Cyberbullying: Factors, Gender and a Group Plan

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There is no doubt that with all the advancements in social media it is easier than ever to reach a larger audience and that has its benefits in terms of collaboration and an immediate response to any topic. However, according to Neil Postman (1998), " … all technological change is a trade-off." With this innovation we must be prepared for the side effects that may be detrimental to our audience, however noble our intentions for the technology may have been. One such manifestation is cyberbullying. The same tools that are used to bring us together socially also include the ability for us to bring unwanted attention to individuals in an abusive manner.

This paper examines the issue of cyberbullying and how it effects society. It will specifically address the issue of gender as it relates to the responses by each group and looks at the relevant factors that add to this growing problem for teenagers and young adults.

My "travels" through technology have taken me to several sites and opened my eyes to the possibilities that exist for students as we move closer to integrating technology with the curriculum. Social media is a viable tool that can be used and incorporated as an extension of a collaborative effort for projects and basic communication between students. This form of collaboration presents a great opportunity for students to communicate without being confined to any specific location. In looking at how best to use this tool I discovered that, as with most innovations, it had also been used as a weapon and provided an easy vehicle by which to bully someone. In addition and in contrast to the traditional methods used to abuse and bully a student, social media and technology have now provided more in terms of scale and immediacy. Bullies were traditionally confined to a specific geographic location that a person could avoid. Cyber bullies have the added advantage of invading a person's cyber space making it more difficult to avoid the relentless taunting. They also enjoy anonymity which can make the abusive behavior

more intense and the fact that all of this bullying takes place on the Internet increases the

viewing audience and the length of time of the abuse.

Cyberbullying is a problem for many students and it is important to understand all the

factors that contribute to its proliferation. My first effort in researching this issue was to look at

the data associated with this growing problem.

My initial research started with the growth of technology among teenagers. Pew Research

Center (www.pewinternet.org) provided some definitive numbers that show how smartphones

are now in the hands of most teenagers. According to the web site, "Some 88% of teens have or

have access to cell phones or smartphones and 90% of those teens with phones exchange texts."

Beyond the social media apps, there is an almost constant communication using cellphones

which includes texting and the obvious phone calls. The data also showed that among the

genders, girls are more inclined to use the visually oriented social media tools than boys. The

information also shows that boys gravitate more towards video games than girls. The data also

highlighted the use of specific social media tools and the breakdown between how girls and boys
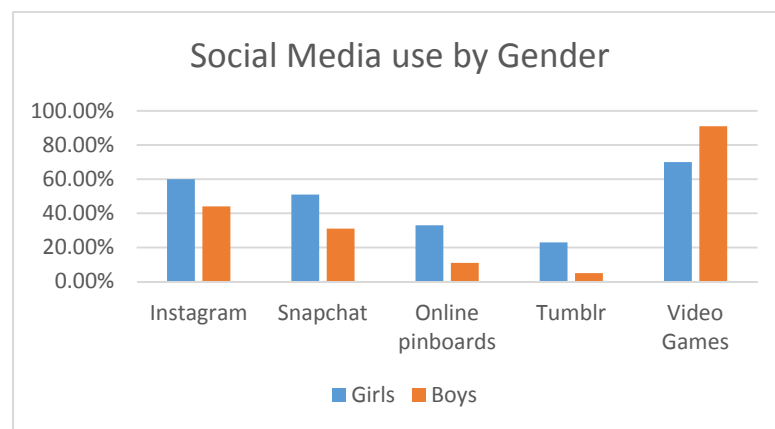
differ in terms of their use of video games.

Figure 1Pew Research Data Sept.25-Oct. 9, 2014 and Feb.10-Mar.16, 2015(n=1060 teens ages 13 to 17)

In looking at the data, it was apparent that the increase in cyberbullying has a direct correlation to the increase in the number of smartphones that are available to the sector of teenagers that were researched. The access to mobile devices has almost reached its saturation point so that most teenagers now use their phones as their central communication device. The numbers also reflect that African-Americans are the highest level of ethnic groups to have access to smartphones. The numbers of teens with cellphones does not drop by considerable numbers as a reflection of household income. The data supports that, at the very minimum, most teenagers have some form of cellular device that affords them a way to communicate. Even the basic phones have texting capabilities. These devices all provide at least one way to engage in cyberbullying. This gradual increase in access to technology also results in an increase in the abusive cyberbullying behavior.

Another important factor that was analyzed was cyberbullying as it related to other countries. A global perspective was necessary to rule out the idea that the issue of cyberbullying was specific to the United States. Several sources reported that cyberbullying is indeed a world-wide problem. In an online article by Computer Business Review (http://www.cbronline.com), "The survey covering 24 countries found that nearly 80% of residents worldwide say cyberbullying is a problem that needs dedicated attention from schools and parents." The numbers were quite varied and I was surprised to see that the leader in its awareness of cyberbullying was Indonesia, followed by Australia and Poland. Other sources reported similar numbers but many only surveyed parents. These numbers were obviously lower because many times cyberbullying is not reported to the parent or guardian. Many victims hide these incidents of abuse from their family and as a result the survey responses can be misleading. The influx of technology around the world proved that a physical location was irrelevant to the occurrences of

cyberbullying. The percentages of this type of behavior varied and were higher in some countries than the United States. In reviewing the articles related to this subject it was apparent that cyberbullying is a concern across the globe and the need to provide a comprehensive solution in and a collaborative approach between parents and educators is extremely necessary.

