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The Pervasive Impact of Digital Bullying Across Schools, Tertiary Institutions, and Workplaces: Gender-Inclusive Perspectives on Psychological, Social, and Professional Outcomes

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines how digital bullying, also referred to as cyberbullying, affects individuals across educational and workplace settings, with an emphasis on gender-inclusive outcomes. Drawing on a comprehensive review of recent empirical studies (2019–2025), the analysis explores psychological, social, and professional consequences among school students, university students and staff, and employees. The research employs a comparative qualitative synthesis of peer-reviewed literature and survey-based studies, identifying patterns of mental health challenges, social isolation, reduced academic or work performance, and institutional coping responses. Key findings indicate that victims of cyberbullying consistently report higher rates of depression, anxiety, stress, diminished self-esteem, and in some cases suicidal ideation. Gender appears to moderate certain outcomes: female students and staff often report greater psychological distress (e.g., depression and anxiety) than their male counterparts In workplaces, digital bullying correlates with reduced job performance, lower organisational engagement, and increased turnover intent The findings highlight that digital bullying is not confined to adolescent or student populations but permeates tertiary institutions and adult professional environments. The paper concludes by arguing for comprehensive prevention and support frameworks that integrate mental health services, gender-sensitive approaches, and institutional policies to safeguard well-being across all settings.

Keywords: Cyberbullying; Digital bullying; Higher education; Mental health; Workplace

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Digital communication has become central to how individuals interact in schools, universities, and workplaces. Email, social networking platforms, learning management systems, and collaborative applications have increased the speed and scope of communication across these environments. While these tools offer benefits for teaching, learning, and organisational efficiency, they have also created new avenues for harmful behaviour. Among the most concerning of these is digital bullying, commonly referred to as cyberbullying, which involves intentional and repeated aggression delivered through electronic or online channels. Such behaviours are designed to cause humiliation, emotional distress, or social exclusion (Fahy et al., 2022). In school settings, digital bullying has been linked to several negative developmental and academic outcomes. Recent studies highlight that learners exposed to cyberbullying often struggle with concentration, experience heightened anxiety, and report lower levels of motivation and engagement in classroom activities (Zych et al., 2021). A 2023 cross-national study further demonstrated that cyberbullying significantly undermines adolescents' emotional well-being and contributes to symptoms of depression and social withdrawal (Kowalski et al., 2023). These effects disrupt both learning and the social support systems that children rely on for healthy development. The increasing integration of mobile devices in educational environments has expanded opportunities for such behaviour to occur at any time, blurring the boundaries between home and school.

Tertiary institutions face similar challenges. University students spend considerable time on digital platforms for academic and social purposes, which increases their exposure to online harassment (Beran et al., 2021). Cyberbullying in higher education environments is not limited to student interactions; staff and faculty are also affected. A study conducted in the United States found that university employees who experienced cyberbullying reported reduced job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and a weakened sense of belonging within their institutions (Branch et al., 2023). The persistence of online harassment in university spaces suggests that cyberbullying continues beyond adolescence and evolves in complexity as individuals transition into adulthood. Workplaces have also been strongly affected by the rise of digital communication technologies. Remote work systems, virtual collaboration tools, and organisational email networks create environments where harmful behaviour can occur with little direct oversight. Workplace cyberbullying often manifests as hostile emails, exclusion from online meetings, derogatory comments in messaging systems, or the misuse of digital platforms to undermine a colleague's professional reputation (Farley et al., 2021). These behaviours can erode organisational trust, reduce productivity, and create a toxic work climate. A recent systematic review concluded that cyberbullying at work has serious psychological consequences, including increased stress,

reduced self-esteem, and symptoms of burnout (Gardner et al., 2022). The professional implications extend further: affected employees often report diminished job performance and are more likely to consider leaving their employment (Koay, 2022).

Gender adds an important layer of complexity to the understanding of digital bullying. Empirical evidence indicates that women face disproportionately high levels of online harassment, including gendered insults, image-based abuse, and stalking behaviours (Henry & Flynn, 2023). Female victims also report stronger negative emotional and psychological reactions, in part because online harassment often intersects with broader societal patterns of gender inequality (Powell et al., 2022). In workplace contexts, women are more likely to experience cyberbullying from colleagues and supervisors, and these experiences frequently contribute to professional disengagement and reduced psychological safety (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2020). Although men also experience digital bullying, research suggests that manifestations and impacts differ across genders, making gender-inclusive analysis vital for developing effective interventions. Against this background, the central research problem addressed in this paper is that much of the literature and many interventions focus primarily on adolescents in school settings. This narrow focus overlooks the continuity of cyberbullying across the life course and its presence in university and workplace environments. Without an integrated understanding of how digital bullying affects individuals at different stages of life, institutional responses risk being fragmented and ineffective. There is a growing need to explore how cyberbullying influences psychological, social, and professional outcomes in varied contexts, while accounting for gender differences in both vulnerability and impact.

This study therefore has three main objectives: first, to synthesise recent empirical evidence on the prevalence and impact of digital bullying across schools, tertiary institutions, and workplaces; second, to examine the psychological, social, and professional consequences of such experiences; and third, to explore gender-related variations in how individuals encounter and are affected by digital bullying. These objectives guide the study's research questions: How widespread is digital bullying across educational and workplace environments? What psychological, social, and professional effects do victims commonly experience? How does gender shape the nature and severity of these outcomes?

Together, answering these questions will contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of digital bullying and provide insights for developing effective prevention and support strategies across multiple institutional contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Cyberbullying and Digital Bullying

Cyberbullying, also referred to as digital bullying, broadly describes repeated hostile or aggressive behaviours conducted via electronic media, such as messaging platforms, email, social networking, or other online channels, with the intention to inflict harm, humiliation, or social exclusion. While this definition has remained relatively stable, recent scholarship has emphasized its changing contours in line with technology, as well as its implications beyond adolescence (Reddy, 2023). In South Africa, for instance, the legal definition of cyberbullying remains underdeveloped, complicating both policy responses and criminal accountability (Reddy, 2023). This definitional gap suggests that cyberbullying should not only be understood as a social–psychological phenomenon but also as a boundary-crossing problem situated in legal, institutional, and developmental contexts.

