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EXPLORING CYBERBULLYING ROOTS AMONG SAUDI HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: A SOCIOCULTURAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying has become a prominent problem in the digital age of societies with a high level of connectivity, where Internet communication has become a part of social life. Cyberbullying in Saudi Arabia, which is among the most digitally active groups in the world, not only mirrors personal psychological mechanisms but also affects and is affected by sociocultural practices, institutional organizations, and specific attributes of the platform in question, which govern the dynamics of online communication. This study examined the fundamental causes of cyberbullying among high school students in Riyadh using a mixed-methodology approach that included semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions, and quantitative descriptions. The findings indicate that cyberbullying is caused by a complex set of factors, including jealousy and revenge, peer conformity, gender expectations, lack of engagement with parents, structural constraints in schools, anonymity, and the algorithm-driven character of social media. These findings builds on the Online Disinhibition Effect by showing how cultural discourse around honor, modesty, and social standing intersects with technologically mediated behavior. This research fills a significant gap in Middle East research, as it places cyberbullying in a sociocultural and educational context. Moreover, it suggests policy implications related to the well-being of young students, school policies, family-based interventions, and the responsibilities of online platforms.

KEYWORDS: Cyberbullying, Saudi Adolescents, Online Disinhibition Effect, Digital Youth Culture, Sociocultural Context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying has emerged as a key point of global attention to the well-being of adolescents, their online activities, and socialization. With the growing influence of digital technologies on young people in communication practices, identity building, and interactions with peers, teens are now subject to emotional vulnerability and social controversies that are no longer limited by the physical environments of schools or households. The affordances of online spaces, such as anonymity, persistence, public visibility, and quick dissemination, have long been observed by scholars to enhance the effects of online aggression in ways that are fundamentally distinct from traditional bullying (Slonje et al., 2013; Kowalski & Giumetti, 2017). The existing literature consistently associates cyberbullying engagement with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and lack of academic motivation and is of urgent concern to both general health and schooling systems across the globe (Wright and Wachs, 2021; Hinduja and Patchin, 2019).

Saudi Arabia is a key location for observing these dynamics. One of the most active social media user groups worldwide is Saudi adolescents, who actively engage in apps such as Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram, which have become an integral part of their lives. Peer belonging, social comparison, reputation management, and self-expression have become central to these digital environments. Simultaneously, Saudi young people live in a sociocultural environment characterized by high family integration, traditional gender roles, and sensitivity regarding honor and reputation (Triandis, 2018; Al-Kandari & Al-Sejari, 2021). These cultural beliefs influence how young people perceive online interactions and react to emotional threats. They are often pressured to balance the individualistic culture of the global digital world with the collectivist basis of their daily lives.

Although studies of cyberbullying in the Middle East are gaining momentum, the available scholarship is primarily based on quantitative survey designs, which aim to chart prevalence rates, demographic trends, or risk factors (Alhur & Alhur, 2023; Al-Qahtani, 2025). Although such studies provide essential descriptive data, they can tell us comparatively little about lived experiences, relational tensions, and sociocultural processes that reproduce online aggression. Notably, the Saudi Arabian education system, characterized by a high level of hierarchy in authority, gender segregation, and unequal access to digital literacy, is an important factor in determining adolescents' reactions to

conflict and deviance (Al-Makhalid, 2021). Nevertheless, school as a social institution is under-researched in regional cyberbullying literature, even though it is central to the lives of adolescents.

To address these gaps, this study adopted a qualitative-dominant approach, focusing on the experiences of Saudi high school students. It examines how teenagers perceive the causes of cyberbullying, the psychological and social scenarios that lead to cyberbullying, and the meanings that they assign to harmful actions on the internet. The Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004) forms the basis of this analysis as it describes how self-regulation can be undermined and hostility fostered by anonymity, invisibility, and psychological distance. Nevertheless, this study intentionally extends past psychological accounts to adopt sociological insights of collectivism, gender regimes, honor culture, institutional norms, and emergent digital youth identity. It states that cyberbullying in Saudi Arabia can only be interpreted productively if online disinhibition is placed in a broader cultural context and educational reality.

By doing so, this study contributes to the international discourse on cyberbullying by examining how this issue develops at the intersection of psychological disposition, sociocultural pressures, and platform architecture. It also holds practical significance for policymakers, teachers, and families, particularly as the fast-paced digital transformation has become a new reality within the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. The goal of this research is ultimately to describe and place cyberbullying within the context of the sociotechnical and everyday digital and cultural lives of modern Saudi youth.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Global Perspective

In the current era, cyberbullying has been a topic of extensive global research, revealing its complexity as a sociotechnical phenomenon shaped by the interplay between adolescent psychology and technical infrastructure. International studies have consistently shown that adolescents are particularly vulnerable because of their developmental sensitivity to identity formation, peer evaluation, and emotional regulation (Kowalski & Giumetti, 2017). Investigations in Europe, North America, and East Asia have demonstrated clear associations between cyberbullying involvement and heightened psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal (Rębisz et al., 2023; Wright & Wachs, 2021). These effects are exacerbated by the unique affordances of digital environments,

persistence, replicability, visibility, and anonymity, which differentiate online aggression from traditional bullying and can magnify its emotional impact (Slonje et al., 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2019).

Researchers increasingly argue that cyberbullying cannot be reduced to individual psychological traits but must be understood within broader cultural, social, and technological contexts. Digital media scholars highlight the role of attention economies and algorithmic visibility, which amplify provocative or emotionally charged content and inadvertently incentivize harmful interactions (Kong et al., 2023; Marwick & Boyd, 2014). Adolescents participate in online spaces characterized by performative conflict, sarcastic humor, and normative public ridicule practices embedded in the digital cultures of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. These environments reward emotional expressiveness and visibility, creating conditions under which online hostility becomes normalized and, in some cases, socially advantageous (Boyd, 2014; Brewer & Kerslake, 2015). Thus, cyberbullying must be conceptualized not only as interpersonal aggression but also as an outcome of platform architecture, youth peer dynamics, and cultural narratives that shape how adolescents interpret, justify, and enact harmful behaviors.

