Effect of Cyberbullying on Adolescents Mental Health: Implication for Education

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying has been conceived as harassments where an electronic medium is used to threaten or harm and to inflict humiliation and fear. Many aspects of cyberbullying are similar to those of IRL bullying, although there are some important differences. Victims of cyberbullying are never left alone since harassments can reach them almost everywhere. Unlike IRL bullying, cyberbullying does not have to be repeated since a single episode can be reposted and forwarded. Electronic communication also allows bullies to remain anonymous and, because of absence of direct reactions from the victim, there is risk of increased cruelty. Cyberbullying has been linked to multiple maladaptive emotional, psychological, and behavioural outcomes; hence, this paper reflected on the impact of cyberbullying on students' mental health. The effects of cyberbullying vary depending on the individual, but its consequences include low self-esteem, anxiety, feeling sad, being scared, embarrassed, depression, anger, truancy, decreased academic achievement, an increased tendency to violate others, school violence and even suicide. As well as impacting on students' wellbeing, cyberbullying has also been found to impact on their mental health. This study reviewed the prevalence of cyberbullying, including the educational implication of this act, on students' mental health.

Keywords: Mental health, Cyberbullying, Impact, Adolescent, Implication

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a major health problem in young people, and individuals involved are at a risk of psychological problems such as psychosomatic symptoms, depression, and attempted or actual suicide [1]. Traditional (in-real life, IRL) bullying can include physical acts, verbal abuse, and more subtle acts like social exclusion and spreading rumours [2]. According to [2] definition, bullying is when a person is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions by one or several people in their surroundings. For young people, school is the main arena for bullying [1]. Increased risk of bully victimisation has been suggested to be associated with poor body image [3] and ethnicity [4]. As digital technology has created new ways to interact, new arenas for harassment have emerged. Young people use electronic-based communication extensively and are therefore at risk of cyberbullying [5]. Cyberbullying has been conceptualised as harassments where an electronic medium is used to threaten or harm and to inflict humiliation and fear [6]. Many aspects of cyberbullying are similar to those of IRL bullying (Kiriakidis and Kavoura, 2010), although there are some important differences (Schneider et al., 2012). Victims of cyberbullying are, for example, never left alone since harassments can reach them almost everywhere. Unlike IRL bullying, cyberbullying does not have to be repeated since a single episode can be reposted and forwarded. Electronic communication also allows bullies to remain anonymous and, because of absence of direct reactions from the victim, there is risk of increased cruelty [6]. Furthermore, unwanted contacts and harassments online are often of sexual nature. According to existing literature, 25–72% of adolescents report life-time exposure to cyberbullying. Some studies suggest no or few gender differences [6], while others found that girls are more exposed than boys. Importantly, victims of cyberbullying are at risk for poor mental health [6].

There is also evidence of overlap between IRL bullying and cyberbullying and that exposure to several types of bullying increases the risk of mental health problems [7]. Most existing research on cyberbullying focuses on prevalence and not on potential differences in risk factors for IRL and cyberbullying victimisation, as well as relationships between cyberbullying and mental health. So far, there is no earlier study with a sample larger than 1000 adolescents that has examined mental health associations (especially several aspects of mental health) of cyberbullying and IRL victimisation. Given the existing evidence of links between poor school environment and rates of bullying as well as young people's poor mental health [6], the next step is to evaluate whether the school environment also matters to cyberbullying. Also, it is unclear if the overlap of different types of harassment and its associations with mental health is the same in boys and girls. The concept of student mental health needs some

consideration. Various lines of argument give support to the perspective taken by the [8] that mental health is not simply the absence of mental disorder or illness; it is also a positive state of mental wellbeing [8]. This position reflects views such as those of [9], which conceptualised mental health as consisting of two dimensions, namely (a) the absence of dysfunction (impairment) in psychological, emotional, behavioural and social spheres, and (b) the presence of optimal functioning in psychological and social domains. Among the general population, mental health disorders, which include depression, aggressive behaviour, feeling down, and alcohol and drug misuse, are amongst the greatest health problem in high-income countries. Internalising problems, such as anxiety and depression, are increasingly recognised as imposing a significant mental health burden. [10], in a review of the KidsMatter mental health and wellbeing initiative pilot study, conducted across 100 Australian primary schools, noted that mental health problems are common among children of primary school age. They cite prevalence figures from the Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing indicating that one in seven primary school aged children has a mental health problem [11]. In particular, anxiety, depression, hyperactivity and aggression are among the more common problems. Children with mental health problems experience considerable distress and have reduced capacity to engage with their schooling and to form and maintain positive peer relationships [12]. This paper aims to review the implication of cyberbullying on students' mental health.

