



An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of the Subjective Emotional Experience of Cyberbullying Among Indonesian Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying has emerged as a significant psychosocial issue within digital communication, particularly among adolescents navigating identity formation and emotional development. Although previous studies have documented its behavioral and psychological consequences, little is known about how adolescents subjectively interpret and emotionally respond to cyberbullying within their sociocultural context. To address this gap, this study explores the question: How do adolescents in Indonesian digital communities experience and make sense of cyberbullying? Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, the study uncovers the emotional and existential dimensions of cyberbullying based on the lived experiences of adolescent participants. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight adolescents aged 15–18, and analyzed using systematic IPA procedures to identify essential themes. The findings revealed three core experiential themes: emotional shock caused by public digital exposure, identity fragmentation influenced by social perception, and silent coping driven by cultural expectations of emotional restraint. These results offer a deeper understanding of cyberbullying as a meaning-laden experience that transcends mere online interaction and penetrates the adolescent's sense of self and belonging. This study underscores the importance of developing culturally tailored interventions and informs educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals in addressing the complex emotional needs of adolescents facing cyberbullying.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication platforms has significantly transformed adolescent social interactions, identity formation, and relational dynamics. Social media now serves as a crucial arena for self-expression and community engagement, yet it also facilitates cyberbullying—psychological aggression conducted anonymously, publicly, and persistently through digital means. Cyberbullying transcends technical or behavioral issues, representing a complex phenomenon situated at the nexus of communication, identity, and emotional experience. Although previous research has documented the rising incidence of cyberbullying globally (Barlett, 2021; Pabian & Vandebosch, 2020), understanding its subjective emotional impact remains underexplored. This gap is critical, as cyberbullying affects victims' self-concept, emotional health, and social integration beyond the digital realm.

In Southeast Asian societies, where collectivist values and strong social norms often discourage the open expression of emotional distress, adolescents who experience cyberbullying may face compounded psychological burdens. Shame, social withdrawal, and identity confusion are frequently reported yet remain poorly understood from the perspective of those who endure them (Lim, 2019; Rahardjo, 2024). These emotional responses are embedded in a cultural matrix that shapes how young people interpret and respond to online hostility.

Given the emotional depth and cultural complexity of cyberbullying experiences, there is a critical need to explore the meaning of these experiences from the viewpoint of the adolescents themselves. Such exploration cannot be achieved through numerical data alone but requires a

methodological approach that foregrounds subjectivity, perception, and lived experience. Phenomenology, as a humanistic and interpretative tradition in social research, offers a lens through which the nuanced and layered experiences of cyberbullying victims can be explored with empathy and depth.

This study, therefore, responds to the urgent call for a more experience-oriented understanding of digital aggression among adolescents by engaging with their personal narratives and emotional landscapes. Through this lens, cyberbullying is not just a technological or behavioral issue—it is a phenomenon that resonates deeply within the human psyche, especially during the formative years of identity development.

Research into the lived experiences of adolescents subjected to cyberbullying has increasingly gained prominence, particularly as scholars and practitioners recognize that the psychological consequences of digital aggression are best understood through the subjective lens of the individuals affected. Understanding how young victims emotionally process, interpret, and assign meaning to these incidents is crucial for developing empathetic and culturally sensitive responses.

Despite this recognition, existing research has often relied on quantitative approaches that prioritize frequency, patterns, and statistical correlations over personal narratives. While such data are useful in mapping the scope of cyberbullying, they frequently overlook the rich, contextual, and emotionally charged experiences of adolescents navigating hostile online environments (Pabian & Vandebosch, 2020). Even studies that incorporate qualitative elements tend to adopt narrative or thematic approaches that offer surface-level descriptions rather than deeper existential insights (Widyastuti, 2023).

Methodologically, this poses a significant challenge. The complexity of psychological resonance—how emotional experiences are internalized and negotiated—is difficult to capture through conventional survey instruments or behavioral coding frameworks. In particular, the cultural context of Southeast Asian adolescents, who may suppress emotional expression due to social norms, adds an additional layer of interpretative nuance that quantitative methods are ill-equipped to uncover (Lim, 2019).

