

The Impact of Cyberbullying on the Emergence of Alexithymia among University Students

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Abstract:

This study aimed to investigate the impact of cyberbullying on the emergence of alexithymia among university students. To this end, the study was conducted on a sample of 500 male and female students from the University of Oran 1 and the University of Oran 2. Using Al-Shennawi's Cyberbullying Scale (2014) and the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), the study revealed that cyberbullying contributes to the emergence of alexithymia among university students. In light of these findings, a set of recommendations was proposed, the most important of which is the establishment of psychological follow-up and listening units at the university level to ensure optimal support for students' problems.

Keywords: cyberbullying; alexithymia; university student.

1. Statement of the Problem

Universities are considered among the most important educational institutions in any society, as they are major sources of training, education, and the development of human resources. It is an educational institution that individuals join after completing their secondary education, as its role is not limited to the transmission of knowledge and learning but also extends to building a generation capable of innovation and creativity (Al-Hadithi, 2011, p. 6). The university student, as one of the fundamental and active elements in the university system, represents a human force that reflects the future and capacities of any country. Therefore, the university is keen to provide the means of excellence. Before becoming a university student, the student was a secondary school pupil; that is, they moved from secondary school to university, which meant that they changed their lifestyle. University students will form new social relationships, as the university is a new environment for them; thus, they find it difficult to adapt and face several problems in light of digital expansion, such as the misuse of social media and cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is considered a recent phenomenon and a common social problem among university students. It is defined as a deliberate, intentional, repeated, and hostile electronic attack that reflects poor social adjustment in digital spaces (Masoudi, 2024). Several studies

indicate that bullying occurs among students themselves. This was reported in a study by Bendada and Fariha (2021) on the manifestations of cyberbullying among university students who were victims of cyberbullying. The study was conducted at Chadli Bendjedid University in El Tarf Province on a purposive sample, and the results revealed the existence of five forms of cyberbullying in the university environment, with the most widespread and recurrent forms being exclusion and sexual harassment compared with the other forms.

Moreover, the study by Belhadji and Ben Amour (2022) aimed to examine the level of cyberbullying among university students in relation to certain personal variables. The study was conducted on a sample of 120 students at Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef. The study revealed that the level of cyberbullying among the study sample was low across both the total score and all scale dimensions. The results also revealed statistically significant differences in the level of cyberbullying according to the specialisation variable, but no differences were attributable to either the gender or university-level variables. Ziad's (2022) study on the relationship between cyberbullying and negative emotions (depression, anxiety, and psychological stress) and the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students was conducted on an incidental sample of 175 students from the University of Tebessa. The results revealed that there were considerable levels of cyberbullying prevalence, in terms of both bullies and victims, among students at the University of Tebessa. The study also revealed statistically significant differences attributable to the gender variable in favour of male victims and bullies. Several studies have revealed that cyberbullying emerges among students as a result of their sense of not belonging to the group and their feelings of inferiority, alienation, and dissatisfaction, which they attempt to alleviate through social networking sites. However, their exposure to cyberbullying through these means affects their lives and adjustment. Fadel and Boudkara's (2023) study aimed to examine the effect of cyberbullying on psychological security among university students. The study was conducted on a sample of 158 students from the University of Mascara. The findings revealed a high level of exposure to cyberbullying from the students' perspective, a low level of psychological security among them, and an effect of cyberbullying on students' psychological security. Yazid and Al-Wannas (2023) also reported a relationship between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation and reported that cyberbullying is a predictor of suicidal ideation.

Cyberbullying also leads to the emergence of a range of emotional disorders, including alexithymia, which causes students to lack the skills that help them engage in social interaction and adapt to others, thereby leading to a deterioration in their psychological state and negatively affecting their social, professional, and academic relationships. Several studies indicate that alexithymia is prevalent among university students at a prevalence ranging from 13% to 19%, as the individual experiences difficulty in recognising emotions and feelings, as well as difficulty in identifying and understanding feelings, which contributes substantially to facilitating social interaction, communication, both verbal and nonverbal, and the exchange of ideas with others, along with the associated psychological and behavioural problems. The most important of these are difficulty in awareness and perception and a weak ability to discuss one's

problems and what one feels about one's experiences; the individual may also suppress his or her emotions (Al-Basir, 2020, p. 279). Some studies have also indicated a high level of alexithymia among university students; for example, Agnes Bonnet et al. (2012) reported that female students experience higher levels of alexithymia, particularly in the dimension of "difficulty identifying feelings" (Bonnet, 2012). González (2010) reported that victims of bullying experience a wide range of negative feelings, such as anxiety, fear, sadness, and depression, and that these emotional effects may have long-term consequences for their mental health. Cyberbullying may also generate a persistent sense of vulnerability as a result of privacy violation (Esquivel & Lopez, 2023). According to the studies by Perren et al. (2010) and Sourander et al. (2010), exposure to cyberbullying is considered a risk factor for the development of depressive symptoms among adolescents. Studies at the university level have confirmed this, as Schenk and Fremouw (2012) reported that university students who were victims of cyberbullying scored higher on measures of depression, anxiety, phobic anxiety, and paranoia. In their study on a sample of Portuguese university students, Teixeira et al. (2010) reported a relationship between depression and anxiety and the four dimensions of aggression—physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility—as a result of exposure to cyberbullying via mobile phones and the internet (Myers & Cowie, 2017).

