



Understanding University Students' Lived Experiences of Cyberbullying in Digital Interpersonal Communication

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying in digital interpersonal communication has emerged as a significant concern in communication and social psychology studies, particularly among university students navigating complex peer dynamics online. While existing research has documented the prevalence and psychological effects of cyberbullying, little is known about how students personally interpret and make meaning of these experiences within their social-academic networks. This study addresses that gap by asking: How do university students experience and internalize cyberbullying in interpersonal online contexts? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study explores the lived experiences of students subjected to peer-based cyberbullying on social media platforms. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 university students from a public university in Jakarta, Indonesia. The collected data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to identify thematic patterns and ensure rigor through member checking and peer debriefing. The findings reveal four central themes: emotional shock, withdrawal from digital interaction, the search for emotional support, and the reconstruction of self-identity. These themes highlight how cyberbullying is not merely a digital behavior but a deeply emotional and relational rupture in trusted social spaces. The study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital harm by emphasizing the subjective meanings and emotional consequences of cyberbullying, particularly in collectivist cultural settings. These insights have implications for developing empathy-based interventions, improving digital emotional literacy, and guiding future research in communication, education, and mental health.



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INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly digitized society, social media has become a central space for interpersonal communication, particularly among university students. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp serve as tools for self-expression and connection, as well as arenas where identity, emotion, and social dynamics intersect. Within these interactions, cyberbullying has emerged as a significant issue, disrupting the quality of engagement among young adults.

Cyberbullying, defined as aggressive, intentional acts carried out through electronic means to harm or humiliate, has become a pressing concern in digital communication studies. Unlike traditional bullying, it blurs boundaries between public and private spheres, often occurring within peer or academic circles once considered safe. For university students, cyberbullying by acquaintances or classmates intensifies psychological and emotional harm by affecting both their online presence and daily relational and academic environments (Hartmann, 2016). This phenomenon holds deep relevance beyond its visible consequences. It touches on fundamental aspects of the human experience, such as vulnerability, identity, social belonging, and emotional safety. The subjective nature of cyberbullying—how it is perceived, internalized, and remembered by the victim—differs from person to person and is deeply influenced by cultural, social, and interpersonal factors. In collectivist societies such as Indonesia, where harmony and group cohesion are highly valued, experiences of public digital humiliation can be profoundly damaging and socially alienating.

Despite the growing body of literature on cyberbullying, there remains a gap in understanding the personal and emotional meaning behind these experiences, especially when the aggression originates from within one's social or academic circle. Quantitative studies have contributed to identifying prevalence and risk factors, yet they often fail to capture the inner world of the individual subjected to such harm.

Given the subjective and emotionally charged nature of cyberbullying, particularly within interpersonal digital interactions, there is a pressing need to explore how individuals make sense of these experiences. A phenomenological approach, which centers on lived experience and meaning-making, offers a compelling framework for such an exploration, allowing the voices of those affected to be heard and understood within their own sociocultural realities.

The study of individual experiences in the context of cyberbullying has become a critical area of inquiry within the broader field of digital interpersonal communication. Researchers have increasingly recognized the need to move beyond statistical representations of online aggression toward a more nuanced understanding of how such experiences are personally lived and emotionally processed. In this context, phenomenological research offers a unique lens through which the emotional and psychological impact of cyberbullying can be explored in depth, especially as it relates to the erosion of trust and social safety within peer-based digital interactions.

However, the methodological landscape of cyberbullying research remains heavily dominated by quantitative approaches that prioritize measurable outcomes such as frequency, behavioral patterns, or psychological consequences in numerical terms. While valuable, such approaches often fall short in capturing the complex emotional responses and symbolic meanings that students attach to their experiences—particularly when the aggressors are not anonymous strangers but peers, classmates, or friends within their academic ecosystem (Bond, 2022; Hartmann, 2016).

