

ROLE THE OF INSTITUTIONAL POLICY LITERACY IN STRENGTHENING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, REDUCING FEAR OF RELAXATION, AND PROMOTING BYSTANDER INTERVENTION, FORMAL REPORTING AND ACADEMIC PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT

Online harassment in Pakistani universities extends beyond social media into academic group chats. Yet few researchers examine how policy knowledge shapes student responses. This quantitative study investigated how understanding campus rules impacts psychological safety, retaliation fear, bystander action and formal reporting among university students. Most students faced high exposure to digital misconduct inside class networks. However, undergraduates knew very little about institutional policies. This knowledge gap stayed wide through the first three years. Policy awareness improved only during the final year of study. Fear of peer backlash was remarkably high across campus. Male and female students shared the exact same concerns. When fear of retaliation increased, psychological safety dropped drastically. Hostile digital environments clearly silence student voices and disrupt learning. Crucially, knowing campus guidelines directly boosted willingness to intervene or report misconduct. These results prove that static guidelines alone cannot ensure safety. Higher education leaders must move beyond hosting rules on university websites. Administration must provide interactive policy training during early student orientation. Finally, safe, anonymous reporting systems remain essential to protect reporters from peer backlash.

I. INTRODUCTION

Universities today rely heavily on online learning platforms and virtual classrooms. While these systems make education accessible, they also create space for digital misconduct. Cyberbullying and harassment are growing problems across higher education campuses. Unlike physical classrooms, online spaces follow students everywhere, which makes harmful behaviour possible at any time. To manage this issue, institutions create digital codes of conduct, cyberbullying policies and reporting tools. In Pakistan, universities rely heavily on informal communication channels like WhatsApp and Discord for daily academic updates. Class announcements and group projects routinely happen in these unmonitored groups. However, sharing personal phone numbers exposes students to unwanted messages, stalking and digital harassment after class hours. This situation creates high

vulnerability especially for female students. Written policies alone cannot fix campus abuse unless students understand them properly. Policy awareness means knowing what counts as digital misconduct, how to submit formal complaints and what safety measures exist. When rules are hidden or confusing, students lose trust in university systems and handle harassment alone. Reporting decisions depend heavily on psychological safety and fear of peer hostility. Psychological safety is the belief that students can report problems without facing bad consequences. Conversely, fear of retaliation involves concerns about losing friends, facing peer conflict or suffering academic damage. In digital spaces where direct contact information is visible, fear stays high because abuse easily enters private messages. These psychological factors directly shape bystander actions and formal complaint habits. Witnesses often stay silent due to online anonymity. Clear policy guidelines give bystanders confidence to help targets and report incidents officially. When guidelines lack clarity, formal reporting drops that allow abuse to go on unchecked. Ultimately, persistent digital harassment causes severe stress, lower concentration, falling grades and dropout risks. Examining policy literacy helps universities build safer learning environments for everyone.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding harassment requires examining aggressive actions across physical and digital spaces. Traditional bullying involves three main traits that are intention to harm, continued abuse and power imbalances between victims and aggressors (Farrington et al., 2021). With digitalization, these have extended to online forums (Cassidy et al., 2013). Cyberbullying shares core features with offline abuse but adds fast sharing, public exposure and online anonymity (Li, 2007; Research Consortium Archive, 2026). Campus harassment works within complex university structures (Harrison et al., 2022). Sexual harassment includes unwelcome conduct that creates hostile learning spaces (Brown et al., 2022). These behaviours worsen through power gaps between faculty and students or supervisors and subordinates (McMahon et al., 2026). Institutional hostility remains tied to structural inequalities, organizational cultures and broader social biases (Wertans & Chakraborti, 2024). Furthermore, modern campuses face targeted hostility through identity discrimination, micro aggressions and online hate speech (Bond & Haynes-Baratz, 2021). The digital landscape lets aggressive acts cross physical boundaries, turning student online groups into spaces where offline and digital victimization continuously overlap (Batool et al., 2025; Bussu et al., 2025). Highlighting these overlapping forms of abuse helps explain why targets struggle to feel safe on campus. Research documents high rates of bullying, cyberbullying and harassment across educational institutions globally (Cassidy et al., 2017; Kowalski et al., 2014). Meta-analytic evidence shows school bullying remains a widespread issue that requires educational interventions (Farrington et al., 2021). Cyberbullying victimization among youth remains high, showing overlap between offline bullying and digital abuse (Kowalski et al., 2014; Lee & Shin, 2017). In higher education, digital hostility affects large student populations (Bussu et al., 2025; Kokkinos et al., 2014). Research in regional university contexts reveals widespread online harassment among female students via messaging applications and social platforms (Ahmed & Wazir, 2025; Udai & Sharma, 2025). Consequences of cyberbullying extend across psychological, academic and developmental dimensions (Giumetti et al., 2022). Psychologically, targets face anxiety, depression, lower self-esteem, panic and heightened suicidal ideation driven by persistent digital exposure (Long et al., 2026; Surrender et al., 2010).

