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University Students' Perceptions and Reactions to Cyberbullying on Social Media: The Case of Türkiye



Halil Sengül, MD, PhD 

ABSTRACT

With cyberbullying emerging as a significant concern in contemporary society, understanding its prevalence, forms, and impacts is crucial for developing effective intervention strategies. This study aims to delve into the underlying factors contributing to cyberbullying incidents among university students. Employing quantitative methodologies, this research utilized a questionnaire comprising multiple-choice, scaled responses, and open-ended questions to explore students' encounters, perceptions, and responses to cyberbullying. The study's development was informed by theoretical frameworks and existing literature, with data analysis conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The sample comprised 392 participants, predominantly female (79.1 percent) and Turkish (98.7 percent). Most participants were 18–21 (46.9 percent) and 21–25 (41.3 percent). The majority (84.9 percent) were studying at a state university. The study reveals a widespread acknowledgment of cyberbullying as a severe problem among social media users, particularly prevalent on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Offensive comments and hate speech were identified as dominant forms of cyberbullying, alongside newer tactics like emoji-based ridicule. Participant responses ranged from passive bystander behavior to active intervention, reflecting diverse coping mechanisms and strategies. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive approaches to combat cyberbullying, including educational programs, institutional support mechanisms, and interventions promoting digital citizenship. Furthermore, fostering peer support networks and enhancing awareness in university settings is crucial for effectively addressing cyberbullying. The study highlights various intervention areas and approaches to mitigate the impact of cyberbullying and promote a healthier digital environment. Future research should continue exploring the underlying motivations and barriers to seeking help, aiming to develop targeted strategies for prevention and intervention.

Introduction

Today, digital technology has transformed human relations and communication styles by radically changing all areas of life. While the proliferation of social media platforms and online communication tools has led people to be online all the time, unfortunately, these advantages offered by the digital world have created new risks and threats. One of these threats, cyberbullying, is the deliberate and repetitive attack of individuals through digital platforms.

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Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can lead to much more devastating consequences due to online anonymity, constant accessibility, and the ability to reach a broad audience quickly. With the transfer of traditional forms of bullying to digital platforms, students are now exposed to dangers not only on campuses but also in online environments. This situation can seriously affect students' emotional and psychological health and educational processes.

Cyberbullying can take various forms, including insulting messages, threats, derogatory comments, unauthorized dissemination of private information, manipulative content, and harassment. Social media platforms, in particular, provide anonymity, allowing bullies to avoid responsibility and become a constant source of discomfort for victims. This is a serious problem among young groups, such as university students, who are heavily integrated into digital technologies. Research shows that university students are increasingly exposed to cyberbullying, which negatively affects their academic achievement, psychological health, and social relationships.

University-age youth, especially, may be vulnerable to such bullying as they are in the process of identity development and assume active roles in the digital world. While being present on online platforms offers the opportunity to establish social connections and express oneself, it also makes them vulnerable to digital attacks. The feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness experienced by university students exposed to cyberbullying may negatively affect their academic performance and overall quality of life.

This study aims to address the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students and its psychological, social, and academic effects on students. It will also focus on the coping strategies that students develop in the face of cyberbullying and the measures that should be taken to combat such bullying. Providing a safer environment in the digital world is critical in supporting university students to maintain a healthy academic and social life.

Cyberbullying

While efforts to reduce verbal, physical and emotional bullying, which are traditional forms of direct or indirect bullying, are frequently seen, efforts to reduce cyberbullying, another form of bullying that is as important as traditional forms of bullying, have not yet been on the agenda. Cyberbullying is a type of bullying in which the bully uses electronic tools in their actions. Today, we can say that cyberbullying is secondary to traditional bullying. Cyberbullying is a phenomenon that is often overlooked and considered insignificant (Kee et al., 2022). In another definition, cyberbullying is characterized as a deliberate, repeated act of harming others through electronic means, but there is no consensus on the definition of cyberbullying (Englander et al., 2017; Krešić Ćorić & Kaštelan, 2020). In the developing digital world, the increase in information and data sharing, the emergence of a new era of socialization through digital tools, and the popularization of social media increase cyberbullying. It is possible to say that cyberbullying occurs especially in situations where parental supervision is insufficient (Martín-Criado et al., 2021). Cyberbullying can take different forms. The most common forms of cyberbullying are sending angry, rude or offensive messages, giving frightening, cruel and possibly false information about a person to others, sharing sensitive or private information, and intentionally excluding someone from an online group (Li, 2007).

