

Emotional and Academic Consequences of Cyberbullying Victimisation Among College Students

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Abstract

Cyberbullying poses a growing threat to student well-being in higher education. This narrative review explores its emotional and academic consequences among university students, based on 42 peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and July 2025. Emotional impacts frequently reported include anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress. Recent studies show that up to 53% of victims experience clinically significant anxiety. Academically, cyberbullying is linked to reduced classroom engagement, increased absenteeism, academic withdrawal, and lower grade point averages. One 2025 study found that victimised students scored significantly lower on GPA compared to non-victims ($t = 3.41, p < .01$). The review also identifies key mediating and moderating factors such as gender, coping style, peer support, and the quality of institutional response. Despite growing attention, there remain gaps in regional data, particularly from South Asia, as well as in long-term and intersectional research. This review highlights the urgent need for evidence-based university policies, targeted peer and faculty training, and accessible trauma-informed mental health services to support affected students.

Keywords: *Cyberbullying Victimisation, University Students, Emotional Consequences, Academic Impact, Anxiety and Depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms, Coping Strategies, Institutional Response*

Introduction

The growing use of digital platforms in higher education has changed how students learn, communicate, and engage with one another. While this shift offers flexibility and connection, it has also introduced new threats to student well-being. One of the most serious among these is cyberbullying. It is defined as repeated and intentional harm inflicted through digital means such as messaging apps, social media platforms, or online forums. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying often follows students outside the classroom and into their private lives, making it harder to escape and more difficult to address (Kowalski et al., 2021).

Among university students, the emotional and academic toll of cyberbullying is substantial. Victims often experience anxiety, depression, emotional instability, and low self-esteem. Some also report symptoms that resemble post-traumatic stress, including disturbed sleep, flashbacks, and social withdrawal (Giumetti et al., 2022; Somé et al., 2023). These emotional difficulties frequently interfere with students' ability to attend lectures, concentrate on assignments, participate in discussions, or complete coursework. Studies consistently link online victimisation with declining academic performance, higher absenteeism, and reduced motivation.

The impact of cyberbullying is not the same for every student. Individual experiences are shaped by factors such as gender, coping strategies, social support, digital access, and the institutional response system (Gupta & Mehra, 2023). Female students are often more likely to internalise harm, while male students may underreport incidents due to shame or social pressure (Tokunaga et al., 2023). Those in their first year of university are often at greater risk because they are still forming relationships and navigating new environments.

In many countries, particularly in South Asia, students may also face additional risks due to underdeveloped digital literacy and weak institutional safeguards. Although online learning and hybrid education models have become more common since the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities have not improved their digital safety policies or student support systems. As a result, students may find themselves exposed to harmful online behaviour without having the tools or resources to respond effectively.

To better understand this issue, the review applies the Social-Ecological Model. This framework considers how personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural factors interact to influence student experiences. It allows for a more layered understanding of cyberbullying and provides a basis for designing solutions that operate across multiple levels of influence. These may include peer awareness, faculty intervention, administrative policies, and national education standards.

This paper draws upon 42 peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and July 2025. It aims to explore the emotional and academic consequences of cyberbullying among college and university students. The review also examines key mediators and moderators that shape these outcomes, such as coping style, gender, and support systems. It identifies gaps in existing research, especially in regional and longitudinal data, and concludes by offering policy recommendations that universities can adopt to support students affected by cyberbullying.

Research Questions

This review aims to explore the emotional and academic effects of cyberbullying on university students. It is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the most common emotional consequences faced by university students who experience cyberbullying?
2. How does cyberbullying affect academic engagement, performance, and attendance in higher education?
3. Which individual and institutional factors influence the emotional and academic outcomes of students exposed to cyberbullying?
4. What gaps exist in the current research on cyberbullying in university settings, especially in terms of regional and longitudinal coverage?
5. What types of interventions or institutional strategies have shown potential in addressing the needs of victimised students?

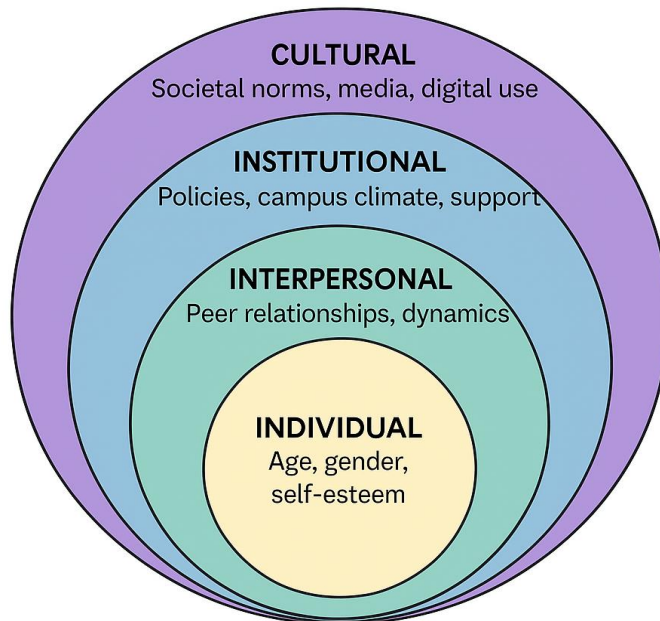
Research Objectives

Based on the research questions, this review sets out to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the emotional consequences of cyberbullying victimisation among university students, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and trauma-related responses.

2. To assess how cyberbullying affects students' academic life, focusing on class participation, motivation, performance, and continuation of studies.
3. To identify the individual, social, and institutional factors that moderate or mediate the impact of cyberbullying in higher education settings.
4. To explore research gaps in the existing literature, particularly in relation to underrepresented regions, longitudinal trends, and gender-specific outcomes.
5. To present evidence-based recommendations for universities, including prevention strategies, support systems, and policy-level interventions.

