



Cyberbullying and the Faculty Victim Experience: Perceptions and Outcomes

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Accepted: 18 April 2023

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Abstract

Cyberbullying affects US youth, adolescents, and adults and can occur in various settings. Among the academic literature exploring cyberbullying, most discuss cyberbullying of youth and adolescents within the K-12 academic setting. While some studies address cyberbullying targeting adults, a limited amount of research has been conducted on the topic of cyberbullying among adults within the higher education context. Of the studies that explore cyberbullying in higher education, a considerable proportion focus on cyberbullying incidents between college students. Less discussed, however, are the experiences of university faculty who have been cyberbullied by either their students, fellow faculty, or administrators. Few, if any, studies address cyberbullying of faculty as the phenomenon relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following qualitative study aims to fill this gap through examining the lived experiences of faculty victims of cyberbullying. Utilizing the theoretical lens of disempowerment theory, researchers recruited a diverse population of twenty-five university faculty from across the USA who self-reported being victims of cyberbullying. The study analyzes participants' interview responses to determine common experiences of faculty and overarching themes concerning cyberbullying in the academic workplace, particularly within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team applied disempowerment theory to support thematic analysis. In addition, the present article offers potential solutions for supporting faculty as they navigate virtual learning environments. The study's findings hold practical implications for faculty, administrators, and stakeholders in institutions of higher education who seek to implement research-driven policies to address cyberbullying on their campuses.

Keywords Cyberbullying · Faculty · University · Academia · Bullying · Workplace

Introduction

Cyberbullying entails using electronic devices to bully another person through threats, spreading rumors, and/or impersonating others. Cyberbullying can occur in various digital settings such as in email correspondence, text messages, or on social media platforms. Cyberbullying is a component of cyber-abuse, or online abusive interpersonal behaviors that are overly aggressive in nature and that threaten, harass, embarrass, or socially

ostracize the victim (Piotrowski, 2012). The phenomenon has been growing in prevalence and is on the rise worldwide (Cook, 2021). While significant academic research has examined cyberbullying among youth and adolescents (Calvete et al., 2010; Hutson et al., 2018, Li et al., 2016; Nikolaou, 2021; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010), fewer research studies have explored cyberbullying among adults. Yet, most adults have first-hand or second-hand experience with cyberbullying. Indeed, in 2014, the Pew Research Center reported that 75% of US adults have witnessed cyberbullying while 40% of US adults have personally experienced some form of online harassment (Duggan, 2014).

The experiences of adult victims of cyberbullying proves distinct from the experiences of youth victims (Scheff, 2019). One unique aspect involves adults' experiences with cyberbullying in the workplace (Chapel et al., 2019). Workplace bullying is defined as a systematic, repetitive engagement of interpersonally abusive behavior that negatively impacts the victim and the organization (Sansone & Sansone, 2015). While workplace bullying previously occurred primarily

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face-to-face, technology is enabling a virtual form, cyberbullying. In a large study of workplace conditions, Kowalski et al. (2018) found that 20% of workers reported experiencing cyberbullying. This proves especially concerning since cyberbullying leads to problematic outcomes for both the individual victim and the organization for which they work. First, the targets of workplace bullying may experience mental distress, sleep disturbances, fatigue, energy deprivation, depression, anxiety, and adjustment disorders. Cyberbullying may even lead to victims' committing suicide (Alipan et al., 2021; Sansone & Sansone, 2015). Second, cyberbullying hurts organizational effectiveness by damaging organizational culture, employee well-being, employee work engagement, and employee retention (Karthikeyan, 2020; Muhonen et al., 2017).

Clearly, the issue of cyberbullying in the workplace is significant and growing. Studying specific work environments can yield targeted solutions to the problem. One industry that is grappling with cyberbullying's deleterious effects is academia. The literature that has studied cyberbullying within the higher education context has primarily concentrated on the experiences of college students who have been bullied by other students (Cimke & Cerit, 2021; Faucher et al., 2014; Khine et al., 2020; Kowalski et al., 2022; Molluzzo & Lawler, 2012; Varghese & Pistole, 2017; Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). A limited number of peer-reviewed research articles have explored the effects of cyberbullying on college and university faculty who have experienced cyberbullying within a workplace context.

Despite the topic not receiving significant discussion in the academic research, the cyberbullying of college and university faculty proves a pervasive problem. Faculty regularly experience cyberbullying not only from students, but from colleagues, superiors, and the general public (Cassidy et al., 2016; Cassidy et al., 2017; Cuevas, 2018; Lloro-Bidart, 2018; Meriläinen et al., 2016; Weiss, 2020). An examination of whether the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to augmented levels of cyberbullying against faculty proves especially necessary. Due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty are increasingly engaging with students and colleagues through online learning management systems, email, and social media. Apart from engaging in increased amounts of online communication, many faculty saw their work duties shift to a virtual format for several months during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, various colleges and universities have shifted courses that had been conducted previously "in-person" in brick-and-mortar classrooms to an online format (Clemmons et al., 2022; Fogg et al., 2020; Kourgiantakis et al., 2021). Since the nature of communication, collaboration, and coursework has changed significantly in academia during the COVID-19 pandemic, the forms and amount of cyberbullying of college faculty may have, likewise, been transformed.

One reason this may be the case is that increases in electronic forms of communication contribute to heightened levels of cyberbullying. When people communicate virtually, they receive fewer social cues, have an increased sense of anonymity, and feel less concern over the tone of their message due to the asynchronous nature of the communication (Wildermuth & Davis, 2012). When considering the higher education workplace for faculty, the amount of time that faculty spend working online correlates to the likelihood that faculty become cyberbullying victims (Cassidy et al., 2014). Since the COVID-19 pandemic has led to greater amounts of electronic communication between faculty and students and increases in the number of job-related duties that faculty perform virtually, faculty may be more likely to experience cyberbullying. However, to the researchers' best understanding, academic research studies on the topic have yet to be published on the subject. The following study seeks to fill this gap through conducting a qualitative analysis of interviews with 25 university faculty from across the USA who self-reported that they had been victimized by cyberbullying in the workplace. Specifically, this study seeks to explore university faculty's lived cyberbullying experiences using disempowerment theory as a framework (Kane & Montgomery, 1998).

