Cyberbullying during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The Internet and advanced technology are increasingly dominating our lives. The number of researches regarding the aggressive behaviour of teenagers on the Internet is rapidly increasing. This study aims at revealing the features of cyberbullying in popular social networks and its negative psychological consequences. This article summarises the results of using Google Trends in the context of 'bullying' and 'cyberbullying' during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kazakhstan during the transition to distance learning. A total number of 32 adolescents participated in an online survey about cyberbullying. According to our results, all participants said that this is a terrifying fact to believe that they cannot rely on adults when it comes to cyberbullying unlike traditional bullying, where the aggressor is known to the face and can be avoided, but the pursuer is anonymous in cyberspace. Cyberbullying can be particularly dangerous for children and adolescents who have had traumatic experiences or who have experienced rejection within the family.

Keywords: Internet space, cyberbullying, victimisation, COVID-19, technology.

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1. Introduction

The Internet and advanced technology are increasingly dominating our lives. We spend so much time in front of the 'black mirror' that we sometimes forget about the dangers of online communication. Cyberbullying is a relatively new topic for the post-Soviet space. Our research topic is especially relevant in the context of the coronavirus pandemic when usual forms of communication are limited. Today, there are about 3 billion people globally, and almost 90% of students do not attend school. Many students and their parents are increasingly communicating with the outside world through their digital screens.

With more than 130 countries restricting travel to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, the Internet has become a critical tool for children and youth to access learning, play, entertainment and social interaction. In short, they may have something to gain from spending time in the digital space.

However, for parents and educators who worry about the time their students and school children spend on social media and online games before the pandemic, the 'jump' into screens may also cause more concern or anxiety.

The Hubei Province and Wuhan were the first to face the lockdown. Yang (2021) interviewed a large group of participants (N = 5,608), and he discovered different strategies that subjects used during a lockdown. Male participants tend to use more problem-solving strategies; this coping mechanism was also used with increased cyberbullying attacks. The emotion-focused coping strategy showed to correlate cyberbullying behaviour with higher rates of depression. A study conducted in China during the pandemic revealed that more than 80% of the respondents noted an increase in their social media exposure (Gao et al., 2020).

Barlett, Rinker and Roth (2021) discovered that participants who had personal health issues caused by COVID 19 tend to show an increased rate of cyberbullying behaviour.

According to Das, Kim and Karmakar (2020), the number of keywords related to the pandemic significantly increased in social media (Twitter) from February till March 2020. We would like to appreciate Twitter's decision to block Mr Trump's account. The increased rates of anti-Asian violence (150%) are a perfect example of how cyberbullying came to change the lives of most Asians in the US.

Researchers in India (Jain, Gupta, Satam & Panda, 2020) found that participants from age 17 to 19 were the most vulnerable population; 80% were cyberbullied. The most common types of cyberbullying were stalking (71.21%), derogatory comments (64.39%), leaking pictures/videos online (41.67%) and harassment (21.97%).

The analysis of the content of the information space of the network allows us to conclude that the Internet has a dual nature: on the one hand, it provides enormous opportunities for information exchange, and on the other hand, it creates problems associated with the use of these opportunities by criminal elements. In this case, social networks, specialised sites, and anonymous Internet spaces (DarkNet, DeepWeb and HiddenWiki) are the primary resources for distributing illegal information. The use of cryptographic protocols significantly complicates or even eliminates the ability of law enforcement agencies to detect, prevent, suppress and solve the crimes committed through the Internet while providing access even to the sites blocked by Internet service providers. The lack of digital protection among children aggravates the problems associated with trafficking in children, child pornography and prostitution, suicide, formation of extremist views and ideology, contributing to the rejuvenation of the drug business and an increase in the facts of the involvement of minors in criminal activity through the Internet. With its public availability, openness, demand and decentralisation, the Internet causes anonymity and invulnerability of cyberbullies. This factor allows them to spread harmful content and commit acts in violation of national and international law. This combination makes the Internet one of the most potent tools of criminalisation and victimisation.

