Original Paper

Equity in the Academy? Examining Cyberbullying Victimization and Conflict Resolution Across Sexual and Gender Identity During COVID-19

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Abstract

Decades of research have examined bullying victimization during the K-12 years of schooling; yet limited research has explored cyberbullying victimization at the university level, and even fewer studies have examined cyberbullying of SGM (sexual and/or gender minority) individuals in higher education. As reliance on technology has increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, university members may have encountered increased victimization experiences. This report aims to expand the literature on SGM cyberbullying victimization and resource utilization in higher education. Findings resulted from a mixed-methods survey of 231 respondents (185 students, 28 staff, 18 faculty) at a large, research-intensive university in the northeast United States. In general, cyberbullying victimization was not attributed to one's sexual or gender identity, and occurred primarily through educational communication tools (e.g., email) and social media; a majority of cyberbullying instances went unacknowledged by supervisors or campus resources. Though community members were aware of institutional conflict resolution resources, many of the reported instances were not resolved. Future research should focus on how cyberbullying in higher education continues to change as reliance on information and communication technology increases.

Keywords

cyberbullying victimization, higher education, mental health, sexual or gender identity, COVID-19

1. Introduction

Decades of research have examined the prevalence of secondary school cyberbullying (Abreu & Kenney, 2018; Notar et al., 2013), but limited research has explored cyberbullying at the university level despite its continuation into higher education (Minor et al., 2013; Ramsey et al., 2016). Even fewer studies focus on sexual and/or gender minoritized individuals (Note 1) (Budge et al., 2020; Legg et al., 2020). SGM students, faculty, and staff may be more vulnerable to cyberbullying (Note 2) victimization, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where university members have depended on technology to maintain day-to-day operations. As perpetrators have the opportunity to maintain anonymity through electronic communication means, cyberbullying may emerge as a more appealing method of victimization (Doxbeck, 2020).

A review of the literature suggests that students tend to cyberbully their peers primarily through text messaging, email, and social media (Macdonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010; Watts et al., 2017) and may take the consequences of cyberbullying more seriously as they mature and prepare to enter the workforce. Students may also experience victimization by faculty or staff members in positions of greater institutional power (Goodboy et al., 2015; Misawa & Rowland, 2014; Twale & DeLuca, 2008), often resulting from course-related discrepancies. In turn, faculty tend to receive intentionally harmful course evaluations, emails, or other correspondence from students regarding their performance or other discrepancies (Blizard, 2016; Daniloff, 2009). Students who utilize social media to discuss experiences with their instructor, such as Rate My Professor, Facebook, or Twitter may indirectly cause harm by posting negative comments online without the victim's knowledge. Further research suggests that faculty and staff experience cyberbullying victimization from their superior colleagues due to the hierarchical structure and power imbalances of academia (Murphy, 2009), which typically occur via email (Cassidy et al., 2014; Cassidy et al., 2017). Cyberbullying victimization is linked to negative mental and emotional consequences (McConnell et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2017), which can exacerbate the impact of higher education stressors such as academic achievement, pressures to produce research, and high-stakes work environments.

Cyberbullying victimization in the academy may be especially prevalent for students, faculty, and staff who identify as SGM, who are often victims of stigma and discrimination by strangers, friends, family, and colleagues (Alessi et al., 2017; Salerno et al., 2020). Research also suggests that SGM students are more likely to experience cyberbullying victimization than their heterosexual counterparts (Doxbeck, 2020). Universities may be unwelcoming to the SGM community which can result in SGM individuals feeling estranged from their institutions (Pryor, 2018). Because campus climate is "mediated by the extent individuals feel a sense of safety, belonging, engagement within the environment, and value as members of a community," SGM students' exclusionary experiences may pose implications for student success, persistence, and retention (Renn & Patton, 2010, p. 248). For faculty and staff, institutions as hiring bodies have non-discriminatory policies towards their employees; however, the potential for SGM faculty and staff to experience discrimination by their colleagues is plausible. Experiences of

