Exploring the Impact of Cyberbullying on Female University Students in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study

Fareeha Naseem

WWF-Pakistan, Lahore, Pakistan

Correspondence:

Fareeha Naseem: fareehannaseem10@gmail.com

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Fareeha Naseem (Corresponding Author), WWF-Pakistan, Lahore, Pakistan. Email: fareehannaseem10@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

With the rise of technology, the internet has become one of the most widely used communication channels among university students worldwide. Alongside increased internet use, bullying has expanded into private spaces and is no longer limited to school grounds. The present study aimed to explore the perceptions, prevalence, experiences, and contributing factors of cyberbullying among female university students. A qualitative research design was employed, and the data comprised N = 20 female university students (aged 22–35 years) from Punjab University, Lahore, who were hospitalized and selected through a purposive sampling technique. In-depth interviews were conducted using an interview guide based on 20 semi-structured, open-ended questions addressing individual perceptions and the effects of cyberbullying experiences. Findings revealed that the participants were frequently harassed, threatened, and blackmailed by bullies through online messages, phone calls, and Facebook. The majority of students (99%) did not disclose incidents of cyberbullying to their families due to fear of being perceived as immoral and the prevailing societal belief that females are the custodians of family honor. As a result, many young women chose to suffer in silence, which not only discourages them from using cyberspace freely but also disrupts their academic performance and social lives. The study also concluded that most female students were unaware of any laws or helplines addressing cyberbullying. Furthermore, they lacked trust in law enforcement agencies and were largely unfamiliar with existing legal protections against cyber harassment. The study recommends that universities should organize awareness campaigns and establish dedicated bodies at the national level to prevent cyberstalking and harassment of young women.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Cyberspace, Harassment, Internet, Technology, University Students, Perceptions, Prevalence, Experiences

JEL Classification Codes: I23, I28, K42, D83, Z13

1. INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying involves using digital platforms to spread false information, engage in violent interactions, send repetitive communications, and disclose personal information without consent in an effort to shame or degrade the victim (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014; Marcum & Higgins, 2019). One form of violence that jeopardizes children's well-being in schools, colleges, and communities is cyberbullying. According to Johnson et al. (2020), cyberbullying is a major contributor to increased anxiety, depression, and frustration among youth today. It has been linked to psychological distress, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation. Beyond its individual impact, it also affects family dynamics, school environments, and broadens society by fostering fear, shame, and emotional instability. This unhealthy behavior can occur in schools, during after-school activities, and within adolescent neighborhoods (Tanriku, 2018).

In Pakistan's socio-cultural environment, where traditional gender roles and honor-based expectations prevail, female students often face heightened vulnerabilities online. The fear of reputational damage or social judgment contributes to a culture of silence, making the psychological burden of cyberbullying particularly severe in this context.

The goal of this study is to examine how cyberbullying victimization occurs in higher education (HE) settings and how it affects students' perceptions, online experiences, and overall well-being (Kaur & Saini, 2023; Lindsay et al., 2016; Marcum & Higgins, 2019). Understanding how evolving Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilitates such violations, and investigating negative online experiences, is essential in rapidly changing ICT environments such as higher education. Electronic devices, including computers and smartphones, enable the spread of intrusive and distressing behaviors that impact relationships, online communication, and social identity—among other dimensions of human interaction (Marcum & Higgins, 2019).

1.1. Aim and Significance of the Study

Cyberbullying is a relatively new form of harassment that affects students both within academic settings and in their personal lives. While numerous studies have explored cyberbullying among adolescents globally, there is limited research on how female university students in Pakistan, particularly those living in hostels, perceive and experience it. Most prior studies focus on school-aged children or fail to contextualize cyberbullying within the socio-cultural constraints of Pakistani society, such as the role of honor, stigma, and women limited digital autonomy.

This study addresses that gap by investigating the lived experiences of female university students residing in hostels—a group that is highly vulnerable due to reduced family oversight and increased online engagement. It uniquely contributes to the literature by uncovering culturally embedded psychological and social responses to cyberbullying, which remain underexplored. The study also highlights the disconnect between existing legal protections and students' awareness of them, thereby identifying urgent needs for targeted interventions and policy-level responses.

