

An Overview of Family Functioning on Cyberbullying among Adolescents: A Conceptual Paper

Reihane Nikkhooy¹, Naqi Dahamat Azam^{1 2}, Muslihah Hasbullah¹ & Aini Azeqa Ma'rof²

¹ Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, ²Institute for Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia
Corresponding Author Email: naqiuddin@upm.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i12/24013> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i12/24013

Published Date: 10 December 2024

Abstract

The prevalence of cyberbullying is higher in adolescents, which affects their psychological well-being. Thus, it is important to understand the role of family functioning in stopping young cyberbullies from wrongdoing and protecting victims. Thus, this conceptual paper aims to explore the relations between family functioning and cyberbullying in adolescents and further discuss the roles played by key aspects such as family cohesion and family communication. Also, this paper explained theoretical backgrounds that highlight how family functioning is essential to address cyberbullying in adolescents. Some future directions are discussed.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Family Functioning, Cohesion, Communication, Adolescents.

Introduction

Cyberbullying refers to a repetitive aggressive act that happens virtually via the Internet and social media, which involves behaviors like trolling, flaming, cyberstalking, and spreading hate speech (Ariffin et al., 2021; Chudal et al., 2021; Gladden et al., 2014). While its prevalence is higher in adolescents (Nixon, 2014; Brochado et al., 2017), cyberbullying can bring undesirable physical and psychological detrimental effects to both perpetrators and victims (Wolke et al., 2017; Tiiri et al., 2020). Indeed, existing studies have shown that cyberbullying perpetrators are prone to experience isolation and secrecy, feelings of helplessness, anger, and aggression (Hellfeldt et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the victims are more exposed to depression and anxiety (Klomek et al., 2015; Wolke & Lereya, 2015), as well as suicidal ideation (Klomek et al., 2009). Family is important to adolescents. According to Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994), family is one of the closest people in an adolescent's microsystem, which plays a vital role in shaping their development. For instance, a close and warm family relationship can help to reduce adolescent's negative behavior, which includes cyberbullying (Bowes et al., 2010; Shah et al., 2021). Nevertheless, how family functioning, such as family cohesion and family communication, can deter cyberbullying among

adolescents needs to be discussed. Thus, this concept paper aims to bridge the gap. The discussion will be divided into four sections: 1) the literature review on cyberbullying and family functioning, 2) the theoretical framework, 3) details of the methodology used, and 4) suggestions and direction for future research. Cyberbullying in adolescents' Recent studies have shown a high prevalence of cyberbullying in adolescents globally, where cyberbullying victimization (14.0%-57.5%) was higher than cyberbullying perpetration (6.0%- 46.3%) (Zhu et al., 2021). This pressing issue gives rise to multiple adverse effects for both perpetrators and victims, such as heightened stress, anxiety, eating disorders, sleep disturbances, and disruptions in daily life (Charoenwanit, 2019). Also, adolescents find themselves compelled to conceal their experiences in cyberspace from their closest people (Kumar & Goldstein, 2020). Most alarmingly, those who struggle to cope with these risky behaviors are at risk of contemplating suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Iranzo et al., 2019; Van Geel, Vedder & Tanilon, 2014).

Family functioning and its key aspects

Family functioning refers to how a family operates as a unit, including how its members interact, communicate, and fulfil various roles and responsibilities within the family system (Panganiban-Corales & Medina, 2011). It encompasses the dynamics and processes that characterize a family's functioning (Chun, 2006). Family functioning can have a significant impact on the overall well-being and development of its members. A key aspect of family functioning is family cohesion. It refers to the emotional bond family members can have towards each other (Olson et al., 1983; Damulira et al., 2019). Existing studies suggest that the sense of belonging to a family can help youth protect their mental health and address issues related to stress, depression, and anxiety (Dwairy & Achoui, 2010). Moreover, a recent study by Najjari et al. (2023) argued that cohesion between parents and children plays an important role in mitigating problematic behavior in adolescents, thus reducing the chances of cyberbullying. Family communication is another key aspect. It refers to the exchange of information, thoughts, feelings, and messages between members of a family unit (Brodzinsky, 2006). It encompasses various forms of interaction, including verbal and non-verbal communication (Abed et al., 2023). Also, it plays a crucial role in shaping family dynamics and relationships, as well as the overall wellbeing of family members (Epstein et al., 1978). Furthermore, openness in family communication allows all members to understand each other, thus facilitating adaptive resolution in family crises (Jiménez et al., 2019).

