

## Cyberbullying as social labeling in digital identity construction

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Cyberbullying is one of the most common phenomena in digital communication, having a significant effect on social relationships and how people are perceived and identified as internet users. Most prior works have largely centered on cyberbullying as a psychological, educational or regulatory issue, relating to its adverse effects and prevention and intervention measures. However, not much has been written about it as an act of communication: a way of producing, circulating and legitimizing social meanings and identity categories in digital spaces. **Purpose:** This study investigates cyberbullying as a social labeling process and its role in building digital identity. **Methods:** This is a qualitative conceptual study using theoretical analysis and interpretive synthesis of the literature and examples. It combines labeling theory, symbolic interactionism and digital communication theory into an account of how identity is constructed through online interactions. **Results:** The analyses reveal cyberbullying as a contingent cycle of interactive symptomatology, cohesive environmental involvement, repeated textual restatement and algorithm-induced aggrandizement. Such post hoc processes convert individual instances of negative appraisal into identity stories that are permanently affixed to the primary and secondary label. This is exacerbated by the persistence and visibility of the digital communication which add to this build up of stigma. **Conclusion:** Cyberbullying is a much more evil form of online hatred and it operates as a socio-communicative process through which identities are constructed, stabilized and finally, allotted by networked publics. **Implications:** A triadic communicative interaction, algorithmic amplification and identity internalization model can be used to conceptualize the effects of cyberbullying on youth digital identity and provide a corybantic communication-based theory for future research as well as inform models for digital literacy programs.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying; labeling theory; digital identity; social labeling; online communication

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## INTRODUCTION

The increase of digital communication across numerous platforms has transformed how interpersonal relationships take shape, identify formation and recognition. Although, social media is originally a medium of one-to-one communication, it is also simultaneously a platform for public performance where users routinely perform identities (Alasal, 2025) focusing on the mediating role of social influence in this relationship. It is based on the hypothesis that the language used in the digital space not only conveys messages, but also contributes to shaping impressions and shaping self-image among others and among individuals. The research relied on a quantitative, descriptive, and analytical approach. Data were collected using a self-administered online questionnaire targeting a sample of 210 active social media users in KSA. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure certain characteristics were present in the sample, such as active daily use and familiarity with digital language. To analyze the data, structural equation modeling (SEM).

A digital identity in this context can no longer be seen as something wholly self-created. Rather, it is constructed via a social process that is ongoing involving a confluence of interaction, exposure to public attention constraining free choice and responding audience. One facet of identity formation is the online self-presentation, including profiles, photos, videos and captions

among a few others. Equally significant are the inputs, assessments and classifications offered by other users in the form of burning (comments), inflames (reactions) or otherwise, reprints, mentions and hashtags. These are all communicative practices that co-construct meaning (from and with) within, and around embodied being. Therefore, the potential for digital identities to be actively deformed, as when public negativity is reiterated in semi-public online sites, continues.

The digital platform, with its openness, anonymity of lurking, and crowd-based interaction, constitutes a communicative space that speeds the creation of social meaning and constantly re-creates who we are online. Here, the construction of digital identity is based on the responses we receive from our online interactions with others.

Cyberbullying has changed into a complex and pervasive phenomenon in digital society. Most studies define cyberbullying as a novel form of aggressive behavior that has serious psychological effects on its targets, such as greater levels of anxiety and depression, or lower self-esteem (Aisya, 2024). These perspectives primarily place cyberbullying within the contexts of mental health and deviance, focusing the analysis upon the emotional impact upon the individual. Although these perspectives are important to consider, it has been observed that an over-emphasis on psychological effects has caused social communication aspects to be overlooked in relation to how identity is created

through symbolic interaction in cyberspace.

Cyberbullying should be rethought in terms of the field of study of communication and should be recognized as a symbolic communicative practice rather than just an online aggression practice. In online media, negative verbalizations, teasing, and shaming, for instance, go beyond manifestations of conflict in interpersonal relations, and they have a symbolic potential to convey evaluative judgments about one's social identity. In the study of communication, cyberbullying can be understood as a communicative practice in which symbols are strategically or collectively used to define, categorize, and position individuals in networked publics (Amanatin & Sekarningrum, 2024).

