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Children's Perceptions of Cyberbullying

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Media and Communications

Abstract

This study analyzed children's perceptions of cyberbullying in a focus group of six youths, ages 10-15. The primary goal of this research was to supplement and expand on previous cyberbullying research that focused heavily on surveys, but didn't provide youths' voices or perspectives (Lenhart, 2010; Wang et al., 2009). Specifically, participants were asked to share their definitions of cyberbullying, their opinions about its pervasiveness, and their thoughts about the connection between cyberbullying and self-disclosure. Findings show that children's perceptions of cyberbullying are similar to those identified in previous, survey-based research. Participants noted the role of technology in facilitating regular bullying and the ability to remain anonymous while posting hateful comments. Although students' perceptions were similar to previous research, there were some interesting differences too, such as the emphasis that participants placed on the public nature of cyberbullying and their empathy for some bullies who may not be aware of the harm they are doing.

Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram have been embedded into our everyday life, affecting their interaction with others (Dijck & Poell, 2013). When social media platforms were introduced their goal was for connectedness (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). They aimed to bring humans together so they could share whatever they wanted and to stay in touch with others. As the years go on, social media presence continues to grow. Recent studies, show that 73% of adolescents go on social networking sites, an increase of about 20% since 2006 (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickurhr, 2010). Some of the benefits that come along with the rise of social media is that it allows adolescents who have trouble making

friends in person to make their social connections online (David- Ferdon & Feldman Hertz, 2007). While there are some benefits to having social media platforms there comes some issues and one of the main issues is cyberbullying. This study analyzed children's perceptions of cyberbullying in a focus group of six youths, ages 10-15. The primary goal of this research was to supplement and expand on previous cyberbullying research that focused heavily on surveys, but didn't provide youths' voices or perspectives (Lenhart, 2010; Wang et al., 2009).

Definition/perceptions

Researchers have yet to come up with one solid definition of cyberbullying. One of the most common definitions for cyberbullying is the repeated harm that is intentionally imposed on another using electronic devices (Kowalski, Shroeder, Giumetti, & Lattanner, 2014). Other researchers have similar definitions with added components like the fact that it's an act that an individual or group commit against someone who cannot defend themselves (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, & Tippett, 2008). Some of the most common themes among researchers' definitions are, 1) repetition, 2) intent, 3) online device, and 4) power balance; however, not everyone agrees with these definitions. So, it's understandable to see researchers come to different conclusions of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying vs. Bullying

Several researchers have compared and contrasted cyberbullying and bullying. Many have come to different conclusions about how closely related the two are. Some research shows a positive correlation between the two (cyberbullying and bullying) and there are some that don't see any correlation between the two (Kowalski et. al., 2014). Which has led other researchers to believe that the

"overlap may be determined by the specific venue in which cyberbullying occurs. In other words, individuals who traditionally bully may be more likely to perpetrate certain kinds of cyberbullying, thinking that they may be more anonymous and be more likely to be targets of cyberbullying via other venues" (Kowalski et. Al., 2014).

One of the differences that are pointed out about cyberbullying compared to bullying is the accessibility to the victims. Cyberbullies can bully anyone at any time with the possibility of a large audience (Davison & Stein, 2014). Face to face bullying is more limited, both parties are present at the time and the audience are those who are near the area where the bullying is occurring (Davison & Stein, 2014). There is a different connection between the timing of it all, as well. Someone can post whatever they want or send whatever they want and it can take the recipient seconds, minutes, hours, day, months, etc. before they see it. The recipient can receive it and not know who it's from and can have several negative feelings during that time which can lead to serious issues of depression (Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2011). It should be noted that researchers' conducted a study that looked into different levels of depression among bullies, victims and bully-victims of tradition and cyber bullying and discovered the "cyber victims reported higher depressions than bullies or bully-victims, which would not be found in any other form of bullying" (Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2011, pg. 3). This is one of the main reasons why some researchers suggest that cyberbullying is a completely separate category of bullying behavior (Abeoujaoude, 2011) and why researchers have a difficult time coming to an agreement on a definition of cyberbullying.