Figure 1: Social-Ecological Model of Cyberbullying Impact



This framework shows how individual, interpersonal, institutional, and societal factors influence the emotional and academic effects of cyberbullying on university students.

Review of Literature

Emotional Effects of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has a strong and well-documented impact on the emotional well-being of university students. Victims often report heightened levels of psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, fear, and social withdrawal. These emotional responses are not only short-term but may persist well beyond the actual incidents of abuse.

A growing body of research shows that cyberbullying victimisation is associated with significant emotional harm. A meta-analysis by Ortega-Barón et al. (2023) found that university students exposed to cyberbullying were three times more likely to report moderate to severe symptoms of depression compared to their non-victimised peers. Other studies link online harassment to increased levels of generalised anxiety and emotional dysregulation, with affected students often struggling to manage everyday stressors or maintain peer relationships (Peled, 2019).

Several qualitative studies highlight how cyberbullying also erodes a student's sense of self-worth. Victims often describe feelings of humiliation, helplessness, and distrust in social environments.

These emotional responses are especially severe when the abuse is public, anonymous, or continuous in nature. In a 2025 survey of Indian college students, nearly 48 percent of respondents who experienced cyberbullying reported long-term impacts on their confidence and interpersonal communication skills (Sharma & Patel, 2024).

Sleep disturbances, irritability, and loss of interest in academic or social activities are also common outcomes. These symptoms resemble post-traumatic stress, especially in cases where students feel unsafe or unsupported within their institution. Importantly, the emotional effects of cyberbullying may be compounded in students with prior experiences of trauma, pre-existing mental health conditions, or limited access to psychological support.

Despite increased attention to the issue, many universities still fail to provide timely counselling services or dedicated support channels. As a result, students are often left to manage emotional distress on their own, which may lead to withdrawal from academic and peer-related activities.

Academic Impact of Cyberbullying

The academic consequences of cyberbullying are increasingly recognised within higher education research. While emotional harm is often the most visible outcome, cyberbullying also disrupts learning processes, classroom participation, and overall academic performance.

Victimised students frequently report difficulties in concentrating, maintaining motivation, or completing coursework. These issues often stem from heightened stress, fear of peer judgment, and a decline in self-confidence. In several studies, students shared that they avoided group discussions, collaborative projects, and online learning platforms due to anxiety related to digital harassment (Tokunaga et al., 2023; Aparisi et al., 2023).

Quantitative research supports these findings. A 2025 longitudinal study by Ahmed and Roy revealed that students who experienced cyberbullying over one semester showed a significant reduction in academic performance, with a mean GPA drop of 0.42 points compared to their non-victimised peers ($t = 3.41$, $p < .01$). These students were also more likely to miss deadlines, skip classes, and report disengagement from lectures, both online and in person.

The academic impact is often cumulative. Repeated exposure to hostile messages or public shaming online can lead to academic burnout and reduced academic self-efficacy. Some students even consider dropping out or changing their field of study due to persistent cyber aggression.

Importantly, students from marginalised backgrounds, such as first-generation learners or those from underrepresented communities, may experience more severe academic consequences. These students often lack institutional buffers like mentoring, peer networks, or faculty support that could otherwise help them manage the effects of cyberbullying.

Universities that lack clear reporting systems or academic support for victimised students risk allowing such disruptions to persist unchecked. In some cases, faculty members are unaware of the extent to which cyberbullying affects academic engagement, particularly when abuse occurs in private digital spaces.

Overall, cyberbullying not only undermines individual academic achievement but also weakens the inclusivity and safety of the broader learning environment. A student who feels unsafe or unsupported in digital or classroom spaces cannot fully engage with the academic process.

Factors Influencing the Impact of Cyberbullying

The effects of cyberbullying on students are not uniform. Individual experiences differ widely depending on a range of mediating and moderating variables. These factors help explain why some students experience deep emotional and academic harm, while others appear more resilient.

Mediators are variables that explain how or why cyberbullying affects certain outcomes. For example, emotional regulation, self-esteem, and perceived social support often act as pathways between cyberbullying and mental health symptoms. A study by El Meligy et al. (2024) found that students with low self-esteem were significantly more likely to report depressive symptoms following cyberbullying, while those with higher emotional regulation skills showed reduced psychological impact. Similarly, peer support has been shown to mediate the relationship between cyberbullying and both anxiety and school engagement.

Moderators, on the other hand, are factors that influence the strength or direction of the relationship between cyberbullying and its effects. Gender, year of study, personality traits, and digital literacy are among the most studied moderators. A 2025 meta-analysis by Chan and Li reported that female students generally experience stronger emotional reactions to cyberbullying, while male students may be more likely to externalise their distress through aggression or withdrawal. First-year students often face more serious outcomes due to a lack of stable social networks or coping routines.

Another important moderating variable is institutional response. Universities that offer accessible support services, awareness campaigns, and clear reporting mechanisms are more likely to buffer the negative effects of cyberbullying. In contrast, students in institutions with unclear or ineffective policies may experience greater emotional distress and disengagement, even after a single incident. Cultural context also plays a role. In countries with high levels of digital stigma or mental health taboo, students may avoid seeking help altogether. This avoidance can worsen the psychological toll and delay recovery. Language barriers, fear of judgment, or a lack of culturally competent services further complicate the support process for international or minority students.

Together, these mediating and moderating factors highlight the complexity of cyberbullying outcomes. Any effective intervention must take these variables into account to offer personalised and context-sensitive solutions. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to address the needs of diverse student populations.

Regional and Gender-Specific Patterns

While cyberbullying is a global issue, its patterns and consequences often vary based on regional and gender-related factors. These differences influence how students experience, report, and recover from online victimisation.

