Cyberbullying in the Workplace Towards a Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the current state of workplace cyberbullying research and provides a listing of the antecedent, outcome and targets of workplace bullying to facilitate future research. Cyberbullying involves the use of internet-based electronic communication devices and services to bully, harass, or intimidate individuals or groups (Hong, Chien-Hou, Hwang, Hu, & Chen 2014). Technology has provided internet-based communication tools that have increased productivity significantly. These communications, however, can have detrimental effects in the work environment when they cross the line into bullying. Schimmel and Nicholls (2013) note that cyberbullying, unlike face-to-face bullying, has several important facets that can increase its impact. The first is that, unlike in face-to-face bullying, there are no face-to-face cues that trigger societal norms and regulate the behavior. Second, in the case of face-to-face bullying, the incident is not confined to a particular place and time. With cyberbullying, the impact is felt whenever the victim is online; this can be home, work, anywhere actually. A single bullying incident can inflict pain multiple times and in multiple locations. Also, with cyberbullying, the information is online and available indefinitely. The impact of cyberbullying in the workplace at the organizational level includes decreased job satisfaction, increased absenteeism, and lost productivity. At the individual level, the impacts can include depression, sleep disturbance, and anxiety. In addition, the prevention and remedies for organizations are discussed.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, behavior models, workplace behavior, workplace bullying, psychological constructs

INTRODUCTION

In the years since our first review of the cyberbullying in the workplace literature (Schimmel & Nicholls, 2014), there have been relatively few academic articles adding to the literature examining the construct. This study picks up at the end of that literature review which was completed in late 2012 and extends it while providing a taxonomy of the variables that have been shown to cause and be caused by workplace cyberbullying.

Workplace cyberbullying leads to both personal and organizational harm and, as such, is an important topic for research (Coyne, et al., 2017). As more digital natives join the workforce, it would make sense that they will bring their past behaviors with them. Cassidy, Brown, and Jackson (2011, 2012) found that approximately 40 percent of students had been cyber-bullied and between one half and a third reported being a cyberbully. This combined with most employees preferring digital communication over face to face (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service [ACAS], 2012) allows the logical leap that cyberbullying in the workforce will only increase in the near future. Kowalski, Toth, & Morgan (2017) support this increase in workplace bullying. In a study of over 3,000 respondents over 30 percent experienced cyberbullying in the workplace.

This paper reviews this literature to assist and guide future research. To this end, the paper is laid out to first define the domain of the construct, and then address the constructs that have been found to be antecedents of the act of workplace cyberbullying. A brief discussion of the research findings of mediating and moderating constructs as well as the outcomes of cyberbullying are addressed. Opportunities for prevention within the workplace are reviewed as well as remedies that address cyberbullying in the workplace. Finally, suggestions for organizations and future research are provided.

DEFINITION

Cyberbullying in the workplace includes aggression by individuals utilizing electronic devices or environments such as cell phones, e-mail, text messaging, Internet websites, chat rooms, blogs, online videos, and tweets. These instruments are used as tools to insult, mock, threaten, intimidate, or spread rumors about a victim. The impact of this exists beyond a normal face-to-face bullying situation because of the electronic nature of the attack (Schimmel & Nicholls, 2013). The attack exists in cyberspace independently of the initial placement of the comments or bullying material and can be viewed repeatedly. Furthermore, workplace cyberbullying follows the victim anywhere electronic devices are accessed—home, commute, work—there is no place that the victim cannot be reached and impacted. This key difference from face-to-face bullying has been referred to as the extended reach of cyberbullying (D'cruz & Noronha, 2013).

Additionally, cyberbullying in the workplace is not uncommon with studies showing about 11 percent of all workers experiencing some form of it (Branch, Ramsay, and Barker, 2013; Forssell, 2016), and it occurs across all workplace disciplines. The figure of 11 percent should be considered through the prism of an underreported event. Wozencroft, Campbell, Orel, Kimpton, and Leong (2015) found that collegiate cyberbullying was underreported because there were not clear policies identifying it and prohibiting the behavior. Several other researchers found that a lack of policies made the victim feel that their complaint would not be received or considered appropriate. Further, companies are not set up for investigating and may not have

appropriate policies in place. (Taylor, Haggerty, Gresty, Criado Pacheco, Berry & Almond, 2015; Beal, 2016). Cyberbullying in the workplace occurs across industries and managerial levels. Studies that have focused on: business interns (Bevill & McDaniel, 2016), doctors (Farley, Coyne, Sprigg, Axtell, & Subramanian, 2015), librarians (Bartlett, 2016), professors (Faucher, Cassidy, & Jackson, 2015), and white collar workers (Snyman & Loh, 2015).