As a result, previous studies have often fallen short in illuminating the core meanings of victimization, identity disruption, and emotional endurance from the perspective of those who live through these experiences. This limitation underscores the necessity of employing an approach that is attuned to subjectivity, depth, and meaning-making. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) offers such a pathway, allowing researchers to move beyond observable behaviors and into the realm of personal meaning, emotional interpretation, and existential reflection.

Current strategies addressing cyberbullying among adolescents have largely centered on behavioral interventions, digital literacy programs, and policy-driven efforts focused on prevention and reporting mechanisms. While these practical solutions serve critical protective functions, they are often grounded in psychological or sociological frameworks that treat cyberbullying primarily as a behavioral issue rather than an existential or emotional experience. Consequently, the subjective meanings and inner struggles of adolescents—particularly those involving identity fragmentation, emotional trauma, and cultural silence—remain underexplored.

Existing research, predominantly quantitative or mixed-method in nature, tends to emphasize what happens (i.e., the prevalence, platforms, and demographics involved) rather than how it is experienced (Barlett, 2021; Pabian & Vandebosch, 2020). Even studies that include narrative or thematic analysis often fall short of unpacking the deeper psychological and existential implications of cyberbullying, especially in cultural settings where emotional expression is constrained (Widyastuti, 2023; Lim, 2019). These approaches risk reducing complex emotional realities into categorical labels, losing the nuanced and contextualized meanings that adolescents assign to their experiences.

Given these limitations, there is a pressing need for an alternative research lens—one that privileges depth over breadth and meaning over measurement. Phenomenology, and particularly interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), offers a way to uncover how adolescents interpret, endure, and emotionally respond to the experience of being cyberbullied. By centering the adolescent

voice and prioritizing their lived experiences, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature: the absence of research that explores cyberbullying not merely as an external event, but as an internal, meaning-laden phenomenon shaped by emotion, identity, and culture.

Previous research on cyberbullying has focused heavily on its behavioral dimensions, often relying on quantitative methods to identify patterns and risk factors. While these studies have contributed to our understanding of digital aggression, they seldom explore how adolescents personally interpret and emotionally internalize such experiences. Some recent works have attempted to incorporate qualitative approaches, but few offer deep engagement with the emotional and cultural meanings of cyberbullying (Widyastuti, 2023; Lim, 2019). Theories of adolescent identity development and psychological resilience have been invoked, yet their application within the specific context of online harassment remains limited. There is a growing recognition that understanding cyberbullying requires more than measuring effects—it demands listening to the lived voices of those affected.

This study applies an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to address this gap and explore how adolescents in Indonesia experience and make sense of cyberbullying. IPA was chosen because it focuses on how individuals assign meaning to their experiences, particularly within emotionally complex or culturally sensitive contexts. Through this approach, the study seeks to answer how adolescents emotionally respond to cyberbullying, how it affects their self-perception, and how they navigate their identities in digital environments. Rather than describing what cyberbullying is, this research asks what cyberbullying means to those who live through it. By doing so, it aims to uncover themes of emotional resonance, silent endurance, and fragmented identity within a specific socio-cultural frame.

The structure of this article follows a logical flow to support clarity and coherence. The introduction outlines the general and specific background of the study, culminating in the identification of a clear knowledge gap. The method section describes the IPA framework, participant selection, data collection through in-depth interviews, and analytical procedures. Results are presented thematically, reflecting the participants' experiences in their own words. The discussion then interprets these findings in light of existing literature, followed by a conclusion that highlights the study's contributions, limitations, and implications.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of adolescents who had been exposed to cyberbullying within digital communities. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, is grounded in the philosophical tradition that seeks to understand how individuals perceive and make meaning of their lived realities. Specifically, the interpretative branch of phenomenology, influenced by Heidegger, emphasizes the interpretive process of uncovering the essence of experience as situated within a sociocultural and relational context.

The IPA approach was selected due to its suitability in exploring the subjective, emotional, and existential dimensions of adolescent experiences with cyberbullying. This method enables a deep, contextual understanding of how individuals construct meaning from distressing digital encounters, thereby aligning with the research objective to capture the psychological resonance of online victimization.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of adolescents aged between 15 and 18 years who had encountered cyberbullying within the past 12 months on social media platforms. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure participants had directly experienced the phenomenon under investigation and could articulate their perceptions and feelings in depth.

