Research Report

COPING STRATEGIES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS EXPERIENCING CYBERBULLYING: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background: Cyberbullying is an emerging concern among undergraduate students, potentially affecting their mental health and academic life. Understanding how students cope with such experiences is crucial for designing effective support systems. This study aimed to identify coping strategies employed by undergraduate students experiencing cyberbullying and to examine the association between these strategies and psychological well-being. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted among 744 undergraduate students selected through multistage random sampling from colleges in Khammam city, Telangana, South India. Data were collected using validated instruments: The Cyberbullying and Cybervictimization Questionnaire, the Coping with Cyberbullying Questionnaire, and the Psychological Wellbeing Scale. Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics, and Chi-square (χ^2) tests assessed associations between cyberbullying status and psychological well-being subscales. **Results:** Among the participants, 40.3% reported being victims of cyberbullying and 25.5% admitted to perpetrating it; 32.3% were both victims and perpetrators. Technical coping strategies such as blocking or reporting perpetrators (mean = 20.52) and seeking close support from friends and family (mean = 17.94) were most frequently used, whereas retaliation was least common (mean = 15.03). No significant associations were found between experiences of cyberbullying or cybervictimization and any psychological well-being subscales ($p > 0.05$). **Conclusion:** Undergraduate students predominantly adopt practical coping strategies, notably technical measures and social support, when facing cyberbullying. The absence of a significant link between cyberbullying experiences and overall psychological well-being suggests that other factors, such as pre-existing mental health and social support, may play a more pivotal role. Strengthening institutional support systems and promoting healthy coping mechanisms remain essential to address the psychosocial impact of cyberbullying.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Coping Behavior, Psychological Well-Being, Undergraduate Students, Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

In today's world, where online interactions are a big part of our daily lives, cyberbullying has become a serious issue, especially for undergraduate students who are trying to balance college work and social life in the digital world.[1] Cyberbullying is defined as the use of digital platforms, such as social media, emails, or text messages, to harass, threaten, or hurt others intentionally. [2] It is different from traditional bullying because it is often anonymous, can reach a broad audience, and continues to affect victims online. This makes it especially harmful for students.[3] It can affect their mental health and academic performance, which is a growing concern for colleges trying to create a safe and supportive environment. [4]

To address cyberbullying, it's essential to understand how students cope with these experiences.[5] Coping refers to the strategies and actions people use to manage stress, difficult emotions, or challenges.[6] Coping strategies are

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important because they help students deal with the emotional stress caused by online harassment. These strategies can include seeking support from friends, family, or counselors, addressing problems directly related to bullying, or using mental techniques such as focusing on the positive aspects of life to stay strong during difficult times.[7]

The goal of this study was to explore the coping strategies employed by undergraduate students in Khammam, Telangana, India, who have experienced cyberbullying. Specifically, coping mechanisms such as seeking support from friends and family or using technical tools like blocking and reporting, to manage the emotional distress caused by cyberbullying. The study also aimed to assess the impact of these experiences on their psychological well-being. Additionally, the study sought to examine the relationship between cyberbullying or cyber victimization and various psychological well-being indicators, including autonomy, personal growth, and positive relationships. By understanding these factors, the study aimed to offer insights that could inform the development of targeted support systems in colleges, helping students effectively cope with the emotional and psychological challenges posed by cyberbullying.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This cross-sectional study involved undergraduate students from several colleges in Khammam, Telangana, India. A total of 744 participants were recruited between July 2024 and December 2024. The students were selected using a random sampling method to ensure that different educational institutions in the area were represented. The required sample size was calculated using the formula for cross-sectional studies: $n = \frac{Z^2 \times p \times (1-p)}{d^2}$, Z = 1.96 (standard normal variate for 95% confidence level), p = 40%[1] (assumed prevalence of cyberbullying among undergraduates, based on previous Indian studies), and d = 5% (desired precision). Based on this, the calculated sample size was 369. To adjust for the design effect of 2 (because of multistage sampling) and a 10% non-response rate, the final required sample size was approximately 812. We distributed questionnaires to 800 students, resulting in a 93% response rate, and 744 participants completed the study. A questionnaire was created to assess the coping strategies, experiences of cyberbullying, and cybervictimization among the students. The questionnaire included several validated scales, each chosen for its ability to measure important factors in the study. Undergraduate students aged 18 to 24 years, enrolled in full-time courses in colleges located in Khammam, and those who provided written informed consent were included in the study. Students were excluded if they had a history of diagnosed psychiatric disorders, were not actively using digital or social media platforms, or submitted incomplete or inconsistent questionnaire responses. A multistage random sampling method was employed. First, five colleges in Khammam were randomly selected by lottery. Next, departments within each college were chosen randomly. Finally, students were selected from these departments using simple random sampling, with enrollment lists as the sampling frame.

