RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

# Exploring Definition of Cyberbullying and its Forms From the Perspective of Adolescents Living in Pakistan

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**Abstract**   There exists a great disparity in the literature on the definition of cyberbullying. This research aimed to explore the definition and forms of cyberbullying from adolescents' perspectives. Six focus groups ($N = 36$) were conducted with participants aged 16–21 years ($M = 17.6$, SD $= 1.8$). The focus group guide was used to gain an understanding of adolescents' perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying. The thematic analysis revealed that, contrary to the literature, participants do not apply traditional bullying definition (intention, repetition, and power imbalance) to cyberbullying. They argue about the relevance of traditional bullying criteria in certain contexts. For example, they stressed upon the perception of the victim, if the victim perceives something emotionally damaging, then intention, repetition and power imbalance become completely irrelevant. Memes and cybermobs were also found to be novel forms of cyberbullying. The current research extends the literature by adding adolescents' perceived definitions and novel forms of cyberbullying.

**Abbreviations**

| | |
|---|---|
| FG5-P4 | Focus group 5, participant 4 |
| FG4-P5 | Focus group 4, participant 5 |
| FG6-P5 | Focus group 6, participant 5 |
| FG6-P3 | Focus group 6, participant 3 |
| FG2-P5 | Focus group 2, participant 5 |
| FG4-P2 | Focus group 4, participant 2 |
| FG6-P2 | Focus group 6, participant 2 |
| FG3-P1 | Focus group 3, participant 1 |
| FG4-P4 | Focus group 4, participant 4 |
| FG4-P3 | Focus group 4, participant 3 |
| FG5-P6 | Focus group 5, participant 6 |

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## Introduction

The use of information and communication technology (ICT) has become omnipresent in present times. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the education of more than 1.5 billion children and young people. It has pushed them to use virtual platforms, which increases their vulnerability to cyberbullying (UNICEF, 2020). In Pakistan, the number of internet users has increased by 21% (11 million) between 2019 and 2020 (Kemp, 2020). The cases of cyber harassment have increased by 200% in Pakistan during the pandemic (Butt, 2020). Therefore, it is important to study the phenomenon indigenously.

Cyberbullying can be defined as a deliberate and repeated act of aggression mediated through digital devices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2006). It can take different forms. On a broader level, it can either be direct cyberbullying (sending insulting messages directly) or indirect cyberbullying (spreading rumours and fake news) (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). Cyberbullying can also be divided into types based on the mode of bullying, for example, visual/sexual cyberbullying, verbal cyberbullying, and social exclusion (Lee et al., 2017). A taxonomy of cyberbullying that focuses on specific types irrespective of mode has featured 8 types of cyberbullying; flaming,

harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion, and cyberstalking (Willard, 2007). Some recent studies have highlighted memes as a form of cyberbullying (Jaiswal, 2021; Nandi et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022). Cyberbullying can also take the form of a group. Certain incidents reported by the media represent how social media can be flooded with hate comments for a particular person leading to a cybermob (Bhutto, 2021; Safina, 2019; Seeker, 2015). This phenomenon has been reported in the news, but it has not received attention from the scientific community. Nevertheless, a monograph from the US army has discussed the role of cybermobs in causing insurgency or civil war in different countries (Krumm, 2013). The German literature uses the term cybermobbing to refer to cyberbullying. It does not differentiate between cyberbullying and cybermobbing (Fawzi, 2015; Marx, 2017; Schenk, 2020).

Although cyberbullying has received a lot of attention from researchers, the disagreement over the definition of cyberbullying still exists (Englander et al., 2017). Cyberbullying is considered a repeated and intentional act of hurting someone through the use of the internet (Tokunaga, 2010). Lee et al. (2017) have also defined it as aggressive behavior that is done with the intent of harm and is carried through the use of ICT. Similarly, it is understood as intentional and repeated aggression against people who cannot defend themselves in cyberspace (Menesini et al., 2012). The above-mentioned cyberbullying definitions are inspired by the definitions of traditional bullying. These definitions have taken into consideration the criteria of intention, power imbalance, and repetition while defining cyberbullying (Englander et al., 2017).