Understanding cyberbullying as symbolic interaction pushes analyses away from behavioral deviance toward processes of meaning-making. This is why digital communication is inherently semiotic every comment, share, meme or reaction is an intersubjective formation of knowledge. Once such a negative labels exists over and over in the virtual sphere, they gradually acquire intersubjective legitimacy (Faqih et al., 2025). To that extent, you can say that cyberbullying is a systematic symbolic activity belonging to an online communication system.

Moreover, cyberbullying is a process of meaning production in digital public spheres (Maulidin et al., 2024). The public comments section, the algorithmic amplification of

posts, and the participatory engagement of the audience in communication create collective communicative events from individual interactions. Therefore, the practices of labeling become more visible and enduring, with the result that the dominant narrative of an individual can emerge in the discourse. This enhancement of communication proves that cyberbullying is not separate from the infrastructure of digital media.

Audience involvement is critical to turning individual acts of cyberbullying into a malaise for social labeling. A nasty post might come out as an individual act of aggression, but with interactions (likes, replies, reposts, mimicry or comments), it takes on a different meaning and power. This form of interaction broadens the exposure of the message and reinforces the evaluative judgment concerning the target. Hence, audiences actively participate in the creation and dissemination of social meaning through digital engagements.

With victims' labels circulating and getting repeated back to one another, they can gain a coherence in the online space. When constant winnowing of certain representations or appraisals transforms a person into a singular categorical lens through which they are viewed. These narratives may be blown up to the point that our shamed identity seems perfectly reasonable, plausible and digestible. Hence cyberbullying serves as violence but also non-violence.

In this light, cyberbullying should not be

treated exclusively as an aggressive practice but also a discursive practice. In fact, those discourses are maintained in practice through the repetition, dissemination and participation of audiences (Oktrianda et al., 2022). They can also refer to the manner in which certain identity constructs bring a degree of stability when recurring nicknames and denigrating tags/labels are replicated again and again, across various threads/channels/sources of information posted or shared, whilst holding those individuals to simple symbolic representation.

Consequently, the analytical attention moves away from analyzing and accounting for cyberbullying as a deviant behavior to studying it as a communicative process taking part in identity construction. Translating to the digital world, identity coexists through interaction, recognition by an audience and also through various technology mediation (Tasruddin et al., 2022). Repeated exposure to symbolic evaluations in public can not only affect self-construction, but the negotiation of identity as well. Such forms of communicative interaction shows that cyberbullying is but one thread in a more complex process of digital subjectification through which meaning, power and visibility converge.

By situating cyberbullying in an emergent communication studies framework, it is transformed into a form of socio-communicative practice that is both symbolically produced as well as co-performed by audiences and mediated by platforms. It learns in which to

build, balance, and challenge digital identities with communicational engagement.

Sociological literature on communication suggests that cyberbullying should not be thought of as a series of aggressive acts but as a social construction of meaning facilitated by symbolic interactions in public digital spaces (Siswanta et al., 2021). Comments, audience reactions and evaluations on the Internet are social symbols that can change public perception of people who express certain opinions and they also determine the social situation of individuals. In this framework, cyberbullying can be understood as a form of social labelling: it generates identity types and sustains power relations in networks of cyber communication.

Analytical perspectives of previous studies on cyberbullying in Indonesia. The first viewpoint is the psychological one in which cyberbullying is considered as a psychological problem of emotional problems, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem among youth. This research has found that the type of psychological effect experienced by the victims relates to the factors associated with cyberbullying, which have been proven in Indonesia. Despite being a major contribution to the knowledge of how cyberbullying harms individuals psychologically, this view has shown that it views cyberbullying as some stimulus causing psychological harm through responses instead of an act in itself in which all child actors are actively participating as part of a symbolic interaction that takes place in a

virtual space.

