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Digital Trauma and Social Silence: A Quantitative Analysis of Cyberbullying and Its Psychological Impact on University Students in Lahore

Maleeha Amjad
Lecturer, Department of Criminology
Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of Lahore-Pakistan
Corresponding Author: (maleeha.amjad@crim.uol.edu.pk)
Husnain Hameed Awan
Lecturer, Department of Criminology
Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of Lahore-Pakistan
Mian Tariq Javed
Assistant Professor- M.A Raoof College of Law
Faculty of Law, The University of Lahore-Pakistan
Dr. Muhammad Faisal Khan
Assistant Professor, Department of Criminology
Faculty of Social Sciences, The University of Lahore-Pakistan

Abstract

Cyberbullying is an emerging threat to psychological well-being, particularly among young individuals deeply integrated into digital life. This quantitative study investigates the prevalence and psychological impacts of cyberbullying among university students in Lahore, Pakistan. A structured questionnaire was administered to a purposively selected sample of 150 students across four universities. Key findings revealed that 72% of respondents had encountered some form of cyberbullying, with 48% reporting persistent psychological symptoms including irritability, anxiety and social withdrawal. Additionally, 30% reported sleep disturbances, while 18% admitted to self-censoring online content to avoid becoming targets. The study also highlights systemic challenges in addressing cyberbullying: only 2% of students believed that social media platforms are adequately addressing the issue. Despite the low institutional trust, there is a strong interest in community-based and peer-level interventions. Participants expressed willingness to intervene if supported through training programs or anonymous reporting tools. The findings underscore a critical need for early digital literacy education, improved platform accountability and accessible mental health support.

By adopting preventive strategies such as stricter regulations, family engagement and awareness campaigns, institutions can foster a safer digital culture. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital safety in South Asia and provides empirical evidence to inform educational, policy and technological reforms targeting cyberbullying.

Keywords: *Cyberbullying, Psychological Impact, Digital Trauma, University Students, Pakistan, Quantitative Study*

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of digital technology has significantly transformed the social interactions of young people, particularly university students. However, with the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp, a new form of psychological abuse "cyberbullying" has emerged. Cyberbullying involves the use of electronic

communication to bully or harass an individual, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature (Kowalski et al., 2014). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying occurs in virtual spaces where the victim may have limited ability to escape and the psychological effects can be amplified due to the permanence, reach and anonymity of online content (Tokunaga, 2010).

Cyberbullying has been associated with a variety of mental health concerns including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and social withdrawal (Bauman et al., 2013). In Pakistan, limited awareness and inadequate policy implementation have made the problem more severe, especially among university students who are constantly active online (Ayub & Aslam, 2022). Although the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA, 2016) provides legal mechanisms for addressing online harassment, a significant proportion of cases go unreported due to social stigma, mistrust in institutions and fear of retaliation.

This study aims to explore the psychological toll of cyberbullying on university students in Lahore, with a focus on emotional and behavioral outcomes. By using a quantitative approach, the study seeks to present measurable evidence of how cyberbullying impacts youth mental health and to inform effective intervention strategies at educational, community and policy levels.

2. Literature Review

Cyberbullying, characterized by the intentional use of digital platforms to harass, threaten, or humiliate others, has emerged as a significant public health concern globally, especially among university students. As social media becomes more embedded in students' academic and social lives, the potential for cyber-aggression has increased considerably (Kowalski et al., 2014). Studies indicate that young adults are particularly vulnerable to online harassment due to their high engagement with social media and limited institutional protections (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Nixon, 2014).

In Pakistan, the phenomenon of cyberbullying has received growing attention. Research shows that university students face regular exposure to cyber threats, often in the form of stalking, impersonation, public shaming and unsolicited messages (Zubair & Asad, 2019). A cross-sectional study by Ayub and Aslam (2022) revealed that 56% of Pakistani youth surveyed had experienced at least one form of cyberbullying in the past year, with psychological consequences ranging from mild anxiety to suicidal ideation.

