



Research paper

Work-related cyber mistreatment from guardians, members of the public, and pupils in the context of educational work – From incivility to aggression

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the nature of work-related cyber mistreatment from guardians, pupils, and members of the public as experienced by educational workers. Thematic analysis of data collected by semi-structured interviews with 31 teachers and principals resulted in two overarching themes; directly addressed cyber mistreatment in email and unwanted negative exposure on social media. The data spans over different types of cyber mistreatment, ranging from cyber incivility to cyberaggression. Educational workers typically feel powerless when exposed to mistreatment, and require support to manage these complex, novel, and distressing situations.

1. Introduction

Digitalisation of work generates new psychosocial risks, and, if not handled appropriately, can worsen occupational health and safety (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2023). Previous research within the novel but emerging field of cyber mistreatment reports severe environmental risk with profound consequences for people's health (Wilson, Douglas, & Lyon, 2011), including detrimental effects on employee well-being (Yuan, Park, & Sliter, 2020) and increased psychological distress (Oksanen, Celuch, Latikka, Oksa, & Savela, 2022). Increasing knowledge about this topic is therefore vital. Pupils' exposure to deviant behaviours online is now a well-documented area of research (Låftman, Modin, & Östberg, 2013; Li, 2007; Privitera & Campbell, 2009), however, educational workers' exposure to work-related cyber mistreatment has been overlooked to date. Teachers' vulnerability in becoming targets of pupils' mocking, offensive jokes or even ostracism existed long before the Internet (Terry, 1998). However, technology mediated interactions reduces geographical distances and increases the availability of educational workers. The advent of smartphones and digital devices has created new means of expressing mistreatment that may adversely affect teachers and principals, often in profound ways.

Some studies have previously reported on cyber mistreatment

against educational workers, particularly highlighting pupils as a source. In their study on primary and secondary teachers exposure to cyber mistreatment from pupils, Kauppi and Pörhölä (2015) reported a prevalence rate of 7.6 per cent. A qualitative study by Rajbhandari and Rana (2022) described behaviour such as trivial belittling, unethical requests and uninvited sexual advances from pupils and colleagues on social media, as examples of cyber mistreatment of educational workers. These deviant behaviours were found to cause humiliation and mental disturbance in teachers, who often reported experiences of being left to cope with the cyber mistreatment on their own (Rajbhandari & Rana, 2022). In a study of uploaded recordings of teachers on YouTube, Kyriacou and Zuin (2016) reported that pupils' cyber mistreatment of teachers ranged from minor incidents in which pupils texted ridiculing messages about a teacher to another learner, to pupils recording teachers in class. The authors concluded that pupils' use of social media challenged the teacher's authority (Kyriacou and Zuin (2016).

The current article investigates educational workers' exposure to cyber mistreatment from organisational outsiders. We use the term "educational worker" to refer to teachers and principals. Teachers are responsible for pupils' education and school-home collaboration, while principals are responsible for their staff and pupils' well-being. "Organisational outsiders" refers here to people that are external to

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the organisation, but still influence the work environment, such as guardians, pupils, or members of the public.

1.1. Cyber mistreatment

Cyber mistreatment is an integrative framework for different counterproductive behaviours, such as cyberaggression, cyber incivility and cyberbullying (Vranjes, Farley, & Baillien, 2020). The forms of cyber mistreatment are related constructs but represent varying degrees of intensity, intentionality, and persistence. Cyber mistreatment can therefore take multiple forms, including active/passive and direct/indirect expressions, and can be experienced as more or less overtly expressed severe and vary in frequency (Kowalski, Limber, Limber, & Agatston, 2012; Richard, Young, Walsh, & Giumetti, 2020; Yuan et al., 2020). In line with Buss's (1961) classification of forms of workplace aggression, cyber mistreatment can be expressed by doing something actively harmful towards the target, or by behaving passively – such as giving someone the “silent treatment” or not returning emails. The negative behaviour can be directly addressed through personal interactions, or indirectly through gossiping. A general characteristic of cyber mistreatment is that is a non-physical negative behaviour, commonly involving written text, images or videos forwarded by email or on social media.

In this study we are focusing on cyber incivility and cyberaggression as two distinct but related constructs. Cyber incivility refers to “communicative behaviour exhibited in computer-mediated interactions that violate workplace norms of mutual respect” (Lim & Teo, 2009). Rudeness, thoughtless acts, insinuating glances are examples of behaviour that characterizes incivility, and that can be both intentionally or unintentionally conducted (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Lim & Teo, 2009). In general, incivility is as a subtle form of interpersonal negative behaviour, and can be distinguished from other mistreatment constructs because of its low intensity (Hershcovis, 2011). Not acting in regard to other peoples' feelings, or treating others disrespectful, characterizes uncivil behaviour that despite its low intensity and ambiguous intent, carries the risk of negatively affecting those exposed. Previous research indicates that incivility and cyber incivility have substantial impacts on individuals and organisations (Holm, Torkelson, & Bäckström, 2015, 2019; Niven, Connolly, Stride, & Farley, 2022; Yuan et al., 2020). Moreover, incivility has the potential to spiral into more intense and overtly aggressive behaviour over time (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Cyberaggression is a broad construct in relation to incivility, but typically refers to a deviant, offensive and derogatory behaviour (Grigg, 2010; Vranjes et al., 2020). Aggression refers to intense forms of mistreatment and in contrast to cyber incivility cyberaggression is often understood as an intentional harmful behaviour (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Grigg, 2010; Neuman & Baron, 2005). Driven by anger, aggressive behaviour often has the intent of physically or psychologically hurt the other person. In workplace settings, however, aggressions are often expressed verbally and are of psychological character (Baron & Neuman, 1996). Moreover, as with other workplace mistreatment, the intent behind the cyberaggression can be both covertly and overtly expressed, leaving room for interpretation. Departing from Neuman and Baron's (2005) definition of workplace aggression, in the current study we define cyberaggression as *any form of online behaviour directed by one or more persons within or outside a work organisation with the goal, or consequence, of harming one or more other people in the workplace (or the entire organisation) in ways the intended targets are motivated to avoid*. Besides placing the aggressive behaviour within a digital context, according to our definition, cyberaggression can either have the goal of bringing harm, or can cause harm as a consequence. Technology mediated communication increases the potential for misinterpretation of messages and posts compared with face-to-face interaction. Being unable to register how communication is received can lead to a higher risk of unintentionally crossing a line and becoming a perpetrator. Further, intentionality can be hard to identify (e.g., in social media, the sender is

