Cyber-Victimized Students: Incidence, Impact, and Intervention

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Abstract
Bullying is a common topic in the media and academic settings. Teachers are regularly expected to provide curriculum and intervene regarding all forms of bullying, including cyber-bullying. Altering the behaviors of those who bully is often the focus of interventions, with less attention being placed on victim impact. The purpose of this article was to provide educators with a review of evidence regarding the occurrence, impact, and interventions for victims of cyber-bullying. Evidence reveals that cyber-bullying can have emotional, social, and academic impacts but that there are very few documented, and even fewer evidence-based, programs for victims of cyber-bullying. We conclude by proposing that school-wide programs and support be developed and provided to victims.

Keywords
cyber-victimization, cyber-bullying, victim impact, students

Recent research indicates that up to 78% of youth own a cell phone and 95% of adolescents are online (Pew Research Center, 2013); the potential for cyber-bullying is a real possibility for many youth. As bullying is aggressive behavior of concern to educators, it is important that cyber-bullying be understood with respect to the academic setting. Cyber-bullying may be more difficult to detect compared with physical bullying; however, it is no less an issue that must be addressed by educators. The purpose of this article is to review evidence regarding the occurrence, impact, and interventions for victims of cyber-bullying to provide educators with evidence that may assist to address this potentially harmful form of bullying.

Definition and Incidence
Although various definitions and inclusion criteria for cyber-bullying are noted, this type of bullying is generally defined as an intentional harmful act using electronic methods such as text messages, emails, and content on websites (Snakenborg, Van Acker, & Gable, 2011). Similar to classic bullying, cyber-bullying involves an imbalance of power, aggression, and a repeated negative action (Smith et al., 2008). Canadian evidence suggests that approximately one in four students have been cyber-bullied (Li, 2006) and various samples in a number of countries indicate that between 10% and 35% of youth are victims of cyber-bullying (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Beran & Li, 2005; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchán, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Rivers & Noret, 2010). In a study of 1,671 adolescents aged 12 to 17 years, 5% were victims of exclusively cyber-bullying while another 5% were victims of both cyber- and traditional bullying (Ortega et al., 2009); these researchers indicated that although exclusively traditional bullying occurred for more youth (15%), the combination of cyber-bullying with or without traditional bullying is concerning.

The secrecy associated with cyber-bullying may be appealing to bullies; cyber-bullies have the potential to harm many victims with little effort while being difficult to identify (Snakenborg et al., 2011). Teachers may need to address concerns of cyber-bullying; by understanding cyber-bully targets, victim impact, and methods of intervention, teachers will be in a position to identify and attend to issues of cyber-bullying.

Cyber-Victims: Age and Gender
To date, little has been written regarding who is victimized (targeted) by cyber-bullies. Although information is available regarding victim characteristics of more traditional forms of bullying (i.e., physical), far less information is available regarding the age and gender of cyber-victims. Evidence that does exist suggests that the method used to bully (i.e., text, websites) may differ based on the target.

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Victim age and gender are investigated in both elementary and high school settings with participants ranging in age from 6 to 18 (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007, 2008; Ortega et al., 2009; Raskauskas, 2010; Spears, Sle, Owens, & Johnson, 2009) or roughly Grades 1 to 12 in Canada. With respect to the victims’ age, Raskauskas (2010) found a significant difference in age for victims of text messages; specifically, more text-victims were reported in the intermediate grades (i.e., Grades 7 and 8; 12-14 years of age) compared with students in higher grades (up to Grade 12). Similarly, Ortega and colleagues (2009) found significantly more mobile phone cyber-bullying (i.e., text messages, pictures, and phone calls) in 14- and 15-year-olds compared with younger and older age groups; no differences were found between age groups for Internet cyber-bullying. In studies of 6- to 17-year-old students, Hinduja and Patchin (2007, 2008) found that older students are more likely to report cyber-bullying. As with self-report research, it is unknown whether or not all those individuals who experienced cyber-bullying reported their experiences; however, given the similarities across studies, it is likely that there are some age-related cyber-bullying experiences.

