



Research paper

# Social Networking Sites and Youth's Mental Health: Investigating the Relationship Between Cyberbullying and Depression

Vikas Jain <sup>1</sup>, Sanjay Payasi <sup>\*2</sup>, Vijay Kumar Jain <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Anand Institute of Management, Barkheda Nathu, Neelbad, Bhopal (M.P.) 462044, India

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Anand Institute of Management, Barkheda Nathu, Neelbad, Bhopal (M.P.) 462044, India

<sup>3</sup> Director, Anand Institute of Management, Barkheda Nathu, Neelbad, Bhopal (M.P.) 462044, India

## KEYWORDS

Cyberbullying  
Depression  
Social Networking Sites  
Youth  
Mental Health  
Digital Harassment

## ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNS) have become an integral part of daily life for youth, providing platforms for communication, self-expression, and social interaction. However, alongside the benefits, SNS also expose young users to cyberbullying—a pervasive form of online harassment that has been linked to various mental health issues, including depression. This study investigates the relationship between cyberbullying and depression among youth, examining the prevalence, impact, and psychological effects of online bullying across different platforms. By employing a mixed-method approach, including content analysis, experimental exposure, and surveys, this research examines the impact of cyberbullying on youth aged 13-19. A sample of 600 participants from the U.S., U.K., and India provided data through structured surveys and interviews. Statistical tools, including regression analysis, ANOVA, and thematic analysis, were used to evaluate the association between cyberbullying experiences and depressive symptoms. The findings reveal that cyberbullying significantly contributes to increased depression levels among youth, with visual platforms like Instagram and Snapchat posing the highest risk. This study highlights the urgent need for intervention strategies to mitigate the impact of cyberbullying on youth mental health. Future research should focus on developing comprehensive anti-cyberbullying programs and mental health support for affected individuals.

## 1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and Facebook are widely used by youth for socializing, entertainment, and self-expression. However, these platforms also present significant risks, including exposure to cyberbullying—an aggressive, intentional act carried out repeatedly using electronic forms of contact. Cyberbullying can have devastating effects on young individuals, often leading to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. This study aims to investigate the relationship between cyberbullying and depression among youth, exploring the prevalence and impact of online harassment



\*Corresponding author: Sanjay Payasi

DOI [105281/ijisr-1751424](https://doi.org/10.5281/ijisr-1751424)



across different platforms.

### **1.1 The Rise of Cyberbullying on Social Networking Sites**

Cyberbullying has emerged as a major concern with the growing use of SNS among youth. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur 24/7 and reach a wide audience instantly. The anonymity provided by online platforms often emboldens perpetrators, making it difficult for victims to escape harassment. SNS features such as comments, direct messages, and public posts create avenues for cyberbullying, which can include threats, harassment, spreading rumors, and public humiliation.

### **1.2 The Impact of Cyberbullying on Youth Mental Health**

The psychological impact of cyberbullying is profound, often leading to feelings of helplessness, social isolation, and depression. Youth who experience cyberbullying are at a higher risk of developing depressive symptoms compared to their peers who are not bullied. Understanding how cyberbullying affects mental health is crucial for developing effective interventions that protect vulnerable youth.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

While the harmful effects of cyberbullying are widely recognized, there is a need to further investigate its specific impact on depression among youth across different social networking platforms. This study aims to assess the relationship between cyberbullying and depression, highlighting the need for targeted mental health support and anti-cyberbullying strategies.

## **2. Literature Review**

**Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J.W. (2010):** Hinduja and Patchin's research examined the prevalence of cyberbullying among adolescents and its impact on mental health, highlighting a significant correlation between cyberbullying victimization and increased depression levels. The study called for comprehensive anti-cyberbullying programs to mitigate these effects.

**Kowalski, R.M., Giumetti, G.W., Schroeder, A.N., & Lattanner, M.R. (2014):** This study explored the psychological effects of cyberbullying, showing that victims often experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. The authors emphasized the importance of addressing cyberbullying as a critical mental health issue.

**Smith, P.K., Mahdavi, J., Carvalho, M., Fisher, S., Russell, S., & Tippett, N. (2008):** Smith and colleagues investigated the nature and extent of cyberbullying, finding that it significantly impacts victims' emotional well-being and increases their vulnerability to depression.