Method

Focus Groups

This study used focus groups as a methodology because "Focus groups provide an opportunity for researchers to encourage participants to generate opinions, feedback and in-depth thought in a group setting and, importantly, allow for some spontaneity" (Southwell, Blake, & Torres, 2005, p. 187). The entire purpose of this study was to see how adolescents perceive and define cyberbullying. Focus groups not only allow people to speak their own opinion but they also allow these people to get feedback from people who are not researchers.

While there are many benefits to using focus groups as a methodology, there are also some setbacks. The first one is that there is no way of ensuring that patterns and tendencies that are observed in focus groups are generalizable to larger populations (Southwell, Blake, & Torres, 2005). Another setback is that sometimes focus groups can lead to more extreme positions at the end due to one to two outspoken individuals. The way we prevented this when we conducted our focus groups is that if it seemed like there were people not speaking up the moderator actively asked to get ideas from all participants. This made the conversation more balanced and allowed everyone to voice their opinion. Even though this encourages quieter participants to speak up there is still no way to ensure that participants, didn't change their mind because of another participant. When a participant did change their mind, it was noted.

Subjects and Settings

A total of seven students participated in the study. The seven youths were clients from a private counselling center in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. Among the seven counseling center participants, Six identified as female and one identified as male; five participants

identified as heterosexual and two identified their sexual orientation as "fine." It should be noted that the two participants who identified their sexual orientation as "fine" were both 10 years old. Participants' ages ranged from 10 years old to 15 years old; all seven participants were White/Caucasian. Counseling center participants were offered pizza and gift cards for their participation.

The focus group session took place in a common room with an area for eating pizza (the arts and crafts space) and a discussion section with couches and lounge chairs. There was an observation window with a curtain that was closed to ensure privacy. The PIs and center staff were in separate rooms away from the focus groups.

Materials

A standard focus group format was employed, comprised of 18 open-ended questions centering around perceptions as well as prevention methods of cyberbullying and self-disclosure. To ascertain participants' awareness / definitions / recognition of cyberbullying, 4 scenarios were included for participants' assessment.

The questions solicited participant's views pertaining to knowledge about cyberbullying, self-disclosure, bullying behaviors, etc. Six or eight chairs and a sofa were placed in a circle around a coffee table. In all of the focus group sessions, participants were audiotaped using two Olympus VN 7200 recorders which were set approximately two feet apart on a table in front of the subjects, with facilitators at either end of the table. Students were informed when the recorders began operating.

Procedure

Parental consent was obtained before conducting the sessions at the counseling center because participants were minors. Participants also filled in assent forms to signify their willingness to participate.

The participants were brought by a counselor to the room where they were met by the moderators and PIs who introduced themselves and explained what the study was about. The participants were asked a general question about cyberbullying. On obtaining several responses, the moderator asked additional questions until all relevant views had been expressed. The moderator then moved to the next question. If the children digressed from the question, they were allowed to continue for a time before the moderator guided them back to the original point. The session lasted approximately one hour.

Findings

When conducting this focus group seven major themes came up and they were; technology, audience, power, empathy, prevention, types of cyberbullying, and intent. All seven participants came to the same consensus about all six themes, with the exception of intention. Some of these themes were similar to researchers themes and some of these themes were never touched upon by researchers.

Technology is to blame

When the participants were initially asked what they thought cyberbullying was all seven participants agreed that cyberbullying is something that must be done online whether people can see it or not. When the students were discussing their perceptions, one students did not see texting as a form on online communication. When they were asked about the scenario with Jill and Katie texting one another, one participant said, "I don't think it's really cyberbullying unless

they were doing it online" (Alyssa, 13) implying that texting isn't done online. Alex, the proctor then said, "Well anything online will be considered cyberbullying even if it is texting because you are still sending through over the internet". After being informed that texting is counted as something that is done online the participant changed her answer and said that she would consider the scenario cyberbullying. Researchers have the same view as the participant in this case. While there are several definition of cyberbullying amongst researchers, they all come to the same consensus that anything that is done online is considered cyberbullying.

