

# Understanding the Experience of Cyberbullying Victimization in Young Adults

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**ABSTRACT:** *With the growth of information and communication technology (ICT), bullying has expanded into the technological realm. Labelled as cyberbullying, individuals are utilizing technology, such as cell phones and the internet, to bully and cause harassment to others with the intention of causing harm. The aim of the present study was to explore and understand the experience of victims of cyberbullying in young adults. A standardised questionnaire followed by a semi-structured interview was used for the same purpose. Thematic analysis was done to understand the experiences of the participants. The findings of the study provided insights into young adults' experience of victims of cyberbullying. The future implications for research include understanding the experience of victimisation, role of support system in coping, need for greater technological and legal measures to deal with it so that the ever rising use of cyberspace can be made safe and inclusive for all.*

**Key Words:** *Cyberbullying, Experience, Harassment, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Victimization*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a revolution in the world through rapid advancements in information and communication technology (ICT). The benefits of these advances are manifold - such as increased availability of plethora of information, improved learning networks and resources for education, increased civic activity and public participation, development of social networks, friendships, etc., to name some of them (Kowalski et al., 2012a; Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). However, many risks and dangers have accompanied the expansion of the 'virtual' space.

### 1.1 Cyberbullying: Characteristics and Types

Cyber bullying is one of the online risks youth face, and the one they are most likely to encounter (Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & O'lafsson, 2011). Smith and his colleagues (2008) defined cyber bullying as: 'an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself'.

Different types of cyber bullying were reported ranging from flaming to cyber stalking. Cyber bullying is seen to have close parallels with the paradigm of relational aggression. Rumours, gossip, exclusion, and attacks against reputations and relationships are common forms of both relational aggression and cyber bullying (Jackson, Cassidy, & Brown, 2009b).

Among the various characteristics of cyberbullying, anonymity is one of the most important one. The cyber bullying victim is not necessarily acquainted with the cyber bully and may or may not know who is hiding behind a pseudonym, which could make it even worse. While anonymous messages may be perceived as more threatening and more fear- and anxiety-inducing, cyber bullying by known and/or trusted persons can also be very damaging (Dooley et al., 2009; Nocentini et al., 2010).

Some researchers argue that communication in cyberspace implies that the perpetrator cannot see the victim's immediate reaction to his/her behaviour which allows for disinhibition and deindividuation (Agatston et al., 2012; Davis & Nixon, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2011; von Mare' es & Petermann, 2012). Being cut off from the emotional impact of one's behaviour may create a disconnect that blunts the empathetic response elicited by seeing the pain one causes. This may explain the severity in the actions of the perpetrator.

### 1.2 Impact of Cyberbullying

The impact of cyberbullying among victims finds that the construct is a repeated behaviour that offends, causes embarrassment, lowers self-esteem, sabotages, intimidates, and negatively affects an individual's academic, professional, personal and social life (Mesch, 2009). A range of problematic psychosocial health

outcomes is associated with cyber bullying victimization including fear for their safety, increased distress, behavioural issues, drug abuse, psychosomatic problems like sleeping difficulties, headaches, bed-wetting, stomach aches, etc.

Victimization increases one's likelihood of experiencing social and emotional loneliness (Brighi et al., 2012; Olenik-Shemesh, Heiman, & Eden, 2012). Victims of cyberbullying and internet harassment also show signs of elevated depression (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012). Recent work shows victimization is associated with an elevated profile of cortisol, a physiological marker of stress, over a day (Gonzalez-Cabrera, Calvete, Leon-Mejía, Perez-Sancho, & Peinado, 2016). Perhaps the most troubling association is that pervasive and ongoing cyberbullying victimization has been linked to suicidal ideation and suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014).

The impact seems to vary from trivial to serious, depending on the frequency, length and severity of cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010). The effects of such victimisation may be magnified due to the reality of being unable to escape cyber bullying without cutting oneself off from one's social communication network. The public nature of cyber bullying and not knowing who and how many people have seen or perpetrated the behaviour can impact the victims' perception (Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009; Tokunaga, 2010; Kowalski et al., 2012). The degree of impact can also be affected by the wide audience, anonymity, the permanence of a message (they can read it over and over, making it harder to forget), and the ability to reach the target 24/7 (Campbell, 2005; Kowalski et al., 2012; Menesini & Nocentini, 2012).

Incorporating cyberbullying material in the curriculum is one method that has been discussed widely as a strong measure against such acts. At another level, existing policies (anti-bullying, acceptable usage, etc.) need to be updated and accompanied by monitoring and sanctioning of unacceptable behaviours (Jager et al., 2010; Marczak & Coyne, 2010). Rather than trying to remove all risks (which is difficult to do), it would be better to help students cope by strategizing with them about how to avoid harm (Collier, 2012). The role of parents and educators cannot be ignored while taking such actions and thus they need to be involved in the whole process.

### *1.3 Review of Literature*

Several studies have attempted to understand the experience of cyber-bullying and its impact on the victims. In a study of university students who had been victims of cyber-harassment, Beran, Rinaldi, Bickham, and Rich (2012) noted the following impacts: anger, sadness, hurt, embarrassment, anxiety, fear, crying, blaming themselves, poor concentration, low academic achievement, and absenteeism.