not necessarily known). From a work environmental perspective, and from the perspective of the person being exposed, intention is secondary to the harm caused by cyberaggression.

1.2. Organisational outsiders as a source of cyber mistreatment

A distinction is commonly made between workplace aggression stemming from people inside the organisation (e.g., colleagues, managers, or subordinates) and people external to the organisation (e.g., pupils or parents/guardians) (LeBlanc & Barling, 2005; Niven, Sprigg, & Armitage, 2013). Negative behaviour originating from insiders and outsiders may have different antecedents and buffers (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). However, research on workplace aggression from organisational outsiders in a nomological network is limited (Niven et al., 2013).

With communication technology overcoming geographical distances and organisational boundaries, the importance of considering organisational outsiders as sources of mistreatment has increased. Indeed, findings from the growing literature on work related cyber mistreatment indicate that organisational outsiders can seriously harm organisational insiders. This harm may include cyber mistreatment from customers in call centres (Bacile, Wolter, Allen, & Xu, 2018; D'cruz & Noronha, 2014) and cyber mistreatment from organisational outsiders directed towards professionals in human service organisations (Spencer, Loehr, & Byrd, 2023)

In this study, guardians and pupils were viewed as organisational outsiders that have an established relationship with the school and its personnel. On weekdays, teachers and pupils work together in the shared classroom at school. Although pupils can impact the teachers' work environment, we consider them to be organisational outsiders because they are not staff members. A further distinction is needed to understand the diverse group of actors that can be considered organisational outsiders in a school setting. Hence, it is common to differentiate between mistreatment from people external to the organisation where no relationship between the target and offender is established (e.g., strangers or members of the public) and people external to the organisation where a relationship exists (e.g., guardians or pupils) (LeBlanc & Barling, 2005).

1.3. Factors influencing online interaction

Online interaction has been suggested to differ from face-to-face interaction. Increased emotional distance when communicating through screens, asynchronous communication in emails, and a perception of being invisible online are factors that influence interaction in digital spaces in general, and power relations in particular (Cowen Forssell, 2019b; Vranjes et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2016). Therefore, the quality, content and perception of communication are likely to be altered in online interactions. Online interaction includes new ways of expressing negative behaviour and novel consequences for the target. Previous studies highlight that people are more willing to engage in deviant behaviour online than offline because of the anonymity provided by the Internet (Cheung, Wong, & Chan, 2021; Clark-Gordon, Bowman, Goodboy, & Wright, 2019; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008; Wachs, Wright, & Vazsonyi, 2019). Eliminating the risk of confrontation, researchers argue that online communication has a disinhibiting effect on its users, leading people to express themselves more openly online and say things that they would not say if their identity was known (Kowalski et al., 2012; Suler, 2004). However, even when not anonymous, “faceless” communication in online interaction may give users a sense of invisibility that influences their interactions (Cowen Forssell, 2019a).

Electronic means of communication can fuel deviant behaviours that may give rise to new consequences for the targeted individuals or organisations. A central feature of cyber mistreatment is accessibility. Cyber mistreatment is intrusive and electronic communication means

that targeted individuals can be accessed at any time (Kowalski et al., 2012). Digital communication enables work-related cyber mistreatment to be sent to the targeted individual at places not traditionally associated with the workplace, such as the home. Cyber mistreatment is therefore an intrusive form of deviant behaviour, leaving little room for the target to escape negative comments online or in emails. Moreover, when cyber mistreatment is expressed in social media, negative posts, films or pictures can remain public indefinitely (Langos, 2012). Digital footprints can make negative behaviour permanent when content becomes accessible through search engines. Some researchers (e.g., Coyne et al., 2017; D'cruz & Noronha, 2013; Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross, 2009) argue that cyberbullying may have more severe and long-lasting social and emotional effects on targets than face-to-face bullying because of its permanence, as well as the large and often unrestricted audience of social media.

1.4. The Swedish school context

Our understanding is that the school context should be considered in the understanding of what constitutes work-related cyber mistreatment. In many parts of the world, schools have undergone transformations that influence the relationship between the school and the home. These changes include the governance of schools through the principles of New Public Management (NPM) that foster customer relations between the school and home, and the overall individualisation of society, in which schools play increasingly important roles in children's future careers. Along with digitalisation, governing through the principles of NPM is manifested in Swedish schools – and schools in other Western countries – in multiple ways. NPM includes establishing customer relations between educational workers and guardians, which often imposes increased emotional labour on teachers and principals (Rayner & Espinoza, 2016). The principles of choice and voice are emphasised as central parts of the NPM reforms (Grand, 2010), and have been widely implemented in the Swedish school system on the basis of a legal right for children to receive free education. A parental right to free choice of school was introduced in 1991 to improve school quality, and the following year, competition between schools was further increased by independent school reform (Imsen, Blossing, & Moos, 2017). Furthermore, the active citizenship of parents was emphasised by, for instance, encouraging their active engagement with school boards (Imsen et al., 2017). Increasing access to technology mediated communication has further facilitated the voice of parents and made access to important information about their educational choices easier. Attending a reputable school and receiving high grades have become increasingly important for children's future careers. While schools play a critical role, many teachers consider their profession to be in decline because the legitimacy and authority of the profession are increasingly challenged (Torres & Weiner, 2018).

