Chapter 75

Online Abuse:
Cyberbullying, Harassment, and Stalking

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ABSTRACT

The development of computers, cell phones, and the Internet allows individuals to connect with one another with ease in a variety of ways in near real time. The beneficial impact of these resources, however, has been adulterated by some to engage in abusive communications while online. Specifically, individuals now use email, text messaging, and social networking sites to spread hurtful or malicious information about others. This entry summarizes the problem of online abuse via cyberbullying, online harassment, and stalking by discussing the prevalence of these phenomena as well as the prospective predictors of victimization.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing dependence on technology in modern life across all age groups has significantly affected the way that individuals interact with one another. Though these resources enable efficient and constant connective capabilities, some have begun to utilize technology as a means to harm and threaten others in various ways. Online abuse involves the distribution of injurious, hurtful, or dangerous materials via the Internet, computer mediated communications, and cellular telephony (Bocij, 2004; Wolack, Mitchell, and Finkelhor, 2006). Criminological and sociological researchers have explored three types of online abuse: bullying, harassment, and stalking. Each of these forms will be defined and discussed regarding their prevalence and predictors.

OVERVIEW

Three primary areas of online abuse among juveniles and adults have been explored by researchers: bullying, harassment and stalking. The research community, however, has not established definitions that completely and clearly separate each form of offending from one another. Each form is interrelated as they all depend on email, instant messaging systems, and other technological resources. There is also conceptual overlap between bullying, harassment, and stalking because of the way in which victims may respond to the receipt of a message. One researcher may therefore define an act as harassment, while another may view the same behavior as bullying. These issues lead to complications in identifying those most likely to experience a specific form of online abuse. Some argue that juveniles are most likely to experience cyberbullying while only adults may experience harassment and stalking. As a consequence, the research literature is muddled due to competing and unclear definitions of relevant behaviors.

It is also important to note that sexual comments and imagery are not a requirement of cyberbullying, online harassment, or stalking (Bocij, 2004). Though sexually charged comments may be used by an individual to antagonize or harm a victim, no definition for any one of these forms of abuse incorporates sexuality. Additionally, child pornography and sexual victimization are defined and viewed differently from harassment and abuse by law enforcement and the research community (Wolack et al., 2006). Thus, it is important that individuals dispel the significance of sexual harm from online abuse. The following overview will explore each form of abuse and discuss researchers whose examinations of cyberbullying, harassment, and stalking provide significant insight into the prevalence of these forms as well as predictors of both offending and victimization.

Cyberbullying

Over the last decade, research has begun to focus on the emergence of cyberbullying, defined by Hinduja and Patchin (2008) as the willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text. There is some disagreement in the research community as to who is most likely to experience cyberbullying as the majority of research focuses on this problem among juvenile populations. By contrast, the same messages sent to an adult may be construed as harassment or stalking based on the severity of the content and frequency of contact. Regardless, it is important to note that bullies often seek implicit or explicit pleasure through the mistreatment of another person.

Cyberbullying can take multiple forms that vary in terms of severity and by frequency of contact. Willard (2004) created a seven item typology of cyberbullying demonstrating this range. Flaming occurs when individuals trade insults within a forum, chatroom, or other online public outlet. Exclusion involves blocking or otherwise ignoring an individual and keeping him/her from joining a group or on-going conversation. Denigration occurs when disparaging posts are made about another person, regardless of the accuracy of the statements. Similarly, individuals may engage in outing behaviors by sharing sensitive information about another person in a public or private setting. Masquerading involves posing as the prospective bullying victim in order to post false information or otherwise embarrass that person. Willard's (2004) typology also includes online harassment and cyberstalking as the most severe forms of bullying, though these elements are not necessarily agreed up on in the larger research literature.

Cyberbullies may directly target their victim through email or text messages or indirectly by posting hurtful or false statements in web forums and social networking sites. The creation and distribution of videos via services like YouTube

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