Audience makes things worse

Four participants perceived cyberbullying as having an audience for various reasons including, the fact that when something is open to the public anyone can jump in and because it can spread quickly. One female participant said, "like if its open to the public, like if it's Instagram or something in the comment section the, like it is still, but like I think it's worse if everyone can see it" (Unknown). Another female participant stated, "I think they should, like, don't continue it out in the open because then other people can say even more mean things, if they are rooting for the other person" (Cathy, 10). The third participant stated, "if you, like, put something out online it can like spread really easily" (Katrina, 13). The way that all four participants discussed cyberbullying with an audience suggest that having an audience only elevates the severity of the issue. For example, a male participant mentioned a post that dealt with Mario, a fictional video game character. He said he read a post that said Mario was an "Italian plumber, made by Japanese people, who looks Mexican, speaks English, jumps like a black man, and grabs coins like a Jew" (Justin, 12). This post can be considered offensive because it includes several stereotypes of groups that are oppressed. Because this post is open to the public it can spread very quickly the more people share it amongst one another. It can also

lead to people adding to the post and commenting other offensive things underneath the post. So not only is the post offensive now it has spread to several thousands of people and could have several hateful comments that follow. Due to the audience, a small cyberbullying scenario easily turned into a much larger and more severe cyberbullying issue. It is important to note that researchers didn't discuss audiences in their definition or perceptions of cyberbullying. One study mentioned that bullying online has the capability of having a large audience (Davison & Stein, 2014) but that was all that was mentioned.

Power over Victims

Another point a participant made when describing their perceptions of cyberbullying was having power over another person. When discussing the scenario with Sharon and Breanna IM-ing one another using derogatory terms and asking if this was considered cyberbullying, a participant stated that they were unsure because it wasn't clear how the recipient of the message was feeling. The participant stated "They're both like doing it at each other so it's not like one has more power over the other and putting the person down. Like sometimes friends like joke around but then their fine the next day because they were both joking so it just like depends (Katrina, 13). The way that the participant spoke about power led to the conclusion that in determining if a case is to be considered cyberbullying or not, detecting who has the upper hand in the scenario would help because if you can tell who holds the power in the situation you can detect who the victim is. Power helps indicate a clear victim which can help determine whether cases are to be considered cyberbullying or not.

As mentioned earlier, a white male participant mentioned a post that dealt with Mario, a fictional video game character. He said he read a post that said Mario was an "Italian plumber,

made by Japanese people, who looks Mexican, speaks English, jumps like a black man, and grabs coins like a Jew" (Justin, 12). It should be noted that earlier in the discussion the same participant stated that he believed racism was a big part of cyberbullying. So, while this post is targeting a fictional character it was posted online so that anyone could see it. This post only incorporates stereotypes about minorities who don't have the upper hand in society. In this case it's very clear to detect a victim in this scenario. The lack of power helped the participant distinguish this example as cyberbullying. It should be noted that this is one of the major themes that also comes up in researcher's definitions and perceptions of cyberbullying. A majority of researchers use the same language as the participants in the focus group. It should also be noted that while this is a major theme not all researchers include having power over another in their definitions of cyberbullying.

Types of cyberbullying

When asked how they perceive cyberbullying the participant interpreted it as different types of cyberbullying. The type of cyberbullying they mention were photo releases, blackmail, repetitive, and derogatory language. When asked what she thought cyberbullying was, 13-year-old Alyssa said, "with, like, sexual images, that's, like, a big thing that's wrong on the internet". She later explained that when she said sexual images she meant naked people. She continued by saying, "I heard that a picture is worth a thousand words. So, like people can say so many things about just one photo". She believed that photos were one of the worst kinds of cyberbullying; she emphasized the impact a picture has over words. This continues to put an emphasis on the audience component because Alyssa talks about how many thing people can say about one photo which means there is an audience involved. One of the reasons Alyssa believes that this is one of

the worse kinds of cyberbullying is because this is exposing someone's full self without their permission to an audience.

When discussing whether or not the scenario with Jill and Katie was considered cyberbullying, 12-year-old Justin stated that he did believe it was cyberbullying but he said, "if it was just like they were out in public and it happened and they refused to talk to each other and they like started texting and arguing I don't think that's as bad but if it was like a picture that started all that, I would consider that more cyberbullying". Justin was comparing different types of cyberbullying and emphasizing that sharing images is "more" cyberbullying that just words.

