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The Perspective of University Students on the Availability and Effectiveness of Cyberbullying Prevention and Response Initiatives on Campus: Virtual Semistructured Interviews on Resources, Barriers, and Solutions

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is a problem in educational settings, and much of the research has focused on the development of effective prevention and response initiatives. Because of the vulnerability of children, cyberbullying research and intervention programs have largely targeted elementary students. A growing body of research has shown that cyberbullying is not limited to elementary settings, but the problem is also prevalent in postsecondary institutions, with potentially severe negative consequences. Yet, there is a gap in research about interventions tailored to this life stage. To address this gap, we conducted virtual semistructured interviews through Zoom with 21 university students on the availability and the effectiveness of prevention and response initiatives on campus, existing barriers, and potential solutions. We found that university students were concerned about a lack of available initiatives, and they identified several barriers, including a lack of cyberbullying conversations occurring on campus, limited knowledge about the impacts of cyberbullying on university students, and stigmatization associated with cybervictimization, which made it difficult for students to openly talk about their experiences. To remedy these barriers, university students offered several solutions: increasing education for postsecondary students, faculty, staff, and support teams; conducting studies examining cyberbullying from the unique life stage perspective of young adulthood and employing an ecological point of view; and finally, creating age-appropriate cyberbullying resources, such as flyers, webpages, and anonymous reporting systems. A central theme across these solutions was the need for conversations around cyberbullying experiences at the postsecondary level, as students perceived that it was treated as a taboo topic.

Keywords: *cyberbullying, prevention and response initiatives, postsecondary students, young adults, social media, digital media*

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Introduction

Cyberbullying is a pervasive problem at the postsecondary level; studies have reported prevalence rates equal to or more than 30% (Mishna et al., 2018). Research has suggested that as children grow older and transition from elementary school to high school to postsecondary education, cyberbullying repercussions change, often becoming more intense, severe, and immediate (Myers & Cowie, 2019). For instance, investigations of cyberbullying in postsecondary institutions provide evidence of negative, lifelong consequences, including irreversible personal, social, and professional impacts (Cassidy et al., 2019; Mishna et al., 2018). Unlike younger age groups, the negative outcomes are further exacerbated for postsecondary students because they are simultaneously coping with transition-related stressors, such as being away from home and having to establish new social connections (Cunningham et al., 2015).

A growing body of evidence has demonstrated the effectiveness of prevention and response initiatives in mitigating the negative repercussions of cyberbullying in children (Polanin et al., 2021) and adolescents (Ng et al., 2020). Yet, these interventions are mostly targeted at elementary and high school students, resulting in a lack of prevention and response initiatives tailored specifically to university students (Faucher et al., 2020). Even in the limited cases where postsecondary institutions have started implementing initiatives, concerns about their effectiveness persist. For instance, these initiatives are not necessarily based on the perspectives of university students but rather on studies conducted with children and adolescents (Faucher et al., 2020). This is problematic because not only are university students a key stakeholder group who should be given autonomy and control (Cunningham et al., 2015), but their insights would ensure that initiatives are better informed, relatable, and age-appropriate (Jackson et al., 2019). Implementing age-appropriate cyberbullying interventions is paramount because research has consistently shown that these interventions are only effective when the life stage is fully taken into consideration (Jackson et al., 2019). To remedy these concerns, new prevention and response initiatives are needed at the postsecondary level that are rooted in young adults' understandings of cyberbullying (Sheanoda et al., 2021) as well as considering the life stage with its unique characteristics, including living away from home, negotiating new social ties, and lessening adult oversight (Myers & Cowie, 2019).

Despite the importance of developing cyberbullying initiatives tailored to a specific social context and life stage, no studies to date have examined postsecondary students' understanding of cyberbullying initiatives on campus. For example, Vaill (2021) argued that we know little about university students' awareness of cyberbullying initiatives (e.g., policies, resources, and/or services). Thus, more research is needed that uses an integrative approach that includes postsecondary students as active participants and facilitates and evaluates their perspective of cyberbullying more generally and how institutions are addressing the problem. This will reveal barriers associated with implementing cyberbullying initiatives and also examine how universities can provide support (Vaill et al., 2021). This research can lead to further insight regarding solutions that would make a difference. Our study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by examining the perspective of postsecondary students to address the following research questions:

1. From the perspective of university students, what initiatives are available on campus to prevent and respond to cyberbullying and how effective are these?

2. What barriers do university students identify to the implementation of cyberbullying prevention and response initiatives?

3. What solutions do university students propose to overcome existing barriers?

Cyberbullying is a pervasive social problem across the life course (Myers & Cowie, 2019), leading to numerous negative outcomes (Mishna et al., 2018); therefore, prevention and response initiatives are critical for reducing cyberbullying prevalence rates (Cassidy et al., 2017), reducing the impacts of cybervictimization (Cross et al., 2015), and providing tools for future prevention and immediate response (Jackson et al., 2019).