2.2 Cyberbullying in the Middle East and GCC: cultural scripts and social expectations

In the Middle Eastern and Gulf contexts, cyberbullying is deeply embedded within sociocultural structures and enduring norms. Gulf societies, including Saudi Arabia, are characterized by strong family cohesion, collectivism, and culturally salient concepts of honor, modesty, and reputation (Triandis, 2018). These cultural dimensions shape adolescents' interpretation of online interactions and their responses to perceived violations. Studies across Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates indicate that cyberbullying is often rooted in jealousy, peer comparison, competition, and fear of exclusion, which mirrors global findings, but acquires heightened importance in collectivist settings where social belonging is central to identity (Al-Kandari & Al-Sejari, 2021; Tahat et al., 2024).

Sex appeared to be particularly significant. Saudi girls have been found to experience greater vulnerability to spreading rumors, image-based shaming, and morality policing, reflecting a cultural emphasis on modesty and the regulation of female behavior (Alhothali & Enezi, 2023). By contrast, boys often engage in cyberbullying connected to humor,

dominance, or group bonding, aligning with masculine honor norms and peer expectations for assertiveness (Al-Qahtani, 2025). These gendered dynamics demonstrate the interdependence of digital behavior and social norms, as adolescents navigate both traditional constraints and emerging digital freedoms. Saudi youth inhabit a unique socio-digital environment where offline restrictions coexist with online spaces that offer anonymity and freedom of expression. Strict gender segregation, parental oversight, and limited avenues for open interpersonal conflict encourage the use of digital platforms as alternative arenas for emotional expression, autonomy, and retaliation (Al-Makhalid, 2021). These "parallel social spaces" loosen cultural constraints and amplify the psychological conditions of online disinhibition described by Suler (2004), while simultaneously magnifying reputational risks due to the cultural weight of honor and family image. The interplay between restrictive offline norms and permissive online environments produces a distinctive landscape of cyberbullying in Saudi Arabia.

2.3 Psychological, Relational, and Technological Drivers of Cyberbullying

Psychological predispositions, including impulsivity, low empathy, emotional dysregulation, and moral disengagement, are widely recognized contributors to cyberbullying (Bandura, 2017; Brewer & Kerslake, 2015). However, research has increasingly emphasized that these factors operate within relational contexts characterized by peer influence and concerns related to social identity. Adolescents often engage in cyberbullying to reinforce group cohesion, secure social recognition, or avoid marginalization (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009; Lester et al., 2013). In collectivist societies such as Saudi Arabia, where group conformity is highly valued and social belonging has a significant influence on self-concept, this peer-driven dynamic becomes particularly influential. Youths may participate in or condone cyberbullying not out of malicious intent but as a means of navigating group hierarchies or preserving social standing.

Technological affordances mediate these motivations further. Anonymous messaging applications and disappearing content platforms lower inhibition and create a perceived sense of safety, which can facilitate aggression (Barlett et al., 2016, 2017). Algorithmic ranking systems reward content that elicits emotional responses. By contrast, visual platforms heighten concerns about

appearance, popularity, and visibility factors that are strongly tied to adolescent self-worth and social comparison (Marwick & Boyd, 2014). These digital structures shape adolescents' perceptions of which actions are permissible, consequential, or socially rewarded. Consequently, technological systems cannot be treated as neutral environments; they actively structure the conditions under which cyberbullying occurs.

2.4 Sociocultural and Educational Lens

Although global research offers extensive insights into the prevalence and correlates of cyberbullying, scholarship within the Middle East and Saudi Arabia in particular exhibits notable gaps. Most regional studies rely on quantitative surveys, which provide valuable descriptive data but fail to sufficiently address the subjective meanings, cultural interpretations, and relational dynamics that shape online aggression (Al-Qahtani, 2025). Socio-emotional and cultural motivations driving cyberbullying remain underexplored, leaving critical questions about lived experiences and contextual nuances unanswered. The existing literature also undertheorizes the influence of cultural values related to honor, modesty, and family expectations, despite their centrality to adolescent socialization in the region.

Similarly, the educational environment has received limited attention even though schools serve as key social institutions that mediate youth interactions. Saudi schools are undergoing rapid digitalization; however, many lack formal cyberbullying policies, teacher-training initiatives, or structured reporting mechanisms (Al-Makhalid, 2021). This institutional silence reinforces the normalization of online aggression and constrains adolescents' willingness to seek help. The absence of systematic school-level interventions represents a significant gap in the regional literature. However, the technological perspectives are underdeveloped.

Despite the dominance of platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram in Saudi youth culture, few studies have examined how platform governance, algorithms, visibility metrics, and anonymity features shape patterns of cyberbullying. This gap limits the understanding of how digital architecture interacts with sociocultural norms to mediate behavior. This study addresses these gaps by integrating psychological, sociocultural, educational, and platform affordance perspectives into a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design. By foregrounding adolescents' lived experiences, this study offers a deeper theoretical and empirical

understanding of cyberbullying as a phenomenon embedded in the everyday lives of Saudi youth navigating rapidly shifting digital and cultural landscapes.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is grounded in the Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) and expands on it through sociocultural, educational, and techno-social theoretical perspectives. While Suler's (2004) conceptualisation remains one of the most influential frameworks for explaining why individuals behave differently online, the theory in its original form does not fully account for the cultural, institutional, and platform-specific factors that influence digital behavior in non-Western contexts. Scholars have increasingly observed that online disinhibition interacts with cultural norms and social hierarchies, rather than functioning as a purely psychological mechanism (Lapidot-Leffler & Barak, 2012; Marwick & Boyd, 2014). Against this backdrop, this framework adopts a layered approach that synthesizes psychological processes with sociocultural norms, educational dynamics, and digital affordances that shape the experiences of Saudi adolescents.

