



Cyberbullying and Children's Personal Safety Online

Scope, Effects and Protection Steps

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1. Introduction: the dark side of cyber socializing

Currently available to 40% of the world's population, the Internet has become a household item virtually anyone can access anytime. Its accelerated development reinvented different aspects of our personal and professional lives, but it also brought some new concerns in terms of personal safety and privacy. Among the most important issues, cyberbullying emerged as a risk younger generations find increasingly difficult to cope with. Although cyberbullying is similar to traditional bullying in many ways, its impact could be much greater due to the fact it can take place anytime and anywhere.

As social media and instant messaging become more widely used among pre-teens and teens, these groups are facing new forms of harassment that could severely hurt their self-esteem and mental wellbeing. However, this does not mean cyberbullying is a problem for young generations only. On the contrary, it involves parents and educators as well, since they also participate in this potentially tragic activity. As the number of victims grows, therefore, it becomes more critical to raise awareness of potential threats and educate the target groups on the best ways to protect from online harassment. Unlike traditional bullying, youth harassment that takes place online can have alarming proportions and thus be more complex to handle. Appropriate protection thus includes youth, parents, governments and even social media companies. With respect to available statistics on the rise and impact of cyberbullying, this white paper aims to examine its current scope and identify key measures of protection against it.

Given its scale, disastrous consequences and target groups it is associated with, cyberbullying is a topic that affects all generations and all nations.

2. Understanding the problem

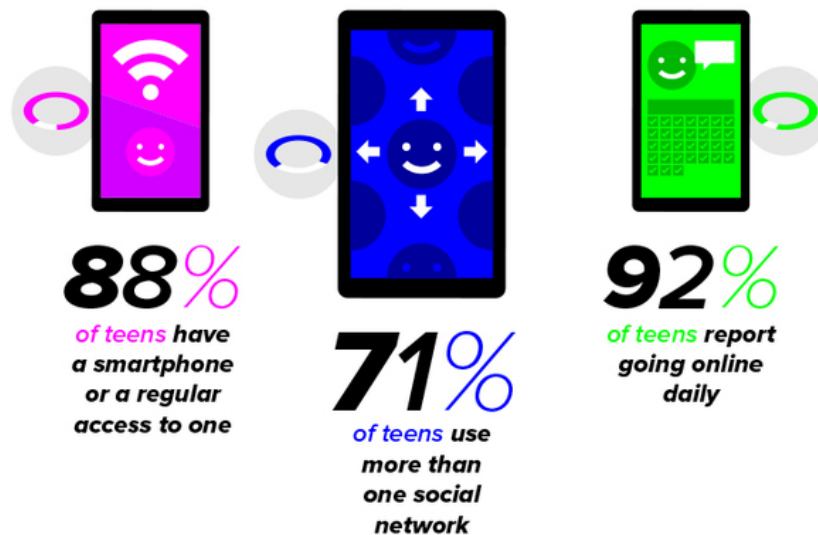
According to the US government website dedicated to raising awareness of the issue, cyberbullying is defined as a form of bullying "that takes place using electronic technology. Electronic technology includes devices and equipment such as cell phones, computers, and tablets as well as communication tools including social media sites, text messages, chat, and websites." In other words, **cyberbullying is closely related to the increased use, or rather misuse of technology** that has become an integral part of young people's everyday lives. This particularly relates to instant messaging and social media communications, which are some of the most widely applications and networks among teens.

2.1. Technology use among children and teens

The use of technology grows parallel to its development. As mobile phones become more powerful, children and teens start using them for a greater variety of purposes, including cyberbullying. Namely, a research by O'Neill and Dinh found out that children who use smartphones and tablets are more likely to be cyberbullied than those who do not, thus implying a direct correlation between the increased use of technology and cyberbullying. In relation to this, 2015 Pew Research Center report provides the following data for teens in the US.

