

# **Cyberbullying Victimization among College Students: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This interpretive phenomenological analysis explored the lived experiences and the psychological impact of victimization from cyberbullying among college students. Two theories, Bandura's Theory of Triadic Reciprocal Determinism and the General Strain Theory, guided the primary research questions used for this exploration. Each of these frameworks posits that human behavior is influenced by an individual's confrontation with various stimuli. Confrontation with negative stimuli, such as that involving cyber abuse, often results in a various psychological affects among victims that may be detrimental to their overall well-being. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 4 community college students who reported abuse to school administration at the college selected as the site for this study. Six themes were generated from the analysis of data: 1) repeated instances leading to feelings of vulnerability and fear; 2) distrust of technology and mistrust of people; 3) the value of friends in college and their impact on victim self-esteem; 4) self-control in response to lack of control over cyberbullying instances; 5) feelings of stress, depression, and embarrassment; 6) frustration leading to self-blame. Findings from this exploratory study may be used by college administrators, college counseling and medical staff, and faculty members to increase their awareness of cyber abuse and the detrimental psychological impact it has on student victims. Furthermore these findings support the creation of sensitivity training relating to cyber abuse, with required and recurrent participation among all elements of the higher educational community.

**Keywords:** Computer anxiety, Social networking, Ethics, Human-computer interaction (HCI), Computer-mediated communication (CMC).

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Existing empirical studies on the phenomenon of cyberbullying among elementary, middle, and high school students have identified and examined its prevalence, common methods of abuse, as well as the overall impact that victimization has on youngsters and early adolescents (Campbell, 2005; DeHue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Conclusions made by researchers from these studies indicate that cyberbullying is a serious and growing problem locally, nationally, and globally, due primarily to advances in technology and the widespread ownership of technological devices among youth, adolescents, and young adults (Yardi & Bruckman, 2011).

In schools, research shows that cyberbullying events do occur in elementary school, are predominant in the middle school years, and slightly decline during the high school grade levels. The impact among victims of this abuse manifests within students in the form of negative psychological, emotional, and social relationship problems (Blair, 2003; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Moreover, the abuse often results in poor academic performance by

student victims (DeHue et al., 2008; Delaney-Black et al., 2002; Van der Kolb, 2003; Wong et al., 2007) and often leads some victims to become cyberbullies themselves (National Crime Prevention Council, 2010).

A significant element defining cyberbullying is the negative differential that exists between the cyberbully and the victim in that the cyberbully holds a position of dominance within the relationship (Campbell, 2005; Froeschle et al., 2008; Privitera & Campbell, 2009; Ortega et al., 2009). Mason (2008) argues that "like other forms of bullying, cyberbullying is centered on the systematic abuse of power and control over another individual who is perceived to be vulnerable and weaker, and that this power imbalance makes it difficult for some victims to defend themselves" (p.323). In some instances, the impact of cyberbullying is so strong that it causes many youngsters and adolescents to avoid school, school functions, and refrain from normal activities they usually enjoy (Dempsey et al., 2009). The same holds true for older adolescents and young adults in that the impact of cyberbullying can be so powerful that they avoid attending classes or going to work. In some extreme cases the cyber abuse can be so relentless and tormenting that victims turn to

suicide as a means of escaping the abuse (Hirst, 2010; Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010).

However, a gap in the literature exists pertaining to the study of cyberbullying victimization among college students. Stories in the national news, such as the student suicide at Rutgers University in 2010, offer a stark reality that cyberbullying does indeed exist within higher education (The New York Times, 2010). The lack of empirical research among this demographic means that existing literature lacks scientific evidence of victim experiences, as well as an understanding of the meaning and interpretation student victims give of their experiences. In response to this dearth of evidence within higher education, this research sought to gain a fundamental understanding of the impact that cyberbullying has on adolescents and adults in college by looking at the phenomenon from the participants' unique personal perspective.

## **2. METHODS**

The method used for this study is qualitative in nature using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a research approach to explore how college students make sense of their lived experiences as a result of their victimization from cyberbullying. IPA serves as an effective data gathering tool for researchers because it is an attempt to get as close as possible to the personal experience of an individual by allowing them to turn their thought processes back to the detailed events of a unique, lived experience. From this process subsequent examination and analysis of that experience can take place by the researcher.

### **2.1 Participants**

Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest that IPA research projects are usually conducted on small sample sizes. They indicate that the reason for this lies in the fact that detailed analysis on a case by case basis is very time consuming. Thus, a small sample size seems more appropriate for such activity. They further suggest that projects for first time IPA researchers should consist of three participants because this size allows for an "in-depth engagement with each participant, and also allows for a detailed examination of similarity and difference, convergence and divergence" (p. 57).

Because IPA research relies on the lived experiences of people, and the subsequent meaning of those experiences, samples for such studies should be selected using a purposeful sample of participants who have experienced a particular phenomenon, rather than through other sample types which use probability methods (Creswell, 2009; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

This study used purposeful sampling to select voluntary student participants from a community college in upstate New York. Each of the participants, 3 females, 1 male, had personal experience as a result of their victimization from cyberbullying. No other criteria such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc were used in the selection process of this purposive sample, thereby giving it the homogeneous attribute needed for this IPA study. The only commonality between the participants was their status as community college students at the community college site selected for this project, and their victimization from cyberbullying.