Academically, hostile environments impair focus, study habits and academic performance, leading to learning environment decay and higher student dropout rates (Aparisi et al., 2021; Muzamil & Shah, 2016). Involvement in aggressive dynamics across growth stages creates long-term vulnerabilities, including antisocial traits, substance abuse and chronic social isolation (Sourander et al., 2007). Longitudinal studies on youth from early adulthood confirm that being bullied significantly increases psychiatric and social risks over time (Sourander et al., 2007; Sourander et al., 2010). Academically, hostile campus lives and digital abuse are related to reduced self-efficacy, reduced study strategies, lower performance and higher dropout rates. This is prevalent among female students and minorities groups (Aparisi et al., 2021; Fredricks et al., 2004; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). Victims experience emotional trauma that disrupts daily functioning, leading to self-censorship, social withdrawal and defensive digital disconnection to avoid ongoing aggression (Leary, 1983; McVay et al., 2025). Institutional responses shape how students interpret, react to and report cyberbullying incidents (Låftman et al., 2017; Myers & Cowie, 2017). Psychological safety, the belief that an environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, is important for letting victims and witnesses speak up without fearing negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999; Newman et al., 2017).

Environments with strong policy clarity foster higher psychological safety, encouraging pro social bystander intervention and building administrative trust (O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). Conversely, procedural vagueness and weak enforcement cause institutional betrayal, leading to victim silence and widespread distrust in official channels (Brunk, 2022; Frasca et al., 2025). When university leaders set clear anti-bullying frameworks, cyberbullying rates decrease (Bussu et al., 2025; Låftman et al., 2017). Unaddressed harassment damages institutional trust and reduces formal reporting rates (Boyd et al., 2023; Helka et al., 2024). Underreporting remains a serious challenge across educational settings (Harrison et al., 2020). Key barriers include fear of retaliation, peer stigma, administrative mistrust and lack of clear information regarding legal protections (Aviso et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2005). Although students may know national laws, reporting depends heavily on trusting campus officials (Chohan, 2025). When official systems fail, targets often turn to peer networks or digital platforms to seek accountability outside formal channels (Cowie & Smith, 2009; Devesa, 2025).

