Letter to Editor

Cyberbullying: The forgotten dimension of university life in the digital age

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Dear Editor,

As society progresses towards the digital age, we are witnessing a new type of bullying called cyberbullying. In this phenomenon, individuals use technology and digital platforms, including social networks, emails, and messengers, to inflict violence on others. Given the competitive atmosphere and academic pressure among medical students, as well as the emotional and physical challenges they are exposed to, cyberbullying, as a destructive and unethical tool, particularly affects these individuals. In light of the necessity for effective execution of the Academic Advisor Program at universities, we identified a teacher whose students had experienced cyberbullying and sought help. However, it became evident that not much help could be given to those students encountered with cyberbullying. It seems that university teachers lack sufficient experience in addressing this issue and are not well-acquainted with available support systems. Consequently, their ability to assist students is limited, often resulting in inadequate or ineffective solutions. This issue prompted us to delve into this phenomenon and come up with some primary strategies accordingly.

Definition of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a form of intentional and repeated violence and aggression in cyberspace using electronic devices such as smartphones, computers, etc., directed towards individuals who are often unable to protect themselves.[1,2] The capacity for individuals to engage in acts of violence against others in an anonymous way, devoid of temporal or place restrictions, has contributed to the increasing prevalence of this form of bullying in recent years, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.[3] Cyberbullying manifests in various forms, including: engaging in online disputes characterized by the use of profane language and threats; perpetrating harassment through the repeated transmission of offensive and derogatory messages aimed at humiliating the individual; disseminating false information to damage the individual's reputation and public image; impersonating the individual to conduct actions in their name; disclosing private information and personal matters in the digital realm; exploiting the trust of the individual to misuse sensitive content related to them; unjustly and maliciously excluding an individual from a virtual community; and instilling fear and intimidation through threats directed at individuals.[4]

Effects of cyberbullying

Students who are subjected to cyberbullying are unable to focus on their studies due to experiencing severe emotional stress and as a result, they suffer from academic failure. Since these victims are often psychologically damaged, the depressive effect of cyberbullying hinders their academic progress.[5] Studies show that victims of cyberbullying generally exhibit psychological problems such as depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, school phobia, and social anxiety. In addition, research findings indicate that cyberbullying causes psychological and physiological harm to victims, as well as psychosocial problems such as behavioral problems, drinking alcohol, smoking, depression, and low academic commitment.[6]

On the other hand, there are concerns that cyberbullying causes greater and more enduring damage to individuals compared to conventional bullying, with these adverse effects having a persistent influence on the individual's psychological well-being. Findings from a study involving 3,103 healthy community members indicated that increased experiences of cyberbullying victimization and

perpetration were significantly and directly correlated with higher levels of suicidal ideation[7,8] for their educational pursuits, the pervasive academic competition among students significantly influences their professional development and social interactions, particularly in the context of cyberbullying.[4]

Strategies to address cyberbullying in universities
Faculty empowerment
In this era of digital literacy, students need to engage actively in cyberspace using digital tools for a multitude of purposes. Consequently, the notion of eliminating cyberbullying appears to be unrealistic. It is also not a controllable phenomenon; therefore, the appropriate strategies to deal with it must be learned.[9] On the premise of the literature review, individuals who experience cyberbullying suffer greater functional impairments in both social and academic domains compared to their non-victimized counterparts. University teachers, who serve as primary supporters and significant role models[10,11] in the academic experiences of students, are crucial in recognizing and addressing instances of cyberbullying. Research suggests that faculty development programs are regarded as fundamental components within the educational system.[12,13] The empowerment of teachers in this context can be analyzed from two perspectives:

In-depth understanding of cyberbullying among teachers
To effectively help students in addressing this form of violence, teachers must possess a comprehensive understanding and a suitable mindset regarding the issue. A study conducted in 2014 examined the experiences of teachers across various academic disciplines in Canada regarding their victimization by cyberbullying. After defining and elucidating the dimensions and examples of cyberbullying, it was found that 17% of teachers reported having experienced cyberbullying within the preceding year.[14] It is important to note that since the time of this study, the utilization of digital tools has markedly increased in many societies. Consequently, it is essential for teachers to first familiarize themselves with this phenomenon, and its various forms, and to acknowledge its diverse aspects.

Student awareness
Teachers can educate students regarding the implications of cyberbullying by implementing training initiatives such as workshops, seminars, and training courses. Furthermore, it is essential to instruct students on safe practices within cyberspace.[15] Beyond understanding the consequences of cyberbullying, students should also be familiarized with its various forms and develop the ability to identify them.

Creating a supportive environment
It is essential for teachers, as reliable and safe individuals, to engage in the establishment of a supportive and trustworthy atmosphere for students. Such an environment enables students to articulate their concerns with confidence. Creating a supportive environment is not exclusively the responsibility of teachers; rather, educational institutions must also participate in this endeavor.[16] Consequently, interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for fostering a supportive environment, specifically the clinical environment which is used for teaching a broad range of medical disciplines.[17] The identification of at-risk students and the development of appropriate support strategies are also critical components of this process. Research conducted by Kowalski et al indicates that individuals who experience cyber victimization are predominantly students transitioning to a new academic program. This suggests that both new and transfer students are particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying, warranting targeted attention and intervention for this population.[1] Additionally, it is necessary to implement initiatives aimed at educating both students and teachers about available support systems and resources.

Establishing clear policies and guidelines
In a recent study, university teachers identified the establishment of a robust anti-cyberbullying policy as the foremost solution to address this issue within academic institutions.[14] In instances of cyberbullying directed at students, which may lead to severe psychological consequences such as suicidal ideation, it is imperative that teachers possess the legal authority and requisite knowledge to assist affected students.[9] While comprehensive guidelines exist in various domains, their dissemination has been inadequate, and there is a pressing need for these guidelines to be tailored to the specific context of higher education institutions.[18] Furthermore, it is important to recognize that teachers themselves can be victims of cyberbullying, necessitating the formulation of clear and precise legal frameworks. Medical teachers, in particular, are at heightened risk due to their specialized expertise and extensive professional networks, thereby underscoring the necessity for the development of explicit policies to address their concerns.

Conclusion
Cyberbullying is evolving in tandem with technological advancements, and universities, as microcosms of society, are not exempt from this threat. Individuals who engage in online interactions are at risk of encountering this phenomenon. The responses of universities to this phenomenon remain largely unexamined, as many officials and administrators lack a definitive strategy and do not engage in discussions surrounding the issue. There is a paucity of research in this area, particularly within the context of medical universities. It is necessary that this significant issue is not overlooked due to its potential negative repercussions, and that targeted, precise, and

effective planning be prioritized. Faculty members, as the organizational power, constitute a critical resource within an organization and serve as a key indicator for assessing the organization's level of dominance.[19] Thus, play can play a pivotal role in the prevention of cyberbullying.

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