The psychological toll of cyberbullying is widely documented. Victims often report symptoms of depression, irritability, insomnia and social withdrawal (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Cyberbullying is particularly insidious due to its **pervasive** and **permanent** nature victims are often exposed 24/7 and digital content can be shared widely and remain online indefinitely (Tokunaga, 2010). A meta-analysis by Kowalski et al. (2014) found that victims of cyberbullying are twice as likely to report depressive symptoms compared to those who are not victimized.

Moreover, several studies emphasize that **bystander behavior** plays a crucial role in either perpetuating or curbing online aggression. Wachs et al. (2017) found that the more bystanders perceived their peers intervening against bullying, the more likely they were to take similar action. However, fear of retaliation, lack of knowledge on how to help and distrust in institutional responses often discourage reporting (Bauman et al., 2013).

An emerging concern is **platform accountability**. According to Livingstone and Smith (2014), most users believe that social media companies do not adequately address cyberbullying despite having reporting tools in place. This belief creates a gap between user experience and institutional response, which further marginalizes victims. In developing countries like Pakistan, the absence of effective reporting systems and limited implementation of cybercrime laws like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016 compounds the issue (FIA, 2016; Naveed et al., 2020).

Some scholars have explored gender differences in cyberbullying. Li (2006) and Barlett and Coyne (2014) report that while females are more likely to experience relational aggression (e.g., exclusion or rumor-spreading), males are more prone to physical threats and public humiliation online. Cultural norms may further affect the way individuals experience and report cyber victimization in patriarchal societies like Pakistan (Ayub & Aslam, 2022).

In terms of academic consequences, students subjected to cyberbullying often experience reduced concentration, academic disengagement and even school dropout (Campbell, 2005; Nixon, 2014). This aligns with findings by Zubair and Asad (2019), who observed a negative correlation between cyber harassment and academic performance among Pakistani university students.

Overall, the literature highlights that cyberbullying is a **multidimensional** issue one that intersects with mental health, digital literacy, gender, institutional accountability and cultural norms. However, most existing research remains qualitative or focused on school-age populations. There is a distinct need for **quantitative, context-specific studies** in South Asian countries to understand the full spectrum of victimization and support mechanisms among university students particularly in urban centers like Lahore, where internet penetration and social media use are highest.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to assess the prevalence and psychological impact of cyberbullying among university students. The approach allowed for standardized data collection and statistical analysis of patterns and relationships.

The target population consisted of undergraduate and graduate students from four major universities in Lahore. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants who had experienced cyberbullying or were active on digital platforms and thus at higher risk of exposure. The final sample size was 150 respondents, providing a sufficient dataset to ensure generalizability within the selected urban population.

A structured self-administered questionnaire was designed, including both closed-ended and Likert-scale items covering areas such as:

- Frequency and type of cyberbullying experienced
- Psychological symptoms (e.g., sleep disturbance, anxiety)
- Coping mechanisms
- Perceptions of platform accountability
- Willingness to intervene

The questionnaire was reviewed by academic experts to ensure content validity and clarity. A pilot study with 20 students was conducted to refine the items and improve the overall structure before final data collection.

Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and all ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects were followed.

Data were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) were used to summarize demographic characteristics and response patterns. Cross-tabulation was used to explore relationships between variables such as gender and psychological impact.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Demographic Profile

The sample comprised 150 university students from Lahore, with 54% female (n=81) and 46% male (n=69) respondents. The majority (68%) were between 18 and 24 years old, while 32% were aged 25 to 30 years. All participants reported regular use of at least one social media platform, with Instagram (76%), Facebook (59%), WhatsApp (43%) and TikTok (31%) being the most commonly used.

