

Schrödinger's Cyber Problem: The Cyclical Cyber-Bullying Epidemic and its Effect on Depression and Anxiety in Adolescent Youth

There can be no doubt that one of the most influential and important inventions of the twentieth century has been the internet. With its insertion into the world, humanity has been given access to the free exchange of thoughts, ideas, and information, which had previously been unavailable to the masses. While the internet has been commended for allowing friends and family to stay in touch through platforms like e-mail and social media, no one could have imagined the negative impacts its use could also lead to. One of these negative impacts is the action known as cyber-bullying. Since it was first discovered, researchers have sought to determine the scope of these negative implications. Specifically, research has been completed on depression and anxiety in adolescent youth, who this phenomenon impacts most. In the academic world there is evidence that supports the theory that cases of cyber-bullying, depression and anxiety in adolescents are strongly correlated with one another. This essay will first clarify what cyber-bullying is, before speaking to how it affects anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts in adolescents, and will finally address the cyclical issue of victims, perpetrators, and victim-perpetrators. Although cyber-bullying in general has received tremendous attention in research, this essay will illustrate that there has been an insufficient amount of study as it relates specifically to the cyclical nature of cyber-bullying and the role mental health plays in potentially turning cyber-bullying victims into cyber-bullying perpetrators.

Due to the complex nature of cyber-bullying, one issue to consistently arise in the research on this topic is that there is not a universally accepted definition of what cyber-bullying entails. Nordahl et al. quote N.E. Willard when he defines cyber-bullying as “using electronic forms of communication (computers, cell phones, or other handheld devices) to bully an individual or a group of individuals” (Nordahl et al. 384). This definition is an over-simplification, which could lead researchers to underappreciate the severity of the issue. An adequate set of definitions is needed to

reduce the chance for incomplete or inaccurate findings. Therefore, it is helpful to acknowledge that the term “cyber-bullying” is too broad. To this end, some in the psychological community have invested time in composing a proper definition. For example, Nordahl et al. expand upon on previous research by Willard, Mishna et al., and Mitchell et al., when they posit that cyber-bullying could be broken down into seven types, or categories (384). The first is name-calling, wherein a perpetrator would simply call their victim a derogatory name (384). The second, Nordahl states, is threatening, by which a perpetrator would imply they would physically harm the victim or those close to the victim. The third category can be defined as rumour-mongering. This action is demonstrated when a perpetrator spreads false information about a victim, to discredit or humiliate (384). The fourth category is sending private pictures of the victim to other individuals in the same or higher peer group. These pictures are generally of an embarrassing or compromising nature (384). The fifth category of cyberbullying is impersonation; bullies who engage in this act either gain access to personal accounts (messaging, e-mail, or social media) or create new, fake accounts, to pretend to be the victim. While impersonating the victim, the perpetrator may attempt to harm the victim’s reputation; for example, they may, through the impersonation, cyber-bully the victim’s friends (384). The sixth and seventh categories are more closely related than the others: sexual comments (perpetrators send unwanted, unsolicited sexual texts or pictures) and sexual behaviours, where victims themselves are asked to perform sexual acts, or send sexual pictures. If a victim does not comply with the request the aggressor will often resort to one of the previous aspects of cyber-bullying to try and gain compliance (384). Grouping the acts of cyber-bullying into these categories lifts the shroud of ambiguity that once covered the term and makes its content easier to assimilate. Furthermore, this information allows us to more closely examine how cyber-bullying could have a negative impact on the psychological well-being of adolescents.

With a clear idea of what the act of cyber-bullying entails, we can begin to form a foundation of understanding into how these actions can affect adolescent mind frames. Victims of cyber-bullying can vary by age, social stature, upbringing, gender, and ethnicity. However, as varied as victims of cyber-bullying may be, the psychological impact from this type of abuse remains largely the same. Victims almost always suffer from lower self-esteem than their bystander peers who are not victims themselves (Balakrishnan and Fernandez 2029). Feelings of shame, often accompanied by bouts of anxiety or fear, are common in these victims. These feelings can be crippling and have many adverse side effects, such as the inability to concentrate during school, which may, on occasion, lead to poor grades (Mishna et al. 1223). Further, victims of cyber abuse often exhibit behaviours that may be difficult for some adults to understand. For example, instances where a youth perpetually skips classes may lead those in authoritarian roles to assume that the child is lazy and uninterested in learning; or, a child who is consistently given detention for misbehaving in class may be considered as having impulse control problems (Mishna et al. 1223). Although laziness can be a valid predictor for skipping school, and impulse control problems may lead a child to misbehave in class, we must be careful not to use these explanations as generalizations; doing so can waste valuable time that could be better spent trying to understand the root cause of the actions and preventing further, escalating poor behaviours, decisions, and conditions. Among these conditions, according to Mishna et al. are “depression, substance use and delinquency,” which Mishna points out have been seen in significantly higher rates in cyber victims as compared to those who have not been victims of cyber crime (1223). A 2018 research study by Raphael Cohen-Almagor echoes many of the same points. In Cohen-Almagor’s article he states “Lack of social responsibility norms harms the bullies as well as the bullied. Both the bully and the victim may suffer from depression - the number one cause of suicide. Youth who bully others are at increased risk for substance use, academic difficulties, and violence later in life” (Cohen-Almagor 44). In a 2008 article on youth

