

Cyberbullying: A Comprehensive Analysis of its Psychological Impact and Preventive Measures

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Abstract. In the contemporary digital landscape, cyberbullying has become a significant societal concern, necessitating a nuanced exploration of its psychological impact and preventive strategies. This study adopts a micro-sociological lens to uncover the intricate dynamics of individual agency within the context of cyberbullying. The research delves into the definition of cyberbullying, highlighting its unique aspects and emphasizing the importance of recognizing individual agency. A comprehensive analysis of the psychological effects reveals both internalizing and externalizing problems faced by victims and perpetrators. Drawing on the concept of individual agency, the study proposes preventive measures at the personal level, emphasizing the role of supportive peer networks, reporting mechanisms, and online ethics education. By acknowledging and empowering individual agency, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of cyberbullying dynamics and offers targeted interventions for fostering a safer and more empathetic online environment.

Keywords: cyberbullying; micro-sociology; individual agency; psychology.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, cyberbullying emerges as a pressing societal concern, urging a comprehensive exploration of its psychological dimensions and preventive strategies. While prevailing research predominantly scrutinizes cyberbullying from a macro-sociological standpoint, this study endeavors to bridge a crucial gap by adopting a micro-sociological lens. The primary objective is to uncover the significant individual agency involved in cyberbullying, emphasizing the unique psychological dynamics within this context.

The study's purpose extends beyond existing scholarship by aiming to provide nuanced insights that inform targeted and effective preventive measures. By focusing on individual agency at the personal level, the research underscores the need for a more thorough investigation to overcome inherent limitations. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to a comprehensive understanding of how individuals navigate and mitigate the psychological toll of cyberbullying, fostering a safer and more empathetic online environment.

2. Definition of Cyberbullying

2.1 Bullying defined

Scholars across disciplines, including child psychology, family and child ecology, sociology, and criminology, have presented definitions of bullying that generally align. Initially resembling harassment, characterized by unprovoked aggression directed repeatedly toward an individual or group (Manning, Heron, & Marshal, 1978), bullying transforms into a more insidious form, resembling violence over time. Roland (1989) defines bullying as "longstanding violence, physical or psychological, conducted by an individual or a group directed against an individual who is not able to defend himself in the actual situation" (p. 21). Stephenson and Smith (1989) argue that bullying is a social interaction where a dominant individual (the bully) exhibits aggressive behavior to distress a less dominant individual (the victim), manifesting as direct or indirect actions (p. 45).

Nansel et al. (2001) offer a comprehensive definition, asserting that bullying is aggressive behavior or intentional "harm doing" by an individual or group, involving a power differential, influenced by various characteristics such as popularity, physical strength, and socioeconomic status (Olweus, 1978,

1993, 1999; Rigby & Slee, 1993; Roland, 1980; Slee & Rigby, 1993). Research on the relevance of these differences between bullies and victims has been inconclusive, with physical appearance showing no consistent predictive value (Olweus, 1978), while other studies found physical shortness (Voss & Mulligan, 2000) and weakness (Leff, 1999) to be relevant.

Bullying-associated harassment can occur anywhere, but the term often refers to youth behavior in school settings, extending to other venues like malls or restaurants. In the past, physical interaction was necessary for victimization, but with the rise of the Internet, personal computers, and cell phones, technology offers additional mediums for bullies to manifest their malicious intentions.

