

Cyberviolence Prevention & Response: New Considerations for Higher Education and Student Affairs

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ABSTRACT

As our students participate in their digital lives, opportunities for victimization like harassment, cyberbullying and stalking plague our students at higher rates than they even realize. This conceptual article aims to explore the landscape of cyberviolence on-campus and offer two frameworks for higher education policymakers, administrators, and practitioners to begin utilizing now to support the prevention and response to cyberviolence on-campus.

Keywords: cyberviolence, higher education, college students, online environments

INTRODUCTION

From chat rooms to social media to online dating to virtual reality, the digital world has become inextricably linked to our physical world. As higher education institutions adapt to meet the changing demands of today's world, such as those caused by a global pandemic, campus community members spend more and more time online. Today, college and university students must participate in online spaces to access course content, reserve study space, or access digital content such as library texts or campus news and alerts. COVID-19 increased campus reliance on online technology, remote work, and education. Computers, laptops, cellphones, smart classrooms, learning management systems, email, and social media have all become essential to campus operations, communications, and learning.

Although internet access provides numerous benefits for campus community members, digital spaces also recreate violence and exacerbate violent images and exchanges inside and outside our online learning environments. Online environments enable perpetrators to harm others while often avoiding having to take accountability. As students engage in their digital lives, they face more opportunities for victimization, such as harassment, cyberbullying, and cyberstalking, than they realize (Al. Qudahm et al., 2019; Bauman & Baldasare, 2015; Lee, 2017; Mishna et al., 2018; Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014;

Washington, 2015). Despite the internet's pervasiveness in nearly every facet of college and university life, cyberviolence continues to be underreported, unacknowledged, and absent from most college administrators' prevention and response initiatives (Byers & Cerrulli, 2021).

Cyberviolence has been linked to low self-esteem, depression, suicidality, low grades, and low attendance rates among students (Alipan et al., 2018). Extreme cases of cyberviolence have led some victims to commit suicide (Lindsay et al., 2016; Mishna et al., 2018). As colleges and universities rely more on digital environments and online learning, administrators, faculty, and staff must address cyberviolence holistically, focusing on awareness, prevention, and response. This conceptual article aims to explore the landscape of cyberviolence in higher education communities and to provide two frameworks for policymakers, administrators, and practitioners (herein, "campus stakeholders") to implement immediately to support cyberviolence prevention and response on campus. Based on existing scholarship on higher education, systems of domination, and cyberviolence, I argue that campus stakeholders can immediately begin implementing structural change on campus that centers on power-consciousness and healing. Instead of waiting for evidence collections and benchmarks to generate structural change, I further posit that institutions can begin preventing and responding to cyberviolence and its impact on campus communities by leveraging the significant amount of existing ethnographic data and scholarship.

In this paper, I assert that we already have the data and tools to better prevent and respond to cyberviolence targeted at college students. As a scholar-practitioner with multiple marginalized identities and firsthand experience with cyberviolence, I will weave my understanding of violence, power, and cyberviolence on campus using current literature to offer concrete recommendations that campus stakeholders can use immediately to better support equitable healing environments. In the following sections, I will share my experiences with cyberviolence, define cyberviolence as used for the scope of this paper, explain the cultural context of the digital age and cyberviolence, and discuss cyberviolence in the context of higher education.

Cyberviolence Through the Lens of a Scholar-Practitioner

In the spring of 2021, I deleted all my social media accounts to limit time spent online. I was tired of being confronted with so much trauma and was frustrated that my values of freedom, equity, and love were not being championed on social media. I also wanted to limit my daily phone use and screen time. My decision to limit my online presence and avoid social media entirely, except for LinkedIn, was motivated primarily by a desire to avoid trauma and cyberviolence. However, I was soon subjected to cyberbullying without even being online, and I realized how pervasive cyberviolence had become. I also started to question how such violence impacts our campus communities, where most college students spend more time in front of screens than not.

I am currently transitioning from a recent doctoral graduate to an assistant professor. In my various roles on campus as a peer advocate, counselor, scholar, and educator over the last decade, I have supported students and clients who have survived trauma and campus sexual violence. Despite having witnessed cyberviolence while working with students who have survived various forms of trauma and campus sexual violence, I was hesitant to pursue further research on the topic until I realized how pervasive this phenomenon is –

not just for students but for all campus community members. I use the term “campus community members” in this paper to refer to students, staff, administrators, faculty, and people who live near campus and are impacted by campus decisions and the physical campus environment.