Although gender has been investigated with respect to traditional forms of bullying, less research has focused on gender and cyber-victimization. Of the few studies comparing gender-based experiences, more females report being cyber-bullied through Internet (i.e., threatening emails, intimidation/abuse in chat rooms, blogs, etc.) and mobile phones (which include text messages, pictures, and phone calls) compared with males (Ortega et al., 2009). Along with incidence, cyber-bullying experiences may differ by gender as slightly more males than females report receiving text messages that threatened their life or safety, whereas more females than males note receiving messages threatening their reputation (Cassidy et al., 2009). Similar results were found in a Spanish study; males were more often involved in traditional direct bullying whereas more females reported mobile phone and Internet bullying (Ortega et al., 2009). These results suggest a similar gender-related trend to traditional forms of bullying where males are more likely involved in physical and females in emotional bullying (Cassidy et al., 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Raskauskas, 2010). It seems that there may be age- and gender-related factors to consider when investigating and addressing victims of cyber-bullying.

Impact

The impact of cyber-bullying may be confounded by the motivations of the bully, which may differ, as noted, based on the gender and age of the victim. Little evidence, however, is available to indicate whether impact of cyber-bullying is related to the victim’s gender and age; instead, respondents are usually grouped and their impact investigated as a whole. Based on both empirical and non-empirical research, it appears that even though the percentage of bullying victims who experienced cyber-methods are lower than for traditional forms, the impact may be extreme. A review of emotional, social, and academic impact of cyber-bullying is provided below; we reviewed these specific impacts, as they are most likely to be brought to the attention of teachers.

Emotional

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods reveal a number of emotional impacts of cyber-bullying. In a qualitative study of 20 students in Grades 8 to 12 who discussed the impact of cyber-bullying on them, the researchers reported three categories of emotionally based recurring themes: (a) strong negative feelings and emotions—embarrassment, unhappiness/sadness, loneliness, powerlessness, depression, and anxiety; (b) fear—regarding going out, leaving home, and invasion of safety; and (c) self-impact—damage to reputation and self-esteem, public humiliation, and feelings of rejection (Spears et al., 2009). Similar emotional impacts are reported in larger samples. Various researchers have found that between 35% and 43% of self-reported victims of cyber-bullying report no emotional impact (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Ortega et al., 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006), indicating that more than half of the victims are negatively impacted. Although it is possible that victims are not emotionally impacted, it is also possible that they do not want to report—or are not aware of—the impact. It may also be that the extent of impact is related to the extent of bullying, which was not investigated. Of those victims who report emotional impact, many (up to 93%) report such issues as sadness, anger, frustration, fear, suspicion, or a combination of emotions (Cassidy et al., 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Ortega et al., 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Raskauskas, 2010; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). The range of percentages of victims reporting impact likely results from the array of sample sizes (i.e., 33-657 victims); higher percentages of respondents reporting impact are from samples with fewer victims. In studies that included measures of depression and depressive symptoms, victims of cyber-bullying report concerns. For example, Raskauskas (2010) compared depressive symptoms of youth who had and had not been bullied through texting and found significantly more depressive symptoms in the text-bullied group. Furthermore, Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) investigated the impact of electronic bullying in 41 adolescent victims and found that 60% reported feeling sad, hopeless, or depressed as a result of their cyber-bullying. In a larger sample, up to 13% reported feeling depressed as a result of mobile or Internet bullying (Ortega et al., 2009). Depression and depressive symptoms are concerning; some victims of cyber-, as well as traditional, bullying engage in self-harm and suicidal ideation. Importantly, issues other than depression may precede self-harm thoughts and behaviors; feeling upset, stressed, worried, afraid, alone, and defenseless were all noted by some victims of cyber-bullying.
(Ortega et al., 2009) and these concerns may also lead to extreme outcomes.

A number of researchers have investigated the relationship between cyber-bullying and self-harm including thinking about and attempting suicide. It appears that children who are cyber-bullied may be at risk of self-harm as demonstrated in a number of studies. For example, researchers have found a weak but significant relationship between increased bullying and suicidal ideation in child and adolescent samples (Hay & Meldrum, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Researchers have reported that between 20% and 42% of victims report suicidal thoughts following cyber-bullying (Cassidy et al., 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010); in addition, 19% of cyber-bullied victims, in one study, acknowledged having attempted suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010) and these same authors note that cyber-victims were almost 2 times as likely as non-victims to have attempted suicide. The link between cyber-bullying, self-harm, and negative mood has been further investigated through mediation models to examine direct and indirect relationships between cyber-bullying and suicidal ideation. Hay and Meldrum (2010) investigated the relationship through a self-report questionnaire using 426 students (ages 10-21 years) who were asked about cyber-bullying victimization, mood, self-control, and deliberate self-harm, and suicidal ideation. Their results indicate that the relationship between cyber-bullying and self-harm is not direct, but is mediated by negative mood/emotion and self-control (Hay & Meldrum, 2010). Specifically, they found that cyber-victims with negative mood and little self-control are more likely to self-harm compared with victims with more positive mood and self-control.

