Bullying in the Digital Age

P201
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November 26, 2011
Word Count: 2,478

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Bullying has been a social problem since the beginning of civilized man. There have always been people in society who intentionally harass and abuse others, either physically or emotionally. Traditional bullying was an act of verbal or physical harassment between a bully and their victim. Usually the bully was an individual who held more power or strength than the person they were bullying. In the last couple of decades, bullying has transcended into an act that can be performed virtually through electronic devices. Cyber-bullying is a relatively new term that describes the act of bullying through the use of an electronic medium such as e-mail, instant messaging, websites, or texting. This new form of bullying is no longer requires the imbalance of power or strength between a bully and a victim. Everyone is on the same playing field and hold equal power when it comes to cyber-bullying. This digital phenomenon is ultimately a product of the rapid growth of communication technologies such as the Internet and cellular phones.

As described by Robin Kowalski, Susan Limber, and Patricia Agatston in Cyber-bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age, the phenomenon of cyber-bullying is a direct result of the inventions of new technologies and the improvement of current ones. The rest of this paper will feature research from their book, which discusses new trends in social interaction among children and adolescents from the use of different communication technologies. The book primarily focuses on the criteria for an act to be classified as cyber-bullying, and how the new trends in social interactions provide the perfect environment for children and adolescents to bully one another via electronic mediums.

The increase in cyber-bullying can be seen as a result of the increased use of computers and cell phones among children and adolescents. The Internet is widely used as a method of social interaction for children under the age of eighteen. Texting is the "note-passing of the new

millennium" (Kowalski 2) and the Internet is the "digital communication backbone of teens' daily lives" (Kowalski 3). The inaccessibility of the Internet or cell phones would mean social death for children and adolescents of contemporary generations.

The vast amount of youths who use the Internet in today's generation is not surprising due to the fact that they were born into a world where the Internet already existed and is widely used. According to the 2005 Digital Future Report, 97% of American adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 actively spent time each day on the Internet (Kowalski 3). The 2005 Pew Internet and American Life Project report indicated that 21 million American adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 spent time each day on the Internet. Of those 21 million teens, 75% have reported that they used instant messaging and 48% reported that they used instant messaging on a daily basis (Kowalski 4). Forty five percent owned cell phones and 33% used text messaging. In the 2007 extension of the Pew Internet and American Life Project report, 55% of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 were reported to have visited social networking sites and 55% of those who have visited social networking sites had profiles of their own (Kowalski 5). In 2005, the Media Awareness Network conducted a survey among 5,272 students from grades four and eleven. Twenty three percent of the students had already owned cell phones and 23% owned web cams (Kowalski 5). From these statistics it is clear that technology is tightly intertwined with the daily lives of today's children and adolescents.

One of the most appealing aspects of the Internet to adolescents is the freedom to explore the "adult world without supervision (Kowalski 3)." The Internet also allows adolescents to be anonymous in their online activities. They can choose to be whomever they want including having a different name or even being a different gender, age, or ethnicity (Kowalski 8). One of the positive aspects of anonymity is that it gives adolescents a chance to become someone

different as a way to explore their own identity. On the other hand, anonymity offers adolescents the opportunity to harass other people without repercussion. Cyber-bullying differs from traditional bullying because it forms a proxy between the bully and their victim. It is much easier for adolescents to bully other people when they have the luxury of doing it anonymously via an electronic medium.

Overall it is hard to distinguish what acts constitutes as cyber-bullying. The intent of a person when using electronic devices to socially interact with others plays a major role in identifying cyber-bullying, but it is not the only factor. A person whose intent is malicious is definitely a cyber-bully, but a person whose intent is not malicious could also be a cyber-bully. Even when the intent is not malicious, a person who is affected negatively by the actions of another person through an electronic medium could just as easily be a victim of cyber-bullying. Jokes at the expense of others are a prime example of a case where the initial intent may not have been malicious, but the person the joke was directed at can be emotionally harmed. While different cases of cyber-bullying consist of different intent, the cases with the most negative impact are generally those where the intent is malicious.

