

# A Qualitative Enquiry on the Cyberbullying Experiences of Early and Late Adolescents during COVID-19

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## Abstract

**Background and Purpose:** Internet usage has increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. The marked increase of digital platforms has escalated the issue of cyberbullying, especially among adolescents who are heavily dependent on Internet for their everyday activities. To address this phenomenon, it becomes imperative to understand the experiences of cyberbullying. Therefore, the study aimed to explore cyberbullying victimization experiences of early and late adolescents during COVID-19

**Method:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted through Zoom on 20 participants (10 early adolescents; 13 to 15 years and 10 late adolescents; 16 to 18 years) without prior knowledge of their cyberbullying experiences.

**Analysis and Results:** The interviews were transcribed, and the data was analyzed through thematic analysis. Four main themes emerged: 1) Perceived motivation behind cyberbullying which included revenge, joke, jealousy and name-calling; 2) Role of anonymity which included online disinhibition, fake IDs and usernames and masking of online identity; 3) Intruding privacy which included incessant calling circulating morphed photos, fake social media accounts; 4) Emotional and psychological consequences of cyberbullying.

**Conclusion:** The findings of this study are imperative, as the study contributes to the less explored area of adolescent cyberbullying experiences in India, thereby helping in designing interventions and programs to reduce and prevent the adverse effects of cyberbullying.

**Keywords:** *cyberbullying, adolescents, harassment, mental health, cyber-victimization, COVID-19*

## Introduction

COVID-19, also known as coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) was first spotted in the Wuhan city of Hubei Province in China during November–December 2019. World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a global health emergency on January 31, 2020 (Lu et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone, to adhere to social distancing measures and remain indoors. The pandemic has also increased social media usage to seek information during uncertain times and stay connected with people while practising social distancing and staying indoors (Wiederhold, 2020; Yang, 2020). Similarly, adolescents stayed socially connected through their widespread Internet and social media usage (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Prior to the period when lockdown was imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19, studies have reported high use of social media and the Internet among adolescents (Kirkaburun & Griffith, 2018) to cope with low moods and complex thoughts as a form of

escapism (Király et al., 2020). Although the digital platform has provided adolescents with novel ways to establish social ties, studies show that apart from the ease that internet has provided, there is also a dark side to Internet usage. For example, Wong et al. (2020) reported that people used internet-enabled devices during the lockdown to vent their negative emotions online. Similarly, one of the dangers associated with Internet-based communication is cyberbullying (Del rey et al., 2016).

Although cyberbullying has been defined in several ways by researchers. A widely known definition by Smith et al. (2008) refers to cyberbullying as "An aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (p. 376). Similarly, Olweus (2013) defined cyberbullying as "a repeated and intentional aggressive act directed towards a victim who cannot easily defend themselves, which occurs electronically" (pp. 5-58). Although some studies have suggested that cyberbullying is an extension of traditional bullying (Citic et al., 2011; Li et al., 2018), stark differences exist between them. First, traditional bullying manifests an imbalance of power when the powerful side exploits the advantage s/he possesses to humiliate another. In cyberbullying, the bullies are not necessarily more physically powerful than their victims (Zych et al., 2015). Therefore, in cyberbullying, one need not be physically stronger to launch forceful attacks on one's victim. Second, cyberbullying is considered different from traditional bullying in terms of ease and the rate at which information reaches people. Moreover, anonymity catalyzes the ill effects of cyberbullying as Geiger (2018) reported that cyberbullying lingers twenty-four hours per day, unlike traditional bullying.

Cyberbullying can take place over multiple e-platforms, such as e-mail, social networking websites (e.g., Facebook), Skype, blogging sites, multiplayer online role-playing games, and applications (apps) and instant messenger services (Smith et al., 2008). Cyberbullying is not specific to one country. Research on cyberbullying in various countries including the USA (Sontag et al., 2011; Williams and Guerra, 2007), Turkey (Erdur-Baker, 2010) and the UK (Smith et al. 2008) show that it is not specific to one country, thus making it an issue of global importance because of its widespread prevalence. In a study by Kowalski et al. (2008), it was emphasized that cyberbullying requires attention since it can intrude victims' homes through Internet-enabled devices. Adolescents, unlike adults, are not equipped to handle the adverse situations. They are at an age when it is easier to give in to their emotional responses, which could lead to the spawn of another abuser or a catastrophic decision (Shariff, 2009).

Although cyberbullying is an area of interest for researchers, one of the limitations of current knowledge on cyberbullying is that most of the studies focus on quantitative research typically obtained through questionnaires and self-report measures (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Topcu et al., 2008). Moreover, earlier studies conducted on the consequences of cyber victimization of adolescents have primarily focused on the relationship between cyber victimization and related mental health issues (Yurdakul & Ayhan, 2021). However, the emphasis on individual subjective experiences has often been overlooked in research.

Literature on cyberbullying shows that few studies have investigated cyberbullying experiences of adolescents through qualitative inquiry (Grigg, 2010; Vadabosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). In her qualitative study, Grigg (2010) aimed to generate a broad definition of cyberbullying. Based on interviews of 32 participants whose ages ranged between 8 and 54

negative things that can happen with people using mobile phones and the Internet was investigated. The researcher also suggested that cyber aggression and cyberbullying should be studied together to understand the complex phenomenon comprehensively. Another study by Vadabosch and Van Cleemput (2008) on 332 adolescents reported that cyberbullying and cyber jokes are two concepts with the critical distinction of intention to harm. These studies show that cyberbullying is a nuanced, complex and context-dependent phenomenon. Moreover, the disagreement over what entails cyberbullying is an important phenomenon to be studied.

### **The Present Study**

In this study, we investigated the lived experiences of adolescents who have experienced cyberbullying using a qualitative approach guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. As mentioned earlier, few qualitative studies have explored adolescents' cyberbullying experiences. Moreover, cyberbullying during COVID-19 lockdown can elicit novel findings, as Vindrola-Padros and colleagues have highlighted how timely qualitative data can uncover aspects of the pandemic experience missed by clinical and epidemiological studies (Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020). Therefore the following research questions were investigated- 1) How do adolescents understand the term cyberbullying? 2) According to adolescents, what are the reasons for any person to get cyber-bullied?

### **Method**

#### **Sampling and participants**

Using purposive sampling, participants were recruited from private schools of the Prayagraj district of India. The participants were contacted for the study via social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, E-mail). The final sample comprised 20 participants aged between 13 and 17 years ( $M=15.2$ ). For the study, 10 participants were male and 10 were female.

The inclusion criteria of participants were – required to have a social media account and use it at least twice a week. Participants were excluded if they were over the age of 18 or if they did not provide consent from their guardians. Participants were also excluded if they were quarantined due to COVID-19 symptoms or received medical treatment for an ongoing medical condition prior to COVID-19. To maintain anonymity, demographic data is not linked to participant pseudonyms (Bell, 2010).

#### **Procedure**

Interviews were conducted remotely by SKC via video call (Zoom) and telephone in an enclosed room using a headset. They lasted between 30 to 45 minutes (Mean Time=34.85 minutes) and were recorded and transcribed. The interview focused on the primary research objectives of the study. The sample size of 20 participants was consistent with usual recommended number of participants for studies using in-depth interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Before the interviews, all participants were provided with complete ethical information about the study to provide informed consent to engage in the research process. After obtaining parental consent, semi-structured interviews with each participant by SKC virtually via Zoom video call. Participants were asked open-ended questions for this study. The interviews were recorded and lasted between 30 to 45 minutes (Mean Time=34.85 minutes).

### Reflexivity

The interviewer (SKC) is a PhD Scholar with a Masters in Psychology along with one year of experience in dissertation. The study supervisor (NK) is a Professor and has worked on numerous qualitative researches. SKC had no prior relationship with the participants. While interviewing and analyzing the data, SKC endeavoured to remain aware of personally held assumptions and judgments about cyberbullying that could have inevitably affected the data analysis.

### Analysis

Data was then transcribed individually. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to analyze participant ideas and experiences in connection to the defined objectives of the study. Transcripts were read several times during the analytic process to become familiar with the data and key quotations from the data were placed under the relevant themes. During the next step of the analysis, emerging themes were recognized and coded. The researchers then underwent an iterative review process of the coding and themes to ensure that the analysis was consistent.

### Quality Considerations

The present study was conducted after receiving approval from the Institutional Ethics Review Board (IERB). To ensure the quality of the present study, research recommendations were followed during each phase of the study, analysis and reporting of the findings. (Reynolds, 2011)

## Results

Four major themes related to participants' cyberbullying experiences were identified. Even though participants shared many unique perspectives, only the pertinent themes that encased the generalizable codes were considered since those responses were common among the participants. The thematic analysis highlighted the factors that potentially placed cyberbullying victims at greater risk of being negatively impacted by such incidents. The participants' demographic details and the relevant themes referenced throughout the interviews are presented below.

**Table 1: Showing the demographic details of the participants of the study.**

	Male (N=10)	%	Female (N=10)	%	Total	%
<b>The device most frequently used to access the Internet</b>						
Desktop	2	20%	-	-	2	10%
Laptop	1	10%	2	20%	3	15%

Smartphone	7	70%	8	80%	15	75%
<b>Internet usage time (Hours/Day)</b>						
Less than 1 hour	-		-		-	
2 hours	1	10%	3	30%	4	20%
3 hours	3	30%	1	10%	4	20%
4 hours	5	40%	4	40%	9	45%
5 hours or more	1	10%	2	20%	3	15%
<b>Residential Status</b>						
Living with Family	7	70%	9	90%	16	80%
Living in a hostel/with a guardian	3	30%	1	10%	4	20%

**Table 2. Identified themes and related sub-themes.**

<b>Sr. no</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Perceived motivation behind cyberbullying</b>	Revenge Joking Jealousy Name-calling
<b>2.</b>	<b>Role of Anonymity</b>	Online disinhibition Fake ids and usernames Masking of Online Identity
<b>3.</b>	<b>Intruding privacy</b>	Incessant calling

	Circulating morphed photos
	Fake social media accounts
4. Emotional and Psychological Consequences	Sleeplessness
	Depressive symptoms
	Social isolation
	Embarrassment

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Theme 1: *The perceived motivation behind cyberbullying* involved anonymous perpetrators on social media indulging in name-calling. It includes making fun, jealousy and revenge.

**Revenge-** Revenge is described in those situations where cyberbullying took place. In that case, the perpetrator was provoked or angered and wanted to get back at the victim. A participant admitted to cyberbullying, stating, "*These people just want to harm. They will say something over text or send something bad so that they can be mean to you. They just want to take revenge for the things that happened in the past.*" (P13)

**Name Calling-** Participants reported name-calling as a perceived motivation for cyberbullying. In this context, another participant reported that, "*He called me names and was commenting bad stuffs on my post. I got so scared while all this was happening.*" (P9)

**Jealousy-** Jealousy emerged as a sub-theme and was coded accordingly. This study refers to the bullying done online by the perpetrator online out of envy or resentment. In the following quote, the adolescent refers to the aspect of jealousy of the perpetrator which was perceived to be a motivator of cyberbullying and uploading

*"She uploaded the photos without asking me. I told her to send only to friends group but by the end of that week, everyone had the photos. She was jealous of the project that I did. So she uploaded the ones where I was looking so bad."* (P14)

#### Theme 2: *Role of anonymity*

Another theme that emerged from the interviews which reportedly contributed to the impact severity of cyberbullying instances was the role of anonymity. Here, the participants reported anonymity as a significant contributor to cyberbullying victimization.

**Online Disinhibition-** Participants perceived a lack of face-to-face interaction and the prevalent anonymity significantly impacting the cyberbullying experiences. A participant said, "*I had no idea who that person was, all I know was that he had so much information about me and he was continuously messaging me*" (P15)

**Making of Online Identity-** "*It happened to me on facebook. The profile picture was not there of that person, but it seemed like the people knew everything about me. Maybe it is someone from my old coaching. Maybe it is my friends' ex, I am not sure.*" (P2)

**Fake ID's and Username-** Participants reported that use of fake IDs and username as a contributor to cyberbullying victimization. A participant reported, *"He was using a fake username and calling me again and again on the messenger app. I could not figure it out since I was using the app on my phone."*

### Theme 3: *Intruding privacy*

Another theme that emerged from the interviews that reportedly contributed to the impact of cyberbullying instances was privacy intrusion. Here, the participants reported privacy intrusion as a significant contributor to cyberbullying victimization.

