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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA HARASSMENT ON MENTAL HEALTH AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract

Objective: *To determine the prevalence of social media harassment and to understand the effect of social media harassment on mental health among young adults at Bakhtawar Amin College of Pharmaceutical Sciences (BACPS).*
Methodology: *The cross sectional study was conducted at Bakhtawar Amin College of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Multan, from March 2025 to September 2025, undertaken with 97 students using a structured online questionnaire via social media. Information on demographic, social media harassment experiences, mental health, reporting and awareness of online harassment were gathered. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables. The associations between frequency of harassment and mental health outcomes were evaluated using Pearson's Chi-square test, and binary logistic regression was run to determine the factors predicting adverse mental health outcomes. Data was analyzed statistically using SPSS – 25 version.*
Results: *There was a strong relationship between the frequency of harassment and mental health outcomes ($\chi^2 = 10.61$, $p = 0.005$). Logistic regression analysis revealed that the group of participants who said that they experienced daily harassment was significantly more likely to report a poor mental health outcome than the group who said that they experienced this type of harassment rarely (OR = 4.82, 95% CI: 1.95–11.91, $p = 0.001$). Those who did not report any harassment incident were also more likely to be psychologically distressed (OR = 2.37, 95% CI: 1.09–5.18, $p = 0.030$).*
Conclusion: *There is a strong link between social media harassment and poor mental health among young adults. The frequency of harassment and lack of reporting behavior are major factors that lead to psychological distress.*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescent and young adults with mental health disorders are one of the greatest public health issues worldwide. The World Health Organization estimates that around one in seven young people have a mental health problem, with anxiety and depression making up a significant portion of the global disease burden for youth[1]. Adolescent to adult transition is a period of significant psychological, social and emotional development, rendering young adults more susceptible to negative factors that can impact mental health. The proliferation of digital technologies and social networking sites has changed the ways in which young people communicate, learn and interact with others in recent years. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and X (formerly known as Twitter) have become commonplace in the lives of many people, especially young people and university students. These platforms offer opportunities to connect socially, experience support, engage educationally, and develop identity[2]. But, as well as these positive effects, there have been some concerns about the possible negative impacts of the use of social media, including the risk of being exposed to online harassment, cyberbullying, and digital victimization. Social media harassment is an intentional act of hostile behavior that is designed to cause emotional distress, humiliation or psychological harm to the victim[3]. Online harassment and cyberbullying is a growing problem for young people around the world. Around one-third of youth Internet users have suffered cyberbullying or online abuse[4]. Likewise, recent research has shown that online harassment happens across all educational and cultural settings, with prevalence rates varying from 20 to 70 percent, depending on the population and the definition of online harassment[5]. Research indicates that the psychological effects of online harassment can be greater than those of offline harassment because of the anonymity and persistence of online interactions[6]. In contrast to traditional victimization, online harassment can happen anytime and anywhere, without regard for physical presence, which decreases the chance for psychological recovery. It's not a secret: there's a clear link between online harassment and poor mental health. As more information comes out, it's no secret that online harassment is linked to poor mental health[7]. The victims of cyberbullying often experience anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, emotional exhaustion and diminished self-esteem. Previous systematic reviews and meta-analyses have consistently shown that those who experience cyber-victimization are much more likely to develop psychological distress and depressive symptoms than non-victims[8]. In addition, repeated exposure to cyberbullying has been linked to various negative outcomes, such as self-harm, suicidal ideation, academic problems, and poor social functioning. There have been several proposed mechanisms that could explain the link between harassment on social media and detrimental mental health effects[9]. Online victimization can lead to victimization that negatively impacts self-esteem, social anxiety, and feelings of isolation and helplessness. Negative comments, public humiliation and social rejection can lead to long-lasting psychological stress, which affects emotional regulation and coping mechanisms[10]. Furthermore, harassment on social media can impact sleep quality and quantity, which are linked to mental health issues in adolescents. Studies also indicate that fear of missing out (FOMO), social comparison, and concerns about online reputation might worsen the psychological effects of harassment experiences[11]. Students at the university are an especially significant group to explore the impact of online harassment. Digital communication is increasingly becoming part of the university environment, with regular exposure to online communication. Past research has found that university students who are bullied online tend to experience more emotional distress, anxiety, and depression than those who are not[12]. While the significance of the issue has increasingly been acknowledged by many students remain silent about incidents of harassment because they are afraid of retaliation; embarrassed; embarrassed by social stigma; or think that harassment incidents will not be addressed. Even though many students

