

Cyberbullying and Adolescent Psychological Well-Being: Social Relationships, Coping Responses, and Adjustment after Online Victimization

Nabil Aflah Tajuddin¹

¹ Fakultas Psikologi, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

Correspondence: nabilaflah132@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying has become a recurring form of peer victimization as adolescent relationships increasingly extend into digital spaces. This study examined how cyberbullying shapes adolescent psychological well-being and how social relationships influence that experience. This research use qualitative literature study. Relevant studies on cybervictimization, psychological well-being, loneliness, coping, peer relations, and social support were read comparatively and analysed thematically. The finding shows that cyberbullying operated as social victimization whose persistence and visibility could intensify distress. Psychological harm appeared through loneliness, stress, diminished self-worth, reduced control, and disruption of social belonging. The literature also showed substantial variation in adolescent responses. Supportive family relationships, peer support, social connectedness, coping capacity, and resilience could alter how victimization was interpreted and managed. The findings indicated that psychological well-being after cyberbullying cannot be understood only as an individual outcome because digital victimization is embedded in peer relationships and wider social environments.



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INTRODUCTION

Digital communication has become ordinary social life for adolescents rather than a separate setting that they enter occasionally. Friendships continue through messaging applications. Peer recognition is displayed through comments and reactions. Disagreement can move from school to social media within minutes and remain visible long after the original interaction has ended. These conditions have made online spaces important for belonging and self-expression, but they have also expanded the settings in which peer aggression can occur. Cyberbullying has emerged within this environment as a form of aggression carried through digital communication, usually involving harmful messages, humiliation, exclusion, threats, impersonation, or the circulation of content intended to embarrass another person (Kumar & Goldstein, 2020). Recent literature continues to describe these behaviours as an important form of adolescent peer victimization (Santre, 2023).

Treating cyberbullying simply as traditional bullying conducted through a screen misses some of the social conditions that make digital victimization difficult for adolescents. The distinction is not absolute because offline and online victimization often overlap. Still, digital communication changes how an aggressive act can travel. An insulting message may be copied. A humiliating image can reach people who were not present when the original conflict occurred. Victims may also struggle to know who has seen the material or whether it will reappear. Research across adolescent populations has linked cybervictimization with poorer psychological outcomes and reduced well-being (Carvalho et al., 2021). Broader reviews similarly show that social media-based cyberbullying can affect several dimensions of psychological functioning (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2022).

The literature has grown considerably during the last several years. A meta-analysis by Hu et al. (2021) found a consistent association between cyberbullying victimization and depressive symptoms across studies from different countries. Longitudinal evidence has strengthened concern that the

association cannot be dismissed as a temporary correlation. Maurya et al. (2022) reported persistent relationships between cyberbullying victimization and later depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation in a cohort of adolescents and young adults. More recent synthetic evidence has reached a similar conclusion while showing substantial variation in outcomes and effect sizes across populations (Kasturiratna et al., 2025).

A difficulty appears when psychological consequences are reduced to a catalogue of symptoms. Depression and anxiety matter, but psychological well-being is not simply the absence of psychiatric symptoms. Adolescents also evaluate whether they feel accepted, safe, connected, capable of handling difficulties, and able to maintain meaningful relationships. Cyberbullying can affect these parts of everyday psychological functioning even when a young person does not meet any clinical threshold. Longitudinal evidence suggests that social connectedness has an important place in the relationship between cyberbullying and well-being (McLoughlin et al., 2022). Research on adolescent loneliness also shows that bullying in digital settings can be associated with a broader sense of social isolation (Madsen et al., 2024).

That distinction matters because cyberbullying is a relational event. A cruel post has psychological consequences partly because another person produced it and because an audience may see it. Exclusion from a group chat matters because group membership already carried social meaning. Rumours shared online can disturb well-being because reputation influences how adolescents expect to be treated by their peers. Psychological responses therefore develop within a social relationship rather than inside an isolated individual. Family and peer environments further complicate the picture. Family support has been associated with better subjective well-being in contexts where adolescents face cyberbullying, whereas family conflict can make adjustment more difficult (Rodriguez-Rivas et al., 2022). Arató et al. (2022) also found that family and peer support functioned as relevant protective factors when adolescent involvement in cyberbullying was examined. Such findings make it difficult to treat exposure itself as a complete explanation for psychological outcomes.