2.2 Cyberbullying defined

Bullying has shifted from physical encounters to virtual realms due to the emergence and ongoing expansion of technological progress. The geographical distance between bullies and victims is no longer a constraint on the frequency, scope, and intensity of harm. As instances of bullying transcend physical settings, the issue has taken on new dimensions. While it might seem logical for bullies to migrate to the electronic domain, our understanding of this phenomenon remains limited. In essence, we define cyberbullying as the deliberate and repetitive infliction of harm through electronic text. Drawing on the earlier-discussed literature, key constructs such as malicious intent, violence, repetition, and power differential play a crucial role in framing a comprehensive definition of both traditional bullying and this evolving form. Cyberbullies are individuals engaging in malicious aggression, seeking implicit or explicit pleasure or gain through mistreating others. Violence, associated with aggression, involves actions intended to cause harm of any kind. For an act to qualify as cyberbullying, it must involve harmful behavior of a repetitive nature. Finally, cyberbullies, by the very nature of their behavior, hold perceived or actual power over their victims. While traditional bullying power may be physical or social, online power may simply stem from proficiency, where youth adept at navigating the electronic world and using technology to harass others gain power relative to their victims.

In a brief 2003 editorial in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, Jerome and Segal (2003) highlighted the scarcity of academic references to cyberbullying despite its anticipated proliferation. Despite the call for research, scholarly attention to the topic remains limited. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) stand out as an exception, conducting telephone surveys with 1,498 regular Internet users aged 10 to 17 and their parents. They discovered that 19% of youth respondents were involved in online aggression in the previous year. Notably, 84% of offenders knew their victim in person, while only 31% of victims knew their harasser in person. This underscores the notion that power and dominance online can be exerted through the ability to keep the offender's identity unknown. Comparing aggressors to those with no involvement in online harassment, the former were more likely to be targets of offline bullying, display problematic behavior, have low school commitment, and engage in substance use. Those who experienced both being an offender and a victim had similar significant differences, except for low school involvement. It is interesting to observe that real-world variables contributing to traditional delinquency and crime are also significantly related to online bullying. Two major electronic devices enable young bullies to harass their victims remotely: personal computers for sending harassing emails, instant messages, posting inappropriate content on online bulletin boards, or creating defamatory websites; and cellular phones for sending harassing text messages to victims.

2.3 Summary

As mentioned, bullying is characterized as a deliberate, aggressive, and recurring behavior, often involving a power imbalance between the perpetrator (bully) and the target (victim) (Olweus, 1993). While the definition of cyberbullying shares considerable overlap with the traditional definition of bullying (Tokunaga, 2010), there are notable distinctions. Firstly, cyberbullying transpires through electronic devices, allowing perpetrators to target victims regardless of physical proximity, in contrast to the confines of workplaces or schools (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Moreover, in online

environments where physical strength is less influential, the power dynamic between bully and victim is frequently determined by factors such as technological proficiency or the cloak of anonymity (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Acknowledging the unique aspects of cyberbullying incidents, the definition proposed by Tokunaga (2010), derived from existing literature, is adopted for this study: "Cyberbullying is any behavior carried out through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that consistently convey hostile or aggressive messages with the intent to cause harm or discomfort to others" (p. 278).

3. Psychological Effects of Cyberbullying

3.1 Internalising problems

Numerous investigations have delved into internalizing issues, particularly focusing on depression and emotional challenges. Research conducted in the USA, Spain, and Germany reveals that a significant proportion of individuals subjected to cyber victimization undergo various negative emotions, including but not limited to sadness, anxiety, embarrassment, and helplessness (Finkelhor, Mitchell, and Wolak 2000; Ortega et al. 2009; Raskauskas and Stoltz 2007; Techniker Krankenkasse 2011). The emotional impact on cybervictims intensifies when victimization becomes a recurring occurrence (Ortega et al. 2009). Moreover, the anonymity of perpetrators contributes to heightened suspicion among cybervictims (Raskauskas and Stoltz 2007).

A study involving Finnish adolescents conducted by Sourander et al. (2010) discovered a correlation between cyber victimization and a broad spectrum of emotional and physical health problems. In Germany, individuals subjected to cyber victimization reported psychosomatic symptoms such as sleep disturbances, headaches, and abdominal pain (Techniker Krankenkasse 2011). A US study by Carter (2011) revealed a significant association between somatic symptoms and cyber victimization, although the depression scale did not exhibit a similar correlation. Dempsey et al. (2009) identified a link between cyber victimization and social anxiety, although no such association was observed with depression in a US sample.