Considering these developments, pupils and their guardians have become prominent actors in schools and teachers' work environments. Within the Swedish school context, guardians are expected to take an active role in their children's education. For example, schools often invite parents to conversations about their child's progress in annual parent/teacher meetings and to attend parent and council meetings. However, it is important to consider situations in which the constructiveness of the dialogue between principals/teachers and guardians/pupils fails, and the role digital platforms have in these situations.

1.5. Aim

Although school employees' exposure to offensive behaviour is widespread (Arnold, Rahimi, & Riley, 2021), little is known about how it is influenced by online interactions. The research field of work-related cyber mistreatment is relatively new, and knowledge about how cyber mistreatment affects different professional groups is limited. The few existing studies of cyber mistreatment towards educational workers (e.

g., (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2015; Rajbhandari & Rana, 2022) have focused primarily on the pupil-teacher relationship. However, parents' prominent role in their children's education make them an additional source to consider in the study of cyber mistreatment towards educational workers. Against this backdrop, the aim of the current study was to explore the nature of work-related cyber mistreatment from organisational outsiders within the school context, and to investigate the ways in which teachers and principals navigate such situations.

2. Methods

The research design is a cross-sectional qualitative study. 31 semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals were conducted and analysed thematically.

2.1. Research process and participants

To enable a broad examination of cyber mistreatment in different educational school contexts, we sought to access schools of different types. A purposive sampling (Patton, 2014) was applied in the selection of schools, aiming to cover experiences from public schools organised by municipalities and independent private schools, as well as experiences from primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools (pupils aged 6–19 years).

The schools were primarily recruited by the research team with an open request via email sent to administration in four municipalities in southern Sweden. Each municipality covered between 10 and 56 schools. With the open requests, the principals were encouraged to contact the principal investigator if they wished to participate. In addition to this procedure, one school was targeted by the research team after being identified in the media as having experiences of cyber mistreatment. One municipality approached the research team themselves and requested participation after reading media coverage about the research project. On the basis of an initial dialogue with all interested schools, a selection was made to achieve variation in the contexts of school types. This procedure resulted in a selection of eight schools.

The principals (head principals and assistant principals) that had expressed their schools' interest to participate in the research project, also gave their consent to participate in an interview. For the teachers, a slightly different recruitment process was applied. Together with written information about the research project provided by the research team, the head principals informed the teachers about the project and requested them to contact the project if they wanted to participate in an interview. Based on this procedure, two principals (head principal and one assistant principal) and two to four teachers from each of the eight schools were interviewed.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 informants (16 teachers and 15 [head and assistant] principals) to understand teachers' and principals' experiences of cyber mistreatment. Participants ranged in age from 28 to 65 years, and the number of years they had been active as an educational worker ranged from 5 to 30 years. Most of the participants were women, with only three male participants, and all of them were principals. Table 1 summarises information about the participants in this study.

2.2. Data collection

Individual interviews were conducted from April to June 2020. The 31 in-depth interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 60–90 min. A semi-structured approach was chosen to explore the informants' understanding of cyber mistreatment in-depth. This approach ensured the structure and flexibility to follow up on any aspects raised that required further discussion (Bryman, 2018). An interview guide was developed but could be slightly adjusted in line with the informant's position as either a principal or a teacher. The research group developed the interview guide, and minor changes were made in the process to

Table 1
Participant information.

Informants	Level of education at the school	Organiser of the school
Teacher (N = 16)	A Primary school	Municipality
	B Primary school	Municipality
	C Primary school and lower secondary school	Independent
	D Primary school	Municipality
	E Primary school and lower secondary school	Municipality
	F Primary school	Municipality
	G Primary school and lower secondary school	Municipality
	H Primary school	Municipality
	I Primary school	Municipality
	J Primary school	Municipality
	K Primary school and lower secondary school	Independent
	L Upper secondary school	Independent
	M Primary school	Municipality
	N Primary school	Municipality
	O Primary school	Municipality
	Principal (N = 15)	P Upper secondary school
A Primary school and lower secondary school		Independent
B Primary school		Municipality
C Primary school and lower secondary school		Independent
D Primary school		Municipality
E Primary school		Municipality
F Primary school		Municipality
G Primary school		Municipality
H Primary school and lower secondary school		Municipality
I Primary school		Municipality
J Primary school		Municipality
K Upper secondary school		Independent
L Primary school and lower secondary school		Municipality
M Upper secondary school		Independent
N Primary school and lower secondary school		Municipality
O Primary school and lower secondary school	Independent	

enhance the quality and clarity of the questions. The interview guide was structured around themes that focused on digital communication, cyber mistreatment, organisational structure and culture, and policies and preparedness. Examples of questions from the interview guide included: What is the focus in parents' digital communication with the school? Is the digital communication with pupils different from the digital communication with parents? Can you give examples of problematic digital communication? When do you experience that a line is crossed in terms of acceptable behaviour in digital communication? What types of consequences does the negative behaviour have for the individual and the school? What types of help and support does the employer supply in relation to cyber mistreatment?

The first and second author conducted the interviews. The interviews were initially planned to take place at the schools in person. However, because of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, interviews were conducted using the digital video communication tool Zoom. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, and the quotations presented in the analysis have been translated into English.

