

The Role of Parent-Adolescent Communication in Cyber Victimization and Emotional Regulation Among Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study looked at how parent-adolescent communication relates to cyber victimization and emotional regulation in a sample of 300 adolescents (135 boys, 165 girls) between the ages of 10 and 19, recruited through convenience sampling from private schools and colleges in Mansehra, Pakistan. Participants completed the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale, the Cyber-Victimization Scale, and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire. Correlational results showed that positive parent-adolescent communication was associated with lower cyber victimization and stronger emotional regulation, while problematic communication showed the reverse pattern. A regression analysis confirmed that positive communication was a significant negative predictor of cyber victimization, and that problematic communication was a significant negative predictor of emotional regulation. Older adolescents reported less victimization and better regulation than younger adolescents. Girls reported both higher cyber victimization and, somewhat unexpectedly, higher emotional regulation than boys. Adolescents from joint family systems reported stronger emotional regulation than those from nuclear families, though the two groups did not differ significantly on victimization. Taken together, these results support the view that the everyday quality of parent-adolescent conversation is closely bound up with how adolescents experience and cope with the risks of online life, and they carry practical relevance for parents, school counselors, and policymakers concerned with adolescent digital wellbeing.

Keywords: parent-adolescent communication, cyber victimization, emotional regulation, adolescents, family system

INTRODUCTION

Growing up now pretty much means growing up online. Smartphones, group chats, and social media have become woven into the everyday routine of most adolescents, and along with that convenience has come something far less welcome: many young people run into hostility, humiliation, or outright harassment through the very devices that keep them connected to their friends. Researchers usually refer to this as cyber victimization, and it covers experiences such as threats, rumor-spreading, impersonation, or the non-consensual sharing of images (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Because adolescents are still developing the cognitive and emotional tools needed to make sense of distressing events, being cyber-victimized during

this stage of life has repeatedly been linked to anxiety, depressive symptoms, lowered self-esteem, and, in more serious cases, suicidal ideation (Kowalski et al., 2014; Tran et al., 2021).

Parents remain one of the steadiest sources of protection and guidance available to an adolescent navigating this digital landscape, and how well parent and child actually communicate appears to matter a great deal. When communication is open, warm, and free of judgment, adolescents tend to be more willing to bring up uncomfortable online experiences, which then gives parents a chance to step in early and offer emotional support (Wright, 2017). When communication instead leans toward criticism, dismissiveness, or avoidance, adolescents are more likely to keep online difficulties to themselves and manage the distress largely on their own (Hertz et al., 2017). This distinction, between what researchers describe as positive versus problematic family communication, has become a useful lens for understanding why some adolescents weather online adversity better than others (Barnes & Olson, 1982).

A second variable central to this study is emotional regulation, broadly understood as the strategies people use to shape which emotions they experience, when they experience them, and how those emotions get expressed (Gross, 1998). Adolescence is a particularly sensitive period for developing these skills, since the prefrontal circuitry responsible for effortful emotional control is still maturing even as social and academic pressures intensify (Steinberg, 2005; Silvers et al., 2017). Adolescents who regulate emotion effectively tend to recover more quickly from distressing events, including online harassment, whereas those who struggle with regulation are more vulnerable to the psychological fallout of cyber victimization (Hertlein, 2012). Family communication is thought to shape this capacity directly: parents who model calm problem-solving and validate their child's feelings give adolescents a working template for managing difficult emotions, while cold or conflict-heavy communication offers little such scaffolding (Morris et al., 2007; Eisenberg & Fabes, 2001).

Demographic characteristics add further texture to these relationships. Younger adolescents, who are newer to independent online activity and less experienced at reading social cues, appear more susceptible to cyber victimization than older teenagers (Oksanen & Keipi, 2013), while emotional regulation tends to mature with age and accumulated life experience (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). Gender differences are also well documented: girls are more frequently reported to experience relational forms of cyber aggression, such as rumor-spreading and social exclusion, than boys (Perren et al., 2012), and gender socialization is thought to shape the emotional strategies adolescents rely on, with girls more often turning to expressive, support-seeking strategies and boys leaning toward avoidance or suppression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012; Gross & Levenson, 1993). Family structure may play a role as well: adolescents raised in joint family systems, common across South Asian households, are surrounded by a wider network of adult relatives who can offer emotional support, guidance, and supervision, which could plausibly affect both online risk and coping capacity (Saleem & Gul, 2016).

