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# Cyber-Stalking, Social Comparison, and Psychological Well-being in University Students

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## Abstract

The current study aimed to investigate the relationship between cyber stalking, social comparison, and psychological well-being in university students. Correlational research design and quantitative method were used to conduct the study. It was hypothesized that there is likely a relationship between cyber stalking, social comparison, and psychological well-being. Moreover, it was also hypothesized that cyber stalking is likely to negatively predict psychological well-being in students. Data was collected online through purposive sampling technique. The study consisted of ( $n=150$ ) university students. Standardized measures, Cyber Obsessional Pursuit Scale, Social Comparison Orientation Scale, and Psychological Well-being Scale, were used to collect the data. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 21. The results of correlational analysis showed highly significant correlation between all study variables. Regression analysis showed that only cyber stalking and social comparison were the significant predictors of psychological well-being in students. These results imply that authorities and respective institutions must devise psychosocial interventions to minimize the psychological disturbances in social media users by controlling cyber-crimes and to promote well-being at individual and societal level.

**Keywords:** cyber stalking, psychological well-being, social comparison, university students

## Introduction

With the advancement in science and technology, almost everyone has a direct access to electronic devices and the internet at present. Despite its significant advancements in providing access to information, data, and communication, the internet has also amplified risks and negative experiences that may have profound consequences on both individual and societal levels. The accessibility of information via the internet has

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revolutionized how information is gathered and connected with others, yet it has also sparked significant concerns regarding cybercrimes. This heightened accessibility has led to an increase in criminal activities, providing new avenues for monitoring, pursuing, or harassing individuals. Resultantly, cybercrimes including cyber stalking have emerged as pressing social issues (Navarro et al., [2016](#); Reyns, [2019](#)). In recent years, cyber stalking has gained considerable attention due to its widespread impact on individuals and communities. Many individuals may not perceive cyber stalking as a crime due to a lack of comprehensive research and awareness pertaining to its detrimental effects on individuals (Lowry et al., [2013](#)).

Cyber stalking encompasses various forms of intrusive behaviors facilitated by technology. It encompasses identity theft, deception, spreading false information, and making threats to harm an individual's reputation (Kaur et al., [2021](#)). Cyber stalkers may also engage in harassment, obtain private information, and create multiple fake identities to target their victims, making it challenging to identify them. Their aim often involves exerting control over their victims. Moreover, they may also resort to sending pornographic content as a means of intimidation. In some cases, cyber stalking may escalate to offline stalking and physical intrusion into an individual's life (Kaur et al., [2021](#); Marganski, [2019](#); Short et al., [2014](#)).

Stalking may stem from various motives, such as obsession, revenge, defamation, jealousy, financial gain, personal insecurities, and technological advancements. It may also involve monitoring loved ones or intruding into others' private lives (Kaur et al., [2021](#)). The motivations behind cyber stalking may vary between genders, with males often exhibiting traits, such as Machiavellianism, anger, or problematic attachment styles, while females may be driven by narcissism, interpersonal jealousy, or discomfort with intimacy (Kaur et al., [2021](#)).

Cyber stalkers often engage in online interactions without considering the physical and psychological impact on their victims, as they aim to fulfill their emotional and psychological needs through these actions (Fox & Moreland, [2015](#)). These behaviors profoundly affect the mental well-being of victims, impacting their daily lives (Wright & Wachs, [2019](#)). Social networking sites serve as the primary platform for cyber stalking, blurring the line between private and public information along with heightening the

risk of online crimes. Peer influences are the significant factors contributing to cyber stalking behaviors (Fox & Moreland, [2015](#); Stevens et al., [2020](#)).

Cyber stalking does not solely refer to harmful behaviors, however, it may also majorly include the violation of individual privacy. Most of the cyber stalkers intend to develop intimate feelings towards their victims during the initial interaction. This interaction may be amusing for the victims in the start, however, later when the chain continues it may become annoying for the victim. This annoying behavior originates with repeatedly intimidating the victim to know more about them or to develop an intimate relationship. Sometimes, it may take a wrong turn when the feelings of the stalkers are not responded the way that person wants. A person can even be cyber stalked by the same stalker via different identities, threatening and intimidating in different ways and showing off as different persons, while in some cases they admit being the same person via different accounts (Fissel & Reynolds, [2019](#); Shimizu, [2013](#)).

