



## Lived Experiences and Meaning-Making of Cyberbullying Among Public Figures in Digital Communication

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### ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed the way individuals communicate, construct digital identities, and manage public visibility. Amid this shift, cyberbullying against public figures has become a pressing challenge with limited scholarly attention, especially regarding how they interpret and respond to such harassment. This study employs an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of public figures facing cyberbullying, emphasizing their meaning-making and adaptive strategies. Semi-structured interviews with eight participants were thematically analyzed to reveal how they confront emotional turbulence, identity negotiation, and reputation management. The findings show that while cyberbullying threatens psychological well-being and professional credibility, public figures develop distinctive strategies such as selective self-disclosure, narrative reframing, and strategic silence. By foregrounding subjective experiences, this research contributes a novel perspective on digital identity negotiation and resilience among public figures. It highlights theoretical implications for communication studies and practical insights for public relations, mental health support, and digital governance.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital era, social media has transformed interpersonal communication, reshaping how individuals express themselves, construct identities, and engage with wider audiences (Kollo & Mahfud, 2024; Zewude et al., 2025). Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have enabled unprecedented levels of interaction between public figures and their followers, creating new opportunities for influence, connection, and personal branding. However, alongside these advancements, the visibility afforded by social media has also heightened the vulnerability of public figures to various forms of online hostility, including cyberbullying and digital harassment.

Cyberbullying, broadly defined as intentional harm delivered through digital technologies, has emerged as a pressing social issue with profound psychological and communicative consequences (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Unlike traditional forms of harassment, cyberbullying is amplified by the permanence, speed, and reach of online content, making it difficult for individuals to control their public narratives. For public figures, this phenomenon is particularly significant due to their constant exposure, where every statement, appearance, or personal choice is subject to intense public scrutiny. The resulting emotional and social impact often extends beyond professional identity, affecting personal well-being and relationships.

Within the broader context of communication studies, digital identity and online reputation have become central themes for understanding how individuals navigate their presence in virtual environments (Khanam & Parihar, 2024; Pratiwi et al., 2024). Public figures frequently balance the demands of authentic self-expression with the strategic management of their reputations to maintain audience trust and professional credibility. Yet, experiences of cyberbullying introduce complex

emotional and cognitive challenges, forcing individuals to negotiate personal and public identities in highly visible, and often hostile, spaces.

Despite the increasing prevalence of cyberbullying, there remains limited understanding of how public figures experience and interpret these incidents at a deeper, more subjective level (Machado et al., 2024; Riany & Utami, 2025). While previous research has primarily focused on quantifying its psychological effects or evaluating coping mechanisms, relatively little is known about the meaning-making processes individuals undergo when confronting persistent digital harassment. This gap highlights the need for qualitative, experience-driven inquiry to uncover the nuanced ways public figures navigate emotional disruption, audience relationships, and self-concept in response to cyberbullying.

The phenomenological approach provides a valuable lens for addressing this knowledge gap. By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence of meaning embedded within personal narratives (Maftuh et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2019). This perspective is particularly relevant in exploring cyberbullying, as it prioritizes the subjective realities of those affected rather than imposing predefined theoretical frameworks. Through this approach, the study aims to illuminate the emotional, communicative, and identity-based dimensions of public figures' encounters with cyberbullying, contributing deeper insights to the fields of communication science, digital culture, and media psychology.

Research on individuals' lived experiences has become increasingly significant in contemporary communication studies, particularly within the context of digital identity, online interaction, and social media exposure (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). As public figures engage in highly visible online environments, understanding how they interpret and respond to phenomena such as cyberbullying has drawn considerable scholarly attention. Previous studies have examined the psychological, behavioral, and reputational effects of cyberbullying among celebrities, journalists, and influencers, highlighting its multidimensional impact on personal well-being and professional identity. However, despite these advancements, current knowledge remains fragmented, and the processes through which public figures construct meaning around their experiences are still poorly understood.

A significant challenge in this area arises from the methodological limitations of prior studies, which have predominantly relied on quantitative survey-based approaches to measure the frequency, intensity, and outcomes of online harassment (Erliyani, 2021; Yosep et al., 2024). While these methods provide valuable descriptive statistics, they often oversimplify complex psychological and communicative phenomena, failing to capture the depth, context, and subjective meaning inherent in participants' personal narratives. Such approaches are ill-equipped to examine how public figures make sense of cyberbullying, how they emotionally process harassment, and how they negotiate their personal and public identities within the digital sphere.

