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Brief report: Cyberbullying perpetration and its associations with socio-demographics, aggressive behaviour at school, and mental health outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Relatively little is known about those who cyberbully others, especially in a UK context. We drew on data from 1144 young people aged 12–13 in eight English secondary schools to examine the prevalence of cyberbullying perpetration and its associations with socio-demographics, other behaviours, and health outcomes. Overall, 14.1% of respondents reported ever cyberbullying others with no significant differences by gender or socio-economic status. Drawing on mixed-effects logistic regression models, first we found a strong, dose–response relationship between aggressive behaviour at school and cyberbullying others, suggesting that cyberbullying may not only be a facet of wider patterns of bullying but also of aggression more broadly. Second, cyberbullying others was associated with poorer quality of life and with psychological difficulties but not with peer/social problems or worse mental wellbeing. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess whether such associations are causal.
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Introduction

Building on definitions of bullying as the *repeated use* of aggression against *someone who cannot easily defend themselves* (Olweus, 1997), cyberbullying has been 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: 376). As public awareness of cyberbullying has increased, so have concerns about the potential health harms. Recent research has found strong associations between being cyberbullied and lower self-esteem, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and increased use of illicit substances (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Litwiller & Brausch, 2013; Moore et al., 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010, 2013; Perren, Dooley, Shaw, & Cross, 2010; Sabella, Patchin, & Hinduja, 2013).

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However, before we can tackle cyberbullying effectively and address resulting psychosocial and health harms, a better science of cyberbullying is urgently required (Patchin & Hinduja, 2013), especially outside of the USA where much of the early research has taken place (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattaner, 2014; Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014). One of the major gaps within the current scientific literature on cyberbullying is regarding the *perpetrators* (Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2013).

First, relatively little is known about the socio-demographic characteristics of those students who cyber-victimize others, which is important for informing any targeted prevention efforts (Patchin & Hinduja, 2013). For example, although studies consistently find that cyber and traditional bullying are very strongly correlated (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Li, 2007; Modecki et al., 2014; Sabella et al., 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a), further research is required to examine if cyberbullying perpetration is associated with other aggressive behaviours to inform new 'poly-aggression' prevention interventions (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Second, although the adverse health outcomes associated with being a victim are well known, the potential relationship between health and perpetration is under-researched. A recent Australian study of 11–19 year-olds found that cyberbullying others was associated with much higher scores on stress, depression and anxiety scales but further studies are needed to explore potential harms in other contexts (Campbell, Slee, Spears, Butler, & Kift, 2013).

This study first reports the lifetime prevalence of self-reported cyberbullying perpetration among young people aged 12–13 at eight English secondary schools and its association with socio-demographic factors and aggressive behaviour at school. Second, using a range of validated measures, associations with measures of psychological distress, mental wellbeing and quality of life are examined.

Methods

Procedure and participants

Data were collected during an exploratory trial to examine the feasibility and acceptability of implementing a whole-school restorative approach to preventing adolescent aggression and bullying (Fletcher, Fitzgerald-Yau, Wiggins, Viner, & Bonell, 2014). Eight mixed-sex English secondary schools (students aged 11–16) were recruited using a purposive sampling frame to ensure diversity with regard to government inspection rating and school-level eligibility for free school meals (a proxy for socioeconomic status). At each school, all year-8 students (aged 12–13) were asked to provide informed consent to participate in baseline paper-based surveys in September/October 2011, which took place on site, lasting approximately 1 h. Surveys were supervised by trained fieldworkers. To obtain data from absent students, a consent form, questionnaire and stamped addressed envelope were left at the school. Parents who did not wish their child to participate could opt out. The study was approved by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine research ethics committee.

Of 1196 eligible students, 1144 (96%) completed the questionnaire. The total number of eligible students at each school ranged from 94 to 184 (mean = 149.5). Participants' mean age at baseline was 12.1 years, 54% were male, and the sample was ethnically diverse: 44% were White British, 18% Black/Black-British, 16% Asian/Asian-British, 9% dual heritage, with 13% from other ethnic groups. Most students reported that they lived with both parents (64%) and that one or more adult at home was employed (70%).

Measures

Cyberbullying perpetration

We adapted an item from Smith and colleagues' DAPHNE II questionnaire (Smith et al., 2008) to assess prevalence and frequency of cyberbullying others. Participants were asked if they had bullied anyone through mobile phone use or the Internet. Response options are listed in Table 1.

Aggressive behaviour at school

Ten items from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (ESYTC) school misbehaviour and delinquency sub-scales (McAra & McVie, 2010) were included and aggregated to measure self-reported aggressive behaviour at school. All

Table 1
Self reported cyberbullying perpetration.

Item	Frequency – N (%)	Baseline		
		Males ($N = 617$)	Females ($N = 522$)	Overall ($N = 1139$)
Cyberbullying questions				
Have you ever bullied someone else through your mobile phone or using the Internet?	Never	499 (85.3%)	446 (86.6%)	945 (85.9%)
	Less than once a week	82 (14.0%)	67 (13.0%)	149 (13.5%)
	About once a week	2 (0.3%)	1 (0.2%)	3 (0.3%)
	Several times a week or more	2 (0.3%)	1 (0.2%)	3 (0.3%)
	Missing	*32*	*7*	*39*

Notes: Students not reporting their gender ($n = 5$) were excluded.

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