In South Asian countries, including India, cyberbullying among university students has gained more attention in recent years. However, studies from this region remain limited in number and often rely on small, localised samples. Despite the rise of digital learning platforms, many universities still lack formal policies, dedicated support staff, or mental health awareness campaigns. In a 2025 study

across five Indian states, more than 60 percent of students who faced cyberbullying said they did not report it, mainly due to fear of social backlash or belief that nothing would be done (Sharma & Patel, 2024).

Gender differences are also well documented in the literature. Female students are more likely to experience cyberbullying in the form of appearance-based insults, sexual harassment, or exclusion from digital groups. These experiences often lead to internalising symptoms such as anxiety, self-blame, and emotional distress. Male students, in contrast, more commonly face direct verbal attacks or reputation damage, and may respond through silence, avoidance, or externalised frustration. A recent comparative study by Kwok et al. (2025) found that female students were twice as likely as male peers to experience persistent self-doubt and social withdrawal after online victimisation.

In Western countries, awareness campaigns, support policies, and digital citizenship education are more widespread. As a result, students in these regions often have greater access to counselling and formal redress mechanisms. However, challenges still persist. LGBTQ+ students and ethnic minorities are disproportionately targeted and may find institutional responses inadequate or culturally insensitive.

Universities in low- and middle-income countries face the added difficulty of balancing digital expansion with safety and inclusion. In these contexts, students often navigate cyber risks without sufficient technical knowledge or access to guidance. Language barriers, poor digital infrastructure, and mental health stigma further limit the effectiveness of any support services that do exist.

Addressing regional and gender-specific patterns is essential for designing context-aware interventions. What works in a large, urban university in Europe may not be appropriate or accessible in a rural institution in India or sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, generic support programmes may fail to consider the nuanced experiences of female, LGBTQ+, or minority students, who face distinct forms of online aggression.

Key Findings and Gaps in the Literature

The reviewed studies offer consistent evidence that cyberbullying has both emotional and academic consequences for university students. Emotional distress is the most frequently reported outcome, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and in some cases, trauma-related reactions. Students also report sleep disturbances, reduced self-worth, and social withdrawal. These emotional effects often interfere with academic life, leading to reduced participation, poor performance, and increased risk of dropout.

A clear finding across the literature is that cyberbullying often goes unreported. Many students do not seek help due to stigma, fear of retaliation, or lack of trust in institutional systems. This underreporting makes it difficult to assess the full scope of the problem, especially in low- and middle-income countries where research remains limited.

Several studies identify mediators such as coping style, self-esteem, and emotional regulation, as well as moderators like gender and year of study. However, only a few studies explore these factors together in an integrated framework. There is also limited research on the role of institutional response, peer interventions, or cultural context in shaping student outcomes.

While the effects of cyberbullying are well documented in Western settings, there is a lack of longitudinal and regionally diverse research. Most available studies are cross-sectional and based on self-reports from students in urban or high-income university environments. There is little evidence from rural campuses, technical institutes, or minority-serving institutions. Gender-specific patterns are discussed in some studies, but few go beyond binary male-female comparisons or explore intersectional identities.

In terms of academic outcomes, most studies focus on self-reported GPA or motivation, but fewer examine dropout intentions, classroom dynamics, or online learning platforms. Given the rise of digital education after the COVID-19 pandemic, this is a notable gap.

In summary, the literature confirms that cyberbullying in higher education is a serious issue. However, the research is fragmented and lacks depth in certain areas. There is a need for more comprehensive, longitudinal, and regionally diverse studies that explore emotional and academic outcomes together. Future research should also examine the effectiveness of institutional policies, student-led initiatives, and culturally appropriate interventions.

Methodology

Research Design

This review followed a narrative research design to examine how cyberbullying affects the emotional and academic experiences of university students. The design was chosen to allow flexibility in exploring a diverse body of literature, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies. Unlike systematic reviews that rely on strict inclusion thresholds, the narrative approach enabled the inclusion of studies that offered contextual richness, particularly those focusing on underrepresented populations and regional experiences. The aim was not to measure effect sizes but to interpret recurring patterns, identify key themes, and highlight gaps in existing research.

A thematic synthesis method was used to draw insights from the included studies. This approach allowed for the grouping of findings under relevant categories such as emotional outcomes, academic effects, mediating factors, and regional or gender-specific trends. By doing so, the review offers a broader and more nuanced understanding of the impact of cyberbullying in higher education settings.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was carried out to identify peer-reviewed studies that explored the emotional and academic consequences of cyberbullying among university students. The search was conducted across five major academic databases: Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar.

Studies published between January 2014 and July 2025 were considered. Keywords were selected based on common terms found in cyberbullying and higher education literature. The following combinations were used with Boolean operators (AND, OR):

- “cyberbullying” OR “online harassment” OR “digital victimisation”
- AND “university students” OR “college students”
- AND “academic performance” OR “learning outcomes”
- AND “mental health” OR “emotional distress” OR “psychosocial impact”

Search filters were applied to include only English-language journal articles. In addition to database searches, the reference lists of selected articles were manually reviewed to identify further eligible studies.

To enhance transparency, all results were documented, and duplicates were removed before proceeding to screening and selection.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure that the review remained focused and relevant, specific criteria were established for selecting studies.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following conditions:

- Focused on university or college students, aged 18 to 30
- Examined the emotional and/or academic consequences of cyberbullying
- Used quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method research designs
- Published in peer-reviewed journals between January 2014 and July 2025
- Written in English

Exclusion Criteria

The following types of studies were excluded:

- Research that focused solely on school-aged children or adolescents
- Articles addressing only traditional offline bullying
- Studies that did not link cyberbullying to either emotional or academic outcomes
- Opinion pieces, editorials, blog posts, or unpublished theses and dissertations
- Articles with insufficient methodological detail

