Understanding Adolescent Cyberbullying in Sri Lanka: A Psychological Lens through the Lazarus and Folkman Model

Around the world, policymakers and institutions often treat cyberbullying as a technological issue. For example, describing it as a product of digital anonymity or unrestricted online access (Field, 2018). But beyond these manifestations lies a deeper psychological process that determines how individuals perceive, experience and respond to online harm. Understanding cyberbullying, therefore, requires examining not just what happens online, but how individuals interpret and cope with those experiences (APA, 2025).

Cyberbullying is defined as *"*an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time, against a victim who cannot easily defend themselves" (Smith et al., 2008). It includes behaviors such as spreading rumors, impersonating others, sending hurtful messages, exclusion from online groups and non-consensual sharing of personal or intimate content. However, the experience of cyberbullying is not uniform across age groups or cultures. For adolescents, for example, online spaces are not only highly social but emotionally charged, making them particularly vulnerable (Sustainability Directory, 2025; Dennehy et al., 2020).

Although most cyberbullying research originates from high-income countries in the West, the phenomenon is now global (Kowalski et al., 2014). In low-and middle-income countries like Sri Lanka, internet access and smartphone penetration has expanded rapidly, exposing users to the same networks and risks as their peers in the West (Rathnayake, 2022; Kemp, 2023). Yet empirical data on online harms remains scarce (Cassidy et al., 2013). This study aims to contribute to that gap by surveying a specific cohort of Sri Lankan adolescents' experiences with cyberbullying and their coping mechanisms, and analyzing the findings through Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1984).

The model provides a useful psychological lens for interpreting how adolescents appraise online harm, perceive control and select coping strategies, i.e. whether problem-focused (taking active steps to change the situation) or emotion-focused (regulating distress). By situating cyberbullying within a psychological rather than purely technological framework, this research seeks to explore how and explain why some adolescents act while others remain silent, and thus suggest how families, teachers and schools can intervene to strengthen resilience in an increasingly digital age.

Literature Review and Context in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, awareness of cyberbullying has grown in recent years, yet empirical research remains limited. A 2020 study by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was the first national investigation into online harm among children and found no prior data on cyberbullying in the country. It surveyed children aged 12-18 across four provinces. Only 4% of respondents reported having experienced cyberbullying. However, as the authors noted, many participants did not consider platforms such as WhatsApp, which had 11 million users in 2019 (Echelon Media, 2024) alone, as "internet," potentially leading to underreporting.

In contrast, a Save the Children's (2021) study found that 27% of respondents had experienced cyberbullying/online extortion and 20% reported having had an indecent image of them shared without their consent. These discrepancies reflect differences in both methodology and recognition. The former study sampled areas of lower internet penetration and lower-income settings where financial barriers to internet access are more common while the latter assessed a wider array of internet harms.

Meanwhile, a qualitative study of cyberbullying among Sri Lankan adolescents found that many adolescents exposed to cyberbullying behaviors are unaware that their experiences could be classified as such (Liyanage et al., 2021). The authors attribute this to technological illiteracy, limited knowledge of the legal framework and psychosocial factors.

The present study aims to contribute to this emerging literature by exploring how affluent adolescents in Sri Lanka's most urbanized and populous city of Colombo perceive, experience and respond to cyberbullying.

Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive design, surveying adolescents at a single point of time to collect data on cyberbullying perception, experience and coping. The research focused on students aged 13 to 18 years enrolled in prestigious schools in Colombo, the most populous and urbanized city of Sri Lanka.

Colombo is the country's primary hub for education, finance, technology and socioeconomic opportunity. It is home to a majority of the most prestigious schools in the country including international, private and national/government (elite public) schools that serve students from upper-middle and high-income households with high levels of English fluency and digital access. These students routinely use smartphones, laptops and social media both for learning and leisure and are not hindered by financial barriers to internet or device access.

Focusing on this cohort allows for comparison with adolescent populations in high-income countries, where online engagement is ubiquitous, and where most cyberbullying research originates and psychological models of cyberbullying have been developed. It also provides insight into a distinctive urban-elite context within a low-and middle-income country, showing

how cyberbullying manifests in a group that is globally connected but socially embedded in local family and social structures.

