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University students' intentions to report cyberbullying

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Abstract
Little is known about the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students and less about whether they utilise anti-bullying policies. However, failure to report cyberbullying incidents to authorities would lessen the efficacy of these policies. This study investigated the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students and their reporting intentions for cyberbullying incidents. Two hundred and eighty- two students completed a survey on their intentions to report cyberbullying. Results found cyberbullying exists among university students and they would report to authorities if the policy outlined specific information. Students who had been cyber victimised were more likely to report than those students who had not been cyberbullied. Implications for universities are discussed.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, university students, anti-bullying policy

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The information and technology revolution has changed the way individuals communicate with one another, affording them the ability to exchange information faster and more easily than before. In 2011, 90% of children aged 5 – 14 years reported accessing the internet, an increase from 79% in 2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). For children and adolescents growing up with this technology, the Internet and mobile phones are regarded as essential tools, not only for their education but also for social communication and interaction (Sticca & Perren, 2013; Völlink, Bolman, Dehue, & Jacobs, 2013). However, not all online experiences are positive. Technology has provided people who bully with another method to target others: cyberbullying (Parris, Varjas, Meyers, & Cutts, 2012). Whilst the majority of research into cyberbullying has been conducted with school-aged students, there is limited research in the emerging adult population attending university.

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Cyberbullying is defined as aggressive, intentional behaviour that is repeatedly carried out by an individual or group, using electronic forms of contact (e.g., mobile phones, internet) against a defenceless victim (Sticca & Perren; 2013; Völlink et al., 2013). Examples of cyberbullying may include sending mean text messages or emails and posting harmful embarrassing pictures on social media (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Research has shown that like traditional bullying, cyberbullying is a global problem (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). In Australia, of the 3000 students surveyed from Year 6 to Year 12, 14% reported being victims of cyberbullying (Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, & Kift, 2012). Cyberbullying has been regarded as more harmful than traditional bullying due to the associated detrimental outcomes associated with it (Sticca & Perren, 2013; Tokunaga, 2010). These negative outcomes which are similar to the consequences of traditional bullying can include suicidal ideation, depression, behavioural difficulties and psychosomatic problems (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Lazarus, Barkoukis, Ourda, & Tsorbatzoudis, 2013; Parris et al., 2012). Victims of cyberbullying have also reported feeling lonely, hopeless, anxious, threatened and angry (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013; Tokunaga, 2010).

Currently, the highest reported incidence of cyberbullying occurs between the ages of 11 to 15 years (Kiriakidis & Kavoura, 2010; Tokunaga, 2010). Many studies suggest that cyberbullying increases with age and can continue into adulthood. However, this remains unclear given that cyberbullying research has predominantly been conducted with children and adolescents. Schenk, Fremouw and Keelan (2013) argued that as cyberbullying increases from primary school to high school, it is plausible that this trend would continue from high school to university. Some studies have confirmed the occurrence of cyberbullying in college and university students; however, there is a paucity of research in this area (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010; Schenk et al., 2013; Turan, Polat, Karapirli, Uysal, & Turan, 2011). In particular, little is known about the prevalence of cyberbullying among Australian university students or how universities are responding to this phenomenon (Kiriakidis & Kavoura, 2010; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Slonje, Smith, & Frišen, 2013).

Help seeking and cyberbullying

To some extent, the negative consequences of being cyberbullied can be reduced by the effective use of coping strategies (Völlink et al., 2013). Coping strategies employed by school students include technical strategies (e.g., blocking the bully from social media), ignoring the cyber perpetrator, talking to friends, confronting the cyberbully, and threatening to tell an adult (Cowie, 2013; Dehue et al., 2008; Perren at al., 2012; Tokunaga, 2010). However, cyber victims rarely employ the coping strategy of help-seeking that involves reporting cyberbullying incidents to an adult in their school (Tokunaga, 2010).

Help-seeking is defined as the "behaviour of actively seeking help from other people" (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005, p. 4). It is regarded as a productive coping strategy that has a positive influence on an individual across the lifespan and can help alleviate distressing psychological symptoms (Ciarrochi, Wilson, Deane, & Rickwood, 2003; Rickwood et al., 2005). Despite research highlighting that it is important that individuals seek help by reporting cyberbullying to a helpful adult, studies have shown that students are unwilling to report to a teacher or counsellor (Cowie, 2013). Compared to victims of traditional bullying, children and adolescent cyber victims are actually even less likely to seek help and report incidents to an adult (Dehue et al., 2008; Li, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008).

