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Cyberbullying on Social Media Among College Students

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Abstract

Cyberbullying, bullying via technology, is prevalent on college campuses. Despite its occurrences, there is limited research among this population. Utilizing a Qualtrics online survey, this study examined undergraduate students' experiences and/or participation cyberbullying: 21.47% of participants reported rarely being victims of cyberbullying; 93.29% reported rarely cyberbullying others. Overall, there was a low prevalence rate for cyberbullying at this university.

Keywords: cyberbullying, bullying, social media, college

In today's society, there are several ways in which people are victimized by bullying. Some of the traditional face-to-face encounters of bullying usually start in neutral social settings such as playgrounds, classrooms, and schoolyards. These settings have been at the forefront of studies for quite some time; however, cyberbullying is a new form of bullying that has emerged and virtually caused a tidal wave of despair. Cyberbullying, bullying via electronic media, is a growing problem in middle and high schools across the United States (Beran & Li, 2005; Brydolf, 2007). However, cyberbullying does not end at high school graduation, and it continues onto college campuses. Cyberbullying is also defined as the intentional act of online or digital intimidation, embarrassment, or harassment (Beran & Li, 2005). Many of these acts primarily involve name-calling, threats, spreading rumors, sharing another person's private information, social isolation, and exclusion. It may be more subtle and covert and can be perpetrated faster and in more environments than traditional forms of bullying (Beran & Li, 2005).

Effects of Cyberbullying

The negative impacts of cyberbullying are numerous. Consequences of cyberbullying can include poor academic performance, school dropout, physical violence, and suicide, and it is a method of bullying that is frequently hidden from adults (Willard, 2006a). According to Patchin and Hinduja, (2008), cyberbullying is linked to serious effects such as low self-esteem, family problems, academic problems, school violence, and delinquent behavior. However, the worst consequences are suicide and violence. While cyberbullying has some of the same negative impacts as traditional face-to-face bullying, it can be done without any physical contact or knowledge of the perpetrator's identity (Willard, 2006). These random acts of harassment go well beyond the scope of traditional face-to-face bullying because unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can occur not only at school, but in the home and any place where technology is accessible (Shariff & Hoff, 2007; Stover, 2006; Strom & Strom, 2005). Studies have suggested that although it may occur less frequently than face-to-face bullying, up to 70% of students in the United States have experienced cyberbullying (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Therefore, there is a need for further studies to obtain a conceptualized view on the number of students across the United States and beyond who have experienced some form of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying on Social Media

As technology has become more advanced, cyberbullying is now able to occur from several outlets including cellular phones, Internet chat rooms, online blogs, e-mails, and instant messaging. Many college students find themselves spending countless hours using some form of digital technology. According to CTIA-The Wireless Association (2010), wireless use in the United States increased 78% from 2005 to 2009, with 276.6 million subscribers and more than 1.36 trillion text messages. Moreover, social media sites provide an environment where victims often become targets of cyberbullies. The most common social networking sites where cyberbullying occurs are Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. One of the most popular social media Web sites, Facebook (2010),

reported over 3.5 billion Web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, and photos shared each week by its more than 350 million users. These sites are intended to provide a positive outlet for social networking and recreation. Despite this fact, individuals are victimized and most victims have no knowledge of the person or persons responsible for their acts. With the capability of cyberbullying occurring anywhere, jurisdictional laws make disciplining cyberbullies extremely difficult. School officials have had a difficult time monitoring online activities, knowing when to report this abuse to law enforcement, and distinguishing first amendment rights of freedom of expression from harassment (Shariff & Hoff, 2007; Willard, 2007).

Prevalence on College Campuses

Cyberbullying among undergraduate college students has become an issue of concern for university administrators. After the suicide of Tyler Clementi at Rutgers University (Pena, 2011), researchers began to delve more into the issue of cyberbullying on college campuses. According to MacDonald and Roberts-Pittman (2010), of the 439 college student participants in their study, 38% knew someone who had been cyberbullied, 21.9% had been cyberbullied, and 8.6% had cyberbullied others. In a survey conducted at Indiana State University, 22 % of students surveyed stated they had been cyberbullied, while 42% reported that they knew someone who had been cyberbullied (Pena, 2011). In another study conducted at the University of New Hampshire, Finn (2004), reported that 10–15% of 339 students reported receiving repeated e-mails or instant messages that threatened, harassed, or insulted them. Additionally, MacDonald and Roberts-Pittman (2010) stated that of their 439 college student participants, 38% knew someone who had been cyberbullied, 21.9% had been cyberbullied, and 8.6% had cyberbullied others.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of cyberbullying via social media among college students.

