Cyberbullying Experiences Among Marginalized Youth: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go Next?

Guadalupe Espinoza¹ · Michelle Wright^{2,3}

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Abstract

Cyberbullying experiences are a social and health concern that many children and adolescents are facing in their day-to-day lives. One limitation of cyberbullying research is that studies have predominately focused on the experiences of youth from majority groups (i.e., European-American youth living in the U.S.). This limitation is addressed by focusing on cyberbullying involvement, both as victims and perpetrators, among marginalized groups. Specifically, studies examining cyberbullying among youth with disabilities and from ethnic, cultural and sexual minority backgrounds are presented. Furthermore, suggestions for future research on cyberbullying experiences among youth are outlined, namely taking into consideration the intersectionality of various identities and the identification of factors that may protect vulnerable children and adolescents from the pain of being victimized online.

Keywords Cyberbullying · Marginalized youth · Disabilities · Ethnic minorities · LGBTQ youth

Introduction

In the last decade there has been a steady increase in the number of studies focused on youth's experiences with cyberbullying, both as perpetrators and victims. Important strides have been made in better understanding not only the prevalence rates but also the factors that influence the likelihood and consequences of involvement in cyberbullying. As a result, numerous studies have shown that cyberbullying, like school bullying experiences, are robustly related to maladjustment among youth. A limitation of research on cyberbullying is that studies have largely focused on the experiences of youth from majority groups (i.e., European-American youth living in Western countries). Thus, many questions remain unanswered when it comes to

understanding cyberbullying among youth from marginalized groups. For example, to what extent do ethnic minority youth, such as Latino adolescents experience cyberbullying and what factors buffer them from the pain of being targeted? What is the long-term impact of being targeted online for young adults who stutter? For youth with a disability, to what extent are they able to detect the presence or absence of cyberbullying? To address some of the gaps in the field, this special issue builds on the existing literature on cyberbullying and expands it to cover the phenomenon among youth who are marginalized and whose experiences have been largely understudied. Specifically, we present a set of studies that examine cyberbullying experiences among youth with disabilities, from ethnic and cultural minority backgrounds and youth who identify as LGBTQ.

✉ Guadalupe Espinoza
guadespinoza@fullerton.edu

Michelle Wright
mfw5215@psu.edu

¹ Department of Child and Adolescent Studies, California State University, Fullerton, 800 N. State College Blvd., Fullerton, CA 92831, USA

² Penn State University, State College, PA, USA

³ Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

What We Learn from the Contributions of the Special Issue

In total, eight papers are included in this special section focused on understanding the perpetration and victimization experiences among marginalized youth. The first three papers focus on the experiences of youth with disabilities. Similar to traditional bullying, early research on cyberbullying among youth with disabilities has shown that children

with particular disabilities may have a greater likelihood of being involved in cyberbullying (e.g., Blake et al. 2012; Kowalski and Fedina 2011) and as such, more research is needed to understand their experiences. These three studies compare prevalence rates between youth with and without a disability, identify protective factors, and consider the long-term impact of being involved in cyberbullying for youth with disabilities.

Specifically, in the first article, Kowalski and Toth (2018) examine the prevalence and correlates of cyberbullying perpetration and victimization among adolescents and emerging adults, ages 16 to 20, with and without disabilities. Regardless of disability status, adolescents and emerging adults reported cyberbullying victimization, with the highest rates reported among individuals with disabilities. No significant differences were found for cyberbullying perpetration for either group. Kowalski and Toth suggest tailoring cyberbullying prevention and intervention programs to group characteristics as such characteristics might increase the risk of cyberbullying victimization. In an article focusing on adolescents with autism spectrum disorder, Wright (2018) found that high levels of parental mediation of technology use and social support made the association between cyberbullying victimization and depression weaker among adolescents. She concludes that perceived social support and parental mediation of technology use reduce the risk of experiencing cyberbullying victimization and the associated depressive symptoms. Consequently, Wright argues for additional research focused on investigating the protective factors for reducing the negative consequences resulting from experiencing cyberbullying. Finally, Nicolai et al. (2018) focus on examining the differences in the psychological effects of cyberbullying among: (1) adults who stutter and who were also cyberbullied as adolescents, (2) adults who stutter and who were not cyberbullied as adolescents, (3) adults who do not stutter and who were cyberbullied as adolescents, and (4) adults who do not stutter and who were not cyberbullied as adolescents. Overall, this retrospective study of cyberbullying victimization suggests that there are long-term implications (e.g., greater levels of depression) of experiencing cyberbullying, and that these effects could possibly continue into adulthood.

