Schools and Digital Spaces Spawned Bullying

Liqi Cui *

The Pennsylvania State University, State College American, U.S.

* Corresponding Author Email: 18991272455@163.com

Abstract. According to theories like symbolic interactionism, people acted out roles by turn in school settings, not according to how they were educated but whether games one did better than another during adolescence years on cell phone chat levels. Another method was Bourdieu's use and spread of social capital, through which some students became more powerful while others lost their work experience which could have made up for that failure in cleverness or network connections, turning those patterns into realities. In Foucault's theory, bullying originates from the power balance. Therefore, practices of violence prevail when such systemic imbalances lean one way, and social inequalities are reflected. Using a mixed-methods approach that combined national surveys and adolescent interviews, the study found bullying is a school culture and digital platform product. Answers are centered in school reform, changing norms of cultural climate and regulating. All these measures aim to create environments in which teenagers feel safer.

Keywords: Sociological Imagination, Bullying, School Culture, Social Inequality, Power Dynamics, Cyberbullying.

1. Introduction

Bullying damages millions of teenagers globally. In the sociological imagination [1], what happens outside on the streets - especially if it isn't part of one's own experience at that moment - is typical although still unbearably painful. It seems individual studies. But like Franklin said, "if we survey them from below as well as above they reveal just as much an America as does history seen from whitehall or from harvard yard." (Mills, 2. A Breach of Promise: Pluralist Society) [2]. The CDC reports 34% of U.S. teens aged 12–17 were bullied from 2021 to 2023. Among this group, there were 4.4% of students who were bullied daily. Cyberbullying is even more prevalent, with 46% of U.S. teenagers suffering online harassment each year. These figures help to demonstrate the extent of bullying as a social problem [3]. This paper explores bullying as a systemic problem. Starting from the social context of bullying, it combines social theory with empirical data and proposes practical solutions. The discussion ranges over both school cultures and digital platforms, moving next to a mixed-methods study and applying theoretical perspectives. Finally, suggestions for remedying the situation are provided. In this way the paper describes both how schools and society foster bullying, and what can be done about it.

Bullying is not unusual. It affects a number of teenagers. According to the 2024a CDC, 34% of U.S. teens aged 12–17 have faced bullying between 2021 and 2023. Among them, 21.5% experienced occasional incidents, 6.5% a month, and 4.4% a week. High school seniors did not escape. One in five reported being bullied in the last year [4]. Cyberbullying takes this one step further. According to Pew Research, 46% of teens experience online harassment such as name-calling or exclusion. Often this targets appearance, popularity and nonconformity. Teenagers who spend a lot of time on social media face higher risks–such as 28% of them check out their online accounts several times a day–than others who step into the cyber world less often before breakfast with such regularity that you can set your watch by it [5]. Limited moderation allows harassment to continue. Behind them victims cannot run. Deleting applications is useless--there will still be posts uploaded which everyone shares. Schools often refuse to deal with it, arguing that "That's out of our hands"--leaving victim to fend for themselves online.

2. Related Work

Bullying is a global issue facing adolescents in many different cultural and geographic contexts. The CDC reported that from July 2021 through December 2023, 34% of U.S. teens aged 12–17 were bullied and that of those, 21.5% were bullied every few months, 6.5% were bullied monthly, and 4.4% were bullied weekly. One in five high school seniors experienced bullying in the previous 12 months [6]. Those numbers only show that bullying is not an occasional act but rather a steady part of the social behaviour in schools.

Cyberbullying becomes more complex. According to a Pew Research Center survey published in 2022, nearly half (46%) of U.S. teens had reported being the target of some form of online harassment — whether it was name-calling, rumor-spreading or exclusion from social groups. Such harassment relates to looks, non-popularity, or breach of peer standards. High school students who often use social media—28% report using social media several times per day—are at increased risk for victimization, which is associated with depression and hopelessness [7].

Because those at the top of this hierarchy — and that top status is one that many people actually strive to achieve because it creates powerful inclusion and powerful exclusion — and those top ones feel the right and the need to assert their top status through acts of bullying or ostracism. This hierarchy is not formally granted but rather forms as peers interact. While symbolic interactionism helps us to understand how meanings are produced, ritual studies showcases process as a productive lens overlooking ritualized encounters [8]. Even though surveillance and discipline are performed more formally by schools, y peer groups also do this through informal means of discipline. Bullying is a form of social control, a punishment for those who refuse to conform.