Another study by Campbell et al (2012) on the victim's perception of traditional and cyber bullying, and the psychosocial correlates of their victimization showed that although students who had been victimised by traditional bullying reported that they felt their bullying was harsher and crueller and had more impact on their lives than those students who had been cyber bullied, the correlates of their mental health revealed that cyber victims reported significantly more social difficulties, and higher levels of anxiety and depression than traditional victims.

Research by Quing Li (2007) examined the nature and extent of adolescents' cyber bullying experiences, and explored the extent to which various factors including bullying, culture, and gender contribute to cyber bullying and cyber victimisation in junior high schools. In this study, one in three adolescents was a cyber victim and culture and engagement in traditional bullying were strong predictors not only for cyber bullying, but also for cyber victimization.

Literature suggests that cyberbullying cuts across nations and cultures. But most of the research work is generally centred around adolescents. In India, there are few studies in the area of cyberbullying, especially among young adults. In the light of serious online trends like the Blue Whale Challenge, Sarahah posts and the ever increasing avenue of trolls which tend to impact the mental health of the users, this study attempts to explore and understand the experience of victimisation of young adults who have had a first-hand experience with cyberbullying. Results may provide insights on building support systems and bringing about legal changes in the technological realm to make the cyberspace safe and inclusive for all.

## **II. METHOD**

### **2.1 Participants**

The survey that identified victims of cyber bullying was administered on a total of 50 participants, both male and females of the age group 18-25 with the average age being 21-22 years. In depth interview was taken from three participants who were identified as victims of cyber bullying based on the scores of the survey.

The first participant is a 22 year old male who had experienced this episode when he was 20 years of age. He reported having been bullied while playing multiplayer games online where teams are formed across the

globe. He was picked on because he was an Indian. He was mocked at by his team mates from US and Europe who sent him for playing first while giving him the worst gun.

The second participant is a 20 year old female who had experienced this episode at 19 years of age. She reported being bullied online through the use of social networking website by anonymous men who sent her disturbing and obscene messages and asked for her nude pictures online. She met with such requests from anonymous men for quite some time.

The third participant is a 23 year old female who had experienced this episode when she was 20 years old. She was bullied by her friend on social networking website who commented something on her photograph to insult the participant. This happened because she had an argument with her friend in the morning where the participant had insulted her friend in front of everyone.

## 2.2 Measures

A standardized tool- Bullying Compendium D2 scale (Cyber-bullying and online aggression survey) was used for screening participants. Cyber-bullying and online aggression survey is a 52 item measure with 2 subscales to measure cyber-bullying victimization, perpetration, and bystander experiences. It was developed by Patchin & Hinduja in 2006. The survey questions are in a likert type format (Never= 0, Once or twice= 1, A few times= 2, Many time= 3, Every day= 4). Items 1-6 and 9-11 are cyber-bullying victimization scale. Items 14-18 are cyber-bullying offending scale. Scale score is created by summing item scores. Range of the victimization scale is 0-36. Range of the offending scale is 0-20. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficients of the subscales (offending and victimisation) of the instrument range from 0.93-0.97. It has convergent validity.

A semi-structured interview schedule was created on the basis of various research studies which had explored cyberbullying and its facets (Aricak et al., 2008; Dehue et al, 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Li, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). The dimensions or themes were culled out from these studies and the standardised semi-structured questionnaire was developed on the basis of these dimensions.

## 2.3 Procedure

In the present study, mixed method research design was used where both quantitative as well as qualitative data was collected. The quantitative data was collected in order to screen participants to identify the victims of cyber bullying and also to compare the trends of cyber-bullying present in the society. For the same purpose, a standardized tool- Bullying Compendium D2 scale (Cyber-bullying and online aggression survey) was used. This scale was sent to multiple participants via email. 50 participants in the age range of 18-25 years responded to this scale. The responses from all the participants were analysed to explore the general trends of cyberbullying present in the society. Three of the 50 respondents scored high on the victimisation scale with scores of 24, 29, 32 out of the total score of 36. Higher scores on the scale represented a greater involvement with cyberbullying. Later qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interview method from these three participants identified as victims of cyber bullying in order to gain an in depth understanding of their experiences. The responses of the semi-structured interviews were coded and analysed using thematic analysis.

## III. RESULTS

The cyber-bullying victimization scale was of prime focus for the current study. The results of the same are as follows:

For Item #1- “in the last 30 days, have you been made fun of in a chat room?” 2.1%, 6.3% and 14.6 % were made fun of many times, a few times and once or twice respectively.