Cyber Bullying

Cyberbullying occurs by innumerable technological nature or ways. It encompasses publicly revealing personal information [13], sending harmful or threatening messages, posting derogatory comments on web site or social networking site, physically threatening and intimidating someone in a variety of online settings [14], creating web sites with content and posting pictures asking other people to rate things, without the consent of an individual [13], bothering someone online by teasing in a mean way, calling someone hurtful names, intentionally leaving persons out of things, threatening someone and saying unwanted sexually-related things [15] etc. Access to high technology, revenge, perceived anonymity, lack of awareness, lack of support and guidance of family [16], negative personal experiences and parental alienation, pleasure seeking and perceived social benefits [17] are the main causes of cyber bullying behaviour. Male students [18], particularly in middle school to high school [19], are more prone to it. In addition to this, students who are from lower income families, overweight or underweight, new or fresh, perceived as weak, depressed, anxious with low self-esteem, antisocial or unpopular is more vulnerable. Cyberbullying has been linked to multiple maladaptive emotional, psychological, and behavioural outcomes [15]. The effects of cyberbullying vary depending on the individual, but its consequences include low self-esteem, anxiety, feeling sad, being scared, embarrassed, depression, anger, truancy, decreased academic achievement, an increased tendency to violate others, school violence and even suicide [15,19] . Among all other experiences, low self-esteem, anxiety and depression are the detrimental outcome of cyberbullying. Self-esteem is important during adolescence stage as it decides the positive or negative orientation toward oneself. Cyber bullying inversely affects self-esteem of students [15]. Moreover, bullied individuals also suffer from heightened anxiety. It is a feeling of fear, worry and uneasiness, usually generalized and unfocused as an overreaction to a situation that is only subjectively seen as menacing. One more potential risk factor is the strong link between bullying and depression. [20], identified that the targets of cyber bullying are at greater risk for depression. Depression is a common mental disorder, characterized by sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, feelings of tiredness and poor concentration. Globally, little scientific research exists till date and when it comes to India there is a dearth of research in this topic. This research was done to bridge the gap in cyberbullying research and an attempt to know the psychological consequences of cyberbullying.

The New Face of School Bullying

A review of the literature over the past 30 years suggests that the face of school bullying has changed with the times. This does not imply that the forms of bullying earlier noted in research literature [21] are no longer employed, but it does highlight that there have been shifts in the research foci and emphases over the last three decades as researchers have become more sophisticated in how they approach it. At the same time, clear societal and technological shifts have occurred which have enabled researchers to access different behaviours at different times. There have therefore been shifts in examining: direct behaviours to indirect; physical to verbal to psychological; the seen to the unseen; and the overt to the covert. The challenge in today's highly technological world is to monitor the latest, namely that of cyberbullying [22]. The act of bullying is not only part of the schoolyard but has emerged to lurk behind the screens in the private worlds of technology. Targets would appear to be more accessible than ever before: 24 hours a day, seven days a week, expressly due to the use of technology as a social vehicle. In Australia, [22] explored the impact of mobile phones on young people's social lives, noting that the mobile phone has shifted from being a technological and safety device to a social tool indicative of social connectedness and status. Campbell has also explored the notion of cyberbullying, reporting on various methods being used including: texting derogatory messages on mobiles; sending threatening emails; forwarding a

confidential email to all address book contacts. The international research suggests that despite some cultural differences, many of the broad features of bullying are similar across countries [23]. For example, there appear to be characteristic sex differences, with boys using and experiencing more physical means of bullying and girls experiencing or using more indirect and relational means. It is also commonly found that many victims do not report bullying or seek help.

Prevalence of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, whatever its characteristics, is a significant problem among young people [24]. In the first Australian study of 120 Grade 8 students, it was found that 14 per cent reported being targets of cyberbullying while 11 per cent identified themselves as bullying others using technology [22]. A survey of 2,027 11-12 year-olds attending Western Australian Catholic schools found that almost 10 per cent had been sent hurtful messages on the internet during the past school term, with the figure being as high as 12.5 per cent among girls [25]. Similar data from the Child Health Promotion Research Centre's (CHPRC) Survey Service indicates that 13 per cent of the 1,286 students participating in the survey had received hurtful messages using SMS, while 15 per cent had received hurtful messages through the internet [25]. The Australian Communications and Media Authority investigation into young people's use of online social media (Click and Connect Report, 2009) found that the incidence of cyberbullying increased with age, with nearly one in five (19%) of 16-17 year-olds reporting having experienced some form of cyberbullying. By contrast, only 1 per cent of 8-9 year-olds and 10 per cent of 10-11 year-olds reported having experienced it. Cyberbullying was more prevalent over the internet than the mobile phone, with 10 per cent of 16-17 year-olds reporting having been cyberbullied over the mobile phone and 17 per cent reporting bullying over the internet. While cyberbullying occurs with less frequency than traditional bullying, its prevalence is still appreciable and possibly increasing in Australia, as is the case elsewhere in the world [26]. It is noted that as technology has become more available in more sophisticated and diverse forms, bullying has emerged via each medium; initially through emails, then text messages and mobile phones and, most recently, through photographs, websites and social networking sites.