The Online Disinhibition Effect posits that anonymity, invisibility, and asynchronous communication diminish the social cues that typically regulate behavior, thereby weakening self-monitoring and enabling individuals to express emotions or hostility that they might otherwise suppress (Suler, 2004). These mechanisms have heightened significance in Saudi Arabia, where cultural expectations of modesty, respectability, and family reputation shape adolescents' offline and online identities (Triandis, 2018; Al-Kandari & Al-Sejari, 2021). Many young people described feeling constrained in face-to-face interactions, but were more liberated when using pseudonymous or anonymous profiles. This temporary detachment from social expectations resonates with what Suler termed "dissociative anonymity," enabling adolescents to articulate jealousy, irritation, or revenge without jeopardizing their social standing in tightly knit communities.

Sociocultural theory further illuminates how cultural values intersect psychological tendencies. In collectivist settings such as Saudi Arabia, group belonging and sensitivity to peer evaluation are central to adolescent identity (Al-Qahtani, 2025; Brewer & Kerslake, 2015). Online interactions are thus interpreted not merely as personal exchanges but as public performances embedded within peer

hierarchies. The fear of exclusion and desire to maintain group acceptance often encourage youth to participate in teasing, mocking, or retaliatory behaviors that align with peer norms. The rise of humorous ridicule (taqtaqah) among Saudi youth, as described in recent regional scholarship, reflects how cultural scripts normalize certain forms of interpersonal aggression that may escalate into cyberbullying (Al-Qahtani, 2025). Within this framework, disinhibition emerges not as an individual aberration but as a socially sanctioned response shaped by collective expectations.

The framework also incorporates moral disengagement theory, which explains how individuals justify harmful behavior by reframing it as insignificant, humorous, or morally warranted (Bandura, 2017). This process was evident when adolescents described their actions as “only joking,” “teaching someone a lesson,” or “responding to what they did first.” Such rationalisations, which have been documented in cyberbullying studies globally (Kowalski & Giumetti, 2017), reflect the mechanisms of responsibility displacement and harm minimisation. When combined with anonymity or the absence of immediate feedback cues, these cognitive processes transform fleeting emotional impulses into recurring patterns of online aggression.

The youth identity theory provides an additional interpretive lens. Adolescence is widely recognized as a period marked by experimentation with identity, heightened sensitivity to peer approval, and frequent social comparisons (Boyd, 2014; Wright & Wachs, 2021). Digital platforms increase these developmental dynamics by offering constant visibility metrics such as followers and views, which shape adolescents’ sense of self-worth. In this environment, cyberbullying may emerge as a strategy for asserting dominance, reaffirming group identity, or managing insecurity. Platforms thus become spaces in which identities are performed and contested, often with limited adult oversight or institutional mediation. Ultimately, insights from platform studies and digital affordance theory highlight the impact of technological design on online behavior. The platforms most commonly used by Saudi adolescents, Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, and Tellonym, possess features that can intensify disinhibition, including anonymous questioning tools, disappearing messages, rapid viral dissemination, and algorithmic amplification of emotionally charged content (Barlett et al., 2016). These features create communicative environments in which provocative or harmful interactions can

easily be initiated and disseminated widely. As several scholars argue, digital architecture is not a neutral backdrop, but an active structuring force that shapes visibility, power, and social capital in youth networks (Marwick & Boyd, 2014; Boyd, 2014).

This multi-layered theoretical framework posits cyberbullying as a phenomenon emerging from the intersection of psychological disinhibition, sociocultural pressures, developmental dynamics, school-based structures, and technological affordances. By integrating these perspectives, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of why cyberbullying manifests in particular ways among Saudi adolescents, and how it becomes embedded within the broader social world that young people inhabit.

3.1. Methodology

3.1.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method design to explore the meanings, motivations, and sociocultural contexts of cyberbullying among Saudi high school students. Qualitative inquiry formed the core of the design as it enabled in-depth engagement with participants’ subjective experiences and interpretive frameworks through which they understood online aggression (Creswell, 2009). Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions enabled participants to share personal experiences, express emotional responses, and collectively reflect on their peer norms and cultural expectations. The quantitative elements were limited to descriptive demographic and behavioral data, including participants’ ages, grade levels, daily social media use, and preferred platforms. These data served as contextual scaffolding that enriched the qualitative findings, rather than constituting a standalone statistical analysis (Creswell 2009). A qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design was chosen to ensure both depth and contextual breadth, consistent with contemporary approaches in digital youth and education research.

The study was conducted in Riyadh. Riyadh was selected for this study because it is the most demographically diverse and digitally active region in Saudi Arabia. The city comprises a broad spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds, school types, and residential districts, which means that the study will be able to capture different experiences in different urban contexts. Riyadh's adolescents have some of the highest levels of social media participation in the country, and the city's educational establishments embody the rest of the cultural and technological change that accompanies the Vision 2030. Sampling

for the study from north, south, east, west and central Riyadh allowed the study to capture culturally rich and socially diverse stories in order to add credibility and relevance to the results.

3.2. Sampling and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was implemented to ensure diversity in terms of gender, type of school, and geographical region within Riyadh (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The sample comprised 50 participants: 29 individual interviewees and 21 participants involved in four focus group discussions. All participants were secondary school students aged 16–18 years, enrolled in both governmental and private schools situated in the central, eastern, western, northern, and southern districts of the city. Each participant was a Saudi national. The inclusion criterion mandated prior experience with cyberbullying, whether as victims, perpetrators, or witnesses, thereby ensuring that the sample encompassed a broad spectrum of perspectives and roles.

