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Workplace Cyberbullying and Professional Quality of Life Among Teachers: Burnout, Secondary Traumatic Stress, and Compassion Satisfaction

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Abstract

Teachers can be reached by colleagues, supervisors, and parents through email, messaging apps, and social media long after the working day ends, and some of that contact is hostile. This study examined whether workplace cyberbullying is associated with teachers' professional quality of life. A sample of 177 school and higher-education teachers in Vadodara, India, completed the short form of the Cyberbullying Questionnaire (CBQ-S) and the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL), which measures compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress (STS). Cyberbullying correlated positively with STS ($r = .518$, $p < .001$) and burnout ($r = .474$, $p < .001$) and negatively with compassion satisfaction ($r = -.258$, $p < .001$), accounting for 26.8%, 22.5%, and 6.7% of the variance, respectively. Teachers who reported more cyberbullying reported more traumatic stress and exhaustion and somewhat less satisfaction from their work. Because the design was cross-sectional, causal direction cannot be determined.

Keywords: workplace cyberbullying, teachers, professional quality of life, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, compassion satisfaction

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Teachers once left most workplace conflict behind when they went home. Email, messaging apps, and social media have changed that: a colleague, supervisor, or parent can now reach a teacher at almost any hour, and these channels carry criticism and ridicule as easily as routine notices. Hostility delivered this way can be repeated, anonymous, and invisible to school administrators.

Cyberbullying is usually defined as repeated, intentional harm carried out through electronic media against someone who cannot easily defend themselves (Smith et al., 2008; Tokunaga, 2010). Early research focused on adolescents, but both bullying and cyberbullying continue into adulthood and the workplace (Kowalski et al., 2012; Kowalski et al., 2018). Anonymity, a potentially large audience, and the absence of limits on time and place make cyberbullying harder to escape than face-to-face aggression (Slonje et al., 2013).

Among working adults, cyberbullying is linked to poorer occupational outcomes. Nearly half of 158 UK trainee doctors had experienced at least one act of cyberbullying, which was associated with greater mental strain and lower job satisfaction (Farley et al., 2015). Among 331 UK university employees, including academic staff, Coyne et al. (2017) found that cyberbullying was more strongly related to low job satisfaction than face-to-face bullying was.

Teachers can be targets too, including of their own students (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2012). Kopecký and Szotkowski (2017) documented cyber aggression against teachers in the Czech Republic and its impact on them as victims, and among 372 German school teachers, more cyberbullying experience went with lower positive mental health and more stress symptoms (Brailovskaia et al., 2023). Longitudinal evidence points the same way: workplace cyberbullying

was associated with later declines in teachers' affective well-being and work engagement over a 1-year period (Leung et al., 2024), and victimization by students and parents has been tied to work-related stress and intentions to leave the profession (Yarbrough et al., 2025).

Professional Quality of Life

Stamm's (2010) model of professional quality of life distinguishes three related ways in which helping work affects the people who do it: compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress (STS).

Compassion Satisfaction

Compassion satisfaction is the sense of reward that comes from doing helping work well (Stamm, 2010). For teachers, it is the satisfaction of seeing students learn and grow, and it may help them absorb the ordinary strains of the job.

Burnout

Burnout is the exhaustion that builds up when work demands stay high and resources fall short (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Stamm, 2010). Maslach and Leiter (2016) describe three components: exhaustion, cynicism or detachment from the job, and reduced professional efficacy. Among 2,003 Portuguese teachers from preschool to higher education, workplace bullying correlated with every dimension of burnout (Portelada et al., 2025).

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary traumatic stress is distress that follows indirect exposure to trauma, such as hearing about or witnessing what others have suffered. Teachers may meet it through their students' hardships and possibly through hostile experiences of their own. Symptoms include intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and heightened arousal (Figley, 1995). This framework has mostly been applied to nurses and social workers; among teachers, avoidant coping has been associated

with higher compassion fatigue and problem-focused coping with higher compassion satisfaction (Patrick & Bensley, 2025).

The Current Study

Most of this evidence comes from outside India. Burnout among Indian secondary school teachers has been studied (Shukla & Trivedi, 2008), but to the author's knowledge, workplace cyberbullying has not been examined against all three dimensions of professional quality of life in Indian teachers. This study addressed that gap in a sample of school and higher-education teachers. Its objectives were to:

- measure the association of cyberbullying with burnout and secondary traumatic stress;
- examine its association with compassion satisfaction; and
- estimate the variance in each ProQOL dimension accounted for by cyberbullying.

It was hypothesized that workplace cyberbullying would be positively associated with secondary traumatic stress (H1) and burnout (H2) and negatively associated with compassion satisfaction (H3).