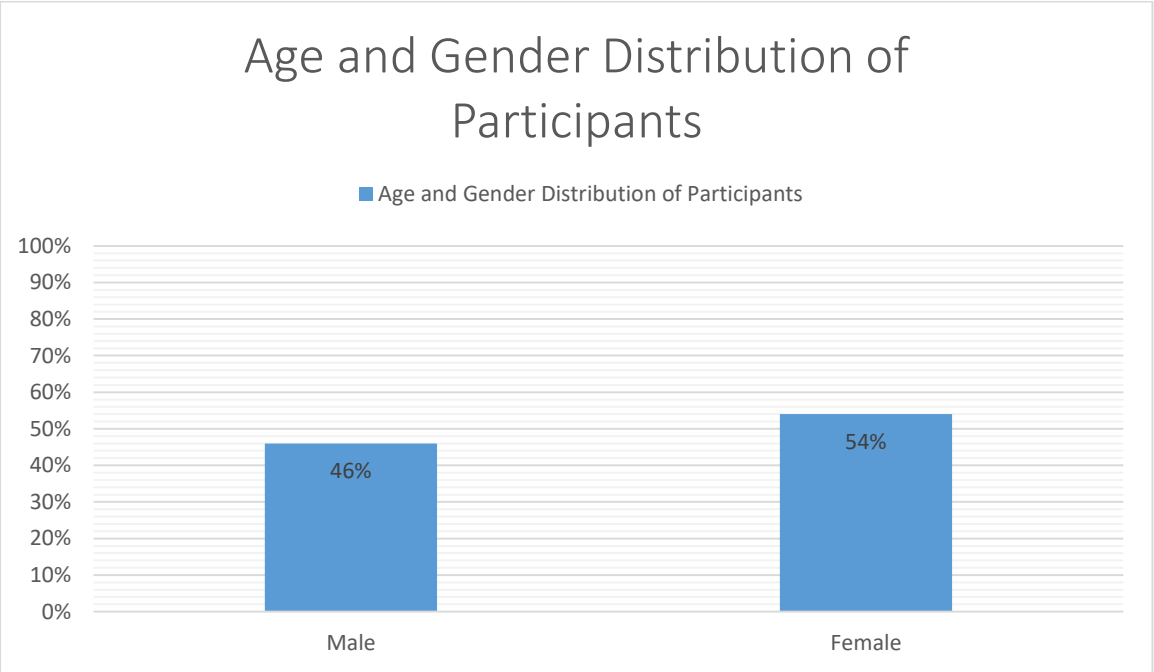

Chart 1: Age and Gender Distribution of Participants

These demographics align with prior studies indicating that young adults are the most active online users and are therefore at higher risk for cyber-related victimization (Kowalski et al., 2014; Lenhart, 2015).

4.2. Prevalence of Cyberbullying

Out of 150 participants:

- 72% (n=108) reported experiencing at least one incident of cyberbullying in the past year.
- 43% (n=65) had been harassed through direct messages or public comments.
- 29% (n=44) had experienced impersonation or fake accounts created in their name.
- 21% (n=32) reported being subjected to image-based harassment or non-consensual photo sharing.
- 18% (n=27) were victims of doxxing or personal information leakage.