Prevalence across Contexts: Schools, Higher Education, and Workplaces

School and Adolescent Settings

Adolescents remain a principal focus of cyberbullying research, but recent studies suggest high prevalence among even vulnerable subpopulations. In a South African psychiatric sample of adolescents (ages 13-18) at Lentegeur Hospital, Paruk and Nassen (2022) found that 56.7% reported involvement in cyberbullying (as victim, perpetrator, or both). Their cross-sectional study revealed that 6.2% were only perpetrators, 20.6% were only victims, and 29.9% functioned as both (Paruk & Nassen, 2022). Notably, female participants were more likely than males to be involved in cyberbullying in any capacity (Paruk & Nassen, 2022). This high prevalence among a clinical youth population underscores that cyberbullying is not merely a peaking concern in general school samples but also in settings where psychiatric morbidity is present. In the context of COVID-19 and extended remote schooling, cyberbullying has remained salient. A qualitative-phenomenological study in South Africa found that adolescents who witnessed cyberbullying ("cyberbystanders") reported significant stress, fear, and educational disruption during lockdowns (Adewoye, 2022). By focusing on bystanders as well as direct victims, this work highlights the ripple effects of cyberbullying: the psychological fallout extends even to those who only observe it, suggesting that cyberbullying should be framed in socio-ecological terms within school communities (Adewoye, 2022). Cross-national research also attests to the ubiquity of school-based cyber victimization. For example, a meta-analytic perspective indicates that school bullying correlates strongly with internalizing problems, such as anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, and poor sleep quality, with more severe levels of victimization producing higher risk (Zhao et al., 2023). Although not all of these studies isolate cyberbullying from face-to-face bullying, the digital component often exacerbates psychological harm due to its persistent and pervasive nature.

Higher Education: Universities and Colleges

Research on cyberbullying in tertiary institutions has grown in recent years, showing that university students are also frequent targets and perpetrators. A Bayesian regression study by Sergeeva and Zheltukhina (2025) examined the relationship between psychological well-being and cyberbullying exposure among 262 Russian university students. Their findings indicated that depression was the strongest predictor of cyberbullying exposure, explaining about 9% of the variance in victimization (Sergeeva & Zheltukhina, 2025). Interestingly, anxiety and stress did not significantly contribute beyond depression, suggesting a nuanced psychological profile in which depressive symptoms may render students particularly vulnerable to online aggression (Sergeeva & Zheltukhina, 2025). Similarly, cross-sectional research among female nursing university students in a Middle East context (United Arab Emirates)

identified anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, and Internet addiction as significant predictors of both cyberbullying perpetration and victimization (Al-Hussaini et al., 2023). Their data showed that 30.17% of participants reported depressive symptoms, while 19.55% reported low self-esteem, and 34.64% experienced anxiety; these psychological states correlated with higher rates of both cyber victimization (17.32%) and cyberbullying behavior (20.67%) (Al-Hussaini et al., 2023). In the South African higher education context, a mixed-methods study at a rural-based public university in the Eastern Cape revealed a high penetration of cyberbullying within the student body (Mwansa, Ngandu, & Khala, 2023). The authors found that many students do not report incidents: around 63% had experienced cyberbullying but did not report it (Mwansa et al., 2023). The reluctance to report was gendered: women were slightly more likely to remain silent than men (Mwansa et al., 2023). These findings underscore not just prevalence, but also underreporting in university contexts, which may hide the full scale of harm.

Workplace Contexts

While cyberbullying research initially centered on schools, the last few years have seen robust studies in organisational settings, especially in information technology (IT) industries. Shao, Gogia, Khan, and Meyer (2025) conducted a study in the IT sector and found that digital ostracism and workplace cyberbullying significantly impaired job performance. They interpret these dynamics through a social exchange framework: cyberbullying violates norms of respect and reciprocity, engendering emotional distress and reducing engagement, trust, and productivity (Shao et al., 2025). Yet, despite the increasing interest, geographical disparities and knowledge gaps remain. A bibliographic review by Obeng and colleagues (2024) pointed out that workplace cyberbullying research in Africa is still extremely sparse. Their survey indicated that, among the 54 African countries, only two (South Africa and Ghana) have contributed empirical studies, highlighting a critical research gap in developing regions (Obeng et al., 2024). The relative dearth of research in these contexts suggests that the understanding of cyberbullying in African workplaces is underdeveloped, despite high digital adoption and unique socio-cultural vulnerabilities (Obeng et al., 2024).

Psychological Outcomes of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying consistently correlates with a range of negative mental health outcomes across life stages.

Adolescents and Early Life

In psychiatric adolescent populations, Paruk and Nassen (2022) documented the co-occurrence of cyberbullying with significant psychiatric morbidity. Among adolescents involved in cyberbullying, the most common primary diagnoses included major depressive disorder (72.4%), schizophrenia (57.1%), and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; 22.0%) (Paruk & Nassen, 2022). Although their study did not find a statistically significant association between involvement in cyberbullying and specific diagnoses, the high prevalence of comorbid conditions suggests that cyberbullying may compound existing psychological vulnerabilities.

Adolescent bystanders, as shown in Adewoye's (2022) study, also suffer psychological strain. Even without being direct victims, they report fear, sleep disruptions, isolation, and schooling challenges, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown. Such indirect exposure contributes to a broader understanding of cyberbullying as a systemic stressor in youth communities.

University Students

Among university students, studies reveal a complex interplay between cyberbullying exposure and mental health. In the Russian Bayesian study, depression emerged as the key predictor of cyberbullying exposure (Sergeeva & Zheltukhina, 2025), indicating that students with depressive symptoms may be more likely either to become victims or to perceive online interactions as harmful. The authors note, however, that their cross-sectional design limits causal conclusions. In the UAE nursing student study, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and Internet addiction co-occurred with both cyber victimization and perpetration (Al-Hussaini et al., 2023). The authors argue for targeted mental health interventions in universities, noting that cyberbullying does not only reflect social cruelty but also embodies psychological risk factors that may exacerbate or reflect preexisting distress. In addition, a systematic review of the impact of cyberbullying on university students' mental health found consistent associations with depression, anxiety, loneliness, and diminished quality of life (Savani et al., 2023). The review emphasized that cyber victimization is not transient; it can have lasting psychological effects that impair academic performance and social integration.

Working Adults

In organisational settings, the psychological consequences of cyberbullying manifest in stress, burnout, decreased self-esteem, and reduced psychological safety. The study by Shao et al. (2025) in the IT industry found that cyberbullying correlates with job performance deterioration via erosion of trust and engagement. The emotional stress triggered by digital harassment undermines physical and mental health, which may lead to increased absenteeism, turnover intentions, and lower organisational commitment (Shao et al., 2025). These findings align with broader literature in occupational health psychology that places cyberbullying as a significant psychosocial risk at work.

Organizational and Social Outcomes

Beyond individual mental health, cyberbullying has systemic implications for social and organisational life.

Social Exchange and Organisational Climate

Shao et al. (2025) apply social exchange theory to explain how cyberbullying disrupts workplace relationships. When digital harassment violates mutual respect and equity, it undermines the social exchange "contract" between employees and the organisation, reducing trust and psychological safety. In

such environments, victims may disengage cognitively and emotionally, leading to lower performance, reduced creativity, and weaker commitment (Shao et al., 2025).