Cyberbullying is understood as a separate direction of bullying, defined as intentional aggressive actions, which is systematically over time carried out by a group or an individual who uses electronic forms of interaction and directed against victims who cannot easily defend themselves.

Cyberbullying aims to worsen the victim's emotional sphere of influence and destroy their social relationships. Cyberbullying includes a range of different forms of behaviour, from playful to virtual psychological terror, resulting in suicide.

The bullying victims showed a higher level of sensitivity, anxiety, tendency to cry, physical weakness, low self-esteem, little social support or friends and preferred to spend time with adults (Olweus, 1993b). A bullying victim's model could be described as a withdrawn child with behavioural disorders, negative beliefs about self and social and communication difficulties (Cook, Williams & Guerrs, et al., 2010). Such characteristics can form not only because of bullying, but can also act as a prerequisite, perceived as 'signals' to other children that this child is easily victimised (Cluver, Bowes & Gardner, 2010; Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim & Sadek, 2010).

Numerous studies show that learning difficulties (Attar-Schwartz & Khoury-Kassabri, 2015), attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorders, diabetes, epilepsy (Kowalski & Fedina, 2011), weight disorders (Falkner, et al., 2001) and other disorders and chronic diseases significantly affect children's appearances. The bullying victims have anxiety and depressive disorders, apathy, headaches, bedwetting and attempt suicide. As a result of these experiences, they develop an image of the world as full of danger and are incapable of influencing what is going on.

According to Aptikeeva, victims experiencing psychological violence, isolation and loneliness are characterised by high data on the scales of feelings of anger and anxiety. They are characterised by negative emotional displays, symptoms of depression and a high level of anxiety.

2. Problem statement

One of the instruments we use for conducting our study is Google Trends. Google Trends is a search trend feature that shows how frequently a given search term is entered into Google's search engine relative to the site's total search volume over a given period.

Figure 1 shows that the number of requests about 'bullying' significantly dropped down after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.
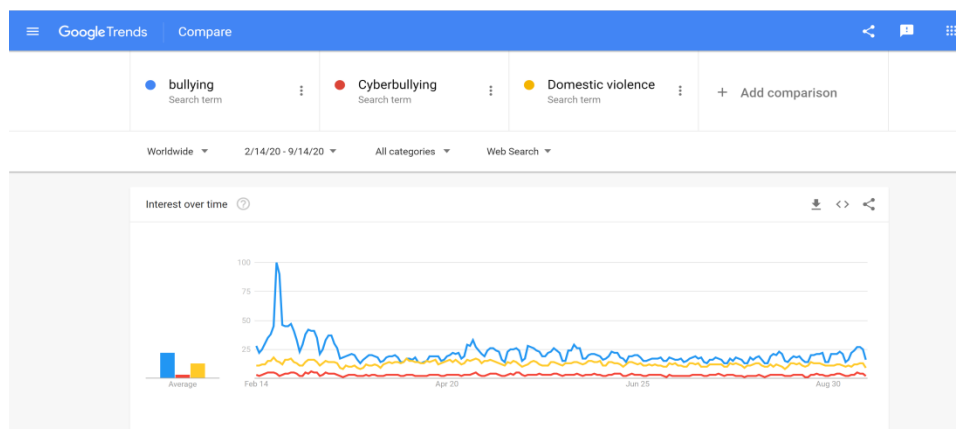

Figure 1. Google Trends comparison between terms 'bullying', 'cyberbullying' and 'domestic violence'

We choose these particular terms 'bullying', 'cyberbullying' and 'domestic violence' because most mental healthcare experts have seen adverse outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic in these areas.

