

“Just a couple of finger movements on a keyboard or a mobile and one button ‘send’...”

Age 13, Year 10

An overview of an investigation of Northern Irish 12-15 year old female perceptions, attitudes and experiences of bullying through their online social networks.

Donna Kernaghan

School of Education, Queen’s University, Belfast

Contact: dkernaghan02@qub.ac.uk

Introduction¹

Bullying has been recognised as a serious problem for children and young people all over the world (Smith et al 2002; Besag, 2006). However, female to female bullying has been, until recently, overlooked in research on bullying (Besag, 2006; Underwood, 2004; Simmons, 2002; Brown, Burman and Tisdall, 2001; Ringrose, 2008). This PhD project considers an under-researched area of bullying between girls, by other girls with specific reference to how new forms of technology such as text messaging, blogs, email, instant messaging, online social network sites and chat rooms can be used to bully. This summary will briefly discuss how cyberbullying has been defined and will outline the initial findings of this research concerning the cyberbullying aspects which has been collected through self administered questionnaires.

What is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is an increasing problem faced by young people. Methods of cyberbullying can take the form of silent or abusive phone calls to mobiles, threatening messages via text, email or instant messaging, nasty comments being left on personal social networking profiles, blogs or messaging boards and private information being shared with a large audience on the internet. The MSN Cyberbullying Report (2007) based on

¹ This summary is based on a conference paper given at the BERA Conference on 2nd September 2009. As it is part of an ongoing PhD study, please do not use any part of this summary without permission. Contact Donna Kernaghan, dkernaghan02@qub.ac.uk

results on YouGov survey of 518 children and their parents found that 11% of UK teenagers had experienced cyberbullying. The report also highlighted the gender difference that 18% of girls have been victims of cyberbullying compared to only 7% of boys. While this report has highlighted that young people have experienced this type of bullying, there is no standard definition of what 'cyberbullying' is. Some definitions focus on the type of technology used in cyberbullying while others include who is involved in their definitions. It has been disputed about whether Nancy Willard or Bill Belsey coined the 'cyberbullying' phrase first. Belsey (2005) writes that cyberbullying "involves the use of information and communication technologies such as email, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal polling websites to support deliberate, repeated and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others." This definition draws parallels from the definition of bullying when it is in 'real life' as it is repeated and intended to cause harm (Olweus, 1999; Rigby, 1996). Wolak et al (2007), go further by suggesting that the term 'online harassment' should be used instead of cyberbullying as bullying has been defined for face - to - face interaction. They argue that harassment using different technologies only becomes bullying when it is part of or related to offline bullying. This refers to the spaces in which bullying can occur in that there is a difference in abuse depending on whether it was in the real or virtual world.

Differences from traditional bullying

While it is apparent varying definitions of cyber bullying exist, it is clear that this type of bullying differs from traditional types of bullying. Whereas in the past, children who bullied tended to have the advantage of being physically stronger or being popular, to practice cyberbullying a bully just needs to be equipped with a mobile phone or computer and a willingness to terrorize (King, 2006). New technologies such as text messaging, instant messenger, and social networking sites have made it possible to bully someone without a physical confrontation and it can happen at anytime. In this way the bully's real identity can be hidden which, "frees aggressors to be crueller and makes victims even more fearful because they don't know who their enemies are" (Dellasega and Nixon, 2003). On the other hand, Wolak et al (2007) argue that youth do

not get as distressed by this as they can terminate the harassment easily with actions such as blocking harassers or turning the computer off. However, this discussion is limited in that it does not take into consideration social online networks which can indirectly attack people as comments or drawings about the target can be left on a profile so others can see and mock. This highlights the issue that cyberbullying can have a greater impact in humiliating the victim as the internet provides a potentially larger audience than would be possible otherwise.

