A Critical Discourse Analysis of Cyberbullying Among University Students in Pakistan

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Abstract

Cyberbullying on social media is a growing challenge for the youth generally and the university students in Pakistan particularly. The research problem of this study is based on the exploitation of university students as victims by the bullies to instil fear in them. This study aims to examine the language use of bullies among the Pakistani university students on social media. This study employed Teun A. van Dijk's three-dimensional model for the Critical Discourse Analysis at three levels: text, social cognition and social context. The data was collected from the five university students in the form of screenshots of the chats on Facebook and Instagram. The findings revealed that the bullies exploited the victims through their language for blackmailing and degrading by specifically targeting their vulnerabilities. The study concluded that the bullies targeted the weaker by creating a power imbalance. The perpetrators' use of harsh, abusive, and specific words led to the victims' exploitation in the form of despair, nervousness, hopelessness, insecurity, and in some cases psychological distress leading to suicidal behavior.

Keywords: Cyber-bullying, exploitation of the victims, language use of bullies, psychological

distress, social media

Introduction

Cyberbullying has been considered "an aggressive act or behaviour that is carried out using electronic means by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). The concept of bullying has explored by Putril and Prihandari Satvikadewi (2017) as a negative activity that is viewed forceful and manipulative. Such activity is executed by an individual or a gathering of people against someone else or a gathering of individuals for a while which comprises brutality and power imbalance. Patchin et al., (2013) has emphasised the act of cyber-bullying when an individual consistently bugs, abuses, or ridicules someone else on the web while utilizing cells or other digital gadgets.

The use of language in cyberbullying includes spreading gossip by mobile phones, making threatening or abusive remarks on social networks, and sharing WhatsApp texts to threaten or insult on online platforms (Garaigordobil, 2015). Faucher et al., (2014) has pointed out that language can be used by the bullies to criticize, compromise, annoy, menace, bar, segregate, disparage, embarrass, tail, reveal individual data, or contain hostile, profane or censorious remarks, to mischief or hurt the victim. The specific features of digital medium include: a) wider audience and impact to enhances its negative effects; ii) anonymity to make it easier to be both a cyberbully and a victim; iii) permanence, to make bullying acts "active" longer; and iv) minimal restrictions due to hardly any control (Nocentini et al., 2010; Smith & Slonje, 2010). In this regard, the differences in technological expertise between the bully and the victim, relative anonymity, social status, number of friends or marginalized group positions may determine the power imbalance with electronic means (Smith et al., 2013).

With reference to social media, power can be exercised on victim as a tool because it provides a platform for developing communication with anyone freely, and letting them do whatever they want. Social media provides an open space for communication which helps people to use it as a medium for bullying the minority in various ways such as sending messages or passing judgmental or rude comments. The same kind of power relationship is witnessed by cyber-bullying by using Facebook and Instagram as a medium in the current study. Bullies particularly set their target by assessing those who are weaker than them or passive targets who are generally less lean to defend themselves. The question here is how language is used by the bullies to exercise the power.

A review of the past literature regarding the long lasting and diverse effects of cyberbullying

presented its various facets at international and national levels. UNICEF (2018) reported that the victims were affected mentally by feeling upset, embarrassed, stupid, even angry; emotionally by feeling ashamed or losing interest in the things you love; and physically by tiredness (loss of sleep), or experiencing symptoms like stomach aches and headaches. Similarly, Rafi and Sarwar (2019) underscored that cyberbullying attack adversely affected participants' mental health, resulting in horrific outcomes such as depression, lack of confidence, trouble sleeping, eating disorders, poor academic performance, and social isolation. The psychological and physical wellbeing of the victims were affected more or less (Smith, 2016).

The findings of some research studies at international level emphasized the effects of cyberbullying on youth related to their psychological and physical wellbeing. Some reports related to emotional and psychological disturbance identified increased stress, social difficulties, depression and anxiety (Wang et al., 2011), increased negative emotions (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), increased aggression, illegal behavior and suicidality (Schneck & Fremouw, 2013), and increased suicidal ideation and depression (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013). Regarding the effect of cyberbullying on academic performance, a visible linkage between the excessive use of social media and low academic performance was identified (Cloud, 2013). Hosseinmardi et al., (2015) and Ditch the Label (2013) enlisted the top five networks having the highest percentage of exercising cyber-bullying as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Ask.com. There were a number of ways through which cyber-bullying happened on Instagram and Facebook including uploading an embarrassing picture of someone and commenting on them via fake profiles. Moreover, there were other reasons such as sending messages, and defaming someone by using offensive language (Hinduja, 2013). Slonje and Smith (2008) stated that electronic communication became easy via text messages, emails, and chats used to spread rumours and destroy acquaintances.