The decision to focus on secondary school girls was based on both theoretical and contextual considerations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Adolescence, particularly the period between 16 and 18 years, is a developmental stage marked by increased sensitivity to peer evaluation, social comparison, and exploration of identity, all of which contribute to the intensification of cyberbullying dynamics. Female students were prioritised because regional and international studies have consistently shown that girls are more likely to suffer image-based shaming, rumour-spreading, morality policing, and reputation-based cyberbullying, patterns that are exacerbated in conservative, honor-based cultural contexts such as Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, girls in Saudi secondary schools are amongst the most active users of social media, making them a critical population to understand the culture and emotion of online aggression.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

At the quantitative phase, a demographic instrument containing basic background information (gender, age, grade level, & school type), types of social media use, and most used platforms was distributed to the 50 students who participated in the study. The essence was to provide a statistical analysis of the participant background and most social media used by student in Saudi. At the qualitative stage, twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted in different phases from February to July 2025. Five well-trained postgraduate

research students were hired to conduct interviews and focus group discussions with participants. Interviews were conducted either in person or via Zoom, depending on participants' preferences and logistical considerations. All the interviews were conducted in Arabic, and the research team translated the interview data with integrity intact. The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes, with an average of approximately 50 minutes. The interview protocol explored experiences of cyberbullying, emotional responses, motivations, relational dynamics, perceptions of platform environments, and cultural interpretations of online behavior.

A semi-structured interview guide (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and a focus group discussion (FGD) protocol were employed (Creswell, 2009). Both instruments were developed according to already available literature on cyberbullying, digital youth culture, and sociocultural norms in the Saudi context. The interview guide addressed critical domains, including definitions and perceptions of cyberbullying, personal experiences, emotional reactions, peer relationships, school climate, and the impact of digital platforms. The FGD protocol included parallel questions intended to spark group reflection about shared norms, humour culture, anonymity, and gender-specific experiences. The instruments were reviewed by two experts in qualitative research and adolescent psychology to ensure clarity, cultural sensitivity, and relevance of the instrument to Saudi adolescents. Minor adjustments to the language were also made to enhance the fact flow of Arabic translations before being used in the field. Researchers encouraged narrative depth by asking participants to describe specific incidents, reflect on their personal circumstances, and articulate how broader social norms influence their behavior.

Four focus groups were conducted with male students and female students separately, each comprising twenty five participants. Moderators of the same gender facilitated all the focus groups. Male participants were coded as ID-M1 to ID-M25, while female FGDs were coded as FG-F1 to FG-F25. The sessions lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Focus groups were used to elicit collective reflections on peer norms, gendered experiences, humorous cultures, and school climate. Discussions generated dynamic exchanges in which participants challenged, affirmed, or elaborated on each other's accounts, thus yielding insights into shared cultural scripts and group interpretations of cyberbullying. Data saturation was reached at the latter stages of

data collection. After the 24th interview and the third focus group, no new themes, codes, or meaningful variations were identified in participant narratives. The research team constantly monitored saturation during coding and memo writing, highlighting repetition in emotional drivers, peer dynamics, the effect of anonymity, and cultural interpretations. Once it was clear that further interviews were yielding redundancy instead of new information, saturation was determined, while still carrying out interviews to ensure complete coverage of the planned sampling distribution across school types and districts.

A descriptive analysis was performed on SPSS to bring out the demographic information. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyse the interview and focus group transcripts. The coding process involved several stages: initial open coding, the development of thematic categories, and analytical interpretation guided by the theoretical framework. The analysis utilized an iterative methodology, wherein codes and themes were re-examined to guarantee alignment with participant narratives and theoretical frameworks. Codes were used during the preliminary stages to respect participants' phrasing. In contrast, the subsequent phases incorporated conceptual coding informed by sociocultural theory and platform affordance perspectives. Discrepancies in coding among the researchers were addressed through collaborative discussions, which provided additional insights to enhance the credibility of the analysis. Member checking with the selected participants was conducted to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected their lived experiences. The study received formal ethical approval from the Imam Mohammed Ibn Saud ethics committee with approval number 638842063125816882. Therefore, all procedures followed established ethical standards for research involving human. However, informed consent was received from the parents or legal guardians, as well as written and verbal consent was also received from all student participants. Participation was voluntary, and the students were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The data were anonymized and securely stored, and they were accessed only by the research team.

4. RESULTS

The analysis demonstrated that cyberbullying among Saudi high school students was influenced by the interconnected effects of personal emotional experiences, social and contextual pressures, and

platform-specific characteristics. These three broad domains are not discrete categories but rather intersect continuously within the narratives of adolescents, indicating that cyberbullying is most accurately understood as a relational and structural process rather than as isolated individual actions. Participants' accounts underscore how emotions, cultural expectations, peer dynamics, and technological design converge to generate harm online, which is further intensified by the psychological conditions outlined in the Online Disinhibition Effect.

4.1 Demographic Results

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants (N = 50).

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	22	44%
	Female	28	56%
Age	16 years	14	28%
	17 years	21	42%
	18 years	15	30%
Grade level	Grade 10	16	32%
	Grade 11	18	36%
	Grade 12	16	32%
School type	Government	31	62%
	Private	19	38%
Social media use	2-4 hours/day	10	20%
	5-8 hours/day	27	54%
	9-15 hours/day	13	26%
Most used platforms	Snapchat	44	88%
	TikTok	37	74%
	WhatsApp	32	64%
	Instagram	28	56%

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of 50 participants involved in the research. Concerning the gender, the male comprises the total number of 22 participants (44%), while the female comprises 28 (56%). The sample contains a slightly higher proportion of female participants compared to male participants. About age, 16 years has 14 participants (28%), 17 years has 21 participants (42%), while 18 years has 15 participants (30%). The figure signifies that most participants are aged 17 (42%), with a sizable representation of 16-year-olds (28%) and 18-year-olds (30%). As for the grade level, grade 10 got 16 participants (32%), 18 participants (36%) represent grade 11, and 16 participants represent grade 12: 16 participants (32%). Therefore, the largest group is in Grade 11, with an even distribution among Grades 10 and 12. In terms of school type, 31 participants (62%) come from government schools, while 19 participants (38%) are from private schools.

