

CYBERBULLYING – A PHENOMENON OF THE DIGITAL AGE

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Submitted: 2014-07-14

Accepted: 2014-07-22

Published online: 2014-12-31

Abstract

This paper deals with the issue of cyberbullying as a dangerous and social-pathological widespread problem, especially among children and young people. This issue is currently a hot topic. It is a misuse of information and communication technologies to harm others. This cybernetic form of bullying has many common features with traditional bullying, but it also gained new ones, typical for an online environment. These are anonymity, disinhibition effect, unlimited audience and independence regarding time and place. The most common symptoms include; cyberbullying humiliation, slander, threats, theft of passwords or publishing inappropriate photos and videos. Experts on the subject differ in many ways on their opinions, resulting in large differences in the results of the studies investigating the occurrence. The aim of this paper is to present the problem of cyberbullying, its basic risk characteristics, and forms and prevalence in the Czech and Slovak Republics, where the investigation is at the beginning stages, compared for example with the United States, which has been investigating this phenomenon. In the future, it will be necessary to get more local data for dealing with and preventing this social-pathological phenomenon, which was given rise by the digitization of the contemporary world.

Key words: *cyberbullying; information and communication technology; internet; anonymity; children*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, information and communication technologies (ICT) are showing an unprecedented boom. They are increasingly becoming part of everyday life and without them, many of us now could hardly even imagine life without them. Children and young people who grew up or are growing up in this electronic age, take them as a matter of course and can intuitively operate them. Now the ICTs have a huge impact on children, since they provide the possibility of easier communication with peers in real time, they “shrink the world”, they provide

an almost unlimited source of information and entertainment and so many children spend large amounts of time in previously non-existent internet environment, which varies considerably from the real world. Canadian politician Bill Belsey refers to today’s generation of young people as “Always On”. This generation has a need to be with their peers in the online environment constantly in touch. Internet for them is not a place that would be different from their real life. On the contrary, it is becoming a more normal and “natural” part of their world. For the “Always On” generation the use of modern technology has become the so

called “digital umbilical cord” that connects them with their peers. Replies in the virtual world are not only expected, but are expected very quickly, otherwise it is considered a social faux-pas (Belsey, undated). However, the ICTs not only brought new ways of communicating and gathering information, but also new opportunities to harm others and new manifestations of various sociopathic phenomena. One of such phenomena is cyberbullying – a modern phenomenon, which in recent years has received a lot of attention in professional and lay circles, which threatens the moral, mental and social development of today’s children and youth (Vitošová 2009).

Cyberbullying is difficult to *define* precisely. Because it is a relatively new issue, experts on this topic diverge regarding the definitions and characteristics. It is uncertain whether the term “cyberbullying” was first used by the above mentioned Canadian politician Bill Belsey or American lawyer Nancy Willard, but Belsey’s definition is more common. Cyberbullying is defined as “the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager, instant messaging, and defamatory personal websites to deliberate, repeated and hostile behavior of an individual or group in order to harm others” (Shariff 2008). This definition captures most basic *characteristics*. These include, of course, the use of ICTs, which are decisive for cyberbullying. Generally, they can be divided into electronic devices such as computers, mobile phones, tablets and things like that, and virtual (software) instruments, such as internet, SMS messages, social networks, instant messengers, e-mail, chat or blogs. Electronic devices provide access to each instrument, by means of which it is then possible to cyberbully others. Another specific feature is the deliberateness of cyberbullying behavior, because the aggressor of cyberbullying must have a goal to harm someone. It may happen that a friendly banter turns in an unpleasant situation, but if there is no intent to harm a friend, such conduct is not possible to be labeled as cyberbullying. It is also mentioned in the definition of repetitiveness. Cyberbullying includes whole patterns of behavior and takes place over a longer period of time, it is not a one-time affair. Exceptional hassle of a few people on

the internet with a negative impact on one of its participants is, therefore, not classified as cyberbullying. The last mentioned feature is the harm. The victim of cyberbullying must perceive attacks on his or her person as a form of maltreatment.

Specifics of cyberbullying

Along with traditional bullying, cyberbullying has many common features, including some of the above mentioned. However, since it takes place mainly in the online environment, in addition to the traditional bullying features, it adopted other characteristic *features typical* for the internet environment. Some have resulted in a reduction in inhibitions on the part of the aggressors, others a deterioration of the victim protection. Even though cyberbullying does not result in physical damage, it causes psychological damage. It is harder to avoid and resist, and therefore it may be even more dangerous than traditional bullying. For third parties, such as parents and educators, it is also harder to detect ongoing cyberbullying, as the victim may not show any visible consequences, as in the case of traditional bullying, such as bruises and contusions (Vágnerová et al. 2009).

