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Psychological protective factors against digital violence in university settings: bibliometric review (2020-2025)

Factores protectores psicológicos ante violencia digital en contextos universitarios: revisión bibliométrica (2020-2025)

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Abstract
The aim of this study is to characterize scientific output on psychological protective factors against digital violence in university settings, using a bibliometric analysis covering the period 2020–2025. Using the PRISMA 2020 method, 77 articles indexed in Web of Science and Scopus (quartiles Q1–Q2) were selected; tools such as Bibliometrix, Python, and VOSviewer were used to analyze the established indicators. The results show sustained growth in publications (from 5 in 2020 to 21 in 2025; $R^2 = 0.9368$), with a predominance of China (54.8%) and the United States (16.1%). Likewise, the conceptual structure is organized into three core areas: adolescent mental health, victimization mechanisms, and protective factors. Current Psychology ranks as the most productive journal (15.9%), while Computers in Human Behavior is the most cited (133 citations). However, gaps are identified in cross-cultural research, longitudinal studies, and the approach to specific university contexts. These findings contribute to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4, 5, and 16 by informing institutional policies aimed at psychological protection in digital university environments. It is concluded that the results show a rapidly expanding, albeit still developing, field of research in which scientific output on psychological protective factors against digital violence has grown significantly, despite the decline in citation rates characteristic of emerging areas. Furthermore, persistent geographical asymmetries and limited exploration of university contexts highlight the need for greater global collaboration and a more in-depth analysis of protection mechanisms in higher education.

Keywords: digital violence, psychological protective factors, higher education.
JEL Classification
I23, I31, O33

Resumen
El presente estudio tiene como objetivo caracterizar la producción científica sobre los factores psicológicos protectores frente a la violencia digital en contextos universitarios, mediante un análisis bibliométrico correspondiente al periodo 2020–2025. Bajo el método PRISMA 2020, se seleccionaron 77 artículos indexados en Web of Science y Scopus (cuartiles Q1–Q2); para el análisis de los indicadores establecidos se emplearon herramientas como Bibliometrix, Python y VOSviewer. Los resultados evidencian un crecimiento sostenido de las publicaciones (de 5 en 2020 a 21 en 2025; $R^2 = 0.9368$), con predominio de China (54.8 %) y Estados Unidos (16.1 %). Asimismo, la estructura conceptual se organiza en tres núcleos: salud mental adolescente, mecanismos de victimización y factores protectores. *Current Psychology* se posiciona como la revista más productiva (15.9 %), mientras que *Computers in Human Behavior* es la más citada (133 citas). No obstante, se identifican brechas en la investigación transcultural, en los estudios longitudinales y en el abordaje de contextos universitarios específicos. Estos hallazgos contribuyen a los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) 4, 5 y 16, al fundamentar políticas institucionales orientadas a la protección psicológica en entornos digitales universitarios. Se concluye que los resultados evidencian un campo de investigación en rápida expansión, aunque aún en desarrollo, en el

que la producción científica sobre factores psicológicos protectores frente a la violencia digital ha crecido de manera significativa, pese a la disminución de las tasas de citación, característica de áreas emergentes; además, las persistentes asimetrías geográficas y la limitada exploración de los contextos universitarios resaltan la necesidad de una mayor colaboración global y de un análisis más profundo de los mecanismos de protección en la educación superior.

Palabras clave: violencia digital, factores protectores psicológicos, educación superior.
Clasificación JEL
I23, I31, O33

Introduction

In an increasingly technology-driven world, the likelihood of experiencing digital violence continues to rise, carrying significant negative consequences for the general population. These risks are especially pronounced among young people, who constitute the most vulnerable group due to their heightened exposure to the internet (Smith et al., 2019; Sorrentino et al., 2019). This observation is reinforced by Kowalski et al. (2014) and Zalaquett and Chatters (2014), who underscore the greater susceptibility of this age cohort to various forms of digital aggression. This landscape encompasses emerging forms of violence, such as cyberbullying and digital stalking, which represent aggression mechanisms aligned with technological advances (Lazuras et al., 2017; Tokunaga, 2010), thereby posing a concerning scenario for students' psychological well-being and subsequent academic performance (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Pham & Adesman, 2015).

