CHAPTER 8

CYBERBULLYING? VOICES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

In order to gain a rich understanding of the phenomenon of cyberbullying among college students, we conducted a series of focus groups on the campus of a large southwestern university. Employing a grounded theory approach to the data analysis, major themes emerged. The roles of sender, receiver, and audience member are very fluid in the cyber-environment. Misinterpretation and miscommunication can result in unintentional cyberbullying; audience comments can easily escalate a benign comment into a major incident. Focus group participants generally believed that the receiver's interpretation rather than the intent of the sender determines whether a communication constitutes cyberbullying. Because of the potential for misinterpretation of messages, anyone can be a (perhaps unintentional) cyberbully. Participants believed that the anonymity of the Internet encouraged cyberbullying, as did the desire for instant gratification and impulsivity. Students who are different in some way (race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and appearance) are perceived as being more vulnerable to being victimized in cyberspace, and students with high profiles (e.g., athletes and student government officers) were also noted as likely targets. Despite being able to describe the dynamics of

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cyberbullying in detail and provide numerous examples of it happening in the campus community, members of the focus groups were reluctant to characterize cyberbullying as a problem at their university and uncertain whether the university should intervene. They did, however, offer many suggestions that will be useful to universities seeking to develop policies, educational programs, and intervention strategies for their campuses.

The tragic suicide in September 2010 of Tyler Clementi, a freshman at Rutgers University whose intimate encounter was streamed over the Internet by his roommate and a friend, drew national attention to the problem of cyberbullying (using technology to harm others), and raised awareness that this problem is not confined to middle and high school. Today's college students are *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001), for whom digital technology is an integral component of all aspects of their lives. College students use technology to navigate the physical and social world of their campuses and also to maintain ties with their pre-college friends and family. Recently, the widespread adoption of smart phones allows students to have the features of both cell phones and the Internet in one compact and highly portable device. It is in this context that cyberbullying behaviors may emerge.

DEFINING CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying definitions abound, but in most cases the definition includes AU :1
the use of digital technology, harm (or negative impact), and repetition. The repetition element has generated the most controversy; it is included in the definition of conventional bullying, but experts differ on whether the sender must take repeated actions, or whether the fact that cyberbullying behaviors are generally visible to multiple witnesses, and can easily be forwarded, copied, and posted or sent to witnesses by third parties makes repetition moot (Patchin & Hinduja, 2011). Some researchers believe that power imbalance is an important component of cyberbullying, as it is in conventional bullying, but others consider that because of the anonymous nature of much digital communication, the power imbalance cannot be determined. Synthesizing the definitions in the literature, we propose the following: *a broad range of behaviors or actions in which a person uses technology in a way that is perceived as aggressive or threatening to another person.*

THE DIGITAL WORLD

The popularity of social networking sites among high school and college students has been blamed for fostering a culture of *digital narcissism* in young people (Keen, 2007). Suler (2004) described a phenomenon called the *online disinhibition effect*, which refers to greatly diminished internal censorship when communicating in cyberspace. He said, ''People say and do things in cyberspace they wouldn't ordinarily do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel less restrained and express themselves more openly'' (p. 321). This effect can be either benign (e.g., appropriate and meaningful self-disclosure) or toxic (e.g., destroying someone else's reputation). The tendency to exhibit a more narcissistic, aggressive, and uncivil persona in the digital world is also described by Aboujaoude (2011), who proposed that a more dangerous e-personality exists parallel to our nondigital selves.

Websites have been developed specifically to facilitate the expression of visitors' malicious impulses and motivations, several of which are specifically designed for college students. For example, the original JuicyCampus.com (now shut down) has been replaced by other sites (e.g., thedirty.com) that serve the same purpose: to allow students at a particular university to anonymously post derogatory, vulgar, and profane comments about other students on campus without regard for the veracity of the content. One such site, AutoAdmit.com, attracts law students from prestigious programs, and has been sued because of personal and professional harm suffered by students who were repeatedly targeted with lewd and defamatory comments (Bauman, 2011). A brief perusal of the subject lines of posts on these sites makes it clear that these sites are not benign.

