

## Perception of Secondary School Students About Cyber Bullying

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the phenomenon of cyber bullying amongst secondary school students. The main purpose was to understand the perception of students about cyber bullying. It exploited a sequential exploratory design, wherein the qualitative data was gathered by holding focus group discussion and conducting interviews. The quantitative data was collected through conducting a survey with 120 students. The results indicate that cyber bullying exists amongst students, although the prevalence rate, on the whole, varied because of different tools and sample sizes. A number of reasons for non-disclosure were identified, including fear of retribution, embarrassment and a belief that adults could not do anything about cyber bullying. Opportunities for future research in this area were outlined. This paper will go some way to close the gap on the paucity of cyber bullying research conducted within the Indian context.*

**Keywords:** *cyber bullying, exploratory study, perception, secondary school students.*

### Introduction

Immersed in the technological realm, we disregard the real. We converse with our hands rather than our mouths, tapping keyboards and touch pads provide route to our thoughts. This is the way we communicate in the 21st century. In addition to using the Internet for personal use, it has become a nearly indispensable tool used in business, education, government, and in the entertainment world (Smith, 2008). This reliance on internet and its services has not only influenced the adult lives but has also influenced the daily lives and activities of our children.

Teenagers not only use technology to communicate, but also as a way of developing their identity (DCSF, 2007a). The popularity of these new adolescent communication tools has created some new challenges as well as some negative adolescent behaviour. For instance, bullying traditionally included physical acts of harassment, such as hitting and shoving; verbal abuse, such as name calling; and also subtle indirect actions like social exclusion and rumour spreading (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Although traditional bullying still exists, especially in elementary

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schools; middle schools and high schools are now facing the proliferation of electronic communications and technology which has brought young people a new means of bullying called **Cyber bullying**.

‘Cyber bullying’, a term first used and defined by Canadian educator Bill Belsey around the turn of the millennium (Campbell, 2005). Belsey defines it as ‘the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group that is intended to harm others’ (Butler et al, 2008). Belsey’s definition of Cyber bullying is widely used in academic and government literature (Li, 2006; Smith et al, 2008; DCSF, 2009).

According to a new study published by *The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, one in every four Indian teenager has been a victim of Cyber bullying (The Times of India, 2014). Psychiatrist, Aruna Sikdar in her interview with The Times of India has mentioned that cyber bullying is one of the main reasons behind the increasing rate of teen suicide in India. ‘It not only undermines the child’s confidence but also affects his or her psyche. In most cases, the child becomes very timid and self-conscious,’ she informs. Hacking, publication of obscene content and banking frauds among other cyber crimes have registered an annual increase of more than 40 percent in the country in the past two years. According to Home Ministry statistics, as many as 71,780 cyber frauds were reported in the year 2013 while 22,060 such cases were reported in 2012 (IBN Live, 2014). Concerned over 40 percent annual increase in cyber crimes, the government want to take steps towards secure and safe cyber space. Dr Purnima Nagraja, a psychiatrist says, ‘victim of such crimes usually suffers a lengthy psychotic episode and is unable to normalise’ (Deccan Chronicle, 2013). She adds, thousand of teenagers are trapped through cyber sex. Your child who is 10 inch away from you on the Net can be a victim.

This study will makes us able to comprehend how well secondary school students understand about the concept of cyber bullying and issues related with it, and if they are aware about safeguard measures and policies in this regard. The data collected will tell a valuable story, which will enable schools to better attend to the problem lurking beyond the walls of the classroom. Bullying is no longer the traditional ‘face-to-face’ conflicts, but rather it has seeped into the digital world. Schools, parents, and guardians need to keep up with the pace. The data from the present study may equip the stakeholders to draft, modify and implement better procedures and policies as well as curriculum that will address the issue of cyber bullying and the misuse and abuse of social network sites among adolescent students.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The effects of cyber bullying are more damaging than traditional bullying and have longer lasting effects. The effects can be social, emotional and academic maladjustment of the victims, which will be identified by the research. In this study following objectives were taken into the consideration:

- (i) Explore into the world of cyber bullying from the perspective of Secondary School students.
- (ii) Find out the probable reasons that lead to cyber bullying.
- (iii) Identify characteristics of the cyber bullying victims.

