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College student cyberbullying on social networking sites: Conceptualization, prevalence, and perceived bystander responsibility

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ABSTRACT

The majority of research on cyberbullying has been conducted with middle school and high school students and has not focused on specific technology platforms. The current study investigated college student experiences with cyberbullying on Social Networking Sites (SNS). College students ($N = 196$) from a northwestern university shared their conceptualizations of what cyberbullying looked like on SNS. Some college students (19%) reported that they had been bullied on SNS and 46% indicating that they had witnessed cyberbullying on SNS. The majority (61%) of college students who witnessed cyberbullying on SNS did nothing to intervene. College students were also asked about their perceived responsibility when they witnessed cyberbullying on SNS. Two diverging themes emerged that indicated some college students believed their responsibility to intervene was circumstantial, while others believed there is a constant clear level of responsibility for college student cyberbullying bystanders on SNS.

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1. Introduction

Cyberbullying (i.e., bullying via technology) occurs among students in higher education, but most cyberbullying research has focused on middle school and high school students (Crosslin & Golman, 2014). Walker, Sockman, and Koehn (2011) indicated "further research is needed to expand our understanding of cyberbullying at the university level" (p. 37). The emerging studies concerning cyberbullying among college students have largely focused on broad digital settings (e.g., the internet), but there is a sparsity of research focused on cyberbullying on specific technology platforms (Schultz, Heilman, & Hart, 2014). Empirical efforts have also primarily focused on the victim and the bully, but not the cyberbullying bystanders (i.e., witnesses; Schultz et al., 2014).

The current exploratory study was designed to increase understanding regarding cyberbullying among college students with a specific focus on the experience of cyberbullying via social networking sites (SNS). Qualitative methodology was employed to contribute to the notable absence in the literature regarding "actual experiences of cyberbullying" (Rafferty & VanderVen, 2014, p. 365). Paullet and Pinchot (2014) advocated for studying "the prob-

lem of cyberbullying more holistically" (p. 68) and consistent with this recommendation we examined direct experiences of cyberbullying victimization in addition to bystander experiences. Finally, college students' perceptions regarding their responsibility when they were bystanders to cyberbullying behaviors on SNS were also examined.

2. College students and social media

Over the last decade, the percentage of young adults ages 18 to 29-years-old who use SNS has drastically increased from only 9% in 2004 to 89% in 2014 (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Facebook continues to be the most commonly used SNS among this age demographic with 71% using Facebook, but young adults also report using Instagram (53%) and Twitter (37%; Duggan et al., 2015). The majority of young adults (92%) also report using SNS that focus on video sharing (e.g., YouTube; Moore, 2011). According to the Pew Research Center, 52% of online adults presently use two or more SNS, which is referred to as multi-platform use (Duggan et al., 2015). The rate of multi-platform use has increased by 10% from 2013 to 2014 and is likely to continue to increase as new SNS are created.

Vaterlaus, Jones, Patten, and Cook (2015) reported that 68% of college students ($N = 743$) spent between one and 6 h on SNS on a weekly basis. This is a shift from a 2008 report that

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indicated 40% of college students ($N = 95$) spent no time on SNS (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Unfortunately, with the increase in time spent on SNS, the rates of cyberbullying have also increased (Schultz et al., 2014). The current study focuses on cyberbullying on SNS in general and specifically via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube.

3. Defining cyberbullying

Frequent internet use has been associated with increased instances of cyberbullying (Balakrishnan, 2015). Cyberbullying definitions vary in research, which has resulted in researchers studying critically different phenomena using the same terminology and ultimately limiting cross-study comparisons (Tokunaga, 2010). Tokunaga (2010) synthesized 25 scholarly definitions of cyberbullying in order to create the following collaborative definition: "Any behaviour performed through electronic media by individuals or groups of individuals that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others" (p. 278). However, the general public may not define cyberbullying in this way (Schultz et al., 2014). Bastiaensens et al. (2014) found that it may be especially difficult for those who witness online interactions to differentiate between cyberbullying and teasing without knowing the context of relational norms between the sender and recipient. Consequently, Shutlz et al. (2014) concluded "the definition of cyberbullying often relies on the perceptions and judgments of bystanders (observers) to the interaction to identify when the bully is asserting himself/herself over the victim and when he or she is causing intentional harm to the recipient" (para. 2).

