

# Theoretical Approaches To Explaining Cyberbullying

Hanane Debbar <sup>1</sup>, Samy Meguellati <sup>2</sup>, Ahmed Djelloul <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of El Oued (Algeria). Email: [debbar-hanane@univ-eloued.dz](mailto:debbar-hanane@univ-eloued.dz)

<sup>2</sup>University of constantine2(Algeria). Email: [samy.meguellati@univ-constantine2.dz](mailto:samy.meguellati@univ-constantine2.dz)

<sup>3</sup>University of El Oued (Algeria). Email: [Ahmed-djelloul@univ-eloued.dz](mailto:Ahmed-djelloul@univ-eloued.dz)

<sup>1,3</sup> Social Development and Community Service Laboratory

Received : 22/05/2024 ; Accepted : 17/09/2024 ; Published : 04/11/2024

## Abstract

Cyberbullying, also known as online harassment or trolling, is a pervasive issue that has gained significant attention in recent years. It involves the intentional and repeated infliction of harm or distress on others through electronic means, such as spreading rumors, sharing embarrassing content, or impersonating someone. Due to the limited amount of empirical research and theoretical investigations on this phenomenon, this paper focuses on the key theories that attempt to explain cyberbullying behavior.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, Bullying, Theoretical Approaches.

## Introduction

Various counseling theories and approaches have been proposed to address bullying and other harmful behaviors. For instance, behavioral theories suggest that replacing negative behaviors with positive ones and reinforcing desirable actions can be effective. Social learning theories emphasize the importance of providing positive role models and creating supportive environments to discourage bullying behavior. Additionally, fostering empathy and respect for others can help prevent individuals from engaging in such harmful acts.

Psychologists have long been interested in aggressive and bullying behaviors, offering diverse explanations based on their theoretical frameworks. While there is a consensus on the prevalence of these behaviors, the interpretations vary widely across different psychological schools of thought.

## Psychoanalytic Theory

Sigmund Freud, a prominent figure in psychoanalysis, proposed that aggression is a fundamental human drive, akin to basic physiological needs such as hunger and thirst. According to this perspective, cyberbullying can be attributed to the conflict between the life and death instincts, where individuals derive pleasure

from inflicting pain and suffering on others. Behaviors like aggression, destruction, suicidal ideation, and dependency are often cited as supporting evidence for this view.

And this school postulated the existence of conflicting instinctual drives, the most important of which are two: the first aims to preserve the individual, and the second to preserve the species. This theory posits that the death instinct exists from the moment of birth, as Freud argued that humans are equipped with instincts for both death and life, and that the death instinct seeks to destroy the individual. When it turns outward, that is, outside of the individual, it becomes aggression towards others, due to the influence of the psychic energy that drives aggression and bullying (Ezzedine, 2010).

Adler also suggested that aggression is the primary motive in the life of the individual and the group, and that life tends towards various manifestations of aggression, such as domination, control, and power. He argued that aggression is the basis of the desire for differentiation and superiority, which led him to conclude that aggression is an expression of the will to power, or the desire to control and dominate others.

Karen Horney, on the other hand, believed that aggression is an acquired rather than an innate drive, and that it is a means by which individuals

attempt to protect their security. The anxious child who lacks a sense of security develops various strategies to cope with feelings of isolation and helplessness. They may become aggressive and seek revenge against those who have rejected or mistreated them (Hussein, 2007). Berkowitz (1990), as cited by Ezzedine (2010), argued that intense frustration leads to a certain amount of aggression that depends on the quantity of negative emotions resulting from frustration or failure. Since frustration is the key to anger, and anger in turn leads to aggression, and aggression is considered a "dynamo" that generates violence, violence develops in this psychodynamic organization into disturbed behaviors and bloody paths that ultimately crystallize into revenge.

However, Freud, after several stages of explaining aggressive behavior, ended up formulating a new hypothesis: that the aggressive instinct does not follow the sexual instinct, but rather follows the "death instinct." Therefore, he considered the primary goal of aggression to be self-destruction, and this instinct does not become directed towards external objects until it is freed from the self-system under the influence of narcissistic libido.