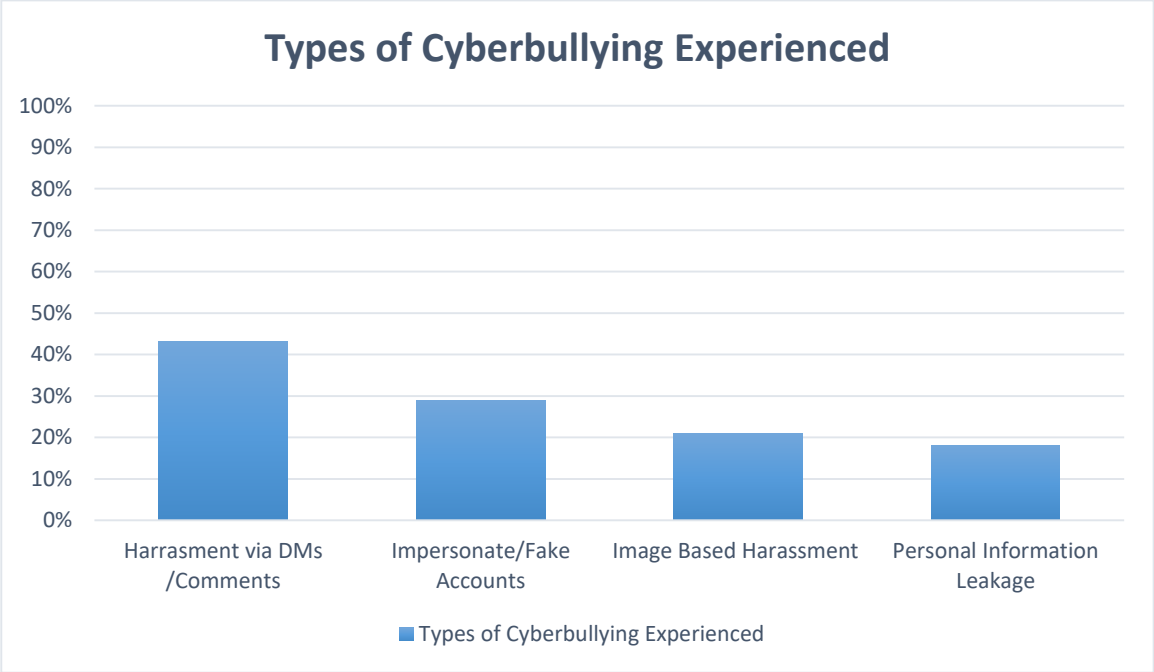

Chart 2: Types of Cyberbullying Experienced

These findings are consistent with global research by Hinduja & Patchin (2008) and Cassidy et al. (2013), which indicate that impersonation, verbal abuse and privacy breaches are common modes of cyberbullying among youth.

4.3. Psychological Impact

The study reveals significant mental health concerns among cyberbullying victims:

- 48% (n=72) reported persistent irritability, anxiety, or depressive symptoms.
- 30% (n=45) had sleep disturbances as a result of online harassment.
- 24% (n=36) experienced withdrawal from social interactions, both online and offline.
- 18% (n=27) admitted to self-censorship—avoiding posting opinions or pictures due to fear of backlash.
- 9% (n=14) experienced suicidal ideation or felt hopeless after repeated bullying incidents.

