

# UNSEEN PURSUITS: THE INTERPLAY OF CYBERSTALKING, OBSESSIVE RELATIONAL INTRUSION, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN FACEBOOK USERS

Faiz Younas<sup>1</sup>, Bushra Ejaz<sup>2</sup>, Vicar Solomon<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer Institute of Applied Psychology, University of Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup>BS Scholar, Institute of Applied Psychology, University of Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup>Incharge & Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Jhang, Jhang, Pakistan.

<sup>1</sup>faizyounasbutt.appsy@pu.edu.pk, <sup>2</sup>bushraejaz@gmail.com, <sup>3</sup>vicarsolomon5@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17510924>

## Keywords

Cyberstalking, Obsessive Relational Intrusion, Psychological Distress, Facebook Use, Gender Differences, University Students

## Article History

Received: 27 August 2025

Accepted: 20 October 2025

Published: 31 October 2025

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Corresponding Author: \*

Faiz Younas

## Abstract

The present study aimed to assess the relationship between cyber stalking, obsessive relational intrusion and psychological distress in youth using Facebook. It was hypothesized that cyberstalking and obsessive relational intrusion would be positively related with and predicted psychological distress. Moreover, there would be significant gender differences across the study variables. Employing a cross-sectional correlational design, a sample of 150 university students was recruited through non-probability convenient sampling (including  $n = 75$  men,  $n = 75$  women;  $M_{age} = 18.89$ ,  $SD_{age} = 1.60$ ). Observing APA-mandated guidelines, responses were collected from participants on the Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit Questionnaire (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002), the Obsessive Relational Intrusion Short Form (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2004) and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler, 2002; Andrews & Slade, 2001). Results indicated that both cyberstalking and obsessive relational intrusion had significant positive relationship with psychological distress as well as significantly predicted it. Also, women scored higher on all the three study variables, indicating significant gender differences. These findings will facilitate the research directions in the field of cyber-psychology.

## INTRODUCTION

The increasing use of social media platforms such as Facebook has created new contexts for interpersonal interaction, where relational behaviors can sometimes take intrusive or distressing forms. Behaviors like cyberstalking and obsessive relational intrusion (ORI) reflect persistent unwanted attention that may contribute to heightened psychological distress. Although these constructs have been studied individually, their interrelationship has received limited empirical attention, particularly within the context of online communication. The present study

aimed to examine how cyberstalking and ORI relate to psychological distress among students using Facebook, contributing to a clearer understanding of the psychological impact of intrusive online behaviors.

### Cyber Stalking

Cyberstalking is a widespread digital threat involving harmful online behaviors such as sending threatening emails, sharing private media without consent, seeking personal information, persistent harassment, and catfishing to deceive

others. It extends traditional stalking into the digital realm, where the perpetrator continues unwanted contact despite explicit refusal (Bansal et al., 2023). It extends traditional stalking into the digital realm, exploiting online anonymity to intimidate, manipulate, and instil fear in victims (Papakitsou, 2020). Common tactics of cyberstalking include sending email threats, engaging in social media harassment, and unauthorised sharing of personal information (Bansal et al., 2023). Perpetrators can be individuals or groups, and often involve third-party manipulation, where offenders exploit others or online platforms to post personal data or engage in social engineering. Cyber-smearing, through impersonation, defamatory posts, or false sexual claims, aims to damage reputation and induce distress (Macfarlane & Bocij, 2003; The National Center for Victims of Cyber Crimes, 2004). These forms frequently overlap; for instance, cyber-smearing may occur via email or group stalking with malware, and can escalate into offline harassment (Mukred et al., 2024).

Researchers have developed several typologies to explain stalkers' motivations and their relationships with victims (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004; Meloy, 1998; Mohandie et al., 2006; Mullen et al., 1999; Zona et al., 1998). Mohandie et al.'s (2006) RECON typology distinguishes stalkers based on relational context: those with prior relationships (intimate or acquaintance) and those without (public figure or private stranger). Similarly, Zona et al. (1993) categorized stalkers as simple obsessional (ex-partners seeking reconciliation or revenge), love obsessional (strangers or acquaintances pursuing unattainable figures such as celebrities), and erotomaniac (individuals deluded into believing the victim reciprocates affection, typically posing low violence risk). Expanding on this, Mullen et al. (1999) proposed five types: rejected stalkers motivated by jealousy or revenge, resentful stalkers driven by perceived injustices, intimacy-seeking and incompetent suitors pursuing unwanted relationships, and predatory stalkers motivated by sexual control or gratification.