In regression analyses involving Swiss and Australian student samples, Perren et al. (2010) demonstrated that cyber victimization predicted depressive symptoms even after accounting for traditional victimization. Remarkably, this effect transcended cultural differences and remained consistent across countries. Turkish adolescents also exhibited a connection between cyber victimization and depressive symptoms (Erdur Baker, and Tanrikulu 2010). US studies examining various involvement groups, including bullies and bully victims, revealed elevated levels of depression (Ybarra and Mitchell 2004a, 2004b). Sontag et al. (2011) identified heightened anxiety and depression levels in both cyberbullies and cybervictims. In Austria, distinctive patterns emerged among involvement groups, with victims displaying more internalizing problems such as depressive and somatic symptoms, while bully victims exhibited both internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Gradinger, Strohmeier, and Spiel 2009).

3.2 Externalising problems

Cyberbullying and cyber victimisation have also been linked to externalising problems. Gradinger, Strohmeier, and Spiel (2009) found elevated externalizing problems, including instrumental and reactive aggression, in Austrian cyberbullies and cyberbully victims. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004a, 2004b) observed higher delinquency rates among US online harassers, with many bully victims exhibiting problematic behaviors.

Contrastingly, studies found externalizing problems associated with cyber victimization. In Finland, Sourander et al. (2010) reported that cyberbullies displayed hyperactivity and conduct problems, while cyber victimization correlated with behavior problems in peer relationships. Sontag et al. (2011) observed high scores on proactive and reactive aggression scales for both cyberbullies and cybervictims in the US.

In Germany, Schultze-Krumbholz and Scheithauer (2009b) found that both cybervictims and bullies displayed more relational aggression than non-involved students. Katzer, Fetchenhauer, and Belschak (2009a, 2009b) identified predictors of chat bullying, including antisocial online behavior and delinquency.

Additionally, cybervictims exhibited externalizing emotional reactions. Ortega et al. (2009) noted angry responses among Spanish cybervictims, and in Germany, a significant proportion reported feeling angry in response to cyberbullying (Techniker Krankenkasse 2011). In the USA, cybervictims expressed feelings of anger and annoyance (Carter 2011). Overall, cyberbullying's impact extends beyond emotional distress, encompassing externalizing behaviors that vary across cultures.

3.3 Summary

Many studies have found cyber victimization to be associated with internalising problems, while cyberbullies showed higher levels of externalising problems. However, some studies also showed negative emotional effects on cyberbullies, such as depression. In addition, aggression levels were higher in victims than in non-involved students. There is a clear picture of the detrimental effects of cyberbullying on all the involved individuals. The concept of individual agency is crucial in understanding these effects. While victims may face challenges in emotional regulation and aggression levels, the notion of personal agency becomes central in navigating and mitigating the psychological toll. Recognizing the nuanced impact of cyberbullying on individuals and understanding the role of individual agency is pivotal for developing effective interventions and support systems. This understanding lays the groundwork for exploring how individuals can empower themselves to avoid and cope with cyberbullying incidents.

4. Preventive Measures

Within the micro-sociological context, the concept of "individual agency" emerges as a cornerstone in the intricate dynamics of cyberbullying. This viewpoint underscores the agency and creativity of individuals. Individual agency refers to the power of individuals to act independently, influencing not only their lives but also the lives of others. Margaret Archer contends that individuals are not passive products of social structures but possess human agency, the ability to actively participate in shaping their social reality to some extent (1995). In the realm of cyberbullying, individuals wield agency as both perpetrators and victims. The anonymity provided by digital platforms enhances this agency, allowing engagement in aggressive acts without immediate consequences and underscoring the significant role individuals play in shaping online interactions (Ortega et al., 2009; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

Understanding individual agency becomes imperative in formulating preventive measures targeting the root causes of cyberbullying. By explicitly acknowledging the agency vested in both perpetrators and victims, interventions can be tailored to address the motivations and decision-making processes at the individual level. This micro-sociological perspective, centered on individual agency, underscores the necessity to move beyond broad societal approaches and delve into the intricate motivations that drive individuals to either engage in or become victims of cyberbullying.

