

Inescapable violence: Cyber bullying and electronic violence against young people in South Africa¹



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Introduction

Internet, cellular and cyber technologies have opened up a wealth of opportunities for learning, exploration, and social and public engagement by children and young people. However, such benefits are not without their dangers, and much has been made of the extant and potential hazards of such technologies.

Most commonly relating to young people, these dangers take the form of what is commonly known as cyber bullying.

Defining cyber bullying

The phenomenon of bullying has over the past decade entered the realm of cyberspace, with the emergence of harassment of various kinds via virtual media.

The term 'cyber bullying' is believed to have been coined and first used by Belsey² and Willard.³ Willard defined it as the use of speech that is defamatory, constituting bullying, harassment or discrimination, and the disclosure of personal information that contains offensive, vulgar or derogatory comments.⁴

Belsey adds that cyber bullying is:

Bullying which involves the use of information and communication technologies such as email, cellphone and text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal websites, and defamatory online personal polling websites to support deliberate, repeated and hostile behaviour

by an individual or group that is intended to harm others.⁵

There are numerous definitions of cyber bullying, which include acts involving bullying and harassment by use of electronic devices or technology.⁶ Cyber violence can also be defined as aggressive, intentional acts carried out by groups or individuals using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time, against victims who cannot easily defend themselves.⁷ As with bullying, the key element that carries across is the repeated nature of the act of intentional harassment or aggression.

Research on cyber bullying is relatively new and has developed following the rapid increase in the use of mobile technology and the internet. While the potential for cyber bullying has escalated with the increased growth and access to networked computers and mobile phones among young people,⁸ Hertz and David-Ferdon point out that the contemporary nature of electronic aggression limits the availability of information on the subject.⁹

Additionally, the studies available have focused primarily on white populations and have been conducted largely in the United States (US), Canada, the United Kingdom (UK) and a small number of European countries. No information therefore exists on the variations of cyber violence by race or ethnicity. However, when put against 'traditional' bullying, researchers propose that cyber bullying constitutes a quarter to a third of traditional bullying.¹⁰



Cyber violence can also be defined as aggressive, intentional acts carried out by groups or individuals using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against victims who cannot easily defend themselves.

Types of cyber violence

There are a number of ways in which cyber bullying is carried out. The main methods are via:

- text messages;
- picture/video clips (via mobile phone cameras) (including 'sexting');
- phone calls (via mobile phone);
- e-mail;
- chat rooms;
- instant messages (IMs) (e.g. MSN, Yahoo);
- websites and blogs;
- social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Hi5, MySpace); and
- internet gaming.

Owing to the widespread availability of these systems, various types of cyber bullying exist which include 'flaming', harassment, denigration, impersonation, 'outing', trickery, exclusion, cyber stalking and happy slapping.

Flaming involves brief yet heated online 'fights' whereby electronic messages with angry and vulgar language are sent or

exchanged. It typically occurs in 'public' online settings such as chat rooms or discussion groups.¹¹

Harassment involves the repeated sending of offensive, rude, and insulting messages. It is usually persistent and repeated and is directed at a specific person causing alarm, annoyance or substantial emotional distress to that person.

Denigration involves the sending or posting of cruel gossip or rumours about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships. In many cases this involves spreading rumours about someone's sexual orientation and information that is derogatory and untrue. Such information may be posted on a webpage or disseminated to others via email or instant messaging. Denigration also includes posting or sending digitally altered photographs of someone to others, particularly pictures that portray the victim in a sexualised or harmful way.

Impersonation or *identity theft* is when someone breaks into someone else's account and poses as that person, sending messages to others online in a bid to damage the victim's reputation and friendships or get the victim in trouble or danger. The perpetrator poses as the victim, usually through using the victim's password to gain access to his/her accounts. Negative, cruel or inappropriate information is then

CYBER BULLYING IN CONTEXT

Electronic media have experienced an exceedingly rapid take-up in South Africa, despite limitations in penetration, broadband connectivity speed and low teledensity. Pay-as-you-go mobile technology has made telephony accessible to the vast majority of the population who were previously un-connected. Many of these people prioritise spending on communication above most other household expenditure.

With the convergence between data and voice services and the shift to a Web 2.0 environment, the potential for cyber violence has multiplied exponentially. Now cell phones can be mediums for violence through email platforms, the web, social networking sites and short messaging, as well as more traditional voice communication.