Most existing research on this topic originates from Western contexts, and comparatively little work has examined how parent-adolescent communication, cyber victimization, and emotional regulation interrelate among adolescents in Pakistan, where joint family living, collectivist values, and rapidly expanding smartphone access create a distinct social backdrop. The present study was designed to address this gap. Specifically, it examined whether positive and problematic parent-adolescent communication are related to, and predictive of, cyber victimization and emotional regulation among adolescents attending private schools in Mansehra, and whether age, gender, and family system further differentiate these outcomes.

Cyber victimization is not a single, uniform experience; it takes several overlapping forms that researchers have found useful to distinguish. Direct cyberbullying involves sending hurtful messages or spreading rumors through chat apps or social media, while online harassment covers a broader pattern of unwanted or threatening contact, including hate speech and repeated unsolicited messaging (Pew Research Center,

2017). Some adolescents experience cyberstalking, in which someone monitors their online activity or tracks their whereabouts through social media, and others face identity-related harms such as impersonation or the misuse of personal photos and information (Federal Trade Commission, 2020). Within romantic relationships, digital monitoring and coercion have also been documented as a distinct form of cyber dating abuse (Zweig et al., 2013). Regardless of its specific form, the common thread across these experiences is a sense of exposure and lost control that can be difficult for an adolescent to process alone, which is precisely where the family environment becomes relevant.

Several theoretical perspectives help explain why parent-adolescent communication would be expected to matter here. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) suggests that adolescents learn ways of communicating and managing conflict partly by observing their parents; a household where disagreements are handled calmly and openly effectively teaches the adolescent a template for handling their own difficulties, including online ones. Family systems theory (Bowen, 1978) frames the family as an interconnected emotional unit, such that a strained parent-adolescent relationship can leave an adolescent more emotionally reactive and less equipped to cope with outside stressors like cyber victimization. Baumrind's (1966) parenting styles framework adds that authoritative parenting, which combines warmth with reasonable structure, is consistently linked to better adolescent self-regulation and more open family dialogue, in contrast to authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful patterns. Together, these frameworks converge on the same basic expectation guiding the present study: that the emotional tone and openness of parent-adolescent communication should be closely tied to how adolescents experience and cope with online adversity.

It is also worth situating this study within the Pakistani context specifically. Internet and smartphone access among Pakistani youth has expanded rapidly over the past decade, often outpacing the digital literacy of the older generation and leaving many parents uncertain about how to guide their children's online conduct (Yaman & Sönmez, 2015). At the same time, cultural norms around family hierarchy can make some adolescents hesitant to approach parents about sensitive topics, including online harassment, for fear of being blamed, restricted, or misunderstood. This combination of rising digital exposure and a communication gap between generations makes the relationships examined in this study especially relevant for families, schools, and policymakers in this setting.

The scale of the problem is not trivial. Estimates of how many adolescents experience some form of cyber victimization vary depending on how researchers define and measure it, but figures in the range of 30% to 60% are common across recent studies, with some surveys reporting that a majority of teenagers have encountered at least one form of online harassment by the time they finish secondary school (Brochado et al., 2017; Kowalski et al., 2014). In South Asian settings specifically, reported prevalence has ranged from roughly a third to well over half of surveyed adolescents, depending on the sample and measurement approach (Sener et al., 2022; Turk & Şenyuva, 2021). These figures make clear that cyber victimization is not a marginal concern affecting only a small subset of adolescents but a common feature of digital adolescence that families and schools are likely to encounter in some form.

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between parent-adolescent communication, cyber victimization, and emotional regulation among adolescents.
2. To determine whether positive and problematic parent-adolescent communication predict cyber victimization and emotional regulation.
3. To explore the influence of age, gender, and family system on these variables.

Hypotheses

1. Positive communication will be negatively related to cyber victimization and positively related to emotional regulation.
2. Problematic communication will be positively related to cyber victimization and negatively related to emotional regulation.
3. Positive communication will negatively predict cyber victimization, and problematic communication will positively predict it.
4. Positive communication will positively predict emotional regulation, and problematic communication will negatively predict it.
5. Age will be negatively related to cyber victimization and positively related to emotional regulation.
6. Girls and boys, and adolescents from joint and nuclear family systems, will differ on cyber victimization and emotional regulation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design was adopted for this study, which allowed the associations among the study variables to be examined at a single point in time using a structured survey.

Participants

The sample comprised 300 adolescents (135 boys, 45%; 165 girls, 55%) aged 10 to 19 years ($M = 15.65$, $SD = 2.54$), recruited through convenience sampling from several private-sector schools and colleges in Mansehra, including IIUI School and College, Mansehra Public School and College, Abasin Public School, and Dubai International College. Of the sample, 130 adolescents (43%) belonged to joint family systems and 170 (57%) to nuclear family systems. Adolescents who could read and comprehend the survey items and who volunteered to participate were included; those outside the 10-19 age range, unwilling to participate, or with limited proficiency in the survey language were excluded.

