



## Psychological Impact of Cyberbullying in Young Adults

<sup>1</sup>Dr Jessica Rehsi, Post-Graduate, Department of Psychiatry, Father Muller Medical College

<sup>2</sup>Dr Chandini, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Father Muller Medical College

**Corresponding Author:** Dr Jessica Rehsi, Post-Graduate, Department of Psychiatry, Father Muller Medical College

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**Conflicts of Interest:** Nil

### Abstract

**Background:** Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant social concern in the age of digital technology, creating an environment prone to victimization experiences. Cyberbullying can lead to severe psychological issues for victims, including anxiety, depression, and poor coping skills.

**Aims:** The study aims to examine the nature of cyberbullying in young adults. To assess the psychological distress and coping related to cyberbullying.

**Methodology:** The descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among students in a medical college in South India. Sociodemographic and clinical variables were recorded in a specific proforma designed for the study. The nature of cyberbullying was assessed. Further assessment of participants was done using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale K10 and the coping with Cyberbullying Questionnaire.

**Results:** The study showed that individuals who experienced cyberbullying were between 16 and 20

years (66.5%). The nature of cyberbullying is found to manifest primarily through social abuse and social media, where rumors, hate speech, and sexual remarks were most commonly reported. On assessment with Kessler's psychological distress scale, 59.6% reported distress, with about 22.5% reporting severe distress. Most of the victims sought distal advice as a method of coping, such as informing concerned authorities or calling a helpline.

**Conclusion:** The findings emphasize the necessity of interventions for individuals who have experienced cyberbullying. The focus should be on implementing effective coping mechanisms to manage stress and psychological aspects.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, Young Adults, Nature of Cyberbullying, Psychological Distress, Coping.

### Introduction

In today's digital age, the rise of social media and online communication has created a breeding ground for cyberbullying. This pervasive issue has become a

significant threat to the mental health and well-being of young adults, who are disproportionately affected by its devastating consequences. Cyberbullying can take many forms, from harassment and intimidation to humiliation and exclusion, all of which can have long-lasting and far-reaching impacts on a young person's mental health.

Olweus in 1974, defined bullying, as repetitive aggressive behavior involving a power differential between the aggressor (s) and the target. <sup>[1]</sup> Bullying typically occurs in physical, and verbal insults, or public shaming in various social settings.<sup>[2]</sup> However, with the emergence of newer technologies, and the growing popularity of networking sites on social media, captivating the young population all over the world, a new portal of bullying has opened up. The platforms of social media are now being used for harmful purposes in the form of cyberbullying.<sup>[3]</sup> The American Psychological Association defines cyberbullying as the “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.” Watts et al.(2017) describe several methods of bullying over the cyber platform, they include: Sending abusive or insulting messages through various electronic means, threats or any other form of aggressive interaction online, stalking using digital platforms, or passing inappropriate sexual suggestive comments.<sup>[4]</sup>

According to a study done by Hamm P. et al in 2015, conducted in the US, which included adolescents aged 12-18 years, the median prevalence of cyberbullying was reported to be approximately 23% with an interquartile range of 11.0% to 42.6%). <sup>[5]</sup> Tokunaga, R. S. (2010), reports that approximately 20–40% of all youths have experienced cyberbullying at least once in their lives.<sup>[6]</sup> In another study done by Wang M. et al, young adults, aged 18 to 25 years reported the highest level of

cyberbullying, both over their lifetime and In the past month.<sup>[7]</sup> Online victimization is associated with heightened distress, anxiety, major depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts. Depressive disorders rise from 3% to 18% among young adults.<sup>[8]</sup>

Findings from previous studies have suggested that adolescents who have been victims were 2.07 times more likely to have depressive symptoms and 2.50 times more likely to have suicidal tendencies. Coping with such situations could be a task, as they need to choose among different possible strategies, which could be in the form of direct confrontation with perpetrator, seeking social support, choosing to distract themselves and to not engage or blocking them.<sup>[9]</sup> Schenk and Fremouw examined the coping strategies used by targets of cyberbullying. Their results revealed that targets of cyberbullying generally cope with cyber victimization by telling someone, avoiding friends or peers, getting revenge, and withdrawing from events, thus potentially undermining important social connections.<sup>[10]</sup>

Cyberbullying can have a profound psychological impact on young adults, individuals may experience increased symptoms of anxiety and depression, including feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. It can also lead to negative self-talk, self-blame, and a distorted self-image. They may struggle with managing emotions, leading to mood swings or irritability. Cyberbullying can erode trust in others, making it challenging to form healthy relationships. It can affect concentration, academic performance, and even career choices.