Literature Review

Cyberbullying in the Postsecondary Context: Young Adults' Experiences and Outcomes

Across different life stages, scholars have found evidence of consistency as well as key differences in terms of not only what cyberbullying is but also what outcomes are associated with cybervictimization. For instance, in childhood and adolescence, cyberbullying typically manifests itself as threats and/or offensive statements or name-calling on social media or online gaming platforms, spreading false rumors, and creating hate accounts with the intent to threaten or embarrass (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; Vogels, 2022). Outcomes associated with such behaviors include ruined reputations (Felmlee & Paris, 2016), social exclusion (Alhujailli et al., 2020), and self-harming behaviors and/or suicide ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018).

While similar behaviors can occur in later life stages, evidence shows that cyberbullying evolves and escalates in young adulthood to include sexting, public shaming, revenge porn, and harassment (Cowie & Myers, 2016). As well, it has been found that cyberbullying behaviors are more directed in young adulthood, such as targeting someone's race/ethnicity and/or sexual orientation (Myers & Cowie, 2017; 2019). Coinciding with these changes comes more intense, severe, and immediate negative lifelong repercussions, including irreversible personal, social, and professional consequences (Mishna et al., 2018; Yoon & Koo, 2020). For example, investigations into cyberbullying outcomes among postsecondary students have revealed that victims increasingly become distrustful of people and digital media (Rivituso, 2014), experience negative academic consequences (Wright, 2018), and are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression as well as engage in self-harming behaviors and/or experience suicide ideation (Cassidy et al., 2017; Mishna et al., 2018). Such outcomes can be further exacerbated when coupled with other postsecondary-related stressors (e.g., increased workload, being away from home) (Wright, 2018) and experiences of victimization (e.g., racism, homophobia, sexual violence) (Myers & Cowie, 2017; Yoon & Koo, 2020). The negative impact of cyberbullying on university students demonstrates a need for examining the opinions and perspectives of postsecondary students with the aim of informing the development of effective, age-appropriate prevention and response initiatives tailored to the postsecondary context (Faucher et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2019).

Cyberbullying Prevention and Response Initiatives on Postsecondary Campuses

In this section, we review research on two types of initiatives: (1) cyberbullying policy initiatives and (2) nonpolicy initiatives. Understanding these types of initiatives is important as debates persist as to which type of initiative is best suited for addressing cyberbullying in the postsecondary context (Cassidy et al., 2019; Yoon & Koo, 2020).

Cyberbullying Policy Initiatives
Scholars such as Wozencroft et al. (2015) argue that policy initiatives are essential for addressing cyberbullying at the postsecondary level. That is because having updated and relevant policies ensures that protocols exist for how to react to cases of cyberbullying, and policies outline the consequences for perpetrators (Smith et al.,

2014). These policy-driven initiatives are categorized into three types: (1) zero-tolerance policies, (2) extensions to existing postsecondary institutional policies, and (3) application of broader legal frameworks.

Early approaches saw zero-tolerance policies as not only necessary but sufficient for cyberbullying prevention (Minor et al., 2013). Zero-tolerance policies are designed to send a strong message by condemning unacceptable behaviors (Skiba & Knesting, 2002) and warn about punishments that will be imposed on perpetrators regardless of the nuanced differences between offenses (Brunecz, 2015). However, critics have argued that these types of policies are too broad, and research examining children and adolescents has confirmed that they are ineffective (Hall, 2017). Instead, scholars recommend designing interventions that are based on the needs and understandings of specific populations (Faucher et al., 2020; Hall, 2017).

A second type of policy initiative has focused on expanding current postsecondary policies to include additional resources related to cyberbullying. For example, Faucher et al. (2014) proposed amalgamating cyberbullying within existing institutional policies, such as student codes of conduct or harassment and discrimination policies. By combining different types of policies, postsecondary institutions can better address cyberbullying by preventing confusion about which policy is applicable (Faucher et al., 2015). Closer investigations into these initiatives, however, have revealed challenges, such as uncertainty about where and how cyberbullying could fit within existing policies (Faucher et al., 2015) and contradictions between different types of policies within a single document (Vaill, 2021).

A third type of policy initiative consists of incorporating broader legal frameworks into institutional policies, such as the Criminal Code of Canada, and applying them to cyberbullying rather than expanding existing institutional policies (Faucher et al., 2015). This would provide postsecondary institutions with formalized procedures and laws as well as address jurisdictional uncertainties often faced when handling cases of cyberbullying in the courts (Langos & Giancasparo, 2019). Through these policies, disciplinary sanctions are attached to breaches of these codes of conduct, providing a roadmap for how to handle cyberbullying cases (Faucher et al., 2015). One problem, however, is that many instances of cyberbullying do not reach the threshold to be considered a criminal offense, so relying on legal frameworks could create unnecessary confusion as well as escalate conflicts rather than focus on solutions (Deschamps & McNutt, 2016).