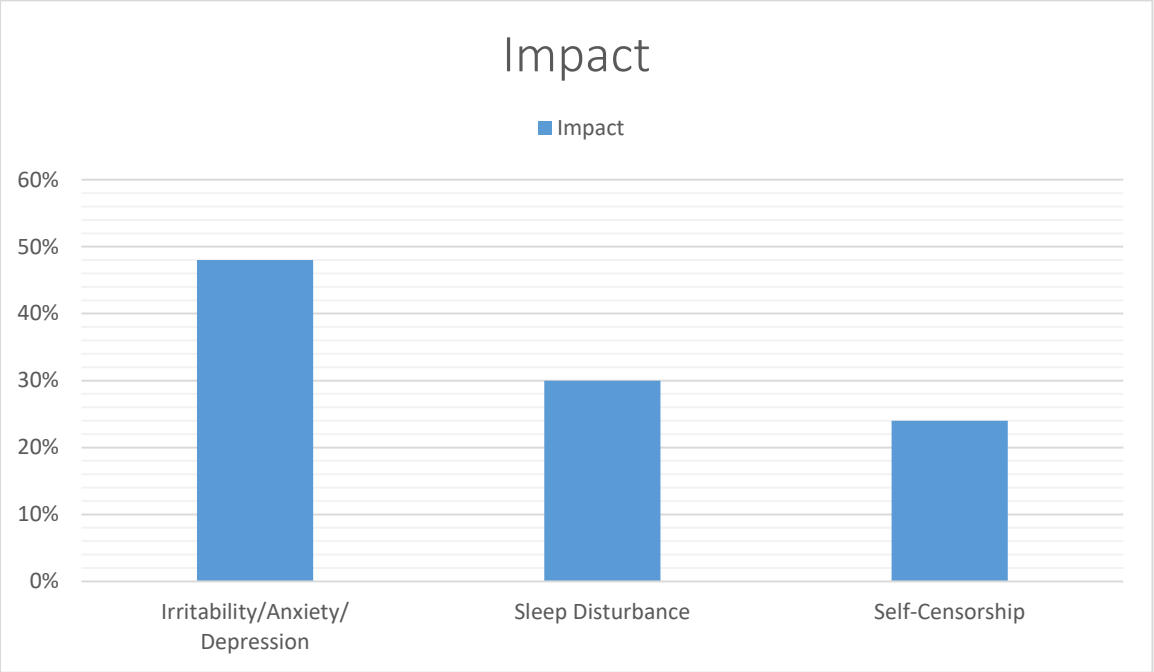

Chart 3: Psychological Symptoms Among Victims

These results reflect prior studies (e.g., Bauman et al., 2013; Nixon, 2014) that link cyberbullying to anxiety, depression and other psychosocial difficulties. The data also show that digital trauma is real and under-addressed in both educational and policy settings in Pakistan.

4.4. Coping Mechanisms

Participants adopted various strategies to manage cyberbullying:

- 34% (n=51) chose to ignore or block the bully.
- 25% (n=37) confided in a friend but took no formal action.
- 13% (n=20) deleted posts or reduced their online activity.
- 9% (n=14) took a break from social media altogether.
- Only 6% (n=9) formally reported the incident to university authorities or platform support teams.

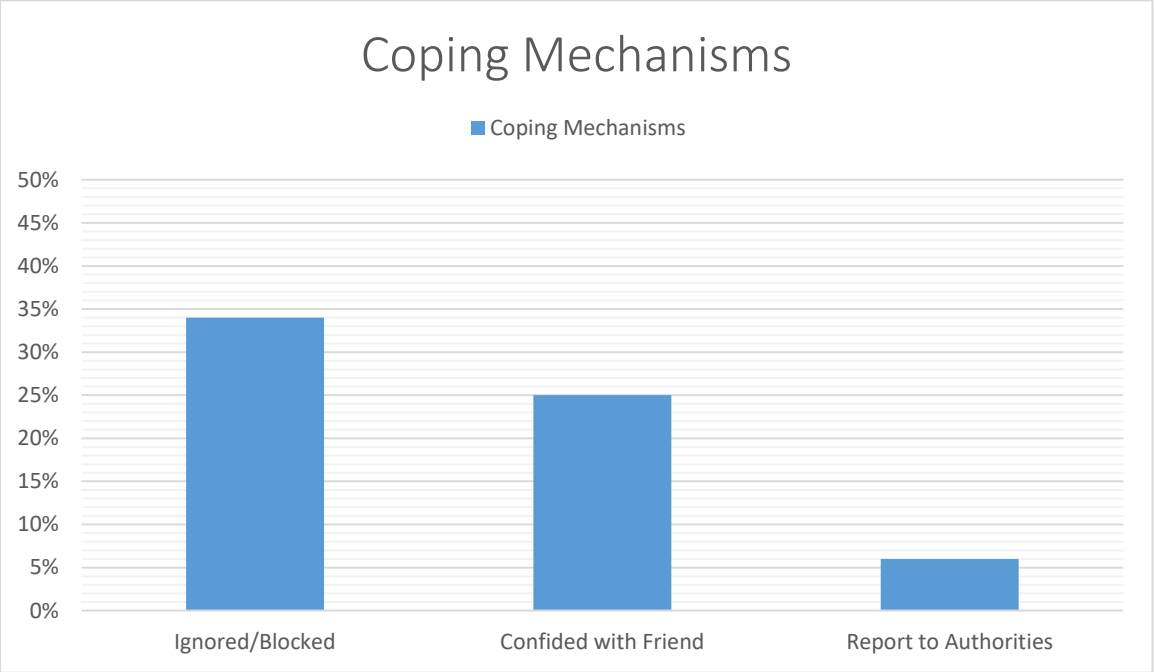

Chart 4: Coping Mechanisms Used by Victims

The reliance on informal strategies suggests a lack of faith in institutional responses, which is echoed in studies by Mishna et al. (2010) and Zubair & Asad (2019), where students preferred peer support over official reporting channels.

