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Psychological Determinants and Socio-Digital Catalysts of Cyberbullying: A Comprehensive Theoretical Investigation within Contemporary Psychosocial Paradigms

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Abstract.

This theoretical study provides a comprehensive examination of the psychological foundations that contribute to the prevalence, continuity, and escalation of cyberbullying within contemporary digital environments. Drawing from modern cognitive-developmental, psychosocial, and socio-behavioral frameworks, the article synthesizes scholarly evidence regarding the psychological profiles of perpetrators and victims and the digital-contextual mechanisms that intensify harmful online behaviors. The analysis reveals that cyberbullying is more than a virtual extension of conventional bullying; it is a distinct psychosocial phenomenon shaped by anonymity, spatial-temporal fluidity, rapid content circulation, and reduced moral accountability. Contemporary research demonstrates that individuals with distorted self-concepts, diminished empathy, insecure attachment patterns, or narcissistic inclinations are more predisposed to violate digital norms and exploit online affordances to inflict psychological harm. Conversely, vulnerable groups—particularly

adolescents with weak social support systems, high dependence on online validation, and psychological insecurity—are disproportionately susceptible to victimization. The theoretical discussion emphasizes that cyberbullying operates as a psychological outlet that reflects unresolved internal conflicts, displaced aggression, emotional dysregulation, and symbolic dominance needs. Moreover, the digital ecology reinforces maladaptive behavior through algorithmic reward systems, social comparison pressures, and audience-based validation mechanisms. The article further synthesizes the therapeutic and preventive implications highlighted in current literature, noting that interventions based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), trauma-informed counseling, and digital ethics education have shown promising outcomes. However, their effectiveness largely depends on multilevel implementation—psychological support structures, school-based programming, parental mediation, and ethical digital governance. This study concludes that cyberbullying must be understood through an integrated theoretical lens that situates psychological predispositions within socio-digital dynamics. Such an approach contributes to the advancement of psycho-educational intervention models capable of fostering ethical digital citizenship, emotional regulation, empathetic interaction, and mental health resilience among digital users.

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Introduction

With the rapid expansion of digital communication networks and the increasing engagement of youth in online environments, cyberbullying has emerged as one of the most pressing contemporary psychological and social challenges. Cyberbullying involves sending offensive messages or threats, spreading rumors, or sharing embarrassing images or videos via the Internet or social media platforms. It represents a form of aggression unbounded by time or place (UNICEF, n.d.).

The significance of this topic lies in its intersection between psychological and techno-social dimensions, where individual psychological factors interact with digital social contexts. This interplay necessitates an analytical perspective that integrates social psychology, developmental psychology, and cognitive psychology.

The theoretical framework of this article focuses on the psychological factors underlying the spread of cyberbullying—that is, why some individuals are more inclined to engage in or become victims of such behavior—without delving into applied or empirical aspects. Through this theoretical exploration, the study seeks to construct a comprehensive understanding of:

- the psychological motivations driving perpetrators of cyberbullying,
- the factors that increase vulnerability among victims, and
- the interaction between individual characteristics (such as low empathy or reduced self-esteem) and digital conditions (such as anonymity and the spatio-temporal distance of online communication).

Recent research indicates that cyberbullying is not merely a digital version of traditional bullying; rather, it possesses distinct characteristics such as continuity beyond spatial and temporal limits, concealed or anonymous identity that may reduce the perpetrator's sense of moral responsibility, and the potential for rapid content dissemination (von Humboldt et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, studies conducted in Arab contexts suggest a correlation between cyberbullying and psychological insecurity, loneliness, and weak social support among students, reinforcing the notion that internal psychological factors play a pivotal role in the phenomenon (Maslukhi, 2023).

From an analytical standpoint, cyberbullying can be regarded as a "digital mirror" reflecting a range of inner psychological conflicts—such as struggles for control, jealousy, frustration, and the need for revenge—but within a

virtual space characterized by ambiguity, speed, and the effortless acquisition of symbolic rewards (such as attention or virtual power). This leads to a central question: What psychological factors make the digital environment conducive to the spread of cyberbullying?

