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Being viral online and its effects on mental health

We are currently living in a digital age, where a lot, if not most of our communication and media consumption is done online, especially through social media and video sharing platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, Youtube, Twitch, and even Facebook. The use of these platforms allows for information and content to be spread almost instantly, as these platforms tend to take content from each other and spread it all over the internet, to thousands of people at once. This has transformed the internet into a place where a lot of its users are waiting for new content to be uploaded in order to spread it around or just to judge it. This content can come in many forms, sometimes as memes, or even just a post made by an influencer or someone that's in the public eye. Memes can take quite a few different forms, they can be simple images with some text, an edited image, a video clip or even just a simple soundbyte, or this content can even just be hate comments or anger towards a particular user. In this digital age we are living in, with all of these social media platforms, it has become extremely easy for your most intimate and even embarrassing moments to be uploaded online for thousands to see, whether it's intentional or not. When something becomes widely spread around the internet, it is considered viral. Today we see a lot of videos and images capturing people doing often embarrassing things that have become viral on the internet, due to the nature of the internet and its users, who are constantly seeking something new to spread around. Something that we as users of the internet don't think about is the impact that being the focus of attention online has on the people who are behind the screen, especially on their mental health, and this paper will focus on the mental health of

influencers, and the effects of being so exposed online has on their mental health. There is surprisingly little to no scholarly research on this specific topic, but there is a large quantity of research on how cyberbullying affects individuals and their mental health. Cyberbullying is a large part of being a user of the online landscape, and these vulnerable moments that can make someone gain so much attention makes them a target for cyberbullying, and I intend to close the gap between this research and make the connections between this and one's mental health, because I believe there is a potential negative effect.

Cyberbullying is when someone is using electronic means to harass or bully another person, this is something a lot of users of the internet encounter while being online. According to Statista, which is a service that provides consumer data, there are about 4.66 billion active users on the internet, which is 59.5% of the global population, more than half of the world's population is online!(Johnson,2021). Also found on Statista's website, it is found that "Social media usage is one of the most popular online activities. In 2020, over 3.6 billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost 4.41 billion in 2025."(Statista, 2022) I think it's safe to say that based on these statistics presented, a lot of these users online have faced some form of bullying or harassment over the internet, especially through social media platforms. People who have gone viral or received attention online must have faced this issue as well. How can cyberbullying affect its victims? According to research done in the Social Science Journal, it is found that there are often two layers to the damage done by cyberbullying, specifically in teenagers. There's an emotional layer as well as a layer of actions that they use to cope with cyberbullying. This first layer of emotions may include "A variety of behaviors including school avoidance, low self esteem, anti social emotions such as fear and powerlessness, and higher levels of stress and anxiety." (Graham and Wood, 184) This second

layer describes more aggressive reactions to cyberbullying, such as bringing in weapons to school or just being violent towards other people.

Influencers, who are people that communicate and influence their followers' opinions through social media strategies also face this issue of cyberbullying, as they often have that level of exposure that comes with being viral online, seeing as that they put their lives online. In a study done surrounding this topic, we see that some people may believe that these influencers actually deserve all the hate and cyberbullying they receive over social media, the author states that “Considering the body positivity of these influencers, their intentional publicness, and the flair they show for baiting attention, it may be that many people believe that such Influencers deserve the hate they get for being ‘attention whores.’”(Abidin, 200) The author also states that because of this, influencers are extremely vulnerable to cyberbullying. This study follows a few influencers from Singapore, and their experiences with cyberbullying, one of these influencers, who goes by Natalie faced backlash from her followers back in 2014, due to her poorly editing her photos for Instagram posts. The author shows the aggression taken against her for this “What began as a crowdsourced quest to interrogate all of Natalie’s past images for hints of photoshopping quickly culminated in a witch-hunt against the Influencer. Threats ranged from calls to boycott her and her platforms for deceit, to calls that she should end her life for being vain.” (Abidin, 204)In addition to this, there’s also information regarding how being in the “public eye” affected Natalie, she stated that she started to feel a lot of pressure socially due to the criticisms she faces on a daily basis, and she even went to discuss in a blog that she felt angry about all of this cyberbullying and criticism online. This study provides a new viewpoint for my research, and it shows that users online will go after people with high levels of exposure online, and that it has some sort of negative effect on the people facing this hate. Further research that I

have found shows that influencers online experience various forms of cyberbullying, not just simple harassment and bullying. This can take form in a few ways, such as slander which is making a false statement about someone to ruin their reputation, catfishing which is taking someone's identity as your own and online and using it to harass, scam or other things with the purpose of harming the victim mentally (Hassan, 202). This research also gives a few reasons as to why perpetrators of cyberbullying of influencers and other people who are viral do what they do, these are reasons such as "jealousy or disagreement." In this research that was conducted, we also see that there is in fact an impact that cyberbullying has on influencers, although these overlap with other research that was presented, such as anxiety, depression and lowered self esteem. Something that is also shown in this research is a certain action that some influencers take when they come under attack from cyberbullying which is described as "When things are getting out of control, the influencers will end up closing their account for a temporary amount of time" this action is not named in the article, but on social media and between its users, this action has become known as 'going dark.' Going dark is also discussed in the research conducted by Crystal Abidin that was discussed in an earlier portion of the paper, and Abidin gives an example of an influencer who 'went dark,' an influencer from Singapore named Rosslyn was accused of stealing her friends potential boyfriend, a large amount of these accusations came from places like forums, and the result of these accusations was a period of backlash that was described by "the intensity of cyberbullying and hate comments accumulating on Rosslyn's social media platforms were so prolific that the Influencer 'went dark' for a few days." (Abidin, 205) It is important to note that this action of going dark is usually attributed to an increasing amount of hate someone receives, so much so that they feel like they do not have control of the

situation that they are in and that they need a break from it, presumably because it is having a negative effect on their mental health.

Another term I would like to discuss is called cyber hate. Cyberhate is defined as “Quite similar with cyber bullying, cyberhate can be described as offensive and humiliating texts, speeches, videos and/or images to individuals aimed at their sexual orientations, disability, ethnic origins, religion, immigration or other group characteristics.” (Bacıoğlu, 32) But the difference the concepts of cyberbullying and cyberhate is that cyberbullying is defined by its repetitive nature, and cyberhate is defined by “being based on prejudiced views on different social groups” and does not have to be repetitive, but I believe it is safe to assume the effects of these two concepts are similar, if not the same, seeing as they have very few differences, and cyberhate may also be used as a way to harass people who are viral online, just based on what social groups they are in, and if they make videos that are for a specific group, it may be easier for people to target them and commit cyberhate against them.

In conclusion, with all of the research presented it is evident that cyberbullying is an issue that a lot of users online face, but internet media personalities such as influencers are especially prone to falling victim to this, as their lives are overly exposed online. In addition to this, I believe the research provided shows that there is in fact a negative effect this being viral has on the mental health of the people ‘behind the screen’ such as depression and anxiety. Hopefully there can be more peer reviewed research on this topic, because it can prove to be beneficial to larger social media platforms by showing them how users are communicating on their platforms and can help them better understand and protect their content creators.

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