recognize that there is a problem, they are not reporting incidents of harassment because they fear that they will be retaliated against; embarrassed; embarrassed by social stigma; or that the incident of harassment will not be addressed[13]. Thus, the real extent of online harassment could be far underestimated. More recently, there has been a focus on the behaviors that bullied individuals engage in and how they cope with the bullying[14]. People who experience harassment often change their behavior, including limiting their social media usage, blocking the harasser, avoiding social media, and completely leaving social media platforms behind. While these tactics can be helpful in the short-term, they could also limit access to digital platforms where social support and education are provided. It is important to understand these behavioral reactions in order to create effective intervention strategies[15]. Both educational institutions and social media platforms play a pivotal role in dealing with online harassment and ensuring online safety. Researchers and policymakers are increasingly urging for more comprehensive anti-cyberbullying policies, digital literacy programs, easy to access reporting systems, and services supporting mental health, to lessen the negative impacts of online victimization[16]. But in many developing countries, including Pakistan, there is not much evidence of how students perceive institutional support and if they report or not. Social media harassment has become common among the youth of Pakistan, but not many studies have examined the effects of social media harassment on mental health in educational institutions in Pakistan[17]. To create evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies, it is crucial to understand the link between online harassment, reporting and psychological outcomes. The purpose of the present study was thus to explore the prevalence of social media harassment among BACPS students, examine the relation between social media harassment and psychological outcomes, examine psychological reactions to social media harassment experiences and identify the factors predictive of negative psychological reactions among young adults.

Methodology

The study was a cross sectional descriptive study to explore the effect of social media harassment on mental health among young adults attending BACPS. This study was designed to determine the prevalence of social media harassment, explore the relationship between social media harassment and mental health outcomes. The both gender of BACPS students by non-probability sampling method (convenience sampling). Structured self-administered questionnaire through Google Forms was used to collect the data. The questionnaire had four parts: (1) demographic information (age, gender, educational status); (2) social media harassment awareness and experiences (social media harassment, low self-esteem, emotional distress, anxiety, depression); (3) perceived mental health consequences (social media harassment, low self-esteem, emotional distress, anxiety, depression); and (4) reporting behavior and coping strategies (how often did they report harassment to parents/carers, teachers, school administrators, or other staff, and how often did they find other people to be a source of support). The questionnaire used both dichotomous (Yes/No) and multiple-choice questions to elicit the participants' experiences and perceptions about online harassment.

Mental health impact after social media harassment was the primary outcome variable (affected/not affected). Independent variables used were gender, age group, educational status, awareness about social media harassment, frequency of harassment, reporting of harassment and perception of institutional support. The participation was voluntary and anonymous. Questionnaire was completed electronically with informed consent. Participants were told what the study was about, that their answers would remain confidential and that they could stop taking part at any time without any repercussions. The questionnaire was completed by 97 persons and was included in the final analysis. The data were analysed using the SPSS version 25.0. Categorical variables were reported as frequencies and percentages and association between the variables was performed by Pearson's Chi square test, and

binary logistic regression analysis and the results were presented as adjusted odds ratio (AOR) and 95% confidence interval (CI) with p value less than 0.05 being considered significant.

RESULTS

There were 97 students and most of the respondents were female 80 (82.5%) and age distribution is concerned, 57 (58.8%) of the participants were aged between 20-30 years. The majority of the respondents were pursuing the graduation level program 78 (80.4%), followed by F. Sc. 15 (15.5%) and matriculation 04 (4.1%) levels. (Table 1). In our study 72 (74.2%) were aware from social media harassment. Moreover, over half of the respondents (54.6%) agreed that social media sites are lacking in efforts to prevent online harassment. Most (86.6%) indicated that harassment on social media is a problem for both males and females (Table 2).