When we look at the literature, the forms of cyberbullying commonly practiced or encountered by university students are as follows;

Swearing: Using vulgar language through online communication.

Trolling: Deliberately forcing people to argue or fight using negative communication.

Humiliation: Spreading rumors to damage someone's reputation.

Masking: Pretending to be someone else or, in other words, hiding the true identity.

Exclusion: Removing someone from an online social group.

Disclosure: Publicly sharing someone's private information.

Cyberstalking: Sending offensive text messages through online communication.

Harassment: Victimizing by sending degrading, rude and offensive messages.

Impersonation: using someone else's social media accounts to pretend to be the real owners and post on behalf of the account holder, including things that are inappropriate to post. This is done in order to make others believe that the account holder is sharing the inappropriate content (Asanan et al., 2016; Mahlangu et al., 2018; Maichum et al., 2016; Zainudin et al., 2016)

Several factors can explain the global cyberbullying problem. One of the reasons is that in recent years, almost everyone in the young population has a smartphone (Ortega-Barón et al., 2019). In Spain, 41.4 percent of 11-year-olds have this device, and at the age of 15, the smartphone ownership rate is 95.7 percent (National Institute of Statistics [INE] 2021). In addition, due to the anonymity of the internet, many victims do not know who their cyberbullies are and feel vulnerable because they do not know who is attacking them (Kowalski et al., 2014). This helplessness and hopelessness felt by victims is exacerbated by 24/7 accessibility and loss of control over harmful content uploaded online (Ortega-Barón et al., 2019).

Cyberbullying is influenced by age, gender, parent-child relationships, and time spent online (Rao et al., 2019; Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2020). Some studies suggest that cyberbullying starts to increase in late adolescence. In addition, there are publications that say that it tends to peak at the ages of 14 and 15 (Kowalski et al., 2014; Pichel et al., 2021).

When we look at the research on the prevalence of cyberbullying, it was found that 24.1 percent of university students were victims of cyberbullying in a study conducted in Canada, and 20.97 percent were exposed to cyberbullying in Saudi Arabia (AlJaffer et al., 2021; Faucher et al., 2014). In another study conducted on a sample of 439 students in the USA, 22 percent of students reported being cyberbullied and 8.6 percent of students reported being involved in cyberbullying (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010). According to the results of a study conducted on 666 students at Selçuk University in Turkey, it was found that 22.5 percent of university students were cyberbullied and 55.3 percent of them were victimized by cyberbullying (Dilmac, 2009).

Based on the fact that cyberbullying is on the rise, cyberbullying is a global public health problem (Dennehy et al., 2020; John et al., 2018; Kwanya et al., 2021) and has been associated with various indicators of psychosocial maladjustment, including depression, anxiety, stress, isolation, and even suicidal behavior. In a meta-analysis by Van Geel et al. (2014), the authors show that 20 percent of cyberbullying victims have suicidal ideation and 5 percent to 8 percent have attempted self-harm. Suicidal ideation is the first link in the chain of suicidal behavior; it is a predictor of future suicide attempts and completed suicide (Yazdi-Ravandi et al., 2021).

Many studies have concluded that college students exposed to cyberbullying suffer from depression, low self-esteem, sleep disorders, stress, anxiety, helplessness, somatization, anger and other emotional problems. In addition, it is also possible to say that cyberbullying negatively affects the academic performance of university students (Gohal et al., 2023). It was also reported that students who were exposed to cyberbullying during their school life were three times more likely to be cyber-victims in their university, and students who were exposed to cyberbullying during their school life were more likely to exhibit cyberbullying behavior during their university life (Beran et al., 2012).

