

TRAPPED ONLINE: CYBERBULLYING VICTIMIZATION, EMOTIONAL REGULATION, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ENTRAPMENT AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The modern youth are more likely to be spending a greater portion of their lives online, and they are particularly at risk from a unique kind of harassment cyberbullying. Drawing on the defeat entrapment model and Gross's process model of emotion regulation, the present study examined the relationships among cyberbullying victimization, two emotion-regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression), and psychological entrapment among Pakistani university students, and tested whether entrapment mediates the association between victimization and emotion regulation. The Cyberbullying Inventory for University Students, Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, and Entrapment Scale were administered on students aged 18-25 (N = 241) at public and private educational institutions. The results found that there was a positive correlation between cyberbullying victimization and entrapment and a negative correlation between cyberbullying victimization and expressive suppression. The results of partial least squares structural equation modeling revealed that entrapment had a significant and partial mediation effect on the relationship between victimization and both cognitive reappraisal (negatively) and expressive suppression (positively). The findings extend the defeat entrapment model to the digital sphere and highlight the possibility of psychological entrapment as an intervening mechanism that can be targeted in interventions with cyberbullied young adults, especially other non-Western cultures like Pakistan where there is limited research.

I. INTRODUCTION

The young adult years are a time of continuous transition in identity, education, and relationships that can lead to personal development and increased psychological risk when the developmental needs of independence, identity exploration and establishing significant relationships are experienced (Erikson, 1968). A key aspect of this is the importance of digital technology in everyday life. A national representative survey found that the vast majority of adults (ages 18-29) use at least one social media platform, and usage is particularly high among this age group of adults, for platforms including Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Social networks have emerged as a central space for young adults to express themselves, build their sense of identity, and socialize with friends. These areas foster connections, but they do present certain risks, particularly cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2014). Digital harassment is a growing issue in Pakistan, where access to the Internet and to smartphone phones has increased significantly amongst young people. A helpline established by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF)

reported thousands of complaints over the past five years, with the bulk of those incidents coming from female complainants, and the most recent helpline data reveal that the age group of 18 to 30 has the largest group of complainants (Vardanyan et al., 2022). Digital communication is ubiquitous, and with so much of young adults' social, academic, and professional life happening digitally, this age group is constantly connected and always vulnerable to digital harassment or victimization.

In their systematic review, Arif et al. (2024) analyzed 32 studies with a total of 29,593 university and college students, revealing a link between cybervictimization and various negative psychological effects such as depression, anxiety, stress, suicidal behavior, decreased self-esteem, and academic problems. The results of the study show that the victimization of university students through cyberbullying is not restricted to the interpersonal conflict in the virtual environment, but can have more comprehensive effects on psychological functioning and adjustment. Saleem et al. (2025) took a national perspective to study cyberbullying victimization among 774 university students in 12 cities from three provinces of Pakistan. The researchers used multistage stratified sampling to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in cyberbullying victimization across a number of digital-access characteristics, and found that students who reported that they had more access to the internet and used the internet more often were more likely to be victimized. The study also highlighted the importance of socioeconomic disparities and digital gaps in addressing the phenomenon of cyberbullying in the context of Pakistan's HEIs. Likewise, Noreen and Iqbal (2024) studied 400 university students in Punjab, revealing psychological impacts with associations connected to anxiety, distress, self-esteem, and depressive symptoms resulting from cyberbullying. The results indicated that the impact of cyberbullying is not only limited to the immediate online interaction but can also affect the overall emotional and psychological state of Pakistani students.

In like manner, Khaliq and Qazi (2024) investigated emotion regulation and cybervictimization among 291 students of university with public and private Universities in Multan, Pakistan. They found a very strong relationship between emotion regulation and cybervictimization and identified self-disclosure as a key player in this relationship. This study not only adds to the existing literature on emotion regulation and its role in the experience and response to being a victim of cyber victimization but also contributes to the understanding of how it is experienced by Pakistani university students. Cyberbullying is defined as "deliberate, repeated hostile behavior using digital technology, including social networking sites, messaging, and other Internet-based technologies" (Kowalski et al., 2014). Cyberbullying, in contrast to traditional bullying, which generally takes place in a given physical environment like in schools or workplaces, can happen anywhere, any time, and is following its victims even to their bedrooms and home (Tokunaga, 2010). It is a constant accessibility that makes it hard for victims to disengage or recover from bullying between episodes, something that has been repeatedly cited as key to the reason why cyberbullying is so psychologically harmful (Moreno & Pumper, 2015). Bullying victimization has been associated with a variety of negative emotional effects such as emotional distress, anxiety, depression and, in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts. Van Geel et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis and reported that their analysis revealed a stronger relationship between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation than did traditional or face-to-face bullying, which the authors hypothesized was due to cyberbullying being more persistent and inescapable. Victims may not be able to pinpoint the end of the harassment, and may end up feeling they cannot get out from under the situation, a feeling that is similar to entrapment (as described by Gilbert & Allan, 1998).