As the perpetrators intended to harm a chosen target, there were three main aspects of cyberbullying which included: i) Intentionality for bullying as a goal-oriented and systematic abusive behaviour; ii) Repetition for repeated bullying; and iii) Imbalance of power for the systematic abuse of power by a perpetrator with more physical or psychological strength than the target (Smith, 2016). The elements of perpetrator were i) some type of control over the other individual on whom the force was worked out., and ii) hurt others (Hughes, 2014). The reason to bully could be either to blackmail for some personal reasons or interests or to make others inferior. Snell and Englander (2010) reported that the most notable reason for cyber-bullying was the prey's appearance and additionally who they

dated or become a close acquaintance with. Bullies were hostile and they victimized the passive targets on the strands where they felt the prey couldnot shield themselves. On the contrary, sometimes cyberbullying in the universities could be an act of playing or exaggerating with language for the sake of fun and upsetting the victim (Hammudin et al., 2022).

Some studies in Pakistani context reported diverse aspects of cyberbullying: comparison of the phenomenon of cyberbullying among online and traditional students of higher education institutions in Pakistan (Mirza et al., 2020); how students were targeted on social media with the impact of cyberbullying on victims (Khan & Asim, 2020); cyberbullying language use from the perspective of female university students (Rafi & Sarwar, 2019); the legal consequences of cyberbullies' language use on Twitter (Supriadi et al., 2020); and the effects of cyberbullying on the psyche as well as academic performance, emotional disturbance and gaps in relationships among Pakistani youth (Batool et al., 2017) . However, the application of CDA as a framework to examine the use of language on social media in Pakistani context needed further investigation.

In this perspective, the purpose of this study was to find out the language use in bullying university students as victims on social media, especially on Facebook and Instagram; and the impact of bullying on their wellbeing. There were two research questions of the present study.

1. How is language used by university students for their victims on social media, especially on Facebook and Instagram?
2. What is the impact of bullying on their victims' wellbeing?

The present study could be significant by providing awareness to individuals about the kind of language used by the perpetrators for coping with the impending situation. The psychological and physical wellbeing of victims may not be affected severely due to prior awareness. The victims may report and restrict the social media accounts to send messages utilizing a certain kind of language, rather than being occupied by the discussion with victims.

Research Methodology

Theoretical Framework

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) refers to "a qualitative analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities" (Mullet, 2018, p.116). Different aspects of CDA, as emphasized by its proponents highlight its significance as a practicing theory. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been considered an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse to view language as a

form of social practice by Drid (2015). In CDA, the language is not considered powerful on its own, rather it gains power by the use of powerful individuals (Faozan, 2020). Janks (1997) perceived CDA as a form of social practice to apply theory critically for analyzing opaque associations. CDA caters the recontextualization of social practice, social action as well as actors (Van Leeuwen, 2008). CDA by Teun A. van Dijk (2003) is considered a socio-cognitive approach in the perspective of ideological practices and social relations of power, politics and hegemony in discourse.

The present study used CDA method by applying Teun A. van Dijk's analysis technique for the interpretation of the data. In the media discourse, van Dijk explained that the idea of power and access were inseparable. The notion of power was essential to the development of discourse and a means used by the institution, social group, or organization to curb thoughts and actions to restrict the freedom of other groups. In this regard, van Dijk (1996) examined the notion of power as the wealth of access to social resources like status, job, wealth or public communication space including all social media sites by a group. Symbolic power was associated with social media as it permitted people to curb the thoughts of people leading to get control of their actions by using language as a tool for harassment and disrupting the life of victims.

