

# The Role of Cyberbullying in Psychological Distress, Mental Health and Spiritual Health among Adolescents during Pandemic

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Cyberbullying is increasing rapidly. The new era of the world helps individuals travel across the world and communicate with each other. However, due to outbreak of the Corona Virus in 2019 created a drastic change in everyone's lives. Corona outbreak makes people live in a closed constraint and social isolation. Due to the corona outbreak and technological advancement, everyone is able to connect to every corner of the world. Around 4 in 10 adolescents are affected by any form of cyberbullying. This study aims to investigate the relationship between cyberbullying, psychological distress, mental health, and spiritual health among adolescents during a pandemic. This study is conducted through an online survey using google forms. Adolescents from age 18-21 were asked to complete the questionnaire, The form consists of demographic details, a questionnaire which measure cyberbullying, psychological distress, mental health and spiritual health. In the research study, the result shows that there is a positive correlation between cyber bullying and psychological distress. There is negative correlation between cyber bullying and spiritual health. There is a significantly negative correlation between cyberbullying and mental health. The COVID-19 has pandemic has brought increased stress and anxiety. Cyberbullying is increasing rapidly like an alarming rate. Adolescents are more prone to the internet and social media usage. Technological development has negative stressful effects on youth minds. Cyberbullying has a negative effect on an individual's mental health which leads to stress, depression, and anxiety, i.e., psychological distress.

*Keywords:* cyberbullying, psychological distress, social media usage, mental health, pandemic

Cyberbullying is increasing rapidly. The new era of the world helps individuals travel across the world and communicate with each other. However, due to outbreak of the Corona Virus in 2019 created a drastic change in everyone's lives. Corona outbreak made people live in a closed constraint and social isolation. Social distancing and isolation create room for the digital world. Due to lockdown and social restrictions, people started to accept and live in an internet world. This digital world has positive and negative effects. Social media paved the way for cybercrime or cyberstalking. This anonymous world created a track for internet-based threats and harassment. Mainly children and adolescents are more attracted to the digital world.

With the COVID-19, a novel coronavirus disease spreading across the globe, many countries have ordered the closure of all educational institutes. Educational institutions have come to a functional standstill since they had to protect their students from viral exposures, likely in a highly socializing student community.

According to UNESCO, countries must implement it by the end of April 2020, 186 countries have implemented nationwide closures, affecting about 73.8% of the total enrolled learners (UNESCO, 2020). Cyberbullying involves hurting someone else using

information and communication technologies. This may include sending harassing messages (via text or Internet), posting disparaging comments on a social networking site, posting humiliating pictures, Alternatively, threatening/intimidating someone electronically. Furthermore, it disrupts a person's mental tranquility.

Many people have been known to become depressed after being bullied. In addition, they indulge in self-harm. All the derogatory comments made about them make them feel inferior. It also results in a lot of insecurities and complexes. The victim who suffers cyberbullying in the form of harassment starts having self-doubt. When someone points at insecurities, they only tend to enhance. Similarly, the victims worry and lose their inner peace.

Research conducted by Symantec, states that 8 out of 10 individuals are subject to the different types of cyberbullying in India. Out of these around 63% faced online abuses and insults, and 59% were subject to false rumors and gossip for degrading their image. According to the survey conducted by Child, Right and You (CRY) a Non-Government Organization, 1 in 10 students has been cyberbullied.

More than 1 in 3 young adults have experienced cyber threats online and over half do not tell their parents or guardians when cyberbullying occurs (Bullying Statistics, 2013). This form of bullying can be very emotionally damaging to teens and can also have legal consequences for them and their parents (Smith-Ross, Esmail, Omar, & Franklin, 2014).

Smith et al. (2006) defined cyberbullying as an aggressive and intentional act carried out by a group or an individual using an electronic form of contacts, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend himself or herself.

Cyberbullying involves using information and communication technologies such as email, cell phones, pager text messages, instant

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messages, defamatory personal websites, and defamatory online personal polling websites to support deliberate, repeated, and aggressive behaviour by an individual or a group that is intended to harm others.

