Reflections of Preservice Information Technology Teachers Regarding Cyberbullying

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Abstract

The current phenomenological study addressed the reflections of preservice information technology (IT) teachers regarding their cyberbullying or victimization experiences. Fifty five preservice IT teachers at a Turkish teacher training institution were offered a lecture with the purpose of awareness-raising on cyberbullying, which was followed by the assignment of take-home reflection papers. Document analysis on reflection papers led researchers to find out underlying themes regarding participants' cyberbullying or victimization experiences. Findings revealed that females were more likely to be victims than males. Instant messaging programs, e-mail, cell phones and online social networks were used as means to cyberbully. Varying psychological consequences of victimization incidents were reported. Noted reactions to incidents were discontinuing interaction with bullies, and seeking family, peer and legal support. Findings further implied that awareness raising activities regarding cyberbullying were likely to reduce cyberbullying instances and increase preservice teachers' action competence.

Keywords: *Cyberbullying; information technology teachers; higher education; empathy training*

Introduction

Emerging information and communication technologies provide us with novel and engaging channels of interaction. The borderless digital world has become a fruitful platform for social interactions where individuals can communicate with more anonymity and less monitoring. In this regard, the traditional interpretation of 'physical' bullying has been extended in a way to address the 'virtual' experiences. Usually referred to as cyberbullying, this new form of bullying involves deliberate and repeated harm that is directed at peers through electronic media (Beran & Li, 2005; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

The rich variety of communication tools and the anonymity provided by emerging technologies facilitate several types of cyberbullying. These have been classified by Willard (2005) as *flaming* (sending angry or vulgar messages), *harassment* (sending offensive messages repeatedly), *cyberstalking* (harassment with threats of harm), *denigration* (posting harmful or untrue statements about other people), *masquerade* (pretending to be someone else to make that person look bad), *outing and trickery* (sending material that contains humiliating information, engaging in tricks to get embarrassing information to disseminate that information), and *exclusion* (intentionally excluding a person from the group).

Cyberbullying is considered a source of deep emotional damage on individuals as victims are often hurt psychologically (Anderson & Sturm, 2007; Feinberg & Robey, 2008). Empirical studies revealed significant relationships between cyberbullying and emotional troubles (Erdur-Baker & Tanrıkulu, 2009; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006 & 2010; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006). Considering that there is a significant relationship between perceived psychological vulnerability and achievement (Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005), it can be maintained that cyberbullying can have the potential to interfere with students' ability to learn at school (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Shariff & Strong-Wilson, 2005). In this regard, it is crucial to take immediate precautions to prevent cyberbullying.

Online perpetrators usually shield themselves through nicknames. This identity hide makes bullies more powerful than the victims (McGrath, 2007; Shariff, 2008). Because of this anonymity and power divide, cyberbullying is also attractive to Web users. In addition, users are likely to say things they would not say to a person face-to-face as long as they believe they remain anonymous (Arıcak et al., 2008; Beale & Hall, 2007). Indeed, a comprehensive survey study with 695 undergraduate students in Turkey revealed that the ease of remaining anonymous in the cyberspace was a significant trigger of cyberbullying (Arıcak, 2009). Thus, even allegedly decent individuals with exemplary characteristics in the physical world may be deceived by the attraction of anonymity and power in the virtual world unless timely and properly awareness raising is realized.

In addition to anonymity, perpetrators do not witness the impact of their actions on the victim, which makes them lack the empathy and awareness regarding the consequences (Froese-Germain, 2008). The role of empathy in cyberbullying was well investigated by several scholars (Ang & Goh, 2010; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). For instance, Ang and Goh (2010) studied the relationship between affective and cognitive empathy, and gender on cyberbullying through surveying 396 adolescents from Singapore. Findings revealed that at low affective empathy, boys and girls who also had low cognitive empathy had higher scores on cyberbullying than the participants who had high cognitive empathy. This was valid for boys at high affective empathy as well. For girls, different levels of cognitive empathy resulted in similar levels of cyberbullying. The study implied the need for empathy training among adolescents.