4.5. Platform Accountability

The trust in platform moderation remains extremely low:

- Only 2% (n=3) of students believed that platforms are taking adequate measures against cyberbullying.
- 76% complained of delayed or no action after reporting.
- 68% found reporting systems confusing or ineffective.
- 51% were unaware of any existing content moderation guidelines.

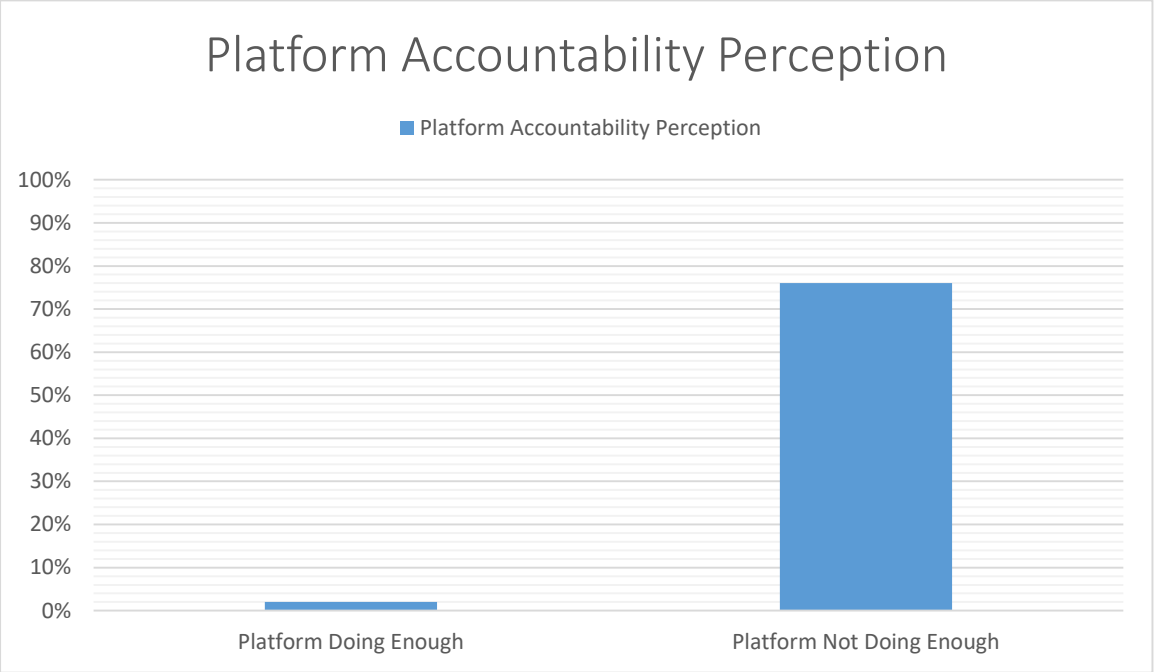

Chart 5: Perceptions of Social Media Accountability

This reflects a global crisis in trust toward platforms (Livingstone & Smith, 2014), where engagement and monetization often take precedence over user protection.

4.6. Bystander Willingness and Preventive Solutions

Encouragingly, many students expressed readiness to intervene:

- 36% (n=54) said they would help a victim if trained properly.
- 22% (n=33) favored anonymous reporting tools as a safer alternative.
- 19% (n=29) supported the idea of peer-led anti-bullying campaigns.
- 13% (n=20) would join university-based cyber awareness clubs.

