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Using young peoples' lived experiences to explore definitional characteristics for cyberbullying

Claire Hawkins 

Faculty of Education, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, UK

ABSTRACT

Applying established definitions of bullying to the more recent phenomenon of cyberbullying often results in an ill-fitting definition which is contested by academics. There are particular difficulties when applying the well-documented facets of intentional harm, repetition and power imbalance to the context of online bullying. A contested definition presents challenges when comparing studies and for building theory. This qualitative study investigates defining characteristics of cyberbullying, drawing on the lived experiences of young people (aged 11–17 years) situated in the north west of England. Young people's experiences point to a more nuanced experience with different characteristics incorporating: the intention to harm or humiliate; that the victim cannot escape from the activities perpetrated against them; an attempt to transfer power from the victim; and the perpetrator hides behind the screen.

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Cyberbullying; definition; youth perception; lived experience; adolescent

Introduction

There is an ongoing lack of consensus regarding a definition of cyberbullying, despite much work internationally to establish one (e.g. Alipan et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2014; Dredge et al., 2014; Kofoed & Staksrud, 2019; Moreno et al., 2019; Peter & Petermann, 2018; Ranney et al., 2020). An accepted, shared definition would enable comparison between studies, accelerate the research process and help develop theoretical and conceptual understanding. UNESCO (2020) are working to establish an integrated definition of bullying, including both cyberbullying and traditional bullying. While academics argue about the nuances of the definition, the lived experience of cyberbullying for adolescents has not formed a substantive aspect of this discussion (Ranney et al., 2020). Kofoed and Staksrud (2019) stress the importance of researchers' ability to listen carefully when children's accounts of cyberbullying do not fit established definitions, and that care should be taken when maintaining existing definitions

CONTACT Claire Hawkins  hawkinsc@edgehill.ac.uk

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through educating children about how their accounts are inaccurate, stifling children's voices. Qualitative research provides a way to authentically listen to children's voices; and researchers (Alipan et al., 2020; Kofoed & Staksrud, 2019) argue for more qualitative work which listens carefully to young people's own experiences and definitions providing greater insight and nuance. Consequently, this qualitative research seeks to explore the defining characteristics of cyberbullying, through the lived experiences of young people, giving insight through young peoples' own voices. The paper will firstly explore the current definitions and challenges with these. Then the voices of young people will be explored drawing on their own experiences of cyberbullying in their own contexts. Finally, the implications of the experiences of young people for the existing definitional characteristics of cyberbullying will be considered.

Many of the definitions for cyberbullying are grounded in Olweus (1993) original definition for bullying: (i) the intentionality of the 'negative actions' (p. 9); (ii) these actions take place repeatedly over time; and (iii) there is an imbalance of power, whereby the victim cannot defend themselves against the perpetrator(s). Internationally, governments used these three factors as indicators in their own definitions to guide activities related to education, policy and practice. In the UK, the government includes repetition, intentionality and targeting certain groups (Department for Education, 2017). The USA defines it as aggression outside of a familial or romantic relationship with a perceived power imbalance and the actions 'are repeated, or have the potential to be repeated, over time' (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In Australia reference is made to misuse of power plus the repeated and deliberate harm caused (Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group, 2021). The Council of Europe (2018) also makes reference to intention to harm, power imbalance and repetition; this definition informs the work of the 47 member states. These three factors are considered to be key definitional criteria for use by governments, educationalists and decision-makers.

Researchers have difficulties establishing a uniform definition for cyberbullying and there is debate in the literature. Olweus and Limber (2018) suggest that cyberbullying is a sub-category of bullying and does not require a separate definition. Smith (2012, 2015) takes a more tentative stance; while his definition builds upon Olweus' bullying definition, he recognises the tensions around repetition, imbalance of power, how our perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying may evolve as technology develops, as well as other structural differences between the two. The over-generalisation of cyberbullying and use of alternative terms is identified by Chun et al. (2020). Campbell and Xu (2022) identify differences between researchers' and children's definitions and children's ability to apply researcher-generated definitions. Peter and Petermann's (2018) conceptual analysis of cyberbullying definitions from the literature highlights the plethora of definitional criteria used.

