

Trauma and Technology: A Developmental Analysis of Cyberbullying in Walsh's *Chatroom*

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is a relatively emerging type of interpersonal trauma in adolescents. Still, the majority of available research focuses on behavioral outcomes rather than on the developmental processes that drive online aggression and susceptibility. In literature, digital harm is not researched profoundly in terms of trauma, especially as it applies to adolescent identity formation. *Chatroom* by Enda Walsh is a psychologically intricate depiction of online manipulation and peer victimization, which can be useful in developmental analysis. This paper analyzes how *Chatroom* sensationalizes cyberbullying as a form of developmental trauma, including instability in adolescent identity and unmet attachment experiences, coupled with psychological forces driving both bully and victim. The research employs the qualitative thematic analysis of dialogue, characterization, and virtual communication in the play. The identification of similar themes in power, dissociation, belonging, and emotional regulation is guided by trauma theory and developmental psychology. The discussion shows that the causes of cyberbullying in chatrooms have a developmental basis, such as weak self-concept, social alienation, and repressed emotional distress. Cyberspace acts as a disaccommodating buffer and exaggeration room of aggression, which allows teenagers to project inner trauma. Online communication promotes identity fragmentation and reduces empathy due to its anonymity and performativity. The results imply that cyberbullying can be viewed as a symptom of developmental trauma as well as misconduct in the sphere of technological mediation. By providing a psychological perspective on digital harm in advance (foregrounding), the study can enter the interdisciplinary discourse surrounding trauma studies, developmental psychology, and literary analysis, highlighting the necessity of traumatic methods for addressing the digital culture of adolescents.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, *Chatroom*, developmental trauma, adolescents, peer aggression

Introduction:

The psychological effects of cyberbullying are quite similar to those seen with other types of traumas, with the highest tendency of intrusive memories, hypervigilance, avoidance, and long-term emotional distress (Hinduja and Patchin, 2025). The permanence of harmful online content exacerbates these reactions; repeated exposure to such posts or messages can provoke distress even after the original experience (Van der Kolk 2015). Continuous digital harassment trains the threat-processing system in the brain, thereby developing chronic hyperarousal, akin to allostatic load (Hendricks & Tanga, 2019). The uncertainty of asynchronous online interactions interferes with coping strategies and increases anxiety, especially in teenagers who are in the process of forming their identity (Jungert et al., 2021). A lower level of emotional regulation can result in either social withdrawal or aggression in response to harm; cycles of harm continue (Noret et al. al 2020). As it was proven by meta-analysis, more than half of victims of bullying reach PTSD symptom thresholds (Hinduja & Patchin, 2025). With prolonged activation of stress hormones, the hippocampus's function may be compromised, and the ability to discriminate between safety and danger may be weakened (Van der Kolk, 2014). Consequently, the victims tend to develop generalized mistrust, which disrupts long-term reintegration into society.

Vulnerability and recovery processes after cyberbullying trauma are greatly influenced by family environment (Idsoe et al., 2021). Absence of support from the caregiver or previous maltreatment enhances attention and defensive behavior during online peer interactions. Even favorable backgrounds might not fully buffer against dysregulation during sensitive developmental periods. Experiential aggression in insecure households may increase aggressive explanations of uncertain online interactions. Physiological and behavioral trauma responses also include such aspects as a deficit in concentration, deterioration of academic results, avoidance of activities, as well as somatic stress symptoms, which can be headaches (Hinduja & Patchin, 2025). Physical locations where bullying has been done are symbolically loaded, just like the location of physical trauma (Cour et al 2022). Associative memory networks can be elicited by interface cues or usernames, thereby solidifying distress. Altogether, cyberbullying is a mixture of neurological threat instigating and a long-term socio-emotional disturbance, making the interventions to cover the technological persistence as well as psychological restoration.

