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Online Social Networking and the Experience of Cyber-Bullying

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Abstract. Online social networking sites (SNS) are popular social tools used amongst adolescents and account for much of their daily internet activity. Recently, these sites have presented opportunities for youth to experience cyber-bullying. Often resulting in psychological distress, cyber-bullying is a common experience for many young people. Continual use of SNS signifies the importance of examining its links to cyber-bullying. This study examined the relationship between online social networking and the experience of cyber-bullying. A total of 400 participants (M_{age} = 14.31 years) completed an online survey which examined the perceived definitions and frequency of cyber-bullying. Users of SNS reported significantly higher frequencies of stranger contact compared to non-users. Spearman's rho correlations determined no significant relationship between daily time on SNS and the frequency of stranger contact. This suggests that ownership of a SNS profile may be a stronger predictor of some cyber-bullying experiences compared to time spent on these sites. Findings encourage continued research on the nature of internet activities used by young adolescents and the possible exposure to online victimization.

Keywords. Adolescents, social networking sites, cyber-bullying

Introduction

In recent years, research has revealed that one in three teens experience some form of cyber-bullying, often resulting in emotional distress, psychosocial trauma and decreased self-esteem [1,2]. While researchers agree on the alarming impacts of cyber-bullying, a precise consensus on what constitutes cyber-bullying is much less clear [3]. It is strongly supported that cyber-bullying involves the use of technology to harass or intimidate others, although, there is some argument as to the nature and regularity of this harassment [3]. Some researchers believe that an action can only be classified as cyber-bullying if it involves ongoing and repeated attacks [5]. Alternatively, others believe that the public nature of online interaction overrides this as offensive internet content can reach much larger audiences than what is typically achieved in face-to-face bullying [6]. In this study, cyber-bullying is defined as a perceived act or decision on the part of another individual that arouses singular or multiple feelings of victimization, embarrassment or harassment. In addition, this study also includes acts or comments that intimidate others or induce the feeling of being threatened. Specifically, these acts or decisions are delivered through technology.

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Traditionally, cyber-bullying primarily occurred through mobile phone activity and instant messaging programs. In Finnish adolescents, a large population based study revealed that cyber-bullying was most common in instant messaging programs where youth would send internet-based text messages to each other in real time [7]. In these contexts, cyber-victims were often bullied by peers of the same age yet older bullies tended to evoke a stronger impact. Although cyber-bullying was found to be less prevalent than face-to-face bullying, it created a stronger sense of fear in victims as bullies were able to transcend the school yard boundaries. These findings are also confirmed in studies of US and UK adolescents [8,9]. In more recent times, the popularity of instant messaging programs has been rivaled by the uptake of social networking sites (SNS). Currently, a decisive link between this new social medium and cyber-bullying has not yet been established.

Eliminating the dimensions of time and space, SNS are interactive media sources which allow young people to keep in contact and share information [10]. A substantial body of literature indicates that many teenagers interact with their SNS for over an hour a day [11]. While some studies reveal positive impacts for offline social interaction, SNS may expose vulnerable youth to a variety of risks [12,13]. Participation in these utilities encourages teens to display a considerable amount of identifiable information including photos and geographic location [14]. Given the availability of personal details and the array of public peer-to-peer interactions, SNS present extended opportunities for cyber-bullying [15,16]. This study aims to explore early adolescents' perceptions and frequency of cyber-bullying experiences. In addition, this study will also examine the relationship between cyber-bullying experience and time spent per day on SNS. It is hypothesized that the use of SNS significantly increases an adolescent's likelihood of experiencing cyber-bullying.

1. Method

1.1 Sample and Procedure

After parental consent was given, this cross-sectional study was undertaken at an Australian high school under the supervision of a researcher. Using Survey Monkey, a total of 400 participants aged between 12 and 17 years (54.8% female; M_{age} = 14.3 years, SD = 1.2) completed an online survey. Some questions were relevant to only a sub-sample, therefore n varies for different analyses. This study received ethics approval from the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics committee.