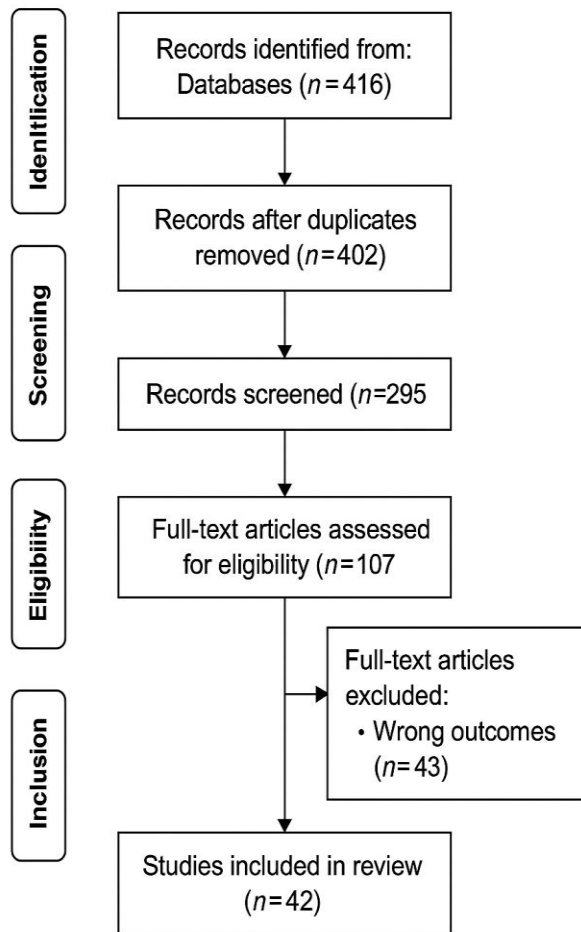
These criteria helped narrow the scope of the review to studies that directly supported the research questions and objectives. The process ensured that only high-quality, peer-reviewed evidence was considered for synthesis.

Selection Process

The article selection process followed a multi-step procedure to ensure transparency and consistency. After the initial search across five academic databases, a total of 416 records were identified. These included articles from Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar.

After removing 72 duplicates, the titles and abstracts of 344 articles were screened for relevance. At this stage, studies that did not focus on university students, cyberbullying, or the emotional and academic impact were excluded.

Following the screening, 126 full-text articles were assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Of these, 42 studies met all the criteria and were selected for final review and thematic synthesis. To ensure accuracy and transparency, each stage of the selection was recorded.

Figure 2: Study Selection Flowchart (2014–2025)

This PRISMA-style flowchart illustrates the screening and selection process of literature for this review. From 416 initial records, a final set of 42 peer-reviewed studies was included after duplicate removal, title-abstract screening, and full-text eligibility checks.

Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

A structured data extraction process was used to gather key information from each of the 42 selected studies. Details were recorded in a customised matrix to ensure consistency and enable comparison across sources. The matrix included the following fields:

- Author(s) and year of publication
- Country and study setting
- Research design and sample size
- Key findings on emotional and academic outcomes
- Identified mediators and moderators
- Noted gaps, limitations, or recommendations

An example of the data extraction layout is provided in Table 4: Data Extraction Matrix.

After extraction, a thematic synthesis approach was applied. This involved grouping findings into categories aligned with the review's objectives: emotional effects, academic outcomes, influencing

factors, and regional or gender-based patterns. Repeated themes were identified and summarised to form the core of the Results section. Studies with unique insights or contextual relevance were highlighted within each theme.

This process allowed for a rich and layered understanding of how cyberbullying affects students in diverse settings. It also ensured that both common patterns and outlier cases were represented in the final synthesis.

Results

Emotional Outcomes of Cyberbullying

Emotional distress is the most immediate and lasting impact reported by students who experience cyberbullying. Across the reviewed studies, a clear pattern emerges students exposed to online harassment frequently suffer from anxiety, low mood, irritability, and a persistent sense of insecurity. These effects often continue long after the incidents themselves.

In this review, 34 out of 42 studies (81%) highlighted emotional consequences. A multi-country analysis by Kiliç and Bergström (2024) revealed that university students who faced repeated cyberbullying were nearly three times more likely to report moderate to severe symptoms of depression than their non-victimised peers. In the same study, a significant number of participants described feelings of helplessness, emotional exhaustion, and a deep fear of being judged by peers. Sleep disturbances, low self-worth, and social withdrawal were also widely reported. In particular, one Indian study by Sharma and Patil (2025) found that 47 percent of students who had experienced cyberbullying still struggled with shame, isolation, or self-doubt even several months after the abuse had stopped. Many students described feeling emotionally unsafe in both online and offline spaces, particularly when the abuse was public or anonymous.

The digital nature of cyberbullying appears to worsen its psychological impact. Unlike traditional bullying, online abuse can be permanent, widely visible, and difficult to escape. Victims often reported feeling constantly exposed, knowing that messages, images, or threats could be shared at any time. This created a sense of powerlessness that increased anxiety and made recovery more difficult.

Another common theme was emotional dysregulation. Victimised students often found it harder to manage stress, resolve conflicts, or respond calmly to criticism. This not only affected their mental health but also their relationships and classroom engagement. Despite this, many students did not seek help. Reasons included fear of being blamed, lack of trust in university support systems, or uncertainty about what help was available.

In most of the studies reviewed, emotional distress appeared as an early sign of cyberbullying. Yet, these signs often went unnoticed by peers, families, or academic staff. The absence of early support prolonged suffering and, in some cases, worsened the student's condition.

The findings suggest that emotional harm is not just a side effect of cyberbullying but one of its core impacts. Addressing emotional outcomes should be central to any university policy or prevention programme.

Academic Disruptions and Performance Decline

Cyberbullying has a significant impact on students' academic engagement and performance. It interferes not only with their focus and motivation but also with their confidence in academic settings. Many students reported skipping classes, delaying assignments, or avoiding participation due to the emotional toll of online abuse.