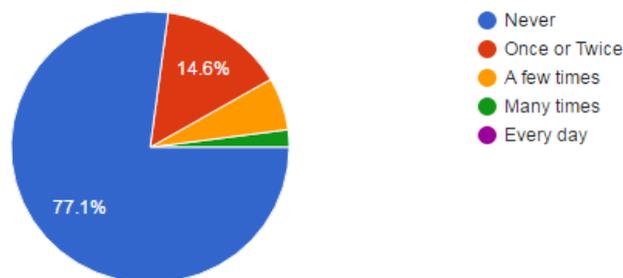


Fig 3.1: Individuals that reported having been made fun of in a chat room (in %)

For item #2-“ In the last 30 days, have you received an email from someone you know that made you really mad?”2%, 2% and 20.4 % responded as many times, a few times and once or twice respectively

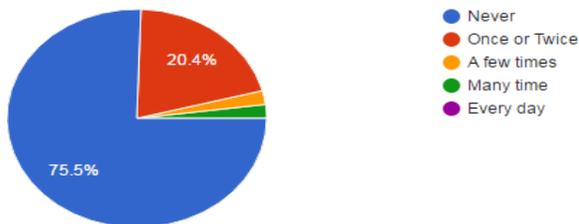


Fig 3.2: Individuals that reported receiving outrageous email from known people (in %)

For item #3 “In the last 30 days, have you received an email from someone you didn’t know that made you really mad? This does not include “spam” mail” 2.1%, 6.3% and 14.6% responded as many times, a few times and once or twice respectively.

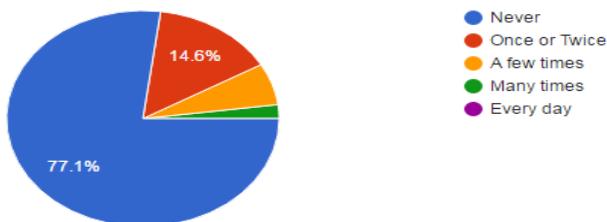


Fig 3.3: Individuals that reported receiving outrageous email from unknown people (in %)

For Item #4- “In the last 30 days, has someone posted something on your Facebook timeline that made you upset or uncomfortable?” 8.2% and 20.4% responded as a few times and once or twice.

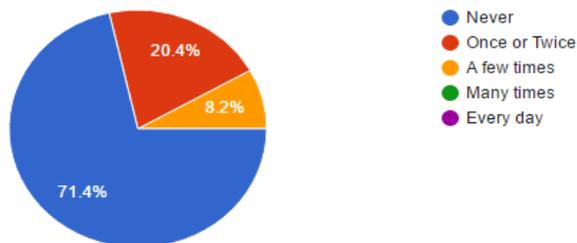


Fig 3.4: Individuals having reported feelings of discomfort due to posts on their Facebook timeline (in %)

For item #5 “In the last 30 days, has someone posted something on another web page that made you upset or uncomfortable?” 4.1%, 10.2% and 32.7% responded as many times, a few times and once or twice respectively.

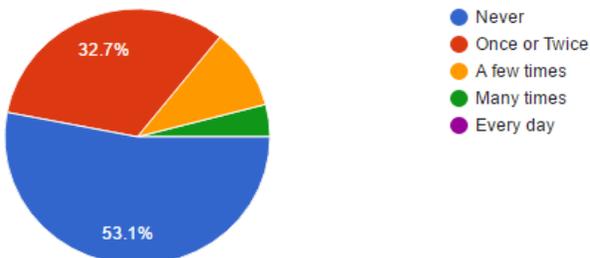


Fig 3.5: Individuals having reported feelings of discomfort due to posts on a web page (in %)

For Item #6 “In the last 30 days, have you received an instant message that made you upset or uncomfortable?” 2% received such messages every day. 2%, 8.2% and 28.6% responded as many times, a few times and once or twice respectively.

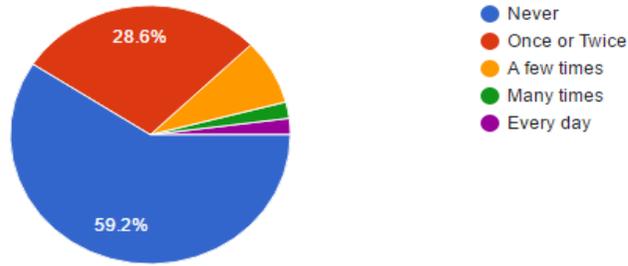


Fig 3.6: Individuals having reported feelings of discomfort due to receiving instant messages (in %)

For item #9 “In the last 30 days, have you been bullied or picked on by another person while online” 8.2% faced this challenge once or twice.

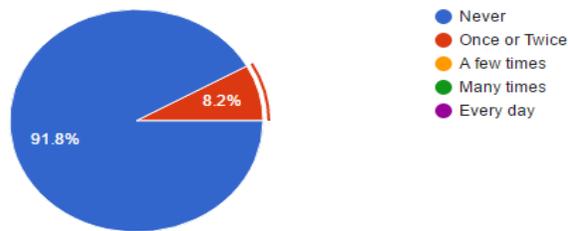


Fig 3.7: Individuals having reported being bullied or picked on while online (in %)

For item #10 “In the last 30 days, have you been afraid to go on the computer?” 4.1%, 6.1% responded as a few times and once or twice respectively.

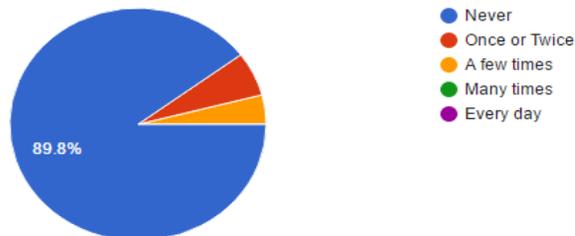


Fig 3.8: Individuals having reported feelings of fear to go on the computer (in %)

For item #11 “In the last 30 days, has anyone posted anything about you online that you didn’t want others to see?” 2%, 14.3% responded as a few times and once or twice respectively.

