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## The Psychological Effects of Cyberbullying: A Literature Review

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### Abstract

*Cyberbullying has become one of the most pressing social and psychological issues in the digital era. Unlike conventional bullying, cyberbullying takes place via electronic communication channels such as social media, messaging apps, online gaming, and emails. The pervasive nature of cyberbullying subjects victims to constant harassment, leading to significant emotional and mental health repercussions. This literature review assesses existing academic research on the psychological impacts of cyberbullying, particularly concerning depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, stress, social isolation, suicidal thoughts, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and academic achievement. It also pinpoints research gaps and offers suggestions for future studies.*

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, mental health, psychological impacts, depression, anxiety, adolescents, literature review.

### Introduction

The swift advancement of digital technology has revolutionized communication, enabling people to connect across vast distances. However, this progression has also led to a rise in cyberbullying, especially among teens and young adults. Cyberbullying entails the intentional and repeated use of digital platforms to harass, threaten, embarrass, or intimidate others. Unlike traditional bullying, it can occur at any hour and intrude on the safety of a victim's own home, intensifying its psychological effects.

Research consistently shows that cyberbullying correlates with a range of negative psychological outcomes. Victims often face depression, anxiety, emotional turmoil, feelings of loneliness, academic struggles, and, in severe instances, suicidal thoughts or actions. Recent systematic reviews underline that those who have experienced cyberbullying are significantly more likely to suffer

from depression, anxiety, stress, diminished self-esteem, and suicidal behavior than their non-victimized peers.

This literature review investigates the psychological repercussions of cyberbullying by integrating findings from prior empirical studies and systematic reviews.

#### Concept of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is characterized as intentional and repeated aggressive behavior conducted through digital means with the aim of harming another individual. This includes actions such as sending threatening messages, spreading false information, sharing embarrassing photos, identity theft, online exclusion, impersonation, and public disgrace.

### **Several features differentiate cyberbullying from traditional bullying:**

- It can happen 24/7.
- Damaging content can rapidly reach a broad audience.
- Perpetrators may remain anonymous.
- Victims often find it challenging to escape from online abuse.

These aspects render cyberbullying especially harmful to the emotional well-being of victims.

### **Psychological Effects of Cyberbullying**

#### **Depression**

Depression is one of the most commonly reported psychological ramifications of cyberbullying. Many studies indicate that victims suffer from ongoing sadness, hopelessness, loss of motivation, and diminished interest in daily activities.

A review focused on university students highlighted a strong connection between cybervictimization and depression in almost all reviewed cases, indicating depression as a prominent psychological outcome of online harassment.

Continuous exposure to negative feedback and public humiliation leads to emotional exhaustion and long-term depressiveness.

#### **Anxiety and Emotional Distress**

Cyberbullying markedly heightens anxiety levels in its victims. They often live in fear of future attacks, social rejection, and embarrassment. This persistent fear results in emotional distress, manifesting as nervousness, panic, irritability, and heightened worry.

Research frequently identifies anxiety as a prevalent outcome connected to cyberbullying. The emotional distress intensifies because victims are unable to anticipate when or where another attack may happen.

#### **Low Self-Esteem**

Frequent online victimization can severely damage an individual's self-worth and confidence. Victims may internalize the negative remarks of their aggressors, fostering feelings of worthlessness and self-doubt.

Studies reveal a significant correlation between cybervictimization and lower self-esteem, increasing victims' susceptibility to additional mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety.

#### **Stress and Psychological Distress**

Chronic stress is a common experience among victims due to the ongoing nature of online harassment. The feeling of being unable to escape from cyberbullying can lead to helplessness and emotional exhaustion.

An increasing amount of research points to psychological distress—including emotional instability, mood disruptions, and chronic stress—as a significant consequence of cyberbullying.

#### **Social Isolation and Loneliness**

Many victims tend to withdraw from their social circles after experiencing cyberbullying. Fear of judgment, embarrassment, and continual harassment often deter them from engaging in social events.

Such social withdrawal limits opportunities for emotional support, thereby exacerbating mental health challenges. Prolonged isolation may heighten feelings of loneliness and despair.

### **Suicidal Thoughts and Self-Harming**

Among the most dire psychological outcomes of cyberbullying are suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and self-harming behaviors.

Numerous systematic reviews show strong links between cybervictimization and suicidal ideation, particularly in adolescents and young adults. Victims subjected to prolonged harassment are much more likely to report suicidal behaviors compared to those who have not faced cyberbullying.

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms**

Recent studies suggest that repeated experiences of cyberbullying can elicit trauma responses akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Victims may encounter distressing memories, heightened sensitivity, sleep issues, emotional numbness, and avoidance behaviors.

Emerging evidence suggests that cyberbullying should be treated as a notably adverse childhood experience due to its potential to produce trauma-related symptoms.

### **Factors Influencing Psychological Outcomes**

Various factors affect the intensity of psychological effects endured by victims.

#### **Age:**

Adolescents appear more susceptible as they are still emotionally developing and depend on peer acceptance.

#### **Gender:**

Research often shows that female victims experience heightened levels of depression, anxiety, and emotional distress compared to males, although both genders face significant psychological harm.

#### **Frequency of Victimization:**

Repeated incidents of cyberbullying increase the likelihood of developing severe mental health issues. Victims facing continuous online harassment tend to report higher psychological distress than those with sporadic experiences.

#### **Social Support:**

Support from parents, teachers, friends, and counselors can significantly mitigate the psychological effects of cyberbullying. Victims with robust support networks typically show better emotional resilience.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Several psychological frameworks elucidate the effects of cyberbullying.

#### **Cognitive Theory:**

This perspective argues that recurrent negative online interactions alter victims' thoughts and beliefs, leading to skewed self-perceptions, feelings of hopelessness, and depressive thought patterns.

#### **Stress and Coping Theory:**

This theory posits that cyberbullying serves as a chronic stressor. When victims lack effective coping mechanisms, prolonged stress can culminate in anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue.

## Social Learning Theory:

According to this theory, exposure to aggressive online behavior may normalize bullying among adolescents, suggesting that such behavior can be learned through observation and reinforcements.

## Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite the considerable growth of research on cyberbullying, several important gaps persist:

Most studies utilize cross-sectional methods, limiting causal conclusions.

- More longitudinal studies are required to explore long-term psychological effects.
- There is limited research focusing on adults, older demographics, and developing nations.
- Further studies should examine culturally appropriate interventions and prevention strategies.
- More evidence is necessary regarding effective school-based and digital mental health programs.

## Conclusion

Research clearly illustrates that cyberbullying has significant psychological effects on victims, including depression, anxiety, emotional distress, chronic stress, low self-esteem, loneliness, suicidal ideation, and trauma-related symptoms. The persistent, anonymous, and extensive nature of online harassment renders cyberbullying particularly harmful compared to traditional bullying.

In light of these insights, it is crucial for schools, families, policymakers, and mental health professionals to work together to develop comprehensive prevention initiatives, enhance digital literacy, improve reporting systems, and provide accessible psychological support for victims. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies and evaluate the effectiveness of intervention strategies aimed at alleviating the psychological impacts of cyberbullying.

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