Secondly, from an educational and preventive standpoint, cyberbullying is seen as a behavioral challenge that can be mitigated via digital literacy and ethics-based communication strategies, as well as school-based interventions (Hero & Astini, 2023). In communication studies, digital literacy has been conceptualized as a strategic solution to negative online interactions (Juditha et al., 2022). While these studies provide a preventive framework for addressing cyberbullying, they rarely look at how communicative actions such as commenting, sharing, and tagging create and stabilize social meaning in network publics. Instead, they concentrate on behavioral remediation and not on how such actions create identity.

Third, the regulative view integrates cyberbullying into digital governance, online platform regulation and communication ethics. In this sense, structural features of digital platforms, such as institutional regulation, are acknowledged in the present research perspective on cyberbullying. However, it primarily emphasizes policies and control, while not addressing how daily interactions between people contribute towards the classifications of identity that help to create public stigma.

In the Indonesian communication studies, an empirical study has focused on virtual patterns of interaction and symbolic exchange in a virtual community. However, cyberbullying has mostly been viewed in terms of hostile

interaction rather than understanding it as a communicative process of identity framing. Symbolic interactionism, which views identity as being socially constructed to some extent is theoretically amenable to exploring how identities can be stabilized through repeated negative framing in online discourse.

In addition to that, the link between labeling theory and platform communication dynamics has been less explored. Although blaming theory has highlighted the important role of social reaction in the construction of deviance, it should be emphasized that digital environments have extended social reaction through algorithmic amplification and participatory audiences (Hamza & Jiomekong, 2020). Interaction with digital media infrastructure on communication dynamics has been investigated in Indonesian communication studies; notwithstanding that the technology-media individuals relationship, and particularly identity labeling relation, have not been sufficiently theorized.

In addition, although these perspectives have increased our understanding of the phenomenon, they fall short in explaining how and why cyberbullying works as a communicative process by which social meaning is created and public definitions are made about identities. This limitation underlines the necessity of a broader approach, indicating how symbolic interaction, social reactions and identity formation all interact in digital environments.

To fill this gap, the current research

conceptualizes cyberbullying as a social labelling process that is part of online identity formation. Not only do we have attention to the impact of online aggression as such, we focus on communicative processes that give rise to labels, circulate them and ensconce them in networked spaces so individuals are associated with unwanted identities. The process of identity category production, reproduction, and reinforcement is a relationship that consists of digital interactions in the form of audience engagement by consumers and platform-mediated visibility. This perspective, by combining labeling theory, symbolic interactionism, and digital communication theory, completely explains how identities are constructed in the context of cyberbullying and why these situations become stabilized through various forms of contemporary online communication.

This idea is well suited to a very sociological theory called labeling theory. Becker (1963) holds that deviance is not found in the individual but that there is only deviance when society labels an act as deviant. This can be considered from the prospective of Symbolic labels where online ridicule, negative comments in online spaces and evaluation will continue to depict individual identities in digital communication (Rinaldi & Ardianto, 2022). Such view can also be supported by symbolic interactionism, where identity is formed from the symbolic understanding of how other people react to a person (Aditya & Sucipta, 2024). The number

of people you reach through digital interaction amplifies the impacts of labeling because it is public, frequent and augmented by audience engagement and algorithms that magnify exposure.

This context of technological features common to digital platforms serve to reinforce the effects of labelling, as they support reproduction (for example when young people refashion viral content) or afford interaction on disseminated data. One important reason is that the algorithmic architecture of social media turns social labels into a public stigma that reaches wider than ordinary interactions. Hence, digital identity is formed not only on the basis of communication and interaction with other fellows but also on technological platform that enables interactions/mediates and able to coerce the technical flows of social meaning as well.

