"It's Common Sense That It's Wrong": Young People's Perceptions and Experiences of Cyberbullying

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Abstract

The use of the Internet, mobile phones, and social networking sites by some young people to harass and intimidate each other has led cyberbullying to become a significant concern for parents, educators, and policy makers. The existing literature on this behavior is largely quantitative, with only a small number of qualitative studies addressing this issue. This study examined perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying in a series of 18 focus groups conducted with young people aged 9–19 in the UK. The results suggest that cyberbullying is perceived to be problematic and serious but relatively routine part of young people's online lives and interactions. The results also highlighted the influence of the characteristics of technologically mediated communication on the dynamics of the behavior. The role of anonymity in determining victim–perpetrator relationships and the seriousness of the behavior was discussed by participants, though the influence of disinhibition and inability to view the direct impact of victimization were perceived to be of greater importance. The implications of the results are discussed, and areas for future research suggested.

Introduction

THE INTERNET, MOBILE PHONES, and social networking sites have become an increasingly integral part of adolescent social lives and relationships in contemporary society. However, the use of the communicative functions of these technologies by some young people to harass and intimidate each other has led cyberbullying to become a significant concern for parents, educators, and policy makers. This has resulted in the development of a body of empirical research examining the prevalence, dynamics, and psychosocial impacts of this behavior.

Although there are a variety of definitions of cyberbullying in the literature, it is generally characterized as the use of technology to bully, harass, or intimidate an individual or group of young people.[1] Researchers have also conceptualized the behavior as intentional, repeated, involving power imbalance, causing harm to the intended victim, and involving a range of technologically mediated behaviors (e.g., making threats, abusive comments, impersonation, etc.).[1–3]

Prevalence

Although there are variations in prevalence figures between different studies that reflect definitional, measurement, and sampling differences,[3] the evidence suggests that cyberbullying is relatively common. A recent study found that 28% of 11–16 years olds in the UK had been cyberbullied, with more than a third reporting that this behavior was persistent.[4] Another study found that 8% of 11–16 year olds in the UK had been bullied online and 5% by mobile,[5] and prevalence figures for the experience of different cyberbullying behaviors were found to range between 5.7% and 18.3% in a sample of American middle school children.[2] Studies generally report that receiving distressing comments and name-calling are the most frequent forms of cyberbullying behaviors.[2,5,6] The evidence suggests that there are few gender or age differences in the prevalence of the behavior,[7–9] although exceptions have been explained as the result of the variations in participant age ranges used in different studies.[3,10,11] Despite these variations in specific findings between studies, there is clear evidence that cyberbullying is experienced by a significant number of young people.

Responses

Studies have also examined victim responses to cyberbullying.[2,5,12] Technological responses reflect the use of blocking or ignore functions, and changing privacy settings to prevent further contact from perpetrators.[3,6,13] Use of passive strategies is also common,[2] with different studies finding that 25% of victims did nothing,[9] and 40% did not report their experiences to anyone.[12] Active strategies focus on preventing further victimization by telling perpetrators to stop, or reporting the behavior to parents and teachers.[3,6,9] The proportion of victims who report their experiences to their

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parents varies between studies (1–9%),[11,13] although recent research found that approximately half of the parents of young people who had experienced cyberbullying were aware that this had happened to their child.[5] Reluctance to report victimization to parents may be motivated by concerns about subsequent restrictions on Internet access and the associated isolation from their friends and social networks online, which is important to young people given the increasing technological mediation of their friendships and everyday lives.[1,3,14] This is also reflected by research suggesting that peers are more likely to be viewed as a source of support where problems are experienced.[3,11,13] It has also been found that they perceive learning to manage online risks and negative experiences themselves effectively to be a necessary skill, and seeking parental help to be a strategy for younger children.[3,6,15]

Impacts

The experience of cyberbullying can have a number of negative psychosocial impacts. These are similar to those of offline victimization, and include the experience of anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, school avoidance, and suicidal ideation.[2,12,16–19] Although there are many similarities between offline and cyberbullying, particularly in relation to perpetrator motivations and the impact of their behaviors on victims, the characteristics of new technologies may intensify the experience of harassment.[1,9,18,20] The online environment increases the potential audience for abusive behavior beyond existing offline social networks to the wider school and online community.[1] It also enables harassment to follow victims into domestic spaces, and removes the protective function of the home as a "safe haven" from bullying.[1,9,14,21] This suggests that cyberbullying has specific dimensions that distinguish it from offline victimization.[1]

Contextual factors and mediated communication

The characteristics of mediated communication are also an important aspect of the dynamics of cyberbullying. Perceived anonymity can lead to disinhibition and reduced adherence to social norms that encourages abusive behavior that would be unacceptable in face to face situations.[13] This, together with the lack of ability to witness the impact of cyberbullying directly, may escalate the severity of abusive behavior.[22] The anonymous nature of mediated communication can also potentially increase the intensity of the impact of cyberbullying, as the victim may be unable to determine the identity of the perpetrator.[22] This suggests the need for further investigation of the influence of different victim–perpetrator relationships and the characteristics of mediated communication on the dynamics and impacts of the behavior.

