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How does cyberbullying affect the values of university youth?: Its' analysis in terms of education and mental health

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is a systematic abuse of power which occurs through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Research on cyberbullying shows that cyberbullying and victimisation have very serious negative effects on the value judgements, social, academic and emotional lives of young people. Persons exposed to cyberbullying include intense sadness and depression, feelings of fear and shame, tense experience, high or very low alertness, low interest in ICTs tools, problematic behaviours, decrease in school success, use of harmful substances or inconvenience, crime, substance abuse, frustration, anger, anxiety, loss of motivation, academic failure, school absenteeism and problems that can lead to suicide. The studies on cyberbullying will encourage young people to recognise this concept and use the technology in the right direction to cope with cyberbullying situations.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, university youth, education, mental health, technology.

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1. Introduction

The rapid change and development in technology has begun to affect the lifestyles and behaviours of people, such as communication, shopping habits, value judgments, friendship relations and marriage forms. The impact of new technologies has affected young people as well as every institution of society, and the use of new technology products, such as computers and mobile phones, has become widespread among young people. Information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as the Internet and mobile phones, are used for communicating, chatting, using for entertainment purposes, accessing information, conducting research and sending files (Beran & Li, 2007; Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler & Kift, 2012). Getting new friends, maintaining social relations and creating norms occur with these technological tools (Yaman, Eroglu & Peker, 2011).

Internet is one of the most important technological developments considering the world-wide impacts, opportunities and risks it brings. Although internet has transformed the way our world operates, it has also served as a venue for cyberbullying, a serious form of misbehaviour among youth (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder & Lattanner, 2014). Facilitating access to ICTs and the wide spread use of Internet have led to a new culture among young people. It gives young people the opportunity to communicate simultaneously with other individuals, enables them to reach information sources quickly and offers new opportunities for their socialisation. In addition to these positive aspects, there are some risks and negative aspects as cyberbullying, cyber fraud, the sexual exploitation of children, and easy access to websites that direct individuals to violence and drugs. Use of risky Internet consists sharing of personal information on the Internet (sending someone to meet on the Internet), contacting someone on the Internet, meeting face to face on the Internet, pornographic, encouraging suicide, directing to use of drugs and humiliating a certain group, making rude comments, knowing someone being embarrassed while on the Internet and cyberbullying (Eroglu & Guler, 2015; Korkmaz, 2016). Cyberbullying is generally understood as bullying taking place on the Internet and there is no single definition of cyberbullying agreed upon internationally (Pozza, Pietro, Morel & Psaila, 2016). The EU institutions have recognised the dangers posed by cyberbullying. In particular, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights' (FRA) has acknowledged cyberbullying as a 'common threat to children's well-being' in its 2013 Annual Report (FRA, 2013). In the light of these explanations, generally cyberbullying has been defined as 'an aggressive act or behaviour that is carried out using electronic means by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself' (Smith et al., 2008). According to another definition, it is an important problem amongst youth century in which we live (Slonje, Smith & Frisen, 2013); or it is as any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278). Cyberbullying is modern day variant of bullying that has unambiguously taken over the world through the means of technology. Because of the digital age, bullying has now transcended physical presence, and bullies have unlimited access to their victims (Watts, Wagner, Velasquez & Behrens, 2017). With many of today's youth experiencing acts of cyberbullying, a growing body of literature has begun to document the prevalence, predictors and outcomes of this behaviour (Kowalski et al., 2014). Cyberbullying has been a concerning global issue commonly experienced by the children and the youth across different countries (Balakrishnan, 2015; Bauman & Newman, 2013; Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Campbell et al., 2012; Del Rey, Elipe & Ortega-Ruiz, 2012; Gradinger, Strohmeier & Spiel, 2010; Laftman, Modin & Ostberg, 2013; Marczak & Coyne, 2010).

Bullying is generally seen as intentional behaviour to harm another, repeatedly, where it is difficult for the victim to defend himself or herself (Olweus, 1999); it is a systematic abuse of power which occurs through the use of ICTs (Rigby, 2002). The following elements characterising cyberbullying emerge in the literature (Pozza et al., 2016):

- The use of electronic or digital mean,
- Intentional harm,
- Imbalance of power,
- Repetition,
- Sense of anonymity and lack of accountability,
- Publicity.