There appears to be several reasons why school students do not report cyberbullying incidents to authorities (Dooley et al., 2009). There is a logistical reason which could be due to the complexity of cyberbullying. Because cyberbullying is carried out via technology, victimisation can occur anywhere and anytime. For some school students, it is unclear whether they should report cyberbullying to a teacher if the incident occurred outside school hours (Cassidy et al., 2013). Even school authorities are uncertain about their responsibility to protect or manage their students when cyberbullying occurs beyond the school grounds (Bhat, 2008; Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2012).

Many students also fear that reporting an incident of cyberbullying to an adult will result in a loss of their access to technology (e.g., restricted internet access) or their access will be more closely monitored (Addington, 2013; Cassidy et al., 2013; Perren et al., 2012). Alternatively, school age students fear that the adult may view their reporting behaviour as childish and advise them to ignore the situation (Perren et al., 2012; Tokunga, 2010). Fear that the adult will not be able to understand the situation or address it appropriately causes some students to conclude that there is nothing to be gained in reporting cyberbullying (Li, 2006). Additionally, studies have also shown that students worry about telling adults because they fear the situation could become worse (Fenaughty & Harre, 2013; Sticca & Perren, 2013). Cross and colleagues (2009) found that of the cyberbullied students who told an adult, 46% stated that the cyberbullying did not stop, and sometimes became worse. This finding is particularly concerning because it can create mistrust and decrease the confidence the students have in adults' ability to help them (Faucher & Jackson, 2013; Williams & Cornell, 2006). Other studies have shown school personnel often ignored cyber victims' reports (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2009; Slonje, Smith, & Frisen, 2013).

Victims become resigned to the fact that even if the cyberbullying has been reported, and action taken, the perpetrator would not be able to be stopped. This form of bullying becomes something that must be endured (Cassidy et al., 2013; deLara, 2012; Williams & Cornell, 2006). Cyber victims therefore experience a sense of helplessness. It is unclear whether university students perceive similar barriers to reporting cyberbullying incidents to authorities. Also, willingness to seek help from authorities tends to decrease with age (Dowling & Carey, 2013; McQuade, Colt, & Meyer, 2009). Older students feel they should be able to manage problems such as cyberbullying by themselves (deLara, 2012). There is limited research on whether university students use reporting protocols within the university's anti-bullying policy to assist them with reporting cyberbullying incidents.

Cyberbullying policies

Schools, workplaces and universities have a responsibility to provide a safe physical and digital environment (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012; Shariff & Hoff, 2007). One way in which organisations and schools can achieve this is through the development and implementation of anti-bullying policies (Marsh, McGee, Hemphill, & Williams, 2011). Many school cyberbullying policies have been adapted from traditional bullying research (Tokunaga, 2010) but few have been formally evaluated (Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011). Overall, the efficacy of anti-bullying policies has yielded inconsistent results. Preliminary research has been conducted, with some studies finding anti-bullying policies to be effective in reducing victimisation in schools (Lambert, Scourfield, Smalley, & Jones, 2008; Marsh et al., 2011). It is important to note that those policies found to be effective were developed collaboratively and

incorporated a 'whole-school approach' (e.g., detailing responsibilities of school personnel as well as students) (Bhat, 2008; Smith et al., 2008). Although some policies have been found to be effective, the majority have not (Sherer & Nickerson, 2010; Smith et al., 2012; Woods & Wolke, 2003). Many policies do not include specific types of bullying (Marsh et al., 2011) and do not provide information on how incidents were to be followed up or how victims would be supported (Marsh et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2012).

These vague policies leave ambiguous areas for students as well as for both university and school personnel. When there is limited direction within a policy, organisations are uncertain how to manage cyberbullying incidents (Bhat, 2008; Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2012). This can lead to reluctance to help the cyber victim, and as a consequence, there is less reporting by victims (Bhat, 2008). There also appears to be underreporting of victimisation in the workplace with approximately 50% of workplace bullying not reported (Serantes & Suárez, 2006). Some employees who did report workplace bullying felt that their employers did not address or manage the bullying situation adequately (Saunders, Huynh & Goodman-Delahunty, 2007).

As Cassidy et al. (2013) point out, if cyberbullying is not reported, the policy is ineffective. To improve the policy, institutions need to understand and to address the underpinnings of why people do not report cyberbullying. While there has been an increase in research on cyberbullying and policies in schools, little is known about cyberbullying policies to assist young adults in the university setting.

The aim of this exploratory study was to examine the prevalence of cyberbullying among university students and their perceptions of barriers to reporting cyberbullying to university personnel. In addition, the study explored whether university policy on anti-bullying had an influence on reporting intentions of cyberbullying.

