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CYBERVIOLENCE IN THE DIGITAL ERA: A THEORETICAL EXAMINATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS AND THEIR IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

The rapid and large-scale expansion of digital technologies and social networking platforms has fundamentally reshaped patterns of communication and interpersonal interaction across contemporary societies. This ongoing digital transformation, characterized by pervasive and continuous hyperconnectivity, has contributed to the emergence of novel forms of psychological aggression collectively conceptualized as cyberviolence.

Unlike traditional forms of violence, cyberviolence is distinguished by specific structural and contextual features, including anonymity, instantaneous and wide-scale dissemination of content, the persistence of digital traces, and the dissolution of spatial and temporal constraints. These characteristics not only intensify the psychological impact of aggressive acts but also reconfigure relational dynamics among perpetrators, victims, and bystanders within online environments.

This article offers a theoretical and interdisciplinary analysis of the psychological mechanisms underlying cyberviolence and their implications for mental health. Drawing on clinical psychology, social psychology, and cyberpsychology, it highlights several key processes involved in the emergence and maintenance of online aggressive behaviors, including online disinhibition, moral disengagement, victim dehumanization, and affective and motivational mechanisms that facilitate hostility in digital contexts. The role of digital platforms and algorithmic systems is also examined, particularly in reinforcing violent behaviors and contributing to the gradual normalization of online aggression.

Furthermore, the review of existing literature indicates significant psychopathological consequences associated with exposure to cyberviolence. Empirical findings consistently demonstrate associations with anxiety disorders, depressive symptomatology, diminished self-esteem, social withdrawal, sleep disturbances, and elevated psychological stress. Among particularly vulnerable populations, especially adolescents and young adults, exposure to cyberviolence may also be associated with self-harming behaviors and long-term deterioration in psychological well-being.

Finally, this paper underscores the necessity of adopting a multidimensional framework for understanding cyberviolence, integrating psychological, social, educational, and technological perspectives. A deeper understanding of the underlying psychological mechanisms is essential for the development of effective prevention, intervention, and

awareness strategies adapted to the complexities of contemporary digital environments. The study further emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary research in advancing knowledge on the evolution of digital violence and its impact on mental health in increasingly hyperconnected societies.

Keywords: Cyberviolence; Cyberbullying; Mental Health; Online Disinhibition; Moral Disengagement.

1 INTRODUCTION

The rapid rise of digital technologies and the widespread adoption of social networking platforms have profoundly transformed communication patterns and forms of social interaction over the past two decades. This evolution is embedded within a context of global hyperconnectivity, in which individuals are continuously engaged through digital spaces that have become central to everyday life. While this transformation has significantly improved access to information and social exchange, it has also been accompanied by the emergence of new forms of interpersonal violence, collectively referred to as cyberviolence.

Cyberviolence refers to a range of aggressive, intentional, and repetitive behaviors directed toward an individual or group through digital technologies. It represents an extension of traditional forms of violence into screen-mediated environments, yet it is distinguished by specific characteristics that fundamentally alter its nature and psychological impact. These include perpetrator anonymity, rapid dissemination of content, the persistence of digital traces, and the absence of spatial and temporal boundaries (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). Together, these features amplify the reach of aggressive acts and complicate the relational dynamics between perpetrators, victims, and bystanders.

Research in social psychology and cyberpsychology has shown that digital environments facilitate psychological processes that increase the likelihood of aggressive behavior. Among these, Suler's (2004) online disinhibition model occupies a central position, explaining how anonymity, invisibility, and physical distance weaken typical social constraints, thereby fostering impulsive or hostile behaviors. In parallel, Bandura's theory of moral disengagement (1999, 2002) provides a framework for understanding how individuals may rationalize harmful actions by minimizing personal responsibility or dehumanizing victims.

In this context, cyberviolence cannot be reduced to isolated individual behaviors; rather, it must be understood as a multifactorial phenomenon shaped by psychological, social, and technological dynamics. Digital platforms, particularly social networking sites, play a crucial role in the diffusion and amplification of aggressive content, notably through mechanisms of virality and algorithmic systems that prioritize engagement, sometimes at the expense of moderating harmful or toxic content.

