

# BULLYING THROUGH THE INTERNET - CYBERBULLYING

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## SUMMARY

**Introduction:** Bullying is an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend himself or herself. However, with the advent of electronic communication via the internet and mobile phones has led to appearance of a new form of violence, i.e. cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is define as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through computer, cell phones and other electronic device". The aim of this paper is to point to the growing problem of cyberbullying.

**Methods:** Review the research and theoretical literature.

**Results:** Bullying through the Internet tends to occur at a later age, around 14 years, when children spend more time on their mobile phones and social networking sites. Estimates indicate that between 15% and 35% of young people have been victims of cyberbullying and between 10% and 20% of individuals admit to having cyberbullied others. Perpetrators of cyberbullying have a degree of anonymity not possible in traditional bullying, and the potential exposure and embarrassment of the victim is on a larger scale. It is possible to victimize a peer within their own home or elsewhere at any time of day or night, and should they remove themselves from the site, the messages often accumulate. Victims of bullying often have mental health problems, including depressive symptomatology, self-harm and suicidal behaviors.

**Conclusions:** This presents new challenges for individuals, families, schools, professionals, researchers, and policy makers.

**Key words:** cyberbullying - child - adolescent

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## INTRODUCTION

Bullying has become one of the leading public health problems among adolescents. It refers on intentional aggressive act carried out by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend himself or herself (Olweus 1993). However, in recent years, rapid advance and ever-increasing access to information and communication technology (e.g. text messages, mobile phones, social networks sites) have created a new way to take out frustrations and aggression among youth. Although the Internet has provided many benefits, it may be responsible for a host of negative outcomes. Bullying through the Internet, so-called cyberbullying, has emerged as a new form of bullying and harassment and has occupied the attention of both investigators and communities worldwide (Kowalski et al. 2014).

There is still some debate about how to define cyberbullying. However, researchers have agreed on a working definition that includes four criteria:

- the sender must intend to harm the receiver;
- there is a power imbalance between the sender and receiver (e.g., age, social status, anonymity, physical strength);
- acts of aggression are usually repeated;

- a personal computer, mobile phone, or other electronic device is used to communicate (Garret et al. 2016).

The media through which cyberbullying can occur are equally diverse, including instant messaging (e.g. through *Viber*, *Skype*, *Messenger*, etc.), e-mail, text messages, web pages, chat rooms, blogs, social networking sites, digital images and online games (Kowalski et al. 2014).

## TRADITIONAL BULLYING VERSUS CYBERBULLYING

Although there are many similarities between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, it is important to mention what are cyberbullying specific traits. Bullying through electronic media is indirect, without physical interaction, the victim does not have opportunities to defend and is available at every moment, while chances of identifying and punishing perpetrators are minimal (Bilić et al. 2014).

Cyberbullying perpetrators often perceive themselves to be anonymous. Perpetrators who remain anonymous can say and do more harmful things than they would face-to-face. Due to the lack of social and contextual indications, such as body language and tone

of voice, there is no affective feedback on how Internet behavior has affected another person. For some perpetrators, the recognition that they have hurt their victim is enough to deter further bullying behavior. With cyberbullying there is no direct way for perpetrators to know the effect of their behavior on the victim, thus the chances for empathy and remorse are significantly reduced (Sourander et al. 2010).

The availability of cyberbullying victim is 24 hours a day, seven days a week, while traditional bullying usually occurs while children are at school. At any time during the day or night, perpetrator can create websites, send text messages, or post messages about others on the Internet. Although the victims can remove themselves from the online site, the message continues to accumulate. Abuse content sent via electronic media is difficult to remove. Victims can be abused in the security of their home, without the simple ability to escape from the perpetrator. The perpetrators of bullying through electronic media do not attract the attention of parents and teachers so they remain undetected for long time (Kowalski et al. 2014).

Additionally, because of the nature of the venues through which cyberbullying occurs, it has a much greater potential audience. This may be several thousand of young people as opposed to bullying incident at school where the audience is scarce (Kowalski et al. 2014). According to some authors to be cyberbullied or to cyberbully others seems to a large extent to be part of a general pattern of bullying, where use of the electronic media is only one possible form (Olweus et al. 2013). Children involved in classic forms of bullying often participate in cyberbullying too, i.e. they continue with their activities from the real into the virtual world, while their victims experience multiple victimisation (Bilić et al. 2014).

## PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING

As cyberbullying is a new area of investigation, research methods are less standardized compared to other areas. Each researcher applied their own unique methodology (e.g., web-based online survey, classroom survey, etc.), as well as anonymous or defined questionnaires within a specific time period. Differences in study designs, study populations, methodology, time periods, and definitions of cyberbullying most likely explain the wide range of the prevalence figures in various studies (Suzuki et al. 2012).

Research results point to the prevalence of cyberbullying exposure from 4.8% to 73.5%. (Hamm et al. 2015). Estimates indicate that between 15% and 35% of young people have been victims of cyberbullying and between 10% and 20% of individuals admit to having cyberbullied others (Hinduja & Patchin 2010). Meta-analysis synthesizing the results of 80 studies estimated the prevalence of traditional bullying victimization to be

about 36%, while the prevalence of cyberbullying victimization was about 15% (Modecki et al. 2014). In the research conducted in Croatia among 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade elementary school students, the authors conclude that the most common forms of cyberbullying are embarrassment on the forum, social networks sites or blogs (38.4%), the publication of shameful images or content on the Internet (32.4%) and harassment via e-mail or text messages (29.9%) (Bilić et al. 2014).