Cyber-bullying can be classified as either direct or indirect. An example of direct cyber-bullying is when a person directly sends malicious messages to their victim. Indirect cyber-bullying, also known as cyber-bullying by proxy, usually involves a third party that may not even be aware that they are involved in the cyber-bullying (Kowalski 44). An example of the indirect method is a person hacking into another person's instant messaging account and sending inappropriate messages to people on their friend's list. Another example of indirect cyber-bullying is posting information online about a person that could potentially expose them to harm, such as posting someone's private information in an online forum for sexual predator.

Some of the categories of cyber-bullying include flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, exclusion, and cyber-stalking. Flaming refers to a heated exchange between two individuals in a public online domain. Harassment is defined as harmful words, conduct or action directed at a specific person. Denigration is the act of posting derogatory information about a person which is untrue. With impersonation, the cyber-bully impersonates their victim and sends offensive things to other people while posing as them. Outing is the sharing of personal information of embarrassing nature which was meant to be private. All of these categories of cyber-bullying are widely used among adolescents.

One of the most famous examples of cyber-bullying from this decade is of Ghyslain Raza, who was deemed the "Star Wars kid" (Kowalski 11). A viral video of Raza pretending to be a Jedi was leaked onto the Internet by his classmates. This embarrassing video received millions of negative comments demoralizing Raza which eventually led him to seek psychiatric help. Other examples of cyber-bullying differ in the severity of harmful intent. Mild cases of cyber-bullying include posting embarrassing information or photos about people. Some people even receive random threats from people they have never met. On the more extreme, there are websites dedicated to demeaning a single individual. Even though there are so many examples of cyber-bullying, there is still lacks vital information on the subject.

Despite the reliance on communications technology in the past couple of decades, there is relatively little formal research conducted on cyber-bullying. Investigations into cyber-bullying trends often rely on the results of surveys, due to the ease of administration and accessibility (surveys may be posted online for anyone to take). However, surveys are not devoid of problems; sampling issues, methodological issues, and analytical issues are present when handling results of a survey in cyber-bullying as well as any other field of research; in order to

further develop trends in the frequency of cyber-bullying, especially in targeted demographics, researchers create focus groups at middle schools and high schools. Other forms of research, such as a laboratory study, are difficult to execute, as the social setting where cyber-bullying takes place is too complex to simulate without significant resources.

An important factor in cyber-bullying research is the timeframe considered when surveying individuals about victimization/perpetration. Most research in early 21st century focuses on the percentage of individuals who have been cyber-bullied *in their entire lives*. While this does provide useful results, a single, "freak" instance of cyber-bullying can occur in a large portion of a sample group, which may not accurately describe important trends in cyber-bullying. US Lawyer Parry Aftab, one of the leading experts in cybercrime, estimates that 85% of all individuals between ages 12 and 13 have experienced cyber-bullying at one point in their lives (Kowalski 75). While this is a startling estimation, it does not provide any conclusive results about the recent trends in electronic bullying. Asking survey participants to identify if they have been cyber-bullied within a particular timeframe helps provide results that describe trends more accurately.

Studies in cyber-bullying primarily take place in the middle school and high school environments, targeting teenagers. These studies, while unable to provide conclusive precise results, show that the act of cyber-bullying is indeed a problem, and a growing one at that. A survey conducted by Kowalski and Limber in 2006 amongst 3,767 students in grades 6 through 8 showed that 18% of the surveyed teenagers had been cyber-bullied at least once in the past two months, with 6% experiencing electronic bullying at least 2-3 times per month. Another study of 257 middle school students by Agaston and Carpenter in 2006 also reported that 18% of participants have experienced cyber-bullying at least once in the past two months. Cyber-

bullying does not only affect teenagers; a study by Fight Crime (fightcrime.org) revealed that 17% of preteens ages six through eleven have been cyber-bullied within the past year (Kowalski 74). This is a disturbing result of increased technological communication between younger children, something likely not to be seen a decade ago.