According to the disempowerment theory, individuals who feel inadequate are at risk of employing power assertions, including violence, to control people who they perceive as threatening (Archer, 1994). The theory identifies a range of risk factors that may predict the use of violence to re-establish power, authority, or control of others in a relationship (Bosco et al., 2022; McKenry et al., 2006). Individual factors such as self-esteem, personality, mental health issues, substance misuse, family origin, and insecure attachment can make a person more prone to abuse others. According to disempowerment theory, acts of violence or aggression are ultimately seen as an individual's attempt to reassert power and maintain control over another individual (Kwong-Lai Poon, 2011; Mendoza, 2011).

Disempowerment theory offers a theoretical framework to understand cyberbullying perpetration and victimization based on the power dynamics of workplace relationships (Kane & Montgomery, 1998). With this theoretical perspective, cyberbullying in the workplace can be at least partially explained by increased feelings of disempowerment among employees. Feelings of disempowerment lead to negative emotions and job attitudes that disrupt work-related goals (Kituyi, 2021). When employees feel disempowered in relationships within a work context, employees may attack others to regain a sense of empowerment over their victims. Over time, this creates a negative work environment, which can adversely influence workplace productivity (Farley et al., 2015). In higher education, disempowerment theory posits that power imbalances can occur between faculty and

students, faculty and staff, and faculty and administrators given varying ranks, positions, and years of work-related experience (Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Woudstra et al., 2018). From this disempowerment perspective, workplace cyberbullying leads to negative outcomes for victims such as high stress, demoralization, and low mental well-being (O'Donnell et al., 2010; Tsang & Liu, 2016).

Apart from applying disempowerment theory to examine faculty's lived experiences of cyberbullying in the academic workplace, the study elaborates on the frequency and forms of cyberbullying that faculty members face. Furthermore, the article details the negative impacts of cyberbullying on faculty. Finally, the authors connect the study's findings with the extant literature and propose practical solutions to the current issue of cyberbullying in academia.

Literature Review

Cyberbullying is associated with significant negative outcomes such as depression, low self-esteem, emotional distress, and even self-harm (Celik et al., 2012; Coyne et al., 2016; Eyuboglu et al., 2021). There are numerous forms of cyberbullying such as hate speech, harassment, and trolling and each form will have different consequences and outcomes (Park et al., 2021; Saladino et al., 2020; Xu & Trzaskawka, 2021). Various research studies have explored cyberbullying among youth in the K-12 learning environment, concluding that cyberbullying proves prevalent in K-12 schools (Calvete et al., 2010; Hutson et al., 2018; Li et al., 2016; Nikolaou, 2021; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Significant research has also been conducted concerning college students' cyberbullying experiences. Like K-12 students, a substantial proportion of college students—upwards of half of college students—report experiencing cyberbullying within the last 6 months (Kowalski et al., 2022). College students often report receiving cyber abuse from their fellow student peers, causing significant harm to victims' emotional wellbeing (Cimke & Cerit, 2021; Faucher et al., 2014; Khine et al., 2020; Kowalski et al., 2022; Molluzzo & Lawler, 2012; Varghese & Pistole, 2017; Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). Additionally, there is a growing body of literature examining the adult experience with cyberbullying in the workplace (Chapel et al., 2019; Coyne et al., 2016; Vranjes et al., 2017). As the present paper concentrates on cyberbullying that targets faculty in the workplace, the literature review will primarily focus on this aspect of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying in the Workplace

Several studies have examined cyberbullying in the workplace among adult populations, concluding that cyberbullying had deleterious effects on worker's emotional

well-being, overall social interactions at work, job satisfaction, and job commitment. Specifically, Kowalski et al. (2018) found that cyberbullying victimization among employees led to enhanced counterproductive work behavior, depression, and reduced job satisfaction. In a large study featuring 254 white collar employees across several corporations, Loh and Snyman (2020) determined that workplace cyberbullying led to an increased level of perceived stress, causing reduced job satisfaction. In the study, females reported more negative effects from workplace cyberbullying than males (Loh & Snyman, 2020). Another study documented that perceived cyberbullying across industries positively related with social vulnerability and social withdrawal (Qaisar et al., 2020). In a cross-sectional study among employees, Makalesi et al. (2022) concluded that workplace cyberbullying was positively correlated with employee burnout, which indirectly affected employee work engagement in the organization.

Several studies have also explored workplace cyberbullying in the healthcare field. For instance, Farley et al. (2015) found that 42.2% of trainee doctors experienced cyberbullying, and this negatively impacted their job satisfaction and mental strain. In another study, Park and Choi (2018) noted that 8% of nurses experienced workplace cyberbullying, which the authors linked to nurses' intentions to leave their current jobs in general and tertiary hospitals especially in cases where nurse victims received little social support. Another study indicated that the workplace cyberbullying of nurses was shown to lead to increased job stress and reduced self-esteem (Kim & Choi, 2021).

Workplace cyberbullying is also evident in online labor fields. D'Cruz and Noronha (2018a) conducted interviews among 13 clients and freelancers who used electronic platforms as part of their jobs. The researchers indicated themes of victims seeking resolution and moving on after the workplace cyberbullying experiences. In a follow-up study, D'Cruz and Noronha (2018b) also interviewed 13 clients and freelancers in online jobs and found that when seeking resolution from the cyberbullying experience, employees focused on maintaining platform mechanisms, implementing interventions, taking initiative, and being cautious. Further, employees overcame cyberbullying through consulting informal social support systems, through avoiding risks, and by increasing their sense of control and personal growth. As can be seen in the aforementioned studies, cyberbullying has become a widespread problem across various industries. The next section of the literature review will discuss the academic literature related to cyberbullying in academia, which can have a direct impact on faculty's experiences of cyberbullying within the workplace.