However, some definitions consider the unique context of cyberspace instead of trying to fit the traditional bullying approach. Disagreement exists over the importance of criteria like power imbalance, intention to harm, and repetition in defining cyberbullying. Patchin and Hinduja (2006) have ruled out the need for power imbalance to define cyberbullying. Yet, power imbalance can be viewed as online expertise and anonymity. Potential victims are also considered powerless if they cannot defend themselves online (Dooley et al., 2009). The relevance of intention and repetition is also questioned in the case of cyberbullying. The cyberbullying victims get harmed even if the act is unintentional and non-repetitive (Englander et al., 2017). Aspects of cyberbullying that are different from traditional bullying are the role of bystanders, pervasive nature of cyberbullying, anonymity, and use of technical skills (Berne et al., 2013; Nilan et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2013).

The phenomenon of cyberbullying has been explored by taking adolescents' perspectives from different countries (Chan et al., 2020; Dennehy et al., 2020; Menesini et al., 2012; Ranney et al., 2020). The relevance of defining criteria is assessed. Adolescents consider *intention to harm* as an essential criterion to define cyberbullying (Nocentini et al., 2010; Spears et al., 2009). If an aggressive act is performed unintentionally, then it is considered a joke or a normal thing in online chat. *Repetition* is considered unnecessary in defining cyberbullying (Menesini et al., 2012). The single act of cyberbullying can be repeated by bystanders without the perpetrators' attempt to repeat it (Dooley et al., 2009; Smith, 2009). The *power imbalance* is considered to be the most important criterion to define cyberbullying if it is defined as the inability of victims to defend themselves. The inability to defend creates an imbalance between the dyad which exacerbates consequences for the victim. Adolescents from six European countries endorsed this criterion for all kinds of cyberbullying. Anonymity also influences the perception of cyberbullying, if there is no anonymity and the behaviour is intentional, adolescents perceive it as cyberbullying. Yet, online aggressive acts that are anonymous and non-intentional are often not perceived as cyberbullying (Menesini et al., 2012).

Due to differences in the conceptualization of cyberbullying, research participants disagree with the statements that are used to measure cyberbullying. Some scales (Lee et al., 2017) add the phrases like "intention to hurt" while measuring cyberbullying. Yet, other scales (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015) do not add such phrases and only describe the behavior. An example item from such a scale is "someone spread rumours about me online". Moreover, the scales (Antoniadou et al., 2016; Betts & Spenser, 2017; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Lee et al., 2017) do not consider the emerging forms of cyberbullying, including memes and cybermobs.

Different ways of understanding and measuring the construct has led to unreliable results regarding the prevalence and other aspects (Kowalski et al., 2014). The prevalence of cyberbullying varies between 1.9% and 65% in Canada only. The Chinese population have a prevalence of 11–57% (Brochado et al., 2017). Cyberbullying is a striking issue for adolescents and it is more prevalent in adolescents as compared to adults. So, the present research will take adolescents as a sample. In Pakistani youth, the prevalence of cyberbullying varies from 9-90% (Rafi, 2019; Saleem et al., 2021). There is a need to have a clear definition of cyberbullying that could help to create reliable and valid instruments (Olweus & Limber, 2018; Vandebosch & Cleemput, 2008). So, the current research aims to explore the definition of cyberbullying from adolescents' perspectives. It will also explore the forms of cyberbullying experienced by adolescents on social media.

## Method

### Research Design

This research has used the focus group research design under the qualitative research method.

### Sample

Participants of focus group discussions included late adolescents of age 16–21 years ($M = 17.6$, $SD = 1.8$). In literature, late adolescents are often considered as aged between 16 and 21 years (O'Sullivan et al., 2014). Students enrolled in different public and private educational institutes were considered. The inclusion criterion for sample selection was that all students must be using social media. Those having no access to the internet or gadgets were not included in the research.

Six focus group discussions were conducted till saturation point was achieved (that is the point at which new information stops emerging from data, rather, the same information is shared by the participants repetitively). The study included 36 participants, with 6 participants in each focus group. As for the sample's use of social media, the most popular social networking sites were WhatsApp (83.3%), Facebook (69.4%), Instagram (66.7%), and Snapchat (44.4%). The description of the sample's demographic characteristics is given in Table 1.

