

IMPACTS OF CYBERBULLYING ON ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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Abstract: Objective: Analyze and synthesize recent evidence on the impacts of cyberbullying on adolescents' mental health. Methods: A literature review was carried out using the PubMed database with the terms "cyberbullying", "adolescent mental health", and "psychological effects". The initial search returned 44 articles, of which 13 were selected after applying inclusion and exclusion criteria. Review: The studies reviewed indicate that cyberbullying is linked to several adverse consequences for adolescents' mental health, such as increased rates of depression, anxiety, aggression, substance use, academic problems, self-harm and suicidal ideation. It is also noteworthy that the perpetrators of these actions may suffer negative psychological effects, although to a lesser extent. Resilience and support from parents and teachers emerge as crucial protective factors. Final Considerations: This study highlights the severity of the damage caused by cyberbullying to the mental health of adolescents and emphasizes the importance of involving parents and teachers in supporting and guiding these young people, highlighting the need for preventive and supportive interventions.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Teenagers, Mental Health.

INTRODUCTION

In the current digital era, the use of social networks has been largely driven by rapid technological advances, resulting in a significant increase in internet access by the global population. Studies indicate that in the United Kingdom, 99% of children between 12 and 15 years old have access to social media; in the United States, 88% of teenagers have easy access to a computer, and 95% use multiple platforms through smartphones (Kwan et al., 2020). These digital platforms, which facilitate the sharing, editing and recreation

of artistic content, connect people of different ages and cultures through messages, photos and videos, integrating them into a complex virtual network (Balt et al., 2023).

However, the expansion of social media use brings significant challenges, especially for teenagers, an age group that is going through important physical and emotional changes and whose well-being can be profoundly impacted by online interactions (Wahid et al., 2022). Unlike adults, who generally have a clearer understanding of online dynamics and what information must or must not be shared, many young people do not demonstrate this distinction as clearly. This contributes to the increase in incidents of cyberbullying, an intentional and repeated form of electronic aggression carried out by an individual or group against victims who are often unable to defend themselves effectively (Lin; Xiao, 2023). The prevalence of cyberbullying varies significantly, with rates ranging from 4.8% to 73.5%, and cyber victimization between 2.2% and 56.2% (Li et al., 2022).

This emerging phenomenon has generated growing concerns among parents and guardians, as cyberbullying can seriously compromise the mental well-being of teenagers. Cybervictimization can become a threatening and persistent experience due to the ubiquitous nature of information on the internet (Brighi et al., 2019). Furthermore, research has shown that prolonged time on social media is directly correlated with a greater risk of cyberbullying victimization, which in turn is associated with adverse consequences such as sleep changes, weight loss, lack of appetite, depressive thoughts, panic attacks, among other mental health problems (Lin; Xiao, 2023; Samsudin et al., 2023).

The complexity of the motivations behind cyberbullying is still a subject of study. Some researchers suggest that bullies may be

victims of traditional bullying that replicate aggressive behavior online, while others point to internet trivialization and personal reasons as possible causes (Lin; Xiao, 2023). Given the increase in social media exposure among young people and the clear association between cyberbullying victimization and the development of depression and anxiety, it is crucial to study the consequences of cyberbullying and explore effective intervention and prevention strategies (Gohal et al., 2023; Kwan et al., 2020).

Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze and synthesize the most recent evidence on the effects of cyberbullying on the mental health of adolescents, with the aim of understanding the extent of the problem and identifying effective approaches to mitigate its negative impacts and improve the mental health of this population. vulnerable.

METHODOLOGY

This literature review was developed using the PVO strategy, which represents the Population or Research Problem, Variables and Outcome components. The guiding question that guided the investigation was: "What is the impact of cyberbullying on adolescents' mental health, and how are these effects being addressed in current scientific literature?"

The target population for this review consisted of adolescents exposed to cyberbullying. The focus was to analyze the impacts on the mental health of these individuals and the possible psychological effects resulting from this exposure. To collect pertinent data, a search was carried out in the PubMed database, using specific descriptors in combination with the Boolean operator "AND". The terms used were "Cyberbullying", "Adolescent mental health" and "Psychological effects". The initial search identified 44 articles.

The inclusion criteria adopted were: articles in English, published in the last 10 years, that addressed the themes of interest in this research and that were available in full, including bibliographic reviews, meta-analyses and observational studies. Abstracts that did not directly address the topic investigated and articles that were not freely available were excluded from the analysis.

After rigorous application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 13 relevant articles were selected from the PubMed database to compose the collection of the present study. This careful selection ensured that the literature review comprehensively and in-depth addressed the effects of cyberbullying on adolescents' mental health, as discussed in current scientific literature.

DISCUSSION

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF CYBERBULLYING IN ADOLESCENTS

The study by Kwan et al. (2020), which adopted the systematic review methodology, analyzed studies addressing the relationship between cyberbullying and mental impacts on young people, identifying depression, suicide, anxiety, aggressiveness, substance use, loneliness and dissatisfaction with life as the most prevalent findings. In agreement, Balt et al. (2023) describe that victims of cyberbullying have an association with self-harm and suicidal ideation, according to the conclusion of two meta-analyses.

Albdour et al. (2019) observe that the advancement of increasingly sophisticated media and programs facilitates the perpetuation of cyberbullying. Additionally, the fact that such an experience occurs on social media and in public, and not in private chats, contributes to a scenario of greater cruelty, since hiding the identity of the aggressor intensifies the

impact. Therefore, a new perspective on social networks is extremely necessary, as they may be the reason why young victims of cyberbullying are at higher risk of mental disorders (Li et al., 2022).