Melanie Klein took Freud's third phase literally; for her, the death instinct is innate but a concrete reality that she discovered in her work. Her clinical observations convinced her that the death instinct is a primary instinct, and a reality that can be observed presenting itself as resisting the life instinct, in envy, jealousy, and hatred, which are clear to Klein as expressions of the death instinct (Ezzedine, 2010). She also drew attention to the role of aggressive tendencies from childhood and their disintegrative or destructive effects.

On the other hand, Al-Dar (1983: 362) opposed this theory, stating that instincts do not work for collective destruction, otherwise the instincts would perish. There is nothing in the human brain that is not found in the brains of some creatures. It is not correct to assume that humans have special nerve cells, and it is unreasonable for the highest and most dominant creatures to exhibit violence, killing, and mutilation among siblings. The emergence of consciousness is accompanied by the emergence of collective violence, slaughter, and representation.

One of the strengths of the psychoanalytic school is that it provides a clear explanation of aggression. It sees aggression as a characteristic rooted in human nature and thus exists in a latent state, aroused if an individual's activity, or even an animal's activity, is interrupted in a series of responses directed towards a goal. When the aggressive drive is aroused, it takes various forms, including violence, in which case violence becomes a natural response like any other natural response of the individual (Al-Dar, 1983).

This theory posits that aggressive and bullying behaviors are expressions of the death instinct, where individuals seek to destroy, whether themselves or others. It suggests that children are born with aggressive drives and that aggression is an instinctive response, though the methods of expressing it are learned. This perspective argues that aggressive behavior cannot be stopped or reduced through social controls or avoiding frustration. Instead, aggression can only be redirected towards constructive goals rather than destructive ones. According to this theory, the driving forces behind human behavior are the death instinct and the life instinct. Psychoanalysis interprets aggression as stemming from the death instinct, which is a tendency towards hatred. When this tendency finds an outlet, violence takes over. When individuals feel threatened, their aggressive instinct is activated, leading to anger, internal imbalance, and a readiness to be aggressive towards any external stimulus. They may even become aggressive without external provocation to release their aggressive energy and reduce their psychological tension. Freud also linked aggression to early childhood stages, emphasizing that all forms of aggression have a sexual source directed towards controlling sexual drives through the different stages of child psychosexual development. Adler, one of Freud's followers, further emphasized that violence and aggression are compensatory responses to feelings of inferiority (Al-Subahin, Musa Ali, 2013).

**Physiological Theory** Proponents of the physiological perspective argue that bullying behavior is more prevalent in individuals with neurological damage, such as brain damage. Others believe that this behavior is caused by the hormone testosterone, as studies have shown that

higher levels of this hormone in the blood are associated with higher rates of aggressive behavior.

**Frustration-Aggression Theory** Dollard, Doob, Miller, and Sears proposed that frustration creates an aggressive drive that instigates harmful behavior towards others. This drive gradually decreases after inflicting harm on the other person, a process known as catharsis or discharge. Frustration causes anger and feelings of injustice, making individuals more likely to engage in aggression. Most preschool children's fights arise from conflicts over possessions and toys. Feelings of distress and frustration from unmet biological needs trigger aggressive behavior in children, such as breaking toys. This theory posits that aggressive behavior results from frustration, making frustration the antecedent of any aggressive act. When an individual is prevented from achieving a goal, they experience frustration, which drives them to behave aggressively. This frustration may result from harsh and inappropriate punishment for aggression at home, leading to its manifestation outside the home. However, this theory has been shown to be insufficient in explaining all aggressive behaviors (Marqa, Munther Reza, 2013).

**Biological Theory** This theory explains bullying behavior as resulting from biological and internal causes, particularly the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for the emergence of aggressive behavior in children. Removing certain neural connections in this area of the brain has been shown to reduce tension, anger, and the tendency towards violence. Other researchers have suggested that physical factors such as fatigue, hunger, or physical pain in children can also lead to aggressive behavior. Some researchers attribute aggressive behavior to instinct, arguing that it is a result of an individual's biological characteristics. Aggression and violence, according to this view, involve an instinctive system, and individuals become aggressive to satisfy their innate needs for possession and defense of their property. Based on these theories and the causes of aggression, solutions and treatments for a child's aggression can be proposed. Most of these

solutions are based on a clear understanding of the cause of the child's aggression.