The ways young people communicate through ICT are rapidly changing. So, some studies have divided cyberbullying into the two main media of Internet and mobile phone bullying (Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra & Vega, 2009). However, in recent years, the advent of smart phones makes it possible to send and receive emails via a mobile phone as well as use these phones to access the Internet more broadly; this makes the earlier distinction between mobile phone and Internet bullying, problematic. Also, there has been a rapid increase in popularity of social-network sites, such as 'my-space' or 'facebook'. Thus, new descriptive words are coming in: for example 'sexting' describes the circulation of sexualised images on mobile phones or the Internet without the persons consent; 'trolling' describes persistent abusive comments on a website; 'griefing' describes harassment of someone in a cyber game or virtual world. It is emphasised that researchers in the field need to keep up to date with such changes and expansions regarding new modes of cyberbullying and cyber aggression (Slonje et al., 2013).

The growing availability of new technologies has resulted in an increase in cyberbullying cases in recent years. More than 1 million people worldwide become victims of cybercrime every day; this includes also victims of cyberbullying. According to the 2014 EU Net Children Go Mobile Report, 12% of the 3,500 children aged 9–16 years old were cyberbullied. Similarly, the 2011 EU Kids Online report found that 6% of the 25,142 children between 9 and 16 years of age had been bullied online across Europe and 3% had carried out cyberbullying. Cyberbullying increased among children aged 11–16 from 7% in 2010 to 12% in 2014 (Pozza et al., 2016). There are no standards specifically targeting cyberbullying at international level. However, Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on the protection from all the forms of violence is applicable to bullying online (UNCRC, 1989).

Despite the differences in involvement rates, the focus of the most research has been on cyberbullying perpetrated and received by young people as the children and adolescents (Tokunaga, 2010). The researchers have traditionally identified three groups regarding cyber bullying involvement (Aricak et al., 2008; Kokkinos, Antoniadou & Markos, 2014; O'Moore, 2012). The first one is the 'pure cyber bullies' who bullied others online but never became a cyber victim. The second group is the 'pure cyber victims' who were victimised online but never cyber bullied others. The last group is the 'cyber bully-victims' who not only cyber bullied others but were also victimised online. Besides these three groups, 'noninvolvers' who neither cyber bullied others nor were never cyber victimised are identified by the cyber bullying researchers making comparisons between the noninvolvers and the other three groups (Tanrikulu, 2015).

Academic exploration of cyberbullying began around 10 years ago, at a time when high-speed Internet services were being developed to allow broader access. These studies have predominately investigated prevalence rates, frequency amongst different demographic groups and a range of negative outcomes (Tokunaga, 2010). MacDonald and Roberts-Pittman (2010) conducted a study of 439 college students to measure how often they experienced a variety of bullying behaviours in an electronic social environment. The findings revealed that 8.6% of the participants had cyber-bullied someone else, 21.9% had been cyber-bullied and 38% knew someone who had been cyber-bullied. In a study conducted by Smith et al. (2008) involving over 500 British secondary school children found that more cyberbullying took place outside school as opposed to inside school. In this study, researchers used seven main media described by secondary school pupils: mobile phone calls, text messages, picture/video clip bullying, e-mails, chatroom, instant messaging and websites. This finding was attributed to bans on mobile phones and the Internet in some schools. A common element of

youth based cyberbullying is that perpetrators can bully anonymously. For example, studies have estimated that 50%–60% of victims do not know the identity of the perpetrator (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2007). Tokunaga (2010) argued that the trend with the age across studies is for a curvilinear relationship for victimisation, with the greatest incidence at seventh and eighth grades (around 13–15 years). Involvement in cyberbullying continues through adult life but does decrease after older adolescence (Sevcikova & Smahel, 2009).

2. Causes and outcomes of cyberbullying

As a relatively new research area, understanding of the causes of cyberbullying has not yet been fully developed. As has previously been discussed, cyberbullying can be done via any device used to electronically communicate. Because of the very nature of cyberbullying, cyberbullies can remain anonymous, and the abuse of victims may last for months or years. The anonymity aspect of cyberbullying may make this form of bullying even more attractive than traditional bullying (Watts et al., 2017). Also, poor relationships and interactions among adults and children have been demonstrated to lead to increase incidences of cyberbullying (Willard, 2005; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) provided support better communication leads to a decrease in cyberbullying actions and the negative consequences for the victims.

