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# Current Cyberbullying Among Junior High School Students in Vietnam and Some Social Work Solutions

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### Abstract

Along with the development of the information technology and Internet, cyberbullying is a serious issue in many nations in recent decades. Cyberbullying can happen to anyone online, including junior high school students. The author explores materials related to cyberbullying and social work solution all over the world, especially in Vietnam in order to collect solid knowledge on those terms. The article is categorized into four main parts following as: Cyberbullying among students is an alarming issue in schools; The status quo of cyberbullied students; The role of the family, school and society in improving the matter of cyberbullied students; and the implications on the role of social work needed so as to solve this rampant problem.

**Keywords:** Cyberbullying, Junior high school student, Social Work solution.

### 1. Introduction

In 2022, in Vietnam, there are 76.95 million social network users, equivalent to 78.1% of the population, of which more than 84% of middle and high school students use social networks. A study by a group of experts from the University of Education, Vietnam National University, Hanoi showed that 31% of middle and high school students were bullied online. Secondary school students are at the age of strong development both physically and psychologically. This is the time when children's psychology is the most fragile and easily shaken. It is the imbalance in psycho-physiological development that has contributed to making it difficult for students at this age to solve their problems. Therefore, consequences of cyberbullying for junior high school students are extremely acute both mentally and physically, negatively affect students' learning and comprehensive development. On one hand, it is necessary to have a proper awareness of the nature, reality and consequences of cyberbullying for junior high school students. On another hand, it is urgent to strengthen the role of family, school and society in the prevention of cyberbullying among junior high school students.

### 2. Materials and methods

Cyberbullying refers to any form of bullying that occurs through digital devices or the Internet. This can include, but is not limited to, bullying through social media, instant messaging, and text messaging <sup>[1]</sup>.

Social work is a profession that is concerned with helping individuals, families, groups, and communities to enhance their well-being and overall functioning. It involves a range of interventions and activities that are designed to empower individuals and communities, address social problems, and promote social justice. To be effective, social work must be informed by a range of theories and approaches that provide a foundation for understanding the complexities of human behavior and social systems.

Social work supporting students experiencing cyberbullying in middle school is the professional practice of social workers performing their roles to support and address the issue of cyberbullying in the student network. This type of social work involves education and communication activities, the professional improvement of school social workers, coordination and cooperation among family, school, and society.

The study was conducted using a quantitative and qualitative research design, and data was collected through surveys, focus group discussions and individual interviews with students, teachers, semi – professional social workers, and literature synthesis.

### 3. Results & Discussion

#### 3.1 Cyberbullying is a form of school violence

##### a. School violence

Decree No. 80/2017/ND-CP of the Prime Minister of Socialist Republic of Vietnam on "Regulations on safe, healthy, friendly educational environment, prevention and combat of school violence", in Section 5, Article 2 on glossary stated: "School violence is an act of torture, ill-treatment, or beating; infringing upon the body and health; insulting honor and dignity; isolation, exclusion, and other intentional acts that cause physical or mental harm to learners happening in private educational settings or classrooms".

It can be seen that the subject of violence can be different members in school, such as violence between student and student, student and teacher, student and school staff, school guard, teacher and parent... Each type of violence has different nature, motives and purposes due to the nature of that social relationship. Student-to-student school violence is when one or a group of students uses language, gestures, means, or physical force intentionally to cause harm to another student physically, mentally, or emotionally.

Other researchers use the term "school bullying", such as Dan Olweus, to describe bullying in schools as "a repeated, negative behavior of one or more students directly against a student who has difficulty in defending himself or herself". Olweus provides three relevant criteria for defining bullying behavior: (1) repetition, (2) intentionality, and (3) imbalance of power. Given these characteristics, bullying is often understood as a systematic abuse of power between student and student.

##### b. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying refers to any form of bullying or harassment that takes place through electronic communication, such as text messages, social media, or email...

Basically, cyberbullying is similar to regular bullying, but there is one more special feature compared to the traditional bullying: Victims of cyberbullying often do not know the identity of their bully, where that person is, why they target them... This harassment can have greater harms and effects more than the traditional bullying because the content used to annoy victims can be much more widely spread and shared.

Cyberbullying among students is bullying through internet-connected media that is the intentional and repeated harmful behavior of one student or group of students against another student in the school setting during certain time.