Cyberbullying in Higher Education

While the overall amount of academic literature focusing on university faculty's experiences with cyberbullying proves scant, some studies have researched the perceptions of students and faculty related to cyberbullying in academia. Molluzzo et al. (2013) examined perceptions of cyberbullying of both full-time and part-time faculty at a large, private metropolitan university. The authors documented that 98% of faculty participants believed cyberbullying was unethical. Further, the researchers identified an overwhelming perception among both faculty and student participants that their university needed to do more to educate students, faculty, and staff about the damaging effects of cyberbullying (Molluzzo et al., 2013). Molluzzo and Lawler (2014) explored both student and faculty perceptions related to cyberbullying at Pace University, a private university. The researchers determined that students were almost twice as likely as faculty to identify cyberbullying as a significant issue affecting them personally (47.4% of students vs. 26.2% of faculty). The researchers' survey showed that 76.3% of students and 55.6% of faculty agreed that their university is working to address cyberbullying. In another study, Meter et al. (2021) determined that among the sixteen college student participants in their exploratory, qualitative study, students overwhelmingly viewed cyberbullying as a gray area. Furthermore, students' definitions of cyberbullying were highly varied. However, there existed a relative consensus among student participants that the distance between the bully and victim empowered the bully (Meter et al., 2021).

Other academic research exploring cyberbullying in higher education has documented the substantial prevalence of cyberbullying on college campuses in the USA and Canada. In Molluzzo et al.'s (2013) study, 12% of faculty participants were aware of the cyberbullying of students at the university, and 10% reported being cyberbullied themselves by a student or another faculty member through social media. In Molluzzo and Lawler's (2014) follow-up study, 16.0% of students and 6.3% of faculty were aware of cyberbullying at other institutions. Cassidy et al. (2016) reported incidents of cyberbullying from four Canadian universities and found that 25% of surveyed faculty members had experienced cyberbullying by students and 15% had been attacked by colleagues. Additionally, the study identified that females were more likely to be the target of cyberbullying. Cassidy et al. (2017) conducted an additional study with a qualitative thematic analysis regarding the impacts of cyberbullying on post-secondary students, faculty, and administrators from four Canadian universities. Interestingly, students primarily reported being cyberbullied by other students, while faculty reported being cyberbullied by both students and colleagues. Hollis (2021) examined cyberbullying in the higher education workplace among work colleagues. A sample of 578

higher education professionals and faculty members were collected in late 2017/early 2018. Forty-five percent of respondents reported they were targets of cyberbullying in higher education via email, social media, and/or text communication from colleagues in their higher education work environment. Uniquely the study applied social dominance theory to examine whether women, people of color, and the LGBTQ community reported more incidents of cyberbullying. Through a chi-square analysis, it was confirmed that people of color and members of the LGBTQ community were more likely to be targets of cyberbullying in higher education. Meter et al. (2021) learned that nearly all college student participants in their qualitative exploratory study had observed or experienced cyberbullying.

While academic literature that focuses on the cyberbullying of faculty in the workplace proves scarce, a few academic research studies have documented the negative impacts of cyberbullying on college faculty. In their study of the various episodes of cyberbullying occurring at four Canadian universities, Cassidy et al. (2017) found that the negative impacts of cyberbullying proved consistent across age and position/title. Participants reported that cyberbullying had negative effects on their mental health, physical health, and perceptions of self. Victims, likewise, reported that cyberbullying harmed their personal and professional lives while also causing victims to have increased concern for their personal safety (Cassidy et al., 2017). Blizard (2018) explored the negative impact of faculty cyberbullied by their students. Targeted faculty experienced negative physical, emotional, relational, and occupational effects. One faculty member even resigned their position and moved to another country due to cyberbullying. The researcher noted that faculty victims encountered detrimental effects in their relationships with others. Indeed, 74% of victims felt their relationships with students deteriorated, while 37% concluded that their relationships with both colleagues and administrators declined (Blizard, 2018).

The literature communicates that adults are experiencing cyberbullying in the workplace and, specifically, faculty are experiencing cyberbullying in their role as educational facilitators. While there is emerging research specifically addressing cyberbullying in academia, there is a gap in the literature that identifies faculty victims' perceptions of cyberbullying. In a similar vein, few studies have explored the lasting, negative impacts of cyberbullying on college faculty. Insight from faculty on viable solutions to cyberbullying has, likewise, been largely unexplored. As such, this study will contribute to existing research by examining the experiences of faculty victims of cyberbullying and faculty victims' beliefs on how cyberbullying in the academic workplace should be resolved. By conducting and analyzing faculty interviews, the authors gathered new perspectives not addressed in prior research.

Moreover, as few studies have utilized disempowerment theory to explain cyberbullying incidents targeting college faculty, the current study adds much to the extant literature.

Research Questions

RQ1: What factors explain cyberbullying perpetration against faculty?

RQ2: How did faculty cyberbullying experiences change during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: What are the challenges of faculty dealing with cyberbullying?

Method

The mixed-method study employed a phenomenological, qualitative research design with descriptive statistical methods. This methodology was particularly appropriate as it allowed the researchers to acquire, and later convey, the lived experiences of research participants. Life experiences are difficult to study through quantitative inquiry, as individual experiences cannot be replicated (Lloyd et al., 2014). While individual experiences are unique, the phenomenological research approach seeks to arrive at a description of the nature of a particular group through understanding commonalities of lived experiences within an identified group (Creswell, 2013). Through interviewing individuals who have first-hand knowledge of an event or an experience, researchers seek to understand each participant, what participants have experienced in terms of this phenomenon, and what contexts or situations have typically influenced their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants

The research team consisted of four faculty members from a mid-size, regional state university in the Southwest. Three members of the research team were business professors, while the fourth member was a faculty member in the department of education. All research team members had conducted previous research on the topic of cyberbullying in the workplace. Several members of the research team had published individual book chapters in a book edited by one of the research team members.