In everyday life, people often compare themselves with others. Whether it comes to understand how they act in a certain situation, what emotions they tend to experience, or how they think and behave, people look to others for cues. This comparison is helpful to shape the understanding of the world and foster social connections among people (Baldwin & Mussweiler, [2018](#)). The information gathered by people to compare themselves with others is used for self-evaluation. People evaluate their own opinions and abilities and improve them and try to bring them in accordance with the others to boost their self-esteem (Schneider & Schupp, [2014](#)). According to the identification-contrast model of social comparison (Buunk & Ybema, [2013](#)), when people face an upsetting occasion or event, they attempt to restore their mental well-being and confidence by comparing themselves with others who are doing better than them. Moreover, they also differentiate themselves with others who are in a terrible state as compared to them. This phenomenon may effect the feelings, state of mind, emotions, prosperity, and confidence of an individual. Relating it with the variables of the current study, the victims of cyber stalking compare themselves with those individuals who have experienced similar situation and who have handled the situation well and managed to keep themselves safe to have a better mental state. Similarly, if the victims compare themselves with those individuals who are incapable to handle the situation well, would leave a

negative impact on the personalities and psychological health by experiencing negative emotions and low vibes (Buunk & Dijkstra, [2017](#)).

Cyber stalking leaves a negative impact on the psychological health of its victims, their relationships with friends and family, and even their grades (Lucas-Molina et al., [2018](#)). Cyber victimization leads to various mental problems as well. For instance, it often leads to the development of fearful behaviors, anxiety, sense of threat, sleep disorder, paranoia, helplessness, and disturbance of daily functioning in the victims. Even if the stalking has been stopped, it may still haunt the victims and disturb their psychological well-being and develop post-traumatic stress disorder among them (Lucas-Molina et al., [2018](#); Wright & Wachs, [2019](#)).

Presently, technological advancements are a huge source to gain access to people's lives and to know about their personal information. This behavior has attained an alarming rate in the present society and has also become an issue of concern. In Pakistan, cybercrime is increasing alongside an increased internet usage, with 41 million students and 1.5 million teachers in the education system. Despite this growth, awareness regarding cyber harassment laws is low, with only 28% of women knowing about such laws. According to surveys, 40% of women have faced online harassment, 70% fear posting pictures online, 45% find reporting harassment embarrassing, and 47% don't find it necessary to report (Sharf et al., [2020](#)). Cyber stalking has serious and negative impacts on the psychological well-being of the individuals. While using social media, social comparison has become a common phenomenon and it plays a major role in determining the psychological health of an individual. Individuals tend to compare themselves, their life events, and their problems with others which has an impact on their psychological health. The current research aimed to establish a relationship among these variables. Mostly, youth and young adults get indulged in social media and fall victims to cyber-crimes. Therefore, this study explored the impact of these variables on the mental health of university students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

According to Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, [1977](#)), individuals are significantly influenced by the behaviors and emotions of others. For instance, when encountering challenges or unfamiliar situations, people often model their actions after those they observe. Social media

enhances this phenomenon by facilitating connections with numerous individuals experiencing similar circumstances, which may have both positive and negative impacts. While it may offer valuable support and guidance to those facing cyber stalking, it may also contribute to the feelings of inadequacy or shame. Ultimately, people learn from those around them, especially from those they admire which may shape their behaviors and well-being (Fox et al., [2011](#)).

## **Rationale**

The rapid technological advancements have provided several benefits to human life. However, at the same time, it has also introduced new ways to engage in crimes. There has been a sudden rise in cyber-crimes recently including cyber stalking. The prevalence and the negative social and psychological consequences of cyber stalking have gained public concerns regarding its presence in the online environment. Moreover, some people do not even consider it as a crime. In a similar way, social comparison has also become an increasing concern among youth. This is because they like comparing themselves with others, for instance pertaining to the sense of popularity, people who stalk them, their life experiences, and problems with others which directly impacts the mental health of an individual. Literature shows that only a few researches have been conducted on cyber stalking in the past in Pakistan. Hence, this topic needs to be studied. Previously, researches mainly focused on cyber bullying and cyber harassment, whereas cyber stalking was neglected (Lowry et al., [2013](#); Wilson et al., [2021](#)). The impact of cyber stalking on the individual's well-being is severe and has been given comparatively least attention.

The current study aimed to focus on the cyber stalking victimization and the related social comparison on social sites along with its consequences on the psychological well-being of university students. This study would be helpful in understanding people's perceptions about cyber stalking and victimization and how it effects their thinking processes, comparison processes, relationships, daily life activities, and mental health. In future, this study would also help in tackling these cyber-crimes and to provide guidelines in order to deal with such issues and to overcome the negative impact of such incidents on mental health.