Overall, policy-based initiatives provide mechanisms for ensuring consequences are in place for cyberbullying perpetrators (Hemphill & Heerde, 2015). These initiatives stress the use of punishments following cyberbullying behaviors, making them effective as a strategy for responding to cases rather than preventing them. With limited knowledge of postsecondary students' perceptions of cyberbullying and perspectives on how institutions are addressing cyberbullying, questions persist about whether university students perceive policy-focused initiatives as effective.

Nonpolicy Cyberbullying Initiatives
In contrast to policy-based initiatives, other scholars have stressed the importance of nonpolicy initiatives, namely, because they emphasize prevention through better equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and tools to be better informed about what cyberbullying is, how to recognize it, and what to do if they are being cyberbullied (Cunningham et al., 2015; Faucher et al., 2020). Two main types of nonpolicy cyberbullying initiatives are frequently discussed in the literature for how to best prevent cyberbullying at the postsecondary level: (1) anonymous cyberbullying reporting systems (Langos & Giancaspro, 2019) and (2) education-related initiatives (Faucher et al., 2020).

The expectation is that anonymous cyberbullying online reporting systems can address the problem of underreporting at the postsecondary level because of the anonymity of the reporter (Langos & Giancaspro, 2019). If the reporting of cyberbullying cases increased, postsecondary institutions could obtain more accurate prevalence rates, which has been missing (Wozencroft et al., 2015). Furthermore, having these reporting systems in place, as well as advertising where and how to access them, would remedy frequently raised concerns by

undergraduate students, such as not knowing where to report cases of cyberbullying (Faucher et al., 2014). Yet, these reporting systems would only be effective if institutions had mechanisms in place to acknowledge, address, and respond to received reports (Cassidy et al., 2013).

Another type of nonpolicy initiative consists of implementing cyberbullying education initiatives (e.g., workshops, videos), which scholars stress are critical for prevention (Faucher et al., 2020). Langos and Giancaspro (2019) argue that to be most effective, education initiatives need to be tailored to target different groups across postsecondary campuses, including, but not limited to, students, residence life staff, and faculty. Two examples demonstrate the effectiveness. First, a Japanese postsecondary institution made cyberbullying courses mandatory for first-year students, which, when coupled with other initiatives (e.g., peer-based mentoring), resulted in a more positive campus climate (Kanayama & Kurihara, 2019). In another example, Black (2019) found that students who took a healthy campus community education program were more aware of the impacts of cyberbullying on well-being. This awareness helped garner a more positive and supportive culture, where students were more knowledgeable about cyberbullying and connected to the community. Overall, the research demonstrates the importance of education in cyberbullying prevention and response initiatives. However, these types of education initiatives are not widespread, leaving concerns about how postsecondary institutions are addressing the problem (Faucher et al., 2020).

Barriers to Effective Prevention and Response Initiatives at the Postsecondary Level

The literature on cyberbullying prevention and response has identified barriers as an important area of study because these make it difficult to address the problem. Barriers are defined as problems/challenges that inhibit a particular outcome (Collins, 2022). For instance, Crosslin and Golman (2014) found that postsecondary students were less inclined to discuss cyberbullying with their parents or friends, thinking they would appear immature. This is because cyberbullying is perceived to be a juvenile problem, mainly targeting children and teens (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006), thereby leaving young adults with the impression that cyberbullying would not be taken seriously when it occurs (Faucher et al., 2020). As a result, when cyberbullying occurs, university students are apprehensive about seeking help (Cassidy et al., 2019). So far, there has been no systematic investigation of what barriers persist at the postsecondary level and how to overcome them. A key outcome of our study is to investigate the perspective of postsecondary students, giving them an opportunity to identify key barriers and potential solutions.

Methods

To learn about the perspectives of undergraduate students on the availability and effectiveness of cyberbullying initiatives at the postsecondary level, we conducted 21 virtual semistructured interviews with undergraduate students. The interviews were structured using a funneling technique (Hermanowicz, 2002), meaning they began by asking participants about their perceptions of cyberbullying occurring at the postsecondary level, particularly how they perceive and evaluate cyberbullying, and then transitioned to asking them about the treatment of and responses to cyberbullying. Semistructured interviews provided sufficient structure to cover a range of topics across all interviews while providing flexibility to explore new topics and follow leads in a free-flowing conversation (Corbin & Morse, 2003). This type of interview is used when scholars already have a broad understanding of a phenomenon, but subjective knowledge is lacking from the point of view of a specific population of interest (Richards & Morse, 2007). University students' maturity level and high language skills allow them to convey their experiences and opinions in detail and depth, making them an excellent fit for the interview method.

Sample

The sample comprised 21 undergraduate students who were evenly distributed across years of enrollment: six participants in their second year of study, seven participants in their third year of study, and eight participants in their fourth year of study. As the data collection started during the COVID-19 pandemic in September 2020, first-year students were excluded because they had not been on campus due to university closures resulting from public health measures in place in Canada. The age of participants ranged from 19 to 24 years (M = 20; SD = 1.2). The sample included 19 women and two men. Fifteen participants were born in Ontario, Canada, and the remaining six participants were born outside of Canada. All participants owned a computer or laptop and a mobile phone. All participants were avid users of social media: all had Facebook, 19 had Instagram, 19 had Snapchat, 12 had Twitter, and 9 had TikTok.