This issue is specifically linked to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set forth by the United Nations (2016). Among these are SDG 4 (Quality Education), which promotes safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all; SDG 5 (Gender Equality), aimed at eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls in both public and private spheres, including digital spaces; and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), which emphasizes the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies through the reduction of all forms of violence.

In this context, digital violence within the university community constitutes one of the most pressing issues facing Ecuador and the Latin American region. International studies report prevalence rates ranging from 20% to 60%, with variations attributable to methodological, cultural, and contextual differences (Watts et al., 2017; Zych et al., 2015). Furthermore, Extremera et al. (2018) and Kowalski et al. (2014) indicate that individuals who experience digital violence may suffer severe psychological consequences, including depressive symptoms, chronic anxiety, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, and, in the most severe cases, suicidal ideation (Van Geel et al., 2014; Wright, 2016).

Although scholarly attention to the phenomenon of digital victimization is growing (Nixon, 2014; Ybarra et al., 2012), significant gaps remain in its understanding from a psychological perspective. Given this scenario, mapping the existing scientific production is essential to grasp the current state of knowledge, identify research trends, and detect voids in the study of psychological protective factors. Identifying such factors is critical for designing effective preventive interventions and creating digitally safe university environments.

The scientific literature has identified various psychological factors that act as protective mechanisms against digital violence. Chief among these is resilience, understood as the capacity to develop positive adaptation in the face of adverse experiences in digital environments (Extremera et al., 2018; Quintana & Rey, 2018). Similarly, emotional intelligence, particularly emotion regulation skills, has been linked to lower vulnerability to the effects of cyberbullying (Elipe et al., 2015; Marín et al., 2020).

Perceived social support also constitutes a significant domain of intervention, as it helps reduce the psychological impact of digital victimization (Garaigordobil & Machimbarrena, 2019; Sampasa & Hamilton, 2015). Regarding coping strategies, evidence shows that active, problem-oriented approaches offer significantly greater protective effects compared to avoidant strategies (Zych et al., 2019). Added to this is digital self-efficacy, defined as confidence in one's ability to manage problematic situations in virtual environments, which is associated with greater coping capacity in the face of digital violence (Meter & Bauman, 2018).

Given the sustained increase in publications on psychological protective factors against digital violence in university settings, a mapping and characterization of knowledge generated during the 2020-2025 period is warranted. Notably, this timeframe coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the use of digital platforms intensified and, concomitantly, digital violence manifestations increased due to students' greater exposure to virtual environments (Chen et al., 2017; Giumetti & Kowalski, 2022).

The relevance of this study also lies in its contribution to SDGs 4, 5, and 16, by providing scientific knowledge and empirical evidence on the topic and identifying research gaps that can inform the formulation of

public policies and strategies at both national and local levels aimed at protecting university populations from the growing threats of digital violence.

Methodology

This study falls within the field of scientometrics and adopts a bibliometric design with a descriptive and analytical approach. The research is documentary, retrospective, and cross-sectional in nature, focusing on the collection, review, and analysis of bibliographic sources, as well as the subsequent characterization of publications using quantitative indicators related to scientific production, citations, publication trends, and the conceptual structure of the field. The study does not intervene directly in the research processes analyzed; rather, it provides a comprehensive overview of the scientific activity conducted by researchers in the areas of interest.

To ensure rigorous and transparent systematization of the identification and selection process, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2020 statement was incorporated, which allowed for the structured organization of the search, screening, and selection phases of the included studies (Page et al., 2021).

Population and search strategy

The study population consisted of 287 scientific articles addressing digital violence and/or cyberbullying among university students, with an emphasis on psychological factors and protective mechanisms. The search was conducted in high-impact databases, specifically the Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus, prioritizing publications in journals ranked in the Q1 and Q2 quartiles.

