

A Systematic Review of Cyberbullying and Mental Health among Adolescent Girls: Risk Factors, Protective Mechanisms, and Intervention Strategies

Lici Liu*

Global Times Press Co., Ltd, No. 2, Jintai West Road, Chaoyang District, Beijing, New Media Building, Beijing, 100026, China

*Correspondence should be addressed to Lici Liu: liulici@globaltimes.com.cn

Abstract

Cyberbullying has emerged as a pervasive and damaging form of peer aggression in the digital age, with adolescent girls disproportionately affected due to gendered social dynamics and heightened online engagement. This paper presents a comprehensive literature review examining the psychological consequences of cyberbullying on female adolescents, including increased risks of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation. Drawing on empirical studies published primarily between 2014 and 2022, the review identifies key risk factors, such as problematic internet use and exposure to online sexual harassment, as well as critical protective mechanisms, including emotional intelligence, psychological resilience, parental support, and school connectedness. Furthermore, the paper evaluates existing intervention approaches, such as school-based psychoeducational programs, role-playing forums, and resilience-building curricula, highlighting their effectiveness in mitigating harm and fostering supportive peer environments. The synthesis underscores the need for multi-contextual, gender-sensitive strategies that integrate family, school, and digital literacy components. Limitations of current research, including small sample sizes, cultural specificity, and lack of longitudinal designs are also discussed, pointing toward future directions for action-oriented and ecologically grounded studies.

Keywords

Cyberbullying; Adolescent Girls; Mental Health; Emotional Intelligence; Psychological Resilience; School Connectedness; Intervention Strategies; Literature Review.

1. Introduction

School bullying is a problem that impacts students all over the world. Pacer's National Bullying Prevention Center states that "one out of every five (20.2%) students" faced bullying [1]. The Chinese report even said that there are 250 million kids faced bullying in the world. There even young actress jumps out of floors because of bullying. There is a high association between school bullying on children and mental health problems like depression and anxiety [2].

School bullying is one track of school violence. Based on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition, school violence is divided into three bands: physical violence, psychological violence, and sexual violence [3]. When physical and psychological violence combine, they form school bullying. When all three types of violence combine, it is sexual harassment. Besides, sexual harassment is involved in school bullying. Today, cyberbullying is also a part of school bullying that bother a lot of students. The prevalence is usually related to mental problems like anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. The media today provide students a chance to look, explore and show their thought on the internet. However, it also helps the explosion of cyberbullying. Ultimately, going home or being

alone might be a chance to avoid school bullying. However, when the internet connects people from a far distance, it also allows the bully to send awful words and pictures to victims of school bullying. The article will introduce the basic problems and traits of cyberbullying in adolescents and the specific problems for female adolescents separately. And I will introduce articles about possible solutions for cyberbullying and female adolescents.

2. Justification

The major focus of this study is cyberbullying and its' impact on adolescent females. The keywords here are female adolescents, cyberbullying, and mental problems. Since the internet has developed very fast in recent years, most papers that focus on cyberbullying were published in recent ten years, and the earliest paper I am writing here was published in 2014. Most studies on school bullying and cyberbullying are based on the survey of students. Several of them also use interviews. However, there aren't much lab research. Although some research may have the limitation of culture and location, there isn't much choice since it is hard to find much research from one country, or culture. I believe that most of the results are still considerable in most other countries.

3. Review of Individual Studies

I divided all the research articles into two sections, presenting the problems and possible solutions.

3.1. Cyberbullying

The study by Alexandra Mattie and his colleagues researched the relationship between parental rejection and moral disengagement with bullying adolescents. This important study finds strong "negative associations between emotional warmth and all forms of bullying [4]." The moral education that Dehumanization and disengagement are highly related to bullying. The result came from the study with 225 teenagers and their self-report questionnaire. The questionnaires included the moral disengagement scales, the EMBU scale (testing the relationship between children and parents), the moral identity scale, and the bullying scale. The study proved that "moral disengagement was found to be the most powerful predictor for all types of bullying within the current sample of teenagers [5]" The study also mentioned that moral education plays an essential role in reducing school bullying. It will be a possibility that educators should consider in school. However, Alexandra also stated that the high level of morale might lead to another problem, that a group of students might make emotional bullying because of their friendship.