The increasing focus on cyberbullying among school-aged students underscores a crucial necessity for comparable inquiries within the university setting. Despite its prevalence, cyberbullying in higher education remains inadequately scrutinized. This research aims to bridge this gap by investigating the extent of cyberbullying among university students, acknowledging its potential amidst the widespread adoption of smartphone apps and social media platforms.

Research questions

Question 1: What is the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students in Turkey?

Question 2: What are the different forms of cyberbullying on social media platforms among university students in Turkey?

Question 3: What are the opinions of university students in Turkey about cyber bullying?

Question 4: Do students prefer to remain silent after being cyberbullied, or do they report such incidents?

Research methodology

With cyberbullying being a relatively new phenomenon, scant studies exist on the subject, and there's a shortage of measures to evaluate it and its associated factors. Some research has viewed cyberbullying as a transition of bullying into a digital realm. Thus, it becomes imperative to delve into the underlying factors contributing to traditional bullying.

Employing quantitative methodologies, this study aimed to understand cyberbullying incidents better. A questionnaire comprising multiple-choice, scaled responses, and open-ended questions was crafted to probe into students' encounters and comprehension of cyberbullying. Moreover, the study's development was informed by both the theoretical framework and existing literature.

Type of research

The research is a descriptive type of research that tries to reveal the prevalence of cyberbullying on social media platforms in university students and the thoughts and attitudes of university students about cyberbullying.

Research population and sampling

The population of the study will consist of university students studying in Turkey. According to the Council of Higher Education Higher Education Statistics for the academic year 2022–2023, a total of 6.950.142 students are studying in 208 higher education institutions in Turkey. Due to the size of the universe and the impossibility of reaching the entire universe, sampling method was used. In the research, in cases where the number of the universe is known, the sampling method used in determining the local mesh size

Adequate sample size was calculated using the formula $n_0 = \frac{(t \times S)^2}{d}$ $n = \frac{n_0}{1 + (n_0/N)}$ (Büyükoztürk, 2016).

With the formula used when the population number is known, 371 people constitute the sample size of our research. The sample selection for the research will be through simple random sampling. When the population number is known, the sample size of our research is 371 people with the formula used. Sample selection for the research will be through simple random sampling.

Measurement tools

Tree measurement tools will be used in our study. These tools are the form questioning the descriptive characteristics of the participating students (1), Cyberbullying and attitude (2), Perspectives on cyberbullying (3),

Cyberbullying and attitude: It consists of 7 questions created by the researcher as a result of the literature review.

Perspectives on cyberbullying: It consists of 10 questions created by the researcher as a result of the literature review.

Data collection method

The necessary data will be obtained through face-to-face interviews using the survey method on primary sources. Participants will fill out the questionnaire after being informed about the study using the Informed Consent Form.

Utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), a reliability test was carried out, yielding satisfactory results for this research endeavor (Alpha = .763). The Alpha tich value attested to the questionnaire's reliability, thus fortifying the study's credibility.

According to Cohen et al. (2011), the quality of research depends on "the appropriateness of the sampling strategy adopted." Consistent with this idea, the convenience sampling method was chosen for this study, and in this context, it was aimed to capture a sample representing university students in all degrees (associate, undergraduate, graduate).

Procedure

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of Sabahattin Zaim University, as approved by the ethics committee on 25 March 2024 (Reference: 2024/2), and conformed to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. The data collection was conducted using an online survey administered via Google Forms. Participants accessed the survey by clicking on a provided link and completed it using either a desktop or mobile device. Initially, participants were presented with an information form and the Research Participation Privacy Notice. They were required to provide informed consent prior to submitting their demographic information. The entire survey process took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Limitations of the research

The research will be limited to the views of the participants.

Sample demographics

Almost all of the sample group consisted of Turkish participants ($n = 387$, 98.7 percent) and the participants were predominantly between the ages of 18–21 ($n = 184$, 46.9 percent) and 21–25 ($n = 162$, 41.3 percent). The sample consisted of a total of 392 participants, 310 female (79.1 percent) and 82 male (20.9 percent), and the majority of the participants ($n = 333$, 84.9 percent) were studying at a state university. As demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants ($n = 392$).