Some of the ways in which the social labeling process of cyberbullying can be empirically illustrated include the 2025 death of Universitas Udayana student Timothy Anugerah Saputra, which illustrates how social pressures, which can be heightened by discourse within the digital realm, can evolve from personal interaction to public labeling with significant consequences for personal identity. The bullying of a junior high school student in Blitar during orientation activities, for example, illustrates how social labeling, which may be initiated within personal offline interactions, can be heightened within the digital realm,

thereby impacting the collective understanding of the victim of the bullying behavior.

Recent public discussions around bullying cases in Indonesia indicate some tensions may simply walk away and re-enter the vise of the digital arena as commentaries, reposts, public speculation, and crowd-sourced punishment. On the other hand, if something goes viral then all of the people who are victims of crime or directly involved with it get framed not just as a victim/ offender in respect of that incident but as an identity constructed through viewing habits by digital viewers. This suggests that cyberbullying extends beyond the (online) dyadic interaction. Or it might refer to the more general communicative space that frames narratives, stigma and identity categories as circulating in and through digital spaces.

Research knowledge about cyberbullying gets more with time, but in fact most of the researches still continues conducting the topics either granting for psychological burden or criminalisation to cyberbullying (Puja Setia Kirana et al., 2025). Nevertheless, this alone is not enough to explain the mechanisms underlying cyberbullying as a social-labeling process of digital identity formation. This is because there exists a necessity to reframe cyberbullying as symbolic communication that produces identity through the discursive workings of social labeling mechanisms.

Considering this background, the current study investigates the process of cyber bullying as social labeling and its effects on identity

construction through digital communications. So as a few examples of the principal theories for analysis, labeling theory and symbolic interactionism are employed, to make sense of social labelling construction and identity response in digital communications.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The present study used a grounded theory approach of qualitative conceptual research methods to explore the broader features of a social-labeling process of cyberbullying in the digital communication context. In this sense, conceptual research plays a vital role for investigating complex social processes with the objective to generate an overall integrated conceptual framework, rather than conducting empirical data collection. This explorative study was concerned with an analytical review of the relevant academic literature, theoretical models and social cases used to develop a cross-cutting conceptual framework about the nature of cyberbullying as it relates to digital identity.

We argued that the focus of analysis should be in the processes of symbolic interaction arising in tools used to launder social labels online, and how these are created, circulated, and incorporated. The text is based primarily on label theory and symbolic interactionism, with ideas taken also from the field of communication sociology, digital culture studies, and humanistic psychology. In simple words, the labelling theory states that deviance and

identity are both an event of social construction resulting from the labelling individuals by society and the response to it (Faqih et al., 2025). Symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals give meaning to social symbols and negotiate their own place in the world through interaction. These frameworks allow for understanding cyberbullying outside of a single-person deviance perspective and within the communicational process situated in a larger social and technological context (Amanatin & Sekarningrum, 2024).

The data sources used for this literature review were peer-reviewed scholarly papers and theoretical treatises as well as cases of public deliberation about cyberbullying and the processes around creating an identity through digital mediums. We undertook a literature search, using purposive sampling of globally published journal literature from the past several years and theoretical literature related to labelling theory, symbolic interaction, and online communicative dynamics. This literature search strategy follows qualitative research methods emphasizing literature-based research, which refers to conceptual synthesis and theoretical integration (Hero & Astini, 2023). The publicly discussed cases were used as part of the analysis for illustrating the theoretical arguments, which enabled the demonstration of the applicability of the theories within real-world communication scenarios.

Data analysis was performed through thematic and interpretive approaches. First,

prominent thematic areas regarding social labeling, identity development, and the processes of digital interaction were identified in the chosen literature base. Theoretical constructs were then synthesized to develop an integrated analysis construct that explains the operation of cyberbullying as a symbolic labeling construct. Lastly, deductive reasoning was employed to interpret the empirical illustrations through the theoretical construct, thus enabling conceptual generalization regarding identity development in the digital sphere. This sequence of methodological approaches enables the research to develop a theoretically informed analysis that integrates psychological, sociological, and communication disciplines in understanding the phenomenon of cyberbullying, thus extending the current understanding of the phenomenon from behavioral and psychological perspectives to a communication-centered conceptual understanding of the phenomenon (Maulidin et al., 2024).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This analysis results demonstrate that cyberbullying is not just an online action of aggression. Instead of this, it is an intricate social and social process whereby symbolic identification plays a vital role in the virtual identity formation through relationship-based correspondence. The virtual media of the present have, however, changed in fundamental ways how people communicate and engage

with one another by generating explicitly public communication events from a point of visibility which are replicated and amplified in deep expression (and impact) (Prasetyo, 2023).