Continuing that discussion about perception of cyberbullying another participant stated, "kind of going of what Alyssa was saying about nudes and stuff; using it as blackmail" (Mary, 15). This is a little different than sharing a photo online to a major audience but instead it's the threat of doing so that is what is the participant considers cyberbullying. This emphasizes the point on how audiences elevate severity and how it can be used as a weapon for a cyberbully.

Another type of cyberbullying that was addressed was repetitive cyberbullying. A female participant mentioned that "bullying usually represents repetition, has repetition in it because if you are bullying just regularly bullying you usually do it over and over again." (Alyssa, 13). This was a response to the scenario about Sharon and Breanna and their nightly interactions. Another female participant responded to the same scenario stated, "I think eventually if they keep calling each other names like that, one of them is going to start to take it seriously and that could lead to cyberbullying" (Unknown). Both participants were talking about repetition but Alyssa was discussing more temporal repetition while the other participant was talking about content repetition. Both types of repetition in this scenario appear to go hand in hand. Both participant

did come to the same conclusion that both these repetitions can start of innocent but ultimately will lead into a hurtful scenario. It's something that slowly escalates into a problem. The two participants used repetition to detect early sign of cyberbullying.

Empathy with Bullies

While all participants agreed that cyberbullying is a problem and there isn't ever a good time to cyberbully anyone, all participants took a softer approach to why the bullies do what they do. One male participant who admitted that he has been bullied before struggles to empathize completely with the bullies. He alternates between calling them names and trying to understand them. He states, "I think that part of the reason is because I think bullies who cyberbully, they might be cowardly bullies who are scared to face the consequences of head up bullying" (Justin, 12). He then later goes on to say, "I don't think people go on Facebook and stuff to bully people, I think it just kind of happens in the heat of the moment" (Justin, 12). It is completely possible that the reason why Justin struggles to completely empathize with bullies is because he has experienced it himself in real life. It's difficult to empathize with people who cause you harm whether it is physically or emotionally.

Other participants were empathizing more with the cyberbullies. One participant stated, "Part of the reason why cyberbullying even happens is because that one person that is being the bully is trying to make them self feel better but it's not worth it because in the end you're only hurting yourself and others" (Mary, 15). The same participant goes on to say, "kind of what you, he was saying but I think people are more peer pressured to targeting certain people because that's what the popular kids and the crowd is going with so you might not want to necessarily, cyberbullying it just happens because you're pressured to do so" (Mary, 15). These participants

saw things from the bully's point of view rather than the victim which is why it was easier to empathize.

Another reason why it was easier for the participants to empathize with the bully was because they all discussed "unaware" cyberbullying. Having all the student mention unaware cyberbullying makes it easier to see it from the bully's perspective and how they may not acknowledge that what they are posting is harming someone else. One participant stated, "I think you should be like really careful if you post something. Like just think about what people might say because you don't want to get your feelings hurt" (Emily, 13).

Another reason why participants went with a softer approach on the bullies is because none of them wanted to be perceived as a bully. It's much easier to justify someone else's case if you have been in the same position. When discussing the scenario with Sharon and Breanna IM-ing each other and being asked if this was considered cyberbullying one participant said, "it happened to me and my friend Maya like when we text each other like occasionally we just joke around and just say mean stuff to each other but we both know it's face and because when we, almost like what everyone else was saying it depends if it's in a joking manner" (Cathy, 10). Researchers did not discuss this theme. Instead most of the research focused on the act itself and did not give touch upon why people think bullies bully.

Intentional Bullying

When it came to perception of cyberbullying whether the bully was aware of his or her own actions came up. At first one participant stated, "Cyberbullying is just like purposely hurting someone's feeling like over social media or text or texting" (Katrina, 13). The key word here is purposely because this means the person is aware of what they are doing. Later, another

participant went on to say "I think you should be like really careful if you post something. Like just think about what people might say because you don't want to get your feelings hurt" (Emily, 13). This would mean that the person is necessarily aware of their actions and then when the proctor, Alex asked, "So it's more like the responsibility of the person like in control of their own social media?" the participant responded by saying yes. This leads to the conclusion that both unaware and aware cyberbullying are other forms of cyberbullying. One is not more severe than the other so it is the job of everyone online to check yourself to make sure you're not cyberbullying anyone else.