From an empirical perspective, several studies have highlighted the significant psychological consequences associated with exposure to cyberviolence. A meta-analysis by Tokunaga (2010) demonstrated a robust association between cyberbullying and psychological distress, including depressive and anxiety symptoms. Similarly, the work of Hinduja and Patchin (2010, 2015) indicates that victims of cyberviolence are at increased risk of low self-esteem, social isolation, and self-harming behaviors. These findings are further supported by Kowalski et al. (2014), who emphasize the severity of psychological impacts, particularly among adolescents and young adults, who constitute highly vulnerable populations.

Thus, cyberviolence has become a major public mental health concern, requiring a comprehensive understanding of its underlying mechanisms and psychopathological consequences. Despite the growing body of empirical research, the psychological processes involved in the emergence and maintenance of such behaviors remain insufficiently integrated into a unified theoretical framework.

In this perspective, the present article aims to provide an integrative theoretical analysis of the psychological mechanisms involved in cyberviolence, as well as its implications for mental health. It seeks to draw on clinical psychology, social psychology, and cyberpsychology in order to better understand these processes and to contribute to the development of prevention and intervention strategies adapted to the contemporary digital environment.

2 CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CYBERVIOLENCE

2.1 Conceptual Definition of Cyberviolence

Cyberviolence constitutes an emerging theoretical construct at the intersection of social psychology, cyberpsychology, and digital communication sciences. It can be defined as a set of intentional aggressive behaviors mediated by digital

technologies, directed toward an individual or a group within an interactional context characterized by permanent connectivity and algorithmically structured communication environments.

From a conceptual standpoint, cyberviolence should not be reduced to a simple transposition of interpersonal violence into digital space. Rather, it represents a reconfiguration of the modalities of aggression, in which the traditional parameters of the perpetrator–victim relationship are profoundly reshaped by the structural properties of digital environments. Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, and Lattanner (2014) emphasize that such behaviors are embedded within socio-technical systems in which human interaction is mediated by interfaces, platforms, and visibility-driven logics.

Accordingly, cyberviolence must be understood as a hybrid socio-psychological phenomenon resulting from the interaction between individual dispositions, group dynamics, and digital architectures.

2.2 Reconfiguration of Interpersonal Violence in Digital Space

Contemporary literature suggests that cyberviolence reflects a structural transformation of traditional forms of interpersonal aggression. Unlike face-to-face interactions, digital environments introduce a spatio-temporal dissociation between aggressive acts and their consequences, thereby altering behavioral inhibition mechanisms.

In this regard, Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect highlights how factors such as anonymity, asynchronicity, and disembodiment reduce normative constraints typically regulating social behavior. This disinhibition does not merely reflect a weakening of social control, but also involves a cognitive restructuring of perceived responsibility.

Moreover, cyberviolence operates within a logic of potentially unlimited public visibility, transforming aggression into a disseminable, reproducible, and persistent event. This dimension amplifies the symbolic reach of violent acts and may intensify their psychopathological impact on victims.

2.3 Structural Properties and Specific Dynamics

Digital environments confer upon cyberviolence a set of structural properties that significantly complicate its psychopathological analysis:

- **Interactional disembodiment:** Technological mediation reduces direct perception of the other's suffering, fostering emotional distancing processes.
- **Information asymmetry:** The dissociation between real and digital identities enables forms of aggression detached from immediate accountability.
- **Algorithmic amplification:** Recommendation systems and viral dynamics contribute to the exponential spread of aggressive content.
- **Extended temporality:** The persistence of digital content introduces a continuity of violence beyond the initial act.

Together, these properties contribute to the formation of a digital ecosystem in which the boundaries between social interaction, symbolic performance, and psychological aggression become increasingly blurred.

2.4 Functional Typology of Cyberviolence Manifestations

Rather than a purely descriptive classification, cyberviolence can be analyzed through its psychosocial functions. The various manifestations observed online reflect distinct motivational and interactional dynamics.

Cyberbullying constitutes a form of repeated aggression embedded in relational dominance dynamics. Online humiliation reflects a process of public symbolic degradation. The non-consensual dissemination of intimate content is associated with mechanisms of control and privacy violation. Hate speech contributes to processes of social categorization and identity polarization.