Theories of Labeling describe cyberbullying in symbolic communication where individuals are labelled and organized into identity. Becker (1963) suggests that deviance comes from social reaction with the individual being no different to anyone else but simply tagged and placed within society. With massive audiences in the digital sphere, this is compounded through listeners ' producing tags as they react to a post; e.g. comment on it, share it or even like it. It turns a simple, so-called dyadic cyberbullying process into a social networking type of process where tag labels are endorsed collectively. However, tagging will be more severe if it is done by powerful people and is validated by the social media support of those with power while the victims are forced to be in a powerless position (Mulyana, 2026).

Cyberbullying can be defined, in part, as a situation of social communicative process. Naming in digital networked spaces is a discursive process of exploration, recontextualization, and assimilation by which meaning is generated through relationality. This captures the essence of communicating: making sense, reaching an audience, mediation and negotiating identity.

Social labelling relies on an initiating utterance. This primary utterance may take several forms including a comment; or, caption;

or meme; or repost; or a four-second snippet that serves as an evaluative break for someone. In a digitally constructed environment those master utterances are not simply opinion, but rather role designators of how to be seen as present in the space.

The first utterance introduces a type of category or evaluative claim that contextualizes an individual within such an interpretive frame. Not really the stuff that appears random or silly in its content but it is a first communication act, a basis for communicating, which signifies the movement from private thought to public expression.

The second stage is that of the audience uptake. In digital communication, meaning is not defined at the time of enunciation. Meaning develops based on the response of people. People's responses can be measured by likes, shares, comments, quote posts, emojis, etc. All these people's responses can be considered a way of responding to the initial statement. The audience can be considered co-creators of meaning. The legitimacy of the labeling statement can be measured based on comments, shares, etc..

As the labeling statement is propagated and distributed through reposts, screenshots, derivative memes, and/or commentary, it is assimilated into discursive repetition. Repetition is used to solidify and stabilize meaning. The more the label is encountered in various modes of communication, the more it is reclassified from an understanding to an

accepted description.

Discursive repetition disambiguates the meaning of the evaluative comment and gradually transforms it into a structured identity marker. At this point, the labeling statement is lodged in the communication environment, independent of the original speaker, as it is shared as common discourse within the digital community.

Digital platforms provide the structural dimension of the labeling process through algorithmic amplification. Platforms with engagement-based algorithms favor content that encourages engagement, thereby increasing its reach. In the same way that the labeling discourse generates engagement in the form of comments, shares, or reactions, the algorithmic amplification of the discourse increases the reach of the engagement. The nature of the engagement expands the reach to include a broad set of labeled publics. Thus, we can describe the algorithmic amplification as the communicative factor of the label (Huszár et al., 2021).

Repetitive and amplifying in nature, labeling leads to framing identity. At this stage, the person is associated (and interpreted) as a basic symbolic element that plays into how others perceive their existence in the digital landscape (Tabroni et al., 2024).

The identity framing level consists of selective highlighting, whereby certain dimensions in the individual's identity are highlighted while others are hidden. In the end, a multifaceted human is reduced to a single-

dimensional identity type through the process of being continuously framed. Framing is not only a matter of description, which is exactly from the position we put these persons in on that digital space, and as it were, giving them only one dimension instead of multiplying their identities in multiple directions.

The final stage involves internalization. The development of identity does not simply come from self-expression but also from interpretive engagement with feedback in the social world. Repeated exposure to labeling in the public sphere can impact individuals' self-concepts (Nugroho, 2025).