From a psychological perspective, the sample's characteristics make it particularly suitable for analysis via the Lazarus and Folkman Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. The model assumes individuals have a baseline capacity for cognitive appraisal, emotional regulation and access to coping resources (Kivak, 2024). Therefore, adolescents from high-resource environments who are tech-literate, digitally confident and supported by educated parents are more likely to engage in the kinds of nuanced appraisal and coping decisions the model describes. Their experiences can thus reveal how psychological processes operate when technological access and awareness are not limiting factors even in a lower middle income country like Sri Lanka.

From a policy and comparative standpoint, this cohort also allows for meaningful alignment with global datasets. In high-income Western countries such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, adolescents have similar levels of device ownership, platform diversity and internet autonomy. By studying a cohort in Colombo that approximates these conditions, the research captures a microcosm of global adolescent digital culture within a developing-country context.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were allowed to skip any and as many questions as they wished. Parental consent was also obtained for respondents to complete the form. The final sample consisted of 66 adolescents, representing both genders and all school types. The survey questionnaire combined both global and specific questions. The global items such as "Have you ever experienced cyberbullying?" capture self-identification, while the checklist items (e.g., "Have you ever been impersonated online?") prompt recognition of concrete behaviors. Comparing responses between these two formats helps identify discrepancies between perception and recognition, which serve as indirect measures of primary appraisal failure in Lazarus and Folkman's framework.

This dual-question design is conceptually aligned with Lazarus and Folkman's notion of "primary appraisal", which emphasizes the subjective interpretation of an event as harmful, threatening or benign (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984. P.31). By contrasting adolescents' global self-assessments with their recognition of specific behaviors, the survey captures instances in which harm may be under appraised or misclassified.

Responses were self-reported via Google Forms and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to identify behavioral patterns and psychological indicators, such as avoidance, help-seeking and emotional responses.

Survey Results and Findings

The survey was completed by 66 respondents aged 13 to 18 years old, representing the highly affluent and digitally connected adolescent school-going population of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Participant profile

The sample skewed slightly female, with 56.1% identifying as female**,** 40.9% as male and two participants identifying as other. All respondents attended international (56.1%)**,** private (25.8%) or national/government (18.2%) schools, categories that correspond to the highest tier of socioeconomic privilege and educational exposure in Sri Lanka.

A defining feature of the cohort is the high educational attainment of their parents/guardians. Only 13.8% of participants reported that the highest level of parental or guardian education was secondary or less, while more than two-thirds (67.7%) had parents with graduate qualifications. This stands in stark contrast to the national average where participation at tertiary level education is less than 5% (University Grants Commission, 2013).

Another notable feature of this group is the strength of family relationships. More than four-fifths (87.9%) of respondents described their relationship with their parents/guardians as being at least good with 62.1% selecting *"*great (can talk about anything; supportive*)"*. Such a high level of perceived openness suggests that these adolescents experience a high degree of emotional availability at home.

Digital access & connectivity

At the same time, parental oversight in digital life appears to be robust but not intrusive. More than half (54.5%) described their parents/guardians as being "very aware" of their social media use with a further 36.4% selecting "somewhat aware". Forty-percent of participants also believed their parents to "fully understand" what cyberbullying is, followed by nearly a third (27.7%) who selected "May be". Such high levels of awareness indicate that parental mediation is active, either through open discussion or monitoring.

The cohort proved to be technologically privileged. More than half (37 participants or 56.06%) had access to at least three digital devices with 81.8% owning a personal smartphone and 78.8% owning a personal laptop. These figures far exceed Sri Lanka's national averages for household device ownership, where only 20.9% of households own a desktop/laptop, underscoring that this is a hyperconnected subgroup (Department of Census and Statistics,2023)**.**

In terms of connectivity, 60.6% reported having unlimited internet access while an additional 28.8% described it as only *"*somewhat limited*"*. Most respondents (51.5%) spent 2 to 5 hours on the internet daily and only 12.12% spent over 8 hours a day. This distribution suggests that while most adolescents maintain moderate usage, a notable minority are heavy users. Research often links such patterns to both higher exposure to online harm and greater digital competence (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Social media participation was universal with respondents using multiple platforms. Over 90% of the sample use YouTube (93.9%) and WhatsApp (92.4%), followed by Instagram (63.6%), Snapchat (50%) and TikTok (47%). Other social media platforms used ranged from X and Threads to Reddit, Discord, Twitch, Roblox and even OnlyFans, showcasing a striking diversity of platforms used.

