



# Cyberstalking and Self-Harm Behavior among College Students: Depression as Mediator

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**ABSTRACT-** The present study examined the relationship between cyberstalking, self-harm and depression among college students. It further investigated the mediating role of depression. Convenience sampling technique was used to draw the sample of 380 students from various public and private colleges of Sargodha. The Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit (COP) Scale, the deliberate self-harm inventory and Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale were used to measure cyberstalking, self-harm behavior and depression respectively. The findings revealed significant positive relationship among all study variables. The finding further revealed that depression mediates the relationship between cyberstalking and self-harm. Significant gender differences were found in real life transfer, a sub-scale of cyberstalking, self-harm behaviors and depression among college students. The current study has implications for parents, teachers, mental health practitioners and policy makers.

**Keywords:** Cyberstalking, self-harm, depression, college students

## I. INTRODUCTION

Stalking is a serious issue, which is affecting the lives of many people around the globe. Now, technology has made the situation even more worse and complex as the internet has made it easy to invade in other person's lives without disclosing one's identity (Shimzou, 2013). Lenhart (2015) states that social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Google Plus, Twitter and Tumblr are providing an opportunity to create an online profile and interact with others, then these sites provide a platform for cyber bullying and cyber stalking.

Cyber stalking is usually defined as repeated effort of an individual to control, monitor, intimidate or harass someone by using internet related devices (Roberts, 2008). Reynolds et al (2011) conducted a study on 974 participants and reported that 41% of them were victims of cyberstalking. Of the 41% victims 23% reported unwanted contact, 20% experienced harassment, 14% have to face unwanted sexual attempts and 4% experience threats and acts of violence. Roberts (2008) posits that the cyber stalking can create different new identities to harass or intimidate a victim. These online stalking behaviors could be described as severe and exaggerated forms of routine social interaction which are used to extend control, and usually cause fear in the victims (Drahokoupilova, 2007). Pinals (2007) argues that Internet has widened the vulnerability to become victim of cyber harassment or stalking, to such an extent that anyone can be a victim of it. Cyberstalking occurs mostly in students (Bjorklund et al, 2010; Henson, Reynolds, & Fisher, 2011). The findings of a study conducted on Finnish students 48% reported stalking or unwanted behaviors (Bjorklund et al., 2010). Similarly, in a study on the students of an urban university in America, 42% of the students who used online social networking sites revealed to being victims of cyberstalking (Henson et al., 2011). Muller, Pathe, and Purcell (2001) report that females appear to be more prone to suffer stalking. Though men are also at risk to be cyberstalked but they usually don't report such incidents. One reason for such under reporting might be the gender roles which make it socially unacceptable for them to be shown as victims.

The stalkers use various sources to intimidate victims including internet sites, email, chat rooms, messages, social networking sites, cameras, blogs and viruses (Pinals, 2007; Roberts, 2008). Spitzberg (2002) termed numerous types of stalking. One type is hyper-intimacy, in which the victim receives emails, persistent calls, gifts, personal contact and letters, another type is chasing and trying to get close, the perpetrator follows and stakeout a victim. Invasion strategies could also be used such as entering into the victim's home or taking personal stuff. The perpetrators may also harass or intimidate the victims by ruining their reputation and sending unwanted letters or intimidating emails. Aggression such as using power and anger towards a victim which might result in damage or death can also be used (p.269)

The victim of cyber bullying has to face many social, physical, economical and psychological consequences (Sheridan, 2012) they may experience fear, anxiety, depression, helplessness, anger, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and suicide ideation (Krafts, & Wng, 2010; Roberts, 2008). The empirical literature indicates a positive relationship between cyber harassment, self-harm and societal behavior among victims.

(Chassiakos et al., 2016; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Nock & Favazza (2009) describe that self-harm includes a comprehensive range of behaviors that could harm the body in all probable nonfatal manner, regardless of intent to die. They further posit that the terms self-harm and self-injury and deliberate self-harm (DSH) can be used interchangeably. Some of the self-harming behaviors contain excessive consumption of a substance or a non-digestible object; self-cutting, self-burning and jumping from a height (Madge et al., 2008). Findings from various empirical researches put forward that cyberstalking and cyberbullying was positively associated with self-harm and suicidal behaviors Van Geel et al., 2015; John et al., 2018). Studies further designate that those adolescents who have experienced stalking a cyberstalking are more likely involve in self-harm behaviors (Messias et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2017).