While interviews with Swedish children revealed that in most cases cyberbullying had started from a face-to-face argument (Slonje et al., 2013). Others have suggested that the characteristics of victims, such as high academic achievement (Huang & Chou, 2010) or poor social skills (Tokunaga, 2010) might enhance the probability of victimisation. The motives for cyberbullying were investigated by Varjas, Talley, Meyers, Parris and Cutts (2010) in a qualitative study using semi-structured individual interviews with 20 students aged 15–19 years. They found that these motives could be categorised as either internal—revenge, boredom, jealousy, trying out a new persona or redirecting feelings; or external—no consequences, non-confrontational ('when a cyberbully did not want to have a face-to-face encounter with the victim) or expressed fear of actually facing the person' or that the target was different in some way, e.g., appearance. In a different study conducted by Sloje et al. (2013) in student interviews, there were some indications that incidents of cyberbullying did continue for longer periods than incidents of traditional bullying. For example, a student (boy 13) says that 'They prank call very, very, very often. Three, four times per day for about a year'; another student (girl 15) says that 'on the net and stuff one dares to say more maybe than one would do in reality'. In some research studies (Beran & Li, 2007; Didden et al., 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006) show that victims of cyberbullying express a variety of emotions, such as anger, sadness, frustration, embarrassment, stressed, fright, loneliness and depression. The experience of being cyberbullied is a stressful one and the impact is likely to vary depending on its severity and frequency. Behavioural effects, such as increased absenteeism (Katzner, Fetchenhauer & Belschak, 2009) and lower academic achievement (Tokunaga, 2010) have been associated with cyberbullying. Psychological effects have also been identified, including depression (Didden et al., 2009), social anxiety (Juvonen & Gross, 2008) and lower self-esteem (Katzner et al., 2009). Children and adolescents have developed novel coping strategies to protect themselves from these effects. Changing phone numbers, login passwords and online identities, as well as blocking abusers are some of the technological strategies reported in the literature (Slonje et al., 2013). Traditional responses, such as telling a parent or teacher and seeking social support, have also been found (Tokunaga, 2010). Hay, Meldrum and Mann (2010) found a greater impact of cyber victimisation compared to traditional victimisation on internalising measures, such as self-harm and suicidal ideation.

Unfortunately, cyberbullying has greater negative effects because victims can be bullied no matter where they are, 24 hour a day, 7 days a week. The ability of cyberbullies to remain anonymous while still terrorising their victims in the privacy of their homes may mean the perpetrators do not see the negative effects they cause, but the effects are real (Watts et al., 2017). Akbulut and Cuhadar (2011) and Schenk and Fremouw (2012) reported victims cried, felt embarrassed, missed school, became

depressed, experienced insomnia and expressed suicidal ideations and/or committed suicide. Related to all of these elements is social anxiety, described as occurring when individuals experience difficulty interacting with peers. Cyberbullying increased social anxiety levels in these individuals (Pabian & Vandebosch, 2016).

In fact, although many victims do feel distressed after cyberbullying incidents, many studies (Ortega et al., 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008) also report that some victims do 'not feel bothered'. In Ortega et al. (2009), between 36% and 44% reported being not bothered, with the highest frequencies found in Internet bullying and the lowest in mobile phone bullying. Ortega et al. (2009) also found that different types of bullying may evoke different emotions; for example, for mobile phone victimisation more students reported they felt 'worried', and generally higher levels of fright, feelings of defenselessness and depression, compared to Internet victimisation.

When children and adolescents are asked what they think they would do if cyberbullied, the most often suggested ways of coping has been through different ways of technically protecting oneself from harassment online (Arıcak et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2008). These technical solutions can consist of blocking certain people from contacting you online, switching one's name on online accounts or changing phone numbers, changing passwords, user names or e-mail addresses and deleting anonymous text messages without reading them. Some respondents select more confrontational ways of online coping, such as responding online, telling the bully to stop (Arıcak et al., 2008) or even bullying back (Dehue, Bollman & Vollink, 2008). Smith et al. (2008) asked respondents to choose the best ways to stop cyberbullying from a list of suggestions produced by focus groups; 'blocking messages/identities' was the option chosen by most respondents. Arıcak et al. (2008) also found this to be the most selected way to stop cyberbullying.