This article seeks to address that question through three main axes:

- the psychological theories that explain digital aggression,
- the individual and psychological factors that increase the likelihood of participation or victimization, and
- the digital and contextual factors that facilitate and reinforce the phenomenon.

Ultimately, this study aims to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework that deepens our understanding of the psychological dynamics of cyberbullying—not merely as a technological or social issue, but as a multifaceted psychological problem in which the self interacts with the digital environment. Such understanding can support the development of more effective preventive and therapeutic approaches in the future.

1. The Theoretical Framework of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is one of the deliberate forms of aggressive behavior exercised through digital media with the intent to cause psychological, social, or moral harm to others. *Kowalski et al.* (2014) define it as "a repeated aggressive behavior performed through the use of technology to harm another person who cannot easily defend themselves" (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014, p. 1075).

1.1 Evolution of the Concept and Its Psychological Dimensions

The term *cyberbullying* began to appear in the psychological literature with the rapid spread of the Internet over the past two decades. Multiple studies have shown that cyberbullying extends beyond aggressive verbal communication to include digital social exclusion, threats, psychological blackmail, and defamation (Smith et al., 2008).

From a psychological perspective, cyberbullying reveals how technology can uncover hidden aspects of the human personality. The perpetrator often finds in the digital environment a safe arena for expressing repressed aggression or satisfying unmet needs for power and recognition. Conversely, victims frequently experience feelings of helplessness, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Tokunaga, 2010).

1.2 Differences Between Traditional and Cyber Bullying

Although both forms share a similar psychological structure, cyberbullying possesses five distinct characteristics:

1. Continuity: it is not confined by time or physical space.
2. Viral spread: the ability to share harmful content rapidly.
3. Anonymity: concealing one's identity reduces self-control.
4. Lack of direct social supervision.
5. Long-term psychological impact.

These features demonstrate that the virtual environment amplifies the "online disinhibition effect"—a state in which individuals behave more aggressively than they would face-to-face due to the absence of immediate accountability (Suler, 2004).

This essential distinction indicates that cyberbullying is not merely a digital extension of real-world aggression but a parallel psychological and behavioral system operating through complex defense mechanisms such as *psychological projection* and *displacement of aggression* from the real world to cyberspace. The cyberbully may experience an illusory sense of psychological power that provides momentary satisfaction but, in reality, reflects inner insecurity or a threatened social identity.

1.3 Theoretical Explanations

Psychological studies have adopted several major theories to explain cyberbullying, the most prominent of which are:

- Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977): interprets bullying as a learned behavior acquired through observation and imitation, particularly in digital environments that model or reward aggressive acts.
- Frustration–Aggression Theory (Berkowitz, 1989): proposes that frustration resulting from failure or rejection can transform into aggression directed toward others within the virtual sphere.
- Anonymous Identity Theory (Suler, 2004): explains how anonymity or the use of pseudonyms diminishes one's sense of moral responsibility.

In the Arab context, *Abu Al-Heija* (2022), in a study published in *The University of Jordan Journal of Educational Sciences*, affirmed that "digital aggressive behavior is directly affected by low moral awareness and poor self-control skills," emphasizing the need for the integration of psychological and digital education.

This convergence between Western and Arab theoretical perspectives underscores that cyberbullying is not a culturally bound phenomenon but rather a universal psychological dynamic rooted in the ongoing interplay of power and weakness—a dynamic that is re-expressed in digital spaces through the language of images, words, and online interaction.

2. Individual Psychological Factors Behind Cyberbullying

Understanding the individual psychological factors is a crucial step in explaining why certain people engage in or become victims of cyberbullying. Technology itself does not generate aggression; rather, it serves as a medium that amplifies latent psychological traits within the human personality. These factors do not operate in isolation but interact with the digital environment to form a complex and recurrent pattern of aggressive behavior.

