



THE UNDERLYING MECHANISM OF CYBERBULLYING ON YOUTH: A LITERATURE REVIEW AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

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Abstract:

Cyberbullying among youth is an issue that is discussed at various levels nowadays. This issue has a huge impact on communication patterns and personal interactions in the digital world. This study explores how cyberbullying impacts youth communication by examining its various forms, underlying mechanisms, and effects. Cyberbullying significantly affects communication by altering youth communication styles, undermining their trust in online platforms, and influencing their online self-presentation. Moreover, cyberbullying incidents can impact real-life relationships and impede the development of positive interpersonal skills in youth. Based on the problems and issues raised regarding cyberbully, this article aims to explore how cyberbullying impacts youth communication by examining its various forms and underlying mechanisms of cyberbullying, including the sense of anonymity and lack of inhibition online, as well as the moral disengagement exhibited by cyberbullies. Additionally, this article also suggests coping strategies for dealing with cyberbullying to enhanced youth communication style, including seeking support, documenting evidence, reporting and blocking, and practicing emotional self-care.

Keywords:

Cyberbullying, Communication, Social Media, Youth, Literature Review



Introduction

In today's digital age, cyberbullying has become a prevalent issue affecting many people, especially youth. Cyberbullying is an issue of significant importance that requires the attention of all groups of people, as it has profound implications for the development of individuals across various age groups, including children, youth, and adults. This cyberbullying problem will impact the country's economy and society. Cyberbullying refers to the use of technology to engage in activities such as harassing, threatening, embarrassing, or singling out another individual. Cyberbullying encompasses the act of transmitting or publishing texts, emails, or messages that are malicious, hostile, or impolite, as well as sharing personal information, images, or videos with the intention of causing harm or humiliation to another individual (Makori & Agufana, 2020).

Cyberbullying has been associated with numerous tragedies on a global scale. In 2006, a 13-year-old girl named Megan Taylor Meier committed suicide after being harassed on MySpace by a neighbour who purported to be a male in order to obtain information about her and disseminate embarrassment at school. This incident was one of the earliest reported cases and one of the most prominent and early instances of cyberbullying that resulted in tragic consequences. The youngest adolescent to commit suicide due to cyberbullying is Rebecca Ann Sedwick, a 12-year-old girl in Florida. She committed suicide at the insistence of 15 middle-school children who urged her to kill herself. Rebecca, who had been using messaging apps to send and receive hateful texts and photos, was found dead in an abandoned cement plant near her home. The bullying began with a dispute over a boy she had dated but stopped seeing. Before her death, she had viewed online questions about suicide, such as "How many Advil do you have to take to die?". The latest tragedy resulting from cyberbullying happened to Rajeswary Appahu, a 30 -30-year-old youth who was found dead in her home on Jul 5. Before the tragedy, Ms. Rajeswary reported two individuals tormenting her on TikTok, using threats and vulgarity in a "live session." She claimed that many viewers and creators in the session also levelled abuse against her. The incident occurred during a live session, where viewers and creators interacted in real time. Ms Rajeswary claimed that the person used her photo and made threats to "rape and kill" her. To note that cyberbullying has become a prevalent issue affecting many individuals, particularly youth in the digital age.

The distinct characteristics of cyberbullying, such as its ability to reach a large audience, the long-term nature of digital information, and the lack of direct surveillance, contribute to its considerable negative impact. In addition, the "disinhibition effect" seen in cyberbullying violators, where individuals may not completely understand the consequences of their acts, contributes to the circumstance (Nixon, 2014). Based on the problems and issues raised regarding cyberbullying, this article aims to explore how cyberbullying impacts youth communication by examining its various forms, underlying mechanisms, and effects through a literature review.

Literature Review

Cyberbullying has garnered increasing academic attention over the past two decades, with research primarily focusing on the contributing factors, victimization, perpetration, and the subsequent consequences. A key factor enabling cyberbullying is the anonymity afforded by online platforms, which often leads to disinhibition and increased aggression. According to Zhang (2020), the sense of power derived from anonymity allows individuals to act in ways they would not in face-to-face interactions, contributing significantly to the prevalence of cyberbullying. This phenomenon, termed the "online disinhibition effect," is exacerbated by the absence of social cues and immediate consequences, leading to behaviors that might not occur in offline settings (Wang et al., 2024). Furthermore, the lack of physical presence and real-time feedback in online interactions can desensitize individuals to the impact of their words and actions, further fueling cyberbullying behaviors. As a result, it is crucial for online platforms to implement measures that promote accountability and discourage abusive behavior in order to mitigate the harmful effects of cyberbullying.