Underreporting and Institutional Response

Studies in higher education reveal that institutional support mechanisms often fall short. For instance, in the Eastern Cape university study, while many students experienced cyberbullying, only about 36.6% reported the incidents (Mwansa et al., 2023). The majority remained silent, with non-reporting more common among female students (Mwansa et al., 2023). This underreporting indicates that institutional policies may not be sufficiently visible, accessible, or trusted. It also raises questions about how universities conceptualize and address cyberviolence, especially in resource-constrained settings. In workplaces, the covert nature of cyberbullying, hidden in emails, private chats, and asynchronous communication, makes detection and intervention difficult. Cyber behaviours often occur outside the physical workspace and traditional office hours, complicating organisational monitoring and normative governance (Shao et al., 2025).

Gender Dimensions and Vulnerability

Gender is a critical lens for understanding cyberbullying, influencing both prevalence and impact. In the South African adolescent psychiatric study, females were more likely than males to be involved in cyberbullying, either as victims or perpetrators (Paruk & Nassen, 2022). This gender disparity resonates with other findings in diverse contexts: policy data from South Africa suggest that girls report cyberbullying more frequently than boys (Masiphephe Policy Brief, 2023). The policy brief further highlights that LGBTQ+ youth face disproportionately high cyberbullying risk, with 70% reporting some form of online harassment (Masiphephe Policy Brief, 2023). These statistics reflect how gender, sexuality, and social identity intersect to shape exposure and vulnerability. Among university populations, gender differences also emerge. Though the Russian Bayesian study did not find a statistically significant effect of gender on exposure (Sergeeva & Zheltukhina, 2025), the nursing student study specifically focused on female students and identified strong associations between psychological distress and cybervictimization (Al-Hussaini et al., 2023). The concentration of research on female students highlights both the vulnerability of this group and the need for comparative studies involving male, non-binary, and transgender individuals. In workplaces, gendered power dynamics can exacerbate cyberbullying risk. Women may be targeted due to gender-based harassment, discrimination, or lack of psychological safety. Moreover, structural inequalities (e.g., underrepresentation, pay gaps) may amplify the effects of digital hostility. However, empirical data on gendered experiences of workplace cyberbullying remain limited, especially in non-Western or developing settings.

Geographical and Contextual Gaps

A significant gap in the literature concerns the regional distribution of cyberbullying research. While much work emerges from North America, Europe, and parts of Asia, research on digital bullying in Africa lags. A bibliographic review highlighted that only South Africa and Ghana have published workplace cyberbullying studies among the 54 African nations (Obeng et al., 2024). The scarcity of data from many African countries suggests that the global cyberbullying narrative may be skewed toward contexts in which research capacity, funding, and institutional infrastructure are more developed. In the South African context, policy analyses reveal further challenges. Reddy (2023) argues that the absence of a legal definition for cyberbullying in South African law complicates enforcement, regulatory clarity, and the protection of victims. Without a formal legal framework, institutions struggle to manage digital harassment systematically, leaving victims exposed and responses patchy. Moreover, the Masiphephe policy brief (2023) underscores the intersection of cyberbullying with gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa. The brief documents that girls and LGBTQ+ youth in South Africa report very high rates of online harassment, but also that institutional support remains inadequate. This gap signals a broader governance problem: cyberbullying is not just a school or workplace issue, but a public policy challenge tied to social norms, legal structures, and digital inequality.

Technological and Methodological Developments

Recent years have also seen methodological innovation in cyberbullying research, particularly with machine learning and artificial intelligence. A 2025 study by Prama, Amrin, Anwar, and Sarker proposed an AI model that integrates psychological, behavioral, and demographic features with online message content to predict the severity of cyberbullying (Prama et al., 2025). Their model achieved high accuracy (98%) and helped identify user-specific risk factors, such as prior history of bullying, gender, and psychological vulnerability (Prama et al., 2025). Such technical approaches are promising for early detection and targeted interventions, though they raise ethical questions around data privacy, surveillance, and bias (Prama et al., 2025). Other methodological contributions include system-level intelligence frameworks. Azumah, Adewopo, Elsayed, Ozer, and others (2023) proposed an open-source intelligence (OSINT) dashboard for monitoring cyberbullying across social media platforms. Their pipeline supports law enforcement and institutional stakeholders in tracking patterns of harassment, identifying repeat offenders, and developing evidence-based responses (Azumah et al., 2023). However, scaling these systems in low- and middle-income countries may be challenging due to resource constraints, capacity, and legal/institutional barriers.

Life-Course Perspective and Under-Researched Transitions

Despite the growing body of research, a life-course perspective on cyberbullying remains underdeveloped. Much of the literature continues to segment populations into "school-aged youth," "university students," or "working adults," without tracing how cyberbullying evolves across these stages. Longitudinal studies that follow individuals from adolescence into early adulthood and the workforce are rare. Such a perspective would be valuable for several reasons. First, it would help to identify persistent patterns of victimization or perpetration, and examine whether early experiences of cyberbullying predict future psychological or professional outcomes. Second, it could expose how role transitions (e.g., from student to employee) change exposure and coping mechanisms. For example, social support structures differ drastically between school, university, and workplace settings; each context likely shapes how individuals respond to and recover from digital harassment. Finally, a life-course lens could illuminate cumulative risk: how repeated exposure

over time, combined with mental health vulnerabilities, interacts with gender, socioeconomic status, and institutional environments to produce long-term effects.

Policy, Legal, and Institutional Gaps

The existing legal and policy frameworks around cyberbullying remain fragmented, particularly in countries with limited resources. In South Africa, the lack of a statutory definition for cyberbullying has been flagged by legal scholars (Reddy, 2023). Without a clear legal concept, enforcement is uneven, and institutions, schools, universities, workplaces, lack a consistent basis for disciplinary or remedial action. Even where policies exist, uptake and implementation are inconsistent. In the South African higher education study (Mwansa et al., 2023), many students did not report cyberbullying because they were unaware of reporting channels, or because they believed nothing would be done. This suggests that universities may not have adequately institutionalised cyberbullying prevention, or that their mechanisms lack legitimacy in the eyes of students. From a public policy perspective, cyberbullying intersects with broader issues of digital citizenship, gender-based violence, and mental health. The Masiphephe policy brief (2023) places cyberbullying within the framework of gender-based violence, noting that online harassment frequently targets girls and LGBTQ+ individuals. The brief calls for coordinated responses that integrate education, digital safety, mental health support, and legal reform.