Cyberbullying can be divided into many forms: Flaming (sending messages with anger, vulgarity about someone on a group or to someone), harassment (repeatedly sending offensive messages to someone), stalking (sending threatening or intimidating messages), denigration (sending malicious, false rumors about someone to others or posting publicly on the Internet), impersonation (impersonating the victim and sending or posting embarrassing information online), outing (sending or posting the victim's private and

sensitive information online), exclusion (separate a person from a group of friends online)

Cyberbullying involves seven characteristics: (a) The indirect transmission of negative, untrue, hateful, and/ or secret, personal information through electronic devices and applications, (b) with the intention to hurt the victim, (c) which may or may not be part of a series of repetitive actions that nonetheless may have ongoing effects, (d) with the perpetrator an individual or a group, (e) in the context of a power imbalance relationship, (f) with the perpetrator(s) able to hide his or her identity, (g) and the bullying able to occur at all times in any place the victim has internet access. <sup>[4]</sup>

Figure 1 shows the percentages of traditional bullying and cyberbullying by grades in junior and high school students in some provinces in Vietnam of Le Thi Hai Ha and her associates in their research in 2016. Of the 1424 students in grade 6, 7, 8, 10, 11 who participated in the study, 44,8% of students in grade 6 said they were victims of traditional bullying, as the highest ones among 5 grades. Along with that, 26,5% of grade-7 students were cyber victims among those grades below. <sup>[5]</sup>

## Traditional bullying and cyberbullying by grades at Time 2 (%)

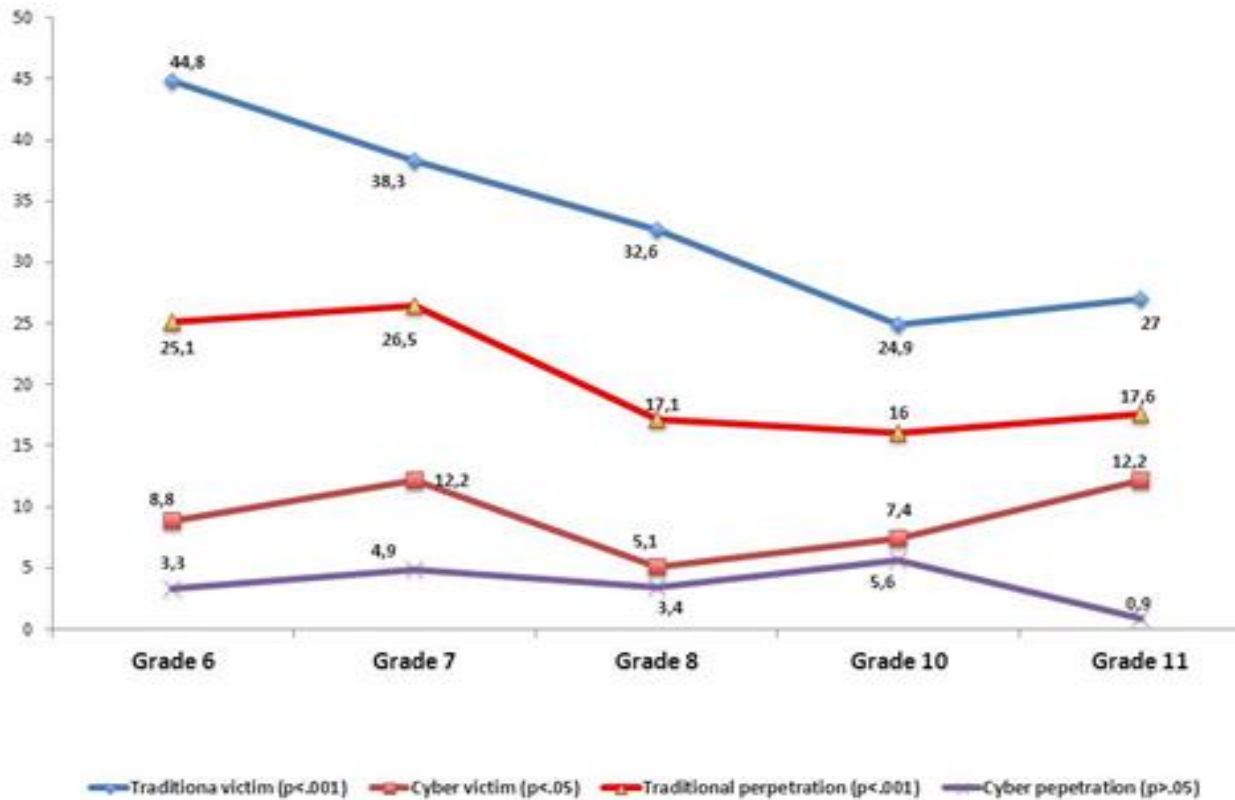


Fig. 1: Traditional bullying and cyberbullying by grades (%)

