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Disappearance. Rethinking The Ethics of Care in the Age of Online Exposure

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Abstract

This article proposes a philosophical reflection on cyberbullying among university students, understanding it not only as a social or psychological problem, but also as an expression of an ethical crisis in the digital age. Using a mixed-methods approach—exploratory and descriptive—applied to 1212 students (quantitative phase) and 20 students (qualitative phase) from CESMAG University (Colombia), the study identifies indicators of family, cultural, and behavioral vulnerability that are statistically significant, albeit modest, in association with online distress among young people. The findings are interpreted through the lens of alterity (Lévinas , 2002), the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993), the critique of technology (Heidegger, 1994; Simondon , 2008), the logic of digital exposure (Han, 2012, 2014, 2017), and the socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1987), which articulates the familial and institutional levels of the phenomenon. The text argues that the disappearance of the other's face and the virtualization of human relationships demand a reconstruction of the sense of responsibility and care as the foundations of an ethically sustainable digital coexistence.

Keywords: *cyberbullying; ethics of care; otherness; human condition; digital responsibility*

Introduction

The digital age has transformed human interaction, expanding communication possibilities but also deepening new forms of symbolic violence. Among these, cyberbullying emerges as a disturbing expression of contemporary unease, particularly in university contexts where identity, exposure, and recognition are under constant tension.

This article is the product of the research project "Appropriation of the digital footprint on social platforms of students between 16 and 20 years old at CESMAG University as a facilitating element of cyberbullying," funded by CESMAG University and developed between 2023 and 2025. Far from being limited to a psychological or behavioral phenomenon, cyberbullying challenges philosophy insofar as it calls into question the ethical conditions of digital coexistence. The invisibility of the other, the disavowal of responsibility of the subject, and the dissolution of the intersubjective bond are symptoms of a broader crisis: the weakening of otherness in a world saturated with images, connections, and performance.

Recent empirical literature confirms that this problem worsened after the social isolation imposed

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by the Covid-19 pandemic (Bachmeier & Cardozo, 2024; Usuga Jerez et al., 2023), which requires updating the references prior to 2017 on which much of the regional production is still based.

Philosophical reflection is complemented by a systemic framework that allows for the anchoring of empirically identified family and institutional factors : Urie Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model (1987), which distinguishes between the microsystem (family, peers), mesosystem (relationships between these environments), exosystem (institutions, parents' work), and macrosystem (cultural values, norms). This model, widely used in educational sociology to study school bullying and cyberbullying, offers a conceptual correlate to the philosophical categories. The face stripped by technology (Lévinas , 2002; Heidegger, 1994) can also be interpreted as a failure in the mesosystem that links family, school, and the digital environment. Institutional neglect (Tronto, 1993) is, in these terms, a deficit in the exosystem. The articulation between both philosophical and socio-ecological registers prevents the analysis of family and institutional factors from remaining as a simple empirical description disconnected from an explanatory framework recognized in the discipline.

The reflection is therefore structured around five conceptual axes:

Carol Gilligan (1982) argues that morality is not constructed solely from logical reasoning, but also from empathy and attention to the vulnerability of others (p. 30). Joan Tronto (1993) complements this perspective by understanding care as a political practice that is not only personal but also encompasses everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world. Applied to the digital environment, this ethic demands that we not normalize anonymity or indifference; every online interaction is also an opportunity to either support or harm others.

For Emmanuel Lévinas (2002), ethics precedes all norms and originates in the presence of the other as a face: a call to responsibility that arises before the freedom of the self (p. 81). In the digital environment, this face is displaced by avatars, symbolic masks, or anonymity; the other ceases to be a subject and becomes an object of ridicule or contempt. Digital responsibility, then, is not only obedience to norms of conduct, but also active resistance to this disappearance of the other.

Martin Heidegger (1994) argues that modern technology transforms the world and human beings into available resources (Bestand), objects ready for use or consumption (p. 21). Gilbert Simondon (2008) nuances this interpretation, maintaining that technology conditions the individuation of the subject, their way of becoming a person in relation to the technical objects they use, and that this mediation can both humanize and reify (p. 59). From this perspective, cyberbullying is not an individual pathology but rather the effect of a technological configuration that facilitates the objectification of the other.

Byung-Chul Han (2014) describes the transition from a disciplinary society to a performance society, in which the individual becomes an entrepreneur of the self and digital overexposure imposes an economy of image where intimacy becomes spectacle (p. 45). Within this framework, digital aggression is not dysfunctional but functional to a system that rewards the spectacularization of the self and punishes difference.