### **2.2 Measures**

The use of in-depth interviews for IPA research is the data collection technique preferred by IPA researchers (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In following, this research made use of in-depth, open-ended questioning, using a semi-structured interview approach during the data collection phase of this project. Each participant was interviewed on two separate occasions with the interviews spaced about one week apart for each participant. All interviews were audio recorded for subsequent use by the researcher during the data analysis phase of this study and subsequently destroyed.

### **2.3 Procedure**

The Vice President of Student Affairs at the community college used for this study served as a gatekeeper in the identification and in the initial contact of potential study participants. The office of the Vice President of Student Affairs is the location at this particular community college where student victims would go to report instances of cyber abuse taking place against them. As such, the Vice President of Student Affairs and office staff would have first-hand, direct knowledge of reported victims of cyberbullying. After discussion between the researcher and the Vice President over study objectives and methodology, email contact was made to reported victims of cyberbullying asking them of their interest and willingness to take part in this study. Victims that agreed to participate were then contacted by the researcher to begin the data collection process.

### **2.4 Data Analysis**

Data analysis for IPA studies is unique when compared to other qualitative research approaches because the analysis being conducted does not attempt to fit research findings into existing theoretical frameworks. According to Smith et al., (2009), "IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience. Its aim is to conduct human lived experience examination in a way that enables the experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems" (p. 33). Thus, the data analysis is different because its goal is a "commitment to an understanding of the participant's point of view, and a psychological focus on personal meaning-making in particular contexts" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 79).

Data analysis for this study made use of a four step process. The first step of the process began with the researcher transcribing the in-depth interviews collected and organizing the data for further analysis (Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The second stage in this process involved making notes of anything within the transcript or audio-tape that seemed of interest to the researcher. It was during this step that the researcher began to identify similarities and differences between participant dialogues that would be used later in the generation of common themes among all study participants (Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The third action in this process involved the development of themes identified by the researcher from each individual participant's transcript (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The final step of the data analysis process for this research

endeavor involved searching for connections or commonalities across emerged themes. Commonalities identified between participant dialogues subsequently served as the results of this study.

### **3. VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY**

Because IPA, as a qualitative research approach, involves the human being as the instrument used to gather data, member check measures must be put in place to insure credibility and validity in the final product of the research project (Creswell & Miller (2000).

One technique that was used for credibility and validity purposes is the Seidman's three-interview process described in the data collection section of this study. Seidman (2006) suggests that the multiple interview process incorporates features that enhance IPA study validity. By interviewing participants over the course of one to three weeks, the interviewer can check for internal consistency in what the participants say. Furthermore, by interviewing several participants during this timeframe, the researcher can connect their experiences and check comments of each participant against those of others helping to insure internal consistency.

Another strategy to insure validity and credibility in this study was the use of triangulation. In this study, varying data sources such as text messages, emails, instant messages, printed documents, and other computer mediated communication obtained from the participants was used to determine a theme or themes from such data. Triangulating several sources of data to establish themes establishes or adds validity to the study (Creswell, 2009).

Lastly, member checking was used to insure validity and credibility of this study. A member check is the process of verifying information with the targeted group. It allows the participant the chance to review identified themes for accuracy, as well as correct errors of fact or errors of interpretation. Member checks add to the validity of the observer's interpretation of qualitative observations (Creswell, 2009).

### **4. FINDINGS**

Six themes were generated from analysis of the data obtained from the participants taking part in this study. These themes represent new information to the database of literature particularly because they uniquely describe the experiences of college student victims, a demographic which has not received significant amounts of research with regards to cyberbullying. The themes identified include the following:

1) Repeated instances leading to feelings of vulnerability and fear; 2) Distrust of technology and mistrust of people; 3) The value of friends in college and their impact on victim self-esteem; 4) Self-control in response to lack of control over cyberbullying instances; 5) Feelings of stress, depression, and embarrassment; 6) Frustration leading to self-blame. Each of these findings will be elaborated on in the discussion section of this article.

### **5. DISCUSSION**

#### **5.1 Repeated instances leading to feelings of vulnerability and fear**

Repeated instances of abuse often led to feelings of vulnerability and fear among victims taking part in this study. All of the participants expressed that they felt vulnerable as a consequence to their cyber abuse. Some described vulnerability based in part on not knowing how their victimization would reflect upon them with potential employers in the future. Furthermore, some described vulnerability based upon the fact that they did not know what action they would take that would trigger the cyberbully to attack them again. In addition, some participants described feelings of vulnerability because the cyberbully actually knew where they lived.

Almost all of the participants indicated that they felt fear associated with their abuse. They indicated that the fear they felt was out of concern for their physical safety, as well as generalized fear because they believed that they had no way to escape the wrath of the cyberbully.