When the definition of traditional bullying is extended to cyberbullying, the phrase *by electronic means* or similar is often added. This assumes cyberbullying is simply a transfer of bullying into the online world. Some do believe there to be role continuity between the physical and online worlds (Baldry et al., 2017; Shin et al., 2016; Wolke et al., 2017). The majority of cyber-victims are also victims of traditional bullying (Wolke et al., 2017) suggesting cyberbullying may be a continuation of traditional aggression. However, bullying and cyberbullying are seen as distinct activities by others (Brown et al., 2014; Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Meter & Bauman, 2018). Brown et al. (2014) state there is little evidence of an overlap between conceptions of traditional and cyber victimisation and so, they should be treated as distinct. Young people also find it challenging to arrive at a clear-cut definition of cyberbullying (Moreno et al., 2019; Ranney et al., 2020), although age and experience helps to hone definitions (Leduc et al., 2022).

There are also more fundamental issues with transferring the three definitional aspects of bullying to cyberbullying: the notions of intentionality; repetition; physical and psychological imbalances of power, which are explored below.

The notion of intentionality is problematic for cyberbullying; youth may perceive cyberbullying as fun or jokes (O'Brien & Moules, 2013; Ranney et al., 2020) rather than harmful. Livingstone et al. (2014, p. 280) suggest 'the line between jokey comments and hostility is often ambiguous'. The definition for traditional bullying is clear: it is an intentional act however, cyber-victims self-identify in circumstances where perpetrators intention to harm is not always evident.

For traditional bullying, repetition is quite clear. In cyberbullying, repetition may be through sharing material once which is viewed multiple times (Moreno et al., 2018; Obermaier et al., 2016); the level of publicity or the severity may have equivalent harm to repetition in traditional bullying (Alipan et al., 2020; Dredge et al., 2014). The publicity of an action is a novel form of repetition (Leduc et al., 2022). Menesini et al. (2013) suggest repetition as a defining characteristic is potentially less important, as it may not involve the original perpetrator. Indeed, Moreno et al. (2018) found stakeholders did not include repetition in their own definitions of cyberbullying.

The definition for traditional bullying refers explicitly to physical and psychological imbalances of power (Olweus, 1993). Online some young people may have increased power through greater technological expertise (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014) and anonymity (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Cuadrado-Gordillo & Fernández-Antelo, 2016b; Moreno et al., 2018). Traditional bullies use cyberbullying as an additional way to harass their victims (Brighi et al., 2012; Ranney et al., 2020). However, traditional victims can also bully online, perhaps as a form of retaliation and utilising the potential anonymity (Ranney et al., 2020). Traditional victims becoming cyberbullies creates challenges for established notions of a power

imbalance. Indeed, Dredge et al. (2014) found young people did not consider power imbalances as necessary for a definition of cyberbullying. Wolke et al. (2017) suggest cyberbullying is about peer relationships, dominance and power. An existing power imbalance does not seem to be a feature of cyberbullying.

The lack of consensus for a definition causes challenges in the literature and for researchers. Different researchers use different conceptions (e.g. timescales) (Brown et al., 2014) and different terminology (e.g. cyber-aggression, cyber-abuse) and there is uncertainty about the accuracy of children's interpretations during self-reports (Campbell & Xu, 2022) which makes it challenging to compare and build upon studies. This qualitative study listened to the lived experiences and perceptions of young people, examines their own definitions and attempts to identify defining features and characteristics to contribute to the debate. The research question was: how do young people perceive and define cyberbullying?

Methods

Data were gathered during a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project investigating cyberbullying with a group of 13–14 year olds in a school over an academic year. The group met weekly for research training and to conduct their project, which included questionnaires to 11–13 year olds and a focus group. The researcher separately conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews in two schools with twenty-eight students aged between 11–17 years. This study draws on qualitative data from the YPAR meetings and project, and researcher-led semi-structured interviews. Both schools are located in areas of socio-economic deprivation in north west England. The participants were not asked to self-identify as a cyberbully, victim or bystander, so their roles were only revealed during the interview discussions. Two were bystanders only, the rest were cybervictims. Only one was explicit about their role as a cyberbully and victim.

The qualitative data were transcribed, coded and analysed using nVivo, drawing on constructivist grounded theory approaches (Charmaz, 2014). In order to construct an authentic and trustworthy account, the researcher worked with the young people for an extended period of time; used triangulation from different data sources and perspectives; debriefed and sought participant checking of data analysis; and used verbatim transcription (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical consent was granted from Lancaster University ethics panel. The research participants were informed that normal school safeguarding procedures would apply in the event of a disclosure regarding potential harm. Informed written consent was obtained from the headteachers, the students

and their parents. Ethical procedures were discussed regularly with the YPAR group. The schools and participants are anonymised.