Previous researches have revealed that individuals who experience cyber-victimization often showed a series of psychological problems, such as loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety, (Guo, 2016). Nevertheless, among the many serious consequences of cyberstalking, depression appears to be one of the most important and common (Kwan et al., 2020). It means that individuals are more likely to develop depressive symptoms after suffering from cyberstalking Chu et al., 2018). Studies on impact of cyber harassment testified stronger relation between experiences of cyberbullying and depression (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Prihadi, et al, 2019). The finding of a study by Li et al. (2018) conducted on 793 students conveyed that cyber victimization was a substantial predictor of depressive symptoms.

Learned helplessness theory (LHT) proposes that feelings of helplessness develop from negative past experiences when people learn that they can't efficiently defend themselves. The same happens with the victims of cyber stalking, when people experience incidents of cyber victimization they cannot handle sometimes because of the anonymity of the abusers and sometimes due to the understanding that fighting back will only intensify the seriousness of the abuse. When they don't come out of the situation they gradually learn that they are helpless (Law et al., 2012). This learned helplessness might lead them toward the development of depressive symptoms (Martinez-Dick, 2013). Subsequently, these negative emotions and depressive symptoms can trigger self-harming behaviors to cope with these depressive and inadequacy symptoms. Numerous studies have shown the affect-regulation role of self-harming behaviors such as decreasing negative emotions and self-punishment function (Claes et al. 2010; Wang et al., 2018). A study of 785 students showed that depression partially mediated the association between victimization and non-fatal self-injury (Claes et al. 2015).

Keeping in view the above literature, the present study was intended to investigate the mediation role of depression in relationship between cyberstalking, and self-harming behavior in the indigenous setting. As evident from the reviewed literature, no previous research was conducted to explore these phenomena in this direction in Pakistani context.

The current study specifically hypothesized i.e.,

1. There will be relationship in cyberstalking, depression and self-harming behavior among students
2. Depression will mediate the link between cyberstalking and self-harming behavior.
3. There will be gender differences in experiences of cyberstalking, depression and self-harming behavior among students.

## II. METHODS

### Participants

Non-probability convenient sampling technique was used to draw a sample of 380 students age ranged between 15 to 18 years (188 girls and 192 boys) with a mean age of 17 years (SD = 1.92) from different public and private colleges of Sargodha city. 257 students (59%) were belonged to rural areas, and 155 (41%) were from urban locality.

### Measures

#### The Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit (COP) Scale

developed by Spitzberg and Rhea (1999) is a 24-item scale to measure the level of a person's experience of cyberstalking or cyber-obsessional pursuit. Participants rate their online stalking experiences on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = *Never*, to 5 = *Over 5 Times*. Total scores range from 24 to 120, higher scores specify higher level of cyberstalking. The scale consists of three subscales: Hyper-intimacy, Real-life transfer, and, each showing significant internal reliability

#### Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory (DSHI)

Developed by Goddard (1996) is a self-report scale consisting 17 items with dichotomous options of Yes and No. But for this study, the optional responses were converted in likert scale ranging from (0=Never, 3=frequently).

### Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS)

Lovibond and Lovibond developed the scale in, 1995. It consists of 21 items to measure depression, anxiety and stress on a four points Likert scale ranging from 0=Never to 3=Every time. In the current study, only depression subscale was used.

### Procedure

The permission for data collection was pursued from principles of colleagues.. Students were separately contacted and informed about the nature of the research. They were assured about the confidentiality of their information. Written informed consents were taken. The questionnaire were distributed. At the end, they were acknowledged for their cooperation and support.

## III. RESULTS

To test the hypotheses different statistical analysis were computed including pearson product moment correlation, regression analysis and t-test using SPSS 25.

**Table 1**  
*Inter Scale Correlation among Study Variables (N = 380)*

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5	6
1. cyberstalking	-	.808**	.830**	.874**	.601**	.349**
2. Hyper-intimacy		-	.617**	.505**	.418**	.279**
3. Real life transfer			-	.569**	.599**	.317**
4 Threats				-	.509**	.290**
5 Deliberate Self-harm					-	.394**
6 Depression						-

\*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

Table 1 shows the correlation between the study variables. The results showed that cyberstalking was significantly positive correlated with all other variables. Likewise, hyper-intimacy showed significant positive correlation with real life transfer, threats, self-harm and depression.

