CYBERBULLYING AS A METHOD OF DISCRIMINATION AMONG PEOPLE OF COLOR: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Amanda M. Evans, Ph.D., LPC, NCC, ACS, BC-TMH
James Madison University,
evans3am@jmu.edu
Stephanie Chalk, Ph.D. LPC
Marymount University
Darius Green, Ph.D.
University of Colorado, Colorado Springs
Tiffany Hornsby, Ph.D., LP
James Madison University
Kristine Ramsay-Seaner, Ph.D.
West Virginia University
Renee Haskins, Ph.D., LPC
University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Abstract

This study investigated cyberbullying among People of Color (POC) through a mixed-methods, Convergent Parallel Design. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling by posting recruitment materials on social media sites. Quantitative data from 100 subjects were analyzed using descriptive statistics, analysis of variance and multivariate analysis of variance. Qualitative data from 44 subjects were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Mixed methods results found that race and ancestry was statistically significant in perceptions of discrimination. Cyberbullying can include a variety of online behaviors that are unwanted and unsolicited by the cybervictims. Using Smith et al.'s (2009) Six Step IPA analysis of qualitative data seven themes were identified (*Bullying Based on a Dimension of Identity, Threats to Private Information, Suppress, Sharing with Others, Boundaries, Hate Groups,* and *Race-Based Trauma*). Recommendations for counseling professionals are provided.

Keywords: cyberbullying, People of Color, and discrimination.

Cyberbullying as a Method of Discrimination Among People of Color: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Health disparities exist in the provision of counseling and healthcare services (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Evans et al., 2021). This issue was compounded following the COVID pandemic which caused immediate changes to the provision of counseling services and exacerbated mental health issues, increased substance use disorders, and imposed significant financial barriers across the United States and the world (Cullen et al., 2020; Kumar

& Nayar, 2021). According to the National Institute of Health (NIH, 2023) health disparities remain high costing the U.S. $451 billion dollars in 2018 which was a 41% increase from economic projections. Although health disparities impact most individuals and communities, they disproportionately impact Communities of Color (Louis-Jean et al., 2020). Evidence of the disparities and oppressions experienced by historically marginalized populations included challenges with accessing care, obtaining up-to-date information, and accessing other resources (Grills et al., 2022; Louis-Jean et al., 2020). For example, it is estimated that African American people were dying from COVID at nearly four times the national average (Louis-Jean et al., 2020). Since 2020, the United States has noted an increase in internet use and social media activity (Drouin et al., 2020). As adults and families transitioned to online communities for professional and personal reasons, rates of online usage increased substantially. Although online activity can promote connectedness, statistics also suggest that online hate speech and discrimination can also increase (Sakki & Castrén, 2022). According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) *Crime Statistics Report* (2020), approximately 62% of victims who reported hate crimes were targeted because of their race/ethnicity (2020) with 55% of the perpetrators identified as white. These statistics can also be reflected in online activity (Yang, 2021).

Online hate speech can be defined as, "anything that directly attacks people based on what is known as their "protected characteristics" — race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, sex, gender, gender identity, or serious disability or disease," (Allan, 2017, para 7.). Targets of online hate speech may be referred to as cybervictims. Sometimes online hate crimes can also be referred to as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is a term associated with aggressive, intentional acts executed by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact to disperse hate and violence (Smith et al., 2018). Cyberbullying can include online hate crimes and other forms of online harassment. Cyberbullying may be more egregious than face-to-face bullying due to its ability to target individuals twenty-four hours a day without boundaries and the potential for anonymity of the aggressor (Dooley et al., 2009).

According to the Cyberbullying Research Center (2022), cyberbullying increased 40% since the onset of the COVID pandemic. A common misconception is that cyberbullying occurs exclusively in child and adolescent populations. This assumption underscores the role of cyberbullying in adulthood and its impact on the mental health of adults (Jenaro et al., 2018; Kowalski et al., 2017). It is hypothesized that up to 98% of adults have experienced workplace bullying including cyberbullying (Porath & Pearson, 2013). Transitional-age adults (18 to 25) have reportedly experienced the highest rates of cyberbullying in adulthood, and it's estimated that approximately 2 in 5 adults have been the victims of cyberbullying (Scheff, 2019). Exposure to online hate speech and cyberbullying can lead to distress among those who are targeted (Jenaro et al., 2018; Velasquez et al, 2021; Wheeler et al., 2022). Romero et al. (2017) suggested that suicidal ideation and depressive symptomology may increase following exposure to online hate and cyberbullying. Individuals who are the recipient of cyberbullying and discrimination because of their racial identity may also experience symptomatology associated with race-based trauma (Hemmings & Evans, 2018). Race-based trauma is the physical,

psychological, and emotional reactions to racism and discrimination (Evans et al., 2015). Many counselors are unprepared to identify and address online hate speech, cyberbullying, and race-based trauma in counseling spaces (Hemmings & Evans, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The increased reliance on technology for counseling professionals necessitates research regarding cyberbullying and cybervictimization in historically marginalized adult communities. The purpose of this manuscript is to examine the experiences of adults who have self-reported experiences with cyberbullying. A mixed methods Convergent-Parallel Design was selected for this study. The research questions were 1) What effect, if any, does subject identification have on perception of discrimination?, 2) What are the prominent types of cybervictimization?, 3) What is the impact of discrimination (racial identification) on cyberbullying (worry, fear, anxiety and avoid)?, and 4) What are the experiences of POC who have experienced cyberbullying online? The results from this study can be used to help inform counseling best practices while specifically addressing the mental health outcomes of adults who have been targeted by cyberbullying attacks and discrimination.

