

Original Article

Cyber-Bullying at Workplace and its Mental Health Outcomes: A Linguistic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Background: Cyberbullying is a growing concern in educational settings, but recent evidence indicates that it has become prevalent in professional environments as well. With the advent of digital communication, employees have become vulnerable to cyberbullying not only during work hours but also in their personal time. This study focuses on understanding the psychological impacts of cyberbullying in the workplace.

Objective: The primary aim of this research was to investigate the lived experiences of cyberbullying victims in the workplace, to comprehend the depth of its psychological implications, and to identify coping mechanisms employed by victims. The study also aimed to examine the patterns of cyberbullying across different hierarchical levels within an organization.

Methods: A qualitative, phenomenological approach was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with eight employees from a public-sector university in Lahore, Pakistan. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques, and thematic analysis was utilized to interpret the data.

Results: Participants reported experiencing stress, embarrassment, and anger due to cyberbullying, with these emotions stemming from a sense of vulnerability and public exposure. Cyberbullying incidents occurred through emails, social media, and text messages, often leading to a need for self-preservation and coping strategies. The study found that aggressors included not just superiors but also peers and subordinates.

Conclusion: The study concluded that workplace cyberbullying is a multifaceted issue that affects individuals across different levels of employment. It causes significant psychological distress, necessitating effective strategies for prevention and intervention. Future research should explore the role of organizational leadership in addressing workplace cyberbullying and aim for more generalizable findings through quantitative research.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Workplace Harassment, Psychological Impact, Organizational Behavior, Digital Communication, Employee Well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying in the workplace, an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in the digital age, is characterized by repeated and systematic behaviors aimed at humiliating and intimidating individuals through electronic means (1). This form of aggression, encompassing harassment, mobbing, e-harassment, cyber deviancy, and cyber aggression, is conducted via the internet and electronic media. The evolution of workplace dynamics, heavily influenced by digital proliferation, has unfortunately facilitated the transition of traditional bullying into this more covert and insidious form (2-4). The implications of cyberbullying are profound, particularly concerning mental health outcomes, warranting a comprehensive exploration of both the linguistic tactics used by aggressors and the psychological impact on victims (5, 6).

The distinctive nature of workplace cyberbullying lies in its virtual conduct, often unseen within the physical confines of the workplace. As detailed by Vranjes et al. (2017), this form of bullying can originate from professional relationships and is executed through various electronic channels (7). ProCon.org (2017) emphasizes that the actors in this scenario can range from coworkers to superiors, employing tools such as emails, web postings, and text messages in their harassment campaigns (4).

The phenomenon manifests in various forms, including direct and indirect cyberbullying. As outlined by Willard (2007) and Bauman (2015), direct cyberbullying can involve verbal attacks like teasing and flaming, while non-verbal forms may include sending obscene images or harmful digital files (1, 8). Social cyberbullying, which impacts victims' reputational standing, involves tactics such as exclusion and denigration. The complexity and reach of these behaviors extend beyond the virtual realm, significantly affecting victims' psychological well-being and job performance (4, 9).

The mental health outcomes of workplace cyberbullying are a critical area of concern. According to Coyne et al. (2017), victims frequently experience distress, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety, leading to a notable decline in job performance and satisfaction (9). These psychological impacts are not fleeting but can persist long after the bullying incidents, as evidenced by studies on sleep disorders, anxiety, and depression among victims (5, 10).

Despite the growing acknowledgment of its prevalence and impact, there remains a significant gap in qualitative, phenomenological research on workplace cyberbullying, particularly in regions like Lahore, Pakistan. While quantitative studies abound, the exploration of linguistic devices used in cyberbullying and the detailed analysis of psychological effects are less understood. This gap, as highlighted by Forssell (2016), necessitates a thorough investigation into the experiences of victims, to understand the nature of the aggression they face and its full psychological implications (11).

A phenomenological study focusing on employees in Lahore who have experienced cyberbullying is therefore essential. This research aims to dissect the linguistic strategies employed by perpetrators, as identified by scholars such as Willard (2007) and Bauman (2015), and to assess the resulting mental health disorders in victims, in line with findings from Coyne et al. (2017) and others (1, 8, 9). Such an in-depth exploration is crucial for developing a nuanced understanding of workplace cyberbullying. This understanding is vital for devising effective strategies for prevention and intervention, contributing to the creation of healthier, more respectful professional environments.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In the context of medical research, the study of cyberbullying in the workplace has garnered significant attention, particularly regarding its impact on mental health. This research, set in a public-sector university in Lahore, Pakistan, sought to delve into this issue through a qualitative, phenomenological approach. The study's focus was on understanding the lived experiences of individuals who had been victims of cyberbullying in their professional environments.