SGM identity victimization in the academy, which co-functions as a home, classroom, and/or workplace for many, can lead to potential negative outcomes regarding mental health and overall well-being (Hatchel et al., 2018a; Hatchel et al., 2018b).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students, faculty, and staff were required to abruptly transition to fully online teaching and learning, where technology became the primary form of communication, education, and management of day-to-day operations. These immediate and significant shifts contributed to feelings of uncertainty, isolation, and worsened mental health among members of higher education environments, where competing responsibilities and stressors are already prevalent (Aucejo et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2020; Copeland et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020). With unexpected increases in technology dependence, instances of cyberbullying victimization may have proliferated. Recent research suggests that SGM students were especially vulnerable to COVID-19-influenced challenges, where campus closures perpetuated minority stress by distancing students from mental health services, support systems/communities, and coping resources (Salerno et al., 2020). In general, COVID-19 has negatively impacted the mental health of university community members (Chandra, n.d.; Copeland et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2020). When coupled with targeted cyberbullying victimization of SGM individuals, negative health-related consequences may be exceedingly maladaptive towards student, faculty, and staff well-being.

This study sought to identity the prevalence and mechanisms of personal and witnessed cyberbullying victimization in higher education, before and during the transition to remote learning resulting from COVID-19, and determine the potential role of SGM discrimination. Further, the researchers sought to examine the extent to which victimization experiences are addressed and resolved in academia. As such, this study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What personal and witnessed experiences of cyberbullying in higher education do students, faculty, and staff report, and what emotional and behavioral impacts do they report? (2) How do participants describe cyberbullying victimization in relation to sexual and/or gender identity? (3) In what ways, if any, are instances of cyberbullying in higher education addressed?

2. Method

Data were collected via an online mixed-methods survey in July 2020, which asked participants to reflect on their personal and observed experiences of cyberbullying victimization and its consequences during the 2019-2020 academic year (exclusive of summer months). Data resulted in an initial sample of 261 students, staff, and faculty from a research-intensive university in the northeast United States. Participants were recruited from email listservs across 12 decanal units and agreed to consent prior to survey completion. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were generated using IBM SPSS Version 25, and written qualitative responses informed the open-ended survey questions. After removal of missing data due to nonresponse and outliers, the final sample included 231 participants (185 students, 28 staff, 18 faculty) whose average age was 29.29 (SD = 10.40). Specifically, 60.3% were ciswomen, 34.2%

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cismen, 3.0% nonbinary, and 1.7% transgender. Further, 61.2% identified as heterosexual, 12.1% gay, 17.7% bisexual, and 9% other. A majority of the sample were White (75.7%), 17.8% were Asian or Asian American, 2.6% Black, 2.2% Hispanic, 0.9% other, 0.4% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.4% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Qualitative analysis involved reviewing and coding participants' short answer responses using a priori codes such as "personal" and "witnessed" experiences with cyberbullying, as well as "conflict resolution". Quantitative and qualitative findings are jointly reported in the Results according to three themes: personal experiences, witnessed experiences, and conflict resolution.

3. Result

3.1 Personal Experiences

Several participants provided quantitative (Table 1) and narrative responses to offer insight into their experiences with cyberbullying victimization and its emotional and behavioral consequences (Table 2). While one student who identified as gay was private messaged "rude words" about her sexuality, another student experienced racialized cyberbullying: "When looking for a roommate when starting college last year around March, I hit up some people via the Facebook group and texted them on Snapchat. One individual's response was a bit unpleasant when he found out about my race." A ciswoman was cyberbullied by a cisman because she refused to have sex with him, yet she had to continue working with him on a class project.