Bystanders play central roles in escalating or reducing harassment (Civita et al., 2026; Gini et al., 2008). Latané and Darley's Five-Step Bystander Intervention Model shows how cognitive, situational and structural factors shape helping choices (Bloom et al., 2024; Brody, 2021). In online spaces, bystander actions depend on anonymity, group size and abuse severity (Macaulay et al., 2022; you & Lee, 2019). Larger group sizes often cause diffusion of responsibility, leading to passive behaviour (Hayashi & Tahmasbi, 2020). Conversely, active intervention, such as confronting abusers or comforting targets, stems from high empathy, personal responsibility and low moral disengagement (Huang et al., 2023; Machackova et al., 2018). Individual factors like emotional closeness and personal accountability significantly increase helping behaviour (Macháčková et al., 2013). However, unbalanced power dynamics suppress action (Borthakur et al., 2026). Witnesses rarely step forward when perpetrators hold power over targets, as students weigh academic risks before acting (Kuntz & Searle, 2023; McMahon et al., 2026). At the organizational level, programs like the "Green Dot" initiative build supportive campus climates (Coker et al., 2018). Yet, without clear administrative support and reliable reporting channels, long-term gains in bystander action fade (Bond & Haynes-Baratz, 2021). Addressing harassment and cyberbullying in Pakistani universities requires clear governance connecting legal rules, campus policies and digital safety programs (Betuš et al., 2026; Tahir et al., 2025). Key rules include HEC anti-harassment guidelines, the Workplace Harassment Act and PECA 2016 (Zahra et al., 2025). Even with these laws, practices vary greatly between public and private institutions regarding policy communication and support services (Harrison et al., 2020). Strong university rules must define digital misconduct, set up active Harassment Monitoring Cells and protect targets from retaliation (Bussu et al., 2025). Effective campus governance rests on three main pillars (Tahir et al., 2025). Legal frameworks align local policies with national laws against online stalking (Zahra et al., 2025). Technological safeguards add security through safe network systems, reporting channels and safety workshops (Alnajim et al., 2023). Psychosocial supports build psychological safety, encourage bystander actions and offer private counselling (Asad & Asif, 2026; Zahra et al., 2025). Campus safety policies must also include digital citizenship education tailored to local online habits (Alnajim et al., 2023). Practical steps like reporting apps, rights workshops and cyber security drives increase legal awareness about PECA 2016, helping female students navigate online spaces safely (Chohan, 2025). Sustainable campus safety in Pakistan needs balanced systems connecting legal rules, practical tools and cultural awareness (Betuš et al., 2026; Zahra et al., 2025).

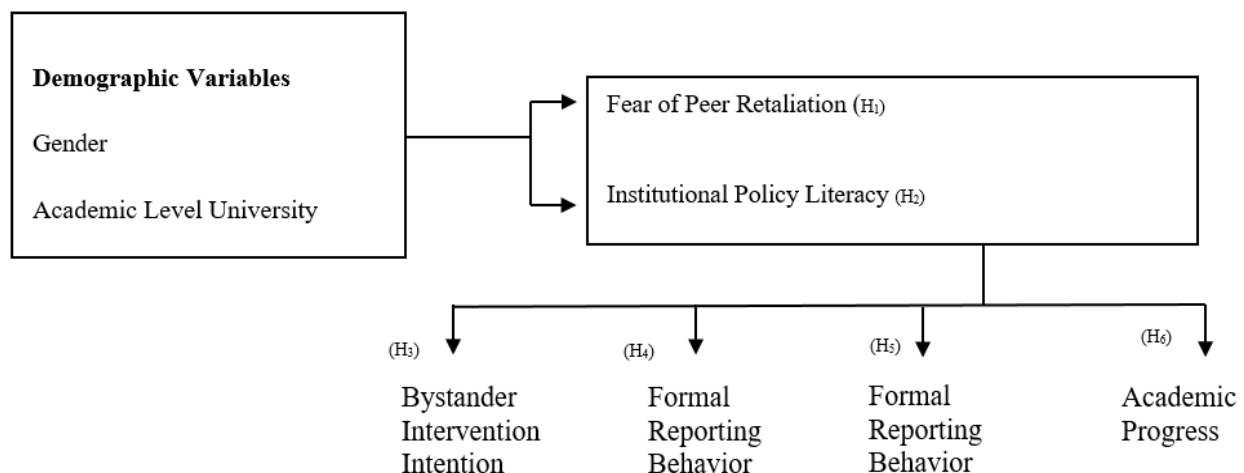
Rationale

Despite formal HEC policies and PECA 2016 laws, cyberbullying remains a major issue across Pakistani campuses (Tahir et al., 2025). Most existing studies focus on Western universities, leaving local reporting barriers and policy awareness unexamined (Li, 2008). This study addresses that gap by evaluating how student policy literacy directly influences formal reporting, bystander action and academic continuity. The study provides three contributions. First, it provides direct local data on how Pakistani students navigate online abuse within strict cultural and family honour dynamics (Chohan, 2025). Second, findings offer actionable guidance for campus leaders and Harassment Monitoring Cells (Bussu et al., 2025). Identifying why targets stay silent helps administrators build reporting routes that are private and safe. Third, results give evidence-based recommendations to regulatory bodies like the HEC. It moves campus safety past basic paperwork toward practical protections, including digital literacy training and dedicated support services. Ultimately, this study provides essential evidence to transform theoretical university policies into real campus protections.