Research Objective

The main objective of this conceptual paper was to assess the relationship between family functioning, such as family cohesion and family communication, and cyberbullying among adolescents. Also, we provided a theoretical overview to understand this phenomenon better.

Theoretical Overview

To explore the relationship between family functioning and cyberbullying, this paper integrates two theoretical models: the Double ABC-X model (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983) and Bowen's Family System Theory (Brown, 1999). These models provide valuable frameworks for understanding how family dynamics can mitigate the effects of cyberbullying and support adolescents in navigating this complex issue.

The Double ABC-X model offers a structured approach to examining how families respond to stressors (A), utilize resources (B), and interpret stressful situations (C) to shape the outcomes of crises (X1) and their eventual resolution (X2). In the context of cyberbullying, stressors may arise from the act itself, its psychological and emotional toll on victims, or interpersonal conflicts within the family triggered by such incidents (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Family cohesion and effective communication serve as critical resources that empower families to address these challenges. For instance, cohesive families provide a supportive environment that helps adolescents feel secure, reducing their risk of becoming either victims or perpetrators (Damulira et al., 2019; Najjari et al., 2023). Additionally, how a family perceives a cyberbullying incident significantly influences their response; viewing the issue as manageable often leads to proactive strategies, whereas negative or fatalistic perceptions may escalate the problem (Jiménez et al., 2019). Families that leverage their resources and maintain a positive outlook are more likely to achieve favorable outcomes, such as emotional resilience or strengthened relationships, following the crisis (Zhang et al., 2020).

Bowen's Family System Theory complements this perspective by emphasizing the interconnected nature of emotions, relationships, and behaviors within a family unit (Brown, 1999). A key concept of this theory is differentiation of self, which refers to an individual's ability to maintain emotional independence while remaining connected to the family. Adolescents from families with high differentiation are better equipped to regulate their emotions and resist peer pressure, reducing their involvement in negative online behaviors (Dwairy & Achoui, 2010). Emotional reactivity is another relevant concept; families with lower emotional reactivity create a stable and supportive environment, which enables adolescents to handle cyberbullying incidents constructively (Epstein et al., 1978). Furthermore, the theory highlights the importance of family interconnectedness, suggesting that harmonious family relationships can buffer the adverse effects of stressors such as cyberbullying (Bowes et al., 2010).

By integrating these models, this paper underscores the critical role of family dynamics in addressing cyberbullying among adolescents. The Double ABC-X model sheds light on the importance of resources and perceptions in shaping family responses to cyberbullying crises, while Bowen's Family System Theory highlights the emotional and relational factors that influence adolescent behavior. Together, these frameworks emphasize that fostering strong family cohesion, open communication, and emotional stability can significantly mitigate the impact of cyberbullying and promote healthier outcomes for adolescents.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is a library search where we evaluated past studies on family functioning (i.e., family cohesion and communication) and cyberbullying. We utilized online academic databases, particularly Web of Science and Google Scholar. Approximately 30 articles about cyberbullying among adolescents and the effect of family functioning on the behavior have been investigated. Themes such as "family cohesion AND cyberbullying." Due to limited resources from the databases, we chose journal articles and book chapters that were available as open access.

Result and Discussion

Cyberbullying poses a significant concern for adolescents, bringing about severe physical and psychological consequences for both perpetrators and victims. This conceptual paper reviewed the role of family functioning, particularly family cohesion and communication, in mitigating the impact of cyberbullying among adolescents. The findings suggest that these aspects of family dynamics significantly influence adolescent behavior, aligning with theoretical frameworks such as the Double ABC-X model and Bowen's Family System Theory.

