

Cyberbullying Among School Students: A Case Study of Nepalgunj Sub-Metropolitan City, Banke, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to study the prevalence, contributing factors, effects, coping strategies, and perceived preventive measures of cyberbullying among school students in Nepalgunj Sub-Metropolitan City, Banke District, Nepal. A descriptive cross sectional survey design was applied for this study. A total of 50 students (25 males and 25 females) in the 8th to 12th standard of Mangal Prasad secondary school was selected through the technique of non-proportionate stratified random sampling. Data were gathered by through structured anonymous self-administered questionnaire and were analysed using descriptive statistics. The results showed that 82% of the respondents used social networking sites and 70% owned a mobile phone that had internet connectivity. All the respondents used Facebook. Overall, 16% of students admitted to being a cyberbully and 28% said they had been cyberbullied. Most victims (71.4%) and perpetrators (75%) were male students. Harassment (71.4%), denigration (50%), and flaming (42.9%) were the most prevalent types of victimization. The tools of cyberbullying were through Messenger, mobile phones and Facebook. Pranks/fun and dislike of the victim's attitude were the principal motives for the perpetrations (62.5% and 50% respectively). Fatigue (71.4%), anxiety (64.3%) and learning problems (42.9%) were common complaints reported by victims. The most common coping strategy was ignoring the incident (50%) and talking to friends (42.9%). The most recommended preventive measures were changing the profile identity (72%) and blocking the aggressor (64%). It is concluded that cyberbullying is a real issue among the secondary school students in Nepalgunj. Awareness programs, enhancing digital literacy, and reporting and support systems must be implemented through the partnership of schools, parents, and policymakers.

Keywords: Adolescence, coping strategies, cyberbullying, school students, victimization

INTRODUCTION

The problem of bullying has been a long-standing concern for parents, educators and students (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). In the past, bullying behavior has been described as recurrent aggressive acts that are characterized by an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993), yet in modern times it has developed with the growth of technology. The use of information and communications technologies to support deliberate, repeated and hostile behavior, with the intention of causing harm to others, is defined as cyberbullying

(Belsey, 2004) and is becoming an increasingly widespread form of peer aggression. It involves flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion, cyberstalking, cyber threats (Willard, 2006).

Cyberbullying can take place anywhere, anytime, and with no regard for location, unlike the traditional form of bullying that happens in school and on the school grounds mostly. The victims can be targeted starting from checking phones on the

mornings and till switching off devices at night. Cyberbullying differs from face-to-face bullying in terms of anonymity, potential audience, permanence of the records, and lack of immediate non-verbal feedback (Shariff, 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Cyber victimization has been consistently associated with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, academic problems, and even suicidal ideation (e.g., Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013). The access to ICTs has increased significantly in Nepal. Internet is currently at about 58% penetration with significant smartphone penetration, especially by the city youth (NTA, 2017). Teens use social networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and messages. In spite of this expansion, empirical studies on cyberbullying of Nepalese school children are limited. The current literature overwhelmingly comes from the Western or high-income Asian context, which results in a significant lack of understanding about the nature, prevalence, and impact of cyberbullying in Nepal.

This study attempts to fill that gap by exploring the situation of cyberbullying in secondary schools in Nepalgunj Sub-Metropolitan City in Banke District. Specifically, it examines: (a) prevalence of cyberbullying victimization and perpetration; (b) access to and use of communication technologies by the student; (c) factors that contribute to cyberbullying behavior; (d) consequences of cyberbullying victimization; (e) coping strategies of cyberbullying victims; and (f) perceived preventive and control measures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cyberbullying is commonly defined as willful and repeated harm inflicted through computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). The elements of definition that are important are intent to harm, repetition, power imbalance, and the use of electronic means (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009; Smith et al., 2008). Forms of cyberbullying range from relatively mild (name-calling via text) to severe (distribution of intimate images or sustained threats). Happy Slapping; recording violent acts and subsequently sharing the recording; is an extreme form (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

Meta-analyses suggest a typical range of 10% to 40% for rates of cyber victimization and 3% to 36% for rates of cyber perpetration (Kowalski et al., 2014; Modecki et al., 2014). The prevalence is at its highest

levels during the middle school and early high school years. Gender results are inconclusive, with some research indicating greater involvement among females in victimization and greater among males in perpetration; especially in the case of aggression that occurs via texting; but other research reporting no differences or higher rates of victimization among males. (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Additionally, many victims are also bullied by others in the traditional sense, and a significant percentage of cyberbullies have also been the victims of traditional bullying (Beran & Li, 2007; Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

These are frequently found on instant messaging, social networking, text messaging and email. Common motives reported by perpetrators are to have fun, because the target disliked them, in reaction to the target or to gain social power (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Anonymity, invisibility and asynchronicity is part of the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) which explains why people may act more aggressively online than offline.

