Chapter 2
Adolescents, Third-Person Perception, and Facebook

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to document the extent of Facebook use and cyberbullying among adolescents. It is based on a study theoretically grounded in third-person perception (TPP), the belief that media messages affect other people more than oneself. As Facebook establishes itself as the dominant social network, users expose themselves to a level of bullying not possible in the analog world. The study found that 84% of adolescents (middle school through college undergraduates) use Facebook, and that most users log on daily. While 30% of the sample reported being cyberbullied, only 12.5% quit using the site and only 18% told a parent or school official. Despite heavy use and exposure, adolescents exhibit TPP, believing others are more likely to be negatively affected by Facebook use. A range of self-protective behaviors from precautionary (deleting or blocking abusive users) to reactionary (quitting Facebook) were related to decreased degrees of TPP. Implications for prevention education are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Consider the numbers:

- 800 million: Number of active Facebook users (Lyons, 2012).
- 49: Percentage of Americans using Facebook (Lyons, 2012).
- >50: Percentage of American teens who have been cyber-bullied (Bullying Statistics, 2012).

- 10 to 15: Percentage of bullied teens who tell their parents (Bullying Statistics, 2012).
- 4,400: Number of teen suicides in the U.S. each year (CDC, 2012).

The National Crime Prevention Council (2012) defines cyber bullying as "the process of using the Internet, cell phones or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person." This may include sending nasty messages or threats to a person's email account or cell phone, spreading rumors online or through texts, posting hurtful or threatening messages on social networking sites or web pages, stealing a person's account information to break into their account and send damaging messages, pretending to be someone else online to hurt another person, taking unflattering pictures of a person and spreading them through cell phones or the Internet, sexting or circulating sexually suggestive pictures or messages about a person.

The use of Facebook and other social media can be especially problematic, because once something is shared, it replicates and may never disappear, resurfacing at later times. Cyber bullying can be damaging to adolescents and teens. It can lead to depression, anxiety and suicide (Bullying Statistics, 2012).

The purpose of the study is to document the extent of Facebook use and cyber bullying among a sample of adolescents. The study is theoretically grounded in third-person perception, the belief that media messages affect other people more than oneself. Exploring third-person perception, Facebook use and cyber bullying may shed light on the extent of the problem and may also explain why adolescents do not report cyber bullying and do not take self-protective measures online.

THE STUDY

Procedures and Participants

Participants were recruited through school-based programs about bullying offered by Crisis Center North, a Pennsylvania women's center. Multiple school districts and universities participated. The sample (N = 1,488) was 51% male, with an average age of 15 (range = 12 (middle school) to 24 (college undergraduate)). These age ranges were selected because they coincide with reported cases of cyber bullying and dating/relationship violence.

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