It is generally believed that cyberbullying is potentially more damaging than conventional forms of bullying (Campbell, 2005). Because many of the acts are committed anonymously, the victim may ruminate about the identity of the bully and begin to question whether friends or others with whom he or she has close relationships could be the perpetrator, undermining trust (Bauman, 2011). By hiding behind anonymity, the bully often feels safe from detection, and thus is more willing to make false or mean-spirited comments. Further, the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) theoretically frees many users of digital communication technologies to say things they would never say in face-to-face interaction. Cyberbullying, unlike face-to-face bullying, can happen any place and at any time, and has the capability of reaching an audience that can number in the millions. Finally,

the absence of paralinguistic cues (tone, emphasis, gestures, etc.) makes it more difficult to extract meaning from a communication.

PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING IN COLLEGE

Several studies have attempted to quantify the problem of cyberbullying at the college level (cf. Anonymous, 2011; Englander & Muldowner, 2007; Finn, 2004; MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010; Selwyn, 2008; Tegeler, 2010). These researchers reported a range of prevalence rates for victimization from 9% to 34%, which is not surprising. This line of inquiry is quite recent, and researchers have yet to agree on a precise definition of the term. Different researchers use different definitions and different time frames, so that in one study participants may report lifetime prevalence while in others they report on the last two months, or the last school term. In addition, the way in which questions are worded, the number of items, and the response options, and the behaviors listed, vary from study to study, so it is predictable that results will vary widely. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that cyberbullying occurs in the college environment. What has not yet been reported are student views of the problem and how it unfolds on a campus.

THE CURRENT STUDY

In this chapter, we describe a study conducted at our university that was prompted by shock at the Clementi suicide and the increasing reports of incidents on college campuses. We chose to focus on the local situation to ensure that we were doing everything possible to create a campus culture wherein cyberbullying is unlikely to occur. The first step was to listen to the students' voices to learn about their experiences, ideas, and perspectives on the issue. Because research on cyberbullying in college students has only recently emerged, and the topic is of such importance, we used a qualitative method (focus groups). Qualitative methods are best for exploring new areas and developing hypotheses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative data allow researchers to reveal complexity, provide "'thick descriptions' that are vivid, nested in a real context, and have a ring of truth that has strong impact on the reader" (p. 10).

Focus groups are particularly useful for exploring new topics because they provide a nonthreatening environment where peers can share ideas and perspectives, and in which the presence of peers dilutes the dominance of the

authority figure (facilitator). This format allows participants to build on other members' contributions, and the spontaneous nature of the interactions stimulates the exchange and production of ideas (Stewart, & Shamdasani, 2006). The findings from this study will inform the next step in our research – to develop and administer a survey to a large sample of students on the campus.

Our work is guided by communications theory, which describes the process of transmitting a message (a text message, email, blog posting, comment on a social networking site, and video on YouTube.com) from a sender to a receiver. In the basic model of communication, a sender uses a channel to send messages to an audience (receiver) or audiences (Littlejohn & Foss, 2007). Messages are the words, symbols, or images used by senders to transmit information. Purpose, strategy, and context are also important considerations in the basic communication model (McQuail, 2005). This theoretical framework considers communication to be the process of interaction among sender(s) and receivers(s) and their social context toward the goal of sharing and creating meaning. Digital communication shares these characteristics.

METHODS

Participants

Participants for the focus groups were recruited in three ways: posters, direct email invitation to a random sample of students, and personal invitations through contact persons who recruited members of identity-specific groups such as athletes, students affiliated with multicultural centers, students in the honors college, fraternity and sorority leaders, and members of LGBT student groups. Recruitment for focus groups on this topic was difficult; thousands of students were contacted, and 53 agreed to participate in sessions that fit their schedules. The final sample for this study was comprised of 30 students.

All participants were undergraduate students with the exception of one female graduate student. Their ages ranged from 18 to 28 ($M = 20.47$, $SD = 2.3$), with all but two between the age of 18 and 23. Students listed 28 different academic majors. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Procedures

The study was approved by the researchers' institutional review board. Upon arriving at the focus group location, participants were presented with informed consent documents and a demographic questionnaire. After completing those documents, the facilitator responded to any questions

and began the group. As incentives, dinner and 10-dollar gift cards were provided to all participants.

