

# Cyberbullying: The Challenge to Define

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## Abstract

Cyberbullying is a reality of the digital age. To address this phenomenon, it becomes imperative to understand exactly what cyberbullying is. Thus, establishing a workable and theoretically sound definition is essential. This article contributes to the existing literature in relation to the definition of cyberbullying. The specific elements of repetition, power imbalance, intention, and aggression, regarded as essential criteria of traditional face-to-face bullying, are considered in the cyber context. It is posited that the core bullying elements retain their importance and applicability in relation to cyberbullying. The element of repetition is in need of redefining, given the public nature of material in the online environment. In this article, a clear distinction between direct and indirect cyberbullying is made and a model definition of cyberbullying is offered. Overall, the analysis provided lends insight into how the essential bullying elements have evolved and should apply in our parallel cyber universe.

## Introduction

WHAT HAS BECOME overwhelmingly apparent over the last decade is just how extensively new information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become intertwined with our everyday lives. The benefits of new technology are undeniable, but along with the advantages comes the potential for technology to be misused. Cyberbullying is one of the negative by-products of the digital age.

Cyberbullying has proven difficult to define. To date, a universal definition has not been agreed upon. A literal approach to interpreting the meaning may be to consider the words "cyber" and "bullying" quite separately, attaching ordinary, natural meaning to the words and then merging the two meanings to create a singular meaning.

Following this approach, "cyber" may be quite simply described as "generated by technology." Defining "bullying" presents a more challenging task.<sup>1,2</sup> Semantic differences may explain the varying conceptualizations of bullying,<sup>1</sup> considering linguistic differences that exist across disciplines and cultures. In general, national and international consensus exists<sup>3</sup> that bullying is a subset of aggression defined as being a "specific type of aggressive behaviour that is intended to cause harm, through repeated actions carried out over time, targeted at an individual who is not in a position to defend him/herself."<sup>4</sup> It can be physical or nonphysical in form.<sup>5</sup>

The elements of repetition (a course of conduct as opposed to a single incident); power imbalance (where the offender demonstrates power over the target); intention (conduct must be intended as opposed to accidental); and

aggression (conduct involves maliciousness on the part of the aggressor) are broadly considered as being the necessary elements differentiating bullying from mere aggression. A distinction can be made between direct and indirect traditional bullying. Direct bullying may include physical bullying (e.g., hitting and kicking), damaging the personal property of a victim, or verbally bullying the victims (e.g., name calling). Indirect bullying in the traditional sense may include behaviors such as spreading false rumors about the victim behind their back.

The four core bullying elements are encapsulated within several descriptive cyberbullying definitions.<sup>6,7</sup> The element unique to a cyberbullying definition relates to use of ICTs through which repeated, aggressive online acts are facilitated. Cyberbullying can occur through a variety of technological media, such as computers, mobile phones (smart phones), or any other ICTs. Cyberbullying is bullying transposed on a technological platform.

## Traditional Bullying Elements in the Cyber Context

There is some academic debate as to the importance of the four foundation elements of traditional bullying in the cyber context. This being the case, the ordinary meanings of repetition, power imbalance, intention, and aggression will need revising/redefining to tailor their meanings to the cyber environment if society is to develop a satisfactory response to the phenomenon.

To assist in understanding how the elements may apply in the cyber context, it is necessary to differentiate between direct and indirect cyberbullying.

Direct cyberbullying occurs where the cyberbully "directs the electronic communications directly at the victim. It encompasses a cyberbully's use of instant messaging, text or multimedia messaging, or email intended to have a direct, immediate effect on the victim."<sup>8</sup> Direct cyberbullying is limited to the context where the cyberbully directs communications to the victim only, as opposed to communications that are posted to more public areas of cyberspace. Direct cyberbullying occurs in the private domain.

Indirect cyberbullying occurs where the cyberbully "does not direct the electronic communication that constitutes the bullying at his/her victim directly. Instead, the bully posts them on MySpace, Facebook, a specially created Website or blog, or some other reasonably public area of cyberspace."<sup>8</sup> Public forums such as social media sites, blogs, Web pages, and video-sharing Web sites are obvious examples of platforms that fall within the public cyberspace arena. The concept of the public domain in cyberspace extends to situations where the victim has knowledge of multiple recipients being privy to a personal communication transmitted via ICTs. The nature of this technology is such that the sender has no control over to whom the original communication is forwarded. Because multiple parties are directly privy to the original electronic communication, the communication has the potential to spread to an infinite audience. Thus, once any other recipient has access to the information, it should be considered material falling within the public arena.