#### **5.2 Distrust of technology and a mistrust of people**

Participants taking part in this study indicated that cyber abuse does indeed generate similar feelings of mistrust against others within the collegiate population. Victims taking part in this study, as a whole, indicated that their use of technology while at school was innocent, conformed to the guidelines of acceptable use, and that they felt safe with its use. However, as a consequence to cyberbullying victimization, all participants indicated that their abuse forced them to become more aware of and distrusting of technology and that they recognized the need to become more cautious with its use. Furthermore, their abusive experiences led them to feel disappointed and distrusting of their student peers.

#### **5.3 The value of friends in college and their impact on victim self-esteem**

Several existing studies indicate that among young adolescents, friends often cyberbully friends (Haber & Daley, 2011; National Crime Prevention Council, 2010). Lenhart (2010) offers statistics on cyberbullying which indicate that over 70% of the cyberbullying victims knew their attacker, offering the possibility that some cyberbullies may have actually been friends with their victims. A separate factor associated with this type of abuse pertains to how acts such as these are perceived by adolescents. For example, the National Crime Prevention Council (2010) has indicated that often times among younger adolescents acts of cyberbullying are performed against friends because the cyberbully finds such abuse to be funny.

Findings from this study indicate that friendship is something of absolute value and an effective tool in helping victims cope with instances of cyberbullying. Findings from this study have identified that friendship plays a very significant role in the lives of cyberbully victims. Among study participants, all indicated that they often turned to friends for guidance, comfort, and emotional support as a means of helping them cope with and endure their abuse.

In addition to the benefits of comfort and guidance, participants also suggested that friendship had a very positive impact on their self-esteem. While most victims taking part in this study indicated that their self-esteem was either slightly

impacted during the period of abuse, or not at all by it, each participant gave statements that showed the value of friendship in helping them to maintain and in strengthening their self-esteem.

#### 5.4 Self-control in response to lack of control over cyberbullying instances

Participants involved with this study indicated that they did not respond to their abuse by in turn cyberbullying another person. Instead, they responded to their abuse by seeking the assistance of the college Vice President of Student Affairs, the local police, or the campus security office.

This finding suggests that among adult victims a more controlled and socially accepted response had been taken toward abuse even though the victims felt that they had no control over what was taking place against them. Dombeck (2007) suggests that this type of response is indicative of social maturity within adults, and that social maturity enables them to deal with chaotic, uncomfortable situations, such as abuse, in a socially accepted manner.

#### 5.5 Feelings of stress, depression, and embarrassment

Findings from this study support those within the literature that suggest that stress, depression, and embarrassment are very common by-products of cyber abuse among students. Each of the participants taking part in this project indicated that they felt significant amounts of stress during their period of victimization. Empirical research has linked the stress associated with abuse to be the result of ridicule from victim peers who knew of their abuse, their inability to stop the abuse, and in not knowing the long-term repercussions of the abuse that was taken against them.

Participants taking part in this IPA study also indicated depression as a response to their victimization. While the basis of their depression seems to be similar in basis to the reasons that they felt stressed, participants indicated that they felt depressed because they knew the cyberbully and they felt they had no escape from him or her. Furthermore, for some participants, depression was also based in the fact that they felt that authorities such as the local police did not take their complaints of abuse seriously, and that they were unsure how long the abuse would last. Essentially initial frustration turned to short term depression for some taking part in this research.

Embarrassment too was identified as a common by-product among the participants involved in this study. Participants indicated that they felt embarrassed in confronting their peers at school who knew of their abuse, embarrassed because they had to tell their spouse or significant other about the instances of abuse taking place against them, and embarrassed because they felt that they rushed into intimate relations with a person who later turned out to be their cyberbully.

#### 5.6 Frustration leading to self-blame

Findings among the participants taking part in this IPA study have identified that feelings of frustration as a result of cyberbullying are indeed common among victims within the higher educational domain. Furthermore, they indicated that the frustration they felt was not based in the anonymity of the cyberbully, but instead with not knowing whom to initially contact within the college for assistance in helping them with

their abuse. In addition, participants also identified frustration with law enforcement in the local community because they felt that law enforcement personnel did not take their complaint and abuse seriously, and that they did nothing to help mitigate the abuse.

## 6. STUDY LIMITATIONS

While this study has offered important information to the database of contemporary literature, several limitations do exist. One such limitation is that younger college students, those in their late teenage years or earlier twenties are not represented in this study. This limitation is beyond the control of this researcher since students in this age group did not come forward and volunteer to be part of this research. A second limitation of this study is that only one male participant took part in this study, again this factor is beyond the control of this researcher. A third and final limitation of this study is that as community college students, all of the participants taking part in this research are commuter students or those that do not live on the college campus. It is possible that the impact and meanings given by participants might be different among students who reside on campuses.

Lastly, a limitation of this study is that it did not contain students of color, any gay students, or students with visible handicaps. The limitation exists in that it is possible that students of color, those handicapped in some physical way, or those that are gay may experience abuse in a different manner than other students.

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