Existing qualitative studies have attempted to address this gap, yet many rely on descriptive content or thematic categorizations that lack engagement with participants' subjective meaning-making processes. Without access to how individuals interpret, internalize, and give voice to their suffering, current research provides only a partial account of the phenomenon. For example, Utami (2023) highlights parasocial digital attachment among Indonesian youth but does not delve into the personal transformations or relational ruptures caused by hostile peer interactions. Similarly, Chen (2020) explores affective online relationships yet does not explicitly address the emotional aftermath of digitally mediated aggression in a peer context.

These methodological limitations suggest that many prior investigations have been unable to grasp the essence of the lived experience of cyberbullying in the interpersonal domain. A phenomenological approach is therefore essential—not only to access the richness of subjective emotional worlds but also to acknowledge the socio-cultural context in which these experiences are situated and given meaning.

In the existing body of research, the dominant response to cyberbullying among university students has been framed through behavioral interventions, digital literacy programs, and institutional support mechanisms. These practical solutions—while important—are primarily designed based on quantifiable data that identify risk factors, prevalence rates, or typologies of cyberbullying behaviors. While such approaches offer generalizable insights, they often lack sensitivity to the deeply personal, emotional, and contextual nature of the experience, particularly when the aggressor is a peer within one's immediate academic or social circle.

This limitation is especially evident in studies that employ survey-based or content analysis methods, which tend to categorize experiences into pre-defined variables and overlook the nuances of internal meaning-making (Tukachinsky, 2011; Hartmann, 2016). As a result, these methodologies are ill-equipped to capture how victims interpret the experience, construct emotional responses, or renegotiate their sense of identity and safety in digital spaces. Consequently, the psychological and relational impacts of peer-based cyberbullying remain underexplored, particularly within the sociocultural context of Indonesian university students.

A more suitable and insightful alternative lies in the adoption of phenomenological inquiry, which seeks to understand the essence of lived experience from the perspective of those who have directly encountered the phenomenon. By focusing on the emotional depth, symbolic meanings, and subjective interpretations of cyberbullying, phenomenology provides a pathway to uncovering the hidden layers of distress, adaptation, and relational transformation that quantitative approaches often miss. This shift is not merely methodological—it reflects a broader epistemological need to center the voices of those most affected by the phenomenon in order to develop interventions that are empathetic, contextually grounded, and meaningful.

Several previous studies have examined how individuals experience distress in online environments, especially in relation to cyberbullying. These studies often focus on psychological outcomes, such as anxiety or depression, using survey-based or quantitative designs. Some qualitative works have explored online conflict, but many fail to investigate the subjective meanings that individuals attach to those experiences. Theories of interpersonal communication and symbolic interactionism suggest that emotional harm in digital contexts is shaped by personal, relational, and cultural interpretations. However, few studies have applied phenomenological approaches to understand how students make sense of being cyberbullied by peers in their social-academic networks.

This article applies interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of university students who have been cyberbullied in peer-to-peer contexts. This method was chosen to reveal how individuals perceive and construct meaning from emotionally significant events. IPA allows for the identification of patterns, symbols, and emotions in narratives without reducing them to numerical categories. The method addresses the knowledge gap identified earlier by focusing on the emotional depth and context of the participants' lived realities. Through this approach, the study reveals how cyberbullying affects not just online behavior, but also identity, relationships, and emotional well-being.

This article begins with an introduction and background on the phenomenon of cyberbullying in interpersonal digital communication. The methodology section explains the phenomenological approach and details the data collection and analysis process. The results section presents key themes derived from participant narratives, supported by direct quotations. The discussion interprets these themes in relation to previous literature and theoretical frameworks. The article concludes with reflections on the meaning of the findings and implications for future research and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of university students who have encountered cyberbullying within the realm of interpersonal communication on social media platforms. The phenomenological approach was selected due to its emphasis on capturing the subjective meanings that individuals assign to their experiences. This methodology facilitates a deep examination of the internal responses, perceptions, and social interpretations associated with the phenomenon under investigation. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), inspired by Heideggerian hermeneutics, was applied to uncover not only the descriptive elements of experience but also the underlying structures of meaning shaped by personal and sociocultural contexts.