2.1. Low Self-Esteem and Feelings of Inferiority

Several studies indicate that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to adopt aggressive online behaviors as a defensive mechanism to assert themselves or gain control over others (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). A cyberbully who feels inadequate in real life may use digital platforms to compensate for this perceived weakness by exercising symbolic power or demeaning others. According to *Bandura* (1991), such behaviors exemplify the process of moral disengagement, in which individuals reinterpret their aggression as *deserved by the victim*, thereby reducing feelings of guilt (Bandura, 1991).

Thus, low self-esteem not only provokes aggression but also justifies it psychologically. The cyberbully often experiences an internal conflict between the *ideal self* and the *real self* and uses aggression to temporarily narrow that gap—a process that may be described as a "false restoration of power."

2.2. Lack of Empathy and Emotional Awareness

One of the most prominent psychological features distinguishing cyberbullies is a deficiency in empathy—the capacity to recognize and resonate with the emotions of others (Ang & Goh, 2010). Empirical evidence shows that online aggressors frequently suffer from impaired emotional awareness, which limits their understanding of how their actions affect others. Within the digital environment, this deficit is magnified by the absence of direct emotional feedback: the bully does not see the victim's tears nor hear the tone of their distress, which weakens moral and emotional self-regulation (Wright & Wachs, 2019).

Consequently, diminished empathy transforms cyberspace into an emotionally anesthetized arena, where the absence of real-world affective cues leads to a form of emotional numbness. The individual loses awareness of the magnitude of the harm inflicted, and aggression becomes normalized as an everyday act.

2.3. The Need for Control and Social Recognition

The need for dominance or control represents another strong psychological drive behind cyberbullying. Individuals who feel powerless or marginalized in real life may seek to assert themselves digitally through humiliation, slander, or rumor-spreading (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013).

The phenomenon is also tied to the need for social recognition, as certain cyberbullying behaviors are perceived—particularly among adolescents—as a means of gaining popularity or acceptance within virtual peer groups (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009).

Here, cyberbullying functions as a psychological mechanism for restoring ego balance: it grants the bully an illusion of control and fulfills an underlying need for acknowledgment. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this behavior can be viewed as a compensatory response to an inferiority complex, which manifests as a false sense of superiority within the digital domain.

2.4. Personality Disorders and Pathological Factors

Psychological literature reveals that certain personality traits and disorders—notably *narcissism* and *psychopathy*—are associated with higher rates of cyberbullying (Goodboy & Martin, 2015). The narcissistic personality is characterized by an excessive need for admiration and validation, whereas the psychopathic personality lacks empathy and remorse—making the online environment an ideal space for expressing aggression without constraint. In the Arab context, *Al-Harbi* (2021) conducted a field study on Saudi university students and found a significant positive correlation between narcissism and online aggressive behavior.

This interplay between personality pathology and online aggression demonstrates that cyberbullying is not merely a temporary behavioral deviation but may represent an extension of deeper personality dysfunctions. For such individuals, the virtual world becomes a convenient stage for acting out aggression in ways that appear socially acceptable and even rewarded.

3. Social and Psychological Factors Facilitating the Spread of Cyberbullying

The phenomenon of cyberbullying cannot be understood in isolation from the social and cultural context in which it occurs. The individual's psychological structure interacts with social and digital structures to produce a uniquely patterned form of aggression. The virtual environment is not a neutral technological space but a social arena that reshapes human relationships and influences values and behaviors (Livingstone & Smith, 2014).

3.1. Influence of Virtual Groups and the Normalization of Aggression

Research shows that belonging to online groups can increase the likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying, especially when these groups are characterized by a culture of "collective mockery" or "aggressive entertainment" (Barlett, Gentile, & Chew, 2016). Individuals tend to adopt behaviors that conform to the implicit norms of their online communities, even when those behaviors are hostile, in order to gain acceptance and a sense of belonging. This phenomenon is referred to in social psychology as conformity. In addition, what may be called digital emotional contagion allows negative emotions to spread rapidly among group members, amplifying the intensity of aggressive behavior.