It is known that cyberbullying has various forms, from ranging flaming to harassment and cyber stalking. This entails the bully delivering disrespectful and nasty remarks to a single person or a group of people, which are frequently repeated. To torment the individual, these messages are sent during unusual hours of the day and even at night (Smith et al., 2006).

Willard (2006) defines each term:

*Flaming*: Sending rude, angry, vulgar messages privately or in an online group directed at a person or person.

*Harassment*: Repeatedly sending a person an offensive message

*Cyberstalking*: harassment that includes the threat or a highly intimidating

*Denigration*: sending or posting a harmful untrue, or cruel statement about a person to another person.

*Masquerade*: pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material that makes that person look bad or places that person in potential danger;

*Outing and Trickery*: sending or posting items about a person that contains sensitive, private, or sexual information, including forwarding private messages or images.

*Exclusion*: actions that specifically and intentionally exclude a person from an online group (Willard, 2006)

## Psychological Distress

Psychological distress refers to non-specific symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression. High levels of psychological distress are indicative of impaired mental health and may reflect common mental disorders, like depressive and anxiety disorders (Cuijpers et al., 2002). It can be assessed by self-report questionnaires and inventories to measure psychological distress symptoms. Psychological distress is a term used to explain annoying feelings or emotions that your level of functioning. In other words, it is the psychological condition that interferes with your activities of daily living. Psychological stress can lead to negative beliefs about the environment, others, and the self. Psychotic sadness, anxiety, distraction, and symptoms are signs of mental distress.

Mental distress refers to the non-specific symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression. High levels of psychological distress are indicative of impaired mental health and may reflect common mental disorders, like depressive and anxiety disorders. Psychological distress is the deviation from some objectively healthy state of being. It implies maladaptive patterns of coping. It is mild psychopathology with symptoms that are common in the community. It is negative feelings of restlessness, depression, anger, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, and problematic interpersonal relationships (adapted definition from Burnette & Mui, 1997).

## Spiritual Health

Spiritual health is defined as the state of being as the person can deal with day-to-day life in a manner that realizes one's full potential, meaning and purpose of life, and happiness from within. Spirituality is an important aspect of human life that is frequently disregarded when considering a person as a biopsychosocial entity. It entails how

people achieve what they believe to be their life's purpose, as well as a desire for meaning and a sense of belonging to the environment. It's a sacred part of the human journey. According to certain findings, the appreciation and fulfillment of spiritual values and experiences are aided by certain parts of the brain, primarily the non-dominant one (Abraham, 2004).

## Mental Health

The WHO has also expressed its concern over the pandemic's mental health and psycho-social consequences (World Health Organization, 2020). The speculates that new measures such as self-isolation and quarantine have affected people's usual activities, routines, and livelihoods, which may lead to an increase in loneliness, anxiety, depression, insomnia, harmful alcohol and drug use, and self-harm or suicidal behaviour (World Health Organization, 2020c). The lockdowns around the world have led to an increase in cases of domestic violence where women and children who live with domestic violence have no escape from their abusers during quarantine (Abramson, 2020; Chandra, 2020; Graham-Harrison et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2020)

## Review of Literature

Research conducted by Chengyan Zhu et al. (2021) was found that the prevalence rates of cyberbullying preparation ranged from 6.0 to 46.3% while the rates of cyberbullying victimization ranged from 13.99 to 57.5% based on 63 references. The prevalence rate of cyberbullying has increased significantly in the observed 5 years period.

Afzal et al. (2021) investigate the relationship between dark triad, cyberbullying, and psychological distress among adolescents. The results state that there is a highly significant positive relationship between dark triads and psychological well-being. It reveals that dark triads and cyberbullying were significant predictors of cyberbullying. It is evident that adolescents who have a high level of dark triad lead them with higher psychological distress.