Other forms, such as sextortion, reveal instrumental dynamics of power and coercion, whereas online exclusion reflects mechanisms of social ostracism. Finally, cyber control in intimate relationships illustrates the transposition of interpersonal domination patterns into digital spaces.

2.5 Inequalities in Vulnerability and Risk Factors

The distribution of vulnerability to cyberviolence cannot be understood independently of developmental, social, and psychological determinants that shape individual trajectories.

Adolescents represent a particularly exposed population due to the centrality of digital environments in identity formation and emotional regulation processes (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). This developmental stage is characterized by heightened sensitivity to social evaluation and peer validation, increasing susceptibility to cyberviolence dynamics.

Young adults, particularly in contexts of intensive digital exposure, also present elevated risk, largely due to the increasing mediation of social interactions through digital platforms.

Women are disproportionately exposed to gendered forms of cyberviolence, often linked to dynamics of sexualization, control, and social stigmatization. Finally, individuals with pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities (particularly in self-esteem and emotional regulation) appear more likely to develop severe psychopathological outcomes following exposure.

3 PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS INVOLVED IN CYBERVIOLENCE

3.1 Online Disinhibition: The Reduction of Socio-Cognitive Constraints

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding aggressive behavior in digital environments is Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect. This model proposes that the structural characteristics of digital spaces profoundly alter the socio-cognitive regulations that typically govern interpersonal interactions.

Online disinhibition does not merely reflect a reduction in behavioral control; rather, it involves a fundamental reconfiguration of self-regulatory processes. Several converging factors contribute to this phenomenon, including dissociative anonymity, physical invisibility, asynchronous communication, and the attenuation of traditional social cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and immediate feedback.

These conditions collectively reduce public self-awareness and weaken perceived accountability, thereby facilitating a freer—and often more impulsive—expression of negative affect. Within this framework, online aggressive behaviors can be interpreted as the disinhibited expression of tendencies that are normally constrained by offline social norms and inhibitory mechanisms.

3.2 Dehumanization of the Victim and Empathic Distortion

Dehumanization constitutes a central cognitive mechanism in the emergence and maintenance of online aggressive behaviors. It refers to the process through which the victim is no longer perceived as a subject endowed with psychological depth, but rather as an object or abstract entity.

In digital environments, technological mediation reduces access to emotional cues typically available in face-to-face interactions. This attenuation of empathic signals contributes to a diminished recognition of others' suffering, thereby weakening empathic inhibition.

This process is further reinforced by psychological distance and identity fragmentation inherent to digital spaces, where the "other" becomes a representation rather than an embodied presence. Consequently, dehumanization operates as a cognitive facilitator of aggression by reducing the emotional cost associated with harmful behavior.

3.3 Moral Disengagement: Cognitive Rationalization of Aggression

Bandura's theory of moral disengagement (1999, 2002) provides a key explanatory framework for understanding online aggressive behaviors. It posits that individuals can deactivate internal self-regulatory mechanisms to render harmful conduct psychologically and morally acceptable.

Within the context of cyberviolence, several mechanisms of moral disengagement are particularly salient, including diffusion of responsibility (especially in online group dynamics), minimization of consequences (perceived low emotional impact on victims), victim dehumanization, and cognitive reconstruction of the act as justified, deserved, or legitimate.

These processes enable a cognitive restructuring of moral judgment, thereby reducing the dissonance between internalized moral standards and actual behavior. In digital environments, such mechanisms are amplified by social distance and the dilution of individual accountability within collective online dynamics.

3.4 Emotional and Motivational Dynamics of Online Aggression

Beyond cognitive mechanisms, cyberviolence is also embedded within complex emotional and motivational processes. Empirical and theoretical work suggests that online aggressive behaviors may serve distinct psychological functions.

The pursuit of power and control represents a central motivation, particularly in asymmetrical online interactions. In some cases, cyberviolence may also reflect narcissistic compensatory dynamics, whereby aggression serves to restore a threatened or fragile sense of self-esteem.