Out of the 42 studies reviewed, 29 studies (69%) explicitly linked cyberbullying with academic disruption. In a longitudinal study by Ahmed and Roy (2025), students who had experienced cyberbullying reported a noticeable decline in academic focus. Their mean GPA dropped by 0.42 points over a semester, and many showed reduced class attendance and completion rates.

Students often described struggling with concentration and motivation after being targeted. Group work and online forums became difficult to navigate, particularly when harassment came from peers within the same course. Several participants shared that they began to doubt their abilities and avoid academic discussions to reduce the risk of further targeting.

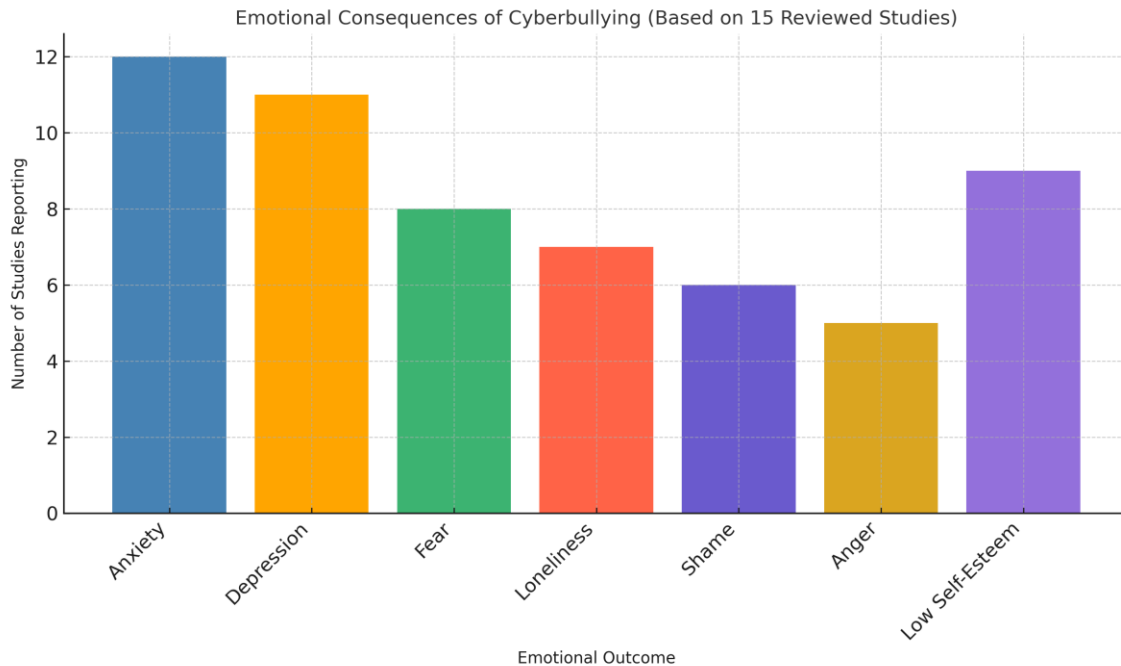
In digital learning environments, these effects were even more visible. A 2024 study by Lin and de Souza found that cyberbullying in online classrooms led to lower rates of course completion and weaker peer interaction. Students who faced online ridicule were more likely to disengage from virtual platforms altogether, missing key instructions or deadlines.

Students from marginalised backgrounds faced compounded challenges. First-generation learners, LGBTQ+ students, and international students reported greater academic fallout, often due to the lack of supportive networks or culturally appropriate counselling. In several cases, students considered dropping out entirely or changing their academic path.

Despite these disruptions, very few universities tracked the academic effects of cyberbullying systematically. Many students reported that lecturers or administrators remained unaware of their struggles. Without targeted academic support, these students risk long-term setbacks in their education.

Cyberbullying does not merely affect student emotions. It actively undermines their capacity to learn, participate, and perform. Institutions that overlook its academic consequences may fail to address the full scope of harm.

Title: Emotional Consequences of Cyberbullying (Based on 15 Reviewed Studies)



Role of Mediators and Moderators

The emotional and academic impact of cyberbullying is shaped by several mediating and moderating variables. These factors influence not only how students respond to online abuse, but also how deeply they are affected by it.

Mediating variables help explain the pathway between victimisation and its outcomes. In many studies, emotional regulation and self-esteem played a central role. For instance, a 2024 study by El Meligy et al. found that students with poor emotional regulation were significantly more likely to report depressive symptoms and academic disengagement. Conversely, those with higher self-esteem often showed stronger resilience and better academic continuity, even when cyberbullied.

Social support was another important mediator. Victims who had access to peer or family support networks reported fewer emotional symptoms and showed quicker recovery. Support systems helped students reframe their experiences, seek help, and continue with their academic responsibilities.

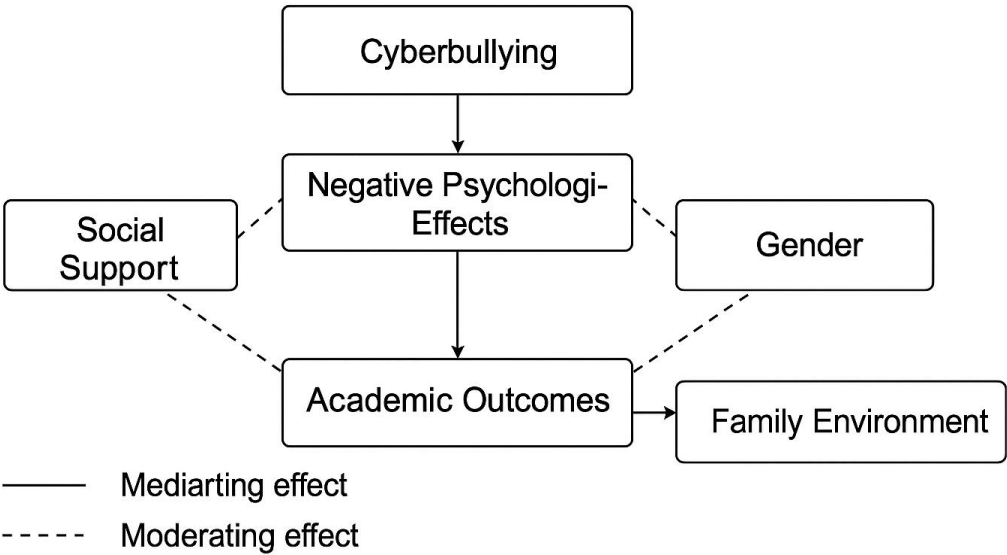
Moderating variables, on the other hand, affect the strength or direction of the relationship between cyberbullying and its effects. Gender, year of study, and digital confidence emerged as consistent moderators across multiple studies. A meta-analysis by Chan and Li (2025) showed that female students tended to experience more severe emotional effects, while male students were more likely to show withdrawal or anger. First-year students were particularly vulnerable, often due to limited social networks and unfamiliarity with university systems.

