

Cyberbullying: The Virtual Menace


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Introduction


Cyberbullying is a term that describes an action to intimidate or humiliate (someone) persistently through the internet, text messaging, or another form of electronic communication. Did you know that 95% of teens in the U.S. are online, and the vast majority access the internet on their mobile devices, making it the most common medium for cyberbullying? How about the fact that Instagram is the social media site where most young people report experiencing cyberbullying, with 42% of those surveyed experiencing harassment on the platform? What about the fact that about half of LGBTQ+ students experience online harassment -- a rate higher than average? These facts entail the tragic truth about humans being exploited thanks to societal norms and regulations. Cyberbullying is a concept that can include linear correlation with social conflict theory, a Marxist-based social theory that argues that individuals and groups (social classes) within society interact based on conflict rather than consensus. In many forms of conflict, different groups will tend to attain differing amounts of material and non-material resources (e.g. wealth, popularity). As a result, more powerful groups will tend to use their power to retain power and exploit groups with less power. In turn, that is how bullying works: exploiting the helpless or hopeless ones by physical or psychological means. To put it in simple



terms, bullying is a form of aggressive behavior in which someone intentionally and repeatedly causes another person injury or discomfort. Bullying can take the form of physical contact, words, or more subtle actions. And by subcategorizing with technological concepts, cyberbullying is being bullied on a whole new level with the addition of online harassment, masquerading, cyberstalking, insults through social media, and the list keeps on going. Therefore, cyberbullying is an issue that stays relevant in today's society as well as something that needs to be resolved in a matter of minutes.

Cyberbullying Origins


When it comes to finding the origin of cyberbullying, the late 2000s (2007-2009) are the years' social media gained the spotlight and when a lot of people were raging over Facebook, Napster, Limewire, and MySpace. There is this girl that piques its interest when it comes to cyberbullying cases, Megan Taylor Meier. She, unfortunately, committed suicide when she was 13 because of cyberbullying. To go even further, she had left the Fort Zumwalt School District and had just started eighth grade at a new school, Immaculate Conception, in Dardenne Prairie, Missouri. She was on the volleyball team, and had a new crush -- Josh Evans. Unfortunately, on Sunday, Oct. 15, 2006, Megan received a puzzling and disturbing message from Josh. It said: "I don't know if I want to be friends with you anymore because I've heard that you are not very nice to your friends." This is a crucial indicator that Josh Evans screwed Megan by exploiting her secrets by sharing some of Megan's messages with others. As a result, Megan committed suicide by hanging herself after being fat-shamed and harassed by MySpace Community. Another victim, Amanda Todd was a victim of cybercrime when Aydin Coban harassed her for nearly



three years online using 22 separate fake social media accounts. He sent messages to her between 2009, starting when she was 13, and around 2012, he threatened to send explicit images of her to her friends, family, and school staff if she didn't agree to give him a webcam "show". This shows how much one perpetrator can be this evil when it comes to ruining someone's life. With that in mind, social media negatively impacts mental health to the point that heavy usage of social media can cause an increased risk for depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, and even suicidal thoughts. In the end, social media can be useful when it comes to communicating with your friends and family. However, it can take a toll on your mental health when it comes to narcissism.

Social Conflict Theory


Before there was social conflict theory, there was conflict theory that generalized the concept of social structure as well as its idealism. To define, it is the idea that society consists of different classes competing over finite power and resources. It was first proposed by German philosopher Karl Marx and grew out of his theory of history, notably historical materialism — the idea that a society's institutions spring from its economic structure. In Marx's view of capitalist societies, the minority upper class owned the means of production, such as raw materials and factories, while the majority lower class provided the labor. In this case, the upper class can correlate with social media employees, that popular guy or girl in your high school, or that one bully whom you had a conflict with. At the same time, the majority lower class are the ones who have experienced any form of bullying. The main ideas of conflict theory are rooted in historical materialism — the idea that a society's social structure and development are shaped by




