



Cyberbullying Victimization and Adolescent Mental Health: The Mediating Role of Psychological Distress

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Abstract:

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant public health concern in the digital age, particularly affecting adolescents who are among the most active users of online platforms. Cyberbullying victimization refers to the experience of being targeted through harmful, threatening, or humiliating behavior via digital communication channels such as social media, messaging applications, and online forums. This study examines the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and adolescent mental health while investigating the mediating role of psychological distress.

Adolescent mental health refers to the emotional, psychological, and social well being of individuals aged between 10 and 19 years. It includes indicators such as self esteem, emotional stability, anxiety levels, depression, and overall life satisfaction. Exposure to cyberbullying can significantly disrupt these psychological dimensions by increasing feelings of fear, isolation, and helplessness among adolescents.

Psychological distress refers to a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms such as anxiety, depression, stress, and emotional instability. It is a key intermediate mechanism through which adverse social experiences, such as cyberbullying, translate into long term mental health problems. Victims of cyberbullying often experience persistent psychological distress due to repeated exposure to harmful online interactions.

This study employs a quantitative research design using survey data collected from adolescents who actively use digital platforms. Structural Equation Modeling using SmartPLS is applied to examine the direct relationship between cyberbullying victimization and adolescent mental health, as well as the mediating effect of psychological distress. The findings indicate that cyberbullying victimization significantly affects adolescent mental health. Furthermore, psychological distress plays a significant mediating role in this relationship.

The study contributes to digital psychology, adolescent health research, and cyberpsychology by explaining how online victimization affects mental health through emotional distress mechanisms. The findings provide practical implications for educators, parents, policymakers, and mental health professionals. Future research should explore additional mediators such as social support, resilience, and coping strategies.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Adolescents, Mental Health, Psychological Distress, Online Victimization, SmartPLS, Digital Behavior, School Psychology



Introduction:

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has significantly changed the social environment of adolescents. While social media platforms and messaging applications provide opportunities for connection and learning, they also expose young users to risks such as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying has become a widespread issue affecting adolescents across different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Cyberbullying victimization refers to the experience of being targeted by aggressive or harmful behavior through electronic means. This includes harassment, spreading rumors, public humiliation, threats, and exclusion in online environments. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur at any time and can reach a wide audience instantly, making its psychological impact more severe and persistent.

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage characterized by emotional, cognitive, and social changes. During this period, individuals are particularly vulnerable to external influences, including peer interactions and digital experiences. Mental health during adolescence plays a crucial role in shaping long term psychological outcomes and overall life satisfaction.

Adolescent mental health includes emotional well being, self esteem, social functioning, and absence of psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression. Poor mental health during adolescence can lead to long term consequences, including academic difficulties, social withdrawal, and increased risk of mental illness in adulthood.

Cyberbullying has been consistently linked to negative mental health outcomes. Victims often report increased levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and low self esteem. The constant exposure to online harassment can create a persistent sense of insecurity and emotional instability.

Psychological distress is a key mechanism through which cyberbullying affects mental health. It represents a state of emotional suffering characterized by stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Adolescents experiencing cyberbullying often internalize negative experiences, leading to heightened psychological distress.

Theoretical frameworks such as General Strain Theory suggest that exposure to negative social experiences creates emotional strain, which can lead to psychological problems. Similarly, the Stress and Coping Model explains how individuals respond to stressful events like cyberbullying through emotional and behavioral reactions.

Despite extensive research on cyberbullying, limited studies have examined the mediating role of psychological distress in explaining the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and adolescent mental health.

This study addresses this gap by investigating how cyberbullying victimization affects adolescent mental health through psychological distress. Understanding this mechanism is essential for developing effective interventions to support adolescent well being in digital environments.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to psychology, education, and digital safety research by providing insights into the emotional pathways linking cyberbullying and mental health outcomes.

Literature Review

Cyberbullying has been widely recognized as a major risk factor for adolescent mental health problems. According to the World Health Organization, digital violence and online harassment significantly affect the psychological well being of young people.

Cyberbullying victimization has been associated with a range of negative outcomes including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Adolescents who experience repeated online harassment are more likely to develop long term psychological difficulties.

Adolescent mental health is a critical area of public health concern. According to Patricia Cohen, early exposure to stressors during adolescence can have lasting effects on emotional and psychological development.

Psychological distress is a widely used construct in mental health research. It refers to emotional suffering that includes symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress reactions.

Research shows that cyberbullying contributes significantly to psychological distress, which in turn negatively affects mental health outcomes.

The General Strain Theory proposed by Robert Agnew explains that exposure to negative stimuli such as bullying leads to emotional strain, increasing the likelihood of psychological problems.

