



ज्ञानविविधा

कला, मानविकी और सामाजिक विज्ञान की सहकर्म-समीक्षित, मूल्यांकित, त्रैमासिक शोध पत्रिका

ISSN : 3048-4537(Online)

3049-2327(Print)

IIFS Impact Factor-6.125

Vol.-3; Issue-2 (Apr.-June) 2026

Page No.- 380-383

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<https://journal.gyanvividha.com>

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Effect of Cyberbullying on Emotional Adjustment of Adolescents

ABSTRACT : Cyberbullying has become an international public health concern among adolescents, and as such, it deserves further study. This paper reviews the current literature related to the effects of cyberbullying on adolescent health (Physical and mental) across multiple studies worldwide and provides directions for future research. A review of the evidence suggests that cyberbullying poses a threat to adolescents health and well-being. A correlational studies have demonstrated a cogent relationship between adolescent's involvement in cyberbullying and negative health indices. Adolescents who are targeted via cyberbullying report increased depressive affect, anxiety, loneliness, suicidal behaviour, and somatic symptoms. Perpetrators of cyberbullying are more likely to report increased substance use, aggression, and delinquent behaviours. Mediating/moderating have been found to influence the relationship between cyberbullying and adolescent health. More longitudinal work is needed to increase our understanding of the effects of cyberbullying on adolescent health overtime. Prevention and intervention efforts related to reducing cyberbullying and its associated harms are discussed.

Key words : Cyberbullying, adolescent health, cybervictimization cyberperpetrators, stress, Aggression, self-esteem.

Introduction : Cyberbullying is primarily associated with adolescents. One in every four younger teenagers experiences cyberbullying (Pichel et al 2021 a, b). Kowalski et al, (2014) assert that cyberbullying is most common between 12 and 15 years of age and the rate of victimization tends to rise during late adolescence. However, (Pichel et al., 2021 a, b) State that cyberbullying peaks at ages 14 and 15 before decreasing in the latter years of adolescence.

In general, cyberbullying is a recent concern compared to traditional bullying. Hence, although most

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researchers have focused on the psychological and demographic factors associated with online bullying, there is still a dearth of literature concerning remedial policies.

It is not always possible to deny online access to today young population considering the academic benefits that may be derived from the internet. Hence, it becomes the responsibility of parents to monitor the online behaviour of their children.

Unlike traditional bullying that takes place in school and among peers, cyberbullying takes place in the digital realm. As stated by UNICEF, “Cyberbullying can takes place on social media, messaging platforms. Gaming platforms and mobile phones. It is repeated behaviour, aimed at intended to scare, anger, or shame those who are targeted” (UNICEF, 2021). The widespread availability of the internet and easy access to social media sites has given young people a platform to express their ideas and share views. For students, social media and the internet in general can be convenient sources of educational information. However, this modern form communication can also foster harmful behaviour in the form of cyberbullying manifests in various forms, including threats, spreading rumours about a person. Verbal attacks and mocking posting indecent or embarrassing photos and hacking accounts or creating fake profiles in another person’s name and sending negative abusive, or threatening messages or emails on that person’s behalf can also involve excluding someone from online groups. Although adolescents may engage in traditional bullying in schools and among peers, they increasingly utilize online platforms, particularly social media to harass others (Li. 2007). Traditional bullying and cyberbullying often coexist, but research indicates that traditional bullies are more likely to engage in cyberbullying than vice versa (Muller et al., 2018).

The issue of cyberbullying has increasingly become a matter of global concern, particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the global lockdown, people, especially younger populations, spent an average of 20 percent more time online compared to pre-pandemic levels (Statista, 2020). According to Security Organization (2022) 21 percent of adolescents 10 to 18 reported experiencing cyberbullying, with 56 percent of these incidents occurring between January and July 2020, during the peak lockdown period worldwide. Increased screen time on mobile devices and computer was associated with a rise in cyberbullying cases.

The rise in cyberbullying among adolescents is a growing concern because increased access to social media sites has often replaced traditional bullying and other forms of offline aggression. A study involving 1431 participants aged 12-17 revealed an association between cyberbullying and other forms of violence (Calvete et al, 2010). Unnever (2005) linked cyberbullying to proactive aggression. Hinduja & Patchin (2008) explored the convenience for perpetrators. Noting that acts of cyberbullying such as excluding someone from online groups or sending harassing emails- can be conducted anonymously, enabling harassers to act without fear of being caught.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically reshaped digital interactions, leading to increased reliance on online communication among adolescents. Studies indicate that this shift was accompanied by a significant rise in cyberbullying incidents, as social isolation, prolonged screentime and heightened emotional distress created an environment conducive to online harassment (Aboujaoude et al., 2021)

Cyberbullying and mental health : Cyberbullying has attracted the world’s attention and therefore researchers across the world have contributed to the literature on cyberbullying and mental health.

