

## **The perception of cyberbullying in adolescent victims**

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## **The perception of cyberbullying in adolescent victims**

### **Abstract**

The goal of this study was to explore how victims perceive online aggressive attacks and when they see them as harmful. Interviews were carried out with sixteen cyber victimised participants aged 15 to 17 years. The findings showed differences in the perception of online victimisation when perpetrated by an anonymous internet user versus by a known person from the real world. The tendency of unknown online perpetrators to threaten to hurt their victims offline increased the victims' feelings of harm. Where cyberbullying interconnected with the school environment, the feeling of harm was intensified by collective perpetration, and by onlookers being personally identifiable. Where cyberbullying was a part of traditional bullying, online victimisation being discussed at school reproduced the bullying and thus the trauma. The results showed that the link between cyberbullying and the physical environment is significant with respect to the victim's perception of its severity.

**Keywords:** bullying; internet; online victimization; youth; peer relationships, the Czech Republic

## **Introduction**

With the development of new information technology, the significance of the use of media and the internet in adolescence has increased. Roughly 93% of Czech adolescents aged 12 to 18 years have internet access (Lupač and Sládek 2008). As previous studies indicate, the internet has become an inseparable part of everyday life for today's youth (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel 2011) bringing with it both positives and negatives. One of the negative phenomena which young people may face is cyberbullying. In the Czech Republic Ševčíková and Šmahel (2009) found that 7.6% of adolescents aged 12 to 19 years had experienced some kind of pestering or slandering on the internet, and 3.4% had faced online victimisation which occurred several times a month.

Although cyberbullying appears to affect only a small percentage of young internet users, it is connected with negative effects (Livingstone et al. 2011) such as depression and suicidal intentions (Hinduja and Patchin 2010; Mitchell, Ybarra, and Finkelhor 2007; Perren et al. 2010). However, studies also point out that for a significant portion of victimised adolescents online, attacks have only short-term or no negative effect (Livingstone et al. 2011; Ortega et al. 2009). Therefore, this study is focused on the experiences of those adolescents who have been victimised on the internet or via cell phones. It looks at what in this kind of attack causes the adolescent harm and when, and under which circumstances, the online attack is connected with negative effects.

### ***Cyberbullying and its characteristics***

Cyberbullying is one of the forms of online aggression; its characteristics are derived from Olweus (1993) definition of traditional bullying. It is the intentional aggressive behaviour of an individual which has a repetitive character, conducted individually or by a group using electronic

media towards a person who is not able to defend themselves (Smith et al. 2008). This concept and criteria are problematic due to the uniqueness of the internet, and to a certain degree mobile phone, environment (Dooley, Pyzalski, and Cross 2009).

*Repetition* is important in distinguishing between bullying and random or isolated attacks (Olweus, 1993). Identification of repeated attacks is relatively easy in the offline world as the frequency of incidents can be counted. A similar approach is used here for attacks via mobile phone or e-mail to find out how many times the victim was sent aggressive messages or calls (Dooley et al. 2009; Slonje and Smith 2007). Nevertheless, previous studies have shown that a single harmful act can have similar effects for the victim as repetitive aggressive attacks (Vandebosch and Van Cleemput 2008; Ybarra, Diener-West, and Leaf 2007). One upload of humiliating photos, videos and other visual material to the internet has the character of repetition as the content is permanent and at the same time available to a wide audience (Heirman and Walrave 2008). The aggressor also often controls when the content is withdrawn from the server (Dooley et al., 2009).

An *Imbalance of power* on the internet can be represented by (1) technological knowledge, (2) anonymity, (3) limited escape options (Heirman and Walrave 2008; Slonje and Smith 2007; Smith et al. 2008; Vandebosch and Van Cleemput 2008). In the first scenario, the aggressor has superior technological knowledge to the victim (Smith et al. 2008). In the second, the aggressor's anonymity can have psychological significance, with the offender often knowing their victim better than the victim knows their aggressor (Kowalski and Limber 2007; Ševčíková and Šmahel 2009; Ybarra and Mitchell 2004). This often prevents the victim from defending themselves effectively (Vandebosch and Van Cleemput 2008). Finally, the internet's constant presence means that online victimisation is not limited in time and space (Heirman and Walrave

2008; Smith et al. 2008).

