OPINION

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Cyberbullying in Contemporary Media Culture: An Opinion Piece

Neelam Shah*

Kingston University, Holmwood House, Grove Crescent, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey KT1 2EE, UK

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*Corresponding Author
Neelam Shah
E-mail: neelams92@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant issue in contemporary media culture, with social media platforms serving as the primary vehicles for this form of abuse. This study aims to investigate the psychological causes and effects of cyberbullying, focusing on the underlying psychological theories and the role of social media and gender in cyberbullying dynamics. **Methods:** The study is divided into three main sections. The first section defines cyberbullying and its prevalence in the digital age. The second section analyzes key psychological theories, including Self-Esteem Theory, General Strain Theory, Social Rank Theory, Norm Theory, and Routine Activity Theory (RAT), as applied by scholars such as Hinduja and Patchin, Hawker and Boulton, Veenstra, and Blumfeld, to understand the motivations behind cyberbullying. The third section examines the impact of social media platforms and gender on cyberbullying, utilizing statistics from surveys and reports to assess which social media sites are most associated with cyberbullying and which genders are more frequently involved as victims or perpetrators. **Results:** The analysis reveals that low self-esteem, social strain, perceived social rank, and the absence of social norms significantly contribute to the likelihood of individuals engaging in cyberbullying. Social media platforms with high user engagement are identified as hotspots for cyberbullying activities, with variations observed across different platforms. Gender analysis indicates that while both males and females are involved in cyberbullying, there are distinct patterns in who is targeted and who perpetrates the abuse. **Discussion:** The findings suggest that psychological factors play a crucial role in cyberbullying behaviors, with social media acting as a catalyst. The study underscores the importance of understanding the psychological motivations behind cyberbullying to develop effective interventions. Additionally, the gendered nature of cyberbullying requires targeted strategies to protect vulnerable populations. **Conclusion:** This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the psychological theories underlying cyberbullying and the influence of social media and gender. It highlights the need for further research and the development of preventive measures to address the growing issue of cyberbullying in contemporary media culture.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, social media, Psychological Theories, Self-Esteem, General Strain Theory, Gender effects, Online Harassment, Media Culture, Social Ranks and Norm theory and RAT theory.

Introduction

In an age where digital communication dominates our interactions, the rise of cyber bullying has emerged as a pressing concern that demands urgent attention. Cyber bullying, defined as the use of electronic communication to bully a person, has become increasingly prevalent, particularly among young people. As social media platforms continue to evolve, they serve not only as tools for connection but also as breeding grounds for harassment and abuse. This opinion piece argues that understanding the psychological underpinnings of cyber bullying is crucial for developing effective prevention strategies and fostering a safer online environment.

The Psychological Landscape of Bullying

As its core, cyber bullying is reflection of deeper psychological issues. The motivation behind this behaviour often stem from factors such as low self esteem, social strain and the desire for social dominance. Psychological theories such as Self esteem theory and social rank theory provide valuable insights into why individuals engage in cyberbullying. For instance, individuals with low self esteem may resort to bullying as a means to elevate their social status among peers. This dynamic not only perpetuates a cycle of abuse but also highlights the need of interventions that address these psychological issues. Moreover, the anonymity afforded by digital platforms exacerbates the problems.

1.1 Social Rank Theory

Hawker and Boulton (2001) utilise the *Social Rank Theory* and argue that 'individuals who have aggressive behaviour hold a *power*, *higher rank or status within a social group*'.

Therefore, bullying and aggression maybe strengthened and provides those individuals who are aggressive a sense of belonging. Hawker and Boulton expressed that peer victimisation serves a number of roles. According to Warren Blumenfeld (2010); 'First it establishes and maintains *social hierarchy* within a group (an "*in group*") and second it maintains differences between members of the in group, from members of other groups' ("*out-groups*").

1.2 Social Learning Theory

Tershjo and Salmivalli (2003, pg135) 'argue that those who cyberbully achieve the social function of initiating and strengthening social norms.' They discovered that students often rationalise bullying behaviors by blaming the victims of their attacks and signifying that they deserve the bullying and peer aggression or in that some way they diverge from the peer social norms.

Social Learning Theory also referred to as *Social Cognitive Theory*, as Bandura (1986) proposes that 'individuals learn by watching others behave.' People's principles, perceptions and attitudes are greatly impacted by peers and co-workers.

