

[Sonia Livingstone](#), Mariya Stoilova and Anthony Kelly Cyberbullying: incidence, trends and consequences

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14. Cyberbullying: incidence, trends and consequences

Sonia Livingstone, Mariya Stoilova and Anthony Kelly²⁹¹

Introduction: What's the problem?

It is widely believed by policy makers and the public that, as children gain more access, and make more extensive use of the internet in their everyday lives, the associated risks to children's safety and well-being are increasing commensurately.²⁹² Certainly the popular media convey a strong impression that it is mobile phones and the internet that now constitute a major threat to children's safety in the digital age. But perhaps these media panics are misleading, distracting attention from the continued underlying problems that children face in their daily lives?

Focusing on cyberbullying, this chapter examines the evidence for the claim that new media bring new problems. We ask whether the frequency of cyberbullying is increasing as internet use spreads among children around the world. And if so, is cyberbullying in some way replacing traditional bullying, so that peer aggression that used to be expressed physically, face-to-face, is now migrating to mobile and online platforms and being expressed via the distribution of hurtful images and messages? Or, is cyberbullying occurring independently of traditional bullying, perhaps involving different children and with different kinds of consequences? Or, as we shall argue, is something more complicated occurring as new forms of peer aggression emerge that mix traditional and cyberbullying, and with shifting boundaries between cyberbullying and other forms of online aggression?

The belief that online risks of harm to children are rising has triggered government, industry, and parental efforts designed to manage and mitigate such risks of harm. In relation to cyberbullying, the value of an evidence review that answers the above questions lies in the potential to guide cyberbullying policy and practical interventions: should efforts to address traditional bullying now switch their focus to address problems on mobile and online platforms, or should they work in parallel with new initiatives, or is an integrated approach preferable? And do the answers to these questions vary, depending on culture or country?

Aims and methods

Four methods were used to research this chapter, concentrating on the period 2010-2016, given the rapid pace of technological change: (i) a web-based search of three databases (Web of Science – including results from SciELO, Scopus, and Google Scholar) using such search terms as cyberbullying, bullying, online, internet, and longitudinal; (ii) a search through the bibliographies of existing reviews and meta-analyses of the literature on cyberbullying for relevant sources; (iii) we consulted experts in the field of cyberbullying, including their literature suggestions where relevant to the aims of the paper; (iv) we drew on the authors' extensive bibliography which already included diverse studies of children's changing relationships with digital media over time. For all sources identified, we further examined their bibliographies specifically for articles cited that focused on change over time, as these proved to be scarce.

Approximately one in three children around the world are now online, in one way or another; further, while most research thus far has been conducted in the global North, it is in the global South that most future internet users are to be found.²⁹³ But despite the global diversity in the conditions of childhood, much of the research literature appears to imply that bullying and cyberbullying are universal phenomena – taking a similar form wherever they occur and, insofar as 'children will be children' and increasingly they have digital devices, also occurring everywhere in the world. We sought out findings from the global South to complement the extensive body of global North literature on cyberbullying but these proved to be scarce,²⁹⁴ with especially little cross-national comparative research that uses constant definitions and measures.²⁹⁵ It is not therefore possible, with the present state of knowledge, to develop confident conclusions and recommendations regarding many parts of the world where children have only recently gained access to the internet and mobile technology, and where associated forms of peer aggression, including cyberbullying, are yet to be researched.

Traditional bullying and cyberbullying compared

Bullying among children – broadly, the repeated physical, verbal or symbolic aggression intentionally expressed by one or more peers towards a less powerful victim – is understood in somewhat different ways in different cultures, and thus terminology and definitions vary.²⁹⁶ For example, in China more emphasis is placed on social status and forms of social exclusion.²⁹⁷ In the US it has been argued that bullying is a form of harassment.²⁹⁸ In the UK it is strongly associated with school, but in Germany the word ‘mobbing’ derives from the workplace.²⁹⁹ Unsurprisingly, approaches to measurement also vary, especially over whether bullying must be intentional, repeated, or related to a power imbalance among peers.³⁰⁰ Estimates of incidence, again unsurprisingly, also vary, although using standardised definitions and measurement across 42 European countries, the Health Behaviour in School Children (HBSC) survey reported an average of 11% of 11-15-year-olds had been bullied at school at least two or three times in the past couple of months.³⁰¹

The definition of cyberbullying is even more unstable, partly because it is a newer phenomenon, occurring on still-evolving technological devices and platforms.³⁰² While at core it concerns aggression expressed by peers through digital (online or mobile) technologies targeting a child victim,³⁰³ some assert that the aggression need not be repeated, since cyberbullying messages are easily and widely shared, multiplying the harm by multiplying the number of bystanders and the persistent possibility of future sharing. Others have argued power imbalances operate differently, if at all, online.