South Africa is the fourth fastest growing mobile market in the world. Recent data shows that nearly 99% of the South African population belong to a mobile network operator (Vodacom, MTN, Cell C or Virgin Mobile).

Fine D, A Beginners Guide to Mobile Communications, Integrat Mobile Aggregation Services, 2008, p 11. Available at www.integrat.co.za [accessed 27/11/09].



SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN 'CONVENTIONAL' BULLYING AND CYBER BULLYING

While cyber bullying shares a number of characteristics with more traditional forms of bullying, there are some key differences:

- *Anonymity*: While traditional bullies are usually known to their victims, many cyber bullies remain anonymous, which can place further emotional stress on the victim.
- *Disinhibition*: Often a result of the anonymity, young perpetrators of cyber violence are usually less inhibited, largely because they do not have the face-to-face contact that will likely mediate conflict.
- *Accessibility*: Again related to the lack of a physical environment, cyber bullying can follow young people wherever they go – at school, home, or elsewhere – and at any time of the day or night.
- *Punitive fear*: While traditional bullying and violence against young people often goes unreported, there is an additional disincentive for young people to report cyber-violence, in that they fear their computer access or cell phone might be taken away from them.

Limber S, *The Challenge*. A publication of the Office of Safe and Drug-free Schools. Available online at www.thechallenge.org [accessed 12/11/09].

Cyber violence, harassment, bullying and aggression are unlikely to diminish in the future but are instead likely to increase in frequency and severity, changing as technology evolves and becomes even more sophisticated.

communicated to others as if the target were voicing these thoughts.

Outing involves sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online with people whom the information was never intended to be shared. *Trickery* is when deception is used to trick someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, which is then shared online. *Exclusion* or *ostracism* – which can be real or perceived – is when someone is excluded from any type of password-protected environment or online group, such as a 'buddy list'.

Cyber stalking, much like traditional stalking, involves threats of harm or intimidation through repeated online harassment and threatening. Finally, *happy slapping* – a relatively new type of cyber bullying – involves incidents where people walk up to someone and slap them while another captures the violence using a camera phone. In some cases it constitutes more than slapping and assault may ensue.¹²

Tippert, Smith and Thompson¹³ observe that text messages, phone calls and instant messaging are the most commonly reported methods through which cyber bullying is carried out.

However, there is no consistent use of the term cyber bullying across explorations into various forms of aggression and violence in the virtual arena. Indeed, the level at which bullying constitutes cyber aggression in its entirety is itself contested. It has been argued that while similarities exist between cyber and face-to-face bullying, there are also distinct differences that warrant a greater level of nuance and differentiation between various forms of online aggression.¹⁴ However, for the purposes of this paper – and notwithstanding the validity of such arguments – cyber bullying, forms of cyber harassment and other forms of aggression that may or may not originate online or in the cyber realm and manifest through the use of electronic media, are used interchangeably.¹⁵

Cyber violence, harassment, bullying and aggression are unlikely to diminish in the future but are instead likely to increase in frequency and severity, changing as technology evolves and becomes even more sophisticated.

As this paper indicates, cyber violence is a problem of some magnitude in South Africa, and increasing attention to policies and strategies to deal with the phenomenon is called for.



One in three (31.0%) young people interviewed had experienced some form of cyber aggression while at school, while more than two out of five (42.9%) had experienced some form of cyber aggression outside of school.

ABOUT THE CJCP CYBER VIOLENCE STUDY

The CJCP study was undertaken in four South African cities, namely: Johannesburg (Gauteng province), Cape Town (Western Cape province), Durban (KwaZulu-Natal province) and Port Elizabeth (Eastern Cape province).

The intention was not to conduct a national study but rather to use the process as a pilot study to test the extent and need for a more comprehensive national study.

The study reflects findings from a purely urban sample of young people aged between 12 and 24 years, in the four largest cities in South Africa. A total of 1,726 young people were interviewed.