As next generations are growing up in a digital world where information lives on through perhaps infinite searches, one can always find stigmatizing labels. Continued use of such labeling reinforces communication feedback in which the self-concept of individuals can be affected by external feedback. No internalization is guaranteed, but the persistence of the construct can play a part in negotiating identity.

Where symbolic interactionism goes one step further, it is in examining how people ascribe meaning and make clear distinct the labels they take on/(or do not). This perspective originates from the identity theory of interpretative responses that represent a response to social feedback (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969; Oktrianda et al., 2022). Digital communications creates this interpretive dynamic, as a single symbol is anticipated to move through multiple referenced audiences

in the context of symbolic evaluations. This eternity of negative comments can almost be seen as a symbolic interaction that changes how a person views themselves when mixed with the identification crisis and branding feeling. This can only result in downstream effects where the internalization of identity happens almost instantaneously (Lemert, 1951). This differs in the sense of constant and asynchronous visibility and engagement which fosters identification (Hamdiah & Ahnaf, 2024).

As such, technological affordances are intimately tied to labeling because algorithms recognize content that is much more likely to be appealing and therefore incentivizes extreme polarization and often emotionally-relatable wording. Thus, it is those stories of cyber bullying are spread quickly in networked publics and stentorian identity narratives are built (Nurrahmi & Nurjanah, 2018). It elucidates the manner in which visibility politics is written in platform governance, where algorithmic mediation underwrites symbolic meaning-making. Thus, communication technologies are now understood as agents in the (re)production of social meanings and identity.

Hence, digital platforms are construed to be the communicative infrastructures that govern meaning-making practices. A social-contextual analysis of cyberbullying illustrates how digital platforms set the conditions by which talk pays off. Algorithmic systems are the new guardians of discourse and determine what types of communication are open to the user through

coaxed engagement with these systems. So that reaction-inducing discourses are more visible, and thus promoted.

Engagements in the forms of likes, shares, comments and views are simply tokens of authority. This same scale allows participation to be translated into performance; interpreted in this case, as a way of performing action through an act of collective legitimation. Labeling content that has somehow managed to successfully get strong engagement is part of a social act (of the legitimation) and supports this assertion which legitimates elements of narrative so that they might build identities. Thus, quantification does not just register an observation of interactive process but instead performs a generative service; recasting identity framing in the digital community.

To be visible is also considered as a symbol of power. Given the ability of platforms to amplify and silence particular narratives, perceptions about the larger population and how identity is situated in the digital milieu shapes platforms' role as arbiter. Datafication of all kinds of interactions make possible computational feedback loops through which the circulation patterns of narratives are shaped in the future. In so doing, cyberbullying can be seen as a socio-technical communicative process in which platform infrastructures govern patterns of meaning-making usability and identity framing in the digital sphere.

The development of digital stigma can be perceived as a significant form of the

impact of the labeling process in the digital sphere. Cyberbullying analysis, as Strana et al. reference Goffman (1963) definition of stigma, shows that it produces stigmatic symbols bring about longterm identity impacts (Hannem, 2022). Digital archives, resurfacing, and the perpetuation of online discourse can also keep the stigmatizing labels in circulation. This peculiarity is inherent in the way possible stigma differs from other forms of traditional social labeling, as its boundaries transcend space and time.

The movement from branding a single label to a collective identity narrative, which is built on the churning audience participation. Networked publics do not only witness cyberbullying interactions, but they coproduce meaning regarding these interactive exchanges, or performative engagement (Tasruddin et al., 2022). Similarly, likes, shares and comments operate symbolically to validate a specific interpretation with normative power attached to the labels that arise. The collective dimension exemplifies that cyberbullying resides in a communication ecology that reinforces identity categories through audience behavior.

Interactions are not limited to self-presentation but rely more strongly upon participatory dynamics where the audience acts as an active participant in defining meaning, in digital-mediated spaces identity is constructed. In the case of social labeling of cyberbullying, the audience further reinforces evaluative discourse, creating a coproduction of identity.