The effects of victimization include frustration, anger, sadness, anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, problems with school attendance, school avoidance, and, in extreme cases, self-harm and suicidal ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Ybarra et al., 2007). There are many coping strategies. Some victims do not report incidents to adults because they fear losing privileges on the device, being retargeted, or that adults will do nothing (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Common strategies are to ignore, block the contact, change privacy settings, talk to friends or tell the aggressor. The Electronic Transaction Act (ETA), 2008, of Nepal punishes unauthorised access, damage to computer systems, illegal publication of contents and other offences. The penalties vary from fines to up to 5 years imprisonment depending on the severity. But the Act has no specific reference to cyberbullying of minors, and means of enforcement are limited. A national policy specifically addressing cyber aggression in schools currently does not exist.

METHODS

Research design

The descriptive cross-sectional survey design was used to explore the prevalence and characteristics of

cyberbullying among secondary school students at one point in time.

Population, sample, and sampling procedure

The study population consisted of all 250 students of Mangal Prasad Secondary School, Nepalgunj, Banke who studied between 8th to 12th grade. Determining the sample size with the standard formula for finite populations ($z = 1.96$, $p = 0.5$, $d = 0.05$) and assuming a non-response rate of 10% resulted in a sample size of 50 students. Non-proportionate stratified random sampling was used for equal number of males and females (25 each) and approximate number of students in each grade: Grade 8 ($n = 8$), Grade 9 ($n = 9$), Grade 10 ($n = 11$), Grade 11 ($n = 12$), and Grade 12 ($n = 10$).

Data collection instrument and procedure

A structured questionnaire was designed in an anonymous manner, based on the literature. The instrument consisted of six sections: (1) Demographic characteristics, (2) Access and use of ICTs, (3) cyberbullying perpetration and victimization experiences, (4) Factors contributing to perpetration, (5) Impacts of victimisation, and (6) coping strategies and perceived preventative measures. The content validity was confirmed by the thesis supervisor. 10 secondary students were involved in a pilot test, which resulted in minor wording changes. The final questionnaire was administered in a confidential classroom setting after obtaining informed consent. The survey was anonymous, no one was compelled to participate, and took about 30 minutes to complete.

Data analysis

The completed questionnaires were edited, coded and tabulated. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were determined and displayed under thematic headings according to the research objectives. Because of the small sample size and exploratory nature, no inferential statistical tests were used.

Ethical considerations

Ethical behaviour was adhered to throughout. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw. Informed consent was obtained, in writing.

No names were recorded and all data treated confidentially.

RESULTS

Demographic profile of respondents

Respondents were evenly distributed by age (15 years and below: 26%; 16 years: 24%; 17 years: 26%; 18 years and above: 24%) and gender (50% male, 50% female). The largest ethnic group was Brahmin/Kshetri (32%), followed by Madhesi (20%), Janajati (16%), Tharu (12%), Dalit (10%), and Muslim (10%).

Access to Information and Communication Technology

Access to ICTs was widespread. Table 1 summarizes key indicators.

Table 1

Respondents' Access to Information and Communication Technology (N = 50)

Access Indicator	Yes n (%)	No n (%)
Social networking site access	41 (82%)	9 (18%)
Mobile phone with internet	35 (70%)	15 (30%)
Email account	30 (60%)	20 (40%)
Home computer with internet	20 (40%)	30 (60%)
Cyber café use	20 (40%)	30 (60%)
School computer with internet	15 (30%)	35 (70%)
Personal blog	8 (16%)	42 (84%)
Personal web page	4 (8%)	46 (92%)

All 50 respondents reported using Facebook; 80% used YouTube, 30% Instagram, and 16% Twitter. Approximately one-third (32%) maintained two or more Facebook accounts. Nearly one-fifth (18%) reported interacting with strangers on social networks. The majority spent more than one hour daily online on school days (88%), holidays (92%), and evenings/nights (78%). Home was the most common location for internet use.

Prevalence of cyberbullying

Only 16% said they knew of cyberbullying incidents in their school or peer group in the past few months. Males reported more often than females as perpetrators and females reported more often than males as victims of incidents (among those who reported on incidents).

Regarding personal experience, 28% (n = 14) indicated that a person they knew was being cyberbullied, 46% said that no one, and 26% said they did not know. The rates of victimisation were highest in Grades 9 and 12 (28.6% of victims at each grade). Of the 14 victims, 71.4% were males and 28.6% were females. Of the 8 people who reported themselves as perpetrators, 75% identified as male, 25% as female. The highest proportion of victims, 35.7%, were Brahmin/Kshetri students while the highest proportion of perpetrators was 50%.