The research team selected subjects through purposive sampling, specifically recruiting tenure track and non-tenure track faculty currently teaching in higher education institutions in the USA. Researchers recruited 25 participants to engage in individual qualitative interviews. Recruitment of participants continued until researchers reached theoretical saturation regarding the themes and topics being discussed

(Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Further, 25 participants are consistent with Creswell's (2013) guidelines of between five and 25 participants for a phenomenological study. Participants had to meet the following criteria: at least 18 years old, currently serving in a faculty position at a higher education institution, and having experience teaching at least one online course within the past year. Participants were recruited via email, word-of-mouth, and oral presentations. Researchers examined all forms of cyberbullying. Participant demographics are listed in Table 1.

Procedures

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the researchers recruited participants using purposeful sampling. Researchers recruited participants by emailing announcements to faculty discussion groups and listservs. Researchers also used word of mouth to recruit participants. Faculty self-selected if they had interest in participating in the study based on their perceptions and experiences of workplace cyberbullying in higher education institutions. If faculty members expressed interest in participating in the study, they received a description of the research study via email with the information necessary regarding the study. Participants were asked to confirm interest by contacting one of the researchers and by signing the informed consent document via email or face-to-face. To assess participants' cyberbullying experiences, they were asked to discuss their specific cyberbullying experiences in performing duties such as teaching, research, and service in their academic job. The research team led semi-structured interviews via Zoom, which were audio–video recorded using the meeting application's recording feature. Interview questions are listed in Table 2. Two of the eight interview questions specifically addressed topics related to disempowerment theory. Specifically, question 5 of the interview protocol asked participants to consider why cyberbullying happens to faculty and why the faculty member, herself/himself, believed that they had been targeted. Based on participants' answers, the researchers asked follow-up questions related to power dynamics and possible motivations for the abuser to engage in cyberbullying. Question 6 asked participants to reflect on how the COVID-19 pandemic had changed the nature of cyberbullying attacks against faculty. While not directly stated to participants to skew participants' responses, one intent behind this question was for participants to consider how the COVID-19 pandemic, a natural disaster which left countless people feeling helpless, physically ill, and disempowered, might have influenced the cyberbullying of faculty members. Whenever possible, at least two researchers conducted the interviews. Having multiple researchers attend each interview supported the thematic analysis of the

interviews, as it allowed for researchers to compare notes and agree upon central themes. Before each interview, participants were asked if they felt comfortable being interviewed by multiple interviewers or if they preferred to only be interviewed by the primary researcher. Following each interview, the researchers who conducted the interview met among themselves to debrief and compare notes. Each participant was assigned a code to preserve anonymity, and each interview lasted approximately 1 h. Interviews were transcribed and reviewed so that researchers could identify central themes across the interviews and descriptive tables were developed from the interview data.

Data Analysis

After researchers performed interviews, researchers transcribed the interviews. The data analysis process followed five steps: (1) prepare and organize data, (2) review and explore data, (3) create initial codes, (4) review the codes, and (5) present the themes in a cohesive manner. The first step required the primary researcher to engage in data by creating interview transcripts and reviewing each interview word for word. Next, the primary researcher examined transcripts to explore the data. From the review of transcripts, the primary researcher identified macro-level themes for each interview question. Next, the primary researcher gave the other research team members interview transcripts and a table indicating the cumulative frequency of macro-level themes across the interviews. Each researcher team member individually reviewed the transcripts and considered micro-level theme interpretations. The research team members then met as a group to review the macro-level and micro-level themes. The research team came to a consensus on macro- and micro-level themes, primarily through redefining, associating, or consolidating identified concepts (Alhojailan, 2012). As a result, the research team agreed upon three macro-level themes (Table 3) and several micro-level question themes (Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7). The three macro-level themes were identified when a clear theme was evident across several interviews (indicated by having a high percentage of participants corroborating the same theme). Through this process, the researchers constructed a collaborative meaning of the participants' experiences as faculty victims of cyberbullying, particularly within the context of disempowerment theory. Incorporating disempowerment theory to determine meaning of participants' responses and to explain participants' responses within a theoretical framework allowed the researchers to develop a greater understanding of the given phenomenon. Inter-theme reliability was tested for the thematic analysis to ensure the themes'

interpretation was maintained between coders (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Any discrepancies between coders and researchers were discussed until a consensus was reached and 100% inter-coder reliability was achieved.

Findings

There were three consistent themes identified across the faculty interviews. First, victims perceived that anonymity and power dynamics significantly influenced cyberbullying incidents. Second, faculty believed that the pandemic led to an increase in cyberbullying against faculty. Third, faculty felt particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying incidents because their universities lacked clear cyberbullying policies and procedures to support faculty victims of cyberbullying. The thematic findings were developed through intense review of participant interview data. The data was examined for key words and similar experiences to support identification of themes.

Anonymity, Power Dynamics, and Cyberbullying

One common theme that addressed RQ1 (factors explaining cyberbullying perpetration against faculty) across many of the interviews was the relationship between anonymity (subtheme 1) and power dynamics (subtheme 2) with cyberbullying. To begin, many participants viewed the aggressor's perceived sense of anonymity online as a contributing factor to cyberbullying incidents. When asked, "*Why do you think cyberbullying happens to faculty,*" more than a quarter of participants (28% or 7 participants) stated that anonymity was a significant reason for cyberbullying. One participant explained that anonymity provides the cyberbullying perpetrator protection, allowing the cyberbully to "hide behind a computer and say...inappropriate things and things they wouldn't say face-to-face." Another participant reiterated this viewpoint: "I think that sort of anonymity or that sense of it's easier to send this kind of rude email to someone versus saying that to their face. I've received [that] from students, for instance." Descriptive frequency analysis was also used, which pointed to other reasons for why cyberbullying occurs to faculty including power (the second most common explanation with 24% of participants associating cyberbullying with the abuser's quest for power), blaming others, technological availability, politics, grade manipulation, and lack of communication skills, among others listed in Table 4. Several of those reasons—most notably exerting power and attempting to manipulate professors' grading—directly tie to disempowerment theory, a topic which will be elaborated upon in the "[Discussion](#)" section of this paper.