ANTECEDENTS OF CYBERBULLYING IN THE WORKPLACE

There is a small but rich body of research that has focused on why people participate in cyberbullying in the workplace. To more fully understand and prevent this form of bullying, this research explores the psychological constructs that can lead to participation. Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus (2014) found that sadism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism were related to cyber trolling and deriving pleasure from trolling and the amount of time spent doing it. In a similar study, Madan (2014) also explored a dark triad including an examination of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism and their adverse effect on workplace outcomes including through cyberbullying. All three constructs were positively associated with cyberbullying. These constructs are primarily negative in nature and have been found to lead to other negative behaviors. For instance, unethical behavior and a need for power are associated with narcissism. Corporate psychopaths have been found to have diminished levels of corporate responsibility and reduced productivity, whereas Machiavellianism is associated with diminished organizational commitment, and team commitment. Managers exhibiting Machiavellianism are perceived as abusive by subordinates and focus on maintaining power and using manipulative behaviors (Madan 2014).

The construct of self-esteem has been examined with mixed results. Zezulka and Seigfried-Spellar (2016) found low self-esteem, low conscientiousness, and low internal moral values were positively related to both cyberbullying and trolling behaviors. Additionally, they found individuals who engaged in both behaviors scored higher on extraversion, lower on agreeableness, and lower on self-esteem compared to individuals who engaged in neither behavior. Interestingly, there were differentiating factors between individuals who only engaged in cyberbullying behaviors (high on neuroticism) vs. trolling-only behaviors (high on openness to experience). However, Brack and Caltabiano (2014) found that self-esteem was not statistically related to cyberbullying. As a construct, this requires further research. Emotional intelligence was also found to be related to cyberbullying. Higher the emotional intelligence results in less cyberbullying. The findings were postulated indicate that more emotionally intelligent the better people are able to handle work related stress and not lash out at others (Keskinar et al., 2016). This research has demonstrated that psychological constructs and traits play a role in predicting the participation in cyberbullying at work. The traits of Machiavellianism, sadism, narcissism, and psychopathy are all positively related to cyberbullying in the workplace and its frequency. Other individual traits such as emotional intelligence and self-esteem also have been shown to play a role in cyberbullying.

FACTORS

Mediating Factors

There have been a series of recent studies that have extended the literature to include mediating constructs. Lowry, Zhang, Wang, and Siponen (2016) developed the social media cyberbullying model (SMSCBM). The SMSCBM found that social media artifacts that facilitate disinhibition and deindividualism such as a lack of identification, lack of proximity diffused responsibility lead to cyberbullying anonymity. Cyberbullying anonymity itself then leads to the social learning factors of cyberbullying which include negative social influences, costs, benefits, and situational morality. These constructs then predict cyberbullying frequency. The control variables of gender (females) and how much time was spent online were also related to the frequency of cyberbullying.

Vranjes, Baillien, Vandebosch, Erreygers, and De Witte (2017) argued that cyberbullying can be explained through the emotion reaction model. According to this model, emotions are evoked by certain work events and fuel emotion driven behaviors, such as cyberbullying. In this model, work stressors which lead to cyberbullying are mediated by the emotions of anger, sadness, and fear play a positive role in the stressor – bullying relationship. Additionally, the moderating constructs of control appraisal and emotion regulation can reduce the impact of the mediating variables on cyberbullying. This indicates policies and training can reduce workplace cyberbullying. Snyman and Loh (2015) found that the relationship between cyberbullying and job outcomes of work stress and job satisfaction was partially mediated by optimism.