Moral disengagement is another critical factor that facilitates cyberbullying. Cyberbullies often justify their harmful actions by displacing responsibility, minimizing the consequences, or dehumanizing their victims. Francisco et al. (2020) highlights how these mechanisms enable individuals to engage in cyberbullying without guilt or remorse, often exacerbating the psychological harm inflicted on victims. The lack of empathy, coupled with a diminished sense of self-worth among bullies, creates a toxic cycle where aggressive behavior is used to enhance self-perception, further entrenching the normalization of such harmful conduct (Runions & Bak, 2015). This cycle perpetuates a culture of online cruelty and aggression, where individuals feel empowered to attack others from behind the safety of their screens. Without face-to-face interactions to humanize their victims, cyberbullies are able to detach themselves from the consequences of their actions and continue to spread harm without accountability.

The accessibility and pervasive use of digital technologies also play a significant role in cyberbullying. Research indicates that the more time youth spend online, the greater the risk of becoming either a victim or perpetrator of cyberbullying (Gohal et al., 2023). The ubiquity of smartphones and social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, has reshaped communication norms, encouraging constant connectivity and a culture of self-expression that can sometimes fuel online conflicts (Lajnef, 2023). Moreover, the constant need for validation and approval on these platforms can lead to harmful comparisons, increased anxiety, and susceptibility to cyberbullying (Sumadevi, 2023).

Anonymity is a particularly potent enabler of cyberbullying. The ability to conceal one's identity online emboldens individuals to engage in behaviors they might otherwise avoid, knowing they are unlikely to face repercussions. Studies have shown that anonymity increases the frequency and severity of cyberbullying incidents, as bullies feel shielded from accountability (Barlett, 2015). This anonymity not only empowers bullies but also deepens the psychological impact on victims, who often feel helpless and isolated, knowing their tormentor is hidden behind a screen (Macaulay et al., 2022). Addressing anonymity is crucial in developing effective cyberbullying interventions, with emphasis on promoting digital literacy, responsible online behavior, and stricter enforcement of cyberbullying laws.

Methodology

The methodology for this literature review followed a structured approach based on the framework proposed by Srivastava (2007), which includes four key steps: defining the unit of analysis, selecting an appropriate classification context, collecting relevant literature, and conducting a thorough evaluation of the gathered material. For step 1, the unit of analysis for this review is defined through various sources including scholarly articles, books, and conference papers that focus on cyberbullying, social media, communication, and youth. Each selected work was treated as a distinct unit, providing insights into various aspects of cyberbullying and its impact on youth. In step 2, the literature was categorized into two main contexts namely problem context and methodological context. The problem context includes studies discussing the impact of cyberbullying on youth communication, and exploring underlying mechanisms such as anonymity, moral disengagement, and the influence of social media. The methodological context focuses on the research designs, data collection methods, and analytical approaches employed in the studies reviewed. Step 3 is literature collection where relevant literature was sourced from academic databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). The search focused on publications from 2019 to 2024 to ensure the inclusion of the most recent studies. Keywords such as "cyberbullying," "social media," "communication," and "youth" were used in various combinations with Boolean operators to refine the search results. This approach ensured a comprehensive collection of literature that addresses both the psychological and communicative aspects of cyberbullying. Lastly evaluation and analysis in step 4 where the collected literature was subjected to a critical analysis, focusing on identifying common themes, methodological rigor, and the relevance of findings to the current study. The analysis involved synthesizing insights from various studies to provide a coherent understanding of the underlying mechanisms of cyberbullying and its impact on youth communication. The methodological approaches of the reviewed studies were also evaluated to assess their validity and reliability in addressing the research questions.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying has become a pervasive issue in the digital age, with far-reaching consequences for individuals and communities. This article explores a comprehensive approach to dealing with this issue by suggesting coping strategies, such as getting support, documenting evidence, reporting and blocking, and practicing emotional self-care.