Coping creates another layer of variation. Adolescents may seek help, disengage from an online space, confront an aggressor, suppress their reaction, or avoid telling others what happened. Those responses do not have equal psychological consequences. Siah et al. (2022) found that avoidant coping had a particular role in the relationship between cybervictimization and depression. Other work indicates that coping processes are connected with adolescent well-being after cybervictimization (Eroğlu et al., 2022). Perceived stress and coping skills can also help explain why similar experiences of cybervictimization lead to different levels of well-being (Peker et al., 2024).

The problem is therefore not whether cyberbullying harms adolescents. Considerable evidence already supports that association. A more useful question concerns how an act of online peer aggression becomes a continuing psychological burden and why that burden differs between adolescents. Much of the literature still separates psychological symptoms from the social relationships through which victimization acquires meaning. Studies of depression may pay little attention to belonging. Research on cyberbullying prevalence may describe exposure without examining whether adolescents remain socially connected after the event. Protective factors are also sometimes treated as additional variables rather than part of the process through which adolescents interpret and survive victimization.

This study addresses that problem through a qualitative synthesis of recent literature. The analysis asks how experiences of cyberbullying shape the psychological well-being and social adjustment of adolescents. Rather than calculating a pooled effect size, the study examines recurring explanations and patterns across recent research. Cyberbullying is approached as social victimization taking place within digital peer relations. Psychological well-being is then considered in relation to emotional distress, self-evaluation, loneliness, belonging, coping, and access to supportive relationships.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a literature study approach. The method was selected because the objective was not to estimate a new prevalence rate or calculate a pooled statistical relationship between cyberbullying and psychological outcomes. The study instead sought to identify how recent research explains the relationship between cybervictimization, psychological well-being, and the social environments in which adolescents respond to online aggression.

Articles were included when they examined cyberbullying victimization or closely related involvement and provided evidence concerning psychological well-being, psychological distress, social adjustment, loneliness, coping, resilience, family relationships, or peer relationships. Empirical quantitative and qualitative studies were considered together with recent review and meta-analytic studies because each offered a different form of evidence. Studies concerned mainly with automatic cyberbullying detection, computational classification, platform engineering, or adult workplace cyberbullying were excluded because their central questions did not address adolescent psychological experience.

Analysis proceeded through repeated reading and comparison of the selected literature. Findings were initially coded according to the form of victimization described, reported psychological consequences, social experiences surrounding the incident, responses used by adolescents, and factors associated with better or poorer adjustment. Closely related codes were then compared across studies. The analysis gradually produced three broader themes. The first concerned cyberbullying as social victimization within digital peer environments. The second concerned the ways repeated or socially visible victimization becomes psychological distress. The third concerned social support, coping, and connectedness as conditions that shape adjustment. Contradictory findings were retained during interpretation rather than removed in favour of a uniform explanation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Cyberbullying as Social Victimization in Adolescent Digital Life

Cyberbullying is often defined by the technology through which aggression occurs, but the device itself explains little about why the experience can become psychologically important. Adolescents are harmed through a social interaction that happens to be digitally mediated. The message, image, rumour, exclusion, or threat matters because another person directs it toward the victim and because other people may observe, repeat, endorse, or ignore what has happened. A relational understanding therefore offers more explanatory value than an account centred only on exposure to harmful content (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2022).

The audience creates an important difference. Traditional peer aggression can also be public, yet online communication makes the limits of that audience difficult to determine. Material can remain accessible and can move between groups without further involvement from the original aggressor. The victim may consequently have little knowledge of who has seen the content. Trauma-informed research on youth cyberbullying has drawn attention to the continuing psychological weight that some digital victimization experiences can carry (Hinduja & Patchin, 2025).