For the current study, van Dijk's, three-dimensional model was used to explore the use of discourse by bullies for maintaining supremacy. This social imbalance was not merely an act of individual but a mutual act which led to depict that all that domination was legitimate and natural (van Dijk, 1993). The three-dimensional model of van Dijk analyzed discourse on three levels: text analysis, social cognition level, and contextual level. At the text analysis level, messages were selected to analyze cyber-bully language and its impact on the prey's psychology. As social cognition monitored the selected discourse, communication, and all forms of action and interaction, it also applied to the understanding of social events or social institutions, and power relations. However, it could be contended that social cognition converted to a medium between the micro and macro levels of society, between discourse and action, between individuals and groups. Moreover, social cognition existed in many forms including opinions, attitudes, ideologies, norms, and value. At the second level, this study used comments in social media as a unit of analysis in alignment with van Dijk's CDA that did not require a detailed text analysis. As the comments in social media were brief and straightforward, so they did not require deep text analysis. Finally, the contextual level analyzed the context i.e., power and access as power was the ownership of one group to control the other. So, the purpose of the current study was to analyze fundamental ways of maintaining supremacy either by

controlling discourse or by controlling minds.

Figure 1: Three-dimensions of van Dijk's Discourse Analysis Model
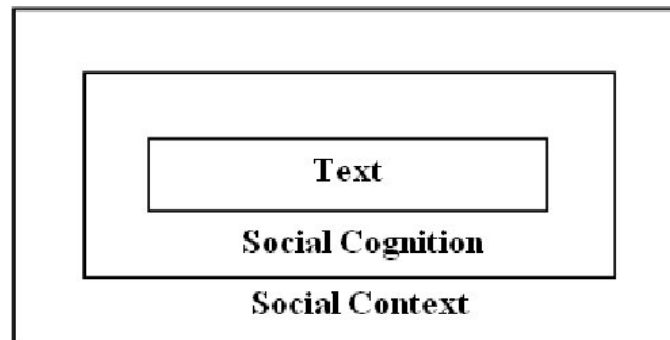
Data Collection

Sample and Demographics

This study aimed to explore the language used in cyber-bullying and its impact on victims. Therefore, two distinct samples were selected: one from Instagram and two from Facebook for analyzing these two parts. A questionnaire was distributed to 20 university students in the age range of 20-25 years for collecting data from victims and aggressors. Out of 5 identified cases, 3 consented to participate in the research by providing the required data in the form of chats; 2 participants were identified as aggressors, and one as a victim from Facebook and Instagram. The rationale for the selection of university students was their exposure and interactions leading to conflicts. Either in the form of a group or pair, they found the victims for exploitation, who were not in a position to defend themselves. The perpetrators bullied them via social media anonymously to scare, blackmail, offend or get a personal goal. Moreover, the linguistic choices of the particular age group were marked as distinct from the people below the age of 20.

Nature of the Data

The selected data was based on the respondents' chats in the form of screenshots from Instagram and Facebook. The chats were provided as their direct messages in which they experienced cyber-bullying on social media. The provided data was bilingual as it comprised code-switching and code-mixing of English and Urdu language. The data was analyzed by using general principles of critical discourse analysis and van Dijk's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis.

Ethical Consideration

The ethical aspect of the research study was maintained, keeping in view the sensitive nature of data. The participants were guaranteed that the information would be used confidentially only for research reasons. The participants details would be anonymous by using fake names.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed by using the model of van Dijik. First, the data was analyzed by the familiarization process at the level of data management. It was labelled and the patterns and themes were sorted out. The entire material was coordinated and organized in order of abstraction and interpretation. The collected data was in the form of screenshots of direct messages from Instagram and Facebook. The data was provided in the results section as evidence of the authentic source. These messages were decoded considering the principles of CDA and Van Dijk's model of three dimensions (Description, Explanation, Interpretation and Analysis). These responses were further analyzed to explore the subsequent research question of the study.
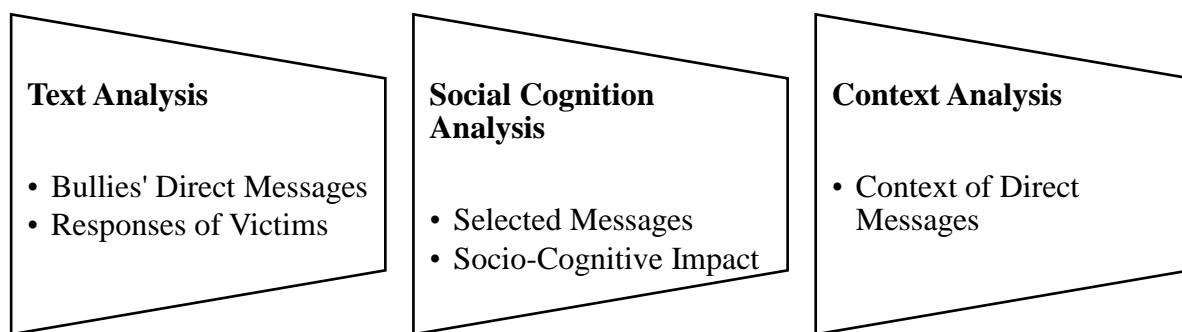
Text Analysis