Data Collection

After obtaining approval from the university's research ethics board, data collection took place between September 1, 2020, and August 31, 2021. Participants were recruited through a poster that was shared via email lists and social media at a large university in Ontario, Canada. Participation was not limited based on experience of cyberbullying because the aim of our study was to garner a variety of perspectives pertaining to cyberbullying rather than evaluating cyberbullying involvement and/or experiences. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic-related health regulations, all interviews took place on Zoom and lasted an average of 90 minutes. Despite scholars identifying the challenges of conducting virtual interviews through platforms like Zoom (e.g., participants opting to keep their video off, connectivity issues, establishing co-presence) (Howlett, 2021), virtual data collection yielded rich data. Following the interview, participants received a debriefing email, a flyer with cyberbullying-specific resources, and, in appreciation of their time, a Cdn $5.00 Starbucks e-gift card. With participant consent, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. To protect participants' identities and maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis, which followed the steps laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006) (see Figure 1). One of us (Dr. Patel) first read the transcripts to gain familiarity with the data, then coded the data inductively, where codes emerged organically from the data, and were merged into major themes (see Table 1). The coding process took place through multiple rounds, spanning several months, and included discussions with the entire team. When coding was complete, and after the entire team reviewed and checked the major themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data, themes were named and defined. To give a voice to participants' perceptions and experiences, we use direct quotes from participants to exemplify the key themes (Given, 2008). These quotes are annotated with the participants' pseudonym, gender, and age.

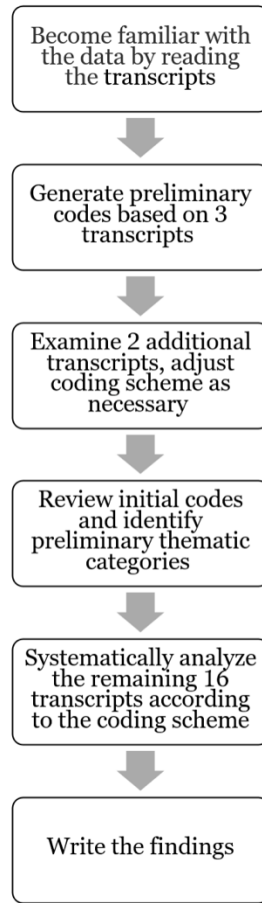**Figure 1.** *Thematic Coding Design Employed for Data Analysis.*

Table 1. *Summary of Major Themes and Their Associated Codes.*

Themes	Codes
Cyberbullying at the postsecondary level	Cyberbullying disappears from the conversation New pressures in postsecondary environment Necessity of regular, ongoing education and awareness
Resources available on campus	Unsure where to go and how to resolve it Lack of resources available Utilize mental health resources (e.g., peer support, wellness center) Because of their age, students can handle cyberbullying on their own
Prevention and response	Prevention initiatives Response initiatives Cyberbullying education Networked response Increase cyberbullying research Necessity of resources for campus leaders
Barriers to addressing cyberbullying	Limited understanding of cyberbullying at postsecondary level Change perceptions around cyberbullying Stigma around cyberbullying victimization Lack of resources

Findings

The Availability of Cyberbullying Initiatives on Campus

To address RQ1, students were asked about their awareness of existing cyberbullying initiatives. Most (19/21) participants indicated that they did not know about any initiatives that were available on campus. Beck Chan (W, 21) expressed her lack of knowledge around resources, how to seek help, and what to do. "If I were to be a target of cyberbullying, and feel like I need that help, that support, and how one might respond to a cyberbully or how to handle that situation, I don't really know of any resources on campus for that."

Participants also indicated that the lack of knowledge about potential initiatives was worrisome, as they were left to figure out by themselves how to proceed.

Two (2/21) participants indicated that they were aware of policy-based initiatives. Farrah Hassan (W, 21) suggested that the student code of conduct would offer guidance if cyberbullying occurred, while Alexis Anderson (W, 19) thought the university had a zero-tolerance policy. She said, "I've never heard of [initiatives] specifically for cyberbullying …. I am sure it is a no tolerance policy." Alexis was not familiar with the details of the document, but she thought it provided important guidance for conduct.