The audience engages by liking, sharing, reposting, etc. which can be interpreted as a communication act in support of their labelling statements thus giving more visibility to the labelling statements. The materialization of the audience engagement acts as a collective legitimization of individual claims (Kee et al., 2022).

Comment threads can be perceived as spaces of framing where identity is constructed or solidified. In these spaces of mutual engagement, the participants develop, reiterate, or reinforce the identity associated with the individual. In the long run, the repetition of the discourse removes the ambiguity of identity, solidifying the dominant discourse and often reducing the individual's complex identity to a single symbolic form. The silent audience also plays an important role in this. The visibility of the number of people who agree with the discourse, along with the absence of people who disagree, can often function as an implicit form of legitimization of the dominant discourse.

In this context, networked publics operate as extended and generalized others in relation to whom the process of evaluating, negotiating, and validating identity is in constant motion. Thus, digital interactions happen in relation to a recognition of a diffuse yet virtually infinite public, heightening the social importance of symbolic judgment. Therefore, cyberbullying should not be understood as a dyadic interaction between bully and victim, but rather as a networked form of communicative interaction

in which identity is enacted in relation to distributed participation and visibility (Philipo et al., 2026) and many people, especially adolescents, use social media platforms to communicate and share information. Some exploit these platforms to embarrass others through messages, e-mails, speech, and public posts, causing severe psychological harm to victims. This study reviews existing research on technologies, approaches, datasets, and evaluation metrics for cyberbullying detection, while highlighting future directions and key challenges. The findings show that traditional models work reasonably well with small datasets but require constant updates; machine learning models face feature extraction and linguistic limitations; deep learning models perform better but lack multilingual and cross-lingual capabilities; and large language models (LLMs).

Power disparities in digital communication practices are another aspect that shapes labels. Visibility and symbolic capital are factors that determine the labels that gain recognition and the identities formed in dominant discourses. The level of reach or influence a person has in society can give them more control over the framing of identity, a theme discussed in sociological studies of communication inequality and the power of the media (Paninggiran et al., 2025). Conversely, those with low symbolic resources may struggle to resist stigmatizing narratives, hence being at a heightened risk of identity collapse, in which a multifaceted identity is

reduced to a singular symbolic form.

While procedural needs are imbedded in digital labeling, identity formation is an open-ended process contingent on negotiation, agency and place. People feel forced into some kind of oppositional narrative, offer self-presentational strategies or leave the digital realm entirely (where interaction happens), which in turn may be also unsuccessful against stigmatization. The three cases illustrate that identity formation is not static and not simply shaped by responses from others, including labeling; rather, it emerges from the dynamic interplay of structure and agency.

Theoretically, this study advances labeling theory by showing that labeling in digital environments happens in a distributed, networked fashion, as opposed to localized interactions. This study also advances symbolic interactionism by including technology in its structural determinants of interpretive processes.

In summary, the theoretical contributions of this study are defined in a conceptual framework around understanding cyberbullying as a tripartite model consisting of communicative interaction (verbal aggression), algorithmic enhancement, and identity internalization. This process begins with communicative interaction through which symbolic labels are generated in discourse. Labels are then amplified algorithmically via deliberative engagement and co-opted into identity.

Table 1 conceptualizes cyberbullying as

**Table 1 Triadic Model of Cyberbullying as Social Labeling**

Dimension	Theoretical Basis	Communicative Process	Role in Identity Construction
Cyberbullying interaction	Digital communication theory	Online discourse, ridicule, symbolic evaluation	Exposure to labeling
Social labeling	Labeling theory (Becker)	Categorization through discourse	Identity framing
Symbolic interpretation	Symbolic interactionism (Mead)	Interpretation of labels given by audience	Self-concept negotiation
Algorithmic amplification	Networked publics theory	Visibility through engagement algorithms	Public stigma formation
Identity internalization	Identity construction theory	Repeated symbolic exposure	Digital identity transformation

Source: Processed by Researchers, 2026

a relational process that connects symbolic meaning to the technology infrastructure that governs visibility and the flow of communication. It points out that identity creation in virtual environments arises from interactions between human agents and systems.

