BEING STALKING ONLINE: THE RISK OF ELECTRONIC ANONUMITY IN CYBERBULLYING PROCESS

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Introduction

During the recent years the perception of the virtual freedom has changed our lifestyles in positive way and/or negative one. This freedom of communication has affected many social aspects which one of them is cyber bullying.

Cyber bullying has been identified as an electronic bullying or online bullying (Beale & Hall, 2007). "This new method of bullying involves the use of-mail, instant messaging, web sites, voting booths, and chat or bash rooms to deliberately antagonize and intimidate others" (Beale & Hall, 2007, p. 8). Also, involves harassing others through the use of electronic media (Li, 2005). Slonje and Smith (2008) have identified a number of differences between traditional bullying and cyber bullying.

1. Bullying and Cyber bullying

Traditional bullying and cyberbullying involve the use of aggressive behaviors as a way to gain power and control over peers (Olweus, 1993).

Bullying can be direct or indirect through exclusion and/or starting rumors (Kowolski et. al, 2008). Olweus (2011) writes that in order for aggressive behavior to be correctly labeled as bullying, as distinguished from age appropriate child's play, three components must be present: (a) aggressive behavior that involves unwanted, negative actions; (b) a pattern of behavior repeated over time; and (c) an imbalance of power or strength.

Cyber bullying is a form of bullying which is an extremely common form of violence among children and adolescents. A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over

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time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and the person has difficulty defending himself or herself" (Olweus, 2011, http://www.olweus.org/public/bullying.page).

One feature that cyber bullying differs from traditional bullying is the accessibility of contact between the cyber bully and the victim. With traditional bullying, the victim is able to avoid physical contact with the bully once they are in a safe environment, such as their home.

However, with cyber bullying allows the cyber bullying to contact their victim endlessly; victims can receive text messages and e-mails at any time. Another crucial difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying is the number of people who witness or become the audience of cyber bullying (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

With traditional bullying, the audience usually only consists of the small audience that witnesses it occurring on the playground, in the lunch room, etc. However, with cyber bullying, bullies can reach a large audience by posting pictures or video clips on the Internet.

Electronic bullying is different from traditional bullying because the anonymity provided by technologies removes the bully from the consequences caused by their actions. Since cyber bullies are virtually removed from their victims, the opportunities for feelings of regret, remorse or sympathy for the victim are removed (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Three main roles that someone may take in an instance of cyber bullying are being *the bully*, the *target*, or *the bystander* (WiIlard, 2007a). *The bully* is the person who harasses or puts down other people. Individuals may also be *the targets.* These are the people who targeted by the cyber bully, and they are sometimes also known as the victim. Although many individuals may think they are not participating in bullying behavior, being a bystander also means that one is involved in a bullying act.

Willard (2007a) identified two types of bystanders, *helpful bystanders* and *harmful bystanders.* Helpful bystanders are individuals who take action to stop the bully by either protesting against the bullying act, by providing both physical and emotional support for the target, or by seeking the help of an adult to intervene in the situation. Hurtful bystanders, on the other hand, are involved either by supporting and encouraging the bullying behavior or by simply doing nothing to intervene or seek help for the target.

2. Types of Cyberbullying

Cyber bullying can assume many different articulations, thus it is difficult to define in a simple sentence (Kowalski, et. al., 2008). Cyber bullying can also be perpetrated through exclusion or ostracism. Examples of this include obviation from groups, chat rooms, or websites

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that can be the result of another person changing their password, exclusion or omission from a buddy list, and/or being ganged up on by other members (Kowalski et. al, 2008, pp. 49-50).

However, there are six forms of cyber bullying that are most common:
Harassment: Repeatedly sending offensive, rude, and insulting messages. *Flaming:* Online '"fighting" using electronic messages with angry, vulgar language. *Impersonation:* Breaking into an email or social networking account and using that person's online identity to send or post vicious or embarrassing material to/about others. *Outing and Trickery:* Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information, or tricking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information and forwarding it to others. *Denigration:* Distributing information about another that is derogatory and untrue through posting it on a Web page, sending it to others through email or instant messaging, or posting or sending digitally altered photos of someone.
Cyber Stalking: Repeatedly sending messages that include threats of harm or are highly intimidating, or engaging in other online activities that make a person afraid for his or her safety (depending on the content of the message, it may be illegal) (Willard, 2007).

3. The profile of cyber bullies

Persons who cyber bullies often fail to see the harm they have caused or the consequences of their actions, which minimizes any feelings of remorse or empathy. They may open temporary accounts or use a false identity to make it difficult for victims to discover their real identities (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Being anonymous limits cyber bullies' fear of being detected and makes it difficult for school personnel and parents to step in and stop bullying (Brown et al, 2006; Li, 2005; Wiseman, 2007).Victims never really know who is involved in cyber bullying because cyber bullies deny or blame cyber bullying on someone else (Wiseman, 2007). Although persons involved in cyber bullying identify other persons engaged in similar behavior and believe this behavior is acceptable, cyber bullies are negatively impacting cyber-victims (Brown et al, 2006).

Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) found that the caregiver-child relationship was significantly related to whether or not children are involved in cyber bullying. In their study, participants who reported a poor caregiver-child emotional bond, were more than two times as likely to engage in online harassment, as opposed to those who reported a strong emotional. This suggests that parental involvement and relationships are a critical factor in whether or not youth will engage in cyber bullying.

Cyber bullies can be either social climbers or aggressive harassers (as cited in Froeschle, Mayorga, Castillo & Hargrave, 2008). Social climbers tend to use the Internet as a tool to put down individuals who, as they perceive, are inferior to themselves. They also use the Internet as a tool to associate with a particular group or crowd they wish to belong to. In contrast, aggressive harassers are individuals who have been bullied themselves and use the Internet to harass others in revenge.

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Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) also examined psychosocial indicators associated with engaging in online harassment towards others. Anonymity is often associated with online interactions and places an individual in a position of power as well as makes individuals less inhibited (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004b; Brown et al, 2006).

According to Brown et al (2006) the internet allows individuals to take on a new identity. Cyber bullies may target individuals in their social group, knowing the target's address, phone number, or email due to their past friendship which they use to send threatening messages (Besag, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a).

Online and offline bullying are rooted in aggression, which may suggest that the internet may simply be an extension of school bullying (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a).

Six major means through which cyber bullying may occur are: *instant messaging, e-mail, chat rooms or bash boards, small text messaging, web sites, and voting booths* (Beale & Hall, 2007).Messaging devices are allowing cyber bullies to attack their victims through means of instant messages. These devices allow users to add other people to their user lists (Beale & Hall, 2007). The devices notify the user when someone comes online, allowing them to initiate a conversation with them. However, cyber bullies can easily switch screen names that hide their true identities, allowing for potential cyber bullying to continue. Cyber bullies are able to send threatening e-mail messages to their victims through e-mail (Beale & Hall, 2007).

Although most e-mail programs allow for particular individuals to be blocked, these screening devices are limited. Although it may be easy to identity where an e-mail originated, it is nearly impossible to actually prove who wrote and sent the message. The loss for accountability is one thing that may draw cyber bullies to using this mean. Another form through which cyber bullies harass their victims is through chat rooms or bash boards (Beale & Hall, 2007).

These devices allow for real-time conversations to occur between users. A bash board, which is the name for an online bulletin board, allows users to anonymously write anything they want. Bash boards are open to the public and potentially leave the information for longer periods and let public access.

Small text messaging, or text messaging, occurs between mobile phone users (Beale & Hall, 2007). This allows users to write messages that can contain words or numbers up to 160 characters in length.

Creating websites is another way that cyber bullies are able to harass their victims through technological means (Beale & Hall, 2007). These sites sometimes contain voting that allow creators to choose an unattractive trait about their victim and poll Internet users about that.

The impacts of cyber bullying in its victims

Cyber-victims experience the same feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness as other victims of traditional bullying encounters (Brown et al, 2006). Victims express anger, fear, anxiety, and sadness as a result of cyber bullying as well as other forms of bullying (Beran & Li,

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2005; Banks, 1997). Self-esteem can be severely crippled from bullying experiences (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

The targets of cyber bullying may be seen as different, either emotionally or developmentally, with participation in few social groups. They also have a difficult time being assertive and trying to stop the bullying. Some targets may even believe those in authority are doing nothing to combat the bullying, but rather perceive that the target is deserving of the behavior (Bolton & Graeve, 2005; Willard, 2007a).

Other individuals who are victimized may not be severely impacted by cyberbullying (Beran and Li, 2005). An individual may consider the online behavior to be expected or normal or may not attribute the hostile intent to the message (Li, 2005). It seems the differences in victims' emotional reactions to cyber bullying may be greatly impacted by the severity of the bullying situation. For example, a victim enduring years of cyberbullying death threats is going to be affected differently from someone receiving prank text messages for a week.

Victims' responses to instances of cyberbullying may also differ due to the interpretation of social cues. Socially and emotionally, a person who is on the receiving end of cyberbullying is more likely to feel anxious and insecure, which over a long period of time, may leave the target feeling emotionally drained and affect one's perceptions of oneself (Willard, 2007a).Cyber bullying can harm victims by damaging feelings of acceptance or group inclusion (Coyne et al, 2006). For example, cyber bullies often gain power and control through humiliation (Beran & Li, 2005).

Some targets may blame themselves (Alderman, 2001) or believe that they deserve to be bullied and harassed, both in school and online (Willard, 2007a). Individuals may post or send harmful messages through the internet as well as leave threatening text messages on a cell phone (Li, 2005). While some individuals may believe a victim has the ability to escape from bullying by deleting messages or going offline, the ability to escape is not often possible (Brown et al, 2006; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Because cyber bullying does not occur face-to-face and is often anonymous, the bully is likely to feel detached from the situation, therefore reducing any potential feelings of guilt over the situation. Hurtful messages may be broadcast worldwide and are often irretrievable (Brown et al, 2006).