Method

Participants

A total of 170 undergraduate students (43 freshman, 29 sophomores, 48 juniors, and 50 seniors) at Jackson State University (total enrollment 9,134) volunteered to participate in the study. Participants were 122 females and 45 males. However, prior to conducting analyses, three subjects who did not complete the entire survey were deleted, leaving 167. All outliers were deleted, leaving 167 undergraduate college students. Participants' ages were 18–21 years old ($n = 72$), 21–25 years old ($n = 45$), and 25+ years ($n = 50$).

Instrument

Nancy Willard's Cyber Savvy High School Survey was adapted for use in this study. The researchers gained permission from the author to use the survey. The amended survey was reviewed by professors at Jackson State University and Alcorn State University. The three parts of the survey contained demographic data, the 17-item survey,

and a definition of cyberbullying as well as the location and hours of operation for the campus counseling center and the security office.

Data Collection

After Institutional Review Board permission was granted, e-mail addresses of the study participants were obtained from Jackson State University's Office of Institutional Research. Surveys were e-mailed to approximately 6,245 undergraduate students through the Qualtrics Online Survey system three times. The three e-mail attempts yielded 170 responses; however, three identified outliers were deleted. One limitation of using an online survey is the potential low response rate (Dillman, 2007); however, due to the size of the population, it was the most cost efficient method. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data was analyzed through the Qualtrics Online Survey system. The study was a preliminary analysis of the data, and only descriptive statistics were used.

Results

Feelings and Beliefs About Cyberbullying

Of the 167 survey participants, 165 responded to the survey. Of those, 35.67% (n=59), reported being very upset regarding their feeling or beliefs about cyberbullying. When asked about their feelings or beliefs about cyberbullying, 35.76% (n = 59) of participants reported being very upset; 38.18% (n = 63) reported being upset; 11.52% (n = 19) reported having no opinion about their feelings; 9.70% (n = 16) reported that they just live with it; and 4.85% (n = 8) reported that it was no big deal.

Feelings and Beliefs About Witnessing Cyberbullying

When asked about their feelings or beliefs about others being cyberbullied, 87.88% (n = 145) reported that they do not like to see others cyberbullied; 3.64% (n = 6) reported that the person posting things that look hurtful was probably joking around; 0.61% (n = 1) reported the person who was being targeted probably deserved it; 5.45% (n = 9) reported that cyberbullying is something that happens to people; and 2.42% (n = 4) reported that it was no big deal.

Victims

The survey also asked participants if they were victims of cyberbullying. The findings revealed that 73.62% (n = 121) reported that they never have been victims of cyberbullying; 21.47% (n = 35) reported that they were rarely victims of cyberbullying; 2.45% (n = 4) reported that they were often victims of cyberbullying; and 2.45% (n = 4) reported that they were victims of cyberbullying sometimes.

Experiencing Cyberbullying

When asked about their behaviors when experiencing cyberbullying, 61.59% (n = 102) reported that they would block the aggressor from communicating with them; 15.24% (n = 25) reported that they would just ignore the aggressor; 9.76% (n = 16) reported that they would file an abuse report; 3.66% (n = 6) reported that they would inform an adult or person of authority about the abuse; and 9.76% (n = 16) reported that

they would inform an adult or person of authority, even if the abuse stopped, just to prevent others from being targeted.

Witnessing Cyberbullying

When asked about their behaviors when witnessing cyberbullying, 17.58% (n = 29) reported they would file an abuse report; 18.18% (n = 30) reported that they would help the person being targeted figure out what to do; 17.58% (n = 29) reported that they would reach out and be kind to the person being targeted; 14.55% (n = 24) reported that they would ignore the situation; 12.12% (n = 20) reported that they would tell an adult who can help; 7.27% (n = 12) reported that they would publicly post messages urging the abuse to stop; 3.03% (n = 5) reported that they would privately confront the aggressor and ask him/her to stop; 7.88% (n = 13) reported that they read the material but do nothing else; and 1.82% (n = 3) reported that they would tell others about the situation but do nothing else.