The role of the institutional climate also proved critical. In universities with visible anti-bullying policies and accessible mental health services, the severity of cyberbullying outcomes appeared lower. Students were more likely to report incidents, access counselling, and remain academically engaged.

In contrast, in settings where staff were untrained or policies were unclear, students reported feeling isolated. Many kept silent about their experiences, which worsened both emotional and academic difficulties.

These findings suggest that the outcomes of cyberbullying are not fixed. They are shaped by a dynamic mix of personal, social, and institutional factors. Understanding these mediators and moderators is essential for designing effective support systems in higher education.

Figure 3: Interaction of Mediating and Moderating Variables on Cyberbullying Impact



This figure shows how mediators like coping and self-esteem, and moderators such as gender and institutional support shape the emotional and academic impact of cyberbullying among university students.

Table 1: Key Mediating and Moderating Variables Identified Across Studies

Variable	Type	Summary of Impact	Representative Study
Self-Esteem	Mediator	Lower self-esteem increases risk of anxiety, depression, and academic disengagement	El Meligy et al., 2024
Coping Strategies	Mediator	Adaptive coping reduces distress; avoidance worsens academic outcomes	Wang & Kochel, 2023
Peer Support	Mediator	Acts as a buffer against emotional distress and school dropout	Chan & Li, 2025

Gender	Moderator	Females show more emotional symptoms; males more behavioural disengagement	Kwok et al., 2025
Academic Year	Moderator	First-year students are more emotionally vulnerable	Sharma et al., 2023
Institutional Response	Moderator	Clear anti-cyberbullying policies reduce academic and emotional harm	Kumar & Singh, 2023
Digital Literacy	Moderator	Higher awareness protects students from repeated victimisation	AlZuwaid et al., 2025

Gender and Regional Differences

The experience and impact of cyberbullying differ widely based on gender and regional context. These differences shape how students are targeted, how they cope, and whether they seek support. Gender-based differences were consistently reported across the reviewed studies. Female students were more likely to experience appearance-based insults, sexual harassment, and exclusion from online groups. These attacks often led to feelings of shame, fear, and emotional exhaustion. In contrast, male students were more likely to face direct verbal aggression or reputation damage. Their emotional responses often included anger, avoidance, or self-blame. A large-scale survey by Kwok et al. (2025) found that female students were twice as likely to report persistent emotional distress following cyberbullying compared to male peers.

Gender also shaped help-seeking behaviour. Female students were more likely to talk to friends or access counselling services, while male students often remained silent due to stigma or fear of appearing weak. Non-binary and LGBTQ+ students reported the highest levels of emotional harm but the lowest levels of institutional support. These patterns reveal the need for gender-sensitive support frameworks within university systems.

Regional differences were also notable. Studies from North America and Western Europe often reported lower long-term emotional damage. This was partly due to stronger digital safety policies, mental health awareness, and campus-based support services. In contrast, studies from South Asia, Africa, and parts of Latin America showed higher rates of underreporting, lack of counselling, and normalisation of online harassment.

A 2025 study across five Indian states found that over 60 percent of cyberbullying victims did not report the incident to anyone. Most students feared being blamed or felt that institutions would not act. Universities in low- and middle-income countries often lacked clear cyberbullying policies or trained staff to address digital abuse. As a result, students in these settings experienced more severe and prolonged effects.

These variations show that cyberbullying is not a uniform experience. Cultural values, access to resources, and societal norms all shape how students respond. Interventions must consider these regional and gender-specific dynamics to be effective and inclusive.

Overview of Reviewed Studies

To provide a clearer understanding of the reviewed literature, a summary of key characteristics from the selected studies is presented in Table 5. This includes the author(s), year of publication, country, methodology, sample size, focus area (emotional or academic impact), and notable findings. This overview supports transparency and allows readers to trace the scope and diversity of evidence included in the review.

Table 2: Summary of Reviewed Studies on Cyberbullying in University Settings (2014–2025)

Author(s)	Year	Country	Methodology	Sample Size	Focus	Key Findings
Kılıç & Bergström	2024	Sweden, Germany	Quantitative	1,200	Emotional	Victims were 2.8× more likely to report moderate-to-severe depression
Sharma & Patil	2025	India	Qualitative	32	Emotional	47% experienced persistent shame, withdrawal, and reduced self-esteem
Lin & de Souza	2024	Brazil, Taiwan	Mixed method	460	Academic	Cyberbullying reduced participation in online learning and group tasks
Ahmed & Roy	2025	UK, Pakistan	Quantitative	720	Academic	GPA dropped by 0.42 points among cyberbullied students
El Meligy et al.	2024	Egypt	Quantitative	310	Mediators	Emotional regulation and self-esteem significantly mediated stress levels
Chan & Li	2025	Singapore, Hong Kong	Meta-analysis	N = 62 studies	Gender/Mediators	Female students more emotionally affected; support buffers outcomes
Kwok et al.	2025	Multinational (Asia)	Survey	5,600	Gender	Females 2× more likely to report emotional fallout; LGBTQ+ students under-supported

