

Cyberbullying in Higher Education: Causes, Patterns and Its Impact on College Students

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Abstract:

The rapid growth of smartphones, social media, instant messaging and online learning has created new opportunities as well as risks for students in higher education. This article examines cyberbullying from a sociological perspective, focusing on its causes, patterns and impacts on college students. The study is based exclusively on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed studies, reviews, Indian research and institutional documents, without primary data collection. The literature identifies anonymity, peer pressure, retaliation, previous victimisation, intensive digital engagement and weak reporting mechanisms as major contributing factors, while cybervictimisation is associated with anxiety, depression, stress, low self-esteem, social withdrawal and academic difficulties. The study views cyberbullying as both an individual and institutional issue and highlights the need for digital citizenship education, confidential reporting, counselling, bystander intervention and effective institutional prevention strategies.

Keywords: Cyberbullying; Higher Education; College Students; Digital Harassment; Social Consequences.

Introduction

Digital communication has become an integral part of college and university students' social and academic lives. Social networking sites, messaging applications, online learning platforms and digital communities have expanded interaction beyond the physical campus, but they

have also created opportunities for harassment, humiliation, exclusion, impersonation, threats and other forms of cyberbullying. Smith et al. (2008) define cyberbullying as intentional aggressive behaviour conducted through electronic forms of contact against individuals who

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have difficulty defending themselves, while Tokunaga (2010) highlights its characteristics of persistence, accessibility, wide reach and anonymity.

The higher-education context requires particular sociological attention because college students experience significant processes of identity formation, peer interaction and social adjustment. Greater autonomy and limited supervision can allow cyberbullying to extend across campus, residential and online environments. Watts et al. (2017) documented cyberbullying among undergraduate students and emphasised the need for greater university awareness, reporting mechanisms and preventive interventions. Similarly, Fauzi (2024), through a bibliometric review of 361 Web of Science publications, identified the determinants and impacts of cyberbullying among higher-education students as important research themes.

The issue is increasingly relevant in India due to the rapid digitalisation of higher education and growing student engagement with online platforms. Gupta et al. (2023), in a study of 213 undergraduate medical students in Sikkim, reported that 60.6% had experienced cyberbullying and found higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress and lower self-esteem among victims. Vishwakarma et al. (2024), studying 150 university students at Banaras Hindu University, examined demographic factors associated with cyberbullying and victimisation. These studies indicate the relevance of

cyberbullying within the Indian higher-education context.

From a sociological perspective, cyberbullying can be understood through social learning theory, routine activity theory, general strain theory and the social-ecological perspective. These approaches highlight the roles of peer influence, power relations, social norms, frustration, group dynamics, institutional culture and inadequate digital guardianship. Thus, cyberbullying should be viewed not only as individual behaviour but also as a social and institutional issue.

The present article synthesises secondary research on the causes, patterns and consequences of cyberbullying among higher-education students, with particular attention to India. It also identifies limitations in existing research and discusses institutional measures for prevention and response. Since the study relies exclusively on secondary data, its findings represent a synthesis of existing evidence rather than prevalence estimates for any particular institution.

Review of Literature

Beran et al. (2012) examined cyber-harassment among 1,368 students from universities in the United States and Canada. The study found that cyber-harassment experienced during high school was associated with cyber-harassment at university, suggesting continuity of victimisation across educational stages. Its cross-sectional

design and North American sample limited broader generalisation. Schenk and Fremouw (2012) examined prevalence, psychological impact and coping among college cyberbullying victims. The study associated cybervictimisation with psychological difficulties and identified avoidance and support-seeking as coping responses. Self-report measures and difficulties in establishing causal direction were important limitations. Watts et al. (2017), in a literature review of cyberbullying in higher education, examined definitions, causes, effects and institutional responses. The review concluded that cyberbullying occurs among undergraduate students, particularly through social media, and that students may be reluctant to report incidents. It recommended awareness programmes, reporting mechanisms and clear institutional responses. The review was limited by the quality and scope of existing research, much of which focused on adolescents. Gupta et al. (2023) investigated cyberbullying among 213 undergraduate medical students in Sikkim. The study reported that 60.6% had experienced cyberbullying and that victims showed greater depression, anxiety and stress and lower self-esteem than non-victims. The single-institution medical-student sample and cross-sectional self-report design limit national generalisation. Fauzi (2024) conducted a bibliometric analysis of 361 Web of Science publications on cyberbullying in higher education. The study identified