Entrapment refers to the feeling of being unable to leave an unpleasant situation (feeling powerless, defeated, and helpless) (Gilbert & Allan, 1998). While entrapment has been investigated in relation to depression, chronic stress, and suicidality, it is easy to see how entrapment can be a factor in cases of cyberbullying: the constant presence of the digital platforms, the public nature of the humiliation and the fear that blocking or reporting a bully could lead to further provocation of the victim's experience of being trapped in the bullying. Although this conceptual overlap exists, none of the available studies in the cyberbullying literature has explicitly explored entrapment as a result or process of cyberbullying, and not a single study has investigated entrapment among young adults or in other cultural contexts like Pakistan, where most of the cyberbullying studies have been conducted, focusing on school-going adolescents. A second construct that has been theoretically relevant to the study of cyberbullying victimization is emotional regulation, which refers to the processes people use to influence what emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them (Gross, 1998). Gross and John (2003)

identified two commonly studied strategies: cognitive reappraisal (an antecedent focused strategy that alters how the situation is interpreted to change emotion) and expressive suppression (a response-focused strategy that involves suppressing the outward expression of emotion). Several studies suggest that reappraisal is linked to more positive psychological adjustment, while suppression is linked to less positive psychological adjustment, such as higher anxiety and depression (Aldao et al., 2010). The strategies employed or not employed to manage negative emotions experienced by victims of cyberbullying would likely influence if the victimizing experience becomes more entrenched than it initially was.

The existing literature has studied the concepts of cyberbullying victimization, emotional regulation and entrapment mostly independently or in pairs, very few studies having combined all three concepts together and even fewer studies on young adults in the context of Pakistan. The aim of the present study was to investigate: (a) the pattern of associations between cyberbullying victimization and the two emotion-regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) and between cyberbullying victimization and entrapment; (b) if entrapment acts as a mediator between cyberbullying victimization and the two emotion-regulation strategies; and (c) if the pattern of associations between cyberbullying victimization, cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression, and entrapment varies by gender in young adults in Pakistan. The following hypotheses were tested:

1. Cyberbullying victimization, expressive suppression and psychological entrapment are positively correlated among young adults.
2. Cyberbullying victimization and cognitive reappraisal are negatively correlated among young adults.
3. Cognitive reappraisal is negatively correlated with psychological entrapment among young adults.
4. Psychological entrapment mediated the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression among young adults.

II. METHOD

This study was based on a cross-sectional, correlational design to study the relationships between cyberbullying victimization, emotion regulation and entrapment, and structural equation modeling was used to test the mediation effect of entrapment.

Participants

The participants consisted of university students aged between 18 to 25 years with purposive sampling done from three institutions in Lahore, Pakistan: Government Graduate science college, Bahria University Lahore and University of Lahore. After data screening, a sample of 254 students (129 male and 125 female) was used for primary descriptive and correlational analysis, and a sample of 241 students (127 male and 114 female) for testing the mediation model. The participants were mostly undergraduate students from nuclear families, while Instagram and WhatsApp were the most commonly used social media platforms. The participants were recruited through self-report on social media and were between 18 and 25 years old and enrolled at university. Participants were self-reported via social media and were aged 18–25, and were enrolled at university.

