The New Era of Bullying:
A Phenomenological Study of University Students’ Past Experience with Cyberbullying

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is an international public health problem that is affecting millions of youth around the world. With the proliferation of digital technology and online social networks, bullying is able to circumvent traditional safety barriers provided within the homes of youth which compounds concerns for parents. This phenomenological research study explored reflections on personal cyberbullying experiences by university students (N = 10) between the ages of 18-23. The study sought to understand why cyberbullying happens and how affected individuals respond to cyberbullying encounters. Findings revealed that online risk behaviour, perceived intention of the bully, response to cyber abuse, and quality of adult and student relationship appear to be linked to the severity of a user’s cyberbullying experience. This research contributes to research by providing insight into how students experience and deal with cyberbullying.

KEYWORDS

Cyber Behaviour, Cyberbullying, Internet and Abuse, Phenomenology, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a national public health issue that affects millions of youth. According to PREVNet (2014), bullying rates in Canada are higher than two-thirds of OECD countries, where 75% of people say they have been affected by bullying. With the proliferation of technology, bullying has permeated private spaces and is no longer limited to just school grounds. Due to the accessibility of technology by youth, bullies are now able to break down the safety barrier that used to be provided within the homes of youth, which could be concerning for parents of current/potential victims (Ang & Goh, 2010; Baldry, Farrington, & Sorrentino, 2015). Youth are also less willing to report online incidents of harassment than in-person incidents because “they are concerned that their parents might find out and restrict their Internet access” (Juvonen & Gross, 2008, p. 502). In short, technology has enabled bullies to bypass the watchful eyes of parents and educators and has given them a more direct access to their victims.

Cyberbullying can be defined as “a form of bullying that uses electronic means such as email, mobile phone calls, text messages, instant messenger contact, photos, social networking sites, and personal web pages, with the intention of causing harm to another person through repeated hostile
conduct’ (Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan et al., 2012, p. 342). Essentially, any communication (message, post, text, etc.) that aims to belittle, torment or intimidate another electronic network user is considered an act of cyberbullying.

Although there are numerous findings from previous research on traditional bullying that are applicable to cyberbullying, it is essential to recognize the features that distinguish cyberbullying: (a) some technological proficiency is required, (b) cyberbullies may be afforded more anonymity than traditional bullies, (c) bullying online usually occurs when there is a physical distance between the perpetrator and victim (Cowie, 2009; Li, Smith, & Cross, 2012), (d) cyberbullying is usually more indirect, (e) the part that physical strength plays is almost negligible, (f) potential for a wider audience, and (g) cyberbullying is hard to escape due to its pervasiveness (e.g., in one’s own home, Heirman & Walrave, 2008; Ševčíková, Šmahel, & Otavová, 2012).

Previous studies have identified many deleterious effects of cyberbullying on the mental health of victims, which include feelings of sadness, hurt, anger, frustration, confusion, stress, distress, and loneliness (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Fahy, Stansfeld, Smuk et al., 2016; Larrañaga, Yubero, Ovejero & Navarro, 2016). More severe effects documented in the research literature include: depression, low self-esteem, helplessness, social anxiety, suicidal ideation, emotional problems, fear, feeling vulnerable and alone, diminished self-worth, serious relationship disruption, increased substance use, emotional and peer problems (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2012; Gámez-Guadix, Gina, & Calvete, 2015; Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009; Kowalski, Morgan, & Limber, 2012; Marczak & Coyne, 2010; Menesini & Nocentini, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Smith, 2012; Sourander et al., 2010; Tokunaga, 2010; von Marées & Petermann, 2012; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007).

Despite increased research over the last decade, cyberbullying research is still at an early stage (Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012; Smith et al., 2008; Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences and strategies of a group of university students who have directly or indirectly encountered cyberbullying. Direct exposure to cyberbullying is defined in this study as individuals who were victimized by cyberbullies, while indirect exposure encompasses participants who were bullies, bystanders or friends of bullied victims. Although the primary focus of the study was on the direct experiences of cyberbullying victims, some attention to indirect experiences of cyberbullying was explored as well in order to deepen the analysis and overall understanding of the phenomenon. This approach was intended to facilitate the understanding of how cyberbullying happens and how young adults cope with it.

BACKGROUND

Researchers have been attempting for several years to assess the influence of the Internet and its various applications on the way human relationships are formed and maintained (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; Hampton, Sessions, Her, & Rainie, 2009; Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva et al., 2002; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). With the growth of social network sites (SNS; Boyd, 2006; Boyd & Ellison, 2008) that are designed to keep individuals socially connected, the potential for managing social contacts appears to have become limitless. Though these online interactions are usually neutral or positive (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000), the ease of access and anonymity allowed by communication technology may increase the risk for victimization for children and adolescents (Ybarra, 2004). Conceptualizing possible causes of victimization and perpetration helps to construct a framework from which to build understanding as this investigation delves into exploring how students experience cyberbullying victimisation and perpetration. Based on an extensive survey
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