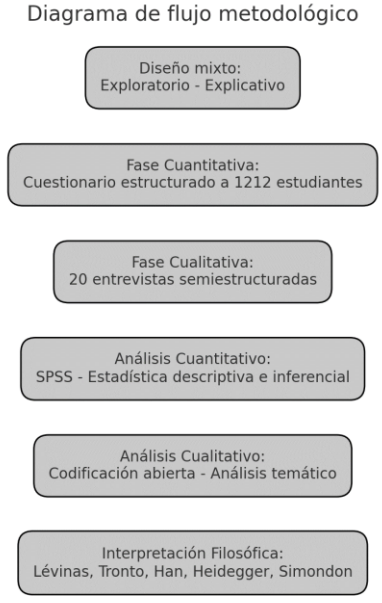
As anticipated, Bronfenbrenner's framework (1987) allows for the integration of the individual, family, institutional, and cultural levels at which cyberbullying unfolds into a single scheme. The microsystem encompasses the young person's direct relationships (family, peers) ; the mesosystem, the quality of communication between these environments; the exosystem, the parents' employment conditions and university institutional policies; and the macrosystem, the cultural values regarding digital exposure and performance described by Han (2012, 2014). This

systemic grounding does not replace the philosophical reading: the specific one, showing at what concrete family, institutional, or cultural level each rupture of the ethical bond occurs, as described by Lévinas , Tronto, Heidegger, and Han.
These five key points allow us to understand cyberbullying not as an isolated behavior but as a symptom of an ontological rupture with the ethical principle of respect for others; the loss of respect for others generates indifference, and indifference enables aggression without remorse. Therefore, the intention of this article is not only to understand the phenomenon but also to contribute to developing a pedagogy of recognition and care in technology-mediated environments.

METHODOLOGY

Type and design of study

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, both explanatory and reflective, combining the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected in a university setting in San Juan de Pasto, Colombia, with a critical and interpretive philosophical reading of the findings. The methodological design was sequential and exploratory-explanatory: a first quantitative phase involved administering a structured questionnaire, while a second qualitative phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with a focus group, with the aim of exploring the subjective meanings and experiences associated with social media use and the perception of cyberbullying.



Population and sample

The population consisted of undergraduate students from CESMAG University. The quantitative sample comprised 1212 students, selected using stratified probability sampling, representative of academic program, socioeconomic level, gender, and age group. The qualitative sample included 20 volunteer students, selected by convenience sampling, with informed consent.

Instruments

Sociodemographic and digital lifestyle questionnaire, aimed at identifying family structure, connectivity, leisure practices, economic leadership of the household, predominant emotions, institutional trust and forms of digital interaction.

A questionnaire on vulnerability indicators associated with cyberbullying, adapted to the local context based on previous studies, is designed to identify risk factors such as digital loneliness, emotional distress, intensive use of social media, and lack of support networks, all of which are linked to cyberbullying in the literature. It is important to clarify that this instrument is not a validated psychometric scale for directly assessing victimization or digital aggression, but rather a set of vulnerability indicators. This distinction, highlighted during the peer review process, is explicitly addressed in the limitations section.

Semi-structured interview guide, with open questions about personal experiences, family contexts, experiences of aggression or exclusion, and coping mechanisms.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics of frequencies and percentages on the total sample N=1212, with variations due to missing values depending on the item. Since, as specified in item 2.3, the instrument did not include a validated scale of direct perception of cyberbullying but rather associated vulnerability indicators, the inferential analysis focused on exploring associations between these indicators (family structure, household economic leadership, frequency of social media use, perception of emotional deterioration, and seeking refuge in the face of difficulties), and not on predicting cyberbullying as a directly measured variable. Chi-square tests of independence, valid cases, and listwise analysis were applied using Python/ SciPy , with the following results:

Household economic leadership and perceived emotional deterioration: **$\chi^2(4, N=1166) = 13.33$, $p = .010$, Cramér 's V = .08.**

Family typology and perceived emotional impairment: **$\chi^2(8, N=1167) = 17.13$, $p = .029$, V = .09.**

Frequency of social media use and perceived emotional impairment: **$\chi^2(4, N=1115) = 12.01$, $p = .017$, V = .07.**