As we can see in Figure 1, a search of the term 'bullying' dropped down with schools' closure and 'stay-at-home orders'. Gradinger, Strohmeier and Spiel (2010) mentioned the co-occurrence of bullying and cyberbullying (Figure 2). Children who are victims of traditional bullying tend to become victims in cyberspace too (Forbes, 2020).
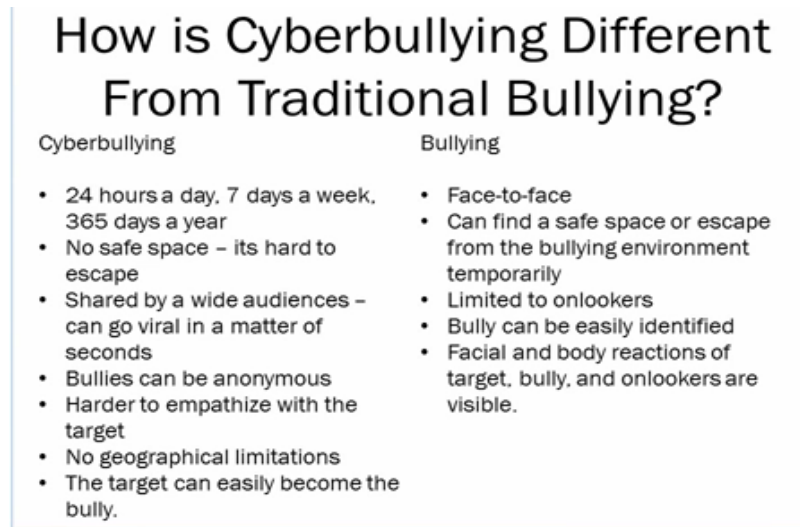

Figure 2. Main differences between bullying and cyberbullying retrieved from
https://stopcyberbullying4life.weebly.com/

Here, we pay detailed attention to some different points. According to NortonLifeLock's Screens and Quarantine: Digital Parenting in a Pandemic Study, parents have serious concerns about their teens' cyber safety. The same study mentioned that only 14% think that big tech companies are making some steps for children's cybersecurity (Forbes, 2020).

According to Wong et al. (2020), increasing screen time has negatively affected Wuhan's children; the adverse outcomes were reduced attention and concentration, increased level of anxiety and vision health difficulties (Wong et al., 2020).

Cyberbullying has a different form; the majority of experts include eight types: flaming, denigration, exclusion, outing, trickery, impersonation, harassment and cyberstalking.
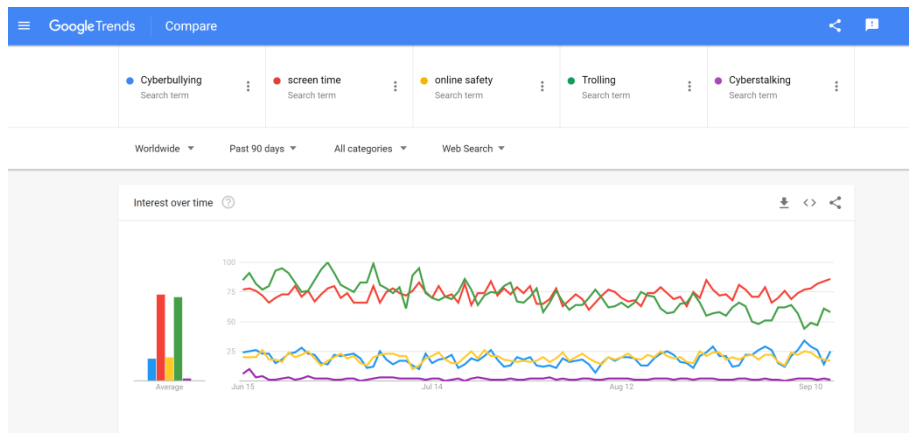

Figure 3. Comparison of Google Trends in terms of 'cyberbullying',
'screen time', 'online safety', 'trolling' and 'cyberstalking'

Figure 3 shows that most Google search users are looking for information regarding 'screen time' and 'trolling'. As researchers, we were surprised to see more questions about 'trolling' than cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying allows the attacker to avoid the consequences, i.e., to avoid physical violence and evade responsibility. An additional 'plus' of cyberbullying for teenagers is that they can do bullying without going out of their own home. The famous American programmer Alan Cooper, 'the father of Visual Basic', highlighted three aspects of Internet communication and called them the Triple-A principle – anonymous, accessible and affordable [6].

Cyberbullying is especially attractive for teenagers because the attacker does not see his victims and their direct reaction, which means that it is much easier for him to suppress in himself a possible feeling of pity.