Summary and Identification of Research Gaps

The literature demonstrates that cyberbullying is not confined to adolescence or school settings; it pervades university life, clinical youth populations, and working environments. Psychologically, it correlates strongly with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and other mental health challenges, across all these domains. Organizationally, it erodes trust, undermines performance, and damages institutional climates. Gender is a salient factor, with women and LGBTQ+ individuals often reporting higher victimization rates and more severe psychological consequences. Technologically, AI-based detection tools and monitoring systems offer promising new directions for identification and intervention, although ethical and resource issues remain. Yet critical gaps persist:

- Life-course continuity: Few studies track individuals longitudinally from youth into adulthood to examine persistent cyberbullying effects.
- Regional imbalance: Research in Africa, especially on workplace cyberbullying, is sparse despite high digital adoption and unique socio-cultural dynamics.
- Legal clarity: In many jurisdictions, including South Africa; there is no formal legal definition of cyberbullying, impeding structured institutional and policy responses.
- Underreporting and trust: Many victims (e.g., university students) do not report cyberbullying, often citing lack of faith in institutional support.
- Gendered nuance: Existing studies often focus on female populations, leaving insufficient comparative data on men, non-binary, and LGBTQ+ individuals.
- Technological ethics: While AI and OSINT systems offer new solutions, there is limited research on their application in low-resource settings, and on their ethical implications (e.g., data privacy, algorithmic bias).

Addressing these gaps is crucial. A more integrated, cross-contextual approach to cyberbullying research can inform more effective interventions, policies, and institutional practices that work across schools, universities, and workplaces. Moreover, centering gender, legal, and life-course perspectives can reveal mechanisms of vulnerability and resilience that have hitherto been underexplored.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on two interlinked theoretical perspectives: the stress and coping model of psychological distress (Lazarus & Folkman, as applied in cyberbullying research) and social identity theory. The stress and coping model postulates that exposure to chronic stressors, such as repeated online harassment, can overwhelm an individual's coping resources, leading to psychological distress (anxiety, depression, PTSD) when support and resilience resources are inadequate. Applying this to digital bullying helps explain why victims often exhibit poor mental health and decreased self-esteem.

Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership. In school or workplace environments, cyberbullying may target aspects of identity (gender, social status, professional role), causing identity threat. For instance, gender-based harassment can reinforce marginalization or exclusion, undermining sense of belonging and social safety. This theoretical lens assists in understanding the gendered dimension of digital bullying and its social consequences, including isolation, withdrawal, and reduced organisational commitment.

Together, these theories frame digital bullying as a chronic stressor with psychological, social, and identity-based consequences, especially when victims lack support or belong to marginalized groups. They help interpret observed differences in outcomes across gender, age, and institutional settings.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative integrative literature synthesis, focusing on published peer-reviewed studies between 2019 and 2025. The selection criteria included: (1) empirical studies assessing cyberbullying or digital bullying in schools, tertiary institutions, or workplace settings; (2) inclusion of mental health, psychosocial, academic or professional outcome measures; (3) presence of gender-disaggregated data or analysis; and (4) open-access or

otherwise accessible articles to ensure traceability. Data collection involved systematic database searches (PubMed, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, ScienceDirect, MDPI, BMC journals) using search terms such as “cyberbullying”, “digital bullying”, “school students”, “university staff”, “workplace cyberbullying”, “mental health”, “gender”. Selected studies were coded thematically: psychological outcomes, social outcomes, performance/achievement outcomes, coping strategies, and context (school / tertiary / workplace). Comparative analysis then identified recurring patterns and variations across settings and gender. Due to the fact that this is a synthesis of existing literature, the study does not require new data collection or ethical clearance.

RESULTS

Through a rigorous synthesis of the most recent empirical evidence (2022–2025), several consistent and significant findings emerge across educational and workplace contexts. These findings highlight not only the scale of digital bullying but also its deeply damaging psychological, social, institutional, and gendered dimensions. Below, I present the results in five thematic domains:

High Prevalence of Digital Bullying

Adolescents and School Settings

The literature confirms that cyberbullying continues to be widespread among adolescents in school contexts. In a cross-sectional study of 355 adolescents in Saudi Arabia, researchers found that 42.8% of participants reported cyberbullying victimization (Gohal et al., 2023). This prevalence rate is notably higher than earlier reports and suggests that as internet access and device usage grow, so too may the risk and incidence of online harassment. Furthermore, meta-analytic work underscores the magnitude of the issue. A meta-analysis involving 133,688 children and adolescents determined that those who experienced bullying (traditional or cyber) faced 2.77 times greater odds of depression compared to non-victimized peers (BMC Psychiatry, 2023). Although this estimate does not isolate cyberbullying exclusively, it underscores the potent psychological burden of peer victimization in online and offline arenas. In addition, a large-scale survey of 95,545 primary and secondary students from Sichuan Province, China, provides further evidence of the ubiquity of bullying in school settings (Zhao et al., 2023). The findings showed very strong associations between higher levels of bullying and multiple psychological problems, including anxiety, PTSD symptoms, depression, and disrupted sleep.

Higher Education

In university settings, cyberbullying remains a major concern. A study of faculty at higher education institutions found that most faculty members reported experiencing cyberbullying from colleagues, administrators, staff, students, or external actors (ScienceDirect, 2024). This suggests that online harassment does not respect academic rank or role and permeates the institutional ecosystem.

Workplaces

In the organizational context, especially in the information technology (IT) sector, cyberbullying is recognized as a widespread problem. Shao, Gogia, Khan, and Meyer (2025) documented how behaviours such as disparaging emails, social exclusion, and digital ostracism are common, and they degrade employee well-being and performance. However, systematic prevalence data remain limited, particularly in developing regions, pointing to a gap in our understanding of how common digital bullying truly is in different professional settings.

Psychological Outcomes

The psychological toll of digital bullying is both broad and deep, affecting victims across age groups in serious ways.

Adolescents

Victims of cyberbullying in school-based samples report significantly elevated symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and even suicidal ideation. For example, in a multi-country study of in-school adolescents, 20% reported cyberbullying victimization and 21.1% reported suicidal ideation in the preceding year; those who had experienced cyberbullying had nearly 1.9 times higher odds of suicidal ideation than non-victims (BMC Psychiatry, 2023). Moreover, in the Saudi Arabian adolescent sample, Gohal et al. (2023) observed that about 21.1% of respondents considered self-harm in response to cyberbullying. Another important psychological mechanism relates to coping strategies. In a study of middle-school students in China, researchers found that avoidant coping significantly mediates the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and depression. Moreover, the effect of avoidance was stronger for students with high “face consciousness” (a cultural dimension reflecting concern about social image), showing that social and personal identities modulate how cyberbullying affects mental health.

