Ongoing and online: Children and youth's perceptions of cyber bullying ☆

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ABSTRACT

The use of online technology is exploding worldwide and is fast becoming a preferred method of interacting. While most online interactions are neutral or positive the Internet provides a new means through which children and youth are bullied. The aim of this grounded theory approach was to explore technology, virtual relationships and cyber bullying from the perspectives of students. Seven focus groups were held with 38 students between fifth and eighth grades. The participants considered cyber bullying to be a serious problem and some characterized online bullying as more serious than 'traditional' bullying because of the associated anonymity. Although the students depicted anonymity as integral to cyber bullying, the findings suggest that much of the cyber bullying occurred within the context of their social groups and relationships. Findings revealed five major themes: technology embraced at younger ages and becoming the dominant medium for communication; definitions and views of cyber bullying; factors unique to cyber bullying; types of cyber bullying; and telling adults. The findings highlight the complexity of the perceived anonymity provided by the Internet and how this may impact cyber bullying. The study offers greater awareness of the meanings of online relationships for children and youth.

1. Introduction

The exponential growth of electronic and computer based communication and information sharing during the last decade has drastically altered individuals' social interactions, learning strategies and choice of entertainment. In particular, there is a rapid rise of social networking on the Internet created by the growing access and use of electronic communication tools such as e-mail, websites, instant messaging, webcams, chat rooms, social networking sites, blogs, and text messages (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Schrock & Boyd, 2008). Indeed it has been suggested that the majority of youth view these electronic communication tools as "critical tools for their social life" (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008, p. 2). The Internet provides innumerable possibilities for growth among children and youth, including benefits such as social support, identity exploration, and development of interpersonal and critical thinking skills, as well as educational benefits generated from expansive access to knowledge, academic support, and worldwide cross-cultural interactions (Gross, 2004; Jackson et al., 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Although most of the interactions are considered positive or neutral, more recent attention has focused on understanding cyber risks and the potential for abuse as youth spend more time online than ever before (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2003; Shariff, 2009).

Although traditional bullying has long been considered a school-based problem (Craig & Pepler, 2008), electronic communication tools are moving the discussion of bullying into the realm of the electronic information highway. Similar to traditional bullying, cyber bullying, also known as electronic bullying or online social cruelty (Kowalski et al., 2008), includes "willful and repeated harm inflicted" (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009, p. 5) towards another. What makes cyber bullying distinct is the use of electronic communication technology as the means through which to threaten, harass embarrass, or socially exclude (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Cyber bullying can encompass the use of an electronic medium to sexually harass (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Shariff & Johnny, 2007), including distributing unsolicited text or photos of a sexual nature or requesting sexual acts either online or offline (Schrock & Boyd, 2008). There has been a recent spike in the academic literature devoted to this new form of bullying (Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Lenhart, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2003; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a,b) including large surveys to determine normative data on the prevalence and character of cyber bullying.

In this paper we add to the growing body of literature by exploring the perspectives of students in grades 5 through 8 (10–13 years) in a large urban centre to provide in depth views of cyber bullying. Qualitative inquiry provides a research design capable of discovering important discourses and nuances of cyber bullying that might be less visible in large scale studies. This is especially important given that previous research has suggested that children may be unlikely to speak about sensitive issues such as harassment and bullying (Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Livingstone and

Haddon (2008) further argue that "less research is qualitative or multi-method in nature, so we have less knowledge of children's own experiences or perceptions, or of the ways in which online activities are contextualized within their everyday lives" (p. 317).

2. Cyber bullying

The prevalence rates of cyber bullying typically range across studies from approximately 10 to 35% (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Li, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Williams & Guerra, 2007), whereas others have found significantly higher rates (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Research provides a picture of the significant psychosocial and academic effects of cyber bullying. Students who were cyber bullied reported feelings of sadness, anxiety, and fear, and an inability to concentrate which affected their grades (Beran & Li, 2005). Youth who were bullied online were more likely to have skipped school, to have had detentions or suspensions, or to have carried a weapon to school (Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). Depression, substance use and delinquency are significantly higher among youth who report experiencing cyber bullying (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007). Evidence reveals that youth who perpetrate cyber bullying are more likely to concurrently engage in rule-breaking and to have problems with aggression (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007).

