




A Qualitative Study on Factors Leading to Victimization in Cyberspace Among Adolescent Girls in Isfahan

Maryam. Motamedi Qalati¹, Fahimeh. Namdarpour^{2*}, Mahmood. Sharifi Esfahani²

¹ PhD student, Department of Counseling, Khomeinishahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Khomeinishahr, Isfahan, Iran

² Assistant Professor, Department of Counseling, Khomeinishahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Khomeinishahr, Isfahan, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: namdarpour@iaukhsh.ac.ir

Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Motamedi Qalati, M., Namdarpour, F., & Sharifi Esfahani, M. (2024). A Qualitative Study on Factors Leading to Victimization in Cyberspace Among Adolescent Girls in Isfahan. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies*, 5(8), 115-121.

<http://doi.org/10.61838/kman.jayps.5.8.13>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study was to identify the factors contributing to cyber victimization among adolescent girls and to design and validate a questionnaire based on these factors.

Methods and Materials: This research utilized a qualitative approach, employing thematic analysis to identify the factors contributing to cyber victimization. The study sample consisted of adolescent girls in high school in Isfahan, Iran, who had experienced cyber victimization. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight participants, selected via purposive sampling until data saturation was achieved. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA software.

Findings: The findings revealed three main categories of factors contributing to cyber victimization: intrapersonal, familial, and environmental. Intrapersonal factors included self-esteem issues, personality traits, lack of social skills, and internet addiction. Familial factors encompassed poor family relations and inappropriate parental responses. Environmental factors involved academic problems and lack of media literacy. The most frequently reported issue was the lack of friendly relationships between parents and children, while the least frequent factor was comparison with siblings and peers.

Conclusion: The study underscores the multifaceted nature of cyber victimization among adolescent girls, highlighting the significant roles of intrapersonal, familial, and environmental factors. Effective prevention and intervention strategies should address these factors concurrently. Enhancing self-esteem, social skills, media literacy, and fostering supportive family and school environments are crucial. Further research is needed to validate these findings in diverse populations and explore cultural influences on cyber victimization. Through comprehensive and collaborative efforts, the detrimental effects of cyber victimization on adolescents can be effectively mitigated.

Keywords: *Cyberspace victimization, Cyberspace, Adolescent girls, Qualitative approach*

1. Introduction

The internet enables millions of people to connect at any moment, exchanging information within fractions of a second. This environment, known as cyberspace, is a crucial tool for achieving globalization (Memar et al., 2013). Adolescents' presence in cyberspace is prominent and inevitable due to the various educational, communicative, recreational, and shopping facilities it offers (Smith et al., 2008). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified and expanded adolescents' use of cyberspace (Kowalski et al., 2014; Kowalski & Limber, 2007). While cyberspace has its advantages, it also poses disadvantages, one of which is the victimization of adolescents.

Victimization in cyberspace occurs when an individual uses electronic devices to harm others. Due to the characteristics of cyberspace, such as anonymity and the potential for widespread communication, this harm is intentional and repetitive, and the victim often cannot defend themselves. Individuals who suffer from such behaviors are referred to as cyber victims (Cosma et al., 2020; Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2022; Strohmeier & Gradinger, 2022). Buelga et al. (2019) define cyber victimization in two forms: direct and indirect. Direct victimization includes direct attacks (such as insults and mocking) and social behaviors (such as excluding or blocking individuals from social groups). Indirect victimization includes manipulating personal images (creating videos or altering photos), identity theft (creating a fake profile with the victim's personal information), and hacking (changing the victim's social network passwords, preventing access) (Buelga et al., 2019). Cyber victims face risks such as anxiety and depression symptoms, decreased self-esteem, poor academic performance, increased psychological vulnerability, and suicidal thoughts (Álvarez-García et al., 2017; Álvarez-García et al., 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008, 2010; Kowalski et al., 2014; Kowalski & Limber, 2007). The negative experience of cyber victimization diminishes adolescents' freedom to use the beneficial aspects of technology, leading to severe functional, social, and psychological consequences. Therefore, a lack of computer skills and excessive time spent on internet searches result in adolescents' victimization in cyberspace (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Lacey (2007) noted that various forms of cyber victimization among students include instant messaging, ridicule, spreading rumors, humiliation, and physical threats (Lacey, 2007). The anonymity provided by the facelessness in cyberspace creates an unequal power balance between the