For repetition, power balance and the use of an electronic device the participants and the researchers' views were the same. When it came to intent they had some disagreements. Most researchers believe that cyberbullying needs to be intentional whereas all participants apart from one believed that it is possible to cyberbully someone without knowing that you are. The participant also mentioned that it is hard to figure out the intent of someone online because you don't know what they truly mean when they post something because you can't always accurately detect emotions through a post.

Prevention

All seven participants had similar methods of prevention for cyberbullying. They came to the consensus that if you were online more the more likely you were to be cyberbullied. All seven participants took a more of a restrictive approach for the victims and potential victims. Their solution was not to stop the bully but instead to minimize the amount of cyberbullying for victims and potential victims by restricting their access to the online world. It's interesting that all participants felt this way because they all agreed that cyberbullying is bad and that no one should do it, but not one participant came up with a solution that would stop the bully from being

a bully. For example, the solution for Cathy to get the victims to not go online as much, she says, "There's an app called I forget what it's called but it's an app that says how much you use your apps. And if you have safari it will say how much you use that so if I ever got the app when I get a phone I would want to keep it under 50% a day." (Cathy, 10).

The reasoning behind taking a more restrictive approach was because it can be hard to detect who needs to be stopped because there are a lot of grey areas that haven't been addressed when it came to distinguishing cases of cyberbullying. Not only is it difficult to get around the grey areas sometimes bullies don't know they are being bullies so how do you stop someone who doesn't know they are being a bully. If they do know they are a being a bully there is no way we can stop them if they don't feel bad for what they are doing mainly because they don't have to witness their victims suffering. One participant said, "Yeah I think it's a problem that if they are just being a lot more mean than they would be in person usually then you can't tell how the person is reacting to it" (Emily, 13). While another participant said that cyberbullies "are not aware of the consequences of what they were actually saying like in person, like you can't beat someone up physically but you can beat someone up mentally.

When it came to discuss prevention, researchers tend to look to people who hold more power like legislators, teachers, parents, etc. for help. A lot has been done in several states in terms of passing certain legislations on cyberbullying and bullying. Researchers also emphasize getting the help of teachers in schools to address problems of cyberbullying whether it be teaching the teacher how to properly intervene and work to prevent bullying (Juvonen, Graham & Schuster, 2006). The participants in this study took a more individual approach to preventing cyberbullying. They decided that it was best to restrict people from using social media too much. They believed it would lessen their chances of being cyberbullied and would make them more

content. Research has shown that the people who report lower levels of life satisfaction are people who spend more time on Facebook (Vigil & Dennis Wu, 2015). Although the participants approach may be more restrictive, it seems like a quick easy solution almost like a band aid. So maybe this could be the first step in dealing with cyberbullying and then the following steps could deal with the higher up authorities.

Discussion

It is important to understand how adolescents perceive cyberbullying to help distinguish what they consider cyberbullying to be because as seen throughout this study that adolescents view cyberbullying different than researchers. Understanding how they view cyberbullying can help future researchers with their definitions of cyberbullying. Overall the participants had some similar views as to what constitutes as cyberbullying. They did include some of the common themes that researchers also include in their definitions. The common themes that were also brought up by the participants were repetition, power balance, intent, and the use of an electronic device.

Strengths and Weakness

One of the strengths of this project is the methodology. We gave the participants the opportunity to speak for themselves, so they had some control of where the discussion led. During the focus group, there was actually a participant who had been bullied which was helpful to compare that participant's answers to participants who never mentioned being bullied. It gave us insight to another component of this project that I didn't think about before.

One of the study's weaknesses is the possibility that one participant changed other participants' minds. Facilitators tried to minimize this by making sure everyone got a chance to speak but there is no way we can tell if participants changed their minds because of someone else or not. Another weakness of this study is the fact that I didn't conduct the focus groups. Since I wasn't able to conduct the focus groups I wasn't able to ask follow up questions and I had to rely on the transcript. Also, for future research I would conduct this study with multiple focus groups because my sample is too small and too homogeneous. The focus group I was working with lacked diversity so for future researchers working on children's perception should look to conduct more focus groups with more diversity in them.

Acknowledgements

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