Family Cohesion and Cyberbullying

Family cohesion emerged as a crucial factor in addressing cyberbullying. Adolescents experiencing close emotional bonds within their families tend to exhibit resilience against the negative effects of cyberbullying. Supportive parental relationships provide an essential foundation for adolescents to develop coping mechanisms, such as seeking emotional and social support. According to the Double ABC-X model, this support serves as a vital resource (B) that influences family perceptions (C) and outcomes during stressful situations (X1). Families with higher cohesion levels can navigate crises more effectively, often achieving post-crisis growth (X2) (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983).

Bowen's Family System Theory further supports this by emphasizing the interconnected nature of emotions, relationships, and behaviors within family systems. Families characterized by emotional support and stability can foster a positive environment that not only benefits victims but also discourages perpetrators of cyberbullying. The enhancement of family relationships contributes to a healthier emotional dynamic, which, in turn, positively impacts adolescents' well-being (Brown, 1999; Shah et al., 2021).

Family Communication and Cyberbullying

Effective family communication also plays a pivotal role in addressing cyberbullying. Open and transparent communication within families encourages adolescents to share their challenges, thereby facilitating timely intervention and adaptive problem-solving. For instance, the exchange of thoughts and feelings within the family aligns with the Double ABC-X model, where communication serves as a resource to address and resolve crises. This communication ensures that all family members understand each other's perspectives, fostering an environment conducive to conflict resolution and emotional healing (Epstein et al., 1978; Jiménez et al., 2019). Also, in line with Bowen's Family System Theory, effective communication strengthens family harmony, enabling members to manage conflicts constructively. Families that prioritize open communication are better equipped to tackle cyberbullying and its effects, ensuring that both victims and perpetrators receive the necessary support to address their behaviors (Brown, 1999; Abed et al., 2023).

Theoretical Integration: Double ABC-X Model and Bowen's Family System Theory

The integration of the Double ABC-X model and Bowen's Family System Theory offers valuable insights into how family functioning can mitigate cyberbullying. The Double ABC-X model highlights the importance of resources (e.g., family cohesion and communication) and perceptions in managing crises like cyberbullying. Families equipped with adequate resources and positive coping strategies are more likely to resolve conflicts and prevent long-term consequences (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Zhang et al., 2020). Bowen's Family System Theory complements this by emphasizing the emotional interdependence within families,

showing that improved emotional dynamics lead to healthier relationships and behavioral outcomes (Brown, 1999).

