

The Impact of Cyberbullying on Help-Seeking Among Depressed Young adults in the United States

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Abstract - Online discourse about mental health frequently triggers targeted harassment and cyberbullying behaviors. Using text mining, this study examined the prevalence and nature of cyberbullying directed at young adults sharing depression content on TikTok in the U.S. Analysis of 83,154 comments from 50 TikTok videos revealed that non-cyberbullying comments occurred significantly more than expected (92.2% vs. 7.8%). Among cyberbullying behaviors, supportive comments dominated responses (53.51%), followed by harmful comments (17.68%) and dismissive comments (15.91%). Sentiment analysis revealed predominantly neutral responses. These findings demonstrate that while overt cyberbullying remains relatively infrequent on TikTok's mental health content, the cyberbullying that does occur encompasses complex patterns requiring targeted intervention strategies to protect vulnerable individuals seeking mental health support online.

Keywords- cyberbullying, mental health, TikTok, depression, social media harassment

I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health challenges among young adults have reached critical levels in the United States, with recent research indicating that 20.1% of individuals aged 18-25 experienced major depressive episodes in 2022 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023). Concurrently, the digital transformation of interpersonal aggression through cyberbullying has created unprecedented barriers to mental health recovery and help-seeking behaviors. The prevalence of cyberbullying is notable, with studies indicating that it affects a substantial portion of the youth population, often overlapping with traditional bullying (Giumetti & Kowalski, 2015; Bottino et al., 2015). Unlike traditional bullying confined to specific locations and timeframes, cyberbullying persists across digital platforms, reaching victims continuously and amplifying psychological distress through its pervasive nature (Aisya, 2024; Arif et al., 2024). Research demonstrates that cyberbullying victimization produces more severe mental health consequences than traditional bullying, with victims experiencing elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Agustiningsih et al., 2024; Hu et al., 2021; Bottino et al., 2015). Meta-analytic evidence confirms a significant positive correlation between cyberbullying exposure and depressive symptoms (Hu et al., 2021), while the digital environment's anonymity and perceived lack of control further discourage help-seeking behaviors (Kim et al., 2018). The stigma surrounding both mental health treatment and cyberbullying victimization creates additional barriers, preventing young adults from accessing necessary psychological support (Kwan et al., 2020). Social media platforms have fundamentally altered how young adults experience and respond to cyberbullying, with increased platform usage correlating with higher depressive symptom rates through mechanisms including social comparison, sleep disruption, and displacement of healthy activities (Twenge et al., 2024; Sabar et al., 2024). Cyberbullying victimization on these platforms predicts increased loneliness and fear of social exclusion, which mediate the relationship between online harassment and depression (Varela et al., 2022).

Despite extensive research documenting cyberbullying's mental health impacts, a critical knowledge gap exists regarding platform-specific effects on help-seeking behaviors among depressed young adults. TikTok, which has emerged as a dominant social media platform among young adults with 62% of 18-29-year-olds using the platform and 82% of Gen Z maintaining TikTok accounts (Gottfried, 2024; Sheikh, 2025), presents unique risks and opportunities for mental health intervention. Interventions are crucial, and there is a need for comprehensive strategies that include educational initiatives, anonymous reporting systems, and psychological support

to encourage help-seeking and mitigate the negative impacts of cyberbullying (Kulkarni et al., 2024). These interventions should be tailored to address the unique challenges posed by cyberbullying, promoting a supportive environment that encourages young adults to seek help without fear of judgment or further victimization (Shpiegel et al., 2015). Although existing research highlights the harmful effects of cyberbullying on youth mental health, a critical gap remains in understanding how cyberbullying on TikTok, a dominant platform for self-expression and community among young adults, affects help-seeking behaviors among those experiencing depression in the United States. As TikTok becomes a key outlet where users share personal struggles and connect with others, hostile comments may discourage vulnerable individuals from seeking professional help or social support. Addressing this gap is essential for developing platform-specific, evidence-based interventions that foster safer online environments, encourage mental health engagement, and support national public health efforts aimed at suicide prevention and early intervention among youth.

Research Questions

1. What is the extent and styles of cyberbullying directed at young adults in the United States who share depressive experiences on TikTok?
2. What topics are most frequently discussed within cyberbullying interactions targeting young adults who post about depression on TikTok?
3. What is the overall sentiment expressed by TikTok users in response to posts by young adults sharing their struggles with depression or seeking help?