An adolescent can therefore leave the physical location in which a conflict began without necessarily leaving the social consequences of the conflict. Smartphones make peer communication portable. Home does not automatically function as a boundary between school conflict and private life. A humiliating post encountered at night may reactivate an event that began during school hours. Associations between cyberbullying involvement and sleep disturbance among early adolescents illustrate one route through which online peer aggression can enter areas of life that might otherwise allow psychological recovery (Nagata et al., 2023).

The social position of the victim also matters. Cyberbullying frequently occurs within existing peer networks rather than between complete strangers. The person who attacks, comments, forwards material, or refuses to defend the victim may already occupy a meaningful place in the adolescent's social world. Loss of trust can consequently extend beyond the aggressor. A young person may become uncertain about friends who saw an attack but remained silent or about classmates who continued interacting normally with the aggressor. Bystanders are particularly important here. Digital communication makes observation easy and intervention uncertain. Silence may have many explanations, but victims can still experience a lack of visible defence as social abandonment. Research on cyber-defending indicates that empathy, social competence, beliefs about victims, and previous experience influence whether adolescents intervene when they observe cyberbullying (Leung & Chiu, 2023). The psychological meaning of a cyberbullying episode therefore depends partly on the reactions of people who were not the original aggressor.

Belonging gives these reactions additional weight. Adolescents use online spaces for ordinary friendship maintenance and group membership. Withdrawal from a platform after victimization can protect a young person from immediate exposure while also removing access to valued social

interaction. The need to belong has been shown to be relevant to adolescents' online behaviour and well-being during periods when digital communication became especially important for maintaining peer contact (Pfetsch et al., 2022). Avoiding the digital setting is consequently not always a simple solution.

This tension helps explain why cybervictimization cannot be treated as a problem of excessive internet exposure alone. Adolescents may remain online because their social lives are there. Asking why a victim did not simply block another person or stop using a platform overlooks the social cost of leaving. Digital disengagement can mean losing access to conversations, group information, friendships, and forms of recognition that continue to matter offline. Cyberbullying also intersects with conventional bullying. Carvalho et al. (2021) found that both forms were associated with poorer psychological outcomes and well-being. Large-scale evidence collected after pandemic restrictions were lifted likewise indicates that adolescents may experience more than one type of victimization rather than falling into clean categories of offline victim or online victim (Wang et al., 2025). Exposure across settings can make the sense of escape even weaker because aggression moves with the adolescent rather than remaining attached to one location.

The boundary between online and offline social life is therefore analytically convenient but psychologically porous. An adolescent who is ridiculed through a social media post still meets classmates who saw the post. A rumour circulated online can alter interaction in school the following morning. Conversely, an offline dispute can produce retaliatory posting later that day. Cyberbullying should consequently be understood as part of adolescent peer ecology rather than as a separate technological event.

This interpretation also guards against technological determinism. Digital platforms create conditions that can magnify visibility, persistence, and accessibility, but technology does not independently generate the meaning of an attack. Existing relationships, status differences, peer norms, and vulnerability continue to matter. Psychosocial correlates identified in adolescent cyberbullying research extend well beyond patterns of device use (Rębisz et al., 2023). The social environment accompanies the adolescent into digital interaction. Cyberbullying is therefore best described as digitally extended social victimization. Such a formulation does not deny technological features. Rather, it places them within the relationships that make humiliation, rejection, or exclusion consequential. The psychological problem begins with an attack but develops through what the event does to the adolescent's expectations of safety, social acceptance, and control over how others see them.

2. Psychological Well-Being under Repeated and Visible Victimization

The relationship between cyberbullying and psychological difficulties is among the most consistent findings in the literature. Cybervictims generally report poorer outcomes than adolescents without comparable experiences. Meta-analytic work has linked cybervictimization with depression (Hu et al., 2021). More recent reviews have widened the picture by identifying anxiety, stress, loneliness, and lower well-being as recurring outcomes (Kasturiratna et al., 2025). Those findings establish the seriousness of cyberbullying, but the psychological process behind them requires closer attention. Depression is one of the most frequently studied outcomes. Grigore and Maftai (2020) found that anxiety was involved in the relationship between cyberbullying experiences and depression among adolescents. Pandemic-era evidence also showed associations between bullying experiences and anxiety and depression (Englander, 2021). A three-year cohort study from India provided further support for a temporal relationship between cyberbullying victimization and later depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation (Maurya et al., 2022). Such longitudinal evidence matters because cross-sectional findings cannot determine whether victimization precedes psychological difficulties or whether adolescents already experiencing difficulties face a greater likelihood of victimization.