However, some of the aforementioned assumptions, such as biological assumptions, may not be helpful in developing physical or pharmacological treatments, despite understanding the underlying causes. As for psychoanalytic assumptions, redirecting aggressive behavior towards more humane goals may be beneficial (Al-Subahin, Musa Ali, 2013). This theory emphasizes respecting individuals' feelings and humanizing individuals. Its primary goal is to help individuals achieve self-actualization. Maslow and Rogers are prominent figures in this school of thought. This theory can explain bullying behavior by suggesting that when a child or adolescent's biological needs, such as food, water, and other basic needs, are not met, they may experience a lack of security. This insecurity can lead to a weakened sense of belonging within a peer group, which can, in turn, lower self-esteem. As a result, individuals may express these feelings through aggressive behaviors, such as bullying (Magar, Abdul Wahab, 2015).

### **Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)**

REBT focuses on identifying and challenging the irrational thoughts, beliefs, and convictions that motivate individuals to engage in bullying behavior. Therapists help individuals understand that their bullying behavior is a result of their faulty thinking and guide them to replace these thoughts with more rational ones. According to this theory, bullying is not a sign of strength but rather a reflection of underlying insecurities. Therapists encourage individuals to challenge their negative self-talk, such as "I must be the strongest and most dominant," and replace it with positive self-talk, such as "I will be respected if I treat others with kindness."

REBT also emphasizes the importance of identifying the irrationality of these thoughts. For example, therapists might explain that happiness is a result of one's thoughts and actions, and that negative thinking leads to unhappiness and insecurity. Ellis (1994) argued that therapists should consistently challenge clients' irrational thoughts and self-talk by:

- Making these thoughts explicit and conscious.

- Demonstrating how these thoughts contribute to distress.

- Explaining the illogical connection between these thoughts and the distress they cause.

Corey (1996) emphasized that REBT empowers individuals with the skills to identify and replace their irrational thoughts with more rational ones, leading to changes in their emotional responses to situations. This theory is applicable to a wide range of problems, including anxiety, depression, anger, personality disorders, and marital problems.

Bullying individuals often hold a set of beliefs, such as the belief that they must always be the strongest and most dominant, that they should provoke conflict, and that they are always right. They also tend to have a "me-first" attitude and expect others to respect them.

Ellis (2005) identified a set of beliefs and thoughts that drive individuals to bully, including: "Things should be easy and quick," "Others should like and approve of me," "Others make me angry and aggressive," and "I should retaliate against others for their actions." Bullies may deny wrongdoing and refuse to take responsibility for their behavior. They may believe that their actions are a result of someone else's fault or that their actions are insignificant. In such cases, the therapist must challenge the bully's thinking without resorting to preaching. For example, the therapist might ask, "If you believe you haven't bullied someone else, but the other person believes you have, who is right?" This highlights the subjective nature of bullying, emphasizing that the victim's feelings are valid. Therapists encourage bullies to examine their beliefs and consider alternative perspectives.

**Behavioral Theory** Behavioral theory focuses on the environmental factors that contribute to bullying behavior. Key points of this theory include:

**1 Societal norms:** Society establishes rules and expectations that define acceptable and unacceptable social behaviors.

**2 Socialization:** Socialization is a crucial tool used by society to instill these norms and values.

**3 Weakened controls:** When these controls are weakened, individuals are more likely to engage in deviant behavior.

Behavioral theorists argue that bullying is often learned behavior, modeled after bullies such as parents, older siblings, teachers, or peers. This process, known as vicarious reinforcement, suggests that individuals learn bullying behavior by observing others being rewarded for it.

Key factors in modeling bullying behavior include:

- The presence of a bullying model.
- The model's motivation to engage in bullying.
- The model's ability to perform the bullying behavior.
- Reinforcement of the bullying behavior.
- The model's goal-oriented behavior.
- The observer's ability to imitate the bullying behavior and receive reinforcement.

Behavioral theory also emphasizes that bullying is a learned behavior, not an innate trait. Children who experience violence in their early years are more likely to become bullies themselves. Ezzedine (2010) adds that bullying is influenced by social imitation, with individuals being more likely to imitate the behavior of those in positions of authority or power.

