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Cyberbullying: A Hostile Environment Perpetuating Itself

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In recent years cyberbullying has emerged as a national concern with more cases of children resorting to suicide to escape online harassment. Traditional face to face bullying in schools has been a constant issue adolescents have dealt with in their school career. Information and communications technology has enabled this harassment to continue online and become a part of the established bully culture at schools. Although the physical aspect of bullying is unable to permeate online, the internet still presents a dangerous atmosphere where teens continue to harass their peers. Recent studies have shed light on its methods, characteristics of participants, and the attributes that fuel the continuation.

Informational and communications technology (ICT), once a luxury to those who could afford it, has become a common personal accessory in today's society of affordable mobile phones, tablets, and lightweight laptops. The devices have penetrated the adolescent market, and it shows with their usage. 77% of teens reported having a cell phone, while 25% of them use a smartphone. They text, and they text a lot. The average time spent on the internet daily is 3 hours, surpassing TV watching. Teenagers now have their own personal computers in their bedroom. ICT is also now being used by children under the age of 2 years. A recent American study showed that 21% of children under the age of 2 have used a computer, and 14% use them on a daily basis. A large number of adolescents own ICT, and they are spending their time online communicating with each other. Rather than make new friends, they bring their real life friends into their virtual world. Concurrently, the hostile bullying environment from their schools is also brought into this environment, creating a dangerous battleground. 20-40% of children have experienced an instance of cyberbullying at least once in their lives. Teenagers are well aware of the problem, and report it as a major issue. Recent statistics show astonishing numbers. 70% of a

school population reported being a victim of cyberbullying. 53% reported taking on the role of the cyberbully, and 76% reported watching it happen.

Traditional Bullying vs. Cyberbullying

Early research categorized cyberbullying as a direct extension of traditional face to face bullying. Traditional bullying is intentional harm or harassment of another individual, creating a power imbalance between the bully and the victim. The harassment is applied through different forms of physical, verbal and nonverbal methods. Usually it is reciprocated, in order to maintain power over the victim, and can involve other individuals as bystanders witnessing the incident. It has been assumed for some time cyberbullying was just a reflection of what occurs at school, but information is showing this is not the case; the power balance and location has changed. Victims may not know who is harassing them, and kids who may be too timid to bully in real life, have taken to the internet to become more aggressive online than they are in real life.

Teens expect to be safe when they are home, but the bullying that occurs in schools is continuing at home. No longer does it happen at or around the school grounds. Cyberbullying is the same intentional reciprocated harm and harassment as the traditional method, however it is achieved through electronic media means. The power scale is no longer measured by physical prowess, but by computer literacy. Adolescents are able to spread gossip, send insults, and deceive easily as little skill is required to do so. They will break into computers to change passwords. More advanced skills are required for breaking into computers to steal private or protected information, spread gossip via email and mobile phones, and forwarding or posting entrusted confidential information. Other examples include installing viruses, exclusion, "outing" someone, masquerading around as a different person, "flaming", "trolling", and kicking people off message boards. Students with internet connected cell phones are now able to cyberbully

while they are at school. They find ways to use them in class without getting caught, they use them in the bathroom, and they figure out ways to bypass parent password features. ICT has helped create an environment of 24/7 nonstop bullying that is continuously changing due to the evolving nature of the internet.

Proactive and Reactive Aggression

Early research on the cyberbully phenomenon focused on finding significant demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and income. The findings are inconclusive, as various studies present conflicting information. New ideas presented go beyond these demographic factors to scrutinize the methods and motivations of adolescent's online aggressive behavior. Their behavior can be categorized as proactive or reactive aggression. Proactive aggression is intentional, unprovoked, and instrumental harassment. Adolescents use proactive aggression to target and dominate others, or to obtain a resource or goal. Creating a hostile website that targets an individual is proactive, and is more likely to happen with older teens, and teens with a computer located in their bedroom. Social media services provides another instrument of proactive aggression.