When it comes to some more specific habits, the report reveals that 92% of respondents go online daily with 56% of them doing so several times a day. Quite expectedly, social media networks are among the most frequently visited websites with 71% of American teens using Facebook, 52% using Instagram and 41% using Snapchat. In such a technology-oriented dailiness, it is unsurpris-

TECHNOLOGY AND INTERNET USE AMONG AMERICAN TEENS



ing that bullying too moves online. A major problem that arises here is the fact that cyberbullying can have a much larger scope than its traditional form since it can take place any time and become very personal. In relation to this, Richard Donegan of Elon University points out that cyberbullying can be particularly dangerous because it **“allows many people to see a side of the person more often kept in a face-to-face interaction,”** which is one of the dimensions traditional bullying does not have. Moreover, Donegan highlights the ability to mask and manipulate identities, which gives an additional weight to bullying in cyber space because it creates a range of new ways for bullies to hurt other people.

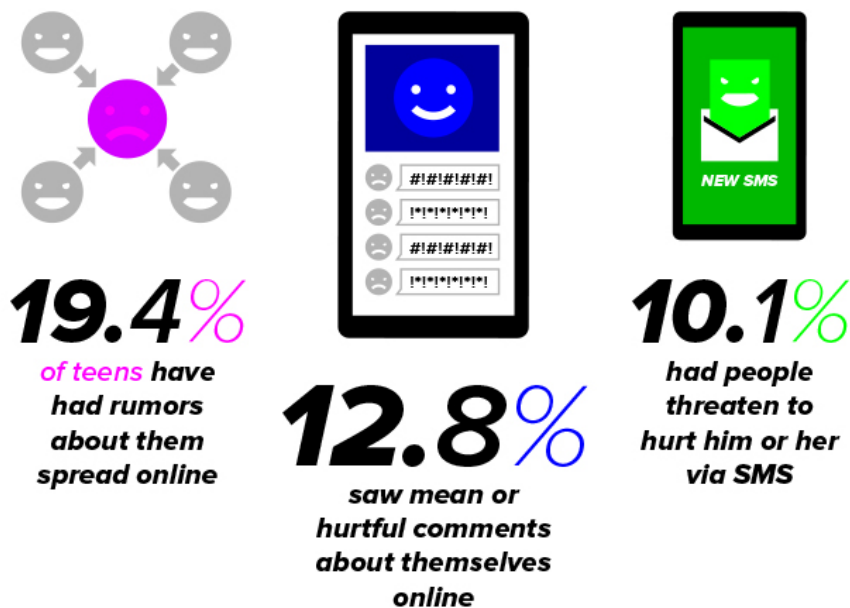
2.2. Types of cyberbullying

Although different parallels can be drawn between traditional bullying and cyberbullying, the later does include some new dimensions of personal threats. Most importantly, cyberbullying can work on a much more personal level, which is probably its most dangerous aspect. Speaking of the most frequent types of cyberbullying, Feinberg and Robey suggest that online harassment typically falls into one of the categories listed below.

| Cyberbullying Categories | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Flaming | Aggressive and vulgar fights via electronic messages |
| Harassment and stalking | Sending malevolent messages regularly or monitoring one's activities on the web |
| Denigration | Spreading rumors or gossip online |
| Impersonation | Breaking into someone's online account and using it to send humiliating or otherwise inappropriate messages |
| Outing and trickery | Tricking someone into believing he or she is having a chat with specific person in order to motivate them to reveal personal information. |
| Exclusion | Intentionally excluding someone from the online group |

Some of these forms have patterns obviously similar to those of traditional bullying, but there are some new threats as well. While offline bullying is limited in terms of reach and the amount of time it can last, cyberbullying can immediately turn into a large-scale disaster.

MOST COMMON TYPES OF CYBERBULLYING



Previously, bullying typically took place in school hallways, near students' lockers or in cafeterias, while today it can happen anywhere and anytime. This gives it a new dimension, as teens can no longer count on the safety of their homes to protect them from harassment. This is pointed out in the article by Brian O'Neil and Thuy Dinh, who explain that offline bullying is no longer the dominant form of bullying in schools across Europe. Namely, this region too has seen a rapid rise in the volume of cyberbullying, which almost doubled from 7% to 12% in the period of 2011-2014, especially among girls. New forms of cyberbullying, according to 2015 Cyberbullying Research Center include spreading rumors online, posting mean or hurtful comments and SMS threats.

