



Cyberbullying in social networking sites: An adolescent victim's perspective



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ABSTRACT

Online social networking sites (SNS) are a ubiquitous platform for communication. However, SNS can provide opportunities for abuse and harassment, typically referred to as cyberbullying. The current study examined adolescent victims' understanding of cyberbullying, the specific types of cyberbullying events experienced in SNS and the impact of these events. Twenty-five adolescents (15–24 years old) who responded to an invitation for participants with previous negative experiences in SNS took part in individual semi-structured interviews. Results showed that the basic criteria for the definition of cyberbullying published in previous research were either not referenced by participants, or they were more complex than initially anticipated. The most referenced criterion was the extent to which the experience had an impact on the victim, which is not a current definitional criterion. It was also found that 68% of victims reported experiencing a combined emotional, social and behavioural impact for each cyberbullying experience, and 12% reported no impact at all. These findings will contribute to the measurement of cyberbullying from the perspective of victims, and will also aid the development of intervention strategies based on the most common impact areas.

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1. Introduction

The use of social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace, has proliferated during the last decade. A SNS is defined as “a networked communication platform in which participants (1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others, and (3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site” (Ellison & Boyd, 2013, p. 158). SNS enable users to communicate with their extended social network in new ways, and provide opportunities to meet new people who share similar interests, demographics or location (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). However, SNS have also been used as a tool for harassment and abuse of other SNS users (Lenhart et al., 2011). Despite the existence of multiple terms, the term *cyberbullying* is most frequently used throughout the literature to describe this phenomenon, and will be used in the current study.

1.1. Definition of cyberbullying

The cyberbullying literature has consistently applied the definition of ‘traditional’ bullying to the realm of electronic media. Therefore, the most common definitions of cyberbullying are based on the three basic components of traditional bullying definitions, namely: repetition, deliberate intent to harm and power imbalance (Olweus, 1993). While cyberbullying has been consequently defined as “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376), there is much variability in the definitions used in the literature. Most of the differences lie in (a) how explicit each of the traditional bullying criteria are (if included at all), (b) the extent to which the definition includes or does not include the technology being used, and (c) the connection to other related concepts such as aggression. This lack of definitional clarity creates a problem of poor discrimination and has been described as “the most pervasive methodological drawback in cyberbullying research” (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 283). It has been noted that due to the variety of “personal, disciplinary, cultural and linguistic factors” (McGrath, 2009, p. 21–22) involved, it may be difficult for an all-inclusive definition to be developed. However, it is still a priority that a reasonable degree of consistency and consensus is reached in the research literature regarding the cyberbullying phenomenon.

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The choice to define cyberbullying as ‘bullying in cyberspace’ relies on the assumption that the two forms of bullying only differ in terms of the medium in which the behaviour occurs. However, by virtue of occurring in cyberspace, the nature of cyberbullying may differ from that of traditional bullying. Nocentini et al. (2010) examined the perception of each definitional criterion in a sample of 70 European 12–18 year old students. Interview data indicated that students used the repetition criterion to differentiate between intentional and non-intentional acts. Further, some reported a relationship between repetition and publicity. In particular, participants noted that an act does not need to be repeated at the hands of the perpetrator if it is made public and can be sent or showed to others. One example of this would be when a comment ridiculing a person is posted on Facebook and is seen by hundreds of acquaintances of that person. This is one act on the part of the perpetrator that may be considered a repeated act by virtue of the number of comments it generates. The majority of participants in the Nocentini et al. (2010) study also reported that the effect that a particular SNS behaviour has on the victim and his/her perception of the act(s) can be a more relevant criterion of whether the act is a form of cyberbullying than the intent of the perpetrator. This shows that similar problems extend to the criterion of intent.

A victim may interpret an experience as a form of cyberbullying regardless of whether or not the perpetrator intended for their action(s) to have a negative impact on the recipient. Using groups of young people across six European countries, Menesini et al. (2012) systematically investigated the role of the three traditional bullying criteria and two new cyberbullying-specific criteria (i.e. publicity and anonymity) in the definition of cyberbullying. The authors found that participants identified power imbalance as the most relevant definitional criterion when defining cyberbullying, followed by intentionality and anonymity. Importantly, the researchers defined power imbalance not only as an individual being unable to defend him/herself, in line with how traditional bullying definitions define this criterion, but also as making the victim feel upset; effectively combining two separate elements (impact and powerlessness) in one definitional criterion.