A team of three facilitators who received formal training in focus group facilitation specific to this study conducted seven 90-min focus groups. Graduate students were the discussion facilitators in order to reduce the social distance between the students and the research team. One facilitator led the discussion, the second took process notes, and the third noted key ideas on a flip chart visible to everyone.

Focus groups were audio and video taped, and transcriptions of the recordings were analyzed by the four members of the research team using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Our "theoretical sensitivity" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) from previous research and anecdotal evidence on campus informed our ability to give meaning to the data and discern pertinent information. Using this inductive approach, each of the four authors independently conducted line-by-line open coding of the

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Characteristics	$N = 30$	Percentage
Gender		
Male	8	27
Female	22	73
Class standing		
Freshman	9	30
Sophomore	8	27
Junior	5	17
Senior	7	23
Graduate	1	3
Race/ethnicity		
African American	2	7
Hispanic	3	10
Native American	6	20
Multiracial	6	20
White	13	43
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	21	70
Bisexual	4	13
Lesbian	1	3
Questioning	2	7
Not reported	2	7

transcripts, assigning each utterance and phenomenon a conceptual tag that described its essence in a more general way. Concepts were then combined into larger analytic categories, and the data for each category was compiled and compared to identify its properties and dimensions and ensure mutual exclusivity and exhaustiveness (Weber, 1990). We then used an axial coding process to specify the context in which each category occurs, the interactional strategies by which it occurs, and the consequences of those strategies. The research team approached each step of this analysis collaboratively, meeting as a team to establish consensus on the meanings and labels for identified concepts, combining those concepts into analytical categories, identifying the properties and dimensions of these categories, and making connections among them.

RESULTS

In this chapter, we use the terms *sender* and *receiver* from communications theory to refer to the individuals who are involved in incidents that might be considered cyberbullying. These terms are less pejorative than the conventional labels of bully and victim or target and reflect the students' concerns about intentionality and misinterpretation. The results illustrate how all the components in the digital communications process of cyberbullying are understood by college students. A conceptual map of our findings can be found in Fig. 1.

Definition

We avoided the term *cyberbullying* at the onset of this study because we thought that the term *bullying* might sound too juvenile to resonate with college students, since it is commonly associated with elementary and middle school behaviors. Instead, our research team began this study referring to the phenomenon as *aggression using technology*.

Participants were asked to reflect on the following definition of aggression using technology or cyberbullying: a broad range of behaviors or actions in which a person uses technology – social networking, texting, and posting to websites – in a way that feels aggressive or threatening to another person. Of the seven focus groups, the facilitators of the first three employed the term aggression using technology when asking about the definition. Participants responded negatively to this term, indicating that they