One of the dominant attitudes toward cyberbullying instances was reported as indifference, since peers prefer to avoid conflicts and to maintain harmony within the group (Huang & Chou, 2010). This finding from a Taiwanese sample was retained in several international studies, which revealed that the majority of the victims do not report the incidents to adults (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Li, 2007). In a recent comprehensive survey conducted in 25 European countries, researchers resorted to a random stratified sample of 23.420 children aged 9-16, and one of their parents (Livingstone, Haddo, Görzig & Ólafsson, 2010). Twelve percent of the children were bothered by something on the internet whereas 39 percent encountered at least one of the risks identified in the survey. Among these risks, cyber-victimization through hurtful messages was the least common risk, but was the most likely to upset the users. Moreover, parental underestimation of the risks was quite substantial since '56% of parents whose child has received nasty or hurtful messages online say that their child has not' (Livingstone et al., 2010, 11). Such findings are raising alarms regarding the lack of precautions to prevent cyberbullying.

Previous studies in Turkey among different populations revealed that the extent of victimization was about 30 percent or more (Akbulut, Sahin & Eristi, 2010b & 2010c). Cyberbullying instances like flaming, denigration and exclusion were observed even in instructional settings, particularly in communicative e-learning environments sheltering platforms for heated group discussions (Dursun & Akbulut, 2010). Further investigations with preservice teachers revealed that there was a significant

correlation between victimization and likelihood of bullying (Akbulut, Eristi, Dursun & Sahin, 2010a). This finding is also retained in a recent study conducted in Belgium, which revealed that cyber-victims were nine times more likely to engage in cyberbullying (Walrave & Heirman, 2011). In such a serious context, taking immediate actions to prevent cyberbullying is not solely a concern of victims but also that of their observers and addressees as well.

Above studies collected data from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Our recent investigations with pre-service teachers suggested that higher levels of education may have suppressed the impact of some background variables that influenced cyberbullying. However, it was also observed that the issue was prevalent among individuals with higher education (Arıcak, 2009; Dursun & Akbulut, 2010). Thus, in addition to high level education, awareness raising and substantive instruction on cyberbullying should be included in school curricula (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). This argument was retained in recent studies (Ryan, Kariuki & Yilmaz, 2011; Slovak & Singer, 2011). Slovak and Singer found that even school social workers were not equipped with skills to deal with cyberbullying properly, though they all believed cyberbullying caused serious psychological harm. Similarly, Ryan et al. (2011) found that Turkish and Canadian preservice teachers felt unprepared to deal with cyberbullying.

It has been suggested that awareness raising on responsible and ethical use of information and communication technologies can prevent cyberbullying instances (Erdur-Baker & Kavşut, 2007). Indeed, raising awareness to eliminate parental underestimation, and empowering collaboration among parents, students, educators and relevant institutions are considered central themes to effectively addressing cyberbullying (Kingston, 2011). These precautions can be further supported through building empathy and training users about online safety skills (Holladay, 2011). In this regard, awareness raising activities among IT people and school stakeholders carry utmost importance.

The current study investigated cyberbullying victimization incidents among preservice IT teachers who will be teaching at K-8 schools. Since they will have considerable roles in organizing IT activities at schools, offering them training on cyberbullying and addressing their perceptions may empower awareness raising and facilitate future collaboration opportunities among school stakeholders. It is also believed that such awareness raising activities may lead to a decrease in future cyberbullying instances. Thus, as a contribution to ethical awareness raising and empathy training on cyberbullying, preservice IT teachers were offered with a lecture on cyberbullying, and their personal experiences and reflections were described.

Methods and Procedures

Participants

Participants were 55 preservice teachers (36 males & 19 females) from a computer education and instructional technology department in Turkey. Age of the participants ranged from 20 to 23 years. They were enrolled in the third grade Education and Technology course in fall 2010. They were the most IT literate preservice teacher group in the college of education since they were required to take several unique courses such as Information and Communication Technologies in Education, Programming Languages, Graphics and Animations in Education, Operating Systems and Applications, and Internet Based Programming.