Cyberbullying of Faculty During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A major theme derived from RQ2 (cyberbullying changes during the COVID-19 pandemic) highlighted that most participants believed that the COVID-19 pandemic created unique conditions for cyberbullying incidents. In response to the question, “*Do you think cyberbullying for faculty has changed at all during the pandemic,*” four-fifths of participants, twenty participants out of twenty-five, felt that cyberbullying had changed during the pandemic. Of the 80% of participants that perceived cyberbullying had changed during the pandemic, nearly half discussed how cyberbullying had increased during the pandemic. Five participants identified that added stress was a factor for increased cyberbullying. As one participant described, cyberbullying had changed “just based on the additional stresses that people have been dealing with through the pandemic... [This] may not be necessarily anything to do with the faculty member, but maybe just life stresses.” Several participants (12%) believed that increased technology usage had spurred cyberbullying during the pandemic. A participant noted, “Everything is more online, so I think the opportunity is [there] for someone to encounter cyber bullying.” Finally, three participants believed social dissention during the pandemic factored into increases in cyberbullying. As one participant explained, cyberbullying changed because of “the situation that we’ve been brought throughout the pandemic, not necessarily because of COVID, but because of everything that happened through COVID, you know, with the riots and all the unrest that happened.” Descriptive frequency analysis also pointed to those changes that occurred from compounding issues, distance communication, more online interaction, exhaustion, and burnout (see Table 5). As will be addressed in the “[Discussion](#)” section of the article, participants’ attributing the heightened levels of workplace cyberbullying against faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic to increased stress, social unrest, exhaustion, and burnout further justify the application of disempowerment theory as an analytical tool.

Faculty Vulnerability and a Lack of Institutional Support

A central theme based on RQ3 (challenges of cyberbullying on faculty) from the interviews included many participants’ feelings of vulnerability as faculty (subtheme 1) and dissatisfaction with their institutions’ handling of cyberbullying (subtheme 2). Many participants mentioned faculty’s vulnerability to cyberbullying due to the public nature of their positions and the accessibility to professors through social media. Five faculty participants (20% of all participants) specifically recommended that faculty be cautious with sharing information on social media. One participant provided the following admonition: “Don’t be

on social media. I think that is one thing. I just feel like a lot of times when you put everything that is important to you [online] that you’re vulnerable... It does give a person who could harm you or who wants to bully you or to cause you distress that ammunition.” Interestingly, some participants felt particularly powerless to protect themselves from cyberbullying. Two quotes from different participants demonstrate these faculty members’ sense of incapacitation: “I really don’t think we can [prevent cyberbullying]. I think we’re pretty vulnerable. I mean, you’ve got different types of students from different backgrounds” (participant 21). A second participant stated “I really don’t know how you could protect yourself against it [cyberbullying], because how do you stop somebody from bullying you? Right?” (participant 19).

Other faculty felt reporting cyberbullying to their institutions led to negative professional repercussions. In terms of their individual experiences as cyberbullying victims, four of the twenty-five participants (16% of all participants) directly referred to the retaliation that professors could receive for reporting cyberbullying. One participant described choosing to not report the cyberbullying incident out of fear of being further targeted by the cyberbully—an administrator—in retaliation for reporting: “I didn’t want to report it because I didn’t want, you know, him to give me bad feedback on my evaluation.” Another participant detailed specific retribution that she received due to reporting cyberbullying: “Well, as a result of me reporting it, he reported me to the ombudsman person. And so, then I had to meet with that individual about my quote, unquote treatment of him, and I was not willing to go into detail with her on anything.” The connection between “disempowerment” theory and acts of retribution will be detailed in the “[Discussion](#)” section of the paper.

Related to many faculty’s feelings of vulnerability to cyberbullying were several faculty’s perception that higher education institutions failed to adequately respond to cyberbullying. When participants were asked, “What are the barriers to reporting cyberbullying to the authorities at your institution?” 28%, or seven out of twenty-five participants stated that they were unaware of a clear cyberbullying policy at their university and, without a policy, steps for reporting were difficult to identify. One participant described how there had never been clear guidance in her institution for how to address cyberbullying, while another participant stated that institutions needed a clear policy “...for people to know where to go and how to do it [report cyberbullying], knowing what the processes are, being very clear about those processes, and making it very accessible and easy to do.” From the descriptive statistical analysis, other barriers for reporting cyberbullying included lack of trust, fear, reporting issues, intimidation, and shame (see Table 6).

On a related question involving faculty challenges, “*What do you think might be the reason bystanders choose to not*

report cyberbullying instances,” four participants (16%) felt that institutions would not address cyberbullying effectively. One participant depicted her lack of confidence in her institution’s ability in blunt terms: “I will say, in my instance...I find that nothing will come from it. It’ll just be filed away under. ‘OK. We’ll just keep an eye on it.’” Another professor detailed both a lack of faith in their institution’s ability to handle the solution as well as a suspicion of retribution for reporting cyber victimization as an outside bystander observing the cyberbullying: “Again, not trusting the system. I’ve seen [that] you’re told that something’s anonymous, but I don’t trust that.” Table 7 provides other reasons faculty believed bystanders failed to report observing cyberbullying (e.g., faculty believing that the cyberbullying did not affect them personally, lack of awareness, fear, concerns about retaliation, etc.).