Results

When defining cyberbullying young people gave a generic definition which reflects e-safety education

It's when someone is like humiliated or like saying stuff about you on the Internet.
(Noah Y7)¹

However, as they talked further, nuances became evident and the following key characteristics were identified:

- (i) intention to harm or humiliate;
- (ii) the victim cannot escape from the activity or activities perpetrated against them;
- (iii) attempts to transfer power from victims to perpetrators; and
- (iv) the perpetrator hides behind the screen.

These are closely related to, yet not quite the same as, the original definition of bullying: intention to harm, repetition and power imbalance. In the following sections these four points are explored further.

Intention to harm or humiliate

The original definitions for bullying and cyberbullying, include the intention to harm. Here, humiliation has been added. Young people do not seem to perceive humiliation as necessarily harmful. Some adolescents argue cyberbullying is joking, fun or banter; indeed, the YPAR group were frustrated when peers labelled bullying activities as 'banter'. Banter is normally between friends and it should not involve humiliation or harm. While perpetrators may not identify humiliation as harmful, others do identify it as an aspect of cyberbullying, therefore definitions presented to young people need to make this more explicit. Including humiliation within the category, makes it clear humiliation is also harmful and a cyberbullying activity.

And then you're just basically trying to make them look stupid in front of other people.
(Josh Y9)

The perpetrators take something which young people like, for instance a photograph which has been posted, and ruin it. Ruining it in this sense is not just about the physical changes they make, but the way the victim also feels about it. The wide audience on social media, which is predominantly their peer group in school, ensures humiliation is complete.

Especially when they're taking your pictures, so you felt confident enough to post that picture and then they're turning it into something bad, they're using it against you. (Amber Y9)

The range of cyberbullying activities described is extensive. Posting nasty comments on photographs the victim has posted is one of the most common activities. Cyberbullying becomes more serious when the perpetrators repeatedly add the victim into group chats or send direct messages involving multiple people. As perpetration escalates fake hate accounts can be set up, to post malicious material about the victim; the audience can be large, but may exclude the victim.

Well, like, they all just, like, type horrible things in and then they'll just send it to me, 'cause the other week, there was girls from my other school texting me that I don't really like and then, like, they was, like, eight or nine of them on to me. (Olivia Y9)

When perpetrators obtain a personal mobile phone number, this is perceived as an escalation of threat beyond accessing someone via their social media accounts, as Jacob explains:

letting you know, they've got your number and they might like find out where you live or something. (Jacob Y9)

The intention here is to instil fear and maximise harm to the victim, potentially damaging mental health. Perpetrators appear to use multiple methods of cyberbullying to maximise the impact on the victim and there can be multiple perpetrators. However, Charlotte, reflecting on assemblies with outside speakers about cyberbullying, makes the point:

when you say 'cyberbullying' and 'bullying' people just like, 'Oh well, I don't do that,' but then they realise that ... they don't realise that by you saying nasty things to people, that's bullying. (Charlotte Y12)

There is an escalation of harm to the victim, which includes humiliation. The intention to harm is very clear through most of these activities, yet young people appear to need additional clarity regarding the harmful and bullying nature of humiliation, which some perceive as fun or banter.

The victim cannot escape from the activity or activities perpetrated against them

Emerging strongly from the data is that young people see cyberbullying and traditional bullying as linked parts of bullying. Although they can recite the definitions for cyberbullying and bullying which they have been told, their reality is different. These are not generally separate activities; if they are cyberbullied, they are very likely to also be bullied in school and vice versa. Although there are times when these are separate, the majority of participants did not

experience cyberbullying and traditional bullying as two separate activities. Cyberbullying takes place out of school, typically while the victim is at home. Meanwhile traditional bullying takes place in school. For brevity, we will use the term 'cyber/bullying' to describe both activities taking place on a continuous cycle and feeding into each other. The victim feels they are unable to escape, they are victimised continuously in both the online world and the physical world.

they are joined somewhere along the line, like, you could basically, like, have somebody be mean to you in the school and then they could be, like, texting you stuff during the night. Like, they might, say, text you, like, saying, like, I'm going to get you in the school tomorrow and stuff. (Amelia Y7)

Participants also discussed the permanence/impermanence of the material posted for cyberbullying and how it impacts upon the victim in different ways to make them feel trapped. Some social media are designed to be impermanent, such as SnapChat, where material posted can be viewed a limited number of times for a limited duration, then it is deleted forever.

mainly Snapchat, only because the chat can ... you say it and then the chat deletes itself so no one else can see it. (Jack Y9)