Conceptual Framework

This study uses a simple model to show how student background and policy knowledge shape safety outcomes in Pakistani universities. Gender and study year represent basic background traits. These factors influence how students perceive authority, gather information and experience digital vulnerability. Institutional policy literacy measures student knowledge regarding campus harassment guidelines, oversight cells and legal rights under national laws. Outcome variables include bystander action, formal reporting, study progress and psychological safety. Fear of peer retaliation also acts as a critical factor. Overall, background differences influence policy awareness across campus. Stronger policy literacy directly encourages students to support peers and report incidents officially.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study



Theoretical Frameworks

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986)

This shows that human actions result from interactions between personal thoughts, surrounding environments and behaviour. Campus policies and digital rules act as key environmental structures. When students know their rights and PECA 2016 laws, their cognitive understanding increases. This knowledge builds confidence, helping students navigate complaint channels and protect academic progress while reducing fear of peer hostility.

The Five-Step Bystander Intervention Model (Latané & Darley, 1970)

It outlines stages before stepping in: noticing an issue, recognizing an emergency, accepting personal responsibility, choosing how to help and taking action. Policy knowledge directly supports the final stages. Clear understanding of university rules helps peers spot online misconduct quickly and provides simple steps that encourage bystander intervention.

Institutional Betrayal Theory (Freyd, 2014)

It explains that when trusted universities fail to protect students, harm worsens. Unclear guidelines caused by poor administrative communication create deep distrust. Conversely, high policy literacy promotes institutional fairness. When universities actively inform students about reporting options, formal reporting behaviour grows because targets trust campus officials to provide real protection.

Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate the relationship between institutional cyberbullying policy literacy and bystander intervention intention among university students.
2. To evaluate the relationship between institutional cyberbullying policy literacy and perceived psychological safety among university students.
3. To evaluate the relationship between institutional cyberbullying policy literacy and fear of peer retaliation among university students.

4. To evaluate the relationship between institutional cyberbullying policy literacy and formal reporting behaviour among university students.
5. To evaluate the relationship between institutional cyberbullying policy literacy and academic progress among university students.

Hypotheses of the Study

- H₁: Female university students demonstrate a significantly higher fear of peer retaliation regarding cyberbullying compared to male university students.
- H₂: Junior university students (1st and 2nd year) demonstrate a significantly lower level of institutional cyberbullying policy literacy compared to senior university students (3rd and 4th year).
- H₃: There is a significant positive relationship between institutional cyberbullying policy literacy and bystander intervention intention among university students.
- H₄: There is a significant positive relationship between institutional cyberbullying policy literacy and perceived psychological safety among university students.
- H₅: There is a significant positive relationship between institutional cyberbullying policy literacy and formal reporting behaviour among university students.
- H₆: There is a significant positive relationship between institutional cyberbullying policy literacy and academic progress among university students.

III. METHOD

Participants

The sample includes 250 students from public and private universities in Lahore, Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Participants are selected using convenience and purposive sampling. The sample covers undergraduate and postgraduate students active in university digital channels like WhatsApp groups and Discord servers. Students must be at least 18 years old, currently enrolled in target cities and active on university digital platforms. They must have witnessed or experienced online discomfort in student groups and agreed to join the live Google Meet filling session. Students under 18, those from other cities, those with no online group exposure or those submitting incomplete forms are excluded.