Mehwihs Iftikhar et al. (2020) studied the prevalence of face-face and cyberbullying in the workplace of health care professions and their impact on job outcomes like job strain and job satisfaction, spirituality is a moderator used as anti-bullying policy in the organization to reduce the negative health impacts. The results showed that workplace and cyberbullying in health sector negatively affect job outcomes as increases job strain and decreases job satisfaction. Spirituality at work act as a moderator between workplace and cyberbullying. It states the significance of spirituality in the workplace while coping with bullying behaviour.

Fan Yang (2020) researched a web-based nationwide questionnaire survey conducted among 5608 netizens during the peak time of COVID-19 in China. The study collected cross-sectional data on participants' coping strategies, and general cyberbullying behavior specifically among residents of Hubei Province where COVID-19 case was reported. The results state that the association between emotion-focused coping and depression was mediated by cyberbullying. Emotion- focused coping was found positively correlated with cyberbullying and depression.

A study conducted by Iranzo et al. (2019) among 1062 adolescents age range between 12-18, found that cyberbullying is directly and indirectly linked to suicidal thoughts. Researchers used seven different sets of scales with different items to determine the

prevalence of different indirect and direct link to cyberbullying. Results found the significant indirect relationship of cyberbullying and suicidal thoughts. This was through perceived stress, loneliness, depressive symptomatology, and psychological relationship.

Shakir et al. (2019) conducted a study on "Do our adolescents know they are victims" studies among 539 adolescents between 11-19, the aim of this study was to determine how common cyberbullying was on social media and what the sociodemographic characteristics were. The study found that 40.6% noted that they had experienced cyberbullying and 56.4% knew someone who had been cyberbullied. It was also found that anxiety was higher in cyberbully victims compared to those who were not cyberbully victims (44.5% vs 17.1 %). Also, the study found that cyberbully victims are more likely to be younger, 14 or 15 years old and that race and gender did not appear to be a factor.

### Objective of the Study

The aim of the study is to investigate the relationship between cyberbullying, psychological distress, spiritual health, and mental health among adolescents during a pandemic.

## Method

### Participants

A total number of 100 adolescents consists of 54 boys and 46 girls from the Coimbatore city and the majority of the samples belong the workings class were selected using a convenient sampling method. The adolescents' age range from 18-21.

### Instruments

*Personal Information Form:* Researchers developed a form for participants to acquire descriptive information of them. It contains several directives to determine participants' gender, age, socioeconomic class, educational qualification and area of living.

*Cyberbullying Inventory:* The revised Cyberbullying Inventory was developed by Topcu and Erdur-Baker (2018). It consists of 18 items. The internal consistency of scores on the RCBI-II was evaluated by computing Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .80 for the cyber-victimization part and .79 for the cyberbullying part.

*Psychological Distress Scale:* The Psychological distress scale was developed by Kessler RC. It consists of 10 items. It has Cronbach's alpha was 0.85, indicating internal consistency (reliability).

*Mental Health Questionnaire:* The COVID-19 pandemic Mental Health questionnaire was developed by (Rek et al., 2021). It consists of 20 items. Internal consistency was assessed by Cronbach's Alpha and McDonald's Omega. The validity internal alpha coefficient is 0.93. It is assessed by using the manual.

*Spiritual Health Scale:* Spiritual Mental Health Scale consists of 21 items developed by Gaur (2021). The internal consistency of the scale is Cronbach alpha 0.82. The test-retest reliability score is 81.14%. It is a five-point Likert scale from never-always. The spiritual health scale measures individual's level of spiritual health, from poor spiritual health, fair spiritual health and good mental health, those who have scored 21-49, 50-77, 78-105 respectively.

### Statistical Analysis

Based on the studies, Pearson's correlation was used to analyse the relationship between the variables using the electronic version of SPSS software.

### Procedure

The data was collected using an electronic version., The Google forms were used in data collection, the form was created and circulated among the adolescents. The form was shared through Whatsapp group and emails.