Because of my multiple intersecting social identities, I have always been a target for violence. My earliest recollection of being bullied in school was when I was five years old. Growing up in the early 1990s, I was exposed to the internet and the digital world in various ways. I decided to renounce social media use completely because of the violence I have witnessed and experienced and the high level of surveillance and silencing on these platforms. One example of such surveillance occurred in 2020, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I was “shadow banned” by Instagram for advocating for Indigenous land rights, dis/ability rights, and medical and racial justice, as well as against sexual violence. A shadow ban occurs when a social media site or online platform bans a user or account without explicitly informing them, typically by making their posts invisible or limiting their visibility (Sharma, 2022).

Despite being away from social media for a year, I maintained a connection with it. Online news articles often reference social media and share video clips. Nearly everyone around me seemed to use social media. Thus, posts that contained malicious statements about me or my advocacies (usually through a public account on Instagram or Twitter) were easily shared. Even though I no longer use the same sites, I still hear about the cyber-violence toward me from friends and colleagues. Nobody intervened on my behalf, and I was expected to ignore this violence. Even though the cyberviolence eventually ended, I still feel its lasting effects and a sense of powerlessness. My frustration prompted me to consider broadly addressing such cyberviolence on campus.

Cyberviolence Terms and Definitions

Most college students do not identify with the terms “bullying” and “cyberbullying” as they associate those terms with a younger demographic (Bauman & Baldasare, 2015; Byers & Cerulli, 2021; Byrne, 2020; Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014; Washington, 2015). The inaccuracy of language makes research on cyberbullying that occurs on college campuses challenging and imprecise (Byrne, 2020). For the purposes of this article, *cyberviolence* is operationally defined as any online experience that causes harm to a person or group of people. I chose this definition of cyberviolence because it best encompasses the various types of cyberviolence discussed in the literature, such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking, cyberaggression, and cyber harassment. The use of the term cyberviolence also avoids perpetuating terminology like cyberbullying that does not accurately capture college students’ experiences (Bauman & Baldasare, 2015; Byers & Cerulli, 2021; Byrne, 2020; Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014; Washington, 2015). Cyberviolence can be either intentional or passive, taking the form of images, videos, or other online content (Centelles et al., 2021).

Cyberbullying is a form of cyberviolence defined as “repeated unwanted hurtful, harassing, and/or threatening interaction through electronic communication” (Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014, p. 364). Cyberbullying is pervasive yet often underreported due to its subtle nature and high level of deniability. According to Byers and Cerulli (2021), cyberviolence is often passed off as a joke or as less serious than it actually is. Other instances

include tactics that allow the perpetrator to deny their involvement in the violence. Whereas cyberbullying is characterized by repeated violent online behavior, *cyberaggression* is defined as intentional harmful actions committed using technology (Bauman & Baldasare, 2015). Cyberbullying differs from cyberaggression or cyber harassment in that it is repeated, whereas cyberaggression and cyber harassment can occur only once (Washington, 2015). A significant feature of cyberviolence that distinguishes it from other forms of violence experienced by campus community members is that it can be perpetrated with perceived or actual anonymity and carried out from anywhere with internet access (Lee, 2017). This feature of cyberviolence has been coined as the “online disinhibition effect,” which can ignite or escalate violence due to the perception of no consequences and anonymity (Suler, 2004, p. 321). As scholar-practitioners considering how to prevent and respond to cyberviolence, we must understand how power, oppression, and violence manifest in the many online spaces on which students’ education is increasingly reliant (Bauman & Baldasare, 2015).

Cyberviolence, Systems of Domination, and Higher Education

My family’s first computer comes to mind. It was a boxy, square old thing that sat in the back corner of our kitchen and had dial-up internet. I remember using it to write book reports and watch the Santa Tracker on Christmas Eve. My young brain could never have predicted that a future version of this dial-up computer in the background of my home would soon take center stage in the world, with many people “dialed in” most of the day. Cellphones, laptops, tablets, video games, televisions, refrigerators, you name it—they all have a digital connection to the internet, where we, as a society, have recreated the same shadows from our physical world. The internet is not exempt from the same sociocultural hierarchies and systems of domination we experience in our physical world. Because it appears limitless, the internet has the potential to recreate and perpetuate harm and violence at even higher rates. College communities are entrenched in circles of violence from their immediate physical environments to their online environments, and both environments are rife with compliance and the perpetuation of oppressive systems. Students with multiple minority identities are engulfed in trauma and violence, from federal policies restricting their freedom to images of their communities being mutilated, microaggressions in the classroom, and cyberviolence on online platforms.

As campuses become more reliant on technology, campus stakeholders must consider how to prevent and respond to cyberviolence to best support our students’ and campus community members’ optimal well-being. At present, structural interventions and prevention strategies to eradicate and respond to instances of cyberviolence are almost non-existent on campus. Thus, higher education contributes to the perpetuation of cyberviolence and complicity.