According to a survey conducted in 2018, most teens (59%) in the US experienced cyberbullying. The most common type of bullying were harassment and 'name calling' (42%). One-third of the participants did not realise that this behaviour was bullying (Bobrovnikova, 2018). Other findings include that teenagers who experience cyberbullying are at a greater risk than those who do not for self-harm and suicidal behaviours (Singh, Radford, Huang & Furrer, 2017). 83% of young people believe that social media companies should be doing more to tackle cyberbullying on their platforms (Dinakar, Reichart & Lieberman, 2011). 60% of young people have witnessed online bullying; they were bystanders (NCPC, 2015).

The most vulnerable population is children due to the lack of services through school districts, family stress and unlimited screen time; all these factors shaped bullying's current reality. For some unknown reason, bullying is a sensitive topic for pedagogical staff in Kazakhstan. We do not know the actual reasons; we assume that cultural attitudes of 'shaming' ('uyat' in the Kazakh language), tribalism and victim blaming have made it exceedingly difficult to speak openly about bullying.

Kazakhstan started its lockdown in March of 2020 (Our world in data, 2020). The schools and colleges moved on remote learning mode. It was not so easy for teachers and children. The majority of parents and teachers complained about the decreasing quality of education. In March 2020, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan declared a transition to distance education. Most Kazakhstan schools were unprepared for the stay-at-home order and the massive migration from school to home due to COVID-19.

Few had fully developed electronic learning systems and platforms such as Canvas and Google Classroom to implement high-quality digital learning environments. Some classroom assignments were directly sent via WhatsApp or Telegram on mobile phones. To continue online 'face-to-face' communication between teachers and students, some schools used Zoom. Kazakhstan is a developing country where access to an Internet connection is still limited in rural areas. Electronic devices are also limited among family members (Pewresearch.org, 2020).

Aktobe was the first city that faced a big wave of COVID-19 deaths, and some of them were written as pulmonary disease; only in June 2020, the WHO included all death reports of 'unknown pneumonia' as COVID-19-related deaths (Safety Net, 2019).

3. Research methods

In April of 2020, we requested school psychologists of Aktobe city to share with students the survey link. The participants who were targeted included 10th graders, aged *M* = 16.8 (*N* = 32) years. We used an online survey link; the study was anonymous. We requested participants to be honest and informed them that some questions could be challenging and cause emotional distress.

4. Results

The first question of our online survey was 'Are you familiar with the topic of Cyberbullying?'. 62% of the respondents answered that they knew what cyberbullying was.

Bullying in his structure includes three significant roles: bully, bystander, and victim.

Figure 4. 'Have you ever been one of the parties in bullying?'

Figure 4 shows that 25% of the participants mentioned that they were victims of bullying. The majority (50%) were bystanders. According to Evans and Smokowski (2017), bystanders were not involved in bullying, but they tend to have more negative outcomes in the future. Cumulative malicious bystander behaviour was positively associated with aggression and internalising symptoms and negatively associated with academic achievement and future optimism (Evans & Smokowski, 2017).

As we know, teenagers often use nicknames and 'labels', but there is a line between teen slang and harassment. We asked our participants what do they feel when someone calls their 'names' online.
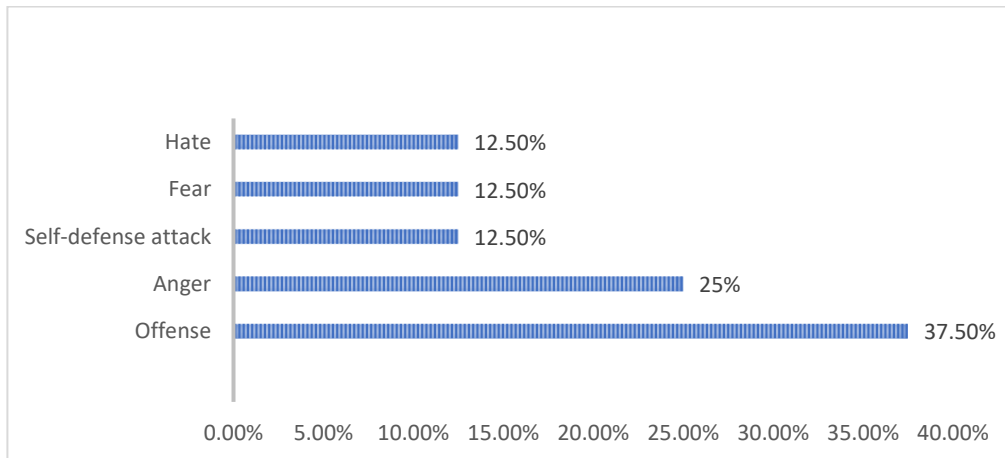