### c. Characteristics of cyberbullied students

To efficiently support students who experience cyberbullying, it is important to understand their psychological and physical characteristics. This includes their emotional and mental state, their relationships with others, and the physical and emotional consequences of cyberbullying. Cyberbullied students are often physically weak. Their body is weakened by frequent stress, along with that, clothes and books may be torn, crumpled, hair is not neat. They are easily startled, or have nightmares, restless sleep...

Cyberbullied students are often shy, taciturn, low-key, scowling, lacks friendship skills so that they have few friends, isolated, tend to live aloof; feel like lacking of support around them. Therefore, they are usually afraid and lack confidence in their own abilities and strengths, or they are children with disabilities.

Secondary school students who are bullied online will show signs such as: Low self-esteem; Withdraws from family and spends a lot of time alone; Do not want to let parents or other family members near their mobile phones, laptops; Find reasons to leave school; Friends disappear or they are excluded from social events; Lose weight or change appearance to try to fit in; New bruises on the skin may indicate self-harm behavior and unusual clothing such as wearing long-sleeved clothing in the summer to cover body bruises. In addition, they also experience mood swings after using the computer or phone (being sad, angry, tearful); Academic grades change; Avoid social settings (school, extracurricular activities) ...

Most cyberbullied children have a gentle, sensitive and shy personality, so when they suffer from cyberbullying, they are

often resigned, often do not share with others about being bullied or only tell after a long time because they feel bad and fearful of their own weakness, scared of being ridiculed, afraid of making loved ones sad, people not believing them, being punished by the bully or retaliation. They think that saying they cyberbullied does not change anything and adults can't protect them neither. They often complain before going to school, do not want to go to school, drop out of school...

### d. Consequences of cyberbullying among students

Cyberbullying is a growing problem among students worldwide, and it can have serious consequences for the victims, including depression, anxiety, and even suicide <sup>[1]</sup>. Research has explored the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of cyberbullying, including increased levels of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, academic problems, and even suicidal ideation.

Cyberbullying leaves victims with persistent mental pain, long-term effects with various degrees on all aspects of the student's life, study, friends and social relationships. At the same time, cyberbullying also negatively affects the value orientation of students, erodes cultural values, and degrades the educational quality of schools, families and society.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), when cyberbullying occurs, victims can feel as if they are being attacked everywhere, even in their own home. There seems to be no way out. The effects can last for a long time and affect a person in many ways:

Mentally – students feel annoyed, embarrassed, stupid, even angry.

Emotionally - students feel embarrassed or lose interest in the things they love.

Physically – students are tired (insomnia), or have symptoms such as stomachaches and headaches. In extreme cases, cyberbullying can even make students take their own lives. The main consequences for students who are bullied online can be summarized as follows:

**Psychological impact on students:** The psychological effects of cyberbullying can be more harmful than the physical effects. Victims of cyberbullying can experience a variety of negative emotions, such as the sadness, anger, fear, and shame... For example, anger that is repressed by students cannot be expressed openly. With the bully, they may become hostile or depressed due to feeling worthless in the bullying situation. When they are constantly insulted in any form, they become self-deprecating, stubborn, unruly, and sometimes no longer consider the offense to be pivotal. The symptoms of psychological trauma caused by cyberbullying such as emotional, behavioral, cognitive, anxiety disorders... lasting too long that will lead to depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation. A study by Yale University, USA showed that: victims of bullying are said to be "two to nine times more likely to have suicidal thoughts than other children".

**Impact on student learning:** Cyberbullied students may find it difficult to concentrate in class and not want to go to school in order to avoid other students. They may also receive lower-than-normal academic results. Students who were bullied are more likely to skip class or drop out than students who were not bullied. Like other forms of bullying, cyberbullying causes stress and anxiety, affects students' ability to understand and retain information. They may feel distracted and busy with being bullied, spend time thinking

about ways to cope, lack interest and motivation in learning leading to skipping classes, truancy, etc.

**Affecting relationships in students' lives:** During cyberbullying, students may begin to feel embarrassed and insecure about what people say or think about them, have difficulty forming relationships with others, or being reluctant to communicate with other people. They can feel lonely and isolated, withdrawing themselves from friends, teachers and family because of negative thoughts about themselves. They may lose motivation to do the things they normally love to do and feel isolated from the people they love and trust... This can have a long-lasting effect on students' physical, mental and emotional well-being.