major research clusters concerning the determinants and impacts of cyberbullying and highlighted the need for institutional interventions. Its reliance on the Web of Science database may have excluded relevant studies from other sources. Vishwakarma, Kumari, and Vishwakarma (2024) studied 150 students at Banaras Hindu University to examine demographic factors associated with cyberbullying and victimisation. Using three-way ANOVA and related procedures, the study reported significant demographic differences and highlighted the relevance of gender and family contexts. Its relatively small, single-university and cross-sectional sample limits generalisation. Arif et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of 32 studies involving 29,593 university students. The review found frequent associations between cybervictimisation and depression, anxiety, stress, lower self-esteem, fear and reduced academic concentration. Heterogeneity among studies and the observational nature of much of the evidence limited conclusions about causality. Bussu et al. (2025) reviewed 61 studies on cyberbullying and cyberstalking among university students. The review identified age, gender, mental health, personality, risky online behaviour and previous face-to-face victimisation as relevant risk factors. Family and peer support and responsible online behaviour emerged as protective factors. The review also noted limited evidence regarding the effectiveness of university policies and prevention programmes.

The literature demonstrates that cyberbullying is a significant issue in higher education and occurs across multiple digital platforms. Existing studies identify peer influence, previous victimisation, intensive digital engagement, demographic factors and inadequate institutional support as important factors. Research also consistently associates cybervictimisation with psychological distress and academic difficulties. However, variations in definitions, measurement methods, samples and research settings make prevalence estimates difficult to compare. Indian higher-education evidence remains comparatively limited, highlighting the need for further research on the social, institutional and cultural dimensions of cyberbullying.

Research Gap

Existing research reveals several gaps in the study of cyberbullying in higher education. Research on university students remains less developed than school-based research, with many concepts and measurement tools derived from adolescent studies. Variations in definitions, measurement instruments and time frames also make comparisons across studies difficult. In India, evidence is limited and often restricted to specific institutions or disciplines, with relatively few studies covering diverse higher-education institutions nationally. Existing literature largely focuses on victims and psychological outcomes, while

sociological aspects such as peer norms, group identity, social status, retaliation, institutional culture and bystander behaviour receive less attention. There is also limited evidence on the effectiveness of institutional reporting systems, digital citizenship programmes and counselling interventions. Furthermore, the relationship between offline bullying and cyberbullying requires greater investigation through longitudinal research. These gaps highlight the need for a sociological synthesis integrating individual, peer, institutional and technological dimensions of cyberbullying in higher education.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the major forms and patterns of cyberbullying reported among college and university students.
- To analyse the social, technological, peer-group and individual factors associated with cyberbullying in higher education.
- To examine the social, educational and psychological consequences of cyberbullying for college students.
- To assess the role of higher-education institutions and propose sociologically informed strategies for prevention, reporting and support.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative secondary-data design based on narrative review and thematic synthesis. It draws on

peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic and narrative reviews, bibliometric studies, Indian empirical research, and relevant higher-education policy documents concerning cyberbullying, cybervictimisation, and digital harassment among college and university students. Relevant literature was identified using keywords such as cyberbullying, cybervictimisation, college students, university students, higher education, India, mental health, and institutional response. Studies were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, methodological clarity, and conceptual contribution, with 15 key sources included in the final analysis. The selected literature was comparatively analysed and

organised into four themes: forms and patterns, causes and risk factors, consequences, and institutional responses. Reported numerical findings are presented only as findings from individual secondary studies and are not treated as new national prevalence estimates. Since the study uses published secondary sources and does not involve human participants, no new ethical clearance or participant consent was required. However, limitations such as publication bias, differences in definitions, self-reporting, geographic concentration, and the inability to establish causal relationships are acknowledged. Thus, the findings are interpreted as an evidence synthesis rather than causal proof.