To optimize search sensitivity and specificity, Boolean operators were employed, and filters were applied related to the analysis period, delimited between January 2020 and September 2025, as well as to language of publication, considering only documents in English and Spanish.

The search equation used was as follows:

(("cyber bullying" OR "cyberbullying" OR "digital violence" OR "cyber* victimization" OR "online harassment" OR "cyber* aggression") AND ("university students" OR "college students" OR "higher education" OR "undergraduate*" OR "young adults") AND ("protective factors" OR "resilience" OR "emotional intelligence" OR "coping strategies" OR "social support" OR "self-efficacy" OR "psychological protection"))*

Statistical and bibliometric analysis

Specialized bibliometric tools were used for quantitative data analysis. First, the Bibliometrix package was employed through the RStudio environment, which allowed for the processing, quantification, and visualization of scientific production with the aim of evaluating the performance of authors, institutions, and journals. Through this software, productivity analyses were applied based on Lotka's Law, which identifies the concentration of scientific production among a small number of authors, as well as Bradford's Law, which explains the thematic concentration of articles in a limited core of specialized journals.

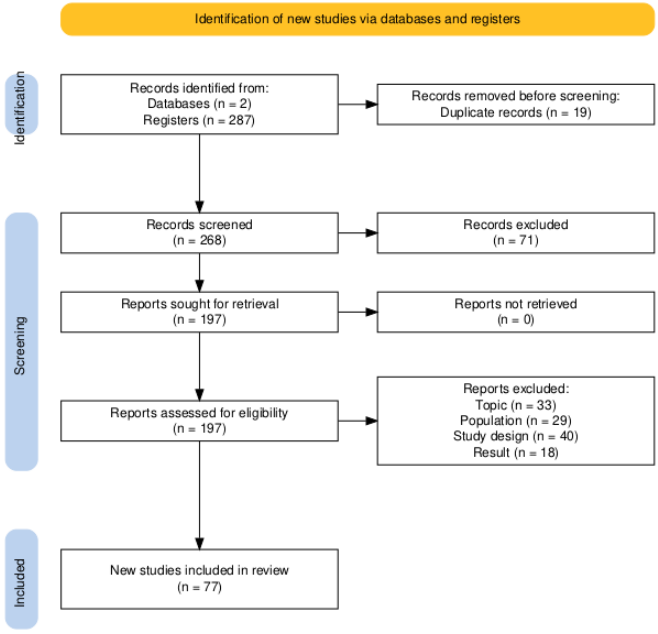
Likewise, to analyze the impact and productivity of publications, the h, g, and m indices were calculated for both authors and journals and institutional affiliations, considering the number of citations received.

Complementarily, Python was used to generate figures and additional visualizations that facilitated the interpretation of results.

The VOSviewer software, meanwhile, was employed for mapping scientific knowledge networks, including co-occurrence analysis of keywords, identification of thematic maps, scientific cooperation networks, and the formation of thematic clusters, enabling a deeper understanding of the evolution and structure of the field.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Page et al. (2021).

Ethical considerations

Regarding the ethical treatment of data and information collected, the application of the PRISMA method in this study establishes clear guidelines oriented toward respect for intellectual property, through the proper citation of all sources used. Given that this is a bibliometric analysis based exclusively on secondary, publicly accessible information, prior approval from an institutional ethics committee or informed consent from human participants was not required. Nevertheless, the ethical principles of scientific research were upheld at all times, in accordance with previous studies of a similar nature (Elipe et al., 2015; Garaigordobil & Machimbarrena, 2019).