Higher Education / University Faculty

Among university staff, the psychological consequences of cyberbullying are similarly severe. In a cross-sectional study of 179 faculty members, most reported being cyberbullied by colleagues, administrators, students, or external actors (ScienceDirect, 2024). Notably, many had never reported incidents, indicating not only psychological harm but also a lack of trust in institutional mechanisms. The study also found that certain personality traits, high neuroticism and low agreeableness, were significantly associated with victimization, suggesting that personality may both shape risk and mediate psychological response.

Workplace

In the workplace domain, workplace cyberbullying undermines employee mental health. Shao et al. (2025) document that victims experience heightened stress, burnout, and reduced self-esteem, which in turn undermines job performance. These outcomes illustrate how digital harassment can degrade both individual well-being and the broader psychosocial climate in an organization.

Social, Educational, and Work Outcomes

Beyond individuals' mental health, the impact of digital bullying extends into their educational experiences, social belonging, and professional lives.

Educational Outcomes (Schools)

For adolescents, cyberbullying contributes to school distress, absenteeism, and even dropout intentions. In the Jazan region study, 26.3% of adolescents reported that cyberbullying negatively affected their academic performance, and about 20% considered leaving school because of harassment (Gohal et al., 2023). These figures point to cyberbullying as not just a psychological risk, but an academic risk that can drive disengagement and marginalization in school systems.

Higher Education (University)

Among staff and students in universities, digital bullying undermines the sense of belonging and engagement. The faculty survey (ScienceDirect, 2024) revealed that many cyberbullied faculty felt isolated, unsupported, and unaware of resources to address the problem. A related qualitative study (in an international context) found that students and staff perceive institutional responses to cyberbullying as inadequate: reporting mechanisms are unclear, retaliation is feared, and psychosocial support is limited. Though the study is not captured in our core quantitative synthesis, its themes resonate with the broader pattern of underreporting and institutional neglect.

Workplace Outcomes

In organizational settings, digital bullying manifests in reduced organizational commitment, lower engagement, and diminished performance. Shao et al. (2025) explicitly demonstrate that when employees perceive harassment through digital channels (email disparagement, exclusion from digital meetings), they feel emotionally unsafe and disengaged, which translates into lower performance and increased turnover intention. The breakdown in social exchange (respect, reciprocity) fosters a toxic climate which inhibits collaborative behaviours, innovation, and long-term retention.

Gender Dynamics

Gender appears consistently as a moderator of both prevalence and impact of cyberbullying, though the patterns vary across contexts.

Adolescents

The prevalence studies often show gendered differences in victimization, although the directionality and magnitude vary by culture and setting. In the BMC Psychiatry meta-analysis, a range of studies indicate that gender is a key factor influencing risk, though not uniform across all samples (BMC Psychiatry, 2023). Another study of cyberbullying perpetration among Lebanese adolescents found that female gender, along with factors such as older age and specific types of cyberbullying (e.g., sexualized harassment), significantly predicted anxiety and depression (BMC Psychology, 2023).

University Faculty

In the faculty sample, female faculty members were more likely to report cyberbullying from peers, administrators, or students than their male counterparts (ScienceDirect, 2024). This gender disparity suggests that women in academia may be particularly vulnerable, perhaps due to power dynamics, social expectations, or intersectional stressors. The same study linked neuroticism and agreeableness to risk, indicating that personality and gender interact in shaping experience.

Workplace

Although fewer studies disaggregate gender in workplace cyberbullying quantitatively, the social exchange framework used by Shao et al. (2025) implicitly hints at gendered power structures. The erosion of trust, psychological safety, and belonging might disproportionately affect women or other marginalized groups in IT settings, especially if hierarchies mirror broader societal inequalities.

Coping Strategies and Institutional Response

The literature highlights a range of coping mechanisms adopted by victims of digital bullying and also calls attention to institutional shortcomings.

***Coping Strategies*:** Victims across age groups commonly rely on a mix of behavioural (technical) strategies and social strategies:

- In middle-school students, avoidance coping (e.g., ignoring or blocking the harasser) mediated the relationship between victimization and depression (BMC Psychology, 2024).
- Among adults (university faculty), the 2024 study revealed that many had never formally reported cyberbullying incidents. Instead, they often resorted to informal coping (blocking, limiting contact) or disengagement. These choices may reflect a lack of trust in formal complaint mechanisms, fear of retaliation, or the perception that institutions lack capacity to enforce sanctions.

***Institutional Response*.** The empirical literature points to several systemic problems in organizational and educational institutions when addressing cyberbullying:

- Underreporting: The faculty study found that reporting was rare; individuals were unclear about where to turn, and many believed that formal complaints would not lead to meaningful change (ScienceDirect, 2024).
- Lack of Resources: Many institutions lack well-publicised or effective policies on cyberbullying. Even when there are guidelines, faculty and students often remain unaware of them or doubt their efficacy (ScienceDirect, 2024).
- Insufficient Preventive Education: In the context of higher education, calls have been made for proactive education (e.g., seminars, awareness campaigns) on cyberbullying. One qualitative study (reported in broader literature) indicated that students wanted clearer education about cyberbullying policies, and staff desired training on digital conduct. While that particular study is not quantitative, it aligns with findings in the more quantitative academic research (IJERN, 2024).
- Structural Barriers: In workplace contexts, digital bullying often takes place in virtual spaces that fall outside traditional human resources oversight, making detection, accountability, and intervention more difficult. Shao et al. (2025) argue for integrated organizational strategies that combine psychological safety frameworks with technology-based monitoring and policy enforcement.

Summary of Key Patterns

- Prevalence: Digital bullying is common in schools, universities, and workplaces, with prevalence estimates as high as 42–43% in adolescent samples (Gohal et al., 2023), and high rates of faculty victimization in academia (ScienceDirect, 2024). In the workplace, especially IT, the behaviours may be underreported despite their ubiquity.
- Psychological Effects: Victimization is strongly associated with depression, anxiety, stress, suicidal ideation, and diminished self-esteem. These mental health outcomes span age groups. Coping strategies, especially avoidant ones, mediate these effects, and cultural factors like face consciousness can moderate them (BMC Psychology, 2024).
- Social/Educational/Work Consequences: Cyberbullying undermines academic performance, engagement, and belonging in educational contexts; it erodes trust, commitment, and productivity in the workplace.
- Gender: Women appear to be more frequently victimized in some contexts, particularly in higher education. Gender also intersects with personality traits, amplifying risk. In adolescents, gender relates to both perpetration and victimization, as well as psychological consequences.
- Coping and Institutional Response: Victims frequently rely on individual coping (blocking, avoidance) rather than formal reporting. Institutions often lack clear policies, accessible reporting mechanisms, or proactive interventions. Where structures do exist, they may not be trusted or well understood.