Implementation

In two groups, participants were provided with a two-hour cyberbullying lecture by the course instructor. Some of the lecture headings were definitions and examples regarding cyberbullying, types of bullies and cyberbullying, reasons behind bullying incidents, psychological effects of cyberbullying on the victims, ways to diagnose victims, descriptions of risky user behaviors, and responsibilities of users, families and educators regarding the problem. The lecture was supported with several top rated videos and impressive cartoons on cyberbullying. These videos were translated to Turkish by the researchers and Turkish subtitles were embedded.

Before the lecture, participants were asked whether they ever heard of the term, which revealed that none of them was familiar with the concept. Through clues provided by the course instructor, they brainstormed to create a definition and description of cyberbullying. The lecture was provided in a way to generate discussions regarding the reasons and prevention ways of cyberbullying. At the end of the implementation, participants were asked to provide and reflect on their personal anecdotes in the light of the provided lecture.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study was conducted with a qualitative stance and followed the phenomenological analysis approach to analyze the data. In such an approach, the purpose is to offer insights into how an individual experiences, perceives and interprets a given phenomenon in a specific context (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). In this regard, perceptions of preservice IT teachers regarding their cyberbullying or victimization experiences are investigated.

Participants were given a take-home assignment in which they were supposed to reflect on their personal experiences. Each reflection paper demonstrated unique cases, and these were analyzed through document analysis techniques. Through investigating the current literature and the data collected, headings to address the findings were determined as (1) victim profiles, (2) means of cyberbullying, (3) types of cyberbullying, (4) problems stemming from cyberbullying, and (5) follow-up actions. Themes and categories were given their final form after a consensus among researchers was sustained, and findings were summarized through frequencies and sample statements.

Findings

It was observed that the number of participants who experienced or observed a specific cyberbullying incident was 42. In 23 (55 %) of the reported cyberbullying incidents, the victim was a female. Reported incidents represented different age groups. Some participants preferred to report experiences from the secondary or high school years whereas the majority tended to report nearby events. Prevalent means of cyberbullying are summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Means of cyberbullying

Means	**f**
Online platforms	**22**
• *Facebook*	13
• *Online games*	5
• *Discussion forums*	3
• *Online gambling sites*	1
Cellphones	**18**
• *Talking*	9
• *Texting*	8
• *Recording / sharing embarrassing scenes*	1
Instant messaging	**11**
E-mail	**8**

Online social platforms like Facebook and mobile communication devices were prevalent means of cyberbullying. In addition, instant messaging services and e-mail were used to cyberbully. Recording embarrassing scenes was reported only in one case. This was probably because the majority of participants did not have access to high tech cellphones yet.

Some of the cyberbullying instances were unplanned and haphazard whereas some involved elaboration. For instance, usernames were stolen through trickery, and these were further used to solicit humiliating and embarrassing information about a specific target group or individual.

> *"The fake address was quite similar to that of my cousin. It was hard to tell the difference. Anyways, he was using my cousin's photo as the profile pic. I was wondering how he could get such an address even though Facebook takes some precautions regarding these fake addresses. I think the guy was a professional. He could contact with my cousin's friends and nobody noticed that he was not my cousin. So, he might know my cousin very well." [Participant$_{11}$]*

As exemplified, masquerading and trickery examples were quite striking. Nearly half of all instances involved harassment, i.e. sending offensive messages repeatedly (Willard, 2005). The distribution of cyberbullying types observed in reflection papers are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2. Types of cyberbullying

Type	**f**
Harassment	16
Flaming	7
Masquerading	6
Cyberstalking	5
Denigration	2

It was revealed that a considerable amount of harassment directed at women were sexual harassment incidents. Harassment incidents were realized through both social networks (e.g. Facebook) and cellphones (i.e. talking and texting). Another common type of cyberbullying was categorized as flaming in the current study. Willard (2005) defines flaming as sending angry, rude or vulgar messages. In almost all reports of flaming, participants believed that the incident was caused because of jealousy, since they believed that the victim was in an enviable status in terms of academic achievement, social popularity or relationships with the opposite sex. Flaming stemmed from jealousy was slightly more prevalent among women.

