

CYBER BULLYING AND ITS IMPACT ON SELF-HARM IN ADOLESCENTS

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Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant issue in the digital age, posing severe risks to adolescent mental health. Unlike traditional bullying, which occurs in physical or face-to-face environments, cyberbullying leverages digital platforms to harass or intimidate individuals, making it more pervasive and relentless. The continuous and often public nature of cyberbullying can exacerbate emotional distress and lead to profound psychological harm. Despite its increasing prevalence, cyberbullying remains relatively under-studied by psychologists, largely because digital communication is a recent phenomenon, emerging only in the last few decades. Consequently, there is a significant gap in research regarding the psychological impacts of cyberbullying, highlighting the need for more comprehensive studies in this area. This study aims to investigate the relationship between cyberbullying and self-harm among adolescents, emphasizing the urgent need for targeted intervention and prevention strategies. Utilizing a case study methodology, the research offers an in-depth examination of how cyberbullying can lead to self-harm. The article provides a detailed analysis of the complex interactions between digital harassment and maladaptive coping mechanisms. The findings underscore the significant impact of cyberbullying on mental health, illustrating that the severe emotional distress caused by cyberbullying can lead to self-harm. This study provides new insights into the specific ways cyberbullying contributes to self-harm and emphasizes the necessity for effective intervention strategies to support adolescents and mitigate the harmful effects of digital harassment.

Keywords: cyberbullying, adolescent mental health, self-harm, digital harassment, social media, digital platforms, psychological distress, maladaptive coping mechanisms, emotional distress, digital communication, self-injurious behaviors

Introduction

In the digital age, cyberbullying has emerged as a pervasive issue affecting adolescents worldwide. Unlike traditional forms of bullying, cyberbullying involves using information and communication technologies to harm others. This can include sending abusive messages through text or online platforms, posting negative comments on social media, sharing humiliating photos, or making threats and intimidating someone electronically. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is distinct in several ways. It has the potential to reach a vast and unlimited audience, providing persistent exposure across time and space. Cyberbullying also preserves

harmful words and images in a more permanent form and often occurs without supervision. Additionally, perpetrators typically do not see their victims' reactions, which may lead to a diminished understanding of the full impact of their actions and a corresponding decrease in personal accountability [7].

The purpose of this article is to examine the impact of cyberbullying on adolescent self-harm. Understanding this relationship is crucial because cyberbullying represents a significant and growing issue in the digital age, with profound implications for adolescent mental health. By shedding light on how cyberbullying contributes to self-harm, this

study aims to provide valuable insights that can help practitioners, healthcare providers, educators, and scholars develop more effective prevention and intervention strategies. This, in turn, is essential for mitigating the harmful effects of cyberbullying and enhancing the well-being of adolescents. Addressing these issues can lead to better support systems, more informed policies, and ultimately, a safer online environment for young people.

As cyberbullying is a relatively recent phenomenon, definitional and methodological inconsistencies persist in the literature. For instance, Patchin and Hinduja adopt a more conservative definition, describing cyberbullying as willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices [9], while Smith, del Barrio, and Tokunaga use a broader definition, characterizing it as using electronic means to intentionally harm someone else [10].

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the effects of cyberbullying due to their developmental stage, which is characterized by heightened sensitivity to peer interactions and identity formation. Nearly half of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 (46%) have experienced at least one form of cyberbullying, according to a Pew Research Center survey. The most common type reported was name-calling, affecting 32% of teens. Other experiences included false rumors spread online (22%) and receiving unsolicited explicit images (17%). Additionally, 15% of teens reported being frequently questioned about their whereabouts or activities by someone other than a parent, 10% faced physical threats, and 7% had explicit images of them shared without consent. Overall, 28% of teens encountered multiple types of cyberbullying [11].

There is growing evidence that cyberbullying leads to higher levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness compared to traditional bullying. A meta-analysis exploring the links between peer victimization, cyberbullying, and suicide in children and adolescents reveals that cyberbullying is more strongly associated with suicidal ideation than traditional bullying [5]. Additionally, the persistent and recurring nature of cyberbullying exacerbates its impact on adolescents, making it a particularly significant issue. Adolescents' emotional responses

to cyberbullying vary in severity and type, but the most common feelings among victims include anger, sadness, anxiety, fear, concern, and depression [2].