### Instrument

A focus group discussion guide was used as an instrument to assist in data collection. It was developed in the light of existing literature. It included 12 broad questions and 5–7 probing questions. For example, one broad question was "Narrate any incident of cyberbullying victimization that you have heard or experienced", the probing questions for this included the platform used to bully, the severity of the incident, and the consequences for the victim. After every focus group discussion, the questions in the focus group guide were revised to incorporate emerging aspects of the phenomenon under study. In the revised guide, questions related to cybermobs, memes, and bystanders on social media were added. For example, "Can memes be the source of cyberbullying? Quote any incident of cyberbullying through memes? Have you ever been in a situation where a large number of people criticized or bullied you on social media?"

### Procedure

- After an extensive literature review, a focus group guide was made considering the research objectives.
- Participants were then approached using the convenience sampling technique. They were informed about the nature and objectives of the research. Their written consent was taken before participation in the research. Their permission to audio-record the discussion was also taken. Participants were informed about the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.
- Before discussing the main topic of research, ice-breaking was done by talking about adolescents' general use of the internet. The focus group discussions were conducted in distraction-free places. Most of the focus group discussions ended in an hour.
- Data from audio-recorded focus group discussion was transcribed and then thematic analysis was done to understand the construct.

### Results and Discussion

Several themes were identified by thematic analysis concerning the research objectives of exploring adolescents' perceived definition, and the forms of cyberbullying. Themes that explain the phenomenon are adolescents' perceived definitions of cyberbullying, constituents of cyberbullying, cybermobbing, and the role of cyber-bystanders in cybermobbing. The opinion of two independent raters was requested to assess the relevance of themes, categories, and codes. The percentage agreement was to be 83.7%. Throughout the results, hypothetical names for participants were used to maintain confidentiality. For example, in the name FG3-P4, FG3 refers to the third focus group discussion, and P4 refers to the fourth participant of the respective focus group discussion.

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of sample (N = 36)

| Demographics | n | (%) |
|---|---|---|
| *Gender* | | |
| Boys | 18 | 50 |
| Girls | 18 | 50 |
| *Educational Institute* | | |
| Private | 17 | 47.2 |
| Government | 19 | 52.8 |
| *Level of Education* | | |
| Secondary School | 14 | 38.8 |
| Higher Secondary School | 11 | 30.5 |
| Under graduation | 11 | 30.5 |
| *Personal gadgets* | | |
| Yes | 31 | 86.1 |
| No | 5 | 13.9 |

## Adolescents' Perceived Definition of Cyberbullying

This theme explains the way adolescents perceive the definition of cyberbullying concerning defining criteria (Intention, Repetition, and Power Imbalance). It was found that adolescents give importance to contextual factors instead of the above-mentioned criteria for defining cyberbullying. The two categories (opinion vs cyberbullying and perception of victim) explain the cyberbullying defining criteria that are considered important by Pakistani adolescents.

Adolescents regard the *intention to hurt* as an unnecessary thing to consider while deciding if an event is cyberbullying or not. The intention of a person cannot be measured. So, it is difficult to establish if the intention is good or bad. FG5-P4 (male) stated that "*The event will be considered as cyberbullying. If someone attempts a murder and apologize saying that he did it unintentionally, that is not how things work*". Alipan et al. (2020) assessed the relevance of intention considering the perpetrator and victim's points of view. It was found that perpetrators think that intention to harm should be considered while understanding cyberbullying. However, the victim labels the incident cyberbullying regardless of the intention.

Participants of the present research did not reflect on the intention by assuming themselves in the role of perpetrator or victims, rather they talked about intention considering different forms of cyberbullying. For example, in the case of verbal cyberbullying, adolescents consider that intention matters, one cannot be called a perpetrator just because he/she gave some opinion that was perceived to be wrong by the prospective victim. Nevertheless, when cyberbullying involves visual or sexual content, it was stressed that a person would be guilty of cyberbullying, even if it was unintentional.

