

Abusive Language Use Among Generation Z: Behavioral, Psychological, and Sociocultural Perspectives - A Narrative Review

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Abstract: ***Background:** Generation Z has grown up within rapidly evolving digital environments characterized by smartphones, social media, instant messaging, online gaming, and continuous peer connectivity. These environments have transformed interpersonal communication and increased exposure to informal, profane, hostile, and potentially abusive language. However, abusive language is often examined indirectly through related constructs such as aggression, cyberbullying, cyberincivility, and problematic social-media use. **Objective:** This narrative review synthesizes evidence concerning the behavioral, psychological, sociocultural, and digital factors associated with abusive-language use among Generation Z, with particular attention to the Indian context. **Methods:** Evidence from systematic reviews, meta-analyses, longitudinal studies, Indian observational research, qualitative studies, and authoritative reports was narratively synthesized. Particular emphasis was placed on peer influence, emotional regulation, emotional intelligence, empathy, moral disengagement, online disinhibition, social-media environments, and psychological consequences. **Results:** Abusive language appears to be a multidimensional communication phenomenon influenced by peer norms, social learning, emotional regulation, self-control, empathy, moral disengagement, family and cultural environments, and digital affordances. Online disinhibition, reduced social cues, asynchronous interaction, and platform characteristics may facilitate hostile communication, although anonymity alone does not adequately explain online aggression. Indian evidence demonstrates substantial problematic internet and social-media use and documents cyberbullying and cyberviolence, but direct evidence concerning abusive-language use among Indian Generation Z remains limited. **Conclusion:** Abusive language should not be equated with ordinary profanity or automatically interpreted as psychopathology. Future research should distinguish casual profanity from targeted verbal aggression and examine behavioral, psychological, sociocultural, and platform-specific determinants using culturally sensitive and longitudinal approaches.*

Keywords: Generation Z; abusive language; verbal aggression; cyberbullying; online disinhibition; social media; psychological well-being; India

1. Introduction

Generation Z has experienced adolescence and early adulthood during rapid expansion of smartphones, social networking, instant messaging, online gaming, and digitally mediated communication. Digital interaction has become an important component of peer relationships, identity development, emotional expression, and social participation. International surveillance demonstrates the scale of this transition: the 2021/2022 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey across 44 countries and regions reported that 11% of adolescents met criteria for problematic social-media use.¹

Digital communication has also created opportunities for harmful interpersonal behavior. Cyberbullying includes harmful or threatening communication through digital technologies and may occur through social media, messaging, gaming platforms, and mobile devices.²

Abusive language encompasses insults, degrading expressions, threats, humiliating remarks, hostile communication, and other verbal expressions that may cause interpersonal harm. It is important, however, to distinguish abusive language from profanity generally. Swearing may serve emotional, humorous, expressive, or affiliative functions and is strongly influenced by interpersonal context.³ Thus, the meaning and impact of offensive language depend

on intention, target, relationship, frequency, context, and consequences.

Digital environments may further modify these behaviors. A recent systematic review found that online disinhibition was associated with adolescent cyberbullying, while evidence concerning anonymity alone was inconsistent.⁴ Therefore, technology itself does not adequately explain hostile communication.

Despite extensive research on cyberbullying, aggression, problematic social-media use, and online disinhibition, abusive language remains insufficiently examined as a distinct behavioral phenomenon. This narrative review therefore integrates behavioral, psychological, sociocultural, and digital perspectives, with particular attention to the Indian context.

2. Conceptualization of Abusive Language

Abusive language overlaps with, but is not synonymous with, profanity, verbal aggression, cyberaggression, cyberbullying, hate speech, and cyberincivility. Profanity may be used for emotional expression, humor, emphasis, or group bonding, whereas verbal aggression is more directly concerned with communication intended to harm another person's emotions, self-concept, or social standing.³

Cyberbullying represents a broader pattern of harmful behavior occurring through electronic technologies and may involve repeated insults, threats, humiliation, exclusion, or dissemination of hurtful content. An Indian community-based study of 387 adolescents aged 15–19 years in Gurugram found that 28.2% reported experiencing cyberbullying at least once during their lifetime.⁵ However, this figure should not be interpreted as a prevalence estimate for abusive language.