Method

Participants

Participants were 282 university students, 204 females (72.3%) and 78 males (27.7%) from an Australian university. A combination of convenience and criteria sampling was used (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Participants were aged between 18 – 25 years (M = 19.73, SD = 2.14). Of the 282 university students, 185 were recruited via the first year psychology research pool and were provided with research credit for their participation. All other participants were recruited via emails sent by a course coordinator from the School of Psychology and Counselling and were offered the opportunity to be entered into a draw to win a shopping voucher for their participation.

Measure

A 126-item questionnaire was administered to examine various sections of life at university as part of a larger study. For this study 14 questions were analysed. A definition of cyberbullying was given before the two questions relating to frequency of cyber victimisation and cyber perpetration:
"Cyberbullying is bullying using technology. It is when one person or a group of people repeatedly try to hurt or embarrass another person, using their computer or mobile phone, to use power over them. With cyberbullying, the person bullying usually has some advantage over the person targeted, and it is done on purpose to hurt them, not like an accident or when friends tease each other."

Two questions asked the following: "How frequently you have been cyberbullied by someone who you suspect was from your university during the past 12 months" and "With reference to the above definition, please indicate how frequently you have

cyberbullied someone from your university during the past 12 months." Both questions required participants to respond on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from never, once or twice, monthly, weekly, and daily.

Ten items referred to barriers that may prevent students' reporting cyberbullying to the university. These items were adapted from previous research (Bhat, 2008; Cassidy et al., 2013; deLara, 2012; Marsh, et al., 2011; Perren, et al., 2012; Wilson, Rickwood, Bushnell, Caputi, & Thomas, 2011). For all ten items, participants were asked to complete a 4 point Likert scale on the likelihood of a barrier influencing their reporting intentions (e.g., be too embarrassed to talk about cyberbullying with anyone): Very Likely; Likely; Unlikely; and Very Unlikely. Participants were also required to indicate their gender (male or female) and also their age (18 – 25 years).

Procedure

Clearance was obtained from the institutional ethics committee prior to distributing the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered via the university's online survey platform, Key Survey. Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous. An online information sheet was provided to participants at the beginning of the study and submission of the questionnaire indicated consent. To receive course credit or enter the prize draw, the participants were required to complete all items on the questionnaire. Data collection was completed between July and November 2013.

Results

Prevalence and frequency of cyber victimisation and cyber perpetration

The frequency of respondents who reported experiencing cybervictimisation and cyber perpetration is shown in Table 1. By combining the frequencies in the "Once or Twice", "Monthly", "Weekly" and "Daily" categories, 14.5% (n = 41) of respondents were classified as cyber victims and 7.9% (n = 22) were classified as cyber perpetrators.

Table 1

Frequency rates of being a cyber victim and/or perpetrator

		Never	Once or twice	Monthly	Weekly	Daily	Total
CB Victim	*N*	241	32	3	4	2	41
	%	85.5%	11.3%	1.1%	1.4%	.7%	14.5%
CB Perpetrator	*N*	260	14	0	7	1	22
	%	92.2%	5.0%	0.0%	2.5%	.4%	7.9%

Gender differences for cyber victimisation and cyber perpetration

A Chi-Square test for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) revealed no significant association between gender and victimisation, χ^2 (1, n = 282) = .48, p = .487, φ = .053 or between gender and perpetration, χ^2 (1, n = 282), = .49, p = .48, φ = -.057.

Frequency of help-seeking strategies

The scale of perceived barriers for future reporting intentions was collapsed from a four point Likert scale to two, Unlikely and Likely, because there were too few responses for the extreme categories of Very Likely and Very Unlikely. Table 2 presents the frequency of perceived barriers for intention to report incidences of cyberbullying.

Table 2
Frequency of perceived barriers for intentions to report incidences of cyberbullying

Perceived Barrier to reporting to the university	Frequency (%)
I am confident in managing cyberbullying myself	81.6
I am too busy to report	45.7
I am too embarrassed to talk about cyberbullying	33.7
I am unsure how to report	75.5
The university does not provide enough information	66.0
I am not confident in support options offered by the university	42.2
I do not know how to make an official report	75.9
I would not expect a favourable outcome to occur if I reported cyberbullying to the university	37.6
I do not know of a policy that protects students against cyberbullying at this university	64.5
I do not know where to locate policy information at this university	73.0