The research sample comprised eight adults, a mix of subordinates and supervisors from various departments within the university. These individuals, with diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, were selected to provide a comprehensive view of the phenomenon across different hierarchical levels. This small yet diverse sample size was deemed appropriate for a phenomenological study, aiming to gather rich, detailed information.

Participant recruitment utilized a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Initially, two participants were identified through professional contacts within the university. These individuals were not chosen based on gender or age but rather on their availability and willingness to participate. The remaining six participants were recruited using the snowball sampling method, enhancing the study's scope by introducing varied perspectives on the phenomenon.

In terms of demographics, the sample included three males and five females, with an average of 13 years of work experience across academic and non-academic departments. The participants, all permanent employees, ranged in age from 29 to 65 years and held positions from office boy to professor. Their qualifications varied from Matriculation to Doctor of Philosophy, reflecting a broad spectrum of educational backgrounds.

The phenomenological research design employed in this study was aimed at comprehensively understanding the structures of conscious experience as related to cyberbullying. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection tool, chosen for their suitability in exploring perceptions, experiences, and attitudes. These interviews allowed participants to articulate their experiences freely and in depth.

The interview protocol, guided by the latest recommendations from Brown et al. (2019), comprised six open-ended questions designed to probe the participants' experiences with cyberbullying (3). The questions, carefully constructed to avoid bias and ensure clarity, were asked in a manner that made participants comfortable and encouraged them to share detailed accounts of their experiences.

Data collection involved interviewing each participant individually, using a semi-structured format that allowed for flexibility and the exploration of additional points as needed. These interviews, lasting between 25 to 35 minutes, were conducted in locations convenient for the participants and were recorded for transcription and analysis.

The transcription process involved converting the audio recordings into text. Participants fluent in English were interviewed in English, while those who were bilingual responded in a mix of Urdu and English. One participant, who spoke only Urdu, was

interviewed in that language, with the transcript later translated into English. The translations were meticulously checked for accuracy to ensure the fidelity of the data.

Thematic analysis was employed to dissect the transcribed data. This process involved an immersive engagement with the data, identifying significant statements, and categorizing them to develop themes. Each participant's experience was described in detail, using direct quotes to authentically represent their perspectives on cyberbullying. In terms of ethical considerations, the study was approved by the ethical review committee of the Department of Linguistics and Communication at the University of Management and Technology, Lahore. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation. The researchers ensured that the identity of the participants remained anonymous throughout the study, using pseudonyms such as P-1, P-2, and so on.

Credibility in this study was maintained through multiple methods. The triangulation of data from eight separate interview sessions enhanced the validity of the findings. The themes that emerged were verified with the participants to ensure accuracy in the representation of their experiences. Reliability was ensured by maintaining consistency in the interview process, with all researchers adhering strictly to the established semi-structured interview protocol.

RESULTS

In a research study conducted at a university in Lahore, a diverse group of eight employees was examined to understand the prevalence and impact of cyberbullying in the workplace. The participants' qualifications varied widely, from Matriculation to Doctor of Philosophy, with the majority holding a Master of Philosophy degree. Their professional experience ranged from six years to a quarter of a century, averaging around thirteen years, while their ages spanned from the late twenties to retirement age, the median being in the late thirties. This sample included five women and three men, occupying roles from junior positions such as an Office Boy to senior academic roles including Assistant Professors, a Senior Admin Officer, a Lecturer, and a Librarian.

The study's conceptual framework traced a pathway from the linguistic features of cyberbullying, which included both the choice of words and the tone used to intimidate or undermine colleagues, through to the manifestation of workplace cyberbullying, and finally, its resultant mental health outcomes. The researchers identified a pattern where the linguistic features served as precursors to cyberbullying behaviors, which in turn led to various negative mental health outcomes for the victims.