Measures

Data is gathered using a composite questionnaire consisting of 30 items divided across six primary subscales, rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). To ensure content validity and structural appropriateness for Pakistani university contexts, the adapted items underwent expert evaluation by a panel of three PhD scholars in psychology. These experts reviewed item phrasing, conceptual clarity and cultural alignment, confirming the scale items before integrating them into a unified, 30-item composite instrument. **[I]** Institutional Policy Literacy (IV): a 5-item scale adapted from Rigby and Smith (2011), Cowie, and Smith (2009) measures student knowledge about campus safety rules and PECA 2016 laws. **[II]** *Perceived Psychological Safety* (DV 1): Measured using Edmondson's (1999) 5-item scale. Items 6 and 8 are reverse coded. **[III]** Fear of Peer Retaliation (DV 2): Measured using Leary's (1983) 5-item Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale. **[IV]** Bystander Intervention Intention (DV 3): A 5-item scale adapted from Brody (2021) and Machackova et al. (2018) measures willingness to help peers during online abuse. **[V]** Formal Reporting Behavior (DV 4): A 5-item scale adapted from Wilson et al. (2005) evaluates intentions to report misconduct to campus officials. **[VI]** Academic Progress (DV 5): A 5-item scale adapted from Pintrich and De Groot (1990) measures study engagement and performance.

Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained before sharing survey links across student groups. Participants joined a short live Google Meet session where instructions were explained. Students accepted digital consent on page one of the Google Form before answering items independently. Responses were exported to IBM SPSS for analysis. Participation was voluntary and students could leave at any point without penalty. No names roll numbers or email addresses were collected to ensure complete privacy. Data will be analysed using IBM SPSS (Version 23). Screening will remove incomplete forms, and reverse items will be re-coded. Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) will test

reliability. Frequencies, means and standard deviations will summarize the sample. Independent samples *t*-tests will evaluate differences across gender and academic levels, while Pearson correlation and simple linear regression will test direct relationships between policy literacy and student outcomes at $\alpha=0.05$.

IV.RESULTS

Before statistical testing, data screening removed one incomplete case ($N=249$). Pilot testing ($N=30$) confirmed scale reliability and diagnostic checks satisfied all parametric assumptions.

Table I: Psychometric Properties, Chronbach's Alphas, and Distributional Properties of Continuous Variables (N=249)

Variables	No. of Items	α	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Institutional policy Literacy	5	.82	11.45	5.18	0.42	-0.65
Perceived Psychological Safety	5	.86	14.12	4.23	-0.18	-0.52
Fear of Peer Retaliation	5	.79	18.67	3.75	-0.35	0.12
Bystandard Intervention Intention	5	.84	14.04	4.43	0.11	-0.78
Formal Reporting Behavior	5	.81	15.98	3.90	-0.24	-0.41
Academic Progress and Performance	5	.88	12.24	5.41	0.31	-0.85

Note. $N=249$. α = Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients confirmed strong internal consistency across all scales. Skewness and kurtosis values fell within acceptable limits, confirming normal distribution for parametric analyses. The sample ($N=249$, 67.9% female, $M_{age}=21.56$) showed low policy briefing (8.4%) and high harassment exposure (68.7%). Normal skewness and kurtosis values confirmed parametric assumptions for inferential testing.

Table II: Bivariate Pearson Correlations among Main Study Variables (N=249)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Institutional policy Literacy	--					
2. Perceived Psychological Safety	.85***	--				
3. Fear of Peer Retaliation	-.55***	.71***	--			
4. Bystandard Intervention Intention	.75***	.73***	-.38**	--		
5. Formal Reporting Behavior	.67***	.61***	-.32**	.73***	--	
6. Academic Progress and Performance	.85***	.84***	-.55***	.83***	.76***	--

Pearson correlation coefficients ($N=249$) were calculated to test relationships among main variables (Table 3). All correlations were statistically significant ($p<.001$). Institutional policy literacy showed strong positive links with psychological safety ($r=.853$), bystander intervention ($r=.746$), formal reporting ($r=.673$) and academic progress ($r=.853$), but correlated negatively with fear of retaliation ($r=-.549$). Fear of retaliation was negatively associated with all positive outcomes. This showed its strongest negative link with psychological safety ($r=-.710$). Overall, higher policy literacy and psychological safety relate to increased reporting, intervention, and academic success.