Cyberbullying in Adulthood

Cyberbullying is an ambiguous phenomenon that can lead to devastating outcomes. Online platforms can be a convenient method to transfer hate due to their wide audience, anonymity, and ability to distort information (Evans et al., 2022; Hemmings & Evans, 2018; Kahn et al., 2013). In some cases, social media encourages participants to share their identities online and this can increase cyberbullying to include racial, sexual, gender, and disability discrimination (Kahn et al., 2013). Targets of online hate crimes and cyberbullying may be referred to as cybervictims (Bauman, 2011).

Cyberbullying can occur in a variety of online environments including direct messages (DM), social media sites, emails, blogs, online gaming programs, video sharing sites (e.g., YouTube), et cetera (Bauman, 2011). Online technology advancements are occurring so rapidly that tracking programs and activity can be challenging. This makes holding perpetrators accountable challenging (Evans et al., 2022). Types of cyberbullying can include harassment, flaming (making hostile/angry remarks), disrespectful or demeaning comments, masquerading by pretending to be another person, attempts to persuade others to share private or personal information, excluding others, and stalking-like behaviors (Bauman, 2011).

The impact of cyberbullying can be noted in educational, professional, personal, and community settings. Examples may include poor academic performance, anxiety, low self-esteem, depressive behaviors, sleep issues, somatic complaints, isolating behavior, substance use, and increased risk of harmful behaviors including suicide (Edwards et al., 2016; Gunther et al., 2016). The effects of cyberbullying may be particularly harmful for Communities of Color. A study conducted by Tynes et al. (2012) found that African American and Latinx subjects were exposed to cyberbullying reported decreased academic motivation following experiences as a cybervictim. For Latinx adolescents, cyberbullying led to increased rates of suicidality and depressive symptoms that exceeded the national average (Romero et al., 2017).

Methodology

This study was approved by a university Institutional Review Board (IRB). A mixed-methods, Convergent Parallel Design was selected because it allowed for the examination of quantitative and qualitative data at the same time for a more comprehensive understanding of cyberbullying with adult POC (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018; Wester & McKibben, 2019). A Convergent Parallel Design empowers the researchers to collect data through a single phase of the research study (Creswell, 2007), to then analyze the data separately interpret the results collectively (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). From a strategic perspective, we selected this approach as it encouraged us to collect data in an efficient way to explore an understudied phenomenon while providing meaningful research data (Wester & McKibben, 2019). In addition, this design allowed for triangulation of the data by converging two methods for a more complete understanding, complementarity of the results by using a second method, and expansion through the examination of the study through different methodologies (Wester & McKibben, 2019).

Adhering to the design suggestions we developed our quantitative and qualitative research questions and aligning designs: descriptive statistics for the quantitative data and an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design for the qualitative data. Data were collected and analyzed with quantitative and qualitative data analyzed separately. The results were then merged to note convergence and divergence.

Research Team

The research team consisted of several counseling professionals. The researchers included five cisgender women and one cisgender male ranging in ages from late 20's to mid-40's. The researchers' racial identities include African American, Multiracial American, and white American. All researchers possess a PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision.

The researchers sought to bracket their assumptions while remaining attuned to our implicit biases (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). Despite some diversity in our racial identity, we were similar in our sexual and gender identification. To preserve the data and respondent contributions, we reflected on our identities and the research process. This included bracketing for assumptions.

Quantitative Method

Quantitative analyses were conducted to examine the participant's responses. We conducted an a priori power analysis using the G*Power 3.1.3. program to determine the number of participants needed to detect a partial eta-square effect size of .1 with a power of 95%. (Faul, et al., 2007). The analysis indicated that 76 participants were needed to detect a moderate effect of change. Our sample size was 100 participants, and we regarded the sample as adequate.

A total of 100 subjects agreed to participate in this study. Of the sample, participants identified 41% (n = 41) male, 56% (n = 56) female, 1% (n = 1) Transmale, and 2% (n = 2) gender fluid. Racially, subjects identified as 47% (n= 47) white, 25% (n = 25) Black/African American, 16% (n = 16) as Multiracial, 8% (n = 8) Asian/Asian American, 3% (n = 3) American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 1% (n = 1) Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Ethnically, participants stated that they identified 12% (n = 11) Latinx, 67% (n = 64) non-Latinx and 21% (n = 20) as

Other. Other responses included Indian, Middle Eastern, Vietnamese, Polish, African, Afro-Latina, Nigerian, and First Peoples'. Educationally, subjects reported 11% (n = 11) high school graduate, 27% (n = 27) some college, 18% (n = 18) college graduate, 31% (n = 31) master's degree, and 13% (n = 13) doctoral degree. Participants reported their employment status as 64% (n = 64) employed, and 36% (n = 36) unemployed. Occupations included student, sales, counselor, CEO, information technology, chef, educator, program manager, and business owner. The annual household income range was $8,000 to $230,000. Participants self-reported their use of technology. Respondents stated that they used technology for professional reasons between 0 to 93 hours a week and personal reasons between 0 to 56 hours a week. Subjects reported that their favorite online sites included Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube.

Data Collection

The researchers conducted a convenience sampling approach by posting recruitment materials (i.e., informed consent, survey instruments and open-ended questions) on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram social media sites. Interested subjects could select the hyperlink included in the recruitment materials to be redirected to a Qualtrics link that included the informed consent, research instruments, and open-ended questions. Data were collected using online recruitment methods and a semi-structured interview format. Subjects who affirmed experiences of discrimination on the EDS scale were then prompted to complete the trauma and cybervictimization scales. By confirming discrimination, the researchers wanted to explore this population more regarding cyberbullying and the potential for trauma.

Measures

Everyday Discrimination Scale. Developed by Williams et al. (1997) the *Everyday Discrimination Scale* is a 9-item measure that examines perceptions of discrimination in day-to-day experiences in life. This scale includes a 6-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*almost every day*). Higher scores indicate a higher level of perceived discrimination. The internal consistency includes Cronbach's alpha at .88 and McDonald's at .85 deeming it acceptable. Distribution statistics suggested univariate normality (skewness <2; kurtosis <7). See Curran et al. (1996) for more information on this instrument.