Victim status and perceived barriers influencing likelihood of future reporting

To determine more directly if there was a significant difference between victimisation status and the likelihood of perceived barriers influencing future reporting intentions, a Z-Test for proportions was conducted instead of a Chi-Square. In order to obtain a more parsimonious view, the scale of perceived barriers was collapsed from a four point Likert scale to two, unlikely and likely. Of the nine perceived barriers, there was only a significant difference for "knowing how to make an official report" between victims and non-victims. As can be seen in Table 3, victims were more likely to know how to make an official report than non-victims (p = <.05). Results with and without Bonferroni adjustments are presented due to the exploratory nature of the study and differing opinions about the validity and potentially over-correcting bias in the application of this adjustment (Perneger, 1998). As can be seen, "knowing how to make an official report" is significant when the Bonferroni adjustment is not applied.

Discussion

It was found that cyberbullying between peers does exist in the university population with approximately one in six students reporting being cyberbullied by another university student in the past 12 months. This is consistent with the literature on cyberbullying victimisation in adolescents where the rates of cyberbullying range between 12% and 25% (Lazuras, Barkoukis, Ourda, & Tsorbatzoudis, 2013; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a). Our results provide evidence that cybervictimisation continues into adult life (Slonje, Smith, & Frisen, 2013). Emerging adults cyberbully, with one in thirteen students reported having cyberbullied another student in the past 12 months. This finding is consistent with adolescent cyber perpetration prevalence rates which range from 3% to 15 % (Li, 2008; Sakellariou, Carroll, & Houghton, 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). No gender differences were found for cyber victims or cyber perpetrators. This is consistent with previous literature that has found no significant differences between male children or adolescents and female children or adolescents being involved either as victims or bullies (Li, 2006; Monks, Robinson, & Worlidge, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

Table 3

Influence of victim status on the likelihood of perceived barriers influencing reporting intentions

Perceived Barrier to reporting to the university	% Non-Victims	% Victims	φ	BCa 95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
I am confident in managing cyberbullying my self	81.4	82.1	.006	-.126	.135
I am too busy	48.5	38.5	-.071	-.187	.051
I am too embarrassed	33.3	41.0	.057	-.070	.199
I am unsure how to report	77.9	69.2	-.072	-.203	.059
The university does not provide enough information	67.5	56.4	-.082	-.231	.059
I am not confident in support options offered by the university	40.7	46.2	.039	-.090	.168
I do not know how to make an official report*	78.4	64.1	-.118	-.263	.026
I would not expect a favourable outcome to occur if I reported cyberbullying to the university	38.1	38.5	.003	-.119	.113
I do not know of a policy that protects students against cyberbullying at this university	65.4	51.3	-.103	-.223	.021
I do not know where to locate policy information at this university	73.6	64.1	-.075	-.202	.048

Perceived barriers to reporting future incidents

The findings show that university students have high levels of confidence in dealing with cyberbullying incidences themselves and would not report cyberbullying to university personnel. This finding is consistent with cyberbullying literature that has found that, as cyber victims age, their likelihood of reporting incidents decreases. This could be a consequence of their developmental need for autonomy (Ciarrochi et al., 2003; deLara, 2012; Vanheusden et al., 2009; Williams & Cornell, 2006). Emerging adults may think they should be able to manage problematic situations independently (Rickwood et al., 2007).

Uncertainty surrounding reporting protocols also appears to be a barrier to reporting cyberbullying. Approximately 76% of students stated they were uncertain how to report cyberbullying. Because cyberbullying occurs via the digital platform, victims can be targeted outside university hours. Students could be unsure of the university's responsibilities in this situation. Our findings mirror previous studies (Bhat, 2008; Cassidy et al., 2013) that show cyber victims are confused about the responsibility of schools or universities when cyberbullying occurs outside teaching hours.

Cyber victims in schools are uncertain to whom they should report cyberbullying (Bhat, 2008). For university students, to whom to report is even more complicated because the structure of authority is more complex than that of a school. In our findings, 58 percent of students indicated increased intentions of reporting incidents if they had confidence that an authority figure within the university would render assistance. Our findings are also similar to the child and adolescent cyberbullying literature, that school students do not report cyberbullying because they fear reporting to an authority figure will lead to an increase in the bullying or the situation will stay the same (Fenaughty & Harre, 2013; Sticca & Perren, 2013). Although victims of cyberbullying and traditional

bullying are encouraged to report incidents to authority figures, there is evidence that not all reporting leads to favourable outcomes. This may have a negative effect on future reporting. A workplace bullying study by Bilgel, Aytac and Bayram (2006) found that employees who did report to authority figures were unhappy with the outcome and experienced negative consequences (e.g., increased levels of anxiety).