Cyberbullying also is different from traditional forms of bullying in that adults have less experience of it. Kowalski et al (2008) found in their student focus groups that most cyberbullying occurs when children are at home under their parents' supervision. The generation born between 1977–1997 is unique as it is the first generation to have had access to technology everyday of their lives whether through multiple television channels, DVD players, game consoles, internet, home computer systems, iPods or mobile phones (Tapscott, 1997, Belsey, 2007). They use technology to learn, communicate with friends, for entertainment and shopping (Tapscott, 1997). While most adults may use mobile phones, email and the internet they are less likely to use communication tools such as instant messaging, message boards or have a social networking site. Shariff (2008) writes that this is due to the perception by adults that technology is a means to an end whereas, young people view it as an integral part of their life. This has led to a virtual unsupervised space with children and young people can interact with others (Kowalski et al, 2008). This can be problematic when incidents of cyberbullying are reported. As adults have not experienced this type of bullying in their own childhood, they can find it difficult to understand their child's experience. There has been disagreement among parents and schools as to who is responsible for monitoring and preventing cyberbullying (Shariff, 2008). Many schools have taken the approach to ban all instant messaging and social networking sites from school computers and so relinquishing responsibility for the issue. This has not prevented the problem but moved it outside of schools. Due to the unregulated nature and the lack of adult supervision in the places children and young people use online, cyberspace has

been likened to a “modern-day Lord of the Flies” (Chris Cloke, NSPCC, 2006) and the wild west of modern times (Chisholm, 2006).

The Study

I have used anonymous self administration questionnaires in eight grammar and secondary schools in Northern Ireland. The questionnaire was a tool to gain background information from a large sample of girls aged 12 to 15 years old that resulted in 494 completed questionnaires. The percentages used in this overview (see below) refer to this number of respondents. The anonymous questionnaire covered issues such as female friendships, different experiences of bullying, cyberbullying and what help girls’ perceive to be available to them concerning bullying. To complement this method I also created a BEBO page to communicate and interact with young girls to explore their experiences, perceptions and attitudes to bullying and female-to-female bullying and carried out online interviews using instant messenger. Data analysis from these collection methods is ongoing. The results in this summary will outline the preliminary findings of how ‘cyberbullying’ is beginning to be used by girls as another way to bully others.

Key Findings

Mobile Phones

Bullying via mobile phone can take the form of silent or abusive phone calls, insulting or threatening text messages, abusive voicemail or pretending to be someone else. The vast majority of girls participating in the study owned their own mobile phone with 97.4%. They reported that they mainly used their mobiles to send text messages with 52.2%. The main difference between the mobile phone and other cyberspace technology is the portability of the mobile in that it can be on someone’s person 24 hours a day. As well as making a phone call, a mobile can be used to send messages, take photos and video, store music, access and download from the internet and play games. Although there are positives to mobile phone use such as parents and children being able to keep in touch, there can be many dangers if mobile phones be abused. The

mobile phone was revolutionary as it meant that a person rather than a place could be called (Haste, 2005). This had made it easier for bullying through mobile phones as it is a direct line to one individual. The table below shows the percentage of girls who report to have experienced bullying via their mobile phones:

Table 1: Percentages of girls who experienced bullying via their mobile phone (n=494)

| | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------|
| A | Phone calls you felt threatened by | 20.6% |
| B | Abusive phone calls | 18.8% |
| C | Text messages you felt threatened by | 27.9% |
| D | Abusive text messages | 27.5% |

Communication via a mobile phone differs from other technologies as it cannot always be anonymous as a phone number will be displayed with each text message received. It is also more likely that abuse via a mobile phone will come from someone known to the target as it is difficult to obtain a mobile phone number without knowing the individual or knowing their name (Bryant et al, 2006). Having seen the importance that young people place on their mobile phones it is not difficult to see how distressing this type of abuse can be.

Online Social Networks

Online social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook, MySpace and BEBO imitate the traditional social networks that people build through their school, university, work and community. Hinduja and Patchin define social networking sites as, "Online services that bring together people by organising them around a common interest and providing an interactive environment of photos, blogs, user profiles, and messaging system." (Hinduja and Patchin, 2009, p.188). Online social networks give the opportunity to connect and interact with close friends and family as well as people that had lost touch and even people you no longer want any contact with without leaving your home. The popularity of SNS has soared and now "accounts for 1 in every 10 UK internet visits and 1 in every 5 page views" (Goad, Hitwise, 5th March 2009). Although the format on each social networking site is different there are three main features they have in common: profiles

where owner can add their personal details, a Friends section and a space for public comments to allow for interaction (boyd, 2008). Rosen (2007) has described these profiles as 'self portraits'. Unlike text messaging or instant messaging there is not one specific person that the profile is aimed at. It is intended to present a certain impression for a multiple audience.