**Bauman, S., Toomey, R.B., & Walker, J.L. (2013):** This study examined the relationship between cyberbullying and depression, revealing that youth who experience online harassment are at a significantly higher risk of developing depressive symptoms. The authors called for enhanced mental health support for affected individuals.

**Ybarra, M.L., & Mitchell, K.J. (2004):** Ybarra and Mitchell's research focused on the link between internet harassment and depressive symptoms among youth, demonstrating that cyberbullying is a strong predictor of depression, particularly among females.

**Bonanno, R.A., & Hymel, S. (2013):** This study analyzed the emotional impact of cyberbullying on adolescents, showing that the negative effects of cyberbullying on self-esteem and mental health are often more severe than those of traditional bullying.

**Cassidy, W., Faucher, C., & Jackson, M. (2013):** Cassidy and colleagues explored the prevalence of cyberbullying across different social networking platforms, highlighting that visual platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat pose the highest risk for cyberbullying incidents.

**Slonje, R., Smith, P.K., & Frisén, A. (2013):** This study compared the psychological effects of cyberbullying to traditional bullying, finding that cyberbullying is associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety due to its pervasive nature and anonymity.

**Campbell, M.A., Spears, B., Slee, P., Butler, D., & Kift, S. (2012):** Campbell's research focused on the emotional toll of cyberbullying, emphasizing that the constant connectivity provided by SNS can exacerbate the impact of bullying, leading to prolonged emotional distress.

**Bartsch, M., & London, R. (2020):** Bartsch and London applied AI-driven analysis to evaluate the prevalence of cyberbullying on social media platforms. They found that algorithm-driven content prioritization often amplifies harmful behavior, contributing to increased exposure to cyberbullying.

### 3. Theoretical Concept and Research Framework

This study is grounded in the Social Ecological Model, which posits that individual behavior is influenced by multiple layers of environmental factors, including social networks. In the context of cyberbullying, SNS create a unique environment where anonymity and a lack of immediate consequences enable aggressive behavior. This research framework integrates AI-driven content analysis to evaluate how cyberbullying experiences influence depressive symptoms among youth, providing insights into the complex relationship between online harassment and mental health.

### 4. Significance of Study

This study provides critical insights into the impact of cyberbullying on youth mental health, specifically examining its relationship with depression across different social networking platforms. By exploring the psychological effects of online harassment, the research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital safety and mental health. The findings will be valuable for educators, parents, and policymakers seeking to develop interventions that protect youth from the harmful effects of cyberbullying.

### 5. Research Methodology

#### 5.1 Study Design

The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining AI-powered content analysis of cyberbullying incidents with experimental exposure and surveys to assess the impact on youth's mental health.

#### 5.2 Sampling

The sample included 600 participants aged 13-19 from the U.S., U.K., and India. Participants were exposed to various social networking platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, to examine the prevalence and impact of cyberbullying. Surveys and interviews were conducted to measure depressive symptoms and experiences of online harassment.

#### 5.3 Data Collection and Research Instrument Design

Data were collected through AI-powered content analysis using machine learning tools, including NLP and sentiment analysis, to evaluate the prevalence of cyberbullying and its psychological impact. Surveys assessed participants' experiences with cyberbullying, depressive symptoms, and social media use.

#### 5.4 Data Sources

Primary data were obtained from surveys, interviews, and experimental exposure studies, while secondary data included existing literature on cyberbullying, depression, and youth mental health.

#### 5.5 Geographical Area

The study was conducted across urban and suburban areas in the U.S., U.K., and India to capture a diverse range of cultural responses to cyberbullying.

#### 5.6 Sample Size

A total of 600 participants were included, providing a comprehensive dataset for examining the relationship between cyberbullying and depression among youth.

#### 5.7 Data Analysis

AI-powered tools, including sentiment analysis and behavioral tracking, were used to evaluate the emotional impact of cyberbullying incidents. Statistical tools such as ANOVA, regression analysis, and thematic analysis were employed to assess the effects of cyberbullying on youth's mental health.

### 6. Analysis of Data: Tools and Techniques

#### 6.1 Performance Evaluation of AI-powered Content Analysis

**Table 1** AI Model Performance Metrics

Metric	Value
Accuracy	0.93
Precision	0.90
Recall	0.88
F1-Score	0.89

The AI model demonstrated high accuracy (0.93) in detecting and categorizing cyberbullying incidents on social networking platforms. The precision (0.90) and recall (0.88) metrics indicate the model's effectiveness in identifying harmful content that contributes to depressive symptoms among youth.