The qualitative analysis revealed two predominant themes of cyberbullying: 'Flaming', which involved making derogatory comments about an individual's intellect and education, and 'Harassment', which encompassed a range of behaviors from threatening communication to demeaning someone's social status. The impact of these behaviors was evident in the reported emotional responses of the victims, who described feelings of embarrassment, helplessness, and low self-esteem. Some felt so demotivated and devalued that they considered leaving their jobs, highlighting the profound effects of cyberbullying on individuals' sense of professional and personal worth.

Victims provided poignant narratives that illustrated the damaging nature of cyberbullying. For example, one employee described how her superior would use office communications to belittle her educational background and writing skills, leading her to question her competence and feel ashamed. Others recounted experiences of being publicly mocked for their social standing or being excluded from critical workplace communications, which not only diminished their professional standing but also made them feel isolated and undervalued within their work community.

Table 1 Demographics

Participant	Qualification	Work Experience (Years)	Age (Years)	Gender	Position
P-1	MPhil	13	35	F	Assistant Professor
P-2	MPhil	15	42	F	Senior Admin Officer
P-3	Matric	10	30	M	Office Boy
P-4	PhD	25	65	M	Professor/Researcher
P-5	PhD	9	34	F	Assistant Professor
P-6	MPhil	6	29	F	Lecturer
P-7	MPhil	16	46	F	Librarian
P-8	MPhil	10	37	M	Assistant Professor

Note: 'MPhil' stands for Master of Philosophy, 'PhD' for Doctor of Philosophy, 'Y' for years, 'F' for female, and 'M' for male.