My online college experience was characterized by a constant barrage of violent images depicting police and military forces killing Black and Indigenous people. I also observed how a White supremacist online news outlet doxed two students for making a flyer on allyship for their student employment position. *Doxing* is when a person’s private information is shared online without their consent. After the students were doxed, they experienced trolling and harassment online and via email. *Trolling* is defined as “the attempt to hurt, humiliate, annoy, or provoke in order to elicit an emotional response for one’s own

enjoyment” (Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014, p. 372). With higher education now more reliant on technology and when anyone can post online at any time, most students will not be able to avoid cyberviolence. As an educator and student, I am well aware that spending more time in front of a screen and on the internet does not always result in more learning, but rather in increased distraction and violence.

According to Rafferty and Vander Ven (2014), the primary motivators for cyberviolence are related to four main causes: power struggles, sanctioning, entertainment, and trolling. Rafferty and Vander Ven (2014) also assert that romantic relationships are a major source of cyberviolence, with an ex-partner typically bullying and harassing their former partner and the former partner’s new partner. Cyberviolence has serious consequences for our students, leading to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Alipan et al., 2018; Holt et al., 2014; Juvoven & Gross, 2008). Understanding the root causes of cyberviolence can help campus stakeholders better prevent it and support students impacted by it.

Campus stakeholders can begin to better prevent and respond to cyberviolence on campus by framing awareness, prevention, and response initiatives with a power-conscious approach (Linder, 2018) and focusing on teaching healing and relationship skills. Students, for example, can develop less harmful ways to cope with distress in such partnerships if students and campus community members are given opportunities to learn how to better navigate relationships and romantic relationships. Furthermore, a power-conscious framework may enable institutions to assess cyberviolence within their communities and understand how systems of power and domination may manifest online. This approach will not only provide a roadmap to help prevent and respond to cyberviolence on campus but also help colleges and universities to address other widespread issues, including harassment, sexual violence, stalking, oppression, and bias. Also, it may help address other widespread issues at colleges and universities, such as harassment, sexual violence, stalking, oppression, and bias. In the following two sections, I will briefly outline how a power-conscious framework and healing approach can assist higher education institutions in preventing and responding to cyberviolence.

Addressing Cyberviolence at the Root: A Power-Conscious Framework for Awareness, Prevention, and Response

To address a problem as pervasive and persistent as cyberviolence, campus response and prevention messaging must identify and combat violence and power at their root, addressing such harm in ways that heal and liberate community members rather than creating more harm. Linder (2018) provides a power-conscious framework that identifies tools that campus stakeholders can use to interrupt and change the systems of domination that have created a hostile environment for our students, particularly those with multiple minoritized identities. The power-conscious framework was developed in response to a lack of focus on power in campus sexual violence awareness, prevention, and response. “A power-conscious framework challenges scholars and activists to reconsider current structures and to consider ways for dismantling and restructuring systems to share power, rather than building structures that contribute to one group having more power over another,” writes Linder (2018, p. 19). Because it provides practitioners with a roadmap to help examine how power manifests in any given situation, such a framework would also allow institutional agents to

better assess and respond to issues of cyberviolence on campus. A process-oriented approach centered on power could produce transformative results.

The power-conscious framework consists of three foundational beliefs, which are followed by six major pillars of action (Linder, 2018). The first foundational belief is that power is omnipresent, which means it operates in all situations. Second, power and social identity are inextricably linked, which means an individual will have more or less power in any given situation, depending on their sociocultural identity(ies). Lastly, identity is socially constructed, which means those with power determine which identities receive power and which do not.

A power-conscious framework pushes student affairs educators to consider the various ways power and privilege influence students' experiences, including dominant group members' investment in and benefit from systems of domination. By recognizing ways people in dominant groups benefit from systems of domination, student affairs educators may develop more effective strategies for interrupting and addressing systems of domination (Linder, 2019, p. 23).

The six pillars of action grounding the power-conscious framework aim to develop a critical self-reflective praxis that leads to long-lasting equitable change. The pillars can be viewed as a process that begins with a critical reflection that considers history and context, then moves on to changing behaviors, interrogating the role of power and privilege, and dismantling systems that only benefit dominant group members. Because the emphasis is on critical self-reflection, history, context, and change, the power-conscious framework can be applied to any situation in which power is being hoarded and misused. Ultimately, the final pillar of action in the power-conscious framework urges us to work in solidarity to end oppression (Linder, 2018).

After examining the roots of cyberviolence uncovered by Rafferty and Van Der Ven (2014), the power-conscious framework can begin supporting campuses in developing structures to prevent and respond to cyberviolence. Using the framework's foundational beliefs and pillars of action, campus stakeholders can begin implementing policies and procedures with the intention of questioning power and acting in solidarity to end violence and oppression.