Participants

Participants consisted of undergraduate students who had experienced cyberbullying on social media, specifically in situations involving personal or interpersonal relationships. A purposive sampling technique was used to select individuals who met the following inclusion criteria: (1) currently enrolled as a university student in Indonesia, (2) aged between 18 and 25 years, and (3) had experienced direct forms of cyberbullying related to interpersonal interactions within the last 12 months. Exclusion criteria included participants who had not experienced personal cyberbullying or whose experiences were solely institutional or anonymous in nature. A total of 10 participants were included in the study, with a gender

distribution of 6 females and 4 males, and an average age of 21.3 years. All participants were drawn from diverse academic disciplines to provide a broader perspective of the phenomenon.

The sample size of 10 was deemed appropriate based on IPA methodological literature, which suggests that smaller, purposively selected samples allow for in-depth exploration and data saturation—achieved when no new themes emerge during analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in a private and comfortable setting either face-to-face or via encrypted video conferencing platforms, depending on participant preference. An interview guide was developed to facilitate the exploration of key themes while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their personal narratives. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. A supportive environment was ensured throughout the process, with attention given to emotional well-being and privacy. The interview guide was informed by existing literature on cyberbullying and interpersonal communication and underwent minor modifications following a pilot test to enhance clarity and sensitivity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved several systematic steps to extract meaning from participants' narratives. First, transcripts were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of each experience. Meaning units were then identified and coded, capturing significant expressions of emotion, thought, and interpretation. These codes were subsequently grouped into emergent themes, reflecting common patterns across the data. The analysis was iterative, with constant comparison used to refine and validate themes. NVivo software supported the coding and organization of data but did not replace the interpretive process. A coding framework was developed collaboratively by the research team to ensure consistency, and trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, whereby participants reviewed preliminary findings for accuracy and resonance. Additionally, peer debriefing was conducted with qualitative experts to verify theme validity and minimize researcher bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants received detailed information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study, with all personal identifiers removed from transcripts and pseudonyms assigned to participants. The research adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and the applicable national guidelines for social research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

This section presents the lived experiences of university students who have encountered cyberbullying on social media platforms, particularly within the context of interpersonal communication. The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), resulting in the emergence of four core themes that encapsulate the essence of the participants' emotional, cognitive, and relational experiences.

The Emotional Shock of Unanticipated Aggression

Participants described their initial reactions to cyberbullying as emotionally overwhelming, marked by disbelief, fear, and confusion. The aggression—often from peers or acquaintances—was unexpected, disrupting the perceived safety of digital interpersonal spaces.

“I was just expressing my opinion about a class issue, and suddenly someone commented harshly, calling me names. It shocked me. I didn't expect that from someone I had group assignments with.” (Participant 4)

The feeling of betrayal was intensified by the familiarity of the aggressor, making the experience deeply personal. This emotional turbulence initiated a state of psychological vulnerability, especially when the attack came from someone within the same social circle.

Silencing the Self — Withdrawal from Digital Interaction

A recurring response to cyberbullying was withdrawal from online engagement, both as a protective mechanism and a manifestation of emotional exhaustion. Participants reported reducing or completely halting their online presence for a period following the incident.

“I deleted my Instagram app for a few weeks. I couldn’t stand looking at the comments or even scrolling. It felt like I wasn’t safe anywhere.” (Participant 2)

This withdrawal was not merely a retreat from social media, but also from peer interactions in academic settings. The digital harassment translated into strained offline relationships, leading to further isolation and silence.

