INITIAL EXPLORATION OF CYBER DATING ABUSE AND IT'S ASSOCIATION WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT

Cyber Dating Abuse (CDA) is an online form of intimate partner violence that is prevalent among emerging adults. This article aimed to explore patterns of CDA among emerging adults and its association with psychological well-being. A cross-sectional research design was used assess a sample of 350 participants aged 17 to 29 years. A specially designed demographic questionnaire, Cyber Dating Abuse Questionnaire, Emotional Vulnerability Scale for University Students and Psychological Well-Being scale were employed to record data. Results indicated that the mean victim score was 32.95 (SD = 21.94), and the mean perpetrator score was 25.77 (SD = 9.35). Participants categorized in the low victim and high perpetrator groups scored showcased varied scores on psychological well-being than those in higher victim score group. The results showcase that though the links between victimization, perpetration, and mental well-being were not very strong, they were significant enough to imply that these issues are interconnected and, thus, warrant further investigation. In general, the results prove how emotional discomfort, online harassment, and complex social dynamics influence many people—often in several ways. Rather than perceiving people as either victims or aggressors, this study suggests a more complex picture. It is critical that support systems, whether in schools, universities, or communities, acknowledge this complexity and provide room for open discussions about emotional health, boundaries, and good relationship behaviors. With continued effort, both in research and in practice, we can work toward healthier, safer environments both online and offline.
Keywords: Cyber Dating Abuse, Emerging Adults, Psychological Well-being.

INTRODUCTION

The world of dating has changed a lot in recent years, with the internet playing a key part in this new way of life. The task of maintaining a meaningful connection has moved online, people are keeping in touch digitally. Digital media is essentially popular among the younger generations for romantic interactions since it enables partners to engage with one other without time or location restrictions (Linares et al., 2021). However, this increased reliance on virtual communication has also given rise to new threats, particularly Cyber Dating Abuse (CDA); abuse that occurs through technology and is a form of dating violence. CDA is most commonly found among adolescents and young adults, who almost entirely depend on digital platforms to stay in touch with their partners (Celsi et al., 2021).

In addition to CDA, all forms of intimate partner violence (IPV) are increasing in the digital age. IPV is a common issue that affects millions of individuals all over the world and consists of economic, psychological, emotional, and physical abuse. Intimate partner violence has transformed with the digitalization of relationships, though it has also become more widespread and insidious. Today, abusers can follow, monitor and control their victims in ways never before possible, thanks to technology. The use of new technologies for social stalking,

surveillance tools and repeated messaging by abusers also enhances the feelings of helplessness and the inability to escape from the abuser's dominion. (Henry et al., 2018)

CDA encompasses several forms of abusive behaviours in intimate relationships, such as monitoring, controlling, stalking or intimidating a partner using technology (Bhogal & Wallace, 2021; Ouytsel et al., 2016). This includes tracking a partner's online activities without their consent, and tracking and manipulating their location and social connections, frequently without the partner's knowledge (Borrajo et al., 2015). Sextortion represents one of the more recent forms of threatening and coercing with the use of technology, whereby a victim is threatened or coerced with the use of private photos or a videos (Henry et al.,2018). Furthermore, sexting coercion is another disturbing application of CDA wherein, a coerces another partner using the means of pressure or manipulation to engage in explicit communication and/or exchanging/do something related to personal images without their consent (Bhogal et al., 2021). The sharing of non-consensual images, along with revenge porn, are also frightening features of Cyber Dating Abuse (Martinez, 2014). In some of such cases, an individual takes a revengeful action of posting intimate, sexual photographs of one's former partner, usually with the intended effect of humiliating someone or causing emotional and social damage. These actions extend beyond the online realm, violate personal space and undermine relationship trust. Those who are victims of CDA lose the ability to control their privacy and security in digital communication and as a result, feel threatened and exposed.

Borrajo et al. (2015) found that CDA was a concern with high prevalence in a sample of young couples. According to their study, a significant number of young couples experience CDA, highlighting the importance of this phenomenon in the current landscape of dating relationships. Likewise, Liu (2022) highlighted the ubiquity of CDA, perceiving it to be a relevant issue to consider among different demographic groups. Knowledge of the extent and nature of CDA is necessary for developing targeted policies and interventions (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021; Aguilera-Jiménez et al., 2023).