1.2. Objectives

The following were the main objectives of this study:

i. To explore the perceptions of female university students regarding cyberbullying.
ii. To examine their experiences and reactions toward cyberbullying.

1.3. Research Questions

Two major research questions were explored through this study:

a. What are the perceptions of female university students regarding cyberbullying?
b. What are the lived experiences and responses to cyberbullying among female university students?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since children are more likely to be connected to the internet and have greater access to social media and other forms of technology, cyberbullying is considered a new form of bullying that can have harmful effects on them. It is estimated that cyberbullying particularly has negative impacts on young people (Van Geel et al., 2014). The internet and digital technologies have become one of the most common communication channels among college students, including female students. Globally, young people, including women and girls, as well as university students, have proven to be adept users of online technologies and often take the initiative to familiarize themselves with new digital tools for everyday use (Hong, 2007).

According to Wang et al. (2011), bullying is a form of aggression in which actions are carried out with the intent to harm or distress someone, the behavior occurs repeatedly over time, and there is a power imbalance, where a more dominant individual or group targets someone less able to defend themselves. Violent behavior may be verbal, physical, or psychological, and power imbalances can be mental or physical (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). Slovak and Arista (2011) assert that

bullying is a pervasive phenomenon affecting millions of individuals across geographical boundaries and can occur anytime and anywhere, including schools.

Cyber bullying has emerged as a significant concern in higher education, particularly affecting female university students in Pakistan. Ahmad, Iqbal, and Naz (2024) conducted a study in Sindh, revealing that 59.34% of female university students experienced cyber bullying, leading to adverse mental health outcomes. The study emphasized the need for targeted interventions to address this growing issue.

Similarly, Hameed and Ismail (2024) explored the perceptions and experiences of cyber bullying among female university students in Pakistan. Their findings indicated that cyber bullying negatively impacts academic performance, and that awareness levels influence how students respond to such incidents.

Noreen and Iqbal (2024) examined the psychological consequences of cyber bullying on university students, finding a positive relationship between cyber victimization and increased anxiety and distress levels, along with decreased self-esteem. These results underscore the psychological toll cyber bullying takes on students' well-being.

Anjum et al. (2019) investigated the mediating role of psychological strain in higher education institutions in Pakistan, highlighting how bullying, including cyber bullying, contributes to increased stress among students. The study called for comprehensive strategies to mitigate these effects.

Bibi et al. (2021) conducted a comparative study on mental health, suicidal ideation, and bullying among university students in Pakistan, Germany, and China. The study revealed that Pakistani students reported higher rates of bullying and poorer mental health outcomes, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive interventions.

Zafar et al. (2021) examined the prevalence of cyber bullying victimization among Pakistani youth, finding that approximately 90% of participants had experienced cyber bullying. The study highlighted the role of socioeconomic status and the digital divide in shaping cyber bullying experiences.

Imam and Naz (2024) discussed the legal challenges and societal impacts of cyber bullying in Pakistan, analyzing the effectiveness of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016. The study called for comprehensive legal, educational, and technological strategies to combat cyber bullying. Ullah et al. (2023) provided a qualitative analysis of cyber bullying from university students' perspectives, revealing that female students are more susceptible to psychological disturbances resulting from cyber bullying. The study emphasized the need for institutional

reforms to address this issue. Ayub and Malik (2020) investigated cyber harassment among female university students, highlighting its impact on social adjustment and noting that self-efficacy plays a moderating role in coping with its psychological effects.

Bullying can take many different forms, such as cyber bullying, social bullying, and physical bullying. With the development of technology and its integration into daily life, it has become easier for individuals to express their emotions. However, excessive access to the internet and advanced communication tools have also been linked to poor social skills, high anxiety levels, low self-esteem, and aggression (Aricak, 2009). Numerous markers of depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and increased suicidal behavior among young people have been identified in an abundance of research (Kowakki & Giumetti, 2016).

Their computer expertise can occasionally create a portal that exposes them to a wide range of illicit activities, including drug abuse, violent crimes, pornography, and cyber bullying (Limber et al., 2007). Cyber bullying is defined as a crime by the National Crime Prevention Council (2013) as occurring when a child, teen, or adolescent is subjected to torture, harm, annoyance, embarrassment, or humiliation by another child or youngster using the internet, advanced technology, or mobile phone. Studies demonstrate an increase in the victimization of academically accomplished or talented students through cyber bullying (Hargrove, 2010; Kaye, 2010).