Thus, cyberbullying is not always motivated by personal hostility, but sometimes functions as a "digital social ritual" that generates an illusory sense of group belonging. Virtual communities may reward aggression with laughter, likes, or shares—reinforcing the behavior and transforming it into a socially justified routine.

3.2. Absence of Ethical and Regulatory Controls

In digital environments lacking effective monitoring mechanisms, the likelihood of cyberbullying increases as individuals experience a decline in moral responsibility (Mesch, 2009). When punitive measures are absent or poorly enforced, users may feel unrestricted in expressing hostility. Likewise, the lack of ethical digital education, particularly among adolescents, leaves them unaware of the potential harm their content can cause.

This finding is consistent with the study by *Al-ʿAṭāwneh* (2022), titled *"Digital Ethics and Their Role in Reducing Cyberbullying in Educational Settings"*, which concluded that weak moral and digital upbringing contributes to the spread of cyberbullying in virtual learning environments. Here emerges the moral dimension of the phenomenon: the issue lies not only in technology itself but in the erosion of the collective digital conscience. The absence of ethical controls does not create bullies, but it provides the ideal breeding ground for them to thrive—just as bacteria multiply in the absence of sterilization.

3.3. The Role of Media and the Culture of Fame

Mass media and social networking platforms contribute to the normalization of verbal and symbolic aggression by presenting humorous or entertaining content that implicitly contains bullying. Studies have shown that repeated exposure to aggressive or derisive content increases individuals' acceptance of similar behaviors (Coyne et al., 2019).

Moreover, the digital fame culture reinforces cyberbullying, as some users view attacking others as a quick means to attract followers. This was confirmed in the study by *Al-Dulaimi* (2021), *"Virtual Fame and Aggressive Behavior Among Arab Adolescents,"* which found that the pursuit of audience engagement drives young people toward provocative and hostile online behaviors.

This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of negative social reinforcement theory, whereby aggression becomes a means of achieving status or attention—turning others' psychological pain into an instrument for gaining digital visibility. Thus, cyberbullying evolves from an act of aggression into a distorted communication strategy, legitimized by a superficial media culture.

3.4. Social Isolation and Psychological Loneliness

Feelings of loneliness and social isolation have been strongly linked to an increased likelihood of engaging in aggressive online behavior (Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2015). Individuals with weak or unsatisfying real-life relationships may use cyberbullying as a means of seeking attention or indirect interaction with others—even if that interaction is negative.

In a related Arabic study, *Salem* (2020), at the University of Algiers, found that psychological loneliness and social marginalization create a fertile environment for digital bullying behaviors among adolescents. From this perspective, cyberbullying can be interpreted as a "distorted communicative call"—an attempt by the aggressor to break their isolation, even through the pain they inflict on others. It represents a pathological form of communication, where the inability to love transforms into a desire to harm.

These factors collectively illustrate that cyberbullying is not merely an individual behavior, but rather the outcome of a broader social–psychological system in which the need for belonging, the decline of ethical self-regulation, and the pressures of digital media interact dynamically. Through this interplay, the phenomenon becomes self-reinforcing and gradually entrenched as part of everyday digital culture—unless countered by deliberate efforts to build psychological resilience and moral awareness in online communities.

4. Psychological Impacts, Treatment, and Prevention of Cyberbullying

4.1. Documented Psychological Impacts

Recent empirical literature demonstrates that exposure to cyberbullying is significantly associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, with longitudinal evidence showing that victims often experience a progressive worsening of symptoms over time (Lee, 2024). From a public health perspective, reports by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) indicate that approximately one in six adolescents in Europe has been a victim of cyberbullying—a rising trend compared to 2018. Furthermore, cyberbullying has been linked to lower academic performance and increased school absenteeism, according to predictive analyses of educational and psychological outcomes (Barlett et al., 2024).