Reactive aggression is a reaction to provoked proactive aggression. The most common examples are commenting or posting embarrassing photos and videos of other individuals. These actions are common amongst females and adolescents in higher grades. Aggressive messaging is another common method of reactive aggression. Significant predictors of these actions include having a bedroom computer, the students' class level, and these apply to both males and females. Reactive aggression is just as dangerous as proactive aggression as it plays a role in the perpetuation of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullies

Real life bullies are often cyberbullies. Studies have shown 33% of traditional bullies partake in cyberbullying, and 50% of cyberbullies also consider themselves traditional bullies. There are common characteristics found in these aggressors. They feel disconnected from school and their peers, have below average grades, and dabble in drug consumption. They assault other individuals, damage property, steal, and have had contact with the police; they are assumed to possess fewer social skills than their peers, however this is untrue. Cyberbullies in fact have well developed social skills that extends to the internet. Studies of an online learning course found cyberbullies to be assertive, approachable, confident, relaxed, open, precise, and competent in online discussions. Unfortunately, these socially affluent students use these skills to harass other individuals online, whether it is marginalizing an opponent or strengthening their social position among a group. They can suffer from “dissociative imagination,” where losing the ability to see nonverbal reactions and cues from others enables them to ignore the real consequences of their actions. In school, cyberbullies are at the core of the various social networks, and they build networks with other cyberbullies. They spend more time on the internet, and typically talk more on a cell phone. Online social networks are their main channel of aggression and they diversify themselves across a greater amount compared to non-bullies. Their second main channel to bully their victims online is through internet chat services. When gender is compared, boys are trying out more methods of cyberbullying compared to their female counterparts.

The Victim

One third of traditional bullied victims are also victims of cyberbullying. Many characteristics define them. Offline they suffer from depression, substance abuse, emotional distress, and low self-esteem. They have poor relationships with their parents and have an above

average rate of absences at school. They are angry, frustrated, sad, yet socially competent. When they are online they can be dramatic, attentive, friendly, animated, open minded, and uncertain. Instances of being cyberbullied increase for boys and girls who spend more time on the internet, use instant messaging, and use webcams, yet they participate in fewer social networks. In the western hemisphere, females are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying; however, in Middle Eastern countries, males are found to experience more instances of online aggression. Males have a greater chance of being a victim by participating in risky internet behavior. Examples of risky internet behavior include inviting or accepting a request to meet an acquaintance met online and the sharing of information with another individual. Frequent usage of the internet positively predicts being a victim for both Middle Eastern females and males. Frequent use of communication tools is also a predictor for Middle Eastern and Western female victims. In school social networks, victims are located at the edge of social connections among their peers. They are more open towards integrating with new people and claim to have a lot of friends, however this perception is false since they have not been accepted by their peers.

Bully/Victim

Bully/Victims are children who participate in both aspects of cyberbullying. Bully/Victims are more extroverted than their peers, and their characteristics distinguish them from the other individuals involved in cyber bullying. They actively bully other students online, and also are victims themselves of cyberbullying aggression. Females are found to frequently use the internet, and males show patterns of risky internet behavior. Online they are heavy users of social networks. At school they are more socially preferred, making them more popular than their bully and victim classmates. They act as the bridge between school social networks, and hold a central communicative role in their classes. It is perceived they exhibit a form of mental

dexterity that enables them to maintain contact between all the social groups they belong to. This social quality enables them to cyberbully others, yet it also exposes them to more instances of being cyberbullied.

Enabling the Hostile Arena

The internet and the online experience it provides is a haven for cyberbully behaviors. Factors not transferable to the traditional environment enable this dangerous environment to thrive. The online method of communication via discussion boards, using open ended and ill-defined questions, can create opportunities for individuals to manipulate discussions and provoke others. Today's ICT allows for adolescents to access the internet from virtually any location, allowing cyberbully aggression to occur at school and home. Students with a computer in the bedroom have been positively linked to the creation of hostile websites, yet location has really become irrelevant. When kids are truly motivated to be aggressive online, they will act out regardless of where they are and without fear of getting caught. Data permanence is a big differentiator between traditional and cyber bullying. Incidents of online aggression are forever captured by the internet machine of social networks, instant messaging, websites, and email. This enables cyberbully incidents to be saved, shared, and revisited countless times.

Anonymity

ICT has provided adolescents the ability to communicate in a manner unlike face to face communication. Rather than being in proximity and facing the person they are communicating with, children are now able to look at a screen regardless of location when communicating with their peers. This new communicative environment fosters cyberbullying. No longer do children feel the anxiety they have when physically in the presence of their peers. It decreases their fear of

being caught and provides a feeling of safety for bullies. More importantly it provides opportunities for children, who are not aggressive in real life, to don an aggressive personality. Something they would be reluctant to do in a real traditional face to face environment. A different level of confidence is provided by anonymity. Physical power is no longer relevant. Children believe they will not get caught or reprimanded by adults, nor will adults be able to monitor their activities.