The next five articles focus on the cyberbullying experiences among youth from ethnic, cultural and sexual minority backgrounds. The “digital divide” that limited internet and cell phone access to only more affluent, majority groups has now largely diminished, and although there may be some difference in how groups use their devices (Tsetsi and Rains 2017), the ability to connect online, and subsequently be targeted online, is now a concern among most children and adolescents. Therefore, there is a need to examine the links between cyberbullying and internalizing symptoms, compare prevalence rates between majority and

minority youth, and identify protective factors for youth from ethnic and cultural minority backgrounds. Focusing on comparing the mental health symptoms based on minority or non-minority status, Duarte et al. (2018) findings revealed that sexual minorities experienced greater mental health symptoms when compared to non sexual minorities.

Comparing ethnic majority and minority youth, Barlett and Wright (2018) found that the relationships between cyberbullying victimization and cyberbullying perpetration as well as relational victimization and cyberbullying victimization were significant for majority adolescents but not for ethnic minority adolescents, whereas physical bullying perpetration and cyberbullying perpetration were associated for minority adolescents only.

In an article focused on identifying friendship factors that may protect Latino youth from the pain of being bullied online, Espinoza’s (2018) findings suggest that time spent with friends reduces the association between cyberbullying victimization and distress, anger, and attendance problems. Similar patterns were found for friendship quality, however, friendship quality only attenuated the link between cyberbullying victimization and feelings of distress. Focusing on yet another understudied group of youth, Broll et al. (2018) study the association between traditional bullying and cyberbullying involvement and depression, anxiety, and stress among Canadian indigenous adolescents. After accounting for age and gender, cyberbullying victimization was associated with greater reports of anxiety and stress while including traditional bullying victimization in the analysis, suggesting a unique contribution of experiencing cyberbullying.

Concluding this special section is a literature review authored by Abreu and Kenny (2018) that includes 27 studies among LGBTQ youth conducted in the United States, Canada, Australia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Findings revealed that cyberbullying victimization of LGBTQ adolescents ranged from 10.5% to 71.3%. LGBTQ adolescents who experienced cyberbullying victimization reported more suicidal ideation and attempts, greater depression, lower self-esteem, physical aggression, body image problems, isolation, and lower grade point averages. Based on the findings from the review, the authors make recommendations that may be particularly salient to protect youth who identify as LGBTQ.

Overall, the manuscripts included in this special issue highlight the importance of focusing on cyberbullying and the associated mental health issues among marginalized youth. These studies also highlight the need for research to move beyond comparison of the cyberbullying prevalence among marginalized and non-marginalized youth, and instead for research to focus on the diverse cyberbullying experiences of youth.

Recommendations for Future Research on Cyberbullying Among Marginalized Youth

As cyberbullying research continues to extend the population of youth who are studied and examine cyberbullying experiences among youth with disabilities, who identify as an ethnic minority, as LGBTQ, and/or who live in a non-Western country, there are still important gaps that need to be addressed. One such gap is the dearth of studies examining the intersectionality of various group memberships (e.g., gender, ethnicity, generational status) and how this may uniquely shape youth's experiences with cyberbullying. For example, it is not only important to test whether boys or girls are more likely to be victimized online, but also consider whether that boy or girl identifies as Asian-American or Black and how their ethnicity may intersect with gender to play a role in their likelihood of being targeted. Another gap is the identification of factors that may protect youth who are a part of marginalized groups and experience cyberbullying. That is, from multiple past studies it is well recognized that being the victim of cyberbullying is associated with a host of maladjustment problems such as school absences, distress, and even suicidal ideation (e.g., Bauman et al. 2013; Espinoza 2015; Juvonen and Gross 2008; Wright 2015), yet, currently there are few studies that aim to identify family, peer or school factors that may serve as a buffer in the links between cyberbullying and maladjustment.

An Intersectional Approach

Currently, most studies examine cyberbullying among marginalized youth by focusing on one part of their identity in isolation, such as examining the frequency of cyberbullying involvement among LGBTQ youth compared to heterosexual youth or studying the impact of being victimized online among Latino youth. Although this has been an important first step in extending research from focusing more exclusively on experiences among White, middle-class youth, we now need research to explore how different identities intersect within an individual and how these intersecting identities impact youth in terms of the likelihood of being involved in cyberbullying, and also the consequences of such involvement. For example, Kowalski and Toth (2018) found that adolescents with a disability were significantly more likely to report victimization experiences online. However, they did not examine if those differences may be amplified based on the adolescent's gender or ethnic background. That is, perhaps the risk of being victimized online is even greater for adolescents

who both have a disability *and* are from an ethnic minority group. Intersectionality research recognizes that multiple identities coexist and may fuse together in unique ways for individuals.