Results and discussion

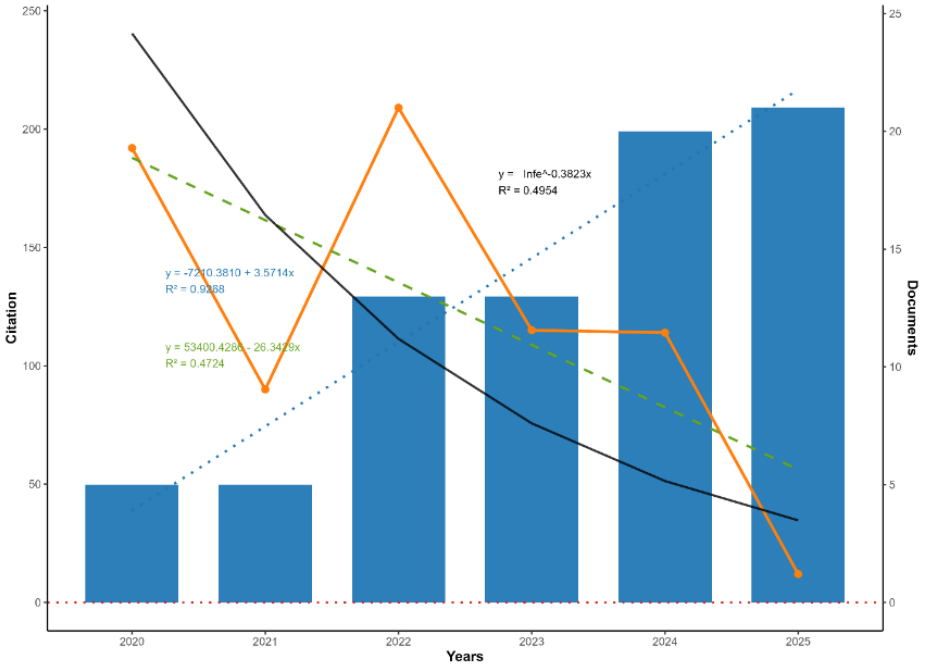
Study selection and annual scientific production

The search process initially identified 287 records. Figure 1 presents the flow diagram of the selection process. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria through the PRISMA 2020 protocol, 77 articles were selected for the final bibliometric analysis. Figure 2 shows the temporal evolution (2020-2025), revealing two contrasting trends: sustained publication growth and a progressive decline in citations.

Scientific production (blue bars): A steady linear growth ($R^2 = 0.9368$) is observed, rising from 5 articles in 2020–2021 to 13 documents in 2022–2023, reaching a maximum of 21 publications in 2025. This pattern reflects the rapid consolidation of the field, consistent with the expansion typical of emerging areas (Alvarez et al., 2023; Carrión et al., 2022).

Citation impact (orange line): Citations show a downward trend ($R^2 = 0.4724$) with irregular behavior. The declines observed in 2023 and 2025 are attributable to the time lag between publication and the recording of citations in indexed databases (Magadán & Rivas, 2022). This phenomenon is characteristic of fields in the process of consolidation, where academic visibility depends on the maturation of collaboration networks and the time required for recognition of recent contributions (Donthu et al., 2021; Magadán & Rivas, 2022).

Figure 2
Annual Scientific Production



Source: Elaborated with Bibliometrix.

Most relevant authors

The bibliometric analysis reveals a limited concentration of production among a few authors. In Table 1, Zhang L leads with 4 articles and 43 citations, followed by Wang C and Zhang X with 3 publications each, albeit with different impact levels (25 and 12 citations, respectively). All authors present an h-index of 2, suggesting recent productivity (starting between 2022 and 2023) and still-incipient consolidation in terms of cumulative impact. Low m-index values (0.5–0.67) confirm trajectories in formation, with growth potential should publication rates be maintained and academic visibility increase.

This pattern is consistent with the dynamics of emerging fields (Alvarez et al., 2023; Carrión et al., 2022), where few authors concentrate initial production without yet reaching high levels of global citation, opening opportunities for more impactful collaborative research.

