

# The Psychology Impact of Cyberbullying on Adolescents: Exploring the Impact and Protective Role of Companionship

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## Abstract:

This article explores the psychological impact of cyberbullying on adolescents, focusing on the potential protective effects of self-esteem and companionship. At the same time, through comprehensive papers, this article also compares the differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying in terms of form, intensity, and characteristics. Studies have shown that cyberbullying can cause irreversible damage to adolescents' psychological state and reduce their self-esteem. It may also lead to negative emotions such as low self-esteem and anxiety. However, the article also found that good companionship could provide adolescents with a good shelter, mitigate the negative impact of cyberbullying through emotional support and resilience building. The article also mentioned that parents, schools, and other institutions need to pay attention to the psychological state of teenagers to prevent cyberbullying from having a significant impact on teens. Meanwhile, the article highlights some research gaps, including the need for continued longitudinal research, the necessity of conducting cross-cultural studies, and the importance of investigating the psychological mechanisms of perpetrators. It aims to provide valuable suggestions for future research directions and policy formulation.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, Self-esteem, Companionship.

## 1 Introduction

Technology is regarded as a product of accumulated human knowledge and innovation, and its rapid development in recent decades has brought significant changes and innovations to human life.

Particularly, emerging new communication and in-

formation technologies make the distance between humans no longer limited by physical space, allowing people to connect more closely than before [1]. Although technology has greatly improved people's lives, if it is not strictly controlled, it poses a significant threat and challenge to human society [1]. With the emergence of social media 20 years ago, people

were offered a platform to document their experiences and alleviate psychological stress. However, this development also led to the emergence of a new form of aggression -Cyberbullying [1]. Cyberbullying is defined as perpetrators using social media to attack the victims verbally. Cyberbullying can have a huge impact on people's daily lives, causing psychological stress and reducing overall well-being [2]. In more serious cases, it may even result in self-harm or suicidal tendencies [2]. According to the research survey, cyberbullying occurs more frequently among adolescents and children, and with the development of time, the rate of cyberbullying has significantly risen [3]. Comprehensive research shows that this is a bad sign because adolescence represents a critical time of physical and psychological development [3]. During this period, teenagers are psychologically fragile; thus, if cyberbullying happens in their lives during this age, it will result in irreversible consequences for them, especially in situations where their self-esteem is undermined [4]. Therefore, it is essential to explore how cyberbullying affects individuals, particularly concerning adolescents' self-esteem and psychological well-being [5]. This paper aims to review current papers to analyze the differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, and discuss how cyberbullying affects adolescents' psychological state, particularly self-esteem, and what role companionship plays in this process.

## 2 Review on Traditional Bullying and Cyberbullying

### 2.1 Printing Area

With the booming development of the Internet, mobile phones have become an indispensable part of people's lives, especially for adolescents, who are at the most significant period for cognitive growth, with forty-five percent of teens aged between 13-17 said that they are online all day [5].

This data is up from twenty-four percent in 2014 [5]. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, the closure of schools, and notional policies limited face-to-face interaction [1]. As a result, adolescents spent more time on digital devices and social media platforms [1]. Because social media provides them with a platform to discover and record their lives [1]. However, this situation has also deepened teenagers' dependence and addiction to the Internet [1]. This also directly leads to teens being more likely to experience and be exposed to cyberbullying, providing a new space for bullying. In cyberbullying, the perpetrator uses messages, pictures, or videos to inflict information violence on the victim [5]. Due to the protection mech-

anism of the Internet, the publisher of such messages is usually anonymous and has an anonymous address, which makes it impossible for victims to find information about the perpetrator [6]. This type of bullying is often direct and targeted and may target multiple people at the same time [6]. For this reason, the damage caused by cyberbullying is often deep and extremely difficult to reverse [5].

### 2.2 Cyberbullying and Traditional Bullying

Cyberbullying is involved in bullying. Therefore, there is a lot of overlap between cyberbullying and traditional bullying; both will cause profound damage to teenagers' psychological and physical health [7].

