

**Cyberbullying Among Adolescents -
Victims Characteristics and Digital Literacy, Stress
Condition, and Mediating Resilience Resources**

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the new millennium, the phenomenon of Cyberbullying, defined as an intentional aggressive activity to harm individuals by spreading offensive messages, has developed side by side with the accelerated development of social sites and applications on the internet.

The current study has four main objectives. The first is to examine the characteristics of the phenomenon of Cyberbullying among adolescents, and the characteristics of its victims. The second is to examine the relationship between the exposure to Cyberbullying and the level of digital literacy of users. The third objective is to check whether the offensive messages on the internet evoke a sense of stress in the victims, which leads to psychological difficulties. The fourth objective is to examine whether resources of resilience such as self-efficacy, social support and hope are capable of reducing these psychological difficulties.

The study participants comprised 510 students aged 13-15 of the grade levels 5-9 in schools of the state and state-religious sectors in Israel. We used a Mixed Methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods. The participants of the qualitative part were 80 students in 10 focus groups. The quantitative part participants were 430 students who responded to self-report questionnaires. We classified the participants into four groups of victimization categories according to the victims' own reports. The first group included victims of violence occurring in the physical space (face to face) and the second included victims of Cyberbullying alone. The third group included adolescents who were victims of integrated violence – both face to face and Cyberbullying. The fourth group included adolescents who were not victims of either kind.

The study uses two theories to investigate the case of Cyberbullying. The one is Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and the dynamic cognitive assessment model, and the other is the theory of resilience (Fergus & Zemermmman, 2005; Masten, 2001). The theoretic argument examined in this study is that exposure to offensive messages might evoke stress in victims. Consequently, resilience resources (self-efficacy, social support and hope) might reduce the sense of stress and the psychological difficulties that follow it.

The findings indicate that the rate of Cyberbullying victims among users is 15.3%; out of which 8.8% are victims of Cyberbullying alone, and 6.5% are victims of integrated bullying (face to face and Cyberbullying combined). The range of negative emotions and sensations reported by the victims is extremely wide. The most common sensations are anger and shame. The Cyberbullying victims had four kinds of reactions: one aimed at stopping the offense, another meant to offend the offender, a third response was seeking help and the fourth one was refraining from response. Concerning the digital literacy aspect, 84% of the study participants reported of being quite familiar with the internet and cyber space, and most of them reported being highly skillful in their various uses and activities on the internet. The level of psychological difficulties such as restlessness, bad feelings, anger fits and sadness, among adolescents who testified to having been attacked on the internet is on a level similar to that of adolescents who experienced being attacked physically. The level of psychological difficulties reported by adolescents who experienced integrated attacks was significantly higher than that of the other groups of victims. The level of resilience (expressed by self-efficacy, social support and hope) of adolescents reporting of having experienced Cyberbullying is similar to that of face to face bullying and lower than that reported by the non-victim group. The level of resilience of adolescents reporting having experienced integrated bullying was found to be lower than that of all other groups of victims. In other words, the group of victims to integrated bullying the lowest in level of resilience resources and highest in the level of difficulties. Distinguishing the "integrated bullying" victim group is a research innovation, and so is the fact that this study is one of the first to examine resilience in relation to the phenomenon of Cyberbullying.

The study confirmed our theoretical arguments. We found a direct relation between falling victim to Cyberbullying and its perception as a stressful condition accompanied by psychological difficulties. In addition, we found that resources of resilience (self-efficacy, social support and hope) might lower the level of the victims' psychological difficulties. The findings of the study indicate that social support is the most significant resilience resource. Concerning digital literacy, the findings in this study do not indicate significant differences between the various kinds of victims. In other words, this variable, checking the level of familiarity, use and control of the internet does not constitute a distinguishing or explaining factor in relation to Cyberbullying victims.

The current study offers a theoretical as well as a practical contribution. On the theoretical side, the study helps to expand our knowledge about the phenomenon of Cyberbullying, its characteristics and effect on its victims. It offers to examine it as a new case in relation to the stress and resilience theories. In addition, this study investigates the relationship between digital literacy and Cyberbullying. It examines the victims' experience of offence on the internet as a subjective experience according to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) dynamic cognitive model according to which what determines the intensity and severity of the offense is the subjective perception of the victim rather than the objective characteristics of the offense. On the practical level, the findings of this study might help to develop intervention programs for the prevention and reduction of the phenomenon of Cyberbullying. These programs should focus on enhancing the resilience resources of adolescents and emphasize the creation of a climate that promotes social support, encouraging those exposed to Cyberbullying and particularly its victims to report it and seek help.