2.3. Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, followed by several readings of the empirical material. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. A theme is defined here as a patterned response in the material that captures important elements concerning the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a first step, the two authors who

conducted the interviews undertook a first initial reading to search for themes. This initial reading involved making notes and becoming familiar with the material in the search for patterns and resulted in preliminary themes. As a second step, 12 interviews that captured a pattern in response or provided especially important information about the research questions were selected for individual reading and analysis by all authors. In the third step of the analysis, all authors discussed and challenged the preliminary themes and final themes were developed jointly. The fourth step involved a re-reading of all the interviews by the first author. In accordance with Malterud (2001), the re-reading included a confirmation of the results where the themes were applied to the individual interview transcriptions and where any remaining important information which could expand or contradict the results were checked for. Through this process, two overarching themes and six sub-themes were discovered (see Table 2).

2.4. Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr: XXX) Participants were informed in writing about the study, the handling of data and confidentiality, potential risks and benefits from participating, their right to withdraw from the study without giving any reason, along with a question regarding consent. Informed consent was also obtained from all participants verbally at the time for the interview, as well as consent for digital recording. Names and other identifying information were deleted from the transcripts and in the written reports of the study results.

3. Findings

In the following section, we present the themes identified in the material and use these to address the aim. In describing their experiences of cyber mistreatment, the informants covered two platforms where mistreatment took place: email and social media. Cyber mistreatment was described as being substantively different between these two platforms. Thus, the findings are presented in two overarching themes: "Directly addressed cyber mistreatment in email" and "Unwanted negative exposure on social media". For each overarching theme, sub-themes that underpin the overarching idea were developed. Each developed theme is presented with extracts from the interviews. While the findings are presented through a descriptive level of analysis, reflective comments on the themes are made in the discussion section to construct additional analytical points.

3.1. Direct cyber mistreatment in email

3.1.1. Covert vs overt cyber mistreatment in email

All of the narratives shared in the interviews about cyber mistreatment in email included situations in which a guardian was the sender. A common characteristic of mistreatment in email was that the email communication was directly addressed to the teachers or principals. Deviation from this pattern occurred when someone not directly

Table 2
Overarching themes and sub-themes identified in the study.

Overarching theme:	Directly addressed cyber mistreatment in email
Sub-themes	1) Covert vs overt cyber mistreatment in email 2) Exerting pressure through recurrent and persistent emails 3) Acting professional when the professional role is questioned
Overarching theme:	Unwanted negative exposure on social media
Sub-themes	1) Public critique on Facebook 2) Being filmed during class 3) Social media – a place beyond interference

involved in the message was added into the “carbon copy” field. For instance, when copying in the principal or a school lawyer into an email addressed to a teacher, the actual recipient of the message became less significant. In most cases, however, complaints, anxiety, frustration, and anger were directly addressed to the recipients of the emails. In one example, Principal G described how, during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, she received emails in which parents wrote that she “*was going to be responsible for their death*” if she did not change the way the school was taking action. In another example, Teacher H described a situation in which a misunderstanding involving a pupil resulted in an email from their guardians scolding the teacher: “*We [Teacher H and a colleague] got this long email with the worst scolding, saying that we should apologise*”.

The experiences described by teachers and principals can be distinguished between overt, outspoken cyber mistreatment, such as threats of reporting the school, removing the child from the school, being responsible for a child’s well-being, and covert cyber mistreatment, in which demands, emotions, and criticism were not explicitly formulated. The informants often had a clear perception of the hidden meaning of a message. In general, this was an interpretation that was based on the informant’s previous communication with the guardians and a judgement of the overall situation. However, in cases of covert cyber mistreatment in email, the writers were typically reluctant to make emotional statements and deviate from norms of appropriate communication. Teacher A, who worked at a school in a high socio-economic area, reflected upon the language used in this type of cyber mistreatment:

It is always written correctly. Never ugly words, not aggressive words in that way, but well-formulated. Still, there is an undertone ... you know exactly what they really mean. Yes, it’s very much ... academics out here, which is noticeable in the way they write. They do not have to use strong words to reinforce their message; they can convey it anyway.

Informants reported receiving emails that were not explicitly uncivil and did not deviate from the norms of appropriate behaviour, but still carried a clear message of dissatisfaction with the educator’s performance or pressure to do things differently. The asynchronous communication embedded in email gives correspondents time to construct carefully formed and controlled arguments. In contrast to these well thought-through emails, informants also reported receiving emotional emails that were perceived as having been written in the heat of the moment. These aggressively formulated emails were characterised by a lack of the control that is usually present in face-to-face meetings. Teacher I reflected on an email that they assumed was written in an emotional state:

I have received emails that I noticed were sent at 11:25pm on a Friday evening, so I feel that this person has written this email while they are in an emotional state, and are expressing themselves in a way that they would not if they were meeting with me face-to-face. (...) I understand that there has been a discussion at the dinner table and then they wind themselves up and write something. It has only happened a few times, but those times have not felt very good on Monday morning.

If a message was perceived as having been written in anger, informants felt that letting time pass before responding could create a more constructive climate. In addition to time, the place of interaction was reported to be relevant to how the complaints were conveyed. When communication was conducted via email, the informants often felt attacked. Scheduling a face-to-face meeting with the guardians was a way of avoiding escalation and/or ending an ongoing discussion. Teacher E, for instance, outlined how she often experienced aggressively formulated emails as being very different to communication when meeting with the sender of the email face-to-face.

It’s a lot like that. People are much tougher in the conversation, and are really like, “You need to ...” and “Your responsibility is ...” and refer to this and that. But when you invite them in, they are suddenly a different person and not at all the same way (...) in email, it is much easier to be open about what one thinks.

