

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**CYBERBULLYING AT WORK:  
EXPLORING UNDERSTANDINGS AND EXPERIENCES**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Human Resource Management

at Massey University, Albany,

New Zealand

**Natalia Judeline D'Souza**

**2017**



## ABSTRACT

Despite growing evidence that workplace cyberbullying exerts a significant toll on employees and organisations, conceptualisation issues linger, impeding efforts toward prevention and intervention. Indeed, researchers continue to frame cyberbullying as an electronic extension of traditional bullying – overlooking the intricacies and potentially more damaging nature of this phenomenon, due to various cyber-specific features – or disregard conceptualisation altogether. Therefore, the main aim of this research was to explore how workplace cyberbullying is understood and experienced in New Zealand, with a focus on nursing.

A three-study qualitative, interview-based research design was employed, with findings from each stage informing the subsequent research progress. Study one explored subject matter experts' perspectives on workplace cyberbullying. In addition to suggesting a differentiation of cyberbullying from traditional bullying as a construct, findings also revealed professional-based distinctions around approaches to measurement and management, emphasising the subjectivity and contextual nature of cyberbullying. In line with these findings, studies two and three adopted a context-specific approach in exploring nurses' understandings and experiences of workplace cyberbullying, respectively. The focus on nursing was intended to address a substantial knowledge gap: although this profession experiences higher-than-average rates of traditional bullying, to date, there had been no efforts to investigate how workplace cyberbullying manifested and was experienced within this group.

Findings from study two suggested that although academics and nurses generally conceptualised workplace cyberbullying as being a distinct phenomenon, nurses tended to emphasise target perceptions of victimisation over features such as repetition and intent. Based on this understanding, a purpose-specific definition was formulated for study three to explore nurse experiences of workplace cyberbullying. Accordingly, it emerged that not only did most targets experience co-occurring forms of bullying, but in some cases, cyberbullying was

perceived as more distressing with a potentially wider scope of harm. Further, findings from study three uncovered the risk of nurses experiencing cyberbullying from external sources such as students, patients, and patient relatives. Unfortunately, several work-related and industry-specific factors frequently presented barriers to reporting and successful resolution. Beyond these contributions to our knowledge on workplace cyberbullying, a multi-factor socio-ecological model is also posited as a framework guiding future research, as well as prevention and intervention efforts.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am forever indebted to the many people that have supported me through my PhD journey.

First and foremost, I would to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Darryl Forsyth, Dr David Tappin, and Associate Professor Bevan Catley, for their continued guidance, patience, and encouragement. I am incredibly fortunate to have been under your supervision, and to have found a home in the Healthy Work Group. I am also immensely grateful to Professor Tim Bentley for extending me a number of opportunities to grow as an early career academic, and to Dr Kate Blackwood for her mentorship and invaluable advice.

Thank you also to the School of Management staff for your immeasurable support and collegiality throughout my candidature. I am especially grateful to have had the advice and ear of my peers – in particular Simone, Fatima, Nimeesha, and Zoe. Your unending encouragement and good humour kept me going through setbacks and blue skies. Special thanks also to reviewer two for always keeping me grounded.

I would also like to sincerely thank the organisations who have been involved in the process and providing access to participants for this study; your interest and cooperation is greatly appreciated. I am deeply indebted too, to the participants who offered up their time and had the courage to share their stories. I believe that sharing your narratives will pave the way for conversations, collaboration, and change to take place.

Last, but most certainly not least, thank you to my loving family for their unwavering support, constant encouragement, and unconditional love. To my parents, for always putting us first; to my husband Raymond, for being my rock; to Simran, for always making me laugh; and to our dogs Chestnut, Thor, and Espresso, for their pensive companionship