Apart from these three central themes, the researchers concluded that cyberbullying is a nuanced experience with varied perceptions. Through the interviews, it was clear that cyberbullying can be clinically defined, but that the individuals’ perception of what designates cyberbullying and of their individual experiences with cyberbullying varied. Some faculty members felt the experience of cyberbullying was humorous, they never felt helpless, and they perceived all bullying events as stemming from issues internalized by the bully. While other faculty described their cyberbullying experiences as hopeless, scary, and without potential for resolve. One variation between these two extremes within the group was the victims’ perception of their own ability to bring about a resolution. The faculty that believed they could resolve the issue or that they, through their own power, had resolved it, perceived the cyberbullying attack as less concerning. The faculty that believed their cyberbullying experiences could not be resolved and that they had no administrative support were more fearful for their lives and careers.

Discussion

The present study documents the lived experiences of 25 faculty who experienced cyberbullying in the university workplace. Participants shared a range of perspectives concerning the cyberbullying incident’s effect on their work life and emotional health. While each faculty’s experiences as a victim of cyberbullying proved unique, the researchers identified three consistent themes through the collective interview process. First, anonymity of the bully is a significant contributor to the rise of cyberbullying as well as the bully’s desire to reassert power. Second, the challenges that arose from the global COVID-19 pandemic spurred increases of cyberbullying against academic faculty. Third, faculty do not perceive that there are clear cyberbullying policies and procedures in place at their universities to support faculty.

As discussed earlier, several participants in the present study believed that the cyberbullying events they had experienced would not occur in a face-to-face environment. The victims perceived that their cyberbullies felt empowered to voice discourteous comments, since the bullies believed they were impervious to repercussions through operating behind the veil of a computer screen and/or a screen name. Cyberbullying literature supports this finding. Wildermuth and Davis (2012) conclude that the internet provides many aggressors with a perception that they can commit acts of cyberaggression with impunity. The authors explain that the asynchronous nature of many electronic forms of communication and the lack of social cues/context cause many abusers to feel that their communication has less of a “real” effect on victims. Disempowerment theory suggests that anonymity can provide a sense of power over victims given bullies’ perceptions of protection behind a computer screen (Kane & Montgomery, 1998). Additionally, the theory that the relative anonymity of the internet influences cyberbullying is further evidenced by the work of Cuevas (2018) and Lloro-Bidart (2018), two professors who documented their separate, individual experiences with cyberbullying. Whereas cyber vigilantes targeted Cuevas (2018), a professor in Georgia, for his politically themed social media posts, Lloro-Bidart (2018), a Californian academic, received verbal assaults for her published, scholarly work related to ecofeminism. In both cases, most of the vitriolic messages directed at the victims originated from non-university affiliated individuals who absconded their identities on the internet.

Moreover, the fact that 24% of participants cited power as a motivation for cyberbullying against faculty can be explained by disempowerment theory. According to McKenry et al. (2006), disempowerment theory contends that violence and aggression are an aggressor’s reaction to both real and perceived challenges; the aggressor responds to these challenges by attempting to possess or control others (McKenry et al., 2006). Students, staff, faculty, and/or members of the general public that engage in cyber-victimization against professors may feel threatened by the professor, and therefore, attempt to reacquire power dynamics through virtual aggression. Furthermore, several participants attributed cyberbullying to students’ attempts to manipulate grading, which also ties to disempowerment theory. Students may feel insecure about their lack of control over professors’ grading, an important factor in students’ ability to graduate and seek future employment, and, as a result, choose to cyberbully in hopes of redistributing power dynamics to students’ advantage. A second central theme in the qualitative interviews involved numerous participants’ contentions that the pandemic fueled cyberbullying. When researchers asked participants why they believed the pandemic had contributed to increases in cyberbullying attacks against faculty, participants had

two common explanations. Some participants attributed the rise in cyberbullying to courses moving online during the pandemic. With more courses being held entirely online, online interactions became the predominant form of communication. According to faculty that held this view, bullying that might have occurred face-to-face in a brick-and-mortar classroom was now occurring online in the virtual classroom. A second common explanation for the increases in cyberbullying against faculty among participants was the belief that the compounded challenges occurring during the pandemic—physical health risks, mental health concerns amid increased social isolation, and the political and economic upheaval that resulted—caused increased emotional stress and anger, leading to more acts of cyberaggression. This perception corresponds with Barlett and collaborator's (2021) findings that during the pandemic, US adults, as a demographic group, perpetrated more acts of cyberbullying compared to pre-pandemic levels. The researchers further documented that adults were more likely to positively perceive acts of cyber-aggression during the pandemic (Barlett et al., 2021). Additionally, from the perspective of disempowerment theory, added stress caused by the uncertainty and devastation caused by the pandemic may have led some students, staff, faculty, and members of the general public to attempt to recapture control over their lives and their situation by cyberbullying college professors. At the same time, the pandemic empowered long-distance bullies who used computer technology to attack faculty without any consequences (Kane & Montgomery, 1998). On the receiving end of the cyberaggression, professors, overwhelmed by increased virtual responsibilities during the pandemic, felt disempowered to defend themselves against the digital aggressions. A third common theme that participants discussed was faculty's lack of awareness of university cyberbullying policies and limited confidence in their universities to respond to cyberbullying. Research conducted by Minor et al. (2013) and Cassidy et al. (2017) documented similar findings. In Minor et al.'s (2013) study of faculty experiences at a US university with all-online classes, nearly two-thirds of faculty participants believed that there were not adequate support mechanisms for faculty experiencing cyberbullying. Minor et al. (2013) cited specific faculty concerns such as a lack of knowledge on how to officially report cyberbullying and a distrust of administrators' ability to effectively resolve cyberbullying incidents. Cassidy et al. (2017), likewise, found that among Canadian faculty who participated in their study, most participants held negative perceptions of the level of assistance that they received from administrators and colleagues after the faculty participants experienced cyberbullying. What is more, without knowledge and resources to deter cyberbullying, power imbalances between faculty

and their aggressors can widen, perpetuating ongoing cyberbullying behaviors in higher education (Kituyi, 2021). In a similar vein, the decision of several participants in the study to not report cyberbullying incidents out of a fear of retaliation relates to disempowerment theory. Indeed, considering the tenets of disempowerment theory, these participants' fear of retaliation may be well-founded. Under the framework of disempowerment theory, reporting a cyberbully to authorities would further threaten the bully's power and increase the bully's feelings of insecurity; this could feasibly inspire the cyberbully to engage in further violence as retribution.