Cybervictimization Scale. Developed by Akbulut et al. (2010), this 36-item scale examines participant experiences with cybervictimization. Using a 5-point Likert scale, respondents' feedback could range from *never* to *always*. Internal reliability is .96 and the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient is .73.

Trauma Symptoms of Discrimination (TSDS). Developed by Williams and Printz (2018) is a twenty-one-item measure that examines trauma-related symptoms associated with discrimination. Items are rated from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*often*) and allow respondents to indicate their identity that was discriminated against (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, religion, age, and disability). The scale includes four subscales of distress from hyperarousal, alienation from others, worries about safety and the future, and feeling keyed up and on guard. The reliability of the measure is .86. This instrument was modified to include the prompt "due to past experiences with cyberbullying."

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data were obtained through Qualtrics and analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were calculated to provide demographic information. Additionally, descriptive statistics were used to answer research questions regarding cybervictimization, perceptions of discrimination, and trauma symptoms of discrimination.

Qualitative Method

Quantitative analyses were conducted to examine the participants' responses. Using IPA we collected data among 44 subjects. IPA was the design selected for this study as it allows the researchers to examine the unique experiences of participants while pursuing a collective pattern of meaning across the narratives. A justification for this sample size is that POC are a large and diverse population. To reach homogeneity of the data, a larger sample of participant responses were included (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Although the sample size is large for this study, the researchers argue that IPA is an appropriate design for managing the data and will provide a rationale for the management of the large data set (Vasileiou, et al., 2018).

A total of 44 participants participated in the qualitative portion of this study. Respondents included 64% (n = 28) females, 32% (n = 14) males, 4% (n = 1) prefer not to identify. Age ranges include 18 to 28 years of age 2% (n = 1), 29 to 38 as 48% (n = 21), 39 to 48 as 34% (n = 15), 49 to 58 as 9% (n = 4) and 59+ at 7% (n = 3). Racially, respondents identified as American Indian 6% (n = 3), Asian American 8% (n = 4), Black/African American 44% (n = 22), non-European white 14% (n = 6), and Multiracial 18% (n = 9). Ethic identify included Latinx 10% (n = 4), non-Latinx 79% (n = 31) and other 21% (n = 9). Other responses include Ashkenazi, Afro-Latina, First People's and "I prefer not to answer". Participants reported their education as high school graduate 2% (n = 1), some college 6% (n = 3), college graduate 9% (n = 4), master's degree 60% (n = 26) and doctoral degree 23% (n = 10). Of the sample, 91% (n = 39) reported that they were currently employed. The annual household for this sample ranged from $42,000 to $94,000.

Data Collection

Demographic information was collected in addition to a semi-structured questionnaire developed by the research team and reflective of the literature (Evans et al., 2020). A Qualtrics link was disseminated containing the informed consent and interview questions (i.e., please describe an experience in which you personally experienced cyberbullying?, how did you attempt to cope with the described cyberbullying experience?, what suggestions, if any, do you have to prevent other individuals from experiencing cyberbullying?, and what are the three biggest threats to POC regarding cyberbullying?). Respondents were prompted to respond to the open-ended questions. This method allowed subjects to review their responses before officially submitting them.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling procedures. Recruitment began when the researchers posted the research study on social media sites and then the study was shared using snowball practices while potential participants reshared the recruitment materials on their personal pages. Interested participants selected the hyperlink redirecting them to the

informed consent document, demographics questionnaire, and interview questions. This method of recruitment was selected because of the population identified and the strengths of utilizing media technology to collect data (Neuendorf, 2017).

Data Analysis

The unit of analysis was participant responses to the interview questions. To triangulate the data, participants were asked to reread their responses before submission as a form of member checking. Next, a peer review process and audit trail was utilized to ensure validation (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The peer review process involved collaboration among peers to review the submissions and reach a consensus on the coding decisions. For the audit trail, the raw data were placed into a code book with columns based on the interview questions (Halpern, 1983). From there, the data were summarized through the data reduction process (corresponding notes), synthesis products (a method used to identify themes) and summary of the analysis (Halpern, 1983; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An external auditor, a colleague in Counselor Education and Supervision, reviewed the codebook and code themes. Collaborations continued to achieve consensus. This described process is an agreement with Smith's *IPA Quality Evaluation Guide* to ensure trustworthiness by adhering to the three theoretical principles which includes utilizing phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography (Smith, 2009).

A six-step IPA method was used for this study proposed by Smith et al. (2009). The first step is to read the responses and identify initial patterns and the second step is to reread the responses to discern the meaning of the emerging topics and group them into initial themes. Themes were then conceptualized in conjunction with the codebook and raw data to ensure accuracy and interpretation. The double-hermeneutic process was applied in this phase, allowing us to determine the frequency of participant responses (Smith et al., 2009). In step three, a final list of themes was identified. This interpretative process was applied to all 44 subject responses. The researchers then conducted a cross-case analysis producing seven themes among four questions. This process was reviewed by a peer reviewer to ensure consensual interpretation. The themes did not change because of these discussions and consensus was unanimously obtained.