The results from the current study found that the most popular reason for increased intentions to report cyberbullying was the knowledge that reporting would result in the cessation of the cyberbullying. For a culture of reporting cyberbullying to occur, it is vital that designated reporting figures respond quickly and effectively to a cyber victim's report.

A clear anti-bullying policy outlining procedure and protocols for university personnel and students to follow may increase students' likelihood of reporting cyberbullying (Bhat, 2008; Cassidy et al., 2013; Williams & Cornell, 2006). However, contrary to previous research in this area, only one in three respondents in our study indicated that they would be likely to report cybervictimisation to the university, even if they knew how to use the protocols to report bullying.

There are two reasons why the students in the current study would not report cyber victimisation to the university despite knowing about reporting protocols. First, some studies found that students only report when they deem the bullying to be chronic and pervasive (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Our findings suggest that these university students may not perceive cyberbullying as detrimental enough to warrant reporting. Because the current study did not investigate types or severity of cyberbullying, it is not known whether students' intentions to report are influenced by these factors. Second, other studies have found that victims of bullying believe that reporting incidents is of no use because little can be done to reduce bullying (deLara, 2012; Williams & Cornell, 2006). It is possible that the students in the current study did not feel that reporting would reduce cyberbullying. This is plausible, given that students only intended to report cyberbullying provided they knew that there would be adequate support and a favourable outcome, that is, cyber bullying would decrease.

Differences between victims and non-victims

In our study, students who were cyber victims and who were aware of reporting protocols reported that they would be more likely to report incidents than students who had never been cyberbullied. This finding is contrary to previous literature which has found that a majority of school students who have been victims of traditional bullying or cyberbullying are unlikely to report to an adult (Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Li, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Perhaps the fear and stigma surrounding reporting is of a lesser magnitude for university students than it is for children and adolescents (Baas, de Jong, & Drossaert 2013; Cassidy et al., 2013; Perren at al., 2012).

Limitations

This exploratory study was limited in several ways. First, these results should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size and low proportion of male students. It is worth noting that the sample was only taken from one faculty in one university and the questionnaire was self-report. The questionnaire asked respondents "How frequently have you been cyberbullied by someone who you suspect was from your university during the past twelve months." Because some of the participants were in their first year of study, they would have only attended university for six months when they completed the questionnaire. The data from the first year students can still be used because the question specified that the

cyberbully was someone whom they suspected was from *their university*.

Another limitation was that the questionnaire did not assess the severity (e.g., one text message, four pictures on social media) of the cyberbullying incident. This would have been useful information because reporting intentions may be influenced by the severity of the cyberbullying. Another limitation was that the questionnaire asked about intentions for reporting as opposed to actual help seeking and reporting behaviours. The questionnaire was worded this way because there may not have been an adequate number cyber victims studying in the faculty to enable the researchers to examine past help-seeking behaviours. The Theory of Planned Behaviour can be used to justify using reported intentions rather than reported actions because intentions are viewed as encompassing the motivational factors that influence behaviour (Pryce & Frederickson, 2013). From the perspective of this theory, as long as the individual has the necessary resources and opportunities, paired with the intention to perform the behaviour, then the behaviour is likely to occur.

Implications

The current exploratory study has practical implications. It would be useful for policy makers in university settings to understand the importance of making policies specific to universities with clear guidelines for students about when to report and to whom to report. University personnel who receive these reports should feel confident that the design of the policy allows them to manage incidents effectively.

A majority of university students do not intend to report cyberbullying even if they know how to do so. The university should therefore focus on increasing students' intentions to report cybervictimisation by providing reassurance that their report will be examined and action will be taken.

Conclusion and future directions

Despite its limitations, the present study contributes to the literature of cyberbullying through the exploration of perceived barriers to reporting intentions in the emerging adulthood population. Universities need to empower students to request assistance, and to ensure that they prepare personnel adequately so that when victimisation reports are made, they are managed well.

To increase understanding of how to help cyber victims within the university, future qualitative research should be conducted on the help-seeking behaviours currently undertaken by students. Future studies should also explore whether cyberbullying policies should be adapted from those used in workplaces. Help-seeking behaviours of university students may be more likely to mirror individuals in workplaces than children and adolescents in schools, as examined in previous studies.

Universities have a responsibility to protect students by providing a safe physical and digital environment. Future research should focus on developments in this area to ensure institutions create effective policies to manage cyberbullying.

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