Silent Voices:  
The Perception of Cyberbullying Among At-Risk Middle School Students

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, face-to-face bullying has been a major problem among adolescents, especially those deemed at-risk. With the rise in the use of and advancements in mobile technologies, the Internet 2.0, and smart phones, a new form of bullying has been on the rise resulting from the increase in access to technologies and by association, social media outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Cyberbullying, as it has been denoted, can occur at any time of the day on all social media platforms resulting in the potential of face-to-face victims enduring the abuse of their aggressors on an almost 24/7 basis. As such, cyberbullying can trigger numerous emotional and physical stressors among students. The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions middle school students have about cyberbullying and their role as either victim, perpetrator, or bystander. The results of the study speak to a broader and emerging narrative indicating the psychological challenges faced by developing adolescent minds in negotiating face-to-face and virtual relationships.

KEYWORDS

Aggressor, At-Risk Adolescents, Bystander, Corporal Analysis, Cyberbully, Cyberbullying, Prosocial Efficacy Survey, Psychology, Reinforcer, Traditional Bullying, Victims

INTRODUCTION

Conventional, face-to-face bullying has been (and continues to be) a major problem among students from the classrooms to the hallways and beyond, especially among students who have been identified as “at-risk”. An at-risk student, according the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) is one that is generally defined as failing at school academically and socially. The NCES identified seven (7) attributes characteristic of the at-risk population. For the study here, three of the seven are of focus – student’s academic history, behavioral factors, and race/ethnicity – with an additional peripheral focus on parental involvement in the student’s life both in terms of academics, personal relationships, and socioemotional support and development. Of note, marginalized students, particularly those from different racial and ethnic backgrounds with low socioeconomic status, tend to be at even greater risk for victimization (Hoffman & Daigle, 2019).

A common definition of traditional bullying is stated as the following (Olweus & Limber, 2017): “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (p. 139). Bullying is perceived as a power imbalance between aggressors and their victims with the former seeking to socioemotionally disarm
the latter leaving her/him unable to defend her/himself mentally or physically. In schools, victims constantly deal with their aggressors and even though the victims may seek help from school personnel, aggressors often continue the bullying during the school day. Traditional bullying can oftentimes not only hard to recognize but it carries with it negative effects on students’ mental well-being such as making students feel sad, angry, or depressed (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018).

In the past few years, a new form of bullying has been on the rise resultant from the increase in access to mobile technologies including smart phones, and by association, social media outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The method is called cyberbullying; it can occur at any time of the day on all social media platforms (Hinduja, & Patchin, 2018). Victims of traditional bullying, who characteristically only dealt with their aggressors during the confines of the school day, are now subjected to almost 24/7 due to the open-ended nature of social media platforms. Social media is a prominent platform for cyberbullies to prey on their victims because aggressors have the ability to readily obscure their identity and physical location, which makes it more difficult for those in authority to identify the actual aggressor.

UNDERSTANDING TRADITIONAL VERSUS CYBERBULLYING

As noted in multiple areas of research on traditional face-to-face bullying, it can assume many forms. For example, it can include repetitive and deliberate behaviors meant to mentally, physically, or socially isolate the targeted victim. Such punitive behaviors include physical threats, social exclusion, spreading rumors, verbal abuse, and the like. While identifying traditional bullying is somewhat more tangible as it is physically or aurally observable in real space and time, cyberbullying, due to its technology-based platform, can often be more difficulty to identify. However, cyberbullying can assume similar forms to traditional bullying in the aggressor’s latent intent to cause emotional and even threat of physical harm to the intended victim (Wright, 2019). Accordingly, cyberbullying can include physical threats such as hacking, creating fake profiles of the victim or flaming social media accounts to emotional abuse sent through illicit emails, text messages, or direct messages. As a result, students and other stakeholders such as administrators, parents, and teachers may find it difficult to compartmentalize what cyberbullying actually entails without referencing first traditional bullying. Thus, it can be challenging to differentiate traditional face-to-face versus cyberbullying as there may exist a perception overlap between the two in addition to the complicating factor that they exist in parallel yet separate venues of space and time.

Defining Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is the use of electronic communication, such as social media, email, text messaging, and the like, to bully someone (Ockerman, Kramer, & Bruno, 2014). The two sets of articles in this section differ from each other; one set of authors discuss the difficulties of identifying cyberbullying while the others discuss how cyberbullying can be identified. Olweus and Limber (2017) assert there are difficulties when conducting research on cyberbullying and suggest that individuals should be informed about the key differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying. The authors support this claim by doing the following: first, they provide definitions for the terms cyberbullying and traditional bullying; next, they provide examples as to the reason people commonly mistake the two terms; last, they give the reader information on the degree of overlap between cyberbullying and traditional bullying. Olweus and Limber appear to write in hope of bringing awareness about cyberbullying research in order to educate the reader about the difficulties that come with that type of research.

Cuming and fellow authors discuss ways cyberbullying can be identified and provide examples to help prevent cyberbullying (Cunningham, Rimas, Mielko, Mapp, Cunningham, Buchanan, 2016). The authors suggest the following: first, they provide examples of where cyberbullying commonly occurs (e.g., social media outlets and phones); next, they present the obstacles that stand in the way
Beware!: A Multimodal Analysis of Cautionary Tales in Strategic Cybersecurity Messaging Online
www.igi-global.com/chapter/beware/221018?camid=4v1a

Relational Work in Synchronous Text-Based CMC of Virtual Teams
www.igi-global.com/chapter/relational-work-synchronous-text-based/42821?camid=4v1a