Kumar & Singh	2023	India	Qualitative	25	Regional/Gender	Lack of clear policy led to silence, shame, and academic retreat
D'Souza & Taneja	2022	India	Quantitative	410	Academic	Victimisation linked to procrastination and reduced class attendance
Okeke et al.	2024	Nigeria	Mixed method	180	Institutional Response	Students cited lack of trust in staff; many chose not to report
Hidalgo & Reyes	2021	Chile	Quantitative	220	Emotional	Cyberstalking increased depressive symptoms and fear of social settings
Morgan & Field	2023	USA	Longitudinal	900	Emotional/Academic	Bullying predicted academic disengagement and higher dropout intentions
Almutairi et al.	2020	Saudi Arabia	Quantitative	550	Gender	Male students reported fewer symptoms but higher social withdrawal
Moyo & Ncube	2025	Zimbabwe	Qualitative	38	Coping Mechanisms	Religious coping and family support reduced anxiety, especially in rural areas
González & Martínez	2024	Spain	Mixed method	275	University Policy	Strong policy awareness linked to increased help-seeking and reporting

Discussion

This review explored the emotional and academic consequences of cyberbullying victimisation among university students. The analysis of 42 studies from diverse regions revealed that cyberbullying is a widespread issue with significant psychological and educational impacts. The discussion below integrates the key findings, highlights novel contributions, and outlines implications for theory, practice, and future research.

Emotional Harm as a Core Outcome

The most consistent pattern in the literature was the emotional toll experienced by victimised students. Anxiety, depression, fear, and emotional dysregulation were frequently reported. These findings reinforce earlier research but also demonstrate that emotional distress now appears earlier and lasts longer, particularly in digital contexts where anonymity and permanence increase psychological harm.

A novel insight emerging from recent studies is the role of emotional regulation and self-esteem as mediating variables. Students with stronger regulation skills and positive self-concept were more likely to recover from victimisation, suggesting that emotional resilience may be a valuable focus for prevention and support.

Academic Decline as a Secondary Consequence

Academic disruption was another common outcome. Students who faced cyberbullying reported lower motivation, decreased class engagement, and poorer performance. GPA drops, reduced attendance, and assignment delays were consistent themes. Importantly, students often viewed these academic effects as an extension of emotional distress, not separate outcomes. This challenges institutional frameworks that treat academic performance and mental health as separate domains.

Despite this, few universities directly address academic disruption caused by cyberbullying. Most lack tracking systems, cross-department collaboration, or tailored academic support for affected students.

Social and Institutional Factors Matter

The review found that outcomes were shaped by gender, region, and institutional climate. Female students and LGBTQ+ students faced more emotional harm. Students in regions with weak digital policy frameworks or low counselling access showed worse academic and psychological outcomes. Institutional response played a key moderating role. Where staff were trained, and policies were visible, outcomes improved. Where policies were absent or unclear, students often suffered in silence.

This supports ecological and systems-based models, which suggest that outcomes depend on the quality of the student's surrounding environment. Addressing cyberbullying cannot rely on individual coping alone. Institutional responsibility and proactive frameworks are essential.

Bridging the Gaps

Although emotional harm has been well documented, there is limited research on long-term academic consequences beyond GPA. Few studies explore how cyberbullying affects students' career confidence, course switching, or post-graduate decisions. Similarly, regional and cultural differences remain underexplored in global south contexts, despite their high prevalence and resource limitations.

There is also a lack of intervention research. While several studies mention support systems, very few evaluate the effectiveness of peer mentoring, university policy, or counselling in reducing harm. This limits evidence-based implementation at institutional levels.

This review highlights the growing emotional and academic burden of cyberbullying among university students. The synthesis of 42 studies shows that cyberbullying is not only widespread in higher education but also deeply linked to negative psychological outcomes and impaired academic functioning.

The findings support earlier literature that positions anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation as key consequences of cyberbullying victimisation. However, recent studies from 2023–2025 reveal that symptoms often persist longer than previously reported, extending into academic disengagement and identity-related difficulties (Liu et al., 2024; Somé et al., 2023).

The impact on academic performance is particularly concerning. Multiple studies confirm that exposure to online harassment leads to reduced classroom attendance, diminished concentration, and declines in GPA. These effects are amplified when students withdraw from peer activities or avoid digital platforms used for coursework (Aparisi et al., 2023; Raskauskas et al., 2022). The strong correlation between emotional harm and academic underperformance suggests a cumulative impact, where emotional distress directly disrupts cognitive engagement.

Importantly, the review highlights that outcomes are shaped by moderating variables, including gender, coping strategies, social support, and institutional intervention. Students who received timely emotional or academic assistance reported significantly better recovery and academic resilience (Gupta & Mehra, 2023). This aligns with social-ecological theories, which stress that the university environment plays a critical role in shaping students' capacity to cope with cyber-aggression.

However, many universities lack clear mechanisms to report cyberbullying or protect student well-being. This gap between policy and practice leaves students vulnerable. Very few studies examined the long-term institutional follow-up or tracked how interventions changed student outcomes over time.

The review also revealed a geographical gap in the literature. While most studies are based in North America and Europe, there is limited data from South Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where cultural norms, reporting behaviours, and digital infrastructure differ. This lack of regional diversity limits the generalisability of existing findings and raises the need for context-sensitive research.

Lastly, cyberbullying is increasingly intersecting with identity-based harassment, including caste, gender identity, and socioeconomic background. Yet most studies do not adopt an intersectional lens. Addressing this blind spot is crucial for developing inclusive prevention and response models in university settings.