The question of whether or not the definition of traditional cyberbullying should be applied to cyberspace remains unclear. The need for further investigation on what constitutes cyberbullying has been highlighted by many researchers (e.g., Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012). In order to improve clarity of the definition, it is suggested that in addition to recruiting research participants from the general adolescent population, participants should be selectively recruited from users of SNS and from self-identified victims of cyberbullying. Therefore, an objective of this study is to turn to the victims of cyberbullying and the users of SNS in order to develop a more accurate understanding of what is experienced as cyberbullying in SNS.

1.2. Experience and impact of cyberbullying

Despite pervasive use of SNS amongst adolescents (Lenhart & Madden, 2007), there remains little understanding of the types of specific victimisation experiences cyberbullying victims are having in SNS. Previous research has investigated the frequency of SNS use in young people, the type of SNS that they use and the way in which they use their accounts (e.g. posting comments and status updates) (Lenhart et al., 2011). However, there is no research focusing on the ways in which the features of SNS are being used to harass and bully its users. Furthermore, the impact that each different type of victimisation experience is having on victims in SNS is largely unknown.

Two main approaches to investigating the impact of cyberbullying have been adopted in previous research. First, there has been a focus on comparisons between the perceived impact of

cyberbullying relative to that of other forms of bullying (e.g. Smith et al., 2008). In their study of 11–16-year-old London students, Smith et al. (2008) asked participants (those who had and had not been victims of cyberbullying) to rate the perceived impact of cyberbullying compared to traditional bullying (i.e., less, the same, more). Results showed that picture/video clip and phone call bullying were perceived to have a greater impact on the victim compared to traditional bullying. Website and text message bullying were perceived as having the same impact as traditional bullying and chat room bullying. Finally, results showed that instant messaging and email bullying had less impact than traditional bullying on participants. Second, research has investigated whether cyberbullying victimisation is correlated with emotional and psychological problems (e.g. Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, & Storch, 2009; Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000) or behavioural outcomes (Price & Dalgleish, 2010). For example, Dempsey et al. (2009) found that cyberbullying victimisation was associated with symptoms of social anxiety amongst 11–16-year-old American students. However, their hypothesis that victimisation would be associated with depression was not supported. On the other hand Finkelhor et al. (2000) found that 18% of 10–17-year-old victims of cyberbullying reported five or more depressive symptoms after cyberbullying had occurred. This was more than twice the rate of depressive symptoms for the overall sample of participants. However, given that each of these studies used different measures of depression it is difficult to directly compare their results. Research has also studied the relationship between suicidal ideation and cyberbullying victimisation. Price and Dalgleish (2010) found that 3% of 10–25-year-old Australians reported having suicidal thoughts and 2% self-harming behaviour as a result of cyberbullying victimisation. Such results support a link between suicide risk and cyberbullying victimisation.

Cyberbullying victimisation has also been associated with low self confidence and self-esteem (Price & Dalgleish, 2010), somatic symptoms (Gradingier, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009) and stress (Finkelhor et al., 2000). Victims typically report emotional responses such as anger, sadness, embarrassment, frustration, annoyance, fear and feeling terrified (Beran & Li, 2005; DeHue, Bolman, & Volink, 2008; Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Topcu, Erdur-Baker, & Capa-Aydin, 2008). Schultze-Krumbholz, Jäkel, Schultze, and Scheithauer (2012) explored the longitudinal impact of cyberbullying victimisation on students in Grades 7–9. Path analyses showed that there were different outcomes for males and females. For both genders, those with higher victimisation scores at time one (baseline) had higher instrumental aggression scores (“aggressive behaviours used to achieve self-serving goals” (p. 340)) at time two (approximately four months later). For females only, those with higher victimisation scores at time one scored higher on reactive aggression and depression measures at time two. Furthermore, Price and Dalgleish (2010) found that cyberbullying victimisation is associated with specific behavioural problems. For example, they reported that of victims, 35% experienced a negative effect on school grades, 28% on school attendance and 19% on family relationships. In their descriptive study on the experiences of cyberbullying in grades 7–9 students, Beran and Li (2005) reported that of those who reported cyberbullying victimisation, 21% had experienced low school achievement and 13% absenteeism.

Despite the research that has reported negative emotional, psychological and behavioural impacts associated with cyberbullying victimisation, there is also research showing that a large proportion of cyberbullying victims report not being affected by the experience. Patchin and Hinduja (2006) reported that 43% of victims (9–18-year-olds) were unaffected. Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, and Finkelhor (2006) found similar results in that 62% of victims felt only a little upset or not at all. Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, and Hinduja (2009) also found that over half of victims (12–18 year-old females)

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