The direction may sometimes operate both ways. Psychological vulnerability can change how adolescents participate in social situations, while victimization can deepen existing distress. A young person who is already lonely may have fewer protective peer relationships. Cyberbullying may then intensify that loneliness. Han et al. (2021) found meaningful relationships among cyberbullying involvement, loneliness, and resilient coping. Nationally representative evidence from Denmark also linked cyberbullying exposure with loneliness among adolescents (Madsen et al., 2024).

Loneliness is especially useful for understanding why psychological well-being is a broader concept than mental disorder. Feeling socially alone is not equivalent to receiving a diagnosis. Yet persistent loneliness can indicate that an adolescent no longer experiences relationships as secure or

available. Cyberbullying can produce this experience even when the victim remains surrounded by other people. Public humiliation may create the belief that peers cannot be trusted. Exclusion may make group membership uncertain. The result can be psychological isolation within an apparently connected social environment.

Self-evaluation can also change. Online attacks often concern characteristics that are socially visible or personally important. Repeated insults may become harder to dismiss when they receive reactions from peers. Adolescents can begin to evaluate themselves through the hostile feedback they encounter. The victim interprets what has happened, evaluates how others may now see them, and decides what the incident means for their own social worth. Depression or distress should therefore not be understood as a mechanical response to digital exposure.

Perceived control provides another explanation. Face-to-face interaction ends when people leave a setting. Online material does not necessarily end with physical separation. A victim may delete a message from their own device without knowing whether screenshots exist elsewhere. Uncertainty about repetition can prolong vigilance. Cyberbullied high school students have been found to report greater perceived stress and poorer mental well-being (Ramadan et al., 2024). Stress in such situations is understandable because the victim may be dealing not only with what has happened but also with what might happen next.

Sleep disturbance further demonstrates how psychological effects can outlast active online engagement. Associations between cyberbullying involvement and sleep problems have been reported among early adolescents (Nagata et al., 2023). Poor sleep may then weaken emotional regulation during the following day. A cycle can develop in which online aggression produces worry, worry disrupts rest, and reduced psychological resources make subsequent peer stress harder to manage. The evidence does not justify assuming that this sequence occurs for every victim, but it illustrates why cyberbullying cannot be assessed only by counting incidents. Frequency alone is also an imperfect measure of severity. A single episode involving highly humiliating material may have greater psychological meaning than repeated low-level comments. An attack tied to identity or a sensitive personal experience can be experienced differently from generic insults. Trauma-oriented research has drawn attention to this variation and suggests that some cyberbullying experiences may be perceived as deeply threatening even when conventional frequency measures classify exposure in the same category as less severe conduct (Hinduja & Patchin, 2025).

The overlap of different bullying experiences complicates interpretation further. Wang et al. (2025) reported substantially poorer mental health among students exposed to multiple forms of bullying. Cybervictimization does not always replace traditional bullying. For some adolescents it adds another setting in which victimization occurs. Psychological burden may therefore accumulate rather than arise from one clearly separable source.

Research on suicidal ideation requires particular care. Cyberbullying should not be described as a single cause of suicide. Suicidal thoughts and self-harm emerge from complex combinations of vulnerability and circumstance. A systematic review nevertheless found that involvement in cyberbullying is associated with elevated risk and that social and family factors may reduce or intensify that risk (Dorol-Beauroy-Eustache & Mishara, 2021). Research among adolescent populations has also reported an association between cyberbullying victimization and suicidal ideation (Peprah et al., 2023). Such findings justify prevention without simplifying causation.

Well-being provides a more balanced analytical frame because adolescents are not only moving toward or away from disorder. They are also trying to maintain ordinary psychological functioning. Feeling safe with friends, being able to concentrate, sleeping adequately, retaining self-respect, and expecting help when something goes wrong are all relevant. Longitudinal work examining cognitive and affective components of subjective well-being reinforces the value of looking beyond symptom counts (Vieta-Piferrer et al., 2024).