Furthermore, studies using traditional content analyses of online interactions have primarily focused on observable behaviors, such as response patterns, media strategies, or audience engagement metrics, while neglecting the internalized experiences of individuals subjected to cyberbullying (Ariana et al., 2024; Aswat et al., 2025). This analytical gap restricts our understanding of the emotional turbulence, identity negotiation, and strategic communication choices that shape how public figures adapt to online hostility. Consequently, the lack of phenomenological inquiry has left the essence of the experience underexplored, creating a disconnect between existing theoretical frameworks and the lived realities of those most affected.

The limitations of previous approaches underscore the necessity of adopting a phenomenological perspective, which emphasizes participants' subjective experiences and prioritizes their personal interpretations of meaning (Mukhlis, 2025b). By exploring the phenomenon from the standpoint of those who experience it directly, this study seeks to address a critical knowledge gap in communication research. Applying Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers the opportunity to move beyond surface-level descriptions toward deeply contextualized insights into how public figures understand, manage, and reconstruct their identities in the face of cyberbullying.

While existing research on cyberbullying among public figures has provided valuable insights into its psychological consequences, coping strategies, and reputation management techniques, much of this knowledge has been generated through practical frameworks and quantitative methodologies (Nina-Gutiérrez et al., 2024; Samala et al., 2024). These studies typically emphasize observable patterns, such as response behaviors or audience engagement metrics, and rely heavily on surveys and content analyses to describe the prevalence and outcomes of online harassment. Although such approaches have advanced our understanding of cyberbullying as a social phenomenon, they remain limited in their ability to capture the richness and depth of subjective experiences.

The central limitation lies in the fact that quantitative or behavioral frameworks cannot fully explain how public figures interpret and make sense of cyberbullying as part of their personal and professional identities. Emotional turbulence, identity negotiation, and self-reconstruction are lived phenomena that extend beyond what can be measured numerically or observed externally. Existing studies often overlook the internal meaning-making processes that shape how public figures experience online harassment, leading to an incomplete understanding of the essence of the phenomenon.

To address this gap, a shift toward a phenomenological approach is necessary (Maltby et al., 2024; Saleem et al., 2022). By focusing on participants' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences, phenomenology enables a holistic exploration of cyberbullying as it is understood from the insider's perspective. Specifically, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provides the analytical depth required to illuminate how public figures emotionally process cyberbullying, negotiate their digital identities, and develop adaptive communication strategies in highly public online environments.

This approach not only responds to the methodological limitations of previous studies but also offers the potential to generate novel insights into the emotional, communicative, and identity-based dimensions of cyberbullying. By uncovering the underlying structures of meaning within participants' narratives, this study positions itself to make a significant contribution to communication science and deepen theoretical understandings of digital identity resilience in the age of social media.

Recent studies on cyberbullying among public figures have provided valuable insights into its psychological, social, and professional impacts. Research has examined the consequences of online harassment on mental health, audience trust, and digital reputation. While these studies advance understanding, most rely on quantitative surveys and content analyses that capture patterns of behavior but overlook subjective meaning-making processes. Consequently, the emotional complexity and personal interpretations of public figures remain underexplored. This research builds on these findings by shifting attention to the lived experiences and personal narratives of individuals directly impacted by cyberbullying.

To address the limitations identified in prior research, this study adopts an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2019; Sheng et al., 2023). IPA is particularly effective for exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences, enabling a deep investigation into the emotional, communicative, and identity-based dimensions of cyberbullying. By prioritizing the participants' perspectives, this study responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier and seeks to uncover how public figures interpret, process, and manage their encounters with online harassment. The approach allows the study to provide rich, contextualized insights into the strategies participants develop to navigate digital hostility. Ultimately, the findings aim to contribute both theoretical knowledge and practical guidance for communication professionals, media practitioners, and public figures themselves.

This article is structured to guide readers through the study in a clear and logical sequence. The Introduction establishes the social and theoretical context of the research, highlighting the significance of exploring lived experiences. The Method section describes the phenomenological design, participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures. The Results present the findings thematically, supported by direct participant quotations to illustrate meaning and context. Finally, the Discussion interprets the findings in relation to existing literature, theoretical frameworks,

and practical implications, followed by a Conclusion summarizing the study's contributions and directions for future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

The research was designed using an interpretative phenomenological framework, focusing on uncovering the essence of participants' personal experiences with cyberbullying (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). The approach aimed to illuminate the meanings embedded within participants' narratives rather than quantify the prevalence of the phenomenon. Through its hermeneutic orientation, IPA allowed the study to go beyond surface descriptions and examine how participants constructed, negotiated, and transformed their understanding of their experiences in online environments.