Ortega et al. (2012) defines cyber bullying as bullying that uses electronic means, such as email, cell phones, text messages, photos, social media, and personal websites, to harm others through repeated threats. Cyber bullying encompasses any behavior through social media, messaging apps, or digital platforms intended to harass, threaten, or humiliate an individual, often anonymously and repeatedly. Because cyber bullying involves communication technologies that many guardians are unfamiliar with, it may appear especially threatening to them (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). According to Belsey (2004), cyber bullying involves using social media, social networking sites, and messaging to harm others. Forty-three percent of the students polled by the National Crime Prevention Board and Harris (2006) reported experiencing e-intimidation in the previous 12 months. According to research conducted that same year by Pew Internet and American Life, one in three young males has experienced cyber bullying or harassment (Lenhart, 2007; Moessner, 2007).

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1. Participants

This study was a qualitative study focused on exploring cyberbullying encounters. Participants were recruited from among hostel students at the university campus. Female participants were either married, unmarried, separated, divorced, or widows, with an age range of 20 to 35 years, and were all hostelized students from Punjab University, Lahore. The sample comprised N = 20 (M = 25.07, SD = 4.73). Participants belonging to low, middle, and upper socioeconomic status were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Participants who were day scholars, enrolled in weekend classes, diagnosed with an anxiety disorder or any other psychological illness, or who had any kind of physical disabilities were excluded from the study. An exploratory research design within qualitative research was used to evaluate the meaning and prevalence of experiences and perceptions of female students about the effects of cyberbullying.

3.2. Measures

Each interview lasted between 15 and 50 minutes. Participants were informed about the goals of the study and given the opportunity to read an informed consent form prior to each interview. An Information Sheet, Consent Form, and Demographic Form were used: An informed consent form was utilized to demonstrate willingness to participate in the current study, together with a participant information sheet that included details about the research topic, nature, purpose, process, ethical considerations, and confidentiality. Age, gender, education, occupation, internet-surfing medium, number of devices, amount of time spent online, socioeconomic status, family structure, number of family members, birth order, and marital status were all included in the demographic information sheet. A brief demographic survey about age, race/ethnicity, sex, education, and work status was given to participants before the start of the semi-structured interview. It also contained statements to determine whether they typically target known or unknown individuals for cyber bullying and whether they adhere to privacy policies when utilizing online communication groups.

3.3. Interview Guide

The interview guide consisted of eight questions, which comprised open-ended questions. Each open-ended question had further categories, which were used to gain deep insight and to understand the impacts of cyberbullying. Semi-structured interview questions were written a priori in an interview guide format, allowing personalized follow-up questions. Questions posed during semi-structured interviews started broad (e.g., "What is your experience with cyberbullying?") and became narrower (e.g., "Where does that tend to take place," "What is the

prevalence and impact of cyberbullying?"). Indicators of social life were used in these categories to explore experiences, perceptions, and the impact of bullying by social networking sites on the social life of females.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

Interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). The six steps involved in this data analysis approach are displayed in Figure 3.1 below.

Figure 1: Steps in Reflective Thematic Data Analysis
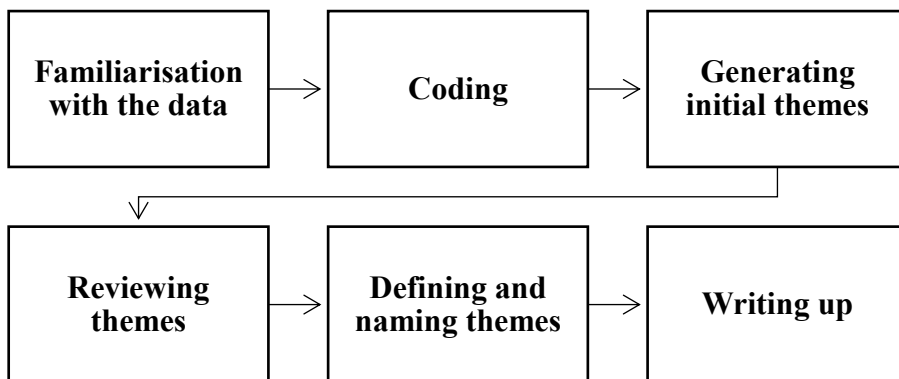
Source: Created by the author based on Braun et al. (2019).