Perpetuation

These attributes of the internet provide a ripe environment for proactive and reactive aggression to perpetuate itself. Data permanence allows a cyberbully incident to be shared among a greater audience of bystanders, creating more participants and consequences. Surprisingly, whereas adolescents are able to distinguish between the roles of a traditional bully incident, they are unable to distinguish the role of the bully, victim, and bystander in a cyberbully incident. Instead, they are only able to determine the method used in such incidents. This is caused by adolescents' retaliations to aggression, proactive or reactive. Teens perceive other individuals' behaviors as provocative and themselves as targets. They consider their retaliation to be a natural response to the threat, and their own proactive retaliatory behavior remains unchecked. This reciprocal effect of aggressions being traded back and forth among teens has created a common situation where the bully and victim are continuously changing roles. Studies show a primary motivation for adolescents' engagement of aggressive behavior, whether through messaging or posting defamatory comments, is this spontaneous retaliation. Children are actively disregarding their own aggressive behavior by placing the blame on the individual on the other side of the screen.

Parents

Adolescents believe parents are oblivious to the cyberbully environment they experience, and do not tell their parents for a variety of reasons. Children wish to be independent and they believe telling will make the problem worse. They lack confidence in adults. They don't believe adults would be able to track down the evidence, and would tell them to ignore it. They feel parents of a cyberbully wouldn't care to correct their aggressive child's behavior. They also believe that since incidents occur off school grounds, teachers are unable to correct the situation. The most important recurring reason why children don't inform their parents when they are cyberbullied is the fear that their ICT devices will be taken away, cutting off their connection to their online social world.

Poor parenting and low levels of parental involvement have been linked to increased online aggression of adolescents, whereas monitoring their activities has proved to reduce children's aggressive or delinquent behavior. Three methods of parent/child relationships and monitoring behaviors have been studied in order to find best method for parents to know about their children's activities. Child Disclosure describes an open and comfortable relationship between the child and parent, where information is spontaneously shared without prompting by the parent. Parent Solicitation occurs when parents seek information from their children or their children's friends. Parental Control involves parents enforcing rules and restrictions upon their children's online activities. Overall, Child Disclose has been linked to fewer instances of online aggression, and deviant and anti-social behavior. Parent Solicitation is linked to norm breaking behavior, and increases the likelihood of anti-social and deviant behavior. Parental Control is counterproductive and can lead to less socially responsible behaviors among children. Children wish to be in control of their own online decisions regarding their friends. Parents' intrusion into

this process can marginalize their relationship. Studies show that well-adjusted and better protected children have an open and caring relationship with their parents.

Canadian East Asian parents were found to be successful with a more controlling monitoring of their children's online activities. This was attributed to the cultural difference in parenting styles between European descent westerners and families of East Asian descent. Based on the teachings of Confucianism and Taoism, this style rejected individuality and self-expression. Distance was kept from the children, and parenting was perceived to be more of a training experience for their children. Westerners would look at this as controlling and lacking in caring experiences, however, this was the norm for Asian families and proved to be significant. Compared to their Caucasian peers, Asian children had lower levels of online aggression. When comparing proactive and reactive aggressions, Asian students participated in more proactive aggressions. There was, however, a significant difference in the overall amount of Caucasian aggressions, more reactive and fewer proactive. Caucasians are more aggressive overall. Interestingly, Asian females participated in more reactive aggressions, suggesting they could have been "westernized" by this western culture.

Conclusion

A new body of cyberbully research has provided a wealth of information. Limitations to the studies included location and style of school as well as quantity of the sample participants. Canadian based Asian participants may not represent Asian countries as a whole. An Australian religious school may not represent the public school environment, and the male and female cultural norms of Turkey may interfere when generalizing the findings with the rest of the world population. Solutions to the cyberbully epidemic suggest limiting of internet usage; however, that would be impractical when the benefits are considered. A better idea involved creating

education programs of prevention, protection, and ethical and responsible internet use for teenagers. International preventative measures were suggested for universal adoption; however, the differences found among the various cultures suggests this may not actually work.

Cyberbullying has become a menacing part of today's adolescent culture. It has turned into a global issue, and may increase as more youngsters become connected to the internet. As the issue is brought to national attention, increased awareness of the methods and motivations used may help slow down its growth.

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