Table 1. Cyberbullying Victimization and Conflict Resolution

| | | Type of Witnessed Cyberbullying Victimization | | | |
	Personal Victimization	Faculty/Staff	LGBTQ Faculty/Staff	Student	LGBTQ Student
N	16	31	8	19	5
M	9.63	3.94	2.25	2.58	1.20
SD	15.14	8.69	1.83	2.82	045
Mode	**Percentage**				
Email	43.8	32.3	50.0	26.3	0.00
Course Evaluations	0.00	22.6	0.00	0.00	0.00
Messaging	31.3	12.9	12.5	42.1	20.0
Virtual Meetings	12.5	12.9	12.5	0.00	0.00
Social Media	25.0	29.0	50.0	36.8	80.0
Course Pages	0.00	3.22	12.5	0.00	0.00
Conflict Resolution					
Not Acknowledged	43.8	41.9	50.0	42.2	28.6

Supervisor	0.00	12.9	0.00	10.5	0.00
Victim	43.8	32.3	25.0	36.8	42.9
Someone Else	12.5	03.2	12.5	10.5	14.3
Not Applicable	0.00	09.7	12.5	0.00	14.2

Note. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to selection of multiple item responses or rounding.

Table 2. Emotional and Behavioral Impact of Cyberbullying Victimization

	Percentage					
	Never	**Once**	**Twice**	**A few times**	**Many times**	**Every day**
Behavioral Impact						
Difficulty Concentrating	14.3	0.0	7.1	35.7	35.7	7.1
Performance Suffered	28.6	7.1	0.0	35.7	14.3	14.3
Missed class/work	71.4	7.1	0.0	14.3	7.1	0.0
Emotional Impact						
Sad/hurt	21.4	0.0	0.0	21.4	50.0	7.1
Angry	7.1	0.0	0.0	35.7	35.7	21.4
Embarrassed	28.6	0.0	0.0	28.6	28.6	14.3
Afraid	28.6	14.3	0.0	7.1	21.4	28.6
Anxious	7.1	7.1	0.0	14.3	28.6	42.9
Cried*	46.2	0.0	15.4	23.7	15.4	0.0
Blamed Myself	57.1	7.1	7.1	0.0	14.3	14.3

Note. $n = 14$

* $n = 13$

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Additional participants described personal cyberbullying experiences with students, staff, and faculty. One respondent regularly received emails where senior administrators were copied on the message: "It appears to be attempts at public shaming." Another student described issues with her staff supervisor, where she would receive "nasty, threatening emails about assignments and [the supervisor] would take out her frustration and anger on students." One faculty member's email inbox was repeatedly bombed with political content that the sender knew "would be abhorrent to [her]." She described receiving text messages and anonymous phone calls in the middle of the night, amid other aggressive tactics: "The harasser used an online intake form to request visitation from the Jehovah's Witnesses to my home…An ad soliciting sex was posted to Craigslist with my cell phone number listed as the contact." Only one respondent, a ciswoman, reported personal experiences of SGM cyberbullying victimization

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by another student two times via email. She explained that while she was unsure about her sexual orientation, she was forcefully introduced to two men by a friend for dating purposes: "That experience is still my trauma."

3.2 Witnessed Experiences

One student described an instance where faculty members used expletives in an argument that took place over email. Although a program director stepped in to help resolve the issue, the student explained that the harmful email exchanges perpetuated. Further, a respondent reported cyberbullying victimization of a faculty member that took place via course evaluations. A student also described an issue with another student who continuously disparaged faculty members via messaging platforms: "The perpetrator was making comments about how one professor didn't know what she was doing (the professor was fully capable and thorough with the course) and about how another professor was a 'ditzy blond' and how could she possibly have a Ph.D." Other instances occurred via Blackboard or Zoom, where offensive comments were directed at faculty members. In one case, a meeting was "Zoom-bombed", where the perpetrator looped a derogatory audio recording and used disrespectful language in the chat.

One student was pressured by a faculty member to share her written work: "She pressured me to email her with permission to use a literature review I had written." Another respondent reported that offensive comments directed at a student were made in Facebook Messenger and texting-based group chats by a peer: "Many of the other students in the group chat, including myself, felt uncomfortable confronting it directly. But we reached out to support the victim privately, at which point [the victim] signaled they would handle the situation independently and ultimately did not confront the perpetrator."