There is an element of controlled risk here for the perpetrator. They may send something unpleasant, but it then becomes their word against the victim's as to what the message contained and their intentions when they sent it; therefore, reporting victimisation is problematic, further trapping the victim. Perpetrators also delete material when they reflect more carefully on their posts. This could be related to removing an evidence-trail and not accepting responsibility; however, the victim is still conscious of the negative material and a audience of peers have also seen it.

you can say something, or you can post something, and be, like...so you get your reaction out of it, but then, like, if you think, like, once it's all calmed down, kinda thing, was that worth it? so you can delete it. But it's deleted and, like, obviously you can't really trace it, but the person who's been the victim of it, still knows about it and it still affects them. (Megan Y12)

Meanwhile, other material remains as a permanent reminder of what has been posted about the victim until the perpetrator removes it or it is removed by the service provider. Where material is always available for victims to see, Alice highlights they can keep looking at it, renewing and building on their victimisation which compounds the sense of being trapped in the cyberbullying.

You don't want to do it to their face, so you do it online. And it's always there so they can always keep looking at and feel more bad about themselves. (Alice Y9)

Even once the material has been deleted it was suggested the impact remains with the victim. The impact can also be developed since a wide

audience has seen the material, they continue to refer to it, gossip about it or build upon that victimisation, thereby increasing the sense of not being able to escape.

It's something that once you post something and people see it, when you're going to school people aren't going to stop saying it. (Grace Y9)

This contrasts with traditional bullying where the victimisation tends to be more covert, the number of people who witness the bullying tends to be smaller and so while others may know it is happening, those who have access to the original perpetration is limited. A wider audience online means victims feel everyone knows and have witnessed their humiliation.

Young people ranked cyberbullying as one of the top threats online. The majority stated cyberbullying was equal to or above the threat of online grooming; those ranking it below online grooming generally placed it just below, although some qualified this based on the level of cyberbullying experienced (i.e. a brief argument versus long-term cyberbullying). The reasons for this ranking were two-fold: their perception of how easy it was to stop both; and the harm which could be caused to the victim. For online grooming, the groomer could be blocked to stop all further contact, whereas cyber/bullies are persistent, they are in school with the victim and if they are blocked they find another way to continue the victimisation (i.e. fake accounts, using other people's smartphones/accounts, involving friends). Young people suggest this persistence can lead to mental health issues, self-harm and suicide.

I think grooming and everything can be bad, but it's cyber bullying's worse. ... Because that's someone that's your age, you know, where grooming you can just say, 'No,' and block them, where ... the other thing you can block them, but they'll always find a way to text you back. ... Like people say things about you and then you start thinking, 'Oh it's right,' and then you start, like, 'cause people have hanged themselves (Charlotte Y12)

The perpetrators can be so persistent that young people perceive cyberbullying to be equal to or above the threat of online grooming. The victim believes they are unable to escape.

Attempts to transfer power from victims to perpetrators

Participants state anyone can be cyberbullied, so a power imbalance is not necessary, as is required in the original definitions. However, there is a transfer of power or an attempt to transfer power during the victimisation process and, if successful, this negatively impacts on the mental health of the victim. Nasty online behaviour can become normalised in some groups and can manifest through cyber/bullying. This behaviour can isolate individuals, and develop a situation where they feel unable to trust other people.

Everyone bullies everyone nowadays, everyone bullies anyone, it happens. Friends bully friends, it's just, it's ... I mean you get people nowadays saying they have trust issues and things like that, it's not a surprise because everyone has it now because you can't really trust. (Grace Y9)

Grace highlights how damaging this culture is for individuals, they feel unable to trust others because even their friends will bully each other online; this diminishes the confidence of individuals.

Charlotte said victims should block cyberbullies immediately, and then considers the impact on the victim of reading cyberbullying posts:

block them, tell someone. ... 'Cause if you're gonna sit there and read it and not keep it in you, gonna start getting, it's gonna work on you mentally. ... But if you tell someone and block the person altogether, and every time someone pops up you block them, don't sit there and go ... and talk back to them, just full on block them. (Charlotte Y12)

Her rationale here is interesting: she seems to divide actions into passive and reactive. Passive is where *'you're gonna sit there and read it'* accepting the comments, internalising them so they *'work on you mentally'*. Alternatively, the victim is active: telling and blocking, taking control. Charlotte says not to engage with the bullies; the victim has control and the power to decide what they will read, who can post on their feed, etc. A victim using their power to decide what will happen within the limits available to them; they can decide what will be read, internalised and how it will affect them mentally. Choosing not to engage with the bullies at all helps to reduce their power over the victim. The most popular response when questioned about how to manage cyberbullying was to block the bully.