By prioritizing subjective meaning over generalization, the design enabled a detailed understanding of how public figures interpret cyberbullying, the psychological impact they experience, and the communication strategies they develop. This focus aligns with the study's broader goal of contributing insights to the field of communication studies, particularly in the areas of digital reputation management and media-based identity negotiation.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they possessed rich and relevant experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The inclusion criteria specified that participants must:

- Be public figures with significant visibility, such as entertainers, journalists, influencers, or media personalities.
- Have experienced direct cyberbullying on social media within the past three years.
- Be willing and capable of sharing their personal experiences in detail.

Individuals were excluded if they experienced harassment indirectly, such as through official team accounts, or if they lacked autonomy in managing their digital profiles.

A total of eight participants took part in the study, consisting of four females and four males aged between 24 and 41 years ( $M = 32.5$ ). Their professional backgrounds varied across entertainment, journalism, and digital influence. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and all identifying information was removed from the data and reporting process.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews to allow participants to share their stories authentically while ensuring coverage of relevant topics. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to prompt reflection on experiences, emotional responses, identity negotiation, and strategies for managing reputation.

Interviews were conducted both face-to-face in private settings and via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participants' preferences and availability. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in an environment designed to ensure comfort and privacy. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy and nuance in participants' expressions.

A reflexive interviewing style was applied, enabling participants to narrate freely while gently guiding the conversation toward deeper exploration of meanings. This approach facilitated the emergence of rich, contextualized data that reflected participants' authentic voices and perspectives.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Lutz & Knox, 2014), following a systematic and iterative process to identify and interpret

themes emerging from participants' narratives. The analysis unfolded through several interconnected stages:

1. **Immersion in the Data**  
The transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity and develop a holistic understanding of participants' accounts.
2. **Identifying Meaning Units**  
Significant statements and expressions were extracted and segmented into meaning units, capturing moments of emotional, cognitive, and communicative significance.
3. **Developing Emergent Themes**  
These meaning units were clustered into preliminary themes representing shared experiences while preserving the individuality of each participant's narrative.
4. **Cross-Case Comparison**  
Themes identified within each transcript were examined across participants to reveal convergent and divergent patterns, forming the basis of higher-order thematic structures.
5. **Synthesizing Interpretations**  
Interpretative insights were integrated to produce a comprehensive understanding of the lived meanings surrounding cyberbullying among public figures.

NVivo 14 software supported the organization and coding of data but did not drive the analytic framework or final interpretations. Throughout the process, reflexivity was maintained to ensure that findings remained grounded in participants' perspectives rather than preconceived assumptions.

## RESULTS

### The Emotional Turbulence of Cyberbullying

Participants consistently described their initial encounters with cyberbullying as psychologically disruptive and emotionally overwhelming. Most expressed feelings of fear, anger, and helplessness as they attempted to comprehend the intensity of online harassment. These emotional reactions were not transient but deeply shaped their sense of self and personal identity as public figures.

“When I first read the hateful comments, I froze. It felt like thousands of people were attacking me at once, and I couldn't control the narrative anymore.” (Participant A)

This turbulence was further intensified by the public nature of social media. Several participants highlighted that cyberbullying felt inescapable, as digital content spreads rapidly across platforms. For many, the exposure amplified their emotional burden, leading to heightened anxiety and self-doubt.

“It wasn't just one or two comments; it became a trending topic. Everywhere I looked, people were talking about me. I felt like my identity was being rewritten by strangers.” (Participant C)

### Navigating the Storm of Cyberbullying



#### Initial Shock

Fear, anger, and helplessness

#### Public Exposure

Content spreads rapidly online

#### Amplified Burden

Heightened anxiety and self-doubt

### **Negotiating Personal and Public Identity**

The data revealed that cyberbullying forced participants to reconstruct their personal and public identities. Most struggled with balancing authenticity and managing audience perceptions. They felt pressured to maintain a positive image despite experiencing emotional distress.

“I wanted to respond and defend myself, but my manager told me to stay silent. I was torn between protecting my feelings and protecting my brand.” (Participant B)

Interestingly, participants reported adopting identity negotiation strategies, such as selective self-disclosure, avoiding controversial topics, and reframing their narratives to align with audience expectations. This process reflected their attempts to regain control over their digital persona while maintaining personal boundaries.

“I decided to share only part of my story publicly. The rest, I kept to myself because I didn’t want to give the haters more ammunition.” (Participant D)

### **Adaptive Communication Strategies and Coping Mechanisms**

Another significant theme involves the strategies public figures employed to cope with online harassment and maintain their reputations. The findings revealed three primary approaches:

#### **1. Silence and Strategic Invisibility**

Some participants deliberately chose not to respond, believing silence would de-escalate the situation.