A large proportion of children and youth do not disclose their experiences of cyber bullying to their parents (O'Connell, Price, & Barrow, 2004). This troubling finding corresponds with the stable results that a significant percentage of children who are bullied through traditional methods do not tell adults (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of children and youths' views of cyber bullying and of factors that either helped or hindered telling parents and other adults.

3. Methodology

Grounded theory was selected as it provided a framework to inductively explore children and youth's perceptions and opinions regarding cyber bullying (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Given the dramatic growth of children and adolescents' use of online technologies for social connections and the relative lack of knowledge about cyber bullying, a grounded theory approach was deemed most appropriate to allow participants' perspectives to emerge and to explore the complexity of this phenomenon. Focus groups are an innovative approach to understanding children and adolescents' experiences, and have been defined as a "carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment" (Kruger, 1994, p. 6). Unlike interviews, focus groups with children remove the emphasis of the adult-child relationship in data collection methods (Heary & Hennessy, 2002) by providing children of similar ages the opportunity to share their experiences and perceptions among their peers. Horner (2000) suggests that children "are more relaxed and willing to share perceptions when discussions are held with a group of peers" (p. 510). The present study received ethics approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board and from one school board's External Research Review Committee. The second school board accepted the approval of the university and the first school board.

3.1. Participants

Students who were in grades 5 through 8 and who self-identified as regular Internet users were recruited to participate, from five schools within two urban school boards. Approval was obtained from the Boards of Education to conduct focus groups during school hours. Schools were purposively selected from each of the four geographical

regions/quadrants of the city in which the larger school board is divided; northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest. Once potential schools were identified, principals were contacted by letter inviting them to participate followed by a telephone call. In schools for which principals gave consent to participate, the research team made presentations to teachers and students in the identified grades, during assemblies and staff meetings. Each student was then given a package with information and consent forms to take home. The parents of each student that participated in the study provided written informed consent, after which assent was obtained from the participating student.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The research team was involved with relevant stakeholders for several months in preparation for and during the time the focus groups were conducted. An advisory committee was established comprising representatives from the school boards, which included guidance counsellors, safe school team members, social workers, psychologists, and information technology personnel. This committee helped to develop the questions and to identify schools to be included in the research.

The facilitators included a Ph.D. student who was a school social worker with several years of experience, a Ph.D. student with several years of experience, and a Master of Social Work student who received training to co-lead focus groups. The children were asked to maintain confidentiality within the focus group. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. Some questions were asked to determine participants' opinions about the frequency with which children and youth use the Internet, cell phones and other forms of communication technology. The students were asked about their views of cyber bullying, for example how often it occurs, what forms it takes, who does the bullying, who is bullied, who knows, and whether and who they tell. Participants were not asked about their own experiences of cyber bullying, in order to protect their confidentiality in the groups. The students were not asked potentially sensitive questions about Internet behaviours in reference to their peers in order to promote openness in the group setting and to lessen the tendency for socially desirable responses (Morgan, 1998). A semi-structured template was developed. Following the constant comparative method (Creswell, 1998), the interview guide was updated upon completion of each focus group and before the subsequent group. This entailed the principal investigator listening to the audio files after each session, making notes based on the children's responses, and revising the template to ensure that the next focus group included questions based on participants' responses.

The focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymized to ensure participant and school confidentiality. Inductive data analysis was conducted using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Line-by-line review of the transcripts was conducted and first-level codes (descriptors of key components of the focus groups), including in vivo codes (participants' language), were noted in the margins (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978). Transcripts were inputted into NVivo (Richards, 1999) and coded into interconnecting themes. Codes were tagged to associated segments of text. Then, the investigators reviewed text corresponding to each of the first-level codes. Using focused coding and a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), first-level codes were further refined and organized into categories. Finally, theoretical coding was undertaken to identify higher level codes and relationships among categories, and to ensure category saturation (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978). Coding discrepancies were resolved by consensus among the three investigators.

Seven focus groups were conducted with 38 students in grades 5–8, comprising 17 boys and 21 girls. The groups were: group 1: $N = 7$, 3 boys and 4 girls; group 2: $N = 6$, 6 boys; group 3: $N = 4$, 1