Table III: Independent Samples *t*-Test for Gender Differences in Fear of Peer Relation (N=249)

Variable	Gender	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Fear of Peer Retaliation	Male	69	18.63	3.63	0.30	247	.764	0.05
	Female	80	18.81	4.02				

An independent-samples *t*-test evaluated gender differences in fear of peer retaliation (Table 4). Female students ($M=18.60$, $SD = 3.63$) reported slightly lower fear scores than male students ($M =18.81$, $SD=4.02$). This difference was not statistically significant, $t(247) = 0.301$, $p = .764$, *Cohen's d*=0.055. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Table IV: One-Way ANOVA and Post-Hoc Comparisons for Policy Literacy across Academic Cohorts (N=249)

Variable	Group	n	M	SD	F (3, 245)	p	η^2	Significant Post-Hoc Pairs (Tukey HSD)
Institutional Policy Literacy	1 st Year	35	10.37	5.18	5.66	.001	.06	4 th Year > 1 st Year ($p=.005$)
	2 nd Year	96	11.58	5.18				4 th Year > 2 nd Year ($p=.020$)
	3 rd Year	76	10.58	5.18				4 th Year > 3 rd Year ($p=.001$)
	4 th Year	42	14.38	5.18				

A one-way ANOVA examined policy literacy differences across undergraduate study years (1st to 4th year). The effect was significant, $F(3, 245)=5.663, p=.001, \eta^2=.065$. Tukey HSD tests showed 4th-year students ($M=14.38$) scored significantly higher than 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year students ($p<.05$). Literacy stayed low and flat across junior years ($p>.05$). Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Table V: Simple Linear Regression Predicting Bystander Intervention Intention from Institutional Policy Literacy

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
(Constant)	6.733	.462	—	14.584	<.001	[5.823, 7.643]
Policy Literacy	0.638	.036	.746	17.607	<.001	[0.567, 0.709]

A simple linear regression was run to test if institutional policy literacy predicts bystander intervention intention. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 247)=310.021, p<.001$, explaining 55.7% of the variance ($R^2=.557$). Policy literacy strongly predicted intervention intentions ($\beta=.746, t=17.607, p<.001$), fully supporting Hypothesis 3.

Table VI: Simple Linear Regression Analysis of Policy Literacy Predicting Perceived Psychological Safety

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Constant	0.27	.52	-	0.52	.60	[-0.75, 1.29]
Policy Literacy	1.05	.04	.85	25.73	<.001	[0.97, 1.13]

A simple linear regression was conducted to evaluate whether institutional policy literacy predicts perceived psychological safety. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 247)=661.124, p<.001$, accounting for 72.8% of the variance ($R^2=.728$). Institutional policy literacy was a significant positive predictor of psychological safety ($\beta=.853, t=25.712, p<.001$), fully supporting Hypothesis 4.

Table VII: Simple Linear Regression Analysis predicting Policy Literacy from Formal Reporting Behavior

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Constant	10.18	.45		22.56	<.001	[9.29, 11.07]
Policy Literacy	0.51	.03	.67	14.29	<.001	[0.44, 0.58]

Simple linear regression showed that institutional policy literacy significantly predicted formal reporting behavior, $F(1, 247) = 204.334, p<.001$. Policy literacy explained 45.3% of the variance ($R^2=.453$) and served as a strong positive predictor ($\beta=.673, t=14.295, p<.001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was fully supported.

Table VIII: Simple Linear Regression Analysis predicting the Effect of Policy Literacy on Academic Progress

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Constant	0.27	.51		0.52	.600	[-0.74, 1.29]
Policy Literacy	1.04	.04	.85	25.73	<.001	[0.96, 1.12]

Simple linear regression showed institutional policy literacy significantly predicted academic progress, $F(1, 247)=662.013, p<.001$. Policy literacy explained 72.8% of the variance in academic performance ($R^2=.728$,

Adjusted $R^2=.727$) and was a strong positive predictor ($\beta=.853$, $t=25.730$, $p<.001$). Thus, Hypothesis 6 was fully supported.

Overall, Institutional policy literacy significantly predicted bystander intervention ($R^2=.557$), formal reporting ($R^2=.453$), and academic progress ($R^2=.728$). Fear of retaliation did not differ by gender ($p=.764$). ANOVA showed fourth-year students had significantly higher policy literacy than junior cohorts ($p=.001$). Four of five hypotheses were supported. Descriptive analysis showed that 68.7% of students experienced or witnessed harassment in class digital groups. One-way ANOVA revealed a policy knowledge gap ($p=.001$), where literacy remained low across first to third-year cohorts, increasing significantly only in fourth-year students ($p<.05$). An independent-samples t -test indicated no gender difference in fear of retaliation ($p=.764$). Finally, fear of retaliation decreased psychological safety ($r=-.710$, $p<.001$).