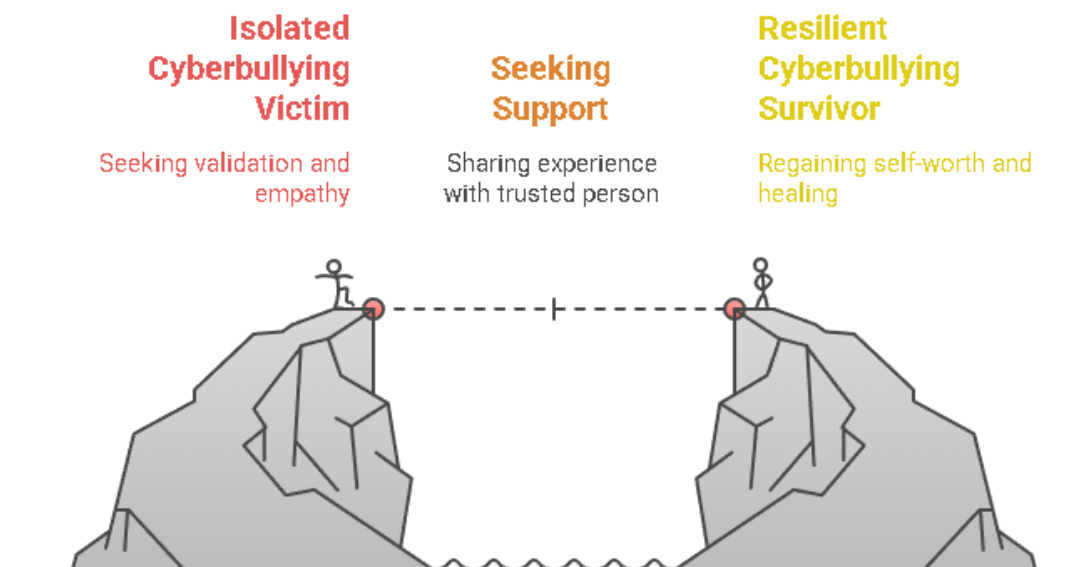
The Search for Validation and Emotional Support

After the initial shock and withdrawal, participants sought emotional support from close friends, family, or campus counselors. The need for affirmation and empathy was crucial in helping them navigate the aftermath of cyberbullying.

“I finally told my roommate. She just listened and said, ‘You didn’t deserve that.’ It felt like a burden was lifted. I realized I needed someone to validate my feelings.” (Participant 6)

Interestingly, while the digital realm was the source of harm, offline interpersonal communication became a space for healing. The act of sharing the experience, even with one trusted individual, played a vital role in regaining self-worth and psychological resilience.

From Cyberbullying Victim to Survivor



Reconstructing Self-Identity and Communication Boundaries

Participants reflected on how the experience of cyberbullying transformed their perception of digital communication and self-expression. Many adopted more cautious or selective communication styles, becoming more aware of potential risks.

“Now, before I post anything, I think twice. I ask myself, ‘Is this worth the risk?’ I feel like I lost a part of my freedom to express, but I also learned to protect myself better.” (Participant 1)

This theme revealed a dynamic process of identity reconstruction where participants negotiated between openness and self-preservation. The shift in communicative behavior was not simply an avoidance strategy but part of a deeper redefinition of their digital persona.

The essence of the phenomenon lies in the way university students internalize, respond to, and eventually adapt to experiences of cyberbullying within interpersonal contexts. From initial emotional destabilization to a gradual reconstitution of digital identity, the findings illustrate a complex emotional and relational journey. Each theme underscores not only the psychological impact of cyberbullying but also the transformative power of interpersonal connections in fostering recovery.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the experience of cyberbullying among university students is marked by emotional shock, withdrawal, a search for support, and eventual identity reconstruction. These themes reflect a complex and deeply personal journey of navigating harm within digital interpersonal relationships, directly addressing the central research question concerning how students interpret and respond to cyberbullying from peers in online spaces.