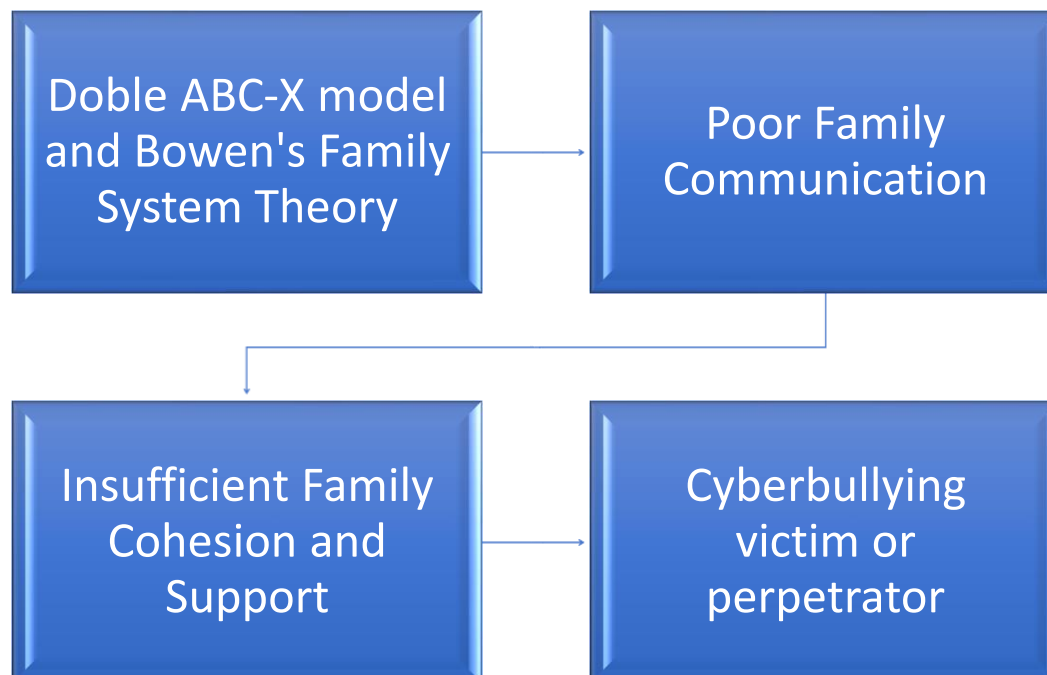


Figure 1. According to the Double ABC-X model and Bowen's Family System Theory Having low-income family functioning, especially insufficient support or cold family communication can be the cause of cyberbullying as a victim or perpetrator

Conclusion

This concept paper has shed some light on the significance of family functioning in addressing cyberbullying among adolescents. The understanding of family cohesion and communication, as well as the related theories, can enhance the knowledge of how family can play their roles in overcoming risk behaviors related to cyberbullying. Also, it can be a basis for designing educational programs, especially for parents, to protect their children from cyberbullying. Specifically, we recommend that stakeholders, governments, educational systems, or other organizations related to adolescents develop educational programs that focus on disseminating information on cyberbullying and how families can play a significant role in tackling the issue. Indeed, providing young people with ample information on the severity of cyberbullying and its negative consequences for adolescents can help them to cater for the issue well. Also, families should be given knowledge, particularly on how they can support their children. This can help to prevent possible physical injuries or mental health issues if their children are involved in cyberbullying. However, some limitations deserve attention. Firstly, this concept paper gathered cohesion and communication. Nevertheless, this paper concludes that family functioning can significantly contribute to the improvement of adolescents' behaviors, particularly on cyberbullying.

References

- Abed, L. G., Abed, M. G., & Shackelford, T. K. (2023). An exploratory study of verbal and non-verbal communication in Saudi Arabian families. *Behavioural Sciences, 13*(2), 175.
- Ariffin, A., Mohd, N., & Rokanatnam, T. (2021). Cyberbullying via social media: Case studies in Malaysia. *OIC-CERT Journal of Cyber Security, 3*(1), 21-30.
- Bowes, L., Maughan, B., Caspi, A., Moffitt, T. E., & Arseneault, L. (2010). Families promote emotional and behavioural resilience to bullying: Evidence of an environmental effect. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 51*(7), 809-817.
- Brochado, S., Soares, S., & Fraga, S. (2017). A scoping review on studies of cyberbullying prevalence among adolescents. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 18*(5), 523-531.
- Brodzinsky, D. (2006). Family structural openness and communication openness as predictors in the adjustment of adopted children. *Adoption Quarterly, 9*(4), 1-18.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Ceci, S. J. (1994). Nature-nurture reconceptualized in developmental perspective: A bioecological model. *Psychological Review, 101*(4), 568-586.
- Brown, J. (1999). Bowen family systems theory and practice: Illustration and critique. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy, 20*(2), 94-103.
- Chun, K. M. (2006). Conceptual and measurement issues in family acculturation research. In *Acculturation and parent-child relationships* (pp. 63-78). Routledge.
- Damulira, C., Mukasa, M. N., Byansi, W., Nabunya, P., Kivumbi, A., Namatovu, P., & Ssewamala, F. M. (2019). Examining the relationship of social support and family cohesion on ART adherence among HIV-positive adolescents in southern Uganda: baseline findings. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies, 14*(2), 181-190.
- Dwairy, M., & Achoui, M. (2010). Adolescents-family connectedness: A first cross-cultural research on parenting and psychological adjustment of children. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 19*, 8-15.
- Epstein, N. B., Bishop, D. S., & Levin, S. (1978). The McMaster model of family functioning. *Journal of Marital and Family therapy, 4*(4), 19-31.
- Gladden, R. M., Vivolo-Kantor, A. M., Hamburger, M. E., & Lumpkin, C. D. (2014). *Bullying surveillance among youths: Uniform definitions for public health and recommended data elements*.
- Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2010). Bullying, cyberbullying, and suicide. *Archives of Suicide Research, 14*(3), 206-221.
- Hellfeldt, K., López-Romero, L., & Andershed, H. (2020). Cyberbullying and psychological well-being in young adolescence: the potential protective mediation effects of social support from family, friends, and teachers. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(1), 45.
- Iranzo, B., Buelga, S., Cava, M. J., & Ortega-Barón, J. (2019). Cyberbullying, psychosocial adjustment, and suicidal ideation in adolescence. *Psychosocial Intervention, 28*(2), 75-81.
- Jiménez, T. I., Estévez, E., Velilla, C. M., Martín-Albo, J., & Martínez, M. L. (2019). Family communication and verbal child-to-parent violence among adolescents: the mediating role of perceived stress. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 16*(22), 4538.
- Khairi, A. K., Li, W., Yeo, S. H., Tong, Y. S., Nazri, M., Rahman, B. A., & Motevalli, S. (2022). The Importance of Emotional Competence in Preventing Cyberbullying: The Role of Family as Moderator. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 12*(4), 262-278.