Measures

Demographical data such as age, gender, education, family system, and social network was gathered with the use of a researcher made questionnaire. [I] The Cyberbullying Inventory (Tanrikulu & Erdur-Baker, 2021; Topçu & Erdur-Baker, 2010) was used for the measurement of cyberbullying victimization. Respondents indicated on a 4-point scale (1 = never to 4 = more than three times) how often they experienced 11 behaviors in the past 6 months (e.g. rumors spread about them online). Higher scores on each item reflect greater victimization. In previous studies, the victimization subscale has demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha \approx .75$; Topçu & Erdur-Baker, 2010). [II] Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ): Habitual use of CR and ERS were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) using the 10-item ERQ (Gross & John, 2003) that included six items referring to CR and four items referring to ERS. The ERQ has been shown to have acceptable-to-excellent internal consistency and a stable two factor structure, with satisfactory results across populations (Gross & John, 2003). [III] Entrapment Scale: The total score on the 16 items of the Entrapment Scale (Gilbert & Allan, 1998) was based on a 5-point scale (0 = not at all like me, 4 = extremely like me) and the higher the total score, the

stronger the sense of entrapment. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency and has been found to correlate well with other measures of depression, hopelessness and suicidality (Gilbert & Allan, 1998).

Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of Professional Psychology, Bahria University Lahore Campus and permission was requested from the authors of the original scale. The participants were recruited and personally informed about the purpose of the study and requested to give informed consent, and the questionnaires were completed voluntarily and anonymously. Participants and data were debriefed after participation and confidentiality was maintained during data collection. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations and independent-samples *t* tests were performed in SPSS. A structural model was estimated to test entrapment as a mediating process between cyberbullying victimization and the two emotion-regulation strategies, using the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4.1.0.0 with bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals for the significance testing of direct and indirect paths.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Demographics' Frequency Distribution (N = 241)

Demographic Variables	Categories	n	%
Gender	Male	127	52.7
	Female	114	47.3
Family System	Nuclear Family	168	69.7
	Joint Family	73	30.3
Type of institute	Government institute	71	29.5
	Private institute	118	49.0
	Semi government institute	52	21.6
Education	Undergraduate	205	85.1
	Postgraduate	36	14.9
Type of social media platform used more	Instagram	117	48.5
	Whatsapp	76	31.5
	Facebook	10	4.1
	Snapchat	14	5.8
	Tiktok	10	4.1
	Youtube	5	2.1

Demographic information of participants is provided in Table 1. The sample consisted of 241 participants, of whom 127 (52.7%) were male and 114 (47.3%) were female. As far as family system is concerned, most of the participants were from nuclear families (69.7%) while 30.3% were from the joint families. On the basis of type of institute, 49.0% of the participants were from the private institutes, 29.5% from the government institutes and 21.6% from the semi-government institutes. In terms of educational level, most of the respondents were undergraduate students (85.1%) followed by post graduate students (14.9%). In terms of social media platforms, Instagram was the most widely used platform (48.5%) followed by WhatsApp (31.5%). Smaller share mentioned Facebook (4.1%), Snapchat (5.8%), TikTok (4.1%) and YouTube (2.1%) as the platforms they use the most. In general, the sample was largely comprised of undergraduate students, slightly more male, and more from the nuclear family and private institutions.

Table II: Pearson Correlation among Study Variables (N= 241)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1.Cognitive Reappraisal	22.46	9.09	-	-0.53**	-0.38**	-0.40**
2.Emotional Suppression	16.97	5.18		-	0.30**	0.33**
3.Cyberbullying Victimization	17.17	5.82			-	0.29**
4.Psychological Entrapment	20.50	13.66				-

***p* < .01

The Pearson correlation coefficients between the psychological entrapment, cognitive reappraisal, and expressive suppression and cyberbullying victimization were obtained and are presented in Table 2. Cognitive reappraisal was significantly and negatively correlated with expressive suppression ($r = -.53, p < .01$), cyberbullying victimization ($r = -.38, p < .01$), and psychological entrapment ($r = -.40, p < .01$). In addition, expressive suppression was significantly positively correlated with cyberbullying victimization ($r = .30, p < .01$) and psychological entrapment ($r = .33, p < .01$). Lastly, psychological entrapment was significantly positively correlated with cyberbullying victimization ($r = .29, p < .01$).

Mediation Analysis

The mediation role of psychological entrapment between cyberbullying victimization and cognitive reappraisal/expressive suppression was analyzed by running the structural equation modeling using the software Smart PLS 4.1.0.0. Notably, the model (cyberbullying victimization as predictor) exhibited a significant substantial 08.2% variance in psychological entrapment ($R^2 = 0.08$). However, the variance of cognitive reappraisal ($R^2 = 0.23$) and expressive suppression ($R^2 = 0.15$) was very significant in the cases of cyberbullying victimization and psychological entrapment as predictors. The direct and indirect effect is shown in the table 3.