## 6.2 Classification of Cyberbullying Features

**Table 2** Types of Cyberbullying Features Identified and Emotional Impact

Feature	Frequency	Emotional Impact on Youth
Harassment Messages	180	Very High
Public Humiliation	150	High
Rumor Spreading	140	Moderate
Threatening Behavior	130	High

The classification analysis identified harassment messages, public humiliation, rumor spreading, and threatening behavior as the most impactful forms of cyberbullying. Harassment messages had the highest emotional impact, significantly affecting youth's mental health and contributing to depressive symptoms.

## 6.3 Regression Analysis: Impact on Depression

**Table 3** Regression Coefficients for Depressive Symptoms

Variable	B	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.400		6.505	.000
Exposure to Cyberbullying	0.570	0.690	9.505	.000
Frequency of Harassment	0.480	0.620	8.405	.001

The regression analysis reveals that exposure to cyberbullying (Beta = 0.690) significantly predicts increased depressive symptoms, confirming that frequent interactions with online harassment negatively impact youth's mental health. Harassment frequency also plays a significant role in influencing depression levels.

## 6.4 ANOVA Analysis: Comparing Influence Levels of Different Cyberbullying Features

**Table 4** ANOVA Summary

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	26.50	3	8.83	34.85	.000
Within Groups	324.50	596	0.74		
Total	351.00	599			

The ANOVA analysis shows significant differences in the emotional impact of various cyberbullying features on youth ( $F = 34.85, p < 0.01$ ), indicating that harassment messages and public humiliation have the highest influence on depression levels.

## 6.5 Thematic Analysis of Youth Feedback

**Table 5** Key Themes from Youth Feedback

Theme	Description	Representative Quotes
Emotional Distress	Youth expressed severe emotional distress due to cyberbullying.	"I feel anxious every time I log in because of the messages."
Impact on Mental Health	Cyberbullying significantly affected participants' mental health.	"I started feeling depressed after being targeted online."
Need for Support	Participants highlighted the need for mental health support.	"There needs to be more help available for those who are bullied."

The thematic analysis highlights that youth frequently experience emotional distress and depressive symptoms due to cyberbullying. Many participants reported feeling anxious, depressed, and in need of additional mental health support due to their experiences with online harassment.

## 7. Results

The combined analysis of AI-powered content analysis, statistical evaluations, and youth feedback demonstrates that cyberbullying significantly impacts mental health, leading to increased levels of depression among youth. Harassment messages and public humiliation were identified as the most harmful forms of



cyberbullying, contributing to severe emotional distress and depressive symptoms. The findings underscore the urgent need for anti-cyberbullying interventions and mental health support for affected individuals.

### 7.1 Hypotheses Status

Hypotheses	Statistical Evidence	Hypotheses Status
H01: Cyberbullying does not significantly influence depression levels among youth.	ANOVA analysis $p < 0.01$ .	Fail to accept
H02: Exposure to harassment messages does not significantly impact depressive symptoms.	Regression analysis $p < 0.01$ .	Fail to accept

## 8. Conclusion

The study concludes that cyberbullying on social networking sites significantly impacts youth's mental health, contributing to increased depression levels. Visual platforms like Instagram and Snapchat pose the highest risk for cyberbullying incidents, with harassment messages and public humiliation identified as the most harmful forms of online harassment. The findings highlight the critical need for comprehensive anti-cyberbullying strategies and targeted mental health support to protect youth from the psychological effects of online harassment. Educators, parents, and policymakers must collaborate to create safer online environments and provide resources to support victims of cyberbullying.

## 9. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study focuses on the impact of cyberbullying on youth aged 13-19 in the U.S., U.K., and India, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other age groups or cultural contexts. Future research should explore the effects of cyberbullying on younger children and investigate the role of different social media features in facilitating online harassment. Additionally, further investigation into the long-term effects of cyberbullying on mental health would provide valuable insights into the broader implications of digital harassment. Integrating AI-driven content analysis with real-time detection tools could also help identify and prevent cyberbullying incidents, providing timely support to affected individuals.

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