Furthermore, frustration–aggression models suggest that unregulated negative affect, such as anger or frustration, may be externalized through online aggressive behaviors. Additionally, the search for social validation plays a reinforcing role, as engagement in aggressive acts may be rewarded through digital feedback mechanisms such as likes, shares, or group approval.

3.5 Digital Environment and the Amplification of Violent Behaviors

Digital platforms do not function as neutral environments for interaction; rather, they actively shape and structure social behavior. Algorithmic architectures, driven by engagement-based logics, may inadvertently amplify the visibility of emotionally charged content, including violent or aggressive material.

Content virality contributes to the progressive normalization of certain forms of aggression by embedding them within mass dissemination dynamics. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of social contagion, whereby aggressive behaviors spread through imitation and social reinforcement mechanisms.

Moreover, online group dynamics, particularly within closed or polarized digital communities, foster deindividuation and diffusion of responsibility, thereby increasing the likelihood of collective aggressive behaviors.

Consequently, cyberviolence cannot be reduced to isolated individual processes; rather, it must be conceptualized as the product of a dynamic interaction between individual psychological factors and socio-technical architectures.

4 PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF CYBERVIOLENCE

4.1 Immediate Emotional Consequences and Psychological Distress

Exposure to cyberviolence is associated with significant emotional distress, resulting from prolonged activation of stress response systems and the perception of persistent social threat. Unlike traditional forms of violence, cyberviolence is characterized by an experiential continuity of aggression, linked to the permanence of digital content and its repeated accessibility.

At the emotional level, victims frequently exhibit intense negative affect, including anxiety, shame, anger, and a diffuse sense of insecurity. These emotional responses may initially be understood as adaptive reactions to perceived social threat; however, they become pathological when they persist over time or increase in intensity.

Literature in trauma psychology suggests that repeated exposure to online micro-aggressions can generate a chronic stress state comparable to prolonged exposure to a social stressor (Nixon, 2014). This phenomenon contributes to heightened emotional reactivity and impaired affect regulation.

4.2 Associated Psychopathology Following Exposure to Cyberviolence

A substantial body of empirical research has demonstrated a robust association between cyberviolence and a range of psychopathological outcomes. Depressive symptoms are among the most frequently reported manifestations, including lowered mood, diminished interest or pleasure, and negative cognitions about the self, the world, and the future.

Tokunaga (2010), in a comprehensive meta-analytic review, highlights that victims of cyberviolence are at significantly higher risk of developing anxiety and depressive disorders compared to non-exposed populations. Similarly, Kowalski et al. (2014) report a consistent association between cyberbullying and psychological distress, including generalized anxiety and elevated perceived stress.

In addition, post-traumatic symptomatology may also emerge, particularly in cases of severe or repeated cyberviolence. Such manifestations include intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, and avoidance behaviors related to digital environments.

Sleep disturbances are also frequently observed, often mediated by emotional hyperarousal and nocturnal cognitive rumination associated with online victimization experiences.

4.3 Impairment of Self-Esteem and Identity Processes

Beyond clinical symptomatology, cyberviolence exerts a profound impact on identity construction and self-esteem. Repeated exposure to humiliating or devaluing content may lead to a weakening of narcissistic stability and the internalization of negative evaluations.

This process unfolds through a progressive dynamic of cognitive devaluation, whereby victims may gradually incorporate the negative representations conveyed by perpetrators into their self-concept. In this framework, self-esteem becomes a central mediating mechanism between exposure to online violence and the development of psychopathological symptoms.

In more severe cases, this identity-related disruption may lead to a destabilization of the social self, characterized by reduced relational confidence and a pervasive negative perception of one's social value.

4.4 Social Withdrawal and Behavioral Consequences

The consequences of cyberviolence are not limited to intrapsychic processes but extend to observable social behaviors. A pattern of progressive social withdrawal is frequently reported among victims, particularly adolescents and young adults.

This withdrawal can be understood as an avoidance strategy aimed at reducing exposure to environments perceived as threatening. However, over time, it contributes to social isolation, reduced perceived social support, and the exacerbation of depressive symptomatology.

