



# An insight into cyberbullying within the sixth form in England

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## Introduction

**A**S YOUNG people increasingly use technology, cyberbullying becomes more prevalent (Cheng, 2012), and expressed in various ways (see Synnott et al., 2017). Cyberbullying has been defined as ‘*wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text*’ (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). This can include, threats, harassment or manipulation that can occur 24/7 (NSPCC, 2018).

Slonje and Smith (2008) reported that cyberbullying within schools is relatively low (5.3 per cent). However, not all cyberbullying occurs at school; on the contrary many cyber-bullies find it easier to use technological means to express their opinions rather than face-to-face bullying (Bauman, 2014). Regardless, cyber-bullied victims suffer equal if not more severe consequences than school-bullied victims such as: low self-esteem, loneliness, anxiety, depression, poor academic achievement and development (Beran & Li, 2007; Weber & Pelfrey, 2014); that can follow victims into adulthood (Tzani-Pepelasi, 2018).

The severity of cyberbullying consequences has been well established (Varghese & Carole Pistole, 2017) and research has indicated that some cyber-bullied victims attempt suicide, although other factors contribute to such decisions (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Researchers have also been studying the risk factors for all forms of bullying and it appears that many of these factors are common amongst the forms, such as aggression

and anger (Tzani-Pepelasi, Ioannou Synnott & Ashton, 2018). However, some risk factors, such as parental monitoring of Internet use, relate only to cyberbullying (Tzani-Pepelasi, Ioannou, Synnott & Fumagalli, 2017).

### Aim

The present study aimed to investigate cyberbullying rates in sixth form in the UK, explore how these victims had been cyber-bullied, and whether such experiences had an impact on victims' mental health.

### Methodology

Students ( $N = 108$ ) aged 16 to 19 ( $M = 17.5$  years,  $SD = .79$ , 42 male, 65 female, 1 missing) were recruited from a sixth form school in England to complete a questionnaire that contained three sections: (a) About-You – demographic information and students' perceptions of cyberbullying definition; (b) Cyberbullying – participants' personal experiences of cyberbullying; and (c) The Self-Esteem section that measured self-esteem, emotional wellbeing, depression and anxiety with the Distress scale (see Weinberger & Schwartz, 1990). The scale's score ranges from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating higher distress levels.

### Results

The majority of participants identified that cyberbullying is bullying online ( $N = 87$ ) and some identified the use of social media ( $N = 37$ ). Nine definitions indicated that cyberbullying was 'repeated' or 'constant' behaviour. More female students ( $N = 11$ ) reported experiencing cyberbullying compared to male students ( $N = 1$ ). Most victims had experienced cyberbullying through the Internet and social media, with Snapchat prevailing ( $N = 62$ ), followed by Facebook ( $N = 15$ ), Instagram ( $N = 14$ ) and Twitter ( $N = 12$ ).

Of the 12 participants who had been cyber-bullied, only six (50 per cent) reported it, and that was to their friends ( $N = 6$ ), parents/guardians ( $N = 4$ ) and teachers ( $N = 4$ ). The majority of participants reported knowing someone else who had been cyber-bullied compared to experiencing it themselves. Twenty-seven reported peer cyberbullying and 16 (14.8 per cent) reported their experience.

A multiple regression test was run and the Adjusted R Squared result was .142, clarifying the proportion of the total variability in the DV – *Have you ever been Cyber-bullied*. The results state that 14 per cent of the variance of cyberbullying victimisation can be explained by low self-esteem, low emotional wellbeing, depression and anxiety.

Table 1: ANOVA for cyber-bullying occurring and low self-esteem, low emotional wellbeing, depression and anxiety

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	14.609	7	2.087	3.523	.002
Residual	59.243	100	.592		
Total	73.852	107			

Table 2: Crosstabulation showing the distress scores in male and female participants

		Gender		Missing	Total
		Male	Female		
Grouped Distress Score	7-21	24	18	0	42
	22-35	18	47	1	66
	Total	42	65	1	108

Some of the victims' beliefs and feelings resulting from their cyberbullying victimisation were:

*'Betrayed, embarrassed'*

*'Disrespected'*

*'Makes you feel ashamed and low'*

*'Annoyed and angry'*

*'It didn't matter – only a joke'*

*'Upset as to why I didn't get asked'*

*'Betrayal of trust'*

*'Me, I didn't care much'*

An independent samples *t*-test was run to compare the gender of the participants against cyberbullying experience. In the Levine test for equality of variance, the significance value was .14, which is greater than .05, therefore, equal variances could be assumed.

Results showed that there was a significant difference between males ( $M = 2.26$ ), ( $SD = 1.149$ ) and females ( $M = 1.89$ ), ( $SD = .504$ ) in terms of cyberbullying experiences ( $t_{(105)} = 2.281$ ,  $p = .025$ ), suggesting that females of sixth form are experiencing higher levels of cyberbullying, compared to male students. Finally, results showed that female participants scored higher on the distress scale than male participants (Fisher Exact test,  $p < .004$ ; see Table 2).

## Discussion

The present study aimed to explore cyberbullying rates in sixth form schools in the UK using a sample of 105 students. The results fall in line with Slonje and Smith (2008) who had reported that the cyberbullying rates are relatively low within the sixth form. Furthermore, the majority of participants expressed the view that cyberbullying is when an individual is bullied online, although, many were unaware that cyberbullying can occur through other electronic devices as well, such as cell phones.

Moreover, the majority indicated cyberbullying to be as distressing as physical bullying, while 23 out of the 108 students supported that it is worse; an indication that had been firstly reported by Bauman in (2014). Results further supported that cyberbullying had an effect on distress levels, such as the more the cyberbullying experiences, the higher the distress level. In more detail, students who had been cyberbullied scored higher on the distress scale, implying depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and low emotional wellbeing. Taking into account that such consequences could lead to suicide attempts (Bauman et al., 2013), it is advised that cyber-bullied victims ask for

advice and support, and are encouraged to report such events to adults or authorities.

In addition, Li (2006) had suggested that males are less likely to report cyberbullying, and this study also found that females were more likely to report cyberbullying victimisation. This could suggest that either females may be more at more risk of cyberbullying victimisation, or that males may find it more difficult to report such events.

## Conclusion

Although the present study's results were limited due to the sample size, nonetheless, the findings support the view that female sixth form students might be at greater risk of cyberbullying experiences. The presence of cyberbullying requires implementation of policies, which clearly define cyberbullying and match that of physical bullying. Educational establishments should increase cyberbullying awareness and provide emotional support.

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