The empirically tested models of cyberbullying in the workplace have demonstrated that the emotions, stress, and job satisfaction all contribute to the participation in workplace cyberbullying. Another mediating factor that was important was the anonymity of the act of cyberbullying itself.

Mitigating Factors

Taylor et al. (2015) provided a format for the forensic examination of cyberbullying at work. The process they suggest is a forensic examination and audit of communications from work computers and examinations of the online communications and the origin of these communications. This systematic audit has two outcomes. The first is that the forensic examination makes proving cyberbullying easier, and the second is that knowledge that the company has a forensic process and will investigate cyberbullying deters future workplace cyberbullying. This process and outcome were supported by the research of Beal and Beal (2016), which developed a format for social media auditing to examine the presence of cyberbullying at work.

OUTCOMES

Some research has focused on the outcomes of cyberbullying. There have been consistent findings of cyberbullying negatively impacting job satisfaction. Farley, Coyne, Sprigg, Axtell, and Subramanian (2015) found that medical doctoral students were the subject of cyberbullying and that it had a negative impact on their job satisfaction. In a study of primary school teachers

and principals, Fahie and Devine (2014) found similar results. The greater the intensity and frequency of cyberbullying, the greater the mental stress and decreased job satisfaction Bullying in general can cause stress-related health complications such as hypertension, auto-immune disorders, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder and it is believed that cyberbullying can have the same effect (Workplace Bullying Institute, n.d.; Woodrow & Guest, 2014). In fact, research has shown that 38 percent of the recipients of bullying felt physiologically and mentally distraught (Jon-Chao, Ming-Yueh, Chien-Hou, Ru-Ping, & Yi-Ling, 2013).

The toll of cyberbullying in the workplace includes both mental and physical factors that impact both the individual and the organizations. The costs in healthcare, lost productivity and employee turnover are significant reasons to create and enforce policies against cyberbullying in the workplace.

PREVENTION AND REMEDIES

With the advancement of technology, bullying has expanded into our online worlds, making it easier for perpetrators to hide behind their computers, cellphones, or other electronic devices while throwing virtual daggers at co-workers. Because many individuals believe that bullying is a childhood and teenage issue, administrators and organizational leaders may not fully understand the extent and impact that cyberbullying can have on their employees. Managers need to be proactive in dealing with workplace cyberbullying in a way that will result in an environment that fosters a collaborative and respectful work environment. Unfortunately, not much is being done to combat this issue and many companies that have implemented a policy are lax in enforcing it (Hubert, 2003).

Most of the literature on cyberbullying focuses on children, youth, and college students. While that research provides insights on the types of cyberbullying and its effects on young victims, more research is needed on cyberbullying in the workplace because it is also happening at the workplace (Acohido, 2013). Farley et al. (2015) found that nearly half of trainee doctors have experienced workplace bullying. However, adult cyberbullying research usually focuses on email harassment (Baruch, 2005) or cyber-incivility (Giumetti, et al., 2012).

Lowry et al. (2016) found that "studying adult cyberbullying is challenging because most of the research involves juveniles, and the nascent literature has not yet developed a cohesive approach to studying cyberbullying. However, the broader cyberbullying literature is arguably the best starting point for building a theoretical model to better understand adult cyberbullying." They performed a review of the 135 related literature articles and found only 64 provided empirical or qualitative evidence on causes related to cyberbullying, and most of those that did were atheoretical and focused on juvenile offenders. Of the 64 studies, only one, Bartlett et al., 2017, involves non-college adult offenders (Lowry et al., 2016, Appendix A).

Because much of the research concerns youth, remedies for the workplace are not readily available, leading to the assumption that remedies that work for youth could also work for adults. This is quite unfortunate as Farley (2015) found that research from the youth context does not necessarily translate to a workplace context. Schools have been introduced to remedies such as school-wide violence prevention policies and programs, educating teachers and students about cyberbullying, implementing peer helper/mentor/responder programs, counseling, small group therapy, etc. with varied success. Generalizing effective remedies for the workplace will prove

problematic, and, unfortunately, there is a dearth of empirical studies among the anecdotal evidence of what works and what doesn't work.