While bullying has traditionally occurred in a host of places little monitored by adults (the school bus, the local park or back street, the school toilets), cyberbullying also occurs in places little monitored by adults (by text messages on a personal mobile phone, in multiplayer online games, on social networking sites – especially those that parents have not used or even heard of). But while traditional bullying depends on the co-location of perpetrator and victim, cyberbullying can occur around the clock, reaching into the victim’s private and once-safe places, its messages hitting home without the perpetrator necessarily being aware of their effects, and they may circulate long after the perpetrator has forgotten about them. Importantly, the anonymity afforded by many online platforms is widely held to facilitate disinhibition and deindividuation.³⁰⁴ In other

words, perpetrators feel able to act aggressively online in ways they would not when face-to-face with potential victims, because the social norms that constrain them are weaker when they cannot be identified and because they cannot see the emotional effect on their victim.³⁰⁵

In terms of demography it appears that, while traditionally bullying is perpetrated more by boys and younger teenagers, cyberbullying occurs relatively equally among boys and girls³⁰⁶ and across the teenage years.³⁰⁷ This may reflect the stronger social norms that constrain the actions of girls and older teenagers in ‘real world’ physical locations, suggesting that the motivations³⁰⁸ that drive cyberbullying are themselves more evenly distributed than has been evident from their manifestation in traditional bullying. It may also be that age and gender interact, since in one study girls were “more likely to report cyber-bullying [others] during early adolescence while males were more likely to be cyberbullies during later adolescence.”³⁰⁹

In terms of victims, research suggests that, both off line and online, victims are more likely to come from minority ethnic or LGBT groups, to be disabled or facing mental health, emotional or familial difficulties.³¹⁰ In terms of harm, the debate rages as to whether the consequences of cyberbullying are lesser,³¹¹ similar or worse³¹² than from traditional bullying. It does appear, however, that online as off line, bullying of others places the bully also at risk of victimisation.³¹³

Incidence of cyberbullying over time

While it is clear that access to and use of mobile and online technologies continues to rise among children,³¹⁴ it is much less clear that cyberbullying is rising commensurately, notwithstanding popular perceptions of rising risk of harm. Some research has charted evidence of rising cyberbullying in the early 2000s across several countries,³¹⁵ although others observe that the evidence for rising or stable incidence is mixed.³¹⁶ In the USA,³¹⁷ UK,³¹⁸ and Belgium³¹⁹ it seems the rate of cyberbullying has peaked. An influential international review concluded that:

the rates found in our research, though cross-sectional, have not demonstrated any significant trend as increasing or decreasing over the last ten years. Furthermore, there is no cross-sectional or longitudinal research that we have reviewed which portrays such a tendency.³²⁰

Interestingly, there is also little evidence for an overall rise in bullying around the world. Comparing findings for 33 countries from 2001 to 2010, the HBSC survey reports “decreasing trends in bullying victimization among boys and girls across a third of participating countries; with few countries reporting increasing trends in bullying victimization.”³²¹ This implies that, insofar as there is scattered evidence of a rise in cyberbullying, this may be due more to increased access to technology than to an increase in the underlying conditions of aggression among children.

As yet, few studies have tracked the incidence of cyberbullying even over the period of a decade. The exception is the Youth Internet Safety Survey, which measured the broader concept of ‘online harassment’ rather than cyberbullying specifically. This found that 6% of US 10- to 17-year-olds reported such incidents in 2000, 9% in 2005, and 11% in 2010.³²² More recent studies, albeit over shorter time periods, suggest equally modest increases. Comparing findings in 2010 and 2014 in Europe, the EU Kids Online project reported a small increase in cyberbullying (from 8% of 9- to 16-year-olds to 12%, across seven countries).³²³ The Kids Online Brazil study of 9- to 17-year-olds reported a rise in cyberbullying from 9% in 2012 to 15% in 2014, especially among girls, across a period in which internet access spread among children in Brazil.³²⁴

Thus while these time periods are fairly short, and trends are modest, they generally point in an upwards direction. What remains unknown is whether these trends reflect increased risk in proportion to the increase in internet use. Or, do they instead reflect increased awareness and, thus, increased reporting, whether as a result of increased familiarity with the internet or because of active policy and safety initiatives. In other words, the common-sense perception of rising rates of cyberbullying may reflect growing public awareness of such risks, with more young people able to talk publicly about being cyberbullied and high levels of media attention to tragic incidents linked to cyberbullying.³²⁵ Complicating matters, in a country such as South Korea, where internet use has been very high for some years, a five year study revealed decreasing rates of cyberbullying, albeit that cyberbullying is still more frequent than in Europe.³²⁶

In short, there is evidence of a slight rise in cyberbullying over recent years in some countries, but evidence of a peak in incidence in others, especially where internet use has itself possibly peaked in terms of reach. Interpreting such evidence is confounded by the likelihood that,

as society comes to rely ever more on internet use, public awareness of the associated risks also rises, so that seeming growth in risk to children may be attributed to a greater willingness to report.