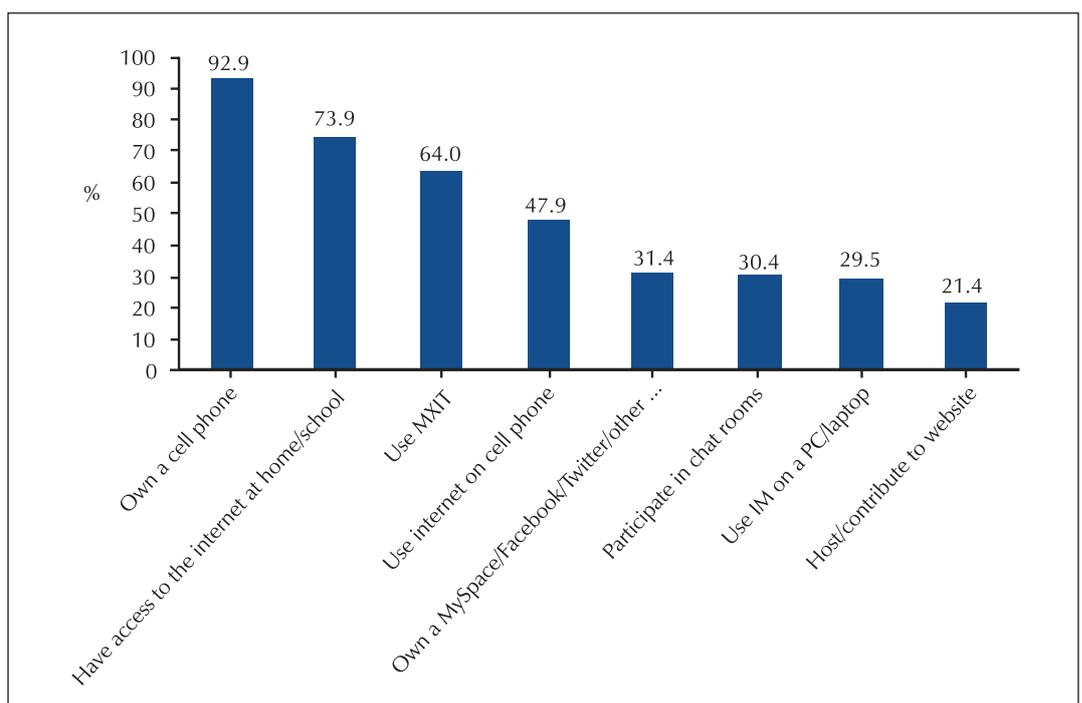
Overview of the sample

The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) study included young people from all walks of life. Almost half (47.4%) the sample interviewed were black, one-quarter (26.4%) were coloured, one in five (18.9%) were white and 7.4% were Indian/Asian. Two out of three (66.7%) of the youngsters interviewed currently attend school. Males were slightly over-represented in the study: 51.2% of those interviewed were boys and 48.3% girls. All participants were urban based.

The penetration of electronic media into young South Africans lives is evident from the sample of young people interviewed in the study. This is most evident by the

number of young people who own cell phones, with 92.9% reporting that they either own or have access to a cell phone which they use for their personal use. MXIT – a free chat application for use on cell phones, incorporating elements of both chat rooms and instant messaging – is the most commonly used mode of chatting, with two out of three (64%) young people reporting that they use MXIT. Almost half (47.9%) have access to the internet on their cell phone, while three out of ten (31.4%) have their own social networking space on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace or Hi5. A similar percentage (30.4%) participate in online chat rooms using a personal computer or laptop, and use instant messaging applications such as

Figure 1: Access and usage of electronic media among young South Africans



Yahoo Chat, Microsoft Messaging/Microsoft Live or ICQ (see Figure 1).

Cyber violence in South Africa

The rapidly evolving nature of technology and the relative dearth of empirical research on various forms of cyber violence mean that the few international studies which have been conducted have tended to use varying definitions, and included some but not all forms of technology and electronic media. This prevents any accurate comparisons being drawn between findings.

However, a recent US Centre for Disease Control policy brief details a 50% increase (from 6% to 9%) between 2000 and 2005 in US internet users reporting being victims of online violence.¹⁶ More recent data places the rates of victimisation from online violence between 9% and 35% depending on the study, the definitions and the forms of technology included.¹⁷ The rates from the CJCP South African study reflect experiences at the higher end of those reported in the US.

Young people in South Africa were asked whether they had experienced any form of cyber aggression either within the home environment or school environment, ever and within the past 12 months.¹⁸ Almost half (46.8%) of the young people reported experiencing some form of cyber aggression, including harassment via telephone.