The study used the following tools: **Cyberbullying and Cyber victimization Questionnaire**: [8.] This was used to measure how often students experienced or participated in cyberbullying. This questionnaire includes 28 items that examine different types of cyberbullying behaviors, such as being excluded online, having rumors spread about them, or

receiving threatening messages. These questions help to look at both the victim and perpetrator sides of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying was characterized as a student who answered "yes" to one or more of the 14 questions with a frequency of at least 1–2 times or more. Similarly, cybervictimization was defined as a student who responded affirmatively to any of the 14 questions with a frequency of 1–2 times or more per year. **Coping with Cyberbullying Questionnaire**: [9.] This questionnaire was used to understand how students deal with cyberbullying. It includes 36 items that ask about seven different coping strategies: seeking advice from others, getting support from friends and family, ignoring the issue, blaming themselves, using technical tools to cope, responding assertively, and retaliating. Each item is rated on a five-point scale. This tool has shown good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.86), meaning it is consistent and reliable for measuring coping behaviors. **Psychological Wellbeing Scale**: [10] This was used to assess the mental health of participants, the study used the Psychological Wellbeing Scale. This scale consists of 18 items that measure various aspects of mental health, such as happiness, life satisfaction, personal growth, independence, and positive relationships with others. The answers help to understand the participants' overall psychological well-being.

Before starting the survey, participants were informed about the study's goals, how it would be conducted, and how their privacy would be protected. They were informed of their rights as participants, and consent was obtained from each one. Participants completed the questionnaire anonymously, which asked for demographic details (such as age, gender, and education level) and how often they use the internet. The data collection took place from July to September 2024, and the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Mamata Medical College, Khammam.

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies, were used to summarize participants' characteristics, experiences of cyberbullying, and coping strategies. The Chi-square (χ^2) test was applied to assess the association between cyberbullying or victimization status and psychological well-being subscale scores. Additionally, the Chi-square (χ^2) test was used to examine the relationship between demographic factors (such as gender and socioeconomic status) and the prevalence of cyberbullying. A p-value <0.05 was considered statistically significant. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27.0.1.

RESULTS

Out of 800 college students who were distributed the questionnaire, 744 students participated in the study, yielding a response rate of 93%. Among the participants, 640 (86.02%) were female. The ages of the students ranged from 18 to 24 years, with a mean age of 20.41 (SD = 1.8). The socioeconomic status distribution of the participants was as follows: 7.79% were from the upper class, 20.96% from the upper middle class, 31.18% from the lower middle class, 34.14% from the upper lower class, and 5.91% from the lower class.

Regarding religion, 70.16% of the participants identified as Hindu, 23.65% as Christian, and 6.18% as Muslim. The participants' residential areas were categorized as 53.2% urban, 23% rural, and 23.2% semi-urban. In terms of family structure, 87.6% of the participants lived in nuclear families, while 12.3% resided in joint families. The average daily internet usage among the students was 5.08 hours.

The distribution of social media platforms used by the study participants is summarized. (Table 1)

Table 1: Social Media Platforms Used by Participants

Social media platform	Number	Percentage (%)
Facebook	102	13.7
WhatsApp	660	88.7
Instagram	580	77.94
Twitter	64	8.6
YouTube	534	71.77
Telegram	266	35.75
Snapchat	318	42.34
LinkedIn	36	4.83
Pinterest	102	13.7
Reddit	8	1.07
Clubhouse	6	0.8

A total of 300 (40.32%) students reported being victims of some form of cyberbullying. In addition, 190 (25.5%) students admitted to engaging in cyberbullying of others, and 240 (32.25%) students were both perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying.

The distribution of coping strategies utilized by the students who experienced cyberbullying (n = 300) is summarized. (Table 2)

Table 2: Coping Strategies Used by Students Who Were Cyberbullied (n = 300)

Different coping strategies used	Mean (SD)
Digital advice	16.3 (4.37)
Close support	17.94 (3.57)
Retaliation	15.02(5.43)
Assertiveness	17.85 (4.08)
Active Ignoring	17.14 (4.44)
Helplessness /Self-blaming	15.64 (4.67)
Technical Coping	20.52 (4.59)

Technical Coping (Mean = 20.52) was the most common response, highlighting the practical steps students took to address cyberbullying (e.g., blocking or reporting). Retaliation (Mean = 15.02) was the least common, suggesting that most students avoided aggressive or confrontational responses. Emotional vs. Practical Strategies: Students relied more on practical strategies (e.g., technical coping, close support) than emotional ones (e.g., helplessness/self-blaming).Across all psychological well-being subscales, there are no statistically significant associations ($p > 0.05$) with either cyberbullying behavior or cyber victimization**.** (Table 3)

Table 3: Psychological well-being among individuals who are cyberbullied and have cyberbullied others

Psychological well-being subscale	Cyberbullying		Cyber victimization	
	χ^2	P	χ^2	P
Autonomy	12.793	0.688	17.528	0.352
Environmental mastery	21.560	0.12	12.751	0.622
Personal growth subscale	6.9	0.807	8.722	0.648
Positive relations	15.207	0.648	14.411	0.702
Purpose of life	18.74	0.282	12.193	0.731
Self-acceptance	16.455	0.422	16.107	0.446

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the coping strategies employed by undergraduate students in Khammam, Telangana, in response to cyberbullying, and its impact on their psychological well-being. A total of 744 students participated in this cross-sectional study, which included assessing the frequency and nature of their experiences with cyberbullying, the coping strategies they used, and their psychological well-being. The results provide insights into the prevalence of cyberbullying, the coping

mechanisms that students adopt, and how these strategies may or may not influence their psychological well-being.