Accordingly, there are a number of practical things that can be done to reduce cyberbullying. Hurley (2004) suggests these common sense strategies:

- protecting personal information (passwords, etc.) in e-mail communication and other online activity,
- avoiding the unknown with regard to electronic messages, e.g., 'learn to discriminate between the important and the potentially harmful',
- blocking messages using software for cell phones and e-mail,
- avoiding replying to bullying behaviour,
- gathering evidence and reporting incidents to school and other authorities. Also, Childnet International (2018) advice to parents when dealing with cyberbullying, not to deny access to technology, always discuss cyberbullying with your child, save the evidence and do not reply or retaliate.

Slonje et al. (2013) and Smith et al. (2008) found that students perceived adults to be unaware of the problem; this could mean that students think adults are not able to handle the problem well. Adults generally encourage student victims to tell a teacher or parent if they are being bullied. Of the Dutch adolescents studied by Dehue et al. (2008), 13% had told a friend when cyberbullied, 9% had told their parent(s), 7% did not tell anyone and only 2% had told a teacher. Smith et al. (2008) found that 16% of cyberbullied respondents had sought help from parents and 9% from teachers. So, programmes dealing with traditional bullying can often be extended to deal with cyberbullying. In addition, new technical developments can be taken advantage of (as in cybermentoring), and specific interventions can be devised for cyberbullying (as in films and information brochures and websites) (Slonje et al., 2013).

Further research is needed to understand the factors that motivate cyberbullying. Longitudinal research, conducted across several time points would be of particular benefit. Such research could help substantiate the claims of cyberbullying researchers who argue that cyberbullying exerts a more negative impact than traditional bullying. Also, longitudinal research could also identify the

relationship between cyberbullying, academic achievement, well-being and absenteeism, and also, which strategies are most effective when coping with cyberbullying.

3. Conclusion and recommendations

As has been presented in the literature, cyberbullying continues to be a disturbing trend not only among adolescents but also undergraduate students. Most of the governments of EU Member States have recently developed action plans to fight cyberbullying which include the set-up of helplines, awareness raising campaigns and recommendations for schools to include cyberbullying in their policies and rules. In particular, half of the Member States have been adopting specific policies in this domain, which relate to four main areas: violence, education, child protection and online safety. Some Member States involve young people in the development of these policies (Pozza et al., 2016). There is also a higher rate of suicidal ideation in individuals exposed to cyberbullying compared to traditional bullying. In order to prevent cyber bullying, it is advisable to develop awareness of such events, how to act when faced with such events, and to provide appropriate coping strategies for individuals experiencing such incidents.

In summary, the impact of cyberbullying is clearly negative, including feelings of anger, fright, depression and embarrassment. However, some victims report being 'not bothered' about it, in part because it is not 'real' or physical. Overall, cyberbullying and traditional bullying appear to have broadly similar negative impacts; but some features of cyberbullying, especially anonymity, lack of a safe haven and embarrassment due to the potentially large breadth of audience, can make the impact of cyberbullying, especially strong, for some young people and in some circumstances.

Continued studies on the effect social media has on the trend of cyberbullying could be helpful in creating anticiberbullying educational programmes for parents, educators and students to mitigate or eliminate the situation. Despite increased awareness and empathy, undergraduates are still less likely to report cyberbullying. Reporting can be encouraged by offering these students a safe, anonymous system and support for reporting offenses. Mentoring, role-playing and legal action may increase awareness of the severity of cyberbullying and encourage cyberbullies and cybervictims to end it. Cyberbullying is gaining ground in the legal arena in all of the world, but continued discussion, research and awareness is important to continue the effort to reverse or end this trend (Watts et al., 2017).

The need to balance personal and professional obligations has led to the growth in online programmes as a solution to advanced education. With this, modality of learning have come challenges in student and faculty behaviours. As a result, coupled with the lack of awareness, support systems and also poor policies against cyberbullying in education facilities, students are more prone to become subjected to this digital crime as depicted with the high percentage of victims. Most students today are members of a digital generation; therefore, educators must be aware of the cyberbullying crisis and realise it occurs among adolescents and young adults (Watts et al., 2017).

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