Table 1
Most relevant authors

R	Author	NP	TC	h-index	g-index	m-index	PYstart
1	ZHANG L	4	43	2	4	0,5	2022
2	WANG C	3	25	2	3	0,667	2023
3	ZHANG X	3	12	2	3	0,667	2023
4	LIU X	3	9	2	3	0,667	2023
5	ZHANG C	2	37	2	2	0,5	2022
6	CHEOUR M	2	17	2	2	0,667	2023
7	FEKIH-ROMDHANE F	2	17	2	2	0,667	2023
8	HALLIT S	2	17	2	2	0,667	2023
9	YANG S	2	16	2	2	0,5	2022
10	WU J	2	10	2	2	0,5	2022

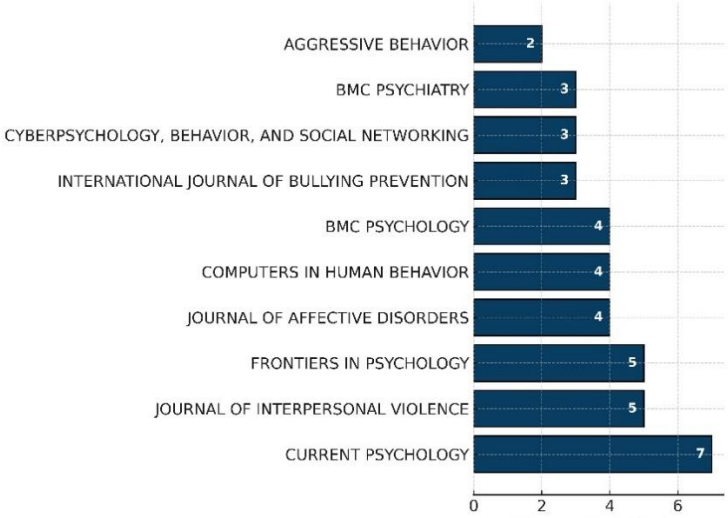
Note: NP = Number of publications; TC = Total citations;
PY_start = Year of first publication.
Source: Elaborated with Bibliometrix

Most relevant journals

The bibliometric analysis (n = 44) shows that Current Psychology leads with 7 publications (15.9%), followed by Journal of Interpersonal Violence and Frontiers in Psychology with 5 articles each (11.4%). The top ten journals concentrate the majority of the analyzed material, evidencing a multidisciplinary approach that integrates clinical, behavioral, and technological perspectives. The presence of journals specializing in cyberpsychology and bullying prevention highlights the relevance of digital and interpersonal factors, while the inclusion of publications in psychiatry and affective disorders suggests significant implications for mental health. Figure 3 presents the most productive journals.

Figure 3

Most productive journals by number of publications



Source: Elaborated with Bibliometrix.

Most cited journals

Citation analysis shows that *Computers in Human Behavior* leads with 133 citations, nearly doubling the second most cited source. *Journal of Affective Disorders* (64) and *Frontiers in Psychology* (51) occupy prominent positions, followed by *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (49) and *Child Abuse & Neglect* (48). This distribution reflects the centrality of the intersection between digital behavior and mental health, with emphasis on vulnerable populations. The presence of high-impact journals such as *Psychological Bulletin* and *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* indicates a solid theoretical foundation, while the inclusion of public health and cyberpsychology journals underscores the multidisciplinary character of the phenomenon analyzed.

Figure 4
Most cited journals



Source: Elaborated with Bibliometrix.

Journal distribution according to Bradford's Law

The distribution of journals according to Bradford's Law reveals a classic pattern of concentration and dispersion of scientific knowledge. In Zone 1, corresponding to the core, six journals are grouped, concentrating 37.7% of the articles, confirming their centrality in the dissemination of scientific production in the field. Zone 2, of medium productivity, comprises 14 journals contributing approximately 29.9% of articles, fulfilling a complementary role in knowledge generation. Finally, Zone 3, of low productivity, includes 25 journals that, although representing more than half of the total (55.6%), contribute only 32.5% of the articles. This pattern confirms the empirical validity of Bradford's Law, according to which a small core of journals concentrates the bulk of production, which then progressively disperses into peripheral zones of greater size.