If one excludes verbal telephone harassment and aggression, 37% of young people reported being victims of cyber aggression. One in three (31.0%) young people interviewed had experienced some form of cyber aggression while at school, while more than two out of five (42.9%) had experienced some form of cyber aggression outside of school.

This pattern follows that identified in a qualitative US study where schoolgoers reported that they experienced most electronic victimisations outside of school, although some instances did occur during the course of the school day and within the confines of the school.¹⁹

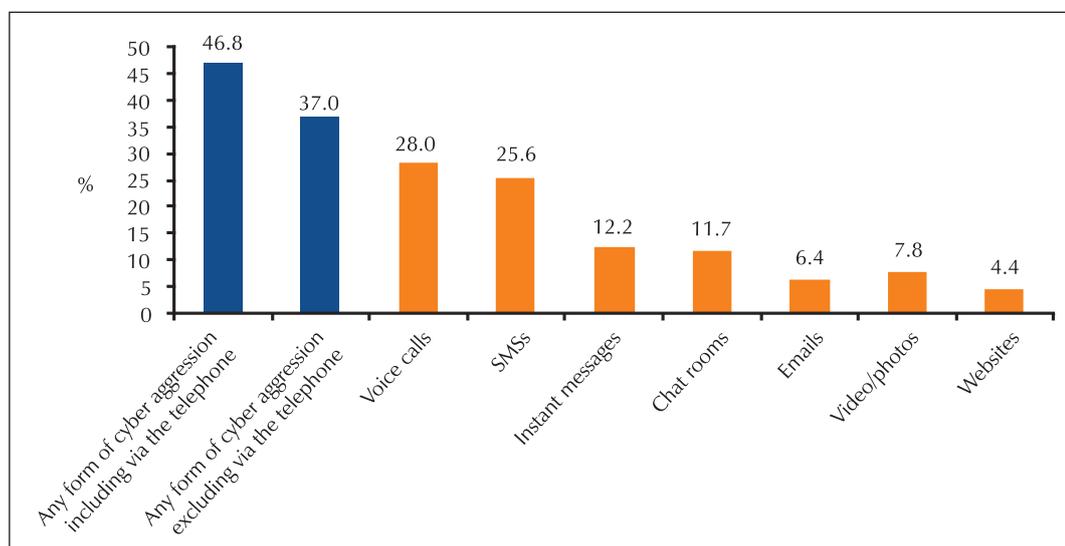
In South Africa – in order of frequency – voice calls, followed by text messaging, instant messaging, emails and then videos or photographs were reported to be the most common mediums through which electronic aggression was experienced (see Figure 2). This follows the broad trends identified in the UK.²⁰

Many young people carry their cell phones with them at all time, either at school or at home. It is therefore hardly surprising that this is the medium through which most cyber aggression is reported.

In total, a quarter (25.6%) of young people reported that they had experienced some form of bullying or aggression via text messages received on their cell phones in

Almost one half (46.8%) the young people reported experiencing some form of cyber aggression, including harassment via telephone.

Figure 2: Young South Africans' experiences of cyber aggression



Text messaging is one of the most difficult forms of cyber bullying to escape.

the 12-month period prior to the study, while slightly more (28.0%) had been victimised via phone calls received on their cell phones.

Texting and voice messaging are arguably the most pervasive, invasive and persistent forms of violence. In order to be victimised via email one has to be online on a computer (PC/laptop) or cell phone, on the web or in a chat room; however, as long as one's cell phone is on, one is vulnerable to receiving an aggressive or harmful text message or phone call. Text messaging is therefore one of the most difficult forms of cyber bullying to escape.

Who is at risk?

International literature shows that, in broad terms, young people who are most at risk for offline forms of bullying and violence are also most at risk for cyber bullying and aggression. Furthermore, young people who are vulnerable to cyber bullying in one context, such as chat rooms, are also the most vulnerable in other forums, such as instant messaging or emails.²¹

While there is contradictory evidence in international literature regarding differences in vulnerability to cyber bullying by gender, some studies have noted that girls are both more susceptible to, and more likely to perpetrate, various forms of cyber bullying.²²