According to Beran and Li (2005) surveyed 432 students from grades 7 to 9 to examine adolescents' experiences of cyber bullying. The majority of students who experienced cyber bullying were also victimized at school. More than half of the students who were victims of cyber bullying also reported victimization by other forms of bullying. Many students also indicated being negatively impacted by cyberbullying. The majority of students who were victimized by cyberbullying reported feeling angry, hurt, or sad (Beran & Li, 2005) Also this situation can impact the victim's school performance. This can lead to difficulty concentrating in school (Willard, 2007a), failing classes, fights or other altercations on the school premises,

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avoiding school or certain classes, changing schools (Willard, 2007c), or even dropping out (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

It is not just the targets who are affected by cyber bullying; the bullies are also impacted as a result. Aggressive bullies have an increased likelihood of delinquency, including drug and alcohol use, which can lead to problems academically. Instead of isolating themselves from others, bullies have the ability to make friends, although their friends are likely to have similar values which support, encourage, and reinforce bullying behaviors (Whitted & Dupper, 2005; Willard, 2007a).

In traditional bullying, a power differential exists between the bully and victim which is often physical. However, individuals who cyber bully gain a sense of power and control behind a keyboard they do not experience during face-to-face interactions (Brown et al, 2006; Beran & Li, 2005). Victims of traditional bullying may use the internet as a place to assert dominance over others as compensation for being bullied in person (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004b). On the internet there is no central power or real explanation of territory, and victims can take on a more aggressive persona (Brown et al, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a). As a result, victims recognize the advantages to using an electronic medium to bully. Individuals who are able to navigate and utilize technology are in a position of power relative to victims (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

The role of education in preventing cyber bullying

Parents and educators should take the appropriate efforts to prevent cyber bullying from happening at school and home. Many prevention efforts were previously described and should be taken into consideration.

One thing parents can do to prevent cyber bullying in their homes is to keep computers in a common area of the house (Wolfsberg, 2006). Also, Wolfsberg suggests that parents establish household rules for Internet use, talk openly with their children about cyber bullying, and teach their children how to safely use the Internet. Parents and educators should also use this document as a tool to gain a better understanding of the multiple aspects of cyber bullying.

Educators, specially, should utilize the prevention efforts to help decrease the effects of cyber bullying on students and decrease the number of cyber bullying instances in their school. They need to determine the prevalence of cyber bullying in their school and emphasize the consequences associated with breaking school rules against cyber bullying as ways prevent cyber bullying (Beale & Hall, 2007).

According to Willard it is important to develop a plan of action to engage in effective threat analysis for any reports of cyber bullying that raises concerns of suicide or aggression. There are eight main steps that Willard suggested for addressing cyber bullying.

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The first step was engaging in participatory planning in which cyberbu1lying concerns are incorporated into safe schools planning, including district technology staff on the school safety committee, and including non-school participants which may include parent organizations, social service agencies, and law enforcement.

Step two was assessing conduct that could need assessment which can be done by conducting a survey of students to identify incident rates, locations of incidents (on or off campus), and factors that may be preventing students from reporting incidents.

Step three was to ensure that an effective anti-bullying program is in place. This program would consist of core values, predictive empathy, peer norms against bullying, peer intervention skills, and effective administrative responses (Willard, 2006).

Step four consisted of reviewing policies and procedures related to Internet and mobile communication devices, which may include restricting the use of mobile communication devices during the school day and monitoring of Internet use. An anonymous report box in which students may submit reports of bullying and cyber bullying concerns may also be utilized.

Step five conduct professional development of individuals in the district, the depth of the development and understanding necessary would be determined by their status, however all administrators should be aware of bullying and cyber bullying basics.

Step six included the parents by educating them on strategies to prevent cyber bullying and detect if their child is a cyber bully or a victim of one.

Step seven provides student education about cyber bullying in which lessons would incorporate cyber bullying into life skills or bullying prevention classes.

Finally, *step eight* was to evaluate the cyber bullying prevention and intervention program periodically to determine its effectiveness (Willard, 2006).

According to Fryer (2006) class meetings are another way of preventing cyber bullying. The culture of the classroom has a large impact on how students treat each other, both inside and outside of the classroom environment. Through class meetings, students would be invited to be responsible members in a society in which they are held accountable for their actions and are committed to helping address and resolve issues such as cyber bullying.

Recommendations

This phenomenon it's a new one for our society and there are just a few empirical studies about cyber bullying. Collaboration between multiple resources and personnel is essential in utilizing this phenomenon and understanding ways to deal with cyber bullying within the home and school setting

One way to prevent and intervene with this issue involves the implementation of a bully-proofing program in the schools. Anti-bullying programs, however, will only be most effective if resources, time, and energy are committed to executing and regularly evaluating the program plan. It is essential that parents, children, school faculty and administration, and ideally the community are all on board to minimize the frequency of cyber bullying. Many ways that

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educators can utilize prevention efforts involve the education of students about safe Internet usage, collaborating with support personnel to help victims of cyber bullying cope, and establishing firm school policies to prevent cyber bullying.

In order to find out the prevalence of this phenomenon in schools, researchers from public and private institutions should be encouraged to develop accurate scientific researches.

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