Vol. 3, Issue 1 January 2025 ISSN: 2584-0142

The Digital Scar: The Psychological Impact of Cyberbullying and Cyber-Victimization among Young Adults

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Abstract

In today's digitally interconnected world, emotional disconnection has led to new forms of social harm, particularly cyberbullying and cyber victimization, which significantly affect adolescents and young adults. Cyberbullying is defined as intentional and repeated harm through electronic devices, while cyber victimization encompasses various harmful online experiences such as

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harassment, threats, and exposure to damaging content. Both phenomena can lead to significant psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and self-esteem deterioration. One factor that may influence how individuals respond to such online harassment is alexithymia, a condition characterized by low emotional self-awareness and difficulty identifying and describing one's emotions. This emotional dysfunction has been linked to various mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and interpersonal challenges. The current research explores the relationship between cyberbullying, cyber victimization, and alexithymia, aiming to understand how emotional processing difficulties, such as alexithymia, influence the psychological impact of online harassment. A study was conducted on 40 young adults aged 18 to 23. Standardized scales were used Perth alexithymia questionnaire (Preece et al. 2018) to measure alexithymia among young adults and the Cyberbully/victim scale development study (Ayas and Horzum, 2010) to measure cyberbullying and cyber victimization among young adults through their experiences on the internet. By analyzing the responses there is a strong positive correlation ($r=0.741$, $p < .001$). This suggests that individuals with higher levels of alexithymia are more likely to experience higher levels of cyber victimization. Educating people on the impact of their words and fostering supportive digital communities can help combat this issue.

Keywords: *Cyberbullying, cyber victimization, alexithymia, mental health, social media patterns, young adults*

Introduction

The world today is connected virtually but disconnected emotionally. The digital landscape is so vast that the possibilities for social interaction, self-expression, and communication are endless. However, the possibilities for real meaningful connections are slim. This intensely inter-

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connected world gives rise to new forms of social harm such as Cyber-bullying and Cyber-victimization. These are two sides of the same coin but often under-flipped. Nowadays it garners a lot of attention due to its impact on individuals particularly adolescents and young adults.

Cyberbullying according to (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006) is defined as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices". Slonje and Smith (2008) defined it as "particularly problematic when applied to cyberbullying, as an act such as creating defamatory post online can have a long-lasting effect due to its continuous visibility, regardless of the lack of repetition". As a result, many victims experience significant emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, and a deterioration of self-esteem.

Closely related to cyberbullying is cyber victimization which according to (Finkelhor & Mitchell, 2007), is defined as "a general term that encompasses a wide range of harmful online experiences, including harassment, threats, sexual solicitation and exposure to harmful content. According to Kowalski et al. (2014), cyber victimization is defined as "experiencing harmful behaviors conducted via electronic communication technologies, such as the Internet or mobile devices." Their definition highlights the broad range of harmful actions that can occur online, including cyber-harassment and cyberstalking."

While much of the existing research has focused on the psychological consequences of cyberbullying, there is a growing need to understand how individual differences, such as emotional processing abilities, influence the experience and aftermath of such harassment.

One trait that may play a crucial role in shaping how individuals respond to online victimization is alexithymia. According to Taylor et al. (1991), alexithymia is defined as "a subclinical condition characterized by a low degree of emotional self-awareness" and according to Nemiah et al. (1976), alexithymia is defined as "an impaired ability to be aware of, explicitly

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identify, and describe one's feelings." This emotional dysfunction has been linked to a range of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties.

Given the challenges faced by individuals with alexithymia in processing emotional experiences, it is important to explore how cyberbullying and/or cyber victimization may influence their vulnerability to such emotional difficulties and psychological responses. Specifically, this research aims to investigate the correlation between alexithymia and cyberbullying and cyber victimization which is nothing but the experience of harassing and being harassed through digital means. It seeks to understand whether cyberbullying or cyber victimization can predispose individuals to psychological issues such as alexithymia.

Review of Literature

The current research primarily explores the relationship between cyberbullying and cyber victimization and its impact on mental health; fewer studies have examined how alexithymia affects the aftermath of cyberbullying. Through a review of the existing literature, an understanding of these terms and their interconnected nature can be developed.

For this, a study was conducted on cyberbullying victimization in the context of issues of key importance to youth: body esteem, social support, and social self-efficacy. The results indicate a noteworthy prevalence (45%) of cyber victims. Cyber victimization is significantly correlated with low body esteem, low social support, and social self-efficacy. Low body esteem and low social support predicted the probability of being a cyber victim. The results extend the knowledge about potential personal and social risk factors for cyber victimization during adolescence (Olenik-Shemesh & Heiman, 2016). Involvement in traditional bullying has proven to be strongly linked

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to age. As children grow older, they are less likely to be bullied or to bully others. However, whether such a similar trend exists for cyberbullying remains unclear.

Most studies tend to suggest that the likelihood of being cyberbullied is not related to a child's age (Völlink 2016). According to research, adult cyberbullying often takes the form of trolling (persistent abusive comments on a website) and is not explicitly connected to demographic markers such as sex and ethnicity (Watson, 2015). Difficulty identifying feelings and externally oriented thinking (alexithymia); anger-in, anger-out, and internet use duration can explain the increase in cyberbullying significantly. Difficulty identifying feelings (alexithymia), trait anger, and internet use duration can explain the increase in cyber victimization significantly (Aricak, Ozbay, 2016).

