"Maybe you don't want to face it" – College students' perspectives on cyberbullying

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A B S T R A C T

Cyberbullying is a growing phenomenon in our society with the technological advances that are occurring. This type of bullying can transpire at all hours via text message, email, or social networking sites. According to several studies, college students are being affected by cyberbullying, with prevalence rates ranging from 8% to 21%. Many psychological ramifications exist as a result of cyberbullying among victims and bullies. It is crucial to learn more about how this phenomenon is affecting the social and learning environments in college, as well as how college students view cyberbullying. First and second-year students at a southern university were recruited to participate in this qualitative study. The researchers conducted six focus groups with 54 students. The participants reported reasons for cyberbullying in the college environment, such as retaliation in relationships. Independence and autonomy were discussed as reasons why college students do not report cyberbullying to others when it occurs. Participants discussed future interventions to reduce cyberbullying that included coping strategies, utilizing university services, and engaging in legal action. The authors recommend utilizing a multi-level Socio-Ecological approach to reduce cyberbullying rates. Additionally, evaluation research needs to be conducted on what works and what does not in the prevention of cyberbullying.

1. Introduction

Cyberbullying is a growing phenomenon in our society with the technological advances that are occurring. While cyberbullying has been defined as repeated, unwanted harassment using digital technologies (Adams & Lawrence, 2011; Kraft & Wang, 2010), there are several other definitions discussed in the literature focusing on threats of physical harm to online aggression to the use of specific technology such as web cams (Sabella, Patchin, & Hinduja, 2013). Although better consensus is needed for a clear definition, cyberbullying can have potentially long-lasting effects on victims and further research is needed to understand the context in which it occurs. Traditional bullying is often contained to the schoolyard; however, cyberbullying can occur at all hours via text message, email, or social networking sites. The frequency of victimization may be greater given the fact that our lives are intricately connected to technology and the permanency of what is written is an added consequence.

1.1. Emotional effects of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying victims have reported effects such as emotional distress, anxiety, and isolation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Kaminski & Fang, 2009; Roland, 2002; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). Unfortunately, suicide has occurred among some cybervictims and the media has highlighted certain cases, such as Tyler Clementi and Jessica Logan. For instance, Tyler's college roommate recorded his sexual encounter with another man and this was streamed live on the Internet. Tyler subsequently committed suicide three days later (Foderaro, 2010). Similarly, Jessica Logan was cyberbullied via text message when her ex-boyfriend disseminated a nude picture of her to hundreds of adolescents. Jessica endured a great deal of harassment and name-calling before she ended her life (Wells, 2012). The fact that these lives were tragically impacted by the inappropriate use of technology warrants more data on why students are engaging in this type of behavior. Furthermore, given that these specific instances occurred among college-age students, this raises the important question of how older students are affected by cyberbullying.

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1.2. College cyberbullying

Because cyberbullying occurs in high school (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Kaminski & Fang, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Roland, 2002), as well as in the workplace (Privitera & Campbell, 2009; Science Daily., 2012), it is logical to infer that college students also face these challenges. One study indicated that cyberbullying in high school may also lead to further cyberbullying in college (Kraft & Wang, 2010). The prevalence of college-level cyberbullying ranges from 8% to 21% (Kraft & Wang, 2010; McDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012) and may include receiving threatening text messages, sexually harassing messages, spreading rumors, and faking someone's identity (Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011).

1.3. Psychological states of victims and bullies

To what extent are college students really impacted by cyberbullying, especially given their age and experience? Researchers have sought to describe the ramifications of college-level cyberbullying to better understand the mental health outcomes. In a recent study, the psychological state of college cybervictims was characterized by interpersonal sensitivity, depression, hostility, and psychotic behaviors when compared to controls (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). On a behavioral basis, cybervictims became less trusting of people and avoided certain situations (Crosslin & Crosslin, 2014; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). Cybervictims were not the only ones affected, but cyberbullies themselves also displayed psychological effects as a result of the victimization. Interestingly, cyberbullies manifested many of the same symptoms as victims, but also reported increased aggression levels, violence, and drug crimes compared to controls (Schenk, Fremouw, & Keelan, 2013).

