WHAT LIES BEHIND A CYBER BULLY? EXPLORING THE FACTORS INFLUENCING ENGAGEMENT IN CYBER BULLYING

Aakash Taneja
Richard Stockton College of New Jersey
aakash.taneja@stockton.edu

Kayla Zakrzewski
Richard Stockton College of New Jersey
zakrzewk@go.stockton.edu

ABSTRACT

The advents of technology and the Internet is affecting youth in both a positive and negative manner. Cyber bullying is an issue that has become a worldwide phenomenon. Bullies use technology to reach out to their targets whenever and wherever. It is a serious and harmful aggressive behavior that cannot be ignored. However little research has been conducted on the reasons for why individuals engage in this behavior. In this study, we derive a model of the antecedents of individuals’ engagement in cyber bullying behavior.

Keywords: Cyber bullying, Electronic aggression, Internet, Technology misuse, Online aggression

INTRODUCTION

The advents of technology and the Internet is affecting youth in both positive and negative manner. The availability of text messages, instant messengers, chat rooms, and emails are a necessity in today’s online environment to connect and communicate with each other. However, the increasing use of technology in the 21st century has also opened the gateway to hide behind some form of electronic devices and have the power to taunt, tease, or harass others, commonly known as cyber bullying.

Cyber bullies instill a constant feeling of concern, vulnerability, suffering and pain, and someone who is being bullied suffers from emotional and physical feelings of distraught. As a result of the increase in the use of technology and a cyber-bully’s anonymity, it’s been extremely difficult for a victim to detect who they are being bullied or stalked by. A home which was once a safe haven is now a place where individuals could face harm and discomfort. This causes the offender to feel powerful and in control. They sit behind a screen and dictate what is being said. For example, college students often take part in web sites and forums to engage in online college gossiping. These websites may be created with the intentions to be a funny joke, although some of the messages can potentially damper someone’s self-esteem.

Although research on traditional bullying has been done for years, research on cyber bullying is limited (Twyman et al. 2010). To glean a better understanding on why young school and college students engage in cyber bullying behavior, this study investigates what influences someone’s attitude towards cyber bullying. To fulfill this objective, our research aims towards identifying
the factors associated with cyber bullying that can help predict someone’s attitude towards cyber bullying which in turns influences engagement in cyber bullying.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The first two sections present an overview of traditional bullying and cyber bullying. The third section provides the similarities and differences between traditional and cyber bullying. Next, we discuss the factors influencing attitude towards cyber bullying to develop the research model. In the last we present our conclusions.

**TRADITIONAL BULLYING**

Bullying can be described as the act of unprovoked verbal or physical harassment, usually on an individual who is smaller and or weaker than the bully. According to Patchin and Hinduja (2011), bullying is “generally equated to the concept of harassment—a form of unprovoked aggression often directed repeatedly toward another individual or group of individuals.” Most of the time traditional bullying takes place in school and a bully can be commonly seen as taunting, teasing or demeaning their victim. Bullies have a tendency of feeling superior over their victim due to the fact that they are physically larger, stronger and popular than their victim and often gain support from the people around them (Erdur-Baker 2010). When bullying continuously happens time after time it tends to become more harmful and someone who is being bullied suffers from emotional and physical feelings of distraught. Traditional bullying has been predicted to decrease with age as bullies tend to grow up and grow out of their “feeling superior” phase.

**CYBER BULLYING**

The most recent epidemic on the rise involving children, teenagers, and young adults is cyber bullying. The increase of technology in the 21st century has removed the schoolyard parameters from traditional bullying and led to a new way to harm others. Although there is no universal definition of cyber bullying (Kraft and Wang 2010), it can be termed as a frequently repeated aggressive and deliberate behavior carried out by a group or an individual at a victim who cannot defend him- or her-self easily that causes willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices (Calvete et al. 2010; Patchin and Hinduja 2011). This way cyber bullies are able to belittle their victim while being anonymous and a victim of cyber bullying could be completely unaware of the bully. (Huang and Chou 2010). Given that the physical distance between the bully and its victim is not visible, the bully will say things that they wouldn’t say if they were standing face-to face (Patchin and Hinduja 2011).

Cyber bullies often resort to flaming (the use of electronic messages with hostile and vulgar language); slandering (sending cruel images or rumors about others to spoil their reputations or social relationships); impersonation (hacking into someone’s account in order cause trouble for to the victim, or harm the victim’s reputation and friendships); defamation (spreading secrets or embarrassing information; happy slapping (recording images/videos with cell phones and later sharing with friends, posted online, or distributed electronically; deliberate exclusion of someone from an online group; sending intimidating messages (Calvete et al. 2010).