The concept of *power imbalance* was interpreted differently in cyberspace. Anonymity was regarded as power for the perpetrator. FG4-P5 (boy) reported that "*When someone hides the identity, it makes that person more powerful than us. The issue of identity is common in all cases*". The computer skills were also labeled as power because hacking or other skills make someone resourceful to become a cyberbully. This finding is in accordance with literature that indicates anonymity and technical skills as power (Dooley et al., 2009; Langos, 2012). Participants also expressed that cyberbullies can be people holding no power in real life. FG6-P5 (girl) reported that "*Those who do not hold power in real life think that keyboard is all they have then they use it for everything they can do*".

There was disagreement among participants on the importance of *repetition* in defining cyberbullying. When it comes to verbal cyberbullying, some adolescents stressed that a negative comment made once will not be cyberbullying rather it will be feedback. Those in favor of this narrative stated that "*Bullying is constant teasing. It is not a big deal if done for once*".

Conversely, some participants were adamant that repetition is irrelevant for verbal cyberbullying. FG5-P4 (male) stated that "*If a negative comment is done for the first time, it will be considered as cyberbullying. If it is done, it is done. It will be considered as cyberbullying*". Though there were mixed opinions on repetition concerning verbal cyberbullying, all participants from all focus group discussions agreed that repetition becomes irrelevant in case of visual or sexual cyberbullying. FG6-P3 (a girl) reported that "*If very sensitive information is used even for once, it is cyberbullying because the information gets propagated*". Though it is mentioned in some studies that repetition is irrelevant in defining cyberbullying (Dooley et al., 2009; Menesini et al., 2012; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith, 2009), the present research has found situations in which it is regarded as relevant and as irrelevant.

Other than widely accepted criteria, *perception of the victim* appeared as a new defining criterion as a result of thematic analysis. It explains that the person's reaction to the event of cyberbullying matters the most. If an event affects the person negatively, then it will be called cyberbullying. FG4-P5 (a boy) reported that "*If someone feels bad by what we do, then it is bad no matter how it was done or if it was done once or a hundred times. If it feels bad, it is bad*". Even the negative consequences experienced by the victim also depend upon the perception of the event. FG4-P1 stated that "*It will be considered as bullying because it does not depend upon our thinking it depends upon the other person, how he/she is perceiving. If that person is considering it bullying and feeling pressurized, then we will call it bullying*". So, if the event is perceived negatively and has negative consequences for the victim, then it is cyberbullying even if the previously mentioned criteria of intention or repetition do not meet. A qualitative study with Australian youth has also found that the perception of the victim and negative consequences of the victim matter when defining cyberbullying (Alipan et al., 2020). However, perception is completely subjective. The same comment or post might be perceived as hurtful by one person and normal by another person. For example, FG2-P4 (a girl) was of opinion that if a friend says something mean, it should not be considered cyberbullying because the person is a friend. However, FG2-P5 (a girl) confronted her saying that "*Cyberbullying is cyberbullying even if it is done by a friend or someone else. It does not make it any different, it is the same thing*".

The perception of the victim appeared to be important in defining cyberbullying, but the participants were of the view that people can take advantage of this criterion and tend to perceive benign comments, opinions, or criticism as cyberbullying to hold opinion makers accountable. According to this aspect, the alleged inappropriate comment

can be an opinion about someone's picture, politics, and religion. This kind of negative comment should not be considered an intentional cyberbullying. FG4-P2 (a boy) stated that *"It is also possible that you comment about something without thinking that you are bullying. You might say a realistic thing but the other person think that you are criticizing to tease. If one does not like a post, he/she can give an opinion"*. Similarly, adolescents asserted that if the opinion or counterargument is logical then it should not be called cyberbullying even if the other person perceives it to be. FG6-P3 (a girl) reported that *"It can also be the constructive criticism, not necessarily intended to show hate"*. The criminal law of Pakistan was amended in 2020 which has criminalized criticism toward some state institutes. It was discouraged by politicians and journalists, who took the stand that criticising is the constitutional right of the people. The criticism should not be criminalized and there should be a clear mention of the definition of the legal and just criticism (Khan, 2021). The clash of opinion during hot online debates is also interpreted as humiliating and cyberbullying. However, people's choice of words should also be considered. FG6-P2 (a girl) stated that *"It depends upon the nature of comment and the reaction of the victim"*.