- Klomek, A. B., Sourander, A., & Elonheimo, H. (2015). Bullying by peers in childhood and effects on psychopathology, suicidality, and criminality in adulthood. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 2(10), 930–941.
- Klomek, A. B., Sourander, A., Niemelä, S., Kumpulainen, K., Piha, J., Tamminen, T., ... & Gould, M. S. (2009). Childhood bullying behaviors as a risk for suicide attempts and completed suicides: a population-based birth cohort study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 48(3), 254-261.
- Kumar, V. L., & Goldstein, M. A. (2020). Cyberbullying and adolescents. *Current Pediatrics Reports*, 8, 86-92.
- McCubbin, H. I., & Patterson, J. M. (1983). *The Double ABC-X Model of family stress and adaptation*. In H. I. McCubbin & C. R. Figley (Eds.), *Stress and the Family: Coping with Catastrophe* (pp. 7-37). New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Najjari, M., Rezaei, R., Moradi, S., & Amini, R. (2023). The role of family cohesion in mitigating problematic behavior in adolescents: A study of social and psychological outcomes. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 37(2), 123-135.
- Nixon, C. L. (2014). Current perspectives: the impact of cyberbullying on adolescent health. *Adolescent Health, Medicine and Therapeutics*, 5, 143-158.
- Olson, D. H., Russell, C. S., & Sprenkle, D. H. (1983). Circumplex model of marital and family systems: VI. Theoretical update. *Family process*, 22(1), 69-83.
- Panganiban-Corales, A. T., & Medina, M. F. (2011). Family resources study: part 1: family resources, family function and caregiver strain in childhood cancer. *Asia Pacific family medicine*, 10, 1-11.
- Shah, S., Choi, M., Miller, M., Halgunseth, L. C., van Schaik, S. D., & Brenick, A. (2021). Family cohesion and school belongingness: Protective factors for immigrant youth against bias-based bullying. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 177, 199-217.
- Tiiri, E., Luntamo, T., Mishina, K., Sillanmäki, L., Klomek, A. B., & Sourander, A. (2020). Did bullying victimization decrease after nationwide school-based antibullying program? A time-trend study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 59(4), 531-540.
- Van Geel, M., Vedder, P., & Tanilon, J. (2014). Relationship between peer victimization, cyberbullying, and suicide in children and adolescents: A meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 168(5), 435-442.
- Wolke, D., Lee, K., & Guy, A. (2017). Cyberbullying: a storm in a teacup?. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 26, 899-908.
- Wolke, D., & Lereya, S. T. (2015). Long-term effects of bullying. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 100(9), 879-885.
- Zhang, X., Han, Z., & Ba, Z. (2020). Cyberbullying involvement and psychological distress among Chinese adolescents: The moderating effects of family cohesion and school cohesion. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(23), 8938.
- Zhu, C., Huang, S., Evans, R., & Zhang, W. (2021). Cyberbullying among adolescents and children: A comprehensive review of the global situation, risk factors, and preventive measures. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 9, 634909.