Figure 5. Respondents' feelings on cyber harassment

Figure 5 shows that 37.5% of the respondents feel 'offensive'. Respondents described their feelings as 'anger', 'self-defence attack', 'fear' and 'hate'. Such a strong emotional response shows that all respondents faced this behaviour online, but not all understand cyberbullying.

Figure 6. Respondents' answer the question 'Do you think an adult could help you when you face cyberbullying?'

Figure 6 shows that all participants, and this is a terrifying fact, believe that they cannot rely on adults when it comes to cyberbullying.

The ubiquity of the Internet and teenagers' predilection for social networks, combined with the lack of user competence and understanding of the need to maintain individual ethics of communication in the network, makes cyberbullying one of the newest severe social risk of adolescents. We consider the psychological aspects of cyberbullying related to the virtual environment's peculiarity and distinguish it from traditional bullying. The anonymity of the stalker and his constant access to the victim made cybersecurity questions complicated. The victims are often afraid to lose access to their computers, so they hide information from their parents about cyberbullying. Globally, children and adolescents' pre-lockdown learning predominantly involved one-to-one interaction with their mentors and peer groups. Unfortunately, schools and colleges' nationwide closures have negatively impacted over 91% of the world's student population (Turegeldiyeva, 2020)

5. Discussion

Cyberbullying is frequently associated with psychological distress. Cyber victims tend to have increased depression, anxiety and insomnia. Cyberbullies are more likely to have problems with outward aggression, hyperactivity and substance use. A significant concern is the increased risk of suicide, which is considered more substantial than in traditional bullying.

62% of the respondents mentioned that they experienced cyberbullying. We think the number is much higher, but cyber awareness and digital security are new concepts for our respondents.

If we compare our results to the current studies in Russia, we would see that 'at least half of Russian users who play games at least sometimes encountered psychological violence in virtual space – aggression (52%), insults (53%) and trolling (49%)'. The study included a significant number of gamers (*N* = 7,000).

Every fifth respondent from Russia (20%) admitted that several times a year, he/she faces depressive and anxious conditions caused by stress. However, only 37% are ready to seek professional psychological help (in fact, only 10% did so). Among the main barriers to such treatment was the belief that all problems can be solved by one's self or relatives' help.

The most significant findings are the absence of support. The participants who were high school students would not say anything to adults. Being a victim in a country with substantial cultural victim-blaming attitudes is quite challenging for a teenager. In Kazakhstan, victimisation, as the desire to blame the victim for her/her fault, is a widespread phenomenon.

The Japanese scholar Miyazawa's research of victimhood in adolescents in school bullying also deserves attention. He concluded that it is necessary to distinguish between general victimhood and unique victimhood. General victimhood is determined by age, gender, occupation and social status. Unique victimhood depends on unstable psychological development, emotional neglect and lagging in the development of intelligence. In his opinion, if these two types are combined, the victimhood of the individual increases (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Scientists Jameson and Jongward offered their approach to explaining the causes and conditions of an individual's victimisation. According to their theory, all people are conditionally divided into two classes: those who win and those who lose. Scientists note that various factors contribute to forming a losing personality: an insufficient response to the need for care, conflicts in the family, prolonged unpleasantness, rudeness of the social environment, lack of approval, excessive physical activity and the like. Such an individual loses real opportunities to improve his or her situation. This situation happens because the person sees herself as in a crooked mirror, underestimating her capabilities and abilities, overestimating the power of external influence and pressure on her. The American psychotherapist Rainwater has developed a relatively rational concept of the reasons that plunge a person into a state of victimhood. The scientist believes that every person is engaged in self-programming in his/her life. How he/she programmes himself/herself determines his/her future behaviour in this or that social situation. If a person has convinced himself/herself that he/she is a failure throughout his/her life, then he/she will most likely become a victim. In other words, a person independently and quite consciously can increase his/her victimhood.

