

Cyberbullying as a Critical Driver of Antisocial Personality Development in Students: A Growing Concern in the Digital Age

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1. Dear Editor

In the digital age, where smartphones and social media platforms dominate daily life, cyberbullying has emerged as a pervasive threat to young minds. Defined as the use of electronic communication to harass, intimidate, or harm others, cyberbullying affects millions of students worldwide. Recent statistics reveal its alarming prevalence; nearly 42% of kids have been bullied online, with almost one in four experiencing cyberbullying multiple times. Among teens, 32% of girls and 24% of boys report facing various forms of online harassment (1). This modern scourge not only disrupts education but also profoundly impacts psychological development. Antisocial personality, characterized by a pattern of disregard for others' rights, often manifests in traits like aggression, deceit, and lack of empathy (2).

Cyberbullying manifests in diverse and insidious ways, amplified by the anonymity and reach of online platforms. Common forms include spreading rumors via social media, sharing embarrassing photos without consent, and sending threatening messages on apps like Snapchat or TikTok. Research showed that platforms like YouTube see the highest rates, with 79% of cyberbullied kids reporting incidents there (3). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying invades personal spaces, leaving no escape. Among tweens aged 9–12, one in five has been cyberbullied or has witnessed it, with half not telling adults due to fear of repercussions (4). From 2018 to 2022, cyberbullying perpetration rose from 11% to 14% for boys and 7% to 9% for girls. This constant exposure erodes students' trust

in peers and authority, paving the way for deeper psychological issues (1).

Antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) involves a chronic disregard for societal norms and others' feelings, with symptoms including aggression toward people or animals, property destruction, lying, theft, and rule violations. Causes are multifaceted, blending genetic predispositions with environmental factors such as childhood trauma or abusive environments. In children, early signs include bullying, fire-setting, or animal cruelty, often escalating into adult sociopathy. People with ASPD can seem charming, but they often manipulate others and don't feel guilty about using them. Although not all antisocial traits lead to full-blown disorder, repeated negative experiences can entrench them, particularly during adolescence, when personality solidifies (5).

For victims, cyberbullying directly contributes to antisocial tendencies by fostering isolation and reactive aggression. Adolescents targeted online report heightened depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidal ideation. This emotional toll leads to withdrawal from social interactions, breeding mistrust and cynicism core antisocial features. Victims of harassment often absorb the abuse, which can damage their self-esteem and lead to behavioral issues. In some ways, these reactions can look like the lack of empathy or rule-breaking seen in antisocial personality disorder, but they are actually defense mechanisms born from distress. For example, research showed that cyberbullying victims frequently suffer from stress and physical symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, and

trouble sleeping. In response, many students turn to unhealthy coping methods such as yelling at others, seeking revenge, skipping class, ignoring school rules, or pulling away from friends (6). In severe cases, this pattern can turn victims into bullies themselves, as the frustration from online harassment spills over into aggressive behavior in real life (7).

Perpetrators of cyberbullying also exhibit and reinforce antisocial traits. Research showed that cyberbullies display higher levels of general aggressiveness and antisocial behavior compared with non-involved peers (8). The “dark tetrad” of personality Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism strongly correlates with cyberbullying, where anonymity allows the unchecked violation of others’ rights. A cyclic model proposes that exposure to antisocial media content fuels anger, leading to more bullying. Among Chilean students, antisocial behaviors predicted both bullying and cyberbullying perpetration (9). People with antisocial traits tend to act impulsively online, which leads to cyberbullying. Over time, cyberbullying can make lying, so taking advantage of others seem normal. This may cause young people to develop behaviors similar to antisocial personality disorder (1).

On the other hand, empirical evidence underscores this connection. A meta-analysis revealed positive correlations between traits such as neuroticism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy and cyberbullying (10). Victims showed internalizing problems and bullies showed externalizing ones, but both pathways lead to antisocial development. Social anxiety connects dark personality traits to cyberbullying. This makes people feel even more alone. Broader impacts include academic decline, eating disorders, and irritability, exacerbating mental health crises. Adolescents, who are still maturing mentally, suffer more profoundly than adults do (3). Addressing this challenge requires multifaceted interventions. Schools must implement digital literacy programs, encourage reporting, and build empathy; parents should monitor online activity without invading privacy, fostering open dialogues; platforms need stricter moderation and anti-bullying algorithms. Also, therapy for affected students can mitigate emerging antisocial traits by focusing on emotional regulation (8).

In conclusion, cyberbullying represents a critical modern peril, undeniably fueling the emergence of antisocial personality traits in students through cycles of victimization and perpetration. With rising prevalence and severe mental health repercussions, society must act swiftly to safeguard youth. By prioritizing prevention and support, we can curb this digital epidemic and nurture healthier generations.

Authors’ Contributions

Reza Abdollahi: Contributed to the conception of the work; drafted the work. Mir Hossein Ahmadi: Contributed to the design of the work; reviewed the work critically for important intellectual content. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work, such as the questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work.

Declaration of AI

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