The perpetrators of cyber-bullying are oftentimes not even known by the victim. The power of anonymity over the internet plays a huge role, as bullies are able to contact their victims without the victim ever knowing who they are. For example, 45% of all preteen victims in the Fight Crime study had no idea who the perpetrator was. In the 2006 study by Kowalski and Limber, almost *half* (48%) of all students who claimed to have been electronically bullied do not know the identity of the bully. Of those who do know the identity of the perpetrator, the majority of bullies are, not surprisingly, fellow students at their school, though a large percentage (36%) of bullies were actually friends of the victim. Siblings are another source of electronic bullies, though to a lesser extent.

With the ever-increasing availability of communications technology, perpetrators of cyber-bullying have an assortment of tools to use on their victims. Text messaging, paging services, internet chat rooms, social networking websites, instant messaging, and e-mail are the most commonly used tools. The primary technology used in electronic bullying varies from country to country; in the United Kingdom, text messaging is the most prevalent, while the United States experiences most of its cyber bullying through the internet (Kowalski 68). In the Kowalski and Limber study of middle school students, the vast majority (67%) of victims were bullied through instant messaging, with 25% bullied in chat rooms, and 24% bullied via e-mail. Compare this with a study done by the National Children's Home in Great Britain, where 16% of *all children ages 11 through 19* had experienced cyber-bullying in the form of text messaging,

whereas only 11% of the children experienced electronic bullying over the internet (Kowalski 70).

Gender plays a significant role in the overall trends of cyber-bullying. Through studies on aggression in the past two to three decades, research has shown that males pursue more direct forms of aggression, such as physical fighting and in-person verbal abuse, while females tend to act aggressively in an indirect manner, spreading rumors and gossiping about an individual (Kowalski 77). As such, cyber-bullying takes place more often between females than it does males. In the Kowalski and Limber 2006 survey of middle school children, 25% of female participants reported being the victim of electronic bullying in the two months prior to the survey, over twice that of male participants (11%). Furthermore, 5% of females (versus 2% of males) experienced cyber-bullying 2-3 times per month, and 3% of females (versus 2% of males) experience the bullying about once per week (Kowalski 78). This agrees with other studies of teenagers; one of Kowalski's focus group participants openly acknowledge the relationship between gender and cyber-bullying, with one female respondent saying, "It depends on if it's a guy or a girl or how mean they are. Some people are just going to do it anyway. Girls are harder to stand up to. Cause like guys can be like `stop bothering me.' I'm not afraid that a guy is going to hit me, but girls are like catty. They get back at you in a more subtle way" (Kowalski 79). In contrast, a male participant's response to hypothetically being cyber bullied stated that he would "Just go up to them and be like `how come you didn't say it to my face ?'" (Kowalski 79). Such responses are typical, and fit well within societal norms for each gender.

There are additional characteristics to take into account regarding cyber-bullying. For example, studies have shown that cyber-bullies typically have below-average grades, while half of all victims are above-average students. Furthermore, victims of cyber-bullying are more

likely to harass others online, have social problems, and be targeted by other forms of bullying (Kowalski 83).   A study by Kowalski and Limber in 2006 combined the frequency of involvement with cyber-bullying and systems for measuring social anxiety and self-esteem. The results distinctively show that cyber bully perpetrators have higher self-esteem scores and lower social anxiety scores than cyber bully victims, and those individuals who are frequently involved as both a bully and a victim have the highest anxiety and lowest self-esteem (Kowalski 84).

Because cyber-bullying is a relatively new development in online social interactions, there has not been much research done on the effects of cyber-bullying. There are definitely enough cases of cyber-bullying that could be used as valuable data toward research. This subject still needs more attention and research to prevent negative psychological impacts on children and adolescents. Unlike traditional bullying, cyber-bullying is something that one cannot avoid. A cyber-bully can be located anywhere and still bully their victim as long as they have access to an electronic device with internet connection. Cyber-bullying takes traditional bullying to a whole new level and in time there must to be ways of protecting children and adolescents from cyber-bullying because new communication technologies are being developed every day.

Works Cited

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