Implications of the Findings

These results highlight several critical implications for policy, practice, and research:

- Institutional policies and reporting mechanisms need strengthening: The low rates of formal reporting, especially among university faculty, indicate a lack of trust or capacity in institutions. There is an urgent need for well-publicized, transparent cyberbullying policies, training, and safe reporting channels.
- Preventive education is essential: Schools and universities should integrate education about digital citizenship, online harassment, and coping strategies into their curricula. Educating both students and staff about how to identify, respond to, and report cyberbullying could reduce prevalence and improve outcomes.
- Mental health support must be culturally sensitive: Given the mediating role of coping strategies and cultural factors (e.g., face consciousness), interventions must be tailored to the socio-cultural contexts of victims. Professionals should support adaptive coping strategies (e.g., problem-solving, assertiveness) while also considering individual and collective meaning-making.
- Gender-sensitive interventions are required: Because women may face elevated risk and more severe impacts, strategies to prevent cyberbullying must account for gender power dynamics. In academic and professional settings, policies should explicitly address gender-based harassment, and resources should be allocated to support victims.
- Research on developing contexts must expand: Empirical research remains concentrated in high-income settings. There is a pressing need for studies from Africa, Latin America, and Asia to map the prevalence, dynamics, and structural factors of workplace digital bullying in diverse contexts.
- Life-course and longitudinal designs are needed: Most studies are cross-sectional. Longitudinal research that follows individuals across developmental and institutional transitions (from school to work) would illuminate how cyberbullying evolves, persists, or abates over time.

Limitations of the Evidence Base

In interpreting these results, several limitations in the current literature should be acknowledged:

- Cross-sectional design: Many of the studies reviewed are cross-sectional, making it hard to draw causal inferences about the directionality between cyberbullying and psychological outcomes (e.g., whether depression increases vulnerability, or vice versa).

- Measurement heterogeneity: Different studies use varying definitions and instruments for cyberbullying, victimization, and coping, which may limit comparability.
- Underreporting bias: The very issue of underreporting may lead to underestimation of prevalence and impact, particularly in adult settings such as academia or workplaces.
- Cultural and regional bias: With most research conducted in high-income countries or specific regions, findings may not generalize to different socio-cultural contexts, especially in developing countries with emerging digital infrastructures.

Conclusion of the Results

In summary, the synthesis of recent research paints a stark picture: digital bullying remains not only persistent but highly damaging across life stages and institutional settings. It is not limited to school-aged youth, it affects university faculty and professional employees alike. The psychological toll is profound, and its expression is gendered, socially disruptive, and institutionally under-addressed. Coping strategies are often private and uncoordinated, and formal systems for addressing harassment lag behind the scale of the problem. These findings underscore the urgent need for integrated, cross-contextual interventions. Institutions must adopt clearer policies, better support systems, and proactive educational strategies. Researchers, too, need to fill critical gaps: we must better understand cyberbullying in low- and middle-income regions, adopt longitudinal designs, and explore culturally informed pathways of coping and resilience. Without such efforts, digital bullying will continue to undermine individual well-being, institutional health, and the broader promise of safe, inclusive digital environments.

DISCUSSION

The Pervasiveness of Digital Bullying Across the Life Span

The synthesis of recent literature supports the conclusion that digital bullying is not limited to adolescence or school settings, it is a persistent phenomenon that extends into higher education and professional life. This broad reach underscores the urgency of reframing cyberbullying as a systemic psychosocial risk embedded in modern, digitally mediated institutions. In adolescent clinical contexts, cyberbullying remains alarmingly prevalent. In a study of psychiatric adolescents in South Africa, more than half (56.7%) reported some form of cyberbullying involvement (as victims, perpetrators, or both) (Paruk & Nassen, 2022). Such high prevalence in a clinical sample challenges assumptions that cyberbullying is confined to "healthy" school populations and highlights the overlap between psychiatric vulnerability and digital aggression (Paruk & Nassen, 2022). Importantly, digital bullying does not dissipate as individuals age. In workplace settings, particularly in the IT industry, cyberbullying has been shown to negatively impact performance: Shao, Gogia, Khan, and Meyer (2025) demonstrated that cyberbullying significantly reduces job performance among IT workers, mediated by organisational climate. Their time-lagged survey of 486 employees found a negative relationship between cyberbullying and job performance. Organisational climate moderated the effect of ostracism, though not the effect of cyberbullying itself (Shao et al., 2025). These findings point to a sustained presence of digital harassment in professional realms. In higher education, too, cyberbullying remains common. For example, a recent study of medical students in India found that 60.6% reported cyber-victimization (Industrial Psychiatry Journal, 2023). This indicates that even in highly educated, ostensibly privileged populations, harassment via digital channels is widespread and persistent. Overall, the continuity of cyberbullying across life stages supports conceptualising it not as a transient adolescent issue but as a life-course problem, with implications for both personal well-being and institutional integrity.

Psychological Toll: Mental Health Risks Across Contexts

The psychological burden of digital bullying is severe and widespread. Victims report significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and lower self-esteem across different life stages. In medical student populations, the 2023 study from India found that cyber-victimized students exhibited higher depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as lower self-esteem, relative to non-victims (Industrial Psychiatry Journal, 2023). Common coping strategies included blocking or deleting the bully, seeking social support, and asserting oneself online (Industrial Psychiatry Journal, 2023). These results underscore that cyberbullying has not only emotional but also cognitive and behavioural consequences. Among adolescents, the effects are similarly grave. A cross-sectional study of female secondary-school students in Nepal found that 32.5% had experienced cyberbullying, and these victims had significantly increased odds of depression, anxiety, and stress (Khadka et al., 2024). Specifically, cyberbullying victimization was associated with an adjusted odds ratio (aOR) of 1.64 for depression, 2.49 for anxiety, and 2.59 for stress (Khadka et al., 2024). These associations illustrate how cyberbullying can act as a potent stressor with real mental health repercussions. Moreover, digital aggression appears to contribute to suicidal ideation. Research among Malaysian youth indicates that cyberbullying victimization leads to suicidal thoughts indirectly, via increased psychological distress: depression, anxiety, exhaustion, and stress mediate this relationship (Yusri & Abdulla, 2024). This mediation effect suggests that repeated online harassment may accumulate, wearing down an individual's psychological resilience over time. Because digital harassment is persistent and often invisible, it operates much like a chronic stressor. Unlike traditional bullying, which may be bounded by time and space (e.g., limited to school hours), cyberbullying can permeate personal life, follow victims into their homes, and leave little refuge. This "always-on" nature likely exacerbates psychological harm and limits recovery opportunities.

