Mobile Technology and Cyberbullying

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INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying, a type of bullying that occurs in digital playgrounds, refers to behaviors that are adverse in nature. Cyberbullying refers to "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself." (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). Research studies from all over the world have revealed that cyberbullying has become a serious concern. Many international studies report schools as a frequent context of such incidents (Li, Cross, & Smith, 2012), leading to the argument that cyberbullying is becoming a severe issue worldwide (e.g., Willard, 2005; Li, 2006; Smith, 2012). Cyberbullying, compared with the traditional face-to-face bullying, possesses some unique characteristics. First of all, since technology is the vehicle, cyberbullies can easily hide their identities. This anonymity of predators creates a significant challenge for our efforts to address cyberbullying issues (Shariff, 2008). Secondly, cyberbullies can inflict harassment at anytime and any in place, making it difficult for us to create a safe place for students. Teenagers, for example, can send and receive threatening phone calls, disturbing emails and aggressive messages with little or no limit on time and geographic location. Thirdly, those hostile messages can be easily saved and quickly distributed to millions of people around the globe instantly. The nature that the hateful messages can be not only widely and rapidly spread, but also saved forever poses another problem for cyberbullying intervention and prevention.

Although cyberbullies may take advantage of any technological tools, this paper focuses specifically on cyberbullying via mobile technology. Mobile technology, according to Wikipedia, includes any tool that we use for cellular communication purposes. Mobile phones, PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants), GPS, handheld game consoles, tablets are all examples of mobile technologies we encounter regularly (Wikipedia, 2014). Mobile technology has gained popularity in recent years, providing great convenience to us. The widespread use of mobile technology is altering our lives in every aspect, from playing, to socializing, learning, and living. This is also true in schools.

While mobile technology serves as an excellent tool to enhance student learning, it can also increase our chance of being exposed to risky communications, potentially endangering our safety and wellbeing (Li et al., 2012). With growing access to mobile technology in recent years, teenagers are more likely to engage in cyberbullying "because of the ease with which digital content can be captured and transmitted, as well as a lack of empathy stemming from the fact that perpetrators can't see or hear the impact of their actions on the victim" (Froese-Germain, 2008, p.44).

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OVERVIEW

In this paper, we focus on cyberbullying in relation to mobile technology, or mobile-based cyberbullying (MBC). In addition, we limit our discussion to youth cyberbullying, excluding the issue of adult workplace cyberbullying.

Both cyberbullying and mobile technology are relatively new. While current research focusing on either of these two topics exists, there is a lack of either empirical or theoretical studies that combine these two important areas. Smith's (2012) study indicates that mobile phones and the Internet are two primary ways that youths engage in cyberbullying. The recent development of wireless internet on mobile devices (especially smart phones) further blurs the boundary between those two media channels, enabling cyberbullies to harass their peers through even more means and with less restriction. This underscores the importance of researching cyberbullying and mobile technology as an integrated whole rather than discrete topics, with one as an activity and the other a tool used to complete it.

Due to the recentness of MBC, there has been no empirical or theoretical study so far dedicated exclusively to MBC. We have, however, located several authors that discussed MBC in their studies as a unique phenomenon. These pioneering authors include Bhat, Chang and Linscott (2010) at Ohio University, the United States; James Norman and Justin Connolly (2011) at Dublin City University, Ireland; as well as Maria Genta and colleagues (2012) at University of Bologna, Italy. This highlights the lack of related literature in this field and calls for future research dedicated to examine mobile-based cyberbullying issues.

CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE IN MOBILE-BASED CYBERBULLYING

In this section, we first describe the prevalence of mobile-based cyberbullying (MBC) by revealing data on access to mobile phones, as well as its varying uses; then we introduce the taxonomy of MBC based on previous research and our own understanding. Furthermore, we report the impact of MBC on involved parties, especially cyber victims. Finally, we summarize recommended tactics on coping with MBC from existing cases and studies.

Prevalence of Mobile-Based Cyberbullying among Adolescents

Adolescents nowadays have grown up with mobile phones as an embedded part of their daily lives. The older they grow, the more likely they are to gain access to mobile technologies that can be used both in and out of school (Norman & Connolly, 2011). Numerous countries have reported pervasive uses of mobile phones by teenagers and adolescents. In Europe, over 90% of British young people have a mobile phone (12 years and over) (Mobile Life Youth Report, 2006), and close to 95% of Italian adolescents as well as Spanish youngsters own a mobile phone (Genta et al., 2012). In the United States, 69% of 11-14 years old and 85% of 15-18 years old have their own mobile phones (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). The MARC (Englander, 2011) survey conducted in 2011 examined the prevalence of mobile technology in schools in Massachusetts, USA. With over 20,000 participating grades 3-12 students, this study shows that about one fifth of the 3rd grade students have their own cellphone, while close to 40% of 5th grade students own a cellphone. Students' ownership of mobile phones increases as they grow, meaning that students, both males and females, in higher-grade levels are more likely to have their own cellphones than their lower grade counterparts. According to the same study, about 85% of middle schoolers and high schoolers carry their cellphones everyday. Within this group, over 90% of them have Internet access. Although these findings come from only one survey of Massachusetts's students, these data nonetheless provide a snapshot of how ubiquitous mobile technology is in schools.