

Cyberbullying

Experiences, impacts and coping strategies as described by Australian young people

Cyberbullying impacts on the wellbeing, schooling, family and peer relationships of many young people. The current study of 548 young Australians revealed that cyberbullying is a group phenomenon most prevalent during the transitional ages between primary and secondary school. It takes on many forms and shows an overlap in roles between 'bully' and 'victim'. Despite the serious emotional impacts of cyberbullying, over a quarter of victims did not seek support from others, which highlights the need for more information and support to be given to young people to encourage them to speak out.

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The negative impacts of bullying on schooling, relationships and the emotional and psychological health of young people who are its victims can be long term; in some cases, the impacts continue into early adulthood (Patchin & Hinduja 2006). There are also long-term implications for bullies; for example, they have been found to typically exhibit higher levels of antisocial, violent and/or criminal behaviour in adulthood (Patchin & Hinduja 2006; Kulig, Hall & Kalischuk 2008). These impacts, both for the bullied and the bully, create ongoing social and economic costs for the community. As the penetration and use of communication technologies grows, especially among young people, it is necessary to consider the potential for cyberbullying to increase the frequency and severity of victimisation.

"Cyberbullying" is the collective label used to define forms of bullying that use electronic means such as the internet and mobile phones to aggressively and intentionally harm someone. Like "traditional" bullying, cyberbullying typically involves repeated behaviour and a power imbalance between aggressor and victim. It extends beyond hurtful messages sent via email or text messaging to include forms such as threats, social exclusion tactics, spreading rumours and circulating defamatory images of the victim. One of the key attractions of cyberbullying is reported to be the perceived anonymity that the internet and other communication technologies can provide. Researchers suggest that the "virtual" environment in which cyberbullying occurs allows bullies to feel less inhibited and

Young people impacted by cyberbullying may be more likely to experience suicide ideation ... than those who experience traditional bullying.

less accountable for their actions (Joinson 1998; Keith & Martin 2005; Sparling 2004).

The results of research on the prevalence of cyberbullying among young people vary considerably. Reports of prevalence in the literature range from 9% to 49% within a school year (Juvonen & Gross 2008), with the wide variance attributed to differences in research design and the types of technology examined. Although rates are not as high as for traditional bullying (with prevalence up to 70%) (Juvonen & Gross 2008), the spread in recent years of technology-mediated communication suggests an increased potential for this form of bullying in the future. International research has found that cyberbullying is often used in tandem with traditional bullying (Li 2005; Smith et al. 2008). Further investigation of this interaction is required, particularly among Australian young people.

The short-term impact of traditional bullying has been widely documented, and includes problems with emotional adjustment, school adjustment and relationships. While some studies have found the impact of cyberbullying to be comparable (Smith et al. 2008), others propose that the impact may be more severe (Campbell 2005). Two reasons given for the severity of impact are the wider audience in which public humiliation or embarrassment can occur, and the increased level of invasiveness that is possible, in particular the ability to penetrate a victim's home and/or bedroom. Additionally, data from Kids Helpline (BoysTown 2009) suggest that young people impacted by cyberbullying may be more likely to experience suicide ideation as a reaction to cyberbullying than those who experience traditional bullying. Although it would be problematic to develop generalised findings from this single study, it does raise a concerning issue.

One area that has received considerable focus in literature, particularly overseas, is the strategies used to address cyberbullying. The material is broad in scope and covers strategies at individual (e.g. blocking/avoiding messages), school (e.g. restricting use of technologies), community (e.g. support service delivery) and legislative (e.g. program funding) levels (Campbell 2005). One concerning finding from the literature is that young people who have been cyberbullied rarely inform adults. Indeed one American study (Juvonen & Gross 2008) found that as many as 90%

of victims claimed to have not told an adult. Other studies have yielded similar findings, and attribute the inhibition to fears of humiliation and embarrassment; not being believed; having their concerns trivialised; and/or having access to technology devices restricted (Campbell 2007; Rickwood et al. 2005; Smith et al. 2008). Not surprisingly, young people, particularly adolescent girls, are more likely to disclose their bullying concerns and seek support from a peer rather than a parent or another adult (Campbell 2007; Juvonen & Gross 2008).