The data clearly supports that fact that cyberbullying is a serious problem and one that requires the attention of both educators and parents. Before anything can be done about this issue it is important to get a strong understanding of cyberbullying and how it effects a typical victim.

Two of the leading authorities on cyberbullying are Dr. Justin W. Patchin and Dr. Sameer Hinduja. These two professors have authored several articles and books about cyberbullying. They have a dedicated website, www.cyberbyllying.org and have defined this problem as, "Willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices." This definition, according to the website, addresses all the elements that make up cyberbullying. The intent must be willful or deliberate. The repeating nature of the behavior is important to categorize this issue. The inclusion of the word harm further accentuates the fact that a victim is affected by this behavior in a harmful manner. The last part of the definition includes the devices that can be used. The broad grouping to include "electronic devices" captures all other computerized technology that may not be defined as computers or cell phones. One aspect of this definition proves to be the source of debate among those who deal with this issue in schools and at home. The degree of harm that cyberbullying poses is one focal point that sometimes gets dismissed by authorities and can lead to some dire consequences.

In 2003 one victim of cyberbullying, Ryan Halligan ended his life by hanging himself in his home after receiving a two pronged attack by both a boy and a girl. The bullying started for Ryan early on as he suffered from various developmental issues related to language and motor

skills. His first encounter with a boy from school led to the traditional confrontations that define most bullying cases. The difference here was that Ryan actually developed a friendship with this classmate after an altercation. His new found friendship was quickly thwarted by rumors spread by this same classmate via an instant messaging service. Once this rumors spread, another girl from school contributed to Ryan anguish by posing as an interested party and causing Ryan to believe there was interest on her behalf. The cruel revelations by both parties lead Ryan to end his life.

Another similar case involved a 13 year-old girl who suffered from her own issues including Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and depression. Megan Meier pleaded with her parents to let her have a MySpace account and soon made a special connection with a boy named Josh. His initial communication indicated that he was interested in her but, similar to Ryan Halligan's abuser, Josh proved to be another bully who used this social media site to send offensive posts to Megan. Her excitement about her upcoming birthday party quickly turned to tragedy when she saw all the postings about her and she too decided to end her life by hanging herself in her bedroom closet.

These two cases deal with the extreme reactions to cyberbullying but should serve as an indicator to all who dismiss this type of activity as normal teenage banter or common horseplay between classmates. The problem is that the escalation of this abuse can multiply and spread like a virus. In Neil Postmans talk about technological change, he points out as his fourth idea about technological change, that, "Technological change is not additive, it is ecological." (1998) The same concept can be extended to cyberbullying. The rippling effect that negative comments on a message board or a social media site have, are not confined to the sender and recipient. The nature of this technology allows a wide audience to view and even participate in an exchange.

The degree of harm to a victim can grow exponentially as more people are presented with opportunity in real time. This threat is further exacerbated by the technology and myriad of options at the disposal of teenagers as more have access to mobile devices. This leads to the researching of the different types of cyberbullying that educators and parents need to be aware of as they permit their children to use mobile technology.

In the "Educator's Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats", Nancy Willard categorizes the different forms of cyberbullying: "Flaming, Harassment, Denigration, Impersonation, Outing, Trickery, Exclusion, and Cyberstalking." These types of cyberbullying are nuanced and share similar traits but differ in small ways. All types deal with an intentional infliction of harm at the expense of another person. Some types are direct attacks and others deal with subtle subterfuge in order to make a person appear mean or hurtful.

After reviewing the data and analyzing the different aspects of cyberbullying, it was important to take all of the information and determine if there were any correlations that could be made in terms of how each gender reacts or internalizes this abusive behavior.

A study by Qing Li from the University of Canada (Q. Li ,2006) looked at these issues and focused on whether gender played a role in cyberbullying. The study identified that middle school students were more likely to be exposed to cyberbullying than any other age group. This was attributed to the fact that this period in a adolescent's life is where the socialization and group dynamic plays and important role. These children are beginning to seek the acceptance of their peers and they place a high level of importance on being part of an accepted group. The study further confirmed other research that males are more likely to do the bullying. This is extended to cyberspace. This study also showed that the numbers were about the same in terms of the victims of cyberbullying. The percentage disparity between the genders only differed by .6

percent. The male population who admitted to being victims of cyberbullying was 25.6%

compared to the 25% of females who responded to the same question. The major finding in this

study pointed out that the male population was far less likely to report cyberbullying to anyone in

authority.