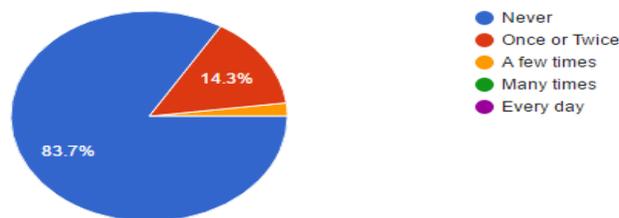


Fig 3.9: Individuals having reported about posts on themselves online which they did not want others to see (in %)

For Item #12 In my entire life, I have been cyber bullied.

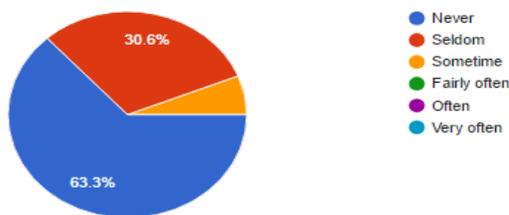


Fig 3.10: Individuals who reported being cyberbullied in whole life (in %)

For Item #13 In the last 30 days, I have been cyber bullied.

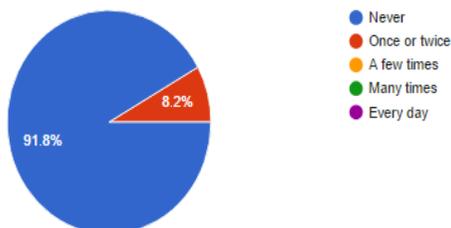


Fig 3.11: Individuals who reported being cyberbullied in the near past (in %)

For Item #14 If you have ever been cyber bullied, did you know who was it who did this to you?

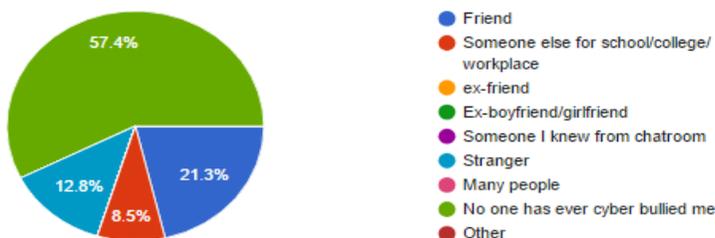


Fig 3.12: Individuals who reported their familiarity with the perpetrator

Table 3.1: Themes that emerged from the qualitative interview along with codes

S.L No.	Themes	Codes	Verbatims
1.	Initial Reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Angry/disappointed</li> <li>Enraged</li> <li>Performance worsened</li> <li>Uncomfortable</li> <li>Sought help</li> </ul>	<p><i>'Initially I was very angry/disappointed.'</i></p> <p><i>'I showed the message to my elder sister and asked her what to do.'</i></p>
2.	Coping mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Changed username</li> <li>Reported abuse</li> <li>Quit playing</li> <li>Blocked the person</li> <li>Changed privacy settings</li> <li>Distracted from the episode</li> <li>Calmed herself</li> </ul>	<p><i>'I blocked the person and changed my privacy settings'</i></p> <p><i>'I remember changing my username'</i></p> <p><i>'I tried to calm myself down'</i></p> <p><i>'I tried to think about something else'</i></p>
3.	Impact on self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Negative feeling towards self</li> <li>Was okay with it the same day</li> <li>Self-esteem crashed</li> <li>Others looked down upon me</li> </ul>	<p><i>'I felt a feeling of negativity towards myself'</i></p> <p><i>'Even the team members who didn't bully me also used to look down upon me.'</i></p> <p><i>'My self-esteem and self-confidence just crashed to the ground'</i></p>

4.	Perception of virtual space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy to team up on virtual space</li> <li>• Pretentious nature of people</li> <li>• Negative view of world</li> <li>• Perception of unknown men changed</li> <li>• Trust issues</li> </ul>	<i>'It changed my perception of how I look at unknown persons, specially men.'</i> <i>'It has impacted my ability to trust people on online platforms.'</i> <i>'It did really change my perception of how people pretend to be someone else when they're on the internet.'</i> <i>'I realized that it's very easy to team up on someone and bully them virtually.'</i>
5.	Support system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fellow Indian gamer</li> <li>• Sister</li> <li>• Friends</li> </ul>	<i>'A fellow Indian gamer (whom I had never met in person) who accepted facing similar issues.'</i> <i>'Sister told me how to handle the situation'</i> <i>'I spoke to my friends about why that person was trying to be so rude.'</i>
6.	Perception of online relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A bad idea</li> <li>• Not preferred</li> <li>• Misuse of social media sites</li> <li>• Good way to connect</li> <li>• Medium to maintain relations</li> <li>• But use effectively</li> </ul>	<i>'I think relationships online is a bad idea.'</i> <i>'When people are not really happy with whom they are and try to project themselves as someone else, they start building online relationships.'</i> <i>'I feel technology is a good medium to communicate but it should be used effectively.'</i>
7.	Views on cyberbullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Underrated crime</li> <li>• Dangerous</li> <li>• Affects teenagers</li> <li>• Mental damage to victims</li> </ul>	<i>'It is underrated and goes unnoticed mostly.'</i> <i>'It's dangerous and can mentally damage the victim, mostly teens.'</i> <i>'Something that can have really adverse effects on the individual because one cannot control others' actions on social media.'</i>