bully and the victim, having more dangerous effects than traditional bullying (Modecki et al., 2014). Pansford (2007) stated that the facelessness feature of cyberspace causes victims to become anxious, distressed, and consequently helpless (Ponsford, 2007). Thus, victimization is one of the most critical issues in today's cyberspace, with statistics showing that about 42% of active adolescents in cyberspace have been victimized (Majdi et al., 2021). Consequently, based on existing research, the importance of cyber victimization on adolescents, considering its harms, is evident. Research both domestically and internationally on cyber victimization has primarily been quantitative and focused on limited factors of adolescent cyber victimization. However, a comprehensive and qualitative examination of all contributing factors for cyber victimization among adolescents has not been conducted. Therefore, to take preventive measures and intervene promptly to address this social issue and reduce its negative consequences, a thorough examination and interview with cyber-victimized adolescent girls were conducted to identify the contributing factors to cyber victimization among adolescent girls. Based on the aforementioned points, the present study aimed to answer the question: What are the contributing factors to cyber victimization among adolescent girls?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study aimed to identify the contributing factors to cyber victimization among adolescent girls using a qualitative approach with thematic analysis. The study population consisted of adolescent girls who were victims of cyber victimization in the second grade of high school (ages 16-18) in Isfahan during the second semester of the 2023-2024 academic year. The sampling method was purposive, and theoretical saturation was achieved after eight interviews with the girls. Participants were selected from high school girls who had experienced cyber victimization and had sought counseling at their schools in Isfahan.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

The study's purpose was initially explained to them, and after obtaining written consent, the interviews commenced. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Four pilot interviews were conducted first, and once proficiency was achieved, the main interviews were conducted. The

interviews began with demographic questions and continued with open-ended main questions. Secondary questions were posed as needed to get closer to the research objective. Secondary questions, in the context of semi-structured interviews, were questions arising from the participants' responses. When new information was obtained from one interviewee, if the next interviewee did not mention that topic, it was raised as a question for that interviewee and subsequent ones. The process continued to determine if the topic applied to them as well. Interviews continued until saturation was reached, with no new findings emerging in the last three interviews.

2.3. Data analysis

For data analysis, each interview was carefully listened to, transcribed word-for-word, and the initial, secondary, and selective codes were identified using MAXQDA software. To validate the findings, Guba and Lincoln's (1985) method

was employed, assessing data on four axes: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. To check the truth value, the identified components were returned to the interviewees for confirmation. For applicability, three additional interviewees were interviewed again, yielding the same data. For consistency, similar questions were posed differently to interviewees, who provided their previous responses. Finally, the coding was validated by three other specialists for neutrality.

3. Findings and Results

The study identified three main categories (selective codes) of factors contributing to cyber victimization among adolescent girls: intrapersonal, familial, and environmental. These categories were derived from thematic analysis of interviews and included 20 initial codes and 7 secondary codes.

Table 1

Extracted Codes from Interviewees' Perspectives

Selective Code	Secondary Code	Initial Code	Frequency		
Intrapersonal	Self-esteem	Feeling ugly and body disrespect	6 (in 4 texts)		
		Large gap between ideal self and real self	7 (in 4 texts)		
		Longing for things not possessed and seeking them online	5 (in 2 texts)		
	Personality	Introversion and withdrawal	7 (in 4 texts)		
		Personal tension	10 (in 7 texts)		
	Lack of skills	Weak or few friendships	14 (in 6 texts)		
		Lack of clear goals and planning	9 (in 5 texts)		
	Internet addiction	Excessive use of cyberspace and phone addiction	Inappropriate sleep patterns and staying up late	12 (in 7 texts)	
				4 (in 3 texts)	
		Poor family relations	Poor relationships with siblings	6 (in 6 texts)	
Lack of friendly parent-child relationships			37 (in 8 texts)		
Familial	Poor family relations	Inappropriate parental responses to excessive phone use	13 (in 7 texts)		
		Age-inappropriate restrictions by family	16 (in 7 texts)		
		Comparison with siblings and peers	3 (in 2 texts)		
		Lack of alternative suggestions by parents	5 (in 3 texts)		
		Non-acceptance within the family	18 (in 7 texts)		
		Environmental	Academic problems	School being boring for students	8 (in 5 texts)
				Academic decline and reduced interest in studying	6 (in 5 texts)
Media literacy	Irrational trust in others in cyberspace		8 (in 6 texts)		
	Lack of sufficient knowledge about cyberspace	6 (in 6 texts)			