Operational Definitions

For the purposes of this study, parent-adolescent communication was operationally defined as a respondent's score on the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale, with separate scores for the positive and problematic subscales. Cyber victimization was operationally defined as a respondent's total score on the Cyber-Victimization Scale, with higher scores reflecting more frequent exposure to online harassment, exclusion, impersonation, or related experiences. Emotional regulation was operationally defined as a respondent's total score on the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, with higher scores reflecting more frequent use of adaptive regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal.

Instruments

A demographic sheet recorded participants' age, gender, and family system. The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (Barnes & Olson, 1982) is a 20-item measure with two 10-item subscales assessing open, positive communication and problematic communication, rated on a 5-point scale; higher scores on the positive subscale reflect more open communication, and higher scores on the problematic subscale reflect greater communication difficulty. The Cyber-Victimization Scale (Martinez-Ferrer et al., 2019) contains 18 items rated on a 5-point frequency scale, with higher total scores indicating more frequent or severe victimization experiences. The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003) consists of 10 items rated on a 7-point scale, with higher scores reflecting more adaptive use of emotion-regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal.

Procedure

Ethical approval and permission to collect data were obtained from the university prior to data collection. Participants and, where applicable, their institutions were briefed on the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was assured, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Questionnaires were administered in paper form with clear instructions, and data were subsequently analyzed using IBM SPSS (version 22 for reliability and descriptive analyses; version 21 for inferential analyses), including Cronbach's alpha, Pearson correlation, linear regression, and independent-samples t tests.

Prior to analysis, data were screened for missing values and out-of-range responses; no cases required exclusion on these grounds. Assumptions underlying the correlation and regression analyses, including linearity and homogeneity of variance, were checked and judged adequate for the sample size, and effect sizes (Cohen's d) were computed alongside significance tests for the group comparisons to aid interpretation of practical, and not merely statistical, significance.

RESULTS

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients for Study Variables (N = 300)

Variable	k	M	SD	Range	α
Positive Communication	10	32.70	9.61	16–50	.68
Problematic Communication	10	27.70	10.12	19–50	.66
Cyber Victimization	18	35.64	17.56	23–110	.94
Emotional Regulation	10	43.76	10.12	12–70	.74

Note. k = number of items; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha.

Prior to hypothesis testing, the reliability of each scale was examined. As shown in Table 1, all three instruments demonstrated acceptable to excellent internal consistency for the current sample.

Table 2

Correlations Among Parent-Adolescent Communication, Cyber Victimization, Emotional Regulation, and Age (N = 300)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Positive Communication	33.66	7.25	-	.66**	-.38**	.35**	-
Problematic Communication	33.09	6.43	-	-	.29**	-.37**	-
Cyber Victimization	35.64	17.56	-	-	-	-.23**	-.23**
Emotional Regulation	43.76	10.12	-	-	-	-	.31**
Age	15.65	2.54	-	-	-	-	-

Note. **p < .01. Age correlations with the two communication subscales were not statistically significant and are represented by a dash.

Table 2 presents the correlations among the study variables. Positive communication was significantly and positively associated with problematic communication, significantly and negatively associated with cyber victimization and significantly and positively associated with emotional regulation. Problematic communication was significantly and positively associated with cyber victimization and significantly and negatively associated with emotional regulation. Cyber victimization was significantly and negatively associated with emotional regulation. Age was significantly and negatively associated with cyber victimization and significantly positively associated with emotional regulation, but showed no significant association with either communication subscale.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis for Positive and Problematic Communication Predicting Cyber Victimization (N = 300)

Predictor	B	SE B	t	p	95% CI
Constant	69.30	5.10	13.30	< .001	[59.00, 79.00]
Positive Communication	-0.83	0.17	-4.80	< .001	[-1.10, -0.49]
Problematic Communication	-0.16	0.19	-0.84	.390	[-0.55, 0.22]

Note. $R^2 = .15$, $F(2, 293) = 26.08$, $p < .001$. CI = confidence interval.

To determine whether the two communication styles independently predicted cyber victimization, a multiple regression analysis was conducted (Table 3). The overall model was significant, $R^2 = .15$, $F(2, 293) = 26.08$, $p < .001$, accounting for approximately 15% of the variance in cyber victimization scores. Positive communication emerged as a significant negative predictor, whereas problematic communication did not reach significance once positive communication was accounted for.