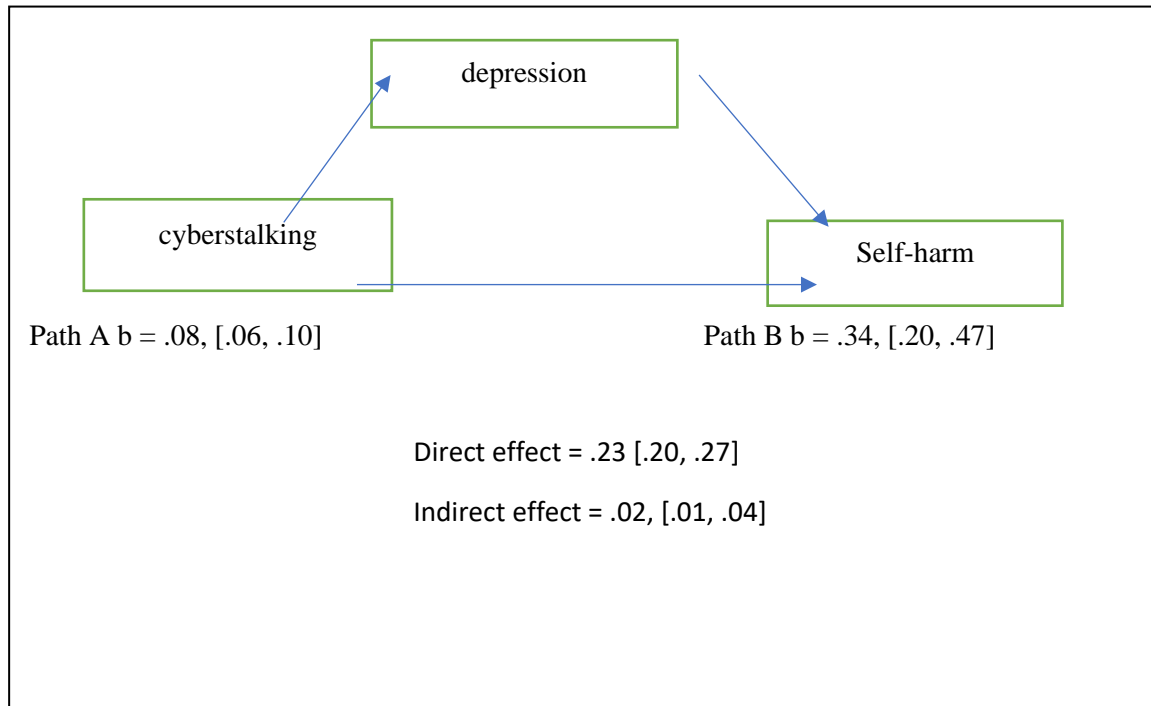
**Table 2**  
*Role of depression as Mediator Between cyberstalking and deliberate self harm (N = 380)*

Predictors	Outcomes	Direct effects			Indirect effects		
		B	95% CL		B	95% CL	
			LL	UL		LL	UL
Cyberstalking	Depression	.08**	.06	.10			
Depression	Self-harm	.34*	.20	.47			
Cyberstalking	Self-harm	.23*	.20	.27	.02	.01	.04

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Table 2 indicate that mediating role of depression between cyberstalking and deliberate self-harm. Cyberstalking predicting depression ( $\beta = .08$ ,  $p < .01$ ). depression predicting deliberate self-harm ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and cyberstalking predicting deliberate self-harm ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $p < .05$ ). both independent variable explained 40% variance in deliberate self-harm which is significant ( $R^2 = .40$ ,  $F(2,375) = 125.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ). depression mediate between cyberstalking and deliberate self-harm.

**Figure 1:** Model of Depression as Mediator between Cyberstalking and Deliberate self-harm.



**Table 3**  
Gender Differences in Present Study Variables (N=380)

Variable	Boys		Girls		$t(198)$	95% CI		Cohen's $d$
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$		$LL$	$UL$	
Cyberstalking	3.91	5.74	2.81	5.21	1.880	-.051	2.25	0.201.
Real life transfer	4.15	7.62	6.32	8.13	2.569*	.50	3.81	0.275
Threats	4.68	6.11	4.78	6.77	.142	-1.44	1.25	0.016
Self-harm	5.77	7.14	2.71	5.17	4.548***	1.74	4.38	0.491
Depression	5.52	4.23	4.18	3.43	3.236***	.524	2.14	0.348.