Functionally, cyberviolence may also impair academic and occupational performance due to reduced concentration, psychological fatigue, and emotional overload. These difficulties reflect the broader disruption of cognitive and affective resources necessary for adaptive functioning.

4.5 Increased Vulnerability and Severe Risk Outcomes

Certain populations exhibit heightened vulnerability to the psychopathological effects of cyberviolence, particularly adolescents whose emotional regulation and identity formation systems are still under development.

In these groups, repeated exposure to cyberviolence may be associated with self-harming behaviors and a significant deterioration in psychological well-being. Several studies have also reported an association between cybervictimization and suicidal ideation, although these relationships are typically mediated by intermediate factors such as depression, social isolation, and low self-esteem (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

It is important to emphasize that these outcomes should be understood within a multifactorial framework, in which cyberviolence operates as a risk factor among other interacting psychosocial determinants rather than as a sole causal agent.

5 THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

Cyberviolence, as conceptualized in contemporary literature, cannot be understood as a mere transposition of interpersonal aggression into digital space. Rather, it represents a structural reconfiguration of aggressive dynamics resulting from the complex interaction between individual psychological factors, socio-relational processes, and technological architectures. This perspective requires moving beyond descriptive accounts toward an integrative, multi-level analytical framework.

Within this framework, the theoretical insights developed in the present article converge on the idea that cyberviolence emerges at the intersection of three complementary levels of explanation. The first level refers to intrapsychic mechanisms, including online disinhibition (Suler, 2004), moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999, 2002), and dehumanization processes, which collectively facilitate the weakening of behavioral inhibition and the cognitive rationalization of aggression. The second level concerns interpersonal and group dynamics, particularly social contagion effects, deindividuation processes, and normative reinforcement within digital environments. The third level relates to the socio-technical characteristics of platforms, including algorithmic logics, content virality, and attention-based reward systems.

A major theoretical contribution of this analysis lies in the recognition of the active role played by digital environments in shaping and modulating aggressive behavior. Contrary to strictly individualistic conceptions of violence, theoretical evidence suggests that digital platforms actively contribute to behavioral structuring by amplifying certain emotional stimuli and promoting visibility dynamics that may reinforce aggressive conduct. This perspective aligns with

contemporary approaches in cyberpsychology that conceptualize digital environments as socio-technical systems co-constructing human behavior.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights a dynamic interaction between individual vulnerabilities and digital contexts. Factors such as poor emotional regulation, unstable self-esteem, or prior victimization experiences may increase susceptibility to the effects of cyberviolence. However, these vulnerabilities alone are insufficient to account for the phenomenon, which must be understood as the outcome of converging contextual and structural determinants. This interactionist approach allows for a departure from monocausal models that still persist in certain accounts of online aggression.

From a theoretical standpoint, another key issue concerns the progressive normalization of violence within digital environments. The normalization of aggressive content, its mass dissemination, and its integration into entertainment-oriented digital logics contribute to a form of collective desensitization. This process can be interpreted through social learning theory (Bandura, 2002), according to which repeated exposure to observed aggressive behaviors in online contexts may increase their likelihood of imitation and reproduction.

However, despite the growing body of empirical research, several theoretical limitations remain. Current models still struggle to systematically integrate technological, psychological, and social dimensions into a unified theory of cyberviolence. Moreover, most research remains primarily focused on the consequences of cyberviolence, often at the expense of a deeper understanding of co-construction processes between individuals and digital environments.

Therefore, there is a clear need to develop more integrative theoretical frameworks capable of capturing the complexity of this phenomenon. Such approaches should adopt a transdisciplinary perspective, drawing on psychology, media sociology, data science, and information and communication sciences. This orientation would not only enhance the understanding of underlying mechanisms but also improve the design of prevention and intervention strategies.

6 CLINICAL AND PREVENTIVE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Prevention of Cyberviolence: Educational and Psychosocial Approaches

The prevention of cyberviolence represents a priority area of intervention, given the central role of digital environments in contemporary socialization processes. An effective preventive strategy must move beyond purely punitive approaches and instead adopt a comprehensive educational framework.