As noted, many victims of cyber-bullying do experience negative mood; therefore, it is not surprising that these factors mediate the relationship between cyber-bullying and suicidal thoughts. Although it may be difficult for adults to intervene in cyber-bullying, it seems important that intervention for moods occur for cyber-victims to reduce the potential for self-harm. As noted, most researchers have investigated male and female victims as one group; however, when victims are investigated by gender, females reported more loneliness and depressive symptoms than males, whereas males reported more aggression (Schultze-Krumbholz, Jákel, Schultz, & Scheithauer, 2012). In addition, more cyber-victimization for females was related to increases in depression and aggression over time; however, more cyber-victimization for males was not related to increases in depression or aggression over time for males (Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2012). This research is important as it demonstrated the need to consider victimization and impacts separately for males and females. Although we have focused our review on cyber-victimization, it is important to note that Schultze-Krumbholz and colleagues (2012) have found that the long-term impacts differ based on not only victim gender but also whether the victim is engaged in cyber-bullying.

**Social**

Although it is not always possible to determine whether victimization causes or results from social difficulties, there is evidence that social status and cyber-bullying are intertwined. Understanding the relationship between social difficulties and cyber-bullying may assist teachers to identify and possibly intervene in an issue connected to cyber-bullying.

The relationship between cyber-victimization and peer status has been examined by a number of researchers. In one study, 1,700 students (Grades 5-11) self-reported their popularity in chat rooms and classrooms as well as the frequency and type of cyber-bullying experienced; the researchers found that lower social popularity in chat rooms, but not at school, predicted cyber-victimization (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009). Cyber-bullying has been found to predict cyber-victimization; however, engaging in traditional bullying has not been linked to cyber-victimization (Katzer et al., 2009; Rivers & Noret, 2010; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). Unpopularity is also found to increase the odds of more than one cyber-victimization experience for female, but not male, students (Rivers & Noret, 2010). Gender may be important in understanding the relationship between social behavior and cyber-victimization; however, as gender is not separated in most studies, this is an area that needs further exploration. Regardless of gender, these results suggest that being a bully and cyber-victimization may be linked to specific contextual (i.e., cyber) but not necessarily general (i.e., traditional) social behaviors.

Other researchers have investigated self-perceived social impact of cyber-bullying. Although small samples indicate that cyber-victimization is strongly correlated with avoiding others (Spears et al., 2009), studies with larger samples provide contrary results. For example, some researchers have shown that the majority of cyber-victims do not feel cyber-victimization has impacted their peer relationships (Cassidy et al., 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). In fact, once own cyber-bullying behaviors and traditional victimization are accounted for, social competence is not found to predict whether an individual is cyber-bullied (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). It appears that most cyber-victims do not believe they experience social problems; however, for some, there are social impacts and it may be the emotional impact of cyber-victimization that contributes to social outcomes. As most research is not temporal, it is not clear whether and how cyber-victimization and social success are intertwined and more research is needed to understand this potentially intricate relationship. Along with emotional and social interventions, academic functioning may be impacted by cyber-bullying, and academics is certainly an area in which teachers may provide support to victims.

**Academic**

The same cause and consequence conundrum is present for cyber-victimization and academic performance as was noted...
for emotional and social functioning. Specifically, it is not clear whether academic problems existed prior to or as a result of cyber-bullying. Two ways to consider cyber-bullying and academic performance include school-based behaviors and achievement, both of which are reviewed below.

With respect to classroom/school behavior, researchers have compared cyber-bullied and non-bullied students to determine whether their behaviors differ. A number of behavioral differences between cyber-victims and non-victims are noted, including carrying a weapon to school (13% vs. 0.6%), detentions or suspensions (0%-21% vs. 11%), and skipping school (<20%-33% vs. 4%; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). Furthermore, moderate relationships indicate that increased cyber-victimization is related to increased school truancy (Katzer et al., 2009). These results suggest that some victims engage in negative school-based behaviors, which may be a result of the fear and other negative emotions reported by victims of cyber-bullying previously outlined. Of course, not all students with negative behavior are victims of cyber-bullying; however, teachers may assist in identifying cyber-bullying by identifying behavior changes or investigating the causes or contributing factors to negative school behaviors.