II. BACKGROUND

The digital transformation of mental health help-seeking behaviors among young adults represents a fundamental shift in public health approaches to depression intervention and prevention. Social media and online communities have become primary pathways through which young adults experiencing depression access mental health resources, fundamentally altering traditional care-seeking patterns and creating new opportunities for early intervention at a population level (Bak et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2021). This transformation has significant implications for national mental health policy, as many young adults now turn to online searches and social media for mental health information and peer support before engaging with professional services, representing a critical entry point for systematic intervention strategies. The dual impact of social media platforms on mental health outcomes creates both unprecedented opportunities and substantial risks for population-level mental health interventions. These platforms provide accessible spaces where individuals can share experiences, seek advice, and find emotional support with the benefit of anonymity not available in traditional face-to-face settings (Bak et al., 2023). Social music communities and similar platforms serve as supportive environments where users disclose emotional difficulties and receive peer encouragement, while user-generated content creates informal support networks that can guide individuals toward professional care (Jin et al., 2023; Meyerhoff et al., 2022). However, excessive or unmoderated social media use poses significant public health risks, with high screen time, lack of supervision, and exposure to harmful content worsening symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress across large populations of young adults (Saleem & Jan, 2024). Cyberbullying and sleep disruption represent key mechanisms through which digital platforms can undermine mental health outcomes, highlighting the urgent need for evidence-based interventions that promote healthy digital habits and address underlying psychological concerns (Saleem & Jan, 2024; Ugwu et al., 2023).

Cyberbullying victimization creates substantial barriers to help-seeking behaviors among young adults with depression, representing a critical public health challenge that affects millions of individuals nationally. Victims experience significantly higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation compared to non-victimized peers, yet paradoxically show reduced engagement with available online support services (Maurya et al., 2022; Selkie et al., 2015). This reluctance stems from multiple factors including limited awareness of resources, accessibility challenges, and the psychological impact of victimization itself (Spears et al., 2015). Emotional consequences such as loneliness and fear of social exclusion, intensified by cyberbullying experiences, create additional barriers that discourage help-seeking even among those experiencing severe depressive symptoms (Varela et al., 2022). Individual characteristics further influence help-seeking patterns, with gender differences, coping strategies, and knowledge of perpetrator identity affecting likelihood of seeking support (Zsila et al., 2019; Na, 2014; Englander, 2021). Evidence-based interventions targeting cyberbullying and help-seeking behaviors demonstrate significant potential for improving population-level mental health outcomes among young adults. Public awareness and cyberwellness programs that educate young people about cyberbullying consequences and emphasize help-seeking importance show promising results when integrated into comprehensive school and community-based prevention strategies (Ong et al., 2021). Parental

and peer support systems play crucial roles, with emotionally supported adolescents showing reduced cyberbullying involvement and increased help-seeking behaviors, underscoring the importance of family-based intervention approaches (Grunin et al., 2020; Spears et al., 2015). Digital citizenship programs effectively reduce stigma around support-seeking while teaching responsible online behavior, creating safer digital environments that facilitate help-seeking among victims (Hendry et al., 2023). Positive Youth Development frameworks that build resilience, empathy, and personal strengths help young people manage cyberbullying effects while encouraging constructive coping strategies and proactive help-seeking behaviors (Xiang et al., 2022). These intervention approaches provide critical foundations for developing platform-specific strategies that can address the unique challenges posed by emerging social media environments and their impact on mental health help-seeking behaviors.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed-methods design to explore the effects of cyberbullying on help-seeking behaviors among depressed young adults in the United States on TikTok. The research integrated qualitative content analysis with text mining to identify both specific patterns of online harassment and the general emotional tone present in user comments.

Data Collection

Data collection targeted TikTok videos identified through a set of specific hashtags related to mental health and emotional disclosure, with comments later extracted using exportcomments.com (<https://exportcomments.com/>). The study used ten hashtags to gather relevant content: #MentalHealthMatters, #INeedHelp, #ItsOkayToNotBeOkay, #ImSoTired, #DepressionTikTok, #SadTok, #AnxietyCheck, #SuicidalThoughts, #CryForHelp, and #NormalizeTherapy. These hashtags were chosen due to their strong association with posts where adolescent girls openly share psychological distress, emotional vulnerability, or requests for support. A purposive sampling method was used to select videos created by users identified as adolescent girls located in the United States. Identification relied on bio information referencing age or school year (e.g., “16 y/o,” “class of 2026”), usernames indicating school affiliation, visual or linguistic markers such as American school clothing, slang, or geographic tags, as well as location confirmation through captions or bios mentioning U.S. cities, schools, or states. Sampling was stratified by creator type and content style, including regular teen users with small followings, micro-influencers (1,000–10,000 followers), and high-reach accounts with viral videos. The videos represented various modes of expression, such as crying videos, venting monologues, humor-based depression narratives, and reflective discussions about therapy or emotional struggles. The sample also aimed to include diversity across race, geographic region, body type, and perceived socioeconomic status. In total, 50 TikTok videos were collected, and all publicly available comments were extracted, resulting in a dataset of 83,154 user comments.