Transitioning to the micro-sociological framework, individual actions and peer dynamics stand out as pivotal components. Dr. Patchin emphasizes the crucial role of bystanders at the micro level, urging the cultivation of a culture of empathy and intervention to counteract cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Recognizing and empowering individual agency within the micro-social level is key. Individuals need to actively engage, advocate for respect, and provide support within their immediate social circles.

By empowering individuals and peers to take micro-level actions, we acknowledge the influence of small social circles. This approach, which places emphasis on individual agency, recognizes the significance of peer relationships and individual choices. It fosters a bottom-up movement against

cyberbullying, asserting that change can be initiated within immediate social circles. This ripple effect extends to larger societal dynamics, creating a safer and more empathetic online environment. The following measures can empower individuals at a personal level:

4.1 Supportive Peer Networks

Encouraging the formation of supportive peer networks within schools and communities is a foundational strategy for empowering individuals against the challenges of cyberbullying. Beyond emotional assistance, these networks act as a resilient safety net that fosters a sense of belonging and community. By engaging with peers who understand their experiences, individuals not only find solace but also gain the strength to navigate and counteract instances of cyberbullying. The collective support within these networks not only mitigates the psychological impact but also catalyzes proactive measures against cyberbullying, creating a united front against online harassment.

4.2 Reporting Mechanisms and Platforms

Ensuring individuals are well-informed about and comfortable using reporting mechanisms on various online platforms is a critical component in the fight against cyberbullying. Empowering users to promptly report incidents is not merely a reactive measure but emphasizes the active role of individuals in maintaining a safer online environment. By reporting cyberbullying, individuals exercise their agency, contributing to a collective effort to create a digital space free from harassment. This process not only safeguards the individual but also reinforces a shared commitment to online safety, harnessing subjective agency for the greater good of the digital community.

4.3 Online Ethics Education

Integrating online ethics education into school curricula serves as a proactive measure in cultivating responsible digital citizenship. This educational approach extends beyond factual knowledge, aiming to activate individual agency consciously. By comprehending the ethical implications of online behavior, individuals are prompted to reflect on their actions and decisions. Online ethics education becomes a powerful tool for channeling subjective agency toward creating a digital environment rooted in ethical conduct and responsible online interactions. It instills a sense of responsibility, empowering individuals to make informed choices, thus contributing to a culture of mutual respect and empathy in the digital realm.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study elucidates the micro-sociological intricacies of cyberbullying, accentuating the paramount role of individual agency. By discerning the distinctive psychological facets of cyberbullying and its repercussions on both perpetrators and victims, the research provides nuanced insights conducive to informed, targeted preventive measures. The concept of individual agency emerges as pivotal, underscored by the potency individuals wield in navigating and mitigating the psychological ramifications of cyberbullying. The study advocates for a preventive paradigm that accentuates empowering individuals at a personal level through the cultivation of supportive peer networks, utilization of reporting mechanisms, and integration of online ethics education. This accentuation of individual agency within intimate social spheres propels a grassroots movement against cyberbullying, contributing substantively to the cultivation of a more secure and compassionate online milieu.

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In the course of this study, my primary objective was to bridge sociological perspectives with psychology, laying the groundwork for potential future contributions to foreign language education research at the graduate level. This study represents a modest step towards a better understanding of the psychological aspects of cyberbullying within the unique context of language education.

I recognize that this journey has only just begun, and I am grateful for the invaluable experiences and insights gained. I look forward to continued exploration and growth in my academic pursuits, especially in the field of foreign language education research, guided by the intersection of sociology and psychology.

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