However, Cyberbullying is a field of growing research with limited previous literature, specifically among young adults, and considering the impact it can have on psychological well-being as discussed above, this study

is conducted to study the nature of cyberbullying and to assess the distress and the coping methods that may be associated with it.

### Materials and Methods

The study was an observational cross-sectional study, conducted among medical students in a tertiary medical college and Hospital, in Mangalore. The sample size was calculated at 246, at a 95% confidence interval, considering the mean prevalence rate of cyberbullying rate as 20%. The study was conducted over 1 year from June 2022 to June 2023, after obtaining approval from the Institutional Research and Ethics Committee.

Inclusion criteria for the study were male or female individuals, aged between 18 to 26 years. Individuals who did not consent to the study or who did not complete the assessment were excluded from the study. Participants were asked to fill out the following self-report structured and standardized rating questionnaires. Scales used were Specially prepared proforma to record the socio-demographic and clinical variables of the participants. Kessler Psychological Distress scale K10, A psychological screening tool designed to measure non-specific psychological distress, has a 5-level response scale from 1- Not at all to 5 - extremely. Low scores indicate low levels of psychological distress and high scores indicate high levels of psychological distress.<sup>[11]</sup> Coping with Cyberbullying Questionnaire, This scale consists of 36 items that assess seven coping strategies used by victims to deal with cyberbullying. Each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale. The coping strategies were assessed under 7 main domains: include advice from others, support from friends and family, ignoring, blaming oneself, technical coping, assertive, and retaliative coping. The scale has

acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha 0.86) and validity.<sup>[12]</sup>

### Statistical Analysis

Data were entered into the Excel sheet. Data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 25.0 version, IBM, Chicago. Data were analyzed for probability distribution using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Descriptive statistics were performed. Data were described as numbers and percentages, and median (inter-quartile range). Inter-group comparison of categorical variables was done using the Chi-square test and continuous variables was done using the Mann-Whitney U test. P-value <.05 was considered statistically significant.

### Results and Discussion

**Results:** The study included 246 students, among which 213, were willing to participate, hence the rate of participation being 86.5%. A specifically designed proforma was then circulated to study the prevalence. About 149 participants, that is around 70% reported an experience of cyberbullying in one form or another. Those 149 were further evaluated for the nature of cyberbullying, assessed for associated distress and the coping mechanisms adopted by them to deal with cyberbullying.

Table 1 shows the comparison of the experience of cyberbullying with respect to the socio-demographic data. It is seen that, among the victims, there are 55 males and 158 females. A greater percentage of males reported cyberbullying compared to females [76.4% vs. 67.7%], although the difference is statistically non-significant (p-value >.05). The majority of the participants were undergraduates, that is 87.79% [187/213] followed by 7.98% [17/213] graduates and 4.22% [9/213] post-graduates.

Among the undergraduates, about 127 of them reported being cyberbullied, the incidence being 69.60%. However, the prevalence of cyberbullying is non-significantly different between different groups based on educational qualifications (p-value >.05). It is also noted that the majority of the participants were married, [207/213 (97.18%)]. Based on Location and family type, it is seen that a large proportion of patients came from Urban areas (91.44%) and Nuclear families (88.26 %), respectively. The Chi-square test applied to test for any association and is found to be not statistically significant. (p>0.05). While studying the association of cyberbullying with the socio-economic class it is discovered that the majority of the participants belonged to the middle class, i.e. [172/213 (80.75%)]. Among those, 69.2% have encountered the experience of cyberbullying. However, the prevalence of cyberbullying is non-significantly different between individuals from different socioeconomic status groups (p-value >.05).

In this study, the students who were exposed to cyberbullying, a detailed assessment is done. The findings as recorded in Table 2 revealed that the majority of the individuals reported to have first exposure to cyberbullying before reaching adulthood (53.7%). Most of the participants faced cyberbullying for a duration of <1 month (52.3%) and occasionally (68.0%). Figure 1 suggests that Rumors (33.6%) were the most common form of cyberbullying followed by hate speech (18.1%) and sexual remarks (15.4%). Around 4% of the victims reported to have faced more than 3 forms. On asking with whom were the most comfortable, in sharing the experience, it was found that a greater share found it convenient to inform their peers/friends (66.4%) but only 33.6% were non-hesitant about sharing it with their primary caregivers. Only 8.7% sought cybercrime help of any kind and only 18.8% were able to seek professional help for associated psychological distress that was inflicted upon them due to the exposure.