In this sample, 76.8% of participants (n = 181) had private access to the internet. The home was the main location of internet access (80.3%) and there was an average of 2.88 (SD: 1.60) computers in each household. A total of 73.7% rarely or never asked for their parent's permission before accessing the internet.

1.2 Measures

The non-standardised online survey consisted of three sections: internet use, perceptions of cyber-bullying and cyber-bullying experience. In section one of the survey, participants were asked how often they used the internet, what they used the internet for and where they accessed the internet. Participants were also asked which SNS they primarily used, how many minutes they spent on their SNS per day and who they communicated with using these sites. In section two, participants were asked to

categorize a list of 23 actions as either examples of cyber-bullying or harmless activity. These actions were adapted from past research in adolescent cyber-bullying and were answered using '*yes*', '*no*' or '*unsure*' categories [17]. In section three, participants were then asked how frequently they had been victims of these actions in the past month. Answers were given using an ordinal scale of *daily* (1), *weekly* (2), *fortnightly* (3), *monthly* (4) or *never* (5). Participants were not asked how frequently they had cyber-bullied others.

2. Results

2.1 Internet use and online social networking

Participants used the internet for an average of 2.53 (*SD*: 1.85) hours per day; 83.8% of participants rated their ability to use the internet as 'good or excellent'. Online social networking (*n* = 198) was ranked as the most popular internet function alongside information searching (*n* = 144) and IM programs (*n* = 116). Educational programs were the least used function of the internet (*n* = 8).

A total of 72.5% (*n* = 290) of participants reported using SNS. Amongst these users, Facebook was the most popular with 97.5% using this utility. On a typical day, participants visited their site up to 2.75 (*SD*: 3.94) times and spent an average of 63.39 (*SD*: 58.37) minutes networking. The primary use of SNS was keeping in contact with local friends (58.7%). Wall posts were the most popular function (29.9%) followed by chat (19.6%), status updates (13.5%), and photo viewing (12.8%). Without SNS, 66.5% said they wouldn't know less about their friends and 63.7% said they wouldn't have less contact.

When asked about their privacy settings, 75.5% had their profile on private or limited, 11% had a public profile, and 13.5% were unsure of their privacy settings. When asked how often unknown friend requests were accepted, 13.5% reported always, 37.7% sometimes, and 48.7% rarely or never. A total of 75.8% of participants said they would be uncomfortable with strangers accessing their site. The majority of participants (88.6%) had parental acknowledgement to use these sites however 6.8% did not know what their parents thought.

2.2 Perceptions of cyber-bullying:

When asked what actions were considered to be cyber-bullying, the majority of 'yes' responses were reported for '*abusive contact from someone unknown*' (90.4%), '*making threats via email*' (89.8%), '*sending insulting emails*' (89.5%), '*abusive contact from someone you do know*' (89.2%) and '*spreading rumors through email*' (88.7%). The majority of 'no' responses were reported for '*sending a huge amount of emoticons*' (70.3%), '*receiving phone calls in the middle of the night*' (57.7%) and '*prank phone calls*' (46.5%). For the action '*being contacted by strangers*', 41.9% reported that it was not an example of cyber-bullying, 20.1% were unsure and 38.1% reported that it was.

2.3 The experience of cyber-bullying

Interestingly, '*being contacted by strangers*' (33.1%) was the most frequent experience of cyber-bullying. In addition to this, '*phone calls in the middle of the night*' (30.5%),

'*prank phones calls*' (29.9%), '*receiving a huge amount of emoticons*' (26.7%) and '*name calling/gossiping over msn*' (25.2%) were also frequent experiences of cyber-bullying.

Mann-Whitney U tests were employed to determine the differences between users and non-users of SNS and their experience of cyber-bullying. Users of SNS ($m = 4.36$, $mdn = 5.00$) reported significantly higher frequencies of '*being contacted by strangers*' when compared to non-users ($m = 4.7$, $mdn = 5.00$) ($U = 7308$, $z = -3.108$, $p < 0.001$). Users of SNS ($m = 4.32$, $mdn = 5.00$) also reported significantly higher frequencies of '*phone calls in the middle of the night*' compared to non-users ($m = 4.67$, $mdn = 5.00$) ($U = 7431$, $z = -2.973$, $p < 0.001$).