Codebook Development

Using NVivo (version 24), an inductive coding approach was applied to manually analyze a subset of 2,000 user comments from TikTok videos featuring adolescent girls disclosing depressive symptoms. This approach enabled themes to emerge directly from the data without relying on predefined categories. The process began with open coding, where each comment was reviewed line by line and assigned initial codes that captured emotional tone, supportive or hostile language, and references to help-seeking or distress. These codes were grounded in users’ own language and reflected their responses to emotional disclosures by teen girls. Similar or overlapping codes were then merged and refined into broader thematic categories through multiple iterative reviews. This cyclical process supported the development of themes related to cyberbullying and help-related discourse within TikTok comment sections. Coding definitions were updated as needed to remain closely aligned with the context and content of the data. To ensure reliability, two independent coders conducted the analysis and reached an interrater agreement of 94%. Table 1 presents the major categories of cyberbullying and help-related discourse identified through this process. This qualitative framework was then applied to large-scale text mining in R to systematically examine audience interaction patterns across all 83,154 user comments.

Code	Definition	Example
Supportive	Validates emotions, encourages help-seeking, offers empathy or solidarity	“You’re not alone.” / “Please talk to someone who cares.”
Harmful	Attacks, ridicules, or shames the creator for emotional expression	“You’re just doing this for attention.” / “Cry more.”

Sarcastic	Uses irony or mock support to belittle the creator's feelings	"So brave... 😊" / "Another day, another dramatic teen."
Dismissive	Minimizes or rejects the seriousness of the emotions shared	"It's not that deep." / "Everyone gets sad. Get over it."
Blaming	Assigns fault to the creator for their emotional state	"Maybe if you weren't so lazy, you wouldn't feel this way."
Peer Invalidation	Shames emotional openness, discourages vulnerability among peers	"Stop trauma-dumping here." / "This is why no one likes you."

Table 1. Codebook

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Keyword Matching

Data preprocessing was conducted using the R packages dplyr (Wickham et al., 2023) and stringr (Wickham, 2022). Each comment in the dataset was assigned a unique identifier via the row_number() function to facilitate systematic tracking and organization. Regular expressions were applied to detect specific words and phrases linked to cyberbullying targeting depressed adolescent girls. The keyword lists for classification were created based on the inductive qualitative analysis described earlier, ensuring that the computational categorization accurately represented the language and expressions found in TikTok comment sections on this subject. A rule-based classification system was developed to categorize comments into six thematic groups: Supportive, Harmful, Sarcastic, Dismissive, Blaming, and Peer Invalidation. Using the case_when() function combined with str_detect() in R, each comment was evaluated sequentially against the keyword lists. Comments were assigned to the first category they matched, while those that did not fit any category were labeled as non-cyberbullying. This approach ensured that the text mining process stayed rooted in authentic user language, maintaining methodological consistency and contextual relevance. The rule-based method offered a scalable and reproducible way to identify and quantify different forms of cyberbullying, providing a foundation for further quantitative analysis of toxic interactions directed at depressed teens on TikTok.