## Objective

The current study aimed to explore the relationship between cyber stalking, social comparison, and the psychological well-being of university students.

## Hypotheses

- There is likely to be a relationship between cyber stalking, social comparison, and psychological well-being of the university students.
- Cyber stalking will likely to negatively predict the psychological well-being of students.
- Females are likely to suffer more negative psychological consequences of cyber stalking and social comparison as compared to males.

## Method

### Research Design

The study employed correlational research design to investigate the impact of cyber stalking and social comparison on the psychological well-being of university students.

### Sample and Sampling Strategy

The sample consisted of 150 university students, and it was observed that 115 (76.7%) were female students and 35 (23.3%) were male students. The sample comprised students aged between 18-24 years ( $M = 21.50$ ;  $SD = 1.37$ ). The sample was approached from different universities of Lahore, Pakistan. The sample was recruited through non-probability sampling technique. The estimated sample size calculated through G power analysis was 134. The sample consisted of students from four universities in Lahore city that included both public and private sector universities. Data was collected online through purposive sampling via Google forms, keeping in view the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

### Inclusion Criteria

Students enrolled in universities, who have been the victims of cyber stalking (as identified by asking the questions in the demographic sheet)

### Exclusion Criteria

- Participants with any kind of self-reported physical or psychological conditions (as it could bias the results)

- Married students or students enrolled in Doctoral program (as other factors could be added and bias the result)

## Assessment Measures

### *Demographic Information Sheet*

Demographic information sheet was prepared to gather personal information from participants. It included gender, age, academic status, relationship status, internet usage, residential status, and some questions regarding being the victim of stalking. The questionnaire also included questions on the primary mediums of stalking (for instance, messages, threats, and obscene images), the nature of relationship with the cyber stalker, and whether the stalkers are predominantly of the same or opposite gender.

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

Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit (COP) Scale is a 24-item scale developed by Spitzberg et al. (2001). This scale was designed to measure the extent of an individual's experiences of COP or online stalking victimization. Participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which they have experienced 24 forms of cyber stalking on a five-point scale (1 = *Never* - 5 = *Over 5 Times*). Total scores ranged from 24-120, with higher scores indicating an increased frequency of experienced cyber stalking. The COP comprised three subscales, that is, hyper-intimacy (six items), real-life transfer (five items), and threat (seven items), each demonstrating moderate to good internal reliability  $\alpha$  ranging from .74 to .88 (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Internal reliability for COP subscales ranged from adequate to good. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranged from .73 to .85 (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). The reliability reported in the current study was .90. The permission to use the scale was sought from the author (Spitzberg & Rhea, 1999; Spitzberg et al., 2001).

### *The Social Comparison Orientation Scale (INCOM)*

The Social Comparison Orientation Scale (INCOM) by Gibbons and Buunk (1999) was used. It consists of 11 items out of which items 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 11 need to be re-coded. In these items, statements about self-comparisons with others were reported on a five-point scale ranging from 1 *strongly disagree* to 5 *strongly agree*. It has proven to be a valid and reliable instrument with a good reliability of .77 (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). The



reliability reported in the current study was .70. The permission to use the scale was taken from the author.

### ***Psychological Well-being (PWB) Scale***

Psychological Well-being (PWB) Scale by Diener et al. (2009) was used. The PWB correlated very strongly with the total scores for the other psychological well-being scales at 0.80 and 0.69. Thus, the PWB provides a good assessment of the overall self-reported psychological well-being. It consists of total 8 statements with which the respondent may agree or disagree. Each item is answered on a 1–7 scale that ranges from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. All items are phrased in a positive direction. The possible range of scores is from 8 (lowest possible) to 56 (highest PWB possible). A high score represents a person with many psychological resources and strengths. It signifies that the respondents view themselves in much positive terms in diverse areas of functioning. The reliability reported in the current study was .70. The permission to use the scale was taken from the author.