  i. **Familiarization with the Data**: Data were familiarized through proper recording of participants' verbatim and statements for further coding. Data for several questions from the interview guide were collected through semi-structured interviews of 20 participants.
 ii. **Coding:** Statements having the same meanings and addressing the same issue were arranged to form codes for further processing and developing subthemes.
iii. **Generating Initial Themes:** Based on the codes, initial themes were generated to reflect clear concepts of participants' responses that are important for the responsibilities and set patterns of effects and prevalence of cyberbullying.
 iv. **Reviewing Themes:** Initial themes were reviewed to avoid overlapping ideas and subthemes before finalizing them. Related subthemes were arranged for further evaluation of themes.
  v. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Major themes about the prevalence, experience, perceptions, and effects of cyberbullying through online communication channels were named themes in major categories. These themes

identified the responsibilities of parents and efforts made by students to overcome the effects of cyberbullying.

vi. **Writing Up:** Overall thematic analysis was written in a revised form to give a complete outlook over the major themes, subthemes, and verbatim quotes so they can further help discuss the results of the present study in the context of previous literature.

6. RESULTS

6.1. Descriptive Analysis of Demographic Information of the Participants

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Academic Qualification	Year/semester
1	Female	22	M.A Education	2nd years
2	Female	23	M.Sc. Applied Psychology	2nd years
3	Female	25	MPhil Applied Psychology	Last semester
4	Female	24	MPhil Education	Last semester
5	Female	24	MSc Political Science	Last semester
6	Female	22	M.sc Economics	Last semester
7	Female	21	MPhil Islamiyat	Last semester
8	Female	21	MPhil Clinical Psychology	Last semester
9	Female	25	M.sc Economics	Last semester
10	Female	26	MPhil Education	Last semester
11	Female	28	MPhil Education	Last semester
12	Female	22	MSc Political Science	Last semester
13	Female	24	MSc Political Science	Last semester
14	Female	23	MSc Political Science	Last semester
15	Female	24	MSc Political Science	Last semester
16	Female	26	MPhil Education	Last semester
17	Female	27	M.sc Economics	Last semester
18	Female	28	MSc Political Science	Last semester
19	Female	23	MSc Political Science	Last semester
20	Female	24	M.sc Economics	Last semester

Note: All the participants were from Punjab University.

Source: Author's field data collected during semi-structured interviews.

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 20 female hostel-based university students who participated in the study. It includes details such as age, academic qualification, year/semester, and department, all from Punjab University.

6.2. Thematic Analysis and Findings

Familiarization and coding: When asked whether they understood the terms bullying and cyberbullying, the majority of participants affirmed their awareness.

At this stage, the response rate was 100% regarding their understanding of the distinction between the two terms. All female students confirmed they were aware of the differences. One respondent expressed her understanding of the terminologies and stated that for her, bullying involves physical coercion, whereas cyberbullying entails online threats. She elaborated:

"Bullying is forcing, influencing someone to do something in person. However, the other one is not willing to do that. In other words, we can say cyberbullying is threatening someone by sending messages via electronic media. By demanding something, or blackmailing using your information from social media, mostly. And it's a crime."

All participants agreed that in both forms of bullying, the primary intent of the perpetrator is to annoy or harass the victim. Another respondent shared her perspective:

"When an unknown person is irritating you face-to-face, this is called bullying. And when an unknown person is teasing or irritating you through Facebook, inbox messages, and phone calls, this is called cyberbullying."

According to all respondents, the underlying goal of both bullying and cyberbullying is the same: to annoy, taunt, or emotionally disturb the victims for various reasons. Some participants noted that certain bullies engage in this behavior purely for personal amusement, while others intentionally target individuals to provoke or irritate them. One female respondent shared her perspective:

"Bullying and cyberbullying both are types of harassment which are used to tease someone or irritate someone without his/her consent."

