

‘The Language Is Disgusting And They Refer To My Disability’: The Cyberharassment Of Disabled People

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Abstract: *Disabled people face hostility and harassment in their sociocultural environment. The use of electronic-communications creates an online context that further reshape this discrimination. We explored the experiences of 19 disabled victims of cyberharassment. Five themes emerged from the study: disability and health consequences, family involvement, misrepresentation of self, perceived complexity, and lack of awareness and expertise. Cyberharassment incidents against disabled people were influenced by the pre-existing impairment, perceived hate-targeting, and perpetrators faking disability to get closer to victims online. Our findings highlight a growing issue requiring action and proper support.*

Keywords: online harassment; cyberstalking; cyberbullying; chronic conditions; disability hate crime; victimisation

Introduction

The UK Equality Act 2010 constructs disability as a ‘physical or mental impairment and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’ (EA 2010, p.7). A total of 11 million individuals meet this definition in the UK (ODI 2014). Whilst these figures are useful, the definition of disabled as synonymous with impairment has been challenged. While we do not deny the effects of illness or impairment, we agree with reframed views that construct disability as the responses to difference. We adopt this logic/terminology in our article.

We know that in an ‘offline’ context, disabled people are more likely to face harassment and hate than their non-disabled counterparts (Emerson and Roulstone 2014). This victimisation was linked with having a health condition (Dixon 2006, Blake et al. 2012), stigma (Emmerson and Roulstone, 2014) or adopting a different lifestyle than peers (Sentenac et al. 2011). The traditional view is that greater hate and harassment are due to disabled peoples’ vulnerability. Recent reworking suggests non-disabled people may expose disabled people to vulnerable acts and situations. This could explain the results from a recent UK-based survey exploring the motivation of

offenders in disability hate crimes, where 87.2% self-defined disabled persons experienced a hate crime or incident. Reported motivations ranged between hate, jealousy, stigma, stereotypes (of life not worth living) and accusations of fraud in cases of invisible impairments (Quarmby 2015). These perceived motivations reflected a prejudice created by linking disability benefits with impairments.

Advancements in digital technology and the Internet have created an 'online' context for these vulnerable situations facilitated by digital communication channels, virtual environments and anonymity of offenders. This has exposed disabled people to online offences (Wells and Mitchell 2014). Fortunately, internet hate crimes including disability-related incidents are gaining more recognition (IHC 2015), with an encouragement to report them to authorities such as the Police. Cyberharassment is an umbrella term covering these anti-social offences, it is defined as intimidating unwanted contact via electronic means (e.g. the Internet) that triggers fear and distress (Dreßing et al. 2014, Maple et al. 2012). Research on cyberharassment is rapidly growing with little attention given to the lived-experience of people affected; the few qualitative studies on cyberharassment did not focus on disabled people. Thus, little is known on how disabled people experienced, perceived and reacted to cyberharassment and whether it differs from the experiences by non-disabled victims. In this article we provide further evidence to the limitation in current literature by exploring the experiences of cyberharassment against disabled people and the impact it has on them.

Methodology

This study forms part of the ECHO-2 (Electronic Communication Harassment Observation) project carried out by the National Centre for Cyberstalking Research (NCCR). A self-administered online survey was employed. The link was shared online via social media and victim support websites such as Network for Surviving Stalking (NSS) from 2011 to 2014. Among 115 respondents, 19 (16.5%) participants identified themselves as a disabled person. The findings reported in this paper focus on this group. Their age ranged between 19 and 63 years (mean = 39.1, SD = 12.3) and 17 (89.5%) were from a white ethnic background. All of the 19 participants identified themselves as victims of cyberharassment, their experiences (100%) were accompanied by distress and 17 (89.5%) had fear. They have experienced between 1 and 100 harassing incidents (median= 3, IQR 11) and 13 cases were ongoing. Furthermore, 15 (78.9%) experienced psychological trauma and 6 (31.6%) stated they were physically harmed.

Findings

Five overarching themes emerged, two of these described the impact of cyberharassment: disability role and health consequences, and family involvement. The remaining three described the nature of the incidents: misrepresentation of self, perceived complexity, and lack of awareness and expertise.

Disability role and health consequences

Participants linked cyberharassment to disability in two ways. Firstly, some participants believed the cyberharassment they experienced was directly related to disability.

‘The language is disgusting and they refer to my disability’ Participant F

Secondly, as expressed by most participant, disability has aggravated the impact of cyberharassment on wellbeing, which included distress, anxiety, mood disturbances, deterioration of existing health condition, and suicidal attempts.

‘I do not think many people realise how bad harassment can affect you psychologically, especially if it has been going on for some time ...’ Participant H

‘ ... I am bipolar so all this (and it’s still going on) has affected me deeply to the point of suicide’ Participant P

Family involvement

Secondary victims of cyberharassment were identified from the responses. This took two forms, the first involved the targeting of family members directly, and the second was the negative effects of witnessing the harassment of someone close to them. Some participants expressed fear, guilt and helplessness especially when speaking of the violation or misuse of their children’s photos or accounts by offenders.