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	310	79.1
Male	82	20.9
Age Group		
Between 18 and 21	184	46.9
Between 21 and 25	162	41.3
25 and above	46	11.7
Nationality		
Türkiye	387	98.7
Other	5	1.3
University Type		
Foundation	59	15.1
State	333	84.9

In the second part of the questionnaire, students’ participation in social media platforms, their online behaviors and their perspectives on cyberbullying in general were examined.

The third part of the questionnaire examined students’ first-hand encounters with cyberbullying on social media platforms and their tendency to report such incidents.

The fourth part of the questionnaire covered students’ social media usage habits and their individual perspectives and encounters with both traditional and cyberbullying. Responses in this section ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” on a 5-point Likert scale.

The questionnaires were distributed as a web-based survey between April and May 2024.

Data analysis was conducted using Cronbach’s alpha α , which is used to evaluate the reliability of Likert scale surveys.

The data analysis using SPSS was guided by the initial research questions raised in the early part of the study.

Except for a small minority, almost all of the participants ($n = 381$, 97.2 percent) stated that they think cyberbullying exists on social media platforms. As demonstrated in Table 2.

Participants indicated Instagram (88.8 percent), TikTok (64.8 percent) and X (Twitter) (45.7 percent) as the top three platforms where they think cyberbullying occurs. Pinterest (3.1 percent) and LinkedIn (3.1 percent) stand out as the platforms where cyberbullying occurs the least. As demonstrated in Table 3.

Participants stated that the main forms of cyberbullying they witnessed on social media platforms were offensive comments (74.5 percent) and hate speech (69.1 percent). Other forms such as stalking against their will and using emojis as a form of mockery (48.7 percent) were found to be the third most common forms of cyberbullying. As demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 2. Cyberbullying on social media platforms.

Do you think cyberbullying exists on social media platforms?	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	381	97.2
No	11	2.8
Total	392	100.0

Table 3. Social media platforms where cyberbullying is found.

Which of the social media platforms do you think cyberbullying is more common?	<i>n</i>	%
Facebook	86	21.9
Youtube	101	25.8
WhatsApp	64	16.3
Instagram	348	88.8
WeChat	17	4.3
TikTok	254	64.8
Telegram	59	15.1
SnapChat	57	14.5
X (Twitter)	179	45.7
Pinterest	12	3.1
Linkedin	12	3.1
Threads	19	4.8
Reddit	23	5.9
Others	18	4.6

Table 4. Forms of cyberbullying on social media platforms.

If you have witnessed cyberbullying on social media platforms, what was the form of cyberbullying?	<i>n</i>	%
Offensive comments	292	74.5
Hate speech	271	69.1
Embarrassing pictures of the cyberbullied person	134	34.2
Publishing or sharing embarrassing photographs	165	42.1
Spreading rumors	164	41.8
Other forms (stalking, using emojis as a form of mockery)	191	48.7

While 10.2 percent of the participants stated that they had never witnessed cyberbullying before, 111 participants (28.3 percent) stated that they would do nothing if they witnessed cyberbullying on social media platforms. 101 participants (25.8 percent) stated that they would actively express their opinion in such a situation. A small portion of the participants ($n = 24$, &6.1 percent) stated that they would try to reach the victim if they witnessed cyberbullying. As demonstrated in Table 5.

In response to the question “Why do people cyberbully?,” the participants stated that the most prominent reasons were “a defense mechanism for their own insecurities” ($n = 294$, 75.0 percent) and personal problems and frustrations ($n = 209$, 53.3 percent). Almost half of the participants ($n = 190$, 48.5 percent) stated “being popular” as the reason for cyberbullying. As demonstrated in Table 6.

74.7 percent ($n = 293$) of the participants stated that they would report the bullying account in case of cyberbullying, 49.2 percent ($n = 193$) stated that they would respond to the bully and that they would take an active attitude toward the situation. 53 participants (13.5 percent) stated that they would review the situation in such a situation and 41 (10.5 percent) stated that they would change their social media platform. As demonstrated in Table 7.