*I can no other answer make but thanks, and thanks; and ever thanks*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Orientation</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>1.2 Justification</b> .....	<b>3</b>
1.2.1 Research significance and contributions .....	6
<b>1.3 Research Focus</b> .....	<b>7</b>
1.3.1 A comment on epistemology: a subtle realist perspective .....	9
<b>1.4 Thesis Outline</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>2.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>2.2 Summary of Workplace Bullying Research</b> .....	<b>13</b>
2.2.1 Prevalence rates .....	15
2.2.1.1 <i>Regional differences</i> .....	15
2.2.1.2 <i>Methodological differences</i> .....	16
2.2.1.3 <i>Industry differences</i> .....	17
2.2.2 The work environment hypothesis .....	17
2.2.3 Antecedents .....	19
2.2.3.1 <i>Organisational-level factors</i> .....	19
2.2.3.2 <i>Industry-level factors</i> .....	19
2.2.4 Intervention .....	22
<b>2.3 Cyberbullying Literature Review</b> .....	<b>23</b>
2.3.1 Definition .....	24
2.3.2 Similarities with traditional bullying .....	26
2.3.3 Distinguishing cyberbullying .....	27
2.3.3.1 <i>Repetition</i> .....	28
2.3.3.2 <i>Intent to harm</i> .....	28
2.3.3.3 <i>Power dynamics</i> .....	29
2.3.3.4 <i>Detached nature and anonymity</i> .....	30
2.3.3.5 <i>Infinite audience and role blurring</i> .....	32
2.3.3.6 <i>Permanence of digital content</i> .....	33
2.3.3.7 <i>Boundary-less spread</i> .....	33
2.3.4 Prevalence .....	34
2.3.5 Antecedents or “risk” factors .....	37
2.3.5.1 <i>Previous victimisation (traditional bullying)</i> .....	37
2.3.5.2 <i>Internet use</i> .....	39
2.3.6 Associated outcomes .....	39
2.3.6.1 <i>Cyberbullying among university students</i> .....	40
2.3.6.2 <i>Workplace cyberbullying</i> .....	41
2.3.7 Cyberbullying as a continuum .....	42
2.3.8 Cyberbullying and gender .....	43
2.3.9 Theoretical perspectives .....	45
<b>2.4 The Present Research Focus</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: STUDY ONE – EXPLORING EXPERTS’ UNDERSTANDINGS OF WORKPLACE CYBERBULLYING</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>3.1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>3.2 Study Aim and Rationale</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>3.3 Method</b> .....	<b>52</b>

3.3.1 Overview of research design.....	52
3.3.1.1 <i>The expert interview</i> .....	52
3.3.2 Recruitment strategy .....	53
3.3.3 Participants.....	54
3.3.4 The interview process .....	55
3.3.4.1 <i>Phone and Skype interviews</i> .....	56
3.3.5 Researcher’s role.....	57
3.3.6 Approach to data analysis .....	58
3.3.6.1 <i>On saturation</i> .....	59
<b>3.4 Findings and Discussion.....</b>	<b>60</b>
3.4.1 Theme 1: Understanding workplace cyberbullying .....	60
3.4.1.1 <i>Theme 1a. Distinguishing cyberbullying from traditional bullying</i> .....	60
Digital trail and permanence .....	61
Expanded reach .....	62
Anonymity.....	64
3.4.1.2 <i>Theme 1b. Perceived extent of workplace cyberbullying</i> .....	66
3.4.1.3 <i>Theme 1c. Predicted trends in workplace cyberbullying</i> .....	67
3.4.2 Theme 2: Measuring workplace cyberbullying.....	68
3.4.1 Theme 3: Managing workplace cyberbullying .....	71
Organisational policy .....	72
The Harmful Digital Communications (HDC) Act.....	73
Utilising digital evidence.....	74
The importance of the work environment and culture .....	76
<b>3.5 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: INTRODUCING CONTEXT – THE NURSING PROFESSION IN NEW ZEALAND .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>4.1 The Focus on Nursing .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>4.2 The New Zealand Context .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>4.3 History of the Profession.....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>4.4 Nursing and Bullying .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5: STUDY TWO – CONCEPTUALISING WORKPLACE CYBERBULLYING .....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>5.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>5.2 Study Aim and Justification .....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>5.3 Methodology.....</b>	<b>93</b>
5.3.1 Overview of research design.....	93
5.3.1.1 <i>Scenario studies</i> .....	93
The scenarios .....	95
5.3.2 Recruitment strategy .....	97
5.3.2.1 <i>Challenges and issues – reflections</i> .....	98
5.3.3 Participants.....	99
5.3.4 Study procedure .....	100
5.3.5 Approach to data analysis .....	101
<b>5.4 Findings and Discussion.....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>5.5 Descriptive Findings: Summary of Scenarios .....</b>	<b>103</b>
5.5.1 Scenario A.....	103
5.5.2 Scenario B .....	103
5.5.3 Scenario C.....	104
5.5.4 Scenario D.....	105
<b>5.6 Thematic Findings and Discussion.....</b>	<b>105</b>
5.6.1 Theme 1. Cyber-specific features that amplify harm.....	106
5.6.1.1 <i>Theme 1a. Anonymity</i> .....	106
5.6.1.2 <i>Theme 1b. Invasion of boundaries</i> .....	107
5.6.1.3 <i>Theme 1c. Rapid dissemination to a potentially infinite audience</i> .....	109