Human Resources' Role

There are multiple routes that can be taken to help prevent cyberbullying from occurring. Human resources (HR) experts explain that there is not one approach to ending or preventing cyberbullying. Because HR is usually the first one to hear allegations of cyberbullying, HR professionals should plan for how to appropriately deal with complaints (Wright, 2016). Wright (2016) explains that the recommended strategies can be placed into four categories:

1. Change the corporate culture.
2. Develop strategies to help strengthen individual managers and leaders.
3. Establish support services for the targets of bullying.
4. Generate accountability measures to coach, counsel, and discipline cyberbullying perpetrators.

Woodrow and Guest (2014) also found that an explicit bullying policy, of which HR has the responsibility of generating, is especially important because it combines "separate components, forming the primary source of information for anyone involved in bullying." With the purpose of creating an effective anti-bullying policy, three crucial features should be defined (Rayner & Lewis, 2010). First, organizations need to define their opposition toward bullying of any type in the workplace as well as implement a zero-tolerance policy that is enforced throughout all levels of personnel, including C-level managers. Additionally, Rayner and Lewis (2010) suggest that this is an appropriate time to reference other policies which the organization has in place, such as disciplinary and whistle-blowing policies. Second, describe the chain of command one should take to prevent or resolve any issues that arise, emphasizing the importance of communication. Finally, the organization should describe the formal process by which cyberbullying may be managed, stressing the importance of early resolve. Because employees are better able to deal with cyberbullying when organizations foster an effective climate (Jon-Chao, Ming-Yueh, Chien-Hou, Ru-Ping, & Yi-Ling, 2013), the policy must be promoted through staff training as well as providing managers with the skills needed to successfully implement the policy (Woodrow & Guest, 2014).

Most of the research recommends implementing an anti-bullying/cyberbullying policy and providing training or education to all employees to raise awareness of cyberbullying and its negative consequences, the costs and benefits of cyberbullying, and how to combat it. Lowry et al. (2016) discussed at length the costs and benefits associated with cyberbullying. "Costs and benefits are learned and not necessarily entirely rational or predictable across all forms of cyberbullying." Additionally, the costs of cyberbullying are likely easier to envision than benefits – for example, it is easier to envision the cost of getting caught than envisioning a benefit such as gaining power over the victim. "Consequently, when people experience positive consequences of cyberbullying, such experiences reinforce their intention to cyber-bully" (Lowry et al., 2016). They also found that "when people experience differential reinforcement that artificially increases perceived cyberbullying benefits and decreases perceived costs, they are more likely to commit cyberbullying." Thus, a remedy could include a method to increase the costs and decrease the benefits of cyberbullying, such as exacting a penalty for

cyberbullying. An example of such a cost would be termination of employment in a zero-tolerance environment.

Ang and Goh (2010) proposed empathy training and education in cyberbullying. Empathy training will provide the victims' experiences and feelings, and, thus, decrease bullying and cyberbullying. Coyne et al. (2017) hypothesize that online the nature of online communication creates an environment where less empathy and social identification exist. They believe increased empathy for victims should result in decreased cyberbullying and the educational programs for cyberbullying intervention should include Internet etiquette, healthy Internet behavior along with empathy training, with the goal of reducing online aggression.

Sarkar (2015) recommends organizations implement anti-bullying policies that define workplace boundaries and maintain employees' freedom of expression. Those policies should have zero tolerance for bullying behavior; social media sites have cyberbullying policies, but protection of users from cyberbullying crimes do not yet exist. Sarkar also recommends that organizations perform structured interviews, educate employees to increase their understanding of each other's value, learn that responding to bullying with silence does not equate to acceptance, endeavor to decrease the level of stress employees face to help decrease bullying, and encourage employees to report bullying.

LawRoom.com's training on bullying in the workplace includes several ideas for stopping bullying (including cyberbullying) in the workplace:

- Respect yourself and others
- Create a positive work environment
- Train employees to recognize and report bullying/cyberbullying
- Create an anti-bullying policy that includes cyberbullying
- Enforce the anti-bullying policy by investigating incidents and disciplining offenders

Coyne, Gopaul, and Campbell (2017) noted that anti-bullying/cyberbullying policies should ensure that when bystanders report an incident, they should feel that they are protected from retaliation. The policy should also recognize the impact (increased stress) on bystanders. They believe that by recognizing the impact on bystanders explicitly the bystanders' level of empathy with the victim of the bullying would be increased. Unfortunately, however, policies are not a panacea for cyberbullying, as traditional workplace bullying literature demonstrates that anti-bullying policy implementation is not completely trusted (Harrington et al., 2012) and has limited effectiveness (Beale & Hoel, 2011).