Category	Keywords/Phrases
Supportive	you're beautiful, stay strong, sending love, we love you, you matter, god bless you, hang in there, you're amazing, here for you, beautiful soul, take care, you're not alone, love yourself, keep going, you got this, beautiful inside and out, praying for you, you're incredible, sending hugs, we support you, hope you feel better, you're gorgeous, stay positive, beautiful person, thinking of you
Harmful	you're ugly, fat, disgusting, gross, nasty, hideous, repulsive, pathetic, loser, freak, weird, creepy, stupid, idiot, dumb, retard, trash, waste of space, kill yourself, die, worthless, useless, piece of shit, go away, nobody likes you
Sarcastic	oh wow, sure jan, okay hun, totally, definitely, absolutely, clearly, obviously, what a queen, such natural beauty, so humble, really feeling yourself, wow so confident, groundbreaking, so original, thanks for sharing, how brave, what a hero, so inspiring, incredible story, life changing, deep thoughts, philosophical, such wisdom, mind blowing
Dismissive	don't care, who cares, nobody asked, so what, whatever, big deal, not interested, boring, move on, get over it, deal with it, not my problem, doesn't matter, who is this, why is this on my fyp, skip, next, irrelevant, pointless, waste of time, not important, old news, seen it before, common, normal, everyone goes through this
Blaming	your fault, you did this, you caused it, brought it on yourself, shouldn't have, you asked for it, your choice, deal with consequences, you let it happen, should have known better, your problem, learn from mistakes, own up to it, take responsibility, you made this mess, stop playing victim, attention seeker, drama queen, you created this, bad decisions
Peer Invalidation	stop being dramatic, grow up, be strong, man up, toughen up, stop crying, get help, see a therapist, you're overreacting, too sensitive, stop whining, quit complaining, everyone struggles, we all have problems, life is hard, suck it up, stop being soft, mental health excuse, just sad, seeking attention, making excuses, being weak, not that serious, happens to everyone, normal pain

Table 2. Keyword matching

Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis was performed on the entire dataset of 83,154 comments collected from 50 TikTok videos featuring adolescent girls sharing depressive symptoms. All data cleaning and analysis were carried out using R (R Core Team, 2023). Comments were tokenized into lowercase words using the unnest_tokens() function from the tidytext package (Silge & Robinson, 2016). Common English stop

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words like “the,” “and,” and “is” were removed to focus on meaningful content. Sentiment classification relied on the Bing Liu lexicon (Hu & Liu, 2004), which categorizes words as positive or negative. Tokenized words were matched with the lexicon through inner joins to identify sentiment-bearing terms. Each comment’s sentiment score was determined by comparing counts of positive and negative words, and comments were classified as positive, negative, or neutral. Following standard practice, comments with equal numbers of positive and negative words were labeled neutral, those with more positive words labeled positive, and those with more negative words labeled negative (10e, 2018, August 10). This method aligns with common sentiment analysis approaches, where neutral serves as a baseline for comments without clear emotional bias (Wikipedia contributors, 2025, July 26). The three-category system (positive, negative, neutral) is commonly used in sentiment research for its clear distinctions and accommodation of neutral content (Nandwani & Verma, 2021). A word cloud was generated to display frequent vocabulary across the dataset. Finally, a sentiment distribution chart showed the percentage of comments in each category, offering insight into the overall emotional tone of audience responses to adolescent girls’ mental health disclosures on TikTok.

Topic Modeling

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling was utilized to examine thematic patterns within the TikTok comment dataset focused on adolescent girls sharing depressive symptoms. The dataset included 83,154 comments, with the goal of uncovering key themes related to cyberbullying and emotional disclosure. Data preprocessing was conducted in R (R Core Team, 2023) using the tm package (Feinerer & Meyer, 2008). The comments were cleaned by converting text to lowercase, removing punctuation and numbers, eliminating common English stop words, and standardizing whitespace. Comments lacking meaningful content after preprocessing were excluded to ensure analytical accuracy. A Document-Term Matrix (DTM) was created to capture word frequency distributions across the dataset. The LDA model was executed using the topic models package in R (Grün & Hornik, 2011), with the number of topics set at five. This choice was guided by evaluation metrics such as perplexity and topic coherence, balancing interpretability with predictive power (Gan & Qi, 2021; Zhao et al., 2015). This approach follows standard practices in topic modeling, where different topic counts are tested to find an optimal balance between model complexity and clear thematic separation (Zhao et al., 2015). Selecting five topics yielded stable and distinct themes, aligning with recommendations for datasets of similar size and complexity (Gan & Qi, 2021). To maintain reproducibility, a fixed random seed was applied. For each topic, the ten terms with the highest probability scores (β values) were extracted to aid interpretation. Visualizations of topic-term relationships were created using ggplot2 (Wickham, 2016), providing a clear summary of dominant themes related to cyberbullying and emotional disclosures within the TikTok comments analyzed.

V. FINDINGS

1. What is the extent and styles of cyberbullying directed at young adults in the United States who share depressive experiences on TikTok?