Results

Quantitative

The first research question was analyzed using descriptive statistics to examine participants' perceptions of discrimination and types of discrimination experienced. Participants rated the discrimination they experienced on ten dimensions (ancestry, gender, race, age, religion, height, weight, aspect of physical appearance, sexual orientation, and education/income level) on a six-point Likert scale – ranging from *almost every day*, *at least once a week*, *a few times a month*, *a few times a year*, *less than once a year*, and *never*. Participants stated that they had experienced discrimination every day, weekly and/or a few times a month based on the dimensions of race (42%, *n*=42), gender (32%, *n*=32), ancestry (32%, *n*=32) and age (29%, *n*=29). The other dimensions listed were less frequently selected by participants were age and weight (18%, *n*=18), aspect of physical appearance (18%, *n*=18), religion (17%, *n*=17), education/income level (13%, *n*=13), sexual orientation (11%, *n*=11), and height (8%, *n*=8).

Additionally, using the same six-point Likert scale, participants rated the types of discrimination they experienced on nine dimensions. The participants stated that they had experienced discrimination every day, weekly and/or a few times a month based on the dimensions of race. Types of discrimination experienced by the participants included treated with less courtesy than other people (52%, *n*=52), treated with less respect than other people are (52%, *n*=52), people act as if they are better than you are (51%, *n*=51), people act as if they think you are not smart (47%, *n*=47), people act as if they think you are dishonest (28%, *n*=28), you receive poorer service than others at restaurants or stores (23%, *n*=23), and people act as if they are afraid of you (22%, *n*=22). The other dimensions listed yielded small sample sizes and did not represent at least a quarter of the sample.

Table 1

Percentage of Participants Experiencing Discrimination Daily, Weekly, or a Few Times Monthly

Dimension	**Number**	**Percentage**
Race	42	42%
Gender	32	32%
Ancestry	32	32%
Treated with less courtesy	52	52%
Treated with less respect	52	52%
People act as if they are better	51	51%
People act as if you are not smart	47	47%
People act as if you are dishonest	28	28%
You receive poorer service	23	23%
People act is they are afraid	22	22%

Follow-up one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were used to examine the data in more detail. The ANOVA's that explored differences of race and ancestry on perceptions of discrimination were statistically significant. The assumption of homogeneity of variances was examined through Levine's test, revealing significant results between groups regarding ancestry and perceived discrimination ($F(1,99) = 13.341$, $p = .000$) and race and perceived discrimination ($F(1,93) = 13.6$, $p = .000$). ANOVA's of age ($F,(1,93) = 2.612$, $p = .303$) and height($F(1,98)$ – 1.986, $p = .88$) were not statistically significant. Further analysis is done to see the main effects of both independent variables. There was a significant difference in the main effect of the approach ($F = 55$, sig = .-00, $p<.05$) with a high impact size (partial $eta^2 = .375$). Ancestry and race showed significant differences in perceived discrimination. Participants who identified as African American/Black reported increased perceptions of discrimination.

Experiences of cybervictimization were analyzed in reference to the second research question. Using a five-point Likert scale with options always, very often, sometimes, rarely and

never, participants shared experiences with cybervictimization within the past six months across 25 dimensions. Participants stated that they had experienced cybervictimization (always, very often and sometimes) within the past six months which included: disturbed by people I do not want to chat with (34%, *n*=34), receiving religious or political content without consent (32%, *n*=32), invited to chat inappropriately (28%, *n*=28), deception by people pretending to be someone else (27%, *n*=27), and receiving obscene emails/messages (23%, *n*=23). The other dimensions listed yielded a small N and did not represent at least a quarter of the sample.

Table 2

Types of Cybervictimization Experienced

Dimension	**Number**	**Percentage**
Disturbed by people don't want to chat with	34	34%
Religious/political content without consent	32	32%
Invited to chat inappropriately	28	28%
Deception	27	27%
Receive obscene messages	23	23%

The third research question examined trauma and discrimination. Utilizing fifteen questions on a five-point Likert scale of always, very often, sometimes, rarely, and never – participants reflected on their experiences with cyberbullying and the following trauma responses. Dimensions included nightmares, trouble relaxing, feeling numb, avoiding activities, cannot control worrying, being embarrassed as a worst fear, being easily annoyed/irritated, constantly on guard, often feeling restless, feeling the world is an unsafe place, feeling physical discomfort, feeling isolated from others, avoiding certain situations, cannot control emotions, nervous in social situations.

Participants reported the following traumatic responses as a result of their cyberbullying experience: I feel the world is an unsafe place (37%, *n*=37), I avoid certain situations or speaking to certain people (32%, *n*=32), begin embarrassed or looking stupid is one of my worst fears (30%, *n*=30), I feel constantly on guard, watchful or easily startled (30%, *n*=30), avoid certain activities in which I am the center of attention (29%, *n*=29), I often become easily annoyed or irritable (28%, *n*=28), I feel isolated and set part from others (25%, *n*=25), cannot control worrying (22%, *n*=22). The other dimensions listed yielded a small N and did not represent at least a quarter of the sample.

Table 3

Trauma Symptoms Associated with Cyberbullying Discrimination

Dimension	Number	Percentage
World is an unsafe place	37	37%
Avoid situations	32	32%
Embarrassed is worst fear	30	30%
Feel on guard	30	30%
Avoid activities/center of attention	29	29%
Easily annoyed/irritable	28	28%
Isolated from others	25	25%
Cannot control worrying	22	22%

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the impact of discrimination on trauma symptoms. There was a statistically significant difference in racial identification and trauma symptoms $F(2, 96) = 2.966$ $p= .000$; Wilk's $\Lambda = .462$, partial η^2 .99. Following univariate tests, participant responses were statistically significant for African American/Black participant experiences with cyberbullying that led to worry (F, 4.133 p= .002) and avoiding activities (F, 4.557 p = .001).

Qualitative

Through Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA process, a total of seven themes were identified. How the data were analyzed and coded are described in the data collection section. After a thorough review of the responses, the themes were *Bullying Based on a Dimension of Identity, Threats to Privacy, Suppress, Share with Others, Boundaries, Hate Groups* and *Race-Based Trauma.* For IPA, themes were determined through the repeated identification among participants and consensus was secured among the researchers. All participants who participated in the qualitative portion of this study confirmed experiencing racial discrimination and cyberbullying. The respondents described in detail their experiencing with cyberbullying and reactions to these experiences.