Frequency

The survey further examined the frequency of cyberbullying perpetrated by participants. The findings revealed that 93.29% (n=154) reported that they never cyberbullied others; 4.88% (n = 8) reported that they have cyberbullied others less than once a month; and 1.22% (n = 2) reported that they have cyberbullied others once a month.

Social Media

Lastly, the survey asked participants about which social media source they use the most, 52.80% (n = 87) reported that they use Facebook; 27.95% (n = 46) reported that they use Instagram; and 19.25% (n = 32) reported that they use Twitter.

Discussion

In this present study, students' beliefs, feelings, and behaviors about cyberbullying as a cyberbully, a victim, or a bystander were examined. This study attempted to capture the overall feelings, beliefs, and behaviors about cyberbullying by asking various questions that focused on scenarios that most likely would occur. Research findings revealed that the overall majority of participants have negative views about cyberbullying. The majority of the participants reported that cyberbullying is wrong, that they do not like to witness cyberbullying, and that it makes them upset when witnessing others be bullied or being bullied themselves. Cyberbullying was not a large problem among the participants, as 93.29% reported rarely cyberbullying others. This is consistent with other research that found that only 8.6% of participants had cyberbullied others (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010). Approximately 21.47% of students reported rarely being victims of cyberbullying. These findings vary among different studies. Kraft and Wang (2010) reported that 9% of their study's 471 participants were victims, and MacDonald and Roberts-Pittman (2010) reported that 21.9% of their 439 study participants were victims. Surprisingly, students exhibited the appropriate behavior when experiencing cyberbullying as 61.59% of students reported that they would block the aggressor from communicating with them. It was also found to be very significant

that most of the participants would report experiencing or witnessing cyberbullying to an adult when we live in an era where most college students tend to find their own sense of autonomy.

Although Facebook was the most common social media outlet for these participants, the researchers believe that other sites like Twitter and Instagram will become the more popular choice for students as time progresses. However, the popularity of Facebook is consistent with the research. Facebook reported that they average 968 million daily users for June 2015, and in the 2nd quarter of 2015, Facebook reported 1.49 billion monthly active users (Facebook, 2015). Furthermore, Kowalski and Agatston (2008) stated that social media sites and text messaging are commonly used for cyberbullying. This study extends the literature on cyberbullying among college students and is a good start for further researchers to explore this phenomena.

Limitations

Since this study was a pilot study, the data collected was limited to undergraduate students at one HBCU in Mississippi; thus, caution should be used in generalizing results to other colleges and universities. Additionally, the majority of the participants in the study were African American as the study was conducted at a predominantly African American HBCU. Another limitation of the study was using an online survey. Online surveys are limited in that they typically have a low response rate (Dillman, 2007); however, due to size of the population, this method was the most efficient. An additional limitation is that survey responses are sometimes not generally accurate predictors of actual behaviors.

Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, it is evident that cyberbullying on social media among undergraduate college students is a problem that needs immediate attention. These occurrences can cause a student to lose perspective of who they are and can lead to suicide, violence, and school dropout. College and university officials should address this issue because of the increase in technology use and instances of cyberbullying. There should be prevention strategies in place that address this problem. The most effective way to tackle the issue is for universities to work collaboratively with university counseling centers, counseling faculty, and counselors in other community agencies. Counselors can help universities develop interventions and prevention strategies as well as provide counseling if needed. Some of these strategies may include cyberbullying prevention education rallies every semester; brochures, posters, and Web page announcements about cyberbullying; and developing a center for violence prevention and intervention. Lastly, college and university officials should put intervention strategies in place to help combat this situation. Some of these interventions may include providing counseling to victims; providing counseling to the perpetrators; and holding town hall meetings and/or group counseling sessions to help students cope with incidents. It is also important for University officials and counselors to educate everyone on the seriousness of cyberbullying.

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