Table 2
Journal distribution according to Bradford's Law

Bradford Zone	Number of Journals	Number of Articles	% of Articles
Zone 1 (core)	6	29	37.7 %
Zone 2 (intermediate)	14	23	29.9 %
Zone 3 (dispersion)	25	25	32.4 %
Total	45	77	100 %

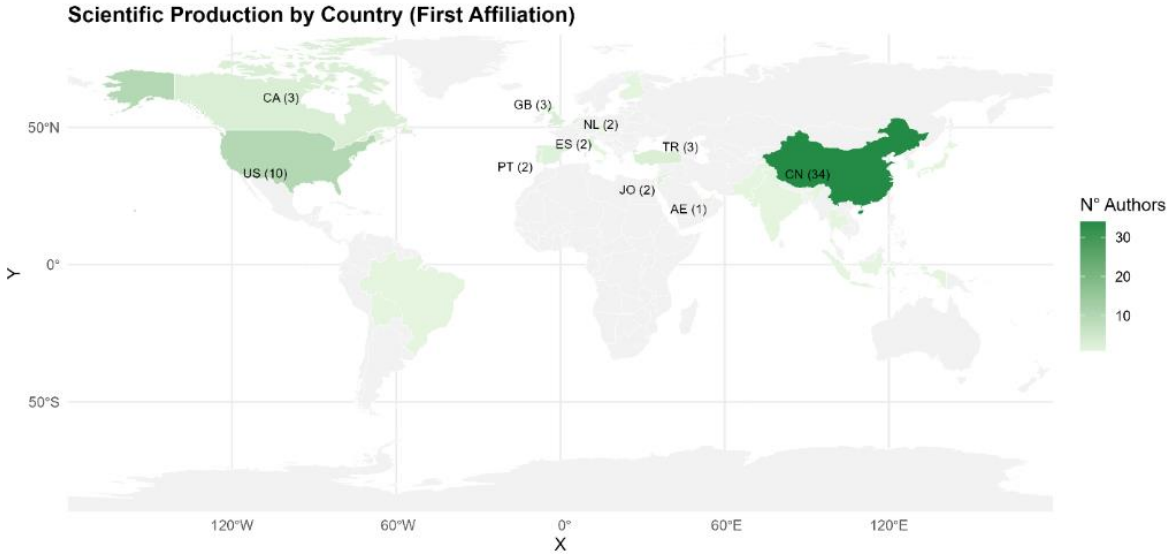
Note: Bradford's Law establishes that a small number of journals (core) concentrate the majority of relevant scientific production, while productivity progressively disperses into peripheral zones of greater size.
Source: Elaborated with Bibliometrix.

Scientific production by country

Figure 5 presents the analysis of geographical distribution by first affiliation, revealing a marked concentration of scientific production in Asia and North America. China ranks as the most productive country with 34 authors (54.8%), evidencing its leadership in research on the studied topic. The United States occupies the second position with 10 authors (16.1%), followed by Canada, the United Kingdom, and Turkey, with three authors each. Production spans 11 countries distributed across four continents, though with a clear asymmetry, as two nations concentrate 70.9% of total authorship. Europe presents fragmented participation (GB, NL, ES, PT, TR), while the Middle East shows limited representation (JO, AE). This pattern suggests the existence of consolidated research centers in countries with higher R&D investment (Sorrentino et al., 2019), reflecting global inequalities in scientific knowledge production.