3.1.2. Exerting pressure through recurrent and persistent emails

Another type of cyber mistreatment involves the format rather than the content of the email. In these cases, it is the recurrent nature of emails that was seen as a violation of the teachers’ and principals’ work environment or professional practice. Receiving repeated negative emails from several guardians was associated with a heavy work burden. This notion was something that many of the informants returned to. In some cases, the assertiveness of individual parents was enough to create a negative work environment. As Teacher C explained:

It was very, very long emails from parents that a lot of anxiety ... one of the parents was never satisfied and the other parent went back and forth. The emails were very long, even when she was satisfied.

This extract demonstrates how repeated emails can strain the teacher’s overall work environment and create a sense of resignation regarding the ability to satisfy guardians’ needs. A similar situation was described by Teacher B. Her narrative described a combination of the content of the email – in which the guardian was unsatisfied with the teacher’s grading of her child’s performance – along with the format of the correspondence that created unease for the teacher. A characteristic of the format was that, besides the emails being recurrent and persistent, the intensity and severity of the cyber mistreatment fluctuated over time. Teacher B outlined this as follows:

She would write three questions in the first email, and then she would send two more emails with new questions. The first email was often quite hard because she probably thought I was wrong, and then it got a little softer in the second email, where she wanted to ask other questions. But what was interesting is that I always got three emails at the same time.

The way the guardian sent her email further triggered interpretations of what was communicated. Although the message in this case was clear (i.e., wanting a higher grade for the learner), the combination of the content and the format of the email contributed to the overall negative experience.

3.1.3. Acting professional when the professional role is questioned

The situations shared in the interviews varied from low intensity situations in which teachers and principals were able to maintain emotional distance, to situations that created great distress. In demanding situations, managers, colleagues and people from the teachers’ or principals’ private life (e.g., their spouses) often gave emotional support or helped navigate around the problem. Most informants felt trapped, with little room to manoeuvre. In some cases, a lack of resources hindered educational workers’ ability to respond to the criticisms put forward in the emails. In other situations, guardians had limited information about the problem, making it difficult to further discuss situations with them. Confidentiality means that teachers and principals cannot always talk openly about all situations. Email correspondence in Swedish schools can become public information, and the email correspondence between guardians and teachers/principals may be open to scrutiny. A recurring attitude expressed by the informants was a need to be correct in their email responses. This need was typically illustrated by a short and polite response that did not include any sensitive information. Not being able to give the whole picture could, however, create a backlash in a precarious situation. One example was given by Teacher N, who described a situation in which her competence was questioned while she was trying to remain professional:

I have experienced parents that questioned my competence because of me not knowing what I am allowed to write in an email.

Informants expressed that being professional was associated with acting in accordance with laws and regulations. Professionalism was also associated with not revealing emotions in their responses. For the informants, it was essential to avoid replying in an emotional way that revealed their feelings, even if it meant disregarding their own views. Principal B emphasised that creating spaces in which teachers could let go of anger was important. Other principals (and some teachers) described how debriefing took place internally in teaching teams. As noted by Principal L, a professional front is essential when communicating with guardians:

You need to have a professional front towards the parents, and you need to be prepared that the parents may not have that in return.

The emotional labour of some of the informants included not defending their own professional practices, but this situation was inevitably associated with dissatisfaction. Teacher A describes her frustration in handling a situation with guardians.

I don't think it was fun to go to work. I take it personally when I don't think I am doing a good job. I did everything to make this work. Yet, nothing worked, and no one was pleased. It all ends up in my back. It becomes physical. I don't get mentally drained in that way, but everything settles in my body.

When cyber mistreatment was directed towards a teacher or principal via email, their professional practices were often targeted. This included not respecting professional boundaries, such as interfering in decision making around a learner or continuing conversations via email even if the teacher signalled that the discussion had to end. Principal F described when she felt that a boundary was crossed:

It is particularly when they [guardians] end up in situations that they are not satisfied with, and they are slandering teachers. I think that part is the most negative – that you give yourself the right to make personal attacks on people in our profession.

While some teachers described how cyber mistreatment via email affects them personally and professionally, a sense of normalisation could also be identified. For some, sharing or joking about negatively worded emails helped the informants process what was said and how it made them feel. However, acknowledging a problem could also be seen as a way of displaying weakness or failure in professional practice. Teacher D noted:

When you talk with your colleagues, it becomes more like ... you joke about it. It can be like, "do you know what mail I got? It's insane!" It becomes irony. You laugh about it, but actually, you've got a thorn in your side (...). I think you don't want to look bad in front of your colleagues. If I show an email with criticism from parents about my teaching, then I might think that my colleague will think that I am actually this bad.

3.2. Unwanted negative exposure on social media

3.2.1. Public critique on facebook

Explicitly or implicitly aggressive emails were the most frequent form of cyber mistreatment received by educational workers. Discussions on Facebook where the school and/or individual teachers were discussed occurred less often but had a severe impact. These situations fundamentally differed from email-based mistreatment. In contrast to mistreatment via email, Facebook-based mistreatment was typically indirectly expressed through discussions about the schools, individual teachers, or situations involving a learner on the public platform.

Two types of Facebook groups were identified in the interviews – those created by parents with pupils in a particular school and local

groups created by the people living in the neighbourhood in which the school is located. Educational workers are not typically part of these neighbourhood groups. Although individual teachers and principals could join these groups as private individuals, the school itself is not intended as the target audience. The Facebook groups were viewed as meeting points for people with a shared interest in the school. Teacher D compared discussions in the Facebook groups with conversations in the schoolyard. However, they noted that these discussions could easily become a forum for sharing negative experiences:

Before, people may have gathered on the street to talk about their children. But now I think ... you use this social channel to discuss different situations and it is often in negative terms. They didn't create these groups to discuss how fantastic it is at their children's school. I think that creating a group like this often stems from something negative.

