

Modeling the Relationship between Sexual Harassment, Cyberbullying, and Preventive Actions Among College Students: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach

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ABSTRACT:

This study examined how sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and preventive actions are related among college students at Laguna State Polytechnic University. Guided by Social Learning Theory, the study expected that preventive actions would reduce experiences of harassment and cyberbullying. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 500 qualified respondents using validated questionnaires. Sexual harassment was measured in three forms: verbal, non-verbal, and physical, along with cyberbullying and corresponding preventive actions. The data were analysed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Results showed generally low levels of reported harassment, with verbal harassment being the most common and physical harassment the least. Preventive actions were reported at moderate levels. The measurement and structural models showed strong statistical fit. However, contrary to expectations, preventive actions were slightly and positively related to verbal harassment, non-verbal harassment, and cyberbullying, while no significant relationship was found with physical harassment. These findings suggest that preventive actions may reflect increased awareness and reporting rather than an immediate reduction in harassment experiences. Although statistically significant, the effects were small.

Keywords: College Students, Cyberbullying, Preventive Actions, Sexual Harassment, Structural Equation Modeling

1. Introduction

Sexual harassment and cyberbullying remain pervasive and structurally embedded problems within higher education institutions. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that sexual harassment continues to affect university students globally (Wood et al., 2018). In the Philippine context, public advocacy movements such as the “Enough is Enough” campaign have

amplified survivors’ voices, revealing patterns of abuse occurring even within institutions presumed to be safe spaces (Rappler, 2022). Institutional records further corroborate these concerns, with formal complaints documenting persistent cases involving both faculty and students. Vulnerable populations, including women and LGBTQ students, remain disproportionately affected, experiencing verbal,

non-verbal, physical, and sexual forms of harassment (Dalugdog & Villanueva, 2021).

The problem extends beyond physical campus spaces into digital environments. The rapid proliferation of information and communication technologies has reshaped social interaction, simultaneously creating new avenues for harm. High rates of online harassment among young women and adolescents underscore the severity of cyber-mediated abuse (Narvaez, 2020). Cyberbullying behaviors—including threats, harassment, identity misuse, and dissemination of harmful content—have become increasingly normalized within digital spaces (Martinez-Montegude et al., 2020). Although some studies report relatively low prevalence in certain institutional contexts (Asio et al., 2022), others highlight a rising trajectory linked to technological expansion (Sanchez-Danday, 2023), suggesting contextual variability rather than absence of risk.

Despite legislative frameworks such as Republic Act No. 7877 and the Safe Spaces Act, substantial underreporting persists. Victims frequently refrain from formal reporting due to embarrassment, fear of dismissal, or perceptions that incidents are not sufficiently serious (Remoto & Villalobos, 2021; Kirkner, Lorenz, & Mazar, 2020). Even where institutional mechanisms exist, barriers to utilization remain pronounced. This disconnect between policy mandates and reporting behaviors raises concerns regarding the actual deterrent impact of institutional preventive structures.

Preventive interventions in higher education have demonstrated consistent improvements in attitudinal outcomes, including enhanced awareness, increased self-efficacy, and strengthened norms rejecting harassment (Crusto, Hooper, & Arora, 2022; de Lijster et al., 2016). However, evidence that these interventions reduce actual harassment or victimization experiences remains limited. In some cases, awareness and bystander programs correspond with increased reporting rates, generating paradoxical positive associations between preventive actions and self-reported

harassment. This pattern suggests that preventive efforts may shift perception and disclosure behaviors without necessarily reducing underlying incidence. Consequently, a critical gap persists between demonstrated cognitive or normative change and measurable behavioral outcomes.

Furthermore, although the prevalence of sexual harassment is well documented, empirical examinations disaggregating harassment into verbal, non-verbal, and physical subtypes remain scarce (Espelage & Hong, 2016; Hendry et al., 2023). Sexual harassment is frequently operationalized as a unidimensional construct, limiting the capacity to determine whether preventive actions exert differential protective effects across distinct manifestations. Within the Philippine setting, structural analyses linking institutional preventive actions to reductions in lived harassment experiences are particularly limited (Gabriel & Panahon, 2017). Thus, whether preventive measures function as substantive protective mechanisms or primarily influence awareness and reporting remains theoretically and empirically unresolved.