- Bullies' Direct Messages
- Responses of Victims

Social Cognition Analysis

- Selected Messages
- Socio-Cognitive Impact

Context Analysis

- Context of Direct Messages

Figure 1: Data Analysis Process

Results and Discussion

The data was analyzed according to the purpose of the research which is reflected through research questions.

Text Analysis

The text refers to a language construction from unit words to discourse (Rahmawati, 2016). The text under study catered the structure of the text with linguistic analysis (Ningsih et al., 2014). Janks (1997) views CDA as a form social practice in which theory is applied critically to analyze opaque relationships. At the text analysis level, the construction of the content was examined to accentuate a specific subject. The language was dissected in the messages (talks) to identify the kind of words for the personalities of the victims, and the forms of words used to engage the victims of cyber-bullying. There were three cases on Instagram and Facebook in which aggressors attempted to create confusion. They pretending that they knew the victims and prodded them to focus on their past

occasions, just by giving their own data for assuring casualties. In this segment, the impact on brain research, was additionally talked about in the second inquiry of this investigation.

Case 1: Facebook

The first case was selected from Facebook. There were various techniques used for cyber-bullying by the bullies such as the aggressor targeted the victim by exposing bio-data (name, address, family information, contact number) and past information (related to personal life) by sharing the images. In response, the victim tried to justify himself besides making an effort to identify the perpetrator. The date history of the chat showed that this intervention was a repeated action which puzzled the victim. The victim's replies and the use of repeated question marks was a sign of anger or shocked response which indicated the victim's feeling of insecurity. Figure 2 (a) shows the repeated laughs of the bully to develop the feelings of insecurity in victim. Figure 2 (b) shows the victims response, "come to point what u want Nw?????". Figure 2 (c) shows that the bully also used some abusive words (bitch, mad, bad, chor, fazool log, and doodh ki dhuli) for the victim to incite for aggressive response. The aggressor was revealing the past happenings related to personal life, and making use of harsh and abusive language to humiliate the victim. Moreover, the use of language was psychologically disheartening and exploiting the victim. The perpetrator was successful to exercise control on the victim by developing a power relationship with the victim by using the derogatory means.

Figure 2: Victim's Response to Aggressors' Language Teasers
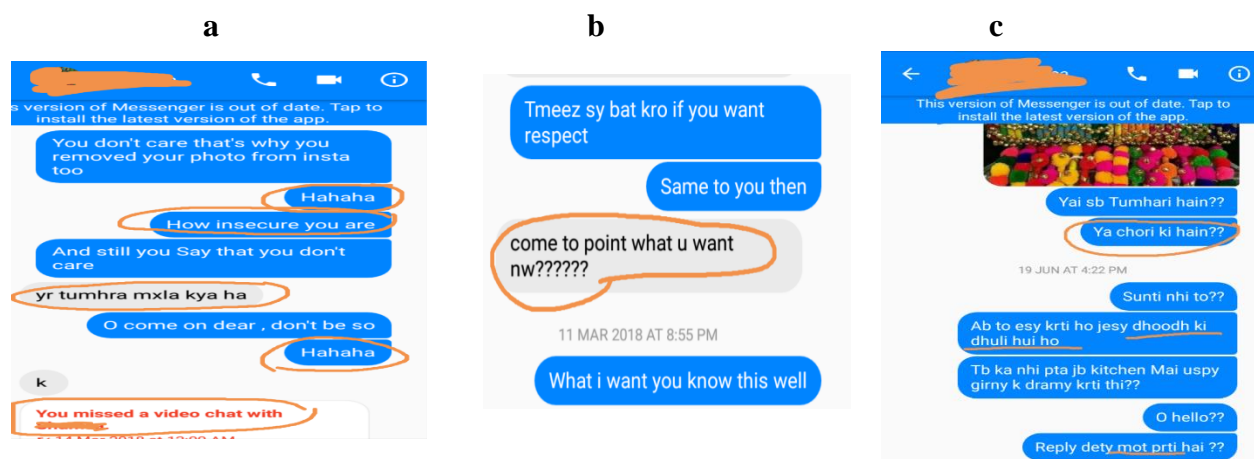

