Cyberbullying and Cyberbullies: Implications For K-12 School Administrators

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study is to collect data regarding the types of cyberbullying present today in K-12 schools, the effects of cyberbullying, and those who tend to serve as cyberbullies. This data will be used to make recommendations for school administrators pertaining to strategies that may result in the abatement of this phenomenon. The study will take place at a university located in the southern region of the United States. Participants will be college students describing their high school experiences.

Keywords: Principals, Cyberbullying, Internet Use, Leadership

INTRODUCTION

The advantages and uses of web 2.0 tools have not only been realized by US students, but by individuals throughout the world. Users of web 2.0 tools encompass a global society with individuals from all ages, ethnic groups, and nationalities joining together to participate, collaborate and engage in this interactive technological environment. Web 2.0 was first introduced to society by Tim O'Reilly [1] but was later defined with John Battelle [2] as tools and technologies "all about harnessing collective intelligence" (p. 4). Many individuals utilize Web 2.0 tools today that include technologies such as social networking sites (e.g. Facebook or MySpace); wikis (e.g. Wikipedia or WikiSpaces); and blogs (e.g. Blogger.com or Wordpress.com). As Internet accessibility has become widespread throughout the United States and the numbers of individuals have computers and mobile devices has increased, the popularity of Web 2.0 tools has exploded and continues to remain highly popular especially amongst teens and children. In a report published by Cox Communications [3] regarding technology use of teens, 72% of teens (ages 13-17) were found to have a personal profile on a social network site. This represented an increase in usage up from 71% in 2007, and 61% in 2006. This critical information provides a better understanding of the level of comfort children have with the use of technology and indicates that students are using Web 2.0 tools outside of the educational environment. Because of the rapid increase in the use of these technologies by students as well as the eagerness of educators to utilize these often free tools within the classroom, school administrators and teachers should understand the emotional and physical implications surrounding Web 2.0 and other use of technologies, most notably the implications of cyberbullying.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Albert Bandua [4] is credited for the development of social learning theory that postulates an individual can learn a specific behavior simply by observing others demonstrating that behavior. Students, particularly at young ages, are highly influential. In fact, many social clicks or social networks start developing at early ages. Social learning theory asserts that individuals learn behavior through modeling what they see in their environment. So, for example, if the leader of the social click was making fun of a particular individual, many of the followers of that group might be more inclined to participate in this type of behavior because it is the social norm for the group.

This behavior, like most traditional problems, can also occur in web-based settings such social network sites. The use of web 2.0 technologies have now given social clicks the power to not only have influence during the normal school hours, but also the ability to slander an individual, send text or chat messages to tease the

individual, or even post inappropriate pictures of the individual online, making the bullying almost impossible to circumvent. While social learning theory has been utilized in educational settings for positive learning experiences, in this context it is extremely dangerous and leads to the increased probability of cyberbullying.

Social control theory may also be applicable to increased improper behavior in that when social constraints on antisocial behavior are weakened or absent, delinquent behavior emerges [5]. Many children who utilize the Internet for social networking, chatting, etc. are not in the presence of their parents therefore the absence of parental involvement and guidance may increase the probability of delinquent behavior in the online social environment. In situations such as this, Chaffin [6] asserts that cyberbullying is more likely to occur because of increased anonymity; group norms, groupthink, deindividuation, and dehumanization, and loss of empathy found in online social settings (p. 7-9). These characteristics are valid causes for legal concern and could be factors strongly correlated with cyberbullying behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hinduja and Patchin [7] describe cyberbullying as 1) behavior that is deliberate not accidental; 2) behavior that is repeated, rather than a one-time incident; 3) behavior in which harm occurs- from the perspective of the target; and 4) behavior executed using the benefit of technology. Cyberbullying has also been defined as any type of bullying or aggressive activity that happens through the use of modern technological devices [8]. Cyberbullying can include but is not limited to derogatory statements, threats to an individual, or sexual harassment. With the increased use of social networking by students particularly while they are off campus, legal systems are finding it hard to regulate and discipline improper behavior on these sites [9] [6].

Multiple forms of bullying exist but the most common forms are limited to physical, verbal and relational bullying [6]. Physical bullying occurs in traditional settings such as at school and usually results in pushing, shoving, or beating up an individual. Verbal bullying is any type of verbal teasing. This could be in the form of name-calling or any type of verbal abuse intended to hurt the individual the bullying is directed towards. With the use of mobile devices, instant messaging, and social networking sites, verbal bullying can take place via text message or chatting. Of all three forms of bullying, physical represents one-third of reported incidents while verbal bullying accounts for seventy percent of bullying incidents [6]. Relational bullying is less likely to occur but does so when an individual uses his/her power in a relationship to convince others to act or behave in a certain way. This type of bullying can also be intermingled in online settings.

Cyberbullying can then be any form of bullying that is performed through an electronic device. Students have indicated that cyberbullying exacerbates traditional methods of bullying since cyberbullying is often inescapable as students continue to deal with this type of behavior after school hours. The most dire consequences of cyberbullying may include student depression or in some cases, suicide [10] [11].

Another issue connected to cyberbullying is the increased access to and uploading capability of photographs and videos. This is particularly targeted at social networking sites but can also be a part of blogs, wikis, and individual websites. In a digital age where most computers and mobile phones have sophisticated cameras and video recording capabilities, students are finding themselves involved in litigation from incriminating documents placed on the Internet. Some schools are even monitoring student athletic pages to ensure proper behavior [12]. One cited case example occurred in Rhode Island when pictures from a Facebook account played a major role in a court ruling regarding a drunk driving incident. The court judge, after being presented incriminating pictures of the defendant at a party retrievable from a social networking site, deemed the individual's lifestyle as out of control and an indication that this was not a one-time incident [13]. Privacy policies in place per site try to accommodate privacy issues. However, none are responsible in matters where privacy is breached. Although policies can give individuals a sense of protection, negative ramifications for pictures that are privately posted are increasing. Furthermore, individuals are being prosecuted even when others upload their pictures and sites do not provide any way to remove these incriminating documents once individuals are aware that they exist.