Social, Academic, and Organizational Effects

The implications of digital bullying extend well beyond individual mental health; they affect social belonging, academic trajectories, and organizational functioning. At the institutional level, cyberbullying undermines trust and cohesion. In professional settings, Shao et al. (2025) show that cyberbullying breaches the implicit social contract between employees and their organizations. When respect and reciprocity are violated, employees feel emotionally unsafe, leading to reduced engagement and performance. Their data also suggest that a positive organizational climate can buffer some of the negative

effects of ostracism (Shao et al., 2025). In the educational context, these dynamics likely interfere with academic engagement and sense of belonging. Victims may withdraw from class participation, avoid online or in-person interaction, or even skip classes. Over time, these behavioural changes can derail academic progress, damage social integration, and reduce the retention of students. Economically, digital bullying imposes costs on organizations. Victims are more prone to stress, burnout, absenteeism, and turnover (Shao et al., 2025). When employees feel undervalued or unsafe, motivation and creativity suffer, undermining productivity and innovation. Over the long term, such effects can erode institutional efficiency and morale.

Gender, Power, and Cultural Dimensions

Gender emerges as a central factor in the experience and impact of cyberbullying. Several studies show that women (and potentially other marginalized gender identities) are particularly vulnerable to digital harassment, often rooted in power imbalances. In the South African psychiatric adolescent sample, Paruk and Nassen (2022) found that female participants were more likely than males to report involvement in cyberbullying. This aligns with broader patterns suggesting that women may face gendered harassment, which compounds psychological risk. Further, cultural contexts modulate these gendered dynamics. The Nepal study (Khadka et al., 2024) focused exclusively on female adolescents, revealing significantly elevated distress among those cyber-victimized. In collectivist societies, concerns about social reputation, "face," and honor may heighten the internalization of shame, making victims less likely to report or seek help. Power also undergirds cyberbullying in institutions. In workplaces or universities, female staff may face harassment from more powerful actors (e.g., supervisors or colleagues), and systemic inequalities (e.g., lower status, fewer resources) make it harder to challenge or report abuse. The fear of retaliation or reputational cost can silence victims and perpetuate harm.

Theoretical Interpretations: Stress, Coping, and Social Identity

To understand why digital bullying exerts such layered harm, two theoretical frameworks are especially informative: the stress-and-coping model and social identity theory.

- Stress-and-Coping Model: Repeated exposure to cyberbullying acts as a chronic stressor. Victims rely on coping mechanisms, often avoidant, like blocking or ignoring, but these may provide only superficial relief and do not address the ongoing emotional injury. Over time, limited coping resources can degrade resilience, leading to persistent psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, or exhaustion.
- Social Identity Theory: Cyberbullying in institutional contexts (school, university, workplace) threatens belonging and social status. Harassing behaviours undermine an individual's membership in a social group, eroding trust, cohesion, and identity security. For example, workplace cyberbullying may violate norms of respect and reciprocity, fracturing the social fabric of the organization and reducing commitment (Shao et al., 2025).

These frameworks together explain why cyberbullying's effects are not merely individual but structural: stress accumulates, social bonds fracture, and institutional responses often remain weak.

Institutional Response: Gaps and Needs

A key finding emerging from the literature is the inadequacy of institutional responses, particularly in adulthood.

Reporting and Trust Deficits: Many victims do not report cyberbullying, especially in professional contexts, due to unclear reporting mechanisms, under-resourced systems, or fear of retaliation (Shao et al., 2025). This underreporting reflects not only distrust but also structural inertia.

Policy and Prevention: Many organizations lack specific, enforceable policies addressing digital harassment. Where frameworks exist, they may not be well publicized or integrated into broader codes of conduct, leaving employees uncertain about recourse.

Support Structures: Psychological support, counselling, peer support, digital literacy training, is often absent or poorly tailored to cyberbullying's unique features: anonymity, 24/7 exposure, and cross-platform dynamics.

Technology Solutions: Emerging technological approaches show promise. For instance, Prama, Amrin, Anwar, and Sarker (2025) developed an AI model that integrates user psychological profiles with message content to assess the severity of cyberbullying (Prama et al., 2025). However, ethical concerns persist: systems must be transparent, consent-based, and non-punitive to avoid surveillance risks.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

Based on these findings, several actionable implications emerge:

- ***Develop Clear Institutional Policies***: Educational institutions and workplaces must create explicit, enforceable policies on digital harassment. These should clearly define prohibited behavior, articulate reporting pathways, ensure confidentiality, and guarantee protection from retaliation.
- ***Enhance Mental Health Services***: Support systems should be scaled to address the specific demands of cyberbullying, including 24/7 access, trauma-informed counselling, and coping-skills interventions. Mental-health professionals need training on the distinct dynamics of digital harassment.
- ***Promote Preventative Education***: Institutions should integrate digital citizenship, empathy-building, and bystander intervention training into their curricula and staff professional development.

- ***Adopt Technology Responsibly***: AI-based detection tools (e.g., the explainable model by Prama et al., 2025) show promise but must be governed by clear ethical frameworks: informed consent, data protection, transparency, and user appeal must be embedded.
- ***Address Gender and Power***: Interventions must be gender-sensitive, acknowledging how power dynamics, cultural norms, and identity shape risk and response. Support services should explicitly include gender-based harassment and offer inclusive resources.
- ***Advance Research***: There is a critical need for longitudinal, life-course research tracking how cyberbullying evolves from adolescence into adulthood. Additionally, more empirical work is needed in underrepresented regions to capture cultural variation and institutional capacity.
- ***Integrate into Public Health***: Digital bullying should be part of public health strategies. National and institutional mental health policies should include cyberbullying prevention, monitoring, and response as key components.

Strengths and Limitations of the Literature

This discussion draws on recent empirical research across multiple contexts (clinical, educational, professional) and integrates psychological, social, gender, and institutional perspectives. It also links findings to theoretical models (stress/coping, social identity) and technological innovation. However, limitations exist. First, many studies are cross-sectional, limiting causal inference. Second, geographic representation remains uneven: research from low- and middle-income countries is growing but still limited. Third, while AI tools are promising, there is little evidence yet on large-scale, ethically robust deployment.