Most of the participants stated that they told a friend about the cyberbullying they witnessed or were exposed to ($n = 240$, 61.2 percent), while a small number ($n = 27$, 6.9 percent) stated that they told their university professors. As demonstrated in Table 8.

Table 5. Perspectives and attitudes toward cyberbullying.

If you have witnessed Cyberbullying on social media platforms, how did you react?	<i>n</i>	%
I actively express my opinion	101	25.8
I will respond verbally	73	18.6
I don't do anything	111	28.3
I log out from the relevant Platform	85	21.7
I oppose the act of cyberbullying	89	22.7
I try to reach the victim	24	6.1
I will report the incident to the relevant authorities	94	24.0
I have never witnessed cyberbullying	40	10.2

Table 6. Causes of cyberbullying from the participants' perspective.

Why do you think people cyberbully others?	<i>n</i>	%
Out of boredom	152	38.8
Becoming popular	190	48.5
He has personal problems and disappointments	209	53.3
As a defense mechanism for their own insecurities	294	75.0
Other reasons	87	22.2

Table 7. Participants' reactions to cyberbullying.

How would you react to cyberbullying if you were cyberbullied?	<i>n</i>	%
I ignore the situation	53	13.5
I am changing my social media platform	41	10.5
I answer the bully	193	49.2
I'll tell a friend	49	12.5
I will report the bullying account	293	74.7

Table 8. Telling someone about cyberbullying Experienced/Witnessed.

If you have told someone about cyberbullying you have witnessed or been subjected to, this person could ...	<i>n</i>	%
I told a friend about it	240	61.2
I told my professor at the university	27	6.9
I told my family	106	27.0
I told my brother about it	63	16.1
I never told anyone	117	29.8

A significant majority of the participants disagreed with the statement “I think cyberbullying is normal in the social media world” (Strongly Disagree: 52.3 percent, Disagree: 28.3 percent). When the tendencies of the participants on cyberbullying were examined, a significant number of them stated that those who are bullied should respond instead of doing nothing (Strongly Agree: 31.4 percent, Agree: 25.8), that they should inform an adult if they are exposed to cyberbullying (Strongly Agree: 36.7 percent, Agree: 41.6), that there should be more courtesy and respect on social media (Strongly Agree: 66.1 percent, Agree: 23.0), that they would report it if they were exposed to cyberbullying (Strongly Agree: 42.9 percent, Agree: 33.2), there are effective ways to stop cyberbullying (Strongly Agree: 26.8 percent, Agree: 35.5), there should be stricter laws about cyberbullying (Strongly Agree: 53.1 percent, Agree: 34.2), cyberbullying is the same as bullying in the real world (Strongly Disagree: 20.7 percent, Disagree: 31.4 percent), cyberbullying is a crime like other crimes (Strongly Agree: 38.3 percent, Agree: 41.1 percent) and cyberbullies should be punished (Strongly Agree: 42.6 percent, Agree: 43.9 percent). As demonstrated in [Table 9](#).

Discussion

The majority of the participants stated that they believe that cyberbullying is present on social media platforms. This shows that cyberbullying is generally accepted as a severe problem among social media users. This finding is consistent with the results of various studies. For example, a study conducted by Smith et al. (2008) revealed that a large proportion of social media users have directly witnessed or experienced cyberbullying. In addition, Anderson’s (2018) study shows the prevalence of this problem by stating that 59 percent of US youth have experienced online bullying or harassment. In the original paper, almost all participants agreed, emphasizing the urgent need to take adequate measures to combat cyberbullying on social media.

Data on perceived cyberbullying on different social media platforms reveals essential trends in user experiences and concerns. Respondents cited Instagram (88.8 percent), TikTok (64.8 percent), and X (formerly Twitter) (45.7 percent) as the platforms where cyberbullying is most prevalent. These findings align with these platforms’ structure and user demographics. For example, Instagram and TikTok are highly visual and interactive platforms with large, young user bases and may increase cyberbullying incidents due to frequent interaction and visibility (Anderson, 2018). Algorithm-based content distribution on these platforms can lead to the rapid spread of harmful content and exacerbate bullying.