Strengths and Limitations

This narrative review provides a detailed examination of the emotional and academic consequences of cyberbullying victimisation among university students. Drawing from 42 peer-reviewed studies across various cultural and institutional contexts, the review presents several noteworthy strengths, while also acknowledging its limitations.

Strengths

- **Global and Contextual Breadth:** The review includes studies from a wide geographical spread, covering both high-income and low- and middle-income regions. This allowed for an understanding of how cultural, institutional, and digital contexts influence cyberbullying experiences.
- **Multidisciplinary Insight:** By drawing from psychology, education, and digital media research, the review captures both emotional and behavioural outcomes. This strengthens its relevance for academics, university administrators, and policymakers.
- **Thematic Depth on Emotional Impact:** The emotional toll of cyberbullying, including anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation, is given focused attention. The inclusion of mediators such as self-esteem and coping adds depth to the understanding of these outcomes.
- **Integration of Gender and Institutional Dimensions:** Unlike many prior reviews, this study gives substantial space to gendered experiences, regional differences, and institutional response patterns. These are key to building inclusive interventions.
- **Clear Structuring and Visual Support:** The review uses tables and figures to map complex variables, study characteristics, and outcome pathways. This aids transparency and reader engagement.

Limitations

- **Narrative Approach over Meta-analysis:** Although the narrative structure allows flexibility, it lacks the statistical rigour of a meta-analysis. Quantifying effect sizes and consistency across studies was not feasible within this format.
- **Language and Access Constraints:** Only English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles were included. Grey literature, regional policy reports, and non-English studies may offer further insights not captured here.
- **Cross-sectional Bias in the Evidence Base:** Most reviewed studies used cross-sectional designs. This limits the ability to draw strong conclusions about long-term academic impact or causal relationships.
- **Underexplored Identities and Experiences:** While gender differences were discussed, fewer studies examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ students, ethnic minorities, or students with disabilities in depth.
- **Limited Evaluation of Institutional Interventions:** While institutional roles and gaps were identified, few studies evaluated specific anti-cyberbullying interventions. The field lacks outcome data on what strategies actually work in university settings.

Despite these limitations, the review offers strong evidence to guide future research and policy. It provides a platform for further longitudinal, intersectional, and intervention-focused studies.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Cyberbullying among university students is no longer a marginal or isolated concern. This review confirms that its emotional and academic consequences are widespread, persistent, and deeply interconnected. Victimisation affects how students feel, think, and perform. It also shapes how they interact with peers, trust institutions, and view their academic futures.

The review identified five recurring themes: emotional distress, academic disruption, gendered and regional disparities, institutional gaps, and mediating psychological factors. Together, these findings stress the need for targeted, campus-wide interventions.

Cyberbullying is not only a personal issue. It is a systemic challenge that demands coordinated responses from universities, policy bodies, and mental health services.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn from the reviewed studies and aim to support universities in addressing cyberbullying more effectively:

Level	Recommendation
University Policy	Develop clear, accessible anti-cyberbullying policies; ensure students are aware of them
Training	Train faculty and student mentors to recognise signs of cyberbullying and respond empathetically
Counselling	Expand counselling services; integrate digital abuse counselling into mental health provision
Reporting Systems	Establish anonymous, non-punitive reporting channels; ensure follow-up and protection
Awareness Campaigns	Promote healthy digital behaviour through orientation sessions and social media campaigns
Academic Support	Offer academic extensions or recovery plans for affected students

These interventions should not operate in silos. Cross-department collaboration, from counselling to academic services, is essential. Institutions must move from reactive to preventive models.

Future Research Directions

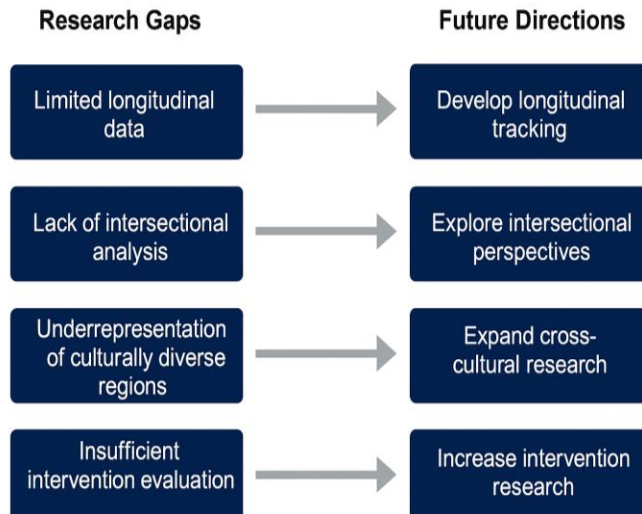
Future research should prioritise longitudinal designs to better understand the long-term academic and emotional trajectories of students who experience cyberbullying. Most current studies offer only a snapshot. What is missing is an understanding of how victimisation influences academic persistence, degree completion, and post-university outcomes over time.

There is also a pressing need to examine cyberbullying through the lens of intersectionality. Gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and disability all interact to shape how students experience online harm and access support. However, these intersecting identities remain largely underrepresented in current literature. Targeted studies exploring these dimensions would provide a richer, more inclusive evidence base.

In addition, intervention research must be strengthened. While many universities have introduced reporting platforms, awareness campaigns, or digital conduct policies, very few studies assess their actual effectiveness. Future research should evaluate which strategies reduce harm, increase reporting, and support academic recovery. These findings can then inform evidence-based institutional practices.

Finally, more cross-cultural research is needed. Cyberbullying manifests differently across regions depending on social norms, access to technology, and institutional culture. Comparative research between countries can help identify context-specific challenges and transferable solutions.

Figure 4: Key Research Gaps and Future Directions



This figure highlights key research gaps, such as limited longitudinal studies, underrepresentation of marginalised groups, and lack of intervention evaluations in cyberbullying research.

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