A review of cyberbullying legislation in Qatar: Considerations for policy makers and educators

Mairéad Foody [a], Muthanna Samara [a,*], Aiman El Asam [a], Hisham Morsi [b], Azhar Khattab [b]

[a] Department of Psychology, Kingston University London, Penrhyn Road, Kingston upon Thames, KT1 2EE, UK
[b] Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC), P.O. Box 3050, Doha, Qatar

A B S T R A C T

Cyberbullying is a worldwide problem affecting mental health, education, safety and general well-being for individuals across the globe. Despite the widespread availability of the Internet, research into prevalence rates of cyberbullying in Qatar is lacking and legislating for the crime has been slow to develop. Recently there have been some positive initiatives in the country such as a Cybercrime Prevention Law, the development of a National ICT Strategy, and a website detailing safe practice guidelines for Internet usage. However, the implementation and usage of these initiatives are still limited and there is a lack of awareness of cyberbullying in Qatar. As a result, the risk factors and consequences among school-aged children are unknown. The current paper presents an evaluation of the legislative and public policy solutions to cyberbullying available in Qatar, and outlines the critical challenges that could potentially face educators in shaping best practice guidelines for the future.

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1. Introduction

Bullying is a common behavior among children, adolescents and adults, which can be witnessed in all countries across the world. In addition to its well-known international prevalence, the impact of traditional bullying (face to face bullying) is believed to have a range of negative outcomes for victims, including health and psychological problems (e.g., Wolke & Samara, 2004; Wolke, Schreier, Zanarini, & Winsper, 2012). Bullying involves repeated physical and/or mental harassment as a consequence of an imbalance in power between the bully and the victim (Olweus, 1993). It can take the form of direct behaviors such as physical assault and verbal abuse (Monks et al., 2009); or relational behaviors such as manipulation of peer relationships to cause harm to the victim (e.g., gossiping and/or spreading rumors; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000). In recent times, the widespread availability of the Internet has exacerbated these problem behaviors such that a new form of peer harassment has emerged called

cyberbullying. However, despite increased recognition of this phenomenon worldwide, appropriate legislation in Qatar is lacking. This paper details the current state of legislation for cyberbullying in Qatar and argues that research is needed to investigate current policies and to develop new laws that promote child safety by setting an official standard of prevention.

Cyberbullying is defined by Smith et al. (2008a) as "an aggressive, intentional act, using electronic forms of contact such as social networking sites, repeatedly and over time against victims who cannot easily defend themselves" (p. 376). Similar to traditional bullying there are several negative behaviors that constitute cyberbullying such as: harassment, humiliation, exclusion, cyber stalking, flaming (i.e. writing abusive comments online), defamation, denigration, impersonation, outing and exclusion (Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Newey & Magson, 2010; Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011). However, there are also numerous factors that distinguish the two. For example, the power imbalance in cyberbullying experiences may refer to: anonymity (Butler, Kift, & Campbell, 2009); the bully's technological skills (Grigg, 2010); and/or the ability to invade their victims' privacy (Aricak et al., 2008; Beran & Li, 2005; Kift, Campbell, & Butler, 2010). Repeated harassment results from the continual viewing of the bullying incident online by different people over a short period of time (Campbell, Cross, Spears, & Slee, 2010). Furthermore, cyber bullies do not receive direct feedback for their actions, which can result in a lack of empathy and understanding of the consequences for the victim (Feinberg & Robey, 2009).

Recent studies investigating this phenomenon have conclusively shown that its impact on victims leads to a range of negative experiences including the development of psychological problems (Cénat et al., 2014; Chang et al., 2013). Specifically, research has shown that cyberbullying can cause brief and long-term periods of psychological distress for both victims and bullies (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010) and in extreme situations can even lead to suicide (Tokunaga, 2010). As a result, the risk factors associated with cyberbullying are quickly becoming recognized by educational researchers and policy makers worldwide as they look to emerging legislation for prevention and appropriate consequences (Nansel et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2012).