### **Procedure**

The synopsis was approved by the Departmental Doctoral Program Committee (DDPC). The study data was collected online due to lockdown. Given that, the assessment measures were entered in Google Forms that was shared on various social media platforms to recruit study participants. Before administration or filling up the questionnaire, participants were briefed about the nature and purpose of the study by adding a descriptive paragraph. After collecting the responses, data was exported from Google Forms to Excel. It was then scored and analyzed using SPSS version 21. Initially, the sample included 170 university students who experienced cyber stalking. However, it was subsequently reduced to 150 following the preliminary data screening.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were followed in the study. For instance, permission was taken from all the concerned authorities for the research. Moreover, permission was also taken from the respective authors to use scales. Informed consent was taken from concerned participants and they were briefed about the research. Anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the data was maintained. Participants were given the right

to withdraw at any part of the research. No physical or psychological harm was involved in the study.

## Results

Descriptive statistics, that is, mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentages were taken to provide preliminary profile of the sample characteristics. Mean, standard deviation, actual/potential scores, and alpha reliability of the study variables were also computed. Pearson product moment correlation was used to assess the relationship among demographic variables and study variables. Multiple Linear Regression was run to determine the variables predicting psychological well-being of the students. Independent sample t-test was run to determine the gender differences in psychological well-being.

**Table 1**

*Normality of Distribution of Study Variables (N=150)*

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis
Cyber Obsessional Pursuit	0.97	0.23
Social Comparison	0.14	-0.53
Psychological Well-being	0.12	0.15

Keeping in view the assumptions of normality, all study variables were normally distributed. Assessment by normal probability plots, skewness, and kurtosis also verified that the assumption of linearity of variables and homoscedasticity were generally met and were within the range of normality of +1 and -1.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive and Psychometric Properties of the Study Variables (N = 150)*

Variable	k	M	SD	Range		$\alpha$
				Potential	Actual	
Cyber Obsessional Pursuit	24	28.69	13.72	0-96	11-72	.89
Social Comparison	11	40.33	4.99	11-55	28-54	.70
Psychological Well-being	8	36.79	5.91	8-56	20-51	.70

Overall, the reliability measure of each scale of the current study was satisfactory.

**Table 3**  
*Correlation between Study Variables (N=150)*

Variables	1	2	3
1 Cyber Obsessional Pursuit	-	.22**	-.24**
2 Social Comparison		-	-.27**
3 Psychological Well-being			-

*Note.* \*\*  $p < .01$ .

According to the results correlational analysis, cyber stalking and social comparison showed a positive association. There was a significant negative correlation between cyber stalking and psychological well-being, whereas social comparison and psychological well-being also had a negative correlation. This proves the first hypothesis.

**Table 4**  
*Multiple Linear Regression predicting Psychological Well-being of University Students from Cyber Stalking (N=150)*

Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	95% CI		p
				LL	UL	
Intercept						
Gender	0.69	1.17	.05	-1.63	3.01	.56
Age	-0.18	0.36	-.04	-0.90	0.54	.62
Relationship status	0.74	1.47	.04	-2.17	3.66	.61
Professional status	-2.83	1.77	-.14	-6.33	0.66	.11
Family income	-0.72	0.49	-.12	-1.68	0.24	.14
Internet usage	-0.99	0.62	-.13	-2.22	-0.22	.11
Student residence	-0.94	1.09	-.07	-3.09	1.21	.39
Cyber Obsessional Pursuit	-0.08	0.04	-.19	-0.15	-0.12	.02
Social Comparison	-0.31	0.09	-.26	-0.50	-0.11	.002
F	3.27**					
R <sup>2</sup>	.174					

*Note.*  $p^{**} < .01$ .

Overall, the model was significant. Total variance explained by these predictors in psychological well-being of students was 17.4% ( $R^2 = .174$ ) where cyber stalking and social comparison were the only predictors of psychological well-being of students. These results prove the second hypothesis that cyber stalking is likely to negatively predict psychological well-being in university students.

**Table 5**

*An Independent Sample t-test to compare Level of Psychological Well-Being and Social Comparison in Females and Males (N=150).*

Variable	Women		Men		$t(df)$	$p$	Cohen's d
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$			
Psychological Well-being	36.58	5.76	37.49	6.43	-0.75(148)	.460	0.15

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the population means of two independent groups to determine the gender differences in the psychological well-being of students. The results were non-significant [ $t = -0.75$  ( $df = 148$ ),  $p = .46$ ] which showed that there were no gender differences in the psychological well-being of students due to cyber stalking, with both males and females equally susceptible to psychological distress. Therefore, the hypothesis that females were more likely to suffer negative psychological consequences due to cyber stalking and social comparison was rejected.