Point-biserial correlations were conducted to determine the relationship between SNS use and the experience of cyber-bullying. A significant relationship was found between SNS use and stranger contact ($r_{pb} = -.17$, $n = 341$, $p < .001$). Use of SNS accounted for 2.89% of the variance in the frequency of '*being contacted by strangers*'. A significant relationship was also found between SNS use and phone calls in the middle of the night ($r_{pb} = -.16$, $n = 341$, $p < .001$). Use of SNS accounted for 2.59% of the variance in the frequency of '*phone calls in the middle of the night*'.

Spearman's rho correlations were used to determine the relationship between SNS daily time and the frequency of cyber-bullying. No significant relationship was found between '*being contacted by strangers*' and SNS time per day ($r_s = -.073$, $n = 274$, $p = .266$). Using bonferroni adjustments, no significant correlations or differences were found between SNS daily time and the frequency of other cyber-bullying experiences.

3. Discussion

The findings of this study signify that unwanted stranger contact is a common experience in teens which may be provoked by SNS membership. In this study, a greater proportion of SNS users reported higher frequencies of unwanted stranger contact. It may be possible that being part of an online social network increases the likelihood of being contacted by strangers. However, this study can't definitively state that SNS users who experience stranger contact, engage in further communication or build relationships with these strangers. As such, it is important to determine what adolescents 'do' when they are approached by strangers online. It may be that adolescents are aware of the dangers of online strangers and simply ignore their requests for contact. In this sense, the internal functions of SNS, such as increased privacy settings, declining friend requests and blocking others, may provide an effective filter for controlling stranger contact. However, 51.5% of SNS users in this study reported that they accept friend requests from unknown people. Therefore, owning a SNS profile may increase exposure to online strangers and entice youth to make further contact. As adolescence is a phase of significant vulnerability, these results reinforce the need for continued exploration of particular behaviours within SNS.

Interestingly, this study found that time spent per day on SNS had no significant relationship with unwanted stranger contact. No significant correlations were found between SNS daily time and the frequency of other cyber-bullying actions. This suggests that the acts included in the cyber-bullying measure had no association with how much time was being spent on Facebook. This is consistent with Sengupta and Choudari [18] who also found that using SNS did not increase the likelihood of

experiencing online harassment. However, as previously discussed, cyber-bullying is a multidimensional construct. It encompasses a range of experiences from online harassment to online stalking and identity theft. Cyber-bullying is also a subjective experience; an act of cyber-bullying may induce a distressful response in one adolescent but not impact another. As such, many teens may not perceive the same actions to be acts of cyber-bullying. This is supported by our findings as many participants were unsure if being contacted by strangers was indeed an act of cyber-bullying. In addition, the most frequent experiences of cyber-bullying as defined by the literature were not actually categorized as cyber-bullying by the majority of participants. This highlights the need for continued research into the perceptions of cyber-bullying and how it is conceptualized and best operationalised in adolescents. With the technology arena changing so quickly, it may be difficult to find a truly appropriate measure of cyber-bullying which addresses all communication sources being used by young people and the changing dynamics of their social interaction.

In conclusion, this study suggests that some cyber-bullying experiences may be moderated more significantly by owning a SNS profile in contrast to how much daily time is spent on this medium. As this study cannot determine the reaction to or impact of online stranger contact, future research would need to reveal what adolescents do when they encounter online strangers via SNS. Determining the reactions to this experience will help minimize the potential harm related to the use of these utilities. In addition, a mixed-methods approach may be more appropriate when exploring this issue in contrast to solely employing a quantitative measure [19]. In addition to surveys, focus groups and interviews may provide more personal insight into the nature of this experience. For now, this study encourages further examination of the safety of SNS and cautions against the un-moderated use of these utilities amongst youth.

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