CYBERBULLYING AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Rajitha Kota
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OUTLINE

• Background
• Methods
• Results
• Conclusions
• Implications and Future Directions

BACKGROUND

• Cyberbullying and bullying are serious public health problems
  • Psychological, academic effects for victims and bullies
• Can occur in many ages, from childhood, to adolescence, even to adulthood
• Internet is a new outlet for bullying, especially social networking sites

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**IMPACT IN COLLEGE**

- Students are away from home and family
- New independence
- Formation of identity

“If you’re independent and mature enough to go to college and live away from your family and live on your own, then you should be mature enough to [handle cyberbullying] on your own.”

**EXAMPLES OF CYBERBULLYING**

- Hacking into another person’s online accounts (Facebook, email, school account)
- Creating false profiles and using the imposter to post embarrassing comments
- Texting or emailing embarrassing or threatening messages
- “Outing” someone’s sexual status or health status (i.e. STI status) online

**PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING**

- College students
  - 38% of college students know a victim of cyberbullying
  - 22% have been cyberbullied
  - 9% have acted as a cyberbully
- Middle and high school students
  - 30% have been cyberbullied

Lenhart, 2007
MacDonald and Robert-Fittsman, 2010
The purpose of this study was to characterize the nature of cyberbullying among college students. We conducted a focus group study to learn more about how and why cyberbullying happens in this population.

**PURPOSE**

**METHODS**

- Recruitment
  - College undergraduates, ages 18-22
  - Purposeful sampling from a range of campus groups, especially those at higher risk for bullying
  - December 2011 to October 2012
  - Emailed groups, Student Organization Fair, attended group meetings
- IRB approval from UW-Madison

- Focus Group Sessions
  - Students were asked questions using a semi-structured facilitator guide
  - How would you define cyberbullying?
  - Do you think cyberbullying can be worse than traditional bullying?
  - How might cyberbullying be different in college compared to middle or high school?
METHODS

• Analysis
  • Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim
  • Transcripts read separately by three researchers
    • Common themes and concepts identified by constant comparative method

RESULTS

• Demographics
  • N=42, 55% female
  • Average age: 19.23 years
  • 87% Caucasian
  • Two major themes emerged
    • Theme 1: Attacks on identity
    • Theme 2: Disagreement about definition
  • Other minor themes

ATTACKS ON IDENTITY

• Many instances in middle and high school revolve around appearance, impersonal comments
• In college, cyberbullying is more personal
  • Sexuality, politics, alcohol
"I think that [cyberbullying] is not as prevalent for college students. But still, especially politically, things can get heated and malicious pretty quickly. Once it starts to get like personal attacks that definitely I think counts as cyberbullying and it happens."

"I think a lot of people might be challenged on their ideas which may lead to possibly them trying to reinforce them strongly, which can sometimes lead to aggression."

"I would say it’s more opinion based in college, whereas when you’re younger, it’s like, ‘Oh my gosh, she commented on my photo!’"
ATTACKS ON IDENTITY

“With the political debates [on Facebook], they’re so lame and then they’d like, get so off topic and be taking personal shots at each other and their intelligence.”

ATTACKS ON IDENTITY

“I remember I knew a guy…someone hacked his account and like changed everything to like rainbows and calling him gay and he was really upset about it. Like, the entire page and all of his pictures were like that. I would definitely consider that cyberbullying.”

DISAGREEMENT ABOUT DEFINITION

• No one group agreed on a definition
• Bullying vs. teasing
• How do we determine that a line has been crossed?
DISAGREEMENT ABOUT DEFINITION

“I think there’s a lot of things people are way too sensitive to and they take cyberbullying and put it in front of them and hide behind a shield.”

DISAGREEMENT ABOUT DEFINITION

“[Cyberbullying] is just as bad [as traditional bullying], and people should be reprimanded just as much and it’s really no different, it’s just on a computer.”

DISAGREEMENT ABOUT DEFINITION

“I think [cyberbullying] can and can’t be [worse than traditional bullying], it really depends on who is being bullied. I guess, with cyberbullying, nothing real is really happening...”
DISAGREEMENT ABOUT DEFINITION

“Maybe this goes back to how we define bullying, but who is doing the bullying? Is it a friend, because then apparently it’s not bullying, it’s not ill-intention, but if it’s someone that you don’t like…what’s your relationship with the bully or the bully’s relationship with the victim…?”

DISAGREEMENT ABOUT DEFINITION

“…Sometimes you see like catty comments from girls or like girls will get mad at other girls and send messages like, ‘you’re such a bitch’ and that kind of stuff, but I don’t know if I would call that bullying, I feel like it’s more just arguments and little petty school rules than like aggressive bullying.”

MINOR THEME: MATURITY

“I’d like to think college is more of a bully-free environment than high school or middle school…in general, people don’t care as much about who you are, what you like…”

“[Hacking people’s Facebook profiles], that happens all the time. It’s like, probably like every other day that your newsfeed is filled with like, ‘I’m gay, I’m gay…’, it’s just kind of funny…”
MINOR THEME: ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

“[The university] shouldn't [do anything about cyberbullying]... I think they should stay the hell away.”

“If [the university] can apply extra penalties to me for underage drinking, they should certainly be able to do it for [cyberbullying].”

LIMITATIONS

• Generalizability
• Homogenous population

CONCLUSIONS

• Cyberbullying continues to occur in college
• Students may not take it seriously
• Cyberbullying has different characteristics between younger and older adolescents
• No consensus on definition of cyberbullying
IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

• Without a well-known, widely agreed upon definition of cyberbullying, it is hard to identify and intervene
• College students can be negatively impacted because older adolescence is a period of identity formation
• Students’ perceptions about the university’s role in combating cyberbullying is unclear
• Currently conducting our own study to determine prevalence and exploring possibilities for intervention

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