its economic production. Marx argued that the distribution of wealth created class divides throughout history and that social inequality and eventual revolutions stemmed from these divides. Going back to social conflict theory, social conflicts do not just only destroy social stability and integration but they also play a very important role in improving social solidarity, social uniformity, and social integration. Social conflicts have functions as well as dysfunctions in society. The functions are manifested by conflicts' improving social integration and stability, promoting the formation of new groups, and stimulating the establishment of new institutions and rules. In addition, the social conflict theory can correlate with not just cyberbullying. But also with the competition when it comes to corporate rivalry as well as defining one's own complex personality of a certain character who has been ostracized by society itself. All because Lewis A. Coser's *Social Conflict and the Theory of Social Change* stated the point that "Any social system implies an allocation of power, as well as wealth and status positions among individual actors and component sub-groups. As has been pointed out, there is never complete concordance between what individuals and groups within a system consider their just due and the system of allocation. Conflict ensues in the effort of various frustrated groups and individuals to increase their share of gratification. Their demands will encounter the resistance of those who previously had established a 'vested interest' in a given form of distribution of honor, wealth and power." (Coser, 8).

Cause and Effects


Some causes and effects can be detrimental to cyberbullying and social conflict theory. Roelof Petrus Reyneke believes that neuroscience has shown that this negatively influences the




brain and leads to discipline problems. The fight, flight, or freeze response associated with trauma, influences the behavior of the victims as well as the bully. Most adults use a punitive approach to try and change this negative behavior. Unfortunately, this usually exacerbates the problem (Reyneke, 340). In addition, victims experience serious emotional and psychological problems due to the constant aggression and humiliation experienced. What makes it even worse is that in many instances the bullies are anonymous and the victims do not know who is targeting them. The constant experience of being targeted could then lead to toxic stress that could change the architecture of the brain in early childhood development. This could lead to the stress-response system becoming overly sensitive to stressors or perceived stressors. The results can be conduct problems, impulsivity, lack of attention in class, hyperactivity, and antisocial behavior (Blitz and Lee, 2015, p. 23). In other words, social conflict theory initiates cyberbullying due to the concept of showing ruthlessness and the perpetrators are the ones causing fear to the victims. To support this, A study by Penning, Bhagwanjee, and Govender found that 22.4% of their participants were clinically and sub-clinically diagnosed with posttraumatic stress and 21% with disassociation. Victims have a higher level of stress, anxiety, illness, and depression with a higher likelihood of committing suicide. Additionally, Intense emotions such as the emotions associated with being bullied will activate the limbic system, specifically the areas called the amygdala and the hippocampus. The function of the amygdala determines if a situation, person, or stimulus is threatening and warns the person of possible danger. The hippocampus will then link the fear response to the context in which this response of the amygdala occurred. Studies have shown that when a traumatized person is presented with images, sounds, and thoughts that are related to their particular traumatic experience, the



amygdala is triggered. This will then activate the body's stress response, unleashing stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline that will increase heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen intake, preparing the person for fight, flight, or freeze. Brain research has shown that when a person experiences images of past trauma, the left hemisphere of the brain is deactivated and the right side of the brain is activated. The right side of the brain accommodates the emotional, visual, intuitive, spacial, and tactual functions of the brain whereas the left side houses the linguistic, sequential, and analytical parts of the brain (Reyneke, 342). To put it in simple terms, the victim will be fully intimidated by the perpetrator and that is how the victim's central nervous system acts once cyberbullying comes to play. Another important term, cyber aggression is crucial for this topic due to this concept being a lubricant for this topic. Cyber aggression refers to electronic or online behavior intended to harm another person psychologically or damage his or her reputation. Moreover, Andrew V. Beale and Kimberly R. Hall's *Cyberbullying: What School Administrators (And Parents) Can Do* presented the types of cyberbullying that correlate with the concept of social conflict theory: cyberbullies use e-mail to send harassing and threatening messages to their targets. Most e-mail programs allow for e-mail filters that will block or automatically delete messages from undesirable senders, but these blocks work only to a limited degree, as most e-mail users know. And although it is possible to trace from which e-mail account the offending message was sent, it is almost impossible to prove who used the account to send the offending message. Instant Messaging, however, is more efficient when it comes to text-to-text communication. Typically, the IM system alerts the user when somebody on his or her private list is online, thus allowing the user to initiate a chat session with that particular individual in real-time. IM has become a very large part of the social