Other than traditional bullying, cyberbullying is a big problem for all adolescents. The internet provides every chance for a better connection from a far distance. However, it is also a chance for bullying. Based on Gianluca Gino, a group of victims might face both cyberbullying and traditional bullying [6]. Based on Gino's paper, there are differences between traditional bullying victims and cyber-victimization. The high frequency of internet use is one of the indexes that happened on cyber-victimization. During the research, Gino had 1377 adolescents as participants, and he tested their traditional victimization, cyber-victimization, problematic internet use, motives for using the Internet, ethical media use, and online activities. The result of the study showed that dual victims, that is, youth who reported the highest frequency of both traditional and cyber-victimization, showed the most problematic use of information and communication technologies [7]"

Like traditional bullying, cyberbullying also has a large group that does not belong to bullies and victims. They are bystanders. Although most studies focus on victims' harm, bystanders should not be invisible in every event. In his paper, Wright mentioned that the powerlessness

of seeing cyberbullying might turn to stress on adolescent bystanders theoretically [8]. He made research based on 1067 students between 12 and 15 years old. Wright and his team used questionnaires and scales to test participants' bystanders of cyberbullying, cyberbullying victimization, cyberbullying perpetration, depression, and anxiety.

3.2. Female

Freire and his team researched the bullying of female adolescents in Brazil. This research has a relatively small number of participants since it happened only in one school - 60 girls attended this research. Freire's team used the Kidscape questionnaire to get the data, and the results showed that verbal aggression (31.7%) is the most common one in girls, and the following reason is racist (the study included many brown and black students), which is 16.6% [8]. Although most participants believe that bullies' fault caused more bullying, 38.3% of participants believe that "school management should solve the problem," and 16.6% of participants believe that parents should involve in reducing school bullying [9]. This study also suggests that a higher percentage of girls faced emotional bullying related to the higher prevalence of verbal bullying in females.

Just as UNESCO's division that sexual harassment is a combination of all violence in bullying, online sexual harassment (OSH) is also an important factor that strongly influences female adolescents. Mitchell's research included five waves of participants in high school, including 1287 students in the first wave (T1), and the number for the final wave is 892. However, the research only used the data from participants who participated in both T1 and T6, and the number is 477 [10]. To collect data, Mitchell asked about participants' experience of OSH, used Patient Health Questionnaire for Depression and Anxiety to measure their mental health status, and used the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale to measure resilience. The result of the study showed that girls with higher resilience have a more positive mental status while facing OSH. For example, they usually have a stronger friendship. In addition, parents' support is another key that girls might have a better mental status.

Exciting research based on Internet research suggests that female adolescents following fitness blogs have a higher suicide rate. Lepesheva's study found another perspective on mental problems and women. In the 112 women aged 18 to 35, the researchers found that the young women who spent over 90 minutes on fitness blogs "had high levels of excessively high body standards and emotional distress, including increased suicidal tendencies" [11].

4. Intervention

After seeking the questions, some studies also provide great possible inventions to reduce bullying in adolescent females. Also, finding the invention to minimize the harm after the bullying happens is essential.

Papatraianou's study provides a basic analysis of young people's online experience ecology. The author believes personal context, home context, school context, and public context form cyber context. The paper suggested that "school contexts can facilitate the development of cyber resilience or risk exposing young people to adversity outside of adequate support mechanisms [12]." As educators, it is hard to influence other contexts. However, as the author mentioned, we can consider finding ways to develop students' resilience and be more supportive of the model of cyber contexts. The article also mentioned that strong peer relationships contribute to students' resilience.

Dr. Lourdes' study is more specific on peer cyber-victimization and emotional intelligence (EI). This research had 645 adolescent participants. The research team measured their cyber-victimization and emotional intelligence through the European Cyberbullying Intervention Project Questionnaire and the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale. The results showed

“significant differences in the associations between emotion regulation and cyber victimization for females, but not males [13].” In other words, training in EL skills might help female students to avoid peer cyberbullying. In addition, when educators try to design programs for anti-cyberbullying, how to improve students’ EI skills will be necessary. But, again, this result might relate to the sensitivity of female adolescents.

Molina’s study connects the school with bullying and cyberbullying. In the study with 1774 students aged 14 to 18, the researchers measured 13 data, including bullying, student connectedness, family, suicide, and so on. Student connectedness is a new measurement for me. Based on the paper, it is “students’ belonging to the school and connections to students.” The data showed a negative relationship between suicidal behavior and school student connectedness, meaning that students with a higher level of connectedness usually have less suicidal behavior. In addition, “high levels of student connectedness could play a protective role against the effects of bullying or cyberbullying.” The study also suggested that cyberbullying and relative victimization have a positive relationship with mental health problems and negatively associated with self-esteem. Therefore, teachers might find ways to build a higher level of connectedness in school to protect students.

Gamlefor and Ebrahim’s intervention is a developed strategy to help high school females to define and discuss cyberbullying. It is a forum that gives a clear definition of cyberbullying, allowing students to discuss and recall their experiences related to cyberbullying. In one of the processes, students will pretend to play different roles in cyberbullying - they might be the victim, the perpetrator, and the bystander. In the end, they will have a reflection on the whole program. Through the intervention, students will learn more about cyberbullying, knowing the severe sequence behind it, and they might be more willing to think before they post.