3.3 Conflict Resolution

Most frequently, instances of cyberbullying were unacknowledged and/or unaddressed (see Table 1). Although one student reached out to the campus police, because the cyberbully's identity could not be confirmed, the cyberbullying went unaddressed. Another student purposefully avoided addressing her victimization "because [she] did not want to make matters worse and more complicated." Another student in a working group felt it would "create a nightmarish work environment" if she acknowledged a group member's cyberbullying. While several respondents explained that the cyberbullying victims chose to ignore the perpetrators because "[the victims know] the perpetrators are ignorant" and/or did not want to exacerbate the issues, another respondent chose to take action: "I witnessed people shit talking someone, so I told [them] off in the virtual space." Respondents also explained that victims of cyberbullying feared how the information would be received due to student-faculty power dynamics: "[The cyberbullying] was not handled. The professor assumed the student was wrong and did not look into the situation. [Eventually], the professor determined the student was correct but never admitted fault or apologized."

4. Discussion

Supporting tenets of SGM victimization (Pryor, 2018; Ramsay et al., 2016) and higher education cyberbullying prevalence patterns (Elci & Seckin, 2019), although only 6.1% of participants personally experienced cyberbullying victimization, a majority were among those who identify as SGM. Similar to prior research (Blizard, 2016; Cassidy et al., 2014; Cassidy et al., 2017; MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010; Watts et al., 2017), reported instances occurred over email, messaging, meeting spaces, and social media apps. Narrative responses suggest that many instances stemmed from beliefs about individual differences and negative sexual behaviors. Aligned with recent research (Aucejo et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2020; Copeland et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020), these reported instances pose negative implications for the victim's health, as all but two cyberbullying victims experienced some degree of behavioral or emotional consequences. When victimization goes unacknowledged, community members may be increasingly less willing to come forward with their experiences, assuming that resolution will not be met.

SGM cyberbullying was not widely reported in our sample, despite evidence that SGM persons tend to experience increased instances of cyberbullying victimization compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Doxbeck, 2020; Pryor, 2018; Ramsay et al., 2016). Although one respondent experienced situations where she was pressured about her sexual orientation, this prevalence was relatively low considering that 68% of victims self-identified as SGM. It is possible that university members may not be self-identified as SGM, resulting in cyberbullying victimization due to other factors. Mirroring prior research (Watts et al., 2017), respondents more frequently observed (rather than personally experienced) victimization which occurred over commonly utilized educational tools; it is plausible that cyberbullying victimization is becoming increasingly popular due to the ability of large audiences to witness or participate in attacks (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010). As reliance on tech-based modes of evaluation and communication grow, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Aucejo et al., 2020; Chandra et al., 2020; Masters et al., 2020), it is possible that the presence of witnessed cyberbullying victimization has since increased.

Among individuals who experienced victimization in this study, conflict resolution resources such as supervisors, Human Resources, university police, and the Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion were accessed. Ultimately, few victimization experiences were handled successfully through institutional resources, and many were "swept under the rug". If community members are aware of the limitations and ineffectiveness of institutional resources, lack of faith in these services could perpetuate deficiencies in conflict resolution and resource utilization, propelling instances of cyberbullying victimization. Thus, universities must work to ensure that all reported victimization experiences are thoroughly addressed and may consider increased training in electronic communication and conflict resolution, which has proven beneficial in undergraduate and graduate education (Brockman et al., 2010; Watson et al., 2019). It is similarly plausible that physical distancing and heavy reliance on

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tech-based communications during the COVID-19 pandemic may have thwarted victims' willingness or access to utilize campus resources for conflict resolution (Wang & DeLaquil, 2020).

The findings of this study are limited to data collected from one institution; further multi-institution research on cyberbullying victimization in academia is warranted to identify further successes and shortcomings of resource utilization and conflict resolution. Yet, this study highlights the prevalence of cyberbullying victimization across the transition to remote learning -in general and for SGM persons- and identifies opportunities for change in the ways institutions respond to instances of victimization in academia.

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Notes

Note 1. "Sexual and/or gender minoritized (SGM)" refers to individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, asexual, queer, and/or other (Budge et al., 2020; Legg et al., 2020).

Note 2. Bullying through electronic communication technologies which can cause direct or indirect harm towards the victim (Watts et al., 2017).