Table 1: Comparison of sociodemographic characteristics of participants enrolled in the study

Sn.	Variable			Cyberbullying		Total	Chi-square test	Df	P value
				Yes	No				
1	Gender	Male	N	42	13	55	1.45	1	0.229
			%	77.40%	23.60%	100.00%			
		Female	N	107	51	158			
			%	67.70%	32.30%	100.00%			
		Total	N	149	64	213			
			%	70.00%	30.00%	100.00%			
2	Education	Under graduate	N	127	60	187	5.13	2	0.077
			%	67.90%	32.10%	100.00%			
		Graduate	N	16	1	17			
			%	94.10%	5.90%	100.00%			
		Post-	N	6	3	9			

		graduate	%	66.70%	33.90%	100.00%			
		Total	N	149	64	213			
			%	70%	30%	100.00%			
3	Marital status	Unmarried	N	145	62	207	0.622	2	0.717
			%	70.00%	30.00%	100.00%			
		Married	N	3	2	5			
			%	60.00%	40.00%	100.00%			
		Others	N	1	0	1			
			%	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%			
		Total	N	149	64	213			
			%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%			
4	Location	Urban	N	139	56	195	1.939	1	0.614
			%	71.30%	28.70%	100.00%			
		Rural	N	10	8	18			
			%	55.60%	44.40%	100.00%			
		Total	N	149	64	213			
			%	70.00%	30%	100.00%			
5	Family type	Nuclear	N	133	55	188	3.414	3	0.3
			%	70.70%	29.30%	100.00%			
		Joint	N	12	9	21			
			%	57.10%	42.90%	100.00%			
		Extended	N	3	0	3			
			%	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%			
		Others	N	1	0	1			
			%	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%			
		Total	N	149	64	213			
			%	70.00%	30.00%	100.00%			
6	Socioeconomic status	Upper	N	25	11	36	2.2	2	0.333
			%	69.40%	69.20%	100.00%			
		Middle	N	119	53	172			
			%	69.20%	30.80%	100.00%			
		Lower	N	5	0	5			
			%	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%			

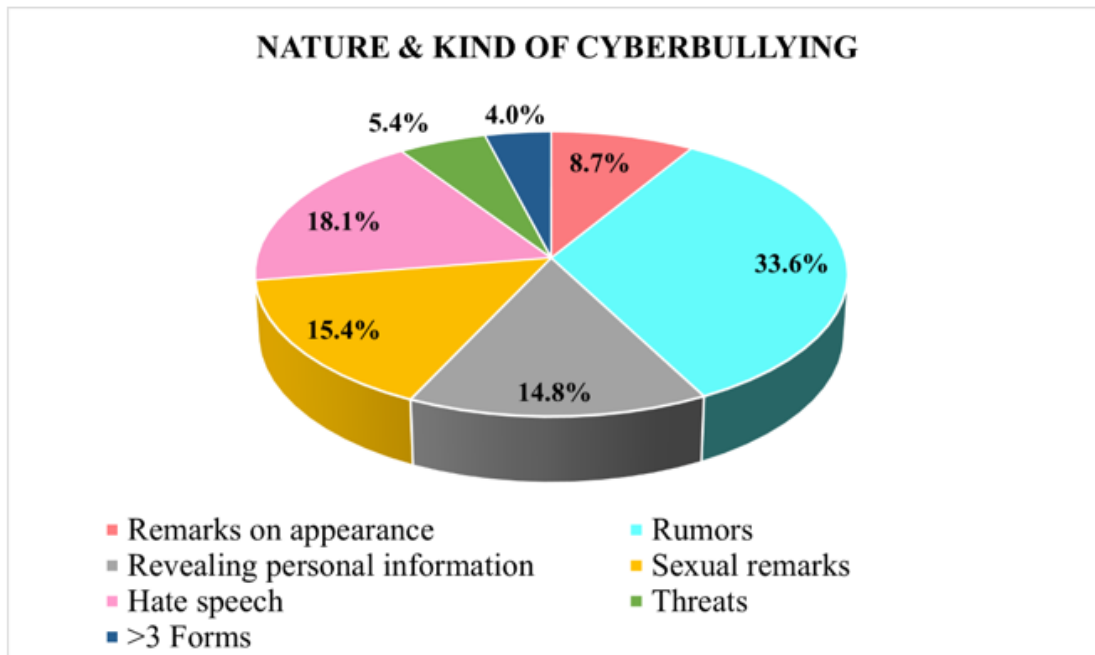
	Total	N	149	64	213
		%	70%	30.00%	100.00%

Test used: Chi-square test, \*p<0.05 was considered to be clinically significant.