Another study took a similar approach to cyberbullying in terms of attempting to find

differences between the genders. Tali Heiman, PhD and Dorit Olenik-Shemesh, PhD studied and

surveyed 507 students in Israel (T. Heiman, D. Olenik-Shemesh, 2013). The added element in

this group was the fact that these students had learning disabilities. The numbers echoed the

findings from other studies and showed that males were more likely to be the bullies and females

were the leaders in terms of being victims. The fact that these students had learning disabilities

did not affect the results in any significant way.

An important element that permeated many of the articles related to cyberbullying had to

do with the witness component. Beyond the two parties involved, which consist of the

perpetrator and the victim, there is a third party, the witness, who can assist with the escalation

and the spreading of this bullying behavior. Witnesses are those who get caught up in the

excitement of the teasing and join in the ridicule or taunting activities. The reasoning behind this

negative contribution mimics the traditional bullying scenario. Those who are gathered around to

witness the "action" feel the need to get involved in an effort to align themselves with the

dominant perpetrator or popular group. In cyberspace this manifests in the form of spreading the

hurtful comments to more audience members and perpetuating this negative response towards

the victim.

Both studies, along with countless others, highlight the need for adult involvement in an

effort to combat this growing epidemic. Educators, administrators and parents can contribute to

developing guidelines that will assist with controlling the tendencies and actions of students as it relates to this topic. Acceptable use policies in schools can be altered to include a no tolerance view of cyberbullying. Resources can also be available to students so that reporting is easier when cyberbullying is identified in or out of school. Parents can reinforce the responsible use policy in the home by discussing this issue with their children and pointing out the dangers of being part of cyberbullying activities.

As a result of the research performed worldwide by experts in the field of criminal justice, social sciences and other related fields, there are numerous resources to help victims, educators and parents deal with and identify cyberbullying.

The most affected person in a case of cyberbullying is obviously the victim. It stands to reason that there are more resources available to help the victim contain this type of behavior. One such resource is *Delete Cyberbullying (*http://www.deletecyberbullying.org). There is a wealth of information on this site to help the victim identify cyberbullying and activities that can be performed to curb the abuse and to get others to help the victim through this painful time. Because cyberbullying occurs in cyberspace there are simple solutions that may be addressed immediately that will help or maybe even stop the bullying. Controlling access and eliminating communication with the cyber bully is the first step. Recording the abusive activity is also suggested in order to reach out to an adult which another action item. There are other options for victims to keep in mind if they are plagued by someone who means to continue this form of harassment.

There are specific roles that parents and educators have when it comes to dealing with cyberbullying. The research shows that parents need to work closely with school administrators and educators to understand and support the rules and regulations put forward by the educational

institutions. Parents should be the support system for students after school hours and should continue to communicate with teachers and counselors as necessary to identify and deal with cyberbullying.

For educators, this problem actually presents the opportunity for teachers and administration to revise their acceptable use policies to include cyberbullying. Other ideas mentioned include a focused campaign similar to the drug awareness programs currently in place. Most of the problems associated with cyberbullying, including perpetrators and victims, stem from a lack of understanding. Students many times don't realize that this behavior can have harmful and lasting effects on the victims. Campaigns that highlight the injuries that occur as a result of misusing technology in this manner would go a long way to helping curb this form of bullying.

Although cyberbullying appears to be a new platform in terms of the associated technology and the venue, it shares many of the same characteristics of traditional bullying. The victims are usually the same shy and isolated individuals who struggle with developing friendships. This research also highlighted the fact that many of the victims also have learning disabilities that makes them more prone to being attacked by the bullies. The only thing that seems to change is the weapon of choice. Bullies have another vehicle to use in order to take advantage of these victims who usually have low self-esteem and struggle with this social dynamic. One important aspect found in both forms of bullying was the third parties in the bully exchange. The witness in both traditional bullying and cyberbullying activities can be a critical role in continuing the abuse on a victim or a possible ally in stopping the cyberbullying. Unfortunately, more often than not, the witness, who usually seeks the approval of others in

order to fit it, chooses to follow suit in terms of extending the torture by spreading the rumors or

threatening comments in order to gain acceptance.

In terms of the research related to cyberbullying and gender, the data supports the

findings that follow the traditional form of bullying. Males are more likely to bully than females.

No distinctions were made in terms of the media sources as it relates to technology. The

victimization numbers were almost equal in terms of gender. The conclusion I made from this

information is that cyberbullying is equally distributed and gender does not factor into how

parents and educators can address this issue. The plans can be inclusive of all students without

the need to tailor them for each gender.

Cyberbullying is not confined to the obvious participants that most think about when

discussing this issue. They include other contributors and victims beyond the perpetrator and the

victim. The best course of action is to include everyone surrounding this problem and to work

together to inform, identify and remove cyberbullying as a growing threat to impressionable and

fragile students.

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