During conversations, many respondents emphasized that living in a technologically advanced era—where the use of Facebook and other social media platforms is widespread—has created new vulnerabilities. They observed that women now often move independently without guardians, which, while empowering, also exposes them to bullying in both physical and digital spaces. One participant added:

"Bullying is passing comments on you when you are going somewhere, or you are standing on the road, while cyberbullying is using insulting and abusive language through electronic media like mobile phones, Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger."

The majority of respondents also shared their understanding of bullying and cyberbullying, emphasizing that both aim to harass and harm individuals verbally, mentally, and psychologically. One female participant defined cyberbullying as

harassment carried out through social media or the internet, while bullying, in her view, refers to face-to-face harassment. She elaborated:

> *"Cyberbullying and bullying both are used to torture someone mentally or psychologically and to play with the psychology of the victim."*

Another respondent offered a different perspective, stating that bullying and cyberbullying are not just about irritation or teasing, but also about defamation and revenge. Sharing her views on the issue, she remarked:

> *"Bullying is humiliating behavior of the bully to insult someone or defame someone, while cyberbullying is to share the pictures of the victims on social media to defame them or take revenge."*

The following codes assessed participants' verbatim assessments of cyber bullying are intent:

- coercing and influencing someone to take action; threatening someone about anything personal.
- Torturing someone when using communication apps, such as Facebook Messenger, or annoying them with incessant calls and messages are examples of humiliating behavior that is typically displayed by young men and women.
- To manipulate the victim's psychology through psychological and mental torment

In-depth interviews with research participants who had experienced cyberbullying allowed them to reflect on the type, nature, and extent of their encounters. They described a range of situations, noting a significant impact on their social, psychological, and academic well-being. One respondent shared her personal experience and stated:

> *"I am a social butterfly, firstly, as a social sciences student, and secondly because I'm involved in the culinary field and research firms. I usually shared my Facebook instead of my contact number. One time, a guy approached me asking questions about cooking and baking. I responded and even shared a few recipes with him. But after some days, he started calling me on Messenger. I asked what he wanted, and he said he needed to talk to me urgently. He insisted on a call just to hear my voice. I ignored him. A few days later, he messaged again saying he was in love with me. I replied, 'Lol man, are you serious? I think you're mad! Don't message me again.' After that, he messaged me again, saying he had copied my pictures and would share them publicly if I didn't talk to him. I got slightly scared—not too much, as I hadn't shared anything inappropriate— but I was definitely confused and irritated. He kept inboxing me with things like, 'I love you', 'your voice', 'your eyes,' and so on. It caused me tension, curiosity,*

and stress, and I couldn't focus on my studies. Eventually, I resolved the matter myself by reporting his account. But I remained under stress for many days because he claimed to have saved my pictures and threatened to post them on social media."

Respondents in this study reported that their experiences with cyberbullying often led to curiosity, anxiety, and psychological distress. Many described feelings tense and afraid, particularly when the harassment appeared persistent and invasive. They believed that such bullies often sought attention, but the repeated calls and messages created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. One female respondent described her experience in the following words:

"For the last 4 to 5 months, a boy started messaging me on Facebook. He knows everything about me, even the smallest details of my private conversations with my family. Sometimes it feels like he is tracking my calls and messages, because the exact things I share with my family, he repeats word for word in his Facebook messages. It feels like he might be someone I know, but the identity he has shared doesn't seem familiar. He knows my home address, my previous job, and even that I live in a hostel. I blocked his ID, but he started messaging me from a new one. This whole situation has made me very scared. I keep wondering who he is and how he has access to such personal information, including my phone conversations. I've been so disturbed by it that I can't focus on my studies. The worst part is, I didn't even know who to report this to or where to seek help."

One more respondent expressed her experience and stated that,

"I am a hostelized student. About four months ago, an unknown person started adding me to unethical pornographic WhatsApp groups without my consent. These groups were male-dominated and explicitly inappropriate. I kept leaving the groups, but he repeatedly added me back. I blocked his number, but he began adding me again from new numbers. This situation made me feel depressed and tense. I kept wondering: Why is he doing this? What are his intentions? I couldn't share this with my family. When I visited home, I constantly feared that my brother or father might check my WhatsApp—what would they think of me? The fear and anxiety deeply affected me. I couldn't concentrate on my research work and found myself constantly thinking about this unknown person. I didn't know whom to report it to. This incident disrupted my sleep so badly that I started taking sleeping pills. My academic life was completely disturbed, and I became mentally distracted."