Recent prospective work also suggests that cyberbullying can be associated with wider behavioural risks. Nagata et al. (2025) found relationships between cyberbullying, mental health, and later substance use experimentation among early adolescents. These findings should not be read as a deterministic sequence. They instead show that digital victimization may become part of a wider pattern of difficulty when psychological and social resources are strained. The literature consequently supports a layered view of psychological harm. Cyberbullying can create immediate distress. Repetition or uncertainty can maintain that distress. Social reactions can then alter what the event means to the victim.

Loneliness, reduced self-worth, and loss of control may develop alongside more recognizable symptoms of anxiety or depression. Psychological well-being declines through this accumulation rather than through a single automatic pathway.

3. Social Support, Coping, and Adolescent Adjustment

Adolescents exposed to cyberbullying do not show identical psychological outcomes. Some report substantial and continuing distress while others recover without comparable deterioration in well-being. Differences in severity certainly matter, but recent literature repeatedly points to another explanation. Victims encounter cyberbullying with different social resources and different ways of coping with stress. Social connectedness is one of the clearest protective conditions. McLoughlin et al. (2022) found that connectedness influenced the relationship between cyberbullying and well-being across repeated assessments. The finding is important because support is not simply something added after psychological harm has developed. Feeling connected may affect the meaning of victimization from the beginning. An adolescent who is attacked online but remains confident that friends value them receives a different social message from an adolescent who experiences the same attack while already uncertain about belonging.

Peer support can interrupt the isolation that cyberbullying produces. A friend who challenges a rumour, reports harmful content, privately reassures the victim, or simply refuses to join public ridicule changes the social structure of the event. The victim is no longer positioned alone against an audience. Research on cyber-defending supports the idea that bystanders can become active participants in prevention rather than neutral observers (Leung & Chiu, 2023).

Support is not valuable merely because another person says something comforting. Effective support can restore social certainty. Victims often need evidence that the attack does not represent the judgment of the entire peer group. Visible defence may be especially meaningful where humiliation has been public. Private emotional support remains valuable, but the social damage created by an audience may sometimes require a response that is also socially recognizable.

Family relationships provide another source of protection. Rodriguez-Rivas et al. (2022) found family support to be relevant to subjective well-being among adolescents in a study conducted during the COVID-19 period. Family conflict moved in the opposite direction. Other evidence has also identified supportive family and peer relationships as important factors in adolescent cyberbullying involvement (Arató et al., 2022). These findings suggest that home can function as a psychological counterweight to unstable peer relations, but only when adolescents experience the family as safe enough for disclosure.

Disclosure cannot be assumed. Adolescents may expect parents to respond by removing their phone, restricting internet access, or treating the incident as evidence that they cannot manage digital life. Such responses can unintentionally create a cost for seeking help. A victim who fears losing access to friends may remain silent. Support therefore depends on how adults respond after learning what happened, not merely on whether adults are physically available. Parenting in digital contexts requires this distinction. Control may reduce some forms of exposure, but psychological support requires communication and trust. Adolescents need to know that reporting victimization will produce assistance rather than immediate punishment for having been online. Family support is most protective when it gives adolescents additional capacity to manage the problem without stripping them of social participation.

Coping strategies show a similarly uneven pattern. Siah et al. (2022) found that avoidant coping played a mediating role in the association between cybervictimization and depression. Avoidance can provide short-term relief, particularly when disengagement prevents further exposure, but persistent avoidance may leave the underlying social threat unresolved. An adolescent who never discusses what happened may continue to interpret the event alone.

Other research found that coping with cyberbullying was associated with adolescent well-being and formed part of the pathway between victimization and psychological adjustment (Eroğlu et al., 2022). Peker et al. (2024) later reported that perceived stress and coping skills helped explain variation in well-being among adolescents experiencing cybervictimization. Taken together, these studies suggest that cyberbullying does not have a fixed psychological effect. What adolescents can do after victimization partly shapes what the experience becomes.