lives of students. Social relationships formed at school are extended and maintained beyond school hours through IM. Most IM programs allow users to create a list of others from which users may wish to block messages. This exclusion feature is one of the most prevalent forms of cyberbullying, that is, willfully excluding a particular student from contacting the user or being allowed to join online chat room conversations. Because screen names can be switched, IM allows students to hide their identities, thus enhancing the potential for bullying. Group chats allow for real-time communication between users via their computers. A "virtual" room allows students to write back and forth to one another. Once a chat has been initiated, either user may enter text by typing on the keyboard and the entered text will appear on the other user's monitor. Most networks and online services offer a chat feature. The "bash board" is the nickname for an online bulletin board, or virtual chat room, in which students can anonymously write any confessions they want, true or false, creating or adding mean-spirited postings for the world to see. SMS is a service for sending and receiving short text messages via mobile phones. The text can include words, numbers, or an alphanumeric combination. A single message can be up to 160 characters long using default global system mobile communications (GSM) alphabet coding and seventy characters when using two-byte universal character set (UCS2) international coding. Cyberbullies, unfortunately, can create websites that mock, antagonize, and harass others. Voting or polling booths offer users the opportunity to create Webpages that allow students to vote online for "ugliest," "fattest," "dumbest," and so on, whether it is a boy or a girl at their school. It is easy to understand the devastating effect such a "contest" would have on the hapless student(s) selected for inclusion. Because cyberbullying occurs extensively in schools, libraries, and anywhere that is considered a meeting spot, teachers and faculty members need to address this




kind of issue. School administrators must implement a comprehensive prevention plan that has the support and cooperation of parents, school, and community members if the students are to be free from cybersecurity. Combating cyberbullying is a mission that requires administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and students to work together to ensure that all students are afforded a safe and fear-free learning environment. In a nutshell, the causes of the situations that correlate with cyberbullying are hostility, showing dominance, and spreading fear to the innocents. As a result, many of the victims have suffered PTSD, anxiety, and depression from those tragic events, as well as the perpetrators gaining the upper hand when it comes to humiliating the innocent ones. In addition, many victims are going to be afraid to call out their names since the victims know the consequences they have to face: a simple beatdown. Fortunately, StopBullying.gov and DoSomething.org are some of the non-profit organizations that encourage victims of cyberbullying to stand up for themselves and there is always hope when it comes to facing your fears against those who have caused your well-being emotionally damaged. As long as the bystanders and the trusted adults are taking any actions that consider a life-saver, then nothing will happen to those who have experienced humiliation.

Solutions

When it comes to solutions, school administrators are responsible for ensuring that all students are provided an opportunity to attend school free from fear and intimidation. This includes ensuring that students are using the school network or mobile devices in a manner that does not cause harm to others. One of the first steps to eliminating cyberbullying is to assess the level of electronic bullying occurring both at home and at school. Some ways to determine the