On TikTok, content shared by depressed young adults in the U.S. who seek support received significantly more non-cyberbullying comments than cyberbullying comments, χ^2 (1, $N = 83,154$) = 59,297.79, $p < .001$. Supportive comments were the most common cyberbullying tactic (53.51% of all cyberbullying comments), followed by harmful comments (17.68%), dismissive comments (15.91%), sarcastic comments (8.83%), peer invalidation (3.42%), and blaming (0.65%). A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the different cyberbullying tactics. The results were statistically significant, χ^2 (5, $N = 6,467$) = 7,190.45, $p < .001$, with significantly more supportive tactics and significantly less sarcastic, peer invalidation, and blaming than the other cyberbullying tactics. Based on the adjusted standardized residuals with critical value ± 1.96 , supportive comments were used significantly more on TikTok than expected, while sarcastic comments, peer invalidation, and blaming were used significantly less than expected.

Tactic	Non-cyberbullying		Cyberbullying			χ^2	df	N	p
	#	%	#	%	Adjusted standardized residuals				
Supportive			3,461	53.51	72.59	7,190.45	5	6,467	< 0.001

Harmful			1,143	17.68	1.98				
Dismissive			1,029	15.91	-1.48				
Sarcastic			571	8.83	-15.43				
Peer Invalidation			221	3.42	-26.09				
Blaming			42	0.65	-31.55				
Total	76,687	92.2	6,467	7.8		59,297.79	1	83,154	< 0.001

Table 3. Extent and style of trolling

2. What topics are most frequently discussed within cyberbullying interactions targeting young adults who post about depression on TikTok?

The analysis revealed that the most frequently discussed topics within cyberbullying interactions targeting young adults who post about depression on TikTok encompassed five distinct categories. Emotional Vulnerability discussions centered on personal emotional states and feelings of uncertainty, featuring terms such as "feel," "will," "like," and "just." Identity Struggles represented content focused on self-perception and personal identity challenges, characterized by terms including "girl," "beautiful," "love," and "time." Social Connection emerged through conversations about relationships and social support systems, with prominent terms like "people," "thank," "eyes," and "going." Negative Emotions involved discussions centered on adverse emotional experiences and coping difficulties, dominated by terms such as "hate," "dont," "need," and "life." Emotional Expression reflected conversations about the manifestation and articulation of feelings, featuring terms including "crying," "beautiful," "day," and "god." These topics collectively demonstrate the complex nature of cyberbullying discourse surrounding mental health content on the platform, encompassing both direct emotional attacks and subtle forms of invalidation that target vulnerable individuals' personal experiences and psychological well-being.

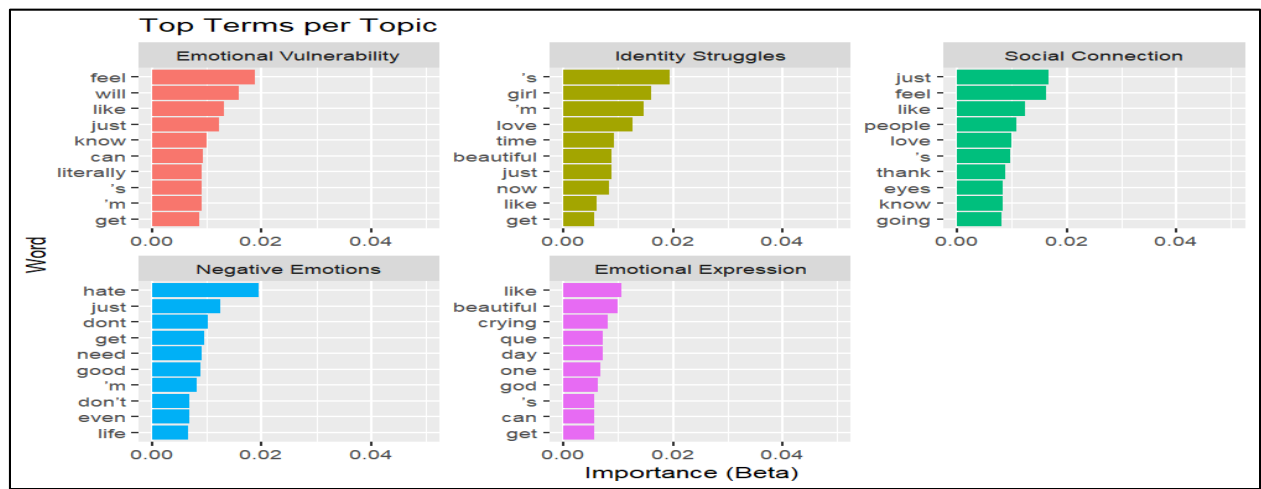


Figure 1. Topics discussed

3. What is the overall sentiment expressed by TikTok users in response to posts by young adults sharing their struggles with depression or seeking help?