### 3.2 Cyberbullied students in Vietnam

The Figure 2 shows the proportion of victims of bullying. Of the 215 students who participated in the study of Pham Lan Chi and associates in 2020, 47% said they had witnessed their friends being cyberbullied. Along with that, 45.1% occasionally or frequently experienced at least one of the six forms of cyber bullying listed as following: Being called in slang words, made fun of, mocked on the Internet, via text messages; Received rude or upsetting messages/photos; Being isolated or detached from your online group; Being spread false rumors of you on the Internet or by phone; Being posted upsetting messages/photos/videos online about you; Being threatened, stigmatized about your actions online or over the phone. Notably, 14.4% said that they were regularly bullied online <sup>[3]</sup>.

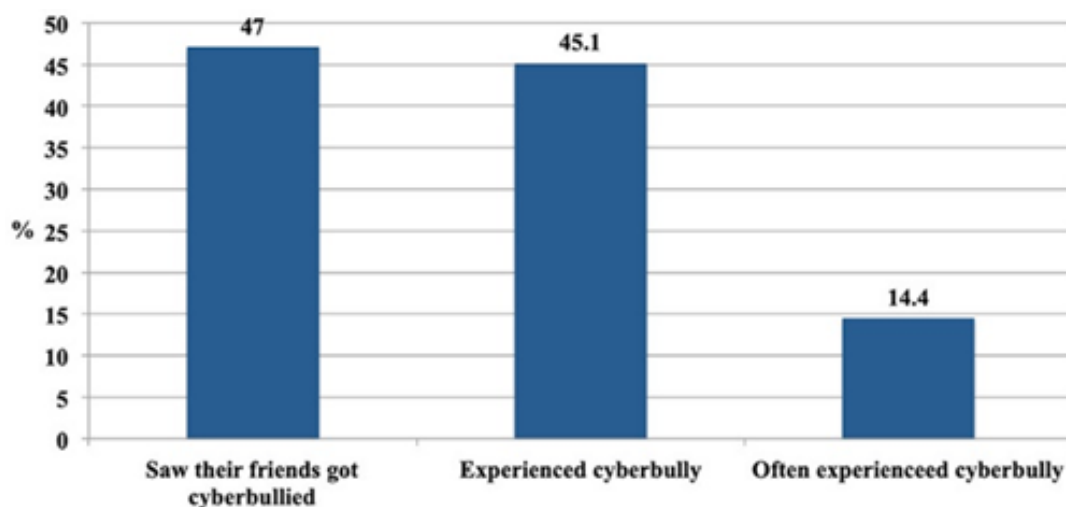


Fig. 2: Victims of cyberbullying in 2020

### 3.3 Causes of students cyberbullied

Cyberbullying can happen for the following reasons:

**Indirect revenge**

Some people, due to pressures from everyday life, they constantly have to face stress, fatigue, hardship or have been victims of bullying, affecting their psychology. There will be a tendency to want to take out your anger on others. They can use social media as a tool to retaliate against those who have bullied or bullied them indirectly. Also, they think their life has suffered too many negative things, they have suffered too much mentally and physically, so they want others to go through the same thing as them.

**Not afraid of being discovered**

Frequently, people who conduct cyberbullying will

intentionally hide their identities, they create many virtual accounts to limit the risk of being discovered. At the same time, acts of violence online are difficult to identify the perpetrator because bad subjects never use their correct information.

Therefore, the perpetrator will always feel safe because they can hardly be exposed, they can freely do what they want to satisfy their own needs. Moreover, many people also feel extremely comfortable when the victim is bewildered, afraid and always looks for the perpetrator.

**Desire for power**

Those who bully others through social networks always think that they are always right, give themselves the right to judge, criticize and insult others. They think they have the

power to judge what is right and wrong, or they think the victim deserves to suffer such hurt.

In addition, in some other cases, cyberbullies have the mentality that, if they don't do it, someone else will do the same and they give themselves the right to blatantly insult and scold others. These subjects will feel extremely satisfied and happy when they grasp the weaknesses of victims, they are happy when they see victims who will be angry, sad and hurt.