Stalking victimization transcends gender, social, or cultural boundaries (Mullen & Pathe, 2002; Dutton & Spitzberg, 2007), though women are disproportionately targeted by men (Dutton & Spitzberg, 2007; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Nobles et al. (2014) revealed that cyberstalking victims tended to have higher household income and education levels than traditional stalking victims. Adults aged 18–24 and separated individuals face higher risk (Baum et al., 2009). Stalkers are commonly known to victims, often former partners, acquaintances, or co-workers, with 79% of cases involving known offenders and over half linked to intimate relationships (Baum et al., 2009; Dutton & Spitzberg, 2007; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998).

Facebook has become a prominent platform for stalking behaviors due to its accessibility and anonymity (Kaur et al., 2020; Rani et al., 2025). Users monitor others' updates and photos to observe both current and former partners (Chaulk & Jones, 2011). These practices align with obsessive relational intrusion, as Facebook allows discreet surveillance of personal activities. Women aged 18–24 experience the highest rates of online stalking and sexual harassment (Pereira & Matos, 2015), with offenders tracking victims through friends' posts and online groups (Basu & Jones, 2008; Ellison & Akdeniz, 1998). Men are more frequently perpetrators, with female stalkers also increasing in number with recent study showing a greater number of women stalkers as compared to men (Silva Santos et al., 2021), and same-gender cases constitute about 14% (Alison & Alison, 2005).

Cyberstalking is explained through social learning theory (Lowry et al., 2013), which holds that deviant behavior is learned through association and reinforcement, with online anonymity normalizing risky conduct. Additionally, the lifestyle/routine activities theory (Guerra & Ingram, 2020) links victimization to exposure to offenders, attractive targets, and weak guardianship, as seen in users sharing personal data. Furthermore, rational choice theory (Lowry et al., 2013) posits that offenders act when rewards outweigh risks, with online anonymity lowering

deterrence. Together, these theories underscore that cyber stalking persists where technological opportunity, psychological motivation, and weak protective systems intersect.

### **Obsessive Relational Intrusion**

Obsessive relational intrusion (ORI) refers to a pattern of unwanted pursuit and invasion of one's physical or symbolic privacy by another person who desires or presumes an intimate relationship (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998; Dutton & Spitzberg, 2007). These behaviors range from unwanted gifts or messages to actions that endanger the victim's safety, sometimes fulfilling legal criteria for stalking (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998). The pursuer's fixation reflects persistent, intrusive thoughts and emotions that continue despite rejection, and the intensity of such behaviors tends to escalate over time (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000). The phenomenon has been labeled variously as obsessional following, harassment, or pursuit (Meloy, 1996; Meloy & Gothard, 1995; Zona et al., 1998). Scholars attribute these behaviors to conditions such as erotomania (Zona et al., 1998), love addiction, pathological narcissism (Meloy, 1996), or pathological love (Mullen & Pathé, 1994). They may also arise from jealousy, unrequited love, or relationship termination (Dutton & Spitzberg, 2007).

Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) identified eight categories of ORI behaviors: hyper-intimacy, harassment and intimidation, mediated and interactional contacts, surveillance, invasion, threats or coercion, and physical aggression. Hyper-intimacy includes excessive affection and ingratiation (Spitzberg, 2002). Harassment involves distressing or socially aggressive behaviors. Mediated contacts occur through digital means, accounting for about one-fourth of cases (Spitzberg, 2002), while interactional contacts involve face-to-face pursuit, reported in up to two-thirds of cases (Mohandie et al., 2006; Spitzberg, 2002). Surveillance involves spying or monitoring, often without the victim's awareness (Baum et al., 2009). Invasion includes trespassing or theft of information, seen in about one-quarter of cases (Spitzberg, 2002). Threats and coercion

encompass explicit or implicit harm, while physical aggression involves vandalism, assault, and even homicide (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Offenders often use multiple tactics, on average, six different methods (Blaauw et al., 2002), and their behaviors tend to intensify over time (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998).