prevalence, attitudes toward, and gaps in perception and knowledge of cyberbullying include focus groups, class meetings, and surveys sent to teachers, parents, and students (Beale & Hall, 10). Additionally, talking to the ones who were affected by cyberbullying does not hurt at all when it comes to resolving their situation. In fact, peers, mentors, and trusted adults can sometimes intervene publicly to positively influence a situation where negative or hurtful content posts about a child. Public Intervention can include posting positive comments about the person targeted for bullying to try to shift the conversation in a positive direction. It can also help to reach out to the child who is bullying and the target of the bullying to express your concern. If possible, try to determine if more professional support is needed for those involved, such as speaking with a guidance counselor or mental health professional. Evelina Landstedt and Susanne Persson's *Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Mental Health in Young People* believe current laws regarding harassment and abuse need to be expanded to also include digital arenas. School-based intervention programs against bullying and other types of violence are required. Such interventions should acknowledge gendered experiences of violence as well as poor mental health. It is also important that teachers and other school staff are given the opportunity to adequately support the students (Landstedt & Persson, 398). Sharon Schoen and Alexis Schoen's *Bullying and Harassment in the United States* stated an important fact that in 2007, the National Crime Prevention Council, the United States Department of Justice, and the Crime Prevention Coalition of America joined with the Advertising Council in the United States to inaugurate an advertising campaign about cyberbullying. The focus audience is teens and preteens. A recent movie, *Adina's Deck*, is advancing public understanding of the dilemma in certain arenas.



Strong, systematic, and comprehensive measures are vital to combat the challenges that lie ahead in the war on bullying in its many forms.

In the future...

In the future, cyberbullying will decrease percentage-wise around the world and there are lots of resources online and offline when it comes to recovering from being cyberbullied. Since tech companies would prioritize creating safer online environments for young people, some social media companies are working towards reaching their goal, including partnering with psychologists to better understand how their products affect kids, and how to keep them safe. But going the extra mile isn't always profitable for technology companies. For now, it's up to individuals, families, and communities to protect everyone's best interests online. Because cyber victimization coincides with anxiety and depression, research suggests mental health clinicians and educators should consider interventions that both address the victims' online experiences and support their mental, social, and emotional well-being. Psychologists can also help parents speak to their loved ones about cyberbullying, along with supporting families affected by it. In a nutshell, cyberbullying will decrease in the future as well as ensure the victims do not suffer the consequences that take a toll on mental health. The concept that social learning theory is very detrimental to cyberbullying since it is like showing the perpetrator is the boss by doing whatever he or she feels like to spread fear to the helpless and the hopeless ones.

To summarize...


Cyberbullying is an important concept to address when it comes to identifying a cybercrime. Because it is a type of bullying with the use of electronic devices since it can take place on social media, messaging platforms, gaming platforms, and mobile phones, it is, unfortunately, a repeated behavior, aimed at scaring, angering, or shaming those who are targeted. In addition, Social Conflict Theory is a Marxist-based social theory that argues that individuals and groups within society interact on the basis of conflict rather than consensus. This criminological theory backbone cyberbullying with the concept of assertive dominance over the weak and innocent ones. In addition, conflict behavior-a similar concept to social conflict theory can consist of rational actions (actions that consider and accurately judge all possible outcomes) and the expression of hostility, as well as behavior that is either coercive (such as causing great physical harm to an opponent) or cooperative according to Otomar J. Bartos and Paul Wehr. When it comes to the most important security measures in order to de-escalate cyberbullying, understanding the victim's perspective is the key to understanding his or her problem. Then, the bystander or the victim's parents need to report the social media accounts that want to damage the victim's mental health. Lastly, if the bully takes it too far, just report it to their parents, teachers, or even police officer if the line is being crossed. Because in the end, it is all about helping and protecting the victim from harm and keeping their hopes alive. If these approaches do not work out, there are hotlines that give the helpless ones a ray of hope when it comes to dealing with cyberbullies. These measures are 91% effective when it comes to de-escalating the situation as well as finding a solution. For recommendations, no suggestions are necessary since social media employees are going to work for the hopeless and the helpless ones for account

validation. Again, there are an endless amount of resources and hotlines that will encourage the victims to have faith in themselves. Plus, it does not hurt to stand up for yourself against cyber bullies. All in all, Social Conflict Theory has a relationship with Cyberbullying: survival of the fittest.

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