



Cyberbullying: Urgent attention to the evolving issue

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Abstract

With the changes in technology and accessibility to various social media platforms, cases of cyberbullying are also rising. There is an urgent need to address this issue and take the necessary steps. In this chapter, the author has first tried to drive attention toward the definition of cyberbullying and the criticism around that. There is evidence that mentions that evolving media and technology act as new channels for cyberbullying to take place in ways not witnessed before, thus a dire need to come to a globally accepted definition of cyberbullying. It then highlights the prevalence of cyberbullying and the methodologies used to research the prevalence rates. It further highlights the limitations and drawbacks of the methodologies used in those studies. The chapter also focuses on the consequences of cyberbullying like psychosocial adjustment, general adjustment issues, social issues, and academic downfall in a student's life. The author has then utilized a case study approach to describe the extreme consequence of cyberbullying, *Suicide*. Lastly, the chapter argues that not one legal body is responsible for tackling cyberbullying, rather schools, parents, police and many more stakeholders need to come together to design intervention techniques. These interventions once in place, then need to be checked with further follow-ups.

Keywords: cyberbullying, bullying, victim, perpetrator, consequences, interventions

Introduction

‘Cyberbullying’ started appearing in the academic community in 2003 followed by the launch of a website that addressed cyberbullying in Canada

(<https://www.cyberbullying.ca/>) (Bauman & Bellmore, 2015). Since then, the research about 'Cyberbullying' on Google Scholar has grown from 16,100 hits for a limited range of 2003-2014 to more than 87,000 results by 2024. The growing number of studies highlights not only the interest of academicians and researchers but also the surfacing concern of educational practitioners and parents due to the many consequences related to the matter (Moreno, 2011). "Cyber bullycide", committing suicide due to cyberbullying, and negative experiences in the digital world, is a catalyst in drawing attention towards this issue (Betts, 2016). However, the important question is, how does one define cyberbullying especially because it is related to the digital world? A world that keeps evolving with advancements in new media technologies and enabling a range of behaviors.

Cyberbullying in an evolving digital world

Scholars have not been very successful in agreeing upon a single, globally accepted definition of Cyberbullying (Law et al., 2012). Some researchers believe it to be an extension of traditional bullying and draw parallels with it in terms of intent, power imbalance, and repetition. It is an extension of traditional bullying using digital technology as a channel (Olweus, 2013).

Other researchers argue that many features of offline bullying are irrelevant to cyberbullying hence making it a distinct phenomenon altogether. Firstly, 'repetition' in the cyber world is operationalized differently. Secondly, cyberbullying can break the barriers of geography and be more public. Together these factors are important facets as the act or content of cyberbullying is present to an unlimited audience who are anonymous and not limited by time and location. It is possible to view cyberbullying after the initial occurrence of the event, days after it initially took place. Additionally, the power imbalance in terms of cyberbullying can be indirectly associated with the number of audiences who have witnessed the one-off act of online bullying. This again is different from the physical power imbalance seen in bullying (Thomas, Connor & Scott, 2015). Thus, leaving a vague understanding of 'repetition' and 'power imbalance' in the context of the online world.

Providing a single definition has also been a challenge because of the way the media has advanced over the past decades. The youth follow a pattern of using the

trending media as the mode of spreading information, thus opening new channels for cyberbullying. This presents another challenge as the media in fashion keeps updating and investigating cyberbullying in an ever-changing technological era will provide no consistency. Few researchers argue to analyze behaviors and personal experiences to develop an understanding of what can be classified as an act of cyberbullying.

Thus, Chisholm (2014) proposed 11 online behaviors that can be categorized as cyberbullying — a) Catfishing; b) Cheating, forming groups and social exclusion; c) Insulting, humiliating, and threatening online; d) Flaming; e) Slamming; f) Impersonating/Pretending to be someone else; g) Ratting; h) Relational aggression; i) Sexting; j) Shock trolling; k) Stalking. Few of these behaviors have proven to be life-threatening, and readers can refer to the case of Jesse Logan on the internet to comprehend more about online behaviors considered as online bullying.