On this basis, the following question was posed:

Does cyberbullying contribute to the emergence of alexithymia among university students?

2. Significance and objectives of the study

By identifying its nature, the extent of its prevalence among university students, and its effects, particularly in the emotional domain, the importance of the spread of the phenomenon of cyberbullying across all age groups and social groups is significant. The objective of the study can be limited to identifying the contribution of cyberbullying to the emergence of alexithymia among university students.

3. Concepts of the Study

3.1. Cyberbullying

Al-Shennawi (2014) defines cyberbullying as the intentional, repeated, and hostile harm to others through the use of the internet, email, electronic games, text messages, and social networking sites (Lahoul, 2022).

The forms of cyberbullying are as follows:

Electronic flaming: This refers to sending angry electronic messages that are inappropriate for the victim to a group, by accident, or to the victim themselves, via email, text, comments, and other means.

Electronic harassment: This refers to repeatedly sending insulting messages via email to another person, often messages that contain sexual harassment.

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Electronic dialogue: This includes online harassment, such as threats of harm, excessive insults, and defamation, through virtual conversations.

Electronic denigration: This involves sending others insulting, harmful, untrue, or unjust messages about the victim or creating posts that do the same.

Impersonation: This refers to the bully pretending to be another person and sending messages or posts that make the other person appear bad.

Exposure and violation of privacy: This occurs when posts, messages, or images containing private information belonging to the person are sent or published.

Exclusion: This refers to the bully making every effort to expel the victim from the group or remove them from social networking sites and urging others to do so, without justification beyond exercising power over the victim or causing them distress (Hassi, 2020, p. 70).

With the development of technology and the increasing use of social networking sites, cyberbullying is increasing and taking multiple forms, including sending threatening or abusive text messages; sending hostile, racist, or sexual material; making silent, deceptive, or abusive calls; creating embarrassing images or videos; sending threatening or disturbing messages on social networking sites, chat rooms, or electronic games; excluding someone from electronic games, activities, or groups; creating websites or hate groups targeting a particular person; encouraging other young people to harm themselves; voting for or against someone in an abusive poll; creating fake accounts; or hijacking or stealing online identities to embarrass someone or cause problems using their name (Myers & Cowie, 2017).

Cyberbullying is operationally defined as the score obtained by the university student on Amina Ibrahim Al-Shennawi's cyberbullying scale (2014).

3.2. Alexithymia

The term alexithymia is considered relatively recent and was introduced in 1973 by the psychiatrist Sifneos; however, this concept did not receive serious attention from researchers until the past two decades (Bouchoucha & Nait Abdessalam, 2021, p. 307).

Alexithymia is defined as a deficit in the mental processing of feelings and emotional experiences, which results in a limited capacity to express feelings and a limited development of emotional experience in reality. Individuals with alexithymia find it difficult to distinguish specific emotions and identify their feelings on the basis of bodily sensations. In addition, they have an externally oriented way of thinking and are often attacked because of widespread negative affection, social avoidance, and poor emotional relationships with others (Epifanio et al., 2018, p. 2).

Olivier Luminet considers alexithymia to be caused by deficiencies in the cognitive processing of emotions and that it refers to difficulty distinguishing between emotions and the bodily sensations resulting from emotional arousal, difficulty in perceiving the emotions of others, limited imaginative processes, and a cognitive style characterised by simplicity, utilitarianism, and an outwards orientation (Bouchoucha & Nait Abdessalam, 2018, p. 34). Al-Sherbini (2001) defines it as an inability to express or a lack of descriptiveness and then defines it as the inability

or difficulty in describing feelings and emotions or a lack of awareness of internal feelings (Qaddash, 2021, p. 489).

The concept of alexithymia can be confined to two dimensions. The first is the emotional dimension, represented by the individual's inability to express, verbally describe, and articulate their feelings and sensations. The second is the cognitive dimension, characterised by a deficiency in the cognitive processing of emotions and difficulty distinguishing them from physical symptoms, as well as a weak fantasy life and practical thinking focused on describing external events rather than emotions.

It is operationally defined as the score obtained by the university student on the Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20).