Figure 5

Scientific production by country

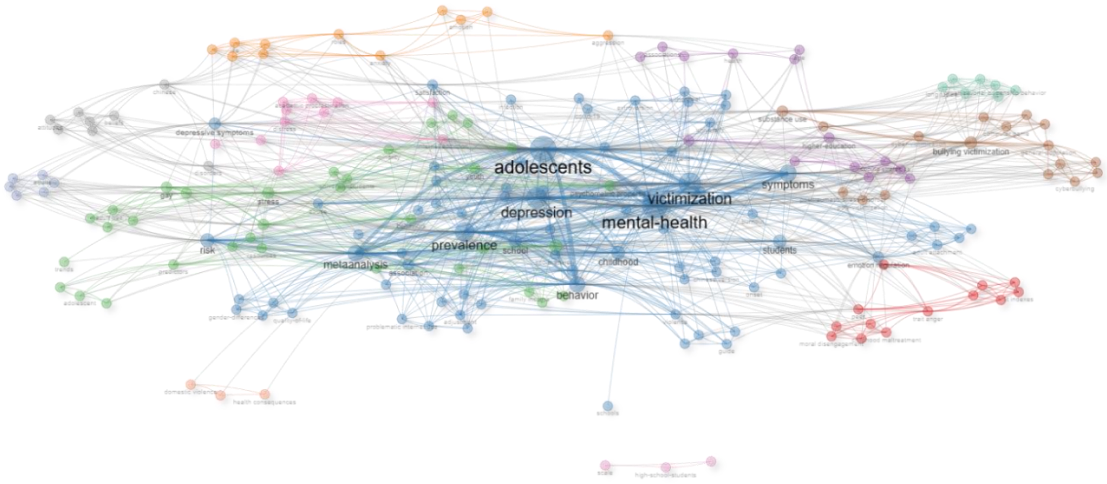


Source: Elaborated with Bibliometrix.

Co-occurrence network

Figure 6 shows that the co-occurrence network presents a conceptual structure organized around three highly interconnected central nodes: adolescents, mental health, and victimization, which act as structuring axes of the field. Network metric analysis identifies depression (PageRank = 0.077; Betweenness = 175.8) and meta-analysis (PageRank = 0.066; Betweenness = 180.6) as the concepts with the highest centrality and betweenness, evidencing their articulating function among different thematic lines. Three main clusters are identified: (1) specific vulnerabilities (sexual orientation, suicidal ideation); (2) population and methodology (youth, minorities, psychometric properties); and (3) epidemiological-clinical core (depression, prevalence, behavior, risk). The peripheral yet connected position of cyber-victimization and Facebook stands out, suggesting the growing relevance of digital harassment as an emerging phenomenon linked to the traditional victimization core. The terms sleep, symptoms, and distress occupy intermediate positions, acting as conceptual bridges between victimization and its clinical manifestations. This configuration reflects a mature field centered on the impact of victimization, both traditional and digital, on adolescent mental health.

Figure 6
Co-occurrence network

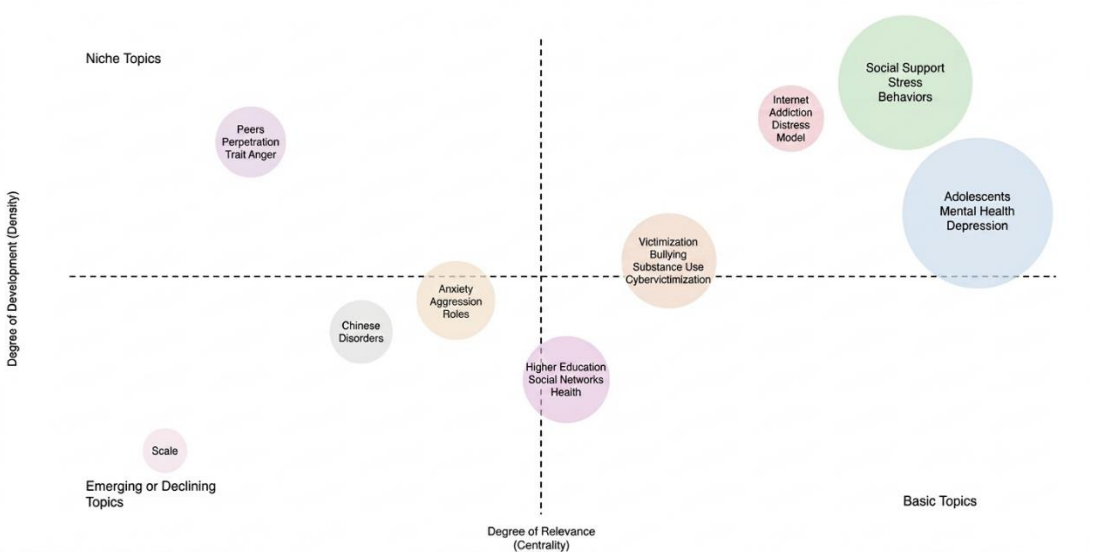


Source: Elaborated with VOSviewer.