In the present study, perhaps because of participants' limited awareness of university policies that dealt with cyber-aggression, several participants advocated for the adoption of new university cyberbullying policies. One university policy that faculty suggested included the university formally defining cyberbullying. This suggestion corresponds with guidelines from Washington et al. (2015) that recommend that universities create a cyber code of conduct that specifically outlines appropriate and inappropriate online conduct. Faculty participants of the current study also advocated for universities to establish specific initiatives to prevent cyberbullying. One initiative could be the creation of what Cassidy et al. (2014) describe as anonymous cyberbullying reporting systems on college campuses, which would allow both students and faculty to report cyberbullying without fear of further retaliation from the bully.

Universities could also consider creating specific university committees to address cyberbullying. These committees might resemble the cyberbullying awareness organizations composed of both faculty, staff, and students, recommended by Weiss (2020) or the cyberbullying action committees proposed by Smith et al. (2014) that would assign a particular administrator to oversee dealing with all cyberbullying incidents. Other preventative strategies could include Smith et al.'s (2014) recommendation for mandatory orientation training on cyberbullying for students and faculty. The orientation could describe the forms of cyberbullying common on college campuses and how to address aggressive behavior online in appropriate ways (Smith et al., 2014).

Implications

This study has implications for a broad array of university stakeholders, namely, university faculty, university administrators, and students. Understanding faculty's diverse definitions of cyberbullying and experiences with cyberbullying can help university leaders respond to cyberbullying, thus creating positive, academic environments free from incivilities and aggressions. Since the study features participants from diverse regions with several types of tenure-track status, the study further documents the prevalence of workplace cyberbullying occurring in universities across the USA

among various faculty groups. Finally, the study's findings provide college faculty and administrators with the challenges or barriers of addressing cyberbullying. As described earlier in the previous section, ways to reduce (and hopefully, eventually eliminate) cyberbullying include establishing an institutional definition of cyberbullying and providing a means to anonymously report cyberbullying incidents. Other recommendations detailed earlier feature the forming of committees composed of diverse stakeholders to address cyberbullying and mandatory orientation on cyberbullying for students, staff, and faculty. The present article's authors further propose the sponsorship of campus-wide awareness campaigns and workshops in addition to a mandatory cyberbullying orientation for all students, staff, and faculty. The authors also suggest that higher education institutions design or purchase anti-cyberbullying software that can be installed on campus computers and/or virtual networks.

Limitations and Future Research

Twenty-five university faculty members shared their perspective and their experiences regarding cyberbullying in their work environments. Their experiences are compelling and powerful; however, it is also important to remember that cyberbullying events are nuanced and complicated. The data in this study relies on singular experiences and perspectives. It would be valuable to have a phenomenological case study where several faculty members shared their experiences and perspectives of a particular cyberbullying event so that researchers would have multiple perspectives of a singular episode. Likewise, since the researchers, themselves, are university faculty who bring to the table their own workplace experiences, the researchers could have interpreted interview data based on their own, pre-conceived notions. Since the validity of qualitative research findings can be limited because of the subjective nature of researchers playing an active role in interpreting data, some possible researcher bias could be a limitation of the present study (Babbie, 2005). Also, only descriptive statistics were used in this study. Future researchers may consider using surveys and quantitative measures to identify relationships among variables relevant to this study. This could help provide explanatory data rather than simply descriptive data (Babbie, 2005). Finally, the sampling procedure featured purposive sampling, which is a form of non-randomized/non-probability sampling (Babbie, 2005). Compared to randomized probability sampling, non-probability sampling could yield sampling bias and provides less generalizability to the population of US faculty members as a whole (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Thus, the results of the present study may prove less representative of the general US faculty population compared to studies that employ probability sampling. One illustrative example of this is that 22 of the 25 participants were from Texas. Ideally, in future research studies, randomized, probability sampling should be employed,

especially since a more randomized sample of participants may yield more diverse perspectives. Thus, future studies that employ probability sampling may prove more representative of faculty experiences across the USA, especially since cyberbullying policies differ across states and universities.

Conclusions

While bullying has occurred since the beginning of time, cyberbullying is a recent phenomenon that has evolved with the growth of the internet. With only three to four decades of cyberbullying accounts, the literature regarding cyberbullying is in its preliminary stages. Researchers are seeking to understand the cyberbullying experience from both the victim and perpetrator's viewpoint. This study contributes to the growing body of literature by further illuminating the experiences and perspectives of university faculty who have been victims of cyberbullying. The present study affirms previous research findings on the link between increased online communications in the academic workplace and acts of cyberbullying against faculty. The research study's findings that faculty are largely unaware of their university's policies on cyberbullying and that faculty believe universities fail to adequately respond to cyberbullying incidents, likewise, echo findings from earlier studies. However, as the extant literature has yet to comprehensively explore workplace cyberbullying of college and university faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic, the present study contributes much to the literature. The study's findings demonstrate that the pandemic has spurred heightened levels of workplace cyberbullying against faculty, which the study's faculty participants attribute to increased levels of electronic communications, shifts toward virtual work during the pandemic, and the added stress caused by the spread of a devastating illness that, likewise, caused significant emotional, political, and economic disruptions.