V. DISCUSSION

Results showed that females ($M=18.60$, $SD=3.63$) demonstrated slightly lower mean levels in fear of peer retaliation than males ($M=18.81$, $SD=4.02$). This result aligns with Macháčková et al. (2013), who examined bystander behaviors and retaliation fears in cyberbullying, concluding that fear of peer consequences operates similarly across genders. Macaulay et al. (2022) also noted that situational characteristics like publicity and severity dictate retaliation fears regardless of gender. Similarly, Zheng and Zhou (2022) argued that hesitation to report due to social repercussions stems from institutional and peer factors rather than student gender. Conversely, Vaillancourt et al. (2021) found that victimized girls suffered more negative psychological impacts from peer harassment than boys did. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) also reported that girls experienced higher relational consequences. The divergence in the present study may stem from sample characteristics, as participants were mature higher education students ($M=21.56$). Analysis revealed that policy literacy significantly differs across academic years, with senior students demonstrating higher literacy than junior students, supporting Hypothesis 2. This finding aligns with general educational progression models where exposure to institutional frameworks increases over time. However, Ermumcu et al. (2026) found no significant grade-level differences in online policy awareness, though seniors reported higher cyber victimization. In qualitative work by Faucher et al. (2020), students stressed that policy education and awareness are necessary to prevent and resolve cyberbullying, reinforcing the value of targeted orientation for junior cohorts. Hypothesis 3 was supported. Institutional cyberbullying policy literacy significantly predicted bystander intervention intention ($\beta=.746$, $p<.001$), accounting for 55.7% of the variance. This result aligns with Harrison et al. (2020), who emphasized that transparent anti-bullying policies increase student likelihood to intervene. Huang et al. (2023) similarly noted that preparedness and policy clarity enhance student responsibility and intervention.

Nevertheless, Kuntz and Searle (2023) observed that initial bystander intervention intentions could decrease over time without continuous reinforcement. Bussu et al. (2025) also cautioned that policy presence does not always guarantee effective institutional responses, showing that policy literacy is a key driver but must be paired with ongoing support. Understanding institutional cyberbullying policy clearly predicts higher psychological safety among university students. Clear knowledge of campus protections provides certainty, reassuring students that rights are safeguarded within academic spaces. This aligns with Harrison et al. (2020), who noted transparent policies create secure learning environments. Clearly communicated safety protocols reduce peer threats and support open communication (Faucher et al., 2020). Conversely, low policy literacy creates ambiguity that fosters fear of social judgment (Zheng & Zhou, 2022). Bussu et al. (2025) highlighted inadequate administrative responses damage student confidence. A secure environment aids adaptation and reduces student anxiety (Aparisi et al., 2025; Ameh et al., 2025). Institutional cyberbullying policy literacy significantly predicted formal reporting behaviour ($\beta=.673$, $p<.001$), supporting Hypothesis 5 ($R^2=.454$). Students who understand policies and reporting channels feel better prepared to use them. This aligns with Wozencroft et al. (2015), who found that explicit reporting details increase willingness to report. Faucher et al. (2020) similarly highlighted accessible reporting mechanisms as essential post-secondary interventions. However, Bussu et al. (2025) noted that barriers like lack of evidence or perceived severity can suppress reporting despite policy knowledge.