Explaining trends in cyberbullying is even more complex, and more research in more countries is certainly advisable before strong conclusions are reached or before the experience of any one country is used to ground policy or practice in another. Generally speaking, it does seem that cyberbullying is a new form – perhaps a reconfiguration – of traditional bullying, because many studies report a strong correlation between traditional bullying and cyberbullying.³²⁷ Moreover, in many studies, traditional bullying remains more common than cyberbullying – for instance, in Europe, as shown by both EU Kids Online³²⁸ and HBSC surveys,³²⁹ and in the USA,³³⁰ where it is noteworthy that, still, most incidents occur off line-only, or both on- and off line, while fewer incidents occur online-only.³³¹

Yet, while this might lead us to conclude that traditional bullying not only remains the bigger problem but is also ‘migrating’ onto online and mobile platforms, in some countries there is evidence that cyberbullying is a distinct problem with its own characteristics. For example, in Turkey³³² and France³³³ the relation between traditional and cyberbullying is weaker, and in some contexts (for example, in Thailand)³³⁴ cyberbullying is becoming more common than traditional bullying. Thus it appears that off line bullying practices are, in some ways, migrating online but in other ways, peer aggression is taking new forms and finding expression in new ways online.

Indeed, given the changeable technological and social conditions under which cyberbullying occurs, and given that the criteria of intentionality, repetition³³⁵ and power imbalance³³⁶ are less important than for traditional bullying, it can be hard to distinguish cyberbullying from other forms of mobile and online aggression.³³⁷ These include ‘trolling’, stalking, harassment, ‘outing’, ‘sexting’, ‘hating’, racist/hateful language and other forms of abusive comments and online actions. In consequence, delineating cyberbullying from other kinds of online aggression is not straightforward and, arguably, becoming less so. Furthermore, the very nature of the online environment is producing new ambiguities, blurring the distinctions between bully and victim³³⁸ and even bystander,³³⁹ for instance; or blurring the boundaries between bullying and other risks (for example, sexual harassment).³⁴⁰ It even blurs the boundaries between cyberbullying and other –

perhaps innocent - forms of online 'drama'.³⁴¹ In a fluid context with changing technological affordances (in terms of visibility, privacy, persistence, and so on), defining clear demarcations among types of practice is difficult, and it is made more complex by children's own pleasure in experimenting with new and sometimes transgressive forms of communication 'under the radar' of adult scrutiny.³⁴²

Conclusions

Because cyberbullying is conducted at a distance, leaving no physical mark and mediated only by words and images, it seems that teachers, parents and policy-makers have been slow to recognise the potential severity of the consequences, perhaps believing the old English saying that "sticks and stone may break your bones but words will never hurt you." One lesson of cyberbullying research, however, is that words shape identities, social relations, and well-being. This lesson has been driven home by the few but notable incidents of suicide,³⁴³ among other harms such as loss of empathy,³⁴⁴ linked to (though not caused in any simple sense by)³⁴⁵ cyberbullying. Yet some of the phenomena commonly labelled as cyberbullying blur into ordinary and often harmless interactions among children as they explore and experiment with the internet and mobile technology.

This chapter has reviewed why, in terms of the conditions that motivate it,³⁴⁶ there are good reasons to conclude that "cyberbullying should be considered within the context of bullying rather than as a separate entity" or as a practice newly invented for the digital age.³⁴⁷ Since "traditional bullying seems to carry over into cyberbullying, [but] cyberbullying does not appear to turn into bullying,"³⁴⁸ it may also be that interventions found to reduce traditional bullying may also help reduce cyberbullying.³⁴⁹

On the other hand, there is also merit in exploring technology-oriented solutions to complement traditional approaches, especially for those cases or contexts where the link between traditional and cyberbullying is weaker. There is also merit in exploring technology-oriented solutions insofar as the specificities of the online environment and its contextual embedding in children's daily lives appear to complicate or reconfigure traditional bullying in new ways.³⁵⁰

Indeed, while it is unlikely that traditional bullying ever constituted a single or simple phenomenon, what is striking today is, in the words of one Australian study, the "extremely complicated combinations of traditional and cyberbullying perpetration and victimization in which the students engaged."³⁵¹ Thus it may be concluded that separate discussion of traditional bullying and cyberbullying definitions, incidence and policy misses the deeper trend, which is to recognise the increasing connections between the two. The research question, then, should not be whether cyberbullying is best explained by either the conditions that shape mobile and internet use or the conditions underlying traditional bullying and other forms of societal aggression. Rather, we should be asking when, where and how do mobile and online technologies facilitate bullying by mediating, mitigating or amplifying forms of peer aggression so as to fuse traditional and cyberbullying in both familiar and new ways.

Endnotes

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