#### IV. DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to explore and understand the experiences of victims of cyberbullying among young adults. For this purpose, the Cyber bullying and Online Aggression Survey by Hinduja & Patchin, 2006 was administered on a sample of 50 respondents. The results indicate the various trends of cyber bullying victimization.

The respondents reported that they have been victimized a large number of times by posting something on a web page and by the means of instant messaging.

"In the last 30 days, has someone posted something on another web page that made you upset or uncomfortable?" 4.1%, 10.2% and 32.7% responded as many times, a few times and once or twice respectively.

"In the last 30 days, have you received an instant message that made you upset or uncomfortable?" 2% received such messages every day. 2%, 8.2% and 28.6% responded as many times, a few times and once or twice respectively.

Almost 36.7% respondents reported that they have been cyber bullied in their life, where 8.2% reported to have been victims of cyber bullying in the last 30 days. In 29.8% cases of cyber bullying, the victim knew the bully either as a friend or someone from school/college/workplace, whereas 12.8% said that they have been cyber bullied by a stranger. Looking at the impact of cyber bullying victimization, 29.8% respondents reported as being sad, 29.2% as embarrassed, 28.8% scared, 27.2% frustrated and 26.3% angry by such an event.

For the purpose of understanding the experience of cyber bullying victimization, three respondents were selected on the basis of their scores and interviewed about their experiences. The following themes emerged from the analysis of their narratives: Role of anonymity of the perpetrator and its impact on the victim's worldview, Initial reaction, Perception of self and virtual world, Present distress, Coping mechanism, Sources of support, Learning from their experiences. These have been explored in detail as follows.

#### **4.1 Role of anonymity of the perpetrator and its impact on the victim's worldview**

Strom and Strom (2005) argue that cyberbullies often hide behind a cloak of anonymity inherently provided by the Internet. Using fake screen names cyberbullies are able to post hurtful and harmful messages intended to embarrass the victim and undermine their reputation by making the matter public and viewable by many. Consequently, such actions create a great deal of anxiety among victims and negatively impact their psychological state (Beale & Hall, 2007; DeHue, Vollink Spear, Slee, & Johnson, 2009; Strom & Strom, 2005).

Findings from this study indicate that when the perpetrator is unknown to the victim, it results in a general mistrust of people and completely negative feelings about relationships on the internet. Two out of three of the participants have been bullied by unknown perpetrators and their responses made evident their generalisation of mistrust against others through the following comments: *"It did really change my perception of how people pretend to be someone else when they're on the internet."*

Another participant whose perpetrator was unknown responded in a similar manner making generalisations about the world which reflect her mistrust against others. She said that, *"Definitely I have trust issues now. I cannot trust individuals easily because of which I get uncomfortable in opening up or sharing with unknown people, especially men."*

In favour of these findings, Oliner (2011) argues that modern day technologies have created an environment where websites are the online version of the bathroom wall, a reference to anonymous students writing messages on the bathroom walls in schools. Her argument further suggests that these types of websites are used to disseminate hurtful comments to a wide scale audience, and that these types of actions lead to feelings of mistrust against others (Oliner, 2011).

On the other hand, the worldview of the participant whose perpetrator was familiar did not reflect such generalised perceptions and feelings of mistrust against others or any kind of negative attitude towards the virtual relationships. She reported that, *"I am indifferent by the whole situation. I don't judge anyone I meet on the internet."* Ortega et al (2012) in their study found a group of "not bothered" victims in case of the non-anonymity of the perpetrator and proposed different explanations for this such as number of witnesses, identity of the aggressor, or previous relationship between victim and aggressors.

#### **4.2 Initial reaction**

The initial reaction to cyberbullying often ranges from anger to fear, embarrassment, guilt, confusion, anxiety and other negative feelings. Most students who reported being victimised also reported experiencing anger more than other emotions initially, as found in the study by Ortega et al. (2009). In an Australian study of 548 cyberbullying victims, it was reported that students said they felt sad, annoyed, embarrassed and afraid (Price and Dalgleish 2010). Anxiety, feeling bad about oneself and not trusting people has also been reported by cybervictims in a study by Raskauskas 2010.

The initial reactions of the respondents have also varied from one another. While one participant reported getting angry and disappointed initially by the episode, another has talked about experiencing a state of discomfort and confusion of not knowing how to act and thus sought help. The third participant has reported feeling annoyed and irritable at such an act by the perpetrator. Previous research has pointed out that anger is a reaction to violations of autonomy, and disregard for the personal rights or freedoms of the individual (Rozin et al., 1999) and serves to facilitate a vigorous response to resolve the danger when an action received immediately impacts negatively on the self (Hutcherson and Gross, 2011).