This indicates that the majority of participants are from government schools, highlighting a focus on public education settings. As for the social media usage, 10 (20%) reported spending 2-4 hours daily on social media, 27 participants (54%) showed 5-8 hours daily, and 13 participants (26%) spend 9-15 hours on social media. The data suggests that more than half (54%) of participants spend 5-8 hours on social media daily, indicating significant engagement with online platforms. Regarding the most used platforms, 44 participants (88%) spend most of their time on Snapchat, 37 participants (74%) on TikTok, 32 participants (64%) on WhatsApp, and 28 participants (56%) on Instagram. Based on this, Snapchat is the most prevalent platform among participants, followed closely by TikTok and WhatsApp, highlighting popular social media habits that could relate to cyberbullying behavior.

Participants demonstrated significant engagement with social media, averaging 6.33 hours of daily usage. The predominant platforms include Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Instagram, whereas Telegram and X are utilized more selectively. These patterns correspond with national usage trends and contextualize the findings within the broader digital zeitgeist framework, influencing the daily routines of Saudi adolescents. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants. These demographic characteristic results suggest the presence of themes that may be associated with experiences and attitudes related to cyberbullying. The significant participation with social media sites, especially Snapchat, may indicate potential avenues for additional study about cyberbullying occurrences.

4.2. Qualitative Results

4.2.1. Personal and emotional drivers of cyberbullying behavior

Participants frequently characterized their engagement in cyberbullying, whether as victims or perpetrators, as arising from profound personal emotions associated with jealousy, comparison, insecurity, or revenge. These emotional tensions constituted the central element of numerous adolescents' digital interactions and were magnified by the visibility of their peers' accomplishments, appearance, or social standing online. Rather than referencing academic success or achievements, many students that participated in the study referenced how appearance, mannerism, and physical traits triggered emotional reactions, which eventually resulted in them engaging in cyberbullying. For instance, a female participant illustrated how

physical insecurities result in cyberbullying, stating that:

"Frankly, I am always bullied at school and outside the school because of my teeth, and they put on me the ugliest stickers that resemble me, such as a squirrel, a donkey, and jealousy, because I was suffering from a slight progress in my teeth. The reason that pushes them to Hashi, and God does not know, but it is possible because they see me sad and annoyed and I try to defend myself; they like this Al-Tenshin because I just became sorry for them. They seemed to stop, but they are salvation and no longer got their need with me." – FG-F12

This shows how personal vulnerability and emotional sensitivity can turn minor insecurities into full-blown harassment. Another participant explained how jealousy and social comparison can influence the nature of interactions girls engage with online. She explained that bullied students are usually easy targets because of their appearance:

"My classmate at school became introverted because of bullying by students. I downloaded a clip of her Snap that showed her style or shape when she came to school; they became commenting on her shape and bullying her." – FG-F7

A different participant also highlighted how emotional sensitivity influences withdrawal from online spaces: "Honestly, I don't get excited to play it, and I don't enter it except rarely when I make sure that my friends don't play. Does 'enter play' mean you avoid playing with them?" – FG-F10. Another participant stated that some of the students are also being bullied for their physical appearance on different social media platforms:

"There are many people who are bullied in the comments. Someone writes a comment on a girl who is all ridiculed for her form or the way she is portrayed or her words and insists all the comments bully this girl; they take it as content." – FG-F15

This narrative shows that the cyberbullying many adolescents usually use cyberbullying as a way to express their insecurities through online aggression. Furthermore, some of the participants identified that peer conflict and jealousy can often result in targeted online attacks, especially when students make use of anonymous platforms like Tellonym to foster interpersonal tension:

"Because of envy, for example, a group of students whose academic average is low and a group whose average is high and always. The teachers praise and rely on students with a high rate and get trust from the teachers, so they exchange anonymous messages through the Teal platform; they bully the shape and the body, and all things are like negative

things. Any mistake or any wrong action of the smart student, they write it in the Teal in a special school account" – FG-F19.

Family stress has emerged as an additional emotional backdrop that contributes to adolescents' online aggression. Several male students spoke about unstable home environments, parental conflict, or high household pressure, and how these experiences created irritability that spilled into digital interactions. One participant said, "Why would the bully enjoy that in your personal opinion? He often fills in the voids in his life, such as if his father divorced his mother, he empties the negative energy with this thing on the Internet." – ID-M14.

This sows that emotional overload, regardless of its source, can fuel impulsive or aggressive digital responses from adolescents. Past victimization also plays a significant role in shaping behavior. A few students described the internalization of bullying to the extent that it becomes predictable, thus shaping future emotional and behavioral responses. One of the participants stated that: "Yes, I was bullied when a picture of me was uploaded and I was subjected to criticism and hurtful words, and I was very sad... I deleted the picture and the account in its size and tried to skip the topic." – ID-M22. Another participant stated that cyberbullying has a long-term emotional impact on the students, stating that "it affects them emotionally and psychologically and affects their grades significantly because this destroys their self" – ID-M6.

Another prominent subtheme is the complex relationship between self-expression and vulnerability. Some participants described online spaces as risky environments in which sharing personal content could quickly invite humiliation. One of the students explained how posting a mere video online could attract mockery among peers: "The girl downloads something in a social media video of her on Snapchat or TikTok and bullies her through her form or way of speaking." – FG-F4. Others reported being mocked for speech issues, physical traits, or posting content that was outside normative expectations. One participant stated that "I always see the ridicule of the dialect always on social media and the comment on its dialect that you do not recognize speaking, 'Why do you speak such and such?'" – FG-F4.