Cyberbullying's diversity is shown through the attempts made to understand it. This diversity may also produce the variability in victim's experiences of online attacks. The impact of cyberbullying differs according to its form. For example, visual imagery of the victim, i.e. abuse including the use of videos and photos, was considered the most harmful (Smith et al. 2008). How the victim responds may also be affected by whether the online victimisation occurs as part of an offline abusive peer relationship. Previous studies have revealed that some incidents of cyberbullying were closely interconnected with traditional bullying (Tokunaga, 2010; Smith et al. 2008). If an adolescent is both a victim at school and online then the impact may be aggravated.

### ***Goals***

Online victimisation has a wide variety of manifestations which may explain why certain adolescents consider the online attacks harmful while others do not (Livingstone et al. 2011). However, there is lack of research studying adolescents' perception of harmful experiences. Previously published qualitative work dedicated to online victimisation has only in part reflected the perspective of the victim (Smith et al. 2008; Spears et al. 2009; Vandebosch and VanCleemput 2008). Therefore, this study's goal was to describe how the victims of cyberbullying perceived different forms of online attack and in what context they considered them harmful.

### **Method**

#### ***Research sample and choice of participants***

The research sample was made up of sixteen secondary school participants, nine boys and seven girls, aged fifteen to seventeen years, who had all been victims of some form of cyberbullying.

The adolescents were addressed via a message on a Czech server [www.lide.cz](http://www.lide.cz) that was widely used by adolescents in the Czech Republic and included a social network, e-mail account, and blogging capabilities. This server was chosen as it was the most broadly used social network in the Czech Republic which allowed its users to be addressed via a message, as at the time the server did not allow private profiles all users could be contacted in this way. The message was sent to all active users aged 15 to 18 years who were registered on the server in 2009. This age group was chosen on the basis of previous empirical studies that documented the increased occurrence of online victimisation in this age group (Juvonen and Gross 2008; Ševčíková and Šmahel 2009).

The initial message sent to participants clarified our research focus on victims of cyberbullying, described what was meant by cyberbullying (behaviour where the aggressor(s) abuses the internet for intentional, repetitive and hostile harm to others) and the basic forms of cyberbullying. It explained that two interviews were to be conducted with the second being a shorter supplementary interview. In total, 6,935 adolescents (4,740 girls, and 2,195 boys) were sent a message (the gender imbalance was caused by the respective number of profiles on the server). Sixteen participants (7 girls and 9 boys) agreed to participate in the interviews, stating that they had experienced some form/s of cyberbullying. With the exception of 3 cases, the cyberbullying had finished. On average, the online victimisation continued for 9 months, while the shortest lasted only 2 weeks and the longest went on for 2.5 years (see Table 1). Participants' names are replaced by numbers P1 to P16, for attribution of. All statements are translated from Czech to English by the authors.

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Add Table 1 here

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### ***Interviews***

The interviews were conducted by the third author online via ICQ instant messenger. This allowed simultaneous text communication. ICQ was the most widely used application of this kind at the time. The immediate advantage of online interviews is anonymity, which helps the adolescent to feel safe, increasing their willingness to talk about their experiences (Schouten, Valkenburg, and Peter 2009). The basic structure of the interview touched several topics: descriptions of the online attacks, where they took place, how often, how long they lasted, and their content; the relationship between the victim and the aggressor, who they were, whether they were pure victims or whether they also bullied someone else, whether they were known to the victim, whether they were from school; the connection between online and traditional bullying; the role of onlookers; and the response to the online attacks, how the adolescent experienced them, for how long, and how they responded. Each participant was interviewed twice within 2 weeks. The first comprehensive interview took approximately 90 minutes, the second approximately 45 minutes, serving to verify and deepen the understanding of the first interview's information.

### ***Analysis of data***

As this was a qualitative study grounded theory method was used. This is based on the inductive creation of theoretical concepts from the phenomenon that is examined (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and on constant comparison which helps to specify investigated topics (Charmaz 2008). First, notes were assigned to the data. Afterwards, in the framework of "open coding", the



content of answers was classified and ordered into subcategories according to semantic interconnections.

For example, the subcategory “who was the aggressor” summarises all statements that defined the offender:

*“First I thought of him as an average friend from school... when he behaved how he behaved; I tried not to communicate with him.”* referred to a schoolmate.