Approximately half (10/21) of the participants suggested that students could turn to other services should they need cyberbullying-related support, such as the student wellness center, student counseling, or peer support services. For instance, Farrah Hassan (W, 21) reported that these services were viable options available to students to deal with the stress and outcomes associated with cyberbullying as well as to obtain additional resources and support. Farrah said, "The peer support center or student experience and stuff like that can help you get resources to get help." While serving as good support systems, participants reflected that these services could be limited in the help they provided, such as excessive wait times and concerns around accessibility. Given these challenges, Emma Williams (W, 24) felt students may be deterred from using them, saying that "[these services] may be able to support a victim of cyberbullying, kind of within mental health support, but it's so limited, and it's so hard to reach that there's also that problem." Because of the lack of awareness around initiatives available on campus, participants felt they needed to handle cyberbullying and related outcomes on their own. Those participants who mentioned potential initiatives did refer to policy-related initiatives because these provide clear guidelines. Taken together, participants viewed the lack of cyberbullying initiatives offered on campus, combined with the limited availability of alternative support services, as a major problem that needed to be addressed.

Barriers to Addressing Cyberbullying

RQ2 examines the barriers to the implementation of prevention and response initiatives at the postsecondary level. We identified three core barriers: (1) a lack of conversations around cyberbullying at the postsecondary level, (2) limited knowledge around the role of digital media in cyberbullying and the impact of cyberbullying on young adults, and (3) stigma associated with being cyberbullied as a young adult. Participants saw these core barriers as responsible for the lack of initiatives available on campus.

Barrier 1: A Lack of Conversations Around Cyberbullying at the Postsecondary Level
The first barrier participants identified was the void in conversations and education around cyberbullying since starting postsecondary education. For participants, this experience often contrasted drastically with their experiences in elementary school and high school, where cyberbullying was a central topic often addressed through workshops or class discussions. For example, Zoe Arnott (W, 19) stated that she could not remember a time when cyberbullying was discussed on campus, let alone any cyberbullying initiatives being offered to students. Zoe said, "I don't think I've ever heard the university like, in an Instagram post, in an email, or even in O-Week when they're talking to us, I've never heard them say the word cyberbullying."

Echoing Zoe Arnott's comments, Yasmin Koury (W, 21) reflected on her role as a student employee and volunteer (e.g., residence life, orientation week), stating that none of these roles have included training or resources related to cyberbullying. She said, "It hasn't been talked about. I've gone through [resident assistant staff] training, worked at [the university] this summer for their [Student Experience Program]… not once have we really highlighted or focused on cyberbullying." This shows that participants perceived there was a lack of conversations around cyberbullying.

When asked why they thought cyberbullying had been omitted from broader conversations, participants gave several potential reasons, including that disproportionate attention was paid to other issues that students faced during their transition to or throughout their postsecondary education (e.g., moving away from home, adjusting to a more demanding schedule, making new friends). As previously discussed, while postsecondary institutions offered a variety of initiatives to students (e.g., mental health resources, peer support center), it was not made clear to students if these services dealt with cyberbullying. Participants saw the exclusion of cyberbullying as problematic because experiencing cyberbullying coupled with transition-related stressors could make cyberbullying outcomes (e.g., increased anxiety, depression, loneliness) worse as well as negatively impact academics (e.g., grades, attendance). Mariam Nasri (W, 19) said, "postsecondary students are already under a lot of stress and pressures …. It's going to be very hard to focus on your academic priorities when there is other negative stuff bringing you down." While postsecondary institutions provided students with a variety of initiatives, not making it clear to students that these could be useful in dealing with cyberbullying signaled to students that the institution did not consider cyberbullying a serious concern on campus. Rather, there were other issues deemed more important for which the university provided students with a plethora of resources and services.

Barrier 2: Limited Knowledge Around the Role of Digital Media in Cyberbullying and the Impact of Cyberbullying

The second barrier that a little more than half (12/21) of the participants identified was the perception that university faculty, staff, and support teams did not fully understand how digital media operate and the ramifications or outcomes associated with online behaviors, specifically cyberbullying. For instance, Anna Johnson (W, 21) said since older-generation adults did not utilize digital media the same way individuals of her generation did, it made it harder for them to know the intricacies of young adults' online activities and to relate to their online experiences. She stated that "With it being a different time, [parents and educators] don't understand technology as much as someone in my generation would. They probably don't understand as much about how [cyberbullying] could happen. They don't interact with people the same way online." To elaborate, Charlie Russo (M, 22) said that though some older-generation adults, such as his parents, may try to understand digital media, they could never truly understand it given that digital media was not as ingrained into their everyday lives as it was for young adults. This was partly because, as Charlie said, social media platforms were complex environments for young adults, and it was hard for those without intimate knowledge of these spaces to truly comprehend the impacts of what happens online. Charlie noted,

> I think that's kind of the effect of a technology society where if you have an older, say like parent, they didn't grow up in the same environment …. I don't even think parents would understand what's actually going on because they are so unaware of the complexities of social media platforms. I mean it's such a complex environment …. They don't understand what the repercussions are to social media use and stuff like that.

As a result, Ara Mok (W, 21) suggested that it was harder for older-generation adults to not only understand cyberbullying but also the outcomes associated with experiencing cyberbullying. Ara stated "[Adults like parents and educators] grew up in an era where cyberbullying wasn't really like a thing …. I think they're not as aware of it as we are … they kind of neglect the fact that cyberbullying could be a very detrimental thing that's happening in someone's life."