Inclusion criteria comprised individuals with active or recent involvement in online communities, a self-reported experience of being targeted in digital bullying incidents, and the capacity to engage in reflective interviews. Exclusion criteria included individuals with diagnosed severe

psychiatric disorders or ongoing psychological crises at the time of recruitment to ensure emotional safety during data collection.

A total of eight participants (5 females, 3 males) were included, with an average age of 16.4 years. All participants were enrolled in urban high schools and had diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Their demographic variation enriched the contextual understanding of cyberbullying experiences across different digital subcultures.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person in private rooms within school counseling centers or neutral community spaces to ensure a secure and supportive environment. An interview protocol was developed, containing open-ended questions aimed at eliciting participants' emotions, perceptions, and coping narratives related to their cyberbullying experiences.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. Participants were encouraged to speak freely and were assured of confidentiality. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and non-verbal cues were noted as field observations to support contextual interpretation.

All interviews were guided by prompts derived from existing IPA studies, yet remained flexible to accommodate emergent meanings unique to each individual. The use of member-checking at the end of each session allowed for clarification and verification of key narratives.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), emphasizing the idiographic and iterative examination of each case before cross-case synthesis. Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure immersion, followed by initial noting of significant phrases and emotional expressions.

Meaning units were identified, coded, and clustered into emerging themes using a combination of manual annotation and assisted coding through NVivo 12 software. Thematic patterns were developed through an inductive process, and interconnections between themes were explored to construct a narrative of shared psychological resonance.

Themes were then refined and validated across participant accounts, with attention given to both convergence and divergence in experiences. The final thematic structure reflected the essential aspects of how cyberbullying was experienced, internalized, and interpreted by the adolescents in their sociocultural context.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from all participants and, where applicable, from guardians, in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving minors.

Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reporting to ensure anonymity. All data were stored securely and used solely for the purposes of this study. The study adhered to the ethical standards set by the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant local ethical frameworks.

RESULTS

This study explored the psychological resonance experienced by adolescents subjected to cyberbullying within digital communities. Through in-depth interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), three central themes emerged, reflecting the participants' lived experiences, emotional landscapes, and meaning-making processes.

The Emotional Shock of Digital Exposure

Participants consistently described their first encounters with cyberbullying as emotionally destabilizing and deeply personal. The experience of being targeted online, especially in public forums, led to acute feelings of shame, fear, and helplessness.

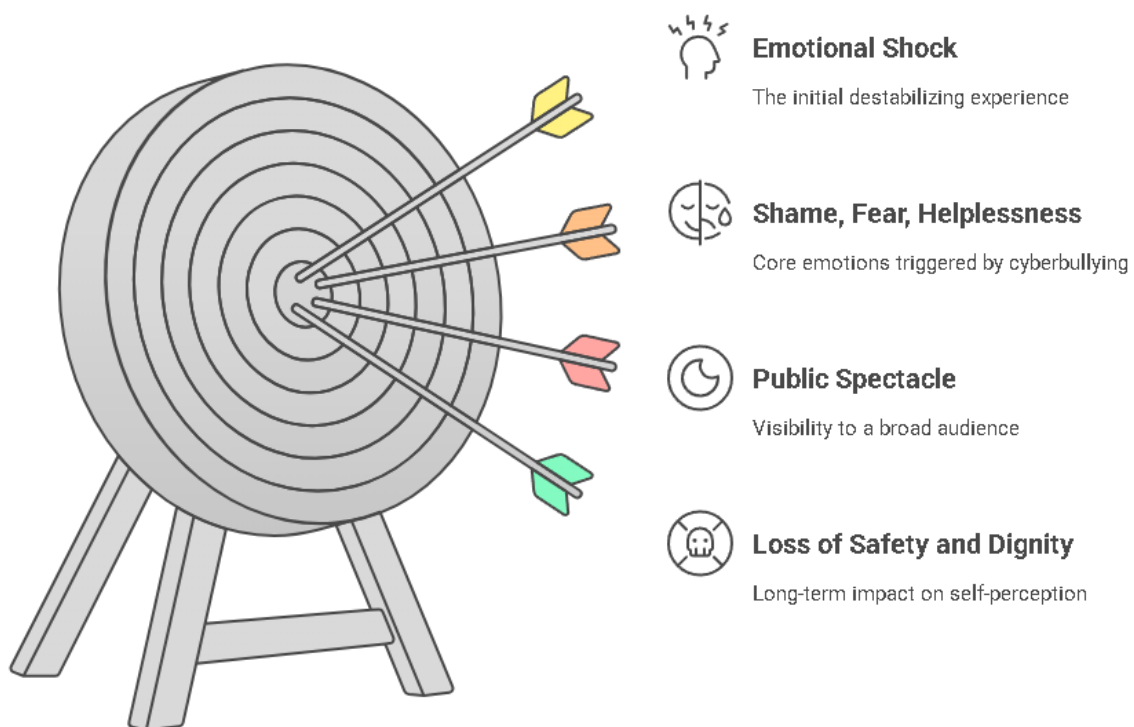
“I couldn’t sleep for days. It wasn’t just the insults, it was the fact that everyone could see it... like they were all watching me fall apart.” (P4, female, 16)