This study is anchored in Social Learning Theory, which posits that behavior is acquired and sustained through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within social systems. Within academic environments, harassment and cyberbullying may persist when such behaviors are modeled by authority figures or peers and remain insufficiently sanctioned, thereby reinforcing their recurrence (Lucas, 2018). Conversely, institutional preventive actions—such as awareness campaigns, clear policy enforcement, and accessible reporting mechanisms—may disrupt reinforcement contingencies, alter normative expectations, and reduce the likelihood of repeated harmful behaviors. From this perspective, preventive actions should theoretically be negatively associated with harassment and cyberbullying experiences, as modifications in the social learning environment reshape behavioral outcomes.

However, given the limited disaggregated testing of harassment subtypes and the absence of robust structural validation in local contexts, this theoretical expectation remains empirically underexamined. To address this gap, the present study aimed to examine the structural relationships among sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and preventive actions among college students using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Specifically, the study sought to:

1. assess the prevalence of verbal, non-verbal, and physical sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and preventive actions among college students;
2. establish the reliability and validity of the measurement model;
3. evaluate the overall fit of the hypothesized structural model; and
4. examine the direct effects of preventive actions on verbal, non-verbal, and physical sexual harassment, as well as cyberbullying.

The following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Preventive actions against sexual harassment have significant direct effects on verbal, non-verbal, and physical sexual harassment.

H2: Preventive actions against cyberbullying have a significant direct effect on cyberbullying experiences.

H3: Verbal, non-verbal, and physical sexual harassment are significantly associated with cyberbullying.

H4: Preventive actions against cyberbullying have significant direct effects on cyberbullying experiences.

H5: Sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and preventive actions are significantly interrelated among college students.

2. Methodology

Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the structural relationship among sexual harassment dimensions,

cyberbullying experiences, and preventive actions among college students at Laguna State Polytechnic University.

Participants/Sample

The respondents of the study are the college students from various colleges of the Laguna State Polytechnic University. The purposive sampling technique was used to identify and select the respondents of the study. Fixed criteria were applied to ensure the relevance of responses. Students who indicated that they had not experienced any form of verbal, non-verbal, physical sexual harassment, or cyberbullying were considered ineligible for inclusion in the final sample. Of the 750 questionnaires distributed, 500 complete responses met the inclusion criteria and were retained for analysis. The final sample size ($N = 500$) exceeds recommended thresholds for structural equation modelling and supports stable parameter estimation. Based on the guidelines of Cohen (1988), a power analysis was conducted before collecting the data. Assuming a 5% margin of error ($\alpha = .05$), a medium expected effect, and an 80% chance of detecting a real relationship if it exists, the study would need around 92 to 120 participants for a model with up to five predictors. Statistical power is defined as:

$$Power = 1 - \beta$$

With $N = 500$, the achieved power exceeds .95, indicating sufficient sensitivity to detect small-to-moderate effects while minimizing the risk of Type II error.

Instruments

Sexual harassment was operationalized as a multidimensional construct comprising verbal (8 items), non-verbal (6 items), and physical (4 items) indicators. Cyberbullying was assessed using 8 items. Preventive behaviors were measured through two constructs: actions taken to prevent sexual harassment (8 items) and actions taken to prevent cyberbullying (8 items). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never to 5 = always). This research questionnaire was made using an existing literature and result of previous studies. Content validation and pilot test were conducted to ensure the suitability of the instrument with this study.

Procedure

Data were collected for three months following institutional approval. Survey questionnaires were distributed face-to-face to ensure proper orientation, clarification of items, and higher retrieval rates. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed in this study. Participation was entirely voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection, and strict measures were implemented to ensure anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Jamovi (Version 2.x), specifically its SEM module based on the lavaan engine. A two-step CB-SEM approach was implemented, beginning with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate the measurement model, followed by structural model testing. Maximum Likelihood estimation was used, as skewness and kurtosis values fell within acceptable ± 2 thresholds.

The measurement model demonstrated strong psychometric properties, with standardized factor loadings ranging from 0.742 to 1.126 and reliability coefficients exceeding 0.70. Convergent validity was supported by AVE values above 0.50, while inter-construct correlations below 0.85 indicated adequate discriminant validity. The structural model exhibited excellent fit, with normed chi-square values below 3.0 and incremental and absolute fit indices meeting recommended criteria (Liu, Zhen, Yi, Jin, Lin & Yang (2026). Structural path coefficients were evaluated at $\alpha = .05$, and although several relationships were statistically significant, effect sizes were generally small, indicating modest practical magnitude.

3. Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables measured using a five-point Likert

scale (1 = Never to 5 = Always). The findings indicate that all dimensions of sexual harassment were reported at relatively low levels, with mean scores below the scale midpoint (3.00). Verbal sexual harassment obtained the highest mean ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 0.878$), followed by non-verbal sexual harassment ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 0.912$), cyberbullying ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.881$), and physical sexual harassment ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 0.940$). These results suggest that although the respondents generally reported infrequent experiences of harassment, verbal harassment was the most commonly encountered form.

Regarding preventive behaviors, actions taken to prevent cyberbullying ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.069$) were reported more frequently than actions taken to prevent sexual harassment ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.990$). Both preventive measures fell between the response categories "Seldom" and "Sometimes," indicating moderate engagement in preventive practices.

The normality of the data was examined using skewness and kurtosis statistics. The skewness values ranged from 0.071 to 0.926, indicating only slight positive skewness across the constructs. Kurtosis values ranged from -0.789 to 0.042, all falling within the recommended ± 2 threshold. These findings indicate that the observed variables adequately satisfied the assumption of multivariate normality required for structural equation modeling.

The internal consistency of the measurement scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha (α) and McDonald's omega (ω). All constructs demonstrated excellent reliability, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.856 to 0.909 and omega coefficients ranging from 0.857 to 0.910.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Data Distribution, and Reliability Analysis

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α	ω
Verbal Sexual Harassment	2.12	0.878	0.7341	-0.1090	0.897	.898
Non-Verbal Sexual Harassment	2.08	0.912	0.8314	-0.0827	0.856	0.857
Physical Sexual Harassment	1.94	0.940	0.9257	0.0415	0.868	0.869
Cyberbullying	1.98	0.881	0.9168	-0.0364	0.909	0.910

Action Taken Prevent Sexual Harassment	2.50	0.990	0.2396	-0.6904	0.903	0.904
Action Taken Prevent Cyberbullying	2.73	1.069	0.0711	-0.7889	0.890	0.900

Convergent validity was assessed using standardized factor loadings, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All CR values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, while all AVE values were greater than 0.50, confirming

satisfactory convergent validity. Factor loadings ranged from 0.742 to 1.126, exceeding the minimum acceptable level for studies with large sample sizes. These findings indicate that the measurement model possesses satisfactory psychometric properties.

Table 2. Factor Loadings, Composite Reliability and Average Variance Extracted

Measure	V	N	P	C	ATSH	ATC	CR	AVE
Verbal							0.924	0.662
v1	0.812							
v2	0.824							
v3	0.893							
v4	0.878							
v5	0.809							
v6	0.857							
v7	0.791							
v8	0.785							
Non-verbal							0.936	0.754
n1		0.755						
n2		0.960						
n3		0.836						
n4		0.773						
n5		0.873						
n6		0.871						
Physical							0.915	0.745
p1			0.940					
p2			0.926					
p3			0.881					
p4			0.746					
Cyberbullying							0.928	0.694
c1				0.835				
c2				0.909				
c3				0.884				
c4				0.836				
c5				0.818				
c6				0.828				
c7				0.832				
c8				0.773				

Action Taken to Prevent Sexual Harassment	0.943	0.774
atsh1	0.943	
atsh2	1.039	
atsh3	0.986	
atsh4	1.053	
atsh5	0.980	
atsh6	1.002	
atsh7	0.742	
atsh8	0.773	
Action Taken to Prevent Cyberbullying	0.946	0.787
atc1	1.075	
atc2	1.126	
atc3	1.052	
atc4	1.072	
atc5	1.101	
atc6	0.930	
atc7	0.868	
atc8	0.840	

Table 2 presents the internal consistency of the measurement scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha (α) and McDonald's omega (ω). All constructs demonstrated excellent reliability, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.856 to 0.909 and omega coefficients ranging from 0.857 to 0.910.

Convergent validity was assessed using standardized factor loadings, Composite

Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). All CR values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, while all AVE values were greater than 0.50, confirming satisfactory convergent validity. Factor loadings ranged from 0.742 to 1.126, exceeding the minimum acceptable level for studies with large sample sizes. These findings indicate that the measurement model possesses satisfactory psychometric properties.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Verbal Sexual Harassment	—				
2. Non-Verbal Sexual Harassment	0.716***	—			
3. Physical Sexual Harassment	0.607***	0.713***	—		
4. Cyberbullying	0.633***	0.710***	0.673***	—	
5. Action Taken Prevent Sexual Harassment	0.221***	0.155***	0.080	0.132**	—
6. Action Taken Prevent Cyberbullying	0.195***	0.156***	0.034	0.144**	0.803***

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation analysis revealed statistically significant positive relationships among the dimensions of sexual harassment and cyberbullying. Verbal sexual harassment was strongly correlated with non-

verbal sexual harassment ($r = .716$), physical sexual harassment ($r = .607$), and cyberbullying ($r = .633$). Likewise, non-verbal sexual harassment showed strong positive relationships with physical sexual harassment ($r = .713$) and

cyberbullying ($r = .710$), while physical sexual harassment was positively associated with cyberbullying ($r = .673$).