Poor academic performance also appears to be linked to cyber-victimization for some students. Lower grades (C’s or lower) have been reported for more cyber-victims (14%) than non-victims (8%; Ybarra et al., 2007) and more than half of the adolescent cyber-victims reported dissatisfaction on a recent exam (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). Moreover, 30% of cyber-victims reported recently cheating on a test (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007).

As noted, cyber-bullying may impact the victim’s mood, which may in turn affect academic performance; however, there is little evidence regarding the direct and indirect relationship between cyber-victimization and academics. Issues likely to impact academic performance have been investigated; for example, Cassidy et al. (2009) found that 9% (n = 33) of young adolescent participants (n = 365) reported receiving negative cyber messages that caused them fear and of these, 57.5% (19/33) indicated that these messages impacted their ability to concentrate. In a qualitative study, 20 youth who reported on the effect of cyber-bullying noted a negative impact on schoolwork (Spears et al., 2009); however, the details of what exactly was impacted (i.e., grades) were not provided. As suggested with behavior, it is possible that teachers may recognize potential cyber-victims if academic performance—or issue likely to impact academic performance—suggest difficulties.

Similar to social difficulties, there may be an indirect relationship between cyber-bullying and school-based behaviors and performance. It is possible that the emotional and social difficulties resulting from cyber-bullying impact school functioning. Of note, less than half of the cyber-victims report any one difficulty and, therefore, teachers should not look for one emotional, social, or academic impact as a marker for cyber-victimization. In addition, based on the evidence presented, teachers should not assume all cyber-victims are negatively impacted. Regardless of the outcome of cyber-bullying, it is essential that effective interventions be in place to assist those who are victims as well as those who may be at risk of victimization.

**Intervention**

As cyber-bullying is a relatively new issue, there is little evidence to indicate whether interventions are useful in preventing and intervening. Much of the research to date has focused on adolescents’ perspectives regarding what type of intervention may be helpful, with little evidence of efficacy of prevention and intervention strategies.

**Reporting**

Before intervention can occur, victims of cyber-bullying must report the incidences. Two Canadian studies were conducted by Li (2007, 2010) to investigate whether and why cyber-bullied victims choose to report or not report incidences. In the first study, 177 seventh-grade students completed a questionnaire; 52% reported knowing someone being cyber-bullied and 25% (n = 44) reported cyber-victimization. Overall, 67% of respondents believed that adults in schools tried to stop cyber-bullying when informed; however, 66% of victims and those knowing a victim did not report their knowledge and experiences to an adult (Li, 2007). In Li’s (2010) study, 247 students in Grades 7 through 12 from suburban and rural schools reported their behavior following cyber-victimization; 42.5% did nothing, 11.7% reported to an adult, and 23.5% reported to a friend. Regardless of who or how the cyber-bullying was handled, only 14% indicated that it improved. Few victimized respondents (17%) indicated that an adult attempted to assist them (Li, 2010). Based on this evidence, it seems that many but not all victims are aware of cyber-safety, that simply telling someone (including adults) about their cyber-victimization is not helpful for many, and that processes to encourage reporting and supporting victims should be explored for efficacy.

**Prevention and Intervention**

Although little to no evidence is available regarding effective cyber-bullying programs for victims, some researchers have examined students’ perspectives on what they feel will help with this form of bullying. For example, Cassidy et al. (2009) asked participants to select strategies they believe would be useful from 10 possible solutions; one of the three solutions most often selected as the first choice included setting up anonymous phone-in lines (19%). Recall Li’s (2010) findings that only 15% of cyber-victims who reported to an adult felt that their situation improved; this suggests that reporting through a phone-line may not impact the situation. However,
Regarding prevention and reporting; there is little evidence of behaviors based on school-based support. The focus of most school-tims, and the known emotional, social, and academic impacts of cyber-bullying, indicates a need to develop and provide support to victims and witnesses of bullying who may otherwise remain silent. Developing programs to teach students about cyber-bullying and its effects and teaching cyber-safety were also noted as likely beneficial (Cassidy et al., 2009). Researchers have found that 70% of victims of cyber-bullying report awareness of cyber-space safety strategies; with more than one third reporting being self-taught and just less than one third reporting that their parents or schools provided them with cyber-safety information (Li, 2007). These results, although limited, suggest that many youth are not informed or are self-informed about cyber-safety, which raises the concern regarding the level and type of knowledge youth have; schools may benefit students by providing curriculum that, along with addressing other safety issues (physical, sexual), includes cyber-safety to ensure accurate and general knowledge of the risks of cyber-space. Given that cyber-bullying is a more recent form of bullying to be recognized, intervention programs are often an extension of those used for more traditional methods of bullying. Although a few programs are currently under investigation for efficacy, such as KiVa (Kärnä et al., 2013), other programs have not shown efficacy in improving risky online behavior (Mishna, Cook, Saini, Wu, & McFadden, 2011). To date, there is no convincing evidence of interventions that assist longitudinally in altering the behaviors of the bully and encouraging disclosure by victims. Even with accurate knowledge of cyber-safety and methods to encourage disclosure of own or others cyber-victimization, there will remain victims of cyber-bullying who are negatively impacted. Intervention strategies must be developed and assessed for efficacy in addressing the variety of possible deterrents to victims and bystanders of this form of bullying.