Despite numerous studies conducted around this area, the literature has little consensus leaving room for debate around a common definition. However, a simple definition can be drawn from the research by Nazir and Thabassum (2021) which states that cyberbullying is a “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cellphones, and other electronic devices.” Moreover, the one thing that remains common over the years is the detrimental effects of cyberbullying on the overall well-being of the associated individuals. It is thus important to understand the occurrence of the issue.

Examining prevalence rate and identifying limitations in the methodology used

A wide variety of studies have taken place to examine the global presence of cyberbullying. It is important to study the prevalence to a) raise awareness among the associated stakeholders; b) draw comparisons between different populations and samples; and c) Effectively establish anti-cyberbullying interventions (Betts, 2016). Studies conducted in cyberbullying contain variables, gender, educational qualification, country, sample size, and age together with other variables that predict involvement in these behaviors.

Researchers have used different methodologies to measure the prevalence rate of cyberbullying in *targets*. Few studies have used loneliness, low self-esteem, enhanced depressive symptoms, and problem behaviors as predictors of being the target of cyberbullying. Some academic work has also noted that students exhibiting anxious

personality traits are more vulnerable to becoming targets as they worry about their image in other's minds. A range of literature also observed the factors that predict involvement as a *perpetrator*. For instance, young people with frequent substance use, poor relationships at home, high levels of aggression, low academic performance, low levels of agreeableness, and moral disengagement combined with frequent internet usage are at higher risk of becoming perpetrators (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Methodologically, scholars have also tried to measure cyberbullying using single or multiple items. Single-item measures operate globally asking people whether they have experienced cyberbullying, delivering a more general output. Whereas multiple item methodology examines the range of behaviors that are the attributes of cyberbullying (Dehue, 2013). Another method used to study the prevalence rate includes self-reports using self-selected samples (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). However, it was observed that young people generally underreported their encounters with cyberbullying as they were concerned that their access to technology might be cut back. This under-reporting acts as a limitation in studying the impact of the prevalence rate.

Researchers have also conducted studies that focus on the time frame to study this phenomenon. For instance, few studies asked participants to report cyberbullying over the time frame of 2 months while other studies asked participants to report any encounter with cyberbullying over a greater window. However, there is a methodological drawback to having an unspecified time frame to measure the presence of cyberbullying. For instance, in studies with no or unlimited time frame participants have the liberty to look at a longer duration generating a higher percentage of prevalence rate as compared to the studies that limit the time frame. The table below mentions the comparison between 2 studies.

Table 1

Comparison between studies with specified and unspecified time frames to examine the prevalence of cyberbullying

	Gomez-Garbiello et al. (2012)	Lam, Cheng & Liu (2013)
Duration	Unspecified	65%
Prevalence rate	Last 7 days	25.7%

Another factor that poses a limitation in studying the general occurrence of cyberbullying is the variation and lack of consensus in the definition of cyberbullying (Berne et al., 2013). A disparity in what constitutes cyberbullying and what does not result in inconsistent output in all the studies, thus hampering the prevalence rate. It is also seen that the prevalence of cyberbullying differs amongst countries thus reflecting a cross-cultural variation. In simple words, many authors identified a mismatch in the conceptualization of cyberbullying between the participants recruited from different countries. This proposition is also supported by a study mentioned by Betts (2016) in which young respondents from the UK could differentiate between ‘banter’ and ‘cyberbullying’. The result of the studies draws attention to another important factor, ie. the intensity with which the young people involved in cyberbullying get affected.

Consequences of cyberbullying

Children become victims of the dark reality of technology, a skill they are competent in but not wise enough to understand the consequences it brings along. A study conducted over 5 years in India by Intel security teens, tweens, and technology study reported in 2015 that 81% of children between the ages of 8-16 are active internet users. One anonymous click in one part of the world can leave a scar on someone’s life sitting in another corner of the world (Rao, Bansal & Chandran, 2018). This scar can traumatize a person and impair their ability to function well.

A few consequences mentioned by Betts (2016) are detailed below:

Psychosocial adjustment: is the ability of a person to adapt well to the surroundings. This includes factors like mental well-being and social relationships. It is observed that people who experience cyberbullying report poorer mental health and higher psychological distress. These individuals also depict increased levels of depressive symptoms as compared to their peers. Social relationship formation and maintenance become a challenge for people associated with bullying. They may seek withdrawal or avoid any social interaction as they foster a sense of mistrust in others. Additionally, few victims are seen to exhibit higher levels of anxiety in social settings.