Theoretical framework:

The theoretical model created by Nathalie Noret represents bullying not only as a behavioral issue but also as a type of developmental trauma that has a potentially long-term psychological impact. In this view, the concept of bullying can be considered as a traumatic interpersonal experience, which is typified by recurrent aggression, high power disparity between the bully and the victim, and the insidiousness of the damage created. These factors cause a long-standing condition of stress to the victim, just like other interpersonal tortures. Since bullying is usually practiced during the most important childhood and adolescence developmental

phases, it disrupts identity, emotional control, and normal relationships with society. Noret points out that these experiences should be considered when studying trauma, saying that bullying is a traumatic experience, and it should be acknowledged as such (Noret et al. 2024). By putting bullying into the context of trauma, this model helps to focus on disciplinary measures, instead of trauma-informed ones that should take into account the profound psychological consequences of ongoing victimization by peers (Noret et al., 2025).

Based on this conceptualization, Noret suggests a 3-stage model to help children who have been chronically bullied: to be safe and stable, to process the trauma, and to be able to reconnect. The initial phase focuses on physical and emotional security, establishing the child's environment, and offering them coping strategies to address distress in the present moment. The second phase is therapeutic processing of traumatic memories by use of therapeutic methodologies like narrative and Gestalt therapies, which enable the child to rework and live through the experience in a healthier psychological paradigm (Švecová et al., 2023). The last phase focuses on reconnection with friends and the community, developing social confidence, and restoring supportive relationships. As the study by Noret also reveals, the psychological impact of bullying can involve post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, anxiety, and even a predisposition to the psychotic experience in certain instances. Nevertheless, perceived social support of family members, teachers, and peers has a key moderating influence, such that it mitigates the negative mental-health consequences of victimization (Noret et al 2020). In turn, the framework promotes the use of trauma-informed learning settings and comprehensive interventions that consider the needs of a child, family, and school system simultaneously.

Analytical part:

Chatroom by Enda Walsh does not depict the psychological breakdown of Jim as a tragic event, but rather as the combined traumatic development over time aggravated by cyberbullying. Walsh builds the character of Jim in segments of early dissociation, loss of familial ties, being bullied at school, being neglected emotionally, and eventually being bullied within cyberspace, which slowly drains his emotional strength. These experiences do not exist in a vacuum; they gradually accumulate, creating a weak psychological foundation. Consequently, Jim is particularly susceptible to online manipulation, where emotional vulnerability can be easily exploited. His biography shows that childhood traumas remain unresolved, and this can lead to subsequent psychological damage.

Since his early years, Jim has received unsound and inconsistent caregiving and emotional insecurity that compromise his sense of safety. The fact that he remembers "JIM:my mother saying he should take care of me and that it would be an opportunity for us to get to know each other" (Walsh 2005, p 220) indicates that caring is not something they do out of love, but a duty. It is an attachment, thus correlated with duty rather than affection. Such circumstances undermine trust and distort the definition of intimacy. According to trauma theory, irregular caregiving interferes with emotional control and the formation of attachments

and results in individuals who fear insecurity and helplessness (Spinazzola et al 2013). As a result, Jim develops the idea that relationships are unreliable and conditional, which shapes his future interactions.

The traumatic experience of being abandoned further enhances this instability. The recollection of being alone is another of Jim's childhood memories.

“I’m happy looking at the penguins, but it’s been an hour since he left and I go to look for him.....It’s getting dark outside, and I start to worry. The house is feeling too big, so I get my quilt and take it into the bathroom, lock the bathroom door, and it feels safer with the door locked, so I stay in there. And he’s not coming back. (*Pause.*) He’s never coming back. (*Pause.*) I stay there for two days” (Walsh 2005, p 220).

It is a break in the psychological continuity. At this point, the time of temporary absence turns into a permanent loss in his mind. His self-confinement and the use of a quilt are signs of compelled self-sufficiency and untimely emotional self-sufficiency. He does not get comfort and assurance but rather learns to comfort himself by withdrawing. The experience is transformed into a fundamental traumatic memory, which produces incessant anxiety and fear of rejection. It teaches him that safety lies only in solitude, which strengthens his emotional weakness.