Experiences with Cyberbullying

Participants acknowledged their experiences with engaging with others in online environments and specific incidents of cyberbullying. Due to how participants were recruited for this study, online experiences could be for professional or personal reasons. The primary themes identified by the researchers were *Bullying Based on a Dimension of Identification* and *Threats to Private Information.*

Bullying Based on a Dimension of Identification

Most participants shared experiences with cyberbullying that included oppressive comments, and tormenting based on a dimension of their identity. It should be noted, all participants identified as a Person of Color and confirmed perceived discrimination. The participants described cyberbullying experiences that included negative comments directed toward their physical appearance, race, sexual orientation, gender identification, religious affiliation, and religious practices.

> *"I experienced one instance over social media in the comments of a Facebook post. An individual started to instigate microaggressions against me and other people of color. They also made sweeping generalizations about communities of color. Additionally, they continued to discuss serious instances to protect their own whiteness and use those arguments to claim we were problematic and too sensitive." (*Asian American Male, age 30*)*

Another participant recalled, "*I was called a [racial slur redacted] by a blank profile*," (African American Male, age 29).

The participants described experiences of cyberbullying that were unprovoked as they engaged in online communities. Attacks towards individuals and groups were noted.

Threats to Private Information

A more aggressive method of cyberbullying included threats to one's personhood and privacy. Participants described instances where they were aggressively contacted, threatened, or trolled online. Participant responses also referenced threats to privacy and private information. This included threats to share embarrassing and/or private photos as well as attempts to negatively impact the cybervictim's digital activity.

> *"I had a supervisor continue to harass me over email for not responding to them within minutes on a weekend. They then started panicking and continued to email and text me when I did not respond. During the exchange, they started trying to police my work," (*Latinx Female, age 34*).*

One participant shared, *"My Instagram pictures and stories have been screenshotted and distributed elsewhere with hurtful comments,"*(Black Female, age 19). Another participant identified the following:

> *"I dated someone who was a computer technician. After we broke up, I stopped receiving employment-related emails in my profession, that I had previously received. My real friends have not been able to communicate with me online for years. I asked family and the police to investigate. They narrowed the list of people down and identified a person who has a host of professional colleagues in health care, security, and technology. Somehow, they were able to block me from being active online,"* (Black Female, age 49*).*

In these instances, participants shared both personal and professional experiences with cyberbullying that extended beyond harsh words and personal criticisms.

Attempts to Cope with Cyberbullying Experience

The participants shared their attempts to cope with the cyberbullying experiences. Two themes emerged of *Suppress* and *Share with Others.* The *Suppress* theme included behaviors such as ignoring, avoiding, and deliberate withdrawal from engaging with the offenders. The *Share with Others* included seeking validation and support from community members and friends to cope with the aggression.

Suppress.

The Avoid and/or Block theme included responses like the examples provided below. Suppress in this instance reflects some of the instruments as noted on the cybervictimization scale that noted some responses may be to avoid or withdraw to avoid continued cyberbullying. One participant described:

> *"Avoid interacting with certain people that exhibit tendencies of ignorant outburst. I have also sometimes avoided revealing my ethic background in order to not give some people the chance to stereotype me," (*Black Male, age 43*).*

Additionally, "*Careful partitioning of my life by use of pseudonyms; avoiding engaging with certain topics in public,"* (Jewish Female, age 48). Moreover, "*I became unhinged. At the time it was how I viewed myself, so I just internalized it*," (African American/Black Female, age 46). These responses reflected some of the mental and emotional toll that exposure to cyberbullying cause.

Share with Others.

Similar to the scales explored in the quantitative section of this study, a common reaction to a trauma is to reach out to others. Some of the participants reported this reaction to cyberbullying as they contacted trusted resources and friends. The Share with Others theme included instances of connection with friends and family to help cope with the event. Examples included: **"***I surrounded myself with positive relationships and blocked them on that site*," (Latinx Trans Male, age 23); "*I just stuck around my friends, and they helped me through it," (*Asian American Female, age 19). In these instances, participants countered the cyberbullying through positive relationships and interactions.

Prevent Cyberbullying

Largely unregulated, online communities may not include internal mechanisms of regulation. For that reason, some participants described establishing person boundaries to reduce the negative experiences associated with cyberbullying. One prominent theme entitled *Maintain Boundaries* emerged when participants shared suggestions to prevent cyberbullying.

Maintain Boundaries.

The participants hared a range of suggestions to prevent future instances of cyberbullying. Boundaries included self-compassion, caution with oversharing on social media sites, supporting others who are cyberbullied, establishing healthy ways to cope with cyberbullying, and blocking others when needed. Responses included descriptions of boundary setting:

> *"Do not be afraid to set and reinforce personal boundaries: the people you deserve in your life will respect these boundaries and will likely share them,"* (Latinx Trans Male, age 23). In addition:

> *"I think that being able to believe in yourself and believe in the strength that you can hold to get you through fabricated and false comments of others. even if you don't really feel like you can overcome something, telling yourself that you can and "faking it until you make it", really helps," (*Hispanic Female, age 18*).* Another example:

> *"Take some time to process with someone close to you or in your community. We need to validate that instances of cyberbullying are real. You can report anonymously on social media sites with less repercussions since perpetrators have a network of multiple friends,"* (Asian American male, age 30).

Plus, *"I don't know that you can prevent it. I think what you can do is help people deal with it in a healthy way,"* (Biracial Female, age 37).

