# Prevalence of Cyber Bullying and its Effect on Adolescents: A Literature Review

| Fouzia Parveen* | Abid Shahzad † | Sobia Altaf‡ |

**Abstract**    *While forms of traditional bullying have been declining over the past two decades, cyber bullying has emerged as a modern form of bullying in recent times. Previous research studies have not been developed much on the issue of cyber bullying. The current study reviews the relevant research studies as the excessive usage of social media and by young people and different themes have been carried out from the help of the existing literature. The present study has synthesised current literature on: i) prevalence of cyber bullying among adolescents ii) huge level of cyber bullying occurrences in educational institutions iii) people who are more prone to be the victims and perpetrators iv) effects of cyber bullying on adolescence v) preventive measures for the wellbeing of Pakistani adolescents. In this article, the researcher reviews the literature related to cyber bullying conducted between the years from 2000 to 2019.*

**Key Words**: Cyber Bullying, Effect, Adolescents, Literature

## Introduction

In recent times, many high-profile adolescent suicides have created a stir globally and have attracted many public eyes to an old problem in a new disguise: bullying. This long-standing problem has been emerged in the form of a new high-tech issue: cyber bullying (Finkelhor, 2014; Molcho et al., 2009). It has appeared as one of the major apprehension among teachers, parents and many other working folks and professionals (Willard, 2007).

## Bullying: Then and Now

According to several researchers, bullying has been with us from ages as break, lunch, and the travel by bus to school. Many empirical studies have been done on this subject from many decades (D Olweus, n.d.; Dan Olweus, 1978, 1994, 2003, 2012; Dan Olweus & Limber, 2018). In recent times the tradition concept of bullying has started to change. According to Molcho et al., (2009), the international time trends, bullying has reportedly been declined among 11 to 13 years and 15 year old students in terms of harassment and bullying between the years 1993 and 2005; dominant in the participating countries that includes United States as well. In this study bullying means enactment of bullying behaviours and the victimization means those folks who are on the other end of this bully behaviour as a receiver. In another relevant study, it has been established the same descending trends and inclinations in bullying behaviour in adolescents in different nations that includes England, United States and Australia (Rigby & Smith, 2011).

In an annual survey in United States, National Crime Victimization Survey has showed 74% downward trend in violence victimization related to school between the years 1992 and 2010 among 12 to 18 years old students. This survey also showed 84% downward trend in theft related to school (Finkelhor, 2014, Finkelhor, 2013). The National Crime Victimization Survey has showed a 29% decline in the rate of students who had become the victim of hate speech in the school settings. So, it appears as student victimization and bullying have a downward trend and inclined more sharply for the boys than the girls in United States (Molcho et al., 2009).

*PhD Scholar, Department of Education, The Islamic University Bahawalpur, Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

† Assistant Professor, Department of Education, The Islamic University Bahawalpur, Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: abid.husain@iub.edu.pk

‡ PhD Scholar, Department of Education, The Islamic University Bahawalpur, Bahawalpur, Punjab, Pakistan.

Despite the fact that the rate of victimization and bullying has been declined over the past two decades, the problem of bullying among adolescents who are living in US is still far too dominants. The age groups of 11 to 15 year olds, it has been reported that out of ten youngsters respectively victimize boys than girls is facing occasionally in 2005- 2006 and roughly one youth out of ten has been reported prolonged victimization (Molcho et al., 2009). Many research studies showed that 6 to 17 year respondents have stated that approximately 25% respondents have reported that they were got bullied at least once in a month (Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros, & Oppenheim, 2012).

**Prevalence of Cyber bullying**

As the traditional bullying has been declining over the past two decades, a different kind of bullying has evolved and with the availability of web, different cell phones and different social media cites and podiums, all have spread across the industrialized nations (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross, 2009). However, the cases related to the cyber bullying are still less in numbers than the cases related to traditional kinds of bullying (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009; Wang et al., 2009; Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014).