Collectively, these personal and emotional factors revealed that cyberbullying was not simply an impulsive act but the culmination of affective insecurities, disrupted relationships, and emotional vulnerabilities intensified by the visibility afforded by digital platforms. The online environment

functioned both as a space of expression and as a site of emotional volatility, where young people negotiated their self-worth under the spotlight of peer surveillance.

4.2.2. Social and contextual influences shaping cyberbullying

Personal emotions do not operate in a vacuum; they are continually shaped by social norms, peer cultures, and institutional contexts that structure adolescents' daily lives. Many participants emphasized that cyberbullying is embedded in broader patterns of humor, belonging, and competition within peer groups. Several adolescents described online mockery as "normal," referencing the social culture of *taqtaqah* that blurred the boundaries between playful teasing and harmful ridicule. Within this cultural script, calling someone's name or spreading light rumors was sometimes interpreted as social bonding, yet the same behaviors frequently escalated into more intense aggression. One of the participants explained how girls often turn embarrassing images into ridicule: "Making stickers for people and placing them in the chat without their permission, they photograph the person, for example, crying or screaming, and then they post it for reaction on WhatsApp and Snap." – FG-F15

Peer validation has emerged as a key social driver. Exclusion from online peer groups was also described as a painful form of cyberbullying. One of the participants stated that:

"The most important thing is the words out of pranks, but other than that, there is an underestimation of the other; the threat is a bad person, something normal, not a bad thing, but someone manipulates it and makes him feel that the other is something wrong and starts threatening him and raising terror in himself, or friends who settle on a group and do not add their friend because she does not like it without knowing and all the time they laugh at her and must write a biography." – FG-F13

In focus groups, students repeatedly noted that individuals who bullied others were often perceived as being "popular," "followed," or "the center of attention." The desire to gain or maintain social recognition has motivated some adolescents to participate in or endorse cyberbullying. Acts of digital aggression often generate entertainment value within friend groups, reinforcing behavior through collective amusement. One of the participants described how students collectively mock others by turning humiliating moments into sharable content:

"Yes, even in our meetings, she tries to stay seated, and when they joke by comparing her to her father's height, she becomes heroic, so she avoids standing next to him and tells me that her friends always tell her that she is tall and sad, and when she reads the comments in the school's TikTok account, she is affected." – FG-F7.

Collectivist social norms have also shaped the interpretation of cyberbullying. Adolescents expressed heightened concern about group belonging and reputation, and any perceived threat to social standing could trigger conflicts. For girls, reputational harm was especially significant because of cultural expectations of modesty and propriety. Rumors, screenshots, or manipulated images could jeopardize not only personal identity but also family honor, giving cyberbullying a moral dimension that intensifies its emotional impact. Some participants also mentioned that specific physical characteristics became repeated targets: "I always see bullying on the nose continuously; I don't know what the reason is." – FG-F18.

This point was further buttressed by other participants, with one participant describing how even a single verbal mistake online becomes collective ridicule: "Like a person who makes a mistake with a word in a broadcast or Snapchat clips, people do not forget and start laughing at him and making their reactions." – FG-F15. Another participant further emphasized how collectivist social norms impact cyberbullying by stating that:

"Numerous individuals are being harassed in the comments. When someone makes a comment about a female who is being made fun of for her appearance, how she is depicted, or what she says, they assume that the girl is being bullied." – FG-F9

Institutional factors further shape the social environment of cyberbullying. Many participants reported weak or inconsistent school responses, limited digital supervision, and the absence of formal policies addressing online harassment. One of the students recalled a time when a teacher made a comment about a student's size:

"Like a domestic student, she was fat and wide. The teacher asked her why she was late for a final exam; she said no one told me, so the teacher asked the student who sent her, 'Why didn't you tell her?' The student said what she saw, and the teacher said, 'All this size,' and pointed with her hand and did not see her." FG-F2

These social and contextual dynamics reveal that cyberbullying is deeply intertwined with peer norms, cultural values, gender expectations, and institutional gaps. Adolescents navigated a social

ecosystem where digital aggression could signal popularity, reinforce a sense of belonging, or express moral judgment, and where the lack of adult intervention reinforced the perception that online behavior existed in a separate, unsupervised domain.

4.2.3. Platform dynamics and technological affordances enabling cyberbullying

Participants' narratives clarified that the technological architecture of social media platforms plays a decisive role in enabling cyberbullying. Anonymity was the most frequently cited element, with apps such as Tellonym and Snapchat's anonymous question features providing adolescents with a protective barrier behind which they could express hostility without revealing their identity. Many described anonymous messages as "the easiest way to attack" and emphasized how anonymity reduced fear of consequences. One participant stated bluntly: "Yes, it increases the chance of bullying because there are fake accounts that some people settle on and can bully how they are because there is nothing in it that prevents them." – ID-M27. Furthermore, the participants stressed how anonymity encourages people to express extreme hostility. One of the participants added that "many people take advantage of the fact that they do not know who he is, so he starts taking his rest and cursing and cursing." – FG-F16.

Thus, the dissociative anonymity central to ODE was not an abstract psychological condition but a concrete feature of the platforms themselves. The structure of platform visibility also shaped the behavior. Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram were described as environments in which social comparison was constant and algorithms rewarded content that generated reactions. Students understood that dramatic, provocative, or humiliating posts attract more views and engagement. A participant stated the following:

"For example, I saw someone whose pictures circulated and was bullied on his manners and shape; the person was threatened and blackmailed with sums in exchange for deleting his pictures that have become used as stickers in WhatsApp and social networking programs." – FG-F18.