Mental health has garnered significant attention from the research community, academics and policymakers across the globe (Some et al., 2022), and has emerged as a major contribution to the global health crisis (Wang et al., 2021). The World Health Organisation (WHO) define

mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (World Health Organization, 2004)

According to the definition, a mentally healthy person effectively manage stress, work to his / her optimal output levels, and positively contribute to his / her community. The definition also suggests that the absence of, or an impaired state of mental well being may hinder individuals, from realizing their full potential, hamper their productivity, and diminish their ability to contribute positively to their communities (Some et al., 2022). The WHO report on mental health reveals that nearly one in every eight individuals globally experience mental health issues (World Health Organization, 2019). The report further indicates that depression is one of the major factors contributing to impaired mental health, affecting almost 3.8% of the world population (World Health Organization, 2022) including 5% of adults, with the rest being children and adolescents (World Health Organization, 2022). Several factors such as genetics (Shabani et al., 2019 environment, Usher et al, 2019), unhealthy life style choices (Lim et al., 2016), extreme conditions such as COVID-19 (Greenberg, 2020); (Moreno et al, 2020), broken relationships and lack of social support (Mehtaa et al., 2023), excessive usages of social media (Karim et al., 2020); and bullying experiences (Guimetti & Kowalski 2022), contribute the rising mental health issues across the globe. People of all ages, Professions, gender, demographic rigions, colors, caste, and creeds suffer from mental health issues (Oksanen et al., 2020); Achuthan et al, 2023), Bansal et al., 2023 a, b). Furthermore, there has been a significant rise in mental health issue since late 2019 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the resultant exponential increase in internet usages. Although COVID-19 is on the decline, the negative repercussion of high internet use are still visible. One of its most annoying and unfortunate consequences of cyberbullying (Xie et al., 2020).

The effects of cyberbullying : The effects of cyberbullying have been predominantly explored in the area of adolescents mental health concerns. In general, researchers have examined the relationship involved with cyberbullying and adolescents tendency to internalize issue (For example, the development of negative affective disorders, loneliness, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and somatic symptoms).

Cyberbullying victimization and interlizing issues : Past work has revealed a significant relationship between one’s involvement in cyberbullying and affective disorders. For example, results indicate that there is a significant relationship between cybervictimization and depression among adolescents, and among college students. Specifically, results showed that higher levels of cyberbullying victimization were related to higher level of depressive affect.

Cyberbullying has been conceptalized as a stressor, for example. Finkelhor et al found that 32% of targets of cyberbullying experienced at least one symptoms of stress. Similarly, targets of online harassment reported increased rates of trauma symptomology. Relatedly, findings from the second youth **Internet Safety Survey** indicated that 38% of adolescents victims reported that they were emotionally distressed (i.e., extremely upset) as a result of being harassed on the internet.

However, reaction to being cyberbullied may depend on the form of cyberbullying. For example, Ortega et al found that different forms of cyberbullying may elicit different emotional reactions. For instance, being bullied online may evoke a different emotional reaction than being bullied via a cell phone. In terms of predicting the most deleterious outcomes, past work have shown that pictures / video images were the most harmful to adolescents.

Cybervictimization is related to disruptions in adolescent relationships, specifically, targets of cyberbullying reported more loneliness from their parents – and peers, along with increased feeling of isolation and helplessness. Not surprisingly, targets of cyberbullying

reported fewer friendships, more emotional and peer relationship problems, lower school attachment, and more empathy. Past work has shown that adolescents who were victimized via cyberbullying were more likely to lose trust in others, experience increased social anxiety and decreased levels of self-esteem. Importantly, the relationship between cybervictimization and adolescents' psycho-social problems remain even after controlling the relational and physical forms of victimization as well as school victimization.

Cyberbullying and suicidal behaviour : Several researchers have examined the association between involvement with cyberbullying and adolescent suicidal behaviour. This relationship has been explored among middle school, high school and college students. For example, Hinduja and Patchin surveyed American middle school students and examined the relationship between involvement in cyberbullying (either as a victim or perpetrator) and suicidality. The results revealed that both targets and perpetrator of cyberbullying were more likely to think about suicide, as well as attempt suicide, when compared to the peers who were not involved with cyberbullying. This relationship between cyberbullying and suicidality was stronger for targets, as compared to perpetrators of cyberbullying. Specifically, targets of cyberbullying were almost twice as likely to have attempted suicide, whereas perpetrators were 1.5 times more likely compared to their uninvolved peers.

Prevention and Intervention : Given the deleterious effects of cyberbullying, effective prevention and intervention efforts must be a priority. However, studies that investigate effective prevention and intervention efforts to address cyberbullying are currently lacking. The few studies that have addressed prevention efforts related to cyberbullying suggest that attention be directed towards enhancing adolescent's empathy and self-esteem, decreasing adolescent's problem behaviours, promoting warm, nurturing relationships with their parents, and reducing their time spent online.

Recent findings also suggest that prevention efforts directed towards reducing cyberbullying should address adolescent's self-esteem, as well as specific problem behaviours. Findings from a recent study revealed that developmental increases in adolescent's self-esteem predicted their subsequent involvement in cyberbullying both as a perpetrator and as a target. Additionally, developmental increases in adolescent's problem behaviours (For example, substance use, delinquency and aggressive behaviours) also predicted their involvement in cyberbullying in subsequent grades. Building on the work of Patchin and Hinduja, these results directed educators and health care professionals to focus on adolescent's emotional well-being during the early high school years, paying particular attention to those adolescent's who experience steep declines in their self-esteem, as well as, adolescent's who experience steep inclines in problem behaviours including substance use and delinquency.

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