A national study has shown that 6 to 17 years old had been bullied on Internet at least once (Ybarra, et al., 2012a). In another study related to bullying have demonstrated that a sample of different internet users from 10 to 17 year olds have been a victim of constant bullying on internet. It was reported that harassment via internet has been over the course over the course of the time as the above mentioned report has said, 83% in the earlier decade, 6% in the year 2000 and 9% in 2005 and then 11% in 2010 (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013).

When the researchers take a deeper look they concluded that the actual rates are much higher when it comes to cyber meanness (Park, Na, & Kim, 2014).  For example in one of the studies which was organized on national level, showed that approximately 56% youngsters aged from 14 to 24 have exposed to verbal and oral abuse via social media sites and many of them have said that such experiences were so disturbing and at times horrific for them (AP-MTV, 2011). In another research study that was conducted by Pew Research Centre, approximately 88% teens that used social media, from 12 to 17 years had been experienced many other people being so mean and malicious when they interacted them they used social media websites (Lenhart, et al., 2011).

Now it has been a proven fact and many researches have shown that bullying behaviour and cyber bullying have a strong link with personality development as various psychologists have presented many theories related to personality development and adolescence.

The prevalence of cyber bullying and its impact on youth has hardly been studied even though it has been anecdotally happened on Internet particularly on online match making and dating websites, i.e. harassment in different forms and hidden and masked identities.

**Adolescence**

Adolescence brings one of the great changes in the personality development phases. It is the time when physical changes occur faster than any other stage of development. However it should be not be forgotten that adolescence is not just a phase of different changes physically but also faces many other changes as change in cognition, emotional and social change, interpersonal and intrapersonal change are more evident. It is not only marked by external changes but many internal changes as well. As humans grow, they absorb numerous things from their environment and get influenced by them (Bester, 2007). There are many outside elements that affect young people including influence of parents, siblings, home, community, school, and peers greatly. Religion, cultural values, ethics and moralities, different events happened in the world and the things media has portrayed, also have a huge impact on the development during the adolescence years (Spano, 2004).

**Theories**

There are numerous theories related to adolescence development (Bailey, 1993). Every theory has its own focus and uniqueness and emphasises on different elements. However, many elements are pretty much similar across the theories.  Therefore, it is an undeniable fact that every adolescent is completely a different individual with different personality traits and interests from one another. Every teenage come across different developmental

problems in different phases during adolescent (Park et al., 2014; Schenk, 2011; Willard, 2007). A renowned psychologist, Erikson had drawn a different picture that is positive and explains all phases of development with the help of Freud's theory of psychosexual (Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981). In his theory that is called psychosocial, Erikson placed sexual and aggressive instincts in a broader perspective. He also supplemented many stages of adulthood and became one of the pioneers who saw personality development as a lifelong effort (Mearns, Thorne, & McLeod, 2013). Erikson believed that at every stage of development, a conflict or a psychosocial predicament must be confronted and first-hand skills developed in this manner (Franz & White, 1985).

## Psychosocial Explanation of Personality Development:

Eric Erikson in (1959, 1963 & 1968) has been an influential writer who proposed the psychosocial stages of development and talked about various challenges that the adolescents face (Selkie, Kota, Chan, & Moreno, 2015). One of the challenges described by him includes the search of an identity. According to his theory, the adolescents develop their personal identity at the stage termed as identity-maturity versus identity-confusion stage. Perceptions of personal strengths and weaknesses also develop during this stage. During pre-adolescence years the Internet generates a kind of sense through which one can explore his or her own identity. Though, in adolescence, it becomes a way of bullying in both traditional and virtual ways.