Overall, 87.4% of girls reported that they used a social networking site. The most popular social networking sites for the girls participating in my study was BEBO with 78.2% of girls using this as their main online profile. Nearly 40.0% of girls used their social networking site everyday while 25.0% use it 2 – 3 times a week. The reason the majority of girls gave the reason for choosing their social networking site was that most of their friends used it. It seems that the 'social' aspect of these sites appeal to girls as 24.9% said their favourite feature was the comments so they could interact with their friends. All social networking sites have an interactive feature where people who have logged in and have access can leave comments, use emoticons and draw pictures on someone else's profile. It is this interactive nature that can be used as a way to bully others. Thirty percent of girls said that they had received a nasty comment on their social networking site. Although the owner of the profile can remove any comment they dislike after it has been posted, abusive comments can be left ridiculing the profile's owner appearance, choices of music or taste in other areas. As it is public, other people can firstly view the comment, and then take sides by either supporting the person who was originally targeted or by joining in with the harassment by leaving their own comment. It can also be used by a group to single out one girl. One girl in Year 11 wrote *"When bullying is used over Bebo only the person that is getting bullied notices, because usually they don't include names. So only a few people realize who it is about"*.

As well as using words on a social networking site, photos can also be used to bully and embarrass others. The second favourite feature on SNS was reported to be photos with 20.9% which means they can share and comment on each others experiences as shown by the photographs. With the rise of camera phones and digital camera it is simple to upload photos to the internet and to social networking sites. Girls reported that

31.8% had embarrassing photos posted on the internet against their will while 18.8% had put photos of someone else up online. The result is that the potential audience to view photos is huge.

Instant Messaging

Instant Messaging (IM) allows the real time exchange of messages over the internet with their contact lists, sharing photos and video conversations. IM is popular as it is quick, inexpensive and allows users to communicate with a group or several individuals at once (Bryant et al, 2006). The need to communicate quickly has seen a new type of language spring up which consists of 'emoticons' – faces which convey a mood or feeling, acronyms and letters being replaced by numbers. Like social network sites, Instant Messaging creates a visual representation of an individual's social network. According to MSN's Cyberbullying Report (2007), Instant Messaging is the most common form of cyberbullying as it can be used to make threats and spread rumours. Girls in my study perceived that instant messenger was the place most girls experienced bullying on the internet. Instant Messenger can provide multiple ways to bully someone which can easily be used to bully is that the identity of the bully can be disguised by the screen name or even through pretending to be someone else. Results showed that 21.6% of girls had pretended to be someone else, while 32.7% said someone else had pretended to be them.

As with all online communications, inhibitions can be lessened as the conversation is not face to face. This can lead to things being typed which are particularly nasty as 18.9% of girls reported typing hurtful things on MSN that they would not say face to face. It is also an easy way to share personal information about someone else through cutting and pasting conversations. This means that girls who thought they were having a private conversation with one person can find that what they said can be sent to many more contacts through emails and other IM conversations. Of the girls participating in the survey, 37.6% cut and paste an IM conversation to share with others. It also can be used to deliberately exclude someone. Like bullying in 'real life' a person can be left out of a conversation or arrangements to meet which socially isolates them. While one act

of these above methods is not necessarily bullying, it can spill out to verbal and indirect or physically bullying in schools.

Conclusion

The growth of cyberspace has created a new space in which bullying can occur and one in which adults may not be familiar with. As adults have not experienced this type of bullying in their own childhood, they can find it difficult to understand a child's experience of cyberbullying. It is important that teachers and parents are educated in how applications work online and how new technology can be used by children to bully others. This would include being educated on the spaces children use on the internet, security settings and how children can manipulate the technology. Although there is now legislation for all schools in the UK to have an anti bullying policy, this can only be as effective as the adults implementing it. This means it is essential that adults can identify the types of indirect methods of bullying such as cyberbullying and have a clear process of dealing with this. It is also important that all children have confidence in the processes in place for handling bullying and feel that the teachers, parents or other adults are approachable regarding their concerns about any type of bullying whether offline or online.