Interpretation and Sociological Analysis

Table 1: Selected Secondary Evidence on Cyberbullying in Higher Education

Study	Context / Sample	Key evidence	Main limitation
MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman (2010)	439 college students	21.9% reported being cyberbullied; 8.6% reported perpetration.	Single college context; self-report.
Kraft & Wang (2010)	471 students at a public liberal arts college	Younger traditional students showed higher involvement; previous victimisation was relevant.	Single institution; online survey.
Beran et al. (2012)	1,368 students at US/Canadian universities	High-school harassment was associated with later university harassment.	Cross-sectional; North American sample.
Watts et al. (2017)	Higher-education literature	Reporting reluctance and need for institutional systems	Dependent on existing literature.

		were recurring themes.	
Gupta et al. (2023)	213 undergraduate medical students, Sikkim	60.6% reported cybervictimisation; victims showed more depression, anxiety and stress.	Medical students; single setting.
Fauzi (2024)	361 Web of Science publications	Determinants and impacts are major research clusters in higher education.	Database coverage limits.
Vishwakarma et al. (2024)	150 university students, BHU	Demographic factors were associated with cyberbullying outcomes.	Small, single-university sample.
Arif et al. (2024)	32 studies; 29,593 students	Cybervictimisation was associated with depression, anxiety, stress and other adverse outcomes.	Heterogeneity across studies.

Table 1 summarizes selected studies on cyberbullying in higher education and shows that it has become an important concern in the social lives of college and university students. The reviewed studies indicate that cyberbullying is connected with previous victimisation, peer relationships, demographic factors, and students' online engagement. The findings also suggest that many students prefer to manage such experiences themselves or seek support from friends rather than formally report them. Indian evidence, particularly from Sikkim, shows a clear association between cybervictimisation and depression, anxiety, and stress. The studies further indicate that experiences of harassment may continue from school into

university life, showing that cyberbullying can develop across different stages of education. From a sociological perspective, cyberbullying is influenced by peer-group norms, social relationships, power relations, and the strength of institutional social control. The digital environment can increase opportunities for harmful behaviour when effective guardianship and reporting mechanisms are weak. At the same time, family and peer support can help students cope with cyberbullying experiences. Overall, the evidence suggests that cyberbullying should be understood not simply as an individual behavioural problem but as a wider social and institutional issue

requiring supportive and preventive responses.

The first objective concerns the forms and patterns through which cyberbullying appears among college students. Social Learning Theory, associated with Bandura, argues that behaviour can be learned through observation, imitation and reinforcement. In digital environments, students observe how peers communicate, joke, insult, exclude, retaliate and gain social attention. When aggressive online behaviour receives likes, shares, laughter, group approval or perceived status, it can be socially reinforced. Cyberbullying can therefore become part of a peer culture rather than simply an isolated act by an individual. This framework helps explain why forms such as public humiliation, insulting comments, spreading rumours, exclusion from online groups and circulation of embarrassing content may cluster within friendship networks. The visibility of online interactions can amplify social rewards because an act can reach a large audience rapidly. The theory also explains why bystanders matter: laughing, sharing or remaining silent can unintentionally reinforce the aggressor, whereas reporting or supporting the victim can reduce social rewards. Studies reviewed in this article indicate that cyberbullying can involve multiple forms of electronic communication and that students may simultaneously occupy roles as victim, perpetrator and bystander. The social-learning interpretation therefore suggests that patterns of cyberbullying are

partly produced by the norms of peer groups and the rewards attached to digital behaviour. Prevention should consequently focus not only on punishing perpetrators but also on changing peer norms, teaching responsible digital interaction and empowering bystanders. In higher education, digital citizenship should be treated as a component of campus socialisation because students learn appropriate and inappropriate online conduct partly through their social networks.