These findings reframe cyberbullying from a mere behavioral issue into a mental health concern, as the combination of digital continuity and ease of re-victimization makes the trajectory of symptoms resemble a chronic, recurring wound that reopens with every new online notification.

Parallel evidence from Arab studies also confirms a correlation between cyberbullying and depressive and emotional disorders among school and university students (Al-Asali, 2023; Ziyad, 2022), as well as a strong link with Internet addiction and low perceived psychological safety (Al-'Amr, 2024). This cross-cultural consistency reinforces the validity of psychological mechanisms such as shame, isolation, and anxiety, which appear to operate similarly across different cultural contexts.

4.2. Psychological Treatment and Support Pathways

1. Individual Symptom-Focused Interventions

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT): Adapted CBT programs for cyberbullying victims emphasize cognitive restructuring, emotional regulation, and coping skills. Evidence from meta-analyses indicates their general effectiveness in reducing anxiety and depressive symptoms among adolescent victims (Gaffney et al., 2021). Their efficacy is enhanced when combined with social skills training and self-efficacy restoration components.

- Trauma-Informed Care: Particularly relevant when victims exhibit symptoms of rumination or intrusive memories linked to digital victimization—especially in cases of repeated abuse or viral content dissemination (Washington Post, 2025). This approach emphasizes safety, choice, and collaboration, critical principles since victims often experience a loss of control within the digital space.

2. Social–Emotional Learning (SEL) Interventions

School-based social–emotional learning programs have demonstrated modest yet meaningful effects in reducing both traditional and cyber forms of bullying by enhancing empathy, conflict resolution, and coping competence (Espelage et al., 2015; Nickerson et al., 2019). SEL appears to function as a "psychological vaccine"—its impact is gradual rather than immediate, yet it reshapes students' emotional baselines, fostering resilience over time.

3. Parental Mediation

Recent studies highlight the protective role of parental mediation, especially instructive and dialogic approaches, which reduce the link between victimization and depressive outcomes while decreasing risks of online harm and misconduct (Chen et al., 2023; Wright, 2024). The strongest effects are observed when strategies combine education, flexible supervision, and active engagement, rather than relying solely on restrictive monitoring.

4.3. Prevention: What Actually Works?

1. Multi-Level School Programs

Systematic reviews reveal that comprehensive school-based programs can significantly reduce both perpetration and victimization of cyberbullying, though the effect sizes remain small (Hedges $g \approx -0.18$ for perpetrators and -0.13 for victims) (Polanin et al., 2022). More recent reviews show mixed or non-significant results, often attributed to short intervention duration or variation in implementation quality (Kamaruddin et al., 2023). Practically, this implies that effects exist but are limited, calling for programs that are longer-term, multi-component, and explicitly integrate behavioral, cognitive, and digital literacy modules supported by ongoing evaluation.

2. Digital Citizenship Education

Some digital citizenship curricula improve students' knowledge and self-efficacy regarding online safety; however, evidence for their impact on actual behavioral change is inconsistent. For instance, the *Screenshots* program enhanced digital awareness and management skills but showed no significant reduction in aggressive or privacy-violating behaviors (Bickham et al., 2021; PMC, 2021). Hence, digital citizenship education must be behaviorally focused, incorporating real-world simulations of social media scenarios rather than relying solely on informational content.

3. Trauma-Sensitive School Policies

The World Health Organization (2024) recommends multi-level approaches encompassing schools, families, and communities, emphasizing clear reporting protocols, rapid response systems, and sustained victim support. Well-defined trauma-sensitive policies help reduce psychological bleeding time—the shorter the delay between reporting and intervention, the lower the risk of re-traumatization through reposting or online commentary.