Adolescents often link virality with popularity, and this logic encourages them to participate in or amplify bullying behaviors. The instant feedback mechanisms of likes, views, and comments created a feedback loop in which aggression was translated into social visibility. Students highlighted the speed at which content circulated across platforms, noting that private photos or comments could "spread

within minutes" to unrelated groups. This rapid dissemination amplified harm, as victims were unable to control the narrative or limit the audience. One of the participants noted that bullies often rely on multiple accounts to intensify harm: "A person settles more than one account and increases bullying on people and celebrities and takes it as a joke and crumbles." – FG-F17. This was further buttressed by another participant who noted that "technology has evolved; so many people settle many accounts and emails for bullying, and if a person closes his account, he settles a new one that stops." – ID-M14.

Finally, platform governance is perceived as largely ineffective. Few adolescents reported blocking, reporting, or seeking help through platform tools, either because they doubted the usefulness of these tools or because they feared being labeled as overly sensitive. The perceived absence of digital accountability reinforces the belief that online aggression occurs in an unregulated environment, further magnifying disinhibition. Taken together, these platform-specific dynamics demonstrate that cyberbullying is not simply a matter of personal choice but is profoundly shaped by affordances that lower psychological barriers, reward provocative behavior, and accelerate the spread of harmful content. In this sociotechnical ecosystem, adolescents learn to navigate digital architectures that facilitate expression and increase the social visibility of aggression.

4.3. Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that cyberbullying among Saudi high school students arises from the complex interplay of emotional, sociocultural, and digital affordances. Although much of the existing literature interprets cyberbullying through psychological or behavioral frameworks (Wright & Wachs, 2021), the present study shows that adolescents' online aggression is deeply situated within broader cultural, institutional, and platform-based contexts. By integrating the Online Disinhibition Effect with sociocultural theory, youth identity research, and platform studies, the discussion suggests that cyberbullying should be understood not as a random or deviant act but as a socially patterned and culturally mediated phenomenon shaped by the environments in which it unfolds.

4.3.1. Extending the Online Disinhibition Effect Through Sociocultural Context

The Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004) provides an important starting point for

understanding the reduced restraint participants described when transitioning from face-to-face encounters to digital interactions. Features such as anonymity, invisibility, and asynchronous messaging consistently encouraged students to express sarcasm, jealousy, frustration, or revenge in ways they avoided offline. These findings align with earlier research, which shows that anonymity increases the likelihood of aggression by reducing accountability (Lapidot-Leffler & Barak, 2012; Barlett et al., 2017). However, Saudi Arabia adds layers of meaning that extend beyond Suler's model. Cultural expectations surrounding honor, modesty, and family reputation significantly intensify the emotional stakes of online interactions (Al-Kandari & Al-Sejari, 2021). Participants did not view disinhibition simply as a psychological release but as an opportunity to step outside the heavy expectations imposed by family norms, gender codes, and community surveillance. Boys frequently use online spaces to display dominance and humor, thereby reinforcing well-documented masculine hierarchies in regional youth studies (Alhur & Alhur, 2023). Conversely, girls described digital spaces as places where modesty expectations followed them, even if temporarily concealed by pseudonyms, thus making them vulnerable to judgment, rumor circulation, and moral shaming. The same anonymous affordances that empower boys to assert dominance expose girls to reputational harm, illustrating that the manifestations and consequences of disinhibition are gendered deeply.

4.3.2. Cyberbullying as Moral Negotiation and Emotional Displacement

Another prominent pattern in the findings relates to how adolescents morally negotiate and justify harmful behaviors. Many minimized the impact of their actions, framing them as humor, retaliation, or "teaching someone a lesson." These explanations resemble Bandura's (2017) moral disengagement mechanisms, in which individuals cognitively restructure harmful acts to preserve their sense of morality. The informal cultural script of *taṭṭaqah* – playful teasing that can slide into ridicule – creates an additional layer of ambiguity, blurring the boundaries between fun and cruelty, as observed in other studies on Arab youth (Al-Makhalid, 2021; Al-Qahtani, 2025). Emotional displacement further deepened these behaviors. Adolescents described using online spaces as outlets for frustrations stemming from family conflict, academic stress, loneliness, or prior victimization. While similar emotional regulation patterns have been reported in

Western contexts (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015), the Saudi social environment, with limited avenues for open emotional expression, appears to intensify these tendencies. Digital spaces thus become arenas in which emotions otherwise suppressed in family or school settings find expression, often through aggression.

4.3.3. Peer Cultures, Identity Performance, and the Pursuit of Visibility

The findings of the study reaffirm longstanding observations that cyberbullying is rarely an individual act; instead, it occurs within peer cultures that reward conformity and visibility (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). Participants described online aggression as a means of gaining popularity, entertainment, or a sense of belonging. In collectivist societies, alignment with group norms is often prioritized over individual agency, and adolescents learn to navigate digital spaces in ways that secure acceptance and recognition (Triandis, 2018). Digital platforms have intensified this dynamic in recent years. Constant feedback loops of likes, shares, and views create pressure to produce content that captures attention. Research on youth digital culture suggests that adolescents often treat online visibility as a form of social currency (Marwick & Boyd, 2014; Boyd, 2014); this study supports this observation. Several participants admitted that controversy or confrontation increased their visibility, further incentivizing the creation of provocative or harmful posts. Cyberbullying, therefore, became intertwined with identity performance and the pursuit of symbolic capital within peer groups.

4.3.4. The Educational Context

A significant gap highlighted in this study concerns the role of schools. Many adolescents felt that educators were disengaged from or unprepared to deal with online harm. This institutional silence is consistent with recent research indicating that schools often lack structured cyberbullying policies, teacher training, or reporting mechanisms. Students' reluctance to report incidents was shaped not only by fear of punishment or parental discovery, but also by the belief that teachers could not meaningfully intervene. The absence of institutional protection magnifies the psychological and social drivers of cyber-bullying. Without trusted adults or clear policies, adolescents navigate conflict autonomously, relying primarily on peer norms that frequently normalize aggression. These findings suggest that cyberbullying reflects systemic gaps in digital education, as well as individual behavior.