As a public platform, these Facebook groups typically gathered people with different relationships to the schools, which is in clear contrast to discussions on school yards. This mixed group membership influences the nature of the discussion, a phenomenon described by Teacher G, who observed a local Facebook group that included members with no clear connection to the school:

The last time I was in [the Facebook group] I had to leave because I got so damn frustrated that it was not possible to stay in there. There were probably 400/500 members, but if you went in and looked, there were maybe 15 people that actually grumbled about the school. The worst thing was that many of them did not even go to the school anymore. They were retired, or ... they included what had happened to them when they went to school in conversations about what was happening currently at our school.

Discussions about schools in the local Facebook groups could include general information about a school and whether one would recommend the school to others or not. However, information about specific situations that had taken place at the school was also shared in these groups. Principal E observed:

There are these Facebook groups called "We that lives in XX" or "We in this neighbourhood". I'm not part of this myself because I don't live in XX, but I get screenshots from my staff sometimes, which show that people write very sad stuff. "What are they doing at the school?" or, "My child ..." and then they say a lot of things. Fairly recently, there was this parent who wrote: "I need to get hold of these parents whose child has hit my child". And then she wrote this thing that is not even true: "Get in touch with me immediately! The school refuses to say who it is."

3.2.2. Being filmed in class

Informants described two situations in which the pupils were offenders. The problematic behaviours included filming teachers during class and creating digital content in other ways, with the potential to be shared online. Informants reported that teachers may be filmed or photographed in class as a direct act of aggression, or they can be indirectly targeted when the material is posted online for pupils to mock and laugh at the teacher. In the narrative below, Teacher M describes a situation in which she felt that a learner had held a grudge against her for a long time and pupils had started to film the teacher in class in a very direct way:

We were using the iPads. They were going to work on something. And then I saw that she was filming me because she was holding the iPad upwards. It was very obvious what she was doing. I approached her, and I took her iPad. But I could see, because they were sitting two and two, that also the pupil sitting next to her was filming or something. (...) Afterwards, I went in and looked. As I noticed [them filming] after only half a minute, there wasn't anything weird about it. But she had also photographed me and

made a collage – there was a picture of me, and she had added the word “censored”, and she had a photo of me, then a photo of a donkey.

This narrative describes a situation in which the cyber mistreatment was perceived as being personally directed toward the teacher. Another example of filming a teacher did not include personal confrontation. Instead, footage that included a teacher losing his temper in the classroom was uploaded and shared among peers online. Although the teacher was the target, the cyber mistreatment was characterised by the pupils' indirect mocking. Principal L, at the school concerned, described the situation as follows:

Well, one time they filmed a teacher. Someone pushed into a classroom, and the teacher was trying to get them out. There was some fighting. Someone filmed it and it was uploaded. It became huge in the media and everywhere.

3.2.3. Social media – a place beyond interference

The general position of the informants was not to respond on Facebook when discovering negative information about the school, a situation at the school, or a teacher. Informants considered that engaging would only incite further discussion. However, refraining from such discussions created frustration and a sense of powerlessness and injustice among the informants. Teacher G explained this situation as follows:

When they sit there on Facebook and tell everyone what they should and shouldn't do, and what us teachers did and didn't do, then you get this desire to go in and say – but come here and work! We need “special needs teachers”, and we need good teachers too. But we can't say that. We're not allowed to go in and respond to it.

The informants did not explicitly state why social media is out of reach for teachers or management interventions. However, this view was often justified by referring to recommendations put forward by the information technology or security management. Some differences in approaches could also be identified. In a Facebook group for one school, an educational worker moderated the group, putting forward rules about content and behaviour. In local Facebook groups, however, the detachment of the school hindered such intervention. Still, the information that is shared in the groups concerns the school and could influence perceptions of the school, generating both positive and negative publicity. The negative comments caused frustration, and when comments moved from an organisational level to focusing on individual teachers or pupils at the school, they became particularly problematic. Teacher K elaborated:

I think the line is crossed when someone is talking about you, or any of the teachers, in an open forum. I think so. And other people, such as the pupils. When someone talks about me as a person and what I have said to the pupils, or accuses me of something, that is crossing the line.

A similar reflection on personal assaults was expressed by principal F, who described a situation from her previous workplace. Here she also included attacks on the profession when describing what makes cyber mistreatment on social media problematic:

It is primarily when they [guardians] end up in situations that they are not happy with that they slander teachers. That part, I think, is the most negative – that they give themselves the right to personally assault people and the profession.

The frequent problem of cyberaggression on social media highlights that a school or individual teachers are being talked about rather than directly addressed. When gossip or slander occurs on an open platform that is separate from the school, informants perceive that intervention is out of reach. In contrast, filming a teacher creates a clearer situation for management involvement. In one situation of photographing a teacher, the problem was not a lack of management involvement but the

teacher's ambivalence in taking action against a learner with special needs. Here, Teacher M reflects on the ethical issue of whose vulnerability is more important to protect – her own, or that of the learner who filmed and photographed her in class:

It didn't feel completely right to crack down on her (...). The fact is that we didn't give her the conditions we had intended.

Ambivalence was noted by several educational workers about intervening on platforms that were detached from their schools, and in situations of cyber mistreatment involving a pupil. In the extract above, Teacher M suggests that the pupil's failure in that instance reflected a failure of the school system.