In short, intention and repetition can be considered part of the defining criteria for verbal cyberbullying. These cannot be taken as the criterion for visual/sexual cyberbullying or other severe forms and the person should be held accountable irrespective of the intention or repetition. However, the perception of the potential victims matters the most. If a person is negatively affected by someone's comment, then the event should be considered as cyberbullying without thinking about intention, repetition, or forms of cyberbullying. Yet, if the person perceives a benign comment or constructive criticism as cyberbullying, then it should not be considered as cyberbullying.

**Forms of Cyberbullying**

This theme explains the forms or types of cyberbullying that were reported by adolescents through the narration of their experiences. The categories related to this theme include visual/sexual cyberbullying, blackmailing, cyberpranks, cybermobbing, bullying on gaming platforms, and memes. Visual or sexual cyberbullying involves using someone's private photos to harm them. Adolescents have reported that it happens when pictures are misused, edited, or made viral. It can include mere sharing of someone's pictures on social media or editing the pictures for blackmailing. The purpose of visual cyberbullying can be to humiliate and hurt the person (Lee et al., 2017).

The incidents of *Blackmailing* were also narrated by the participants of the present study. It can be done for money. An incident was reported by the FG3-P1 (a boy), in which

someone's Facebook account was hacked, putting personal information at risk. The person had to pay a lot of money to get it back. Social media blackmailing is prevalent in females, younger people, and those who use social media to share photos (Al Habsi et al., 2021). Blackmailing is experienced differently by Pakistani girls and boys. Participants from all focus group discussions were of the view that girls are blackmailed more often. Moreover, boys are usually blackmailed for money but their private information that can result in stigmatization is seldom at risk. However, the girls are blackmailed through photos, and sensitive and identifying information. FG4-P5 (boy) narrated an incident, in which his friend used a casual or modest photo of the girl to make a fake ID. He blackmailed the girl to talk to him. He threatened the girl to comply or he would message other boys with fake ID and they will think that the girl is messaging. It was so traumatic for the girl that she wanted to attempt suicide. Pakistani society judges or blames the girls for their victimization (Lodhi, 2020). They are thought to lose their honour if victimized. This makes the consequences of blackmailing worse for girls as compared to boys.

*Cyberpranks* are popular among youth. Adolescents enjoy playing tricks on their friends. Though pranks are intended for fun, they can have serious consequences for the victim. The perpetrators of cyberpranks often do not realize that they are creating psychological and emotional turmoil for the person. FG4-P4 (a boy) reported experiencing crying episodes, lack of concentration, and suicidal thoughts due to falling victim to cyberpranks. Since cyberpranks can lead to severe negative consequences for the potential victim, these can be considered a form of cyberbullying. Recent studies also indicate that social media pranks are performed by hiding identity and are intended to tease people (Jarrar et al., 2020). Baas et al. (2013) indicated that there is no clear line between cyberbullying and innocent pranks. The potential bullies underestimate the consequences of their seemingly harmless jokes or pranks. They tend to not empathize with the victim. So, the victim is likely to interpret the intended prank as cyberbullying.

All incidents of cyberpranks were reported by boys. Girls were of the view that they rarely engage in such activities. The present research found that pranks are usually played with the people you know. Because perpetrators can witness the victim and see their trick working, that becomes a source of enjoyment. FG4-P2 (a boy) shared his experience of falling a victim to prank *"When I was in high school, I was talking with a girl then it went wrong. The next day, someone called on my phone and badly scolded and threatened me saying that I am teasing his girl. I was very afraid. Later, it was revealed that it was my friend who called"*.

Multiphasic Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG) are a common site of *cyberbullying on gaming*

*platforms*. Adolescents cyberbully each other using live audio and chat options. Adolescents tend to lose their mind when they think that they are losing the game. They become so absorbed in the game that the virtual fight appears to be real. FG4- P5 stated that *"It becomes inevitable because it feels that it is not a game but happening actually"*. So, in these types of intense fighting games, the exchange of abusive language and arguments happens frequently. Pujante (2021) has found that trash talk is becoming increasingly common on gaming platforms. It includes verbal aggression like insulting remarks, slurs, swears, commands, and threatening statements. Sometimes, adolescents also cyberbully other players because they are obsessed with making progress in games and any hindrance is not taken lightly. FG4-P3 stated that *"The person wants to reach the last stage and be a conqueror. So if at that time, you harm him, he will start to abuse and say why did you do it? It is the point from where an argument starts"*.