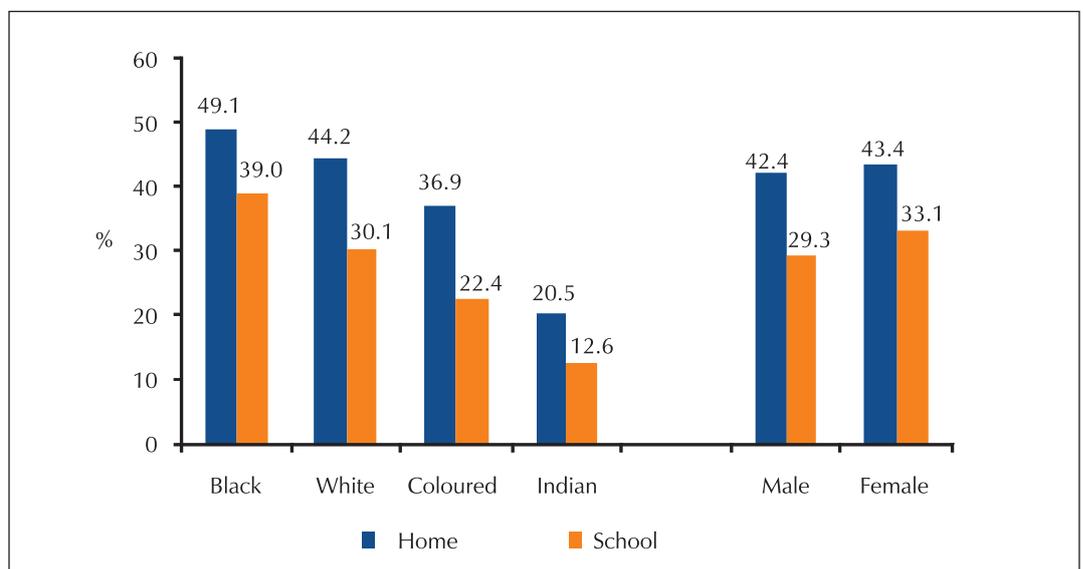
South Africa seems to follow this trend, especially in terms of susceptibility, with more girls reporting experiences of cyber victimisation over the 12-month period prior to the study than boys (33.1% compared to 29.3%) (see Figure 3.). However, initial analysis suggests that gender is unlikely to be a sound predictor of cyber violence within the South African context.

Race appears to be more significant both at home and in the school environment, with black children and youth reporting the highest incidence of cyber aggression, followed by white youths, coloured youths and finally Indian/Asian youths who report the lowest incidence.

Almost half (49.1%) the black youngsters interviewed reported incidents of cyber aggression at home and two out of five (39%) at school, while among the Indian/Asian sample one in five (20.5%) reported incidents of cyber aggression at home, and just over one in ten (12.6%) reported experiencing such incidents at school.

Two other relationships relating to the identity of those at risk of cyber aggression warrant exploration. The first is between those who experience cyber bullying and those who experience face-to-face or 'school-yard' bullying. There is some evidence internationally to suggest that those who experience face-to-face bullying

Figure 3: Experiences of cyber violence by race and gender



are at increased risk of experiencing cyber aggression arising out of or continuing from physical bullying and aggression incidents, and started as separate acts online.²³

The second relationship is that which may exist between experiencing online or cyber aggression, and perpetrating or engaging in similar behaviour.

Who is a cyber bully?

A significant relationship seems to exist between those who experience cyber aggression and those who perpetrate it.

Young people appear to be significantly more open about their engagement in cyber aggression as perpetrators than they are about more physical acts of aggression, violence or bullying. Almost one in five (18.3%) young people admit they have bullied others via text messaging (18.3%), one in eight admit having bullied others via phone calls (16.9%), and over one-tenth admit having bullied others in chat rooms (12.2%) or via instant messaging (11.8%).

A clear relationship seems to exist between having been a victim and being a perpetrator of cyber bullying: seven out of ten (69.7%) of those who had, for example, bullied others via text messaging (SMS) had themselves been bullied.

Initial analysis based on text messaging as

one example shows that being a victim significantly increases the likelihood of bullying others, with half of those who had been bullied via texting reporting having bullied others, compared to 7.4% of those who had never been bullied via text messaging.

The same relationship exists between those who have experienced cyber aggression in chat rooms and those who perpetrate cyber aggression in the same forum. Three out of five (60.3%) of those who had ever bullied someone in a chat room had themselves been bullied in a chat room.