Prabowo et al. (2021) recently pointed to a disturbing phenomenon: an increasing number of young people simply accept social media and tech-enabled controlling behaviors as part and parcel of modern relationships and don't recognize them as abusive. Due to this normalization of cyber abuse, the importance of its continued occurrence becomes less significant, underscoring the need for educating victims about CDA and its adverse effects. Studies also indicate that CDA can have a damaging psychological impact which could cause chronic emotional distress and anxiety for young adult (Kristhi & Sukmaningrum, 2023).

Sexting coercion takes away control over the victim's own expression of digital intimacy and usually leaves people violated and disempowered. The psychological anguish and emotional turmoil caused by sexting coercion demand extensive research into this type of CDA and its effects on victims' emotional health (Bhogal et al., 2021). Similarly, the ramifications of revenge pornography include not just the invasion or breach of an individual's privacy, but also a great deal of mental distress, legal repercussions, and reputational harm. The victims of this form of cyber dating abuse are often ensnared in a hurtful and stigmatizing situation, which not only requires formal legal protection but also a substantial transformation of public understanding and compassion (Martinez, 2014). In digital-age relationships, there are various forms of CDA, namely surveillance, coercion, and non-consensual image sharing. Each of these behaviors has significant mental health implications, and automatically results in emotional and psychological suffering for victims. Other determinants such as gender roles, personality and cultural expectations play a role in CDA, thus they are worth understanding. The desensitization of violent acts particularly among youths continually points up the intense need of awareness and education. CDA requires targeted intervention and prevention to safeguard people's mental health amidst the growing digital space. The main objective of this study is to explore the rate of Cyber Dating Abuse in emerging adults and identify the correlation between CDA and the psychological well-being of emerging adults.

Method

The study employs a cross-sectional research design to examine patterns of cyber dating abuse among emerging adults, capturing data at a single point in time to understand the prevalence and associated factors within this population.

The sample consisted of 350 participants aged from 17 to 29 years. The gender distribution was 157 males and 193 females. Most participants came from nuclear families (n = 288), while a minority (n = 62) were from joint family systems. Monthly income varied widely among participants, ranging from 15,000 to 3,000,000 PKR. It was also determined that participants with a monthly income of 50,000 or below reported their personal monthly income, while the rest reported their family's income. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria, specifically emerging adults active on digital communication platforms. The sample size was calculated through G-power analysis with a medium effect size to ensure adequate statistical power and validity for the study objectives.

Data was collected using several tools. A demographic form gathered information on participants' age, gender, family income, relationship status, and experiences with cyber dating and cyberbullying. To assess cyber dating abuse, the 20-item Cyber Dating Abuse Questionnaire (CDAQ) developed by Borrajo et al. (2015) was used, focusing on direct aggression and monitoring/control behaviors. Participants' emotional vulnerability in daily life was measured using the 16-item Emotional Vulnerability Scale for University Students by Yamaguchi et al. (2022). Additionally, psychological well-being was assessed through the 18-item Psychological Well-Being scale by Ryff, which evaluates various dimensions of well-being. The complete questionnaire demonstrated good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.77.

To maintain ethical rigor, all participants provided informed consent after receiving a comprehensive explanation of the study's objectives, potential risks and benefits, and details on how their data would be used. This process ensured that participants had a thorough understanding of their involvement and could ask questions before agreeing to participate.

Data collection occurred in accessible locations to ensure a diverse sample, with participants completing the consent process, demographic form, CDAQ, Emotional Vulnerability Scale, and Psychological Well-Being Scale in a standardized order to minimize response bias. Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27.0, utilizing both descriptive and inferential statistics, including Pearson product-moment correlation. These analyses were performed to explore associations among variables and examine group differences, offering insights into the patterns and factors associated with cyber dating abuse among emerging adults.