In Pakistan, Awan et al. (2026) identified institutional mistrust and trusted reporting pathways must accompany cultural stigma as ongoing obstacles, showing that policy literacy. Hypothesis 6 was supported, as policy literacy significantly predicted academic progress ($R^2=.728$, $\beta=.853$). Clear policy knowledge protects student interests, allowing them to focus on academic goals. Ameh et al. (2025) similarly reported that students with higher digital literacy and support were 40% less affected academically by online hostility. Aparisi et al. noted that adaptability and safety predict academic performance, whereas younger students with lower policy literacy face greater academic disruption. Sukarna et al. confirmed that strong policy implementation reduces cyberbullying, directly leading to better academic outcomes. Although Bussu et al. (2025) observed that some students attempt to handle abuse independently due to weak implementation; overall evidence confirms that policy literacy safeguards academic continuity. Descriptive findings show that most students face online harassment inside class group chats. This shows how common digital misconduct has become across university networks. A clear policy knowledge gap exists among students. Literacy stays consistently low during the initial three years of university. Awareness increases only among final-year undergraduates. This gap indicates that institutional communication fails to inform junior students early on, as noted by Faucher et al. (2020). Meanwhile, both female and male students express equal fear regarding potential social retaliation. This matches findings by Macháčková et al. (2013), proving that peer pressure affects both genders equally. However, high variance in data suggests possible measurement overlap that future research should address. Finally, fear of backlash strongly reduces psychological safety among undergraduates. This supports Zheng and Zhou (2022), who state that hostile online environments damage trust and limit open student participation in campus life.

Implications of Findings

These findings directly advance the application of the study's core theoretical frameworks within digital academic environments. First, the strong inverse relationship between retaliation fear and psychological safety extends Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory. By showing how peer hostility in class digital groups acts as a coercive environmental factor, the findings demonstrate how environmental threats directly suppress cognitive confidence and personal agency, inhibiting student voice despite individual policy awareness. Second, the gender-neutral nature of retaliation fear refines Latané and Darley's (1970) Five-Step Bystander Intervention Model. The results indicate that barriers to the final execution phase, taking action, might be structurally rooted in collective fear of social costs rather than demographic differences, showing that peer backlash operates as a universal deterrent in online student networks. Finally, the substantial policy knowledge gap among junior undergraduates validates Freyd's (2014) Institutional Betrayal Theory. The lack of early policy literacy illustrates how administrative communication breakdowns may create institutional vulnerabilities, as students cannot trust or utilize protective mechanisms they are not informed about during their early academic years. Universities must address the significant policy knowledge gap among junior undergraduates. Institutional outreach should not rely on late-stage degree orientations. Instead, cyber-misconduct policies and reporting mechanisms must be integrated into first-year orientations with annual awareness programs. Furthermore, because peer hostility directly suppresses student voice, higher education administrators must establish safe, transparent, and strictly confidential reporting channels to mitigate retaliation concerns within class digital groups.

Limitations

Several methodological constraints should be considered when interpreting these results. First, the cross-sectional design restricts the ability to establish strict causal relationships between retaliation fear and reduced psychological safety. Second, data relied entirely on self-reported measures, which may introduce social desirability bias when reporting sensitive experiences of harassment and policy awareness. Finally, the sample focused on a single institutional context, which may limit the direct generalizability of the findings to broader or non-academic online settings. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to track how policy literacy and digital safety perceptions evolve from entry into higher education through graduation. Researchers could also explore qualitative methodologies, such as in-depth interviews, to examine the specific peer dynamics and group structures within class digital networks that trigger retaliation fear. Additionally, future work should evaluate the effectiveness of targeted intervention programs, such as anonymous reporting tools and active bystander training, in restoring psychological safety among university cohorts.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the pervasive challenge of online misconduct within university digital groups and underscores critical vulnerabilities in institutional response. The early-stage policy knowledge gap among undergraduates, combined with equal levels of retaliation fear across genders, demonstrates that passive administrative policies are insufficient. To foster psychologically safe and participatory digital learning environments, higher education institutions must prioritize proactive policy education and robust reporting protections that actively shield students from peer backlash. This study was conducted independently as student-led research. Formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not sought; however, the study strictly adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and standard psychological research protocols. All participants were adults (aged 18 and older), participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the study posed minimal to no risk to participants. Informed consent was obtained electronically from all individual participants prior to data collection. The survey-landing page provided detailed information regarding the research purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data handling practices. Participants explicitly confirmed they were 18 years of age or older before proceeding to the survey. The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly strictly for basic grammar checking, language refinement and copyediting purposes. No artificial intelligence tools or automated generative systems were used in the collection, analysis, reporting, or interpretation of data, nor were they used to write the manuscript or draw research conclusions.

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