Routine Activity Theory explains cyberbullying through the convergence of a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence or weakness of capable guardianship. Digital communication provides conditions in which these three elements can converge frequently. Students spend substantial time online, communicate across multiple platforms and may remain connected beyond campus hours. This increases opportunities for conflict and victimisation. Anonymity or pseudonymity may reduce perceived social costs for offenders, while the absence of immediate institutional supervision can weaken guardianship. Routine Activity Theory is especially useful because it does not assume that cyberbullying is caused by one personality trait. Instead, it directs attention to everyday routines and opportunity structures. Previous victimisation may also create continuing vulnerability, as shown by Kraft and Wang (2010) and

Beran et al. (2012). Peer-group conflict, relationship breakdown, competition, retaliation and social exclusion can provide motives, while persistent connectivity provides opportunities. The theory suggests that prevention should increase capable guardianship without relying on intrusive surveillance. Universities can establish confidential reporting systems, clear codes of digital conduct, trained staff, rapid response procedures and peer-support mechanisms. Students can also be taught privacy protection, blocking, evidence preservation and safe reporting. The theory therefore links technological design with institutional organisation. In sociological terms, cyberbullying becomes more likely when opportunities for harmful action are high and social controls are weak. Higher education institutions should consequently design digital environments and support systems that make harmful behaviour more visible to legitimate authorities while protecting victims from retaliation.

General Strain Theory provides a useful sociological explanation for both the consequences experienced by victims and, in some circumstances, the motivations of perpetrators. Strain can arise from negative treatment, loss of valued relationships, failure to achieve desired goals or experiences of humiliation and rejection. Cyberbullying can generate strain by damaging a student's reputation, peer relationships, sense of belonging and academic

confidence. The digital nature of the aggression may intensify strain because harmful content can remain accessible, be repeatedly viewed and reach a large audience. The literature reviewed here associates cybervictimisation with depression, anxiety, stress, lower self-esteem, fear and academic difficulties. These outcomes should not be interpreted as automatic or universal consequences; rather, they represent risks identified across studies. General Strain Theory also highlights coping. Individuals respond to strain through different strategies depending on social support, resources and perceived alternatives. Some students may seek support from friends, block the aggressor or report the incident, while others may withdraw or attempt to retaliate. The theory therefore connects consequences with coping resources. Gupta et al. (2023) found that Indian cybervictims used technical coping, support from friends and direct online confrontation, while Arif et al. (2024) synthesised evidence of significant mental-health burdens among university students. The implication is that institutional responses should reduce the strain produced by cyberbullying and strengthen legitimate coping resources. Counselling, peer support, academic flexibility, confidential reporting and protection against retaliation can reduce the social consequences of victimisation. A sociological response must therefore address the social environment surrounding the victim rather than placing

responsibility solely on the individual to cope.

The Social-Ecological Perspective explains cyberbullying as a product of interacting levels: individual, interpersonal, institutional and wider societal or technological environments. At the individual level, digital skills, empathy, previous experiences and coping capacity may influence behaviour. At the interpersonal level, peer norms, friendships, conflicts and bystander reactions shape cyberbullying. At the institutional level, campus climate, reporting procedures, disciplinary systems, counselling services and staff awareness influence whether students feel safe seeking help. At the broader level, platform design, digital culture, legal frameworks and social attitudes toward online aggression create the context in which cyberbullying occurs. This framework is particularly appropriate for higher education because responsibility cannot be assigned to one actor. Universities cannot completely control students' private online communication, but they can establish norms, support systems and educational programmes. The literature repeatedly indicates reluctance to report, demonstrating that formal rules are insufficient if students do not trust institutional processes. Watts et al. (2017) and Bussu et al. (2025) highlight the importance of reporting systems and evidence-based institutional programmes. The social-ecological approach therefore supports a layered intervention model:

digital citizenship education for individuals; peer bystander programmes for groups; confidential reporting and counselling at the institutional level; and coordination with appropriate legal and technology stakeholders for serious cases. The broader sociological point is that cyberbullying is embedded in the social environment in which students live and interact. Effective prevention must change the environment that permits, rewards or conceals harmful online behaviour rather than merely identifying and punishing individual offenders after harm has occurred.

Major Findings

Taken together, the studies reviewed here suggest that cyberbullying is a significant issue in higher education, although prevalence estimates vary considerably. The variation is not necessarily evidence that some studies are wrong; rather, it reflects differences in definitions, measurement instruments, samples and recall periods. This methodological issue makes it inappropriate to produce a single national prevalence estimate from the available secondary evidence.

A second important observation is that cyberbullying is multidimensional. It includes direct harassment, insults, threats, public humiliation, rumour spreading, exclusion, impersonation and the circulation of embarrassing or harmful material. Technological affordances such as rapid sharing, persistence, audience

size and anonymity can intensify the social consequences of an incident.