Without an understanding of cyberbullying and related outcomes, participants perceived it to be more difficult for university faculty, staff, and support teams to provide support to students who may disclose experiences of cyberbullying and/or come to them for support, namely, because they are unable to relate to cyberbullying as it did not exist when they were young. Not being able to relate to what it means to be a part of cyberbullying contributed to the lack of conversations being had at the postsecondary level.

Barrier 3: Stigma Associated With Being Cyberbullied as a Young Adult

The third barrier participants identified was related to perceptions around cyberbullying occurring in young adulthood. Just over half (13/21) of the participants referred to a stigma associated with being the victim of cyberbullying, but this especially applied to young adults. Alexis Anderson (W, 19) said perceptions around cyberbullying being a phenomenon largely impacting children and adolescents lead to young adults experiencing shame or embarrassment if they were cyberbullied. She noted,

> I think there's still a barrier, a stigma around being bullied. We think it's something that happens to kids and if you get bullied, then you're still a kid kind of thing. But also, that shame aspect, like, "oh, you can't defend yourself from this person."

The narrative that cyberbullying was more juvenile and that, by young adulthood, individuals should be more mature, thereby refraining from engaging in cyberbullying, was vastly problematic as participants indicated it led to the perception that cyberbullying was not as serious when it occurred at the postsecondary level.

Participants frequently mentioned that cyberbullying continued to be a problem in postsecondary institutions and could not be ignored. For Yasmin Koury (W, 21), this was a myth as she saw cyberbullying occurring across the life course—from childhood through young adulthood—and for her it did not decline in severity:

> I think [cyberbullying] is still as serious as it ever was. I don't think [the level of severity] decreases over time … I think it's just the way it's presented maybe changes because people are older, but the seriousness is the same, and it should be taken seriously the same way as people took it seriously in grade school.

Zara Nazim (W, 20) said cyberbullying may be even worse in young adulthood because the consequences associated with cyberbullying had changed. She said there was more at stake in young adulthood and mentioned concerns such as damaged personal and professional reputations:

> In postsecondary [environment], there is just more at stake, I think, for a lot of people …. The content of the bullying changes and the consequences change too …. You look bad to peers, you look bad to people you want to network with. It could probably follow you, making other things down the line harder.

As a result, participants said the severe implications further justified the need for cyberbullying initiatives to be implemented at the postsecondary level.

An additional problem that approximately half (10/21) of the participants identified was that, given the stigma around cyberbullying occurring in young adulthood, coupled with concerns that cyberbullying was not taken seriously, individuals who were being cyberbullied felt that they needed to handle cyberbullying-related matters on their own. This was because, as Sophie Torres (W, 21) elaborated, these individuals may be ashamed or embarrassed to come forward, ask for help, and disclose that they have been impacted by such "juvenile" behavior. Sophie said,

> I do know some people would likely be embarrassed to admit they are getting cyberbullied … the victim shouldn't feel like that. No matter what age you can get cyberbullied, but there definitely is that kind of embarrassment level.

Adding to this, Farrah Hassan (W, 21) discussed the stigma associated with asking for help more generally, which could be especially hard for postsecondary students given perceptions that young adults should be more independent and able to deal with certain matters on their own. She said, "In postsecondary [education], I think they treat you like, deal with your problem, deal with it yourself, and you should know how to do this …. Victims don't realize they can do something about it." Thus, several factors were at play that impacted young adults' willingness to potentially seek help and support as well as disclose cyberbullying experiences.

Solutions to Overcome Existing Barriers

RQ3 asked about what solutions university students propose that could address existing barriers. Participants discussed a variety of potential solutions. Most (17/21) participants suggested postsecondary institutions should increase nonpolicy initiatives, particularly education-based initiatives. Participants viewed education as an important means for increasing awareness of and conversations around cyberbullying in young adulthood. For example, Chantal O'Connor (W, 19) stressed the importance of education, especially for adults like parents and educators, for facilitating a better understanding of how to talk with young adults about their experiences in an open and nonjudgmental way and provide support that takes into consideration that young adults want to maintain their autonomy. Chantal stated, "I don't think adults properly understand [cyberbullying and social media] …. Adults weren't educated on cyberbullying …. The best way to combat cyberbullying is to educate, educate, educate." Participants urged that education should not be only engaging postsecondary students, but rather should cast a wide net and include parents, student leaders, educators, and staff. This was important because, as Aisha Ali (W, 19) said, various individuals on campus that students feel comfortable approaching (e.g., faculty) should be able to direct students to the appropriate resources. Aisha stated, "If I were to come to someone, a faculty member, with a problem like, 'hey, I'm being cyberbullied by this person,' there should be somebody who knows what I should do as my next step. I shouldn't be hitting a brick wall."