Psychologists refer to the term '*Levelling effect'* to describe bullies that want to degrade others to escalate their own egos reflecting on their own insecurities. Therefore, the '*Levelling effect'* has a psychological impact on bullies. In connection to cyberbullying (Suler, 2001) refers to the '*online disinhibition effect*'. Blumenfeld (2010) states 'Cyberbullying is a particularly cowardly form of bullying.' (Blumenfeld, 2010). Cyberbullies can conceal their identities in the cyber world. With anonymity, cyberbullies have no fear of being punished as they do not have to be accountable for their actions. The technology can also hide the user from feedback from consequences of one's actions which can result in minimum remorse and empathy for the victim. The people who engage in cyberbullying cannot see the reactions of their victims on the other end of the message in terms of intonation of their voice, body language. Therefore, they can inflict pain without having to see the effects. According to Blumfeld (2010) 'Bloombecker (1990) who has investigated cyber related crimes found that denial of responsibility is a significant factor leading to computer abuse.'

1.3 The Social Norms Theory

It is based on how behaviour is often influenced by opinions of how other members of a social group thinks and acts. *Social Norms Theory* involves intervention methods that are meant to rectify misperceived social norms. According to Blumenfeld; '*Social Norms Theory* in many contexts has proven to be effective in empowering those that oppose an unhealthy or abusive behaviour, as well as empowering by standers who are aware of negative behaviours but feel powerless to intervene.' (Blumenfeld, 2010)

1.4 Both Rational Choice Theory and Self Control Theory

These were used to explain cyberbullying. Sameer Veenstra (2011) argues that '*Rational Choice Theory* states that aberrant conduct is the result of costs and benefits whereby the benefits outweigh the costs. The research that supports the theory, due to the low risks of bullying online, cyberbullies feel free from constraints on their behaviour.' To establish why some young people, make the decision to bully online while others do not, *Self- Control Theory* was used. According to Veenstra (2011) 'this theory assumes that engagement in *deviant behaviour* depends on a person's extent of *self- control*.

Consistent with the theory, the results indicate that cyberbullies have less *self-control* than non-cyberbullies.'

1.5 Routine Activity Theory (RAT)

This was used to explain victimisation. The *RAT theory* state there has to be a connection of likely offenders, targets and an absence of parents/guardians for cyberbullying to occur. Veenstra (2011) states; 'firstly, the results indicate that motivated bullies are present in *cyberspace*. Furthermore, victims seem to be suitable targets: they spend significantly more time online and use Instant Messaging significantly more than non-victims. Finally, parents of victims are less capable to protect their children from cyberbullying than parents of non-victims.'

1.6 Self esteem

The theory evolving around *self-esteem* and bullying systematically finds that victims of bullying tend to have lower self-esteem than non-victims. Downs and Leary (1995) imply that;

'*self-esteem* to be an inner depiction of *dismissal* and *social non-acceptance and* a *psychologica*l *instrument* recording the degree to which an individual is excluded vs. Included by others.'

These two concepts undermine the fact that *self-esteem* is seen as a perception- one's belief as to their personal value affected by one's participation in the social world- where often interpersonal disputes occur that lead to behaviour such as bullying. The connection between bullying offending and *self-esteem* is much less systematic.

According to Hinduja and Patchin (2010) 'Studies have found evidence to suggest that bullies tend to have higher 7, 8 and lower 9, 10 *self-esteem* levels than non-bullies'. There is also research stipulating there are no significant distinctions between bullies' self-esteem and victims. This point is supported by Hinduja and Patchin (2010); 'research has constantly found that bully's relationship to *self-esteem* is less strong than among victims.'

1.7 General Strain Theory (GST)

Another popular contemporary *Criminology Theory* used by many sociologists- is the *General Strain Theory (GST) -* to subscribe to what is known about the elements connected with both online and offline bullying. The *General Strain Theory* implies that individuals who experience strain as a result of that strain feel frustrated or angry are more at risk to engage in criminal or aberrant behaviour.

Young people were more likely to engage in bullying and cyberbullying who reported anger/vexation or strain. According to Hinduja, Patchin (2010) Agnew (2000) suggests experiencing strain, he argues 'makes us feel bad; that is, it makes us feel angry, frustrated, depressed, anxious, and the like. These bad feelings create pressure for corrective action; we want to do something so that we will not feel so bad.'