Frequency of social media use and feeling heard by the family: **$\chi^2(8, N=1101) = 15.63$, $p = .048$, V = .08.**

Household economic leadership and absence of a refuge network: **$\chi^2(2, N=1144) = 6.15$, $p = .046$, V = .07.**

Family typology and feeling heard by the family: **$\chi^2(16, N=1154) = 32.13$, $p = .010$, V = .08.**

Family typology and absence of refuge network: **$\chi^2(4, N=1141) = 4.65$, $p = .326$ (not significant).**

All statistically significant associations show small effect sizes (Cramer 's V between .07 and .09): family and connectivity variables are significantly, but modestly, associated with reported emotional distress, without allowing for the establishment of causal relationships or robust risk magnitudes. This result, rather than weakening the study, honestly clarifies its scope; these are exploratory associations between vulnerability factors, not a predictive model of cyberbullying.

For the qualitative analysis, open and axial coding was used, following the thematic analysis approach, carried out by a single researcher from the team, without double coding between peers or member After subsequent checking with the participants, this lack of triangulation is recognized as a methodological limitation.

Ethical considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the principles of respect, confidentiality, voluntariness, and informed consent. All participants were informed of the study's objective, the nature of the data collected, and its exclusively academic use.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study with university students between the ages of 16 and 21 reveals not only quantitative patterns, but also lived experiences that demonstrate ethical, symbolic, and existential tensions. The key categories are analyzed below, taking into account the proposed conceptual framework.

Family structure and economic leadership

The predominance of nuclear families with shared economic leadership (42.7%) suggests a family structure in which care is distributed between both parents. Following Tronto (1993), care is not only an individual act but also a social practice that must be visible and shared. However, the reliance on informal work (22.9%) reveals a structural precarity that weakens this practice. Han (2012) warns that the performance-driven society imposes constant productivity even in the private sphere (pp. 19–23), which emotionally and physically exhausts family members and hinders timely support in the face of signs of cyberbullying.

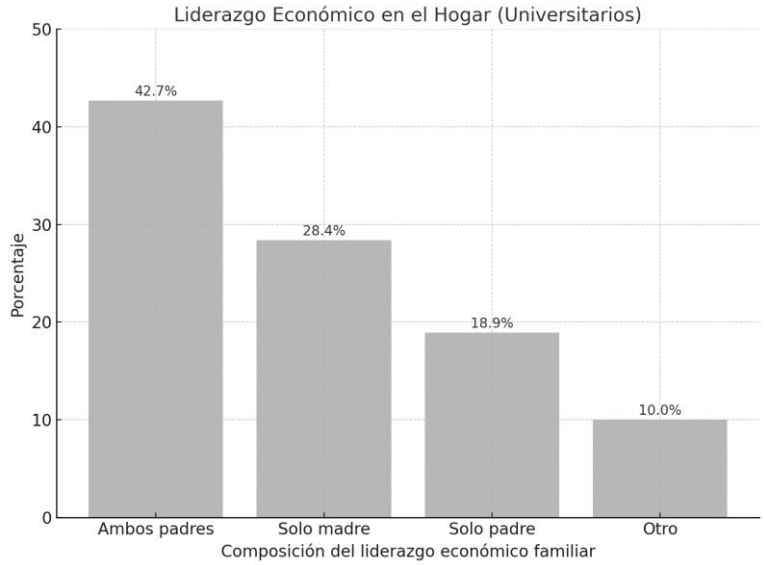


Figure 1. Economic leadership in the household according to the perception of university students. Source: Prepared by the author, CESMAG University survey (2025).

Emotions, connectivity and digital loneliness

7.6% of students reported emotional distress in the past year. Although this percentage may seem marginal, Lévinas (2002) reminds us that the suffering of others cannot be reduced to a statistic;

it is the uniqueness of the face that ethically challenges us (p. 81), and in the digital realm, that face is replaced by depersonalized images. Cyberbullying not only harms: it disconnects, erases the other as a subject of recognition, and empties the digital space of ethical weight.

