An Exploratory Study of the Cyberbullying and Cyberstalking Experiences and Factors Related to Victimization of Students at a Public Liberal Arts College

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ABSTRACT

This article shows the results of a study of the cyberbullying and cyberstalking experiences of students at a public liberal arts college. A survey was administered online to sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduate students at the college. The prevalence rates were 10% for cyberbullying and 9% for cyberstalking, shown in the sample of 471 respondents. Traditional college students under 25 years of age were experiencing and participating in cyberbullying at higher rates than older college students. Prior experience as a victim of cyberbullying in high school was a significant risk factor for cyberbullying and cyberstalking in college, which implies that students’ roles in cyberbullying are maintained from high school to college. The majority of college students are handling cyberbullying incidents themselves rather than utilizing campus resources, but two-thirds of respondents would be more likely to consider reporting an incident if there was a central e-mail address available for reporting incidents.

Keywords: Campus Resources, College, Cyberbullying, Cyberstalking, Reporting, Students

INTRODUCTION

The Millennial generation’s view of technology is different from prior generations who did not grow up with the Internet. According to research by the Pew Internet and Life, the Millennial generation is the first generation to “view social networking sites, YouTube.com, Google, and the Wikipedia not as astonishing innovations of the digital era, but as everyday parts of their social lives and their search for understanding” (Keeter & Taylor, 2009). The millennial generation’s view of technology is different from prior generations who did not use the Internet while they were growing up. Technoethics is a field that “recognizes techn-
nology as an intricate part of societal development which fosters change and new ethical considerations to address” (Luppicini, 2008, pp. 2). Ethical considerations arise when new norms of how people interact with technology are being established such as in the case of the Millennial generation using the Internet for socializing and viewing the Internet as part of their everyday life. Web 2.0 technologies are shaping how college students socialize on the Internet and raise the technoethical issue of what content they perceive as normal to see on the Internet. They also are faced with the technoethical dilemma of deciding what content they want to post online.

Cyberbullying can occur when content that is posted online is offensive to others. There are several research studies published that document that cyberbullying is currently a problem for middle school and high school students (Beran & Li, 2005; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Shariff, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007). Students are now coming to college having experienced cyberbullying in high school. Cyberbullying offenders in high school may be graduating to more serious forms of online harassment such as cyberstalking in college. There is limited empirical research about cyberbullying and cyberstalking of college students although there have been many anecdotal incidents documented in the literature (Dickerson, 2005; Pepitone, 2006; Rogerson, 2002; Schweitzer, 2005; Kraft, 2010).

College students using the Internet for socializing need to consider the technoethical issues of the opportunities to access information about others and have an extended social network online versus the risks of having their privacy and security compromised (Caruso & Solaway, 2008). However, students are often unaware or indifferent to privacy and risks on the Internet (Caruso & Solaway, 2008). Having the freedom to post content on the Internet and meet new people without seeing them in person places college students at risk for cyberbullying and cyberstalking.

Further research is needed to document the problem of cyberbullying and cyberstalking among college students. This study will explore the following issues:

1. What is the prevalence rate of cyberbullying and cyberstalking at a public liberal arts college?
2. What types of cyberbullying and cyberstalking incidents have students experienced?
3. What is the impact of cyberbullying?
4. Are there factors such as demographics or experiences with cyberbullying in high school that would place students at risk for being victims of cyberbullying in college?
5. How would students choose to report an incident of cyberbullying or cyberstalking?

WHAT IS CYBERBULLYING?

There is no precise, universal definition of cyberbullying (Szoka & Thierer, 2008). Educators, lawyers, law enforcement, and researchers have conceptualized cyberbullying based on established definitions of traditional in person bullying and online behaviors (Belsey, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Willard, 2007). Canadian school teacher Bill Belsey defined cyberbullying as “The use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others” (Belsey, 2010). This definition conveys the concepts from the definition of traditional bullying being a form of repeated intentional abuse against a victim from an individual or group of individuals (Campbell, 2005; Olewus, 2001).

The National Crime Prevention Council states on its website that cyberbullying “happens when teens use the Internet, cell phones, or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person” (National Crime Prevention Council, 2010). Examples of cyberbullying behaviors are listed on the website. These behaviors include “teens pretending they are other people online to trick others, spreading lies and rumors about victims, tricking people into revealing personal informa-
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