

# Victims of Cyberbullying during COVID-19

Subjects: Psychology

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In Chile, during the COVID-19 pandemic, reports of cyberbullying victimization increased for adolescents and younger adults. Cyber-victims—adolescents and young adults alike—are at greater risk for mental health problems such as depression as a result of this negative type of aggression. Cyberbullying victimization has negative consequences for mental health across ages. In Chile, during the pandemic, there were increasing reports of this behavior, which is connected with mental health. Thus, the need for prevention programs in the school and other contexts is significant.

Keywords: cyberbullying ; depression ; loneliness

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## 1. Introduction

Online communication technologies access and use are widespread across the world. This has opened new opportunities for social interaction and new forms of social relationships between children and adolescents <sup>[1]</sup>, but also for people of all ages and globally. These new technologies have also influenced and expanded the way people communicate. However, at the same time, individuals may create negative online interactions, such as cyberbullying.

## 2. Cyberbullying Prevalence

In online contexts, the concern about internet safety has emerged due to, in part, cyberbullying <sup>[2][3][4]</sup>. Cyberbullying can be defined as its own form of aggression compared to bullying behavior <sup>[5]</sup> based on unique features such as the use of technologies <sup>[6]</sup>, the hidden identity of the aggressor <sup>[7]</sup>, unlimited boundaries beyond the schools and face-to-face communities <sup>[8]</sup>, a larger audience as a bystander <sup>[9]</sup>, and the power imbalance may not necessarily apply <sup>[10]</sup>. Indeed, a recent international report from Unesco <sup>[11]</sup> highlighted unique and shared attributes between cyber and traditional bullying, such as power imbalance, an absence of victim's response, repetition, and all perpetrators not always acting intentionally—coinciding with the aforementioned past work.

The prevalence of cyberbullying varies across the world and populations. For example, the Digital Civility Index reported in 2020 that 10% of people were victims of cyberbullying (bullied online only) based on a sample of 16,051 individuals from 32 countries, aged between 13 and 74 years. In Chile, the last national study was conducted in 2016, in the First National Survey on Poly-Victimization (Primera Encuesta Nacional de Polivictimización, in Spanish), with students from the 6th to 11th grades. This national study found that 69% reported suffering cyberbullying victimization in the last year <sup>[12]</sup> <sup>[13]</sup>, somewhat consistent with studies conducted in Chile in the past (e.g., <sup>[14][15]</sup>). Recently, the Minister of Education in Chile received a significant increase in reports of people becoming victims of cyberbullying during the COVID-19 global pandemic. In particular, in 2019, 14 out of every 100 complaints corresponded to cyberbullying, which increased to 26 out of every 100 in 2020 <sup>[16]</sup>.

## 3. Depression as a Negative Consequence for Cyber-Victims

Research has consistently shown that cyber-victimization is related to a higher risk for depression <sup>[17][18]</sup>. This association is consistent across different developmental stages, such as young adolescents <sup>[19]</sup>, adolescents <sup>[20]</sup>, college students <sup>[21]</sup> <sup>[22]</sup>, younger adults <sup>[23]</sup>, and adults <sup>[24]</sup>. The negative effect of cyber-victimization on mental health is consistently shown in myriad meta-analyses (e.g., Zhang et al. <sup>[25]</sup>; Evangelio et al. <sup>[26]</sup>). For example, Molero et al. <sup>[27]</sup>, based on 13 studies with a final sample of 7348 adolescents, found a correlation between victims of cyberbullying and depression of 0.28—a moderate to large effect size.

Research on cyberbullying victimization during adulthood is still scarce. Jenaro and colleagues' <sup>[24]</sup> systematic review based on 90 different studies in the adult population reported that the percentage of victims ranged from 2.38% to 90.86%. Negative effects on victims were also linked with negative mental health and depression, but with variation among the subjects, which highlights the need to explore more about those individual differences and possible underlying

mechanisms. Moreover, during the pandemic, emotional problems for victims of different ages. The pandemic has affected people's mental health, which can lead to severe psychological crises. According to Hawes et al. [28], people who have been in isolation and quarantine for a long-time experience high levels of anxiety, anger and confusion, and stress. The systematic review of Rubin and Wesley [29] pointed out that, due to the pandemic, people have reported severe trauma, depression, emotional stress, fear, and anxiety due to the infection of themselves and relatives impacted by the loss of quality of life. Therefore, it is imperative to study the psychological effects of cyber-victimization on depression during the pandemic.