HR should also make counseling options available for employees who may have difficulties with anger issues, establish explicit standards on workplace casual and romantic relationships, with the availability of counseling options when interpersonal conflicts arise, and ensure that policies are be made highly visible to both current and new employees, including middle and upper management (Piotrowski, 2012).

In addition to creating a policy that will aide in changing the corporate culture and the availability of counseling services as needed, HR should:

- Develop a plan regarding the acceptable use of technology.
- Train employees on how to deal with workplace bullying.
- Educate employees that, once they post anything on the internet, it is potentially there forever.
- Suggest that employees reread an email before sending it and consider the reaction of the receiver.

- Encourage employees to talk face-to-face rather than continuing a disagreement via email as it will remove the emotional uncertainty of email (Office of Information Security, 2013).

Management's Role

Whereas HR plays a critical role in ensuring that cyberbullying is not tolerated as well as establishing the guidelines employees are expected to follow, management plays an even larger role in prevention, intervention, and enforcing the cyberbullying policy within the areas they oversee to make certain they are providing a safe work environment. Managers first should adopt and participate in the zero-tolerance policy established by HR (Woodrow & Guest, 2014). Zero-tolerance policies can have a positive effect in the workplace. For example, three years after Meloni and Austin (2011) implemented a zero-tolerance bullying and harassment program in a hospital setting, employee satisfaction survey results had significantly improved.

Second, management must maintain confidentiality and professionalism. According to the Systematic Approach Model, the formation of a preemptive policy, which includes communication with employees, is the responsibility of management (Hubert, 2003). Management should lead by example, take the undesirable circumstance seriously, and demonstrate that this type of behavior will not be tolerated. Hubert (2003) explains that, if an organization wants management to appreciate the policy's importance and prevent cyberbullying from occurring, they need to understand the legal ramifications, the consequences, including financial, and the nature and prevalence of the negative interaction within their organization. Upper- and top management should be aware of the legal liabilities to the organization while preserving the rights of all employees involved (Piotrowski, 2012).

Next, management needs to manage employee complaints confidentially and only involve the appropriate people such as HR and the corporate legal counsel. Many times, when an individual is cyber-bullied, the attack on said person occurs in the public eye, such as posts on social networking sites and group emails. The victim has already suffered public humiliation. If the matter is discussed at the proverbial water cooler, not only could this create more humiliation, stress, and anxiety for the victim, but could result in legal action toward the organization.

Additionally, employers may have to identify their "role in and responsibility for enabling bullying, by allowing work and personal time to overlap through the expectation of 24/7 employee availability and consenting to the personal use of company-owned technology" (West, Foster, Levin, Edmison, & Robibero, 2014). Recently, the French government attempted to address this issue by defining work and personal time through an employer/employee agreement which mandated that employees are not to work after hours. The challenge herein is that technology continues to blur employees' work and personal space and time. The prediction is that the French government will generate more formal strategies in an effort to deal with emerging and disruptive technologies.

Managers also need to remain "vigilant regarding any signs of intimidation, threat, emotional outbursts, or suspicious messaging regarding potential abusers, and aware of signs and characteristics of targeted employees" (Piotrowski, 2012). All managers need to understand that threat assessment, which should be a component of the organization's policy, must emphasize prevention. Furthermore, continuous education on the latest technological advances in

communication devices that can expose paths for cyber-abuse to occur, such as cyberbullying, should be a requirement for all middle to upper management.