Considering that social networks are a common online environment for aggression to occur, and that prolonged internet use is associated with an increased frequency of cyberbullying, as pointed out by Li et al. (2022), it is important to clarify how adolescents interact with this technology and the impacts that this excessive involvement can have. In the study by Balt et al. (2023), about the causes that led the young people analyzed to commit suicide, excessive use and dependence on social networks were reported from the moment when people close to them noticed anxiety about being offline, missing conversations and online content, in addition mood swings and weakening of interpersonal relationships.

As highlighted by Tian, Yan and Huebner (2018), worldwide attention is focused on the potentially serious consequences of cyberbullying and cyber victimization, where, despite victims presenting negative psychological results, it is worth analyzing that the negative commitment also extends to the aggressors. Several studies show that those who commit cyberbullying also report higher levels of depression and anxiety, as well as low psychological well-being. However, much of this evidence uses a cross-sectional methodology, which limits the results to the field of associations, rather than establishing definitive causes. The analysis of longitudinal studies suggests that those who practice cyberbullying have a lower mental impact than victims.

Based on the negative repercussions on all teenagers involved with cyberbullying, it is clear that the victims are the most mentally affected, according to the studies analyzed.

However, in addition to the negative impact of cyberbullying, whether as an aggressor or victim, Albdour et al. (2019) innovate by addressing that suicidal thoughts and attempts are more prevalent in aggressors than in young people not involved in virtual aggression. Furthermore, aggressors have more reports of involvement in physical aggression and use of alcohol and tobacco than victims and adolescents not related to cyberbullying.

Complementing the impact on victims, the meta-analysis by Li et al. (2022) examined the combined and isolated effect of traditional bullying (TB) and cyberbullying (CB), concluding that victims of CB alone have greater risks of psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-mutilation and academic dysfunction, when compared to those who suffered TB alone or a combination of the two. And, although the prevalence of TB is still higher, two thirds of young people who suffered cyberbullying have also suffered TB, demonstrating that aggression when migrated to cyberspace is continuous and can be perpetuated.

Therefore, it is evident that both victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying face severe psychological impacts, and it is crucial to address these effects appropriately and in a timely manner to prevent more serious consequences such as anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders (Tian, Yan, Huebner, 2018).

CYBERBULLYING INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES

According to a review of the literature, it is clear that children and adolescents with high levels of resilience tend to present fewer symptoms of depression and higher rates of satisfaction with life. Santos et al. (2021) state that cyberbullying is strongly associated with depression, one of the most frequent internalized disorders with

serious consequences among adolescents. Hellfeldt, López-Romero, and Andershed (2020) observed that, across gender, boys showed higher levels of cyberbullying and subjective well-being compared to girls, who demonstrated higher levels of anxiety and social support from friends.

Santos et al. (2021) also associate cyberbullying with the likelihood of suicidal ideation among young people. This theory is corroborated by Balt et al. (2023), who, in a study carried out in the Netherlands, found that 81 teenagers who committed suicide in 2017 were involved in situations of online abuse, such as cyberbullying, encouraged self-harm, online sexual abuse, and online challenges that encouraged suicide. Thus, 23.45% of the cases analyzed were related to traumatic events online.

Given these data, it is essential that strategies to combat cyberbullying are studied and disseminated globally. Resilience is identified as a crucial protective factor to reduce the impacts on victims of cyber attacks, as it is associated with a better state of mental health, according to Santos et al. (2021). Brighi et al. (2019) also analyzed the impact of resilience in coping with cyberbullying, finding that it acts as a protective mediator against emotional symptoms, especially in boys who showed less resilience and, consequently, more emotional symptoms.

Another factor analyzed was age. Hellfeldt, López-Romero and Andershed (2020) found that older people had more depressive symptoms than younger people, while Brighi et al. (2019) observed that older people resorted more to direct confrontation, attributed to greater knowledge about the virtual world.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Han, Wang, and Li (2021) highlighted that loneliness plays a crucial role in cyberattacks related to cyberbullying, with an increase in domestic violence and cyberbullying against

children. The experience of being a victim of cyberbullying in childhood can lead to loneliness until adulthood, with support from parents, teachers and friends being an essential protective factor to reduce the impacts of involvement in cyberbullying and the feeling of loneliness. Support from parents and teachers significantly reduces victims' chances of experiencing depressive symptoms and anxiety, and improves subjective well-being.

Finally, according to Lin and Xiao (2023), although the internet offers immediate access to information and expansion of knowledge horizons, its effects on cognition, emotions, attitudes and behaviors can be harmful due to online anonymity and secrecy, making cyberbullying an important social issue, characterized by repetitive, aggressive and harmful behaviors based on the feeling of impunity provided by the online environment.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This review confirms that cyberbullying negatively affects the mental health of adolescents, associated with prolonged internet use and anonymity on social networks. Serious consequences, including depression, panic attacks, self-harm and suicide, were highlighted, especially among boys, who demonstrate less resilience. The prevalence and emotional impact of cyberbullying point to the need for more studies. It is essential to develop awareness campaigns that treat cyberbullying as a serious problem, not just a joke among teenagers. It is also vital to involve parents and educators in actively supporting victims and preventing this phenomenon, recognizing its potential impact on future adult health.

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