Adolescents and youth are especially vulnerable to mental health due to COVID-19 [30]. During the pandemic, schools were closed, and remote education was initiated, which severely limited students' social interaction with their peers and teachers [31]. Longitudinal studies show that adolescent anxiety and depression have increased since the pandemic compared to a previous period [32][33][34]. Due to this situation, Liang et al. [35] found that students reported a poorer quality of life and academic difficulties during this period. Zhang et al. [36] found in Shandong province that at least 50% of secondary school students reported having some level of depression symptoms, and a third of them had some level of anxiety during the pandemic situation. In Pakistan, [37] noted that there is a high prevalence of anxiety and depression during the quarantine due to COVID-19. Another China-based study by Chen et al. [38] showed that the prevalence of depression and anxiety among adolescents in China increased by 12% and 6%, respectively, compared to the situation before the onset of the pandemic. Likewise, Liu et al. [39] evaluated mental health indicators of more than 5000 high school students in China during the lockdown and after the lockdown period and found, for depression, a prevalence of 17.35% during the lockdown and a decrease to 13.76% after the lockdown; in the case of anxiety, it fell from 10.35 to 6.73%.

For young adults between 18 and 24 years old, during this developmental stage, many types of behavior are developed, which can lead to either normalcy or mental health illness. Depression, anxiety, and stress (DAS) are the most common mental illnesses among young adults [40][41][42]. Due to these particularities, the effect of the pandemic has had a special impact on this group. According to Seçer and Ulaş [43], following the serious physical and medical effects on individuals, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have short- and long-term psychosocial consequences, especially for young people. Nowadays, with the psychological problems of young adults, it is possible that the fear and anxiety caused by the pandemic will trigger various anxiety disorders and similar negative outcomes. For example, Knopf [44] states it is known that for adults, the duration of quarantine, infection fears, boredom, frustration, lack of necessary supplies, lack of information, financial loss, and stigma increase the risk of negative psychological outcomes. A Chinese study by Liu et al. [45] confirms that during COVID-19 young adults faced major psychological challenges. At least one-third of young adults reported having clinically elevated levels of depression (43.3%), anxiety (45.4%), and PTSD symptoms (31.8%). Moreover, a UK study confirmed that for anxiety/depression, there was a strong effect for age, contrary to the effect observed for COVID-19-related anxiety, with very high levels of psychological symptoms in the youngest participants [46].

## **4. Cyberbullying during the Pandemic**

Due to COVID-19, people face higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety leading to behavioral and emotional problems [47][48]. Likewise, measures to prevent contagion cause people to isolate themselves, causing them to be more vulnerable to attacks by their aggressors [49]. Related, cyberbullying generates uncertainty in the victim regarding who their aggressor is; this generates an increase in their anxiety, leading to what is particularly dangerous for young people who have traumatic experiences [50]. In turn, students who have experienced cyberbullying (victims or aggressors) have significantly lower self-esteem compared to those who have little or no experience with it; it should be added that low self-esteem and cyberbullying are significantly correlated [49].

Victims of cyberbullying can feel lonely [51][52][53], which has been found in adolescents [54] and emerging adults [55]. Moreover, recent studies during the pandemic found cyberbullying victimization correlated with a higher degree of loneliness [56]. Age is also an important factor in loneliness; high school students reported higher levels of loneliness compared to elementary school students; in turn, victimization by cyberbullying correlated with a higher degree of loneliness [56]. Additionally, older age and higher incomes were associated with less depression, less general cyberbullying behaviors, and fewer cyberbullying behaviors in Hubei residents [57].

Adolescents are very vulnerable to becoming cyber-victims during the pandemic. For instance, in June 2020, 80% of young people between 17 and 18 years old were cyberbullied, mostly through the internet [49][58]. It should be added that when people have more personal experience with the pandemic or are close to people who have had the disease, their likelihood of cyberbullying others increases [47]. A study conducted in South Africa detected that in young people who were victims of cyberbullying during the pandemic, their emotional health was affected; for example, depression and even

suicide attempts were observed [59]. Likewise, another study conducted in Aktobé, Kazakhstan, showed that high school students who are victims of cyberbullying experience strong emotions such as “anger”, “fear”, and “hatred”, but that they do not turn to other people for help due to the existence of a culture in which the victim is blamed [50]. Additionally, another study conducted in China concluded that adolescents who have experienced cyberbullying during the pandemic reported higher levels of loneliness and lower levels of resilience compared to their counterparts who have not experienced this situation [56]. In addition, another study conducted in Jordan on youth between 19 and 28 years old showed that exposure to cyberbullying is a predictor of low self-esteem and that both are correlated [60].

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