The study contributes a nuanced understanding of how cyberbullying is internalized and experienced as a relational disruption rather than simply a digital conflict. Unlike anonymous attacks, peer-to-peer cyberbullying carries the weight of personal betrayal and emotional dissonance, which intensifies its psychological impact. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study uncovers the inner dialogues and emotional recalibrations that students undergo, offering insight into the lived meaning of digital aggression within a trusted social environment. This contribution expands the current discourse by foregrounding subjective vulnerability and resilience, aspects often overlooked in behaviorist or statistical frameworks.

These findings align with and extend existing literature on the emotional consequences of online harassment. As Hartmann (2016) suggests, parasocial and mediated interactions can trigger real affective responses; however, the current study emphasizes that these responses are even more pronounced in contexts where interpersonal trust has been violated. Unlike the study by Utami (2023), which highlights parasocial attachment but lacks exploration of peer-originated digital aggression, this research exposes how interpersonal familiarity amplifies the trauma of cyberbullying. The study also reinforces Chen's (2020) argument that digital relationships carry emotional depth, but goes further by illuminating the process of identity fragmentation and realignment following such experiences. In doing so, the research deepens our understanding of emotional safety, relational identity, and communicative boundaries in digital interpersonal spaces.

The findings of this study carry important implications for educators, mental health professionals, and institutions of higher education. By revealing the deeply personal and emotional dimensions of cyberbullying among university students, particularly in peer-related contexts, this research highlights the need for interventions that go beyond policy enforcement or digital awareness campaigns. Emotional support structures—such as peer counseling, reflective discussion forums, and culturally sensitive guidance services—should be integrated into academic environments to address the inner turmoil caused by relational digital aggression. In collectivist societies like Indonesia, where personal dignity and group harmony are closely intertwined, cyberbullying can have far-reaching effects on identity and community belonging. Therefore, promoting empathy-based digital citizenship and reinforcing emotional literacy within campus culture becomes essential to prevent and mitigate such harm.

This study is not without limitations. As a phenomenological investigation focused on lived experience, the findings are grounded in the specific contexts of a small group of university students from Indonesia. The use of purposive sampling and in-depth interviews limits the breadth of perspectives and may not reflect the full diversity of student experiences across different regions, institutions, or cultures. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces potential recall or emotional bias, particularly concerning sensitive topics like peer aggression and identity. These

constraints underscore the need for cautious interpretation and contextual application of the findings, rather than universal generalization.

Future research may build upon these insights by examining the long-term effects of cyberbullying on students' interpersonal trust, academic performance, and mental health within broader educational ecosystems. Cross-cultural comparative studies could explore how different value systems and digital norms influence the experience and expression of online interpersonal harm. Moreover, integrating phenomenological findings with complementary methods—such as digital ethnography or participatory action research—may offer richer, multi-layered understandings of how individuals adapt, resist, or heal in the aftermath of cyberbullying. This research provides a foundation for such interdisciplinary inquiries, contributing meaningfully to both communication studies and the evolving field of digital mental health.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how university students experience cyberbullying within the context of interpersonal communication on social media. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the research uncovered four core themes: emotional shock, digital withdrawal, the search for emotional support, and the reconstruction of self-identity. These findings offer a deeper understanding of the personal and relational impact of peer-to-peer digital aggression, particularly within collectivist cultural settings. Distinct from prior phenomenological or qualitative studies, this research uniquely integrates the cultural dimension of collectivism in Indonesia, providing nuanced insights into how cultural values shape students' meaning-making and coping mechanisms in cyberbullying experiences. The study addresses a significant gap in the literature by centering the subjective meanings and emotional processes often overlooked in previous quantitative approaches. It also highlights the importance of empathy-based interventions and emotional literacy programs in university environments. Such interventions may include training programs that foster perspective-taking, active listening, and emotional regulation skills among students and staff, as well as the creation of peer support networks to build resilience and communal empathy. Future research could expand this work by exploring cross-cultural differences or combining phenomenology with digital ethnography to enrich the analysis of online interpersonal harm.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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