3.3. University Student

A university student is a student who regularly pursues university studies at both the University of Oran 1 and the University of Oran 2 during the 2024–2025 academic year.

4. Methodological Procedures of the Study

4.1. Adopted Method

This study relies on a descriptive method, as it is the most appropriate for achieving its objectives.

4.2. Instruments Used

This study relied on the following instruments:

4.2.1. Cyberbullying Scale

The Cyberbullying Scale developed by Amina Ibrahim Al-Shennawi (2014) was used. The scale consists of 26 items, and the responses are distributed on a five-point scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always), corresponding to scores of 0, 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. The scale includes five dimensions: mockery and defamation (8 items), exclusion (5 items), annoyance and violation of privacy (5 items), insult and threat (3 items), and sexual harassment (5 items). Responses to the scale are scored according to the Likert method, with five response alternatives. Thus, the highest possible score on the scale is 104, the lowest score is 0, and the hypothetical mean is 52.

Through an exploratory study on a sample of 100 university students, the psychometric properties of the scale were verified as follows:

First. Validity: The scale's validity was assessed using the extreme-group comparison method. Statistically significant differences were found ($t = 21.19$) at the 0.01 significance level in the level of cyberbullying between the upper group (79.53) and the lower group (25.48) of students. This means that the scale has discriminant validity for measuring cyberbullying among the sample members. Hence, the scale demonstrates acceptable discriminant validity.

Second. Reliability: The scale's reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and the split-half method, yielding coefficients of 0.75 and 0.79, respectively. As a result, the scale is reliable.

4.2.2. Alexithymia Scale

The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20), developed by Bagby, Parker, and Taylor (1994), was used. The scale consists of 20 statements, and the responses are distributed on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The total score on the scale ranges from 20 to 100. The scale contains three subscales: difficulty identifying feelings (DIF), which consists of seven positive statements, namely, items 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 13, and 14; difficulty describing feelings (DDF), which consists of four positive statements and one negative statement, namely, positive items 2, 11, 12, and 17, and negative item 4; and externally oriented thinking (EOT), which consists of four positive statements and four negative statements, namely, positive items 8, 15, 16, and 20 and negative items 5, 10, 18, and 19.

The scale scores are calculated as follows: if the total score is greater than or equal to 61, this means that the person has alexithymia; if the score ranges between 52 and 60, it indicates the possibility of alexithymia; and if the score is 51 or below, it indicates the absence of alexithymia (Al-Aidan, 2019, p. 118).

Through an exploratory study on a sample of 100 university students, the psychometric properties of the scale were verified as follows:

First. Validity: The scale's validity was assessed using the extreme-group comparison method. Statistically significant differences were found ($t = 31.59$) in alexithymia levels at the 0.01 significance level between the upper group (73.53) and the lower group (45.48) of students. This means that the scale has discriminant validity for measuring alexithymia among the sample members. Thus, the scale demonstrates acceptable discriminant validity.

Second. Reliability: The scale's reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and the split-half method, yielding coefficients of 0.82 and 0.94, respectively. Therefore, the scale is reliable.

4.3. Study Sample

The study was conducted on a sample of 500 university students who were randomly selected from both the University of Oran 1 and the University of Oran 2 (35.5% males and 64.8% females) during the first semester of the 2024–2025 academic year.

5. Presentation and Discussion of the Results

5.1. Presentation and Discussion of the Results Related to the Research Question

This question states, "Does cyberbullying contribute to the emergence of alexithymia among university students?" To answer this question, regression analysis was used, and the results were as follows:

Table 1

Regression Model for Predicting Alexithymia through Cyberbullying

Table 1

Regression Model for Predicting Alexithymia from Cyberbullying

Durbin–Watson	Standard Error	Adjusted R^2	R^2	R	Model
2.094	4.526	0.715	0.761	0.872	01

Statistical Significance	F Value	Mean Square	df	Sum of Squares	of Source	Cyberbullying
0.01	197.21	36,490.24	1	36,490.24	Regression	
		185.03	1149	2,126.29	Residual	
			1150	14,066.78	Total	

The table shows that the regression model is acceptable according to the Durbin–Watson test, as the relationship between the variables of exposure to cyberbullying and alexithymia was estimated at 0.71. This relationship indicates that exposure to cyberbullying accounts for 71% of the variance in alexithymia. It is also evident that there are statistically significant differences in the exposure to cyberbullying, as the *F* value reaches 197.21 at the 0.01 significance level, indicating the validity of the model in predicting alexithymia through cyberbullying. The results of the *t* test also reveal statistically significant differences among the groups for the exposure to cyberbullying variable, with a *t* value of -14.04 at the 0.01 significance level.