The study revealed that cyber victimization among adolescent girls in Isfahan is influenced by a combination of intrapersonal, familial, and environmental factors. The most frequently reported issue was the lack of friendly relationships between parents and children, highlighting the importance of strong familial bonds in preventing cyber victimization. On the other hand, the least frequent factor was the comparison with siblings and peers, indicating that

while this can contribute to victimization, it may not be as prevalent as other factors.

Intrapersonal factors, such as self-esteem, personality traits, lack of skills, and internet addiction, were significant contributors. Adolescents with low self-esteem, introverted personalities, and poor social skills were more susceptible to cyber victimization. Additionally, internet addiction

exacerbated the risk, as excessive use of cyberspace and irregular sleep patterns created vulnerability.

Familial factors were also critical, with poor family relations being a major theme. The absence of supportive and understanding relationships within the family, coupled with inappropriate parental responses and unrealistic restrictions, were significant contributors. These findings emphasize the role of a positive and nurturing family environment in safeguarding adolescents from cyber victimization.

Environmental factors included academic problems and media literacy. A boring school environment and academic decline increased the likelihood of adolescents seeking validation and engagement in cyberspace, making them more vulnerable to victimization. Moreover, a lack of media literacy, characterized by irrational trust in others and insufficient knowledge about cyberspace, further heightened the risk.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The study's findings underscore the multifaceted nature of cyber victimization among adolescent girls, highlighting the significant roles of intrapersonal, familial, and environmental factors. This section discusses these findings in the context of existing literature, outlines the study's limitations, and offers suggestions for future research and practical applications.

The study identified self-esteem issues, such as feeling ugly and disrespecting one's body, as significant contributors to cyber victimization. Adolescents with low self-esteem are more likely to be targeted in cyberspace, as they may exhibit behaviors that attract bullies (Chan & Wong, 2017). Previous research supports this finding, indicating a strong link between body image dissatisfaction and cyber victimization (Calvete et al., 2016; Ramos Salazar, 2017). Adolescents striving to portray an ideal self online, often due to a significant gap between their ideal and real selves, are particularly vulnerable. This aligns with the findings of Manago et al. (2008), who noted that individuals with neurotic tendencies and introversion are more likely to engage in diverse self-presentations online, increasing their risk of victimization (Manago et al., 2008).

Introversion and personal tension were also significant intrapersonal factors. Introverted adolescents may lack the social support and assertiveness needed to defend themselves against cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). This is consistent with findings that introversion

correlates with higher internet addiction, which in turn predicts cyber victimization (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008, 2010). Personal tension, such as unmanaged anger and emotional dysregulation, exacerbates these risks. Adolescents who cannot manage their emotions effectively are more likely to engage in maladaptive online behaviors, making them targets for bullies (Arató et al., 2022).

The study highlighted that weak or few friendships and a lack of clear goals and planning in life contribute to cyber victimization. Adolescents who struggle to form and maintain peer relationships may turn to cyberspace for social interaction, increasing their exposure to potential bullies (Baldry et al., 2015). The lack of specific goals and poor life planning can lead to excessive and purposeless use of the internet, heightening the risk of encountering harmful individuals online (Choi, 2008).

Internet addiction emerged as a critical factor, with excessive use of cyberspace and irregular sleep patterns contributing to victimization. Adolescents addicted to the internet often spend significant time online, increasing their chances of encountering cyberbullies (Alimoradi et al., 2019). This is consistent with findings that internet addiction correlates with sleep deprivation and other health issues, which can exacerbate vulnerability to cyber victimization (Manda et al., 2019).

Poor family relations, particularly a lack of friendly parent-child relationships, were the most frequently reported factor. Adolescents who do not have supportive and understanding relationships with their parents are more likely to seek validation and support online, making them targets for cyberbullies (Navarro, Ruiz-Oliva, et al., 2015; Navarro, Yubero, & Larrañaga, 2015). This finding is supported by previous research indicating that family dynamics significantly influence the likelihood of cyber victimization (Elsaesser et al., 2017; Hong et al., 2018; Larrañaga et al., 2016; Rahmati & Seyfi, 2022).