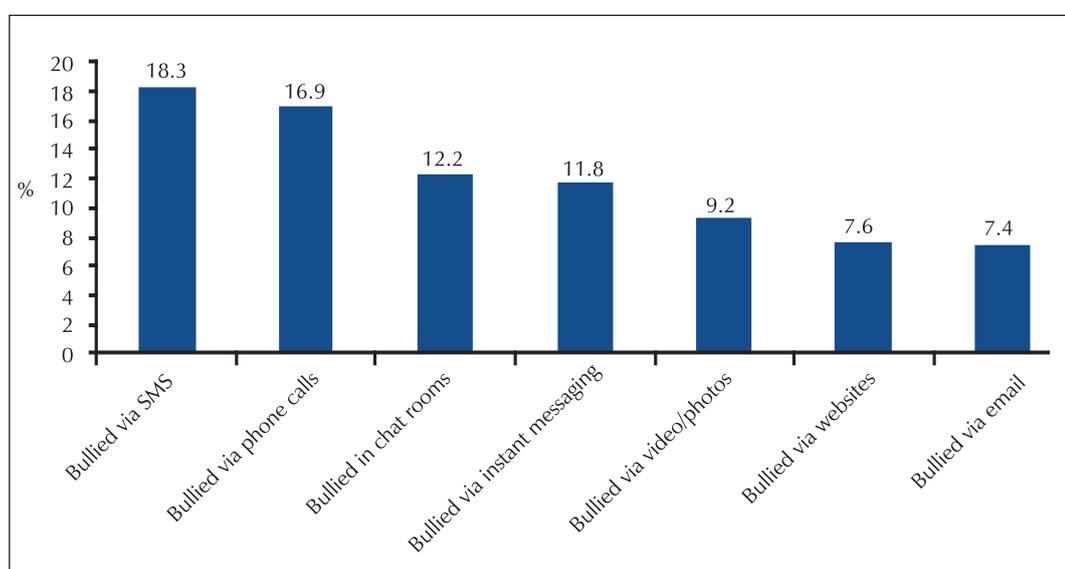
A slightly higher percentage (63.0%) of those who had experienced cyber aggression in a chat room environment went on to inflict cyber aggression on others in chat rooms, compared to 5.5% of those who had not experienced cyber aggression in a chat room.

While this analysis does not identify whether the act of perpetrating cyber bullying came prior to or as a result of the young person's own experiences of cyber violence in the specific forum (text messaging or chat rooms), it does suggest a possible element of automatic retaliation or response to cyber aggression using the same or similar means.

It is possible that this is in part due to the absence of mediating factors that might

Half of those who had been bullied via texting report having bullied others, compared to 7.4% of those who had never been bullied via text messaging

Figure 4: Young people who have bullied others via different electronic media



One cannot overstate the potential of cyber bullying and cyber aggression to have as many, if not more, harmful and longer lasting negative effects on young people as face-to-face or school-yard bullying.

prevent an aggressive response in physical or emotional face-to-face bullying or aggression bullying.

The use of electronic media in bullying and for inflicting harm on young people allows the perpetrator to do so anonymously, as the perpetrator is usually able to hide his/her identity from the victim. This is clearly evident in the South African data, with most young people who have experienced cyber bullying reporting that they did not know who was responsible for their victimisation.

This trend exists across the various mediums of cyber bullying: two out of five who reported being bullied via text messaging, 48.8% of those who reported videos or photos of themselves being distributed, one in three who reported aggression via emails and two out of five who reported being bullied via instant messaging reported that they knew the perpetrator.

This anonymity may feed into apathy regarding reporting, may create greater psychological stress for the young person being victimised and may diminish his/her sense of control over the (ongoing) incidents, all of which increase the short- and long-term harmful effects on the child or youth.

Implications

One cannot overstate the potential of cyber bullying and cyber aggression to have as many, if not more, harmful and longer lasting negative effects on young people as face-to-face or school-yard bullying. The harm of posting derogatory comments, suggestions, photos or videos on websites or in chat rooms continues long after the actual posting and initial viewing, and indeed is recorded relatively permanently. These postings may come back to haunt the victim later in life.

The sense of loneliness that many young people feel when bullied is exacerbated when the medium is electronic, as the young person is usually alone when the incident happens. The fear of access to computer or cell phones being sanctioned might prevent a young person from talking

to his/her parents or teachers about the incident, effectively lessening the possibility of any support becoming available.