Results

The study data were analyzed through SPSS and used a range of descriptive analysis to summarize the data (Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptives of Demographic Variables

	N	*%*
Sex		
Male	157	45%
Female	193	55%
Family System		
Nuclear	288	82%
Joint	62	18%
Relationship Status		
Single	233	67%
In a Relationship	96	27%
Married	21	6%

The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 29 years. The average age of participants was 21.27 years (*SD* = 2.64). The age breakdown was as follows: 29 participants (8.3%) were 17 years old,

33 (9.4%) were 18 years old, 23 (6.6%) were 19 years old, 50 (14.3%) were 20 years old, 66 (18.9%) were 21 years old, 46 (13.1%) were 22 years old, 35 (10.0%) were 23 years old, 27 (7.7%) were 24 years old, 17 (4.9%) were 25 years old, 10 (2.9%) were 26 years old, 9 (2.6%) were 27 years old, 3 (0.9%) were 28 years old, and 2 (0.6%) were 29 years old.

When asked whether the participants experienced significant emotional difficulty in the past 6 to 12 months, 220 participants (62.9%) responded "yes," while 130 (37.1%) responded "no." Regarding romantic relationships, 214 participants (61.1%) reported having been in a romantic relationship, while 136 (38.9 had not. A total of 73 participants (20.9%) reported experiencing a breakup in the past year, while 277 (79.1%) did not.

The participants were asked if they had ever been bullied or harassed through internet, social networks, email, or mobile phone applications, 113 participants (32.3%) responded "yes," while 237 participants (67.7%) responded "no". Among participants who experienced online abuse, 43 (12.3%) reported that it occurred on Facebook, 82 (23.4%) on Instagram, 47 (13.4%) on WhatsApp, 3 (0.9%) on X (formerly Twitter), 16 (4.6%) on other platforms, and 159 participants (45.4%) indicated that they had not experienced any form of online abuse.

The descriptive data summarizes that majority (62.9%) of the participants claimed to have experienced notable emotional distress in the last 6 to 12 months, with 61.1% having been in a romantic relationship. Furthermore, 32.3% of participants reported online bullying or harassment, with Instagram being the most common app for such occurrences.

Table 2: Scores for Cyber Dating Abuse Victimization & Perpetration, Emotional Vulnerability and Psychological Well-being

Variable	Cronbach alphas	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Control Victim Score	0.77	9	54	16.50	11.93
Control Perpetrator Score	0.77	9	38	13.24	6.06
Direct Aggression Victimization Score	0.77	11	56	16.45	10.61
Direct Aggression Perpetration Score	0.77	11	38	12.53	4.06
Total Victim Score	0.77	20	110	32.95	21.94
Total Perpetrator Score	0.77	20	72	25.77	9.35
Vulnerability Score	0.77	19	61	36.69	10.18
Psychological Well-being	0.77	50	119	85.72	14.19

The analysis of control and aggression scores among participants revealed that the mean score for control as a victim was 16.50 (SD = 11.93), while the mean score for control as a perpetrator was 13.24 (SD = 6.06). In terms of direct aggression, the mean victimization score was found to be 16.45 (SD = 10.61), whereas the mean perpetration score was 12.53 (SD = 4.06).

The total victim and perpetrator scores were also analyzed, with participants' average total victim score reported at 32.95 (SD = 21.94) and the total perpetrator score averaging 25.77 (SD = 9.35). Participants' vulnerability and psychological well-being scores were examined, revealing an average vulnerability score of 36.69 (SD = 10.18). The average score for psychological well-being was calculated as 85.72 (SD = 14.19).

Table 3: Frequency Distribution for Binned Total Victim and Perpetrator Scores

Score Category	N	%
Total Victim Score		
≤ 20 (Weak)	147	42.0
21–40 (Moderate)	133	38.0
40+ (High)	70	20.0
Total Perpetrator Score		
≤ 20 (Weak)	163	46.6
21–29 (Moderate)	104	29.7

30+ (High)	83	23.7

The total victim scores were categorized into three severity levels: weak (≤ 20), moderate (21–40), and high (40+). The distribution of participants across these categories showed that 147 participants (42.0%) fell into the weak category, 133 (38.0%) into the moderate category, and 70 (20.0%) into the high category.

Similarly, the total perpetrator scores were divided into weak (≤ 20), moderate (21–29), and high (30+). Results indicated that 163 participants (46.6%) had weak perpetrator scores, 104 (29.7%) fell within the moderate category, and 83 (23.7%) were in the high category

Table 4: Relationship Between CDA and the Psychological Well-being of Emerging Adults.