Such knowledge would be obtained through education on cyberbullying best practices as well as institutional responses to handling cyberbullying (e.g., what campus resources are available to students). Participants suggested that to effectively reach each of these groups, different strategies were needed.

Looking first at students, postsecondary institutions could offer immersive cyberbullying seminars, informal information sessions, and ongoing awareness campaigns. Participants, including Louis Beaumont (M, 20), suggested that these types of initiatives would be useful for providing students with updated knowledge (e.g., extending cyberbullying knowledge obtained in elementary or high school) and increasing awareness around cyberbullying occurring in young adulthood. He said,

> General awareness would go a long way because I just have basically stopped seeing any material on cyberbullying since I've been in postsecondary [education] …. A quick crash course kind of thing to jog our memories would [remind everyone] that it still exists and stuff; [that] would definitely be good.

However, a few (4/21) participants, including Anna Johnson (W, 21), were skeptical about larger-scale postsecondary initiatives due to uncertainty around how to get university students to attend, participate, and ensure cyberbullying education was being widely received. To mitigate these concerns, Anna Johnson suggested targeting student leaders since they were accessible to incoming students and could, as leaders, disseminate information to the student body, saying that "it is not like in high school where they can make you go to an assembly. They can't have like 30,000 students come do something. But just making sure student leaders do it would be a good start, I think." Given that training programs were already in place for student leaders, Yasmin Koury (W, 21), an active student leader on campus, felt it would be easy to include cyberbullying. She said,

> A lot of students are student leaders … incorporating [cyberbullying] into these training modules can be a step in the right direction because once students go through that training … that will automatically go into everything else that we are teaching to other students as well.

As participants suggested, expanding awareness and mobilizing knowledge via student leaders was a central way for postsecondary institutions to open conversations around cyberbullying, signaling to students that these concerns mattered, and that cyberbullying was taken seriously.

Further, to remedy perceived generational differences between university students and older generations regarding digital media, cyberbullying, and their impacts, just over half (11/21) of the participants, including Isabelle Martin (W, 20), suggested providing cyberbullying-specific education to those working at postsecondary institutions (e.g., faculty, staff). Isabelle said,

> I think when it comes to educators and administration at the postsecondary level, there needs to be updated information for them …. I think that if the resources are available to them to understand these issues, they would be better equipped to help us when these things came up.

In this way, university personnel would be better able to understand cyberbullying and related outcomes, engage in conversations around cyberbullying, and facilitate more supportive environments for students.

A few (4/21) participants vocalized that research was necessary for starting conversations and raising awareness around cyberbullying at the postsecondary level. Participants suggested that cyberbullying-related research needed to focus on students' voices and perspectives. Participants, such as Farrah Hassan (W, 21), also noted that should cyberbullying initiatives be implemented in the future, research would become a priority to ensure initiatives were continually evaluated to assess their relevance and effectiveness. Farrah said, "A lot of the times people go and ask to create change or create things, and they ask for research to back up their claim, so I think having academic research to back it up would be helpful."

Another solution that all participants discussed was for postsecondary institutions to provide on-campus cyberbullying-related resources. However, as Aisha Ali (W, 19) warned, not only did postsecondary institutions need to create these resources, but they needed to ensure students were aware of where and how they could access them. She stressed how it was important to "[make] it all accessible in person and online. If I am going on campus, and I see a paper … or if I am googling it, then it should be the first thing that pops up."

While many of these solutions pertained to postsecondary campuses, participants also recognized that postsecondary institutions did not bear the entire burden of preventing and responding to cyberbullying occurring among young adults. Rather, as Louis Beaumont (M, 20) suggested, it takes a networked response to deal with and address cyberbullying, saying, "I think it is kind of society's collective responsibility to realize that it's happening, and to think about ways to stop it from happening." Addressing narratives around cyberbullying requires larger-scale initiatives that are aimed at changing broader perceptions of cyberbullying. For instance, participants suggested that at the societal level, conversations around cyberbullying, occurring in young adulthood, needed to be continuous and ongoing. This was necessary since, as Farrah Hassan (W, 21) said, cyberbullying will always persist in some form, given the pervasiveness of digital media in young adults' lives. She elaborated,

> [Cyberbullying] is going to continue to happen. There are going to be different ways, different things that come, different technologies, but it's not a conversation that is going to end, it's always going to be present in society, so society needs to keep being aware, to keep talking about it.

Participants felt postsecondary institutions needed to assume responsibility in dealing with the cyberbullying that occurred among postsecondary students, as doing so could set a strong precedence for the treatment of cyberbullying, subsequently leading to much-needed large-scale change.