“At some point, I realized that answering every attack was pointless. Silence became my way of taking back control.” (Participant E)

#### **2. Engaging in Constructive Dialogue**

Others adopted proactive communication strategies, directly addressing their audience to clarify misinformation and rebuild trust.

“I posted a video explaining my side of the story. Surprisingly, many followers appreciated my honesty and supported me.” (Participant C)

#### **3. Seeking Social and Professional Support**

Most participants relied on communication teams, mental health professionals, or close friends to manage the crisis collaboratively.

“My PR manager helped craft my responses while my therapist helped me process the emotional damage.” (Participant A)

These coping mechanisms illustrate the complex interplay between emotional regulation, reputation management, and audience engagement in the digital era.

### **Reframing Reputation and Digital Resilience**

The final theme highlights participants’ journey toward rebuilding resilience and redefining their public image after experiencing cyberbullying. Rather than perceiving themselves solely as victims, many described developing a newfound strength and adopting long-term strategies to safeguard their reputations.

“After going through this storm, I learned to filter what I read online and focus on voices that matter. I’m stronger now.” (Participant F)

Some participants transformed their experiences into opportunities for personal growth and advocacy, using their platforms to raise awareness about cyberbullying and mental health.

“I started speaking openly about online harassment during interviews. Surprisingly, people related to my story and it helped me connect with my audience on a deeper level.” (Participant D)

This transformation illustrates how cyberbullying, while initially destabilizing, prompted participants to redefine self-worth, strengthen audience relationships, and enhance digital resilience.

The findings reveal that cyberbullying deeply affects public figures' emotional, personal, and professional lives. Despite experiencing significant psychological turbulence, participants demonstrated adaptive communication strategies and identity negotiation to cope with online harassment. Ultimately, many transformed their experiences into opportunities for personal growth and advocacy, highlighting the interplay between emotional resilience, digital identity, and strategic communication in the age of social media.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Summary of Key Findings**

The findings of this study reveal that public figures experience cyberbullying as a deeply personal, emotionally disruptive, and identity-challenging phenomenon (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Through the lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study highlights how participants make sense of these experiences, negotiate their personal and public identities, and develop adaptive communication strategies in highly visible digital environments. These insights directly address the central research question posed in the introduction: How do public figures interpret and manage their experiences of cyberbullying while maintaining their public image and personal well-being?

### **Contributions of Findings to the Research Question**

The study provides new insights into the subjective meaning-making processes underlying public figures' experiences of cyberbullying, offering a richer understanding of the phenomenon beyond what previous research has established (Mahmood & Kalo, 2024; Utomo et al., 2020). While earlier studies primarily quantified the psychological impacts and coping mechanisms of online harassment, this study demonstrates that cyberbullying represents more than an external attack—it is experienced as a threat to identity, emotional stability, and professional integrity.

Participants' narratives illustrate how cyberbullying initiates complex emotional turbulence, involving fear, anxiety, and a perceived loss of personal control. However, the findings also reveal a dynamic process of identity negotiation and digital resilience, where public figures develop adaptive communication strategies such as selective self-disclosure, reframing narratives, and strategic silence to maintain reputational stability. These processes highlight the interplay between personal meaning, emotional regulation, and audience engagement, offering a more nuanced understanding of how cyberbullying reshapes the way public figures perceive themselves and manage their public roles.

By centering on participants' lived experiences, the study contributes unique perspectives that advance theoretical discussions in communication science, particularly in the areas of digital identity, strategic communication, and resilience in social media ecosystems. These findings fill a critical gap in the literature by showing how public figures construct meaning and agency within the context of online hostility.

### **Relationship with Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks**

The findings align with previous research that highlights the psychological consequences of cyberbullying, such as increased anxiety and identity disruption. However, this study extends the existing literature by demonstrating that public figures do not merely experience cyberbullying passively but actively engage in meaning-making processes to reconstruct their sense of self and manage public perceptions. This observation supports Goffman's theory of self-presentation, which posits that individuals continuously manage their identities to maintain social acceptance, particularly in highly visible environments.

Additionally, the study complements the work of Mukhlis & Abdullah, (2025), who identified coping strategies among K-pop idols, by revealing deeper emotional and communicative dimensions not fully explored in their research. While Chen and Park primarily focused on observable responses, this study highlights the internal negotiation and interpretive frameworks through which participants understand their experiences. Moreover, the findings challenge assumptions in Mukhlis et al., (2023)

regarding the universality of digital reputation management strategies, demonstrating that public figures adopt highly individualized approaches shaped by their emotional thresholds, audience expectations, and personal values.