Correlations

	Victim Score	Perpetrator Score	Psychological Wellbeing
Total Victim Score			
Total Perpetrator Score	.484**		
Total Psychological Wellbeing	.208**	-.106*	

$**p=0.01$, $*p=0.05$

Pearson correlation analyses were also conducted to examine the relationships between total victim score, total perpetrator score, and total psychological well-being. The results showed that perpetration was directly proportional to victimization ($p < 0.01$), indicating that those who experience more victimization tend to perpetrate more Furthermore, it was observed that an increase in victimization was also related to an increase in psychological well-being ($p < 0.1$). While significant, the relationship is weak, indicating that higher victimization scores are associated with slightly better psychological wellbeing in this sample. Additionally, it was noted that the rate of psychological well-being moved in the opposite direction from the rate of perpetration ($p < 0.05$). This implies that, although poorly, higher levels of perpetration are linked to somewhat lower psychological health. The relationships between victimization/perpetration and psychological well-being are weak, but they are statistically significant, suggesting some degree of interaction between these factors, though the effect size is small.

Discussion
Over the decades, using online social networks and platforms to develop and maintain romantic relationships has become common (Biolcati et al., 2021). These technological advancements made it easier for the romantic couples to stay connected, despite the benefits involved, electronic media has also led to vulnerabilities towards abuse and harassment (Branson, & March, 2021; Caridade et al.,2019). Cyber dating abuse is a new way of controlling your partner, its a form of digital abuse that occurs within romantic relationships, where one person uses technology such as testing, social media or other online platforms to intimidate, control, harass or stalk the other. This abuse can be of various types and may include constant monitoring, spreading private or false information, sending threatening messages or pressuring a partner to share intimate content. It can feel overwhelming and isolating, even though it's happening behind a screen. While it often goes unnoticed, cyber dating abuse can have serious psychological and emotional effects especially on young people. It is important to recognize the signs and promote healthy, respectful digital communication in relationships. As cyber dating abuse is becoming very pronounced over time (Fernet et al., 2019), this study set out to explore experiences related to online harassment, cyber dating abuse, emotional challenges related to it among adult participants, while also examining how these factors connect to control, aggression, and psychological well-being. The findings offer a deeper look into the experiences of many individuals and raise some important points worth reflecting on.

About one third of participants (32.3%) said they had been bullied or harassed online (Afrouz,2023), with Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook being the most commonly mentioned platforms. These findings align with what we know through previous researches that popular social media platforms and apps can unfortunately become spaces where harassment occurs (Branson & March, 2021; Smith et al., 2018). That said, a majority of participants hadn't experienced such abuse, which may point to the effectiveness of some privacy settings or support networks, but it also raises questions about underreporting or normalization of such behavior. One factor related to under reporting can be that most participants did not see controlling behvaior as offensive rather they considered it possessiveness from their partner which according to them was a normal part of romantic relationship. This also aligns well with findings of the previous studies that reported inconsistent pattern of cyber dating abuse with incident rates ranging from 28 percent to 64 percent in different countries (Afrouz et al., 2024) with a significantly varied pattern of reporting the dating abuse.

Pakistan reported to have more than 9 million social media users (Arif et al.,2024) with a large majority of them identified as regular users of Facebook and Instagram. Therefore, the fact that Instagram was noted to be the most reported platform for harassment in present study could relate to its visual nature and the frequency of interactions it encourages. WhatsApp and Facebook are the most used social networking apps in Pakistan and high incident rates of cyber abuse on these networking sites make sense (Zafar & Mobin, 2023). These results also stress the importance of improving digital safety and encouraging users to speak up when they face harmful online experiences.