References

- Belsey, B. 2007, *Cyberbullying: A Real and Growing Threat* [Homepage of The Alberta Teachers' Association], [Online]. Available: <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/Quick+Links/Publications/Magazine/Volume+88/Number+1/Articles/Cyberbullying.htm> [2008, 21/02] .
- Belsey, B., www.cyberbullying.ca. Available: <http://www.cyberbullying.ca> [2009, 16th June]
- Besag, V.E. 2006, *Understanding girls' friendships, fights, and feuds: a practical approach to girls' bullying*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, England; New York.
- boyd, D.M. 2008, "Social Networking Sites: Public, Private or What?", *The Knowledge Tree*, [Online], vol. 13, pp. 19th March 2008. Available from: http://kt.flexiblelearning.net.au/tkt2007/?page_id=28
- Brown, J.A., Burman, M. & Tisdall, K. 2001, "Just Trying to be Men?" Violence, Girls and their Social World" in *Notes from Child Welfare and Social Action in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century: International Perspectives*, eds. J. Lawrence & P. Starkey, Liverpool University Press, Great Britain, pp. 36

- Bryant, J.A., Sanders-Jackson, A. & Smallwood, A.M.K. 2006, "IMing, Text Messaging and Adolescent Social Networks", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, [Online], vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 18/04/08. Available from: <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue2/bryant.html>. [18/04/08].
- Chisholm, J.F. 2006, "Cyberspace Violence against Girls and Adolescent Females", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, [Online], vol. 1087, pp. 74-89.
- Dellasega, C. & Nixon, C. 2003, *Girl wars: 12 strategies that will end female bullying*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Haste, H. 2005, *Joined-Up Texting: The role of Mobile Phones in Young People's Lives*, Nestle Social Research Programme, Britain.
- Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J.W. 2009. *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard; Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying*, Corwin Press, United States of America.
- King, L. 2006, August 15. *No hiding from online bullies*. Retrieved 3rd September 2008, from <http://www.news-leader.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?Date=20060815>.
- Kowalski, R.M., Limber, S.P. & Agatston, P.W. 2008, *Cyberbullying Bullying in the Digital Age*, Blackwell Publishing, United State of America.
- MSN Company 2006, *MSN Cyberbullying Report: Blogging, Instant Messaging and Email bullying amongst today's teens*, MSN
- Ofcom Office of Communication 2008, *Social Networking: A quantitative and qualitative research report into attitudes, behaviours and use*, UK.
- Olweus, D. 1999, "Sweden" in *The Nature of School Bullying: A Cross National Perspective*, eds. P.K. Smith, Y. Morita, J. Junger-Tas, D. Olweus, R. Catalano & P. Slee, Routledge, Great Britain, pp. 7-27.
- Rigby, K. 1997, *Bullying in Schools: And what to do about it Revised and Updated*, 1st edn, ACER Press, Australia.
- Ringrose, J. 2008, "'Just be friends': exposing the limits of educational bully discourses for understanding teen girls' heterosexualized friendships and conflicts", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 29, no. 5, pp. 509-522.
- Rosen, C. 2007, "Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism", *The New Atlantis*, [Online], no. 17, pp. 15-31. Available from: <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/virtual-friendship-and-the-new-narcissism>. [23/03/08].
- Shariff, S. 2008, *Cyber-Bullying: Issues and solutions for the school, the classroom and the home*, Routledge, Great Britain.
- Smith, P.K., Cowie, H., Olafsson, R.F. & Liefhoghe, A.P.D. 2002, "Personality and Social Development. Definitions of Bullying: A Comparison of Terms Used, and Age and Gender Differences, in a Fourteen-Country International Comparison", *Child Development*, vol. 73, no. 4, pp. 1119-113.
- Tapscott, D. 1997, *Growing up Digital: the Rise of the Net Generation*, McGraw - Hill Companies, USA.

Underwood, M.K. 2004, "Glares of Contempt, Eye Rolls of Disgust and Turning Away to Exclude: Non-Verbal Forms of Social Aggression among Girls", *Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 371-375.

Wolak, J., Mitchell, K.J. & Finkelhor, D. 2007, "Does online harrassment constitute bullying?" An exploration of known peers and online only contacts and", *Journal of Adolescence Health*, vol. 41, no. 6, pp. 51-58.