*“I sent a photo to a boy who I met online... he made a photo montage where I was naked and uploaded it onto the internet“* referred to an unknown online contact.

In the next phase these subcategories were reorganised and merged into higher categories on the basis of similarities or interconnections. In this phase, referred to as “axial coding” by Strauss and Corbin (1990), the first drafts of concepts were created. For example, the category “relationships of people involved” captured the dynamics of the relationship between the victim, aggressors, and bystanders. Further, the category of anonymity versus being-known summarised knowledge of the borders between the online and offline world. These higher categories were repeatedly compared to the interviews and integrated into three contexts of online aggressive attacks characterised by different processes used to harm the victims: These contexts are described in the results of the research.

### ***Ethics of the research***

This research was carried out with respect to ethical principles (Miovský, 2006) and thus with awareness that the participants shared their personal experiences under the condition that their anonymity was maintained (choice of a nickname), that their privacy was maintained, and that they could choose to end their participation or not to answer some questions. Involvement in the

research was by informed consent. Participants were informed in advance about the form of the qualitative research and expected duration of the interview, this could be adjusted to their time needs. At the end of the interview the adolescents could ask for whatever information they were interested in. Attention was paid to ensuring that the participants did not feel uncomfortable after the interview. The concluding questions directed participants towards social help and possible solutions. At the end of the interview those who were interested were given links to websites and other institutions that offer help to adolescents who face online aggression.

## **Results**

Three basic contexts in which cyberbullying occurred were identified: (1) online attacks perpetrated by an unknown aggressor - 6 participants; (2) online attacks perpetrated by a known aggressor - 4 participants (3) bullying with elements of totality (i.e. online aggression both on and offline) - 6 participants (see Table 1 for further details). These contexts also differed in the extent of harm that the victim experienced.

### ***Online attacks by an unknown aggressor***

Relationships between aggressors and victims were differentiated on a continuum from anonymous online communication, through previous online friendship, to relationships within an age group both inside and outside of the school environment. The degree of anonymity and the overlap of cyberbullying to offline life appeared to be the crucial element in the degree of harm felt by the victim. The results showed that in anonymous contact, the greater the connection between the online aggression and the real world the greater the victim's perceived harm.

P2: *"I used to chat with a guy on lide.cz and then suddenly this girl started to message me saying I shouldn't chat with him, that he sleeps with her and stuff. But we only chatted. And when I removed him from my friends, she wrote to me for maybe a year afterwards and threatened to*

*find me. She wrote many insults to my friends too.”*

P14: *“I sent a photo to a boy (whom she did not know offline)...he made a photo montage where I was naked and uploaded it onto the internet... then he blackmailed me that if I didn't meet him or sleep with him or whatever, he'd send the link to my parents, people at school would know and whatever”*

I: *“What were you afraid of?”*

P14: *“Of what would happen... of how it could be solved, who could help me out of it, what that guy could do.”*

These excerpts document that the impact of online attacks by anonymous people was increased when the aggressors connected their virtual threats with the real world, e.g. in the form of attacking the victim offline or humiliation in front of people who were part of their real lives. Lack of acquaintance with the offender also played a role in that the victim could not be sure whether the offender would be able to fulfil their threats.

### ***Online attacks by a known aggressor***

Victims of online bullying were encountered who knew their aggressor or connected them with a person from their real lives. In many cases they were a person from school. This was a repetitive form of aggression from a known person with whom the victim was often in everyday contact. Although the attacks happened only in the online world, some aggressors used online applications that allowed others to watch the victimisation.

P15: *“I have experienced cyberbullying in the sense that a girl uploaded my photo to her profile on a social network and wrote a comment which humiliated and offended me.”*

In this situation the victim could not defend himself as the photo was published on the internet and the aggressor had control of when the photo and comments were deleted. The

participant also considered it distressing that the aggressor chose a social network to carry out this cyberbullying, as in so doing they allowed the content to be made publicly available. In this case it meant that the victim was humiliated in front of a wide circle of people who knew both him and the offender.

Another form of cyberbullying in which the aggressors came from the victim's real world was victimisation carried out by multiple people. The following example is from an interview with a girl whose classmates pretended to be an unknown boy during online communication. It illustrates a case where the victim was bothered by the fact that she became the target of a plot by several people whom she knew offline.