Peer relationships become important in addition to parental relationships and contribute to the emotional and social and progress of adolescents (Fantuzzo & Rohrbeck, 1992; Fogarty & Wang, 1982; Greenwood et al., 1984; Shahzad, Valcke, & Bahoo, 2012; Slavin, 1990; Zeichner, 2013). Therefore, positive peer relations become critical to positive self-identity. Forms of social aggression such as cyber bullying threaten the positive identity of an adolescent and may harm the healthy self-development thus creating problems like depression (Vogt & Johnson, 2011) .
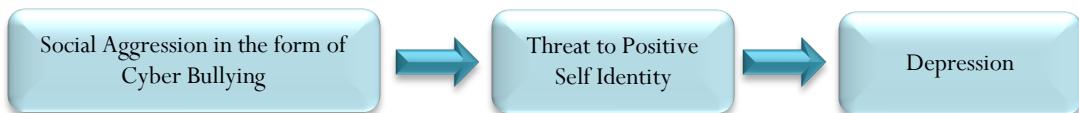


**Figure 3:** Model of Erikson's Psychosocial Development
(Vogt & Johnson, 2011)

## Effects of Cyber Bullying

Research studies have reported that cyber bullying causes a serious threat to the victims (Bester, 2007; Fahy et al., 2016; Nixon, 2014; Dan Olweus, 1994; Young, Subramanian, Miles, Hinnant, & Andsager, 2017). The victims reportedly had low- self-esteem, suicidal behaviour with a lot of emotional imbalance in personality that includes being frightened, frustrated, depressed and fuming (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014).

After many research studies about cyber bullying, it has been proven that traditional ways of bullying are not as harmful and dangerous as cyber bullying, since there is no avoidance of it (King et al., 2011.). It is also reported that one of the most devastated things is that the one who becomes the victims started fearing to face people including friends and in some cases family members. The victim starts to avoid taking part in different activities that is most often the prime intention of the one who bully.

Few research studies have shown the symptoms of depression and suicidal behaviour among adolescents (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; John et al., 2018; Smith, 2012; Von Marées & Petermann, 2012). Data from youth Risk Behaviour Survey that included 15,425 students (high school) has shown that 15% of them, who became the victim of cyber bullying, have made attempt for suicide as compared to those high school students who were not cyber bullied (Messias, Kindrick, & Castro, 2014). In one of the studies that was a meta-analysis, it was discovered that cyber victims were more prone to suicidal behaviour than those who were not the cyber –bullies (John et al., 2018).  Another research related to cyber bullying had found that emotional intelligences also had a link with suicidal behaviour. It was said that suicidal behaviour and thoughts were cushioned by emotional intelligence (Extremera, Quintana-Orts, Mérida-López, & Rey, 2018).

A sample of 1,6660 adolescents with a much higher emotional intelligence scores from Spain, were having lesser suicidal behaviour, and had higher self- esteem in comparison to those adolescents who were not having high scores when it comes to emotional intelligence (Extremera et al., 2018).  Various research studies related to many suicides of adolescents caused by cyber bullying have attracted many eyes globally. In one of the studies, the researchers did a content analysis of around 189 newspaper articles about the suicides caused by cyber bullying and discovered that many articles did not stick to the instructions and guiding principles given as preventive measures against suicidal behaviour (Young et al., 2017).

In many high school students, different psychiatric warning signs have reported about those students accused of cyber bullying. A study on Turkish students (1276 student), has found high scores regarding bullying and violent behaviour that was considerably associated with the depression, hostility and anxiety low self- esteem scores (Tural Hesapcioglu & Ercan, 2017).  A sample of 2480 adolescents from UK in a longitudinal study, 14% participants were reported as victim of cyber bullying, 8% were as cyber bullies and approximately 20% were reported as victims as well as cyber bullies (Fahy et al., 2016).

It has been reported in many research studies that cyber victims and cyber bullies are more prone to have social anxiety and acute depression than those who were neither a victim nor a bully. In a review of 35 research studies related to social media, the prevalence of cyber bullying was approximately of 23% (Hamm et al., 2015).

Meta-Analysis could not have been done, as the related studies were homogeneous in methodology and outcomes. Cyber bullying is considerably related to depression and generally to social anxiety and different issues in relationship to peers and others. Students have said that they do not believe that anyone could do something in order to control the situation.

## Internalizing and Externalizing

Many symptoms of Internalizing and externalizing have been found in different studies (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2015). A study of 28,104 school going children conducted in 58 schools, have said that 5% students were being bullied via cyber and approximately 50% of them had not only internalizing  (ratio=1.25) but externalizing (ratio= 1.25) the problems as well.