5.6.1.4 Theme 1d. Permanence online.....	110
5.6.2 Theme 2. The Role of context.....	112
5.6.3 Theme 3. Underlying systemic factors that facilitate bullying behaviours.....	116
5.6.3.1 Theme 3a. Vulnerable targets at work.....	117
5.6.3.2 Theme 3b. Ineffective leadership.....	118
5.6.3.3 Theme 3c. Work design and organisational culture.....	121
5.6.4 Theme 4. The importance of reporting.....	124
<b>5.7 Toward a Definition of Workplace Cyberbullying.....</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>5.8 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6: STUDY THREE – EXPLORING EXPERIENCES OF WORKPLACE CYBERBULLYING.....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>6.1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>6.2 Study Aims and Justification.....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>6.3 Method.....</b>	<b>132</b>
6.3.1 Overview of research design.....	132
6.3.2 Ethical considerations.....	133
6.3.3 Recruitment strategy.....	134
6.3.4 Participants.....	136
6.3.5 Procedure.....	136
6.3.6 Approach to data analysis.....	137
6.3.6.1 Introducing the framework method.....	137
<b>6.4 Findings: Themes.....</b>	<b>141</b>
6.4.1 Theme 1: Pattern of behaviour.....	144
6.4.1.1 Theme 1a. Co-occurrence of traditional bullying-type behaviours.....	145
6.4.1.2 Theme 1b. Other targets involved.....	149
6.4.2 Theme 2: Impact of behaviours.....	152
6.4.2.1 Theme 2a. Personal impact.....	152
6.4.2.2 Theme 2b. Work-related impact.....	156
6.4.2.3 Theme 2c. Wider impact.....	157
6.4.3 Theme 3: Sensemaking and response.....	159
6.4.3.1 Theme 3a. Noticing ‘something odd’.....	159
6.4.3.2 Theme 3b. Reflecting.....	161
6.4.3.3 Theme 3c. Identifying enabling and influencing factors.....	163
6.4.3.4 Theme 3d. Creating an identity.....	167
6.4.3.5 Theme 3e. Evaluating barriers and helpful resources.....	169
6.4.3.6 Theme 3f. Initiating a response.....	176
6.4.4 Theme 4: External workplace cyberbullying.....	178
6.4.4.1 Theme 4a. A new vulnerability for nurses.....	179
6.4.4.2 Theme 4b. Uncertainty about the future.....	181
<b>6.5 General Discussion.....</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>6.6 Conclusion.....</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>CHAPTER 7: OVERALL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>188</b>
<b>7.1 Summary of Findings.....</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>7.2 Discussion of Findings Across Studies.....</b>	<b>190</b>
7.2.1 Understanding cyberbullying.....	192
7.2.2 Experiencing cyberbullying.....	195
7.2.3 Digital evidence and reporting.....	196
7.2.4 Policy.....	197
7.2.5 The nursing context.....	198
<b>7.3 Contributions.....</b>	<b>200</b>
7.3.1 Theoretical contributions.....	202
7.3.2 Practical implications.....	205
7.3.3 Policy recommendations.....	207
<b>7.4 Limitations and Future Research.....</b>	<b>208</b>

7.5 Conclusion .....	210
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>212</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Appendix A – Study One Participant Information Sheet .....</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Appendix B – Study One Consent Form .....</b>	<b>232</b>
<b>Appendix C – Nursing Scopes of Practice.....</b>	<b>233</b>
<b>Appendix D – Study Two List of Scenarios.....</b>	<b>234</b>
<b>Appendix E – Study Two Recruitment Flyer.....</b>	<b>235</b>
<b>Appendix F – Study Two Participant Information Sheet .....</b>	<b>236</b>
<b>Appendix G – Study Three Participant Information Sheet.....</b>	<b>238</b>
<b>Appendix H – Study Three Full Ethics Approval .....</b>	<b>240</b>
<b>Appendix I – Study Three Recruitment Flyer .....</b>	<b>241</b>
<b>Appendix J – Statement of Contribution Forms .....</b>	<b>242</b>



## LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure 1. Thesis Structure .....	9
Figure 2. Factors in the work environment contributing to bullying .....	21
Figure 3. Underlying Systemic Factors Thought to Facilitate Bullying Behaviours.....	117
Figure 4. An ecological systems model of workplace cyberbullying in nursing .....	187
Figure 5. Thesis Progress, with research objectives indicated.....	189
Figure 6. Proposed socio-ecological model of workplace cyberbullying in nursing.....	204
Table 1. Distinguishing features of cyberbullying.....	61
Table 2. Summary of Scenarios .....	96
Table 3. Thematic findings from Study 2 .....	102
Table 4. Table illustrating Framework Analysis matrix .....	139
Table 5. Thematic findings from Study 3 .....	143
Table 6. Common Themes Across Studies .....	191
Table 7. Theoretical Contributions of my Research .....	201