Such diversity reflects the cosmopolitan digital culture of Colombo's elite schools, where adolescents interact with global content and trends in real time. The presence of outlier mentions such as Roblox and OnlyFans (each cited by one respondent) also reveals that exposure to adult or boundary-blurring platforms exists, even in closely supervised environments. This is in keeping with international research showing that adolescents' online worlds often exceed parental awareness in both scope and complexity (Imran et al., 2023 and Hawk et al., 2013).

Privacy behaviors further illustrate the interplay between openness and caution: 50% of **r**espondents use private settings on their accounts. This indicates some awareness of digital self-protection, though not necessarily consistent implementation. The coexistence of broad platform participation with moderate privacy safeguarding suggests that these adolescents balance curiosity, peer connection and self-preservation, a triad common to adolescent internet behavior globally (Mahama et al., 2024; Nesi et al., 2018; Öztürk & Kaymak Özmen, 2016).

Patterns of victimization

Less than a fifth (16.7%) of respondents reported having ever experienced cyberbullying, while a similar percentage (15.2%) were not sure. Meanwhile, nearly half (48.5%) said they had witnessed or heard of a cyberbullying incident of an adolescent in the past six months. However, when presented with specific behavioral descriptions, 48.5% selected at least one harmful experience they had personally faced. This discrepancy highlights a recognition gap of what constitutes cyberbullying. Even the most educated adolescents may not label their experiences as cyberbullying even as they acknowledge harmful acts. This aligns with findings from the U.S. where teenagers reported higher victimization when provided with a checklist rather than a single global question (Vogels, 2022; Chun et al., 2020).

The most frequent cyberbullying experiences faced were rumor or gossip spreading (50%), intentional exclusion from chats or online groups (37.5%) as well as exposure to hurtful or insulting messages, trolling and feeling unsafe (34.4% each). The least frequent experience (15.6%) was of doxing**,** i.e. unauthorized sharing of personal information such as phone numbers or addresses. The multiplicity of responses implies co-occurrence rather than isolation, reflecting what scholars describe as the "fluid ecology of online aggression", i.e. when the boundaries between teasing, hostility and harassment are blurred (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Psychological impact and support systems

The psychological consequences ranged from minimal to severe distress. Nearly half (45.7%) of respondents "felt nervous, anxious or on edge" while about a third reported feeling "sad, depressed or hopeless" and/or "losing interest/pleasure in doing things". Less common but still notable were sleep disturbances, loss of focus at school and feeling unsafe. This pattern too aligns with the literature, showing that emotional distress in cyberbullying victims is often subtle and internalized and often manifests as withdrawal or preoccupation rather than overt crisis behaviors (Völlink et al., 2013).

Nearly a fifth (17.1%) of respondents even reported feeling unsafe at school as a consequence, suggesting cyberbullying experiences can have spillover effects in real-world environments, affecting their broader sense of safety and belonging.

Interestingly, five respondents selected "had no impact" alongside reporting experiences of sadness, hopelessness, anhedonia, etc. This apparent contradiction underscores the complexity of self-perception**.** Meanwhile, two-thirds (66.2%) of respondents considered cyberbullying to be as serious as bullying in real life while nearly a quarter (23.1%) judged it as being "more serious." This suggests this cohort recognizes the negative impact of cyberbullying, even as they have trouble recognizing specific behaviors when faced with them.

Among those who reported their cyberbullying, the majority sought help from a parent, teacher, counselor, friend or sibling. Others resorted to in-platform reporting tools or quit the platform altogether. This reveals a strong preference for interpersonal over institutional mechanisms. Meanwhile, equal numbers (25%) rated the response of their chosen remediation strategy as being 0 and 5 (on a scale of 0 to 5).

These findings resonate with studies in the South Asian context where adolescents tend to rely on close relational networks rather than institutional authorities when facing online harassment (Liyanage et al., 2021; Elgar et al., 2014).

