

## Horrors of Cyber-Bullying: A Qualitative Study of the Victims of Cyberbullied Adolescents of Pakistan

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### Abstract

The present study focuses to uncover the psychological impacts of cyberbullying upon adolescents by qualitative interviews conducted through interpretative phenomenological analysis. A number of ( $N=10$ ) adolescents from both genders were taken as participants to conduct the study. These participants had been taken depending on the severity of their experience and their willingness to contribute to this research. The age range of participants were from 13-19 years. Results of the present study indicated that an increase in psychological distress may lead to suicidal ideation because of cyberbullying victimization. The measures used in this research study were a demographic sheet along with cyberbullying interview questions prepared in light of bullying prevention guide (Ahmad & Jandali, 2014). Themes extracted after the conduct of interviews were the hiding behind the screen, psychological problems stemming from cyber-bullying, bullies hide identity, cyber-bullying is worse than traditional bullying, cyber-bullying events experienced, emotional and psychological consequences for victims of cyber-bullying, common ways of cyber-bullying on social media, internet based technology to help cyber-bullying and avoidance of social media to prevent cyber-bullying. The existing data indicates the dire need to policy development and interventional program to handle the mental health issues among adolescents in Pakistan. It was also concluded that the victimization of cyberbullying is itself one of the major factors of suicidal ideation. Implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** Adolescents of Pakistan, Cyber-Bullying, Qualitative Research, Victims

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### Introduction

Cyberbullying is a spiteful process in which a powerful or dominant individual tries to torture the less powerful or submissive individual through mental or physical pain. Being a victim of cyberbullying brings various psychological and behavioral

consequences such as lack of confidence, lack of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and in many cases infliction of self-injury and psychosomatic complaints (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013). Cyber-bullying effects both genders but it has been observed that girls are more prone to suicidal ideation as compared to boys (Klomek et al., 2010). When an individual goes through something they usually think that they are the only one going through this whereas there are thousands of others who face the same cyberbullying every day and keep quiet about that. Cyberbullying has consequently increased in Pakistan in the last five years as it has to be a proper educational concern not just in Pakistan but also in other countries as well. Various factors may have contributed towards increasing the intensity of problem. Cyber-bullying creates number of effects on

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individuals who bear it as it is being used to humiliate, oppress and traumatize the person who suffers from it. The very reason it might lead a sufferer towards suicidal ideations. After road or traffic accidents suicide is considered to be the second cause of mortality in adolescents (Dumon & Portzky, 2014). Suicidal behavior is a very tricked behavior or process which takes off with the ideation then that ideation turns into planning which involves thinking and carving the plan and then attempting which usually ends up in suicide (Dumon & Portzky, 2014).

Social stigma and religious taboos related to cyberbullying and suicidal ideation prove to be the biggest challenges to treatment and rehabilitation. Several types of research are being conducted to analyze the data on the effect of therapeutic interventions to reduce the risks of suicide. Tarrier et al. (2008) examined 28 randomized controlled trials involving adults and adolescents. It is being concluded that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) creates or leaves positive effects which reduce the risk a lot and another assumption was to directly deal with the suicidal ideation instead of targeting the mental health issues, direct targeting works more than following the whole pathway. The meta-analysis by Ougrin et al. (2012) supported the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions including CBT, dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), and metallization-based therapy in reducing self-harm among adolescents.

The objectives of the current research were to study underlying factors, in-depth that

contribute towards suicidal ideation among cyber-bullied adolescents with the help of in-depth qualitative interviews. To explore the differences on basis of demographics of the respondents in psychological effects of cyber-bullying and to develop a record sheet on the basis of emerged themes and subthemes during face-to-face interviews. The researcher also tried to understand the concept of cyberbullying with reference to Pakistani society.

### **Research Question**

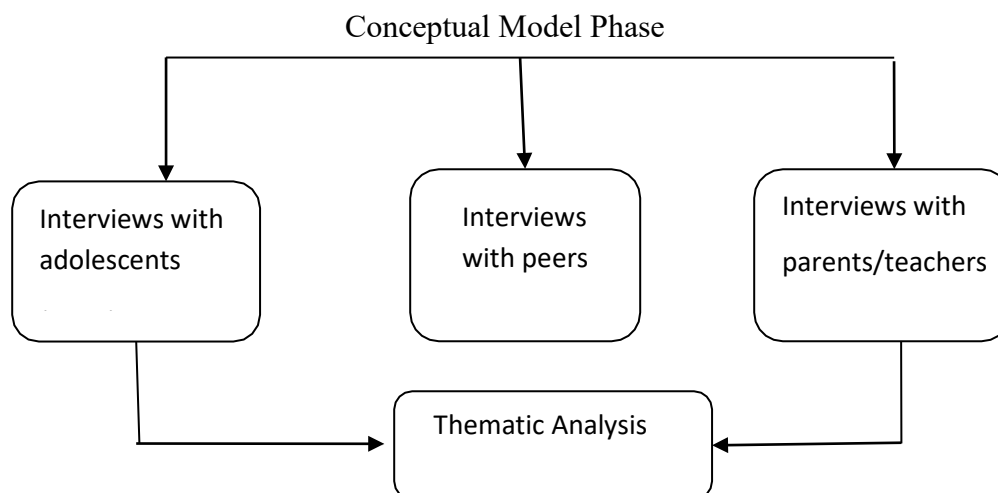
In line with the above-stated objective, the present study attempted to answer the following research question.

