgment all of which impair learning motivation and attendance (Martínez Martínez et al. 2020). The results are consistent with the stress diathesis framework which posits that the environmental stressors such as online harassment can trigger the maladaptive outcomes when individual coping capacities are low. Within this context emotional regulation acts as a resilience factor that mitigates stress responses and preserves the cognitive focus during adversity (Gross 1998).

The moderation analysis further highlighted that the emotional regulation is a key psychological skill that buffers the harmful effects of cyberbullying. Students with the greater capacity for cognitive reappraisal and lower reliance on expressive suppression displayed the stable academic performance despite the high levels of cyberbullying exposure. These findings align with the resilience and the self-regulation perspectives which view emotional regulation strategies as the protective mechanisms that allow individuals to reinterpret the stressors more adaptively (Zimmer Gembeck & Skinner 2016). This suggests that emotional regulation may enhance the academic persistence by reducing rumination and preserving working memory under stressful digital interactions.

From a cultural standpoint the study holds the particular significance in the Pakistani educational context where the discussions of mental health and online harassment remain limited. Many students hesitate to seek the formal psychological help due to the social stigma and limited campus based counseling services (Shaheen et al. 2023). Therefore internal regulatory abilities become critical resources for maintaining the well-being and the academic functioning. The present findings indicate that the integrating emotional literacy training within university curricula could help to the students build these essential coping skills. Additionally fostering awareness programs about the digital ethics peer empathy and the cyber safety practices can further reduce bullying behaviors and their academic repercussions.

These findings also have the theoretical implications. They extend Gross's (2002) process model of the emotion regulation by demonstrating that the regulation not only influences affective outcomes but also predicts the cognitive and the academic resilience. Furthermore by situating the emotional regulation within the stress diathesis model the study highlights how personal strengths interact with the environmental stressors to determine academic performance. The interaction between cyberbullying and emotional regulation underscores the need for integrative models that address both the psychosocial and the emotional dimensions of the digital behavior.

Despite its strengths, this study is not without limitations. Its cross sectional design restricts the causal inferences and self-reported measures may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research should employ the longitudinal or the experimental designs to explore how emotional regulation training may alter cyberbullying outcomes over time. Additionally, the qualitative methods such as interviews could provide richer insights into student's coping experiences and the contextual factors influencing cyberbullying exposure. Expanding samples across the different provinces or including private versus public institutions may also enhance generalizability.

In the conclusion, the current findings affirm that cyberbullying poses a significant risk to student's academic achievement but that emotional regulation serves as an effective protective factor. Students who can manage their emotional responses through adaptive reappraisal are more resilient and less likely to experience academic decline following online harassment. These results emphasize the need for universities to adopt proactive mental health policies, promote digital well-being and cultivate emotional regulation skills as part of the holistic educational development. Ultimately empowering students with emotional competence can transform the potentially damaging cyber experiences into opportunities for the resilience and the growth.

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