Table 2: Distribution of study participants based on their responses to various questions about cyberbullying experience.

Question	Response	Number of subjects (n=149)	Percentage
Age of first exposure	Less than 18 years	80	53.7
	18 years or above	69	46.3
Total duration of exposure to cyberbullying	<1 month	78	52.3
	1 month to 6 months	60	40.3
	>6 months to 1 years	5	3.4
	>1 years	6	4.0
Frequency of cyberbullying	Daily	26	17.4
	Frequently	31	20.8
	Occasional	68	45.6
	Once	8	5.4
	Cannot recall	16	10.7
Nature and kind of cyberbullying?	Remarks on appearance	13	8.7
	Rumors	50	33.6
	Revealing personal information	22	14.8
	Sexual remarks	23	15.4
	Hate speech	27	18.1
	Threats	8	5.4
	>3 Forms	6	4.0
Did you inform primary caregiver?	Yes	50	33.6
	No	99	66.4
Did you inform peer/friend?	Yes	99	66.4
	No	50	33.6
Did you seek cybercrime help?	Yes	13	8.7
	No	136	91.3
Did you seek professional help for associated psychological	Yes	28	18.8
	No	121	81.2

Figure 1: Nature & kind of cyberbullying.



The Kessler psychological distress scale is used to assess the impact of the experience on their mental health. It is seen that the score is significantly greater among individuals who experienced cyberbullying compared to those who had not [25.0 (19.0- 30.5) vs. 14.5 (11.0- 18.75)] (p-value <.05). (Figure 2)

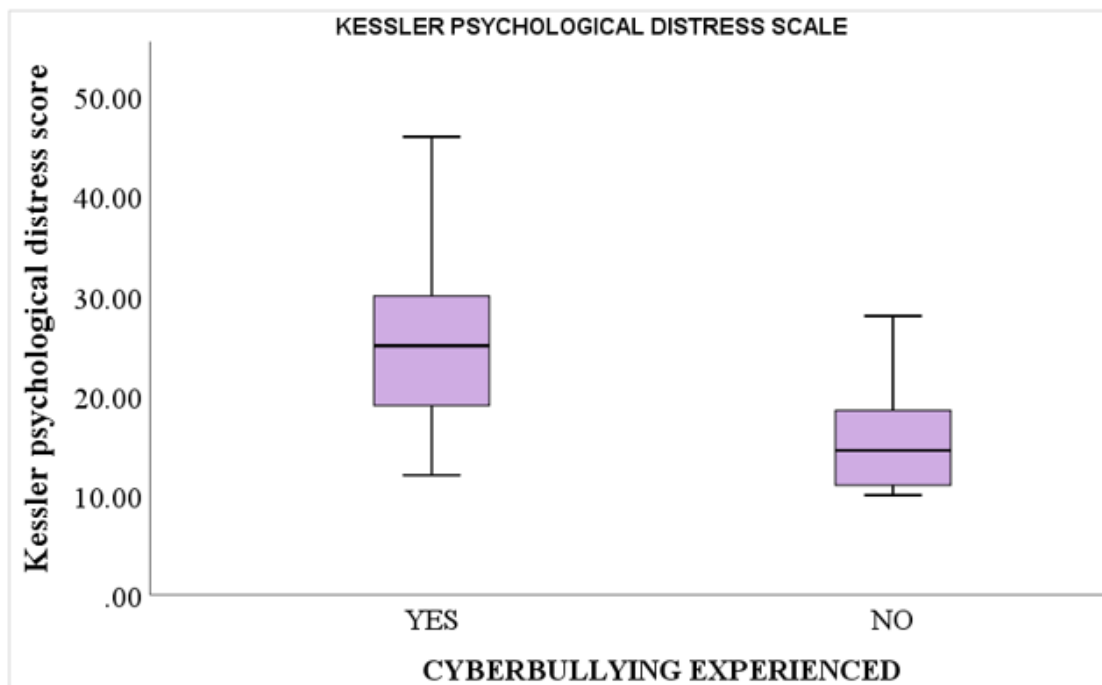


Figure 2: Kessler psychological distress scale score between individuals with and without experience of cyberbullying. Another notable finding is that, among individuals who did not experience cyberbullying (compared to those who had experienced it), a significantly greater proportion is likely to be well (79.7%) whereas

prevalence of mild, moderate, and severe psychological distress was significantly more among those who had undergone cyberbullying (p-value <.05). Overall, there

was a significant association between cyberbullying and psychological distress (p-value <.05). The findings are recorded in Table 3.