*Memes* are one of the ways to be entertained or have fun. Nevertheless, they too have a dark side. Adolescents have also reported that memes are also a source of cyberbullying. They can also be perceived as blackmailing. FG5-P6 was of the view that *"Now people make memes and put other person in trouble about whom memes are made"*. Memes are also used for a lot of negative purposes that include targeting people personally, teasing others, spreading misinformation, and hurting someone's self-respect. Memes are also used to make judgmental comments about people and spread them to the public. For example, someone may use a meme to highlight the other person's shortcoming that is then laughed at by people on social media. Indian research has also highlighted cyberbullying through memes and regarded it as a serious problem for college students as memes may involve vulgar language and offensive comments about a particular student (Jaiswal, 2021). Adolescents have also reported the concept of reciprocal memes. If someone makes a derogatory meme, then the other person responds with another meme about the perpetrator. FG6-P3 stated that *"I think memes are mostly for entertainment but if there are sexist or racist jokes then it does have a negative impact. It includes promoting bad things in the garb of a joke"*. Participants of the current study maintained the stance that memes should continue to exist and they are a good source of entertainment but one should avoid targeting a specific person in memes.

Interestingly, those who make or share memes frequently do not always enjoy them. Whether or not a memer will experience negative consequences depends upon the nature of memes. FG6-P3 stated that *"Those who make roasting memes try to look for negative in every situation. If memes are intended to insult others, then memer may develop a negative mindset over the time and start to see casual experiences in life negatively"*. Those who make harmless memes do not bear such consequences. Making memes frequently also makes a person indifferent to problems, one starts responding to things with humor which exacerbates the problem. Though the audience of memes tends to enjoy and those who make memes also do it for fun but in the long run, it can lead to negative consequences for memers. FG4-P4 reported negative consequences *"Due to watching a lot of memes our life has become a joke; we have also become a joke. I was a different person back then. I have observed that since I have been involved in this meme thing people's serious talk also seems like a joke to me"*. The literature agrees about memes as a problem (Kiela et al., 2020), but it is silent on the consequences of memes for those who make them. Conversely, participants also have mentioned that memes can elevate mood, and provide entertainment to the audience. Roster (2021) has also shown that memes can have positive consequences like engaging and motivating the respondents.

## Cybermobbing

Cybermobbing was found to be a new type of cyberbullying. The exhibition of cybermobbing is similar to real-world mobs. According to the present research, a cybermob is a group of individuals that criticize someone (a person e.g., politician, or celebrity) on social media, which have negative consequences for the victim. Literature suggests that cyberbullying can take the form of a group where people may open a group against someone (Aizenkot, 2017). Cybermobs do not necessarily target a person, a mob can also be set up against an ideology, institution, government policy, or some other topic of discussion. Results of the present study have shown that virtual mobs or conflicts on social media can lead to conflicts in real life. Social media can surge with posts and comments against a certain person of ideology. Thus, cybermobs play a crucial role in mobilizing people which leads to mobs on roads (Krumm, 2013). The theme of cybermobbing has 4 categories: s*ettings the stage, conformity, lack of support, and intolerance*. The first category "*Setting the Stage*" indicates that the prolonged debates initiate the cybermobs. The argument is then fueled by involvement of bystanders. The number of comments on a particular post/topic of discussion increases exponentially, turning an argument into a mob. FG4-P4 quoted an example:

> "*My classmate posted something like repugnant proxy war in Gilgit Baltistan then someone mentioned his friends to ask about their opinion. Then they all teamed up and said to him "this is strange what you are saying, you are a wrong person". Those three persons, the only three did almost 200 comments then we asked our friend to mention us to take revenge and we all teamed up and started to fight. So, it kept going*

*like this, commenting and mentioning each other so that number of comments became 1000. Other people also started to join*".