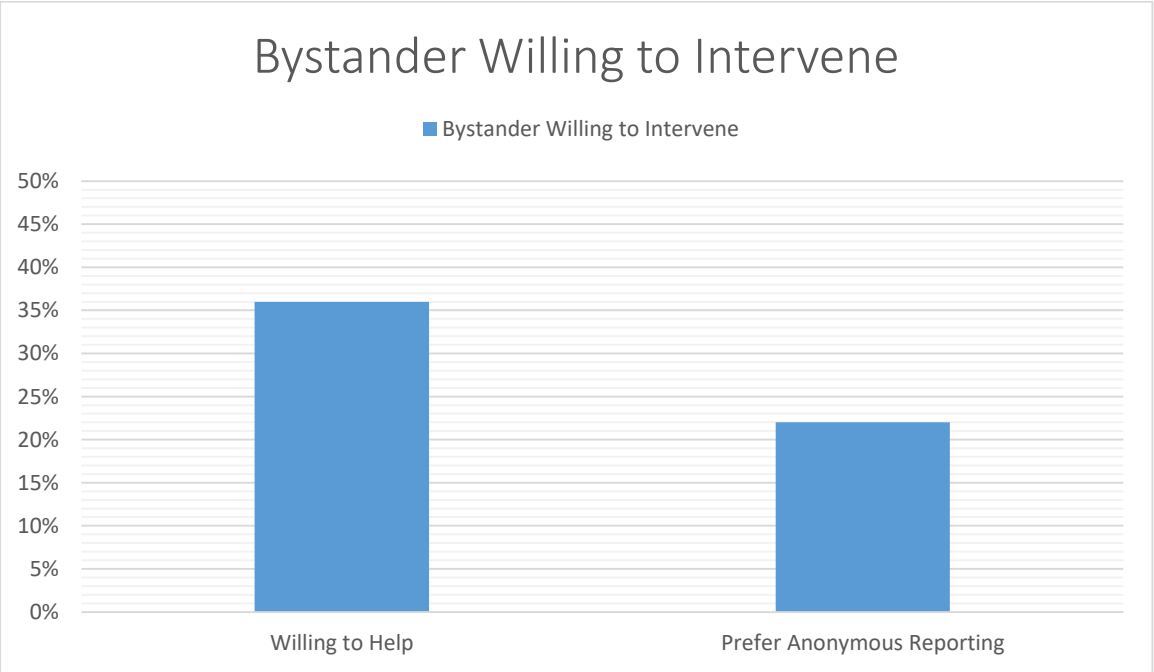

Chart 6: Bystander Intervention Preferences

These results indicate the potential for community-based approaches and digital literacy initiatives. Similar recommendations have been made by Campbell (2005) and Wachs et al. (2017), who highlight the importance of bystander education in fostering safer online environments.

The data paints a clear picture: cyberbullying is prevalent, underreported and psychologically damaging. Most participants suffer in silence or resort to limited peer support due to distrust in institutions. While existing reporting structures remain ineffective, there is strong openness among youth for prevention programs, anonymous reporting and mental health support.

Policy implications include:

- Mandatory integration of digital safety curricula in universities.
- University-level support services for cyberbullying victims.
- Legal mechanisms for holding platforms accountable.
- Collaboration between academic institutions and NGOs to run awareness drives and resilience training.

These quantitative findings emphasize that cyberbullying is not only a digital threat but also a psychological and sociocultural crisis. The proactive involvement of educational institutions, families, tech companies and the state is essential to disrupt this harmful cycle.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that cyberbullying is a prevalent issue among university students in Lahore, significantly affecting their mental and emotional well-being. A large number of participants experienced online harassment, with many reporting symptoms such as anxiety, irritability and disrupted sleep. Despite the severity of the issue, only a small percentage sought formal help, reflecting limited trust in institutional and platform responses.

The findings underscore the need for stronger support systems, including awareness campaigns, digital literacy programs and effective reporting mechanisms. Notably, the willingness of students to intervene if provided with proper training indicates the potential for peer-driven solutions. Universities, policymakers and social media platforms must collaborate to implement proactive strategies that ensure safer digital environments for students.

Cyberbullying is not only a technological issue but a social one that requires collective responsibility. Through education, policy reform and mental health support, it is possible to reduce harm and foster respectful online interactions.

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