The sentiment analysis revealed significantly more neutral sentiment expressed towards young adults who post about depression or seek help on TikTok than positive or negative sentiment. Neutral comments comprised the largest proportion of user responses, followed by negative sentiment, while positive sentiment constituted the smallest category of responses. The sentiment distribution demonstrated that users predominantly responded with non-judgmental reactions to depression-related posts.

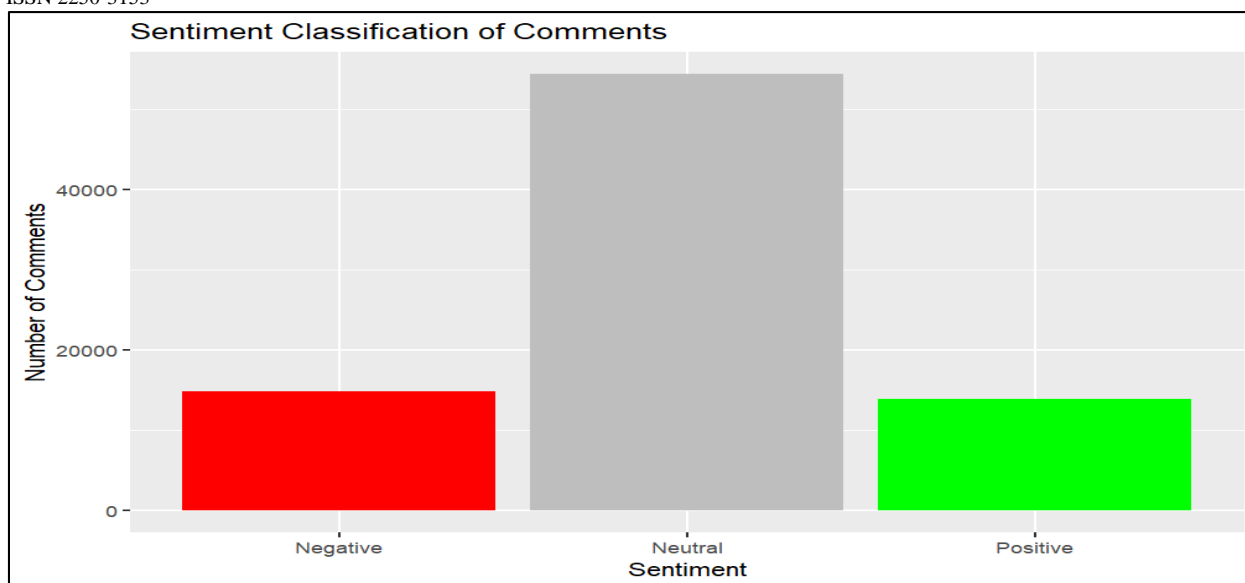


Figure 2. User sentiments

The word cloud analysis showed the most frequently used terms across all comments. The most prominent words included "love," "feel," "don't," "you're," "i'm," "people," "hope," "life," and "god," indicating that discussions frequently centered on emotional support and empathetic responses. Other notable terms included "hugs," "strong," "support," "heart," "crying," "stay," "hard," and "happy," suggesting supportive discourse around mental health struggles and recovery. Mental health-related terms such as "depression," "pain," "sad," "hurt," and "feeling" also appeared prominently, reflecting the connection between personal vulnerability discussions and emotional validation in the comment sections.