Compared to traditional forms of bullying, online bullying poses a greater risk for suicidal thoughts in adolescents. Firstly, teens who are bullied online are less likely to report the abuse or seek help, increasing their risk of suicidal behavior. Secondly, online bullying can be more harmful as it can occur at any time and place, leading to prolonged exposure and higher suicide risk. Additionally, the anonymity of online bullies may reduce the consequences they face [1].

Existing literature indicates that a substantial number of young people worldwide engage in self-injurious behaviors. Muehlenkamp et al. [6] conducted a systematic review of 52 studies involving adolescents and found a mean lifetime prevalence of 18.0% for nonsuicidal self-injury and 16.1% for deliberate self-harm. The high prevalence rates, combined with strong associations with recurrent self-injury and suicidal behaviors, highlight the significant health concerns associated with these issues [3].

Nonsuicidal self-injury refers to the intentional act of causing harm to one's own body without the intent of suicide. This behavior includes methods such as cutting, burning, scratching, and hitting oneself. Unlike suicidal self-harm, nonsuicidal self-injury is performed for reasons not sanctioned by society and often serves as a coping mechanism for emotional distress [8].

Prior to the early 2000s, this behavior was relatively overlooked, but key studies and developments during this period have significantly advanced our understanding. Notable contributions include Kim L. Gratz's influential measure for assessing nonsuicidal self-injury, E. David Klonsky's findings on its prevalence and psychiatric implications in both clinical and nonclinical populations, and Matthew K. Nock and Mitch J. Prinstein's exploration of the underlying motivations for this behavior. Additionally, Jennifer J. Muehlenkamp has emphasized the need to distinguish nonsuicidal self-injury from other self-injurious behaviors, such as suicide attempts, advocating for its recognition as a

distinct clinical syndrome. This growing body of research underscores the importance of addressing nonsuicidal self-injury with appropriate clinical strategies and interventions [4].

As cyberbullying becomes increasingly prevalent, its unique characteristics – such as its wide reach and persistent nature – intensify its effects on mental health. This study sheds light on the connections between cyberbullying and various forms of self-injury, offering crucial insights into how digital harassment contributes to emotional distress among young people. By exploring the specific ways in which cyberbullying exacerbates self-harm, the findings can help develop targeted interventions that address both the immediate and long-term needs of affected adolescents.

Methods

In our research, we used the case study method to explore the relationship between cyberbullying and self-harm in adolescents. This approach involves a thorough examination of a subject within its real-world context, facilitating a detailed understanding of complex phenomena. Case studies are particularly effective for investigating intricate and unique situations, providing valuable insights into specific cases and their relevance to psychological theories and principles. We chose this method for its ability to offer comprehensive and detailed analyses, which is crucial when addressing multifaceted issues like cyberbullying.

We selected this approach due to its effectiveness in delivering thorough and nuanced analyses, which is essential when examining multifaceted issues like cyberbullying.

Case Study 1

Emily (a pseudonym) is a 15-year-old high school student who has faced significant emotional challenges following her parents' divorce. After the separation, Emily was primarily raised by her grandmother, who provided a stable and supportive environment. Despite her grandmother's loving care, Emily struggled with the emotional fallout from the family split, which contributed to her gaining extra weight. In an effort to cope with her feelings and find a sense of belonging, Emily turned to

social media. Initially, she found solace and validation through posting selfies and interacting with others online. The positive feedback and social connections she received helped her escape from her personal difficulties and boosted her self-esteem.

However, Emily's experience with social media took a distressing turn when a group of her schoolmates began targeting her. These peers focused on Emily's appearance and extra weight, using her social media accounts as a platform for their bullying. They left derogatory comments, belittling her and making fun of her body. The negativity was persistent and public, further exacerbating her emotional pain.

The cyberbullying Emily experienced included derogatory comments and public humiliation. Her posts were flooded with hurtful remarks about her weight and appearance. These comments were designed to mock and demean her, contributing to her growing anxiety and self-doubt. The bullies used Emily's social media presence to embarrass her in front of her peers, making her feel increasingly isolated and unworthy.

Emily developed significant anxiety about leaving the house, feeling as though nobody liked her. This anxiety affected her daily life, making her reluctant to participate in social activities and school.

The continuous barrage of negative feedback made Emily feel belittled and ignored. She began to perceive herself as worthless and unwanted. The relentless harassment led to deep sadness and a sense of hopelessness. Emily's self-esteem was severely damaged, and she began to withdraw from friends and activities she once enjoyed.