Inappropriate parental responses, such as excessive restrictions and punitive measures for phone use, also contribute to cyber victimization. Adolescents who perceive their parents as overly controlling may engage in risky online behaviors as a form of rebellion (Mishna et al., 2009). This aligns with the prior findings (Buelga et al., 2019; Van Dijk et al., 2014) that noted that negative family interactions increase the risk of cyber victimization.

Non-acceptance within the family and a lack of alternative suggestions for healthy activities were also significant factors. Adolescents who feel rejected or unsupported by their families are more likely to spend

excessive time online, seeking acceptance and validation, which increases their risk of cyber victimization (Buelga et al., 2019). This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the protective role of positive family interactions against cyber victimization (Elsaesser et al., 2017).

Academic problems, such as a boring school environment and academic decline, were significant environmental factors. Adolescents dissatisfied with their school experience may turn to cyberspace for engagement and fulfillment, increasing their exposure to cyberbullies (Lee & Song, 2012). This finding is consistent with research indicating that a positive school environment and strong relationships with teachers can protect against cyber victimization (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Lack of media literacy, including irrational trust in others online and insufficient knowledge about cyberspace, was another critical factor. Adolescents who lack the skills to navigate cyberspace safely are more likely to fall victim to cyberbullies (Saridakis et al., 2016). This finding is supported by research indicating that media literacy can significantly reduce the risk of cyber victimization by empowering adolescents to make safer online choices (Whittle et al., 2013).

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the factors contributing to cyber victimization among adolescent girls in Isfahan. The findings highlight the importance of addressing intrapersonal, familial, and environmental factors concurrently to prevent cyber victimization. Interventions should focus on enhancing self-esteem, social skills, media literacy, and family relationships while creating supportive school environments. Future research should expand on these findings by including diverse populations, using multiple data sources, and exploring the role of cultural factors in cyber victimization. Through comprehensive and collaborative efforts, the detrimental effects of cyber victimization on adolescents can be effectively mitigated.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, the sample was limited to adolescent girls in Isfahan, which may not be representative of all adolescents experiencing cyber victimization. Future studies should include diverse populations, including boys and adolescents from different regions, to increase generalizability. Additionally, the

qualitative nature of this study provides in-depth insights but may not capture the prevalence of these factors in larger populations. Quantitative studies are needed to validate these findings and assess the relative importance of each factor.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias. Future research should incorporate multiple data sources, including parental and teacher reports, to triangulate findings. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to examine the long-term effects of cyber victimization and the stability of these contributing factors over time.

Future research should also explore the role of cultural factors in cyber victimization. Cultural norms and values may influence how adolescents and their families interact with technology and respond to cyberbullying. Understanding these cultural differences can inform the development of culturally sensitive interventions.

The findings of this study have important implications for parents, educators, and policymakers. Interventions aimed at preventing cyber victimization should address the identified intrapersonal, familial, and environmental factors concurrently. For instance, programs that enhance self-esteem, social skills, and media literacy can empower adolescents to navigate cyberspace safely. Schools can play a crucial role by creating engaging and supportive environments that reduce the need for adolescents to seek validation online.

Parents should be educated on the importance of supportive and open communication with their children. Parenting programs that teach effective communication skills and positive disciplinary techniques can help reduce the risk of cyber victimization. Additionally, policies that promote media literacy education in schools can equip adolescents with the skills needed to navigate cyberspace safely.

Community-based interventions that involve multiple stakeholders, including parents, schools, and mental health professionals, are essential for creating a supportive environment for adolescents. Collaborative efforts can ensure that adolescents receive consistent messages about safe online behavior and have access to resources and support when they encounter cyberbullying.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. It was registered on August 13, 2023, by the National Committee for Ethics in Biomedical Research at Islamic Azad University, Khomeini Shahr Branch, with the identifier IR.IAU.KHSH.REC.1402.077.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally. This research is derived from the doctoral dissertation of Ms. Maryam Mo'tamedi Qalati, from the Department of Counseling, Faculty of Psychology, Counseling, and Social Work at Islamic Azad University, Khomeini Shahr Branch, titled "A Study of Factors Contributing to Cyber Victimization among Adolescent Girls and the Design and Validation of a Questionnaire Based on These Factors."

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