Social networking platforms have expanded the context of ORI. The Internet facilitates intrusive behaviors due to anonymity and access to personal data. Facebook, in particular, has become a medium for online pursuit or "cyber-obsessional" behaviors (Chaulk & Jones, 2011). Features such as profile browsing and constant updates allow individuals to monitor or contact targets easily. Modern technology thus sustains offline patterns of pursuit within digital networks (Chaulk & Jones, 2011; Spitzberg & Rhea, 1999).

ORI displays notable gender differences: women are more often victims, and men more often perpetrators (Nguyen et al., 2012). Across 260 samples, women were over twice as likely as men to report persistent pursuit, while men were three times more likely to engage in it (Spitzberg et al., 2010). Most female victims were aged 18–29 (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), and significant proportions of undergraduate women and men reported victimization (Fremouw et al., 1997).

Two major theoretical perspectives explain ORI. The **relational goal pursuit theory** (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2011) posits that relationships are seen as goals tied to higher needs such as happiness or self-worth. When relationship goals are unattainable, pursuers experience rumination and negative emotions, which intensify their persistence. Factors such as goal-linking, rumination, and self-efficacy maintain these efforts. Cognitive-emotional mechanisms together explain the persistence and emotional intensity of obsessive relational intrusion.

### **Psychological Distress**

Psychological distress is widely recognized as an indicator of mental health across public health and clinical research, though its conceptual boundaries remain somewhat ambiguous (Drapeau et al., 2010; Marchand et al., 2005). It

generally encompasses depressive and anxious symptoms such as sadness, loss of interest, hopelessness, and tension, often accompanied by somatic complaints like insomnia or fatigue (Kleinman, 1991; Kirmayer, 1989; Mirowsky & Ross, 2002). Distress typically arises from exposure to stressors coupled with inadequate coping, leading to emotional disequilibrium (Horwitz, 2007; Ridner, 2004). While some view it as a transient emotional reaction (Wheaton, 2007), others consider it a marker of disorder severity (Phillips, 2009; Watson, 2009). In the present study, psychological distress is conceptualized in line with Kessler et al. (2002, 2003) as a nonspecific measure of emotional suffering reflecting symptoms of depression and anxiety, capturing how often individuals feel nervous, hopeless, restless, depressed, or that everything requires effort.

The causes of psychological distress are multifaceted. Traumatic experiences such as the death of a loved one or exposure to disturbing events are among the most significant contributors. Distress may also result from maladaptive responses to stress, major life transitions, or persistent external demands that exceed coping capacity. Since individuals differ in emotional resilience, the same stressor may evoke varying degrees of distress (Schneidman et al., 2005).

Theoretical perspectives have long sought to explain the origins and mechanisms of psychological distress. The medical model posits that psychological distress stems from biological or neurological dysfunctions, analogous to physical illnesses, and should thus be addressed through medical intervention (Deacon, 2013; Lebowitz & Appelbaum, 2019). In contrast, interpersonal theory emphasizes that distress arises from dysfunctional interpersonal patterns and a diminished sense of social connectedness (Dozois, 2021). Individuals who experience repeated relational failures often develop feelings of isolation and alienation, predisposing them to distress (Lee & Draper, 2001).

A more integrative understanding is offered by Leonard Pearlman's theory of psychological distress,

which situates distress within the dynamic process of life changes. According to Pearlman (1989), distress emerges as individuals adapt to evolving values, beliefs, and social roles. Four elements play a central role in distress management: personal characteristics (e.g., gender, education, personality), coping skills, social support networks, and the nature and timing of stressors.

In the context of the present study, this theoretical understanding provides a foundation for exploring how digital phenomena such as cyberstalking may contribute to psychological distress. Prior research indicates that cyberstalking, an online extension of traditional stalking, often involves repeated unwanted pursuit behaviors that evoke fear, anxiety, and stress (Dutton & Spitzberg, 2007). Therefore, this study aims to examine the interrelationships among cyberstalking, obsessive relational intrusion, and psychological distress in male and female college students, thereby situating psychological distress within both interpersonal and technologically mediated frameworks.