Cyber bullies aren’t necessarily bigger than its victim but may feel more powerful hiding behind a computer or cell phone. There is no time restriction for a cyber-bully and they have the access
to their victim readily available at any point and time. This creates a feeling of being trapped as victims could be targeted in their own homes. The issue of cyber bullying has become such a severe issue that state governments have either enacted or creating laws specific to this behavior (Hinduja and Patchin 2012).

**TRADITIONAL BULLYING VERSUS CYBER BULLYING**

The characteristics of traditional and cyber bullying share a common similarity of being both intentional and repetitive. A bully’s main goal is to make someone feel bad in order to make them feel better. Bullies feel a way of dealing with their pain, anger, and frustration is to take it out on others. They feel bullying is a solution to their problems. Also common to both traditional and cyber bullying are factors like lower academic performance, higher levels of stress, low self-esteem, changes in interests, and depression (Twyman et al. 2010).

Traditional bullying and cyber bullying may share a few characteristics but in reality cyber bullying looks and feels different. The increase of communication through the use of text messages, instant messengers, chat rooms, and emails is a major reason of cyber bullying. Individuals feel more powerful when they are behind their phone or their computer. The use of non-verbal communication allows them to say things they wouldn’t feel comfortable enough say to someone’s face. While in traditional bullying, it is not easy for the victim to defend himself or herself, in cyber bullying, the victim can comparatively easily fight back with a computer (Huang and Chou 2010). Moore and colleagues (2012) have recently reported some important differences between traditional bullying and cyber bullying Table 1 shows some important differences between traditional bullying and cyber bullying.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Bullying</th>
<th>Cyber Bullying</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victims are aware of their bully</td>
<td>Bullies are anonymous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually takes place on school grounds</td>
<td>Takes place anywhere anytime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually larger in size and more popular</td>
<td>No significant size difference; more computer literate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal than can possibly lead to violence</td>
<td>Verbal and viral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No use of technology</td>
<td>Use Technology to coordinate attacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease with time / age. Incident may fade away from memory</td>
<td>Attacks using forums or websites have some degree of permanency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1:**

**Traditional Bullying versus Cyber bullying- Differences**

**RESEARCH MODEL**

**Cyber bullying Engagement**

Cyber bullying can take place in various forms. We use the second order self-reported cyber bullying engagement as a dependent variable that encompass three first order dimensions- i) multimedia uploads (uploading photos / videos), ii) texting, and iii) social networking (Boulton et al. 2012). Although attitude is considered to be an important predictor of intention which
predicts predictor, it has been argued that due to the indirect nature of cyber bullying it is very difficult to identify the intention of this behavior (Nocentini et al. 2010). From a theoretical perspective the attitude-behavior relationship has a prominent place in social and behavioral science (McBroom and Reed 1992) and IS literature. Based on this, we derive a research model (Figure 1) and provide various hypotheses to identify the factors that influence attitude towards cyber bullying engagement which in turn influences cyber bullying engagement.

**Attitude:** Various researchers have reported significant links between traditional bullying attitudes with behavior with varying effect sizes (Boulton et al. 2012). Boulton and colleagues (2012) conceptualized bullying to include three interrelated dimensions: i) attitude towards bullying behavior, ii) attitude towards bullying perpetrators, and iii) attitude towards bullying victims. We surmise that attitude towards cyber bullying is a second order formative construct formed by the three first order dimensions and is an important predictor of cyber-bullying engagement. An individual with more favorable attitude towards cyber bulling is more likely to engage in cyber bullying as compared to someone with less favorable attitude. Therefore,

**H1: Attitude towards cyber bullying is positively related to cyber bullying engagement**

**Perceived enjoyment:** It is defined as finding enjoyment or fun taking part in an aggressive or verbal harassment. Bullies tend to engage in bullying as they find enjoyment in watching their victims tremble in fear. As observed by Twyman and colleagues (2010), many individuals cyber bully because they consider it to be entertaining and funny. Therefore,

**H2: Perceived enjoyment/fun is positively related to attitude towards cyber bullying**

**Retaliation:** Retaliation is when an individual attacks someone with the intent of seeking revenge. Bullies argue that they retaliate as a result of being provoked by their victim. Such cyber bullies are typically the victim of traditional bullying, who are unable to defend themselves in real world. Individuals who were once bullied may seek revenge on the individual who had caused them harm and distress. “The phenomenon of ‘tech-savvy’ victims of traditional bullying ‘getting their own back’ on their bullies through the internet or mobile phone is sometimes referred to as ‘the revenge of the nerds’.” (Vandebosch and Van Cleemput 2009). Therefore,