According to Rybalskaya (1979, p. 68), agreeing with Konovalov, 'it is advisable to recognise victimhood depending on the factors that formed it, namely: victimhood as a set of socio-psychological qualities of the individual, which are associated with the features of its socialisation; victimhood as an exclusively social "impersonal" quality associated with the performance of social functions; victimhood as a physiological quality of the individual (age-related victimhood); victimhood as a consequence of a pathological state of the individual'. Odintsova (2010, p. 76) stated that young people with increased victimisation have a typical model of behaviour, more typical for a child than for an adult. The scientist defines the main characteristics of victimhood: lack of contact with others, they feel helpless and uncomfortable; and indefinite reaction in response to criticism and disapproval (Odintsova, 2010, p. 76).

6. Conclusion

We look at the primary forms of cyberbullying (flaming, griffing, trolling, slander, impersonation, secret disclosure and fraud, exclusion/ostracism, cyberstalking and sexting) to show the specifics of cyberbullying behaviours on the Internet.

In November 2020, the Russian Media (RIA NEWS) published the results of another online survey where 72% of Russian teenagers had experienced some form of bullying on the Internet. Simultaneously, almost one-third of the teenagers (29%) perceived cyberbullying as a norm.

The Head of the Internet Association, Shavkat Sabirov (09.09.2020), mentioned that his organisation found more cases of cyberbullying. However, then he called trolling (name calling) an 'innocent game'.

Unlike traditional bullying, where the aggressor is known to the face and can be avoided, the pursuer is anonymous in cyberspace. The victim does not know if there is one stalker or several of them; boy or girl; older or younger; whether they know each other or not friends. This uncertainty increases anxiety; the victims may begin to fantasise about the aggressor's power and strength and, in this regard, about his vulnerability and defencelessness, based on his personal experiences. Thus, cyberbullying can be particularly dangerous for children and adolescents who have traumatic experiences or who experience rejection within the family. Uncertainty is reinforced by continuity: bullying over the Internet and cell phones may not stop day or night.

Moreover, a single published message may work as a reusable act of bullying, causing more and more painful comments for the victim, other than the victim may read the offensive or threatening text received and experience retraumatisation. Because the Internet serves as a communication function and a space for socialisation, a victim may experience bullying as a complete loss of relationship building, development and socialisation opportunities. A child's fear of being bullied is the fear of being denied access to the network. For many parents who learn that their child is a victim, the first step is to prevent their child from using a computer or cell phone. While this seems a logical way to stop cyberbullying, for a child the fear of losing screen time exceeds even the fear of continuing to be bullied because lack of access to electronic communications greatly annuls their social life. Therefore, children often hide the facts of electronic harassment. Depriving a child of technological devices is an additional punishment for the victim. In a cyberbullying situation, the stalker does not see the victim's facial expressions, does not hear his/her intonations and is not aware of his/her emotional reactions: e-mail or instant messages allow him/her to distance themselves from them.

The ability not to be identified leads to the phenomenon of disinhibition: without the threat of punishment and social disapproval, people say and do things that they would not say and do under their name, allow themselves much more than they are used to in ordinary life, where they are responsible for their actions and statements. This anonymity is more of an illusion than reality that users leave 'electronic footprints' [23]. However, even if identified, the persecutor may claim that someone else used his/her account to carry out the bullying and try to evade punishment.

7. Limitations

Our study has some limitations. It was conducted among school students of Aktobe city at the beginning of the pandemic. It would be essential to investigate increased cyberbullying during the COVID-19 crisis cross-nationally.

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