Additionally, managers have a responsibility to abide by anti-bullying laws and regulations. Whereas almost all the states in the US have bullying laws that include cyberbullying for schools and most state departments of education have model anti-bullying policies schools can use (Sabella et al., 2013), yet there is no adult or workplace-focused anti-bullying legislation. The U.K. has several statutes that could be of use in combating cyberbullying including the "Education and Inspections Act 2006, Protection from Harassment Act 1997, Communications Act 2003, Malicious Communications Act 1988, Telecommunications Act 1984, Public Order Act 1986, Obscene Publications Act 1959, Computer Misuse Act 1990, Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and Defamation Act 2013" (Asam & Samara, 2016). However, given the lack of a clear bullying/cyberbullying definition, the applicability of these laws is difficult to establish.

Edwards and Blackwood (2017) propose a non-conventional method for managing bullying/cyberbullying in the workplace: a forum theatre intervention. By engaging employees in a forum theatre workshop in which they role play a workplace bullying scenario, employees learn how to recognize and respond to bullying. While the efficacy of using an artful approach has yet to be determined, interventions have been successful. Strandmark and Rahm (2014) found that small group interventions that include lectures and reflection groups are able to make employees more aware of bullying and that the immediate supervisor, along with management, are best positioned to prevent and combat bullying.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As noted previously, Farley et al. (2015) found that research from the youth context does not necessarily translate to a workplace context. The lack of this research link indicates that the more extensive research stream in childhood cyberbullying is not necessarily applicable to workplace cyberbullying. Determining which constructs do translate from childhood cyberbullying to workplace cyberbullying is an excellent avenue to advance the understanding of the phenomenon. Table 1 (Appendix) lists the constructs that have been empirically studied in relation to workplace cyberbullying.

Another growing area of workplace cyberbullying is the need to build and replicate the research to confirm earlier findings across samples, countries, and cultures. Areas that have been fruitful to date are sadism, psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism (Buckels et al., 2014; Madan, 2014). Another construct that has been tied to both juvenile and workplace cyber-bulling is self-esteem—although these results have been mixed (Brack & Caltabiano, 2014; Zezulka & Seigfried-Spellar, 2016). Extending the examination of self-esteem may help clarify the results in this area and deepen our understanding of its role in bullying (and victimology).

The use of behavioral models may have a benefit of bringing a rich theoretical background and framework to draw upon. An example includes Vranjes et al. (2017) who used the emotion reaction model to explain cyberbullying. The development of behavioral models allows the testing of the component parts of the model to better develop and understand the relationships among the constructs. The models provide a theoretical underpinning for both experimentation and longitudinal research.

Lowry et al. (2016) believed that "future research could benefit from the examination of specific psychological costs and benefits of adult cyberbullying, and how these come about."

By costs include other's social perception of the person bullying which is limited in an online environment. The benefits include the assertion of power and dominance as well as revenge. Other research suggests that cyberbullying in the workplace is related to low job satisfaction, absenteeism, and low productivity (see Farley et al., 2015; Fahie & Devine, 2014).

The efficacy of organizational interventions and policies also needs to be explored in order to develop best practices for managers. Policies around who should report and how should it be reported are important questions but have insufficient research to answer them. Advances in cyber-forensics have made clearly tracking and measuring the frequency of instances possible and continuous updating of these techniques as they change with technology is important. The arena of cyber-forensics will need to expand with each new app brought to market.

CONCLUSION

The study of workplace cyberbullying is still in relative infancy, which is both a blessing and a curse. At this time, we can say that workplace cyberbullying has negative impacts on both organizations and individuals. However, we cannot say we know the exhaustive list of these impacts or how to prevent them. This lack of empirical evidence does provide researchers extensive opportunities to contribute in an area of study that crosses the disciplines of business, information systems and information technology, psychology, sociology, and ethics.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Variables Studied

Antecedent Constructs	Targets of Bullying	Outcomes
Low conscientiousness	Middle managers	Intention to quit
Emotional intelligence	Employees with poor physical	Lowered well-being
Sadism	health	Work engagement
Psychopathy	Team members	Stress
Machiavellianism	Women	Job satisfaction
Workplace aggression	Minorities	Emotion
Male		Exhaustion
Low self-esteem		Sadness
Low internal moral values		Fear
High on neuroticism		Anger
Lower agreeableness		
Higher extraversion		
Anger		
Positive affect		
Anonymity		
Social learning		
High team stress		