When Mills more explicitly draws the line between micor and macro as it relates to abtract sociological investigation it is through his sociological imagination, wherein he explains how personal troubles reflect such public issues [4]. To summarize, these theories illustrate that bullying is a structural problem embedded in the social order of schools and society. Blaming it on one person's evil is not going to help, we need to find and understand cultural and institutional roots of bullying that give rise to it and allow it to flourish. Through numerous policies, curricula, and extra-curricular practices that reward some characteristics (eg: extroversion, athleticism) over others, schools as socializing agents replicate, reinforce and instantiate hierarchies [9]. Tackling bullying must tackle the sociological structures that engender these and the need for more inclusive spaces.

3. Method

This study has used a multi-method approach, combining quantitative research on Internet bullying with qualitative adolescent interviews and using triangulation to strengthen the findings of this kind of study. Both qualitative and quantitative data are analyzed in three parts based on methods that reflect the division in sociology: "sociocultural context; social structure and process"; as well as personal troubles vs. public issues. This study tests Mills' idea that personal troubles win become public issues because of the way society is set up.

This study analyzes information from two databases:

One is the National Health Interview Survey for Teenagers, which is conducted by the CDC. Consultation was made with a representative sample from 12 to 17 year-olds over the web (N =~ 10,000). Its subject matter includes trends in bullying, disability and racism. This survey also measures anxiety with only two questions asked on the GAD-2 scale, not depression--which the NHIS cannot do because it only has four items or less to cover any topic (CDC, 2014). The

The other database analyzed is the Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted by the Disease Control centers. A representative sample of 9th- through 12th-grade students in 2023 found 20103 interviews at 11 predominantly white and 6 Black nonschool locations for nonrespondents. The survey covers such areas as drug abuse, sexual behavior and violence against oneself or others [10]. Each uses complex sampling to ensure national representation. The sample weights are adjusted for nonresponse and clustering.

3.1. Measures for Dependent Variables

Bullying victimization: A yes-no question in NHIS-Teen, "Have you been bullied one or more times in the past year?"

Cyberbullying: A yes-no question in YRBS.

Mental health: Anxiety (GAD-2 ≥3), depression (PHQ-2 ≥3), frequent feelings of sadness/hopelessness All punctuation marks, except for periods and commas (YRBS).

3.2. Statistical Analysis

This study uses SAS 9.4, combining SUDAAN 11.0.3 for handling complex sampling. Statistical analyses include the following:

Descriptive statistics: Bullying prevalence of the entire group by demographic and social media characteristics, with 95% confidence intervals (CIs).

Bivariate analysis: Chi-square tests are used to investigate group differences.

Multivariate analysis: Logistic regression in addition to unadjusted odds ratios (ORs). The models are adjusted for age, sex, race or national ethnic background, sexual orientation or gender minority status and disability. Statistical results are reported at $P<0.05$ level of significance.

3.3. Qualitative Component

3.3.1 Subjects and Recruitment

Twelve teenage respondents (aged 12-17) from mid-atlantic schools in 2025 were recruited to participate in this study. Those recruited met the condition of being bullied in the last year, gave their assent (with parental consent when needed) to be subjects and could speak English. The flyers they agreed to share were passed on by school counselors. Seven of these participants were female, five male; four identified as White non-Hispanic and three as Black non-Hispanic, one Hispanic and the remaining three multiracial or other. Three said they were of minority gender and two had disabilities-- in 1 adhd, 1 dyslexia.

Data School counselors in two 45- to 50-minute semi-structured individual interviews in 2025 conducted via Zoom or in person covered the following topics: bullying experiences and the reasons behind them, roles of school and social media in bullying. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. Data were coded with inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

Familiarization: Transcripts were read multiple times.

Coding: NVivo 12 was used to code lines such as "self-blame" or "peer pressure".

Theme development: Codes starting to form into themes like "Structural Influences". Twenty. Two researchers then took 302 records, 302 data points and 1326 quoted statements for the transcriptions; this material was analyzed by hand (outside of computer searching) to see themes that could not have been indicated by any software already installed on a writer's own laptop as it folds up and goes away after completion of production. Now additional verification will be put into place anyway so that each month two-thirds

No financial compensation or other sources of gain were offered for participating in this study. Participants were offered $100 as a "thank you" for completing an individual interview, and for a subsequent group interview 2 days later, also 45 minutes 8 days later.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Results

Table 1 shows bullying rates (NHIS–Teen, 2021–2023). Younger teens (12–14) faced more bullying (38.4%, 95% CI=34.4–42.5) than older teens (29.7%, 95% CI=26.3–33.4; $p<0.05$). Females (38.3%) and SGM teens (47.1%) reported higher rates than males (29.9%) and non-SGM teens (30.0%; $p<0.05$). Teens with disabilities (44.4%) were more vulnerable than those without

(31.3%; p<0.05). White non-Hispanic teens (39.6%) had the highest rates, followed by Hispanic (26.7%), Black non-Hispanic (23.8%), and Asian non-Hispanic (16.1%; p<0.05 vs. White non-Hispanic).