The present research has shown that people use ruthless language to communicate their point of view. Cybermobs are usually observed for topics like politics and religion. Due to anonymity, adolescents use harsh language on social media (Kang et al., 2013). It gives them a sense of deindividuation. It absolves them of responsibility for their behavior. FG6-P2 gave an example in which someone was accused on social media of raping someone. Masses on social media believed it and bashed the alleged perpetrator, who was recently declared innocent by the court.

*Conformity* comes to the equation once the cybermob is formed. People see the mob situation as an opportunity to comment whatever comes to their mind without thinking or being logically correct. According to FG3-P1, "*After seeing the criticism many of the people do criticize*". Participants reported that people add to the bashing of cybermobs without having any knowledge about the topic of the discussion. They lack a sense of social responsibility and act under the influence of the mob. Literature suggests that group membership can diminish the sense of individuality and people conform with the group even if it hurts someone. The deindividuation or herd mentality increases the intensity of the mob. Physical anonymity plays a significant role in participation in a real-world mob (Chomczyński, 2020; Myers & Twenge, 2016).

In the same way, anonymity in cyberspace increases people's likelihood to be part of cybermobs. FG2-P6 (a girl) was of the view that we, as a nation, think emotionally and instead of focusing on different aspects of an issue, we follow cybercrowds. People get influenced by information without evaluating the different aspects of the matter. It includes paying attention to peripheral cues and getting persuaded (Myers & Twenge, 2016). Adolescents reported deliberate thinking or commenting against cybermobs on matters that were important to them. It was found that the people engaging in cybermobs do not realize that their bashing is immoral or can harm someone on cyberspace. Other than the group influence, moral disengagement can also explain it. Increased moral disengagement is related to a high level of cyberbullying perpetration (Bussey et al., 2015). Some participants reported remaining indifferent to cybermobs because they do not want to bother themselves with things that do not concern them directly.

There exists a *lack of support* for victims who get trapped in cybermobs. People on social media usually ignore the victim's suffering and avoid speaking for the victim. FG5-P3 expressed that "*No one defends others, even relatives also say that let it go and think that their opinion would not be listened to when hundreds of people are furious against*

*a person*". The bystander effect becomes strong on social media because people cannot know if someone turned a blind eye instead of supporting the victim (Alipan et al., 2020). People may not support due to the screen barrier, as pain and bruises can be seen in physical bullying but it does not happen in cyberbullying (Meter et al., 2021). FG6-P3 reported that "*Most of the audience do not intervene, only the courageous people comment. Especially those who respond to your comment and then keep replying*". The participants from all focus group discussions expressed fear of trolling and harsh criticism as a reason for not supporting the victim. According to Chomczyński (2020), bystanders fear supporting the victim because they know that a collective opinion about the matter exists.

Some participants tend to intervene on the behalf of the victim if he/she is a friend, relative, or acquaintance. Others expressed that they do not support avoiding unnecessary fights. They do not want to get bothered for the things that do not concern them personally. The perceived interest or investment of bystanders decides their intention to intervene or support the victim (Alipan, 2020).

*Intolerance* is also observed in social media debates where a lot of people with a similar point of view gather. They make it difficult for dissenters to express themselves. The expression of opposing opinions leads to severe bashing. According to FG5-P3, "*Our people do not listen, they say if many people are endorsing something then the dissenter must be wrong*". Due to intolerance, people use vulgar language and destructive criticism to make their point, which fuels the cybermob. According to Singh (2017), intolerance and racial or religious bigotry enables a mob to take the law in their hand. Participants reported that people who add a logical point to the online arguments about religion or other topics also use inappropriate language. FG6-P3 reported that "*Even the good things are written in such a bad way that one says that I will not listen to this and I will not listen to the religion and I will not do anything good*".

## Consequences of Cybermobs

This theme explains the consequences of cybermobs for both the victim and other people in general. *Consequences for the victim and attitude change* are the categories falling under this theme. Cyber victims who experience bashing for interacting with cybermobs experience a lot of negative consequences. Participants reported that it can lead to poor mental health or depression. However, the consequences depend upon individual differences. Some people just ignore the backlash and become indifferent to it. FG4-P4 (a boy) wishes to not get hurt by the criticism but cannot help it. He stated that "*If I am criticized on social media that thing gets stuck in mind. It is retrieved from memory before sleeping or during the study*".