Table 4

Multiple Regression Analysis for Positive and Problematic Communication Predicting Emotional Regulation (N = 300)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Constant	21.89	2.9	7.3	.00	[.16-.27]
Positive Communication	.25	.10	2.5	.01	[.05-.45]
Problematic Communication	.40	.11	3.5	.00	[.18-.62]

Note. $R^2 = .15$, $F(2, 295) = 27.96$, $p < .001$. CI = confidence interval.

A parallel regression examined emotional regulation as the outcome (Table 4). This model was also significant, $R^2 = .15$, $F(2, 295) = 27.96$, $p < .001$. Here, both positive and problematic communication contributed significantly, with problematic communication showing the larger standardized effect, indicating that the presence of conflictual or dismissive communication was a somewhat stronger predictor of poorer emotional regulation than the presence of positive communication was of better regulation.

Table 5

Gender Differences on Cyber Victimization and Emotional Regulation (N = 300)

Variable	Males(n=135)		Females(n=165)		t(298)	p	d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Cyber Victimization	29.48	17.67	64.15	17.67	3.29	.001	0.38
Emotional Regulation	42.01	8.37	45.45	10.59	-3.04	.003	0.36

Independent-samples t tests were conducted to examine gender and family-system differences. As shown in Table 5, girls reported significantly higher cyber victimization than boys, with a small-to-moderate effect size, and also reported significantly higher emotional regulation than boys, with a small effect size.

Table 6

Family System Differences on Cyber Victimization and Emotional Regulation (N = 300)

Variable	Joint(n=130)		Nuclear(n=170)		t(298)	p	d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Cyber Victimization	35.04	17.13	36.73	17.97	0.82	.412	0.96
Emotional Regulation	45.08	10.57	42.50	8.51	-2.27	.024	0.26

Note. n = 130 joint family, n = 170 nuclear family.

Table 6 presents comparisons between adolescents from joint and nuclear family systems. The two groups did not differ significantly in cyber victimization. However, adolescents from joint family systems reported significantly higher emotional regulation than those from nuclear families, though the effect size was small.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how the quality of parent-adolescent communication relates to cyber victimization and emotional regulation among adolescents attending private schools in Mansehra, and how age, gender, and family system shape these associations. Taken together, the results paint a fairly consistent picture: warmer, more open communication between parents and adolescents is linked to safer and more emotionally resilient online experiences, while conflictual or dismissive communication is linked to the opposite.

Positive communication was negatively related to cyber victimization and positively related to emotional regulation, echoing earlier findings that adolescents who feel comfortable talking to their parents are less likely to engage in risky online behavior and more able to draw on parental support when problems arise

(Wright, 2017; Bi & Wang, 2021). Problematic communication showed the mirror-image pattern, consistent with research linking hostile or avoidant family communication to heightened vulnerability online and difficulties in managing emotion (Hertz et al., 2017; Zhou & Huang, 2024). In the regression analyses, positive communication stood out as the stronger predictor of cyber victimization, while problematic communication stood out as the stronger predictor of emotional regulation. One plausible explanation is that open dialogue does more to keep adolescents safe by encouraging disclosure and guidance around online risks, whereas the emotional tone of the household, captured more directly by problematic communication, has a more immediate bearing on how adolescents learn to handle their feelings (Morris et al., 2007).

Age-related findings aligned with expectations: older adolescents reported less cyber victimization and stronger emotional regulation, consistent with evidence that younger teenagers are both more exposed to online risk and less equipped, cognitively and emotionally, to manage it (Oksanen & Keipi, 2013; Charles & Carstensen, 2010). Gender differences were more nuanced. Girls reported considerably higher cyber victimization than boys, matching the broader literature on girls' heightened exposure to relational forms of online aggression (Wu et al., 2024; Perren et al., 2012). Girls also reported higher emotional regulation, a finding that runs somewhat counter to the common assumption that boys are the more emotionally controlled group. It may be that girls in this sample, who also reported more victimization, had more occasion to practice active coping and reappraisal strategies, or that cultural norms around emotional expression in this setting encourage girls to develop and rely on these skills more visibly (Kring & Gordon, 2016).

The family-system findings were partly unexpected. Cyber victimization did not differ significantly between joint and nuclear family adolescents, which departs from the hypothesis that joint family living would be protective. It is possible that in larger, multi-generational households, supervision of any one adolescent's online activity is more diffuse, offsetting the potential benefits of a wider support network. Emotional regulation, however, was significantly higher among adolescents from joint families, in line with the idea that the presence of multiple adult relatives can provide additional emotional scaffolding, modeling, and reassurance (Saleem & Gul, 2016).