3. Cyberbullying as a global concern

80% of people believe that cyberbullying is a serious problem in their country

Parallel to the increased use of technology and social networks among younger generations, cyberbullying grows at a rapid pace and recent reports reveal some alarming statistics about this. While most of such events are recorded in the UK, other parts of the world are seeing a rise, as well. Reuters 2012 Cyberbullying Report that polled over 18000 people in 24 countries found that 80% of respondents believe that cyberbullying is a serious problem in their country. This shows a great awareness of the problem all over the world and makes cyberbullying a global concern.

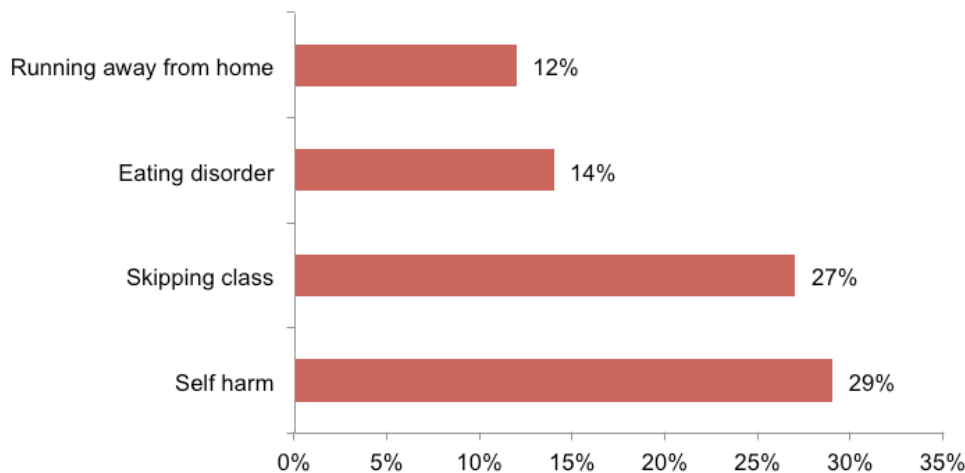
In 2015, US statistics show that 34.4% of students experience cyberbullying in their lifetimes, while 14.6% say they have cyberbullied others. This is a significant increase compared to 2010, when 20.8% of young people said they were cyberbullied in their lifetimes. In the UK, the scope of cyberbullying is even more alarming. According to the Annual Bullying Survey 2015, which surveyed over 4,800 of young people across the country, 43% of respondents say they have been bullied and 69% have witnessed somebody else being bullied. The report also highlights the groups that are most likely to be the targets: young people with different types of disabilities, people with LGBT and low income backgrounds. In addition to this, physical appearance including body shape, size and weight accounted for causes of cyberbullying in 40% of cases.

34.4% of US students and 43% of UK students experience cyberbullying in their lifetimes

3.1. Effects and consequences

The effects of cyberbullying can be quite serious and are often associated with teen suicide. However, as highlighted by experts on stopbullying.gov, most bullied children have no thought of suicide whatsoever. Nevertheless, it brings some severe consequences that can affect one's health or self-esteem on a long-term basis. According to the Annual Cyberbullying Report, 29% of young people harmed themselves as a result of cyberbullying, 27% skipped class, 14% developed an eating disorder and 12% ran away from home. In addition to this, the organization also points out that **12 of 15 school shootings were done by students who have been bullied.**

Consequences of Cyberbullying



4. Handling the issue

Given its scope and possible impact, cyberbullying needs to involve multiple levels of protection to ensure healthier online environment for younger generations. This includes both legal regulations and policies concerning involvement in online communities, which should be implemented by governments and social media companies themselves. Therefore, these institutions should invest joint efforts to ensure every individual has the right to build their online identity without the fear of being hurt by his or her peers.

4.1. Legal regulations

The early occurrences of cyberbullying can be traced back to the time when first social networks and instant messaging apps emerged as a global trend among younger generations. The first legal case of cyberbullying presented at court took place in 2008, when a housewife who bullied a neighbor's teen daughter was sued for causing the teen's suicide. This case ended in acquittal and the court found the bully not guilty since the violation of a website's terms of service was not considered a crime at the time. Few weeks afterwards, the town council in Missouri declared online harassment a criminal activity. This was one of the first legal bases for reducing the volume of malevolent use of online resources and protecting youth's privacy online.