The existing literature is largely quantitative, and focuses on using definitional or behavioral operationalizations to measure the prevalence, impacts, and predictors of cyberbullying.[3,13] There has been less qualitative research examining online victimization. This approach is important, as it can ensure that definitions of cyberbullying and the results of quantitative research are consistent with young people's perceptions and experiences. A small number of qualitative studies have provided support for such consistency, and highlighted the need for future research to recognize the role of the social contexts in which cyberbullying occurs in order

to distinguish it from other forms of online behavior that are not consistent with the definitional criteria of intention, repetition, power imbalance, and harm (e.g., teasing or arguing).[23–25] This study builds on this research by further examining young people's perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying, with a specific focus on the influence of the characteristics of mediated communication on the dynamics of the behavior.

Method

Design and participants

This study used a focus group methodology to obtain a deeper insight into young people's online behaviors and experiences. Eighteen focus groups ($N=108$) were conducted with participants aged 9–19 years old from schools and colleges in the UK. This approach was more suited to the aims of the study than individual interviews, as they provided a less focused interaction with the researcher, and enabled peer discussion of young people's online activities and experiences. Although there are some limitations associated with the group format used, this enabled an exploration of the contextualization and construction of cyberbullying within their everyday lives. It also provides young people with a voice in discussions about their subjective experiences,[26,27] and recognizes that they are a key stakeholder group whose opinions are underrepresented in public and policy discourse about online safety.

Materials

The groups had a semi-structured format in order to facilitate more open discussion of the key research themes, and enable other relevant issues to be raised by the participants. The focus group agenda addressed a number of different research questions associated with young people's online behavior and experiences. Each research theme was characterized by a general question (e.g., "What kind of things can go wrong online?") and a number of subsequent probe questions to facilitate discussion further (e.g., "What would you do if you experienced such problems?"). These aimed to facilitate group discussion and enable relevant themes associated with cyberbullying to emerge without significant input from the facilitator. This article presents the results of the analysis of specific themes relating to participant discussions about cyberbullying and the research objectives outlined in the introduction.*

Procedure/data analysis

All participants were provided with full ethical information about the study in order to provide informed consent to engage in the research process. School and parental consent was also obtained. The groups were tape-recorded and lasted approximately 1 hour. Session tapes were transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed by the research team using Nvivo. Thematic analysis[28] was used to explore participant

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*The results of the analysis of the data relating to other themes explored in the groups (e.g., trust, disclosure of personal information, interacting with "strangers," evaluation of awareness messages, etc.) are presented in subsequent publications.

opinions and experiences in relation to the identified research objectives. The analytic process commenced with the transcripts being read a number of times in order to achieve familiarization with the data and to develop a list of coding labels associated with each theme specified in the focus group agenda. These were applied to the data during the next stage of analysis, and emergent themes were also identified and coded. An iterative review process of the coding and themes was then undertaken by the researchers to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the analysis.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study indicated a consensus among participants that cyberbullying was wrong and could have potentially serious impacts on victims. They were able to draw on direct, peer, or family experience to describe incidents of online harassment and intimidation (e.g., texts, comments on social networking sites, etc.). The resulting experiences of fear and anxiety were discussed, though participants may have been unwilling to describe more severe outcomes in front of their peers. There was a general perception that despite its potential seriousness, cyberbullying was an inevitable and relatively routine occurrence that young people accepted as a normative dimension of online relationships and experiences.[23–25,29,30]

> Everyone gets hassled…there's always people giving you jip. (F, 14)
>
> It does happen, it's bound to happen. (M, 17)
> You just get used to it after a while. (F, 13)

The normalization of cyberbullying as an online risk was also reflected in participant awareness of strategies for responding to the behavior, which focused on blocking the perpetrator and seeking support from peers, consistent with previous research.[3,11,13,16,22,24] This contrasts with previous qualitative research finding that young people were generally pessimistic about the potential to respond to cyberbullying.[24,25] This difference in results may reflect the success of educational strategies addressing cyberbullying in raising awareness about the behavior and associated responses.

> If someone comments you and you don't like it, you just block them. (F, 12)
>
> I would say see how it goes for a bit and if gets worse, tell the teacher. (M, 10)

This was also related to participant discussions about the influence of the characteristics of mediated communication on emergent social norms in online spaces and the dynamics of cyberbullying. Perceived anonymity was discussed as a factor determining victim–perpetrator relationships, and the experiential impacts of the behavior. Previous research suggests that young people perceive anonymous harassment to have more serious and negative impacts on victims,[22,23] and there was evidence of this perception in the groups.