### Literature Review

Recent research has consistently demonstrated the adverse psychological consequences of cyberstalking and cyber harassment. A systematic review of 43 studies found that adult victims frequently experienced depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and suicidal ideation, with only one study reporting no association between cyber victimization and mental health outcomes (Stevens et al., 2021). Similarly, Short et al. (2015) reported that self-defined cyberstalking victims exhibited high levels of psychological distress, including symptoms comparable to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) such as isolation, irritability, and guilt, and that their distress levels exceeded those found in the general population. Consistent with these findings, Worsley et al. (2017) identified comorbid anxiety and depression among victims, along with disruptions in social and occupational functioning; victims often relied on avoidant or support-seeking coping strategies but reported limited professional and legal support. Extending these effects to academic

contexts, Ugwu and Trejos-Castillo (2025) found that cyberstalking victimization was positively associated with anxiety, depression, and PTSD, and negatively associated with academic motivation, with self-esteem partially mediating these relationships. Collectively, these studies indicate that cyberstalking is strongly associated with psychological distress and impaired functioning across emotional, social, and academic domains.

In recent research, cyberstalking is increasingly viewed as a technologically mediated form of ORI (Kowalski et al., 2018). Both behaviors are conceptualized along a continuum of intrusive relational pursuit, with cyberstalking representing the digital extension of traditional ORI tactics, such as online surveillance, repeated unwanted contact, and identity manipulation (Brem et al., 2015; Lyndon et al., 2011). Empirical findings reveal significant behavioral overlap, with shared psychological predictors including emotion dysregulation and stalking-supportive attitudes that drive both offline and online harassment (Smoker & March, 2017). Among emerging adults, low-level cyber monitoring is nearly universal (94.4%), while more invasive cyberstalking behaviors parallel the escalation patterns typical of severe ORI, especially following relationship dissolution (Kowalski et al., 2018). Further, established ORI pursuit measures have been shown to predict cyberstalking outcomes, indicating shared relational motivations and underlying psychological mechanisms (Kanwal et al., 2023). Recent systematic reviews emphasize that cyberstalking in romantic relationships should be examined through ORI-based frameworks, as both involve persistent boundary violations driven by attachment-related motives and amplified by technology's affordances for surveillance and harassment (Tannuss et al., 2024). Studies also show that jealousy, anger, and lack of forgiveness predict stalking and psychological abuse, particularly among men (Dye & Davis, 2003). Cupach and Spitzberg's (2007) meta-analysis further revealed that stalking episodes often last nearly two years, with 79%

stemming from prior relationships and producing severe psychological consequences.

Across studies, gender and relational context emerge as key demographic predictors. Women are disproportionately targeted and experience greater distress and fear than men (Wrixon, 2014; Henson et al., 2013; Maple et al., 2011; Paullet et al., 2009). University-based samples report high prevalence rates, with one in six students experiencing cyberstalking, often through both online and offline means, and women more frequently victimized (Curtis, 2012; Henson et al., 2013). Research also indicates that victims are commonly pursued by ex-partners or acquaintances (Wrixon, 2014; Cupach & Spitzberg, 2007; Blaauw et al., 2002), and that frequent internet use increases vulnerability (Paullet et al., 2009). Overall, the evidence suggests that cyberstalking and ORI disproportionately affect women and students, particularly in the context of prior relationships, resulting in heightened psychological distress and impaired functioning across emotional, academic, and occupational domains.

In the Pakistani context, empirical research on cyberstalking, obsessive relational intrusion, and psychological distress remains limited but reflects trends consistent with international literature. Early investigations provided foundational insights into the prevalence and consequences of online harassment. Hafeez (2014) examined the incidence and effects of cyber harassment among youth, surveying 100 active social media users. The study reported that 36% of respondents had experienced some form of online harassment, with females (61%) being more frequently targeted than males (39%). Most incidents occurred on social networking sites where personal information was publicly shared, leading to distress, depressive symptoms, and disruptions in academic and professional functioning. Building upon this, Avais et al. (2014) explored awareness of cyber victimization among students at the University of Sindh, Jamshoro. Their findings revealed risky digital behaviors, 77% of participants shared personal information with online acquaintances, 41% read social media

policy guidelines, and 57% spent over six hours online daily. Furthermore, 82% believed women were more vulnerable to cyberattacks, and 73% were unaware of governmental support systems for victims. Collectively, these early studies underscored that Pakistani youth face considerable cyber risks, with women disproportionately affected and limited awareness of digital safety mechanisms.