Table 2

Nature of Cyberbullying Victimization Experienced (N = 14)

Form of Cyberbullying	n	%
Harassment (nasty/insulting messages)	10	71.4
Denigration (gossip/rumors)	7	50.0
Flaming (angry/vulgar messages)	6	42.9
Sexting (obscene images/messages)	5	35.7
Masquerade/Impersonation	5	35.7
Exclusion from online groups	4	28.6
Cyberstalking (threats)	3	21.4
Outing/Trickery	3	21.4
Happy slapping	1	7.1

The most frequent platforms for victimization were Messenger (78.6% of victims experienced it at least sometimes), mobile phones/text (64.3%), and Facebook (64.3%). Instant messaging, chat rooms, email, Twitter, and YouTube were less commonly reported. Approximately 35.7% of victims did not know the identity of their perpetrator; 28.6% identified students from within their school. Half of the victims reported being cyberbullied fewer than

four times in the past year, while 21.4% experienced more than ten incidents.

Regarding perpetration, 16% (n = 8) of all respondents admitted to having cyberbullied others. The majority of these perpetrators used mobile phones (87.5%) and home computers with internet (87.5%); half also used school computers.

Factors contributing to cyberbullying behavior

Among the eight self-identified perpetrators, the most frequently cited motives were “prank/just for fun” (62.5%) and “dislike of the person’s attitude” (50%). Other reasons included the victim fitting commonly mocked stereotypes (37.5%), a belief that such behavior was unproblematic (37.5%), revenge for past episodes (25%), desire for group acceptance (25%), belonging to a rival group (12.5%), and a desire to assert oneself (12.5%).

Impacts of cyberbullying on victims

Victims reported substantial negative effects across educational, emotional, and psycho-behavioral domains (Table 3).

Table 3

Impacts Experienced by Cyberbullying Victims (N = 14)

Impact Domain / Specific Effect	n	%
Educational: Lack of concentration	10	71.4
Educational: Learning disability	6	42.9
Educational: Educational withdrawal	4	28.6
Emotional: Anxiety	9	64.3
Emotional: Nervousness	5	35.7
Emotional: Feeling of worthlessness	3	21.4
Emotional: Depression	2	14.3
Psycho-behavioral: Low self-esteem	3	21.4
Psycho-behavioral: Concentration disorders	3	21.4
Psycho-behavioral: Despair worse at night	2	14.3
Psycho-behavioral: Self-destructive behaviour	1	7.1

Lack of concentration and anxiety were the most prevalent consequences. A minority reported more

severe outcomes such as depression or self-destructive behavior.

Coping strategies adopted by victims

The most frequent answer was to ignore the incident and not inform anyone (50%). The second most common strategy was talking to friends about the situation (42.9%), while blocking or excluding the aggressor from one's social network was the third most common strategy (28.6%). Other strategies were ending the response to anonymous phone calls (21.4%), avoiding contact with the aggressor (21.4%), bullying the aggressor back or confronting the aggressor (14.3% each), seeking help from a trusted individual (14.3%), talking with other adults or parents (14.3%), or deleting a Facebook page (14.3%), and changing a telephone number (14.3%). A single victim (7.1%) complained to a class teacher/principal, but no one reported to the police. The other measures taken to prevent and control the risk were rated by the respondents as 4.7.

The most common answers to questions about how cyberbullying could be prevented or controlled were to change your profile identity (72%), to block or exclude the aggressor (64%), and to seek assistance from a trusted person (56%). Other frequently mentioned options included changing profile privacy settings (48%), talking with friends (46%) and blocking replies to anonymous messages (44%). Less respondents suggested talking to parents (30%) or complaining to the police (28%) or involving the school authorities (18%). There was limited support for the following: monitoring social network accounts by parents (12%) and banning mobile phones or private internet use in school (10% and 6%, respectively).

DISCUSSION

The present study is one of the first empirical snapshots of cyberbullying reported in western Nepal among secondary school students. The prevalence of cyberbullying among respondents (28%) is similar to international estimates ranging from 10% to 40% (Kowalski et al., 2014; Modecki et al., 2014). The perpetration rate of 16% is also similar to the lower to mid-range of rates previously reported. The percentages derived from this small sample from an urban setting suggest that cyberbullying is a very real problem affecting a considerable number of Nepalese adolescents.