Conclusion of the Discussion

Digital bullying is not a confined adolescent problem, it is a life-course challenge with significant psychological, social, and institutional implications. Its persistent presence in educational and professional settings demands systemic, coordinated responses. Institutions need to strengthen policies, support services, and preventive education. Researchers must fill critical gaps, especially through longitudinal studies and culturally diverse samples. Finally, technological solutions should be leveraged responsibly, guided by ethical principles. Addressing cyberbullying is not just an individual or academic concern, it is a collective imperative. Only through proactive, multi-layered strategies can we begin to build digital environments that protect dignity, foster belonging, and support psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION

The synthesis of recent scholarship shows clearly that digital bullying has become a widespread and persistent concern across multiple phases of life. The evidence confirms that it is no longer reasonable to treat online aggression as an issue limited to adolescence or confined to school environments. Instead, it is a phenomenon that continues to affect individuals well into university life and through various stages of their professional careers. This extended reach demonstrates that digital communication technologies have reshaped the social conditions in which bullying takes place. The boundaries that once limited harmful interactions have dissolved, allowing online hostility to follow individuals into settings that were previously insulated from such risks. Across all contexts examined in this review, the consequences of digital bullying are both serious and multidimensional. Victims often report psychological distress that includes anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and diminished self-esteem. These outcomes have been observed among adolescents, university students, academic staff, and working professionals. The persistence of these harms across age groups shows that digital bullying is not a temporary discomfort but a significant public health issue with implications that may extend across the life span.

The social effects of digital bullying are equally profound. Many victims experience declining social participation, withdrawal from academic or work-related activities, strained peer relationships, and a loss of trust in their institutions. For school learners, social withdrawal commonly undermines classroom engagement and may disrupt learning trajectories. Among university students, the sense of exclusion and humiliation tied to online harassment weakens their connection to the academic community. Faculty members who experience cyberbullying often report feelings of marginalisation and a reduced sense of professional legitimacy. In workplaces, individuals facing sustained digital harassment may withdraw from team interactions, reduce communication with colleagues, or avoid participating in collaborative projects. This withdrawal can weaken organisational cohesion and diminish productivity. The academic and professional consequences of digital bullying deserve particular attention. Students who are targeted online are more likely to report declines in concentration, academic motivation, and overall academic performance. These effects are not superficial. They influence long-term educational outcomes by shaping achievement levels, persistence in educational programmes, and even occupational aspirations. In professional settings, digital bullying contributes to absenteeism, burnout, presenteeism, and elevated turnover intentions. Research in diverse occupational sectors indicates that employees who encounter online harassment often feel unsafe, undervalued, or unsupported, which leads to lower job satisfaction and weaker commitment to organisational goals. These consequences demonstrate that digital bullying is not merely a personal issue. It is an organisational challenge with direct implications for institutional efficiency and workforce stability.

Gender continues to shape patterns of vulnerability, type of victimisation, and the severity of outcomes. A consistent finding across the literature is that women experience distinct forms of digital bullying, often involving sexualised harassment, gendered insults, or intimidation linked to broader societal inequalities. Women also report a greater fear of online harm and adopt more extensive safety practices. These gendered dynamics reveal that digital bullying cannot be separated from the social structures in which it occurs. Power differences, social expectations, and cultural norms shape who becomes a target, how they are attacked, and how they cope. Understanding these patterns is crucial for designing interventions that respond to the needs of diverse groups rather than assuming that all individuals experience digital bullying in the same way. Although the psychological, social, academic, and organisational consequences of digital bullying are now well documented, institutional responses remain uneven. Many schools, universities, and

workplaces lack clear procedures for reporting digital harassment. Even when policies exist, their implementation is often weak or inconsistent. Victims frequently express uncertainty about reporting channels or fear that their complaints will be ignored, minimised, or dismissed. In hierarchical organisations, fear of retaliation may prevent individuals from coming forward. This creates environments where online aggression becomes normalised and where individuals feel unprotected. In many tertiary institutions and workplaces, support services such as counselling or employee assistance programmes exist, but they are often not tailored to the distinct pressures associated with digital forms of harassment. Without targeted psychological support, victims may struggle to develop effective coping strategies.

The widespread nature of the problem underscores the need for stronger institutional commitment at all levels. Schools, universities, and employers must move beyond reactive responses and adopt proactive strategies that create safer digital environments. These strategies should include explicit policies that define unacceptable online behaviour, outline reporting procedures, guarantee confidentiality, and establish clear consequences for misconduct. Policies should be integrated into broader organisational frameworks for conduct and well-being. Institutions should ensure that staff and students are aware of their rights and responsibilities and know where to seek support. Awareness campaigns, induction sessions, and ongoing training can help embed these policies into institutional culture. Mental health services must also be strengthened. Counsellors and psychologists need to be trained to recognise the unique features of digital bullying, which may include anonymity, constant accessibility, and the wide visibility of harmful content. Support services should provide victims with tools to develop adaptive coping strategies, rebuild confidence, and reconnect with their academic or professional communities. In workplaces, employee wellness programmes should incorporate training on managing digital conflict and promoting respectful communication in online environments.

Creating supportive and inclusive digital cultures requires a focus on prevention. Educational programmes on digital citizenship, empathy, and respectful communication should begin early and continue into adulthood. In universities and workplaces, training should involve real-life scenarios that encourage individuals to reflect on their online behaviour, intervene when witnessing harassment, and develop healthy communication practices. Prevention is most effective when it is ongoing rather than limited to isolated workshops. Technology may also play a constructive role in early detection and intervention. While emerging AI-based tools show potential for identifying patterns of online aggression, institutions must use them carefully. The deployment of automated systems raises ethical questions related to privacy, consent, transparency, and the potential misuse of collected data. Any technological approach must be supported by clear guidelines and should prioritise the safety, rights, and autonomy of users.

Despite the progress made in understanding digital bullying, significant research gaps remain. Much of the existing scholarship is cross-sectional and cannot capture long-term consequences. Longitudinal studies are needed to follow individuals from adolescence into adulthood to understand how early experiences of digital bullying shape mental health, educational outcomes, and career trajectories. There is also a growing need for research in underrepresented contexts. Many studies come from high-income countries with well-resourced institutions. By contrast, very little research examines digital bullying within African tertiary institutions or workplaces. Limited empirical evidence from these settings restricts our understanding of how social, cultural, economic, and technological factors interact to shape digital harassment. Expanding research to include diverse social contexts will strengthen the global evidence base and support more culturally relevant interventions. Overall, this review demonstrates that digital bullying is a complex, multidimensional issue that demands coordinated action. Its psychological and social harms are substantial. Its academic and professional consequences disrupt progress and achievement. Its gendered nature reveals deep structural inequalities. Its institutional responses remain inconsistent and often insufficient. Addressing digital bullying requires more than isolated policies or temporary interventions. It requires a sustained, integrated effort to build digital environments where safety, dignity, and respect are guaranteed. Only by combining research, policy, education, mental health support, and technological innovation can institutions begin to reduce the pervasive impact of digital bullying and support the well-being of individuals across the life span.

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