Actions taken to prevent sexual harassment were positively associated with verbal sexual harassment ($r = .221$), non-verbal sexual harassment ($r = .155$), and cyberbullying ($r = .132$), whereas the relationship with physical sexual harassment was not statistically significant ($r = .080$). Similarly, actions taken to prevent cyberbullying demonstrated weak but significant positive relationships with verbal sexual harassment ($r = .195$), non-verbal sexual harassment ($r = .156$), and cyberbullying ($r = .144$), but not with physical sexual harassment ($r = .034$). None of the correlation coefficients exceeded .85, indicating the absence of multicollinearity concerns.

Table 4 presents the goodness of fit indices that the structural equation model demonstrated an excellent overall fit to the observed data. Although the chi-square statistic was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1221.0$, $df = 804$), the normed chi-square value ($\chi^2/df = 1.52$) was well below the recommended threshold of 3.00. Incremental fit indices also indicated excellent model fit, with CFI = 0.990, TLI = 0.989, NFI = 0.970, and IFI = 0.990. Absolute fit indices further supported the adequacy of the model, as evidenced by RMSEA = 0.032 (90% CI = 0.029–0.036) and SRMR = 0.055. Moreover, the Parsimony Normed Fit Index (PNFI = 0.906) confirmed that the model achieved substantial explanatory power while maintaining parsimony. Collectively, these indices indicate that the proposed structural model adequately represents the observed data.

Table 4. Goodness of Fit Indices

Fit Index	Threshold	Model Fit Value
χ^2	> 0.05	1221.0
Df		804
χ^2/df	< 3.0	1.52
CFI	≥ 0.95	0.990
TLI	≥ 0.95	0.989
NFI	≥ 0.90	0.970
IFI	≥ 0.90	0.990
RMSEA	≤ 0.08 (≤ 0.05 excellent)	0.032
RMSEA90%		0.029–0.036
SRMR	≤ 0.08	0.055
PNFI	≥ 0.50	0.906

Note. χ^2 = chi-square; df = degrees of freedom; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis Index; NFI = Normed Fit Index; IFI = Incremental Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; PNFI = Parsimony Normed Fit Index.

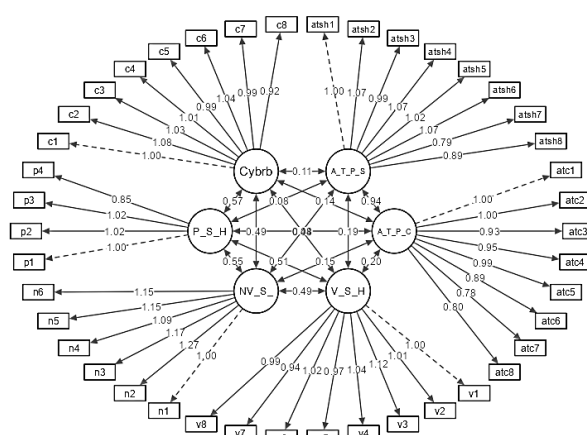


Figure 1 Best Fit Model for the Self-Reported Sexual Harassment and Cyberbullying Among the College Students.

The figure 1 below presents the structural path analysis revealed that actions taken to prevent sexual harassment had significant positive effects on verbal sexual harassment ($\beta = 0.221, p < .001$) and non-verbal sexual harassment ($\beta = 0.155, p = .002$). However, no significant relationship was observed between preventive actions and physical sexual harassment ($\beta = 0.080, p = .116$).

Similarly, actions taken to prevent cyberbullying exhibited a significant positive association with cyberbullying experiences ($\beta = 0.144, p = .006$). Overall, the observed effects were relatively small, suggesting modest practical significance despite statistical significance.

Discussion

The verbal sexual harassment was the most frequently reported form of harassment among college students, followed by non-verbal harassment, cyberbullying, and physical harassment. Although the overall frequency of harassment was relatively low, the findings indicate that verbal harassment remains the most common manifestation of victimization in higher education settings. This pattern is consistent with the findings of Mamaru et al. (2015), who likewise reported verbal harassment as the most prevalent form of sexual harassment among university students. The moderate variability observed across the dimensions further suggests that while most students reported infrequent experiences, a smaller proportion experienced substantially greater exposure, highlighting the unequal distribution of victimization within the student population.