Behaviorists believe that bullying, like any other behavior, can be unlearned and modified through the principles of learning. They focus on the idea that behavior is shaped by environmental consequences. Skinner's law of effect suggests that behaviors followed by positive consequences are more likely to be repeated, while those followed by negative consequences are less likely to be repeated.

**Social Learning Theory** Proponents of this theory argue that human behavior is learned through interactions with the social environment. Albert Bandura is a prominent figure in this field, emphasizing the significant role of social learning experiences in shaping an individual's behavior. New behaviors are acquired when children observe and imitate the actions of those they care about.

This theory suggests that bullies reinforce their behavior through positive interactions with peers, friends, and even achieving a certain status among their peers. This reinforcement motivates

them to continue bullying, as they perceive it as a means to stand out and feel superior. Additionally, bullies often face little or no consequences for their actions from family or school authorities, which further reinforces their behavior.

Bandura emphasized that aggressive behavior is learned through observation and imitation of models. He argued that violence is a learned behavior, acquired by observing others and then internalizing these behaviors as symbolic responses that can be imitated later.

Bandura believed that most human behavior is learned through observational learning, where individuals observe a model and then store these behavioral patterns in memory. If these behaviors are reinforced, they are more likely to be repeated.

Bandura also proposed that aggression is a contagious behavior, learned by observing and imitating others. He identified three key factors in bullying behavior: the characteristics of the bullying behavior itself (e.g., physical bullying, severity), the characteristics of the bully (e.g., age, gender, past behavior), and the characteristics of the victim. Bandura also highlighted the role of cognitive processes in learning aggressive behavior.

Social learning theorists can be divided into two categories: those who attribute aggression to the effects of rewards, punishments, and frustration, especially during early childhood and socialization, and those who attribute aggression to imitation and the presence of appropriate models.

Based on this theory, bullying is seen as a learned behavior acquired through observation and modeling. It occurs as a result of the rewards or punishments associated with bullying, or due to external motivating factors.

While Bandura's theory emphasizes the role of learning in aggressive behavior, it does not account for individual differences or predispositions towards violence. Additionally, the theory does not fully consider the influence of broader societal factors, such as socioeconomic status and systemic inequalities, on the development of bullying behavior.

**Economic Theory** Al-Adawi (2008) suggests that social interactions are often influenced by

power dynamics. Individuals with more resources and power are less likely to resort to violence, while those with fewer resources may be more inclined to use aggression to achieve their goals. Similarly, Al-Samari and Khalifa (1963) argue that adverse conditions such as poverty, inadequate housing, and lack of educational opportunities contribute to frustration and aggression. Osman (1982) found that low-income families are more likely to use physical punishment, which can foster aggressive behavior in children, compared to middle and upper-class families who tend to use psychological punishment such as neglect or indifference.

### **Biological (Genetic) Theory of Bullying**

This theory links bullying to genetic factors, attributing aggressive and violent behaviors to innate traits that individuals are born with. According to this perspective, criminal tendencies are inherited from parents and ancestors (Jado, 2005).

Some researchers argue that aggression is a primitive behavior with physiological roots, suggesting a connection between aggression and the hypothalamus in the brain. This is because the hypothalamus regulates autonomic processes such as body temperature, heart rate, and hormones, while also influencing motivational and emotional processes (Hussein, 2007).

The biological school has also offered an explanation for the higher prevalence of bullying among males compared to females. They posit a link between male sex hormones and bullying, suggesting that fluctuations in these hormones, particularly testosterone, can influence behavior. Testosterone levels are naturally higher in male criminals involved in violent crimes, compared to women. Men commit six times more homicides than women, especially during periods of elevated testosterone levels (Hussein, 2007).

Al-Dar (1983) adds that fluctuations in hormones and biogenic amines, such as noradrenaline and serotonin, can cause temporary or chronic violence in an individual, especially if these fluctuations affect the limbic system, which is

involved in the neural mechanisms underlying emotional behavior. Individuals with chemical imbalances may experience increased irritability and aggression, especially if injected with testosterone, which also boosts self-confidence.

MacDougall, the founder of the instinct theory in modern psychology, argues that bullying or aggression is the result of an innate psychophysical predisposition that equips an organism to behave in specific ways in different situations. This involves perceiving a stimulus, experiencing a specific emotion associated with that stimulus, and then being inclined to perform an appropriate action in response.