One acknowledged benefit of cyberspace is that it provides potential cyberbullying victims with a wide suite of coping tools that are not available offline. For example, victims can attempt to avoid receiving messages from suspected bullies by blocking their screen names from their computer, restricting buddy lists or changing their own avatar (Juvonen & Gross 2008). While there is some literature suggesting that most young people appear familiar with such strategies (Li 2005), usage varies greatly, ranging up to 67% depending on the particular strategy (Juvonen & Gross 2008). Here lies another area where further exploration is needed. In particular, further evidence is required as to the methods young people rely on most, and the extent to which they have been effective.

Although the amount of published data from Australia has increased since the onset of this study, it is still somewhat limited. For this reason the current study sought to extend knowledge, particularly around the use and perceived effectiveness of coping strategies, as defined by young people themselves. Additionally, it sought to further understand the prevalence and impact of cyberbullying in Australia, and the extent to which it occurs simultaneously with traditional bullying. Initially designed to inform the service response of Kids Helpline counsellors, it was later hoped that this research might also provide evidence to inform young people, parents, schools and government about the nature of cyberbullying in Australia and the type of strategies that could be developed to effectively address this issue.

Method

A mixed-method online approach was used to collect data on the cyberbullying experiences of Australian young people.

Sample

The analysis sample consisted of 548 self-identified cyberbully victims aged under 25 years (male=101). Participants were sourced in 2009 primarily from the Kids Helpline website and email counselling service, as well as the ABC's *Behind the news* television and web audience. The sample's female bias is the likely result of Kid Helpline's involvement in recruitment; it is representative of national help-seeking trends (Kids Helpline 2009).

The majority of participants were aged 10–14 years (50%) or 15–18 years (42%), a bias also reflective of Kids Helpline contacts. The remainder were aged 19–25 years (6%) and 5–9 years (2%). With regard to the geographic distribution of Australian youth (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006), a representative spread was achieved across the sample including all six Australian states and two territories, with highest proportions representing New South Wales (35%) and Victoria (21%). With the exception of the Northern Territory, all other locations contributed more than 13 participants.

Measures

The survey consisted of 18 web-based questions, including 16 quantitative and two qualitative questions. The mix of the two approaches complemented each other and provided a flexible approach to the gathering of data on a sensitive topic (Protheroe, Bower & Chew-Graham 2007). Moreover, the "complementarity" of the mixed-method approach improved the validity and interpretability of the study, as overlying yet diverse facets of cyberbullying were able to be measured (Rocco et al. 2003). Specifically, the qualitative component provided an in-depth description of the experience, while the quantitative component measured its nature and level. Testing of internal consistency reliability was also enabled by cross-examining the consistency between participants' qualitative and quantitative responses.

Questions were designed for the purpose of this study, and took into consideration the nature of online research and the large variance in age, attention span and literacy levels of the target group. The language used in the survey and the emotional impact measures were developed in consultation with experienced

Kids Helpline counsellors and clinical psychologists. Pilot testing was conducted online with 10 young people, and learnings obtained from qualitative responses were used to inform survey improvements.

In addition to their current age, participants were asked to specify the age(s) in their life in which they had experienced cyberbullying. This measure allowed for a more accurate interpretation of the age at which to associate other responses (e.g. method, type and impacts), although it also introduced the possibility of recall bias. Measures relating to the type and method of cyberbullying experiences were informed by existing literature and insight gained from pilot testing. Multiple responses were allowed for in many of the list questions as was the opportunity to provide free-text explanations.

Two tools were used to measure impacts. The first involved a six-item, three-point scale, which measured how participants felt as a result of victimisation (e.g. "not frustrated", "frustrated" or "very frustrated"). A free-text option was also provided to capture emotions not mentioned. Limitations of the survey tool meant that participants could choose multiple responses within the one item. However, to avoid over-representation, multiple responses in this instance were re-coded to reflect only the more severe emotion selected. The second impact tool involved a six-item list of potential impact areas (i.e. school attendance, school grades, confidence, self-esteem, friendships, family relationships) as well as a free-text "other" option.

The use and perceived effectiveness of various online and offline coping strategies were measured with a usage indicator and a three-point scale ranging from "not helpful" to "very helpful". Participants were asked to indicate which strategy (or strategies) they had used, before rating its effectiveness. Measures used for both online and offline strategies were similar except that the measure for online strategies also noted where a user had attempted to use a strategy but, for technical reasons, was unable to get it functioning. Last, qualitative measures were used to explore effectiveness by asking what advice victims would give a friend experiencing cyberbullying. It must be noted that the decision to include

the measures of online strategies was made following a review of initial survey responses. Rather than miss capturing the data, additional quantitative measures were added midway, and analysis of relevant prevalence statistics adjusted in line with the smaller sample.