The first coping strategy is cyberbullying victims should seek support and have a strong network. Reaching out to trusted friends, family members, or professionals is a crucial first step in addressing cyberbullying. Emotional support and guidance from these individuals can help the victim navigate the emotional stress and provide a sense of community and understanding. By fostering a supportive network, victims can better cope with the psychological impact of cyberbullying and develop strategies to address the situation effectively.

Secondly, documenting evidence as proof for keeping track of cases of cyberbullying. Maintaining accurate records of cyberbullying incidents, including screenshots, messages, and emails, serves as vital evidence for reporting and potential legal action. This documentation not only helps to substantiate the victim's claims but also provides a clear timeline of events, which can be crucial in seeking justice and holding perpetrators accountable. It is important for individuals experiencing cyberbullying to save all evidence of the harassment they are receiving. This evidence can be used to support their case when reporting the cyberbullying to

authorities or to the website or platform where the harassment is occurring. By documenting and preserving evidence, victims can take proactive steps to protect themselves and seek help to address the situation effectively.

Next, victims can utilize the reporting and blocking features on social media platforms. Utilizing the reporting features on social media platforms and websites is a proactive approach to addressing cyberbullying. By reporting incidents, victims can bring attention to the issue and prompt platform administrators to investigate and take appropriate action. Additionally, blocking or unfriending the individuals involved can help limit their access to the victim's online presence, reducing the potential for further harassment. Taking advantage of these tools can create a safer online environment for victims of cyberbullying. By actively utilizing reporting and blocking features, victims can control their online experience and protect themselves from continued harm. It is important for individuals to be proactive in addressing cyberbullying and to seek support from friends, family, or professionals if needed. By standing up against cyberbullying, victims can help create a more positive and respectful online community for all users.

Lastly, youth as social media users should practice self-care to maintain emotional well-being. Engaging in activities that promote personal well-being, such as exercise, hobbies, or spending time with loved ones, can be a powerful tool in combating the emotional toll of cyberbullying. By prioritizing self-care, victims can build resilience, manage stress, and maintain a positive mindset, which can be crucial in navigating the challenges posed by cyberbullying. Additionally, seeking support from trusted friends, family members, or mental health professionals can provide a sense of comfort and validation during difficult times. It is important for youth to remember that they are not alone in their experiences and that there are resources available to help them cope with the negative effects of cyberbullying. By taking proactive steps to care for themselves, young social media users can better protect their mental and emotional well-being in the face of online harassment. They can also consider reaching out to online support groups or helplines specifically created for individuals facing cyberbullying. Engaging in self-care activities such as mindfulness, exercise, or creative outlets can also be beneficial in managing stress and anxiety caused by online harassment. Ultimately, by staying connected with supportive individuals and practising self-care, young people can build resilience and empower themselves to overcome the harmful impact of cyberbullying.

Discussion and Future Research Directions

The literature study provides an overview of the several elements that lead to cyberbullying, such as the widespread availability of technology, the culture of self-expression, the widespread use of smartphones, the ability to remain anonymous, and frequent engagement in online activities. Understanding these fundamental principles could help formulate practical approaches to prevent and handle cyberbullying in educational establishments. In conclusion, cyberbullying is a prevalent issue in today's digital age, particularly affecting youth. It is a significant problem that has profound implications for individuals across various age groups. The underlying mechanisms of cyberbullying include anonymity, moral disengagement, and the culture of self-expression propagated by social media platforms. The widespread accessibility of digital technology and the increasing number of online platforms contribute to the occurrence of cyberbullying. Coping strategies for dealing with cyberbullying include seeking support, documenting evidence, reporting and blocking, and practicing emotional self-care. By addressing the issue of cyberbullying and implementing effective strategies, we can

strive to create a safer and more compassionate online environment for all individuals. Cyberbullying can have profound and lasting effects on individuals' mental health, self-esteem, and overall well-being. Despite its prevalence, there is a shortage of longitudinal studies that track the long-term impact of cyberbullying on victims.

Future research should aim to follow individuals over extended periods, examining how early experiences of cyberbullying influence mental health outcomes, and social relationships. Online platforms often facilitate cyberbullying due to the anonymity and physical separation they provide, which frequently results in online disinhibition and moral disengagement. Future research also can investigate the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that motivate people to participate in cyberbullying. Creating treatments that specifically address these fundamental processes might effectively decrease the prevalence of cyberbullying and encourage individuals to engage in more responsible behaviour online.

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