One of the most important features typical of cyberbullying may be the anonymity of the attacker. The online environment provides countless ways to hide their identity from anonymous accounts through false names to nicknames. If the attacker does not wish to be revealed, they may not disclose their identity, and in this case it is very difficult to trace and stop them (Eckertová and Dočekal 2013). Anonymity reduces the inhibitions of the aggressors because they do fear possible punishment (Spitzer 2014), and this worsens the situation of the victims, who may be, in the case of threats from an unknown aggressor, totally helpless.

An important phenomenon is the so-called *disinhibition effect*. It occurs as a result of indirect contact between members of electronic communication not only in the case of cyberbullying, but also in ordinary online communication. It is the name for the reduced ability to estimate the response at indirect communication where neither side sees the other. Although it may seem that the insults in written text don’t affect the victim, in fact the victim may be strongly emotionally affected.

In case of direct contact, gestures also play a role, such as facial expressions and other nonverbal means of communication, which constitute an essential part of communication. However, in the online communication these are completely missing. Another feature of indirect communication is the reduction of inhibition, so young people reveal more about themselves and are willing to discuss intimate topics rather than if they were speaking face to face. This can be dangerous in the case of contact with a potential aggressor (Vašutová et al. 2010).

Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is **not affected by time and place**. In the age of “smart phones” and nonstop internet connection, you can contact almost anyone, anytime and anywhere, so the victim cannot avoid insults, threats and unpleasant calls (Kavalír 2009). It is of course possible to turn off the phone, but even at that time, cyberbullying can occur in the absence of a victim. This may include vilification on social networks among friends or spreading defamatory inappropriate photos and videos. In addition, despite the fact that the victim of cyberbullying turns off the phone, there are unread received messages that will appear any time they turn their phone on again.

Unpleasant published material such as ridiculing videos or edited photos, can approach an **unlimited number of people** on the internet. Sites for uploading and sharing videos, such as YouTube.com, contain many recordings of traditional bullying or painful and awkward moments. These videos have vast audience and to the person who is captured on such a video can have dire consequences in the form of hints of the people, unknown user comments and of course mental harm (Krejčí 2010). This is related to the fact that the stability of internet contributions is unfavourable for the victim. It is not easy to remove recorded material from the internet, unless it is done by its author. Usually it is necessary to contact the website administrator and resolve the situation with him or her, which may take a relatively long time, during which various users can access and download the material and spread it even after its potential removal.

In addition, cyberbullying is often linked with traditional bullying in two ways. The first, is an extension of traditional bullying

into cyberspace, so the victim faces both bullying at school and on the internet, and the effects are multiplied by each other. The second way is another specific feature of cyberbullying, the so called **profile transformation of the aggressor and the victim**. In general, the aggressor, in bullying, is always in some way stronger than the victim. In traditional bullying, it is mostly the superiority of physical strength, age, social status etc. In cyberbullying, these properties do not play any role. Anyone can become an aggressor of cyberbullying, even though this person is weak and unpopular (Kavalír 2009). It depends mainly on whether the individual is proficient in the use of the ICTs and how they are ingenious. Victims of traditional bullying in the online environment, due to the anonymity, large amount of resources and indirect contact between the aggressor and the victim, have an ideal opportunity to take revenge on their tormentors from the real world. There are cases in which the victims of traditional bullying become the aggressors of cyberbullying or vice versa.

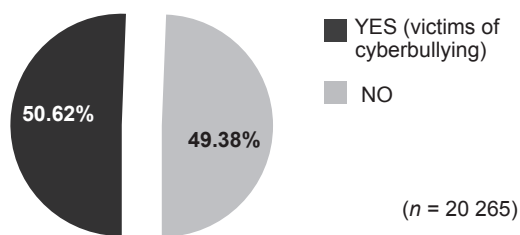
Forms of cyberbullying

Regarding the forms or manifestations of cyberbullying, experts disagree again, what social pathological phenomena can be related to cyberbullying. Most discussed are “sexting” or online sexual harassment, and cyber-grooming which means using the internet to trick a victim to attend a personal meeting with malicious intentions. Cyberstalking which means stalking someone using ICT, and happy slapping, which is a physical attack on an unsuspecting random person and publishing recordings of the incident on the internet. Some authors classify such behaviour as signs of cyberbullying (Vašutová et al. 2010, Hulanová 2012, Černá et al. 2013), while Kolář (2011) and the Methodological Instruction of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports on bullying in schools and educational institutions (2013) classify them as separate phenomena. The most common manifestations of cyberbullying, in which the experts agree, include the previously mentioned publication of humiliating or edited photos and video clips, slander, threats, stealing passwords, publishing private personal information, creating fake profiles, threats, extortion or exclusion from

the group. Again, there are some symptoms consistent with both traditional bullying and cyberbullying, but in the online environment and the use of ICT they receive a new form.