However, some researchers have found no correlation between hormones and aggressive behavior. They suggest that hormones are merely associated with physiological changes that accompany emotions like fear and anger, which often precede aggressive behavior. Moreover, elevated testosterone levels alone are not responsible for aggressive and violent behavior. Instead, numerous external stimuli and environmental conditions contribute to the emergence of aggressive behavior in individuals (Hussein, 2010).

A criticism of this theory is its exclusive focus on genetic factors in determining bullying behavior, while neglecting the role of environmental and psychological factors in modifying bullying behavior.

#### **Key points emphasized in the translation:**

- The theory connects bullying to innate, genetically inherited traits.
- The hypothalamus and hormones, particularly testosterone, are linked to aggressive behavior.
- The theory explains the higher prevalence of bullying in males.
- Critics argue that the theory overemphasizes genetics and neglects environmental and psychological factors.

#### **Cognitive Theory of Bullying**

The cognitive theory posits that bullying behavior stems from the bully's cognitive failures,

including difficulties with information processing and cognitive deficits such as (Qatami & Sarairoh, 2009):

1. Failure in information processing.
2. Failure in attention and concentration.
3. Failure in achievement and success.
4. Failure in task engagement.
5. Failure to utilize learning abilities such as studying and academic achievement.

This implies that bullying is a behavior arising from the bully's cognitive failures. The following cognitive theories provide explanations for bullying behavior:

#### **Berkowitz's Theory**

Hussein (2010, p. 223) summarizes Berkowitz's central idea as follows: "When an individual encounters new stimuli, such as aggressive stimuli, the information stored in memory and associated with the new stimulus is retrieved. This stored information is organized into nodes or poles, with each node representing a separate concept linked to others. These concepts are interconnected through associative pathways in the mind."

Berkowitz and Zillman (1983, cited in Hussein, 2010) further suggested that aggressive behavior is underpinned by cognitive processes. The central component of this cognitive process involves the processing of social information. Frustration does not necessarily lead to aggression; rather, there are intervening variables between frustration and aggression, with anger playing a crucial role.

#### **Piaget's Theory**

Piaget proposed that through the processes of assimilation and accommodation, individuals construct mental structures or schemas that are used to process incoming information. These schemas increase one's ability to cope with problems and interact with the environment. Piaget argued that these schemas are abstract cognitive structures that allow for the categorization and organization of new information. They shape how individuals

perceive and mentally represent the world (Ezzeddin, 2007).

This implies that environmental interactions, discovery, and stimulation reinforce individuals' unique ways of constructing the world, leading them to adopt deviant strategies. They develop distorted schemas that justify their bullying behavior, resulting from increased interactions with their external environment.

### **Attachment Theory**

This theory attributes bullying to disturbances caused by a child's poor relationship with their caregiver. Proponents of this theory argue that children who receive authoritarian and inconsistent parenting develop feelings of insecurity, leading to low self-esteem and a lack of respect for themselves and others. They also exhibit numerous personal problems and disturbances, and develop conflicts towards other children who live more stable lives (Shayea Mohsen Rana, 2018).

### **Sociological Theory**

Bullying often originates from impoverished backgrounds and families living in deprived and isolated areas facing economic challenges within a sociological context characterized by widening gaps and disparities between social classes. Psychologically, bullies, especially the ringleaders, often possess strong, psychopathic, and antisocial personalities. The danger of this type is the potential for these individuals to become future criminals who threaten societal stability, as they frequently form or join criminal gangs (Magarab Abdelwahab, 2015).

### **Functionalist Theory**

This theory attributes violence, aggression, and bullying to a loss of attachment and belonging to social groups that regulate and guide the behaviors of their members or to a loss of social norms and control. Proponents of this perspective believe that bullies resort to violence and bullying due to a lack of awareness of alternative lifestyles other than those characterized by violence and aggression.

### **Phenomenological Theory**

This theory has gained scientific value due to its perspective on violence, as it starts from the individual's subjective experience and interaction with others. Violence is seen as a catastrophe in relationships, affecting both the perpetrator and the victim. It is a way of building a relationship with others through the assertion of dominance and the denial of the other through violence. This theory does not view violence as a sudden occurrence but rather as a manifestation of a shock in the relationship, resulting from a slow internal process of change and transformation that replaces love and shared experiences with unrestrained violence (Magarab Abdelwahab, 2015).