## Results

**Table 1**

*Shows that the Relationship between Cyberbullying and other Variables*

	Cyberbullying	Psychological distress	Spiritual health	Mental health
Cyberbullying	1	.098**	0.157	-0.092
Psychological distress	0.098**	1	-.075	0.105
Spiritual health	0.157	-.116	1	-0.116
Mental health	-0.092	0.105	-0.116	1

Note: \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

Table 1 show that there is a significantly negative correlation between cyber bullying and mental health ( $p=-0.092$ ) was higher than 0.05. Cyberbullying has a negative impact on mental health because cyberbullies are intended to harm others which leads to poorer self-esteem, and over all well being of them. The cyberbully victims have harmed, abused and affected by the bullies to produce a feeling of helplessness. The environment factor during the COVID-19 pandemic already created stress and anxiety among the adolescents. Social distancing and lockdown paved a way for digital world, and desperately challenges the world of adolescents. Majority of them were addicted to screen its breaks the emotional connection with the reality world. Research studies show that social isolation during a pandemic leads to a more active lone in mobile phones and

laptops, which results in any form of cyberbullying.

Table 1 shows that there is a significantly positive relationship between cyberbullying and psychological distress ( $p=.098^{**}$ ). Bullying victimization was harmoniously associated with increased psychological distress all over the world, from depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation to reports of self-injury and suicide attempts.

Table 1 shows that there is a negative relationship between cyberbullying and spiritual health ( $p= -0.092$ ). Spiritual health helps an individual to find the purpose of life, self-actualization and different dimension of human beings. Spiritual health aids to manage the balance between physical, psychological, and environmental factors of human life.

## Discussion

Research has shown that there is an alarming issue in the internet and digital world. Because technology is such an essential part of their lives, limiting access to such platforms will significantly impact them. Research studies conducted by Wang (2021) state that online and offline victimization are positively associated with depression, and predicted higher possibilities of cyberbullying perpetration. Cyberbullying has a great negative influence on younger people. Cyberbullying impact the individual psychological and mental health. This study shed a light on the bullying which occurs through digital platform and those who suffered from cyberbullying has a higher risk for suicidal thoughts and loneliness.

The new era has paved a way for people's personal space is occupied with an internet and digital world. The mental health of younger generation is deteriorated because of stress, depressed state in cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is associated with anxiety, depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation, and reportedly has a stronger association with depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation than traditional bullying. The younger generation has difficulty in facing the reality and feel comfortable in hiding inside the mobile screen. This study demonstrates that adolescents had difficulty in finding themselves and their purposes in life. The overall well-being of a human being who belongs to adolescents age group is under psychological distress. Lastly, the intervention plans can be implemented to reduce psychological distress and improve the spiritual, mental, and overall, well being of adolescents. The social isolation and social distancing during pandemic COVID-19 breakdown has a major impact in individual life and affects their mental health. In this age of social media, the Coronavirus pandemic has an exciting feature: individuals are being bombarded with rumours and misinformation that are not true or validated.

With a rapid and near-constant stream of news stories about an outbreak, such rumours and unauthenticated information induce worry, anxiety, and stress. Spiritual health deteriorates among adolescents where the individual does not understand their purpose of life and peace in life. Spiritual health also helps adolescents to keep their life in balance which it leads to self-actualization. Spiritual health is an important aspect of everyone's life, whereas adolescents need to improve their spiritual well-being for a better future and a better nation.

## Conclusion

In the era, we are in the cage of the digital world, this study helps to investigate the relationship between cyberbullying, psychological

distress, spiritual health, and mental health among adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. It demonstrates that cyberbullying is tremendously growing among adolescents, Cyberbullying is a form of electronic bullying where an individual can easily affect their mental health and increase depressed mood or symptoms of depression and anxiety. This study shed light on the importance of spiritual health and mental health where we need to improve these among adolescents for the development of our nation.

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Received June 6, 2022

Revision received June 16, 2022

Accepted June 17, 2022