This distinction is important because a single offensive expression may not constitute cyberbullying, whereas repeated targeted insults may form part of cyberaggression or cyberbullying. Similarly, language perceived as humorous within one peer group may be experienced as humiliating or threatening by another individual.

Future research should therefore distinguish between casual profanity, slang, emotional expression, verbal aggression, targeted abuse, threats, discriminatory communication, and cyberbullying.

3. Behavioral Perspectives

Peer Influence and Social Learning

Peer groups strongly influence communication patterns during adolescence and young adulthood. Young people may adopt language, humor, slang, and communication styles that provide social acceptance or group belonging. Expressions that receive attention, laughter, or approval may become normalized within particular peer groups.

Social learning theory provides a useful framework because communication behaviors may be acquired through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. In contemporary digital environments, young people are exposed to communication models through peers, influencers, entertainment, gaming, and online communities. However, current evidence does not establish that Generation Z is inherently more aggressive than earlier generations. Rather, particular social environments may reinforce particular forms of communication.

Emotional Regulation, Anger and Self-Control

Emotional dysregulation may contribute to reactive aggression when individuals experience anger, frustration, rejection, or perceived provocation. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis of 137 articles involving 252,605 participants found that difficulties regulating emotions and maladaptive emotion-regulation strategies were associated with higher aggression.⁶

Self-control may also be relevant to digital communication because online responses can be generated rapidly and sometimes without immediate interpersonal feedback. The systematic review of online disinhibition similarly identified low self-control as a possible pathway linking online behavior with cyberbullying.⁴

Nevertheless, anger and profanity should not automatically be considered pathological. Anger is a normal emotional response, and profanity may have non-aggressive functions. The concern arises when communication becomes

intentionally harmful, threatening, humiliating, or persistently hostile.

4. Psychological Perspectives

Emotional Intelligence and Empathy

Emotional intelligence may influence the ability to recognize, understand, and regulate emotional responses during interpersonal conflict. A systematic review and meta-analysis of 17 studies found evidence that adolescents with higher emotional intelligence generally demonstrated less aggressive behavior.⁷

Emotional intelligence is also associated with psychological well-being. A systematic review and meta-analysis including 41 studies found positive relationships between emotional intelligence and both affective and cognitive subjective well-being among adolescents.⁸

Empathy may similarly influence aggressive behavior by increasing awareness of another person's emotional experience. A meta-analysis involving 198 studies and 192 unique samples found small-to-moderate associations between traditional measures of empathy and youth aggression, while callous-unemotional traits demonstrated stronger associations.⁹

Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement provides another explanation for harmful communication. Individuals may minimize the consequences of their behavior, justify hostile actions, blame recipients, or interpret abusive communication as harmless humor. A meta-analysis of research involving children and young people demonstrated a positive association between moral disengagement and aggressive behavior.¹⁰

In digital settings, moral disengagement may become particularly relevant when psychological distance reduces awareness of the recipient's emotional response.

Self-Esteem and Psychological Well-being

Self-esteem and psychological well-being may interact with aggressive and harmful communication in complex ways. Evidence concerning cybervictimization indicates associations with depression, anxiety, stress, and lower self-esteem, although these findings cannot be directly equated with the consequences of abusive language itself.^{11, 12}

The available evidence therefore supports a multidimensional psychological framework in which emotional intelligence, empathy, moral disengagement, self-control, self-esteem, aggression, and psychological well-being may interact rather than operate independently.

5. Sociocultural Perspectives

Language develops within family, peer, cultural, and social environments. Family communication provides early models for emotional expression, conflict resolution, and interpersonal respect. Supportive communication may promote adaptive interpersonal behavior, whereas hostile communication environments may normalize aggressive expression.

Peer groups become increasingly influential during adolescence and young adulthood. Expressions that generate humor, attention, acceptance, or status may become normalized within particular groups. However, normalization should not be equated with harmful behavior. A swear word used casually among consenting peers may function differently from the same expression directed toward an unwilling recipient.

Popular culture, memes, influencers, gaming, and social-media communities further accelerate the circulation of slang and informal expressions. Digital communication can simultaneously function as identity expression, humor, entertainment, emotional release, and social bonding.