Figure 1: Cyberbullying Victimization through Psychological Entrapment and Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression

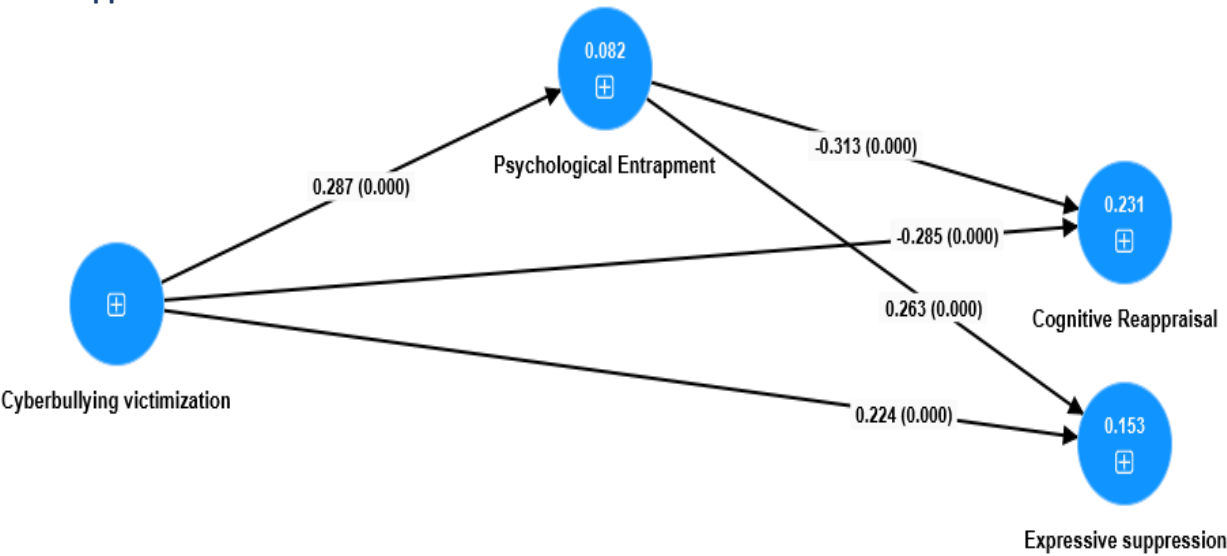


Table III: Direct and Indirect Effects

Causal Path	95% CI				
	β	t	p	LL	UL
Cyberbullying Victimization → Psychological Entrapment	0.29	4.28	0.00	0.15	0.42
Cyberbullying Victimization → Cognitive Reappraisal	-0.29	4.59	0.00	-0.40	-0.16
Cyberbullying Victimization → Expressive Suppression	0.22	4.21	0.00	0.11	0.32
Psychological Entrapment → Cognitive Reappraisal	-0.31	5.65	0.00	-0.42	-0.20
Psychological Entrapment → Expressive Suppression	0.26	4.51	0.00	0.15	0.37
Cyberbullying Victimization → Psychological Entrapment → Cognitive Reappraisal	-0.09	3.24	0.00	-0.15	-0.04
Cyberbullying Victimization → Psychological Entrapment → Cognitive Reappraisal	0.08	3.12	0.00	0.04	0.13

As seen in Table 3, cyberbullying victimization has a statistically significant positive direct effect on psychological entrapment ($\beta = 0.29, p < .001$). In addition, there was a significant negative direct effect of cyberbullying victimization on cognitive reappraisal ($\beta = -0.29, p < .001$). The direct pathway, however, was significant and positive for cyberbullying victimization and expressive suppression ($\beta = 0.22, p < .001$). Furthermore, psychological