Codes derived from this narrative help explain the reasons for underreporting and the psychological consequences that make female students vulnerable to continued cyberbullying:

- Repeated inclusion in unethical digital groups without consent
- Emotional fragility and psychological vulnerability among women
- Perceived inferiority and dependence on male family members
- Increased vulnerability due to sharing pictures and contact information
- Over-trusting unfamiliar individuals online
- Cultural expectation to protect family honor
- Heightened insecurity, emotional distress, and fear of judgment
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Sleep disturbances and use of sedatives
- Academic distraction and cognitive fatigue
- Nervousness, loss of appetite, and general irritability
- Persistent anxiety about the bully's identity and intentions
- Lack of trust in reporting mechanisms
- Overall decline in emotional well-being and academic engagement

Major Themes and Sub-themes Developed from Participants' Verbatim in Response to Interview Questions (N=20)

Table 2: Themes and Sub-Themes

Familiar Codes	Sub-Themes	Major Themes
Forcing and influencing someone to do something Threatening about something private Irritating someone through persistent calls and messages	• Intentions behind the action • Motive for blackmail • Techniques used to irritate	Personality Characteristics of a Bully
Teasing someone without his/ her consent Torturing someone during the use of communication apps, i.e., Facebook Messenger, etc. Humiliated behavior is usually adopted by young males and females	• Breaching privacy • Humiliated behavior	
Humiliated behavior is usually adopted by young males and females Psychological and mental torture. To play with the psychology of the victim	• Psychological torture • Threaten someone's private life	Perception of Cyber Bullying
To add unknown people Females are emotionally weak	• Females lack confidence	Reasons behind Cyberbullying

Females are considered subordinate and dependent on male members Sharing of personal information and cell numbers	• Lack of ability to sort people • Wrong use of social communication apps	
Sharing their picture makes them more vulnerable They trust easily in unknown people They are responsible for the honor of the family Lack of confidence, delicate nature, and less expressive nature	• Personal Interest • Self-Efficacy • Self-confidence • Self-Motivation • Psychological Distress	Intra-personal/ Psycho Perception
Emotional distress. Social isolation. Sleeping disorder. Use of sleeping pills. Anxiety. Deep tension. Unmindful of hunger and thirst.	• Psychological distress • Physical illness • Social effects	Reaction towards the experience
Irritation from everyone. Fear of bullying and social life. Curiosity about the bully. Lack of concentration on studies.	• Social withdrawal • Motive to become a bully	Effects of Cyberbullying

Source: Developed by the author based on thematic analysis of participant interviews.

7. DISCUSSION

The current study contributes to filling a critical gap in the literature by focusing on cyberbullying among female hostel-based university students in Pakistan, a population that is underrepresented in prior research. Unlike many studies that adopt a quantitative or generalized lens, this qualitative investigation provides culturally specific insights into how these women interpret, experience, and respond to cyberbullying. The findings offer nuanced understandings of digital victimization in conservative settings, especially in societies where honor, shame, and institutional silence act as barriers to support-seeking.

There are many factors identified from the results of the present study that encourage a bully to harass another person online. The respondents of this research said that this is the age of technology and that everyone has easy access to social networking sites; therefore, people misuse the technology. They said that technological misuse and lack of awareness are the main factors contributing to cyberbullying. Some of the respondents said that children who had low socio-economic status, such as those from families below the poverty line or with parents who had limited education or worked in low-status jobs, are more likely to be both victims and bullies.

There are laws in Pakistan to control cybercrime, and there are also regulations to protect the rights of females. These laws and rules are made to stop cyberbullying and abuse against females, but according to the study findings, most respondents were unaware of the laws and the helpline dealing with cybercrime. They did not even know whom to approach or contact to report such incidents effectively. One of the respondents said that she was aware of the law but did not know how to proceed. She also said that cyberbullying against a student can be harmful to a person's image, and bullies can use personal information against the victim to disgrace her among social circles.

It is important to note that the findings of this study are based on a purposive sample of hostel-based female university students from a single institution. Therefore, the generalizability of these results to all female university students in Pakistan may be limited due to contextual, institutional, and demographic constraints.