This way, information and communication technologies provide new, comfortable, and effective platforms, but they also provide new and unique tools for people who demonstrate bullying behaviors (Dursun & Akbulut, 2010). Today, because of the increasing trend toward cyberspace and Internet addiction, cyberbullying has become more prevalent among teenagers. Adolescents have a great tendency to use information and communication technologies such as the internet and smartphones to cover their emotional and communicational needs which is crucial for them (Movahedi et al., 2024). On the other hand, some teenagers try to overcome and control their negative feelings or bad environmental conditions by performing risky behaviors in this space (Lu & Fu 2022), which can make them engage in cyberbullying (Manuel, Erika & Carmen, 2016). In addition, teenagers who experience a lack of self-esteem and spend much time on the internet may become victims of cyberbullying (Otake, Luo & Xuerong, 2019).

A self-administered close-ended electronic questionnaire was used to assess student's cyberbullying/cyber-victimization behaviors and depression symptoms. Results indicate most

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students have been involved in cyberbullying as follows, 6.8% cyberbullies, 29.2% cyber victims, 35.8% cyberbully-victims, and 28.2% not involved in either. Approximately 50% of the students scored a ten or higher on the PHQ9 test indicating symptoms of depression.

Therefore, a brief overview of the previously conducted studies indicated that further research exploring the relationship between alexithymia and cyber victimization and cyberbullying is required to understand the underlying factors that instigate cyberbullying and make individuals susceptible to cyber victimization.

Purpose

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the relationship between alexithymia and experiences with cyberbullying and cyber victimization. Its specific goal is to determine whether engaging in or experiencing cyberbullying is a risk factor for heightened emotional distress, which leads to alexithymia. Given the growing incidence of cyberbullying and the potential for long-term emotional trauma, it is critical to discover variables like alexithymia that can enhance or alleviate the impact of such abuse.

By looking into the relationship between alexithymia and cyberbullying, this study could shed light on how the emotional and psychological toll of online assault contributes to emotional processing impairments. Furthermore, the findings could help to shape interventions and support networks for cyberbullying victims, particularly those who may be more sensitive owing to emotional processing issues.

Hypothesis

There will be significant relationship between alexithymia and cyberbullying among young adults.

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Methods

Sample

A sample of 40 young adults aged 18-23 was taken from Mohali.

Measures

The ***Perth Alexithymia Questionnaire*** (Preece et al. 2018) is developed using 24 self-report measures. Scores for each PAQ item are indicated by a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (partially disagree), 4 (neither agree nor disagree), 5 (partially agree), to 6 (strongly agree).

The ***Cyberbully/victim Scale*** (Ayas and Horzum, 2010) is developed by 15 self-report measures. The scale is divided into 2 categories, measuring the subject's exposure to and off cyberbullying and cyber victimization. The 5-point, Likert-type scale uses the following anchors: 4 = always, 3 = often, 2= sometimes, 1= rarely, and 0 = never.

Procedures

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and questionnaires were filled out in person, each participant responded willingly and was thanked for their cooperation. Standardized psychological tests were administered to the participants.

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Analysis of Data

Results

Table 1: *N, Mean and Standard Deviation*

	Alexithymia	Cyber-victim	Cyberbullied
N	40	40	40
Mean	77.8	37.4	44.2
Standard deviation	23.7	11.9	13.1

Table 2: *Correlation between Alexithymia and Cyber-victim/bully*

	Alexithymia	Cyber-victim	Cyberbullied
Alexithymia	—		
Cyber-victim	0.741***	—	
Cyberbullied	-0.009	-0.005	—
Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001			

Discussion of Results

The current study aimed to investigate the correlation between cyberbullying and cyber victimization among college students and their experience of internet surfing. The study focuses on the psychological impact of cyberbullying and cyber victimization on young adults. The results

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found a strong positive correlation (r=0.741, p < .001). This suggests that individuals with higher levels of alexithymia are more likely to experience higher levels of cyber victimization. However, the results display that cyberbullying and alexithymia have no significant relationship (r=-0.009).

Maurya (2022) explored the longitudinal relationship between cyberbullying victimization and depression and suicidal ideation among adolescents and young adults, given the scarcity of such studies in poor-resource settings like India, using a sample of 11,864 adolescents. This study follows lead to the result found in the above study where individuals experiencing cyber victimization have higher levels of alexithymia.

A cross-sectional study was conducted by Taremian & Farhad (2019) to examine and compare the roles of traditional and cyberbullying victimization in substance use, self-harm, and suicide attempts. A total of 425 high school students were selected for the study in Kermanshah, Iran. The results revealed that 54.2% of students have experienced traditional or cyber victimization. Any kind of victimization was associated with self-harm. Cyber victimization alone and the combination of cyber plus traditional victimization showed significant association with suicide and substance use.

Conclusion

This study discusses the relationship between alexithymia cyber victimization and cyberbullying among young adults. The findings of this study show that Alexithymia has a significant positive correlation with cyber victimization indicating the possibility of low emotional processing levels leading to exacerbated vulnerability to online harassment and eventually cyber victimization. However, when studying the relationship between cyberbullying and alexithymia it was found that both have no significant correlation. The results of this study highlight the need for

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and importance of functional emotional processing. It interprets the levels of emotional regulation challenges faced by young adults which can be beneficial in understanding and developing cyberbullying strategies. Psychological interventions that emphasize increased emotional awareness and strengthen of positive coping mechanisms can help prevent cyber victimization at an early stage. Further research should explore this relationship between emotional regulation and cyberbullying- cyber victimization and the external factors affecting it to develop efficient coping and preventive measures for individuals in distress.

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