Procedure

The survey was conducted using a publicly accessible, secure online survey tool. The approach was chosen because of its inclusiveness, ease in reaching a national sample and familiarity to the target group. In addition, the anonymity and privacy afforded by the tool allowed young people to feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues (Coman, Burrows & Evans 2001; Mallen et al. 2005). To address validity concerns associated with online research, a check of IP addresses, location data and qualitative responses was conducted. A total of 100 invalid responses were removed during this process.

Youth who had experienced cyberbullying were invited to participate in order to improve the response of Kids Helpline's counselling support. Cyberbullying was defined to participants as being "teased, harassed, ignored or bullied in some other way via an electronic device (e.g. mobile phone or computer)". No parental consent was required because recruitment took place via the internet and the survey was anonymous. It was believed that requiring parental consent may have discouraged some young people from participating, particularly those who feared their technology use may be monitored or prevented – potentially those most at risk of being cyberbullied. Although great caution was taken in the question design to ensure participants were not re-traumatised by the survey, support was offered in the form of contact details for Kids Helpline. No contacts were reported.

Data analysis

Data regarding the types and methods of cyberbullying, impacts and experiences with coping strategies are summarised in percentages. Due to the fact that many of the questions offered multiple responses, reported percentages often do not equal 100%. CHI-square analysis was used to test significance. Bayesian's Odds Ratio

calculation was used to measure the probability distribution between males and females. Thematic coding was used to determine the main issues evident in free-text responses.

Design limitations meant that where cyberbullying was experienced across multiple ages, the specifics of the event (e.g. method) could not be attributed to one age. To ensure that cross-tabulation analysis relating to cyberbullying methods/type could be confidently associated with its relevant age band, a filtered sample was used, including only those participants who reported one cyberbullying age. The distribution of participants falling into this subgroup represented a similar distribution to the total sample. The various sample sizes used in the analysis have been reported within the Results section to provide full transparency and clarity in interpretation, particularly around some of the smaller subgroups.

Results

The results section has been divided into three separate sections, including i) prevalence and forms of cyberbullying; ii) impacts; and iii) strategy use and effectiveness.

Prevalence and forms of cyberbullying

The majority of participants reported victimisation during the period associated with the transition from primary school to high school. Of the 548 young people surveyed, 49% experienced cyberbullying when aged 10–12 years, 52% when aged 13–14 years, and 29% when aged 15–16 years. Interestingly, the majority of older participants also reported being cyberbullied when aged 13–14 years (15- to 18-year-olds: 72%; 19- to 25-year-olds: 50%). On average, participants experienced cyberbullying at multiple ages while growing up ($M=1.49$ age bands per participant), which explains why the sum of percentages totals more than 100%. Thirty-three percent claimed they were being cyberbullied at the time of survey.

Across the sample, the most common sites in which cyberbullying occurred were email (21%), online chatrooms (20%), social networking sites (20%) and mobile phones (19%). Other websites (8%) and other forms of texting, such as Twitter (6%), were also reported. Through free-text

response, 12% of participants also reported MSN Messenger as a cyberbullying tool.

Analysis by specific age of bullying experience found that social networking sites became the more dominant form of cyberbullying in victims aged 13 and older, increasing in prevalence from 41% in 13- to 14-year-olds to 53% among 15- to 16-year-olds, and was highest (57%) among 17- to 18-year-olds. For 10- to 12-year-olds, the most common methods for cyberbullying were chatrooms (48%) and email (41%). Analysis by gender showed chatrooms to be the most common method reported by male participants (52%), whereas for females cyberbullying was more evenly distributed across emails (47%), mobile phones (43%), social networking sites (46%) and chatrooms (42%).

Across the sample, the most prevalent forms of cyberbullying were name calling (80%), abusive comments (67%) and spreading rumours (66%). The least common was circulating embarrassing and/or defamatory images of the victim (19%). While name calling showed little difference by age or gender, abusive comments were found to be significantly more common among victims aged 15–16 years ($X^2(1, 134)=4.77, p<0.05$), and among females compared to males ($X^2(1, 548)=12.43, p<0.001$). Females also reported significantly higher levels of being victimised by spreading of rumours ($X^2(1, 548)=6.70, p<0.05$) and having their opinions “slammed” online ($X^2(1, 548)=4.96, p<0.05$). Figure 1 provides a breakdown of responses by the various cohorts.