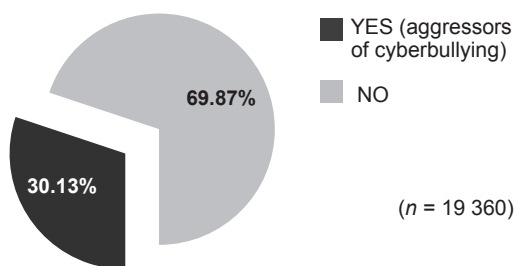
Incidence of cyberbullying

In the Czech and Slovak Republics, the research related to cyberbullying is not as common as in the USA or England. The research results differ significantly mainly because of the above-mentioned inconsistencies among the experts. Other factors that lead to differences between the results may be differences in the investigated samples, such as age, gender, location and other demographic criteria, and also differences in the type of research. The first research on the modern phenomenon of cyberbullying in the Czech Republic was published in 2009–2010 (Rogers 2011). In 2009, in the Czech Republic the research within the “E-security” project started to be pursued, and is repeated every year. In recent years, the research involved more than 20,000 respondents. It is the largest project in the Czech Republic and based on the research results of 2013, the victims of cyberbullying were half children (50.6%) under 18 (Chart 1) and almost one third (30.1%) of the children were reported the attackers of cyberbullying (Chart 2). The respondents most often experienced verbal attacks (33%), intrusions into their accounts (33%) and harassment by calling (24%) (Szotkowski et al. 2013). The incidence of cyberbullying, according to the research results, has an increasing tendency; there is an increase in reported cases, which differ from each other, and also an increase in their severity (Kopecký et al. 2013). According to the most recent of these quantitative studies, whose results were published in July 2014, in which 50.9% of children had met some of the manifestations of cyberbullying. Children most often encounter intrusions in their personal accounts and verbal attacks, including extortion. The research at first also looked at whether children have access to a web camera and how they use it. Over the past year, nearly 3% of children reported that someone humiliated, blackmailed or threatened them by webcam recordings (Skáčelíková 2014).



Source: Szotkowski et al. 2013

Chart 1 – Victims of cyberbullying



Source: Szotkowski et al. 2013

Chart 2 – Aggressors of cyberbullying

The report based on the qualitative research published in 2011 by the Research institute of child psychology and psychopathology in Bratislava, quoted 5.9% of the respondents as the victims of cyberbullying, but this research did not deal exclusively with this phenomenon. The leading types of online harassment that are mentioned are: swearing, mocking (50%) and slander (43%) (Gregussová et al. 2011).

In 2012, a research report by the project “EU Kids Online” was published, in which qualitative research involved more than 25,000 children from all over Europe, including the Czech and Slovak Republics. According to this research in Europe, 6% of children between 9 and 16 years are cyberbullied. The same value was obtained in the Slovak Republic. In the Czech Republic, cyberbullying seems to be a bit more serious problem, with 7% of its victims. Despite the fact that according to the research “EU Kids Online”, cyberbullying

is more widespread in the Czech Republic and daily use of the internet is lower compared to the Slovak Republic. In the Czech Republic, 75% of children use the internet every day or almost every day. In the Slovak Republic, 81% of children use the internet one or more times a day (Haddon and Livingstone 2012).

CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying, with the expansion and development of the ICTs, has become a real problem for both the Czech and Slovak Republics and elsewhere in the world. It threatens the moral upbringing of children, their psychological development and socialization ability. Since there will be further development of these advanced technologies and an increase in cyberbullying can be expected, it is important to confront this phenomenon. The most important preventive measures are not mainly only in schools

but also in family environment. Of course, early detection of ongoing cyberbullying is important, because the longer you let it run its course, the greater the number of victims, the better fixed position of the attackers which may have serious consequences for the victims of bullying (Brandejsová and Lukášová 2011). The cornerstones of preventive and intervention measures are empirical findings. In the Czech and Slovak Republics, these findings are insufficient compared with the Western world and the authors are forced to draw on foreign publications that are used for taking potential measures. Since cyberbullying is a relatively new issue, the investigation is just starting to develop. The more acute the problem, the more attention it will get. The main preventive measure is to inform children what dangers they may face on the internet, and to spread general awareness about cyberbullying as a hazardous phenomenon affecting the mental health of children.

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