**H3: Retaliation is positively related to attitude towards cyber bullying**

**Empathy:** Empathy is defined as an understanding of and entering into another's feelings and experiencing their emotions and is found to be negatively related to bullying (Ang and Goh 2010). Bullying someone through the use of electronic devices allows the bully to say hurtful derogatory comments that they wouldn’t be able to say to someone’s face. There is no face to face contact between the cyber bully and their victim. Cyber bullies are not physically witnessing the pain and suffering they are causing to their victim; there is no feeling of empathy. Therefore,

**H4: Empathy is negatively related to attitude towards cyber bullying**

**Jealousy:** Twyman and Colleagues (2010) report that tensions rise among teens when dealing with relationship issues, envying, and ganging up, thereby making jealousy an important characteristic that impacts bullies attitude. Also, teenagers often suffer under intense academic pressure from parents and become jealous of high achievers (Huang and Chou 2010). Bullies
bully their victims because they may be jealous that all the attention is always on them. Jealousy is a common motive for cyber abuse (Strom and Strom 2005). Therefore,

**H5: Jealousy is positively related to attitude towards cyber bullying**

**Anonymity:** The anonymity available to the individuals on cyberspace takes away their socially accepted roles and allows them to express themselves freely without any restraints, be ruder, harsh or even threaten other individuals (Mason 2008). The bullies can open free email / online accounts that do not need any verification, hide behind computer screens and avoid being recognized and punished. The individuals who believe that they will not be found by anyone getting involved in cyber bullying others will have a lesser degree of inhibition, and hence a more favorable attitude as compared to others. Therefore,

**H6: Anonymity is positively related to attitude towards cyber bullying**

**Moderating Effects**

**Strain:** Individuals who suffer from a feeling of strain take out their stress by retaliating and bullying someone else. Patchin and Hinduja (2011) argued that the risk of taking part in deviant behavior such as bullying is higher for individuals who undergo strain and causing pain on another individual as it relieves a bully of the pain they are enduring. An individual facing high strain may respond aggressively in seeking revenge whereas those who are facing less strain are more likely to bear the situation. Therefore,

**H7: Retaliation is more positively related to attitude towards cyber bullying for people who are under high strain than those who rank lower in strain**

**Vengefulness:** People often take revenge for various reasons. However, a malevolent desire for revenge, known as Vengefulness, is different for different individuals and is a predisposition oriented toward revenge seeking behavior. A highly vengeful person may respond aggressively in seeking revenge against a perceived transgressor whereas those who are less vengeful are more likely to choose to avoid the offender (Workman 2012). Therefore,

**H8: Retaliation is more positively related to attitude towards cyber bullying for people who rank high in vengefulness than those who rank lower in vengefulness.**

**Gender:** Through the use of electronic devices cyber bullies don’t physically see how they are hurting their victim. This causes them to feel even more powerful as they continue to tease, taunt, and harass their victim. Males feel less empathy towards their victims than females (Ang and Goh 2010). Males have a tendency of being more cold hearted than females. They can say hurtful remarks to someone and feel no remorse. Females are more likely to regret the things they said while they were mad or upset. Therefore,

**H9: Empathy is more positively related to attitude towards cyber bullying for males as compared to females**

Compared to males females have a greater tendency of being jealous of others. Jealously turns into inner rage. Girls feel the need to take out this rage on someone else, preferably the other female they are jealous of.

**H10: Jealousy is more positively related to attitude towards cyber bullying for females as compared to males**
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We will conduct a survey to collect the data and partial least square analysis to validate the results.

CONCLUSION

Cyber bullying is a severe problem faced by individuals between the ages of seven to eighteen. When watching the news and reading up on magazines it is extremely heart wrenching to hear and read about the harm cyber bullying has caused children, young adults, and their families. To provide an effective support system, there is first a need to better understand the role played by technology on bullying, hence the cyber bullying.

There is a need to properly understand the factors related to cyber bullying so as to develop appropriate training intervention programs and also identify the person susceptible to this behavior. People need be educated on the signs portrayed by someone who can be a cyber-bully, how to handle the situation, and how to be a support system for these children in need. This paper will make a significant, value-added contribution to current thinking by identifying the factors behind cyber bullying, what signs to look for in someone who is being bully. It will raise awareness as individuals will know what to look for and how to prevent this deviant act of bullying from spreading.
References:


