



CHAPTER - 9 CYBERBULLYING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

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Abstract

Cyberbullying has emerged as one of the most pervasive forms of peer victimization in the digital age and is increasingly recognized as a significant public health concern. While traditionally examined as a behavioral or educational issue, growing evidence suggests that cyberbullying should also be understood through a trauma informed perspective because of its potential to produce enduring psychological consequences. This chapter synthesizes current theoretical and empirical evidence on the relationship between cyberbullying and psychological trauma. It first examines the conceptual foundations linking cyberbullying to trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), emphasizing the developmental vulnerability of children and adolescents. The chapter then reviews the broad spectrum of psychological outcomes associated with cybervictimization, including anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, impaired academic functioning, self-harm, suicidal behaviors, and posttraumatic stress symptoms. Attention is given to the mechanisms underlying trauma responses, highlighting the roles of maladaptive coping, perceived control, childhood adversity, attachment insecurity, and cumulative

trauma. The emerging concept of digital trauma is also discussed to illustrate how the unique characteristics of online environments, including anonymity, permanence of harmful content, unrestricted audience reach, and continuous accessibility, may intensify traumatic experiences. Finally, the chapter explores the implications of adopting a trauma informed framework for prevention, early identification, psychological assessment, and intervention. Overall, the evidence supports a paradigm shift in the understanding of cyberbullying, recognizing it as a potentially traumatic interpersonal experience whose psychological impact extends far beyond immediate emotional distress and has important implications for adolescent mental health and well-being.

Keywords: Cyberbullying; Psychological Trauma; Posttraumatic Stress; Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Cyberbullying and Psychological Trauma

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the social lives of children and adolescents. Although online platforms provide valuable opportunities for learning, communication, and social interaction, they have also created new environments in which interpersonal aggression can occur beyond the physical boundaries of schools. Among these emerging forms of online aggression, cyberbullying has become one of the most significant public health concerns affecting young people worldwide. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is characterized by its potential for continuous exposure, rapid dissemination of harmful content, anonymity of perpetrators, and the difficulty victims face in escaping repeated victimization. These characteristics may amplify the psychological burden experienced by victims and increase the likelihood of long-term adverse mental health outcomes. Over the past decade, the scientific understanding of cyberbullying has evolved considerably. Initially examined primarily as a behavioral or educational issue, cyberbullying is now increasingly recognized as a significant psychological stressor capable of producing profound emotional and psychiatric consequences. Recent literature has shifted from describing cyberbullying solely as a form of online peer aggression toward conceptualizing it as a potentially traumatic experience that may interfere with healthy psychological development (Lillestolen et al., 2024; Hinduja & Patchin, 2025). This conceptual evolution reflects growing evidence demonstrating that repeated online victimization can generate persistent emotional distress, disrupt cognitive and emotional functioning, and increase vulnerability to a broad spectrum of psychological disorders.

This emerging perspective is consistent with trauma-informed models of

mental health, which emphasize that repeated interpersonal victimization may have consequences comparable to those associated with other adverse childhood experiences. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014), trauma results from exposure to an event or series of events perceived as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that produces lasting adverse effects on an individual's psychological, emotional, physical, social, or spiritual well-being. Although cyberbullying rarely involves direct physical violence, its repetitive nature, public visibility, permanence in digital environments, and perceived inescapability may satisfy many of the psychological conditions necessary for traumatic stress responses.

Increasingly, researchers have argued that cyberbullying should be considered within the broader framework of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Traditionally, ACEs have included experiences such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction because of their enduring effects on health and psychosocial development. More recently, scholars have proposed that repeated online victimization also represents a form of developmental adversity capable of producing long-lasting emotional and psychological consequences (Lillestolen et al., 2024). This proposition is supported by accumulating evidence demonstrating substantial overlap between cyberbullying, previous childhood adversity, and subsequent mental health problems (Nagata et al., 2023; Trompeter et al., 2024). The developmental context further reinforces the importance of this conceptualization. Childhood and adolescence constitute critical periods during which the brain, emotional regulation systems, identity, and interpersonal relationships undergo rapid maturation. Exposure to chronic interpersonal stress during these stages may alter emotional processing, coping capacities, and social functioning, thereby increasing vulnerability to anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and other psychological difficulties throughout adulthood (Fisher et al., 2016; Solmi et al., 2022; Kieling et al., 2024). Consequently, understanding cyberbullying through a trauma-informed developmental framework provides a more comprehensive explanation for its long-term psychological impact than models focusing exclusively on aggressive online behavior. The urgency of this issue has become even more apparent in recent years. International reports have highlighted a growing mental health crisis among adolescents, characterized by increasing rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal behavior (Shim et al., 2022; Slomski, 2023; Walters, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified many of these vulnerabilities by increasing social isolation and substantially expanding adolescents' reliance on digital communication technologies (Breuner & Bell, 2023; Santaniello et al., 2022; Marinoni et al., 2024). Simultaneously, social media has become deeply embedded in young people's daily lives, creating

unprecedented opportunities for both social connection and digital victimization (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Within this context, understanding the psychological and traumatic consequences of cyberbullying has become an important public health priority. Historically, bullying itself was often dismissed as a normal developmental experience until the pioneering work of Olweus fundamentally changed scientific and societal perceptions of peer victimization (Olweus, 1978; Olweus & Limber, 2009). A similar paradigm shift is currently occurring regarding cyberbullying. Rather than viewing it simply as an extension of traditional bullying into digital environments, contemporary research increasingly recognizes cyberbullying as a distinct form of interpersonal trauma whose consequences extend beyond immediate emotional distress and may affect long-term psychological adjustment.

This chapter synthesizes current evidence regarding the relationship between cyberbullying and psychological trauma. It first examines the conceptual foundations linking cyberbullying to trauma and adverse childhood experiences before reviewing the emotional, behavioral, academic, and psychiatric consequences associated with online victimization. Attention is given to post-traumatic stress symptoms, the psychological mechanisms explaining trauma responses, including maladaptive coping, perceived control, childhood adversity, and attachment insecurity, as well as the emerging concept of digital trauma. Finally, the chapter discusses the implications of adopting a trauma-informed framework for prevention, early identification, and psychological intervention among children and adolescents exposed to cyberbullying.

2. Understanding Cyberbullying Through a Trauma-Informed Perspective

2.1. Trauma, Adverse Childhood Experiences, and Digital Victimization

The concept of trauma has progressively evolved from a narrow focus on catastrophic or life-threatening events toward a broader understanding that encompasses chronic interpersonal stressors capable of producing lasting psychological harm. Contemporary trauma theories recognize that repeated exposure to emotionally threatening experiences may disrupt emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being even in the absence of physical injury (SAMHSA, 2014). Within this framework, the cumulative nature of stressful experiences is often more important than the objective severity of a single event.

This broader perspective has contributed to the expansion of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) framework. Initially developed to explain the long-term consequences of childhood abuse, neglect, and household

dysfunction, the ACE model has increasingly incorporated other forms of chronic interpersonal adversity that interfere with healthy development (Finkelhor et al., 2013; Karatekin & Hill, 2019). Recent evidence suggests that repeated peer victimization, particularly in digital environments, shares many characteristics with established ACEs because it involves persistent exposure to humiliation, rejection, fear, helplessness, and social isolation during critical developmental periods (Lillestolen et al., 2024).

Cyberbullying differs from many traditional adverse experiences because of the unique characteristics of digital communication. Harmful messages, humiliating images, or threatening content can remain permanently accessible online, be rapidly disseminated to large audiences, and continue circulating long after the original event. Victims frequently report feeling unable to escape the aggression, even within the safety of their homes, as online attacks may occur continuously across multiple digital platforms. The combination of permanence, uncontrollable dissemination, anonymity of perpetrators, and unrestricted accessibility distinguish cyberbullying from many offline forms of peer aggression and may substantially intensify its psychological impact.

From a developmental perspective, adolescence represents a particularly vulnerable period for exposure to these experiences. During this stage, identity formation, self-esteem, emotional regulation, and peer acceptance become central developmental tasks. Consequently, repeated online rejection or humiliation may directly threaten adolescents' developing sense of self and belonging. Developmental psychopathology research consistently demonstrates that adverse experiences occurring during childhood and adolescence exert disproportionate effects on later emotional functioning and psychiatric vulnerability (Fisher et al., 2010; Solmi et al., 2022; Kieling et al., 2024). Cyberbullying therefore occurs during a developmental window in which psychological resilience is still emerging while sensitivity to peer evaluation reaches particularly high levels. Recent studies have strengthened the argument that cyberbullying should be conceptualized as a chronic developmental stressor rather than an isolated behavioral event. Longitudinal investigations indicate that repeated online victimization predicts persistent emotional distress, psychiatric symptoms, and impaired psychosocial functioning even after controlling for previous mental health difficulties (Nagata et al., 2023; Trompeter et al., 2024). These findings suggest that cyberbullying contributes independently to adverse developmental trajectories instead of merely reflecting pre-existing psychological problems.

2.2. Why Cyberbullying Can Become a Traumatic Experience

Although not every victim of cyberbullying develops post-traumatic stress

symptoms, increasing evidence indicates that repeated online victimization possesses many characteristics commonly associated with traumatic experiences. Unlike one-time stressful events, cyberbullying typically involves repeated exposure to humiliation, uncertainty, social rejection, and perceived powerlessness. Such chronic interpersonal stress may progressively overwhelm an individual's coping resources, particularly when adequate social support is unavailable. The subjective perception of threat appears to play a crucial role in determining whether cyberbullying becomes psychologically traumatic. Trauma theories emphasize that an individual's appraisal of an event, rather than the objective characteristics of the event itself, largely determines subsequent psychological responses. Consequently, experiences such as persistent exclusion from online peer groups, repeated dissemination of humiliating rumors, identity-based attacks, or public shaming may produce levels of emotional distress comparable to those associated with direct threats or overt harassment. Recent nationally representative evidence supports this interpretation by demonstrating that online rejection, exclusion, malicious gossip, and attacks targeting personal identity are as strongly associated with post-traumatic stress symptoms as explicit online threats (Hinduja & Patchin, 2025). These findings challenge traditional assumptions that only severe or overtly aggressive online behaviors are psychologically harmful.

Another distinguishing feature of cyberbullying concerns the loss of control experienced by victims. Traditional bullying usually occurs within specific physical settings and is often limited by time and location. In contrast, cyberbullying may continue uninterrupted across multiple digital platforms, exposing victims to repeated reminders of the aggression long after the initial event. The inability to predict, control, or terminate online victimization may contribute to persistent hypervigilance, feelings of helplessness, and heightened emotional arousal, all of which are central components of traumatic stress responses. Emerging literature has therefore introduced the concept of digital trauma, referring to psychological injury resulting from persistent harmful experiences occurring within digital environments. Digital trauma extends beyond cyberbullying to include phenomena such as online harassment, reputational attacks, doxing, digital surveillance, hate speech, and non-consensual dissemination of personal information. However, cyberbullying remains one of its most common manifestations during adolescence because it directly targets peer relationships and social identity. Unlike many traditional forms of trauma, digital trauma frequently blurs the boundaries between online and offline life, creating continuous exposure that interferes with recovery and emotional regulation (Ali et al., 2025). Taken together, these conceptual developments support a shift from viewing cyberbullying solely as problematic online behavior toward understanding it as a potentially traumatic interpersonal

experience. This trauma-informed perspective provides a strong theoretical foundation for explaining the persistent psychological consequences observed among victims and offers a useful framework for interpreting the empirical evidence reviewed in the following sections.

3. Psychological Consequences of Cyberbullying

3.1. Emotional and Mental Health Outcomes

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that cyberbullying is associated with a wide range of adverse psychological outcomes affecting emotional well-being, mental health, and overall psychosocial adjustment. Although traditional bullying and cyberbullying share several psychological consequences, the characteristics of online victimization, including anonymity, the permanence of harmful content, unrestricted audience reach, and continuous accessibility, may intensify emotional distress and prolong victims' exposure to stress. Among the most consistently reported consequences are anxiety and depressive symptoms. Adolescents exposed to cyberbullying frequently report excessive worry, persistent fear, emotional insecurity, sadness, hopelessness, and diminished psychological well-being (Okumu et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2021). Meta-analytic evidence further indicates that cybervictimization significantly increases the likelihood of developing clinically relevant depressive symptomatology, suggesting that repeated online aggression represents an important risk factor for emotional disorders during adolescence (Hu et al., 2021).

Beyond anxiety and depression, cyberbullying has been associated with broader emotional dysregulation characterized by irritability, persistent negative affect, emotional instability, loneliness, and feelings of helplessness (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Brighi et al., 2012; Kowalski & Limber, 2013). Many victims also experience chronic stress arising from uncertainty regarding future attacks, fear of public humiliation, and perceived loss of control over their digital identity. Because harmful online content can remain permanently available and easily redistributed, victims may experience continuous psychological activation even after the original incident has ended. The consequences of cyberbullying extend beyond emotional symptoms to encompass more severe psychiatric outcomes. Research consistently reports associations between cybervictimization and increased psychiatric symptom severity, including depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, dissociative experiences, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Saltz et al., 2020; Ranney et al., 2016). These findings suggest that cyberbullying should not be regarded merely as an unpleasant online experience but rather as a significant psychosocial stressor capable of contributing to clinically meaningful mental health difficulties.

3.2. Behavioral, Social, and Academic Consequences

The effects of cyberbullying are not confined to emotional functioning but frequently extend to behavioral, interpersonal, and educational domains. Victims often exhibit reduced academic engagement, diminished concentration, school absenteeism, and poorer educational achievement (Halliday et al., 2023; Torres et al., 2020; Okumu et al., 2020). Emotional distress may impair attention, motivation, and executive functioning, thereby negatively influencing academic performance. Interpersonal functioning is also substantially affected. Adolescents who experience cyberbullying frequently report lower self-esteem, reduced life satisfaction, diminished social connectedness, and increased loneliness (Lei et al., 2020; Foody et al., 2017; Carvalho et al., 2021; Giumetti & Kowalski, 2022). Because peer acceptance represents a central developmental task during adolescence, repeated online rejection or humiliation may undermine self-concept and interfere with healthy identity formation. Behavioral consequences have likewise been documented. Cybervictimized adolescents demonstrate higher rates of substance use, behavioral misconduct, hostility, aggression, and involvement in other forms of interpersonal violence (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2013; Yoon et al., 2019; Pichel et al., 2022). Importantly, growing evidence suggests that cybervictimization and cyberbullying perpetration frequently coexist rather than representing mutually exclusive categories. Some victims subsequently engage in retaliatory online aggression, highlighting the dynamic and reciprocal nature of digital interpersonal violence (Scott & Barlett, 2025).

Recent theoretical models therefore propose that cyberbullying should be understood as a multidimensional psychosocial process influenced by individual characteristics, online behaviors, and social contexts. Factors such as excessive time spent online, perceived anonymity, favorable attitudes toward cyberbullying, and certain personality traits may simultaneously increase the risk of becoming both a victim and a perpetrator (Scott & Barlett, 2025). This integrative perspective challenges traditional victim–perpetrator distinctions and underscores the complexity of cyberbullying within contemporary digital environments.

3.3. Self-Harm, Suicidal Behaviors, and High-Risk Psychological Outcomes

Among the most concerning consequences of cyberbullying are self-harming behaviors and suicidality. Numerous investigations have shown that adolescents exposed to repeated online victimization are at significantly greater risk of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and non-suicidal self-injury than their non-victimized peers (John et al., 2018; Dorol & Mishara, 2021; Yang et al., 2021). These associations appear to be partially explained by the cumulative

effects of depression, hopelessness, social isolation, and perceived burdensomeness resulting from persistent online harassment. Importantly, cyberbullying rarely occurs in isolation. Victims frequently experience multiple co-occurring adversities, including traditional bullying, community violence, emotional abuse, family difficulties, and pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities (Ranney et al., 2016; Saltz et al., 2020). Exposure to multiple stressors may substantially increase emotional burden and contribute to more severe psychological outcomes than any single adverse experience alone.

Collectively, the available evidence demonstrates that cyberbullying affects virtually every major domain of adolescent functioning. Its consequences extend far beyond temporary emotional distress, influencing psychological health, social relationships, academic achievement, behavioral adjustment, and suicide risk. These findings provide a strong rationale for examining cyberbullying not only as a behavioral phenomenon but also as a potentially traumatic developmental experience capable of producing enduring psychological sequelae.

4. Cyberbullying and Psychological Trauma

4.1. Cyberbullying as a Trauma-Related Experience

Growing empirical evidence indicates that cyberbullying should not be conceptualized solely as a form of online aggression but also as a potentially traumatic interpersonal experience. Unlike acute traumatic events, cyberbullying generally involves repeated exposure to humiliation, rejection, intimidation, or social exclusion, creating a chronic stressor capable of overwhelming an individual's emotional coping resources. The persistence of harmful digital content, the unpredictability of further attacks, and the inability to escape online victimization distinguish cyberbullying from many traditional forms of peer aggression and may intensify its psychological impact. Repeated cybervictimization can undermine fundamental psychological needs, including safety, social belonging, identity, and perceived control. Consequently, victims frequently experience persistent fear, hypervigilance, helplessness, shame, and emotional insecurity. These reactions closely resemble the psychological responses commonly observed following other forms of interpersonal trauma and provide theoretical support for conceptualizing cyberbullying within a trauma-informed framework (Lillestolen et al., 2024; Hinduja & Patchin, 2025).

Recent studies have further argued that cyberbullying should be regarded as a digital form of Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). Like other ACEs, repeated online victimization may interfere with emotional development, increase vulnerability to subsequent psychopathology, and contribute to long-term psychosocial maladjustment (Lillestolen et al., 2024). Rather than

representing an isolated stressful event, cyberbullying often becomes part of a broader developmental trajectory characterized by cumulative exposure to interpersonal adversity.

4.2. Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms Following Cybervictimization

Among the psychological consequences associated with cyberbullying, post-traumatic stress symptoms have received increasing scientific attention. Although only a proportion of victims develop full diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), many exhibit clinically significant trauma-related symptoms, including intrusive recollections, recurrent distressing thoughts, avoidance of social interactions, emotional numbing, exaggerated startle responses, sleep disturbances, concentration difficulties, and persistent hyperarousal. Meta-analytic and longitudinal evidence increasingly supports the association between cybervictimization and trauma-related symptomatology. Across different cultural contexts, adolescents exposed to repeated online aggression consistently report significantly higher levels of PTSD symptoms than their non-victimized peers (Ranney et al., 2016; Mateu et al., 2020). These findings suggest that cyberbullying may produce enduring psychological consequences extending well beyond the immediate period of victimization. One explanation for this relationship concerns the repetitive nature of digital victimization. Unlike many offline stressful events that have a clearly defined endpoint, cyberbullying frequently exposes victims to repeated reminders of the original aggression. Harmful messages, photographs, videos, or rumors may remain accessible online indefinitely, preventing emotional recovery and maintaining a persistent state of psychological threat. Consequently, victims often experience continuous cognitive and emotional activation that resembles chronic traumatic stress.

4.3. International Evidence Linking Cyberbullying and Trauma

Evidence from multiple countries consistently demonstrates a robust association between cyberbullying and trauma-related psychological outcomes. Research conducted among Italian adolescents found significantly higher levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms among cybervictims than among non-victimized students (Baldry et al., 2019). Similar findings were reported in the United Kingdom, where nearly one-third of cyberbullying victims attending secondary schools met criteria for clinically significant PTSD symptomatology (Mateu et al., 2020). Longitudinal studies provide even stronger evidence regarding the temporal relationship between cyberbullying and trauma. For example, Liu et al. (2020) demonstrated that cybervictimization predicted subsequent increases in post-traumatic stress symptoms among Chinese adolescents over time, supporting the hypothesis that online victimization contributes directly to the development of trauma-related psychological

difficulties rather than merely co-occurring with them. Clinical investigations have produced comparable findings. Among adolescents presenting to emergency departments, Ranney et al. (2016) reported that cyberbullying victimization was independently associated with PTSD symptoms after controlling for other forms of violence exposure. Importantly, PTSD symptoms frequently coexisted with depression, suicidal ideation, substance use, and community violence exposure, illustrating the complex clinical presentation of traumatized adolescents. Recent nationally representative research has further expanded current understanding of trauma resulting from cyberbullying. Hinduja and Patchin (2025) demonstrated that less overt forms of online aggression, including social exclusion, peer rejection, malicious rumors, and attacks targeting personal identity—were as strongly associated with post-traumatic stress symptoms as explicit online threats. These findings challenge the traditional assumption that only severe or physically threatening forms of cyberbullying produce traumatic outcomes and instead suggest that the subjective emotional significance of online victimization largely determines its psychological impact.

4.4. Psychological Mechanisms Underlying Trauma Responses

Although cyberbullying is consistently associated with post-traumatic stress symptoms, not all victims experience comparable psychological consequences. Recent research has therefore begun to identify the mechanisms that explain individual differences in trauma responses. One important mechanism involves coping strategies. Chen et al. (2024) demonstrated that negative coping partially mediates the association between cybervictimization and PTSD symptoms. Individuals relying on maladaptive coping responses, such as avoidance, emotional suppression, self-blame, or rumination, appear particularly vulnerable to developing persistent trauma-related symptoms. Conversely, adaptive coping strategies may facilitate psychological recovery following online victimization. Perceived control represents another important protective factor. According to Chen et al. (2024), greater perceived control weakens the association between maladaptive coping and PTSD symptoms. Adolescents who believe they possess greater capacity to manage stressful situations appear more resilient following cyberbullying than those who perceive themselves as powerless. These findings are consistent with contemporary cognitive theories of trauma, which emphasize that individuals' interpretations of stressful experiences substantially influence subsequent psychological adjustment. Collectively, current evidence indicates that trauma resulting from cyberbullying cannot be explained solely by characteristics of online aggression itself. Rather, psychological outcomes emerge through a complex interaction between exposure to cybervictimization, individual coping resources, cognitive appraisals, developmental vulnerabilities, and environmental protective factors.

Understanding these mechanisms provides an essential theoretical foundation for developing trauma-informed prevention strategies and targeted psychological interventions.

5. Factors Influencing Psychological Trauma Following Cyberbullying

5.1. Childhood Trauma and Cumulative Adversity

Recent research suggests that the psychological consequences of cyberbullying cannot be understood independently of an individual's developmental history. Exposure to adverse childhood experiences may increase vulnerability to later online victimization while simultaneously reducing resilience to subsequent psychological stress. Rather than representing an isolated traumatic event, cyberbullying frequently occurs within a broader trajectory of cumulative adversity in which previous traumatic experiences heighten susceptibility to future interpersonal victimization. Studies involving adolescent psychiatric populations have demonstrated that victims of cyberbullying report significantly higher levels of post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, anger, dissociative experiences, and overall psychiatric symptom severity than non-victimized adolescents (Saltz et al., 2020). Importantly, emotional abuse experienced during childhood appears to be particularly associated with subsequent cybervictimization, suggesting that earlier interpersonal trauma may increase sensitivity to later forms of online aggression. This cumulative pattern is consistent with developmental models proposing that repeated exposure to adversity progressively weakens psychological resources and increases vulnerability to emotional disorders. Comparable findings have been reported among university students. Childhood traumatic experiences have been identified as significant predictors of both cybervictimization and cyberbullying perpetration, indicating that early adverse experiences may influence later patterns of digital interpersonal relationships (Akarsu et al., 2022). Consequently, cyberbullying should not always be interpreted as an isolated event but rather as one component of a broader developmental process in which multiple adversities interact to shape psychological adjustment.

5.2. Attachment Insecurity and Developmental Vulnerability

Attachment theory provides another useful framework for understanding individual differences in responses to cyberbullying. Secure attachment promotes emotional regulation, adaptive coping, and effective help-seeking behaviors, whereas insecure attachment may increase vulnerability to interpersonal stress and emotional dysregulation. Empirical evidence indicates that adolescents and young adults characterized by anxious or avoidant attachment styles are more likely to experience cybervictimization than

individuals with secure attachment patterns (Türk et al., 2021). Insecure attachment may heighten sensitivity to peer rejection, increase dependence on online social approval, and reduce confidence in interpersonal relationships, thereby amplifying the emotional impact of digital aggression. These findings suggest that attachment insecurity does not directly cause cyberbullying but rather influences the way individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to online victimization. Consequently, developmental history should be considered an important factor when evaluating the psychological consequences of cyberbullying.

5.3. Cognitive and Emotional Processes

Beyond developmental vulnerabilities, recent studies have highlighted the importance of cognitive and emotional mechanisms in explaining trauma-related responses following cybervictimization. Among these mechanisms, coping strategies appear particularly influential. Chen et al. (2024) demonstrated that maladaptive coping partially mediates the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Victims who predominantly rely on avoidance, emotional suppression, self-blame, catastrophizing, or persistent rumination tend to report substantially greater psychological distress than those using more adaptive coping strategies. These findings support cognitive models of trauma suggesting that the way stressful experiences are processed often determines their long-term psychological consequences. Perceived control represents another important protective mechanism. Individuals who believe they retain some capacity to influence or manage stressful situations appear less likely to develop severe trauma-related symptoms after experiencing cyberbullying. Conversely, persistent feelings of helplessness and loss of control may maintain hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, and emotional dysregulation (Chen et al., 2024). Together, these findings indicate that psychological trauma results not only from exposure to cyberbullying itself but also from the interaction between stressful experiences and victims' cognitive appraisal of those experiences.

5.4. Digital Trauma: An Emerging Concept

The growing integration of digital technologies into everyday life has contributed to the emergence of the concept of digital trauma, which refers to psychological harm resulting from repeated adverse experiences occurring within online environments. Although cyberbullying represents one of the most common forms of digital trauma among adolescents, the concept also encompasses online harassment, cyberstalking, reputational attacks, hate speech, doxing, identity manipulation, and other forms of persistent digital abuse (Chohan & Rani, 2025).

Unlike many traditional traumatic experiences, digital trauma is characterized by the absence of clear temporal and spatial boundaries. Harmful content may remain permanently accessible, be repeatedly shared without victims' consent, and continue generating psychological distress long after the initial incident. Victims often experience persistent uncertainty regarding future attacks, contributing to continuous psychological activation and impaired emotional recovery. Narrative and psychological analyses further suggest that digital trauma frequently involves themes of public humiliation, identity disruption, social exclusion, and loss of perceived safety within online environments (Chohan & Rani, 2025). As adolescents increasingly integrate digital interactions into their personal identity and social relationships, online victimization may become inseparable from offline psychological functioning. This growing body of evidence supports expanding traditional trauma models to include digital environments as important contexts in which traumatic experiences may occur. Overall, these findings indicate that psychological trauma following cyberbullying emerges through the interaction of multiple developmental, cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors. Childhood adversity, attachment insecurity, maladaptive coping strategies, diminished perceived control, and the unique characteristics of digital environments collectively contribute to explaining why some individuals develop persistent trauma-related symptoms while others demonstrate greater resilience. Recognizing these interacting mechanisms provides a more comprehensive understanding of cyberbullying and offers valuable guidance for the design of trauma-informed prevention and intervention strategies.

6. Toward a Trauma-Informed Framework for Prevention and Intervention

The growing body of evidence linking cyberbullying to trauma-related outcomes has important implications for research, clinical practice, and educational policy. Traditionally, interventions addressing cyberbullying have primarily focused on reducing aggressive online behaviors through disciplinary measures, digital citizenship education, and anti-bullying campaigns. Although these approaches remain essential, accumulating evidence suggests that they may be insufficient to address the complex psychological consequences experienced by victims. A trauma-informed perspective shifts attention from asking "What happened online?" to "How has this experience affected the individual's psychological functioning?" This change in perspective allows professionals to better understand the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses that frequently follow repeated online victimization. Trauma-informed care recognizes that cybervictimization may have enduring effects on emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, self-concept, and stress reactivity. Consequently, assessment should extend beyond documenting the

occurrence of cyberbullying to include evaluation of trauma-related symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, avoidance behaviors, hypervigilance, emotional dysregulation, sleep disturbances, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Because many victims do not spontaneously disclose their experiences, routine psychological screening in schools and healthcare settings may facilitate earlier identification of adolescents at risk for persistent psychological difficulties (Hinduja & Patchin, 2025; Ranney et al., 2016).

Schools represent one of the most important settings for implementing trauma-informed prevention strategies. Rather than relying exclusively on punitive responses toward perpetrators, comprehensive school programs should integrate psychoeducation about trauma, emotional regulation training, digital literacy, peer support initiatives, and accessible psychological services for victims. School personnel, including teachers, counselors, psychologists, and administrators should receive training to recognize both the overt and subtle manifestations of cyberbullying-related trauma. Such an approach may improve early detection while reducing stigma associated with seeking psychological support.

Intervention programs should also recognize that psychological recovery is influenced by individual resilience and protective factors. Recent findings suggest that adaptive coping strategies, stronger perceived control, secure interpersonal relationships, supportive family environments, and positive peer support may buffer the adverse psychological consequences of cybervictimization (Chen et al., 2024; Türk et al., 2021). Accordingly, interventions should not focus exclusively on reducing exposure to cyberbullying but should also strengthen emotional regulation, problem-solving abilities, cognitive flexibility, resilience, and help-seeking behaviors. Promoting these protective resources may reduce the likelihood that cybervictimization evolves into persistent trauma-related psychopathology.

From a clinical perspective, adolescents presenting with anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation, or unexplained emotional distress should routinely be assessed for current and previous experiences of cyberbullying. Given the demonstrated associations between childhood adversity, attachment insecurity, cumulative trauma, and online victimization, psychological assessment should adopt a developmental and ecological perspective that considers the broader psychosocial context rather than viewing cyberbullying as an isolated incident. This approach may improve diagnostic accuracy and facilitate individualized treatment planning.

Future research should continue to investigate the longitudinal pathways linking cyberbullying to psychological trauma. Although current evidence

consistently supports an association between cybervictimization and trauma-related symptoms, additional prospective studies are needed to clarify causal mechanisms, identify protective factors, and examine developmental differences across childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood. Greater attention should also be devoted to cultural diversity, gender differences, neurobiological mechanisms, and the influence of rapidly evolving digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, immersive virtual environments, and emerging social media platforms.

7. Conclusion

Contemporary evidence supports a fundamental shift in the conceptualization of cyberbullying. Rather than viewing it solely as a form of online peer aggression, cyberbullying should be understood as a potentially traumatic interpersonal experience capable of disrupting emotional development, psychological well-being, and social functioning. The literature consistently demonstrates associations between cybervictimization and anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, impaired academic functioning, self-harm, suicidal behaviors, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Importantly, these outcomes are not determined exclusively by the characteristics of online aggression itself but emerge through complex interactions involving childhood adversity, attachment patterns, coping strategies, perceived control, resilience, and environmental support. The emerging concept of digital trauma further expands current understanding by recognizing that online environments may constitute unique contexts in which chronic interpersonal trauma develops. Features such as anonymity, permanence of harmful content, unlimited audience reach, and the absence of temporal or spatial boundaries distinguish cyberbullying from many traditional forms of victimization and may intensify its psychological impact. Consequently, digital victimization should increasingly be integrated into developmental models of trauma and adverse childhood experiences. Adopting a trauma-informed perspective has important implications for prevention, assessment, and intervention. It encourages professionals to move beyond behavior-focused approaches toward comprehensive strategies that recognize victims' psychological needs, strengthen resilience, promote adaptive coping, and provide timely psychological support. As digital technologies continue to shape adolescents' social lives, integrating trauma-informed principles into schools, healthcare services, and public health policies will be essential for reducing the long-term psychological burden associated with cyberbullying and fostering healthier developmental outcomes.

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