entrapment has significant negative direct effect on cognitive reappraisal ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < .001$). Expressive suppression ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < .001$) was significantly positively direct predictor of psychological entrapment. Mediation analysis was then conducted to examine if there was a mediating effect between cyberbullying victimization and emotion regulation strategies. The indirect effect of cyberbullying victimization on cognitive reappraisal through psychological entrapment was significant with a $\beta = -0.09$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.15, -0.04] (see Table 3). This suggests that psychological entrapment is a significant mediator between cyberbullying victimization and cognitive reappraisal with the results being that higher levels of cyberbullying victimization are linked to higher levels of psychological entrapment, which are linked to lower levels of cognitive reappraisal. Likewise, the indirect effect of Cyberbullying victimization on Expressive suppression through psychological entrapment was significant ($\beta = 0.08$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.13]). The present findings suggest that psychological entrapment is a significant mediator between cyberbullying victimization and expressive suppression, such that higher levels of cyberbullying victimization are associated with higher levels of psychological entrapment which in turn are associated with higher levels of expressive suppression. In general, the results showed that there are direct relationships between cyberbullying victimization and psychological entrapment, cognitive reappraisal, and expressive suppression. In addition, psychological entrapment plays a role as a strong mediator in the relationships of cyberbullying victimization with cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study explored the associations between cyberbullying victimization, the cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression, and psychological entrapment in young adults. It also investigated whether psychological entrapment mediated the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and emotion-regulation strategies. The overall results confirmed the proposed hypotheses. Expressive suppression and psychological entrapment were positively associated with cyberbullying victimization, whereas cognitive reappraisal was negatively associated with cyberbullying victimization. Cognitive reappraisal was also negatively related to psychological entrapment. Moreover, psychological entrapment played a significant mediating role between cyberbullying victimization and cognitive reappraisal as well as between cyberbullying victimization and expressive suppression. The results indicate that the psychological dimensions of cybervictimization may partly impact victims' subjective feeling of being trapped, which may subsequently affect the ways they cope with their emotions. The first hypothesis was that there would be a positive correlation between cyberbullying victimization, expressive suppression and psychological entrapment for young adults. This hypothesis was confirmed by the findings: the more exposed to cyberbullying, the more expressive suppression and psychological entrapment. In line with Chen et al. (2025), victimization was associated with higher levels of expressive suppression and negative psychological outcomes. In a similar fashion, Munir et al. (2024) pointed out that cyberbullying is related to emotion regulation problems. Psychological entrapment was also highlighted as a significant reaction to stressful and traumatic events by Rasmussen et al. (2023). The results offer insight into how repeated online harassment can induce feelings of helplessness and lack of control in victims, which may result in the suppression of emotional responses, instead of openly processing or expressing them. These experiences can be exacerbated by the chronicity of cyberbullying experiences, where victims may not feel able to leave negative interactions that take place across digital platforms. While cyberbullying is similar to many types of bullying in the real world, it can be available beyond the initial encounter, and can be seen in different environments. Therefore, victims might be unable to create a psychological distance from the perpetrator of the harassment. This is corroborated by qualitative research which has suggested that young people might perceive cybervictimisation as being a universal and challenging experience to escape, which is ruminated upon, worrying about, and hindering them from seeking help (Holfeld and Mishna 2019).

The second hypothesis suggested that there would be a negative relationship between cyberbullying victimization and cognitive reappraisal. The results confirmed this hypothesis, as youth exposed to higher levels of cyberbullying victimization reported using cognitive reappraisal at lower levels. The findings align with Uddin and Rahman (2022) who emphasized cognitive reappraisal as a protective mechanism to cope with the impact of cybervictimization. Likewise, Tao et al. (2024) showed that cognitive-emotional regulation strategies play a crucial role in the understanding of the link between cyberbullying experiences and psychological well-being. Humiliating, threatening or distressful experiences online can lead to more negative thoughts and rumination, which can be a

challenge for victims to see stressful events from other angles. The cognitive reappraisal strategy demands cognitive flexibility, and when an individual has been cyber-victimized for a long period of time, he or she may not be able to use this strategy adequately. The current result is also consistent with Munir et al. (2024) who observed a negative correlation between cognitive reappraisal and cyberbullying among adolescents in Pakistan. Overall, the findings from the samples across Pakistan indicate that cognitive reappraisal might be especially important for adolescents' responses to negative online experiences. However, the results of the present study should be interpreted with caution because of its cross-sectional design and should not be interpreted as a certain consequence of cyberbullying. Otherwise, people who tend to reappraise less frequently could be more easily triggered into feeling threatened or upset by online interactions.