- (iv) Discover how cyber bullying is affecting the victims.
- (v) Find out if students are aware about the methods and policies formulated against cyber bullying.

### **Research Methodology**

Keeping in mind the objectives of the study wherein the researcher wanted to understand the phenomena of cyber bullying from the perspective of school students an exploratory design was chosen. The exploratory design is a two-phased mixed methods design that uses quantitative data to explain qualitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The researcher has utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative data was obtained from interviews conducted and the focussed group discussion held with the participants. The interview schedule was administered with few students to gain deeper insight of the topic and to form a bridge between the qualitative experiences and the quantitative data obtained from the students. It consisted of open ended questions related to their understanding to cyber bullying. Open-ended questions were used so that each participant was able to fully explain their views and experiences without restriction (Creswell, 2007). While a narrative approach was employed in order to gain a full understanding of the essence of the cyber bullying episode experienced by each individual during the focussed group discussion. The participants selected engaged in a one-on-one interaction with the researcher.

The sample for the focus group discussion comprised participants who had previously reported the incidents of cyber bullying with the school counselor. The sample consisted of four girls and three boys studying in classes IX and X. Lottery system was used for selecting the sample of 10 students for conducting the interview. The participants gave their consent for being part of the study. Stratified random sampling technique was utilized to choose a sample of 120 students of classes IX and X for the administration of the questionnaire.

### **Results**

#### **Understanding the term ‘cyber bullying’**

During the course of the present study when interviewed, only four of the participants associated the act of cyber bullying with technology, internet and computers while rest of them coupled it with feelings, emotions and motives. They all felt cyber bullying is a negative practice and it hampers the lives of those who get bullied. While the findings of the questionnaire administered showed that almost two- third of participants [n=81] understood the meaning of the term cyber bullying in its true context.

#### **Role of Gender**

When interviewed, all the respondents believed cyber bullying was not to be considered as gender specific as both genders suffer the humiliation equally. Three felt that females are more vulnerable to such issues and may suffer more while one respondent was unsure. Through the questionnaire the respondents were asked to enlighten which gender as per them is at a higher risk when we talk about cyber bullying and more than half of the respondents 52% [n=62] felt that both genders are at equal risk when comes to cyber bullying.

### **Prevalence**

The researcher tried to understand the prevalence of cyber bullying incidents by explicitly asking respondents about their experiences during the focus group discussion. It was evident that most of the participants were targeted through social networking sites. Majority of them had no idea about the identity of the person who had abused them, making cyber bullying easier than traditional mode of bullying where the offender has to be present physically in front of the victim. When interviewed, 60% of the participants shared incidents of cyber bullying that they had witnessed within the span of past six months. When the question of being cyber bullied was posed to a larger sample through the questionnaire, 45% [n=53] of the respondents revealed that they have occasionally witnessed incidents of cyber bullying while these episodes were often noticed by 36% [n=42] of the respondents.

### **Reasons leading to cyber bullying**

When the researcher tried to find out the reasons why an individual would become a cyber bully, fun and revenge were the most common reasons mentioned by the participants (n=7) when interviewed. Jealousy among friends, a low level of confidence, anger and frustration were also held responsible for actions and reactions from a cyber bully. In congruence with the above findings, when the participants were asked about the probable reasons that might provoke someone towards cyber bullying through the questionnaire, 77% [n=92] of the respondents felt that it may be done by someone who wants to have fun by teasing others while 64% of the respondents feel that people may cyber bully if they want to seek revenge. Frustration, anger and mental stress were also highlighted as possible reasons.

### **Profile of a cyber-victim**

During the focus group discussion, the victims were asked by the moderator to mention reasons they think were responsible for them getting cyber bullied. All seven respondents had their individual reasons but most of them held themselves and their actions responsible for the cyber bullying. None of the participant accused the bully and felt they were naive and polite with others which went against them. The participants while the interview, were asked to reveal reasons why students get cyber bullied. 60% confirmed that students who were introvert, quiet and busy with their own lives get cyber bullied more as compared with others. The data compiled from the questionnaire revealed that 90% [n=108] of the respondents felt that there is no peculiar characteristic and anyone could become victim to cyber bullying. While 16% [n=20] maintained that shy individual may get targeted more in comparison with others.