Recent Pakistani scholarship has advanced this discourse by focusing on the psychological consequences of cyberstalking, particularly among university students. Agha and Kamran (2024) investigated associations between cyberstalking, psychological distress, and social comparison, reporting that both genders were equally affected by intrusive online behaviors that predicted lower psychological well-being (Agha & Kamran, 2024). Expanding on this, Bibi et al. (2023) identified fear of missing out (FOMO) as a moderating variable that intensifies the emotional and mental health effects of cyberstalking, especially among younger students with high social media dependency. In a related study, Tallat et al. (2024) emphasized the protective role of psychological resilience in alleviating distress associated with cyberstalking and internet addiction, suggesting that emotionally adaptive students are less susceptible to anxiety and depression.

Gender-based differences in victimization patterns remain a salient focus. Ahmad et al. (2024) reported that female university students in Sindh experienced significantly higher exposure to online harassment, which correlated with elevated symptoms of depression and anxiety. Similarly, Ali (2025) adopted a feminist perspective, illustrating how digital harassment perpetuates psychological silencing, self-censorship, and social withdrawal among Pakistani women, thus reinforcing cycles of emotional distress and gender-based digital inequality. Together, these studies highlight that cyberstalking and related relational intrusions exert profound psychological, emotional, and social consequences for Pakistani youth, with women remaining particularly vulnerable due to structural, cultural, and digital asymmetries.

### **Rationale of the Study**

Despite increasing digital connectivity in Pakistan, psychological research has rarely examined cyberstalking as a relational phenomenon linked to ORI and psychological distress. Existing local studies focus mainly on general cyber harassment or bullying (e.g., Hafeez, 2014) without distinguishing persistent, relationship-driven pursuit behaviors that characterize stalking and ORI. This gap limits understanding of how online relational intrusions affect mental well-being within Pakistan's socio-cultural context. The present study addressed this gap by integrating cyberstalking and ORI frameworks to examine their joint relationship with psychological distress among Facebook-using university students, a group highly exposed to online relational interactions. Moreover, by comparing male and female students, the study also provides insight into gender-based differences in experiences and emotional consequences of online intrusion, which remain largely unexplored in local literature despite cultural norms shaping gendered social-media behavior.

### **Hypotheses**

Based on previous literature, the following hypotheses were proposed:

1. There would be significant positive association between cyberstalking, obsessive relational intrusion and psychological distress in the Facebook users.
2. Cyberstalking and obsessive relational intrusion would predict psychological distress.
3. There would be significant gender-based differences across the study variables.

### **Method**

For this correlational (cross-sectional) study, a non-probability convenient sampling technique was employed to recruit participants ( $N = 150$ ) from private colleges of Lahore, Pakistan. Participants were intermediate and undergraduate students aged 17–22 years, including 75 men ( $M = 18.41$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) and 75 women ( $M = 19.37$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ). Eligible participants were required to have regular internet access and use Facebook at least once

daily. Only private college students were included, whereas those from public institutions or outside the specified age range were excluded. Data were collected in person following a detailed briefing about the purpose and scope of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. All ethical considerations were observed in accordance with APA standards, ensuring confidentiality and data protection throughout the process. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 23.

### Assessment Measures

#### Demographic Information Sheet

Participants were given a demographic sheet to obtain their personal information. It included questions about their age, gender, educational level, and the name of their institute.

#### Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit Questionnaire (COP)

Participant's experiences of cyber-obsessional pursuit, or online stalking were measured through the Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit Questionnaire (Spitzberg et al., 2001). COP is a 24-item scale with a five-point Likert scale (1= Never, 2= Only once, 3=2-3 times, 4= 4-5 times, 5= Over 5 times). The total scores range from 24 to 120, with higher scores reflecting greater frequency of experienced cyberstalking. This scale consists of three subscales: hyper-intimacy (6 items), real-life transfer (5 items), and threat (7 items), each demonstrating adequate to good internal consistency, with  $\alpha$  values ranging from .73 to .88 in previous research (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). However, the remaining six items did not belong to any subscale but rather contribute to the total score based on the factor structure. In the present

study, the overall reliability of the COP was excellent ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

#### Obsessive Relational Intrusion (ORI-Short Form)

Obsessive Relational Intrusion was measured using the Obsessive Relational Intrusion-Short Form (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2004). It is a 28-item instrument rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Over 5 times). The scale assesses the extent to which individuals have experienced unwanted pursuit or intrusive behaviors aimed at initiating or maintaining an undesired intimate relationship. The ORI-SF comprises three domains of obsessive behaviors: Intrusion, Endangerment, and Threat. Score ranges from 28 to 140. Previous studies have reported high internal consistency, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values ranging from .75 to .90 (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2004).

#### Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10)

Psychological distress was measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al., 2002). It is a 10-item scale with a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1 (None of the time) to 5 (All of the time), with a score range of 10 to 50. This instrument yields a global measure of psychological distress based on symptoms of anxiety and depression experienced over the past four weeks. This scale has demonstrated acceptable internal reliability, with  $\alpha$  values ranging from .42 to .74 (Kessler, 2002; Andrews & Slade, 2001).

### Results

Reliability analysis showed the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values of .92 for Cyber-Obsessional Pursuit, .95 for Obsessive Relational Intrusion, and .93 for Kessler Psychological Distress Scale.

Table 1

Correlations among demographic variables, cyber stalking, obsessive relational intrusion and psychological distress (N=150)

Variables	1	2	3
1.Cyber Stalking		.78**	.71**

2. Obsessive Relational Intrusion	.63**
3. Psychological Distress	

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 1 presents the results of the Pearson correlation analysis among cyberstalking, obsessive relational intrusion, and psychological distress. Cyberstalking was positively correlated with obsessive relational intrusion ( $r = .78, p < .01$ ) and

psychological distress ( $r = .71, p < .01$ ). In addition, obsessive relational intrusion was positively correlated with psychological distress ( $r = .63, p < .01$ ).

**Table 2**  
**Hierarchical Regression Analysis: Effect of Demographic Variables, Cyber stalking, Obsessive Relational Intrusion (N=150)**

Predictors	Psychological Distress	
	$\Delta R^2$	B
<b>Step 1</b>	.38	
Control variables		
Age		.45***
Gender		.33***
Education		-.02
<b>Step 2</b>	.21	
Cyber stalking		.55***
<b>Step 3</b>	.02	
Obsessive Relational Intrusion		.21***
Total $R^2$	0.61	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$



A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether cyberstalking and obsessive relational intrusion predicted psychological distress. As shown in Table 2, the overall model was significant and explained 61% of the variance in psychological distress ( $R^2 = .61, F(5, 143) = 6.10, p < .001$ ). After controlling for demographic variables ( $R^2 = .38$ ), cyberstalking

significantly predicted psychological distress ( $\beta = .55, p < .001$ ), accounting for an additional 21% of the variance. In the final step, obsessive relational intrusion also emerged as a significant predictor ( $\beta = .21, p < .001$ ), explaining an additional 2% of the variance in psychological distress.

**Table 4.4**  
**Independent Samples t-test Comparing Cyber stalking, Obsessive Relational Intrusion and Psychological Distress in male and female students (N=150).**

Variables	Males (n=75)		Females (n=75)		t(148)	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
CS	68.82	14.10	84.60	16.50	-4.37	.000	-.74	-.27	-0.72
ORI	72.40	15.80	86.20	17.30	-2.82	.005	-.62	-.11	-0.47
PD	24.70	6.80	33.70	7.90	-6.35	.000	-1.3	-.7	-1.05

Note. CS = Cyber Stalking; ORI = Obsessive Relational Intrusion; PD = Psychological Distress.

Independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to examine gender differences in cyberstalking, obsessive relational intrusion, and psychological distress. As shown in Table 3, females scored significantly higher than males on cyberstalking, levels than males. Similarly, females exhibited significantly greater psychological distress than males,  $t(148) = -6.35, p < .001, d = -1.05$ .

### Discussion

The present study examined the relationships between cyberstalking, obsessive relational intrusion, and psychological distress among university students using Facebook. Consistent with the hypotheses, results indicated significant positive associations among all three variables. Both cyberstalking and obsessive relational intrusion were correlated with higher levels of psychological distress. These findings align with previous research demonstrating that online harassment and unwanted digital pursuit are associated with increased fear, anxiety, and emotional disturbance (Maple et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2001; Short et al., 2015). Victims in such studies frequently reported feelings of isolation, irritability, guilt, and symptoms comparable to post-traumatic stress disorder, suggesting that cyber victimization has profound psychological implications.