As her emotional distress intensified, Emily began to significantly reduce her food intake. Initially, she cut back gradually, but over time, her avoidance of eating became more severe. Despite experiencing noticeable physical and mental decline, she continued to restrict her food intake. This pattern of restrictive eating resulted in severe health issues, including malnutrition and weakness. Her condition worsened to the point where she required emergency medical care and was admitted to the hospital.

Following this, Emily sought professional psychological help and began therapy to address both

her emotional distress and the disordered eating behaviors that had developed as a coping mechanism. With continued support, Emily has made significant strides in improving her mental health and has started to adopt healthier eating habits. She is now better equipped to manage her anxiety and effectively handle the challenges posed by cyberbullying. Although her journey has been challenging, Emily's situation is gradually improving, and she is finding renewed hope and resilience as she continues on her path to recovery.

Case Study 2

Sophia (a pseudonym) is a 16-year-old high school junior who grew up in a middle-class suburban neighborhood. She has always been a bright and ambitious student, involved in various extracurricular activities, including the school debate team and community service projects. Sophia lives with her parents and an older brother, who is away at college. Her family is supportive, but they have a busy schedule that often leaves Sophia feeling somewhat alone.

Sophia's troubles began when she started dating her boyfriend, Alex (a pseudonym), who was also a student at her high school. Initially, their relationship seemed positive and supportive. However, as their relationship progressed, Sophia felt pressure to prove her affection and commitment. In a moment of vulnerability, she sent intimate photos of herself to Alex.

Unfortunately, Alex shared these photos with his friends, and soon, they were circulated among hundreds of students at their high school. The images were spread across various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. The photos quickly became a subject of widespread ridicule and harassment.

Sophia's peers made cruel remarks about her appearance, and some even threatened her. The constant barrage of negativity led to a significant deterioration in her mental health.

The impact on Sophia was profound. She experienced intense feelings of shame, embarrassment, and anxiety. The public nature of the bullying exacerbated her distress, making her feel exposed and vulnerable. Sophia became increasingly isolated,

withdrawing from her friends and extracurricular activities. Her academic performance began to suffer, and she struggled to concentrate on her studies.

As Sophia's emotional distress intensified in response to the relentless cyberbullying, she began to struggle with overwhelming feelings of shame, helplessness, and despair. In an attempt to cope with the intense stress and emotional pain, Sophia started to engage in self-harming behaviors.

Initially, her self-harm involved small acts of cutting her arms with a blade, which she had kept hidden from her family and friends. These acts of self-harm provided a temporary, albeit unhealthy, release from her internal turmoil. The physical pain served as a distraction from the emotional pain she was enduring, offering a brief sense of control and relief. The cutting became a recurring behavior as Sophia found it increasingly difficult to manage her anxiety and depression. Each time she felt overwhelmed by the cyberbullying or the breach of her privacy, she resorted to self-harm as a way to cope. Despite the temporary sense of relief, Sophia's actions led to a cycle of shame and guilt, further exacerbating her emotional distress.

Sophia's arms began to show signs of her self-harming behavior, with visible cuts and scars. Her worsening physical and emotional state eventually became noticeable to her parents, who were deeply concerned about the changes they saw in her. They observed her withdrawal from activities, a decline in her overall demeanor, and discovered the signs of self-harm when they found her in a vulnerable state.

This revelation led them to seek immediate help for Sophia. Through therapy, Sophia learned alternative strategies to manage her stress and emotional pain. Although Sophia's recovery was gradual and ongoing, she began to regain her confidence and sense of self. She worked on repairing her self-esteem and learning to navigate social media more safely. While the experience left a lasting impact, Sophia's journey through therapy helped her build resilience and hope for the future.

Discussion

Cyberbullying is a pervasive issue that can have severe psychological consequences, particularly for adolescents. It often exacerbates existing emotional

vulnerabilities and can lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms. This discussion analyzes two cases of adolescent girls who experienced severe cyberbullying and engaged in self-harm.

Forms of Self-Harm: Both Emily and Sophia engaged in self-harm, but their methods were different. Emily's self-harm was manifested through restrictive eating, which involved reducing her food intake significantly. This behavior, while less visibly immediate than cutting, was a way to manage emotional pain and exert control over her life. In contrast, Sophia's self-harm involved cutting, which provided immediate, albeit temporary, relief from emotional distress. Both forms of self-harm reflect the underlying emotional pain and maladaptive coping strategies of the individuals.