These initial wounds find their way into Jim as he grows up into adolescence, since he requires reassurance and approval. His hypervigilance and anticipatory rejection are evident in the way he keeps questioning Laura when asked, for example, “And you really do not mind listening to this?” (Walsh 2005, p 204) He always questions the validity of his emotional needs and is afraid that he is a burden. This is an internalized form of shame and low self-esteem that is based on early neglect. These insecurities are structurally exploited within the chatroom, as William, in his manipulative questions, such as “ I want you to ask yourself two questions before you go to sleep tonight..... Why is it people treat me like I’m nothing?’ If no one cares about my life, why should I care?” (Walsh 2005 p 227). They pass on desperation and self-incrimination in the guise of empathy. Jim gives his self-perception up to external control by writing and rereading these statements. In this case, cyberbullying is conducted with subtle restructuring of the mind, as opposed to verbal bullying.

This procedure is very well aligned with the trauma theory of Nathalie Noret, who believes that bullying must be seen as a traumatic event that can cause permanent psychological harm. Recurrent victimization transforms self-concept, emotional security, and identity formation (Noret et al 2025). In Jim's case, emotional attacks on him are repeated to the point of undermining his sense of agency and autonomy. The bullying does not simply bring him short-term distress; it redefines the way he perceives himself. These invisible scars are integrated into his personality and affect both his relationships, expectations, and his worldview. This weakness is supported by his home life, in which even his family members

taunt and leave him without support (emotionally). Due to the lack of a safe attachment figure, the online world seems to serve as a replacement source of belonging, which William and Eva finally use.

The long-term effects of the developmental trauma are stated in the last monologue of Jim, "I just want my childhood back" (Walsh 2005, p 237). It displays unfinished heartbreak over a lost period of life, robbed by emotional neglect and premature maturity. In this context, trauma is incorporated into the identity and not an experience. Walsh supports this point with the help of disjointed dialogue, self-disclosure, and extended silences, which reflect a traumatized self-story and emotional burnout. The ownership of his own story is damaged as others manipulate and refreeze Jim's personal experiences. In a way, his identity is formed by his aggressors, which proves that bullying is not only a way of assaulting emotions but also a way of defining oneself.

Finally, Jim's suicide attempt is not brought out as an accident and a spontaneous event, but rather, the result of long-term mental trauma. Being left alone, continuous insecure attachment, ridicule in the home, and emotional neglect, as well as digital manipulation, all come together to ruin his resilience. Cyberbullying is the culminating trauma factor in a protracted course and not its cause. Walsh depicts adolescent self-destruction as socially and developmentally constructed, not a matter of choice, through Jim and his tragic fate.

Conclusion

Chatroom explains how online spaces can exacerbate psychological frailty, especially in youth who are searching for their identity, place of belonging, and emotional stability. Enda Walsh reveals the relationship between technology and trauma that is multi-layered through interactions that play out in the online chatroom, demonstrating that anonymity and distance may conceal and increase the negative behaviors. The dialogue of the characters shows that cyberbullying is not only a technological process but a highly human one based on unresolved hurt, manipulation, and the need to dominate or be seen as such.

In terms of development, the play shows how the emotional immaturity or emotional need for validation of adolescents and their lack of coping strategies can make them most vulnerable to both causing and being victims of online abuse. The virtual environment eliminates social repercussions, which makes the cruelty increase, and it also isolates the victims who might already have problems with internal trauma. Consequently, the chatroom turns into a potent metaphor of the darker side of digital communication, where the lack of empathy and the possibility of psychological damage can happen quickly and unnoticed.

In sum, Chatroom is a critique of the ethical and emotional duties that go with technological communication. It is the combination of trauma, adolescence, and cyberbullying that Walsh emphasizes in his work that the audience should be aware of the practical outcomes of online actions and the need for awareness, education, and supportive intervention in the online environment.

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