However, Amber argues blocking a bully can be counter-productive:

sometimes especially when they're in school then it's like blocking them could be worse because now they're like 'Oh okay so now she's shook' and you've got this-this like ... shadow kind of that 'Oh she's scared of us.' And then that's when it, kind of, spills again into real life 'cause now you've blocked them, so they've kind of won in a sense. (Amber Y9)

Here she is talking about when cyberbullying has reached a stage of group chats. The perpetrators keep adding the victim into a bullying group chat. They can see when the victim leaves and the perpetrators keep adding them back into the chat. The only escape is to block the perpetrators. In this extract we have a sense of power transfer between victim and bully. Blocking provides a reaction to the bullying activity and the perpetrators know they have *'shook'* the victim, the victim is scared; the bullies have won.

While cyberbullying does not necessarily start with a power imbalance, the perpetrator seeks to establish power over their victim through the cyberbullying process. Yet victims can try to stop the power transfer through deciding to respond proactively to cyberbullying.

The perpetrator hides behind the screen

This is a new characteristic which emerged strongly from the data. Participants often stated that cyberbullies are cowardly; they hide behind the screen. Some participants suggested cyberbullying provides a relatively risk-free environment for perpetration. Not only are they behind a screen, but they can also use a fake username.

I think 'cause when it's online I think people have a lot more confidence to say things that they say a lot more, like, you wouldn't just walk up to someone and start saying some of the things that they'll say online 'cause online you're, kind of, protected yourself you're behind a screen. Or some people use, like, fake user names and all this stuff so it's a lot more brutal online I think. (Amber Y9)

Some surreptitiously use someone else's smartphone, so the cyberbullying activities cannot be traced back to them. Young adolescents appear to have lax attitudes towards security of their technology, sharing passwords and rarely changing them; however, this alters as they mature. This makes it simple for others to access someone else's smartphone or social media account to engage in perpetration.

You could like make a separate account or you can go on someone else's phone and send it, so it looks as if they have started it. (Caitlin Y7)

There appear to be degrees of protection. Where a cyberbully is anonymous, this is clearly a high degree of protection from most people who might intercept the messages; however, cyberbullying does occur where the victim knows who the bully is. Indeed, it appears this is frequently the case. However, this idea of hiding and being protected behind a screen is still discussed even when the identity of the perpetrator is known.

Amber (above) realises people would not say the same things face-to-face that they do online; cyberbullies are experiencing disinhibition. Grace (Y9) offers this from her own experience when arguing with her sister:

it's more or less they're hiding behind a screen, they, like everyone says, it's 'cause you think you can say it all, I've done it before when I've texted someone, like me sister and ... I'm like that sometimes texting and feeling really awkward, saying somehow text and go, but like if I'm arguing with my sister [laughter] we'll text each other when we're in the next room. ... But I'll say it on there so it is the coward way out cyberbullying. (Grace Y9)

She recognises what she is doing is cowardly, she is hiding behind a screen rather than arguing directly with her sister. There seems to be a level of protection afforded by the screen, even if you are physically close to someone. There may be a nuance here about being protected, in the same way as we are protected from animals at the zoo by glass or bars. We each know the other is there, but cannot reach them. Potentially

this is what protection means for cyberbullies, rather than anonymity. Therefore, protection may lie on a continuum from bullying face-to-face with no protection through to anonymous cyberbullying with apparent total protection.

Participants also talked about the evidence-trail for cyberbullying. It appears when young people are cyberbullied they are expected to produce evidence of perpetration which can be used by the school in their investigation. This is in contrast to face-to-face bullying where victims are unable to gather this evidence. The ability to delete messages, use of apps which automatically delete messages, and using other people's accounts makes it problematic for victims to prove what has happened.

As explained, younger adolescents had a very lax attitude to security; sharing passwords and not changing their passwords when discovered.

Everyone knows my password. You know my password don't you? I should really change my passwords. (Hannah Y9)

They also use each other's smartphones with or without permission, sending messages to others from the smartphones of family or friends.

someone came up to her and said why are you texting someone this about this and she was like 'what?' someone had took their phone, got their, the sister's phone or something, and text them. (Grace Y9)

This lax security makes it difficult to state definitively who is the perpetrator. This provides another means for protection behind the screen, built-in deniability. Combined with the capacity to delete messages, this is really powerful for perpetrators who wish to hide and avoid responsibility or sanctions. It is much harder for victims to demonstrate and prove what has happened to them and who is responsible.