1. What significant psychological, physiological and social factors are associated with cyberbullying among adolescents?

### **Method**

#### **Research Design**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design was used for the current study. The study was initiated by developing an interview guide with the help of the Bullying Prevention Guide by (Ahmad & Jandali, 2014). and in light of the literature review. On the basis of information obtained from respondents, detailed semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected individuals with the help of the newly developed interview guide. Information was further transcribed and content analyzed. Multiple themes were extracted with the help of IPA which was helpful in understanding the psychological impact of cyberbullying.



### Participants

A number of ( $N=10$ ) adolescents from both genders were taken as participants to conduct the study. These participants had been taken depending on the severity of their experience and their willingness to contribute to this research by giving a detailed interview. The age range of participants was from 13-19 years. These participants were selected for the study based upon a twelve-month time frame while collecting data. (Doane et al., 2013).

### Measures

#### Demographic Sheet

An appropriate demographic sheet was devised by the researcher to obtain the necessary demographic information of the participants. This information included age, gender, name of institute, study year, and birth order.

#### Interview Guide

An interview guide was prepared with the help of a literature review and the Bullying Prevention Guide by (Ahmad & Jandali, 2014) and utilized for conducting interviews. This was helpful in highlighting the unexplored areas related to the phenomenon in our society.

#### Procedure

Proper consent was asked from the parents of adolescents before conducting the interviews.

The interviews were conducted at the counselor's office of the respective colleges. Participants were provided with comfortable and peaceful environment that facilitated opening up to such difficult experience. Audio recordings were obtained alongside taking notes during the interviews. Later, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and themes were extracted with the help of NVIVO software (version 12). Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. No incentives were provided for the participation. Ethical approval was attained from Ethical Review Board, Department of Psychology, International Islamic University, Pakistan along with head of the institutes. In addition, the participants were ensured regarding privacy and confidentiality of the information obtained.

### Results

The aim of this study was to understand the association that existed between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation. Results of the study revealed that cyberbullying victimization is itself considered as one of the major factors provoking suicidal ideation, the existing literature suggests that people high on psychological, social, and emotional well-

being could be resilient against suicidal tendencies (Brailovskaia et al., 2018). The current study was derived from qualitative interviews and data were analyzed using NVIVO software.

### **Theme 1: Hiding behind the Screen**

According to participants of the study, cyber bullying is a type of bully where social or electronic media is used to bully instead of face-to-face interaction. Bully feels it secure than physical interaction. Some participants said that cyberbullying is a type of bully in which a bully can hide his/her identity.

### **Theme 2. Psychological Problems stemming from Cyberbullying**

Different themes are created regarding respondents' opinions about the harm that victims experience as a result of cyberbullying. These themes are stress & depression, fear & insecurities, diffidence, social distancing, low academic achievement, discountenances and character assassination. Cyberbullying can cause serious psychological problems to victims i.e., stress & depression

### **Theme 3. Bullies hide Identity**

Different themes regarding respondents' beliefs of what is cyber-bullying are created. These themes are social media utilization and hidden identity. Some participants said that social media is used for bullying that's why it is called cyberbullying. Others believed that as the true identity is hidden in electronic media so it is cyberbullying

### **Theme 4. Cyber-bullying is worse than Traditional Bullying**

The themes regarding respondents' opinions about the difference between cyberbullying from traditional bullying and the worst type of bullying are generated by using NVivo. These themes are; effects on mental health, difficulty identification of bully, no fear of punishment, quick, irreversible proliferation, uncontrollable, self-destruction, damage to one's life and more approachable. Participants thought that cyberbullying

bullies cannot harm physically rather they harm mentally, this is the basic difference between traditional and cyberbullying.