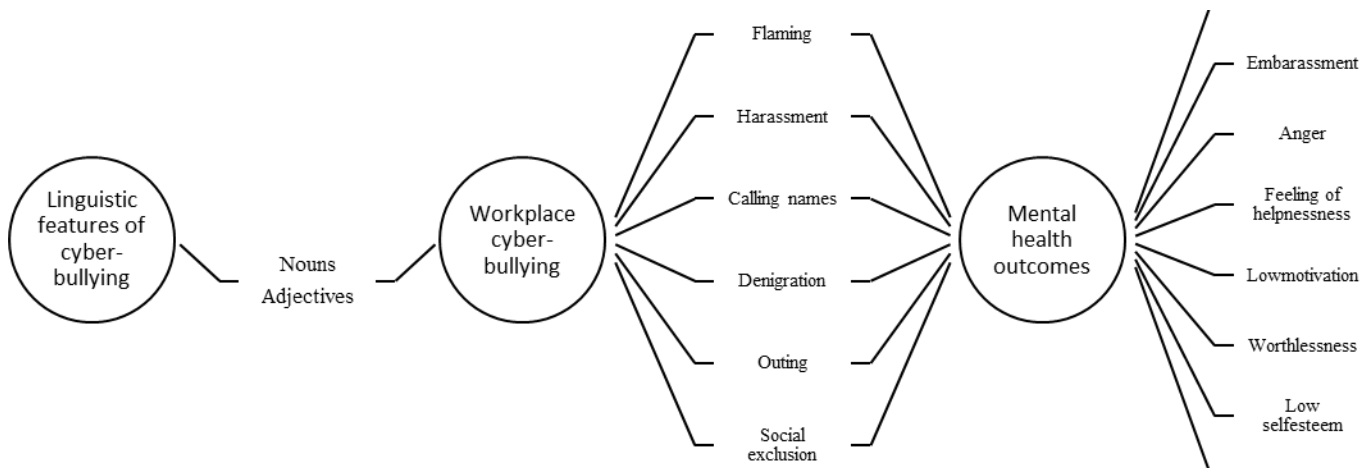


Figure 1 Cyberbullying Thematic Representation

Table 2 Thematic Representation

Themes	Linguistic Features	Mental Health Outcome	Supporting Data
Flaming	Remarks on Intellect and Education	Embarrassment	“sometimes my boss will call on my office extension and start blaming me for one or the other thing. Though I was never been a language student but my boss wanted me to write like natives (which I can’t) and then he got the opportunity to pass comments on my education.” “Aap to bohat parhi likhi hain na. Parha likha kehti hain aap khud ko” [So, you call yourself educated. You are quite educated, right?]
		Ashamed and Low Motivation	“aap khud kiya karti ho, doosroo kay ideas chura k un ki opinion lay kay apnay naam say likh daiti ho” [What do you actually do? You steal others’ ideas and their opinions and share it with your name.]
	Remarks on Sarcastic Social Status	Feeling of Helplessness	“Takay takay ki nokri kartay hain aap” [You are worthless that’s why you have a job that gives you a few pennies/ coins.]
Harassment	Threatening Tone	Low Motivation	“Aap kaam nahi kar saktay to resign kar dain” [If you can’t work (the way I want you to do), give me your resignation.]
	Remarks on Social Status	Low Self-esteem	“Ooqat daikhay hay aap nay” [Have you seen your worth.]
	Threatening Comments	Wanting to Quit	“Tumhain nokri nahi karni aati tum astifa likh kay day do” [You don’t know how to do your job, give in your resignation.]
	Sarcastic Remarks (Nouns/Pronouns)	Stress	“I was very uncomfortable with the disrespectful way he, the perpetrator, addressed me in the WhatsApp group. I was most of the times called as “Ms. Conference” and not by my name.”
	Sarcastic Remarks of Worthlessness	Worthlessness	“Garbage hain aap loag. Aap ko kaam karna nahi aata” [You are garbage. You don’t know how to work.] “Aap loag Kharab macheenai(n) hain jo kissi kaam kin ahi hain” [You are like, out of order machines, that are of no use.]

Themes	Linguistic Features	Mental Health Outcome	Supporting Data
	Sarcastic Remarks/ Choice of Words to Insult someone with the purpose of demotivating and distractingA?	Helpless, Worthless, Demotivated	"I am a researcher cum teacher. Research is my passion. However, my boss always wants me to add his name in the research without any contribution from his side. On my refusal he sent a WhatsApp message in our official group stating that "some people focus on their personal growth and are not contributing towards the growth of the department; such people are worthless for us."
	Use of Linguistic Choices to Insult	Embarrassed	"I felt embarrassed because whenever I composed any document and shared with my boss, he forwarded it to HR manager, keeping me and other colleagues in CC, stating that I don't know how to write a single sentence."
		Anger	"in the last month our appraisal forms were to be sent to the HR. I knew that the last date was approaching however I had not received any form from my boss. Then one day my other colleagues told me that they had already filled and submitted the forms that were emailed by the boss. It added anger to my surprise as I had not received any such mail."

These findings underscore the need for organizations to recognize and address the corrosive impact of workplace cyberbullying. With the potential to inflict long-lasting psychological distress, it is imperative for workplaces to establish support systems and policies that protect employees' mental health and promote a safe and respectful working environment.

DISCUSSION

In a detailed qualitative investigation into the consequences of cyberbullying within the professional milieu of a public-sector university in Lahore, Pakistan, the study meticulously documented the emotional and psychological distress experienced by victims. The sample comprised eight employees who delineated a spectrum of negative emotions stemming from their encounters with cyberbullying, reflecting a deep-seated impact on their mental health and workplace well-being.

The pervasive sense of stress highlighted by all participants was primarily attributed to the unpredictability and constancy of cyberbullying. The stress was exacerbated by the knowledge that their harassment was not confined to private interactions but was visible to a broader audience, including colleagues from their own and other departments. This visibility not only intensified their embarrassment but also the sense of vulnerability to peer judgment and scrutiny.

The genesis of anger among the victims was multi-faceted. Incidents ranged from being monitored and spied upon to experiencing outright mockery and derision in digital communication platforms that were ostensibly for professional use. For example, an assistant professor who played a consistent role in a conference committee recounted how she became the butt of jokes and was derogatorily referred to as "Ms. Conference" in a WhatsApp group—a forum that should have fostered professional collaboration rather than becoming a conduit for cyberbullying.

The emotional reactions to these incidents were complex and deeply felt. A senior assistant emotionally recounted instances where her supervisor would demean her qualifications and writing abilities during official communications. This form of verbal assault, identified in the literature as "flaming," involved the use of hostile and humiliating language to undermine and insult the victim. Such exchanges serve not only to belittle the individual in question but also to create an environment of fear and subservience (5, 6).

Another profound experience was that of exclusion, which one participant faced when she was deliberately left out of critical email communications regarding performance appraisals. The realization of being intentionally omitted led to feelings of anger and bewilderment, as the act of exclusion is a powerful tool employed in cyberbullying to ostracize and marginalize victims, making them feel isolated and undervalued (1, 12).