Besides the development of individual theoretical approaches, the present study reveals a metatheoretical change in the understanding of cyberbullying as a sociotechnical and communicative phenomenon. The classical sociological explanations have established the role of social interaction as a key driver for shaping identity. The new digital medium through which we collaborate images either alone, or with others — in the modern form of media-algorithmic mediation as one more ingredient along the way creating “meaning” This framework of cyberbullying labels integrates symbolic interactionism and digital communication theory in the

dynamic environment of communication, with implications for symbolic interactionism, techno-governance practices, and power.

The findings from this study add to the already prolific literature in communication studies about identity construction within networked cultures. The psychology literature mainly identified concepts like the effects of cyberbullying or laws against them, while the present research situates the construct cyberbullying as part of the discursive social communicative process that resides in a networked culture. The recasting of this issue is theoretically significant, as it demonstrates that identity is a social product constitutively developed from recursive relations between labels, algorithmic amplification, and collective audience behavior.

The study re-framed the issue of cyberbullying as a fundamental concern of digital communication theory in turn offering

further theoretical contributions to the field of communication studies. Instead of reframing the topic of cyberbullying as either deviant behavior or psychological injury, the article is reframing the topic of cyberbullying as a relational communicative process in networked interaction cultures. This recasting of cyberbullying is an appropriate theoretical model as existing models which situate the phenomenon in a discourse of making meaning, making visible, and how identity is produced.

This study also advances an extension to labeling theory by transposing it into the realm of digitally mediated communication. Indeed, labeling theory has modeled on the basis of a social reaction as the starting point for identity feedback and construction. However, this study has found that in digital environments, social reactions are not limited to localized interactions but are made public and distributed by algorithms and archived over time. By transplanting these digital processes into the framework of labeling theory, this study has found that deviance and identity are not only socially constructed but also digitally amplified and structurally stabilized.

Moreover, this study synthesizes the framework of symbolic interactionism and platform studies. In general, symbolic interactionism has depended upon closely analyzing how people interpret social responses to recognize identity formation. This study showed that when these are incorporated into the platform studies framework, identity

formation is interactional and structural. It is algorithmically negotiated via systems that mediate communicative visibility.

## CONCLUSION

The present study reconceptualizes cyberbullying as a socio-communicative labeling mechanism in interaction systems characterized by digital mediation. It is a socio-communicative process through which identity categories are constructed, disseminated, and internalized within a networked environment. The current triadic model contributes to theoretical understandings of identity stigma by demonstrating how communicative labeling practices are amplified through technology and, therefore, transform individual interactions into identity narratives that inform digital identity and identity stigma.

Theoretically, the current analysis contributes to communication theory by extending classical sociological theories of identity and interaction to a socio-technical model that recognizes algorithmic amplification as a mechanism for symbolic interaction. Empirically, it indicates that communication strategies and digital literacy programs should focus on identity formation processes, as opposed to behavioral regulation. Further research is required to understand how emerging platform architectures, moderation systems by AI, and audience participation affect labeling practices and identity construction in digital communication environments.

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**AI declaration:** Artificial intelligence tools were used for editing and language refinement. The use of AI was limited to improving readability and linguistic accuracy. All substantive aspects of the research, including conceptual development, methodological design, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and formulation of conclusions, were conducted independently by the authors.

**Ethical clearance:** This research adheres to established ethical standards in digital communication and media studies. The study analyzed publicly accessible social media content and did not involve direct interaction with individuals, interventions, or the collection of confidential or sensitive personal information. All materials were reviewed responsibly, with due regard for privacy considerations and ethical principles governing online research. Therefore, formal institutional ethical approval was not required.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available as they consist of curated social media documentation and qualitative coding materials. However, they are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest in this study.

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