5. Cross-study Information Or Conclusion

Bullying is a severe prevalent problem. Therefore, educators, parents, and the community must make many changes to solve the problem. Cyberbullying shares common with traditional bullying. But the victims are not overlapped completely. There are differences between adolescent females and males if they are facing cyberbullying.

Several studies mentioned family support plays an essential role in cyberbullying. I believe it could relate to attachment theory. It will be a lot of expansion to prove it. However, it focuses more on the family. For educators, it is more important to think about the aspects of school and teaching.

Being supportive is an important role for school, either. Educators should learn to improve students’ connectedness or belonging, to the school. More group discussions and encouragement of peer helping groups might be the solution.

Resilience appears in two articles, and it has a negative association with cyberbullying, or cyber violence, in both studies. Resilience is not the intervention that directly helps to reduce cyberbullying or traditional bullying. However, it is a possible solution that educators can train in their classes to reduce harm. There should have further research on how to improve adolescents’ resilience.

Overall, teachers must develop more programs or improve resilience and emotional intelligence skills to help students against cyberbullying.

There are many limitations in those studies. First, compared with the number of all adolescent females, most research here has a small number of participants. In addition, school-based research might only work in a certain environment. Finally, other than the cyber context, most research had no theory or model that can use in other studies. Therefore, the action research in the targeting school will be the next step!

References

- [1] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2019, January). Behind the numbers: Ending School violence and bullying - UNICEF. Retrieved June 27, 2022, from <https://www.unicef.org/media/66496/file/Behind-the-Numbers.pdf>
- [2] Bullying statistics. PACER Center - Champions for Children with Disabilities. (n.d.). Retrieved June 27, 2022, from <https://www.pacer.org/bullying/info/stats.asp>
- [3] Arseneault L. (2018). Annual Research Review: The persistent and pervasive impact of being bullied in childhood and adolescence: implications for policy and practice. *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry, and allied disciplines*, 59(4), 405–421. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12841>
- [4] Gini, G., Marino, C., Jia-Yan Xie, Pfetsch, J., & Pozzoli, T. (2019). Associations of Traditional and Peer Cyber-Victimization With Adolescents' Internet Use: A Latent Profile Analysis. *Cyberpsychology*, 13(4), 45–64. <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2019-4-1>
- [5] de Aquino Freire, D., Rufino da Silva, R., da Silva Oliveira, T., Souza Torres, K. M., da Rocha Cabral, J., & Neto Menezes, M. L. (2020). The practice of bullying in adolescents of the female gender. *Revista de Enfermagem Da UFSM*, 10, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.5902/2179769239002>
- [6] Papatraianou, L. H., Levine, D., & West, D. (2014). Resilience in the face of cyberbullying: an ecological perspective on young people's experiences of online adversity. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 32(4), 264–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2014.974661>
- [7] Maftei, A., Bumbaru, E.-V., Grigore, A.-N., & Holman, A.-C. (2020). Parental Rejection and Moral Disengagement Predict Romanian Adolescents' Bullying Behavior. *International Journal of Education & Psychology in the Community*, 10(1/2), 163–185
- [8] Mitchell, K., & Štulhofer, A. (2021). Online sexual harassment and negative mood in Croatian female adolescents. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 30(2), 225–231. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-020-01506-7>
- [9] Lepesheva, S. O., & Kholmogorova, A. B. (2021). Fitness Blogging as a New Social Practice and Its Implications for Young Women's Mental Health. *Cultural-Historical Psychology*, 17(2), 144–154. <https://doi.org/10.17759/chp.2021170214>
- [10] Rey, L., Quintana-Orts, C., Mérida-López, S., & Extremera, N. (2018). Emotional Intelligence and Peer Cyber-Victimisation in Adolescents: Gender as Moderator. *Comunicar: Media Education Research Journal*, 26(56), 9–18.
- [11] Camelford, K. G., & Ebrahim, C. (2016). The Cyberbullying Virus: A Psychoeducational Intervention to Define and Discuss Cyberbullying Among High School Females. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 11(3–4), 458–468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2016.1183545>
- [12] Wright, M. F., Wachs, S., & Harper, B. D. (2018). The moderation of empathy in the longitudinal association between witnessing cyberbullying, depression, and anxiety. *Cyberpsychology*, 12(4), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2018-4-6>
- [13] Lucas-Molina, B., Pérez-Albéniz, A., Solbes-Canales, I., Ortuño-Sierra, J., & Fonseca-Pedrero, E. (2022). Bullying, Cyberbullying and Mental Health: The Role of Student Connectedness as a School Protective Factor. *Psychosocial Intervention*, 31(1), 33–41. <https://doi.org/10.5093/pi2022a1>