Cultural and linguistic context is particularly important in India. Young people communicate across English, Hindi, regional languages, transliterated languages, and code-switched forms. The meaning of an expression may change according to language, region, relationship, and social context. Consequently, instruments developed exclusively in English may not adequately capture culturally specific forms of abusive communication.

6. Digital Environment and Online Disinhibition

Digital environments differ from face-to-face communication through physical separation, reduced non-verbal cues, asynchronous interaction, potential anonymity, persistent content, and varying audience sizes.

A systematic review of 15 studies found that online disinhibition was positively associated with cyberbullying. Moral disengagement and low self-control appeared to contribute to this relationship, while evidence concerning anonymity was inconsistent.⁴ Asynchrony was also associated with cyberbullying in the limited studies available.⁴

Recent qualitative evidence from NIMHANS involving 14 individuals aged 18–30 years who experienced cyberbullying identified anonymity, wider audiences, continuous accessibility, difficulty escaping the interaction, and difficulty gathering evidence as characteristics that may facilitate online violence.¹³ These findings provide important contextual evidence but should not be generalized to all online communication.

Platform characteristics are also relevant. Messaging applications, gaming environments, short-form video platforms, and social-networking sites differ in audience, communication speed, persistence, anonymity, and moderation. The National Academies concluded that social media provide both opportunities and risks and should not be treated as a single homogeneous exposure.¹⁴ Algorithmic amplification may influence exposure to harmful content, but evidence does not justify assuming that algorithms universally amplify abusive language. This remains an important area for further research.

7. Indian Context

India represents an important setting for studying Generation Z because of its large young population, rapid digital expansion, multilingual communication, and substantial urban-rural and socioeconomic diversity.

An Indian systematic review and meta-analysis of 15 studies found pooled prevalence of moderate problematic internet use of 21.5% and severe problematic internet use of 2.6% among school-going adolescents.¹⁵ A 2024 school-based study of 1,795 adolescents in Tamil Nadu identified problematic internet use in 24.5% of participants.¹⁶ In Gujarat, a study of 320 school-going adolescents found problematic smartphone use in 12.5% and problematic social-media use in 11.9%; approximately 80.6% supported school-based sessions on responsible smartphone use.¹⁷

Indian research also documents harmful digital interactions. The Gurugram study reported that 28.2% of adolescents had experienced cyberbullying at least once during their lifetime.⁵ NIMHANS qualitative research among young adults who experienced cyberbullying identified anonymity, accessibility, audience size, persistence, and difficulty escaping online victimization as important characteristics.¹³

Longitudinal Indian evidence has also examined social-media use and depressive symptoms using two waves of the UDAYA cohort from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The study found associations between social-media use and depressive symptoms but did not establish a simple unidirectional causal relationship.¹⁸

These studies demonstrate the relevance of digital behavior to Indian adolescent and young-adult health. However, they **do not establish the prevalence of abusive-language use among Indian Generation Z**. Direct research addressing this construct remains limited.

8. Psychological and Interpersonal Consequences

The consequences of harmful communication may differ according to whether individuals are recipients, perpetrators, or both.

Evidence from cyberbullying research demonstrates associations between cybervictimization and depression, anxiety, stress, suicidal behavior, and lower self-esteem among university students. A 2024 systematic review involving 32 studies and 29,593 university students reported associations with depression, anxiety, stress, suicidal behavior, and reduced self-esteem.¹¹

Longitudinal evidence provides additional support. A meta-analysis of 27 longitudinal studies found a weak but consistent positive association between cyberbullying victimization and subsequent mental-health symptoms among children and adolescents.¹² Importantly, this evidence concerns cyberbullying rather than abusive language specifically.

The impact of harmful communication may depend on frequency, severity, intention, public visibility, relationship

between participants, social support, and individual vulnerability. Persistent humiliation or hostile communication may undermine interpersonal trust and increase social conflict, while digital conflicts may extend into classroom, family, and peer relationships.

Therefore, abusive language should be considered within a broader interpersonal and psychosocial context rather than treated as an isolated linguistic behavior.

9. Research Gap

The literature reveals several important gaps.