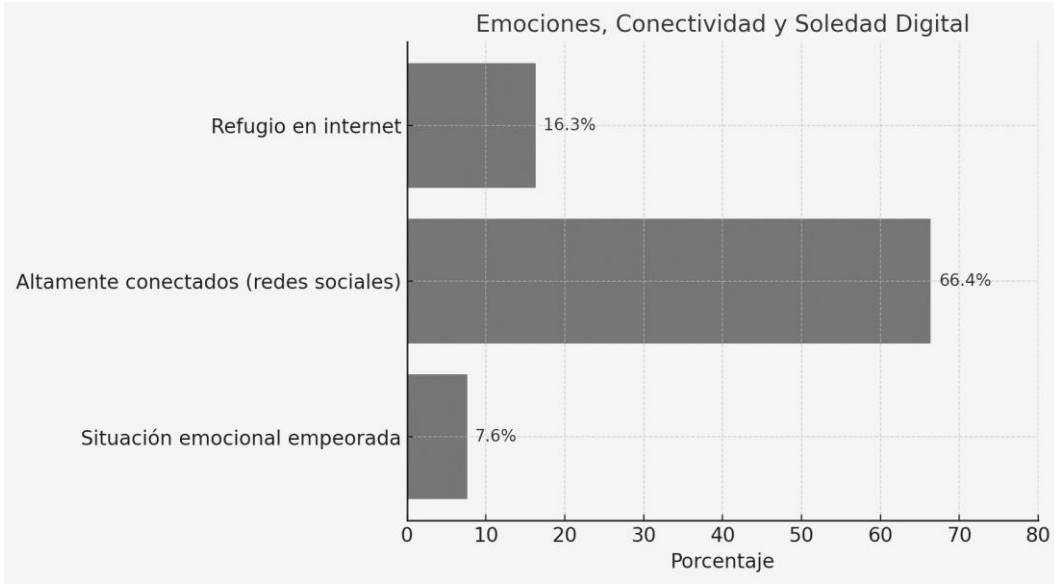


Figure 2. Emotions, connectivity levels, and search for digital refuge among university students. Source: Author's own elaboration, CESMAG University survey (2025).

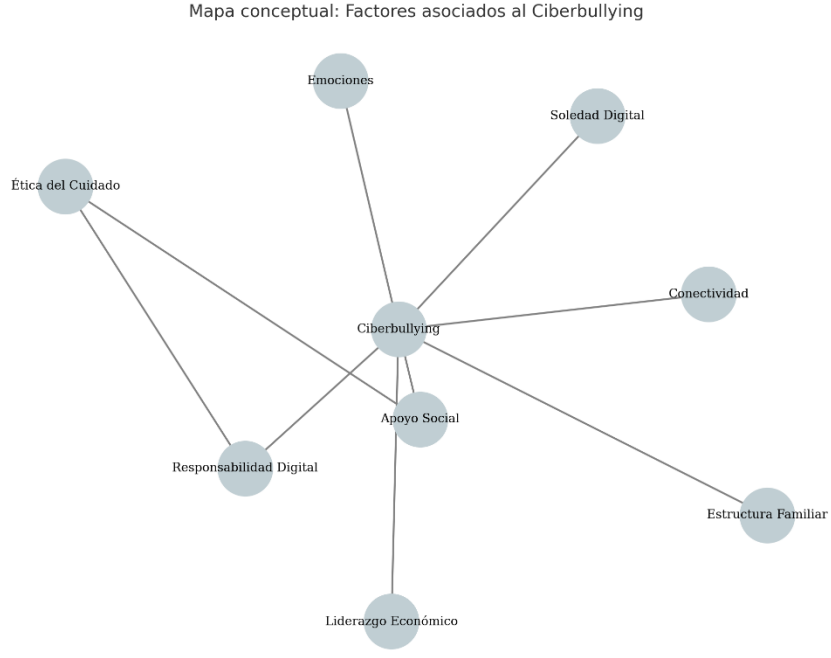


Figure 3. Conceptual map of the factors associated with cyberbullying in university students.

Source: own elaboration, research CESMAG University (2025).

The conceptual map (Figure 3) systematically represents, in a non-linear and non-causal way, the interactions between sociocultural, emotional, and ethical variables that shape the phenomenon. Cyberbullying is conceived as a result of relational dysfunctions at multiple levels (family, emotionality, digitality , ethical bonds), a symptom of a broader crisis in the structuring of the contemporary subject.

Primary determining factors

The type of family structure—nuclear, single-parent, or extended—influences the presence of protective bonds in homes with little communication or supervision. Young people are more exposed to hostile digital environments, which, from the perspective of care ethics, is interpreted as a deficit in adult attention. The economic leadership of the household introduces additional tensions when parents are absent for work-related reasons, reducing emotional support and increasing digital autonomy without ethical guidance. Heidegger (1994, p. 21) would warn here about the instrumentalization of relationships, where time and affection are subordinated to the logic of production. The intensive use of social media, for its part, generates constant exposure without real connection. Han (2012, p. 21) warns that this logic leads to relational fatigue and the impoverishment of authentic encounters.