Over half the respondents (55.7%) stopped using one or more social media platforms after experiencing harassment, and 28.9% decreased their use. Less than one-fifth (15.5%) said that they had no change in their online habits. In addition, 61.9% reported the incident to friends, family members or other trusted persons, but 38.1% did not make any disclosures to others. These results indicate that online victimization can impact digital use and that it could potentially lead to social isolation for victims. (Table 3). There was a range of engagement in formal reporting mechanisms amongst participants. Just over half (55.7%) said they reported such incidents to cybercrime authorities 'occasionally' while 30.9% said they never did. A small proportion of incidents were consistently reported (13.4%). As for the type of problem, 76.3% felt social media harassment was a serious problem in their learning environment and their community. Additionally, 41.2% believed that their educational institution was not doing enough to address cyber harassment, highlighting concerns regarding institutional support and intervention measures. (Table 4).

There were a number of different types of harassment reported on social media platforms. The most common type reported (46.4%) was when anyone received unwanted sexual explicit messages, followed by verbal abuse or name-calling (35.1%) and rumors being spread (18.6%). In terms of occurrence, 57.7% reported rarely, 18.6% monthly and 23.7% stated that this happens daily. (Figure 1). Chi-square test of independence was used to assess the association between the frequency of harassment and mental health status. There was a significant relationship between social media harassment experiences and mental health problems ($\chi^2 = 10.61$, df = 2, p = 0.005). Those who were harassed more often were significantly more likely to report anxiety, depressive symptoms, emotional distress, and low in self-esteem. The results suggest that exposure to online harassment could have a significant impact on psychological distress in young adults.

A binary logistic regression analysis was performed to determine factors associated with poor mental health outcomes among participants. The dependent variable was mental health impact (affected/not affected), and the independent variables were gender, age group, frequency of harassment, reporting behavior and awareness of social media harassment. The model showed that frequency of harassment was significantly associated with mental health stressors specifically that those who reported being harassed daily were at higher risk of mental health stressors than those who reported infrequent harassment. Additionally, those who did not report about harassment incidences were more likely to experience psychological distress. After controlling for other factors gender and awareness of social media harassment was not significantly associated with mental health outcomes. (Table 5).

The overall results support a high prevalence of social media harassment among young adults and highlight a strong relationship between social media harassment and negative mental health outcomes. A higher risk for psychological distress was observed among those who were harassed frequently and those who were not harassed and did not report. The findings are a reminder of the need for robust reporting processes and targeted

interventions to reduce the potential harmful mental health impact of online harassment.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants (N = 97)

Variable	Category	No. (%)
Gender	Male	17 (17.5)
	Female	80 (82.5)
Age Group	15–20 years	40 (41.2)
	20–30 years	57 (58.8)
Education Level	Matric	4 (04.1)
	F. Sc.	15 (15.5)
	Graduation	78 (80.4)

Table 2. Awareness and perceptions regarding social media harassment (N = 97)

Variable	Response	No. (%)
Awareness of social media harassment	Yes	72 (74.2)
	No	1 (1.0)
	Unsure	24 (24.8)
Social media platforms do enough to prevent harassment	Yes	44 (45.4)
	No	53 (54.6)
Harassment affects only females	Yes	9 (9.3)
	No	4 (4.1)
	Affects both genders	84 (86.6)

Table 3. Behavioral responses to social media harassment (N = 97)

Variable	Category	No. (%)
Change in social media usage	Quit some platforms	54 (55.7)
	Reduced usage	28 (28.9)
	No change	15 (15.5)
Shared experience with someone	Yes	60 (61.9)
	No	37 (38.1)

Table 4. Reporting behavior and perceived seriousness of social media harassment (N = 97)

Variable	Category	No. (%)
Reporting harassment to cybercrime authorities	Never	30 (30.9)
	Sometimes	54 (55.7)
	Always	13 (13.4)
Social media harassment is a serious issue	Yes	74 (76.3)
	No	8 (8.2)
	Not sure	15 (15.5)
Institution does enough to prevent harassment	Yes	31 (32.0)
	No	40 (41.2)
	Not sure	26 (26.8)

Figure 1. Frequency of social media harassment among participants
Distribution of participants according to the frequency of social media harassment experiences.