Results surrounding relationships between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, and victims as bullies showed 51% had also been bullied “face to face” by their cyberbully. The majority (71%) claimed to know who their bully was, with a further 14% unsure. Additionally, 27% of victims had bullied others, including 9% who had used both online and traditional methods. Bullying others via traditional methods was found to be slightly more common than cyberbullying (20% v. 16%). No significant differences were found between genders.

Impacts

Of the 86% who reported some effect, the most common areas of impact included self-confidence (78%), self-esteem (70%) and

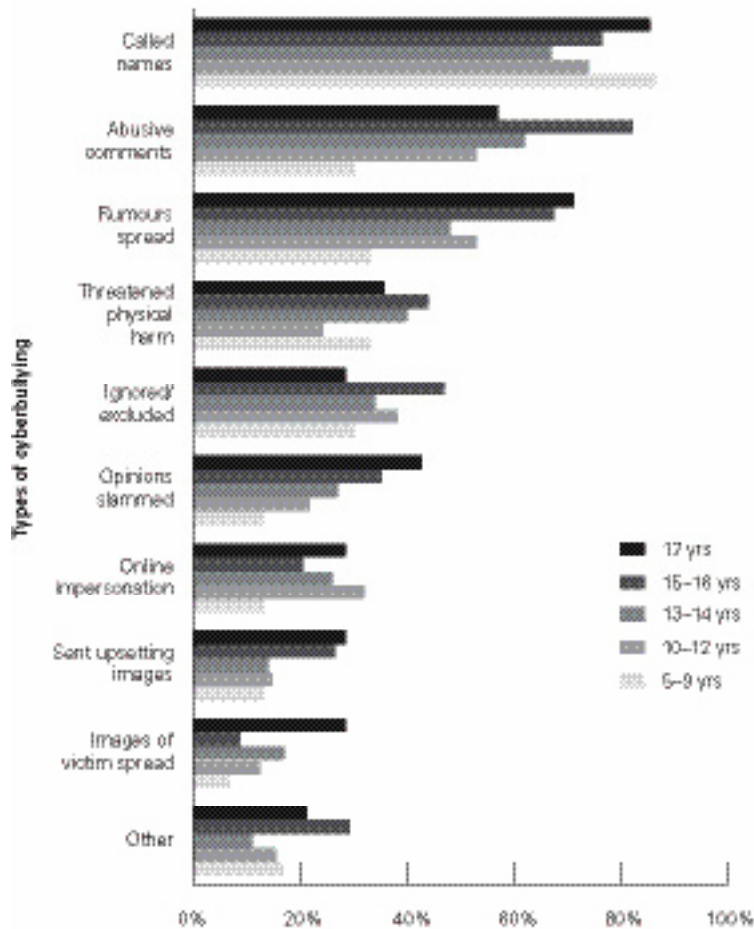


FIGURE 1 Different forms of cyberbullying experienced by age group

friendships (42%). Notably, 35% reported a negative effect on their school grades, 28% on their school attendance and 19% on their family relationships. On average, participants reported $M=2.39$ effects per participants (males: $M=2.18$; females: $M=2.99$). Rate ratio analysis showed that females were 1.23 times (23%) more likely than males to report the effect of their cyberbullying experience(s) had had an effect.

Many participants also reported multiple emotional impacts. Seventy-five percent of participants reported feeling sad, of whom 54% claimed feelings of extreme sadness. Similarly, 72% reported feeling annoyed, including 52% who reported this as anger (i.e. the more extreme emotion). Participants also reported feeling frustrated (58%), embarrassed (48%)

TABLE 1 Participants' use of coping strategies

Type of strategy	Total who tried		Frequency by gender		Frequency by age of bullying experience*			
	n	548	M	F	5-9yr	10-12yr	13-14yr	15+ yr
Offline		%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Confronted bully	242	44.2	40.6	45.0	36.7	46.1	36.0	39.6
Told a friend	216	39.4	31.7	41.2	40.0	39.8	35.0	39.6
Stayed offline	177	32.3	24.8	34.0	16.7	29.7	32.0	33.3
Stopped looking	163	29.7	29.7	29.8	10.0	35.2†	23.0	25.0
Told parent / carer	161	29.4	28.7	29.5	40.0	25.0	32.0	25.0
Did nothing	148	27.0	27.7	26.8	33.3	18.8	27.0	29.2
Told teacher / principal	135	24.6Δ	16.8	26.4	30.0	21.1	24.0	22.9
Retaliated	88	16.1	21.8	14.8	10.0	18.0	16.0	20.8
Told a sibling	64	11.7	12.9	11.4	10.0	10.2	10.0	12.5
Told Kids Helpline	50	9.1	6.9	9.6	10.0	9.4	4.0	6.3
Told another adult	33	6.0Δ	1.0	7.2	6.7	2.3	7.0	8.3
Online		%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Blocked bully	185	71.4	65.2	72.8	11.1	36.9	22.3	77.8†
Removed from friend list	119	45.9	56.5	53.5	2.9	23.0	26.2	63.0†
Changed own avatar / mobile number	60	23.2	19.6	23.9	2.9	7.8	7.0	18.5
None of the above	64	24.7	30.4	23.5	19.4	7.6	13.6	18.5