I: *"How did you learn that multiple people were pretending to be that boy? How did you discover their true identity?"*

P9: *"From the beginning, I knew that it was probably them from the way they wrote... and I was told by a friend who knew."*

Similarly, in the next excerpt the dynamics of collective participation in attacks can be seen on a victim who was attacked because of the race of his mother's boyfriend.

P15: *"I've come across cyberbullying at school on the spoluzaci.cz server where there were swearwords about the nationality of my mum's boyfriend, further pics and texts, also verbal suggestions, so I deleted them. There were several people (aggressors)...they were friends, one of them is sort of my best friend, another is sort of a leader, but also the punk of the class if you see, they started it and the others followed."*

In the online environment adolescents seem to succumb more easily to collective participation in bullying. As this excerpt suggests, even those peers who the victim considers friends can be drawn in. This exacerbates the victim's feelings of powerlessness and thus also the

negative experience connected with the attacks.

### ***Bullying with elements of totality***

The participants' experiences with cyberbullying also served to demonstrate that the extent of the harm perceived was also influenced by the victimisation spreading from one environment to another, from school to the internet. As opposed to the previous form of online attack committed by a known person, the third context of cyberbullying was distinctive in that it represented a direct extension of traditional bullying. Metaphorically speaking, the internet replaced the school playground, where the bullying would move after classes. Through the story of one victimised participant it was clear how the victim had to face bullying both on the internet and at school. The excerpt also demonstrates how the imbalance of power was established in the online environment. The offline aggressor, who was seen as a star of the class, mastered the internet environment by becoming an administrator of the class site at the Czech social networking site [www.spoluzaci.cz](http://www.spoluzaci.cz) (a web server which is widely used by primary school children and secondary school students for networking).

P16: *“He comes up with everything and the others join, he rules over the weaker and if they don't conform, he bullies them.... for example they always talk about what admin wrote like that I'm gay and stuff which isn't true.”*

The aggressor from school thus used the internet to increase the victimisation by abusing a social network that connected classmates in the online environment. It can also be seen here that the mechanism by which the offline aggressor strengthened his position on the internet was built on the interconnection between the online and offline lives of today's adolescents. Through the social network site the offline relationships of the class were extended to the online environment and thus the class dynamics were reproduced online.

The following excerpt shows that the content of the online victimisation was discussed in the offline environment (at school) which leads to further victimisation and thus a deepening of the trauma.

P1: *“The others mocked me about being bullied, etc., he then took a photo of me and someone mutilated the photo totally and uploaded it to classmates server ([www.spoluzaci.cz](http://www.spoluzaci.cz)) I haven't dared to look there yet and it's been a year... The next day a classmate told me that he'd seen the photo at a classmates and that it's really cool but I was so down that I haven't dared to look at it yet because many people have told me that they've seen it and that it's cool”*

It is worth noting that the excerpt comes from an interview with a participant who was continuously bullied at school for two and a half years. The traditional bullying had reached the state when members of the group including the victim himself had accepted the standards of the aggressor. As this interview demonstrates, the internet intensified the bullying in the sense that classmates who had not before witnessed the bullying became part of the bullying due to the easy spread of victimising materials (deformation of photos). It contributed to widening the circle of people in front of whom the victimisation was realised, and thus to deepening the victim's trauma.

## **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to examine how adolescent victims perceive online attacks and when they consider them harmful. The character of aggressive online attacks was differentiated according to the relationships between the people involved on a scale from online perpetration by unknown aggressors, through known and close attackers from the offline world, to cyberbullying carried out by members of existing social groups (school classes). Although the distinction between anonymous online attackers and offline aggressors from their offline world may seem

schematic at first glance, the findings document the importance of this distinction.

Perpetration that took place only in the online environment was less bothering for the adolescents if it was not transferred offline or if it did not interfere with the victim's offline relationships. Partially, the different perceptions can be explained by online dissociation effects, i.e. internet users in general tend to dissociate experiences in the online world from their offline lives (Suler, 2004). Therefore, it can be assumed that to strengthen the impact of online threats the aggressor points their aggressive behaviour to the offline life of the victim which supports the victim's fear of whether the aggressor can cross the border between online and offline worlds and thus fulfil online threats.