When the cybermob favors one particular point of view, people also start to endorse it. So, cybermobs can lead to a change in the public's attitude toward a social issue or a person who is at the center of a scandal on social media. FG6-P3 (a girl) reported that change in attitude can be due to lack of knowledge "*Yes people's opinion can be formed. Like if someone does not know what the scandal is, he/she will read the comments and see the majority endorsing the same opinion then that person will modify own opinion if he/she is suggestible. This is how generally people are. Now a days, they do not research a lot to find out if the perspective is right: they just believe. One should not believe*". Bystanders on social media get influenced by the popular perspective on social media.

Thematic analysis has shown that due to cybermobs, the alternative explanation about a matter does not surface strongly on social media. Even if people are exposed to it, they deny it and prefer going along the group. So, cybermobs can lead to polarization of opinion. According to Bakshy et al. (2015), social media is increasing opinion polarization because people are selectively exposed to information. Social media is affecting the attitude or perception of people (Younus, 2018). If a large group of people or a mob is endorsing something, it can intensify people's opinions (Myers & Twenge, 2016). An alternative explanation does not exist because people start to bash those who comment against the mob. FG5-P3 (a boy) stated that "*Then one says that I will never comment again*". Following a discussion about cybermobs, FG4-P5 (a boy) has explained how our thinking is influenced by social media "*I think social media has captured our way of thinking that God has made and started a new type of thinking. If someone fights with me, my original and natural way of thinking will not work*".

To sum up, mobs can occur in cyberspace. Any social media fight or issue can turn into a mob if a lot of people get involved in it. The mob shows intolerance and harshly criticizes the target. People usually go along with the popular opinion on social media. They conform with the mob without assuming personal responsibility. Thus, the cybermob can contribute to public's attitude toward a person or a social issue. However, the victim may experience depression or other psychological issues upon seeing masses turning against them.

## Conclusion

Adolescents argue about the relevance of traditional bullying criteria (intention, repetition, and power imbalance) to define cyberbullying. Intention cannot be measured so it should not be considered while defining cyberbullying. On cyberspace, humiliating pictures or other content can be shared and seen for an unlimited number of times which makes repetition irrelevant. So, repetition by perpetrators also does not stand valid in eyes of adolescents. They have stressed the importance of the perception of a victim in defining cyberbullying. If a prospective victim perceives something to be emotionally damaging then it is considered cyberbullying, irrespective of intention, repetition, and power imbalance. Current research has found that cyberbullying can also be done through memes and gaming platforms. Memes are not only perceived to be a source of entertainment but also hurtful or personally targeting. Current research also found that the posts that go viral on social media can have thousands of comments. It often takes the form of a cybermob. It can lead to mental health problems for victims. Cybermobs also serve to increase the polarization of opinion in society as people tend to believe and follow what the majority says.

## Implications and Contributions

The present research has added the adolescents' perceived definition to the literature of cyberbullying. The way adolescents conceptualize the construct can be used in future researches and policy making. For example, adolescents stress that intention to harm is not a relevant criterion while deciding if some act of aggression is cyberbullying or not. The findings can be used by policy makers and law enforcing agencies who usually define cyberbullying as an intentional behavior and often give leeway to the perpetrator for unintentionally cyberbullying someone. The research has also contributed novel forms of cyberbullying (memes and cybermobbing) to the literature. It implies that emerging forms of cyberbullying and adolescents' definitions should be considered while measuring cyberbullying. So, the instruments should capture these aspects to measure the construct precisely. The findings can be used by cyber psychology researchers for in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of cybermobbing in different cultures.

## Limitations and Suggestions

The sample was taken from urban areas of Pakistan. The findings may not be generalizable to the whole of Pakistan. As the research was qualitative, the researchers' subjectivity might have influenced the results. The definition was explored by taking adolescents' perspectives, however, educators and policy makers can also be taken into account to understand their point of view and study the phenomenon comprehensively. Perspectives change with respect to age, time, gender, and advancement in technology. In future, cohort and longitudinal studies to study cyberbullying and change in construct can be considered.

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