A further reason for perpetrators to hide was raised by a few participants who identified that sometimes nice people are cyberbullied, but bystanders would take action, if the perpetrator was seen to be doing this.

people could be seeing it and they're like then they decide to go behind . . . behind the screen 'cause then no-one can see they're doing it to them. . . . 'Cause they feel scared that they might lose the rest of their friends because they're bullying the person and they can all see it. (Hannah Y9)

The perpetrator may also want to protect their reputation and avoid being labelled as a bully. Hiding behind the screen, therefore, is about protection for the perpetrator; it is not, necessarily, about anonymity. Rather it provides distancing from the victim and, in some cases, the opportunity to protect their own reputation and status.

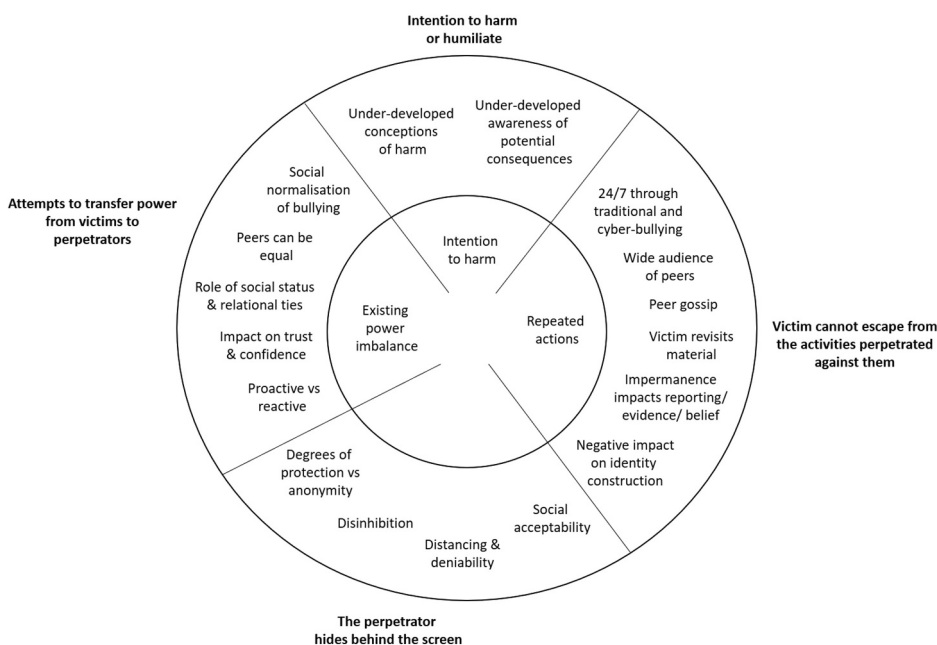


Figure 1. Definitional characteristics and insights from young people.

Discussion

The findings from this study add nuance and extend the literature on definitional characteristics for cyberbullying based on the experience of young people. In particular, it helps to address the question: how do young people perceive and define cyberbullying? The results indicate four definitional characteristics based on the experience of young people which will be explored further and include: intention to harm or humiliate; the victim cannot escape from the activity or activities perpetrated against them; attempts to transfer power from victims to perpetrators; and the perpetrator hides behind the screen. The relationship between the original criteria, the issues illuminated by the data and the definitional characteristics considered in this paper are summarised in [Figure 1](#).

Intention to harm or humiliate

The literature supports this defining characteristic (Alipan et al., 2020; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008), however, some authors question whether cyberbullying always includes the intention to harm others, as some adolescents claim their intention was a joke or banter (e.g. Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013). Banter was derided by the YPAR group; meanwhile, interview participants acknowledged they had posted hurtful items without reflecting on the potential consequences. This is difficult to resolve; the technology makes it easy to send

hurtful messages online before reflecting on their potential impact, but this is not banter or a joke. Indeed, once they have time to reflect, they may remove the material, regretting their actions and the hurt caused. Some young people appear to have difficulty associating humiliation with harm; Cuadrado-Gordillo and Fernández-Antelo (2016a) state perpetrators and victims perceive harm in different ways, perpetrators may only recognise the most serious forms of harm as harmful. It seems young people are adept at developing responsibility-avoidance techniques which build in deniability to excuse their actions to themselves and to others. These techniques include calling cyberbullying banter, using apps which delete material automatically or sharing their passwords and smartphones with each other.