High levels of ICT access, especially owning an internet-enabled mobile phone (70%) and the near universal use of Facebook, present a challenge for electronic aggression and an opportunity for positive social interaction. Messenger, mobile phones and Facebook are the most common ways of being victimized, reflecting international trends where private messaging and social networking have emerged as the main contexts for cyberbullying (Smith et al., 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008).

Despite some other international research indicating that females are more likely to be involved in cyberbullying, the present sample revealed a clear male predominance in both victimization (71.4%) and perpetration (75%). The pattern could be due to the local gender norms, differential reporting or sample-specific characteristics and larger multi-site studies are required to understand the gender dynamics in the Nepalese context. It should be noted that the Brahmin/Kshetri students are over-represented both as victims and as perpetrators, and there is a need for further investigation to understand if there are any socio-cultural or access-related issues.

The most prevalent victimization experiences were harassment, denigration, and flaming, which correspond to Willard's (2006) typology and to other samples of adolescents. It is troubling that the rate of being a victim of sexting is relatively high (35.7% of victims) and highlights the need for age appropriate and appropriate digital citizenship education focused on image-based abuse.

Motives were focussed on amusement and inter-personal dislike instead of ideas and group hostility. This reflects findings that research has shown many teens engage in cyberbullying impetuously and without really understanding what is happening to them and the damage they are causing (Cassidy et al., 2009). The online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) may be responsible for this because it allows users to feel less responsible for their actions, as noted above.

The effects of the victims; including impaired concentration, anxiety, and learning problems; are consistent with the overall literature on the relationship between cyber victimization and emotional distress and academic impairment (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). That half of victims reported it to no one, and that almost no victims reported it to school authorities or police, is consistent with documented barriers to reporting – including fear of device confiscation, skepticism about adult efficacy and concern about

social stigma (Agatston et al., 2007; Juvonen & Gross, 2008). The implications of this finding for the design of school-based intervention programs include the importance of the provision of reporting channels that are safe and confidential and the assurance by adults that the response will be supportive and not punitive of the victim.

Learners' preferred preventive behaviours focus on individual technical and social responses (changing profile identity, blocking aggressors, seeking peer and/or trusted adult support). Such approaches may be successful but they leave the victim primarily to their own defense. The endorsement of structural measures (parental monitoring, school policy enforcement, formal complaints) was less than the endorsement of individual coping measures, indicating a disconnect between individual coping preferences and the structural supports that research has identified as essential to reduce cyberbullying over time.

There must be an awareness of the limitations of the study. This sample is not representative of the rural or private school population as it is from a single government school in an urban setting. Self-report data may be influenced by social-desirability and recall bias. Due to the small sample size, multivariate analysis was not possible. Overall, the study provides some background information and directions on priorities and future research and practice in Nepal.

CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying is present among secondary school students in Nepalgunj, affecting more than one-quarter of the sampled adolescents as victims and approximately one-sixth as perpetrators. This is the type of aggression which is supported by high ICT penetration, especially mobile communication and Facebook. The engagement of boys as victim and perpetrators seems disproportionate. Most frequently, cyberbullying takes the form of harassment, denigration, or flaming, with some being acts of amusement or interpersonal dislikes. A measurable educational and emotional damage has occurred in the lives of victims, but most of them are not asking for intervention from adults.

Recommendations

Based on the above, the following recommendations are made:

1. School-level action: Establish clear anti-cyberbullying policies that clarify what is prohibited, the process for reporting cyberbullying, and taken steps for escalation of consequences. Incorporate digital citizenship and netiquette education into the curriculum from upper primary school onwards.
2. Awareness and training: Hold regular awareness sessions for students, teachers and parents about the nature, impact and law of cyberbullying. Educate school counselors and teachers about identifying victims and responding to them in a compassionate manner.
3. Safe reporting systems: Provide confidential and accessible reporting systems (for instance anonymous suggestion box, trusted adults or electronic reporting systems) which will enable students to seek help without fear of device confiscation or peer retaliation.
4. Parent engagement: Open communication between parents and children on online experiences, sharing of passwords, and appropriate use of technology by parents. Offers practical advice on Privacy settings and blocking tools.
5. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, along with the Nepal Telecommunications Authority and child protection agencies, should create a country-wide policy to tackle cyber aggression in schools covering off-school cyber aggression that affects the learning environment.
6. Further research: National prevalence estimates should be generated and differences between rural–urban and public–private settings should be explored in larger multi-district studies using mixed methods approaches to assess the effectiveness of prevention programs.

Finally, although technology is indisputably educational and social good, it also broadens the scope for peer aggression. To empower Nepalese adolescents to safely and respectfully interact in the digital world, a multi-stakeholder, pro-active, education-based approach is crucial, involving clear behavioral norms and accessible support, complemented by evidence-based policy.

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