The deterioration of emotional health increases vulnerability to symbolic aggression; loneliness ceases to be merely an emotional experience and becomes an ontological condition, a accompanied loneliness in which the subject is surrounded by screens, but devoid of real encounters.

Moderating or protective factors

Social support networks—family, friendship, or institutional—act as emotional containment and restore bonds. From the perspective of an ethics of care, these networks not only protect but also constitute subjects insofar as they acknowledge their vulnerability. Digital responsibility is configured as the capacity to recognize the other as a subject even behind a virtual profile—an ethical attitude rather than a behavioral norm. The ethics of care, as a pedagogical horizon, is the node toward which all possible transformation converges; it is not enough to prevent harm, it is necessary to cultivate a culture of recognition.

Digital activities and leisure

The high frequency of social media use (66.4%) indicates that digital technology is not just a tool but the medium where one lives, communicates, and shapes identity. Following Lévinas (2002, p. 81), this space can operate as a territory of disengagement , where the face of the other is diluted in anonymity and performance; the other does not challenge but becomes content. The most frequently reported activity, studying and doing homework (80.5%), can also be interpreted within the logic of self-exploitation denounced by Han (2012, p. 15), where institutional pressure transforms the educational process into constant performance.

Other individual leisure activities such as watching television (45.0%), reading (39.2%), and playing video games (25.7%) suggest less communal forms of leisure that, without significant support networks, can reinforce digital loneliness.

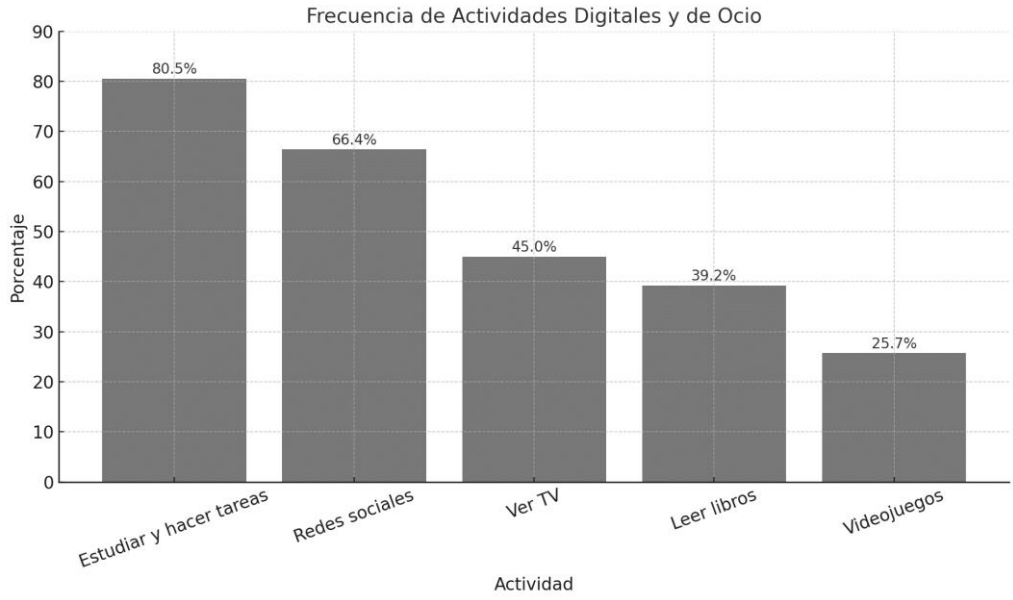


Figure 4. Frequency of digital and leisure activities among university students. Source: Prepared by the authors, CESMAG University survey (2025).