1.4. Qualitative research is needed – purpose

Given the psychological states of students involved in cyberbullying, it is crucial to learn more about how this phenomenon is affecting the social and learning environments in college. When cyberbullying occurs in high school or in the work place, there are trusted people who can assist with these situations (e.g., parents, counselors, supervisors); however, college students may not have many resources at their disposal, particularly at a time when independence and autonomy is reinforced. Previous research has largely been quantitative to better describe the scope of the problem. Nevertheless, there are very few qualitative studies in the published literature about how college students perceive cyberbullying. Qualitative approaches are crucial to glean more in-depth descriptions of cyberbullying and to determine whether college students view cyberbullying as an issue.

Furthermore, prevention programs are more effective when the social context is understood instead of relying solely on individual skills (Page & Page, 2011). Prevention requires understanding the factors that lead to cyberbullying, and the interplay of factors in social environments is often explained well with the Socio-Ecological Model (SEM) (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2013). This includes levels of influence (i.e., individual, organizational, community, and policy) that impact cyberbullying attitudes and behaviors in college students. By applying the SEM, salient factors may be identified to guide multi-level interventions to prevent cyberbullying. The purpose of this study was to assess undergraduate students' perceptions of cyberbullying by conducting several focus groups. Additionally, the authors sought to determine acceptable interventions to reduce cyberbullying in this population by applying the SEM.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

First and second-year students at a southern university were recruited to participate in this study. Students in their first years of college were sought because they are more likely to live on campus and in a community with other students where cyberbullying may be more pervasive.

Potential participants were informed of the study using various channels, such as announcement in undergraduate classes, an invitation to participate using a campus-wide information board, and through the psychology department which requires students to participate in research studies. While there were some students who participated in the study due to the university-wide advertisements, most participants were drawn through psychology. The study was advertised as a way for participants to express their views on the positive and negative aspects of technology, especially in social networking. All students received partial course credit and a $25 gift card as a reimbursement for their time. The study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board.

There were 54 students who participated in this research with the mean age of 19 years (SD = 1.8; range, 18–27). The majority of the participants were female (85%) and several ethnicities were represented, such as African American (33.33%), Hispanic (27.8%), Asian (18.5%), and Caucasian (14.8%).

2.2. Research design

The researchers conducted six focus groups (6–10 participants per group) to learn more about college students' experiences with cyberbullying, and collected rich contextual data on how students perceived this issue. Two researchers experienced in qualitative approaches conducted the focus groups, as a moderator and note taker, respectively. Given the anonymity and opportunity for clarification in focus groups (Then, Rankin, & Ali, 2014), this design was well-suited for the nature of this study. The design also allowed for individual and group opinions to be expressed in order to gain an overall understanding of the issue.

2.3. Discussion guide

The authors carefully reviewed the current literature on cyberbullying to develop a discussion guide for the facilitation of the focus groups. Participants answered open-ended questions regarding their views of cyberbullying and described any experiences they have had on this topic. The following interview questions were utilized: (1) What does cyberbullying mean to you? (2) How useful is the term "cyberbullying?" (3) Is cyberbullying a significant issue in the college setting? (4) Should more attention be given to cyberbullying in the college arena? If so, who should be involved?

2.4. Data collection

When participants attended the focus group, they were in a private room on campus. Light refreshments and a brief introduction to the study were provided. Ground rules and expectations for participation were communicated, as well as the need to treat all information conveyed as confidential. Additional information about the study, including potential risks, was communicated and the participants completed the informed consent form. Before the groups began, the participants also completed a brief demographic questionnaire. Because this topic is on deviant behavior, the researchers asked an ice breaker question on the positives