The initial reactions seemed to stem from the seriousness of the episode as perceived by the participants. The participant who had initially felt angry had thought about quitting the game in the beginning but later found it to have a positive impact in improving his game play and thus had no regrets later with diminishing seriousness of the event. On the other hand, the participant who had experienced discomfort and confusion in the beginning felt even more disturbed when the episode got serious with the perpetrator bullying through outrageous demand for her obscene pictures. The third participant who had experienced feelings of annoyance and irritability at the beginning seemed to have felt alright with the decreasing seriousness of the episode. Thus the intensity and seriousness of the episode seemed to have influenced the later reactions of the participants.

Supporting these findings, Tokunaga, 2010 found that the initial reactions range from trivial to serious, depending on the frequency, length, and severity of the cyberbullying. Spears et al. (2009), in their qualitative study of the impact and human dimension of covert and cyberbullying, found that cyberbullying in particular, evoked more than anger and sadness, i.e. strong, negative feelings and emotions and fear and concerns for safety; impacting on self; and dislocating and disrupting relationships (p194). However, Smith et al. (2008) found that students qualified the impact of cyberbullying according to the medium employed;

they felt that text messaging and email bullying had less of an impact, but that bullying by pictures or video clips had a higher negative impact, suggesting a continuum of subjective impact overlapping bullying.

#### **4.3 Perception of self and the virtual world**

There are several negative effects stemming from cyberbullying victimization which have been documented in the research literature such as depression, poor self-esteem, anxiety, suicidal ideation and psychosomatic problems like headaches and sleep disturbances' (Olweus, 2012a, p. 532; see also Kowalski et al., 2012b; Menesini & Nocentini, 2012; Smith 2012b). Contemporary research pertaining to the victimization of cyberbullying has found that this construct has a detrimental impact on the self-esteem of its victims (Peterson, 1993).

The first participant recounted experiences which impacted his self-esteem till a great extent, *"Around the time the above mentioned bullying incident took place, my self-esteem and self-confidence just crashed to the ground. After the incident, even the team members who didn't bully me also used to look down upon me. It used to reflect in their behaviour. Used to matter to me then. Not anymore."* The second participant has reported the impact to be majorly on her perception of the world and people and not much effects on her perception of self.

The third participant reflected on the experience and reported that she had negative feelings or perception towards self after the incident. In this case, the perpetrator was not anonymous. Support for this finding comes from a study that being cyberbullied by someone you know can be more damaging. Also, the public nature of the cyberbullying and not knowing who and how many people have seen or perpetrated the behaviour can impact the victims' perception (Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009; Kowalski et al., 2012a; Tokunaga, 2010).

A prominent finding of the present study is the change in perceptions towards people, the virtual world and online relationships among the victims of cyberbullying. All the participants reported having a change towards the way they perceive people and relationships, especially in the virtual space with one of them mentioning the need for caution in online relationships while the other two describing negative attitudes with trust issues at the forefront.

The feelings of the two respondents, as discussed above, stem from the fact that their perpetrators were anonymous. This finding can be supported by current literature which illustrates that the degree of impact can be influenced by factors like anonymity of the perpetrator, permanence of the message and a wide audience (Campbell, 2005; Kowalski et al 2012; Mensini and Nocentini, 2012).

The negative view towards virtual world can be seen from the verbatim of one of the participants, *"The experience has influenced my perception of virtual relationships in general and about men in particular. It has resulted in a negative perception of men on online platforms especially. Also it has impacted my ability to trust people on online platforms. I get uncomfortable in opening up or sharing with unknown people, especially men. I think relationships online is a bad idea."*

This attitude resonated in another participants view about the virtual world and perceptions of people online, *"It did really change my perception of how people pretend to be someone else when they're on the internet. There are 2 types of online relationships. One, where the people involved are very shy or suffer from social anxiety. For such kind of people, getting started online is a great thing. Second, when people are not really happy with whom they are and try to project themselves as someone else. People are very different on the internet and in person. So when it comes to relationships, then I don't think it's the right way."*

The third participant who had reported a negative perception of self (whose perpetrator was not anonymous) after the incident indicated the causal attribution of the incident towards her own self which has impacted her perceptions of others as can be seen from her response that, *"My perception has changed in a way that people can put their anger towards you in different ways and it is better to not hurt anyone and always get positive energy from people."* She has also sounded a word of caution in online relationships but does not air any negative views as given by the other participants, *"I think that internet is a good way to get connected and maintain positive relationships, but many people use it negatively. I feel technology is a good medium to communicate but it should be used effectively."*

The difference in perception of virtual space between the first two participants and the third participant can be understood from the manner in which they had experienced the episode of cyberbullying. The first two participants had negative attitude towards virtual space and displayed trust deficit against people which could be explained from the fact that their experience of cyberbullying did not stem from any prior act of theirs. They did not do anything which led to them being bullied online by anonymous perpetrators.

On the contrary, the third participant had a negative perception of self and indicated a change in her perception in ways of dealing with people. This can be explained by the fact that the reason she was bullied

was actually a reaction to some kind of tiff or insult she had caused to the perpetrator in the real life. This seems to explain that she did not have any negative attitude towards people online or the virtual space but towards her own self and rather sought to change her ways of dealing with people.