Online victimisation was also harmful when the offender was connected with the offline world and when online victimisation was collective in the sense that others joined the main aggressor in the role of bystanders or co-aggressors. It may be that ability to blend with the group contributes to the deregulation of social behaviour which then conforms to the standards of the group. In addition, according to de-individualisation theory, aggressive forms can occur relatively easily because online interaction is characterised by loss of direct feedback and physical contact, and thus awareness that someone is being hurt (Spears et al. 2002). Thus, bystanders who would not tend to behave aggressively face to face might easily join the primary aggressor's side without thinking through the consequences of their behaviour (Lüders, Brandtzaeg, and Dunkels 2009).

This study showed that adolescents who were bullied both at school and on the internet had greater feelings of harm when online victimisation served to reproduce bullying at school. In this context the harm of online victimisation seems to originate from school bullying as the mechanism of hurting was primarily based on abusive peer (school) relationships being extended

to the online environment. Therefore, it is assumed that cyberbullying characterised by abuse of school based peer relationships is a subtype of traditional bullying rather than a new isolated phenomenon.

Although, according to Slonje and Smith (2008), the perception of online attacks depends on their manner of perpetration (i.e. abuse via photos or spread of defamation), our study shows that it is not only this that is important, but also the context of the aggression itself. Feelings of trauma and danger appeared mainly in connection with the offline world. It can be assumed that compared with anonymous forms of aggression, cyberbullying connected with the offline world defines significantly better the context of victimisation, providing a social space where the victim is humiliated in front of known onlookers. Further research could look at bystanders and their role in the process of victimisation.

There are certain limitations to the results of this study. It is important to mention that the sample included only those who considered their experience to be within the invitation message's definition of cyberbullying. The narrowness of this definition or its interpretation by certain recipients may mean that the sample lacks some whose participation could have facilitated a more diverse perspective of the phenomenon of harming via the internet. Furthermore, the findings are overwhelmingly based on pure victims. However, in the Czech environment online perpetration and cyberbullying occur most commonly in the context of sharing the role of aggressor and victim (Ševčíková and Šmahel 2009). Including those who have experienced both roles might provide a greater understanding of the contexts in which online victimisation is harmful.

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown differences in perception of online aggression committed by both an



unknown person, and a person whom the victim connects with the real world. As a result, specific differences contribute to the variability in perceptions of online attacks. In relation to perpetration by an unknown aggressor the perception of victimisation is to a degree influenced by the attacker's tendency to focus the aggression towards the victim's real life. In cases of connection between cyberbullying and the real world, most precisely the school environment, collective participation in victimisation becomes significantly more important, as well as the identification of bystanders. If cyberbullying follows school bullying, then the online victimisation can deepen the impact of bullying in the physical world in that the content of online victimisation discussed offline (at school) reproduces the bullying and thus the trauma itself.

These findings also have practical implications. The fact that cyberbullying occurred in the context of existing peer relationships shows the importance of remembering that school bullying can spread into the online world. Specifically, offline bullying intervention should be expanded to cover the online world. Furthermore, cyber/bullying preventative education should be extended to teach pupils that even online aggressive behaviour may have serious negative impacts on the peers targeted. Finally, adolescents should be made more aware that the internet and its features can easily provoke dissociative behaviours, including aggressive conduct towards peers.

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Table 1. Participants of the study.

Participants	Sex	Age/Age of cyber victimization	Length of cyber victimization	Relationship to an aggressor
P1	M	16/15	6 months	known/totality
P2	F	15/13	1 year	unknown
P3	M	16/16	4 months	known
P4	F	17/17	1 month	known
P5	F	16/15	3 months	known/totality
P6	M	16/15	1 year	unknown
P7	M	18/16	2.5 years	known/totality
P8	M	15/13	1 month	known/totality
P9	F	17/15	1 month	known
P10	M	17/16	1 year	known/totality
P11	F	16/15	1 year	unknown
P12	M	17/15	2 years	unknown
P13	F	17/17	1 year	unknown
P14	F	17/13	3 months	unknown
P15	M	15/15	14 days	known
P16	M	17/16	1 year	known/totality

*Notes.* Totality = online aggression both on and offline.