According to Hinduja and Patchin (2010) 'bullying online or offline is one such corrective action is youth that experience strain might consider and acquire'. The *General Strain Theory* argues that individuals who experience strain and its effects of negative emotions are more likely to engage in aberrant behaviour- such as bullying and cyberbullying. The next paragraph will look at traditional bullying in non-virtual spaces and cyberbullying in virtual spaces.

Cyber bullies can hide behind screens, allowing them to inflict harm without facing immediate consequences. This disconnection from their victim's emotional responses dimishes empathy and accountability creating an environment where harmful behaviours can flourish unchecked. Understanding this psychological disinhibition is essential for crafting strategies that encourage accountability and foster empathy for users.

The Role of Social Media

Social media platforms have revolutionised communication but have also facilitated new forms of bullying. Research indicates that certain digital platforms, such as social media networking sites Facebook and Twitter, are hotspots for cyber bullying incidents. The persuasive nature of these platforms that victims cannot escape the harassment, leading to severe psychological consequences. It is imperative that social media companies take responsibility for creating safer online spaces by implementing stricter policies against bullying and providing resources for victims. Additionally, educational initiatives must be prioritised to raise awareness of the impact of cyberbullying. Schools should incorporate comprehensive programs that educate students about digital citizenship and the importance of respectful online behaviour. By fostering a culture of empathy, kindness and respect from an early age, we can work towards reducing the incidences of cyberbullying.

2. Results
2.1 Research conducted

Two surveys conducted by Smith and his colleagues Smith et al., (2008) in the UK found that 'cyberbullying was more common outside of school than in school and less prevalent than traditional bullying.'

Traditional bullying was easier to tackle by teachers in non-virtual spaces such as playgrounds inside schools than cyberbullying, due to the increase of social media and more young people are using virtual spaces such as the internet as a mechanism to bully from outside of school. The virtual space has become a world for cyberbullies and victims.

'*Happy Slapping*' is one of the UK's most popular form of cyberbullying. This form of cyberbullying involves groups of teens hitting and beating victims, filming these actions and posting them online. Other forms of peer cyberbullying included denigration, impersonation, outing and trickery, exclusion/ostracism and cyber stalking. Also cyberbullies create bulletin boards and websites containing photos of a classmate and inviting demeaning insults, sexual comments and ratings to be posted and viewed by an infinite cyber audience. As well as taking pictures of victims, filming them and modifying the photographs to represent sexually graphic images, uploading them online and inviting comments from a worldwide audience. The next few paragraphs will be examining the role that social media plays in *cyberbullying*.

'The report, published by national anti-bullying charity Ditch the Label, sampled 10,008 young people aged between 13 and 22 and found that levels of cyberbullying were much higher than previously reported. 69% of youth' are targeted by cyberbullying.' Daily Express (2013) this shows that more young people are facing cyberbullying crimes on the internet.

The survey said Facebook, Ask.fm and Twitter were found to be the most likely sources of cyberbullying, and '54% of those using Facebook reported cyberbullying on the network.' The national anti-bullying survey (2013) this indicates that web.20 is the main factor of cyberbullying and facebook seems to be one of the worst platforms to be cyberbullied on. The next paragraph will look at examples of cyberbullying victims.

Gender dynamics in cyber bullying

Another critical aspect of cyberbullying is its gender nature. Studies reveal distinct patterns in how different genders experience and perpetrate cyberbullying. While both males and females are involved in these dynamics, the methods and motivations often differ. For instance, girls may engage in relational aggression through exclusion and spreading rumours, while boys may resort to overt forms of aggression.

Recognising these differences is vital for developing targeted interventions that address the unique experiences of various groups.

Programs aimed at preventing cyberbullying must consider applying these gender dynamics to effectively support all victims and reduce instances of any forms of bullying behaviour.

Gender differences exist in the way teenagers perceive cyberbullying. Initial research indicates that 'boys may be more likely to hack into others systems and engage in online name calling'. Dehue, et al., Lenhart (2008) argue that 'Girls on the other hand are more likely than boys to gossip in cyber space and likely to spread rumours online.'