Masquerading and trickery instances were reported to go together. The former involves pretending to be someone else and sending material to make that person look bad whereas the latter refers to engaging in tricks to solicit embarrassing information to disseminate that information (Willard, 2005). Cyberstalking (i.e. harassment with threats of harm) was partly conducted by perpetrators who masqueraded. Among cyberstalking instances, blackmailing was observed frequently. Finally, denigration was a type of cyberbullying observed in the data. The following sample depicted several cyberbullying types together.

> *"Even though some time has passed, he continued to harass my friend. He called and sent online messages invariably. My friend could not stand this, but could not tell anybody either. He was blackmailing with threats of harm to either my friend or my friend's family. He was asking my friend to do several favors for himself and sending offensive messages when rejected." [Participant$_{37}$]*

Psychological effects of cyberbullying on individuals were reported by participants. These problems ranged from common problems including anxiety through more serious ones like suicide attempts. These problems are summarized in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Problems stemming from cyberbullying

Problem	**f**
Varying psychological issues	11
Paranoia	11
Social anxiety / disbelief in people	9
Non-attendance / Academic failure	8
Aversion / Desire to revenge	8
Humiliation	5
Despair	4
Low self-esteem	3
Suicide attempt	1

Fear and anxiety were among popular psychological issues observed after victimization. Reflections revealed that the anonymity of the perpetrators and the ambiguity of the extent of their power increased the fear and anxiety. Since victims could not control what was going to happen next, the level of paranoia got higher. While the victims developed a disbelief in people and preferred to isolate themselves from the social group, their attendance rate dropped down, and interfered with the academic success as well.

> *"Even though there was no personal or physical contact between the bully and her, she was really hurt. She was depressed for a long time after the incident. They identified the boy who published the pictures, who did not come to school either. Both of their grades decreased. My friend would not show up in our planned activities, participate in our conversations. She was even running away from obligatory conversations. This isolation brought about several social problems, I think." [Participant$_{21}$]*

Reactions to cyberbullying instances and the way these incidents ended varied among participants. The most common reaction among bullies was regret, if they saw or understood the impact of their actions. Among bullies, there were also some who repented their injustice to their peers particularly because of the current lecture.

Table 4. Reactions and ending

Reaction	**f**
Regret	7
Discontinuing interaction with bullies	7
Family support	7
Peer support	5
Legal support	4

Victims on the other hand, resorted to several strategies to deal with bullies. As the frequency of instances revealed, a considerable number of victims did nothing against bullying but wait till the incident was over. Discontinuing interaction with the bully (e.g. blocking the sender) was the most frequent precaution, followed by family support, peer support and legal support successively.

> *"My family helped me a lot. If they did not support me, I would not get over the problem." [Participant$_{41}$]*

> *"First, we applied to Facebook to shut down the address. Then, my parents found a way to contact with the bully. I learnt that he confessed, and he was really regretful." [Participant$_{07}$]*

Cases reported by participants revealed that family support was sometimes preferred only if personal efforts and peer support did not help. It was also revealed that legal support usually followed the family support, which occurred through family's intervention.

One of the significant findings of the current study was that the training helped participants have a certain level of awareness regarding cyberbullying. Participants were able to reflect on their personal experiences better through the help of the provided lecture. Some believed that they should focus on their technical skills development whereas the majority considered themselves as responsible to prevent further cyberbullying incidents. This awareness and understanding was observed in almost all reflection papers. Participants who paraphrased their previous bullying actions were all regretful. They further reported that they would not only abstain from such actions, but also help others deal with the situation.

