

Mediating Effect of Loneliness on the Relationship between Self-esteem and Cyberbullying among University Students: Gender Difference as a Moderator

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Abstract

Objective: Digital media in education is important to students' success. However, the double-edged nature of digital media poses a potential risk of cyberbullying (CYB). Feelings of loneliness (LON) and perceptions of being rejected by peer group have often been associated with CYB. The present study explores the mediating effect of LON on the relationship between self-esteem (SE) and CYB behavior, especially among university students. In addition, the moderator effect of gender on SE and CYB behavior was also investigated. **Materials and Methods:** A convenience sampling technique was employed in this cross-sectional study, participated by 231 university students. The participants completed a self-report inventory consisting of Cyber Victim and Bullying Scale, UCLA LON Scale Version 3 Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale-10, and Socio demographic profile questionnaire. Data were analyzed using Structured Equation Modelling and Hierarchical regression. **Results:** Simple mediation analysis depicted that the association between SE and CYB was significantly reduced, in the presence of LON as the mediator ($c^* = -0.27, P = 0.000$), indicating a partial mediation. In other words, LON partially mediated the effect of low SE on CYB. Hierarchical regression analysis revealed a potentially significant moderation between gender, SE, and CYB behavior (R^2 change = 0.028, $P = 0.001$). **Conclusion:** The present study illustrated that LON had a mediating effect on the relationship between SE and CYB behavior. Besides this, gender difference was found to be a noticeable cause in the perpetration of CYB behavior. These findings indicate that SE and LON-oriented interventions may successfully address CYB behavior.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, loneliness, mediating effect, self-esteem, university students

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying (CYB) is a modern societal issue, accelerated by the ubiquity of cell phones and dependence on technology. With the advent of social media and the digitalization of communication, CYB has inevitably been a growing phenomenon.^[1] The double-edged nature of modern technology, continuously balancing between risks and opportunities, manifests itself clearly in an emerging societal problem known as CYB.^[2] Youth and university students are the adept users of technology and adopt new technologies for their daily lives. In some instances, these technical services can become a platform to be cyber harassed.^[3] The motivation behind CYB, as reported by both cyberbullies and non-bullies, included a lack of confidence or the desire to feel better about themselves, a desire for control, finding it entertaining, and

retaliation.^[4] Impulsivity, callous-unemotional traits, and self-esteem (SE) can play a role in bullying involvement.^[5] The bully usually aims to undermine the victim's social status and their sense of personal security, while at the same time raising their own SE and social status.^[6] Several studies in the past have linked low SE to CYB. Whilst some studies^[7] have found evidence to suggest that bullies tend to have higher SE, other

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