On the other hand, Pinterest (3.1 percent) and LinkedIn (3.1 percent) were identified as platforms with minimal levels of cyberbullying. This difference can be attributed to purpose and user behavior

Table 9. Participants’ views on cyberbullying.

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
I think cyberbullying is normal in the social media world	205	52.3	111	28.3	33	8.4	34	8.7	9	2.3
I think that people who are bullied should fight back instead of doing nothing	16	4.1	44	11.2	108	27.6	123	31.4	101	25.8
If someone is being cyberbullied, I think it is important to inform an adult about it	6	1.5	21	5.4	58	14.8	163	41.6	144	36.7
I think there should be more courtesy and respect on social media	5	1.3	7	1.8	31	7.9	90	23.0	259	66.1
I think I will report if I am subjected to cyberbullying	8	2.0	17	4.3	69	17.6	130	33.2	168	42.9
I think there are effective ways to stop cyberbullying	10	2.6	38	9.7	100	25.5	139	35.5	105	26.8
I think there should be stricter laws on cyberbullying	6	1.5	10	2.6	34	8.7	134	34.2	208	53.1
I think online cyberbullying is the same as offline (real world) bullying	32	8.2	75	19.1	81	20.7	123	31.4	81	20.7
I think cyberbullying is a crime like any other crime.	9	2.3	19	4.8	53	13.5	161	41.1	150	38.3
I think cyberbullies should be punished.	6	1.5	5	1.3	42	10.7	172	43.9	167	42.6

on these platforms. Pinterest is primarily used for idea sharing and inspiration, often in more niche and less interactive communities. At the same time, LinkedIn, a professional networking site, usually encourages a more measured and formal interaction style, reducing the likelihood of cyberbullying behaviors (Duggan, 2014).

These findings highlight the importance of platform design and user demographics in influencing the prevalence of cyberbullying. It suggests that platforms with high interactivity and younger audiences may need more effective anti-cyberbullying measures compared to those with more specialized or professional user bases.

The prevalence of cyberbullying on social media platforms is a major concern. According to the results of the research, 74.5 percent of the participants stated that they encountered offensive comments and 69.1 percent stated that they encountered hate speech. These high rates indicate that verbal attacks are a dominant tactic in cyberbullying (Doğan, 2018; Yaman & Peker, 2012). The impact of such behavior can create a hostile atmosphere online and lead to serious psychological consequences for victims. Overall, the data reveal that the most prominent forms of cyberbullying on social media are offensive comments and hate speech, but it also draws attention to the diversity of methods used by cyberbullies. This information is important in terms of developing comprehensive strategies to combat cyberbullying, emphasizing the need to both prevent traditional verbal attacks and address newer and more subtle forms of harassment (Doğan, 2018; Yaman & Peker, 2012).

In addition, the study found that other forms of cyberbullying, such as stalking (following someone even if they do not want to) and the use of emojis to ridicule, are also common, being the third most common forms of cyberbullying. The derogatory use of emojis highlights the evolving nature of cyberbullying; bullies are adapting to new digital communication tools to harass and belittle others (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Tokunaga, 2010). This finding suggests that measures to combat cyberbullying need to be continuously monitored and updated.

A mixed picture of member responses to cyberbullying on social media platforms emerges. 10.2 percent of participants reported that they had never witnessed cyberbullying. This could mean that they had either never been cyberbullied or did not know what cyberbullying was. A significant percentage of participants (28.3 percent) who said they would do nothing if they were cyberbullied indicated a concerning passivity or fear of potential retaliation or social backlash. This result is consistent with previous research suggesting that bystanders in cyberbullying situations are often passive (Patterson, 2017).

On the other hand, 25.8 percent of respondents indicated that they were willing to actively express their opinions when they witnessed cyberbullying. This proactive attitude may indicate that society is ready to challenge negative online interactions, which may reflect a growing awareness and intolerance of such behavior. There is also a small group of respondents (6.1 percent) who emphasized providing direct emotional support to the victim and reducing the negative effects of cyberbullying (Smith, 2019).