suicide prevention, Dr. Stanley Kutcher, an internationally renowned expert in adolescent mental health, writes that “In Canada an estimated 3665 individuals commit suicide each year, about 500 of whom are 15–24 years old” (Kutcher and Szumilas 282). Kutcher and Szumilas state that reasons for suicide in youth vary; however, they attribute psychiatric disorders, including substance use and depression, as being a considerable factor in over 90% of victims (Kutcher and Szumilas, 282). Logically, a positive correlation between these qualities could be expected, but the extent one factor influences another is undetermined. Until these connections are thoroughly explored the cycle of cyber-bullying is likely to continue without a conclusion.

Often it may be difficult for people to identify where a cycle of cyber-bullying begins, and where it ends. The theory utilized in this essay is that all cycles of cyberbullying, like “real world” bullying, start with a root cause, a seed, that is metaphorically cultivated by a trigger. The trigger acts as fertilizer, causing the seed, which is buried deep in the rich soil of the adolescent subconscious, to quickly grow and manifest itself in a variety of ways. While some “seeds” may grow counter to the negative circumstances that shaped them and form positive attributes, often they grow under the surface of the adolescent psyche like weeds, constricting and choking developing, young minds. When this occurs, young people begin to feel the imbalance of power associated with being bullied. Fledgling minds, unable to comprehend that individual power is earned through understanding and acceptance of self worth, may seek to restore their station by taking power from others. Like other types of bullies, cyber-bullies are consumed by their own pain; they either do not possess the empathy required to understand what they are doing to others, or they find it easier to push their empathy to the side. The anonymity of the internet further fosters this empathy deficiency in both victims and perpetrators, which makes it much easier for a victim of cyber-bullying to become a perpetrator themselves (Balakrishnan and Fernandez 2029). Mishna et al. explain that cyber bullying goes beyond the idea of the ‘big bully’. Instead, cyber-bullies can be people who otherwise may be

too timid to bully in 'real life' (Mishna et al. 1224). The internet does not require physical muscle for an individual to be powerful; instead, it can allow individuals to rely on the power of the mind, and the ability to communicate in an intelligent, albeit morally ambiguous, manner. Without considering the implications of their actions, those who begin as victims become perpetrators, and thus the cycle continues. As Cohen-Almagor states, this is because "Cyber bullies are less aware of the consequences of their behaviour compared to face-to-face bullying" (Cohen-Almagor 43). This new dynamic may be difficult to combat, as victims, perpetrators, and victim-perpetrators all share one commonality: no one wants to accept responsibility for the parts they play in cyber-bullying as it would expose them to scrutiny by authoritative figures.

As has been demonstrated in this essay, the issue of cyber-bullying among adolescents is both serious and complex. The nature of cyber-bullying promotes a cycle, where victims can potentially be turned into victimizers, who then go on to unwittingly propagate the act of cyber-bullying and repeat the cycle. In general, this cyber-bullying sequence has received an insignificant amount of research. The impact of this cycle is serious, because cyber-bullying is likely to lead to moderate or severe mental, emotional, and physical complications in both its victims and its perpetrators. These complications include, but are not limited to, violence and substance abuse issues that harm not only the individual, but also those close to the individual (Cohan-Almagor 44, Kutcher and Szumilas 282, Mishna et al. 1224). As these adolescents are the future of our society, it would be unwise not to commit to research regarding the epidemic of cyber-bullying, so that we may find a cure for this disease before it reaches a point of no return. Cyber-bullying is not an issue that has a predetermined conclusion. Through discourse, examination, and hard work by those figures in authority, it can be combatted in ways where both victims and perpetrators are given the help they so desperately need. For a future to come to fruition where adolescents are largely free

from cyber-tyranny, those of us in positions to cultivate change must be ready, willing, and able to dedicate time and resources to fixing a cyclical problem we are all part of.

Works Cited

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