### **Stress and Strain Theory**

This theory posits that external life stressors impact psychological processes, which in turn drive individuals towards aggressive behavior. There are two types of stressors:

- **Type 1:** Associated with unpleasant life events, work stress, and various roles, serving as stressors that can lead to violent and aggressive behavior.
- **Type 2:** Related to environmental stressors such as noise, crowding, pollution, weather, and intrusions into personal space. These environmental factors do not create aggression per se but can induce psychological or behavioral effects that may lead to aggression (Rania Al-Sharif, 10).

- **Social Hierarchy and Power Theory**

This theory posits that peer groups are hierarchical structures within which some peers use aggression to control and dominate others, aiming to achieve higher social status, power, and access to resources. When peers submit to this control through fear, avoidance, or crying, the bully's power is reinforced, and this dynamic can persist for extended periods. Victims often lack the power or social status to resist or defend themselves (Rania Al-Sharif, 12).

- **Historical-Cultural Theory**

This theory contends that bullying occurs within specific sociocultural contexts, and language plays a significant role in the bully's

culture. Encouraging and reinforcing contexts motivate bullies to engage in their behavior (Naifa Al-Qatami, 2009, p. 88). Moreover, social and cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping bullies' behavior, especially when a conducive environment fosters such actions.

#### • General Strain Theory

The occurrence of victimization aligns with the broader concept of general strain theory, which explains deviance and lawbreaking through the underlying forces and motivations within the social structure or through responses to situational events that act as stressors or strains. This is particularly true when individuals are unable to achieve socially accepted goals. Sources of strain extend beyond the frustration of being blocked from achieving a goal, encompassing negative emotions arising from various social situations. Being a victim of bullying is consistent with this broader concept of general strain theory (Mohamed Thanaa Hicham, 122).

#### References:

1. Houssen, T. A. (2007). *Strategies For Managing Anger And Aggression*. Amman: Dar Al-Fikr.
2. Al-Dar, I. F. (1983). *The Biological Bases Of Human Behavior*. Beirut: Dar Al-Afaq Al-Jadida.
3. Darwish, A. M. M., Al-Lithy, A. H. M. (2017). The Effectiveness Of A Cognitive-Behavioral Learning Environment Based On Social Preferences In Developing Coping Strategies For Cyberbullying Among High School Students. *Journal Of Educational Sciences*, 4(1).
4. Al-Saed, F. A. (1981). *The Psychological Bases Of Growth From Childhood To Old Age* (4th Ed.). Cairo: Dar Al-Fikr Al-Arabi.
5. Shia, M. R. (2018). *School Bullying Behavior And Its Relationship To Psychological Health Among Middle School Students*. *Journal Of The College Of Basic Education For Educational And Human Sciences*, 40.
6. Al-Sabbahin, A. M., Al-Qodah, M. F. (2013). *Bullying Behavior In Children And Adolescents: Concept, Causes, And Treatment* (1st Ed.). Riyadh.
7. Al-Adawa, O. (2008). *The Role Of School Principals In Reducing The Phenomenon Of Violence Among High School Students In Gaza Governorates And Ways To Activate It From The Teachers' Point Of View* (Unpublished Master's Thesis). Islamic University Of Gaza.
8. Ezzeddine, K. (2010). *Aggressive Behavior In Children*. Amman: Dar Osama For Publishing And Distribution.
9. Mohamed, T. H. *The Reality Of Cyberbullying Among High School Students In Fayoum Governorate And Ways To Confront It: A Field Study* (Master's Thesis). University Of Fayoum.
10. Marqa, M. R. (2013). *The Relationship Between School Bullying Among Upper Basic Stage Students And The School Climate In Schools In Hebron City* (Master's Thesis). Al-Quds University, Palestine.
11. Al-Massoudi, K. M. (2005). *The Extent Of High School Students' Satisfaction With The Role Of The Student Counselor And Its Relationship To Aggressive Behavior* (Master's Thesis). Arab University For Security Sciences, Riyadh.
12. Magar, A. (2015). *Workplace Bullying: A Theoretical Approach*. *Journal Of The Human Sciences*, 8, 511-521.