### **Theme 5. Experience of Cyber-bullying Events**

Different themes of respondents' experiences regarding cyberbullying are created. These themes are; mocking physical appearance, mocking inefficiency, hate speech, sexual harassment, religious discrimination & racism and propaganda. Most bullies target the physical appearance of people and mock them for their look

### **Theme 6. Emotional and Psychological Consequences for Victims of Cyber-bullying**

Sub themes were created regarding respondents' feelings regarding cyberbullying. These themes were; psychological problems, insecurity, affected self-esteem, violation of privacy, aggressive behaviour and decrease social interaction. Most of the victims experienced psychological problems after being cyber-bullied. For example, depression, insecurity, fear, self-destruction, trust issues, introversion, de-motivation, isolation, shyness, physical distress and panic attacks

### **Theme 7. Common Ways of Cyber-bullying on Social Media**

Themes regarding respondents' experience regarding common ways of cyber-bullying on social media were generated. These themes were inappropriate messages, using a fake account, deep-fake, violation of privacy and propaganda.

### **Theme 8. Internet-based Technologies to Help Cyber-bullying**

Different themes produced regarding respondents' opinions regarding new internet-based technologies help to address cyberbullying. These themes are; making censor policies, educating people, content control, assistance to victims, hardly controllable and blocking the guilty. Detail is given below. New internet-based

technologies should be used by social media sites to implement censorship policies to stop bullying.

By using new internet-based technologies social media sites should introduce cyberbullying victims' assistance services to help victims to live normal life and prevent them to harm selves

### **Theme 9. Avoidance of Social Media**

Participants thought that restricting people to use social media is not the solution for the cyber bullying.

### **Discussion**

Results of the study revealed that cyberbullying victimization is itself considered one of the major factors provoking suicidal ideation, the existing literature suggests that people high on psychological, social, and emotional well-being could be resilient against suicidal tendencies (Brailovskaia et al., 2018). An association has been observed between cyberbullying and bullying in school (Buelga et al., 2017). 80% of children who bully in school are indulge in cyber-bullying (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2016; Olweus, 2013), the psychological well-being is being compromised by this double bullying (Garaigordobil & Machimbarrena, 2017; Larrañaga et al., 2018; Navarro et al., 2018). The analysis of the present study highlights the major responses of the victims as a result of being bullied comprised mainly of stress, depression, the problem with energy level and sleep, lack of confidence, low academic achievement, lack of peace, torture to self-identity, violation of privacy, aggressive behavior and trust issues. The reasons behind its elevation are social media utilization and the hidden identity of the perpetrator.

There is a consistency observed in the present study and a study was done by Navarro et al. in 2018 throwing light on the serious impact on the life of the victim being cyberbullied. With respect to the major variable of the

present research, suicidal ideation keeps on increasing when there is an increase in emotional disruption because of the feeling of hopelessness about the future as there is not a single way to get justified.

In addition, psychological distress is loneliness are the major themes identified. The findings of this study were relatable to another study observing the major theme of loneliness in the victims of cyberbullying (Larrañaga et al., 2016) being bullied by anonymous perpetrators increased feelings of loneliness & isolation (Martínez-Ferrer et al., 2021), which leads to the feeling of emptiness and doubt the meaning of their lives.

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of the current study have highlighted the psychological gravity of being cyber-bullied. How it may lead young minds to think darker and finally land into ideations of suicide which is very serious issues of the youth of Pakistan. The current research would be helpful in taking the understanding of the phenomenon to next level and create more awareness among youth as well as parents or teachers. Some of the solutions concluded from this study were that internet-based technology should be used to help educate people as well as controlling content, assistance to victims, making censoring policies to highlight victims, emotional support to victims and blocking the guilty. Quitting social media is not a solution instead parents should provide social as well as emotional support to tackle these bullying-related issues (Feng et al., 2022).

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

Limitations of the present study were time restriction as if these types of studies are done in longitudinal manner, more in-depth and interesting factors might get highlighted. However, it would be better if the coming researchers would work on a broader levels such as role of the family as one of the major variables acting as a buffer for the victims.

the coming researchers would work on a broader level taking the role of the family as one of the major variables acting as a buffer for the victim.

### Conclusion

Overall, present study proved to be helpful for giving the adolescents a chance to open up and talk about such difficult and painful experience. Most of participants were glad about being able to share their thoughts and wanted some solid solutions and demanded the measures for preventing cyber-bullying. They are wanted that schools and government should take measures for making safer environment for youngsters. Some solutions were also offered by participants. The youth of Pakistan need more of such researches followed by constructive solutions so, further researches must be conducted.

### Contribution of Authors

Samera Jabeen: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft  
Neelam Ehsan: Methodology, Writing - Reviewing & Editing, Supervision

### Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest declared by authors.

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The authors declared no source of funding.

### Data Availability Statement

The datasets of the current study are not available publicly due to ethical reasons but are available from the corresponding author [S.J.] upon the reasonable request.

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