Case 2: Facebook

In case 2 situation on Facebook, the bully harassed the victim. The aggressor blackmailed the victim by threatening via messages to accomplish the intended target. Figure 3 (a) shows that the victim's reputation was threatened to be harmed by leaking the personal photos from fake ID or profile if the

perpetrator's demand would not be fulfilled. The bully hacked the victim's personal record and stole the confidential data. The victim was stressed out and asked for the bully's demand (What do you need?). Figure 3 (b) shows the victim's depressed mental state; which made him tolerate and obey the bully's demands. Figure 3 (c) shows that by the use of specific words, the bully was successful in undermining and hustling the victim. The victim was ultimately experiencing depression, discouragement, submissiveness and helplessness. The victim exhibited hopelessness and sensations of pity and sadness (Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007) due to the control of bully.

Figure 3: Aggressors' Threats to Exploit Victim
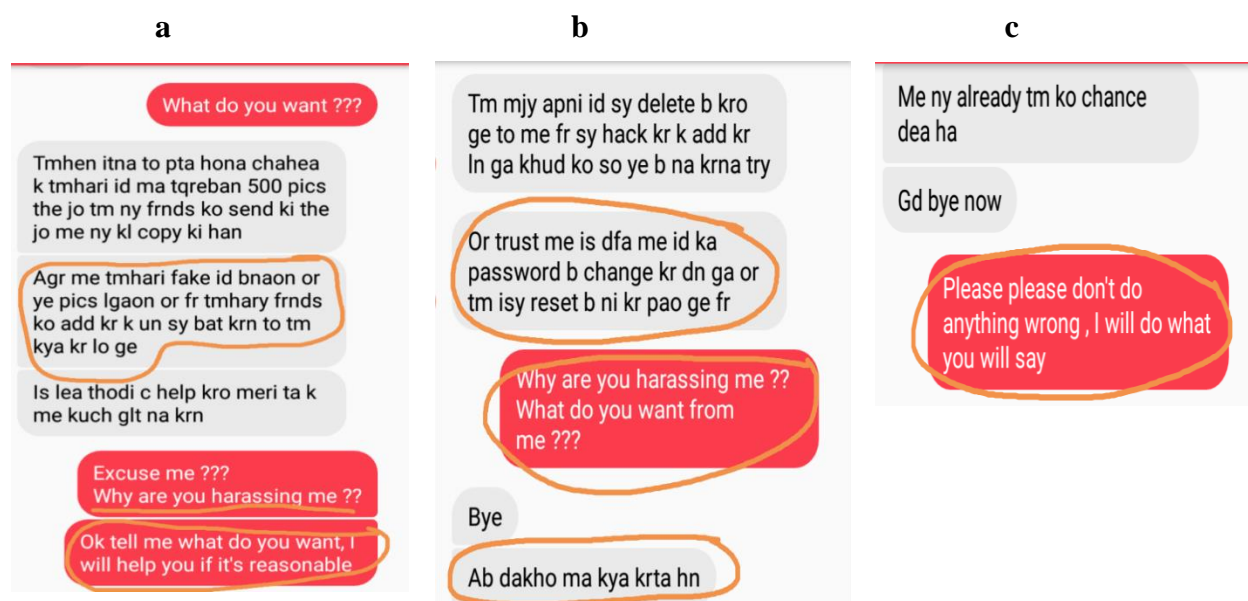
Case 3: Instagram

In case 3 situation on Instagram, the communication between the aggressor "X" and the victim "Y" revealed the psychological distress of the victim due to bullying of the perpetrator. Figure 4 (a) shows that X targeted Y by sharing the private data in the form of chats (such as family details, happenings and events, details of the x-girlfriend and so forth) to another fellow. Figure 4 (b) shows that Y started feeling inquisitive, anxious and upset after this communication; and inquired about the identity of Y. The bully 'X' repeatedly laughed at the inquires "Yar sai btao kon ho tum? Q tens de rhi." to maximize the perplexity of Y. The secrecy and the continuous upsetting behavior of X ignited anger in Y. However, Y started showing submission with the realization of the power of aggressor X on himself. The repeated inquiry about the identity of X revealed the level of perplexity and anxiety of the victim Y, whereas the aggressor enjoyed the victim's state of mind.