Refuge in family and ethical relationships

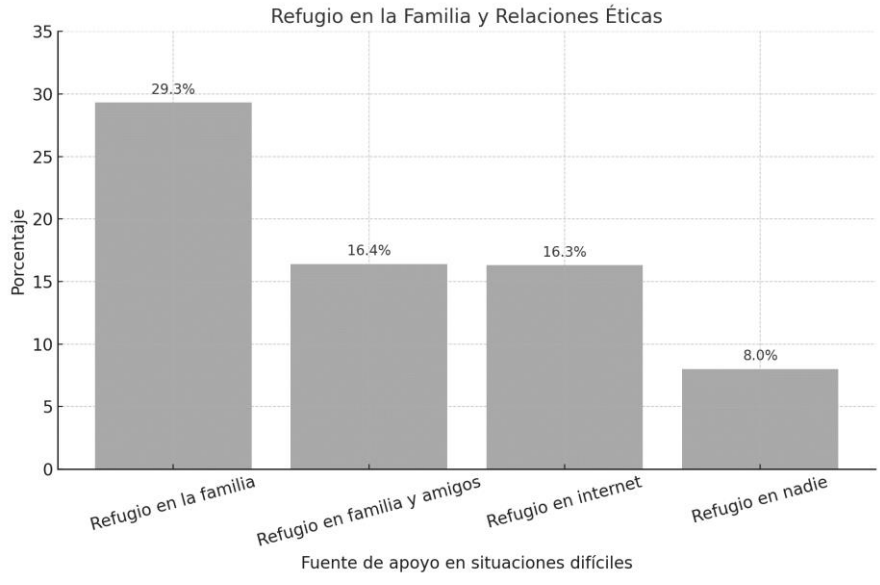


Figure 5. Emotional refuge and support networks among university students facing difficult situations. Source: Prepared by the authors, CESMAG University survey (2025).

29.3% of students rely exclusively on family, and 16.4% combine this support with that of friends, indicating the persistence of spaces of protective intersubjectivity, in line with the ethics

of care formulated by Gilligan (1982). The family, as a caring community, guarantees attention, responsibility, and responsiveness, although its effectiveness depends on the quality of the bond and should not be taken for granted. 16.3% turn to the digital environment as a place of comfort or connection, revealing a paradox: the same space that harbors bullying can also be an emotional refuge. It is concerning that 8% report not seeking refuge in anyone; more than an absence of a support network, this figure points to a wound in the relational fabric in Levinasian terms , a practical denial of otherness, the subject's retreat into themselves without a face to challenge them.

Institutional trust

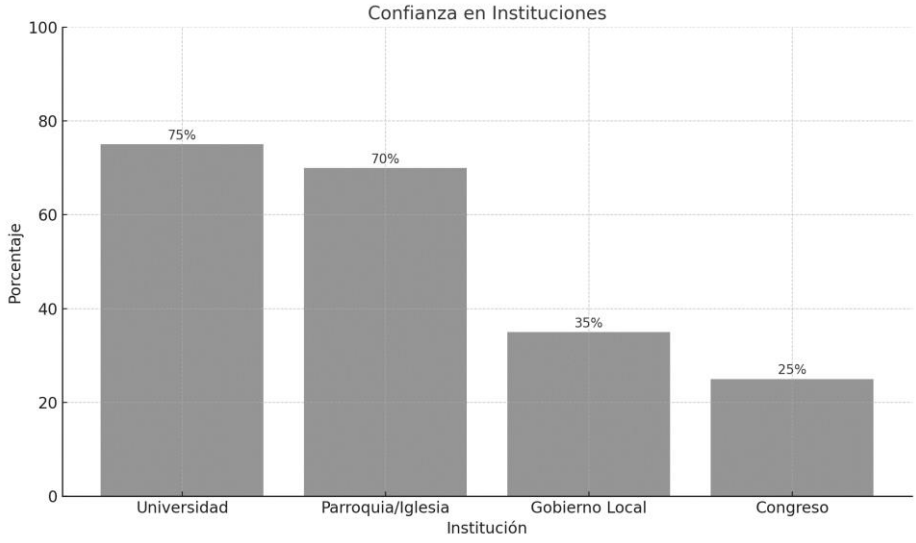


Figure 6. Levels of trust in institutions among university students. Source: Prepared by the author, CESMAG University survey (2025).

The university enjoys the highest level of trust (75%), underscoring its role as a formative agent not only of technical knowledge but also of ethical values. The church also enjoys high trust (70%), suggesting a search for spiritual meaning. According to Ricoeur (2005, p. 148), religious institutions embody collective narratives of meaning that integrate suffering and exclusion into a symbolic horizon of hope. In contrast, trust in local government (35%) and Congress (25%) is considerably low, which Han (2017, p. 41) interprets as part of a contemporary crisis of meaning in which politics loses its ethical function and becomes mere spectacle.