Our findings revealed that a significant proportion of students (40.32%) reported being victims of cyberbullying, highlighting the growing concern of this issue in the digital age. This is consistent with previous research indicating a high prevalence of cyberbullying among youth and college students, especially those active on social media platforms.[11] Moreover, the study also found that a considerable number of students (25.5%) admitted to being perpetrators of cyberbullying, with 32.25% experiencing both victimization and perpetration. This dual role, often referred to as "bully-victims," has been identified in other studies as an important aspect of cyberbullying dynamics.[12, 13] The fact that many students occupy both roles underlines the complex and cyclical nature of cyberbullying.

The study identified various coping strategies employed by students who had experienced cyberbullying. Among the strategies, technical coping (e.g., blocking or reporting the bully online) was the most commonly used (Mean = 20.52). This suggests that students prefer practical and direct solutions to manage their experiences, which aligns with the findings of other studies that highlight the efficacy of technical responses in reducing online harassment.[14] Additionally, close support from friends and family (Mean = 17.94) emerged as another commonly used coping strategy, indicating the importance of social support in helping students manage the emotional distress associated with cyberbullying.

In contrast, retaliation (Mean = 15.03), which involves responding aggressively to the bully, was the least common coping strategy. This finding suggests that, despite the emotional toll cyberbullying can take, most students refrain from retaliatory behavior, possibly due to the fear of escalating the situation or negative consequences. This is consistent with the principle of non-violent coping strategies recommended for managing bullying situations.[15, 16]

Interestingly, self-blaming (Mean = 15.65) and feelings of helplessness were also noted as significant coping mechanisms. These emotional strategies, though less effective, reflect the psychological burden faced by victims of cyberbullying and suggest a need for better mental health support and interventions. The use of self-blaming and helplessness as coping responses is troubling, as these strategies may exacerbate feelings of depression and anxiety, which have been linked to prolonged exposure to cyberbullying.[17, 18]

Despite the diverse coping strategies reported, the study found no significant relationship between cyberbullying or cyber victimization and the psychological well-being subscales (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose of life, and self-acceptance). This could suggest that while cyberbullying impacts the emotional and social lives of students, it does not directly affect the more general aspects of psychological well-being as measured in this study. It is possible that other factors, such as pre-existing mental health conditions or the availability of social support, play a more significant role in influencing psychological well-being than cyberbullying experiences alone.

The lack of significant findings may also be attributed to the limitations of the tools used to measure psychological well-being, which may not capture all the emotional nuances associated with cyberbullying. Additionally, students' coping mechanisms, particularly the use of technical coping and close support, may buffer

against the negative psychological impacts of cyberbullying, reducing the expected associations with mental health indicators.

Given the prevalence of cyberbullying among undergraduate students in this study, it is crucial for colleges to develop and implement comprehensive support systems that address both the emotional and practical needs of students facing cyberbullying. The findings suggest that technical coping and close support are effective strategies, so colleges should offer resources such as online reporting tools, counseling services, and peer support programs to help students navigate these challenges.

In addition, education and awareness programs about the harmful effects of cyberbullying and the importance of emotional resilience should be integrated into college curricula. Such programs could help students better understand the psychological impacts of cyberbullying and promote healthier coping strategies, reducing reliance on self-blame and helplessness.

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality between cyberbullying, coping strategies, and psychological well-being. Longitudinal studies are needed to better understand how these factors evolve. Additionally, the study focused solely on undergraduate students in Khammam, Telangana, limiting the generalizability of its findings to other regions or populations. Future research should include diverse student populations from various geographic locations to provide a broader understanding of the impact of cyberbullying.

Moreover, although this study identified various coping strategies, future research should explore the effectiveness of each approach in greater depth, particularly in relation to individual factors such as personality traits, previous experiences, and social support networks. The study also did not consider certain socio-demographic and clinical variables, including the type of college (government or private), type of academic course, and history of substance use, which could have provided more comprehensive insights into coping skills and psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study's findings highlight the widespread nature of cyberbullying, and also find a significant number of students engaging in cyberbullying behaviors. The study revealed that students employed a range of coping strategies, with technical coping and close support from friends and family being the most common and practical approaches. The results emphasize the need for educational institutions to provide comprehensive support systems for students dealing with cyberbullying, including technical solutions, counseling services, and peer support networks. Additionally, awareness programs should be introduced to help students build resilience and develop healthier coping strategies to deal with online harassment.

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