More than half of the participants (62.9%) reported going through significant emotional difficulties in the past 6 to 12 months and the incident rates of distress were observed to be significantly higher in cyber dating abuse victims. This suggests that emotional distress is a common experience and may be related to a variety of pressures and problems including personal, social or academic (Fernet et al., 2019). It's clear that many people are carrying emotional burdens, which could have a meaningful impact on their

day to day lives (Afrouz,2023). Psychological stress can limit one's resilience against abuse and harassment supporting increased distress in cyber dating abuse victims. In terms of romantic relationships, around 61percent participants reported to be in a relationship, and about 21percent experienced a breakup during the past year. While this isn't surprising, it does highlight how personal relationships especially the breakup can deeply affect emotional health. Past research (Cava et al., 2020) has shown that relationship troubles can lead to stress, low mood, and even physical symptoms (Smith et al., 2018), which might be part of what we're seeing here.

Past literature reported high rates of anxiety and other psychological problems in victims of cyber dating abuse (Brown & Hegarty, 2018; Monteiro et al., 2023). When looking at the control and aggression scores, participants reported higher averages as victims than as perpetrators (Afrouz,2023; Reed et al., 2020). In other words, more people said they had been controlled or treated aggressively than admitted to acting that way themselves. This might reflect how difficult it is to self-identify as a perpetrator, or it could show that some people are experiencing these behaviors repeatedly from others.

Another interesting finding was that some participants had high scores both as victims and as perpetrators. This supports the idea that the lines between being a victim and being an aggressor are often blurred, especially in emotionally charged or complicated relationships. It's a reminder that these dynamics can be cyclical, where someone who has been hurt might also lash out, knowingly or unknowingly. Another possibility can be that the past victims of dating abuse have now turned into perpetrators considering it a normal pattern of romantic relationships.

Participants reported an average psychological well-being score suggesting a moderate level of overall psychological health among participants, though notable variability exists which aligns with literature well (Murray, 2019). While most participants did not fall within the high risk categories, the presence of emotional difficulty, harassment, and interpersonal conflict clearly influences mental health trajectories. The analysis offered some interesting insights, participants who had experienced more victimization were also more likely to report

being perpetrators. This connection might point to emotional shift and learned behaviors, coping mechanisms gone wrong, or unresolved conflict playing out in other relationships.

One unexpected finding was the small but significant positive link between victimization and well-being, this findings gets support from other researches reporting that victims of cyber bullying and harassment are likely to experience both negative and positive aspects of psychological well being (Halliday et al., 2024). While counterintuitive, this weak positive association may suggest that in certain contexts, the experience of victimization leads to the development of resilience, self-reflection, or the pursuit of support systems, thereby contributing positively to long term well-being. However, this interpretation must be approached cautiously, as alternative explanations like measurement limitations or contextual confounds are also plausible. Conversely, perpetration was weakly but negatively associated with psychological well-being. This finding implies that individuals who engage in harmful behaviors may experience internal conflict, guilt, or social isolation, which undermines their overall mental health. Although the relationship is weak, it aligns with literature suggesting that engaging in aggression especially when socially condemned can erode self-esteem and increase emotional distress (Hussain & Sharma, 2014).

Overall, the findings highlight how emotional distress, online harassment, and complicated social dynamics affect many people—and often in more than one way. Rather than viewing people strictly as victims or aggressors, this study supports a more nuanced understanding. It's important that support systems, whether in schools, universities, or communities, recognize this complexity and create space for open conversations about emotional health, boundaries, and healthy relationship behaviors.

At the same time, social media platforms need to take more responsibility for user safety. Prevention programs, reporting tools, and digital education can all play a role in reducing online harassment and helping users feel more secure.

Moving forward, future research should look into what helps people cope—such as social support, coping strategies, or personality traits—and examine how these factors might protect people from the negative effects of distress or aggression.

Following people over time could also help us understand how these experiences play out in the long term.

While this study offers useful insights, there are a few limitations to note. The findings are based on self-reporting, which can be influenced by memory, perception, or social desirability. Also, because the data was collected at a single point in time, it's hard to draw conclusions about cause and effect. Finally, we didn't take into account demographic factors like age, gender, or background, which could affect the patterns we found.

Conclusion

This study shines a light on just how common emotional difficulty, relationship stress, and online harassment are. It also highlights the ways these experiences are linked to how people treat others and how they feel about themselves. Though the connections between victimization, perpetration, and mental well-being were not particularly strong, they were significant enough to suggest that these issues are connected—and deserve more attention. With continued effort, both in research and in practice, we can work toward healthier, safer environments both online and offline.

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