Discussion

Much literature has focused on the need to implement both policy and nonpolicy initiatives regarding cyberbullying prevention and response (Faucher et al., 2020). On the one hand, early evidence suggested that policy-based initiatives are useful at the postsecondary level for deterring cyberbullying perpetration by ensuring there are consequences for cyberbullies (Faucher et al., 2015). On the other hand, emerging evidence has found that nonpolicy initiatives are extremely effective because they foster a positive campus climate and help to ensure that students are well informed (Black, 2019; Kanayama & Kurihara, 2019). However, with an outstanding gap in the literature regarding postsecondary students' perceptions of cyberbullying and how institutions are addressing cyberbullying, questions persist as to what types of initiatives postsecondary students perceive as most effective. Therefore, our study contributes to resolving this debate by finding that most participants in our study preferred nonpolicy initiatives, particularly those rooted in education. From the perspective of undergraduate students, these types of initiatives can not only reduce the occurrences of cyberbullying but also address the negative outcomes associated with cybervictimization. Undergraduate students preferred these types of initiatives because they are well suited to the life stage of young adulthood, with individuals being more mature than elementary and high school students, therefore not needing overbearing rules, but rather a need for conversation, education, and engagement. For instance, through an increase of nonpolicy initiatives on campus, such as increased educational resources, on-campus support, and anonymous reporting systems, undergraduate students are provided with agency. Student agency manifests itself through activities like seeking information and support on their own terms. The problem that participants in our study identified was that postsecondary institutions have failed to provide a range of nonpolicy initiatives.

A second key contribution of our study was to uncover the barriers that undergraduate students perceive as impacting the implementation of cyberbullying initiatives on campus. One of the most prominent barriers that students identified was the stigma associated with being cyberbullied as a young adult. With cyberbullying perceived as a juvenile phenomenon (Sheanoda et al., 2021), and the potential of being stigmatized, participants suggested that students may be embarrassed or fearful to come forward. Helpful to interpret this finding is Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma, defined as a discrediting attribute, which may result in individuals experiencing judgment (e.g., labeling, stereotyping, status loss) (Link & Phelan, 2001). When looking at the relationship between stigma and cyberbullying in youth, a review of the literature by Kshetri and Voas (2019) concluded that cyber victims face both the consequences of cyberbullying (e.g., primary victimization) as well as stigmatization (e.g., secondary victimization), which leads to social isolation and intrusive and humiliating questioning. This occurs because there are preconceived notions or myths of what it means to be a cybervictim, and, as participants in our study expressed, postsecondary students do not fit the "typical" cybervictim profile (e.g., children and youth). Another key barrier participants identified was the lack of conversation around cyberbullying in the postsecondary context, which they believed further contributed to and reinforced the stigma, making cyberbullying a taboo topic. Thus, one central way to remedy this barrier is to encourage conversations around cyberbullying at all stages of the life course. Key outcomes of doing so, as our participants indicated, would be twofold. First, they would help to make cyberbullying less of a taboo topic, thereby destigmatizing cybervictimization. Second, they would help older-generation adults (e.g., parents, educators) better understand the impacts of cyberbullying on young adults as well as how they can provide more effective support.

Finally, evidence from our findings links directly to the work of Broll (2014) who emphasized the need for a "networked response" for dealing with cyberbullying. A networked response is where different social groups come together to mitigate instances of cyberbullying and support victims. While Broll (2014) focused on the high school context, our work suggests that such a networked response is also needed at the postsecondary level. What differs is that, at the postsecondary level, there is a need for a more concentrated network of individuals and groups. For example, Broll (2014) discussed the coming together of parents, educators, police, and community members, whereas in our study, participants discussed involving students, faculty and staff, and support teams with the potential for additional network members to be involved in prevention and response depending on the initiatives offered on postsecondary campuses (e.g., external community members and organizations). With their focus on nonpolicy initiatives, participants did not identify law enforcement as a central member of a networked response in contrast to the high school context discussed by Broll (2014). By integrating a networked response, participants saw great potential for shifts in narratives and perceptions of cyberbullying occurring at the postsecondary level. This was a key outcome for students as they expected this to lead to significant changes regarding cyberbullying (e.g., taking cyberbullying seriously, becoming part of the conversation, and leading the development of prevention and response initiatives).

Limitations and Future Research

Our study has several limitations. The sample consists of a small number of second-, third-, and fourth-year postsecondary students from only one institution in Canada. Future research should work toward uncovering student perspectives across all years of study, across campuses, and cross-culturally to engage in comparisons within and between groups. Scholars could expand the findings by collecting large-scale data, for example, through surveys that corroborate and evaluate the barriers and solutions identified in this work. Researchers, as well, could seek to uncover additional barriers and potential alternative solutions. While efforts were made to recruit a diverse range of undergraduate students, the sample was dominated by the perspectives of women, which is a common challenge when recruiting undergraduate students (McCray et al., 2005). Despite evidence indicating women are disproportionately more commonly targets of cyberbullying (Choi & Lee, 2017), future research can expand the scope and diversity of the sample as there is a growing body of evidence indicating racialized individuals, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities are at heightened risk of being cyberbullied (Abreu & Kenny, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2023). Drawing from more diverse samples will give insight into variations regarding cyberbullying experiences and outcomes, unique challenges impacting different social groups, as well as better-tailored strategies for cyberbullying prevention and response.

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