The research on intersectionality among children and adolescents lags compared to research among adults (Ghavami et al. 2016). However, there are some studies that have started to tackle the challenge of taking into account numerous identities and their intersection in the study of cyberbullying. In a study focused on examining the prevalence of cybervictimization, Stoll and Block (2015) hypothesized that the extent to which ethnicity is predictive of cyberbullying involvement among high school students may depend on their gender and sexuality. The results revealed that gender and ethnicity did intersect. Specifically, among students of color, rates of cybervictimization did not differ based on their gender, but among white students, it was female students who were most likely to be victimized online. Although no intersection of ethnicity and sexuality was found, the results reveal how the intersection of gender and ethnic identities may impact victimization rates. In a different study among adolescents that also examined the intersections of ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, the results showed that when examining the intersections of these identities in the associations between bullying (school and cyber) and suicidal ideation, it was sexual orientation that most robustly put adolescents at the greatest risk of suicidal ideation (but did not intersect with ethnicity or gender; Mueller et al. 2015). Thus, these two studies differ in their results on the extent to which an adolescent's ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation intersect to impact bullying.

Overall, the limited studies in the area show mixed results, but as this is an area in its nascent phase, more studies are needed to understand and account for how mutual and simultaneous identities play a role in cyberbullying among youth. It will certainly be challenging for research that utilizes an intersectionality framework to take into account the various and complex identities relevant for children and adolescents, but it is important to note that in their day to day lives, there are some identities that may be more relevant, especially within the online context. Thus, researchers will need to consider the unique aspects of both the online context and their particular sample to identify the intersecting identities that may be most critical to capture.

Identification of Protective Factors

As the research on cyberbullying among youth from marginalized groups continues to grow, so does the evidence that across all groups, youth who are victimized online fare worse compared to youth who do not experience victimization. For example, in a study among Asian and Pacific Islander high school students, reports

of cyberbullying increased the likelihood of substance use and suicide attempts (Goebert et al. 2011). Kowalski et al. (2016) found that being cyberbullied was especially linked to low self-esteem and greater depression among college students with a disability. Moreover, research in this special issue highlights how LGBTQ youth who are cyberbullied report a number of psychological, emotional, behavioral and academic problems (Abreu and Kenny 2018), and that Indigenous adolescents in Canada who are cyberbullied report higher levels of anxiety and stress, over and above the impact of school bullying (Broll et al. 2018). Thus, given our growing understanding of the ways in which youth are impacted by cyberbullying and given that this may be further complicated given the challenges they face as members of marginalized groups, it is important for future work to test and identify factors that may protect youth from the pain of being victimized online.

In the current issue, some strides are made towards filling this gap with Wright (2018) identifying that both parental mediation of technology use and social support weakened the positive link between cyberbullying victimization and depression among youth with autism spectrum disorder, and Espinoza (2018) finding that time spent with friends protects Latino adolescents from the anger, distress, and attendance problems that result from being bullied online. Given differences in culture, ability, context and a number of other factors that may differ among youth from various marginalized groups, a protective factor for one group may not necessarily be protective for another group of youth. For example, it could be hypothesized that family closeness and support may serve a greater protective role for victims of cyberbullying from collectivistic backgrounds (e.g., particular Latino or Asian backgrounds) where the role of family is particularly emphasized (Fuligni et al. 1999). Given that LGBTQ youth tend to first come out to their friends before their parents and other family members (Savin-Williams 1998), then when they are victimized online, peer and friendship support may be more protective against negative outcomes than family support. Thus, more research is needed to test and identify the factors that will protect youth from the pain of being cyberbullied, as this will be paramount to the continuing development and improvement of intervention programs to help victims of bullying, especially those youth who may be the most vulnerable. In conclusion, understanding the cyberbullying experiences among marginalized youth that is presented in this special issue and furthermore, future research extending this research area will help educators, social workers and policy makers as we all work towards addressing this important problem of cyberbullying that many children and adolescents are facing in their day to day lives.

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