Psychological Mechanisms:

- **Control and Distraction:** For Emily, restricting food intake was a method of exerting control in a situation where she felt powerless due to cyberbullying. The act of controlling her eating offered a distraction from the emotional pain and served as a way to cope with her sense of worthlessness.

For Sophia, cutting provided a direct, albeit harmful, means of controlling her emotional turmoil. The physical pain of cutting temporarily distracted her from the intense feelings of shame and helplessness.

- **Cycle of Shame:** Both individuals experienced a cycle of shame related to their self-harming behaviors. Emily's restrictive eating led to physical health problems and further feelings of inadequacy, while Sophia's cutting resulted in visible scars and guilt, exacerbating her emotional distress.

Therapeutic Intervention: Both Emily and Sophia's cases underscore the need for targeted therapeutic interventions to address the complex issues related to cyberbullying and self-harm. For Emily, therapy focused on rebuilding self-esteem, improving eating habits, and managing anxiety related to cyberbullying. For Sophia, therapy aimed to address the trauma of public humiliation, provide healthier coping mechanisms, and rebuild self-confidence.

The cases of Emily and Sophia illustrate the profound impact of cyberbullying and the diverse ways in which individuals may engage in self-harm as a response to their emotional distress. Emily's disordered eating and Sophia's cutting highlight different expressions of self-harm and underscore the need for comprehensive support and intervention.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying, characterized by the use of digital platforms to harass, intimidate, or embarrass individuals, poses a severe risk to adolescent mental health. Unlike traditional bullying, its pervasive nature and 24/7 reach can exacerbate emotional distress, leading to significant psychological harm. The constant and often public exposure makes it a particularly insidious form of harassment, contributing to increased feelings of shame, anxiety, and isolation.

Our study, through detailed case analyses of Emily and Sophia, reveals that cyberbullying can indeed lead to self-harm. Emily's restrictive eating and Sophia's cutting are two distinct yet profound examples of how cyberbullying can drive adolescents to engage in harmful coping mechanisms. These cases illustrate the direct link between cyberbullying and self-harm, emphasizing how severe emotional distress can manifest in various self-destructive behaviors.

This study is unique in its detailed examination of the relationship between cyberbullying and self-harm through individual case studies. By exploring how digital harassment leads to maladaptive coping strategies, the research highlights the urgent need for both immediate and long-term intervention strategies. The findings underline the urgent need for comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies to address both the immediate psychological impact of cyberbullying and the long-term recovery of affected adolescents.

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КИБЕР БУЛЛИНГ И ЕГО ВЛИЯНИЕ НА САМОПОВРЕЖДЕНИЯ У ПОДРОСТКОВ

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Кибербуллинг стал значительной проблемой в цифровую эпоху, представляя серьезные риски для психического здоровья подростков. В отличие от традиционного буллинга, который происходит в физическом окружении или лицом к лицу, кибербуллинг использует цифровые платформы для преследования или запугивания людей, что делает его более распространенным и доступным. Постоянный и часто публичный характер кибербуллинга может усугублять эмоциональное напряжение и приводить к глубоким психологическим травмам. Несмотря на растущую распространенность, кибербуллинг остается относительно малоизученным феноменом, поскольку цифровая коммуникация является недавним явлением, возникшим только в последние несколько десятилетий. В результате существует значительный пробел в исследованиях психологических последствий кибербуллинга, что подчеркивает необходимость более комплексных исследований в этой области. Проведенное исследование направлено на изучение взаимосвязи между кибербуллингом и самоповреждением у подростков, подчеркивая срочную необходимость целенаправленных интервенций и стратегий предотвращения. Используя методологию кейс-исследований, работа предлагает глубокое изучение того, как кибербуллинг может привести к самоповреждению. Статья предоставляет детальный анализ сложных взаимодействий между цифровым преследованием и дезадаптивными механизмами копинга. Результаты подчеркивают значительное влияние кибербуллинга на психическое здоровье, иллюстрируя, что серьезное эмоциональное напряжение, вызванное кибербуллингом, может привести к самоповреждению. Это исследование показывает новые способы, которыми кибербуллинг провоцирует самоповреждение, и подчеркивает необходимость эффективных стратегий интервенции для поддержки подростков и смягчения вредных последствий цифрового преследования.

Ключевые слова: кибербуллинг, психическое здоровье подростков, самоповреждение, цифровое преследование, социальные сети, цифровые платформы, психологическое напряжение, дезадаптивные механизмы копинга, эмоциональное напряжение, цифровая коммуникация, самоповреждающее поведение