Platform Architectures as Structural Catalysts of Cyberbullying

Technological design has become a critical factor. Participants repeatedly described how features, such as anonymous messaging, algorithmically curated feeds, and ephemeral content, facilitated harmful interactions. These patterns align with recent research on the impact of platform architecture on adolescent behavior (Barlett et al., 2016). The incentives embedded in social media visibility, engagement metrics, and viral circulation effectively reward provocative and emotionally charged content. Platform structures do not merely tolerate cyberbullying; they are often easier, rewarding, and challenging to trace. This underscores the fact that online aggression cannot be fully understood without recognizing how technological affordances shape the social environment of youth interactions. In this sense, the Online Disinhibition Effect becomes materially embedded in platform design, transforming psychological impulses into patterned behaviors reinforced by the digital infrastructure.

4.3.4. Reframing Cyberbullying as a Sociocultural and Sociotechnical Phenomenon

Altogether, these findings invite a conceptual shift: Cyberbullying among Saudi youth must be understood as a sociocultural and sociotechnical phenomenon. Psychological factors, such as disinhibition and emotional dysregulation, matter, but they interact with and are shaped by cultural values, gender norms, school structures, and platform architecture. This study highlights the significance of contextualized qualitative research in capturing these intersections, providing insights that survey-based studies in the Middle East have largely overlooked.

4.4. Implications of the Study

The results of the present research have valuable practical implications for schools, parents, and policymakers in countering cyberbullying among Saudi adolescents. The findings emphasize the need for multifaceted interventions that include emotional support, cultural sensitivity, digital literacy, and platform accountability. The findings indicate that schools and teachers should implement more straightforward and standardized methodologies to detect and respond to hate speech on the internet with enhanced digital literacy education that will allow educators to differentiate between culturally-affirming joking and damaging behavior. This can be achieved by adopting a comprehensive anti-cyberbullying policy with clear reporting

procedures. Schools should also provide recurring digital citizenship and SEL lessons, train staff in trauma-informed responses, and create confidential reporting channels. Schools should monitor policy awareness and incident resolution times annually. These interventions, such as training programs and policy awareness, should focus on highlighting the causes, consequences, and punishments of cyberbullying in schools. This will boost the staff's confidence and readiness to perform their duties more effectively. The parents can also play a significant part in safely guiding their children. Therefore, parents too need more awareness about risks peculiar to the platforms because many students stated that they were hiding accounts or dodging monitoring, which means that family-oriented digital safety education can be useful. In this regard, parents should receive support through culturally tailored digital-literacy workshops, establish family media agreements, receive practical guidance on preserving evidence and reporting incidents, and provide non-punitive emotional support to children. These lessons can be used by policy makers to reinforce national policies on prevention of cyberbullying in school curricular programs, and social media firms, especially those allowing anonymity, can adopt the use of improved safety features and reporting systems as a way of minimizing the abuse of anonymity and curb online bullying.

The theoretical contribution of the study is also the extension of the available models of online behavior to a collectivist cultural setting. Its results demonstrate the interaction of several elements of the Online Disinhibition Effect, including anonymity, invisibility, and low accountability with cultural norms of reputation, peer conformity, and family honor, which results in the expression and interpretation of cyberbullying. These relationships enhance our perception of the ways in which adolescents bargain their self-expression and identity on the digital platforms that are stipulated by social comparison and peer surveillance as well as threat of being humiliated publicly. By so doing, the study contributes to digital youth identity theory and supports the need to adopt culturally-based approaches in the analysis of cyberbullying in non-Western contexts.

5. CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the causes of cyberbullying among Saudi high school students in Riyadh. A qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach revealed that

cyberbullying is driven by a constellation of emotional, social, cultural, and technological factors. Jealousy, envy, revenge, and past victimisation are intertwined with peer dynamics, humor cultures, institutional silence, and platform affordances. The Online Disinhibition Effect offers a valuable framework for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying online aggression. However, the findings demonstrate that disinhibition is profoundly shaped by the sociocultural and technological environments in which adolescents operate. This study highlights the importance of multifaceted interventions incorporating emotional support, cultural sensitivity, digital literacy, and platform accountability. Schools must play a proactive role in addressing cyberbullying by developing formal policies, training educators, and creating safe reporting channels. Families also require digital awareness programs that equip them to engage in adolescents' online lives. At the platform level, transparent design choices, safer anonymous features, and robust moderation systems are crucial. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that cyberbullying among Saudi adolescents is not merely an online problem but a reflection of broader social transformations, cultural tensions, and technological shifts shaping the digital generation. Understanding these dynamics is essential to creating safer, more empathetic, and equitable digital environments for young people.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

The research has a number of limitations that must be recognized. The researchers also restricted their sample to secondary school students in specific areas, which can limit the extrapolation of results to the rest of Saudi Arabia. The sex ratio was not balanced, and the percentage of female participants was higher, which might have affected the thematic patterns that emerged. The information relied on self-reported accounts, which can be influenced by recollection, social desirability, and cultural sensitivity, especially in topics concerning family reputation or peer conflict. Moreover, the qualitative design, though rich, does not enable a wider generalisation to the rest of the adolescent population.

Future studies must expand on such findings by adopting more mixed-method designs, which integrate qualitative information with extensive quantitative data to enhance generalisability. A comparison between male and female students would help better appreciate gendered experience of cyberbullying in Saudi context. The longitudinal

research might also examine the dynamics of cyberbullying behaviors and digital identities as they evolve over time. Moreover, future research could explore longitudinal changes in cyberbullying behavior, examine cross-gender and cross-school differences more systematically, and investigate how emerging platforms transform youth socialisation. Comparative studies across Middle Eastern contexts

would further illuminate how cultural variation shapes digital aggression. Lastly, future research might investigate platform governance, algorithmic visibility, and the interventions of social media companies in filtering harmful content to provide more insight into the technological frameworks that influence the online experiences of adolescents.

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