For many, the immediacy and permanence of digital communication intensified their emotional response. Unlike traditional bullying, which may occur in private or isolated settings, cyberbullying rendered participants’ vulnerabilities visible to a broader, often anonymous, audience.

“When I saw the comments, my hands trembled. I felt like the whole school knew about it. I couldn’t even go to class the next day.” (P2, male, 17)

These narratives revealed that cyberbullying was not merely an act of aggression—it was a public spectacle that assaulted the participants’ sense of safety and dignity.

Emotional Impact of Cyberbullying



Fragmented Identity and the Fear of Misrecognition

A recurrent experience among participants was a disruption in self-perception. As adolescents negotiate their identities through online interactions, being misrepresented or ridiculed publicly created a conflict between their self-image and how others perceived them digitally.

“They said I was fake, that I only posted happy things. But they don’t know me. I felt like I had to delete everything and disappear.” (P6, female, 15)

Several participants spoke about withdrawing from social media platforms temporarily or permanently, not simply as avoidance, but as a way to reclaim control over their narrative.

“I logged out for weeks. I couldn’t stand seeing myself through their eyes. I needed to breathe without the noise.” (P3, male, 16)

This theme underscores how digital misrecognition through bullying narratives triggered an internal identity crisis, leading participants to re-evaluate how they presented themselves online and offline.

Silent Coping and the Norm of Endurance

Rather than confrontation, most participants adopted silent coping strategies—blocking perpetrators, avoiding online spaces, or suppressing their emotional responses. Cultural values in Southeast Asia that emphasize emotional restraint and social harmony shaped how these adolescents navigated their distress.

“My parents said to ignore it. That’s what I did. I didn’t talk to anyone. Just acted like it never happened.” (P1, female, 16)

Others echoed similar sentiments, citing feelings of futility and fear of being judged as weak or attention-seeking.

“I didn’t report it. Who would believe me anyway? It’s just ‘internet stuff’, right?” (P5, male, 17)

These findings point to an internalized norm of emotional endurance, where resilience was not expressed through resistance, but through suppression and silent withdrawal.

Across all participants, cyberbullying was experienced not only as a social threat but as an emotional rupture that disturbed their sense of identity, agency, and connection. The psychological resonance extended beyond the digital moment—manifesting in real-world anxiety, altered self-perception, and long-lasting emotional scars. While coping mechanisms varied, the overarching pattern revealed a profound tension between the need to protect oneself and the desire to be seen, understood, and accepted within digital communities.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study revealed that adolescents who experience cyberbullying undergo profound emotional disruptions, identity disorientation, and adopt silent coping strategies shaped by cultural expectations. These essential meanings, constructed through the participants’ narratives, directly address the research question concerning how adolescents in digital communities subjectively experience and make sense of cyberbullying.