2. Internet usage in Qatar

Qatar is a small Arab country with a population of only 2,003,700 (Statistics Authority, 2014). Despite its size, it has made extensive economic progress in the last decade, resulting in affluence for a large portion of society. The population has changed drastically in recent years because of the influx of foreign workers employed to accomplish Qatar's development plans (Qatar Population Status, 2012). As a result there is an imbalance in residents where the majority of the working population are expatriates (96% compared to 4% nationals in 2011; Qatar Population Status, 2012). The changing economic and social climate in the country has presented a challenge to Qatari natives as they encounter expatriate values different to their own traditional norms. However, the government is striving to create a contemporary approach to such issues and have a clear future agenda on the world stage in areas such as sports, healthcare and education (Qatar National Development Strategy, 2011–2016).

Together with the growth of the economy, Internet usage has grown considerably for the current generation in Qatar. According to Internet World Stats (2010) Internet and broadband penetration is similar to the European average and among the highest in the Middle East (51.8% vs. 31.9% for the Middle Eastern average). Furthermore, it was reported in Qatar's ICT Landscape (2009) that the country has a high uptake of mobile phones (97.8% of households), which is nearly 10% higher than the EU average. Despite the widespread availability of the Internet, legislating for cybercrimes and particularly for cyberbullying has been slow to develop.

2.1. Traditional bullying and cyberbullying in Qatar

Like many countries worldwide, bullying is a significant social problem in Qatar, particularly for school-aged children. The Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS, 2011) in Qatari schools found that 48% of boys and 35% of girls aged 13–15 years were bullied on one or more occasion in the previous month. In addition, an annual report by the Supreme Education Council (SEC, 2011/2012)[1] found that 14% of students disagreed with the statement "my school is a safe place to be" (12% of which were primary students and 15% were secondary). However, these studies are limited in that most definitions of traditional bullying make reference to the behaviors being repetitive instead of isolated incidences (Smith et al., 2008a, 2008b). The GSHS required participants to comment on bullying experiences that occurred once or more in the previous month. This does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the situation, as it did not focus on the repetitive nature of bullying. Indeed, establishing a worldwide consensus on the definition of traditional bullying is a widely debated topic and the conclusions drawn from studies are not always comparable due to varying concepts and measurement (Kazarian & Anmar, 2013; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Scheithauer, Smith, & Samara, 2016).

Studies investigating parents' perspectives on traditional bullying in schools have produced contradictory results. For example, the SEC (2011/2012) report found that 90% of primary parents and 91% of secondary parents felt that their child "gets along well with other students". However, when parents were interviewed for the Annual Omnibus Survey of life in Qatar (SERSI, 2012), less than half of all interviewees (44%) said their child did not bully other children while 36% said their child sometimes did. Twenty percent of parents said this was *certainly true* of their child. Cultural differences and discrepancies in parents' views of what constitutes bullying might explain these contradictory results. While awareness of bullying and the associated negative consequences is commonplace in western societies, it is relatively non existent in the Arab world. This could be due to the lack of an Arabic term to describe such behaviors (Kazarian & Anmar, 2013) and/or a lack of awareness at a community level. In the Arabic speaking countries and specifically in Qatar, there is no common Arabic term used to explain the concept of bullying (Samara, Sherif, Perkins, Morsi, & El Asam, 2014), although new alternatives to the term such as 'peer harassment' are becoming more prevalent. Indeed this may be a consequence of having a relatively new education system (e.g., the SEC in Qatar was only established in 2002). Consequently, government led research into relevant and associated factors such as child well-being and mental health is limited.

Only two published studies have investigated prevalence rates of cyberbullying in Qatar. Microsoft (2012) commissioned a study investigating online bullying among 8–17 year olds compared to the rest of the world. This study defined cyberbullying as "the willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices" (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015, p. 11). The results demonstrated that Qatar had the 19th highest rate of cyberbullying out of 25 countries worldwide and rates of cyberbullying were above average in Qatari students (32% compared to 24%). Furthermore, Qatari youths were slightly below the worldwide average in terms of knowledge about the topic (50% compared to 57%). The study also highlighted interesting comparisons between online and offline bullying in Qatari youths. For example, 28% of students reported experiences of being an online victim compared to 68% offline and 32% reported cyberbullying compared to 44% for traditional bullying. However, this study did not provide information regarding the psychological impact on victims and there was no differentiation between different forms of traditional

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[1] Now named Ministry of Education and Higher Education