#### **Incessant calling**

Participants reported that perpetrators used the calling feature widely available on social media apps to call incessantly. One of the participants from the study reported that:

*"Facebook and IG have this feature which lets you call them. I did not know until someone from my tuition classes started calling me on that. I got scared and cut the call every time, but he repeatedly called. I thought my parents would scold me if they see me talking to anyone"* (P11)

#### **Circulating morphed photos**

The following excerpt shows that cyberbullies used social media apps to circulate morphed images of their peers and friends, leading to further victimization and trauma. Another participant shared that:

*"Just because I gained some weight so my classmates photo-shopped my old image and made a meme out of it."* (P4)

#### **Fake social media accounts**

During the interview, some participants mentioned that perpetrators on social media used fake accounts and various IDs to mask their identities. One participant reported that:

*"My friend told me that he got a friend request from an ID with my name and photo. I just have one account and this new account was filled with bad photos. My cousin told me to immediately block it."* (P3)

### Theme 4: *Emotional and psychological consequences faced by the victims*

#### **Sleeplessness**

Various participants reported the consequences they faced or perceived by being a cyberbullying victim. The most common response was sleeplessness and sleep troubles faced after experiencing such incidents in the digital space. One of the participants reported that: *"I got so scared that I could barely rest. My mind was so alert even at night, I felt so insulted for weeks"* (P17)

## Depressive symptoms

In addition to sleeplessness, participants reported having depressive symptoms caused by such incidents. Some participants reported that:

*"There is this feeling of sinking when people make fun of you every time they see you. I stopped eating well and had trouble concentrating just about thinking of the events that happened." (P5)*

**Social isolation** Among other consequences reported by the participants, a common theme of social isolation was found among the responses. Participants highlighted factors associated with instances where the victims tend to isolate themselves or no longer feel the need to be around people. Some participants reported that:

*"I stopped going out and stayed in bed during any social event, it felt as if there was nothing to look ahead for. Friends invited me to their plac but I did not feel like going and meeting them" (P 11)*

**Embarrassment** *"I have not done anything to my classmates. Only once, I said no to one classmate when he asked for something. He got angry back then. So the reason behind spreading my photos could be because he wanted to take revenge from me. But he should not have made it so public. He has no idea of the damage it caused me" (P19)*

## Discussion

The present study aimed to understand the subjective experiences of adolescents' cyberbullying during COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly we focused on understanding whether the adolescents were aware of what cyberbullying. Secondly, we tried to understand the adolescents' perspectives on what they think are the perceived motivation behind cyberbullying perpetrators. Third, we enquired about the different means of the online platform available to adolescents and the forms of cyberbullying one might face while navigating these sites. Lastly, we focused on understanding the consequences of cyberbullying by tapping into emotional and psychological issues which may be directly related to cyberbullying or whether individuals are at risk of developing long-term problems.

The findings of our study revealed that adolescents are aware of the term 'cyberbullying' and were able to understand the issues related to it. They were aware that cyberbullying is an emerging issue. Although the study did not use a screening tool to identify victims of cyberbullying and regular participants were used for the study. Apart from the themes that emerged from the study, the participants also reported knowing at least one peer who has faced harassment or bullying in the digital space. The findings of the present study support previous research on the experience of cyberbullying and its related victimization (Tokunaga, 2010; Spears et al., 2009).

The study also reported revenge as a critical motivator of cyberbullying. Past studies by Wang et al. (2019) also reported that revenge was one of the key factors behind the motivation for cyberbullying. The study results also reveal that the adolescents could identify the motivation behind cyberbullying. Most participants reported that cyberbullying was done 'for fun' by the perpetrators. Therefore, no line could be drawn between cyberbullying



incidents and innocent pranks because it had an unclear distinction during the incident. Various studies have highlighted no clear line between pranks and cyberbullying (Baas et al., 2013). The unclear distinction eventually makes the identification process challenging.

Similarly, existing research have reported that name-calling and disturbing comments are the most frequent ways of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Jovoven & Gross, 2008), which has been found in the present study. Some researchers have also found other factors behind cyberbullying that are not directly linked with our findings. For example, Baas et al. (2013) found that some children 'feel the urge to cyberbully' and have no clear intention behind their actions.