Initial evidence for gender differences in physical forms of cyberbullying comes from examining emotional responses to cyberbullying. Hinduja and Patchin, (2009) found that 'girls are more likely to feel frustrated whereas boys are more likely to feel scared following cyberbullying, and they suggest that this difference may result from boys being subject to more online physical threats.

In terms of different media forms used to cyberbully, girls often reported being bullied through text messages and email than boys. As Luke Gilkerson (2012) states that '38% of online girls report being bullied, compared with 26% of online boys. In particular, 41% of older girls (15-17) report being bullied—more than any other age or gender group'.

According to Smith, P., et al; (2006). 'In June/July 2012, a questionnaire In the UK was designed and returned by 92 students aged between 11-16 years, across 14 different London schools. The questionnaire looked at the different types of cyberbullying experiences in and outside school, distinguishing between seven forms of cyberbullying. These included text message bullying, phone call bullying, email bullying, picture/video clip bullying, bullying through instant messaging and via websites. The questionnaire found that 'girls were significantly more likely to be cyberbully victims than boys especially through text messages and phone calls. Girls were more likely to be both cyberbullied and bullied in school than boys.' Smith, P., et al; (2006). In all cases girls had reported a greater degree of victimisation than boys.

Furthermore, girls were more exposed to cyberbullying via text messages and phone calls, the two methods of cyberbullying found to be the most dominant among school children.

Girls' involvement in being cyberbullied is consistently higher than boys, with girls reporting greater victimisation through all cyberbullying mediums with the exception of website and picture/video clip bullying. The next and final paragraph will look at adults and celebrities who had been affected by cyberbullying with examples.

We see more and more a person's entire life displayed on social media from birth to death. Cyberbullying does not only affect young people by young people, it can affect anyone at any age. For example, a mother In the US had

posted pictures of her baby daughter on facebook; she had received some horrible comments and remarks about her baby girl from other mothers. Also, many celebrities such as Ellen Page, Melanie Griffiths, Australia's next top model host Charlotte Dawson, singer Cheryl Cole have all been attacked on twitter with threats from internet trolls who made rude comments on how they look etc. This shows that cyberbullying occurs almost anywhere in homes, at work, in the neighbourhood etc. across the globe and from all different types of people.

Conclusion: A call to action

Cyberbullying is not a fleeting issue; it is a pervasive problem that affects countless individuals across the globe. As we navigate this digital landscape, it is crucial to prioritise understanding the psychological factors at play and the role social media have in facilitating bullying behaviours. By fostering empathy and kindness and implenting stricter policies on social media, and addressing gender dynamics within bullying contexts, we can create a safer online environment for everyone. The time has come for society, parents, educators, policy makers and tech companies to unite in combating cyberbullying.

Through collaborative efforts and a commitment to understanding this complex issue, we can pave way for a future where online interactions are characterised by respect and kindness rather than hostility and fear.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article. This article is the sole work of the author and has not been presented or published elsewhere.

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Biographical Statement of Author

Neelam read BA honours International Relations with Researching Media Cultural Studies, Social Sciences in 2014.

She graduated with Masters in Psychoanalysis in 2017 at Kingston University. Neelam is currently a remote Social researcher/Consultant for MMC economics and finance and statistics, freelance Mental Health Researcher for MQ Mental Health, Early careers Researcher for Smarten Kings College London, Research Scholar, Academic Journal Writer, academic mental health journal reviewer for PLOS mental health web of science.

She is currently a social scientist for web of science/ academic/ volunteers board of trustee/ academic essay writer/ blogger/ Poet/children's author, and works as a part time researcher for Civil Consultancy CIC and acts as a journal reviewer for Nature Journals.

She loves volunteering and campaigning for animal welfare and human rights and environmental welfare world-wide charities.

In her spare time, she likes visiting science/history/ art galleries museums/ exhibitions, reading, tutoring online, playing key board, badminton, table tennis, hiking, learning extra curricular courses, languages and online skills.

She also loves fine art drawing, painting, digital photography, producing and creating digital mood boards, 2D Photoshop interactive animations/documentary making/ producer.

Ms. Neelam Shah
Kingston University,
Holmwood House,
Grove Crescent, Kingston upon Thames,
Surrey KT1 2EE, UK.
E-mail: neelams92@yahoo.co.uk