Complementary study on institutional knowledge of cyberbullying

Since the main sample did not include a direct measurement of cyberbullying, a complementary study conducted at the same CESMAG University is incorporated here, as a form of triangulation, which did directly investigate the knowledge and institutional perception of the phenomenon, comparing students from the Law and Psychology programs (Belalcázar Tutalcha & Mejía Benavides, 2024).

That study found that general knowledge of cyberbullying is high in both programs (84% in Law,

90.2% in Psychology), but a lack of awareness of the institutional norms that regulate it is also high (83% and 86.9%, respectively), as is a lack of awareness of the available support services (83% and 82%). Prior participation in training on the topic is low in both programs (88.3% and 77% have not attended), and a considerable proportion of students (57.4% in Law and 44.3% in Psychology) report not knowing how to act in a case of cyberbullying, even though the vast majority (89.4% and 90.2%) recognize the importance of the phenomenon and its future impact (95.7% and 95.1%).

These findings align with the philosophical diagnosis presented in this article : a gap exists between the discursive recognition of the problem—the awareness that others can be harmed—and the effective institutional capacity for response and care. The university enjoys the greatest student trust (Figure 6), but this trust capital has not yet translated into established protocols or competencies for action. This confirms, from an independent empirical source, the diagnosis of a deficit in the institutional exosystem discussed in the conceptual framework.

Limitations

This study has limitations that must be made explicit for a correct interpretation of its findings.

The quantitative and qualitative sample comes from a single educational institution , CESMAG University, in San Juan de Pasto, Colombia. Therefore, the results cannot be directly generalized to the entire Colombian university student population. Regional, socioeconomic, and institutional differences may substantially modify the patterns described here.

The study did not employ a validated psychometric scale of perceived or direct victimization by cyberbullying, but rather a set of vulnerability indicators associated with family structure, social media use, emotional distress, and lack of safe haven. The reported statistical associations (section 2.4) should be interpreted as exploratory between risk factors, not as a direct measurement of the prevalence or intensity of cyberbullying.

The statistically significant associations identified have small effect sizes (Cramer 's V between .07 and .09), which limits their explanatory power and discourages causal extrapolations.

The coding of the interviews was carried out by a single researcher, without double coding between peers or members. checking with the participants, which reduces the usual guarantees of interpretive reliability in rigorous qualitative studies.

Since there are no repeated measurements over time, it is not possible to establish whether the vulnerability indicators precede, accompany, or are a consequence of the reported digital malaise.

The study by Belalcázar Tutalcha and Mejía Benavides (2024) cited in 3.6 used a different sample and instrument than this research; its function here is thematic triangulation, not direct statistical comparison between both samples.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The integrated analysis of empirical data and philosophical categories allows us to view university cyberbullying not as an isolated or behavioral event, but as the result of multiple ethical ruptures, the weakening of the ability to engage with others, the erosion of support networks, and the depersonalization of digital relationships. Following Lévinas (2002), the face of the other disappears in the virtual world and becomes a manipulable image, allowing responsibility to be displaced or nullified; this is the philosophical core of the phenomenon. The findings also show that single-parent households, low incomes, and informal work create contexts of limited supervision that weaken support networks (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993), while high participation in social networks reveals an intense but not necessarily relational digital presence

(Han, 2012, 2014): the paradox of being permanently connected yet profoundly alone increases the emotional fragility of young people.

The trust placed in the university presents a concrete opportunity: to transform it into a welcoming space where education is not limited to technical skills but fosters an ethic of recognition. Based on this analysis, the following lines of action are proposed:

Create cross-curricular subjects or elective courses in practical philosophy, ethics of technologies, digital citizenship and anthropology of virtuality, aimed at encouraging students to critically reflect on responsibility in digital environments. Transitioning from a reactive model to a proactive one, with safe listening spaces and peer and teacher care circles, strengthening university welfare services.

Design workshops for parents and caregivers on affective communication, digital boundaries and respectful accompaniment of children's digital lives, revaluing the family as a primary ethical community. To orient awareness campaigns towards the value of the other as a subject of dignity, ethical stories, testimonies, exercises in empathy beyond the norm.

Design digital coexistence protocols that encourage questioning what it means to be responsible for what is said or shared on social media, and how to use digital language as a form of hospitality and not exclusion.

Philosophy, far from being detached from contemporary technological problems, reminds us that every interaction, even online, is an opportunity to exercise care or neglect, to welcome or expel, to build community or generate violence; the digital age demands, more than ever, an ethics that starts from the other as its foundation.

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