General adjustment issues: The consequence of cyberbullying expands into the life of an individual in many more ways. One such impact is the ‘digital footprints’ of an online user. With technological advancements, it has become easy to access information

about anyone. Thus, employers today can view candidates' social media contacts and activities. These checks carried out by recruiters can question the reputation of an individual involved in cyberbullying. Another impact on reputation can be seen in educational settings where a child experiencing cyberbullying might want to avoid encountering the bully and is not willing to attend school.

Academic downfall: Kids fear the situation and feel negative about attending school. Many correlational studies reported a downfall in the academic performance of the student. These students also reported disruption in their daily routine, impacts on overall health, and development of somatic symptoms.

Suicide: Being a victim of cyberbullying increases the chances of self-harm and suicidal ideation and attempt. The associated individuals are also seen to have depressive symptoms, substance use, and violent behaviors. These factors act as mediating factors between experiencing cyberbullying and suicidal behavior. Bullycide, committing suicide following the experiences of bullying is a term used since early 2000 and is now relevant in cyberspace. Next is a case study to examine the dire consequence of cyberbullying, cyber bullycide.

Case study (suicide)

A 15-year-old girl named Amanda Todd from British Columbia; Canada was found hanging in her room on Friday the 10th October 2012. The adolescent was a victim of cyberbullying and decided to end her life after failing to escape the harassment. Amanda, like every other teenager, used to spend her free time on the internet engaging in social interactions around singing. Her father gave her a webcam as a tool to record her music videos and upload them on the internet. One day she met a person online who claimed to be her fan. Eventually, he lured her and took advantage by requesting her to flash online for him, of which he took a picture. Little did she know that this little mistake made online could be the reason for her taking her own life.

One year later Amanda received a friend request online from the same person. He had a topless picture of her and threatened to share it with her contacts and network if she denied performing for him online once again. The stranger had been following her around for a year. On refusing his request he carried out the threat and shared her picture with her acquaintances and on a pornographic website. The perpetrator continued harassing

her and asked for her obscene images and videos. On refusal, he shared her picture with her peers and family members. She changed schools after this episode which was then followed by continuous bullying from her peers.

Amanda was a victim of behaviors that can be classified as cyberbullying — impersonation, sexting, cheating, humiliation, and threatening and stalking. She was sexually, mentally, and emotionally abused with one click on the internet by a stranger. This led to her developing anxiety and depression. She started using substances and took pills to cope with her emotions. She started cutting herself and attempted suicide multiple times before finally succeeding on Friday. She also tried to tell her story through a YouTube video which she uploaded a few days before committing suicide (My story: struggling, bullying, suicide, self-harm).

The case of Amanda Todd drives attention to the dark side of the internet. It teaches the world to stay cautious of strange connections on social media and be aware of actions on the internet as everything is present online for a long time. The bully was later convicted of online bullying, stalking, and harassing, and was sentenced to 13 years in prison.

Associated stakeholders

When talking about cyberbullying one question raised is whose responsibility is it to combat this issue and the answer is ‘everyone’ as a combined responsible society. The researchers can draw upon their research and propose frameworks to alert the other stakeholders. They can propose specific guidelines to mental health workers which can be used to develop therapies and design intervention techniques. With the help of educational practitioners, efficient training can be designed to educate about cyberbullying. This can equip parents and teachers to notice behavioral changes, if any, in the kid. These trainings can also be used to educate the other members of the society. Digital literacy programs can be set in place to teach users to stay safe in the digital world. Help states to create law and order around cyberbullying to provide safety and justice for the citizens (Betts, 2016).

Conclusion

To summarize, technology comes with its benefits and certain dark truths. One of those truths is cyberbullying its prevalence, and the intense consequences that come with it. These instances leave a person with some adverse, unforgettable experiences that impact the overall well-being of a person. The scar is so deep that it sometimes results in loss of life. However, if all the stakeholders work collaboratively to achieve the goal of fighting cyberbullying, its impact can be drastically reduced, and positive results will be visible.

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