Bystander experiences

The dataset also records self-reported involvement in perpetration or bystander-type behaviors during the prior six months. While only a third of respondents answered this multi-selected item, the results indicate non-trivial participation. Trolling someone was the most frequent, followed by spreading rumors/stories. Posting/sharing something without consent, joining in making fun of someone online and excluding others from online spaces were reported by 22.7% of this subset. This shows that the same sample includes victims, bystanders and perpetrators, often taking on overlapping roles.

Analysis Through the Lazarus and Folkman Model

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping provides a nuanced framework for interpreting these findings. Lazarus and Folkman define psychological stress as a "particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her wellbeing" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 19). Thus, they conceptualize it as a dynamic transaction between an individual and the environment while emphasizing that perception rather than objective threat determines their response.

The model defines coping as "realistic and flexible thoughts and acts that solve problems and thereby reduce stress" and states two appraisals that guide coping: Primary and secondary (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 118). In the primary appraisal phase, the individual appraises

what he or she is facing, i.e., is the experience harmful, threatening or merely annoying?. In the secondary appraisal, they decide what can be done about the threat, i.e., how controllable the situation is and what resources are available to them to deal with it.

It is the interaction of these two appraisals that determines the type of coping (Kivak, 2024). Problem-focused coping aims to change the situation (for example, in this context, blocking a perpetrator, reporting the incident or seeking adult help). Emotion-focused coping is an attempt to control distress when change seems unlikely (for example, avoidance or silence). Previous research on harm that used the Lazarus and Folkman model find that appraisals and coping interact over time through reappraisal as circumstances and information change (Kivak, 2024; Spătaru, 2024).

The most striking example of primary appraisal processes in this dataset is the recognition gap, i.e. the large discrepancy between adolescents who say they have been "cyberbullied" (16.7%) and those who acknowledge experiencing harmful acts (48.5%). This gap reveals that recognition depends not merely on experience but on interpretation and labeling. Adolescents often engage in semantic and relational negotiation when deciding whether an act constitutes bullying (Dooley et al., 2009**;** Menesini & Nocentini, 2009). For instance, rumors, exclusion or trolling among peers may be seen as part of everyday digital interaction rather than bullying, especially within friendship circles. In Lazarus and Folkman's terms, these adolescents are appraising harm as a challenge or annoyance rather than a threat to wellbeing, which delays or prevents coping action. Thus, the recognition gap in this group of adolescents reflects not denial but uncertainty in primary appraisal, a key cognitive bottleneck where awareness and intervention must focus.

Taken together, the findings illustrate how the two appraisal stages operate in tandem. Primary appraisal is visible in adolescents' difficulty identifying online harm as bullying, demonstrating uncertainty in defining the threat. Secondary appraisal is reflected in the subsequent variation in coping responses: Some respondents sought help or adjusted privacy settings (problem-focused) while others disengaged or minimized the experience as having "had no impact" (emotion-focused). The interaction of these two processes explains why similar experiences yield different coping trajectories; perception shapes control and perceived control, in turn, shapes action.

The secondary appraisal stage determines whether adolescents feel capable of altering the situation (Schulz & Lazarus, 2012). In this dataset, actions taken - from talking to parents to reporting the event to platforms - serve as proxies for perceived control. Those who sought help from family or friends likely appraised their support networks as available and effective, enabling problem-focused coping. Conversely, those who remained silent or "did nothing" may have perceived low control, anticipating either futility or social costs.

Cultural and structural contexts heavily influence this stage (Park et al., 2021). In Sri Lanka, adolescents are socialized to value family mediation and collective resolution (Gunawardena & Schuck, 2021). This explains why parents (43.2%) and siblings (37.8%) are preferred sources of help over teachers or counselors (13.5%). Institutional hierarchies in schools may also discourage reporting, as teachers are viewed as authority figures rather than allies. The absence

of confidential and youth-friendly mechanisms further encourages emotion-focused coping such as avoidance or denial. These finding parallels Suler's (2004) concept of the online disinhibition effect, where the anonymity and permanence of online spaces can heighten aggressors' boldness and leave victims feeling powerless. Similarly, Spătaru et al. (2024) found that increasing adolescents' perceived control and assertiveness reduced passive, emotion-focused coping when facing online harassment.