After experiencing a long duration of this kind of injury, teens may become depressed, develop anxiety, develop social phobia, and even have suicidal thoughts [5]. Bullying is extremely harmful to the physical and mental development of young people because adolescence is a developmental period of identity formation and emotional vulnerability [5]. Cyberbullying may reduce adolescents' self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and social anxiety symptoms, leading to maladaptive well-being in adolescents [1]. The damage sustained during this period often persists throughout an individual's lifetime. Related research shows that many people who are cyberbullied have also experienced traditional bullying before [6]. However, as a new era issue, cyberbullying is different from traditional bullying. Cyberbully victims report higher levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness than traditional victims [3]. This report indicates that traditional bullying can cause great emotional damage to people, but the impact of cyberbullying is even more far-reaching and painful. Because cyberbullying is anonymous, the insulting remarks made will not disappear over time but will always be there [6].

### 2.3 The Rise of Cyberbullying

Building on the above understanding, although the rise of media has given young people more opportunities to access the outside world and a platform to express themselves, there are huge challenges hidden behind this [8]. Cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying not only in form, but also in its scope, persistence, and psychological intensity [5]. Based on these characteristics, it poses a great threat to the mental health of adolescents. At the same time, it also tests the coping ability and solutions of parents; they should focus more on this issue [3]. The following chapters will further explore the impact of cyberbullying on self-esteem and examine whether companionship can mitigate the harm caused by cyberbullying.

### 3 Self-esteem and Cyberbullying

#### 3.1 Definition of Self-esteem

Self-esteem is a psychological construct that reflects an individual's perceived social acceptance, self-worth, and value, thereby indicating their sense of value within a social environment [4].

It includes self-beliefs such as "I can do it" and "I can not do it", as well as emotional states like "pride", "confidence", and "inferiority" [9]. Contemporary psychologists usually divide adolescent self-esteem into two categories: "Domain-specific Self-Perception" and "Global Self-Esteem". "Domain-specific Self-Perception" refers to the evaluation and assessment of adolescents' abilities in specific areas, typically including learning ability, sports level, and social relationships. "Global Self-Esteem" is an overall evaluation of adolescents, which belongs to a more generalized dependence and evaluation of self [10]. Self-esteem is an important part of everyone's personality. An individual's behaviors and cognitive patterns often reflect their level of self-esteem [9]. Correspondingly, the level of self-esteem also has a great impact on people's behavioral habits [9].

During adolescence, self-esteem is vital for them [10]. This period is an important period of physical and mental development, and their emotions, cognition, and physiology undergo significant changes [9]. At the same time, adolescence is also a period when individuals' self-awareness rapidly increases, and their self-esteem is most sensitive and intense during this period [10]. This indicates that teenagers are particularly concerned about what others think, which makes them need more recognition and acceptance from their peers, meanwhile being more sensitive to criticism and accusations from others [9]. Encouraging applause and praise from peers and adults can boost their self-esteem, whereas negative influences, such as bullying and name-calling, will lower their self-esteem [9]. The self-esteem they form during this period will profoundly affect their mental health, interpersonal relationships, and future social adaptability [10]. Therefore, it is very important to build up good self-esteem for teenagers.

#### 3.2 Impact of Cyberbullying on Self-esteem

Cyberbullying has a direct negative impact on teenagers' self-esteem [4].

This is a worrying result as teenagers are at their most vulnerable period physically and mentally [5]. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying happens all the time because it is not limited by space [8]. The verbal attacks in cyberbullying often leave a deep impression on the victim. The victim will digest these words internally, causing self-doubt, insecurity, and reduced self-worth [4]. Patchin

and Hinduja clearly state that teens who have experienced cyberbullying have significantly lower self-esteem than those who have not [4]. Simultaneously, the result of the destruction of psychological emotions and psychological resilience [4]. In more serious cases, it will lead to social withdrawal, self-harm, and even suicidal thoughts [5]. In addition, the anonymity and mobility of the Internet make it impossible for victims to find clues about the perpetrators, and thus unable to launch further rights protection systems [6]. This also exacerbates their helplessness and isolation, causing them to gradually close their hearts. Once this depressive and self-abasement mindset is established during adolescence, it is challenging to change when adolescents reach adulthood [4]. This directly leads to their inability to establish healthy social relationships and maintain a positive self-image [4]. Therefore, it is crucial to establish good Internet relationships, proactively protect adolescents from online harm through policy, education, and technological supervision, and create a harmonious Internet atmosphere.