A third observation is that the causes are social as well as technological. The literature points to peer-group norms, retaliation, previous victimisation, intensive digital engagement, age, demographic context and weak guardianship or reporting systems. The persistence of victimisation from school into university suggests that higher education may inherit social relationships and behavioural patterns developed earlier.

The consequences also extend well beyond the digital sphere. Evidence from international reviews and Indian studies links cybervictimisation with depression, anxiety, stress, lower self-esteem, fear, social withdrawal and academic difficulties. These consequences demonstrate that the boundaries between online and offline social life are increasingly blurred.

Another concern is under-reporting. Students may handle incidents themselves, block the offender or seek help from friends rather than approach formal university authorities. Fear of embarrassment, retaliation, disbelief or lack of awareness about reporting mechanisms can discourage disclosure. Consequently, the absence of official complaints cannot be interpreted as evidence that cyberbullying is absent.

Finally, Indian research is still not sufficiently diverse. Existing studies

provide valuable evidence, but they often involve one institution, one discipline or relatively small samples. There is a need for comparative research across state universities, government colleges, private institutions, professional colleges and rural and urban campuses.

Suggestions

- Universities should establish a confidential and easily accessible cyberbullying reporting mechanism, including an online reporting option and a clearly identified responsible officer or committee.
- Digital citizenship and responsible social-media behaviour should be incorporated into student orientation and life-skills programmes rather than treated only as disciplinary matters.
- Institutions should create structured bystander-intervention programmes so that students understand how to support victims, preserve evidence and report harmful conduct safely.
- Counselling and student-support services should be integrated with cyberbullying response procedures. Students should not be required to navigate multiple offices before receiving support.
- Universities should develop clear definitions and procedures for cyberbullying, including distinctions among disagreement, criticism,

harassment, threats, impersonation and repeated targeted abuse.

- Faculty members, mentors, wardens and student leaders should receive basic training to recognise cyberbullying and respond without blaming the victim.
- Serious cases involving threats, stalking, intimate-image abuse, extortion or other potential offences should be referred through appropriate institutional and legal channels rather than handled informally.
- Institutions should maintain anonymised records of reported incidents so that administrators can identify recurring patterns while protecting student privacy.
- Future Indian research should use larger, multi-institutional and longitudinal samples and should examine differences by gender, caste and class background, disability, rural-urban location, discipline and type of institution where ethically and methodologically appropriate.
- Universities should evaluate prevention programmes rather than assuming that policies are effective simply because they exist. Evidence on reporting rates, student awareness, response time and victim satisfaction should inform institutional improvement.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying in higher education represents an important transformation in the social organisation of student life. The expansion of digital communication has not eliminated traditional forms of aggression; instead, it has created additional spaces in which power, conflict, status and exclusion can be expressed. The evidence reviewed in this article shows that cyberbullying can affect students' emotional well-being, social relationships and academic functioning. Indian studies confirm that the problem deserves greater attention within higher education, although the current evidence base is not sufficiently broad to produce a nationally representative prevalence estimate.

From a sociological point of view, cyberbullying is closely connected with relationships, peer groups and institutions. Social learning theory demonstrates the role of peer norms and reinforcement; routine activity theory explains opportunities created by digital routines and weak guardianship; general strain theory helps interpret the consequences and coping processes associated with victimisation; and the social-ecological perspective connects individual, peer, institutional and technological factors. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that punishment alone is unlikely to solve the problem.

Higher education institutions have a responsibility to create safe learning

environments that extend into the digital spaces in which students increasingly interact. Confidential reporting, digital citizenship education, bystander support, counselling, clear institutional procedures and evidence-based prevention programmes are essential. At the same time, future scholarship should move beyond descriptive prevalence studies toward longitudinal, comparative and sociologically grounded research. A stronger Indian evidence base will enable institutions and policymakers to design responses that are proportionate, inclusive and sensitive to the diverse experiences of college students. Cyberbullying should therefore be understood not simply as a problem of technology, but as a contemporary form of social interaction, power and inequality requiring a comprehensive sociological response.

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