With scholars considering coping to be iterative, an adolescent who initially perceives online teasing as harmless, for example, may later reinterpret it as threatening after repeated exposure or social humiliation. The dataset's overlap between cyberbullying experiences (for example, rumors, trolling and exclusion) supports this dynamic that harms often escalate, forcing reevaluation of their seriousness. However, when secondary appraisal is weak (e.g., disbelief in adult efficacy), even recognition of harm(s) may not translate into action.

It is important to note that emotion-focused strategies are not always inappropriate (Schmodde & Wehner, 2024). In contexts where a perpetrator can't be identified or a harmful post has gone viral, a short and deliberate pause from the platform or being online altogether is prudent as an adult is consulted and evidence secured. When avoiding or doing nothing becomes the default response however it showcases low secondary appraisal where the victim does not see a path to improve their circumstances.

The findings also support Lazarus and Folkman's description of social support as a key moderating resource that influences both the appraisal of stress and the effectiveness of coping. Respondents' high perception (87.9%) of strong family support and open communication correlates with overall respondents' choice to involve parents (40.3%) and self-identified victims' choice to report incidents to their parents (43.2%).

Discussion and Recommendations

The findings suggest that cyberbullying among a comparable Sri Lankan adolescent cohort is similar to developed economies. The U.S. Center for Disease Control's (CDC) 2023 U.S. Youth Risk Behavior Survey found 16% of high-school students had been cyberbullied. This is similar to the 16.7% of respondents in this study, despite the different time windows (past year vs. lifetime, respectively). When presented with a behavior checklist rather than a single global label, recognition rises. The 2022 Pew study reports 46% of U.S. teens of having experienced at least one cyberbullying behavior, similar to this study's result of 48.5% for the same. Alignment is also seen with regards to trust and help-seeking. The Pew study finds low confidence in institutional actors such as platforms (25%) and law enforcement (37%) but higher confidence in parents (66%). This echoes the family-centered response pathways reported in this cohort.

Applying the Lazarus and Folkman framework, interventions should focus on improving primary appraisal by teaching adolescents to recognize specific behaviors as cyberbullying. Awareness must integrate real-world examples of the many behaviors that constitute cyberbullying in order to bridge the recognition gap. The Ministry of Education, with assistance from the Information

and Communication Technology Agency (ICTA) could integrate modules on digital literacy and coping skills into core curricula, explicitly teaching how to identify online harm and respond constructively. Concurrently, such education should also be integrated into teacher training curricula. At the policy level, the Ministry could develop standardized reporting and referral mechanisms that begin at school.

Enhancing secondary appraisal requires strengthening adolescents' belief that their actions can make a difference. School programs that demonstrate how reporting works, or that provide confidential and predictable responses, can convert emotion-focused coping into problem-focused behavior. Finally, reinforcing perceived social support, particularly from families, can sustain coping efficacy. Parents, too, need awareness on how to respond consistently and non-punitively, reinforcing their child's sense of agency rather than fear.

Despite its contributions, this study has a few limitations. The small sample size (n=66), drawn conveniently from elite schools in Colombo, limits generalizability to the broader Sri Lankan adolescent population, particularly those from rural or low-income backgrounds. The cross-sectional design captures experiences at one point in time, preventing causal inference about coping processes. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability and recall bias. Future research should employ larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal designs to better capture experiences, perceptions and coping behaviors.

Conclusion

This study examined how affluent adolescents in Colombo, Sri Lanka, experience, perceive and cope with cyberbullying, framing their experiences through Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 66 students aged 13–18, the research explored both global self-identification and behavior-specific reports of online harm to understand how recognition and response interact.

The findings revealed a clear recognition gap, indicating underrecognition at the level of primary appraisal, where adolescents experience harm but fail to label it as such. Differences in secondary appraisal were also evident. The high perception (87.9%) of strong family support and open communication correlates with overall respondents' choice to involve parents (40.3%) and victims' choice to report incidents to their parents (43.2%).

Further, by situating cyberbullying within a psychological rather than technological framework, the study demonstrates that recognition, perceived control and social support together determine how adolescents respond to online harm. Strengthening these factors through education, parental awareness and youth-centered school policies can help convert passive avoidance into constructive coping. These insights contribute to both Sri Lankan and global understandings of adolescent digital resilience, underscoring that fostering psychological literacy is as crucial as regulating technology itself.

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