**Desire to express oneself**

The majority of perpetrators of cyberbullying are teenagers, young people. At this age, children always have the desire to become an adult, the desire to assert themselves through acts of violence and bullying others. More specifically, when their bullying behaviors are praised, they will become even more complacent. At the same time, when the victims of cyberbullying feel fear and confused, they will feel even more excited and happy.

**Considering it as an entertainment online**

Many people engage in provocative behavior but are not aware that the wrong things they do will hurt others. They think this is just a joke, a harmless game to find joy in their lives. Maybe because their lives are too boring, tasteless and do not receive much attention and sharing from those around them, they tend to scold others and see it as a "success" of their own.

**Hate and jealousy**

Cyberbullying behaviors sometimes stem from feelings of jealousy and envy for what others have. They often target objects with beauty, money, and high status in order to humiliate and overthrow them by threatening to release hot messages, photos or blackmail.

### **3.4. The Role of Family, School, Society and Social Work Solutions in Mitigating Cyberbullying**

#### **3.4.1 The role of family**

School leaders, unions, staff and teachers need to assign specific responsibilities, in accordance with facilitating functions and tasks for each organization and each member of the school about the program, the actual plan of the school for prevention and control of cyberbullying; building regular and consistent coordination mechanism on objectives, contents, methods and organization in the school; Urging, inspecting and regularly monitoring activities of prevention and control of cyberbullying of organizations and individuals assigned; Organizing preliminary review, evaluation review, lessons learned with work experience, adjusting to suit with real conditions of the school.

#### **3.4.2 The role of school**

Family plays a really essential role in students' education on attitudes, morals, and feelings and make a vital contribution to the formation of the students' personality. The exemplary character of grandparents, parents, traditions, family background directly affect the establishment of students' personality right from the beginning as a child. Therefore, it can be affirmed that education on prevention and control cyberbullying is the main duty of parents in the family. Students' brothers and sisters are always with them in learning, especially in the process of prevention and control against cyberbullying. Thus, the role model of brothers and sisters for students towards the children is really indispensable.

#### **3.4.3 The role of society**

Collaboration among school, family and society (the government, local mass organizations such as Youth Union, Learning Promotion Association, Women's Union...) to prevent and repel cyberbullying is really important. Education of the school cannot be separated from society and educational activities. Cyberbullying prevention is also closely linked to the society. Each organization and individual have different roles, so the level of the influence is also different in education activities for cyberbullying prevention. Active participation, coordination rigorously, scientifically with the appropriate mode of forces of local communities will be highly effective in propaganda, communication, education and prevention of cyberbullying for students and their parents.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### **3.4.4 Social work solutions**

First, promote education and communication activities to raise awareness, attitudes and behaviors in terms of cyberbullying prevention among junior high school students. Social workers can play a crucial role in raising awareness, attitudes and behaviors to prevent cyberbullying among junior high school students in Vietnam. One effective solution is to promote education and communication activities that educate students on the dangers of cyberbullying and the importance of online safety and respectful behavior. These activities can be delivered through various mediums, such as workshops, presentations, and online resources. By increasing students' understanding of the negative impacts of cyberbullying, they are more likely to recognize when they or their peers are being bullied and take appropriate action to stop it.

Second, promote training, fostering and improving the professionalism of school social workers in supporting cyberbullied junior high school students

In order to effectively help secondary school students who are bullied online, it is essential to provide school social workers with the necessary training, skills, and support. This includes training on the latest laws, policies, and best practices for addressing cyberbullying, as well as ongoing professional development to help social workers stay still with the latest trends and challenges. By improving the professionalism of school social workers, they will be better equipped to provide support to students who are cyberbullied and help prevent cyberbullying from occurring in the first place.

Third, promote the Family-School-Society coordination and cooperation to support cyberbullied junior high school students

Cyberbullying is a complex issue that requires a coordinated response from families, schools, and society. Social workers can play a key role in fostering collaboration among these groups, including by working with parents and families to educate them on the dangers of cyberbullying and the pivotality of monitoring their children's online activities. By strengthening the partnerships between family, school and society, social workers can help create a supportive environment for students who are bullied online and prevent cyberbullying from triggering in advance.

### **4. Conclusions**

Cyberbullying has been a serious impact on cyberbullied students, and a school issue that needs addressing. There have been many studies on the reality, consequences, causes,

and measures of preventing cyberbullying for students from different perspectives. However, research on social work supporting middle school students experiencing cyberbullying has not yet been much mentioned. Then, the author recommends some social work solutions, including school social work, support cyberbullied students on their holistic well-beings.

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