Moreover, a male office attendant described a situation that left him feeling both confused and threatened. His superior demanded that he spy on faculty members, threatening harm to him and his family if he did not comply. This abuse of power and violation of

personal ethics was not only a form of cyberbullying but also a breach of professional conduct that induced significant stress and fear.

The emotional toll of such experiences manifested in feelings of helplessness and demotivation. A research-focused professor shared how his refusal to include his supervisor as an unmerited co-author on publications led to public shaming and accusations of selfish behavior. Such denigration, a tactic to discredit and devalue an individual's contributions publicly, not only undermines professional integrity but also diminishes the sense of self-worth and motivation (2-4).

Instances of subversion of authority were also reported, such as a team leader who found her directives ignored and her professional efforts discredited. She faced direct hostility and accusations of stealing ideas, leading to feelings of shame and reduced motivation. These narratives of flaming, where individuals are subjected to rude and disrespectful language, highlight the damaging impact of cyberbullying on an individual's professional stature and self-esteem.

The contemplation of resignation was a recurring theme among the participants, who reported that the cumulative effect of cyberbullying had severely impacted their professional identity and self-regard. The constant undermining and questioning of their capabilities led to a crisis of confidence and a pervasive desire to escape the toxic environment.

The central question of the interview series sought to understand the long-term effects of cyberbullying on the participants' personal and professional lives. It revealed that cyberbullying had insidiously undermined their self-assurance, leading to a retreat from workplace interactions and a general decline in their professional engagement (13, 14). This phenomenon aligns with the social cognitive theories of Bandura, which suggest that a negative environment characterized by repetitive, distressing actions can substantially lower individuals' self-esteem, engender a sense of isolation, and diminish their belief in their ability to succeed (10, 15).

The findings of this study dovetail with a substantial body of research linking the trauma of workplace cyberbullying to a host of negative outcomes (8, 16, 17). The psychological sequelae, as reported by the participants, included pervasive stress, depressive symptoms, feelings of embarrassment, a notable decline in professional performance, and profound job dissatisfaction (7, 18, 19). These experiences underscore the imperative for proactive measures to address cyberbullying in the workplace, including the implementation of robust policies, the fostering of a supportive work culture, and the provision of resources to support affected employees (11, 20). The compelling evidence from this study emphasizes the critical need for organizational leadership to recognize and mitigate the impacts of cyberbullying to promote a healthy, respectful, and productive work environment (9, 21, 22).

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study reveals that cyberbullying, a phenomenon traditionally associated with educational settings, has permeated the workplace, underscoring a pervasive issue not limited to any specific hierarchy within organizational structures. Employees, irrespective of their rank or file, find themselves susceptible to cyberbullying both within and beyond the confines of working hours, primarily due to the constant connectivity afforded by electronic media and social networking sites. These platforms, while facilitating communication, have paradoxically become tools for perpetuating harassment and intimidation.

Through a meticulous examination of the responses from eight participants, the research elucidated the psychological impacts of cyberbullying on individuals in the workplace. The findings highlight that cyberbullying in professional environments is not only about the misuse of power by superiors; peers or even subordinates can be aggressors. Victims often engage in self-preservation strategies to cope with the abuse, which, despite the non-physical nature of cyberbullying, proves challenging to avoid during daily workplace interactions.

The study, however, is not without limitations. The data was drawn from a single university, constrained by time and institutional policy, which restricted the scope of the research to a small and specific population. The use of snowball sampling, while beneficial for in-depth qualitative insights, presents a limitation in terms of sample size and diversity. Consequently, the findings, though insightful, are not universally applicable and should be interpreted within the context of the studied environment.

Future research should extend beyond recording the lived experiences of victims and examine the role of leadership and higher administration in mitigating cyberbullying in the workplace. It is imperative to explore the strategies that can effectively address and prevent such behavior. Additionally, there is a call for quantitative studies that encompass a broader population across multiple institutions. This approach would allow for the gathering of data that could lead to more generalizable conclusions, potentially informing policy-making and the development of comprehensive anti-cyberbullying programs in various professional settings.

In light of the current findings and the identified gaps, it is evident that further exploration is required to fully understand the dynamics of workplace cyberbullying and to develop effective interventions that protect employees' mental health and foster a safe, respectful, and productive work environment.

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