Cyber bullying has various effects on both victims and the bullies, for instance those adolescents who were reportedly being bullied, demonstrated many symptoms of depression, social anxiety, and suicidal behaviour including somatic symptoms. Surprisingly the cyber bullies also told having many disturbing effects as self-reported aggression, felonious behaviours and substance use (Nixon, 2014).

## Cyber Bullying and Gender Differences

Cyber bullying is also having an impact on gender differently.  A sample comprised of 31,148 students from 6th and 12th grade, cyber bullying was found as a major indicator of emotional after the structural equation analysis

In a sample of 31,148 students in grades 6-12, structural equation analyses yielded cyber bullying as a substantial predictor of emotional imbalance for female and problems related to behaviour for males, while dealing with others (Kim, Colwell, Kata, Boyle, & Georgiades, 2018). The results of the study and the association between them are not shocking or surprising as male students more frequently complain about cyber bullying than female students. Their numbers are often higher than the female when it comes to cyber bullying. As research have said that cyber bullying is directly associated with behavioural problems i.e. aggression, social isolation and criminal behaviour.

The recent literature considers gender differences in terms of cyber bullies and adolescents who have been the victims of cyber bullying. Many research reports show that there are significant gender differences; however, some reports say that there are no gender differences. In one of the studies no difference found was found as 8.6% of students were reported as being the victims of cyber bullying (Schenk, 2011).

## Preventive Measures

To prevent cyber bullying in adolescents the following measures can be taken:
1) Different programs should be introduced to prevent cyber bullying. Such programs should be introduced in the curriculum of the school. Detailed instructions and guidelines on the proper usage of internet should

be included in the curricula (Walther, 2012). These measures would make the victims learn those ways that could protect them from being cyber bullied i.e. block the unwanted and unwelcoming messages. They could also enhance the security of the computer they use if they want.

Teachers can play a vital role in this regard as they can discuss openly to their students about the issue of cyber bullying. Teachers should take part in all the preventive educational mock-ups. At many times the victim does not report about the cyber bullying because the victim thinks nothing could be done. But if students will be introduced with preventions and pay more attention in the classroom, teachers can solve the issue by providing proper assistance. Therefore the trio of victim, teacher and parents can find out the way out (Von Marées & Petermann, 2012).

2)  Cyber bully act should be taken serious and the person who involves in such activity. The school should restrict the access of social media and networking web sites while banning mobile phones in school premises.

3)  For any incident of cyber bullying happened at school, a serious act should be taken and the culprit should be given punishment according to the severity of the act. It should be reported to the police station as priority.

4)  There should be legislative efforts to take control of the current situation regarding bullying and cyber bullying. Many efforts have been made in USA to pass the legislative bill to prevent cyber bullying.

5)  There should be proper discussions with stakeholders and informative seminars should be conducted in schools and introduce a systematic way to file the complain about the deeds of cyber bullying.

**Conclusion**

The present study has reviewed the existing literature on cyber bullying among adolescents and finds many research gaps in it. Though not much research has been done on the subject of cyber bullying globally, it has also not been done much in the context of Pakistan. Hence, more research should have been done for the awareness of this epidemic like situation. Therefore, we all need to understand this comparatively new phenomena cyber bullying and should know the risk factors i.e. as bullies, being bullied and victims, posing for the adolescents, the most vulnerable among online users. The study has also documented the effects of cyber bullying. Suicidal thoughts, depression, low self- esteem, aggression, social loneliness, emotionally imbalance personality are some of them which have been reviewed. This is prerequisite for the stakeholders and legislative bodies including law enforcement agencies to take immediate steps to get our youth out of the turbulent situation caused by cyber bullying. It is also needed to make our children understand the circumstances in which they must stand up straight and voice their sound loud and clear in order to fight this silent killer. In this study many preventive measures have also been suggested to cope with cyber bullying. School interventions are very significant in this regard.

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