> If it was one of your friends then you would be hurt but you don't know them, so you don't really have to care that much. (M, 17)
>
> You don't even know them but they've said something really serious about you.
>
> You're thinking, "What's happened here?" You get confused and scared at the same time. (M, 17)

However, victimization within existing peer networks by known perpetrators was most prevalent and perceived to be more serious. This contrast with previous research may reflect differential participation in online behaviors that potentially expose young people to anonymous harassment (e.g., use of chatrooms, public social networking profiles, etc.) between studies. It is also consistent with other studies suggesting that the majority of victims know the identity of the perpetrator, and suggests that anonymity does not have a uniform impact on the dynamics of the behaviour.[3,4,6] Other factors (e.g., trait characteristics, platforms, etc.) are also likely to influence the perceived seriousness of victimization by anonymous or known perpetrators. This is also reflected in participant discussions about the role of other characteristics of mediated communication in facilitating victimization experiences. Participants perceived lack of face-to-face interaction and inability to witness the direct impact of behaviors on the victim to have greater importance than anonymity.

> No, it's easier; if they say it on MSN they wouldn't come up to you and say it to your face. (F, 12)
>
> Stuff that you wouldn't say to someone in the street, like you wouldn't go up to someone and say something offensive to them, I don't think you should say on the Internet because it's the same thing really—you just can't see each other. (M, 14)
>
> It's nastier, 'cos people feel more confident saying it over the computer than to your face. (F, 13)

Disinhibition was perceived to increase the confidence of the perpetrator and escalate the extremity of online comments and behavior compared to equivalent offline situations.[13,22,24,31] The young people also highlighted difficulties in determining perpetrator intentions (e.g., humor or threat) as the result of lack of visual social cues in ambiguous communicative situations, consistent with previous research.[2,32]

> You can't see their emotions when they're saying things, it can get a bit confusing sometimes and misleading. (M, 16)

This highlights the ways in which mediated communication blurs traditionally understood boundaries between humor and threat, intention and reception, as well as acceptable and unacceptable behavior in online spaces.[23] Its ability to transform or alter existing social norms is central to many concerns about young people and online risk, partly due to the persistent and textual nature of online interactions and the potential visibility of victimization. Participant discussions suggest that young people are aware of the influence of mediated communication on social norms, and their facilitation of cyberbullying.

> They can hack into it and leave nasty comments for other people, and when you get back on it, people are asking why you've said that about them. (F, 13)
>
> It can get worse because they can copy all your messages and send it round, and then they send it to someone else…and everybody knows about it the next day. (F, 14)
>
> If you ruin someone's Bebo, it's like some people's life. (M, 17)

The potential visibility of harassment was discussed in relation to the potential audience for cyberbullying behaviors. This was reflected in participants' discussion of the ability of mediated communication to create new opportunities for victimization, and there was particular concern about the possibility of having their online identities compromised and used to make nasty or embarrassing postings to friends/

contacts. The potential reputational impact of impersonation on their online identities and interpersonal trust within peer networks was perceived to be substantial, consistent with previous research.[25] This indicates that the impacts of cyberbullying are social as well as psychological, and that reputational damage represents both a motivation and outcome of the behavior. This is unsurprising given the technological mediation of young people's identities and social relationships in contemporary society,[23–25,29,30] and suggests that cyberbullying can have a significant impact on trust within peer networks.

Conclusions

The results of this study are consistent with previous research on the prevalence and experience of cyberbullying.[3,23–25] Young people perceived the behavior to be routine, inevitable, and an unfortunate feature of their online interactions. Their confidence in being able to respond to cyberbullying effectively suggests that young people perceive themselves to have the necessary awareness and agency to manage online risk responsibly.[33,34,35] However, there is a need to identify the characteristics of young people who may be particularly vulnerable to victimization as the result of particular psychological, social, or cultural factors.[3,30] This can inform the development of targeted educational strategies that develop coping skills and resilience to cyberbullying for specific groups of young people, for example those who may be vulnerable to victimization due to specific religious, ethnic, and sexual identities.[36]

The study highlights the ability of qualitative research to develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of cyberbullying, particularly the associated influence of the characteristics of mediated communication. This approach also enables researchers to ensure that theoretical frameworks and understandings of the behavior are consistent with young people's everyday experiences. It further provides them with a voice in public and policy discourse about online safety, and ensures that policy decisions are consistent with the use of the Internet in their everyday lives.[30]

Although there are limitations associated with the representativeness of qualitative data, the number of groups conducted and the structured sampling by age and gender provided a sufficiently robust data set exploring young people's online experiences. The focus group study methodology was more suitable for addressing the overall aims of the research to examine young people's online experiences than individual interviews, as it enabled peer discussion and the ability to examine how the behavior is contextualized within their everyday lives. This broader focus limited the ability to examine the specific themes examined in this article in greater depth, and the group format potentially prevented participants from discussing more severe experiences and impacts. However, the results highlighted that young people understand the role of mediated communication in facilitating cyberbullying and accept this as a routine feature of online interaction that is contextualized within their everyday lives. The study also suggests that young people's understanding of the boundaries between intention and reception, acceptable and unacceptable online behavior, and the associated role of social norms in online interactions, are areas requiring further research.

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