* Analysis includes only those participants who reported experiences during one age group (n=301: offline; n=147: online).

** The different sample size (n=259) refers to the total number of participants asked these questions.

† Value is significantly higher than for those aged 5-9 (p>0.05).

Δ Value is significantly higher among females (p>0.05).

and/or afraid (48%), including 29% who reported feeling terrified. Through free-text 3% also reported having suicidal thoughts and 2% claimed they engaged in self-harming behaviour (as distinct from feeling suicidal) as a result of cyberbullying.

I felt like I wanted to be dead ... like I wasn't worth anything.

[I felt] isolated from everyone and very frustrated, annoyed and depressed.

I started [self-harming] to help deal with the pain.

Strategy use and effectiveness

Findings relating to the use of coping strategies and their reported effectiveness are detailed in Tables 1 to 3. Results show that across their lifetime most participants had tried a number of strategies (M=2.80 per participant). Table percentages total more than 100% due to multiple responses per question.

With regard to advice young people would give others being cyberbullied, qualitative analysis and thematic coding found some contrasting recommendations, as well as many similarities. The key themes identified (listed in order of prevalence) included: i) speaking out; ii)

ignoring; iii) avoiding; iv) being positive; and v) retaliating.

Don't ignore it. If you ignore bullying it will just hurt more. Talking to someone else is always helpful, especially when it is someone you are comfortable with and have a close relationship with. Never fight back, you are just going to get yourself in a deeper problem.

Block. Delete. Don't be afraid to tell people.

Only one way to react to bullies, beat them up – humiliate them in front of their friends. Make them feel small, depressed, the loser. Make them start skipping school, and be the one who has to cry to figures of authority. Make their life a living hell and leave the physical scars of pain and humiliation ... An eye for an eye.

Stay strong, tell someone you trust, stay off the internet/mobile phone and keep away from the bully.

Discussion

This study explored the phenomenon of cyberbullying from a youth perspective. It shows that many adolescents repeatedly fall victim to cyberbullying through name calling, abuse, harassment, exclusion, impersonation, threats of physical harm, defamation and public humiliation. Although the study revealed a high proportion of female victims compared to males, it is unclear if this is truly indicative of the gender split or a reflection of national help-seeking trends and related sampling bias. Past research has, however, shown a similar female bias (Beale & Hall 2007). That is, where boys tend to be the primary perpetrators and victims of traditional bullying, online it is girls who dominate the statistics on both victims and bullies.

The finding that cyberbullying most commonly occurs within the transitional years between primary and secondary school is interesting. While it must be noted that the majority of the sample came from this age band (10–14 years), reports from older participants still support this claim. Parents, community and schools would do well to recognise this finding and ensure support and guidance is given during these critical years.

TABLE 2 Extent to which offline strategies were considered helpful by participants

	Effectiveness rating			Proportion of those rating some degree of helpfulness
	Not helpful	Sort of helpful	Very helpful	
Offline	%	%	%	%
Told a friend	31.5	35.5	33.0	68.5
Told parent/ carer	32.5	28.9	38.6	67.5
Stayed offline	37.1	33.9	29.0	62.9
Told teacher / principal	38.1	30.5	31.5	61.9
Told Kids Helpline	39.7	28.4	31.9	60.3
Stopped looking	40.7	38.3	21.0	59.3
Told another adult	45.2	22.2	32.6	54.8
Retaliated	48.3	24.4	27.3	51.7
Told a sibling	52.6	25.3	22.1	47.4
Did nothing	64.5	22.9	12.5	35.5
Confronted bully	68.2	22.1	9.7	31.8

TABLE 3 Extent to which online strategies were considered helpful by participants