These findings highlight the diversity of responses to cyberbullying, ranging from inaction to active intervention. The results highlight the importance of educational programs to encourage a more supportive and active response.

The results of this study help us understand the underlying motivations that lead people to engage in cyberbullying behaviors. Most participants suggested that personal insecurities are the main reason behind cyberbullying, a finding consistent with previous research (Smith, 2019). Accordingly, people may resort to cyberbullying to cover up their vulnerabilities or to regain a sense of control.

In addition, the prevalence of personal problems and frustrations among cyberbullies highlights the complex relationship between online aggression and individual psychological distress. Cyberbullying can be an outlet for individuals experiencing internal conflict, allowing them to externalize their frustrations toward non-targeted individuals (Hinduja & Patchin, 2020). Understanding the root causes of these personal problems is important for developing effective intervention strategies.

Interestingly, a significant proportion of participants cited cyberbullying as a motivation to “be popular.” This finding highlights that people may resort to harmful behaviors in search of social status or approval in online environments (Wang et al., 2021). Popularity seeking may encourage people to engage in cyberbullying for the purpose of gaining recognition or acceptance within peer groups and perpetuate the cycle of harmful behavior.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the complexity of cyberbullying motivations and highlights the importance of addressing insecurities, personal distress, and social pressures in combating online aggression. Future research should further explore these complex motivations to help develop comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies for safer and supportive online environments.

The results of the study show that there is a range of reactions to cyberbullying incidents among respondents. A significant high of 74.7 percent indicates that respondents are willing to report cyberbullying incidents. This trend reflects an awareness of the seriousness of cyberbullying and a desire to combat it. Moreover, this reporting tendency is consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of bystander intervention in reducing cyberbullying (Smith et al., 2008).

Interestingly, almost half of the respondents (49.2 percent) indicated that they were prepared to take an active approach to responding directly to bullying. This finding highlights some individuals’ determination to fight against online harassment. However, it also raises concerns about the potential escalation of conflicts and highlights the need for strategies that promote constructive dialogue and conflict resolution (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Furthermore, a significant proportion of participants (10.5 percent) indicated that they preferred to change their social media platforms in response to cyberbullying. This response shows the impact of online harassment on individuals’ digital experiences and their willingness to change their online behavior to mitigate such negative encounters. However, this approach may not always be practical, as comprehensive interventions are required to address the root causes of cyberbullying (Twyman et al., 2010).

In summary, the results of the study highlight the diverse strategies used in response to incidents of cyberbullying. While reporting and responding directly are common responses, the decision to change social media platforms reflects the complex interplay between individual coping mechanisms and broader contextual factors. These findings highlight the importance of comprehensive approaches to addressing cyberbullying, including both proactive measures and supportive interventions for those affected.

The results of this study explain the common behaviors of individuals who are exposed to or witness cyberbullying in university settings. 61.2 percent of the participants stated that they shared their experiences of cyberbullying with their friends. This trend is consistent with the existing literature emphasizing the importance of social support in coping with online harassment (Smith et al., 2008). By seeking solace and advice from friends, individuals can reduce feelings of isolation and distress brought on by cyberbullying incidents (Kowalski et al., 2014).

On the other hand, only a small portion of the participants (6.9 percent) disclosed their cyberbullying incidents to their university professors. This finding points to a potential lack of support systems in academic settings. Universities often provide resources to address traditional forms of bullying, but specific strategies are needed for cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010). Students may have difficulties disclosing online harassment to academic staff due to barriers such as fear of repercussions or incompetence (Shariff & Hoff, 2007).

These findings highlight the importance of fostering peer support networks and enhancing institutional support mechanisms to effectively address cyberbullying in university communities. Future research should examine barriers to students seeking help from academic professionals and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at promoting a culture of online safety and support.