#### **4.4 Present Distress**

All the three participants have reported that there is no distress currently being experienced by them as a result of that episode as it did not have any long term effects. While the first participant has mentioned that he still has memories of how he used to switch off the system and go to bed in anger, but he has also indicated that he does not experience any discomfort presently recounting those memories. In addition, he has exclaimed that this had a positive impact by improving his game, *“But later I realized it was a blessing in disguise. My game play improved a lot because of the extra exposure. My aim got better. And eventually I became the one with the highest number of kills on the team. So, no regrets.”*

The other two participants have also refuted the possibility of any discomfort or distress presently as a result of that experience. The third participant rather shared that, *“It was not that big a fight that I will be distressed now. I have moved on over the years.”* Apart from the change in their perceptions caused by the experience, there has not been any long term effect. All the participants have rather downplayed the seriousness of that event in their present life which is in contradiction to some research studies.

One possible reason that can be ascribed to the participants not feeling any distress currently could be related to the seriousness of the incident, how they perceived it and the kind of internalisation that occurred as a result of such an experience. All the participants seemed to downplay the seriousness of the episode. The third participant said, *“It was not that big a thing that I would get depressed or think over it again and again.”* The second participant refused to even acknowledge during the interview that the incident was as serious as bullying normally is despite having been bullied online.

This indicates to some extent that the perception of the participants about the seriousness of the event also influenced their experience of distress in the present times. Another point that might explain the lack of serious impact is that the episode occurred at a time when the participants were young adults where the degree to which they would internalise the consequences is less as compared to what adolescents would.

During adulthood, one’s emotional and personality development is more mature and well established and the individual’s identity is relatively more coherent and stable as compared to the identity and maturity of the adolescents. This could therefore have contributed to the participants’ current perceptions because as young adults they have not been impacted so severely as compared to what studies suggest about the long term impact because the increasing research studies have been conducted with adolescents.

#### **4.5 Coping Mechanism**

Coping strategies are responses (behaviours, emotions, cognitions) that are successful (or unsuccessful) against cyberbullying (Perren et al., 2012). These include preventing cyberbullying by reducing the risks, combating cyberbullying, and buffering its negative impacts. The participants’ coping mechanisms with the episode has largely been technical in nature where they have taken the help of technology to counter cyberbullying. The first participant responded by saying that, *“I remember changing my username. I must have clicked on the “report abuse” button at least 50 times.”* The second participant also reported the use of technology again in her words, *“I blocked the person and changed my privacy settings.”*

Support for such findings come from research studies which show that technical solutions such as blocking the cyberbully, implementing privacy settings, changing email address, refraining from visiting a particular site, and keeping evidence of cyberbullying have been suggested as ways of using the technology to counter cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2012a; Tokunaga, 2010).

The third participant described using self-regulation strategies such as relaxation, social support and distraction to have countered and coped with the episode of cyberbullying. This is evident in her verbatim, *“I tried to calm myself down, tried thinking about something else and chilled with friends.”* These mechanisms help to calm oneself and overcome the negative aspects by attentional regulation and increasing sense of control. Research has shown that approaches that reduce feelings of revenge and increase one’s sense of control should also be promising (Ko’ nig, Gollwitzer, & Steffgen, 2010).

#### **4.6 Sources of Support**

The support systems are inevitable in such cases as one goes through a tough period as a result of victimisation against cyberbullying. The source of support could be many but there are some who play a major role during the entire experience of the victims. The participants in the present study have reported confiding into friends or siblings after occurrence of such an event, indicating use of social support systems more than other modes.

The first participant reported that, *“A fellow Indian gamer. He is 3 years elder to me. He acknowledged the problem and accepted facing similar problem. He convinced me that it was common thing and to take it in a*

*good spirit.*" The second participant recounted that it was her elder sister in whom she confided in and only then with her sister's assistance and directions, she could make sense out of the whole situation. The third participant has talked about the role of friends as her support system which helped her sail through such experiences, *"I talked to my friends about why that person was trying to be so rude as the issue could have resolved easily."*

These findings have been supported by the various research studies on support systems. Victims often tell their friends (Cassidy et al., 2009, 2011; Smith, 2012b) and according to Perren et al. (2012), social support is probably the coping strategy or support system with the best indicators of success as it can encompass emotional support and instrumental support.

Another common pattern that can be observed is the lack of adults' help or professional intervention by the participants. Other research studies have shown such trends. Most cybervictims do not alert adults (Agatston et al., 2012; Campbell, 2005; Cassidy et al., 2009, 2011; Dooley, Grading, Strohmeier, Cross, & Spiel, 2010; Smith, 2012b; Smith & Slonje, 2010; Yilmaz, 2011). This may be explained by the fear young people have of losing access to their technology if they tell adults, because they fear the cyberbully will retaliate further (Jackson, Cassidy, & Brown, 2009a) and/or because they think that adults could not do anything to stop it even if they tried.

#### **4.7 Learning from their own experiences**

The participants have described significant learning points from their experiences with regard to their understanding of the phenomena of cyberbullying and the current measures taken as well as suggestions for what should be done.