Contribution to the Research Question

The findings of this research illuminate the psychological resonance of cyberbullying as experienced by adolescents—not merely as an external social phenomenon, but as an emotionally internalized reality that influences their sense of self and belonging. By uncovering themes such as emotional shock, identity fragmentation, and silent endurance, this study provides a rich, experience-based understanding that was previously absent in the literature. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed for the articulation of how these individuals interpret their experiences in ways shaped by both their developmental stage and sociocultural context. In doing so, this research offers a new lens through which cyberbullying can be understood—as a phenomenon embedded in the existential and emotional lifeworlds of youth, rather than as a behavior that can be resolved solely through policy or prevention campaigns.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory

The results of this study both confirm and extend prior research on the emotional consequences of cyberbullying. Barlett (2021) identified the presence of emotional distress among adolescent victims, yet stopped short of exploring how that distress was experienced and interpreted from the perspective of the victims themselves. Similarly, Pabian and Vandebosch (2020) addressed the impacts of cyberbullying on self-esteem but relied heavily on correlational data that lacked contextual richness. The present findings advance these discussions by offering a more nuanced understanding of how adolescents internalize shame, fear, and confusion in the face of public digital attacks. Moreover, the theme of identity fragmentation resonates with the theoretical insights of adolescent identity development, particularly Eriksonian theory, which emphasizes the role of social feedback in shaping

self-concept. The cultural dimension of silent coping observed in this study complements Lim's (2019) work on emotional restraint in Southeast Asia, providing further evidence that social norms significantly influence how youth respond to online hostility. Thus, this research not only validates prior findings but also contributes original insights into the subjective and cultural dimensions of cyberbullying.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study offer both theoretical and practical implications for educators, mental health professionals, and digital policy makers. On a social level, the participants' narratives reflect a cultural tension between emotional vulnerability and societal expectations of silence, revealing how deeply rooted norms around shame and emotional suppression shape adolescents' responses to digital victimization. This has significant implications for interventions aimed at supporting youth, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts where emotional expression is often discouraged. Psychologically, the study underscores the need for trauma-informed and culturally sensitive counseling approaches that acknowledge the layered emotional experiences of cyberbullying victims. Moreover, in educational settings, these insights can inform school-based programs that foster emotional literacy and safe spaces for disclosure, ensuring that adolescents are not left to endure cyberbullying in isolation.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its relatively small and geographically specific sample, consisting only of adolescents from urban high schools in Indonesia. As such, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of adolescents in rural settings, other age groups, or cultural contexts with differing norms surrounding emotional expression and digital engagement. Additionally, while the phenomenological approach allows for deep exploration of subjective experiences, it does not aim for generalizability, and the idiographic focus of IPA means that the insights generated are bound to the unique contexts of the participants involved. The reliance on self-reported experiences also introduces the possibility of recall bias or emotional filtering, especially in relation to sensitive topics such as cyberbullying.

Prospective Statement for Future Research

Future studies may expand on these findings by exploring the experiences of adolescent victims of cyberbullying across diverse sociocultural settings, including rural or minority communities where digital access and social values may differ. Longitudinal research could also offer insight into how the meanings and coping strategies identified in this study evolve over time, especially as adolescents mature or encounter repeated incidents of online harassment. Furthermore, integrating perspectives from parents, educators, and peers may provide a more holistic understanding of the communal dimensions of cyberbullying experiences. Such multi-perspective phenomenological work could deepen our grasp of how digital harm is collectively perceived, responded to, and potentially transformed into resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Indonesian adolescents psychologically experience and interpret cyberbullying within digital communities. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the research revealed three essential themes: emotional shock, identity fragmentation, and silent coping shaped by sociocultural norms. These findings provide a deeper understanding of the internal and emotional dimensions of cyberbullying, addressing the limitations of previous research that often overlooked subjective meanings. The study contributes to the field by highlighting how cultural values influence adolescents' emotional responses and self-concept in the face of online harassment. It also offers practical implications for educators and mental health professionals to develop culturally sensitive interventions. Future research may expand these insights by involving more diverse populations and exploring longitudinal impacts on identity development and emotional resilience.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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