3.2.4. Integration of findings

The results indicated that heterogeneity is exhibited in cyber mistreatment, in terms of the platform involved and how the mistreatment is perceived, including the potential motives and intensity of the mistreatment. In Table 3, examples of cyber mistreatment reported in the study are divided into types of deviant behaviour (i.e., cyber incivility and cyberaggression), how the cyber mistreatment is navigated, and the space in which mistreatment occurs (i.e., e-mail, Facebook, and the classroom).

In general, three different types of cyber mistreatment were identified in relation to educational workers' environments. These included aggressive and uncivil formulated emails, public critique on Facebook, and being filmed in class. These types of cyber mistreatment can be seen as different but interlinked phenomena. Regarding aggressive and uncivil emails, guardians were the source, and often perceived their behaviour as exerting pressure on the school to do things differently. Discussions on Facebook were always indirect, manifesting as comments about something or someone at the school. Although guardians were the major source of this type of cyber mistreatment, this was the only negative act in which outsiders with no previous relationship with the school participated. Discussions on Facebook were perceived as a meeting point. Harm was generally experienced by educational workers as a consequence of the public disclosure of information and lack of concern about how it was received. Finally, filming in the classroom was the only type of cyber mistreatment in which pupils were the source. This behaviour included both the physical classroom and online platforms if the content was uploaded on the Internet.

Regardless of the space in which it occurred, navigating the cyber mistreatment was characterized by a limited scope of action. Acting professional involved short and polite responses in email, in which the whole picture of the situation was seldom disclosed. Facebook, as well as other social media platforms, was seen as a place beyond the school's interference. Moreover, when pupils were the source of the cyber mistreatment, behaving professionally involved teachers putting the pupils' needs before their own. This was manifested by teachers blaming the school system for failing a pupil rather than taking action against the pupil.

4. Discussion

This article explored the nature of work-related cyber mistreatment within the school context. Cyber mistreatment towards educational workers is a relatively new topic in research and presents a contemporary work environmental risk. The novelty and the communication technology involved calls for a broad approach to understanding how different actors can become sources of work-related cyber mistreatment. In this study, we focus on teachers' and principals' experiences of cyber mistreatment from organisational outsiders.

Two overarching themes were identified, highlighting a fundamental difference in how cyber mistreatment was expressed. The expressions encompassed aggressive and uncivil formulated emails, discussion on social media, and filming during class, and illustrate substantively different but interlinked phenomena. In email communication, cyber

Table 3

Overview of cyber mistreatment divided into types of deviant behaviour, space and how the cyber mistreatment is navigated.

	Aggressive and uncivil formulated emails	Public critique on Facebook	Being filmed during class
Cyber incivility	Covert negative acts (e.g., telling staff what to do without using strong language). Direct negative acts (e.g., personally addressed emails) or indirect negative acts (e.g., copying the principal into emails). Guardians are the source. Perceived as putting pressure on the school to do things differently.	Covert expressions of negative opinions about the school, a situation at the school, or an individual worker. Indirect negative acts (e.g., sharing negative experiences about the school, an educational worker, or a situation at the school). Guardians and members of the public are the source. Facebook was perceived as a meeting point for people with a shared interest in the school.	Covert negative acts (e.g., secretly filming a teacher in the classroom). Direct negative acts (e.g., showing the teacher that s/he is being filmed), and indirect negative acts (e.g., showing the film to peers). Pupils are the source. Filming was perceived as personal when the pupil held a personal grudge against the teacher, and impersonal when the film was used by pupils for making jokes on the Internet.
Cyber-aggression	Overt negative acts (e.g., threats of reporting the school, removing the child from the school, forwarding critique in a persistent way). Direct (e.g., holding the educational worker personally responsible for wrongdoings in email communication) or indirect negative acts (e.g., copying the principal into emails). Guardians are the source. Perceived as putting pressure on the school to do things differently.	Overt negative acts (e.g., public critique on Facebook, slander, personal insults, and personal attacks). Guardians and members of the public are the sources. Facebook was perceived as a meeting point for people with a shared interest in the school.	Indirect negative acts (e.g., secretly filming teachers, jokes and malice among peers when the film is uploaded on the Internet), direct negative acts (e.g., openly filming teachers in class). Filming was perceived as personal when the pupil held a personal grudge against the teacher, and impersonal when the film was used by pupils for making jokes on the Internet.
Navigating cyber mistreatment	Acting professional when the professional role is questioned.	Social media – a place beyond interference.	Professional practice involves teachers putting the pupils' needs before their own.

mistreatment was directly addressed to educational workers. Confrontations, questions, and demands were sent in aggressively or uncivil worded emails. However, smaller discourtesies could also be problematic when the number of such emails grew and became recurrent element in the daily working life. Contrary to cyber mistreatment in email, such personal confrontations did not tend to occur on social media. Instead, on social media, cyber mistreatment was expressed indirectly as discussions about the school, its personnel, or a situation at the school. When these discussions contained false or misleading information, they became a source of frustration and anger for school staff, and often a potential source of bad publicity for the school. Filming or photographing teachers in class on the other hand, was described as a form of both direct and indirect aggression. When openly performed in the physical classroom, the cyber mistreatment was directly expressed toward the teacher. When uploaded on the Internet, however, the film/ photographs potentially resulted in indirect malice and jokes among peers. Accordingly, our findings suggest that cyber mistreatment includes a spatial dimension regarding how the aggression is expressed. The spatial dimension (i.e., considering email and social media as two distinct spaces for cyber mistreatment) has several implications concerning the actors involved and potential motives.