### Repetition

Repetition is firmly established as being a key criterion in cyberbullying.<sup>9,10</sup> Without the presence of this element, conduct may arguably be described as mere face-to-face joking or jovial teasing in the traditional sense, or cyberjoking or playful cyberteasing in the virtual world. Teasing is specifically referred to as playful or jovial in nature. Olweus comments that some forms of "repeated teasing of a degrading and offensive character continued in spite of clear signs of distress or opposition on the part of the target qualifies as bullying."<sup>11</sup> Repetition is an important criterion to allow for differentiation between a joke or jovial teasing and an intentional attack.<sup>12</sup> The presence of repetition demonstrates systematic conduct.

The nature of cyberspace alters the way in which repetition should be understood in some instances. One act in cyberspace, such as one posting of a photo or video, one posting on a blog, on a Web site, one e-mail sent, one twitter tweeted, or one SMS sent, has the unique ability to remain in cyberspace indefinitely, as photos, videos, e-mails, tweets, and phone messages can be archived or forwarded by anyone who gains access. A single act could be considered repetitive each time the blog, Web site, video, e-mail, photo, or text message is accessed/viewed.<sup>13</sup> In the cyber context, it is necessary to consider the element of repetition differentiating between direct and indirect cyberbullying.

Direct cyberbullying occurs in the private arena. It involves electronic communications directed from the perpetrator to the victim only. Direct cyberbullying could include, but is in no way limited to, calls from the perpetrator's mobile phone to the victim's mobile phone, SMS messaging between the perpetrator's mobile phone and the victim's mobile phone, or e-mails sent to a victim's personal e-mail account from the perpetrator's personal e-mail account. In the direct cyber-

bullying context, for conduct to qualify as cyberbullying, the victim would need to be subjected to a course of conduct to establish the element of repetition. The negative conduct needs to occur on more than one occasion so as to distinguish it from a one-off act of aggression. In this manner, the element of repetition in the direct cyberbullying context is defined in the same way as it is defined in the traditional face-to-face bullying context.

Indirect cyberbullying occurs in the public cyber arena. It refers to material that has been posted to areas in cyberspace that are publically accessible. In circumstances where a perpetrator posts an electronic communication into a public forum, such as a public blog, a social media forum, or a video-sharing Web site, it is no longer necessary for the victim to prove a course of conduct to satisfy the element of repetition. Repetition occurs by virtue of the arena in which the behavior occurs. Material can remain in the public cyber arena indefinitely. It can be viewed publically countless times. It can be distributed, and it can be saved and re-posted at a later time. In the instance where an electronic communication has been sent directly to the victim but has, to the victim's knowledge, been copied/forwarded to other people, the act of distribution propels the material out of the private domain and into the public arena. This negates the victim's onus to establish a course of conduct to establish the element of repetition.

For the purpose of the definition of cyberbullying, repetition in the private context (electronic communication between the perpetrator and the victim only) occurs as a result of multiple contacts; in the public arena (electronic communication that has been distributed to persons other than the victim only), it can be established simply by its appearance in that forum.

### Power Differential

Power imbalance (power differential) is another element considered by many researchers as an essential criterion to the cyberbullying definition. In the traditional bullying context, a power imbalance relates to the "demonstration or interpretation of power by the offender over the target."<sup>7</sup> The meaning is not altered in the cyber context. Although a power imbalance may be achieved in various new ways in cyberspace, this does not alter the fact that, in order for conduct to qualify as cyberbullying, the conduct must place the victim in a position where he/she cannot easily defend him/herself.

In the physical world, a person's characteristics such as popularity, height, intelligence, physical strength, age, sex, and socioeconomic status can give a perpetrator perceived or actual power over a victim.<sup>7</sup> It is not uncommon to hear of instances where a larger student bullies a smaller student. The power imbalance between the two students is likely to result from the smaller student feeling defenseless against the physically much larger student. Additionally, factors such as low social integration, low self-esteem, a problematic parent-child relationship, or school-related behavioral problems have been established as determinates of school victimization.<sup>14</sup> In the physical world, it is not uncommon to hear of situations where a bully targets a victim who displays signs of low social integration. This aspect makes the target a perceived easy target for the bully. There is a power imbalance