Figure 3. Word cloud

VI. DISCUSSION

This section starts by describing the differences in both the frequency and style of cyberbullying comments aimed at depressed young adults in the U.S. who seek support online. It then highlights the key topics identified in user comments and discusses the results of the sentiment analysis. On TikTok, content shared by depressed young adults in the U.S. seeking support receives significantly more non-cyberbullying comments than cyberbullying ones. This pattern can be explained by the important role that online mental health communities play in reducing harassment. These communities foster environments of social support and rely on effective moderation to maintain a positive atmosphere. Social support within these spaces is often described as “contagious,” meaning that users who receive positive encouragement are more likely to offer support to others, creating a reinforcing cycle that helps mitigate harassment and promotes a welcoming environment (Chen & Xu, 2021). Moderation also plays a crucial role in reducing harmful behavior by ensuring that discussions remain respectful and focused. Research shows that active moderators increase user engagement, encourage open conversations about negative emotions, and significantly decrease antisocial behavior, including harassment (Wadden et al., 2020). Moreover, moderators benefit from mutual support networks where they exchange strategies and resources, which strengthens their capacity to maintain safe and supportive community spaces (Tabassum et al., 2024.). These factors could help explain why non-cyberbullying comments are more prevalent in TikTok content shared by depressed young adults seeking support. Supportive comments were used significantly more on TikTok than expected, while sarcastic comments, peer invalidation, and blaming were used significantly less than expected. One factor contributing to this pattern is the higher levels of mental health literacy among users, which have been linked to lower levels of stigma (Fahmawati & Affandi, 2024). Additionally, public disclosures of mental health struggles on social media can further increase mental health literacy and reduce stigma, especially when audiences perceive empathy and identify with those sharing their experiences (Zhang et al., 2025; Meyerhoff et al., 2022). These factors could contribute to a more supportive environment, reducing negative reactions like sarcasm, invalidation, and blame. The most discussed topics in cyberbullying interactions targeting young adults who share content about depression on TikTok highlight the complex nature of online abuse related to mental health. These interactions encompass both direct emotional attacks and subtle forms of invalidation that specifically target personal experiences and psychological well-being of vulnerable individuals. Several platform characteristics facilitate this harassment. The relative anonymity provided by social media platforms often reduces users' inhibitions, enabling hostile or invalidating behavior without fear of immediate consequences (Suler, 2004; Sezer & Tunçer, 2021). Additionally, low digital literacy can worsen the problem by creating knowledge gaps that perpetrators exploit. When victims lack awareness of reporting mechanisms or blocking procedures, abusive users can continue their behavior without detection or accountability (Tao et al., 2022). The sentiment analysis showed that comments directed at young adults posting about depression or seeking help on TikTok expressed significantly more neutral sentiment compared to positive or negative sentiment. TikTok serves as a platform where personal experiences and emotional expressions related to mental health are shared extensively, yet the content often conveys sadness, loneliness, or despair. Users may feel uncertain about how to respond appropriately to such sensitive topics, leading to more cautious, neutral commentary rather than potentially inappropriate positive or negative reactions (Tudehope et al., 2024). Additionally, the platform's algorithmic design creates a unique environment where personal stories blend with professional psychology content. This mixture of therapeutic and algorithm-driven material may leave users unsure about how to respond emotionally, resulting in neutral sentiment as they navigate between authentic personal narratives and curated mental health content without clear social cues for appropriate responses (Avella, 2023). These factors could explain why neutral sentiment dominates responses to mental health content on TikTok. Building on these findings, the following section outlines key policy implications that can guide platform regulation, youth mental health initiatives, and targeted prevention strategies to address cyberbullying and its psychological impacts on vulnerable adolescents sharing depression content on TikTok in the U.S.

Policy Implications and National Relevance

The mental health crisis among American youth represents a critical threat to national prosperity and security, with cyberbullying serving as a significant driver of psychological distress that undermines the nation's future workforce and social stability. While 40% of high school students report feeling persistently sad and hopeless according to the latest CDC data (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2025), mental health issues cost the U.S. economy 30% higher than prior estimates—\$282 billion annually, representing 1.7 percent of the country's annual consumption, or the budget of a major federal department (Chatterjee, 2024). The prevalence of cyberbullying compounds this crisis, with 26.5% of students experiencing cyberbullying within the past 30 days, up from 16.7% in 2016 (Scovell, 2025), and nearly half of US teens having experienced some form of cyberbullying (Joshua, 2025). Among adolescents who experienced a major depressive episode in the past year and arguably are in serious need of treatment, 40% still did not receive mental health care (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2025), highlighting the urgent need for platform-specific interventions that can reach vulnerable youth where they spend significant time online. TikTok's dominance among American youth makes understanding its cyberbullying dynamics

essential for national mental health policy, with 62% of U.S. adults under 30 using TikTok (Eddy, 2024), over 76 percent of users aged between 18 and 24 years active on the platform (eMarketer, 2025), representing 136 million monthly active users in the US alone (Woodward, 2025). Despite the apparent social connection, 95% of youth ages 10 to 24 believe there are people in their lives who really care about them, yet 45% reported struggling with their mental health within the past two years, and 29% had engaged in or considered self-harm (Hicks, 2025). The economic implications are staggering: suicide was the 12th leading cause of death in the United States overall; the second leading cause of death for youths ages 10-14 years; and the third leading cause of death for people ages 15-24 years, while from 2008 to 2020, the rate of suicide death among youths ages 12-17 increased from 3.7 per 100,000 population to 6.3 per 100,000 population, representing a 70% increase (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2022).