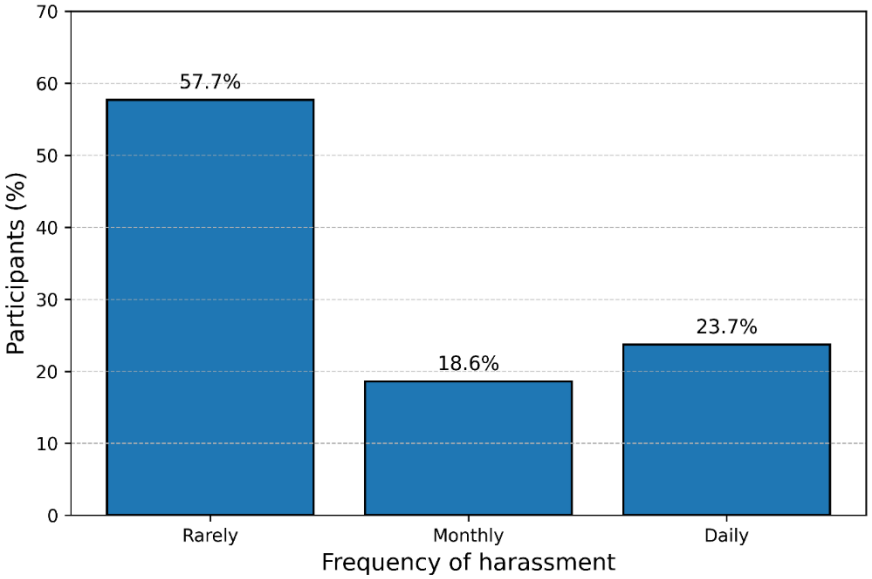


Table 5. Binary logistic regression analysis of factors associated with adverse mental health outcomes among participants (N = 97)

Predictor Variable	Adjusted OR	95% CI	p-value
Female gender	1.68	0.72–3.92	0.227
Age 20–30 years	1.29	0.58–2.87	0.531
Monthly harassment	2.14	1.01–4.56	0.047*
Daily harassment	4.82	1.95–11.91	0.001**
Did not report harassment	2.37	1.09–5.18	0.030*
Lack of awareness regarding harassment	1.41	0.54–3.66	0.479

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Discussion

The present study examined the effect of social media harassment on mental health amongst young adults and found a significant number of respondents (76.3%) had negative psychological outcomes after social media harassment. The results align with previous studies that found cyberbullying and online victimization are important psychosocial stressors for adolescents and university students that can affect their anxiety, depression, emotional distress, and self-esteem[17]. A more recent systematic review has also found that people who experience online harassment are far more likely to suffer mental health issues than those who don't. The high prevalence of psychological distress in the present study[18]. Who found a relationship between negative online experiences and higher depression scores among adolescents. Likewise, the mental health issues of those who experienced online harassment were raised after cyber-victimization[19]. Repeated exposure to negative experiences on social media can add to emotional regulation issues, chronic stress and feelings of helplessness, fear, and social isolation, and increase the risk of poor mental health. The current results are thus consistent with the accumulating evidence that unhealthy online experiences are a significant factor in psychological health in young adulthood. There was a strong relationship between frequency of harassment and poor mental health outcomes[20]. Those who were harassed more often were more likely to feel anxious, sad and distressed. This finding aligns with the dose-response relationship