## THE CONNECTION OF CYBERBULLYING WITH THE AGE AND SEX OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Cyberbullying is a widespread problem that can be experienced by children at any age.

However, the majority of the current research has been conducted on middle or high school children. There were mixed results in the current literature, where some authors find no significant association between age and cyberbullying (Garett et al. 2016), while some authors find the association between the mentioned variables. For example, in a research conducted in the United States, the authors came to the conclusion that cyberbullying tends to occur at a later age, around 14 years, when children spend increasingly more time on their mobile phones and social networking sites (Kowalski & Limber 2007). Williams and Guerra found in their research that cyberbullying increases after fifth grade and peaks during eighth grade (Williams & Guerra 2007). Other researcher suggest that age differences depend on the method by which the cyberbullying occurs. Smith et al. observed that text messaging, picture/video clip bullying and instant messaging were more frequent with older than younger adolescents (Smith et al. 2008). In research conducted among college student population, it was found that over 30% of youth claimed that their first experience with cyberbullying was in college. Even including those who had been cyberbullied in middle and high school, 43% of the respondents indicated that the majority of the cyberbullying they had experienced had occurred during college (Kowalski et al. 2012).

When compared to gender, boys are more involved in direct physical contact while girls engage in indirect forms of bullying, including cyberbullying (Kowalski et al. 2014). Even in this area the research results are inconsistent. Although some research supports this hypothesis (Kowalski & Limber 2007), other research has found no statistically significant difference between gender and cyberbullying (Garett et al. 2016). In research conducted by Sourander et al., it was concluded that boys are more likely than girls cyberbullying perpetrators, while girls are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying (Sourander et al. 2010). The results of the research conducted in Canada also confirm that girls are twice as likely to be victims of cyberbullying and that

the more time young people spend on electronic media they are more likely to be cyberbullying victims (Sampasa-Kanying et al. 2014). In research among children aged 11 to 13 years was found that the risk of cyberbullying is higher in boys if they are victims of traditional bullying, and in girls the risk is higher as the popularity among peers is lower (Rivers & Noret 2010). One group of investigators suggests that gender differences depend on the venue by which the cyberbullying is occurring. Girls are cyberbullying victims via e-mail more frequently than boys (Hinduja & Patchin 2008), whereas boys are cyberbullied through text messaging more often than girls (Slonje & Smith 2008).

## CYBERBULLYING AND MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Considering the importance of virtual spaces for interaction and for the psychosocial development of adolescents, it is important to point out that the results of many researches indicate the connection of cyberbullying with a wide range of disorders (Bottino et al. 2015).

Emotional responses of adolescents exposed to cyberbullying vary in intensity and quality. The European multicenter study conducted on a large number of adolescents examined the emotional impact of different forms of traditional bullying and cyberbullying on victims of violence. The results indicate that 68.5% of adolescents experienced some negative emotions such as anger, upset, worry, stress, fear and depressive feelings (Ortega et al. 2012). In a review study conducted by Reed et al. on adolescents aged 12 to 18 years, was found a positive correlation between depressive symptoms and cyberbullying (Reed et al. 2016). Adolescents who reported experiences of cyberbullying, particularly those who suffered frequent attacks (two or more times a month), had more severe depressive symptoms when compared with adolescents exposed to other forms of bullying (Schneider et al. 2012).

The feelings of helplessness and powerlessness to defend themselves from incidents of cyberbullying can increase the sense of fear and emotional distress, contributing to the emergence of depressive symptoms (Bottino et al. 2015).

Cyberbullying may have even more harmful outcomes to adolescents' mental health, including substance abuse, unsafe sexual behavior, violent and suicidal behavior (Litwiller & Brausch 2013). In a meta-analysis involving 156 386 children and adolescents, it was concluded that cyberbullying victims are at a greater risk than nonvictims of self-harm and suicidal behavior (suicidal ideation, suicide plans and suicide attempts). To a lesser extent, perpetrators of cyberbullying are at risk of suicidal behaviors when compared with nonperpetrators (John et al. 2018).

However, it is unclear whether cyberbullying contributes to mental health problems primarily because of its overlap with traditional bullying. Results of previous research support an association between bullying (cyberbullying and traditional bullying) and poorer well-being (Przybylski & Bowes 2017). In a cross-sectional study conducted of 18 834 adolescents aged 12 to 18 years, authors conclude that cyberbullying, regardless of other forms of bullying, causes internalizing, externalizing, and substance use problems. As a protective factor, authors point out frequent family dinners (Elgar et al. 2014).

## CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying remains a pervasive and troubling problem among children and adolescents. Consequently, continuous monitoring of the potential harmful effects of electronic media on the health and well-being of youth is required. Further research is also needed to explicate the unique mechanisms at the individual and the social level that lead to reductions in cyberbullying behaviors. Knowing all this it is important to start implementing prevention and detection of cyberbullying and also include and educate social community. All this presents new challenges for individuals, families, schools, professionals, researchers, and policy makers.

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### **Contribution of individual authors:**

Martina Krešić Ćorić: design of the study, literature searches, writing the manuscript toward the previously selected articles.

Ana Kaštelan: participated in the study concept and also critically drafted and revised the final appearance of the paper.

All authors provided their approval for the final version of the manuscript.

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