Resilience should be interpreted carefully within this discussion. Describing one adolescent as resilient can easily move responsibility away from the social environment and toward the victim. Resilience is useful only when it is not treated as an instruction to tolerate aggression. Han et al. (2021) found that resilient coping could reduce loneliness associated with cyberbullying involvement. More recent person-centred analysis identified different patterns of loneliness, resilience, and self-regulation across adolescent cyberbullying profiles (Yazıcı-Kabadayı et al., 2025). These findings support strengthening psychological resources, but they do not make victimization an individual coping failure.

A social understanding of resilience is more appropriate. Adolescents regulate distress with resources that are partly interpersonal. Friends help reinterpret events. Parents provide practical assistance. Teachers may stop peer aggression from moving between classroom and digital spaces. Schools can create reporting procedures that reduce fear of retaliation. Platforms can remove content or restrict accounts. The victim's capacity to recover therefore depends partly on whether other people and institutions respond.

School responses are particularly important because many cyberbullying incidents remain connected to school peer groups even when the harmful act occurs outside school hours. Treating online incidents as automatically outside school responsibility ignores the continuity between digital interaction and classroom relationships. An adolescent who spends the evening being mocked in a class group chat returns the next morning to the people who participated or watched. Psychological safety in school is already affected. The evidence also suggests that prevention should not be built entirely around identifying perpetrators. Peer norms matter. When humiliation produces attention and social rewards, aggressive behaviour gains an audience. When peers defend victims or refuse to distribute harmful material, the same communication system can interrupt aggression. Prevention consequently involves changing the social conditions around cyberbullying rather than only punishing the person who initiated it.

Psychological interventions are still relevant, particularly when adolescents show sustained distress. Yet a purely therapeutic response risks treating a social injury as though the problem exists only inside the victim. Counselling may help an adolescent manage anxiety or rebuild self-worth. Such work has greater value when the peer environment is also addressed. Returning a victim to an unchanged social setting can leave the original source of insecurity intact.

The strongest pattern across the reviewed literature is therefore not that one protective variable cancels cyberbullying. Support works through relationships. Coping works through how adolescents interpret and respond to stress. Resilience develops alongside access to resources. Connectedness gives the victim evidence that rejection by an aggressor does not equal rejection by everyone. Psychological well-being after cyberbullying is consequently relational as well as individual. Victims need emotional regulation, but they also need credible reasons to feel safe among other people. They may need coping strategies, but they also need peers who do not reward aggression. They may need family support, yet that support must preserve trust and social participation. Recovery becomes more likely when the social environment helps restore the sense of belonging and control that cyberbullying has disturbed.

CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying affects adolescent psychological well-being through more than exposure to hostile digital content. The literature reviewed in this study shows that cybervictimization occurs within relationships that already matter to adolescents. Digital communication can extend the visibility and duration of peer aggression, while uncertainty about audiences and future circulation can make harmful experiences difficult to contain. Psychological consequences emerge through stress, loneliness, damaged self-evaluation, reduced feelings of safety, and disruption of ordinary social belonging. Evidence linking cyberbullying with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation remains important, but an exclusive focus on clinical symptoms gives an incomplete picture. Psychological well-being also concerns whether adolescents remain connected to others and believe they can manage social difficulties without losing valued relationships. Cyberbullying threatens those conditions because the victimization itself is social.

Prevention should therefore move beyond advice directed only at victims. Blocking an account or leaving a platform may reduce immediate exposure, but neither response addresses the peer relationships that give cyberbullying much of its psychological meaning. Schools, families, peers, and digital environments all participate in the conditions under which harm either continues or begins to

recede. Supporting adolescent well-being requires attention to those relationships alongside attention to individual psychological recovery. Future research would benefit from more longitudinal work that separates temporary distress from persistent changes in well-being. Greater attention should also be given to differences in the social meaning of cyberbullying incidents rather than relying mainly on frequency measures. Qualitative research with adolescent victims could further clarify how public visibility, bystander behaviour, friendship changes, and disclosure shape recovery. Such work would strengthen an understanding of cyberbullying not merely as harmful online behaviour but as a form of social victimization whose psychological consequences depend heavily on what happens around the victim after the attack occurs.

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