between the perpetrator and the target that defines the relationship: where the perpetrator is perceived as the stronger party and the victim (the social outcast) as the weaker party who cannot easily defend him/herself against the bully. Known determinates of school victimization, along with a person's physical characteristics, can act as ammunition a perpetrator uses to exploit power over a victim. Studies conducted on school children in Sweden, Germany, and Belgium demonstrate that targets of traditional bullying are more likely to become targets of cyberbullying.<sup>13-15</sup> This would suggest that determinates of traditional bullying that enable a perpetrator to demonstrate actual or perceived power over a victim may also be determinates of cyberbullying. (The fact that a victim is perceived as a social outcast in the physical world may continue to be a reason for the continued bullying of the victim in the parallel cyber world.) However, it is also possible that a perpetrator in cyberspace does not know his/her victim in a physical social context. Electronic media provide a novel platform for individuals to connect with strangers. In such cases, physical characteristics or other determinates of school victimization are unlikely to be the trigger for the cyberbullying.

In addition, cyberspace presents a bully with new opportunities in which to flaunt their power over a perceived weaker victim. It has been suggested that varying degrees of technological skill may create a power differential between a perpetrator and a victim in the digital world.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, a victim could feel powerless in defending him or herself against a perpetrator's online actions as a result of the perpetrator's perceived or actual greater technological expertise. Once online material enters the public online environment, as material can be disseminated, archived, reposted, or altered by people other than the victim or the perpetrator. This fact plays to a perpetrator's perceived and actual power over the victim in the cyber context given the complexities associated with controlling material in cyberspace.

A perpetrator may feel emboldened to engage in cyberbullying as a result of the perceived anonymity cyberspace presents. Cyberbullies are able to create pseudonyms and provisional e-mail addresses and to block their telephone number to conceal their identity. A victim is likely to feel increased feelings of powerlessness by not knowing the person behind the cyber aggression.<sup>15</sup> In this manner, the victim could be interpreted as the weaker party.

The seemingly limitless nature of technology means a cyberbully (as opposed to a schoolyard bully or a workplace bully) can penetrate the home environment. There are no spatial or time limitations. This factor awards a perpetrator the upper hand and ensures the victim feels powerless in comparison.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, a victim may feel less able (and therefore more powerless) to defend him or herself against a potentially infinite cyber audience. In the physical world, the number of witnesses to bullying is likely to be far fewer.

The cyber environment creates a variety of new opportunities that can give rise to an exploitation of power in a perpetrator/victim relationship. The element of power imbalance remains and therefore an essential criterion that applies equally in both the private and public contexts. In either setting, physical or virtual, a victim's lack of perceived or actual power comparative to the perpetrator's possession of power is crucial to the definition.

## Aggression and Intention

### *The bullying context*

In the bullying context, the elements of intention and aggression are intrinsically linked. Defined as a subset of aggression,<sup>17</sup> bullying inherently contains the same elements that frame the definition of aggression. What propels bullying out of the broad pool of merely aggressive behaviors into a new realm (or subset of aggression) are the necessary elements of repetition and power imbalance.

Arguments for and against the inclusion of intention in a definition of bullying relate to the arguments advanced in the context of aggression.<sup>18-21</sup> Those who argue against inclusion maintain the weaker argument. Without its inclusion, joking, jovial teasing, and inadvertent/accidental behaviors are captured in an overly broad meaning of bullying. In the same way, inadvertent online behaviors and common behaviors such as playful cyberteasing and cyberjoking, which do not require the elements of repetition, power imbalance, or intention to cause harm to the target, would be labeled aggressive cyber acts. An exclusion of the element of intention suggests that acts carried out in an attempt to cause a victim harm will not be deemed aggressive if harm does not materialize.<sup>19</sup> To differentiate behaviors, acts (online or otherwise) should only be deemed aggressive where the action was directed toward the goal of producing a negative consequence for a victim which that victim is motivated to avoid.

## Intention in the Cyberbullying Context

### *Direct cyberbullying*

It is necessary to consider the element of intention in relation to direct and indirect cyberbullying. Direct cyberbullying requires the perpetrator to engage in a course of conduct to fulfill the criterion of repetition. The repetitive conduct, in turn, may illustrate an intention to harm, as the conduct is not an inadvertent or isolated incident. Behavior demonstrated as a course of conduct is likely to implicate the perpetrator as having the desire and the knowledge that the victim would be harmed by the conduct. In this manner, repetition and intention may be considered related elements. The context of the conduct and form of words, images or sound used need to be taken into account.