These contributions emphasize the value of adopting a phenomenological perspective when studying cyberbullying and digital identity. By prioritizing participants' subjective interpretations, this study reveals insights that complement existing theories while opening new directions for understanding identity negotiation, emotional resilience, and strategic communication in the context of public visibility and online hostility.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study hold significant theoretical, practical, and social implications within the broader field of communication studies. From a theoretical perspective, the results deepen our understanding of digital identity negotiation and emotional resilience among public figures facing cyberbullying. By uncovering the lived meanings behind participants' experiences, the study provides insights into how identity, reputation, and audience engagement are reconstructed within high-visibility environments. These insights contribute to advancing theories of self-presentation Mukhlis et al., (2024) and strategic communication in digital contexts, showing that meaning-making is central to coping with public scrutiny.

From a practical standpoint, the findings offer guidance for public relations professionals, mental health practitioners, and digital platform regulators. Public figures demonstrated a range of adaptive communication strategies, including selective disclosure, narrative reframing, and strategic silence, which may inform the development of evidence-based training programs for managing online harassment. Moreover, the results highlight the urgent need for platform-level interventions, such as stronger anti-harassment policies and improved moderation mechanisms, to better protect individuals with high public visibility. At a broader social level, these findings underscore the importance of fostering digital empathy and promoting healthier online environments, where public figures are less vulnerable to reputational harm and emotional distress.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged to ensure proper contextualization of the findings. First, the research is based on a small, purposively selected sample of eight public figures, which aligns with phenomenological principles but limits the generalizability of the results to wider populations. Second, the reliance on self-reported experiences introduces the possibility of recall bias or selective disclosure, as participants may consciously or unconsciously manage their narratives to align with their public image. Third, the focus on public figures from specific professional domains—entertainment, journalism, and digital influence—may restrict the applicability of findings to individuals in other fields with different audience dynamics and reputational pressures.

Additionally, the study's methodological reliance on semi-structured interviews may not fully capture the broader digital ecology of cyberbullying, including the role of platform algorithms, media amplification, or audience behaviors. While Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers deep insights into subjective meaning-making, it does not aim for statistical representativeness, and thus, findings should be interpreted as context-specific understandings rather than universal claims. Recognizing these limitations, the study emphasizes the need for future research to explore these dynamics using diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and multi-method approaches.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Building upon the findings and addressing current limitations, future research could pursue several important directions. First, expanding the participant pool to include public figures from diverse cultural, social, and professional contexts would enrich understanding of how cyberbullying experiences vary across different audience dynamics and societal norms. Comparative studies could also examine cross-cultural differences in meaning-making processes, revealing how cultural values influence emotional regulation and communication strategies when facing online harassment.

Second, future studies could integrate digital ethnography or content-based analyses of social media interactions to triangulate self-reported narratives with publicly available behavioral data. This integration would provide a more holistic perspective on how cyberbullying unfolds and how public figures actively manage their reputations within algorithm-driven digital spaces. Finally, interdisciplinary collaborations that combine communication science, psychology, and media studies would help develop more comprehensive frameworks for understanding digital resilience, identity negotiation, and strategic self-presentation in the context of online hostility. Such work could inform policy development, platform regulations, and intervention strategies, contributing to safer and more sustainable digital ecosystems.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of public figures facing cyberbullying on social media, focusing on how they interpret, process, and manage these challenges within highly visible digital environments. The findings revealed that cyberbullying creates significant emotional turbulence, forcing participants to negotiate their personal and public identities while developing adaptive communication strategies to maintain their reputation and well-being. By adopting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the study addressed limitations in previous research, which often relied on quantitative methods and overlooked the subjective meaning-making processes underlying these experiences. Unlike earlier works, this study demonstrates how identity negotiation, emotional regulation, and strategic self-presentation intersect in ways that are unique to individuals under continuous public scrutiny, thus providing a more nuanced account of digital resilience. The results contribute to advancing theoretical understanding of digital identity, emotional resilience, and strategic communication in the context of online hostility. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of phenomenological depth with the public relations and digital communication perspective, offering distinct insights into how public figures actively construct protective narratives rather than being portrayed merely as passive victims. These insights also offer practical implications for public relations professionals, mental health practitioners, and digital platform policymakers in supporting individuals exposed to public scrutiny. In doing so, the study makes a distinct contribution by bridging theoretical discourse with applied strategies that can inform intervention frameworks in both media practice and mental health support systems. Future research could expand these findings by including cross-cultural comparisons, integrating digital ethnography, and employing longitudinal designs to better understand the evolving nature of cyberbullying and digital resilience.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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