Figure 4: Insecurity of Victim for the Sake of Aggressor's Enjoyment

a   **b**

Impact of Exploitment Process

The screenshots of the provided chats showed the impact of exploitation of the victim by the perpetrator in cyberbullying. In the first case, the young lady recalled over and over restlessly to know the assailant and rehashes a similar inquiry. The use of so many question marks showed that the victim was getting depressed, stunned, nervous, and discouraged. In the second case, the victim was influenced by the bully's threats, so a similar inquiry was rehashed. The control of the bully over the victim demonstrated her instability and anxiety which compelled her to become submissive and weak.

Regarding the case on Instagram, the instances of switching of victims' mood were evident in the chats between the bully and the victim. At first, the victim got shocked; but later the mood of depressed and worried victim switched to fun and laughter. The next response was an angry outburst, and finally there was a feeling of stressed. It was noticeable that the victim accepted his stress if someone knew a lot about his personal life. Likewise, Klomek et al., (2008), Price (2010), and Wang et al., (2011) also revealed expanded sensations of hurt, instability, burdensome effect, and defenselessness.

Social Cognition Analysis

The social cognition not only indicates how a text is written but also acts as a determining factor in the writing direction (Ningsih et al., 2014). Th social cognition analysis helps in exploring the production of text in the context of social cognition about the message. In this regard, the mental

structure model of van Dijk was applied as it helped in providing an insight to analyse other human beings living in the society. For the present study, the text in chats described the authors ideology. The chats in Facebook and Instagram, specifically the harsh words of bullies showed how aggressors perceived and value their victims to control over them. As a result of the power irregularity, the bully utilized awful, hostile and harsh language. In one of the cases, the bully used several abusive words such as mad, bitch, "fazool log" etc. for the victim to realize him that he was under the command of the bully. Moreover, the victim was humiliated by making him realize his status. The Facebook case did not witness those abusive words but threats were observed. As far as the Instagram case was concerned, the bully addressed an adult by using vocabulary such as "Ghadha" (Donkey), "Bandar" (Monkey), "Bacha" (Kid) and "BC" with offensive connotations. The bullies used such kind of words to exploit the victims, and make them realize their hold on them for the sake of showing their superiority.

Context Analysis

The social context manifests how the text is related to the social structure and knowledge that develops in society (Ningsih et al., 2014). It emphasises how the social context effects the production of the text. This level deals with the analysis of the selected chats for the discourse analysis with respect to the cyber-bullying context according to van Dijk. The current study analysed the context of how and why cyber-bullying texts were produced. Furthermore, it probed into various reasons, aims and involved participants in the context. As the context of cyber-bullying unveiled the idea of power and access, so the current study analysed the psychological impact on the victims.

In this regard, the involved members consisted of 4 females and 2 guys. Out of three, two aggressors were focusing on casualties for no particular reason and diversion, to debase the victims. However, one attacker had a few objectives to accomplish by undermining her to play out specific assignments in an undesirable manner. One case managed the task of threatening someone by hacking the record to play out specific acts leading the bully to exercise control of the young lady by getting her own data. Similarly, the other two cases presented the very idea. The bully focused on some close connections and negative comments to humiliate the person in question. Moreover, the data was managed to establish the authority on the victim to satisfy certain desires as well to accomplish a few objectives. So, this was the way how language was used to maintain dominance and power in online media.

Conclusion

Cyber-bullying is a serious concern for the youth. The results of this investigation revealed that bullies were exploited by the use of language in online media, which focused on their weak points to humiliate, mortify and degrade them. The publicity of personal data made victims anxious; the harsh language was used to exercise the authority over victims; the victims faced psychological distress in the form of melancholy, seriousness, pressure, and uncertainty. The reasons behind that harassment, provocation and blackmailing included certain objectives like fun, or fulfilment of specific demands.

Limitations

The study is limited by sample. There were only three university students as participants from one city. The current study investigated only two social media sites, namely Facebook and Instagram.

Recommendations

The exposure of cyberbullying to the youth may provide awareness to take precautionary measures. The victims may ban or report the bullies' profiles. It may be controlled by counselling of the expected victims through seminars or lectures. The stakeholders may organize training programs to help students overcome feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, helplessness, and low self-esteem. The other social media sites may also be considered for future research.

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