### *Indirect cyberbullying*

Let us presume that a perpetrator has posted material via ICTs into a public area of cyberspace. Brenner and Rehberg appropriately posit that two issues unique to indirect cyberbullying arise in that instance. The first issue relates to the extent to which the cyberbully intentionally directed the online communication at the victim; the second issue relates to the extent to which the cyberbully intended the communication to have a negative impact (harm) the victim.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, where material is posted in a public forum, it may be possible to determine the extent to which the cyberbully intentionally directed the online communication at the victim. For example, addressing the victim in the public forum by name may be considered reasonably strong evidence that the cyberbully intentionally directed the communication at the victim. There may be instances, however, where it is much more difficult to make this determination. Where material is

posted to a public forum, but either restricted to a particular audience by virtue of privacy settings, or posted to an area of cyberspace where it would not readily come to the victim's attention, establishing intention becomes problematic. The perpetrator has posted the material to an area where it is unlikely to become known to the victim.

Where the victim is deemed to be the intended target of the aggression, particularly hostile/malicious material is more likely to be deemed material that is intended to have a negative impact on the victim. Where the material posted is not of the type that is clearly intended to harm the victim, it will be more arduous to fulfill the criterion of intention. The context of the cyberbullying and the form of words, images or sound used will be relevant.

### How Intention Could Be Established

It is clear that the subjective nature of intention can make this element difficult to establish in some instances. To assist in making a determination, it may be appropriate to take into account the age of a perpetrator.<sup>8</sup> A younger child is likely to have a reduced capacity to appreciate the consequences of his/her actions than an adult because of a child's less-developed stage of maturity.<sup>8</sup> Research findings suggest that the relationship between victim and perpetrator plays an important role in the way conduct is interpreted.<sup>15</sup> Others suggest it is a victim's perception of the incident rather than the intention of the other that should be considered.<sup>12,20</sup> It is the view of the author that intention is best determined based on how a reasonable person would perceive the perpetrator's conduct.

The reasonable person approach is an objective test that measures the conduct of the perpetrator against conduct of a hypothetical reasonable person placed in a similar position as the victim. This approach is widely adopted in both criminal law and law of torts. In Australia, it is not uncommon for offences to be defined by the reasonable person test in relation to harassment or workplace bullying.<sup>22</sup> Applying the reasonable person standard to the cyberbullying context would set some boundaries to an establishing intention. It would serve as a practical tool for diminishing the level of subjectivity from a finding of intention. By introducing the reasonable person standard as an objective measurement of conduct, intention becomes a practicable element of the definition.

### A Suggested Descriptive Definition

In light of the above, an appropriate descriptive definition is suggested:

Cyberbullying involves the use of ICTs to carry out a series of acts as in the case of direct cyberbullying, or an act as in the case of indirect cyberbullying, intended to harm another (the victim) who cannot easily defend him or herself.

*Direct cyberbullying* involves a perpetrator repeatedly directing unwanted electronic communications to a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself with the intent to harm the victim.

*Indirect cyberbullying* involves directing a single or repeated unwanted electronic communications to a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself with the intent to harm the victim.

An *intention to harm* is established where a reasonable person, adopting the position of the victim and having regard to all the circumstances, would regard the series of acts or an act as acts or an act intended to harm to the victim.

*Electronic communication* includes (but is not limited to) any transfer of signs signals, writing, images, sounds, data transferred whole or in part by wire, radio, a photo electronic or photo optical system, including electronic mail, Internet communications, instant messages, and facsimile communications.

*Harm* refers to emotional harm.

The elements of power imbalance, aggression, and intention (which are intrinsically linked) and the use of ICTs are all included in the above description. The altered meaning of repetition in the indirect cyberbullying context is captured by differentiating between direct and indirect cyberbullying.

### Conclusion

To address the phenomenon of cyberbullying, it is imperative to know what it is. A workable definition is crucial. This article has presented a model definition that encompasses both direct and indirect cyberbullying. The definition highlights the importance and applicability of traditional elements of bullying in relation to cyberbullying. Traditional face-to-face bullying requires a course of conduct to be established before the criterion of repetition is satisfied, and this aspect is retained in the model definition. The meaning of repetition in the cyber context is, however, altered in relation to indirect cyberbullying because of the public nature of the material once it enters the public online domain. Power imbalance is an equally essential criterion to cyberbullying and is preserved in the cyber context. The elements of intention and aggression are intrinsically linked and are fundamental aspects of this proposed cyberbullying definition.

### Disclosure Statement

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