Chapter 49
The Social Networks of Cyberbullying on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This research applies a social network perspective to the issue of cyber aggression, or cyberbullying, on the social media platform Twitter. Cyber aggression is particularly problematic because of its potential for anonymity, and the ease with which so many others can join the harassment of victims. Utilizing a comparative case study methodology, the authors examined thousands of Tweets to explore the use of denigrating slurs and insults contained in public tweets that target an individual's gender, race, or sexual orientation. Findings indicate cyber aggression on Twitter to be extensive and often extremely offensive, with the potential for serious, deleterious consequences for its victims. The study examined a sample of 84 aggressive networks on Twitter and visualize several social networks of communication patterns that emanate from an initial, aggressive tweet. The authors identify six social roles that users can assume in the network, noting differences in these roles by demographic category. Serious ethical concerns pertain to this technological, social problem.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a pervasive issue that has been identified as a serious, social problem in the U.S. and elsewhere (Beauchare, 2014; Faris & Felmlee, 2011; Faris & Felmlee, 2014; Kraft & Wang, 2010; Neves & Pinheiro, 2010; Squicciarini, Rajtmajer, Liu, & Griffin, 2015; Xu, Jun, Zhu, & Bellmore, 2012). Bullying represents a type of aggression that can take various forms, such as physical, verbal, and relational (Faris & Felmlee, 2011; Faris & Felmlee 2014; Faris & Felmlee, 2015; Olweus, 1993; Xu, Jun, Zhu, & Bellmore, 2012). The newest genre of peer aggression, cyberbullying, now takes place through the use of digital or online means (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009; Felmlee & Faris, 2016; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009; Xu, Jun, Zhu, & Bellmore, 2012).

Cyberbullying is unique in the degree to which it provides anonymity and in its ability to facilitate the participation of multiple individuals in the harassment of victims. Perhaps for these reasons, victims often exhibit emotional distress (Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006), low self-esteem (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010), loneliness (Sahin, 2012), and other negative emotions (e.g., Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Those targeted by forms of electronic aggression also reported more suicidal thoughts and were more likely to attempt suicide than those who had not been victimized (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

The purpose of this research is to examine cyber aggression on the social media website of Twitter. On this widely popular venue, Twitter enables users to send and read short, informative messages called "tweets" on a website with millions of active users each day. Yet Twitter can be used by some to disseminate aggressive, bullying messages, and the website has come under scrutiny for some of the most public instances. With only a few exceptions, bullying on Twitter has received little attention in the scholarly literature. In this project, therefore, the authors study instances of aggressive tweets that derogate individuals on the basis of one or more of three demographic characteristics: gender, race, and/or sexual orientation. The authors examine the network spread of cyber aggression within a twitter conversation and identify the social roles of the participants within the interchange. Given the potentially serious, ethical questions raised by cyberbullying (Neves & Peinhero, 2010), studying this type of damaging interchange on the relatively novel technological site of Twitter remains particularly important.

Recent social network research suggests that two of the processes that contribute to cyber aggression include the enforcement of social norms and the establishment of social status and esteem (Felmlee & Faris, 2016). Vulnerable, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) young people, for example, are frequent targets, as they appear to be viewed by some as failing to conform to traditional, heterosexual norms. In addition, adolescents who are connected by close social network bonds, such as those of a past friendship or a former romance, are significantly more likely to be involved in cyber aggressive incidents, due at least in part to motives of rivalry, jealousy and revenge.

Furthermore, cyberbullying is becoming more prevalent over time, which is partly a function of the exponential growth rate of online sources of communication, especially among young people (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Twitter represents a highly utilized forum for cyberbullying (Lenhart, et al., 2011; Walker, 2015). The CEO of Twitter recognizes this issue, and has indicated the company is ill-equipped to handle this negative, pertinent activity (Tiku & Newton, 2015; Walker, 2015). Moreover, Twitter constitutes one of the most frequently visited websites in the world, with over 500 million users in 2015.

Extensive research focuses on adolescent cyberbullying and its highly problematic consequences such as self-harm and suicide. However, this type of aggression affects more than adolescents and likely extends significantly beyond high school to influence both younger and older adults, although these populations receive little attention in the literature. Additionally, research often focuses on the negative outcomes of cyberbullying on victims, but much less is known about what factors increase a person's risk for becoming the target of cyberbullying. Understanding these mechanisms may help to develop a set of policies designed to diminish the prevalence of cyberbullying.

The purpose of this research is to apply a social network perspective to the issue of cyberbullying. This paper outlines a study to understand how aggressive tweets spread through the networks of users on Twitter, the role of the strength of ties in the dissemination of aggressive messages known as "tweets", and users' response to aggressive tweets. The authors begin with a review of relevant literature, followed with a discussion of their methods and findings. They end with conclusions and a discussion of ethical considerations as well as issues to consider regarding possible mitigation techniques.

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