Cyberbullying Threats to People of Color

From a macrolevel, we wanted to explore the phenomenon of cyberbullying on Populations of Color. Participants were asked to identify institutional/systemic threats to POC regarding cyberbullying and cybervictimization. The respondents discussed threats to POC in online and social media communities. Themes generated from responses included *Hate Groups* and *Race-Based Trauma.*

Hate Groups.

Respondents reported that online hate groups used to discriminate against others is a threat to POC. Responses included:

> "*In my opinion, the biggest threats to people of color regarding cyberbullying could be that there could be hate groups or people with hateful beliefs watching the harassment happening online or causing it themselves. Also, for people of color, I think cyberbullying has a greater effect in terms of defamation and humiliation. Finally, I think people of color who experience cyberbullying will be affected more by it because people of color are less likely to get help mentally*," (Latinx Female, age 18).

Additionally, "*People saying rude-racist comments behind a computer and try to justify it as "freedom of speech*," (Mexican and Black Female, age 31) and "*The systematic attempt to marginalize and suppress and oppress people of color using social media as a means of spreading disinformation and hate,"* (Black Male, age 47).

Race Based Trauma.

Respondents also discussed racism and discrimination in online communities as a threat to People of Color. These included both overt and covert racism. *"Racial slurs and comments, fear of being reported and/or getting in trouble for responding, feeling the burden of having to teach others about your experience," (*Latinx Female, age 28*).* Moreover, "*Being seen only as a color - not being acknowledged individually- and not having a safe place to go to process."* (Native American Female, age 42). "*Loss of self-worth or self-esteem. Negative self-image, and fear of the outside world or a feeling of exclusion*," (African American Male, age 43).

Unlike previous question responses, these threats and actions target populations of people and not specific individuals. The type of cyberbullying described threatens Communities of Color who may not even engage online and has the potential to groom and desensitize individuals toward hate speech.

Integrated Findings

After analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data separately, the two data sets were grouped together for additional analysis. An interesting finding is that a trauma response to cyberbullying was avoiding, and this was also reflected in our theme in attempting to cope with cyberbullying. Our theme of bullying is based on the dimension of identity and race-based trauma, and the findings in the first and third research questions suggest that cyberbullying is traumatic and reinforces discrimination behaviors. Notably, race and ancestry were statistically significant in perceptions of discrimination and that African American/Black individuals reported higher trauma symptomology as a result of cyberbullying. The findings from both data sets appeared to complement one another and provide a comprehensive view into the interaction of discrimination, cyberbullying and trauma.

Discussion

This study sought to examine the experiences of adult POC in response to experiences with cyberbullying. Using a mixed methods Convergent Parallel Design, we gathered qualitative (n=44) and quantitative (n=100) data among adults who have self-reported experienced cyberbullying. With the increase in online technology use because of the COVID-19 pandemic, more individuals are accessing online communities for both professional and personal responsibilities (Monaghesh & Hajizadeh, 2020). Researchers must examine how individuals respond to and engage with online communities especially as this relates to mental health. Adult cybervictimization and cyberbullying is an understudied area relating to online activity. A phenomenon associated with aggressive and hurtful behaviors, cyberbullying can be traumatic and exacerbate mental health issues (Akbulut et al., 2010). This may be especially true for Communities of Color who have been the target of oppressive political and systemic discrimination historically within the United States as online methods to spread hate and discrimination is easily accessible and reaches a large audience (Grills et al., 2022; Velasquez, et al, 2021; Wheeler et al., 2022). Following the COVID-19 pandemic and murder of Mr. George Floyd, discussions on racial injustice and discrimination reemerged and so did hate crimes and acts of discrimination (FBI, 2020). Despite the enforcement of social distancing policies, acts of racism and discrimination continued in online communities. This was reflected in the qualitative results that noted hate groups and race-based trauma as the biggest threat to POC regarding cyberbullying.

The results of this study reinforce the research that discriminatory behavior specific to race are frequently experienced by Communities of Color, especially for African American/Black Communities. Discrimination can be experienced intrapersonally, interpersonally, institutionally, and systemically (Evans et al., 2021). This might include a range of discriminatory behaviors that include covert and overt messages of exclusion. Furthermore, respondents shared experiences with cyberbullying and cybervictimization. The results suggest that cyberbullying may include targeted attacks from a known or unknown perpetrator(s). Having experienced cyberbullying, the participants tended to endorse responses commonly associated with trauma. SAMHSA's (2014) definition aligns with the responses reported by cybervictims "experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening

and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (p. 7). This definition tends to parallel some of the responses to race-based trauma (Evans et al., 2022). Both cyberbullying in adulthood and race-based trauma are understudied traumas in the counseling profession (Evans et al., 2022; Hemmings & Evans, 2018).

Suggestions for Practice

Trauma can be debilitating and harmful. Counselors must be trained to identify and address both race-based trauma and cyberbullying in adulthood when working with clients. Counselors must be trained in the harm and discrimination that can occur through online activity and possess a cadre of skills and techniques in supporting their clients who have been cyberbullied. Counselors should consider approaches like Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2010), Relational Cultural Theory (Duffey & Sombody, 2011), Feminist Theory (Enns, 2012), and Intersectionality Theory (Carbado et al., 2013) when providing culturally responsive and liberation-oriented approaches to working with diverse clients (Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020; Singh et al., 2020).

Malott and Schaefle (2015) proposed *racism-focused counseling* which is "counseling that in some way addresses racial discrimination experienced by clients of color," (p. 362). An approach like RFC can integrate trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches to serving Communities of Color (Malott & Schaefle, 2015). This aligns with the literature that endorses increased knowledge, skills, and awareness in the provision of counseling services as well as the recognition of the roles of privilege and oppression in health outcomes (Arrendondo, et al, 1996; Sue & Sue, 2013). Approaches, like those described above, that are decolonized and liberation-focused offer great potential for counselors and researchers to explore institutional and systemic forms of discrimination that lead to additional barriers for Communities of Color causing health disparities and race-based trauma (Comas-Díaz & Torres Rivera, 2020; Grills et al., 2023).