Table 1. Prevalence of Past-Year Bullying Victimization (12–17-Year-Olds) by Demographic Characteristics, NHIS–Teen 2021–2023

Characteristic	% (95% CI)	Standard Error	p-Value (vs. Reference)
Total	34.0 (31.4–36.7)	1.34	—
Age Group			<0.05
12–14 (ref: 15–17)	38.4 (34.4–42.5)	2.02	<0.05
15–17	29.7 (26.3–33.4)	1.78	—
Sex			<0.05
Female (ref: Male)	38.3 (34.4–42.3)	1.97	<0.05
Male	29.9 (26.4–33.6)	1.81	—
SGM Status			<0.05
Yes (ref: No)	47.1 (41.5–52.7)	2.78	<0.05
No	30.0 (27.0–33.1)	1.52	—
Developmental Disability			<0.05
Yes (ref: No)	44.4 (38.2–50.7)	3.12	<0.05
No	31.3 (28.3–34.4)	1.54	—
Race/Ethnicity			<0.05
White non-Hispanic (ref)	39.6 (36.2–43.0)	1.72	—
Black non-Hispanic	23.8 (16.1–33.0)	4.13	<0.05
Asian non-Hispanic	16.1 (10.3–23.4)	3.16	<0.05
Hispanic	26.7 (21.4–32.6)	2.78	<0.05

Bullying harms mental health (Table 2). Bullied teens reported more anxiety (29.8%, 95% CI=25.4–34.5) than non-bullied teens (14.5%, 95% CI=12.2–17.0; aOR=2.31, 95% CI=1.98–2.69, p<0.05). Depression rates were higher too (28.5%, 95% CI=23.9–33.3 vs. 12.1%, 95% CI=9.9–14.6; aOR=2.87, 95% CI=2.45–3.36, p<0.05).

Table 2. Association Between Bullying Victimization and Mental Health, NHIS–Teen 2021–2023

Mental Health Outcome	Bullied (Yes) % (95% CI)	Bullied (No) % (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI) *	p-Value
Anxiety (GAD-2 ≥3)	29.8 (25.4–34.5)	14.5 (12.2–17.0)	2.31 (1.98–2.69)	<0.05
Depression (PHQ-2 ≥3)	28.5 (23.9–33.3)	12.1 (9.9–14.6)	2.87 (2.45–3.36)	<0.05

**Adjusted for age, sex, race/ethnicity, SGM status, and developmental disability.*

YRBS data in Table 3 show 77% of teens used social media frequently. Frequent users faced more cyberbullying (17.0%, 95% CI=15.7–18.4) than others (15.9%, 95% CI=8.1–28.7; aOR=1.54, 95% CI=1.26–1.88, p<0.05). They also reported more sadness (42.6%, 95% CI=40.4–44.8 vs. 31.9%, 95% CI=25.3–39.3; aOR=1.35, 95% CI=1.23–1.47, p<0.05) and suicidal ideation (20.2%, 95% CI=18.8–21.8 vs. 18.7%, 95% CI=12.8–26.6; aOR=1.21, 95% CI=1.06–1.37, p<0.05) [11-18].

Table 3. Association Between Frequent Social Media Use and Health Outcomes, YRBS 2023

Health Outcome	Frequent Use (Yes) % (95% CI)	Frequent Use (No) % (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)*	p-Value
Cyberbullying	17.0 (15.7–18.4)	15.9 (8.1–28.7)	1.54 (1.26–1.88)	<0.05
Persistent Sadness	42.6 (40.4–44.8)	31.9 (25.3–39.3)	1.35 (1.23–1.47)	<0.05
Suicidal Ideation	20.2 (18.8–21.8)	18.7 (12.8–26.6)	1.21 (1.06–1.37)	<0.05

5. Conclusion

After summarizing the above findings, some suggestions are proposed for different communities. Policies must protect SGM teens and those with disabilities. Restorative practices, like peer mediation, address root causes. Platforms need stricter moderation. Digital literacy in schools can teach teens to spot harassment. Cooperative learning reduces competition. Programs like Olweus build empathy and accountability. Restorative justice circles foster dialogue. Media literacy helps teens navigate online risks. Educators must spot subtle bullying, like exclusion. They should model inclusion. Parents and communities can reinforce anti-bullying norms. Schools need more counselors. They should address bullying's emotional toll.

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