	Effectiveness rating				Proportion of those rating some degree of helpfulness
	Unable to get to function	Not helpful	Sort of helpful	Very helpful	
Online		%	%		%
Blocked bully	5.1	18.5	36.9	39.5	76.4
Removed as a 'friend'	10.0	23.7	29.5	36.5	66.0
Changed own avatar / number	2.0	47.5	24.2	26.3	50.5

This research provided support to a number of international findings. First, findings support the claim that ICT (information and communication technologies) do not necessarily protect a perpetrator's identity (Juvonen & Gross 2008). Indeed in many cases the bully is known to the victim and technological environments are just one of multiple environments they may be using to bully their victim (Katzer, Fetchenhauer & Belschak 2009). Additionally, this research further confirmed that young people are often not exclusively classifiable as "bully" or "victim", but rather at various times they may be bullied, be the bully or act as a bystander to bullying (Espelage & Swearer 2003; Haynie et al. 2001;

Kulig, Hall & Kalischuk 2008; Veenstra et al. 2007). Such strong inter-relatedness between the various forms of bullying and also the dynamics between the role of bully and victim suggest to the authors that school and government interventions need to focus not only on cybersafety but also on the quality of peer relationships.

With regard to short-term impacts, the high number of victims reporting negative effects on their self-confidence, esteem, relationships, school grades and attendance highlight the fact that cyberbullying should not to be ignored. The levels of extreme sadness and anger reported, and associations made to self-harming and suicide ideation, undoubtedly support this finding. Moreover, they reinforce the importance of ensuring that cyberbullying complaints are not minimised, and that strengths-based support and guidance is provided to young people.

One of the challenges in providing support is the fact that only a minority of victims are choosing to speak out to either adults or peers about their experience. This is in spite of the reportedly high efficacy of this strategy and the fact that many claim it is the advice they would give others. Although not explored in this research, one could assume, based on previous research (Campbell 2007), that reluctance to talk with adults may be due to barriers discussed earlier in this report, including the fear and perceived ineffectiveness of speaking out. It may also be that young people need further information regarding the benefits of seeking help, how to seek help and who they can safely turn to for support. Peers, parents and schools can all play a role in encouraging this behaviour. Further research may do well to investigate what strategies are currently in place to encourage victims to speak out, and how to engender this behaviour. Consideration should also be given to young people who are using retaliation as a coping strategy. Although only a minority of the participants reported trying this measure, their reports of high efficacy raise alarm bells around the message this may send and the impact its use may have on breeding further bullying behaviour.

Last, with regard to online strategies, the majority of young people were found to be familiar with, and active users of, online intervention tools, which is a finding that echoes earlier research (Juvonen & Gross 2008; Li 2005). Of the

various online tools, the high use and efficacy of blocking techniques suggest that reinforcement of this response is likely to be a fruitful strategy for parents and schools, particularly as it is less disruptive and “punishing” for the victims than some other alternatives. Additionally, given the major role that social networking sites were shown to play in the lives of participants aged over 13 years, it is suggested that specific strategies need to be given to this age group around how to protect themselves on this medium.

Limitations

While this study provides a number of interesting insights into cyberbullying, there are several limitations to consider when interpreting these results. First, due to the sample bias towards females and young people aged 10 to 18 years, generalisability of the results should not extend beyond this group. Similarly, the sample’s selection bias towards help-seekers means that we can not say for certain that the help-seeking rates reflected in this report are indicative of young people nationally. If anything, however, one would expect that the levels of help-seeking reported in this research may be higher than average, given most of the sample were recruited while in the act of seeking information and/or support. Third, the potential for recall bias among those who reported cyberbullying experiences earlier in their life (at least half the sample) is a factor for consideration. Last, while the use of an online data collection method is believed to have benefited the study, its inflexibility around survey instruments and its inability to verify the authenticity of self-reported anonymous surveys must be considered.

Conclusion

The current study provides a good basis for understanding cyberbullying in Australia, particularly in regard to the use and perceived effectiveness of coping strategies available to young people. The findings reveal both reassuring and concerning issues in relation to cyberbullying. They highlight that a critical response to effectively addressing cyberbullying relies on both increasing the help-seeking behaviour of victimised young people and improving the efficacy of those they speak to.

While evidence suggests that cyberbullying presents its own unique set of characteristics, it is also important to recognise that it is strongly interrelated with traditional bullying, which suggests a need for interventions that focus on improving peer relations in general. The authors believe that future research may do well to qualitatively explore the current coping strategies used by young people – what they are, reasons for their efficacy (or lack of), and how inadequacies can be overcome. This will in turn assist in the development of effective response strategies for government, schools, parents and peers.

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