‘This group has posted 2 pictures of my child on this page, they have also posted a picture of my driver’s license [...] I fear for my child’s safety’ Participant Q

Another form of family involvement is the support and action to end the harassment.

‘The harassment became apparent to my friends and family when I fell ill and they became my carers. They took action to stop it by contacting my harasser directly’ Participant I

Misrepresentation of self

Fraud, deception and manipulation were terms frequently used by participants. Accounts of this nature included communications with individuals who claimed to be disabled or used false names to get closer and obtain more information from victims, or to keep their identities hidden.

‘... I caught him posting threatening comments under a false name on the guest book of my website, shortly before he had told me that there was someone out to get me ...’ Participant R

Other participants suggested that harassers were interfering with support channels by providing false information or pretending to be the victims.

Perceived complexity

This was a recurrent theme reported by participants, the complexity was expressed to be related to the offence itself and the accessibility of legal remedies. Perceived complexity related to law emerged from reports where incidents were at international level, and in responses about the confusion in dealing with incidents under the Disability

Discrimination Act 1995 or the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 when attempts were made to access instrumental support.

‘Police were ill informed and actually saw it as a diversity issue about disability. I had to fight them to act under the protection from harassment act 1997 - and in interviewing others affected, there was gross disability discrimination’ Participant A

Most participants considered cyberharassment as sophisticated means of victimisation and having distinct patterns of activity. Some of them described offenders as clever and beating the legal system.

Lack of awareness and expertise

The majority of participants perceived a lack of awareness, education and/or training when they asked for help or support from victim support groups, police, or healthcare professionals.

‘... this crime needs a dedicated unit staffed by officers who truly understand how devious and clever offenders are ...’ Participant G

However, some participants stated that the National Stalking Helpline was more victim oriented when offering help. The perceived lack of expertise went beyond instrumental support to public awareness about the impact of cyber abuse. Some participants requested experts to be utilised in the field to inform the channels of support.

Discussion

Themes emerged were generally comparable to the impact of cyber-victimisation on non-disabled people (Sheridan and Grant 2007) but there were differences in perceptions underlying them. Negative consequences of cyber-victimisation experienced by disabled people are consistent with the documented impact on the wellbeing of non-disabled victims (Dreßing et al. 2014, Hensler-McGinnis 2008, al-Khateeb et al. 2015). Furthermore, this study shows the impact was exacerbated by two vulnerability factors. Firstly, the presence of an existing impairment and subsequent health deterioration in some cases. Secondly, the perceived online disability-based targeting. These findings are supported by previous research which identifies the ‘offline’ hate incidents against disabled people (Emerson and Roulstone 2014).

Misrepresentation of self is one of the tactics used by some offenders (Sheridan and Blaauw 2004). In our findings, perpetrators pretended to have a disability to manipulate victims and create a vulnerable situation. Another way of involvement in the victims’ social network was through targeting individuals close to the victim, which is one of the approaches in cyber offences (Sheridan and Grant 2007). These actions include spreading false information and threats online by the perpetrator, which consequently increases the social isolation of the victim (Maple et al. 2012).

International cross-boundary harassment has increased the complexity of some cases which is consistent with those experienced by non-disabled people (Kamphuis et al. 2005, Sheridan and Grant 2007). Precisely, the struggle to find the most appropriate legal remedy adds to the complexity of the victims’ accounts. Within the UK there are a number of legislative acts to respond to cyberharassment such as the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, Malicious Communications 1988, Communications Act 2003, Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and Equality Act 2010 (CPS 2016). When the victim is seen disabled, the harassment could also be addressed under the Disability

Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA 1995), Equality Act 2010 or Communications Act 2003, section 127 for disability hate crime (CPS 2016). This could bring subjectivity to the assessment of cases and reinforces the need to develop more adequate responses to cyberharassment based on the objective assessment of the offence itself.

It could be concluded that victimisation of disabled people has reached higher levels of concern, vulnerable situations are more easily created with the continuous emerging of electronic communications. Despite some similarities with studies focusing on non-disabled cyber-victims, differences were present in the impact and experiences of cyberharassment namely linking disability with impairment, prejudice and the use of the disability to coerce victims into closer contact. The complexity of the legal remedies and additional acts available in this area increased the challenges in supporting victims and managing responses. These differences could be highlighted to pay special attention to address disablism and vulnerability in online context.

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How to cite this article?

Zhraa A. Alhaboby, Haider M. al-Khateeb, James Barnes & Emma Short (2016) 'The language is disgusting and they refer to my disability': the cyberharassment of disabled people, *Disability & Society*, 31:8, 1138-1143, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2016.1235313

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2016.1235313>