The normalisation of abusive behaviour through models presented in the online world (Cuadrado-Gordillo & Fernández-Antelo, 2016a), could influence young peoples' behaviour towards others. For some peer groups this anti-social behaviour extends to cyberbullying between friends. However, despite these contextual factors, the intention to harm or humiliate is still evident when the initial message is sent; the regret which follows does not mitigate the original intention.

The victim cannot escape from the activity or activities perpetrated against them

This aspect is related to the mental health of the victim, whereby the victim feels unable to escape from the activity or activities which have been carried out against them. Moreno et al. (2018) identified nuances in terms of repetition which involve the victim repeatedly viewing the abusive material or the further dissemination of the material by others; these factors could induce a sense of being trapped, even from a single episode, as peers who have viewed the negative material may discuss it in school (Pelfrey & Weber, 2014) and the victim's image has been damaged. Dredge et al. (2014) suggested definitional components should be considered from the victim's perspective as well as through the perpetrator's actions. Hence, refocusing the definition away from repetition to the victim's sense of being trapped by the activities may be helpful.

The converse of single incidents is where a victim is continuously hounded through both cyberbullying and traditional bullying means; this formed the majority of the stories from participants. A cycle of abuse is created which leaves the victim without a way of escaping. Wolke et al. (2017, p. 903) state 85.2% of the time, this cycle is formed between cyber-victimisation and traditional victimisation. During cyber/bullying, the perpetrators invoke a range of online strategies which are supplemented by traditional bullying in school. The socially-constructed reality for a victim who is subjected to continuous abuse from peers, through both online and traditional means, must appear bleak. Burr (2003) explains we construct our identities through the roles which are offered

to us in dialogue with others; if the dialogue is perpetually abusive, the identity constructed by the victim will be negatively impacted. This can be seen through the references to mental health issues, including self-harm and suicide ideation both in this study and others (e.g. Fahy et al., 2016; Kofoed & Staksrud, 2019; Wolke et al., 2017). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying follows the victim into their home, meaning there is no escape. Even if technology is turned off, the abusive messages wait for the victim until they return to their smartphones and online accounts. Then they can continually revisit the abusive material, until it is removed, yet the impact remains.

Some studies have found teachers and schools do not always take cyberbullying seriously, particularly in comparison to traditional bullying (e.g. Stauffer et al., 2012). This study found young people perceive cyberbullying to be as serious as online grooming. If young people rank cyberbullying alongside online grooming in terms of harm, then sustained cyberbullying needs to be taken as seriously as we would a child reporting online grooming. Instead, the number of young people reporting cyberbullying decreases as they progress through school because they do not believe the school systems will support them (Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013).

Attempts to transfer power from victims to perpetrators

The notion of a power imbalance between victim and perpetrator is problematic in cyberbullying (Moreno et al., 2018). However, there is a transfer of power from the victim to the perpetrator during cyberbullying activities. The self-esteem and confidence of the victim decreases (Dredge et al., 2014; Heiman et al., 2015; O'Brien & Moules, 2013), while the cyberbully seeks to gain power and status (Wolke et al., 2017). Wolke et al. (2017) argue that, like traditional bullying, cyberbullying is about power and dominance, and this includes reducing competition for friends or romantic relationships, through increasing their own status at the expense of others. There is not necessarily a power imbalance when cyberbullying commences, rather the cyberbully seeks to establish a power imbalance to gain ascendancy over their victim and secure social status. A high level of cyberbullying activity occurs in the top level of the social hierarchy in school; Closson and Watanabe (2018) discuss how popular students are subject to covert manipulation and relational victimisation as they strive for status within the group. Layla (Y9) commented that the top level of the social hierarchy consists of the popular group and those who want to be in the popular group; membership of this group requires status maintenance and wrangling for position (Cho & Chung, 2012) which invokes cyberbullying behaviour.

Cyber-victims can maintain power by choosing to deal with their victimisation proactively (Perren et al., 2012). Allowing a sense of disempowerment to develop impacts on mental health and well-being. Instead, victims can retain power by deciding to block the victim, refusing to

engage with the cyberbullies and the material they post and seeking support from others. Blocking the cyberbully was the most popular way of dealing with cyberbullying, but it is by no means universally applied by students. The decision to block a perpetrator may be affected by an existing relationship/friendship with the cyberbully (Felmlee & Faris, 2016) which would cause problems in the friendship group. Consequently, the relational ties between victim and perpetrator may make it problematic for victims to take the actions recommended to them. This will strengthen the perception that a victim cannot escape from the situation and disempower them.