Mental Health Concerns of Cyberbullying

As well as impacting on students' wellbeing, cyberbullying has also been found to impact on their mental health. [27], found in a New Zealand study of secondary school students (11-18 years old) that cyber victims reported significantly more depressive symptoms than non-victims, with all victims reporting above the cut-off score of mild to moderate symptoms on the Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression measure. Experiencing cyberbullying more frequently was shown to correlate with an increase in self-reported depressive symptoms [27]. In an Australian study, the consequences for all types of bullying for victims' mental health were found to be significantly worse than for students who had not been bullied [24]. In addition, there were significant differences in consequences depending on how the victims were bullied. That is, the victims of cyberbullying were significantly more anxious and depressed than the victims of traditional bullying. Those who were bullied in both ways had similar anxiety and depression scores to cyberbullying victims. Cyber victims also reported a higher level of social difficulties than those who had been traditionally bullied. These findings were supported by an Australian and Swiss comparison of secondary school students where cyber victimisation was a significant predictor of depressive symptoms, and was found to be over and above that of being victimised by traditional bullying [28]. Students who have been cyberbullied have also been shown to have significantly lower self-esteem than those who were not cyberbullied [15]. There have been few studies which have focused on the consequences for those students who cyberbully. One, however, found that these students were at significantly more risk than non-bullies for externalising adjustment disorders similar to students who traditionally bully [29]. As the research on cyberbullying is still in its infancy, there are quite a few methodological problems with existing research on consequences. The first of these is the extent to which studies have accurately identified those students who have been involved in cyberbullying. This is most commonly accomplished by self-report; however, there is controversy over whether there has been an accurate definition included in surveys. For example, in some studies, cyberbullying has been defined as any mean message sent electronically [30], therefore inflating the number of students involved as the characteristics of repetition and the imbalance of power were not used. Other surveys also have different time periods in which students are asked whether they have been cyberbullied (in the last month, etc.), as well as different frequencies, ranging from once to once every few months. Surveys also either ask a global question as to whether a student has experienced cyberbullying, or students may be given discrete behavioural examples. These two measures give different results [31]. Secondly, many early case studies on the consequences of cyberbullying did not consider the overlap of traditional and cyberbullying, and failed to account for the considerable overlap of students who are involved in both traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Studies by [31], found 92 per cent of students who were cyberbullied were also traditionally bullied. Finally, all studies conducted so far have been cross sectional, and therefore it is not known whether the effects reported are consequences or antecedents.

Educational Implications of Cyberbullying

Although it has been shown that cyberbullying is mainly conducted outside of school hours and outside of school grounds [31, 26], it is a vexatious problem for schools. Parents and the community are increasingly turning to schools to provide preventative strategies and to manage incidents of cyberbullying.

Proposed Technological Solutions (Approach)

There are many websites (such as the Cybersmart website, set up by the Australian Communications for Media and Technology) and authors giving advice such as ─Block the person. This will stop you seeing messages from a particular person.‖ This may give some temporary abatement from the cyberbullying, but if someone is intent on bullying they will usually find other ways to overcome the block or to 'get' the victim by other mediums. Some authors advocate restricting friends on Facebook or changing an avatar if they have been bullied [30]. Some advice is to turn off the computer or mobile phone so that bullies cannot contact the victim [15]. It is interesting to note, however, that in most studies, students have been shown not to use these technological solutions [23]. The use of an Australia wide filter has also been proposed by some sections of the Federal government (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). However, filters are probably more appropriate for restricting unintentional access to pornography, and not for policing nasty comments made by young people.

Proposed Whole School Solutions

It is known that the most successful intervention studies on traditional bullying have been those where whole school approaches have been taken rather than curriculum implementation alone. This means the intervention views bullying as a social systemic problem and targets individuals, classrooms and the school community. In a meta-analysis of 44 school-based intervention programs where a whole school approach was taken, traditional bullying was reduced by an average of 20 per cent [32]. Unfortunately, there are only a few published interventions on cyberbullying to date. Most studies which explore coping strategies for cyberbullying are purely descriptive or small scale. For instance, it has been found that upper primary students from a school where a philosophy for children' program claiming to increase social skills [33] is run reported more traditional bullying than a matched sample from schools where philosophy was not conducted. There were no differences in reported involvement in cyberbullying between the two samples for both students who had been cyberbullied and students who cyberbullied [34].

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