Table 3: Comparison of psychological distress among subjects with/without experience of cyberbullying.

Cyber bullying		Kessler psychological distress scale				Total	Chi-square value	df	P-value
		Likely to be well	Mild disorder	Moderate disorder	Severe disorder				
Yes	Number	39	32	37	41	149	54.203	3	<.001*
	Percentage	26.2%	21.5%	24.8%	27.5%				
No	Number	51	5	1	7	64			
	Percentage	79.7%	7.8%	1.6%	10.9%				
Total	Number	90	37	38	48	213			
	Percentage	42.3%	17.4%	17.8%	22.5%				

In the group of participants who were subjected to cyberbullying, their coping mechanisms were evaluated using the Coping with Cyberbullying Questionnaire and the Median (inter-quartile range) scores obtained by using the Coping with Cyberbullying questionnaire have been presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Description of scores obtained on using the Coping with Cyberbullying questionnaire.

Cyberbullying	Median (inter quartile range)
Distal advice	21.0 (18.0-24.0)
Technical coping	15.0 (11.0-21.0)
Assertiveness	14.0 (10.0- 22.0)
Close support	14.0 (16.0-21.01)
Helplessness/self-blame	15.0 (12.0- 19.0)
Retaliation	18.0 (16.0- 21.0)
Ignoring	17.0 (14.0- 21.0)

The table 4 findings are indicative that, a maximum number, sought Distal advice. That means that most of the sufferers tried to seek help by asking help on media platform or from their teachers. At least a proportion of those were able to actively ignore the situation, by choosing to not retaliate, and ignore all the messages or the attempts made by the perpetrator to harass the individual.

**Discussion**

A study done by Wang et al. reported that young adults, those aged from 18-25 years often endure the highest levels of cyberbullying in both lifetime and recent, past month measures. Our study done in a similar age group reported the overall prevalence to be around 70%. Amongst the subjects, it was found that Males had a slightly higher preponderance as compared to females (77.04% vs 67.07%), a similar finding noted in the latest



study done by Gohal G et al. to study the prevalence of cyberbullying. However, another study done by Alhajji M et al. reported that females were twice as likely to be victims as compared to males. This could be attributed to the gender forms of aggression, which is a matter of concern. Women ages 18-24 who use the Internet are more than twice as likely as women ages 25-29 to have experienced sexual harassment online (25% vs. 10%) Based on a 2015 review of studies on issues relating to gender and online sexual harassment. This study, however, reports that 15.4% of the total 70%, faced sexual threats. This study reported that the maximum was subjected to rumors-based cyberbullying (33.6%) followed by hate speech.

In a literature review done by Zhu C et al, it was noted Verbal violence was the most prevalent nature, which included making offensive comments and threatening and spreading fake information on online platforms.<sup>[14]</sup> These individuals are prone to develop a psychiatric illness due to the subject harassment. For instance, Schenk and Fremouw<sup>[10]</sup> discovered that those who were victims, scored higher while assessing matched controls for psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, and phobia. Based on a study done by et al. it was noted that 33% of females and 16.6% of males exhibited depressive symptoms in their young adulthood. Those who were exposed were at 2.07 times higher risk of suicide as compared to those not.<sup>[15]</sup> Hence, to examine the same, the Kessler psychological rating scale was used to analyze the likelihood of developing distress and further assess its severity in the participants.

The findings implied that the proportion who were not subjected to cyberbullying were likely to function well, that is about 79.7%, whereas the victims reported significant levels of stress ( $p < 0.05$ ).

In this study, when open-ended questions about their personal experience with cyber victimization were asked, it is found most resort to Distal advice, ie(seeking advice on the public platform, or seeking professional advice). However, in a similar study, using the Coping with Cyberbullying questionnaire, contradictory results were noted. According to that study, the most common coping strategy employed was technical coping, which means restricting the information they share online or blocking those bullies over social networking sites.

Though this study with a large sample size, on a clinically relevant topic gives an insight into distress and coping that could be associated as part of the cyberbullying experience, there are certain limitations such as the results being limited to one college, and possibility of having a recall bias and the lack of generalizability. Future Directions that can be considered are Longitudinal studies to explore the long-term effects of cyberbullying and also the development of evidence-based interventions and prevention strategies.

### **Conclusion**

This study has highlighted the profound psychological impact of cyberbullying on young adults, underscoring the urgent need for effective interventions and support systems. The findings suggest that cyberbullying can have consequences for mental health, emotional well-being and coping. Awareness of the existing coping situations can help them deal with them effectively and reduce the adversity of the impact on their mental well-being.

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