This is in line with the study conducted by Shaheen et al. (2023) which explored the effect of cognitive emotion-regulation strategies on the link between cyberbullying victimization and psychological distress in 400 students from Wah Cantt, Rawalpindi and Islamabad. They found that adaptive cognitive strategies were related to reduced psychological distress and buffered the negative relationship between cyberbullying and distress. The third hypothesis was that cognitive reappraisal would have a negative correlation with psychological entrapment. This was also confirmed by the hypothesis. Participants who had more negative thoughts regarding entrapment/helplessness showed less cognitive reappraisal. The result is in line with Wessa et al. (2024), who found that stressful experiences can hinder people's regulation of negative emotions by cognitive reappraisal. Psychological entrapment is characterized by a sense of helplessness, limited options and not being able to get out of an undesirable situation. These perceptions can diminish the ability to flexibly reinterpret distressing experiences. If people feel that they cannot possibly change their situation, they can start to concentrate on the bad things and may be unable to think about other possibilities. Thus, psychological entrapment could be a significant psychological state linked to problems in adaptive emotion regulation.

The fourth hypothesis suggested that cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression would be mediated by psychological entrapment when it comes to cyberbullying victimization. This hypothesis was supported by the findings, which showed that psychological entrapment mediated the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. The results indicate that the impact of cyber-victimization may be indirect rather than direct, via important psychological pathways. The results are in line with the recent studies that identified the mediating psychological processes between cybervictimization and its consequences. Hu et al. (2025) has shown that emotion-regulation strategies acted as an important mediator between the relationship of bullying victimization and mental health. Likewise, Molero Jurado et al. (2025) suggested that psychological flexibility and inflexibility are important factors that mediate the relationship between cybervictimization and emotional symptoms. Moreover, Hayat et al. (2025) identified cognitive processes of emotion regulation as a mediator between victimization and psychopathological symptoms of childhood, and Wu et al. (2025) showed that psychological experiences could serve as mediators between cyberbullying victimization and subsequent outcomes. Overall, the results suggest that victimization can have a direct impact on psychological functioning via intervening cognitive and emotional processes.

The present study contributes to this literature by revealing psychological entrapment as a possible pathway between cyberbullying victimization and emotion-regulation strategies. Repeatedly experiencing rejection, humiliation, and powerlessness from cyberbullying may make it seem to victims that they can't escape or change. These entrapment emotions can later lead to decreased use of cognitive reappraisal and increased use of expressive suppression. Psychological entrapment seems to be a significant psychological mechanism that could relate to adaptive and maladaptive emotion-regulation strategies that can be the consequence of cyberbullying victimization. The results indicate that cyberbullying victimization is related to significant psychological and emotional issues in youth. The higher the amount of cyberbullying exposure, the more psychological entrapment, expressive suppression, and the less cognitive reappraisal. Importantly, psychological entrapment was an intermediary between cyberbullying victimization and both emotion-regulation strategies. The results underscore the need to deal with not just cyberbullying behavior, but with the victim's sense of powerlessness and that he or she can't get out of the uncomfortable situation. Interventions could be enhanced by improving adaptive emotion regulation (e.g., cognitive reappraisal), and by supporting youth adults in decreasing the sense of psychological entrapment, as well as in developing more effective methods of coping with unsettling online experiences.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a number of restrictions that should be taken into account. The cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences; longitudinal and/or experimental designs are required to establish the direction of the mediation model. The sample was obtained from three universities of a single city through purposive sampling, thus limiting the generalization to other parts of Pakistan and non-university young adults. All measures were self-reported, and may have been subject to a social desirability and/or recall bias, especially for a sensitive topic like online harassment. Last, the differences in results with the bivariate and the structural model analyses for expressive suppression highlight the importance of studying these associations in larger, more representative samples with other variables that we did not measure here, like perceived social support, cultural emotion norms, or platform-specific exposure. Longitudinal studies of entrapment and emotion regulation also would be useful to determine if change in reappraisal and emotion suppression are outcomes of entrapment, antecedents to entrapment or if they are co-occurring.

V. CONCLUSION

This study found that cyberbullying victimization is associated with increased psychological entrapment, which, in turn, led to increased expressive suppression and decreased cognitive reappraisal among Pakistani young adults, and this explained a portion of the variance in cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. The results bring together cyberbullying victimization, emotion regulation and entrapment and tested the latter as an explicit mediator in a single model and a population/culture rarely studied: young adult Pakistanis. Psychological effects of cyberbullying may, therefore, necessitate interventions that go beyond addressing the act of cyberbullying to helping address the felt sense of being trapped, which can be created by cyberbullying.

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