In contrast to previous studies on work-related cyber mistreatment in schools (e.g., (Kauppi & Pörhölä, 2015; Rajbhandari & Rana, 2022) pupils were not found to be the main source of cyberbullying in the current study. Rather, depending on the type of cyber mistreatment involved, different sources were responsible. Our findings align with those of a previous study by LeBlanc and Barling (2005), who reported that mistreatment exhibited by groups of organisational outsiders can have different antecedents and buffers. Guardians were the primary source of the cyber mistreatment via email. These are organisational outsiders with an established, long-term relationship with the school. These direct messages conveyed via email can be seen as an expression of this. On social media, however, guardians and members of the public tended to be the sources of cyber mistreatment. In the case of the general public, these organisational outsiders often had an unclear or unknown relationship with the school. Moreover, members of the public constitute a new group of organisational outsiders that have emerged with social media. Filming of teachers included an additional source of cyber mistreatment carried out by pupils.

The heterogeneity in cyber mistreatment calls for a nuanced and broaden understanding of the phenomenon. In the current study, we

have distinguished between cyber incivility and cyberaggression. Andersson and Pearson (1999) stress the potential for incivility to spiral into more severe behaviour over time, and escalation was identified in the current findings. However, considering the long-term relationship with organisational outsiders in human services work (Hasenfeld, 2009), cyber mistreatment may fluctuate back and forth between more or less intense and overtly expressed cyber mistreatment as communication unfolds.

While the content of the cyber mistreatment sent by email often included demands of different kinds, cyber mistreatment from organisational outsiders on social media may have other drivers and motivations. Previous studies have highlighted the disinhibiting effect of communicating online caused by anonymity and low risk of confrontation (e.g. Cheung et al., 2021; Clark-Gordon et al., 2019; Kowalski et al., 2012; Suler, 2004). The platform and distance in relation to the aggressor, is likely to also influence people's behaviour in the home-/school collaboration. In addition to this, many of the posts on social media is indirectly targeting the educational worker. When negatively discussing a school, a situation at a school or staff on a public platform, the aggressors may not even consider whether the educational worker will view the post. Similarly, pupils' filming in class may constitute aggression towards the teacher or simply serve to show off among their peers when the clip is uploaded to the Internet. Hence, the goal of harming one or more person in the workplace, which has been claimed to distinguish cyberaggression from cyber incivility (e.g., Vranjes, 2020), may not apply to social media. The unrestricted audience on social media and the indirect nature of the deviant behaviour, indicates that cyber mistreatment is impersonal. Moreover, intention does not necessarily play a substantial role in relation to the effect cyber of mistreatment on the recipient. Thus, the intent to harm can also be problematised when guardians send aggressive content via email. These negative acts may not be intended to harm the individual teachers and principals, but emerge because guardians take out their frustration regarding their child and the school on the staff. However, the potential motives underlying cyber mistreatment directed towards teachers and principals require further study.

Irrespective of the platform, most informants expressed a limited ability to navigate cyber mistreatment. For mistreatment via email, this limitation manifested in the professional role that teachers and principals adhered to when responding to the mistreatment. Acting professionally and concealing feelings is a form of emotional labour that is

often required in service occupations (Grandey, 2003; Hochschild, 1983). For educational workers, this emotional labour may be amplified by the customer relations needed to facilitate home and school relationships (Rayner & Espinoza, 2016). Educational workers must nurture the relationship with parents to retain them as customers. Yet, prioritising this relationship and setting up a professional front requires emotional and physical sacrifices (Grandey, 2003; Zapf, 2002). Informants also described their limited scope for action when faced with negative comments about the school on social media. While many informants sought to avoid confrontations on these platforms, it is also likely that intervening in spaces that are geographically and organisationally detached from the school causes ambivalence about the professional role. On the one hand, many Facebook groups are public forums that anyone can access. On the other hand, the discussions take place outside the school environment and behind the backs of the personnel (Cowen Forssell, 2019a). Intervening in such instances may not be straightforward as it raises questions about who the educational worker represents (i.e., themselves as professionals, or as private individuals).

4.1. Practical and theoretical implications

In accord with previous research on workplace aggression (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Wilson et al., 2011), the current findings indicate that cyber mistreatment negatively impacts educational workers' health and well-being. The limited room to manoeuvre at an individual level indicates a need for organisational strategies to address the problem. Hence, the first implication is for school management to develop proactive and reactive strategies to defend their personnel from cyber mistreatment. For approaching this on a higher level within the organisation and at the same time taking on a proactive approach, we suggest schools to start with surveying the existence of cyber mistreatment at the school, starting a dialogue on what is acceptable behaviour from organizational outsiders, and build routines for how to handle and mitigate the negative effect of cyber mistreatment.

Second, although parents' involvement in their children's education is legitimate and beneficial for their education, it is important to discuss when the dialogue with the school loses its constructiveness and creates a work environmental problem for educational workers. Schools need to consider how they can include guardians in their children's education while at the same time maintaining equality and the ability to make educationally-informed decisions. Email communication and interaction on social media may fill an important void in which the possibilities of spontaneous conversations between school and the home have been removed. As digital interaction often is a source of conflict and misunderstanding, increasing guardians' constructive influence without negatively affecting educational workers' work environment may require schools to scrutinise the infrastructure they provide for dialogue between home and school. Besides offering face-to-face meetings, we suggest schools to consider creating their own social media groups. This is a way to offer an ongoing dialogue among parents, and between the home and the school, while at the same time reduce the exposure of teachers and principals to problematic discussions on open platforms that are outside the school's control.

Third and lastly, when cyber mistreatment occurs, situations can arise that include actors external to the organisation in places where the school's management has little control. Considering digital platforms follow their own logic regarding who is participating and what is being discussed, we suggest an urgent need for a broader understanding of what constitutes teachers' and principals' work environments.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Rebecka Cowen Forssell: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Lisa Ringblom: Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Sandra Jönsson:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Hanne Berthelsen:** Validation, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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