### **How it affects the victim?**

Much like traditional bullying, cyber bullying is connected to a wide range of psychiatric and psychosomatic problems. During the focus group discussion, the participants were requested to share how being cyber bullied affected their health. All seven respondents admitted that being cyber bullied, affected their mental health negatively. Depressive mood, negative emotions, sleeplessness and guilt were primary feelings that came into light while during the discussion. A question to assess the impact of cyber bullying was presented to a larger sample [n=120], 97.5%

[n=117] of the respondents believed that individuals if cyber bullied, will get affected emotionally and mentally. 55.8% [n=67] felt that cyber bullying may affect the social health of the victims while only 10 participants felt that these incidents might affect the physical health of the sufferers.

### **Awareness and Policies**

It was evident from the data that 80% [n=96] of the respondents were confident that there was not any policy formed by the school for the safety of its students while 11% [n=13] remained unsure. Though 9% students confirmed that they have such policy in their institution but as clear from the data it has not reached most of them. The school should make utmost efforts that the information regarding such programs and policies reach every stakeholder including parents. 47% [n=57] of the respondents who maintained that they would report the incident to the school authorities in case they ever get cyber bullied. While shocking enough, 53% [n=63] of cyber victims in this study did not make a disclosure and decided not to report the incident. Lastly 20% of the respondents feared that their reporting about being bullied will make them a subject of entertainment and fun for others. Though the figure is less as compared to the earlier studies but it does echo the same concern featured in the DCSF (2009) guidance and studies by Mishna et al (2009) and Feinberg and Robey (2009). These feelings of embarrassment may make it difficult for teenage victims, to disclose and report the matter. Therefore, the institution should take care to provide confidentiality to the victims in such cases.

### **Safety measures**

According to the participants of the focus group, not adding unknown people/ strangers to their account, being careful with the privacy setting provided by the social networking sites were few measures adopted to keep themselves safe. When interviewed, inquiring about the ways the respondents may adopt to safeguard themselves, thirty percent said that they will take care of the privacy setting of their accounts and an equal number said that they will not add or chat with unknown people. Respecting cyber laws, not making account on unknown sites, blocking the abuser were also few of the methods suggested.

### **Limitations**

The samples for the study were drawn from a public school in Ghaziabad, rather than the wider population. The impact of this could have been bias in terms of not collecting a representative view of the population on cyber bullying. A more appropriate approach would have been to collect data from different institutions to make responses more representative of the institution. Furthermore, the sample sizes chosen for interview [n=10] and focus group discussion [n=7] were relatively small and would have benefited not only from choosing a wider range of institutes to improve the validity of results. The validity of the information provided by the focus groups could have been compromised by the fact that the participants knew the facilitator and each other meaning that students might have withheld information. A way of combating this might have been to arrange for students to be interviewed individually by an independent person who did not teach them. However, the purpose of the approach taken was to prompt discussion of issues between participants, encouraging discourse and providing greater depth to results. Selecting students by random sampling rather than opportunity sampling might have added to the representativeness, but the benefit of students knowing each other could have led to students being more open with their responses.

### Opportunities for further research

Content analysis on what cyber bullying messages actually say, and not merely what effect they have on the victim, would be useful in order to understand the psyche of the bully and to raise awareness amongst students about specific instances of cyber bullying, which can lead to a greater understanding of its causes. Furthermore, these can be used in framing policies and programs and to understand could be done in particular situations. A disparity between what students say they will do and what they actually do was found in this study and even in few previous researches, but the reasons for the disparity have not been considered and could be a topic of research. It is apparent that cyber bullying has negative effects on victims' emotions, but no research has been found that considers the relationship between attendance, academic performance and being a cyber victim. By considering these relationships, a better understanding of the effects and impacts of cyber bullying can be gained. These suggestions demonstrate a significant amount of research is yet to be completed in this field, further illustrating the infancy and lack of width in cyber bullying studies, especially in the Indian context.

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