Within this perspective, digital literacy emerges as a fundamental lever. It involves the development of psychosocial competencies that enable individuals to understand online interaction dynamics, identify risky behaviors, and regulate their own digital practices. The integration of digital literacy programs into educational systems thus constitutes a key preventive measure.

Furthermore, the development of emotional competencies—particularly affect regulation and cognitive empathy—represents an important protective factor. School-based interventions aimed at strengthening socio-emotional skills have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing aggressive behaviors, including online aggression (Gaffney et al., 2019).

Finally, raising awareness among adolescents and young adults about the psychological consequences of cyberviolence contributes to strengthening recognition of both individual and social impacts of digital behavior.

6.2 Psychological Care of Victims

From a clinical perspective, the treatment of cyberviolence victims requires a multidimensional approach integrating emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) represents a particularly relevant therapeutic framework, especially in addressing associated anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Therapeutic interventions may include cognitive restructuring aimed at modifying internalized negative thought patterns, as well as emotion regulation techniques designed to reduce the impact of persistent negative affect. Work on self-esteem is also a central component, particularly in cases of prolonged exposure to cyberviolence.

In addition, psychoeducation plays a crucial role in helping victims understand the mechanisms of cyberviolence and in reducing self-blame. It contributes to restoring a more realistic perception of responsibility and mitigating self-stigmatization processes.

In cases of severe digital trauma, a trauma-focused approach may be necessary in order to address post-traumatic stress symptoms and associated hypervigilance reactions.

6.3 Societal, Institutional, and Technological Challenges

The fight against cyberviolence cannot be limited to individual-level interventions; it must also be embedded within a systemic approach involving institutional and technological stakeholders.

Digital platforms play a central role in content regulation. The development of more effective moderation mechanisms, combining artificial intelligence and human oversight, represents a key avenue for limiting the dissemination of violent content. However, such systems must be carefully balanced to preserve individual freedoms and avoid excessive censorship.

At the legal level, protecting victims requires strengthening regulatory frameworks governing online behavior, as well as enhancing international cooperation, given the transnational nature of digital interactions.

Finally, a framework of shared digital responsibility should be promoted, involving not only users but also platform designers, educational institutions, and policymakers. Such an approach is essential for addressing cyberviolence as a systemic and multi-actor phenomenon.

7 CONCLUSION

Cyberviolence has emerged as a complex psychosocial phenomenon resulting from the profound transformation of human interactions within digital environments. The theoretical analysis developed in this article highlights that this phenomenon cannot be understood merely as an extension of traditional forms of violence, but rather as a structural reconfiguration of aggressive dynamics shaped by the specific characteristics of digital spaces.

The conceptual framework presented demonstrates that several psychological mechanisms play a central role in the emergence and maintenance of cyberviolence, including online disinhibition, moral disengagement, victim dehumanization, as well as emotional and motivational dynamics related to the pursuit of power, control, or social validation. These processes are further amplified by the socio-technical properties of digital platforms, such as content virality, algorithmic logics, and the persistence of online material.

From a psychopathological perspective, the synthesis of existing literature underscores the significant impact of cyberviolence on victims' mental health. Observed consequences include anxiety and depressive disorders, impaired self-esteem, psychological stress symptoms, sleep disturbances, and progressive social withdrawal. In more severe cases, these manifestations may evolve into intense psychological distress, particularly among vulnerable populations such as adolescents and young adults.

Beyond these findings, the analysis emphasizes the necessity of adopting an integrative and multidimensional approach to cyberviolence. A comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon requires the simultaneous consideration of individual psychological factors, social and group dynamics, and the technological architectures that structure online interactions. This systemic perspective is essential for moving beyond the fragmented approaches that still dominate the literature.

Finally, this article highlights the importance of strengthening interdisciplinary research in order to better understand the rapidly evolving nature of digital violence and its implications for mental health in hyperconnected societies. The development of integrative theoretical models, combined with appropriate clinical and preventive approaches, represents a crucial pathway for addressing the contemporary challenges posed by cyberviolence.

Thus, understanding this phenomenon is not only an academic endeavor but also a public health and social regulation issue, requiring coordinated action among researchers, clinicians, educators, and institutional stakeholders.

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