The perpetrator hides behind the screen

This characteristic of cyberbullying captures two aspects: firstly, the anonymity which has been identified regularly in other literature (Ackers, 2012; Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Mark & Ratliffe, 2011; Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013); but also a perception of protection for the perpetrator which is not related to anonymity. There is much discussion in the literature about the role of anonymity in cyberbullying, yet, the literature suggests approximately half of victims know the perpetrator's identity (Mark & Ratliffe, 2011). The discussion centres around the use of anonymity to redress the power imbalance and aid victims in retaliating anonymously against traditional bullies (Cuadrado-Gordillo & Fernández-Antelo, 2016b), or the role of anonymity as a facilitator of the disinhibition effect (Udris, 2014), which enables young people to engage in unpleasantness online which they would not do off-line (Pabian et al., 2018). Yet, if victims often know the perpetrators' identity, then 'hiding behind the screen' is about more than anonymity; it also captures the protection afforded by being away from a victim and their response. Protection is afforded through cyberbullying, even when the perpetrator makes no effort to hide their identity. Certainly, some perpetrators go to great lengths to hide their identity, however, hiding behind the screen was also discussed when victims knew the perpetrator. Hence, there appears to be a continuum of protection afforded by cyberbullying from complete anonymity (which is regularly discussed in the literature) and apparent protection, through to being virtually distanced from the victim and their response, through the use of the technology, with the identities known.

Hiding behind the screen affords the perpetrator additional advantages over the victim: it is more difficult for the victim to tell someone, as school staff will ask for evidence, which may have been deleted; and adolescents' lax security with technology, means cyberbullies are able to deny responsibility and blame others. Also, social status in the group could be damaged, if others discovered they were cyberbullying someone who was nice or a friend (Closson et al., 2017).

Conclusion

These definitional characteristics for cyberbullying are based on the lived experiences of young people. Refocusing on what young people tell us about cyberbullying can help researchers to reflect on the definitional characteristics used and the extent to which these reflect lived experiences.

As qualitative research, the aim was to investigate cyberbullying in-depth, gaining insight into the lived experiences of the young people, and limitations to this study should be considered. Necessarily, the project size was small and results may not be generalisable to the wider school population. The schools are both located relatively close together within the north west of England with similar demographics. Interviewing predominantly those who have been cyberbullied, rather than a greater proportion of cyberbullies and bystanders may influence the results, and future research could explore whether similar characteristics are identified across groups, using a larger sample size. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the results and seeking applicability across the age phases in schools. The research may have yielded different results if implemented in schools with different characteristics and future research could explore different contexts with larger population samples.

The extension of the definition of bullying, to include electronic means of bullying, is an ill-fitting definition for cyberbullying. Researchers (e.g. Alipan et al., 2020; Kofoed & Staksrud, 2019) raise many questions about the existing definitions for cyberbullying. Some researchers have called for definitional issues to be addressed through further research (Alipan et al., 2020; Dredge et al., 2014; Kofoed & Staksrud, 2019; Moreno et al., 2018). This research draws on the lived experiences of young people to examine the definitional characteristics which emerge from their own experiences and perceptions of cyberbullying. These characteristics refocus attention on the experiences of both the victim and the perpetrator and addresses the unique characteristics of cyberbullying which differentiate it from traditional bullying.

The characteristics of cyberbullying make clear that humiliation is an aspect of harm; an aspect which young people can dismiss as a joke or banter. Educational definitions of cyberbullying should include humiliation as harm and schools should make clear that humiliation is harmful through curriculum and school anti-bullying policies. Definitions should consider the perception of the victim, in terms of repetition, and that they are unable to escape from the activities perpetrated against them; this may involve activities perpetrated by different individuals, through repeated access to materials, gossiping, or through the cycle between online and offline bullying activities. Schools should consider repetition from the victim's perspective when identifying cyberbullying incidents. Finally, a power imbalance does not need to be in place at the start of cyberbullying, but rather the perpetrator seeks to transfer power from their victim. Cyberbullying offers

psychological protection to the perpetrator as they gain a level of protection from the screen, which may involve anonymity, but may also just be a perception of distance from their victim.

This study has foregrounded the voices, experiences and perceptions of young people, it has sought to listen carefully and provide greater insight of the nuances of their lived experiences, rather than requiring young people to conform to researchers' preconceptions. Young people have the right to express their views on matters which impact them and for those views to be given due regard (United Nations, 1989), therefore I recommend that researchers try to involve a wide range of children and young people in future cyberbullying research.

Note

1. Y7 is Year 7 in English schools age 11–12 years old, through to Y13 age 17–18 years)

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ORCID

Claire Hawkins  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7200-8509>

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