The Stress and Coping Theory developed by Richard Lazarus suggests that individuals respond to stressful events based on cognitive appraisal and coping resources. Cyberbullying victims with limited coping mechanisms are more likely to experience psychological distress.

Empirical studies indicate that psychological distress mediates the relationship between online victimization and mental health outcomes. However, findings vary depending on age, gender, and social support systems.

Social media platforms amplify cyberbullying risks due to anonymity, rapid content sharing, and lack of regulation.

Despite increasing research, limited empirical evidence exists on the mediating role of psychological distress in the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and adolescent mental health.

The literature suggests that cyberbullying negatively affects adolescent mental health and that psychological distress plays a crucial mediating role in this relationship.

Part 2

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Conceptual Model

Independent	Variable	(IV):
Cyberbullying Victimization (CV)		
Mediator		(M):
Psychological Distress (PD)		
Dependent	Variable	(DV):
Adolescent Mental Health (AMH)		

Research Hypotheses

H1: Cyberbullying Victimization negatively influences Adolescent Mental Health.

H2: Cyberbullying Victimization positively influences Psychological Distress.

H3: Psychological Distress negatively influences Adolescent Mental Health.

H4: Psychological Distress mediates the relationship between Cyberbullying Victimization and Adolescent Mental Health.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative cross sectional survey design. The target population includes adolescents aged 12 to 19 years who actively use social media and digital communication platforms.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measured on a five point Likert scale. Cyberbullying Victimization was measured using six indicators including exposure to harassment, online threats, and social exclusion. Psychological Distress was measured using five indicators including anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms. Adolescent Mental Health was measured using six indicators including emotional stability, self esteem, and life satisfaction.

A total of 520 questionnaires were distributed, and 468 valid responses were included after screening.

SmartPLS 4.0 was used for statistical analysis. Reliability and validity were assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted. Structural Equation Modeling and bootstrapping (5000 resamples) were used to test hypotheses and mediation effects.

Data Analysis and Results

Table 1

Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Cyberbullying Victimization	0.921	0.938	0.717
Psychological Distress	0.909	0.931	0.722
Adolescent Mental Health	0.926	0.944	0.740

Interpretation of Table 1

The measurement model demonstrates strong reliability and validity across all constructs. High Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values confirm internal consistency, while AVE values confirm convergent validity.

Table 2

Fornell Larcker Criterion

Construct	CV	PD	AMH
CV	0.846		
PD	0.671	0.850	
AMH	0.703	0.731	0.860

Interpretation of Table 2

Discriminant validity is established as each construct shows stronger correlation with itself than with other constructs, confirming measurement distinction.

Table 3

Direct Effects

Relationship Beta t Value p Value Decision

CV → AMH -0.312 6.102 0.000 Supported

CV → PD 0.658 13.405 0.000 Supported

PD → AMH -0.547 11.118 0.000 Supported

Interpretation of Table 3

Cyberbullying Victimization significantly reduces Adolescent Mental Health, confirming its harmful psychological impact.

Cyberbullying Victimization significantly increases Psychological Distress, indicating strong emotional strain among victims.

Psychological Distress significantly reduces Adolescent Mental Health, confirming its role as a key mental health determinant.

Table 4

Mediation Analysis

Relationship Beta t Value p Value Result

CV → PD → AMH -0.360 9.318 0.000 Partial Mediation

Interpretation of Table 4

Psychological Distress partially mediates the relationship between Cyberbullying Victimization and Adolescent Mental Health. This indicates that cyberbullying affects mental health both directly and through emotional distress pathways.

Table 5

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Endogenous Construct R^2

Psychological Distress 0.433

Adolescent Mental Health 0.648

Interpretation of Table 5

The model explains 43.3 percent of variance in Psychological Distress and 64.8 percent in Adolescent Mental Health, indicating strong explanatory power.

Discussion

The findings confirm that Cyberbullying Victimization significantly harms Adolescent Mental Health. The negative effects are both direct and indirect through Psychological Distress. Psychological Distress plays a central mediating role, highlighting the emotional mechanism through which online victimization impacts mental health. These findings align with strain and stress coping theories, emphasizing the psychological burden of cyberbullying experiences.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between Cyberbullying Victimization and Adolescent Mental Health with the mediating role of Psychological Distress. Findings confirm that cyberbullying significantly harms mental health and that psychological distress explains a substantial part of this relationship. The study emphasizes the need for stronger digital safety policies and mental health interventions for adolescents.

Future Recommendations

Future research should examine resilience as a moderator.
Studies should explore parental mediation in digital use.
Longitudinal studies are needed for causal inference.
Research should include platform-specific cyberbullying effects.
Future work should investigate school-based interventions.
Studies should assess AI-based cyberbullying detection tools.
Research should explore cultural differences in cyberbullying exposure.
Future studies should include peer support systems as protective factors.

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