Finally, the present study provides several practical solutions to prevent cyberbullying against faculty. As illustrated in previous research as well as within the present study's findings, faculty desire clear cyberbullying policies and procedures from their institutions. Institutions of higher education can adopt proactive policies such as establishing an institutional definition of cyberbullying, cyberbullying committees, anonymous reporting mechanisms, and mandatory training on cyberbullying. Universities could also employ software in system computers and networks that directly restrict cyberbullying behaviors. While cyberbullying is a current issue in many universities, the university stakeholders are uniquely positioned to explore, understand, and create solutions to minimize cyberbullying in academia. The first step begins with awareness, and this study hopes to have provided some beneficial illumination of faculty's unique experiences as cyberbullying victims.

Appendix

Table 1 Demographics of the participants

Participant	Title	Years teaching	Location	Gender
1	Adjunct	25 +	Texas	Male
2	Adjunct	1	Florida	Female
3	Faculty and director	20+	Texas	Female
4	Assistant professor of management	8 to 10 years	Texas	Male
5	Lecturer	16 years	Texas	Male
6	CEO Educational Consulting Company	27	California	Male
7	Adjunct instructor	20	Texas	Male
8	Professor	11	Georgia	Male
9	Professor	13	Texas	Male
10	Assistant professor	17	Texas	Female
11	Associate professor and interim chair	7	Texas	Female
12	Assistant professor	18	Texas	Female
13	Associate professor and department chair	20+	Texas	Female
14	Lecturer	4	Texas	Male
15	Lecturer	7	Texas	Female
16	Assistant professor	5	Texas	Male
17	Associate	9	Texas	Female
18	Full professor	30	Texas	Male
19	Associate professor	4	Texas	Female
20	Associate professor	11	Texas	Female
21	Lecturer	6	Texas	Female
22	Lecturer	3	Texas	Female
23	Clinical associate professor	7	Texas	Female
24	Associate professor	5	Texas	Male
25	Professor	28	Texas	Male

Table 2 Interview questions

Demographic information:

Title:

Years teaching:

Years teaching online:

Percentage of work duties moving online based on the pandemic:

Type of institution where you work:

1. Before we get started, can you tell me about the types of online and virtual academic experiences you have had?

a) What are your online experiences with teaching, research, and conferences prior to the pandemic?

b) Do you feel that the amount of time that you spend online for work-related purposes has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020?

Why or why not?

2. We define cyberbullying as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.” How do you define cyberbullying?

3. Can you describe a time when you experienced cyberbullying in relation to your teaching, research, service, or other aspects of your job?

4. How did this experience make you feel?

a) How did it impact you personally?

b) How did you deal with each incident of cyberbullying?

c) Did you find that the person who dealt with the incident of cyberbullying handled the situation effectively? Why or why not?

d) Do you think the incident (s) of cyberbullying have been resolved? Why or why not?

5. Why do you think cyberbullying happens to faculty? Explain.

a) Why do you think you were a target of cyberbullying?

6. Do you think cyberbullying for faculty has changed at all during the pandemic? Explain.

a) Do you feel that the amount of time that you spend online for work-related purposes relates to your experiences with cyberbullying? Why or why not?

7. Based on your experience, describe a specific impact of cyberbullying on the faculty, the student, or the institution.

8. What are the barriers to reporting cyberbullying to the appropriate authorities at your institution?

Table 3 Overall study themes*Overall study themes with research questions*

RQ1:

Subtheme 1: Anonymity fuels cyberbullying.

Subtheme 2: Power dynamics fuel cyberbullying.

RQ2:

The COVID-19 pandemic helped fuel cyberbullying against faculty.

RQ3:

Subtheme 1: Faculty felt vulnerable.

Subtheme 2: Faculty do not perceive that their university has clear cyberbullying policies and procedures in place to protect faculty.

Table 4 Reasons cyberbullying happens to faculty

Why do you think cyberbullying happens to faculty?	Percentage	Overall occurrence
Anonymity.	0.28	7
Power.	0.24	6
Blaming others for your problems.	0.12	3
When students don't get what they want.	0.08	2
Technology availability.	0.08	2
Happens in all workplaces.	0.08	2
Politics.	0.04	1
Grade manipulation.	0.04	1
Lack of communication skills.	0.04	1

Table 5 Cyberbullying during the pandemic

Do you think cyberbullying for faculty has changed at all during the pandemic?	Percentage	Overall occurrence
Yes	0.8	20
No	0.12	3
I do not know.	0.08	2

Table 6 Barriers to reporting cyberbullying

What are the barriers to reporting cyberbullying to the appropriate authorities at your institution?	Percentage	Overall occurrence
No clear cyberbullying policy at the university.	0.28	7
Retaliation.	0.16	4
There are no barriers.	0.12	3
Lack of trust.	0.08	2
Fear.	0.08	2
Knowing nothing will be done if you report.	0.04	1
Hassel to report.	0.04	1
Intimidation.	0.04	1
Shame.	0.04	1
Expectations that faculty handle their own student situations.	0.04	1
I have no idea.	0.04	1

Table 7 Bystanders not reporting cyberbullying instances

What do you think might be the reasons bystanders choose to not report cyberbullying instances?	Prevalence	Overall occurrence
Not trusting the system.	0.16	4
It does not affect them.	0.16	4
Fear they will be a victim too.	0.08	2
Lack of awareness.	0.08	2
Faculty should handle their own class events.	0.08	2
Power differentials.	0.04	1
Retaliation.	0.04	1
Bystanders.	0.04	1
Embarrassment.	0.04	1
Fear of being ostracized.	0.04	1
Apathy.	0.04	1
I am not involved in this.	0.04	1
It did not happen to me.	0.04	1
Policies not clear.	0.04	1
Do not agree that the event was cyberbullying.	0.04	1
Anonymity.	0.04	1

Author Contribution Jillian Yarbrough (first full draft), Katelynn Sell (contributed with analysis/proofing), Adam Weiss (contributed with discussion/proofing), Leslie Ramos Salazar (contributed with lit/proofing).

Data Availability The data that supports the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author, JRWY, upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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