$p^* < .05, p^{***} < .001$

Table 3 shows mean, standard deviation and  $t$ -values for men and women on the study variables. Results indicate significant mean difference on deliberate self-harm with  $t(198) = 1.0, p < .001$ . The findings revealed that men scored high on deliberate self-harm as compared to women.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The current study was conducted to explore the relationship between cyberstalking, self-harm and depression among adolescents. It was further intended to investigate the mediating role of depressive symptoms. The study is unique in this way that it focused on cyberstalking, previous studies were mainly conducted on the cyber bullying, cyber-victimization or offline/ traditional stalking or bullying. The findings of the correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationship in cyberstalking, self-harm and depressive symptoms among adolescents. These finding are in line with Azami and Tarmian (2020) who conducted a study on traditional and cyberbullying and concluded that any type of bullying has strong positive association with self-harm. [Chu et al., 2018](#)) recounted that cyber-victimization was strongly correlated with depression. Baren and Li (2015) described that among the victims of both traditional and online stalking, crying, feeling hurt and depress are most frequent reaction. These reactions weaken the

self-control of the victims and make them more vulnerable for development of depression and self-harm behavior.

Another finding of the current study revealed that depression significantly mediate the relationship between cyberstalking and self-harm behavior. The finding is consistent with that reported by Claes et al (2015) that depression partially mediate the association between cyber-victimization and self-injurious behavior. Similar findings were revealed by Baiden et al., (2017) who conducted a study on the sample of 1650 adolescent to find out the mediating role of depression in the association between victimization and non-suicidal self-injury and found that depression partially mediate the relationship. Cassidy and Taylor (2005) used the stress theory to describe the effect of victimization on mental and emotional health. It was suggested that repeated abuse and the powerlessness to respond properly tu this harassment and victimization can be a reason stress, fear, anger and depression, which can consequently develop self-harming behaviors as a coping strategy to deal with these emotions (Pouwelse et al. 2011).

The results of the current study further revealed significant gender differences in real life transfer types of cyberstalking, self-harm and depression. The Findings showed that male reported higher level of self-harm and depression as compare to female students whereas female reported more real life transfer type of cyber stalking than boys. The finding on self-harm behavior were consistent with Hilt et al (2008) who reported higher degrees of non-suicidal self-injuries in boys than girls. But the results on the level of depression are contrary to the existing literature as Almenayes (2017) reported the findings of a study conducted on 1400 college students and revealed that gender was a significant predictor of depression in females as compared to males. The findings on cyberstalking was consistent with previous literature which indicate the female ate more vulnerable of online harassment then boys. A study by Myklestad and Straiton (2021) found significant interaction effect between gender and experiences of being bullied as the chances of self-harm in case of being stalked or bullied was suggestively greater for girls than boys.

## V. LIMITATIONS & SUGGESTIONS

This is a reality that cyberstalking is a serious issue which subsequently affect the mental health of victims. The current study has certain limitations. The study has limited sample size of students collected from different colleges of single city, therefore, the findings may not be generalized. It is needed to explore the issue in a more representative sample to have a clearer picture of the problem. Another limitation is that I have only focused on the relationship cyberstalking, depression and self-harm. It is suggested to explore the prevalence and nature of cyberstalking and self-harm behavior. Future researchers should also investigate the age and socio-economic characteristic as they may affect the seriousness of experiences of cyberstalking and its mental outcomes. Another constraint of the study was its cross-sectional design; more longitudinal studies are needed to add required knowledge.

## VI. CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

Cyber victimization and cyber stalking are becoming more serious and widespread with the advancement of the technology and excessive use of internet. The current study demonstrated that being cyberstalked was linked with high risk of self-harming behavior. The study also revealed that depression mediate the relationship between the both variables. Moreover, the study showed significant gender differences in the study variables. This research is very important in Pakistani context as the problem has not been previously explored in this direction. The present study has many implications for the parents, teachers, mental health practitioners and policy makers. Students should be teaching emotion regulation skills to deal with cyber related issues. Parents and teachers should be involved to develop strategies to prevents adolescents from victimization and self-harming and depression. Authorities and policy makers should work on laws to prevent cyberstalking. Policies should be made to enhance awareness about nature, recognition and dealing with cyberstalking.

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