In addition, due to required social distancing policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, many counseling professionals were reliant on technology to deliver counseling services (Monaghesh & Hajizadeh, 2020). In a time when mental health needs increased, counseling practitioners were attempting to improve their digital literacy to address the evolving needs of client populations. This sense of perceived stress and pressure on professional counselors throughout the pandemic was noted in increased levels of compassion fatigue and post-traumatic stress disorder (Litam et al., 2021). Counselors can experience their own trauma while trying to address the trauma experienced by their clients. This warrants a discussion in the profession on the expanding roles and responsibilities of counselors in the COVID era. Due to the continued dependency on technology for communication and connection, it is important that researchers examine the role of online communities and social media on client health, counselor health, and the perpetuation of oppressive health disparities as social interaction in online platforms is often a daily interaction for many U.S. citizens. Whether discrimination is delivered

in-person or through online mediums, the implications can be harmful (Hemmings & Evans, 2018; Wheeler et al., 2023).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations for this study include the limitations associated with self-report studies and cross-sectional research. The *Cybervictimization Scale* (Akbulut et al., 2010) is a survey and many of the psychometric properties were not provided. This should be noted when interpreting the data and drawing conclusions about the results. The sample size for the qualitative study was larger and the respondents reported a higher level of education than what may be reflected in the general population. It is recommended that future research examines the role of cyberbullying in the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of clients. Additionally, methods to assist counselors in assessing threat in social media postings could be helpful.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying in adulthood can be a complex and understudied issue. Consistent with SAMHSA's definition of trauma, people who are cybervictims may present with symptoms associated with trauma and folks representing racialized minorities may experience race-based trauma (Hemmings & Evans, 2018). Counselors must be trained to identify and address the role of cyberbullying in mental health and how it can reinforce experiences of discrimination in historically marginalized communities. Recommendations must include increased understanding in the counseling profession on the impact of cyberbullying on client treatment.

References

Akbulut, Y., Eristi, B., & Levent, Y. (2010). Development of a scale to investigate cybervictimization among online social utility members. *Contemporary Educational Technology, 1*(1), 46-59.

Allan, R. (2017). Hard questions: Who should decide what is hate speech in an online global community? *Meta*. https://about.fb.com/news/2017/06/hard-questions-hate-speech/

Arrendondo, P., Toporek, M.S., Brown, S., Jones, J., Locke, D.C., Sanchez, J., & Stadler, H. (1996). Operationalization of the multicultural competencies. *Association for Multicultural Counseling & Development*.

Bauman, S. (2011). Cyberbullying: What counselors need to know. *American Counseling Association*.

Carbado, D. W., Crenshaw, K. W., Mays, V. M., & Tomlinson, B. (2013). Intersectionality: Mapping the movements of a theory. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race, 10*(2), 303-312. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000349

Center for Disease Control (May 26, 2023). Health Disparities. Retrieved from: https://www.google.com/search?channel=ftrc&client=firefox-b-1-d&q=health+disparitties+united+states.

Comas-Díaz, L., & Torres Rivera, E. (Eds.). (2020). *Liberation psychology: Theory, method, practice, and social justice*. American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000198-000

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed-methods research*. Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed). Sage Publications.

Cullen, W., Gulati, G., & Kelly, B. D. (2020). Mental health in the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Medicine, 113*(5), 311-312. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-036850

Curran, P. J., West, S. G., & Finch, J. F. (1996). The robustness of test statistics to nonnormality and specification error in confirmatory factor analysis. *Psychological Methods*, 1-16.

Cyberbullying Research Center. (2022). Cyberbullying in 2021 by age, gender, sexual orientation and race. https://cyberbullying.org/cyberbullying-statistics-age-gender-sexual-orientation-race

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2010). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.

Dooley, J. J., Pyżalski, J., & Cross, D. (2009). Cyberbullying versus face-to-face bullying: A theoretical and conceptual review. *Zeitschrift für Psychologie/Journal of Psychology, 217*(4), 182-188. https://doi.org/10.1027/0044-3409.217.4.182

Drouin, M., McDaniel, B.T., Prater, J., & Toscos, T. (2020). How parents and their children used social media and technology at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and association with anxiety. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 23*(11), 727-736. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2020.0299

Duffey, T., & Sombody, C. (2011). The role of relational cultural theory in mental health counseling. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling, 33*(3), 223-242.

Edwards, L., Kontostathis, A. E., & Fisher, C. (2016). Cyberbullying, race/ethnicity and mental health outcomes: A review of the literature. *Adolescents in the Digital Age: Effect on Health and Development, 4*(3), https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v4i3.525

Enns, C. Z. (2012). Feminist approaches to counseling. *The Oxford handbook of counseling psychology*, 434-459.

Evans, A. M., Hemmings, C., Seaner-Ramsay, K., & Barnett, J. (2021). Perceived racism and discrimination amongst individuals of color: An ethnographic content analysis. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 49*, 152-164. https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12183

Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A.G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G*Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods, 39*, 175-191. https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193146

Federal Bureau of Investigation (2020). FBI releases updated 2020 hate crime statistics. https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/press-releases/fbi-releases-updated-2020-hate-crime-statistics

Grills, C., Fiorella, L., Chavez, C., Saw, A., Walters, K.L., Burlew, K., Randolph Cunningham, S. M., Capielo Rosario, C., Samoa, R., & Jackson-Lowman, H. (2022). Applying culturalist methodologies to discern COVID-19's impact on communities of color. *Journal of Community Psychology, 51*(6), 2331-2354. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22802

Gunther, N., DeSmet, A., Jacobs, N.C.L., & De Bourdeaudhuji, I. (2016). Comparing associated harm with traditional bullying and cyberbullying: A narrative overview of mental, physical, and behavioural negative outcomes. In T. Völlink, F. Dehue, & C. McGuckin (Eds.), *Cyberbullying: From theory to intervention* (pp. 54-76). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Halpern, E. S. (1983). Auditing naturalistic inquiries: The development and application of a model [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Indiana University.