The present results further indicated that cyberstalking was a significant predictor of psychological distress, consistent with prior evidence linking repeated or unwanted online contact to psychological trauma and impairment in academic and occupational functioning (Hensler, 2008). Similarly, studies have shown that individuals who experience cyberstalking often fear for their safety and report persistent distress (Maple et al., 2011; Finkelhor et al., 2000). Prior relationships with perpetrators have been associated with heightened trauma, whereas harassment from unknown individuals tends to cause broader disruptions in daily life and functioning.

Obsessive relational intrusion also emerged as a significant predictor of psychological distress. This finding aligns with earlier work indicating that

$t(148) = -4.37, p < .001, d = -0.72$ . A significant gender difference was also found for obsessive relational intrusion,  $t(148) = -2.82, p = .005, d = -0.47$ , with females reporting higher

persistent unwanted pursuit, manifested through excessive affection, repeated messaging, or monitoring on social media, provokes intense fear and anxiety (Chaulk & Jones, 2011; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2000; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Such behaviors are perceived as invasions of privacy and, in some cases, escalate from online to offline settings, amplifying distress (Spitzberg & Rhea, 1999). Collectively, these findings reinforce the conceptualization of obsessive relational intrusion as a psychologically damaging form of relational aggression.

Gender differences were also observed in the present study. Female students reported higher levels of cyberstalking, obsessive relational intrusion, and psychological distress compared with male students. This pattern is consistent with previous findings that such behaviors are gendered phenomena, disproportionately affecting women (Henson et al., 2013; Maple et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2001; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). Meta-analytic evidence suggests that 60–80% of female participants report some form of cyberstalking or intrusive relational experience, highlighting their greater vulnerability to online victimization. The convergence between the current findings and previous literature underscores the enduring gender disparity in exposure to cyberstalking and its emotional consequences.

Taken together, these results contribute to a growing body of literature on the psychological impacts of technology-mediated relational aggression. The findings indicate that cyberstalking and obsessive relational intrusion are not isolated online experiences but rather extensions of coercive relational behavior that can produce significant psychological distress. The observed gender differences emphasize the need for preventive and educational interventions that address the unique vulnerabilities and experiences of female users in online environments.

### Limitations and Suggestions

While the present study contributes to the emerging understanding of cyberstalking, obsessive relational intrusion, and psychological distress within the Pakistani context, several methodological and conceptual limitations warrant consideration. The most notable constraint is the relatively small and demographically narrow sample ( $N = 150$ ), which consisted primarily of intermediate and undergraduate students from private colleges in Lahore. Such a homogenous sample limits the generalizability of findings to broader populations, including students from public institutions, different socioeconomic backgrounds, or individuals outside academic settings. Furthermore, the reliance on self-report measures raises concerns regarding social desirability bias and underreporting of sensitive behaviors such as stalking or intrusive pursuit, particularly within collectivistic and gender-normative cultural settings where discussing such experiences may be stigmatized. The cross-sectional nature of the data also restricts causal inferences, preventing conclusions about the temporal direction between online victimization and psychological distress. Future research should seek to overcome these limitations by employing larger, more diverse samples drawn from multiple cities and educational or occupational sectors, enabling cross-regional and cross-gender comparisons. Longitudinal or mixed-method designs could provide stronger causal insights into how patterns of obsessive relational intrusion evolve over time and under varying interpersonal or technological contexts. In addition, future studies might incorporate qualitative interviews to explore the subjective meaning-making and coping strategies of victims, offering a richer understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved. Including potential mediators and moderators, such as attachment styles, digital literacy, social support, and cultural attitudes toward online privacy, could further clarify the pathways through which cyberstalking contributes to psychological distress.

### Implications

The present findings carry important implications for both research and practice. The study extends the literature by empirically linking cyberstalking and obsessive relational intrusion with psychological distress in a South Asian context, an area underrepresented in global cyberpsychology research. Theoretically, it underscores the role of cultural values, gender dynamics, and digital socialization in shaping online relational behavior. Practically, the results highlight the need for psychoeducational programs that promote responsible digital conduct and awareness of online boundaries among young adults. From a forensic and policy perspective, the findings may assist in the development of culturally sensitive frameworks for identifying, profiling, and legislating against cyberstalking behaviors. Incorporating these insights into counseling, law enforcement training, and educational curricula could help mitigate the psychological harm associated with technology-mediated harassment and contribute to safer online environments.

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