4. Cyberbullying and college students

4.1. Prevalence

Most college students do not have a clear understanding of the term cyberbullying and view the term as "outdated" (Crosslin & Golman, 2014). Given the lack of understanding and acceptance of the term cyberbullying among college students, it is difficult to measure the prevalence of cyberbullying within this population. The prevalence rates are often inconsistent because researchers provide different definitions of cyberbullying to participants (Shultz et al., 2014), resulting in a broad range of reports regarding cyberbullying prevalence in college-aged samples. With results derived from a sample of 439 college students, Macdonald and Roberts-Pittman (2010) reported that 38% of college students knew someone who had been cyberbullied, 22% self-reported that they had been cyberbullied, and 8.6% stated that they had engaged in cyberbullying behaviors.

A few studies have included total reports of victimization, but also explored victimization on specific mediums. For example, a study with 613 college students reported that 35% of students self-reported that they were cyberbullied while in high school, but only 19% experienced cyberbullying while in college (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014). Victims of cyberbullying indicated that their victimization occurred through text messaging (46.1%), email (43.5%) and websites (36.2%). Walker et al. (2011) surveyed 120 undergraduate students and identified that 54% of participants knew someone who had been cyberbullied and 11% had been cyberbullied. Additionally, 56% of college students reported that they knew someone who had been cyberbullied on Facebook, which was higher than reported cyberbullying on the other eight platforms (i.e., email, cell phones, web cam, instant messaging, MySpace, Blogging, Twitter, and chat rooms) they were asked about.

Other studies have found cyberbullying prevalence may be difficult to accurately ascertain, as cybervictimization is not always reported. Paullet and Pinchot (2014) found most participants told a friend about the cyberbullying, but did not report it to an adult or an authority. The stigma of cyberbullying in college contributes to students avoiding the problem even though most admit it needs more attention. This has also resulted in cybervictims having less desire to talk to parents or friends about cyberbullying because they fear they will be seen as childish (Crosslin & Golman, 2014).

4.2. Motivations and consequences

Research on cyberbullying among college students has primarily focused on the consequences of cyberbullying for cyberbullies and cybervictims. Schenk and Fremouw (2012) reported college-aged victims of cyberbullying experienced significantly higher rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors as well as higher rates of depression, anxiety, and paranoia. Interestingly, college students who cyberbullied also have reported experiencing increased emotional distress, suicidal behaviors, and higher rates of aggression than their peers (Schenk, Fremouw, & Keelan, 2013). Motivations to engage in cyberbullying have also been investigated among college students (Doane, Pearson, & Kelley, 2014; Rafferty & VanderVen, 2014). Rafferty and VanderVen (2014) identified three main motivations for cyberbullying among college students ($N = 221$), which included: (a) cyber-sanctioning: bullies intent was to make the victim ashamed of his or her actions, (b) power struggles: bully in an attempt to hurt, humiliate, or influence another, and (c) entertainment: to provoke or get an emotional response from the victim for personal enjoyment. Doane et al. (2014) reported that cyberbullying behaviors increased when college students perceived that their peers would respond favorably to them or if they thought their peers join in on the cyberbullying.

4.3. Bystander characteristics and behaviors

Bullying has been traditionally characterized as a group process involving a bully, a victim, and witnesses or bystanders (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2008). Bystanders can respond to bullying by remaining an outsider, assisting or reinforcing the bully, or supporting or defending the victim (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; Thornberg et al., 2012). In traditional (face-to-face) bullying, bystanders often decide to respond to the bullying based on their definition and evaluation of the situation, the social context, and their own personal characteristics (Thornberg et al., 2012). Their decision to respond may also be influenced by the audience, others' actions or non-actions, being blocked by others' actions, or diffusion of responsibility (Latane & Darley, 1970).

Characteristics are similar among bystanders in face-to-face and cyberbullying situations, but technology allows for increased accessibility, anonymity, and autonomy (Wong-Lo & Bullock, 2014). In traditional bullying, bystanders are bound by their immediate environment to decide and react to the incident in public. The digital environment allows bystanders the opportunity to decide on their reaction in private and to access or share the bullying with the click of a finger (Wong-Lo & Bullock, 2014). The anonymity of the internet creates a disinhibition characterized by loss of self-control and a lack of restraint in social interactions (Barlińska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013). It may be that SNS that promote or allow for more anonymity also have higher rates of cyberbullying reports.

Bystanders can respond to cyberbullying situations with positive (defending) and negative (reinforcing) behaviors (Shultz et al., 2014). Positive bystander behaviors included defending the victim