## Discussion

In the present era of science and technology, cybercrimes have become an issue of concern. These crimes have reached an alarming rate around the globe with serious impacts on the psychological health of people. Young adults are the most frequent users of social media and technology. Therefore, they are more vulnerable to its negative impacts. In cyber world, people tend to repeatedly stalk and intimidate others out of love, jealousy or as an entertainment while disturbing their peace. Social sites are considered as the major platforms for cyber stalking (Stevens et al., [2020](#)).

The first hypothesis of the current study that there would likely be a relationship between the study variables, that is, cyber stalking, social comparison, and psychological well-being, was accepted. The results of Pearson product moment correlational analysis showed significant relationship among these variables. The studies conducted by Brandenburg

et al. (2019) and Vogel et al. (2015) also found a significant negative relationship between these variables. It reported profound negative impact of cyber stalking and social comparison on the psychological well-being of individuals. Similarly, the review of forty-two articles by Stevens et al. (2020) also showed significant negative relationship between cyber stalking and psychological well-being.

The second hypothesis of the study was that cyber stalking negatively predicts the psychological well-being in university students which was also proved in the study. The results of Multiple Linear Regression analysis revealed cyber stalking to be a significant predictor of psychological well-being of the students. The correlational analysis also showed a significant negative relationship between the two variables. This finding was supported by previous studies. The research conducted by Worsley et al. (2017) and Morris et al. (2019) showed negative vibes, worry, anxiety, low mood, irritability, and low mental well-being experienced by the victims of cyber stalking. A peer review of forty-two articles by Stevens et al. (2020) also revealed similar results of experiencing low psychological well-being. Some of the researches conducted in Pakistan also add up to the evidence of experiencing deteriorated emotional and psychological health by individuals facing cyber stalking. Research studies conducted by Al-Rahmi et al. (2019) and the report by Digital Rights Foundation have revealed that cyber stalking is posited to evoke negative emotions, such as fear, distress, concern, or helplessness which negatively impacts the psychological well-being of individuals. It was found to be negatively linked with the mental and subjective well-being as well as self-esteem.

Furthermore, the third hypothesis that females were more likely to suffer negative psychological impact due to cyber stalking was rejected. The results of t-test independent sample showed that males and females were equally likely to suffer psychologically due to cyber stalking. These findings are contrary to the findings in literature which reported females to suffer more negative consequences as compared to males. However, there has been a countable study in the literature which supports this result. The study conducted by Dreßing et al. (2014), showed similar results that males and females were equally likely to suffer and there were no gender differences in their psychological well-being due to cyber stalking. Another study conducted by Fissel and Reyns (2019), also reported that in some domains, males and females were likely to suffer equally. The results seem

contrary to previous findings. However, one explanation for these divergent results could be the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown which may have led the students to indulge in stalking as a form of entertainment and fun during the ongoing depressive situation. Moreover, another reason could be that students may not have filled the questionnaires with honesty. It could also be possible that the addition of social comparison variable may have affected the results.

According to the current study, more women than men have been the victims of cyber stalking, while among the perpetrators, men significantly predominate. These findings are in line with the population-based studies on cyber stalking. However, there has been limited research evidence investigating the impact of cyber stalking and social comparison on university students' well-being in Pakistan. This is because the major focus of studies has been cyber bullying and cyber harassment. Therefore, the current study added knowledgeable findings to literature and also helped in taking into consideration the facilitation in crimes provided by the internet, its seriousness, and its impact on individual and societal level.

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

The study utilized a correlational research design which identified relationships between variables, however, did not establish causation. Future research could employ alternative designs to better elucidate the causal relationships among these variables.

Additionally, the unequal distribution of male and female students could have contributed towards biasness in results. Equal representation of both the genders could produce better results. Further, the sample size of the study was relatively small. These limitations can be catered in the future studies to support the generalizability of the findings.

### **Implications**

This study suggests that higher cyber stalking victimization along with social comparison leads to poor state of mind in university students. Moreover, this study would open more grounds for further research on this topic and to study the variables in more detail. It would also help the authorities to cater these cyber-crime issues efficiently and effectively keeping in view the negative outcomes. Additionally, it would also provide helplines for reporting such incidents and gaining psychological help to the victims to overcome those incidents.

## Conclusion

Cyber stalking and social comparison significantly impact the psychological well-being of university students, serving as major predictors of poorer mental health. The study found no gender differences in psychological well-being among students affected by cyber stalking. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions and support systems to mitigate these negative effects. Addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing mental health and fostering a safer online environment for students.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

## Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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