Table 2

Contribution of cyberbullying to the level of alexithymia among university students

Regression Model	Unstandardised Coefficients A	Standard Error	Unstandardised Coefficients B	Standardised Coefficients	T	Statistical Significance
Constant	128.4	0.50			255.73	0.01
Cyberbullying	0.63	0.031	0.58		-14.04	0.01

The results also show that the slope parameter indicates that students' exposure to cyberbullying increases alexithymia by 0.63; that is, the level of alexithymia can be predicted by exposure to cyberbullying. Hence, the regression model can be written as follows:

$$\text{Alexithymia} = 128.4 + 0.63 (\text{exposure to cyberbullying})$$

These results are consistent with those of Ziad's (2022) study, which revealed a positive relationship between cyberbullying and negative emotions, namely, depression, anxiety, and psychological stress, among students at the University of Tebessa. This finding is also consistent with the findings of Aricak and Ozbay's (2016) study on the relationships among exposure to cyberbullying, alexithymia, and anger expression styles among adolescents according to gender and duration of internet use. The study involved 1,257 students in Istanbul Province during the 2012 and 2013 academic years. The findings revealed that a substantial increase in cyberbullying could explain the difficulty of identifying feelings, that is, alexithymia and trait anger among them. Alexithymia is considered one of the personality traits known to affect anger. Erden (2005) and Sayar, Güleç, and Topbaş (2004) also reported that individuals who exhibit alexithymic behavior are more likely to use self-destructive behaviors. Norman and Borrill (2015) reported that individuals who have difficulty expressing their feelings,

particularly those who experience frustration, are more likely to exhibit symptoms of anger. According to Erden (2005), individuals who are likely to display symptoms of alexithymia have low levels of anger management.

In a study of university students, De Berardis et al. (2009) reported that difficulty identifying feelings, dissociative experiences, low self-esteem, and emotional disturbance may constitute risk factors for internet addiction. Garisch and Wilson's (2010) study on alexithymia and exposure to bullying revealed that adolescents who deliberately engage in self-harm show more symptoms of exposure to bullying and alexithymia than others do. Teo (2010) also reported an inverse relationship between emotional awareness and cyberbullying, both internally and externally (Aricak & Ozbay, 2016).

Being a victim of cyberbullying is considered an important indicator of difficulties in emotional regulation. A descriptive, correlational, and explanatory study was conducted on a sample of 904 adolescents in Ecuador and revealed that the prevalence rate of cyberbullying was low. Moreover, there was a moderate level of difficulties in emotional regulation, including 9.3% of at-risk cases. There was also a moderate positive relationship between cyberbullying victimisation and difficulties in emotional regulation, as being a victim of cyberbullying explained 22.8% of the variance in difficulties in emotional regulation (Solis & Herrera, 2022). These results may be explained by the fact that students who are victims of cyberbullying have low levels of self-confidence and fear of confrontation and may suffer from several disorders, such as anxiety, feelings of guilt, and shame. These disorders affect victims, leading them to develop a negative view of themselves, which results in a decline in their satisfaction with life. Victims of bullying focus on criticising themselves and searching for their flaws. The emotional impact of cyberbullying can be devastating for affected students, as they experience a wide range of negative feelings, such as anxiety, fear, sadness, anger, shame, depression, low self-esteem, and mental health problems, in addition to difficulty concentrating on their studies, which affects their academic performance and personal development. Students' perceptions of cyberbullying also play a role in this regard, as students may view themselves as helpless victims, which contributes to feelings of helplessness and despair. They may also form distorted beliefs about their personal worth and their ability to communicate with others, leading to reduced social participation, isolation, and a lack of self-confidence (Esquivel & Lopez, 2023). In addition, the more university students are exposed to cyberbullying, the more they develop the belief that they are ostracised and rejected by society, generating psychological and emotional wounds that last throughout life. Electronic harassment and electronic defamation affect life satisfaction and psychological security, leading to feelings of pessimism, despair, a sense of danger, and a loss of enthusiasm for life. Suicidal thoughts and weakness of personality also crystallise, thereby lowering their level of satisfaction with life.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to identify the relationship between cyberbullying and alexithymia among university students. Through a field study on students at the University of Oran 1 and the

University of Oran 2, it was found that cyberbullying contributes substantially to the emergence of alexithymia among university students.

On the basis of these results, a set of recommendations was proposed, the most important of which are as follows:

- Organising awareness programs for university students on the seriousness of cyberbullying.
- Further in-depth scientific studies on cyberbullying and its causes among different groups in society should be conducted.
- Organising awareness-raising campaigns to encourage the positive use of social networking sites.
- Activate the psychological follow-up and listening unit at the university level to ensure optimal support for students' problems, particularly emotional problems.
- Activate university clubs for students to make use of their leisure time and not leave them prey to social networking sites.

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