In 2010, several states in the US expanded their bullying laws to include cyberbullying despite the fact attacks take place off the school grounds. In 2012, such laws become more common and were passed in Georgia, Kentucky, Nebraska, New York and Arizona. At the same time, European Union introduced several regulations regarding the issue and run different campaigns to help raising awareness of it. When it comes to the UK, however, the country does not yet have a legal definition of cyberbullying, but there are multiple Acts that can be applied to it. These are Protection from Harassment Act (1997), Communications Act (2013), Defamation Act (2013), and others.

4.2. Social media companies

Besides legal regulations on a national level, there are several ways to address the problem as a part of a global campaign against any type of online harassment. This is most important in relation to social media companies whose reactions could bring some large-scale effects in terms of minimizing the scope of cyberbullying. In fact, multiple social media companies already made some efforts to prevent such malevolent practices from happening on their networks.

4.2.1. Twitter

Although the most serious problem about cyberbullying is online users' personal and emotional involvement, social media companies have another reason to fight against it. Namely, cyberbullying often leads active users to leave the network, which practically equals to negative user experience on these websites. This is perhaps most evident in case of Twitter that has no particular strategies for coping with the issue, but that frequently see a decline in the number of active users due to someone else's malevolent tweets. Namely, as suggested by the leaked data on internal communication, Twitter CEO Dick Costolo is greatly concerned about cyberbullying, particularly because it causes active users to leave the service.

“
We're going to start kicking these people off right and left and making
sure that when they issue their ridiculous attacks, nobody hears them.”

4.2.2. Reddit

In addition to Twitter, Reddit, an online discussion forum that counts 7.55 billion monthly pageviews also recently announced a policy to fight cyberbullying. In a blog post related to the issue, the Reddit team quotes a recent survey, which revealed that a large number of Reddit users are dissatisfied with cyber harassment. This is probably the main idea behind the introduction of new policies, which include handling specific issues individually and potentially banning users.

4.2.3. Facebook

Given the number of its active users, it is unsurprising that Facebook is the most widely used social network for cyberbullying. In fact, cyberbullying has been an important issue for the company ever since its mass adoption started. The company expressed concerns about this back in 2012, particularly by launching a new page in Family Safety Center with an aim to raise awareness of the problem. In March 2015, they also updated their community standards to create a "safe and respectful environment where you always feel comfortable being and expressing yourself," according to Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook CEO. In an interview for Tech Times, he also emphasized that cyberbullying, along with other content that aims to degrade or hurt other people had always been unwanted on Facebook.

4.3. Intervention and protection strategies

According to different surveys, cyberbullying is not always a major anxiety for the bullied. In fact, many students say that they were only slightly concerned about degrading stuff people posted about them online. However, there are some serious cases that required medical interventions. This is why understanding the problem and helping an individual protect from it is essential and should be a common activity for parents, educators and students themselves. In relation to this Feinberg and Robey suggest several important steps that include parental and educators' involvement.

Namely, awareness of the issues the bullied may be experiencing and readiness to talk about them are the essential steps to help protecting young people's online selves. Experts suggest that **both parents and educators should show a greater interest in students' online behavior** and potential social problems they might have. Parents should monitor their children's technology use and teach them how to recognize the symptoms of bullying. Bullies, on the other hand, should be directed to the views that this is unacceptable social behavior that can severely hurt other people. For the bullied, it is important to be ready to talk about their feelings and immediately seek advice on coping with the issue. Furthermore, they should restrain from reacting aggressively or emotionally, but rather try to either laugh it off or talk with someone close to them. Most importantly, however, it is essential that everybody start actively participating in raising awareness of the problem and helping the targets realize that being involved in cyberbullying is not their fault.

5. Conclusions

The digital age brought different threats to individual's privacy, which is why it is important to develop the understanding of online risks in general. As one of the burning issues among pre-teens and teens, cyberbullying is yet another trend that requires active social engagement and involvement of different parties. Much like traditional bullying, cyberbullying can be a distressful experience and cause deep emotional anxieties for the bullied. This is why it is essential to publicly address the issue and educate young people on the best practices of using technology and recognizing the symptoms of malevolent behavior. From teaching them to properly use online resources and technology to talking to them about the issues that matter, different steps should be taken by adults to create healthier online environments for everybody.

Resources:

<http://www.stopbullying.gov/>

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