Thematic map

Figure 7 shows that the thematic structure of the field organizes around two motor axes located in the upper-right quadrant: adolescents–mental health–depression and social support–stress–behaviors, considered central and highly developed themes. The victimization–bullying–cybervictimization–substance use cluster occupies a central-transversal position, acting as a bridge between various research lines. Niche themes, such as peers–perpetration–trait anger, present specialized development but less integration with the main corpus. Noteworthy is the placement of higher education–social networks–health in the lower zone of the map, suggesting an emerging or transitional area with future growth potential. The presence of internet addiction–distress in an intermediate position indicates its role as a secondary motor theme. Overall, this configuration reveals a consolidated field centered on adolescent mental health, with development opportunities in digital university contexts and cross-cultural approaches.

Figure 7
Thematic evolution map



Source: Elaborated with Bibliometrix.

Conclusions

One of the most notable outcomes of the bibliometric analysis was the sustained and accelerated growth of publications in this area of study, rising from five publications in 2020 to 21 in 2025, which is a fourfold increase in scientific output. Conversely, a decline in citations was observed, reflecting a time lag that, according to Donthu et al. (2021) and Magadán and Rivas (2022), is characteristic of emerging fields, given that visibility and consolidation of scientific production require a longer maturation period.

Another relevant aspect pertains to global asymmetries in scientific production, which reveal a gap between developed and developing countries. In this regard, China (54.8%) and the United States (16.1%) together concentrate over 70% of scientific production on the analyzed topic. This concentration may limit cross-cultural understanding of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2019), underscoring the need to strengthen networks, competencies, and research capacities, particularly in Latin America, a region that remains underrepresented.

Likewise, theoretical consolidation centered on the adolescent segment is identified, supported by a field structure organized around three main axes: mental health, victimization mechanisms, and protective factors (Machimbarrena et al., 2018). This landscape opens opportunities to expand research in university contexts, considering the peripheral position of terms such as higher education and university contexts, which are characterized by higher levels of autonomy, digital exposure, and life transition.

It should be noted that research on psychological protective factors against digital violence is still in an emerging stage. Donthu et al. (2021) highlight the need to develop bibliometric analyses with greater methodological rigor that allow for the identification of gaps and research opportunities that have not been explored or have been addressed superficially, thus contributing to a better understanding of the evolution of knowledge in dynamic contexts such as digital violence among university students.

Within this framework, emotional intelligence and perceived social support are consolidated as key elements in preventing the psychological impact of online victimization. Previous studies indicate that emotional intelligence can moderate the emotional consequences derived from cybervictimization (Elipe et al., 2015; Marín et al., 2020). Complementarily, Zych et al. (2019) and Schultze-Krumbholz et al. (2016) conclude that strengthening coping strategies and empathy contributes to reducing the negative effects of cyberbullying, underscoring the importance of multidisciplinary approaches that integrate psychology, education, and technology in the design of preventive strategies in the university context (Vranjes et al., 2017; You & Lim, 2016).

Finally, recent studies have evidenced the role of moral disengagement and certain personality traits in individuals who perpetrate cyberbullying (Rice et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2016), emphasizing that prevention strategies must consider both individual and contextual variables to achieve greater effectiveness.

Limitations

This study presents limitations inherent to the bibliometric approach, including: (a) restricted coverage to two databases, (b) potential bias toward English-language publications, and (c) an emphasis on quantitative indicators without in-depth content analysis. Future research should complement these findings through qualitative systematic reviews that evaluate the specific effectiveness of protective psychological interventions.

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