These effects cannot be underestimated: there are increasing reports of depression and suicide among children and youth, which are directly attributable to their experiences of violence online and through electronic media.

Such acts also undermine the victim's formation of positive, healthy and pro-social relationships with peers and others. Perpetrator anonymity also makes it easier to engage in acts of aggression, and the negative effects are rarely seen in their immediacy.

Furthermore, both victims and perpetrators of cyber aggression are significantly more likely than others to engage in substance abuse.²⁴ Young people who experience problems online are also more likely to be experiencing problems offline.

The occurrence of online harassment or cyber bullying is frequently correlated both with other risky behaviour and a range of psychosocial behaviours, which suggests that the levels may be cause for concern in a greater context.²⁵

Those considered to be 'at-risk' for other violent behaviour (such as sexual abuse, parental conflict or physical violence) also appear to be at greater risk of cyber aggression.²⁶

Way forward

Cyber bullying and cyber aggression – in all its forms and regardless of differences in definition – clearly present a challenge to policy-makers, parents and educators, and most importantly to children and young people.

As technology continues to advance at exponentially faster rates, the need to develop comprehensive, adaptive, dynamic and responsive solutions to the challenges of cyber aggression will become even more important. At the same time it becomes imperative to develop a public health approach that focuses on prevention rather



than cure, and which addresses the environment and context in which young people live their daily lives.

Targeted resources can provide support for parents and caregivers, educating them as to the real (as opposed to media hyped) risks,²⁷ dangers and potential means of managing the technologies that young people use.

Parents and caregivers should be familiar with and engage in the use of electronic media with their children, educating and guiding them regarding acceptable usage and behaviour as well as providing adequate monitoring and supervision. Additionally, a cyber-bullying prevention curriculum can be developed for schools,

and awareness campaigns and advertorials for young people and caregivers can be developed.

Targeted interventions should be provided to young people identified 'at-risk' for other forms of violent or antisocial behaviour, while the resilience of not-at-risk youth and children should be enhanced. Issues around cyber bullying and violence can be integrated into some existing programmes that already target at-youth risk.

There is currently no policy framework that directly addresses cyber aggression, and the need exists for a comprehensive policy that directly addresses the safety of young people both online and in the realm of cellular technologies. ■

The occurrence of online harassment or cyber bullying is frequently correlated both with other risky behaviour and a range of psychosocial behaviours.



ENDNOTES

- 1 The complete findings of the CJCP cyber violence study are presented in a forthcoming (2010) CJCP monograph.
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- 6 Smith P, Mahdavi J, Carvalho M & Tippett N, 'An investigation into cyberbullying, its forms, awareness and impact, and the relationship between age and gender in cyberbullying'. A report to the Anti-Bullying Alliance by Unit for School and Family Studies, Goldsmiths College, University of London, no date.
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- 21 Finkelhor D, *Childhood Victimization: Violence, Crime and Abuse in the Lives of Young People*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
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CJCP mission

The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) is dedicated to developing, informing and promoting innovative evidence-based crime prevention focused on the groups identified as being vulnerable to victimisation or offending. The CJCP does this by:

- conducting rigorous research into issues of relevance to policy makers, public service officials, development partners and crime prevention practitioners;
- facilitating the implementation of crime prevention projects;
- providing sector-specific and accredited training in crime prevention for policy makers, public sector officials and non-governmental organisation practitioners; and
- disseminating the results of its research and lessons learned to relevant audiences.

About this paper

The rapid development of social networking sites, mobile social networking platforms, such as MXIT, and indeed the widespread access to mobile telephony itself has provided a powerful space for young people to engage in public life. But these media have also increased the opportunities for online or 'cyber' victimisation, bullying and aggression. This is evident in the reports of, for example, hate lists on websites, incidents of 'happy slapping' and the phone-videoing and distribution of schoolyard fights and assaults.

Internet and mobile technologies increase anonymity and provide some level of disassociation with acts of aggression, making

aggression and bullying much easier through these media. And yet very little empirical research has been done in South Africa on the extent and nature of these forms of cyber aggression.

This paper presents the initial findings of a 2009 CJCP research study undertaken in four South African cities, in which 1,726 young people participated and spoke about their experiences of aggression. The paper explores the prevalence of various forms of cyber aggression, as well as other characteristics and relationships, not least of which is the strong relationship between victims and perpetrators of online aggression.



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