### 4 Companionship and Cyberbullying

#### 4.1 Definition of Companionship

Companionship refers to a more intimate and emotionally supportive relationship compared to casual peer interaction.

It developed in the process of interaction in small clusters of individuals that are closely connected based on shared interests and friendships [11]. Therefore, since companionship is significantly different from a general relationship, it often takes more time and effort to develop. Unlike superficial companionship, true psychological understanding and identification of values can make this relationship more lasting and profound [11]. As a result, this represents a true companionship that is persistent and multi-dimensional, which includes characteristics such as warmth, support, attachment, and friendship quality [11]. From a developmental psychology perspective, companionship plays a vital role in influencing adolescents' physical and mental development [11]. As mentioned above, during the critical period of cognitive development, teens are more likely to accept peers' support and encouragement [9]. Companionship is precisely associated with support and encouragement. Based on the same hobbies and concepts, peers can make reasonable suggestions and corrections while respecting the teenagers' wishes, which provides them with a stable support system [11]. In this environment, adolescents develop clear social cognition, seek their true self, and feel accepted in society [11]. Research shows that strong companionship can improve mood and reduce loneliness and anxiety [11]. When teens

are under excellent companionship, they can improve their cognition and develop a more positive attitude. To cultivate and nourish healthy companionship, schools and families should be actively concerned about the mental health of teens [11]. Schools can actively carry out student group discussions and skill demonstrations, while parents integrate students' emotional needs to help young people establish a good social network [11]. Once this solid network of relationships is established, adolescents' cognition can grow steadily [11]. In conclusion, companionship serves as a solid foundation for adolescent development and has a significant influence on cyberbullying [2].

## 4.2 Companionship: A Double-edge Sword

In the context of cyberbullying, companionship plays a critical role [12].

A good companionship acts as a buffer zone, alleviating the negative impact of cyberbullying and providing an emotional haven for young people [11]. Studies have shown that teenagers with stable and strong companionship are less susceptible to external factors; thus, cyberbullying has less negative impact on them [2]. Under companionship, teens are more likely to feel safe and recognized and find a sense of belonging in the group [11]. This emotional system encourages and supports victims to express their pain and seek help in groups, thereby alleviating the impact of cyberbullying [13]. Meanwhile, companionship can better help teens to form correct social values. Peer groups characterized by intimate companionship tend to foster positive social norms that discourage intimate behavior [13]. In this positive environment, individuals feel more courageous and confident to stand up against cyberbullying, while others in their network witness and support the victim's courage to stop the behavior [2]. This supportive dynamic fosters a caring and respectful atmosphere, which not only raises awareness of cyberbullying but also helps reduce its prevalence [2]. Conversely, an unhealthy companionship will increase the probability of suffering from cyberbullying [13]. Peer pressure often contributes to an increased risk of engaging in cyberbullying [13]. In an unhealthy companionship, teenagers may resort to cyberbullying or other negative activities to gain a sense of belonging and fit in with the group [13]. In summary, companionship plays a dual role of protecting young people and endangering them at the same time. Choosing and cultivating the right companionship requires both adolescents' self-awareness and appropriate guidance from families and educators [11].

## 5 Discussion

In the general public's perception, cyberbullying is a behavior that repeatedly bullies others through information.

