

Cyberbullying: academic research briefing paper

Background

Academic interest in cyberbullying can be tracked back to 2003 (Bauman & Bellmore, 2015). There is an ongoing debate about the nature of cyberbullying ([Two NTU academics submitted oral evidence to the ongoing Science and Technology Committee inquiry](#)). Some researchers argue that cyberbullying represents an extension of face-to-face bullying because there is often a power imbalance, an intent to cause harm, and repetition. Conversely, other researchers have highlighted the unique characteristics of cyberbullying because it can occur at any time of the day and the audience for cyberbullying is much greater. Research at NTU has begun to explore in detail cyberbullying and we hope this briefing will help provide a summary of our work and relevant resources for educators.

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Dr Lucy Betts is an Associate Professor in Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. Lucy has over 15 years experience of undertaking research in social developmental psychology. Focusing on cyberbullying Lucy has undertaken research with secondary age students and teachers, and university students to explore the impact of cyberbullying involvement. Her research in to cyberbullying has been funded by the British Academy, published in a number of academic journals, presented at national and international conferences, and the subject of a book. Recently Lucy gave oral evidence on cyberbullying to the ongoing Science and Technology Committee inquiry and has authored a resource for secondary school teachers.

Prevalence

Currently, there is public and media concern about how common cyberbullying is. There is a wide variation in the reported prevalence of involvement in cyberbullying. Although the reported prevalence rates of involvement in cyber bullying converge between 20 and 40% (e.g., Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008), some studies report far greater involvement in cyber bullying. My own research suggests that two thirds of 16- to 19-year-olds report some involvement in cyberbullying during the last year ([Betts, Gkimitzoudis, Spenser, & Baguley, 2017](#)). This variation in prevalence can be partly attributed to variation in the questions young people have been asked. For example, comparing cyberbullying experiences over during the last month versus during the life time.

Impact of cyberbullying involvement

The consequences of involvement in face-to-face bullying are well documented for psychosocial adjustment (e.g., Olweus, 2013; Smith, 2004) and perceptions of school (e.g., Gruber & Fineran, 2016); however, comparably fewer studies have explored the consequences of involvement in cyberbullying. The studies that have examined the impact of cyberbullying have tended to be cross-sectional (providing a snapshot) or short-term longitudinal (conducted over a couple of years) in nature. In order to provide evidence of causal impact of cyberbullying high quality longitudinal studies are required.

Findings from my research

What follows is a summary of the key findings from a number of studies that I have conducted in the area of cyberbullying.

Research with 11 to 15 year olds (Betts & Spenser, [2017a](#), [2017b](#); [Betts, Spenser, & Gardner, 2017](#))

Young people regard technology as a facilitator and mechanism to maintain social networks (i.e., they can access information about their friends, see what they had been up to, arrange social events and share pictures). However, they recognise the tension between a desire for privacy and the need to be sociable but often perceive that others are more at risk of negative online behaviours than they are.

Young people considered cyberbullying as behaviours undertaken by an anonymous coward and were able to distinguish between cyberbullying and 'banter'. There was also a desire to disclose cyberbullying experiences but the fear of the potential consequences are seen as a barrier to disclosure. For example, the fear of making the situation worse or that cyberbullying would translate become face-to-face bullying.

There is cross-sectional evidence that involvement in cyberbullying (irrespective of role) affected young women's perceptions of learning. A similar association was evident for young men who experienced and engaged in cyberbullying.

Research with teachers ([Betts & Spenser, 2015](#))

Teachers recognised that young people's technology use shaped their social interactions in positive and negative ways. Teachers expressed concern that some young people regarded the virtual world as the 'real' world with some young people becoming detached from reality despite the benefits of facilitating social relationships and removing geographical boundaries.

The teachers also suggested that some young people approach technology with naivety (i.e., not realising the internet is largely a public space) whereas other young people actively use controls to protect them. The teachers argued that involvement in cyberbullying undermines young people's confidence and that distress is often caused, not by the content of the message but, by the fear that a message can be received at any time. Although some teachers regarded cyberbullying as similar to face-to-face bullying, most argued that the impacts of cyberbullying were greater.

Focusing on disclosing experiences of cyberbullying, teachers believed that the potential absence of evidence was a barrier for young people. Also, there was a perception that teachers could not deal with cyberbullying, especially if it was something that had occurred outside of the school day.

Resource for teachers

Drawing on the above findings, an educational resource (comprising of three lesson plans) that is targeted at secondary age students has been developed. This resource is freely available and can be accessed at: <https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/people-think-it-s-a-harmless-joke-exploring-cyber-bullying-11995914>

What we are doing next

Developing the line of inquiry, current research is examining the distinction between bullying and banter as many young people discuss how behaviour that could be interpreted as bullying by others is actually banter. Other research is exploring the perceptions of safety online and the optimistic tendency to report others are at greater risk. Aligned to this line of research, we are also exploring the current trend of digital self-harm where young people cyberbully themselves.

Recommendations

- Through education, young people need to be made aware of the relative risks of cyber bullying and how to protect their information online. However, this message needs to be carefully framed as young people acknowledge that cyberbullying is something that happens to others and it is important to recognise that engagement with digital technology affords young people many benefits. Our educational resources are a useful step in the right direction to support teachers and young people in schools.
- Effective mechanisms need to be established to enable young people to disclose confidentially experiences of cyberbullying without fear of consequences. Young people need to be able to tell a trusted adult who will be able to support them with their experiences. Guidance should also be provided on how screenshots can be used to provide evidence of cyberbullying.
- Educators need to be aware that involvement in cyberbullying can spill over to the school environment and impact on perceptions of learning.
- A large-scale nationally representative study conducted over a number of years is needed to establish the prevalence rates and the impact of cyberbullying involvement in the UK.

Contact

Dr Betts is available to discuss the specifics of her research and the more general bullying related topics to support the development of anti-bullying policy and practical interventions.

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