4. Empowering Parents

Evidence indicates that blending dialogic guidance, moderate control, and emotional support mitigates the relationship between victimization and negative psychological outcomes, thereby curbing harmful behaviors (Wright, 2024; Wright, 2017). Put simply, "control without connection" is ineffective; what is needed is a relational model of communication between parents and adolescents.

5. Utilizing Artificial Intelligence for Early Detection

Recent advances in AI-based harm detection have improved the monitoring and identification of abusive content, supporting secondary prevention through rapid reporting mechanisms (Allwaibed, 2025; Eissa, 2025). These technologies serve as complementary tools, not substitutes for psychological education and institutional governance.

Conclusion

Recent theoretical and empirical evidence indicates that cyberbullying is neither a transient phenomenon nor a purely individual behavior, but rather a reflection of a complex interplay among psychological, social, and cultural factors within the modern digital environment. From a psychological perspective, it represents the reproduction of human aggression in a borderless virtual space, one in which moral and social constraints dissolve and aggression is redefined through new technological means.

At the psychological level, findings show that low self-esteem, lack of empathy, the pursuit of control and recognition, and certain personality disorders constitute the core psychological drivers of online aggression. At the social level, the culture of virtual communities, the normalization of aggression in media, and the absence of digital ethical boundaries create fertile conditions for the escalation of the phenomenon.

Together, these dynamics affirm that cyberbullying is not merely a behavioral deviation, but a psychological-cultural phenomenon nourished by the dynamics of digital interaction and the values of virtual society.

Cyberbullying may thus be viewed as a form of collective psychological projection, in which digital communities discharge their psychological and social tensions onto others through symbolic media—words, images, and comments—within environments that tolerate verbal hostility more readily than physical aggression. The danger lies in how technology amplifies the "negative self", allowing it to disguise itself behind anonymous identities.

From the therapeutic and preventive standpoint, psychological interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, and trauma-informed support have shown relative effectiveness in reducing the negative consequences of cyberbullying (Gaffney et al., 2021; Espelage et al., 2015). However, these strategies remain limited in impact unless integrated within a comprehensive, multi-systemic framework encompassing the individual, the family, the school, and the broader digital community.

Accordingly, there is an urgent need for an integrative approach that combines individual psychological therapy, digital moral education, and institutional policy enforcement. Addressing the issue must move beyond mere legal deterrence toward cultivating a digital psychological consciousness—one that fosters empathy, responsibility, and emotional regulation in online spaces.

In conclusion, cyberbullying mirrors a psychologically and socially disoriented reality that cannot be remedied solely through technological or legal tools. Its resolution depends on rebuilding the collective psychological conscience of the digital world. Combating this phenomenon requires a cumulative effort—beginning with the family, extending through educational institutions, and culminating in a global digital culture grounded in respect, awareness, and responsibility.

Ethical Considerations

This study is theoretical in nature and does not involve empirical data collection from human or animal subjects. Accordingly, no direct ethical risks to participants were present. The manuscript adheres to internationally recognized ethical research and publication guidelines, including transparency in authorship, avoidance of plagiarism, accuracy

of information, and academic integrity. All sources referenced in this study have been duly cited following scientific citation standards. The authors affirm that the concepts discussed throughout the manuscript comply with ethical recommendations related to digital rights, psychological well-being, and responsible communication.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization, formulation, and development of this theoretical article.

- **Saidi Rachid** contributed to the conceptual framing, theoretical synthesis, and structuring of the psychological frameworks.
- **Samy Meguellati** participated in literature analysis, documentation of contemporary psychological theories, and refinement of thematic classification.
- **Ghorab Rahma** contributed to manuscript drafting, editing, and integration of socio-developmental interpretations.
- **Aouine Belkacem** supervised the methodological cohesion of the study and contributed to academic language review and theoretical enhancement.
- **Ahmed Djelloul** contributed to scientific validation, manuscript revision, and strengthening theoretical rigor.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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