The psychometric evaluation confirmed that the measurement model possessed satisfactory reliability and convergent validity. The acceptable levels of Cronbach's alpha, McDonald's omega, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted indicate that the constructs consistently measured the intended latent variables. Furthermore, the normality assessment demonstrated that the data satisfied the assumptions required for covariance-based structural equation modeling, thereby increasing confidence in the robustness of the subsequent analyses.

The correlation analysis demonstrated that the different forms of sexual harassment and cyberbullying were strongly interconnected. Students who experienced one form of harassment were also likely to report other forms, supporting the concept of poly-victimization. These findings corroborate previous studies by Mamaru et al. (2015), Wang et al. (2009), Ehman and Gross (2019), and Bucchianeri et al. (2015), which collectively suggest that various forms of victimization frequently co-occur rather than occur independently. Consequently, institutional interventions should address sexual harassment and cyberbullying simultaneously instead of implementing isolated prevention programs targeting only one form of victimization.

An interesting finding of the study is the positive association between preventive actions and reported experiences of verbal harassment, non-verbal harassment, and cyberbullying. At first glance, this relationship appears counterintuitive because preventive efforts are generally expected to reduce victimization. However, this finding should not be interpreted as evidence that preventive programs increase harassment. Rather, it likely reflects increased awareness, recognition, and reporting among students exposed to prevention initiatives. As students become more knowledgeable about behaviors that constitute harassment, they become more capable of identifying, labeling, and reporting experiences that might previously have been ignored or normalized. This interpretation is consistent with the findings of Leemis et al. (2020), Espelage and Hong (2016), and Yurdakul and Ayhan (2022), who reported that prevention education improves awareness, self-efficacy, and reporting behavior.

The absence of a significant relationship between preventive actions and physical sexual harassment suggests that physical forms of victimization may be influenced by broader organizational, environmental, and structural factors beyond individual preventive behaviors. This finding aligns with the work of Dobbin and Kalev (2019) and Crusto and Hooper (2024), who argued that prevention programs focusing primarily on individual behavior often produce

limited reductions in actual harassment unless accompanied by systemic institutional reforms. Consequently, universities should strengthen organizational policies, reporting mechanisms, disciplinary procedures, and campus safety systems alongside educational interventions.

Overall, the structural model provides empirical evidence that preventive behaviors among students are predominantly reactive rather than proactive. Students who have experienced harassment or cyberbullying appear more likely to engage in preventive actions after victimization rather than before exposure. This interpretation is supported by Sobba and Radu (2024) and Newman (2024), who found that previous victims and witnesses are more likely to intervene, discourage harmful behavior, and report future incidents because of heightened awareness and empathy. These findings underscore the importance of shifting institutional strategies from reactive responses toward comprehensive, proactive, and campus-wide prevention programs that reduce the occurrence of harassment before victimization takes place.

5. Conclusion

The sexual harassment and cyberbullying are related but still distinct experiences among college students. Preventive actions did not reduce harassment as expected; instead, students who reported more experiences also reported taking more preventive steps. This suggests that

preventive behaviors may be reactive rather than fully protective. While the model showed strong statistical support, the small effect sizes indicate that individual efforts alone may not be enough. Institutions should strengthen proactive and system-level strategies to create a safer learning environment.

The implications of the study suggest that although sexual harassment and cyberbullying are interconnected, they remain distinct forms of victimization. This means that institutional policies and intervention programs should address them both jointly and separately, ensuring that strategies are tailored to the specific dynamics of each form of misconduct. The findings also imply that students' preventive actions tend to be reactive rather than proactive in nature. Instead of preventing harassment before it occurs, students appear to adopt protective behaviors after experiencing victimization. This highlights a gap in proactive prevention efforts and suggests that awareness campaigns alone may not be sufficient to reduce incidents. Moreover, the small effect sizes indicate that individual-level strategies—such as personal precautionary measures—may have limited impact when implemented in isolation. This underscores the need for broader, system-level approaches. Educational institutions should therefore strengthen structural interventions, such as clear reporting mechanisms, consistent enforcement of policies, faculty and staff training, bystander intervention programs, and campus-wide awareness initiatives.

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8. Author Declaration

I confirm that this manuscript is my original work. It has not been published previously and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. All sources used have been properly acknowledged and cited.

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.