With regard to the phenomena of cyberbullying, all the participants have a common understanding that it is an underrated though highly prevalent crime and has the potential to cause significant effects on individuals' psyche. Their understanding is reflected in the following words of the first participant, *"I feel cyberbullying is a very underrated crime. This mostly affects teenagers. It's dangerous because it mostly doesn't happen in public and the victim usually keeps it to themselves. This can mentally damage the victim and nobody around him will have an idea of what he/she is going through."* Another lesson pointed by the first participant for himself is that, *"I started suspecting that most of the cyberbullies are victims of bullying in real life. So even I avoid bullying even slightly fearing that they might go home and bully someone else on the internet."*

These words somehow reflect that the understanding stems from the impact it has had on them. The second participant too aired similar opinion with regard to her views about cyberbullying, *"Well I feel most of the people are unaware of cyber bullying and hence it mostly gets unnoticed. However such acts do impact one's self and their world view."* The third participant too shared the same opinion, *"It is something that most of us experience in some ways. It is something that can have adverse effects on the individual because one cannot control the actions of others on social media."*

Because of the adverse impact cyberbullying can have, a significant lesson that the participants indicated was the necessity of measures against such phenomena, the current ones and their suggestions related to what should be done. All of them stressed on strict action against such incidents, need for awareness about cyberbullying and stringent laws to protect the victims from such acts.

The first participant felt that the current measures are not enough and need to be strengthened along with increasing vigilance by the moderators of the websites to be an important step in that direction. The second participant remarked that, *"I think people should file complaints for big crimes and there should be a law against such crimes. People should be made aware of this and strict actions should be taken against the bullies."* The third participant also talked about existing measures about reporting which can be further strengthened through awareness programmes, especially in schools by adding it in curriculum or something.

Thus the learning points highlighted by the participants seem to stem from their own experiences and perceptions which has contributed to their understanding about the phenomena of cyberbullying and the preventive measures they feel should be taken so that others do not face such consequences or at least have some idea about what is to be done if faced with such situations.

These suggestions find support in research studies. Overwhelmingly, the research literature points to the need to address cyberbullying through education on a number of different levels (Agatston et al., 2012; Cassidy et al., 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Collier, 2012; de Santo & Costabile, 2012; Donlin, 2012; Grigg, 2010; Jackson et al., 2009a; Jager, Amado, Matos, & Pessoa, 2010; Marczak & Coyne, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2011; Perren et al., 2012; Sakellariou et al., 2012; Tangen & Campbell, 2010; Topcu & Erdur-Baker, 2012).

#### **4.8 Limitations of the present study**

The present study had certain limitations. As the exploration of the experiences of the participants was done through a qualitative investigation, the results cannot be generalised to a larger population. As the access to the sample being surveyed was limited to just 50 participants, the sample was not representative of the general population. The participants who were interviewed for understanding the impact of cyberbullying were limited to a particular cohort belonging to the 1990s whose experience with internet as a part of their socialisation began in their adolescence. So the degree of their virtual dependence might be restricted as compared to the adolescents.

#### **4.9 Implications for further research**

The study, however, has certain future implications. Most studies on victimisation experiences of cyberbullying are limited to adolescents. As research with young adults' experience of cyberbullying is limited, this study by exploring this age group added to the existing literature in the Indian context. While research on cyberbullying is growing, new directions on the nature of the research is warranted. For instance, studies on prevalence, and the different methods employed by the bully to abuse their victims, should be redirected to involve research focused upon the impact of victimization among victims.

Through the present study it could be seen that some actions which actually qualify under cyberbullying are taken to be a part of the accepted behaviours online. This reflects a lack of awareness among the population about the phenomenon of cyberbullying. So the implication for future research is that there is a need for a consensual definition of cyberbullying which also needs to be revised and updated time and again as contexts for online interactions get renewed.

The experiences of the participants helped to understand the prevalence, nature and impact of cyberbullying and thus hold a key to design and develop interventions that would facilitate the participants to deal with such experiences. The present study also highlighted the lack of institutional and stringent policies which imply a need to further bolster them and spread awareness to deal with this crime. The present study found that victims' source of support was limited to friends and no professional help was sought, nor were any adults or parents involved. Future studies need to focus on ways to strengthen the role of parents, peers and schools as indispensable sources of support for the victims. With the increasing virtualisation of the world, cyberbullying requires greater attention and focus to support those being victimised in this way.

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

This study has been significant as it identified basic themes or key findings including, anonymity of perpetrator in participants' worldview, initial reaction, perception of self and the virtual world, present distress, coping mechanism, support system and learning from such experiences, which added insight to the current literature and knowledge on the impact of cyberbullying on young adults. The implication for future research holds that greater awareness of the technological and legal aspects of cyberbullying would assist psychological service providers, teachers, and parents in working toward informed approaches for responding to incidents when they occur. Cyberbullying is an ever increasing phenomenon with the increased use of information and communication technology. Thus there is a need to investigate the dynamics of cyberbullying including its impact on victims, and a greater collaboration between research and practice in order to develop strong preventive and reactive measures against cyberbullying and thus foster a more inclusive, welcoming and safe virtual space for all.

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