First, abusive language is frequently studied indirectly through cyberbullying, cyberaggression, cyberincivility, hate speech, or general aggression. These constructs overlap but are not interchangeable.

Second, adolescents and young adults are frequently studied, but Generation Z is rarely examined as a distinct population with its particular digital, linguistic, and sociocultural characteristics.

Third, psychological variables such as emotional intelligence, empathy, moral disengagement, self-control, self-esteem, aggression, and well-being have largely been examined independently. An integrated model explaining abusive-language behavior is lacking.

Fourth, platform-specific communication remains underexplored. Abusive communication may differ between private messaging, public comments, gaming chats, short-form video platforms, and group communication.

Fifth, Indian evidence is particularly limited. Indian studies document problematic internet use, problematic social-media use, cyberbullying, and cyberviolence, but direct research on abusive-language use among Indian Generation Z is scarce.^{13, 15–18}

Finally, culturally validated measurement is lacking. Future Indian research should account for English, Hindi, regional languages, transliteration, code-switching, slang, memes, and culturally specific expressions.

Accordingly, future research should examine **frequency, intention, target, context, language, platform, publicness, and perceived consequences** and should increasingly use longitudinal and mixed-method approaches.

10. Implications for Mental-Health Nursing and Education

Mental-health nurses can incorporate digital and interpersonal communication into psychosocial assessment, particularly among young people presenting with emotional distress, irritability, interpersonal conflict, social withdrawal, or academic difficulties.

Assessment may include exposure to cyberbullying, online harassment, abusive communication, peer influence,

emotional regulation, problematic social-media use, and coping strategies.

Nursing and educational interventions should emphasize **emotional intelligence, empathy, self-control, anger regulation, respectful communication, conflict resolution, and digital citizenship**. Educational institutions can establish reporting mechanisms, peer-support systems, counselling services, and structured digital-literacy programmes.

Interventions should avoid relying exclusively on punishment and should address emotional, interpersonal, and digital competencies. Collaboration among mental-health nurses, psychologists, educators, parents, and institutional administrators may strengthen prevention and early intervention.

11. Recommendations

- 1) Conduct longitudinal and mixed-method studies directly examining abusive-language use among Generation Z.
- 2) Develop and validate culturally sensitive instruments specifically assessing abusive-language behavior.
- 3) Distinguish profanity, slang, verbal aggression, targeted abuse, threats, discriminatory communication, and cyberbullying.
- 4) Conduct multicentric Indian studies across linguistic, regional, socioeconomic, and urban-rural populations.
- 5) Examine emotional intelligence, empathy, moral disengagement, self-control, self-esteem, anger, and psychological well-being within integrated models.
- 6) Investigate platform-specific patterns of abusive communication.
- 7) Develop and evaluate nursing-led and multidisciplinary interventions addressing emotional regulation, empathy, communication, and digital citizenship.
- 8) Strengthen parental digital literacy and open communication regarding young people's online experiences.
- 9) Encourage digital platforms to improve reporting mechanisms, moderation, safety features, and transparency.
- 10) Evaluate interventions using behavioral and psychosocial outcomes rather than knowledge or attitudes alone.

12. Conclusion

Abusive language among Generation Z is a complex communication phenomenon influenced by behavioral, psychological, sociocultural, and digital factors. Peer norms, social learning, emotional regulation, self-control, emotional intelligence, empathy, moral disengagement, family communication, cultural context, and online disinhibition may influence how young people use and interpret offensive language.

Digital environments may facilitate hostile communication through reduced social cues, psychological distance, asynchronous interaction, audience effects, and platform characteristics. However, technology alone does not explain

abusive behavior, and profanity should not automatically be interpreted as aggression or psychopathology.

Indian evidence demonstrates substantial problematic internet and social-media use and documents cyberbullying and cyberviolence among adolescents and young adults. Nevertheless, **direct evidence concerning abusive-language use among Indian Generation Z remains limited.**

Future research should therefore adopt culturally sensitive, multidimensional, and longitudinal approaches that distinguish casual profanity from targeted verbal abuse and examine psychological, social, cultural, and digital determinants. Such evidence can support effective mental-health nursing, educational, family, and digital-safety interventions aimed at promoting respectful and psychologically safe communication among Generation Z.

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