The study's conclusions paint a troubling picture of the frequency and type of cyberbullying that Pakistani female university students face. The findings show how digital harassment affects young women pursuing academic careers on an emotional, psychological, and academic level. Participants talked about instances of emotional manipulation, unsolicited messages, and blackmail, which not only caused emotional distress but also interfered with their academic focus and social interactions. These stories align with earlier research indicating that cyberbullying causes social disengagement, anxiety, and sadness (Noreen & Iqbal, 2024; Ayub & Malik, 2020).

These findings can also be interpreted through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which suggests that individuals learn behaviors, beliefs, and emotional responses through observation and interaction within social environments, including digital spaces. In the context of this study, repeated exposure to peer responses, societal expectations, and online norms appeared to reinforce feelings of shame, helplessness, and silence among female students, thereby perpetuating the psychological impact of cyberbullying.

The study supports the claim made by Ahmmad et al. (2024) that social pressures, a lack of knowledge about legal protections, and a fear of social stigmatization make female students especially susceptible to cyberbullying. Because of the idea that female honor is strongly linked to one's online persona, victims often choose to remain silent rather than take action, which exacerbates psychological stress and upholds the culture of impunity. The results align with those of Hameed and Ismail (2024), who noted that social and cultural norms discourage women from reporting such occurrences.

Furthermore, a persistent problem was the sense of powerlessness and mistrust towards the justice system. The vast majority of participants were not aware of the terms of cyber legislation, such as Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 (Imam & Naz, 2024). The discrepancy between policy and practice was further exacerbated by the fact that even individuals who were aware expressed uncertainty about how to access legal support or initiate legal action.

Psychologically, the participants reported symptoms of sleep difficulties, appetite loss, emotional tiredness, and pharmaceutical dependence, which are indicative of the severe mental toll previously documented in studies (Bibi et al., 2021; Van Geel et al., 2014). Lindsay et al. (2016) further describes how emotional responses are mediated by online harassment through anxiety and distress, both of which are strongly represented in the participants of this study.

Tanrikulu's (2018) systematic evaluation, which promotes the institutional integration of preventive and interventional initiatives, is also consistent with these findings. This requirement is echoed in the recommendations made by the participants, who place a strong emphasis on institutional victim support organizations, university-based awareness campaigns, and digital literacy programs focused on both prevention and recovery.

The cultural context in Pakistan plays a pivotal role in shaping how female students experience and respond to cyberbullying. Deeply entrenched concepts of family honor, gender-based expectations, and societal stigma significantly influence the likelihood of reporting such incidents. For many participants, remaining silent was not merely a personal choice but a cultural necessity, driven by the fear of shaming the family or being blamed for their own victimization. The patriarchal structure of society often places the burden of moral responsibility on women, thereby limiting their agency in seeking help.

This cultural pressure was evident in the participants' reluctance to disclose harassment, even to close family members. The internalization of norms such as "protecting family izzat (honor)" and the avoidance of scandal further exacerbated psychological distress. These findings are consistent with other South Asian studies that emphasize the intersection of gender, silence, and digital victimization. Therefore, effective interventions must not only raise awareness but also be sensitive to these cultural dynamics, promoting safe and stigma-free avenues for reporting.

The complex effects of cyberbullying on female university students are clearly supported by this study, which also underscores the urgent need for educational institutions to bridge the gap between student experiences and institutional responses. Legal organizations, policymakers, and mental health professionals

must collaborate to address this issue and to create a safer online environment where students can thrive without fear.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings and responses gathered from the participants in this study, several recommendations and suggestions have been made.

i. Firstly, universities should collaborate with Pakistan's Cybercrime Wing and the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to organize seminars that educate students about the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, existing cybercrime helplines, and reporting mechanisms.

ii. Additionally, printed materials and digital campaigns should be disseminated across campuses to raise awareness of legal protections. Establishing university-level digital safety cells can further bridge the gap between institutional support and law enforcement.

iii. Educational institutions must also arrange awareness programs and seminars to prevent such incidents and exploitation against female students. Furthermore, institutions should establish dedicated cells to manage these situations and ensure the safety of female students. Students should be made aware of the importance of reporting such incidents rather than remaining silent.

iv. Finally, to quantify the effects of cyberbullying on a broader scale, further research should be conducted.

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