A power-conscious approach to cyberviolence prevention and response depends on the context of each institution. Below are some examples of action items that correspond to the pillars in the power-conscious framework, as well as how the pillars could be used to effect change on campus.

Pillar One: Be engaged in cyclical critical self-reflection.

Example Action Item: Every course in the student curriculum includes critical self-reflection as a learning focus, emphasizing interrogation of their sociocultural identities and investment in maintaining power hierarchies.

Pillar Two: History and context have to be included to interrogate power and alter systems of domination.

Example Action Item: The campus website provides transparency by describing a timeline that interrogates the history of domination in the relevant culture as well as the institutional history of compliance in systems of domination.

Pillar Three: After engaging in critical self-reflection, change behaviors to align with equity instead of further harming.

Example Action Item: The campus office in charge of conduct and cyberviolence response should be open to learning from students who have been victims of cyberviolence, especially from those most affected by violence. Office actions and procedures should be flexible, allowing for change as new learning emerges.

Pillar Four: Constantly bring attention to and name the ways dominant group members are benefiting from systems of domination.

Example Action Item: A campus-wide online system will track instances of inequity and compliance in systems of domination. Working groups on campus would use data from the system to make equitable, power-conscious recommendations to the institution.

Pillar Five: Interrogate the role of power in policy, practice, and individual interactions.

Example Action Item: The institution should conduct annual power-conscious environmental assessments of the campus to identify inequitable policies, practices, and actions.

Pillar Six: Constantly work in solidarity to end oppression.

Example Action Item: At the start of each semester, every campus community member pledges to work in solidarity to end oppression. A comprehensive workshop series available throughout the year can assist students, staff, and faculty in developing tools to interrogate oppression and practice equity.

The action items listed above are examples to help campus stakeholders begin thinking about how to create a power-conscious campus. The action items are intended to address the root causes of cyberviolence, which include interrogating power, identity, and each person's investment in domination. Institutions should consider what data emerge from climate assessments and incorporate the power-conscious approach in ways that align with the foundation of the framework and the hyperlocal context of each individual campus. Combining healing resources with a power-conscious framework could help mitigate the harsh effects of cyberviolence while also supporting issues of equity and harmony on campus as a whole.

ADDRESSING CYBERVIOLENCE AT THE ROOT: HEALING INITIATIVES & MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

The literature on cyberviolence and higher education supports the belief that the roots of intentional cyberaggression and cyberbullying stem from power, relationships, and

malice (Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014). As a trained mental health counselor and scholar-practitioner who advocates for structural mental health initiatives on campus to support equity, liberation, and healing, I argue that when campus community members are taught skills to interrogate their power struggles, better manage relationships, and avoid harming out of malice, violence will be less perpetuated. Higher education institutions must first consider the mental health needs of their faculty and staff. They can provide more comprehensive benefits such as free mental health services, paid time off for mental health days, and training on power, relationships, and conflict resolution (“National workplace survey finds mental health affects indirect costs,” 2007). The more support faculty and staff receive, the better they can support and show up for their students.

Many students arrive on campus with existing trauma. Those who have previously been targeted for violence face a higher rate of re-victimization (Linder, 2018). Higher education institutions should assess the extent of students’ trauma before they matriculate and immediately support their healing upon enrollment, instead of perpetuating harm and revictimizing. For example, colleges and universities could provide increased access to clinical services on and off campus that respect students’ social identities and cultures. Alternatively, institutions can offer campus-wide incentives to encourage their community members to engage in healing initiatives and opportunities to learn how to manage relationships, cope, and critically self-reflect. Supporting the healing of our campuses will be necessary if higher education institutions are to better prevent, respond to, and eradicate cyberviolence and its effects.

CONCLUSION

Many studies and reports on cyberviolence among college students focus on its prevalence, the characteristics of the violence, and how college students heal from cyberviolence by using cyber-specific coping strategies (Byrne, 2020; Holt et al., 2014; Lee, 2017; Mishna et al., 2018; Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014; Washington, 2015). More research on cyberviolence and its effects on campus populations with multiple minoritized identities is needed to inform higher education strategies for using a power-conscious framework in supporting students through healing and coping.

As they navigate their digital worlds, our students live in hypervigilance, gradually recognizing that consenting to participate in online environments may result in accepting the risk of harm. Accepting cyberviolence deprives us of power and human rights. Colleges have a responsibility as stewards of these digital domains to re-create equity, access, and safety rather than replicate the systems of domination and harm in which many are complicit in the physical world. Although the digital space allows for collaboration, it also provides equal, if not greater, opportunities for harm. This is an opportunity for us as scholar-practitioners to model active and authentic engagement in deconstructing the power structures that foster cyberviolence.

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