Chapter 9
Workplace Cyberbullying and Online Harassment as an Organizational Threat:
Exploring the Negative Organizational Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

With the continued growth of social media use and the development of online communication, organizations now face the challenge of maintaining a healthy working environment offline and online. Cyberbullying, online harassment, and inappropriate online content posted by employees, CEOs, social media managers, and other users can all lead to organization crises. This chapter defines types of harmful online communication, such as cyberbullying, trolling, and online harassment; explores online harassment through the lens of situational crisis communication theory; provides case studies of employees, CEOs, social media managers, and other users who engaged in inappropriate online behavior; and offers solutions and recommendations for organizational response and employee social media training.

INTRODUCTION

Today organizations are paying close attention to how their employees use social media and other digital communication platforms (Tredinnick & Laybats, 2019). Specifically, organizations recognize that the actions their employees take online by using corporate software and public and private social media pages can live on and reflect negatively on the organization. Cyberbullying and online harassment are no longer just concerning for teens. Organizations have taken notice of these negative behaviors and

the implications that they have on organizational productivity and wellbeing. This chapter examines how cyberbullying and online harassment have the potential to threaten organizational image and the responses that organizations can take to ensure that their employees are not engaging in these behaviors.

As the lines between work and social media blur, communication that traditionally took place only at the workplace now has the potential to go online and cause organizational harm. Workplace cyberbullying and online harassment are uniquely positioned to threaten an organization's reputation because of the negative public perceptions of these issues. That is, the way that the public perceives individuals who post on social media, and by extension the organizations they are affiliated with, has potential negative outcomes for organizational wellbeing. This chapter explores the connection between online harassment in the workplace and organizational crisis. Specifically, the chapter explains workplace cyberbullying and online harassment from an organizational perspective, applies situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) to workplace online harassment, provides a typology of workplace cyberbullying that could result in organizational crises, and discusses a framework for understanding potential organizational consequences and needed organizational responses.

BACKGROUND

Scholars have been debating how to conceptualize cyberbullying and seeking to understand what makes it unique from face-to-face bullying and other forms of harassment (Heatherington & Coyne, 2014). The Internet provides a unique environment for bullying to occur due to heightened anonymity from a perpetrator, the ability for a large number of people to view the harmful communication (Heatherington & Coyne, 2014), and the blurring between public and private boundaries (Vranjes, Baillien, Vandebosch, Erreygers, & De Witte, 2017). While many definitions of cyberbullying focus solely on the perspective of the victim, not the bully, Alipan, Skues, Theiler, and Wise (2015) proposed a multidimensional definition of cyberbullying:

Using an information and communication technology to target one or more people directly or indirectly, whereby (1) the goal from the bully's perspective is to intentionally harm the victim. Repetition can also help establish intentionality and cyberbullying, in which the bully continuously carries out a harmful behaviour towards the same victim; (2) the behaviour is perceived as intentional and harmful as defined by a victim. A once-off attack can also be considered as cyberbullying as the negative impact on the victim may be just as severe as frequent attacks; and (3) a bystander observes that a behaviour has negatively affected another person, or that such a behaviour would likely negatively affect the bystander if directed toward him or her. A bystander may also perceive the behaviour alone as intentional and aggressive. (p. 12)

Alipan et al.'s (2015) multifaceted definition thoroughly describes cyberbullying but should be distinguished from other types of harmful online communication. Different from cyberbullying, *online harassment* could include incidents brought forth by strangers (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007) where the harmful acts are "more unique, once-only acts or behavior" (Jönsson, Muhonen, Forssell, & Bäckström, 2017, p. 478). A specific type of online harassment is *trolling,* which is still in the early stages of being defined in scholarly research. Craker and March (2016) describe trolling as "an inter-

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