School Administrators should proceed with caution when disciplining students for cyberbullying offenses. The constitutional protections of students include due process and free speech [9]. Due process provides a student with the opportunity to go through a fair and equitable process when a legal accusation has been made. So, for example, if students were talking about a teacher on a MySpace group page and the principal caught them, if the principal initially suspends the students without providing due process, the courts are likely to rule in favor of the students since they were not afforded due process. Due process is a common procedure that all school administrators along with Instructional Technology and Design (ITD) professionals should be aware of.

Regarding the student's right to free speech, although K-12 teachers and administrators make every effort to teach children appropriate behavior and respect, every student has the right to say whatever they choose based on their First Amendment rights. What is important to understand nonetheless is that these rights are limited in the context of educational settings. Off campus and

Internet speech are harder to regulate since these activities occur away the school campus and outside of normal school hours. Courts are apt to rule in favor of schools that have taken action to regulate or monitor students off-campus and/or Internet speech [9]. However, schools should use caution to ensure that disciplinary actions are taken because of potential disruption to the educational process as opposed to individual perceptions of inappropriate, offensive, or hateful speech. Courts have been reluctant to require schools to intervene for fear that this power might end up interfering with the students' freedom of speech; yet when related to school safety or disruption of the educational process, courts have granted favor to schools for action taken.

METHODOLOGY

Description of Procedures

After IRB approval, a modified questionnaire developed by the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use (CSRIU) will be given to college students regarding their high school experiences with cyberbullying, both as a cyberbully and as a victim during high school. Questions will solicit demographic responses and responses regarding the following types of cyberbullying as defined by Willard [14]: Flaming--defined as angry, rude, vulgar messages about a person to an online group or person via email or texting; Online Harassment--defined as repeatedly sending offensive messages via e-mail or other text messaging to a person; Cyberstalking--defined as online harassment that include threats of harm or is excessively intimidating; Denigration (put-downs)--defined as sending harmful, untrue, or cruel statements about a person to other people or posting such material online; Masquerading--defined as pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material that makes that person look bad; Outing--defined as sending or posting material about a person that contains sensitive, private, or embarrassing information, including forwarding private messages or images; and Excluding--defined as cruelly excluding someone from an online group. (p. 2).

Participants

Participants will be college freshman enrolled in a university located in the southern region of the United States. These students will be questioned regarding their high school experience(s), or lack thereof, as a victim or perpetrator of cyberbullying.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study will be: 1) To what extent have high school students been the victim of cyberbullying? 2) What are the most common forms of cyberbullying? 3) To what extent have high school students initiated acts of cyberbullying? 4) What forms of cyberbullying were used by those who self-identified as cyberbullies? 5) What was the impact of cyberbullying on the emotional and physical well being of high school students?

Instrument

The instrument was initially developed by the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use located in Eugene, Oregon. Permission to modify and use this instrument was given by Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D., Director. The instrument will contain questions to solicit self-identified initiated acts of cyberbullying and personal incidences of being the victim of cyberbullying, along with how frequently it happens, where it happens, and its effect on students.

The demographic section of the questionnaire includes questions regarding participant's gender, and use of the Internet and cell phone. The original instrument included questions pertaining to the experiences, or lack thereof, of the participant as a victim of cyberbullying. Modifications of the instrument included questions pertaining to the experiences, or lack thereof, of the participant as a cyberbully.

The instrument includes 3 questions each regarding Flaming, Online Harassment, Cyberstalking, Denigration, Masquerading, Outing, and Excluding. Additionally, there are 10 questions pertain to the location, frequency and normality of cyberbullying, the role of the participant as victim, perpetrator, or witness, the types of devices used, to whom cyberbullying was reported, and the social acceptance of cyberbullying.

Analysis Procedures

Data for this study will be entered into the statistical analysis program called SPSS. To answer research questions one and three, an independent-sample t-test will be conducted to determine if there are significant levels of self-reported incidences of cyberbullying (RQ1) and/or self-reported levels of initiated cyberbullying acts (RQ3). For research question two, based on validity and reliability reporting of the instrument author, frequencies of forms of cyberbullying will be reported to indicate the most prevalent forms of cyberbullying students encounter. A Pearson correlation will be conducted to determine if a relationship existed between sub-categories as they relate to participant demographics. Research question four will be answered by selecting the group of participants who self-reported initiating acts of cyberbullying to determine the most commons forms utilized to bully others and whether these forms are statistically significant to the population or merely representative of the specific participants in the study's sample. Research question five will explore

frequencies of self-reported answers on the respective question to each form of cyberbullying, "On the following scale, what is your reaction to harassment? There are four responses participants will be provided ranging from "no big deal" to "very upsetting" to indicate the level of impact that particular form of cyberbullying had on the emotional and physical well-being the respective participant. Participants will also be provided a "no opinion" selection should this form of cyberbullying have no impact on the respective participant or if they've never had that type of cyberbullying harassment therefore have no opinion on the reaction to such harassment. Research question six will be answered with two open-ended questions that ask students to self-report support available at their respective high school for students dealing with cyberbullying as well as the types of services they believe are needed to support cyberbullying victims. Open-ended responses will be analyzed by using a selective coding technique to develop topical categories for each qualitative response set and a nominal ordinal method recording the relative frequency for each response category to quantify responses [15]. Data will be transcribed and coded to determine if any themes exist, thus providing insight to the phenomenon surrounding responses.

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