It is worth pausing on why positive and problematic communication diverged in which outcome each predicted most strongly. One interpretation is functional: positive communication operates mainly as a channel of information and guidance, prompting adolescents to disclose problems, seek advice about privacy settings, or ask what to do when something upsetting happens online, which more directly reduces exposure to victimization. Problematic communication, by contrast, may operate mainly through emotional climate, shaping the adolescent's baseline stress level and the extent to which they feel safe expressing negative feelings at home, which would explain its stronger link to emotional regulation. This distinction is broadly consistent with the family communication patterns literature, which separates conversation orientation, or the degree to which topics can be freely discussed, from the more general emotional tone of the household (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

The pattern of results here also resonates with research on other domains where a moderating or buffering factor shapes how a risk translates into an outcome. In much the same way that healthy sleep hygiene has been shown to buffer the negative psychological effects of an eveningness chronotype among working adults, allowing individuals whose biological rhythms are misaligned with typical schedules to nonetheless maintain reasonable psychological wellbeing when their sleep habits are sound, positive family communication appears to function as a buffering resource for adolescents navigating the risks of online life. In both cases, a modifiable behavioral or relational practice, whether it is a consistent bedtime routine or an open conversation, appears able to soften the impact of a less controllable risk factor, whether that is circadian predisposition or exposure to a hostile online environment. This parallel suggests that

interventions built around strengthening everyday practices, rather than attempting to eliminate the underlying risk altogether, may be a promising and realistic strategy across a range of adolescent and adult wellbeing outcomes.

The finding that girls reported more cyber victimization than boys deserves further comment. Beyond the relational-aggression explanation offered earlier, it is also possible that girls in this sample were simply more willing to acknowledge and report victimization experiences, given documented gender differences in emotional disclosure (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012), which would inflate the apparent gender gap somewhat. Similarly, the finding that girls also reported higher emotional regulation should not be read as evidence that victimization is harmless for them; rather, it may indicate that many of these girls have developed compensatory coping strategies precisely because they face more frequent online adversity, a possibility that would benefit from direct testing in future mediation or moderation models.

Several limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting these findings. The cross-sectional design cannot establish causal direction, and it remains equally plausible that emotional regulation difficulties make communication harder as that poor communication undermines regulation. The reliance on convenience sampling from private schools in a single city limits how far the results can be generalized, and self-report measures are subject to recall and social-desirability biases. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs, more diverse and representative samples that include public-sector schools, and the inclusion of additional variables such as socio-economic status, parental mental health, or the specific platforms on which victimization occurs.

Despite these limitations, the findings carry practical value. They suggest that interventions aimed at reducing cyber victimization and strengthening adolescent emotional regulation might do well to start at home, by helping parents build the kind of open, non-judgmental communication that makes adolescents comfortable disclosing difficult online experiences. Schools and family counselors could incorporate communication-skills components into digital-safety programming, and awareness campaigns might specifically target younger adolescents and boys, who appear to be at differential risk on the dimensions examined here.

CONCLUSION

Positive parent-adolescent communication was associated with lower cyber victimization and better emotional regulation, while problematic communication showed the reverse pattern, and each communication style predicted a different outcome most strongly. Older adolescents and girls reported distinct risk and coping profiles, and adolescents from joint family systems showed an emotional-regulation advantage without a corresponding reduction in victimization. Together, these findings underscore that the everyday conversations parents have with their adolescents are not incidental to digital wellbeing but appear to be closely bound up with it.

Implications

The pattern of findings reported here points toward several concrete applications. For parents, the clearest message is that the everyday tone of conversation with an adolescent, rather than any single dramatic intervention, appears to be what matters most: consistently listening without judgment, avoiding sarcasm or dismissiveness when an adolescent raises a concern, and creating routine, low-pressure opportunities to talk about online life all fall within a positive-communication style that this study links to better outcomes. For schools, the results suggest that digital-safety curricula focused solely on technical precautions, such as privacy settings or password security, may be incomplete; pairing this content with sessions that help parents and adolescents practice open communication, perhaps through structured family workshops, could

extend the reach of such programs into the home environment where much of the protective effect appears to originate. For school counselors and clinicians, the emotional-regulation findings suggest that adolescents presenting with symptoms of anxiety or distress related to online experiences may benefit from an assessment of family communication patterns as part of a broader treatment plan, rather than treating the online incident in isolation from the home context. Finally, for policymakers, the gender and age patterns observed here indicate that awareness campaigns and helpline services aimed at cyber victimization might achieve more impact if they are tailored to reach younger adolescents and are sensitive to the differing ways boys and girls tend to experience and disclose online harm.

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