Method

Design and Participants

The study used a cross-sectional correlational design, which estimates the strength and direction of associations but not their causal order. Participants were 177 teachers from Vadodara, India (90 school teachers and 87 higher-education faculty), aged 18 to 65 years, recruited by convenience sampling from educational departments including those affiliated with The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. All had at least 6 months of tenure at their current institution.

Instruments

Cyberbullying Questionnaire–Short Form (CBQ-S)

Workplace cyberbullying was measured with the 7-item short form of the CBQ (Jönsson et al., 2017), on which respondents rate how often they have experienced negative behaviors through email, social media, and messaging. Internal consistency in this sample was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$).

Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL-5)

The 30-item ProQOL-5 (Stamm, 2010) yields subscale scores for compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress; reported internal consistency typically ranges from .71 to .90.

Procedure and Data Analysis

Questionnaires were completed on paper or through an anonymous online form. Institutional permission was obtained, and all participants gave informed consent after being told the study's purpose and their right to withdraw. Analyses were conducted in JASP on the full sample. Pearson correlations between CBQ-S totals and each ProQOL subscale tested H1 to H3, and simple linear regressions with cyberbullying as the sole predictor estimated the variance explained in each subscale. With one predictor, R^2 equals the squared correlation. Significance was set at $p < .05$.

Results

Table 1 shows the correlations for the full sample (N = 177). All three were statistically significant.

Table 1

Correlations Between Workplace Cyberbullying and Professional Quality of Life Dimensions

ProQOL dimension	*r*	*p*
Compassion satisfaction	−.258	< .001
Burnout	.474	< .001
Secondary traumatic stress	.518	< .001

Note. N = 177. ProQOL = Professional Quality of Life Scale; CBQ-S = Cyberbullying Questionnaire–Short Form.

Cyberbullying accounted for 26.8% of the variance in secondary traumatic stress, 22.5% in burnout, and 6.7% in compassion satisfaction. The largest effect was for STS, $F(1, 175) = 64.09$, $p < .001$. All three hypotheses were supported.

Discussion

Teachers who reported more workplace cyberbullying also reported more burnout and secondary traumatic stress and less compassion satisfaction. By Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, the associations with STS and burnout were moderate to large and the association with compassion satisfaction small to moderate, so cyberbullying appears more closely tied to the distressing side of professional quality of life than to its rewarding side. The direction of each association

matches earlier international findings (Brailovskaia et al., 2023; Coyne et al., 2017; Leung et al., 2024).

The strongest link was with STS (r = .518), consistent with the view that cyberbullying can act as interpersonal trauma rather than a minor irritation; Mateu et al. (2020) reported a similar association with posttraumatic stress symptoms in UK adolescents. One caveat applies: the ProQOL STS subscale was designed to capture indirect exposure to others' trauma, whereas cyberbullying happens to the teacher directly.

Burnout was also clearly related to cyberbullying (r = .474). Teachers who deal with hostile messages without institutional backing may find their emotional reserves depleted faster, and Varela et al. (2025) found that burnout mediated the link between cyberbullying and lower well-being among Latin American teachers. Because digital messages arrive outside working hours and can reach wide audiences (Slonje et al., 2013), cyberbullying may also make it harder to detach psychologically from work (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015), prolonging each hostile episode.

The weaker association with compassion satisfaction (r = −.258) may reflect the fact that this satisfaction rests largely on relationships with students, which can remain rewarding even when hostility comes from colleagues, supervisors, or parents. Even a modest reduction matters, however, because high burnout combined with low compassion satisfaction is associated with intent to leave teaching (Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). In practice, when a teacher reports cyberbullying, institutions should check for traumatic stress and exhaustion and offer support that addresses trauma-related reactions, not only general work stress. Clear expectations about after-hours digital communication may also reduce exposure.

Limitations

The cross-sectional design rules out causal conclusions; teachers who are already distressed may also notice or recall negative online interactions more readily. The convenience sample came from one city, and school and higher-education teachers were analyzed together even though their settings may differ. The ProQOL STS subscale has not been validated for direct victimization. All measures were self-reported in a single session, raising the risk of common method variance, and paper and online administration were mixed. Finally, potential confounders such as age, gender, teaching experience, and workload were not controlled.

Conclusion

Teachers in this sample who experienced more workplace cyberbullying reported more burnout and secondary traumatic stress and less compassion satisfaction. Although causal claims are not possible, the pattern supports treating workplace cyberbullying as an occupational hazard that institutions, not individual teachers alone, must address through clear digital-conduct policies, confidential reporting, and supportive supervision. Longitudinal, multi-site studies with multivariable models are needed to test whether reducing cyberbullying improves teachers' professional quality of life.

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