Hemmings, C., & Evans, A.M. (2018). Identifying and treating race-based trauma in counseling. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 46*, 20-30. https://doi.org/10.1002/jmcd.12153

Jenaro, C., Flores, N., & Frías, C.P. (2018). Systematic review of empirical studies on cyberbullying in adults: What we know and what we should investigate. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 38*, 113-122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.11.004

Kahn, K.B., Spencer, K., & Glaser, J. (2013). Online prejudice and discrimination: From dating to hating. In Y. Amichai-Hamburger (Ed.), *The social net: Understanding our online behavior* (pp. 247-274). Oxford University Press.

Kowalski, R.M., Toth, A., & Morgan, M. (2017). Bullying and cyberbullying in adulthood and the workplace. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 158*(1), 64-81. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2017.1302402

Kumar, A., & Nayar, K.R. (2021). COVID 19 and its mental health consequences. *Journal of Mental Health, 30*(1), 1-2. https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2020.1757052

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.

Litam, S.D.A., Ausloos, C.D., & Harrichand, J.S. (2021). Stress and resilience among professional counselors during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 99*(4), 384-395. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12391

Litam, S.D.A. (2020). Take your kung-flu back to Wuhan: Counseling Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders with race-based trauma related to COVID-19. *Professional Counselor, 10*(2), 144-156. https://doi.org/10.15241/sdal.10.2.144

Louis-Jean, J., Cenat, K., Njoku, C.V., Angelo, J., & Sanon, D. (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19) and racial disparities: A perspective analysis. *Journal of Racial and Ethical Health Disparities, 7*(6), 1039-1045. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-020-00879-4

Malott, K. M., & Schaefle, S. (2015). Addressing clients' experiences of racism: A model for clinical practice. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 93*, 361-369. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2015.00196.x

McLeod, J. (2011). *Qualitative research in counseling and psychotherapy* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Monaghesh, E., & Hajizadeh, A. (2020). The role of telehealth during COVID-19 outbreak: A systemic review based on current evidence. *BMC Public Health, 20*(1193), 25-38. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09301-4

Neuendorf, K. A., (2017). *The content analysis guidebook* (2nd ed). Sage Publications.

Porath, C. L, & Pearson, C. M. (2013). The price of incivility. *Harvard Business Review, 91*, 115-121.

Romero, A., Bauman, S., Ritter, M., & Anand, P. (2017). Examining adolescent suicidal behaviors in relation to gun carrying and bullying. *Journal of School Violence, 16*(4), https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2016.1190933

Sakki, I., & Castrén, L. (2022). Dehumanization through humour and conspiracies in online hate towards Chinese people during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Applied Network Science, 6*(1), 1-21. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11142-022-00371-9

Smith, P. K., Sundaram, S., Spears, B. A., Blaya, C., Schäfer, M., & Sandhu, D. (Eds.). (2018). *Bullying, cyberbullying and student well-being in schools: Comparing European, Australian and Indian perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2022). Trauma and violence. Retrieved from https://www.samhsa.gov/trauma-violence

Scheff, S. (November, 2019). Adult cyberbullying is more common than you think. *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/shame-nation/201911/adult-cyberbullying-is-more-common-you-think

Singh, A., Appling, B., & Trepal, H. (2020). Using the multicultural social justice counseling competencies to decolonize counseling practice: The important roles of theory, power, and action. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 98*, 261-272. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12247

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. Sage Publications.

Sue, D.W & Sue, D. S. (2013). *Counseling the culturally diverse* (6th ed.). Wiley.

Tynes, B. M., Umana-Taylor, A. J., Rose, C. A., Lin, J., & Anderson, C. J. (2012). Online racial discrimination and the protective function of ethnic identity and self-esteem for African American adolescents. *Developmental Psychology, 48*, 343–355. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025829

Utemissova, G.U., Danna, Su., & Nikoavna, V.N. (2021). Cyberbullying during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Global Journal of Guidance and Counseling in Schools, 11*(2), https://doi.org/10.18844/gjgc.v11i2.5471

Vasileiou, K., Barnett, J., Thorpe, S., & Young, T. (2018). Characterising and justifying sample size sufficiency in interview-based studies: Systematic analysis of qualitative health research over a 15-year period. *BMC Medical Research Methodology, 18*, 148. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0594-7

Velasquez, N., Leahy, R., Restrepo, N. J., Lupu, Y., Sear, R., Gabriel, N., & Johnson, N. F. (2021). Online hate network spreads malicious COVID-19 content outside the control of individual social media platforms. *Scientific Reports, 11*(1), 11549. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-90904-2

Wester, K., & McKibben, B. (2019). Integrating mixed methods approaches in counseling outcome research. *Counseling Outcome, Research, and Evaluation, 10*, 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1080/21501378.2018.1531239

Wheeler, B., Jung, S., Hall, D. L., Purohit, M., & Silva, Y. (2023). An analysis of temporal trends in Anti-Asian hate and counter-hate on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 26*(7), 535-545. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2023.0050

Williams, M.T., Printz, D., De Lapp, T. (2017). Assessing racial trauma in African Americans with the Trauma Symptoms of Discrimination Scale. Presented at the annual convention of the Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, San Diego, CA.

Yang, D. B. (2022). COVID-19 Hate crimes: Why hate is rising, and what the United States can do about it. *J. Legis., 49*, 166.