that has been found in previous research: greater psychological harm from cyberbullying with repeated exposure[21]. Persistent cyber-victimization consistently has been shown to be associated with increased depressive symptoms, perceived stress, emotional exhaustion, and lower self-esteem among university students. Regularly experiencing harassment can produce a state of psychological alertness, with chronic activation of stress pathways, which can ultimately harm mental health[22]. The logistic regression analysis also showed that daily harassments were significant factors that raised the risk of reporting poor mental health outcomes. Previous research has also suggested that repeated cyber-victimization is one of the strongest factors predicting depression and anxiety among adolescents and young adults[23]. Frequent victimization can lead to a heightened sense of fear of future victimization and can result in emotional exhaustion and psychological vulnerability. The results indicated that both the incidence and intensity of harassment are critical factors in the psychological consequences, not just the incidence[24]. Another significant finding of this study was behavioral reactions to harassment. Over half of those who participated said that they quit or limited their own use of social media after experiencing harassment in one of these platforms[25]. Avoidance behaviors have been observed in victims of cyberbullying who try to avoid contact with negative online situation. Limiting social media use could potentially reduce emotional distress for a short period of time, but it could also lead to a reduction in social support networks, peer interaction, and access to social media education as well[26]. Thus, avoidance strategies can temporarily alleviate distress, but may not be effective in treating the psychological impact of victimization. About 38 percent did not talk to anybody about their harassment experiences[27]. The finding is alarming as social support is always reported as a protective factor against the negative effects of cyber-victimization on mental health. The reasons for not reporting are due to fear of reprisal, embarrassment, stigma, and no effect of reporting procedures. Moreover, the current study revealed that those who were not harassed were more likely to have negative mental health outcomes[28] study of how supportive peer and family relationships buffer the emotional impact of cyberbullying found similar results. The results highlight the significance of encouraging help-seeking and enhancing support mechanisms for those impacted. Most of the respondents felt that there was a social media harassment against both males and females and females were more in numbers from the study population. Previous research indicates that cyberbullying can impact both genders, but that females are more likely to report feeling negative emotions resulting from cyberbullying, such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, and decreased self-confidence[29]. Gender differences might be related to differences in socialization processes, coping strategies and patterns of online engagement[30]. Even so, the present results indicate that social media harassment needs to be regarded as a problem of general concern for youth regardless of their gender.

Participants also voiced concerns about the effectiveness of institutional and platform-level responses to online harassment. Over half felt social media platforms were not sufficiently doing their part to prevent harassment, and a significant majority found there was not enough institutional support. There have been similar findings across the world, with users often reporting problems with reporting systems, content moderation policies and responsiveness of digital platforms. Schools are also being called upon to adopt comprehensive anti-cyberbullying policies, make mental health services available and establish digital literacy programs designed to create safer online experiences. The results should also be seen in the context of the broader research field of social media and mental health. Although recent research indicates that total screen time may not be the most critical aspect of the negative mental health effects, the quality of the online experience appears to have more impact than the amount of social media use. While positive online interactions can contribute to increased social connectedness and psychological wellbeing,

exposure to harassment, cyberbullying and exposure to hostile content has always been linked to poor mental health outcomes. Thus, interventions need to not only address excessive use of social media but also the quality and safety of social media interactions. This study has a few strengths: it measures several aspects of social media harassment, reports of harassment, mental health outcomes, and institutional perceptions. There are, however, some restrictions which must be recognized. Because of the cross-sectional nature of the design, causal inferences cannot be made and self-reported data can be susceptible to recall and reporting bias. In addition, findings from the present study are not necessarily generalizable to other groups of individuals. Longitudinal studies on a larger and more diverse sample are recommended to further examine causal pathways between online harassment and mental health outcomes in the future. Overall, the present results corroborate the already existing evidence that social media harassment is a large public health issue in the life of young adults. The links found between frequency of harassment, reporting, and mental health outcomes highlight the importance of a holistic approach to harassment prevention, including the need for digital literacy training, easy access to mental health support, better reporting systems, and more robust platform-level harassment and abuse policies. These interventions can help alleviate the emotional impact of cyberbullying and foster safer online experiences for young people.

Conclusion

The present study provides evidence that social media harassment is a major factor influencing mental health of young adults. Important risk factors identified for negative mental health outcomes included frequent harassment and lack of reporting of incidents. The results underscore the critical need for comprehensive digital safety programs, robust reporting systems, and readily available psychological assistance resources in schools. A multi-stakeholder approach to tackle cyber victimization and create a healthier, safer online environment for young adults will require the involvement of students, educators, policy makers and the use of social media.

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