The survey results show that there is a different perception of cyberbullying among the participants. The majority do not agree that social media is not a normalized cyberbullying environment. Instead, they point to a decreasing acceptance and rejection of cyberbullying in online communities. Furthermore, participants took a proactive approach to cyberbullying. Many of them preferred to react directly to cyberbullying or to inform an adult they trusted. This reflects the importance of

effectively dealing with cyberbullying and finding support, as highlighted by existing research (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018).

There is also a general consensus that more courtesy and respect should be shown on social media. This highlights the importance of online codes of conduct in promoting a healthier digital environment, consistent with Ribble's (2015) concept of digital citizenship. Participants also believe that interventions against cyberbullying are effective. This is consistent with the findings of Dredge et al. (2014), as the need for punishment and accountability of cyberbullies is emphasized.

However, it is noteworthy that some respondents did not perceive cyberbullying as equivalent to traditional bullying or in the same way as offline offenses. This suggests that there may be a gap in understanding the seriousness and impact of cyberbullying and highlights the importance of education and awareness campaigns. In conclusion, the attitudes of the respondents highlight various approaches and areas of intervention in relation to cyberbullying.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying among university students is a significant issue that impacts mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. The digital landscape provides anonymity and broad reach, making it a fertile ground for malicious behavior. Universities must adopt comprehensive strategies, including education, support services, and strict policies, to combat this pervasive problem. By fostering a culture of respect and providing resources for those affected, higher education institutions can mitigate the harmful effects of cyberbullying and create a safer, more supportive environment for all students.

Clinical implications and recommendations

Psychological effects and prevalence of bullying

It is widely stated in studies that cyberbullying has serious psychological effects, especially on young people and university students. This situation shows that in clinical practices, outcomes such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and trauma should be carefully addressed in individuals exposed to cyberbullying. Clinical interventions may aim to reduce the trauma-based symptoms of individuals exposed to cyberbullying.

Differences according to social media platforms

The prevalence of cyberbullying on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok indicates that individuals who are active on these platforms may be particularly targeted. In clinical settings, questioning social media usage habits and determining whether they are exposed to bullying can help to better understand the digital lives of clients. In addition, training programs and awareness campaigns should be developed to deal with cyberbullying on platforms aimed at younger audiences.

Verbal bullying and different types of bullying

The fact that insulting comments and hate speech are the most common types of cyberbullying indicates that such verbal attacks should be taken into consideration in clinical evaluations. In addition, the emergence of more "insidious" forms of bullying, such as the use of emojis, emphasizes that psychologists and therapists need to understand these new communication methods and raise awareness for their clients.

Passive and active responses

The fact that 28.3 percent of participants preferred to do nothing when they were exposed to cyberbullying indicates that these individuals may need more emotional support or reinforcement clinically. Passive responses may be related to victims feeling vulnerable or experiencing fear of social exclusion. In contrast, participants who respond actively may be more resistant to bullying, and this sense of resistance can be strengthened in clinical settings.

Personal insecurities and bullying motivations

It is understood that individuals who engage in cyberbullying generally experience psychological problems stemming from personal insecurities. This finding shows that individuals who bully may need clinical interventions such as individual therapy or group therapy. It can be concluded that individuals who bully in particular need professional help to address their own psychological problems.

Support mechanisms

The high rate of participants sharing their cyberbullying experiences with their friends (61.2 percent) in the study shows that social support mechanisms are important against cyberbullying. Clinically, group therapies or social support programs can be recommended to strengthen victims' social support networks and alleviate feelings of loneliness.

Need for education and awareness

The fact that some participants do not find cyberbullying as serious as traditional bullying indicates a lack of knowledge in society in general on this subject. From a clinical perspective, awareness-raising training programs should be organized especially for young individuals and information should be provided about the long-term effects of cyberbullying.

These clinical implications emphasize that cyberbullying is a multifaceted problem that needs to be addressed at individual and societal levels and reveal the necessity of developing effective therapy and intervention strategies.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Patient anonymization statement

Potentially personally identifying information presented in this article that relates directly or indirectly to an individual, or individuals, has been changed to disguise and safeguard the confidentiality, privacy and data protection rights of those concerned, in accordance with the journal's anonymization policy.

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