> *"I'm twenty years old now somebody is telling me what cyberbullying is. I used to love doing it. I wish somebody told me about it when I was younger. We had a lot of fun when we were younger, because we did not know that we were harming others" [Participant$_{19}$]*

> *"The first time I heard it, I did not think it was that important. But now I think that we were too late to learn the meaning of this word." [Participant$_{34}$]*

Conclusion and Discussion

The proportion of participants who experienced or observed a specific cyberbullying incident retains previous arguments regarding the prevalence of the problem (Akbulut et al., 2010b & 2010c; Arıcak, 2009; Arıcak et al., 2008; Erdur-Baker, 2010; Erdur-Baker & Kavşut, 2007; Ryan et al., 2011). In this regard, awareness raising towards collaboration and dialogue is of utmost importance. That is, even though certain individuals are not victims, they are quite likely to be aware of the victims around them. Encouraging them to take immediate and responsible actions against cyberbullying is a critical implementation in this regard.

Differences between males and females were expected (Akbulut et al., 2010b; Aricak et al., 2008; Erdur-Baker & Kavşut, 2007) in contrast to studies indicating no gender differences (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). However, the victims were more likely to be females in the current study. In addition, the profiles of the victims suggested that the issue was not peculiar to adolescents, but apparent in different age groups (Akbulut et al. 2010a & 2010b; Arıcak, 2009; Dursun & Akbulut, 2010). Such univariate reflections partially retain previous hypotheses. Further and in-depth analyses can be conducted to address the influence of several other background variables on cyberbullying and victimization. For instance, marital and socioeconomic status; purpose, frequency, location, time and nature of Internet use; program of study; language proficiency; and several psychosocial factors can be embedded in research designs to describe interactions among background variables influencing cyberbullying and victimization. Moreover, regarding cultural differences observed previously (Li, 2008; Ryan et al., 2011), cross-cultural comparisons of individuals' experiences through in-depth analyses may lead to critical leaps regarding the description of cyberbullying in different cultures.

The means and types of cyberbullying reported by preservice teachers were quite similar to those reported in the literature (Willard, 2005). Harassment was the most frequent type followed by flaming. Previously it was reported that indirect flaming, exclusion and denigration were prevalent cyberbullying types observed in formal instructional settings (Dursun & Akbulut, 2010). Thus, one can suggest that flaming and exclusion transforms into harassment and cyberstalking when the perpetrators are confident that they remain anonymous. Findings further implied that blackmailing was a common type of cyberstalking. The least frequent type of cyberbullying was recording/sharing embarrassing scenes through mobile phones. Regarding that capturing humiliating scenes is quite attractive to young individuals, this finding could be interpreted as a consequence of digital divide rather than the scarcity of the incident. If the majority had PDAs, probably such instances would have been reported more frequently.

Reported problems stemming from cyberbullying revealed that the issue was quite serious, and retained the significant relationships between cyberbullying and emotional troubles (Erdur-Baker & Tanrıkulu, 2009; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006 & 2010; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006). Themes emerging from the reflections further retained that cyberbullying interfered with students' ability to learn at school (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Shariff & Strong-Wilson, 2005). Thus, awareness raising on ethical use of information and communication technologies through embedding the subject in the school curricula, and empowering collaboration among stakeholders of the school are urgent steps to take.

The frequency of precautions among participants demonstrated the high degree of indifference toward cyberbullying, which was expected (Huang & Chou, 2010). However, current findings further implied that even a two-hour lecture regarding the issue could contribute to awareness raising and serve as empathy training, which could be quite helpful in decreasing future incidents (Ang & Goh, 2010). In this regard, after planning to embed the issue to school curricula as a compulsory subject, further investigations can be conducted to understand the nature of training to lessen such unpleasant incidents. As a critical step, the subject matter could be covered in the curricula of the departments of computer education and instructional technology, since the graduates of these departments play the leading role both in the IT literacy education of the pupils, and in assisting other school staff.

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