The participants also reported that they know that strangers through fake profiles and IDs can cause harm. Therefore the role of anonymity is evident in online bullying cases. This is due to two reasons- first, the cyber-victim may not know their cyberbully, or the perpetrator purposely did not reveal his identity to the victim. Similar findings by Campbell et al. (2012) and Meter et al. (2021) showed that adolescents reported screens and fake personas such as avatars and counterfeit IDs as a mechanism through which the online aggressor could distance themselves. It leads to online disinhibition and perpetrators engage in behaviours they would not engage in face-to-face interactions.

Online identity disinhibition, also known as anonymity, was an essential aspect that escalated the incidents of cyberbullying. Various studies have also highlighted that the extremity of online comments increases compared to offline conditions (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009; Smith et al., 2008; Suler, 2008). Previous studies also indicate that young people consider anonymous harassment to have more severe and detrimental effects (Heirman & Walrave, 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Moreover, perpetrators are less likely to fear the consequences of their activities due to a screen barrier hiding their identity (Peebles, 2014).

Unlike physical environments, where people feel pressure to behave in socially appropriate ways, virtual environments are not bound by environmental constraints. Further, it paves the path for bullies to act in a certain way they would never in real life. Masking of online identity also emerged as a recurring theme in the present study, which is in line with previous research where creating or masking identity in cyberspace can make people feel less responsible for their actions (Topcu et al., 2012).

One of the frequent ways of cyberbullying reported by adolescents is circulating fake edits or morphed photos on photo-sharing social networks and social media apps such as Instagram. It could lead to long-term repercussions on adolescents' mental health as adolescents are known to be conscious of their physical appearance (Harter, 2000). Moreover, from a developmental perspective, adolescents' ego identity changes through interaction with others and how others perceive them (Erikson, 1968). Cyberbullying through morphed photos during this developmental phase may lead to deviations from how adolescents see themselves and the way their peers perceive them.

The study revealed that participants who faced cyberbullying had experienced varied consequences ranging from sleeplessness, social isolation, depressive symptoms and embarrassment. Past research on adolescents has also reported negative consequences of cyberbullying with experiences of anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem and school

avoidance (Bryce & Fraser, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). One of the indirect reasons that adolescents feel emotional and psychological problems is their expectation of the adverse results of the things that could happen if their parents find out. In some instances, the situation may only worsen due to adults' overreacting and victim blaming leads to embarrassment.

Previous research has also highlighted the experiences of fear, embarrassment and emotions of sadness caused as a result of cyberbullying instances. The adverse effects were catalyzed when the cyberbullying victims felt that their families would punish them. The inability to report the problem escalated the negative emotions felt by the victims. Therefore, focusing along the lines which indicate that past studies support the findings of the present study. (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Topcu et al., 2008; Yurdakul & Ayhan, 2021).

### **Limitations and Future Suggestions**

Apart from understanding the motivation for cyber bullying as perceived by adolescents, the study also highlighted the psychological and emotional consequences. Moreover, it has focused on the issues that have the potential to deepen the trauma adolescents face in digital space severely. The findings of this study have several practical implications. The study highlights the need to focus on attachment style and parental support. The role of victims, bystanders and bullies should be considered in future work to identify the problem holistically. The study emphasizes the need for further research on cyberbullying among various age groups and institutions, which heavily depend on technology for communication.

Despite the potential dangers of children's Internet use, parents, caregivers, and teachers should be more appreciative and understanding of the Internet's role in children's social life. They should make explicit that they are aware that children may sometimes unintentionally have negative online experiences, that they are always available for guidance or support and will not take action without the children's consent. Above all, assuring children that they will not take away their online privileges.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlights that cyberbullying remains a problem among adolescents who may have been exasperated during COVID-19. This shows that the impact of cyberbullying is profound and can have a deep impact on the mental health of individuals. Findings of the study also highlight the need to understand the cyberbullying process and how reporting such incidents could be monitored and promoted. Intervention programmes become pertinent in such cases to combat cyberbullying incidents. Cyberbullying preventive programmes should be extended in various educational settings to make adolescents aware of the ill effects caused by such incidents. Moreover, such programmes can also help to enhance coping strategies and teach practical ways to deal with such instances.

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