It has the characteristics of fast transmission, anonymity, and widespread [6,8]. With the rapid development of the Internet, the frequency of cyberbullying has increased significantly [1,3,6]. Meanwhile, cyberbullying, as a type of bullying, has a high degree of overlap with traditional bullying. The two types of bullying often occur at the same time and influence each other [5,7]. The victim will have a distorted psychological state due to bullying, anxiety, inferiority, and depression, which is positively correlated with the degree of bullying [4,5,12]. The varying degrees of trauma to self-esteem caused by cyberbullying can lead to impairing adolescents' cognitive development and reducing their ability to engage in healthy social interactions, resulting in irreversible consequences [2,4,12]. Although cyberbullying has such a great impact on teenagers, good companionship can help them effectively resist the negative effects of cyberbullying [11,13]. Therefore, parents and various departments need to raise awareness about cyberbullying prevention and help young people develop good and correct behavioral values, helping adolescents avoid cyberbullying and mitigating its adverse effects [3,5,8].

Meanwhile, there remains significant divergence of opinions on this topic. Olweus et al. support that modern psychology should not make an excessive distinction between cyberbullying and traditional bullying [7]. Although they are spread in different ways, some researchers argue that their psychological impacts on teenagers are largely similar. Excessive distinction may lead to some unexpected consequences [7]. However, Kowalski et al. hold a different point of view; they believe that since cyberbullying and traditional bullying are significantly different in form, concealment, and psychological mechanism, these two bullying modes should be strictly distinguished [12]. Some scholars suggest that perpetrators may perceive cyberbullying as a form of humor [2]. Individuals experience ethical dissonance in their theoretical judgments, which blurs the line between jokes and moral standards, indirectly triggering cyber violence [2]. In contrast, Yang et al. believe that cyberbullying is closely related to peer pressure [13]. Some students use cyberbullying to show their sociability to fit into the companionship [13].

Researchers have different views on whether the epidemic has affected the frequency of cyberbullying. Some people believe that the stay-at-home mode during the pandemic has led to an increase in the frequency of Internet use, exacerbating the process of cyberbullying [1]. Others believe that there is no obvious relationship between the pandemic and the increase in the frequency of cyberbullying and instead question the reliability of these data [7].

While these contrasting findings offer valuable insights, they also reveal several areas that remain underexplored. First, in the selected literature, the research focus is main-

ly on education in Europe, America, and China. Therefore, there is a lack of systematic comparison of the differences in cyberbullying performance in different cultural backgrounds, and it is impossible to widely apply the experimental results to various cultures. Second, each article proposes a series of measures that parents and educational institutions need to take regarding youth online safety, but there is a lack of systematic empirical verification of these intervention measures. Third, the literature lacks longitudinal research that tracks the psychological, social, and academic development of adolescents after being bullied. It only talks about the possible impacts and harms that may occur after adolescents encounter cyberbullying. Fourth, most studies only focus on the victim's situation, but lack the psychological state, personality structure, etc. of the perpetrator. There is a lack of a comprehensive perspective to explore the formation mechanism and potential for rehabilitation of offending behavior.

## 6 Conclusions

This article mainly discusses the increasingly serious problem of cyberbullying as time progresses. The focus is on the differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, their impact on self-esteem, and the impact of peer relationships on it. In the era of widespread Internet use, online life has become an indispensable part of human lives, especially for teenagers. Comprehensive literature and research show that the continued increase in cyberbullying will cause permanent damage to teenagers' psychology. In particular, it can lower their self-esteem and increase their anxiety. Because cyberbullying lasts a long time, spreads widely, and is anonymous, it is difficult for victims to recover from the psychological damage. We also found that positive companionship can provide adolescents with emotional value and a sense of belonging, alleviating the impact of cyberbullying on them. In response to these research findings, this article advocates that parents, schools, educators, and policymakers should prioritize youth online safety and create a supportive and inclusive online environment. For example, formulate relevant policies to help teenagers build positive companionship. Offer emotional support to teenagers who are bullied online. The significance of this article lies in comprehensively summarizing the psychological consequences of cyberbullying, so that more people can strengthen their awareness of cyberbullying. At the same time, this article also has several areas that have not been explored in depth, such as longitudinal research, comparative cultural differences, and the psychological mechanisms of perpetrators. Conclusions of the present study also provide optional directions and valuable suggestions for future scientific research and government decision-making.

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