**Victim Intervention**

Although many bullying programs attempt to increase reporting by victims and witnesses, intervention programs specifically to address the impacts of cyber-victimization are less often discussed. Based on the evidence presented, there are many possible short- and long-term deterrents to cyber-victims and these issues will be evident within schools. The high percentage of children and youth who are cyber-victims, and the known emotional, social, and academic impacts of cyber-bullying, indicates a need to develop and provide interventions to assist victims. It is likely that many victims who experience emotional, academic, and/or social difficulties regarding cyber-victimization are provided individual but not school-based support. The focus of most school-based programs is on the bully and altering the bully’s behaviors.

The majority of the programs offered focus on education regarding prevention and reporting; there is little evidence of support programs for current victims of bullying. As there is little evidence that the currently implemented programs are effective, it is incumbent upon those working with victims (as well as witnesses and potential victims) of cyber-bullying to evaluate various initiatives that may benefit victims. In addition, the need for victim intervention has been acknowledged through recent amendments to Ontario’s Education Act (1990): Bill 14 designates a definition of bullying (which includes cyber-bullying), outlines steps that must be taken by teachers and the principal with respect to reports of bullying, and indicates that both the perpetrator and victim should be offered remediation. The Education Act stipulates that remedial assistance may be offered to victims by trained professionals such as social workers and psychologists (ss. 170(1)); however, given the large number of victims in schools, it is unlikely that trained school-based professionals will have the time and resources to devote to each individual victim of bullying. As a solution to the potential lack of victim support, school-based programs that go beyond simply educating regarding identifying cyber-bullying and protection strategies should be offered to victims. Support through school-wide initiatives for victims of cyber-bullying could include structured and scheduled support groups for victims (and witnesses), which would provide an open and safe place for discussions regarding the impact of cyber-bullying as well as brainstorming ways to deal with its impact; peer mentors who could meet regularly with victims to provide support from an empathetic peer; drop-in centers that are students and/or school personnel would allow for support that could be accessed by victims at any time of the school day; and/or an anonymous school-based phone-line that may allow for increased incidence reporting and much-needed emotional support to victims and witnesses of bullying who may otherwise be fearful of seeking assistance. In addition, as victims are reported to experience a range of negative outcomes (i.e., carrying weapons, truancy, negative emotions, academic difficulties), it may be beneficial for teachers and/or school social workers to include inquiries about cyber-victimization into their observations regarding reasons for changes in student behavior. As a number of victims and witnesses report little support from teachers and adults once they have disclosed incidents of bullying, teacher training and support must be provided and teachers and students should be encouraged to fully address and acknowledge any reports of student-to-student cyber-bullying. School-wide victim initiatives may not only assist victims experiencing negative impacts, but they may also provide the necessary support that could prevent possible negative outcomes for those victims who currently report no difficulties.

**Conclusion**

Bullying is a complicated and detrimental issue for victims; cyber-bullying is no less impactful and must be addressed from the victim angle. Evidence reveals that cyber-bullying
targets and methods may differ based on the age and gender of the victim, and the victim impact crosses social, emotional, and academic spheres. A number of intervention and prevention programs are implemented for traditional bullying and some also attempt to address cyber-bullying; however, little support and programming is in place for victims of traditional, let alone cyber-, bullying. Current bullying initiatives attempt to improve reporting by the victim and witnesses; however, this appears to be the extent of intervention for victims. Although individual school support may be available for cyber-victims, school-wide interventions may be useful in supporting victims of cyber-bullying. Until these are developed, implemented, and shown to be effective, individual teachers will be relied on to identify, acknowledge, and support individual victims, on top of intervening and providing programming for the bully.

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Ryan and Curwen

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