This research provides critical evidence supporting multiple federal initiatives and regulatory frameworks. The findings align directly with the Kids Online Safety Act (Kids Online Safety Act, 2023), reintroduced in the 119th Congress in May 2025 (Blumenthal, R., n.d.), which requires social media platforms to put the well-being of children first by providing an environment that is safe by default (Blumenthal, R., n.d.). The documentation that supportive comments comprised 53.51% of cyberbullying interactions while harmful comments represented 17.68% offers specific evidence for implementing KOSA's platform accountability measures, as the duty of care provisions require social media companies to prevent and mitigate specific harms including sexual exploitation, mental health disorders, and cyberbullying (Blumenthal, R., n.d.). The identification of specific harassment patterns provides platforms with targeted content moderation priorities that could be implemented through algorithmic detection systems, with recent research demonstrating that cyberbullying detection systems can achieve accuracy rates of 84-95%, including CNN models achieving 95% accuracy and Random Forest models achieving 91% accuracy when trained on specific harassment patterns (Raj, 2023). The neutral sentiment dominance documented in this study suggests that most user interactions on depression-related content are neither overtly supportive nor harmful, indicating potential for intervention strategies that encourage more positive engagement and contribute to the development of evidence-based digital citizenship programs that teach students about responsible online behavior and reduce stigma around seeking support.

Recent cybersecurity concerns highlight the intersection of platform safety and national security, with 386 health care cyber-attacks reported thus far in 2024, indicating that data-theft crimes and ransomware attacks against health care and mission-critical third-party providers appear to be unfolding at the same elevated rate as in 2023 (Riggi, 2024), while cybercrime is predicted to cost the world \$9.5 trillion USD in 2024 (eSentire, n.d.). The mental health implications of cyberbullying represent a complementary threat to American resilience, particularly as support for the U.S. government banning TikTok now stands at 32%, down from 50% in March 2023 (McClain & Dawson, 2024), indicating the platform's continued presence in American digital infrastructure. This research provides federal agencies with actionable evidence for developing targeted interventions that protect youth mental health while balancing free speech considerations and platform regulation needs. The economic benefits of addressing cyberbullying-related mental health issues extend beyond immediate healthcare savings, as virtual mental health care solutions are effective and would generate economic gains equivalent to 1.1 percent of annual US consumption (Sperling, 2024), while the current research demonstrates that platform-specific understanding can inform scalable digital interventions. As Congress considers comprehensive online safety legislation, these findings offer evidence-based guidance for policy development that protects vulnerable youth without undermining the beneficial aspects of social media connectivity that support mental health recovery and peer support networks.

VII. LIMITATIONS

The data collection focused exclusively on TikTok content from young adults in the United States, which limits the applicability of results to other social media platforms, age groups, or cultural contexts. Furthermore, the keyword-based text mining approach, while systematic and scalable, may have missed nuanced forms of cyberbullying that do not contain explicit harmful language.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study addresses a gap in the literature on cyberbullying comments directed at young adults sharing depression content in the U.S. on TikTok. This study is significant because it examines harassment patterns on a platform where mental health discussions are increasingly prevalent among young users, providing insights into how cyberbullying manifests in mental health-related content. The findings contribute to understanding platform-specific harassment dynamics and inform strategies for supporting vulnerable individuals seeking mental health resources on social media. On TikTok, content shared by depressed young adults in the U.S. seeking support receives significantly more non-cyberbullying comments than cyberbullying ones. Supportive comments were used significantly more on TikTok than expected, while sarcastic comments, peer invalidation, and blaming were used significantly less than expected. The most discussed topics in cyberbullying interactions targeting young adults who share content about depression on TikTok highlight the complex nature of online abuse related to mental health. These interactions encompass both direct emotional attacks and subtle forms

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of invalidation that specifically target personal experiences and psychological well-being of vulnerable individuals. The sentiment analysis showed that comments directed at young adults posting about depression or seeking help on TikTok expressed significantly more neutral sentiment compared to positive or negative sentiment.

Future research could explore the effectiveness of intervention strategies designed to reduce cyberbullying on mental health content, using experimental designs. Furthermore, studies could examine how cultural and regional differences influence cyberbullying experiences toward mental health content across various social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter.

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