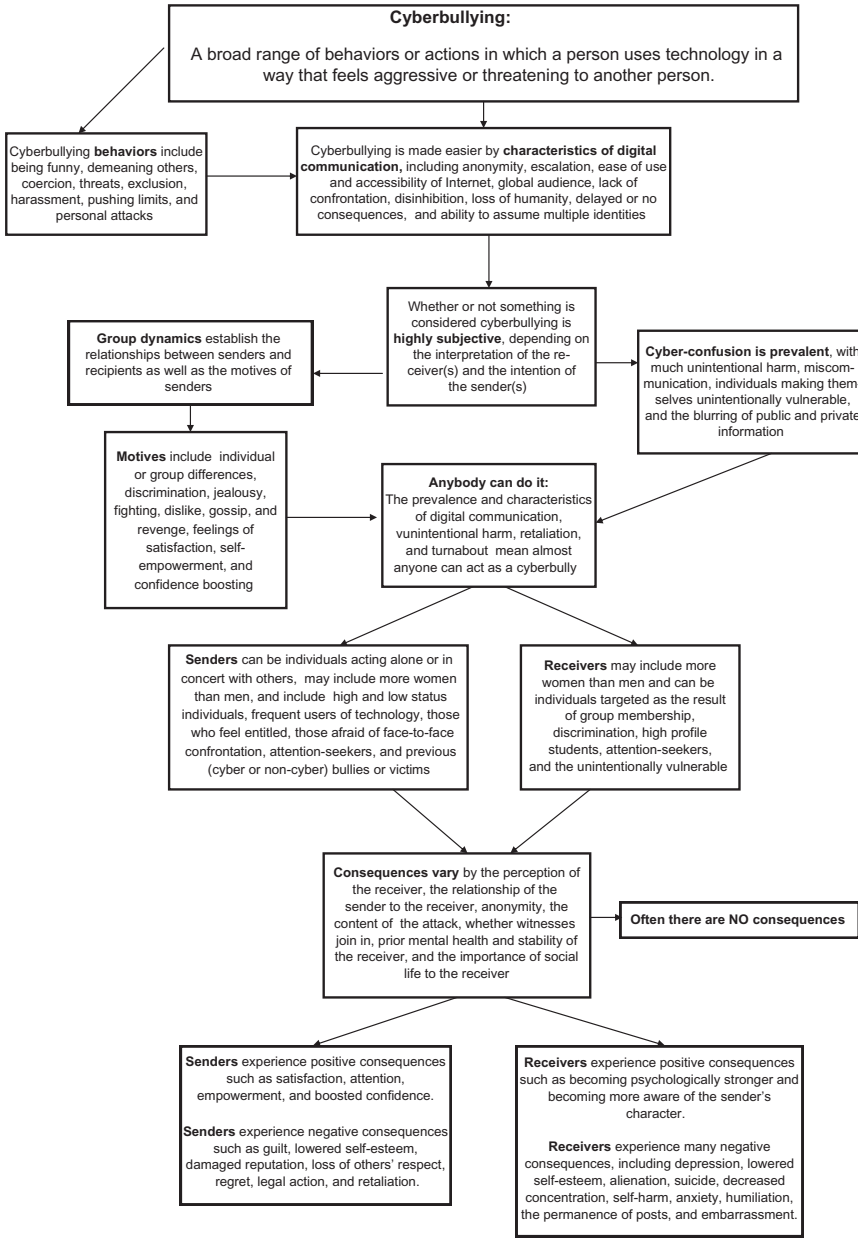

Fig. 1. Concept Map of Findings.

associated the term aggression with physical violence. Alternative terms suggested by participants were bullying and harassment. In light of this, the remaining four focus groups employed the term cyberbullying, which appeared to be easily understood and less objectionable.

In reflecting on the definition of cyberbullying, participants noted that it is difficult to specify, in part because it entails a broad range of behaviors using an ever-changing array of communications technology. As one female student put it, "cyberbullying is kinda like a broad term. It's like saying *art*; art is a broad term." Among the behaviors that participants included in cyberbullying were being funny or joking, demeaning others, coercing others, threatening someone, harming someone's reputation, excluding, and harassing others. The technologies that participants mentioned in connection with cyberbullying included social networking websites, text messages, email, chat rooms, blogs, videos, and web-based instructional platforms for university courses.

Students also believed that cyberbullying is highly subjective. Whether an event is or is not identified as cyberbullying depends on intention and interpretation of sender, receivers, or witnesses. As one respondent heard the definition she said,

> I think it's [cyberbullying] deceptive. It seems straightforward, but it's open to so much interpretation that you really can't say, "Oh yeah, that was bullying." It – there's a word I'm looking for – there's nothing objective about it. I can't think of a way to make it objective.

Another student agreed:

> I could say something that's meant to be aggressive to you, and you can say, "Oh, that doesn't bother me." And I could say something that's meant as a joke and you could say, "I feel threatened." So, it depends. Like, if you wanna take it from the victim's point of view where the victim is always right, or from the bully's point of view, or suspected bully.

Point of view was a central issue in this part of the discussion. For many students, the intention and motive of the sender were seen as the most important factors in defining cyberbullying. From this perspective, if the sender did not intend a message to be aggressive or threatening, then it should not be considered cyberbullying, regardless of how it is interpreted by the receiver. As one student put it, "I think the intent is almost more important than the way it is taken." Another participant expressed it this way:

> I was going back and forth between should it be the victim's point of view or the aggressor's point of view. And it has to be from the aggressor's point of view because if they truly intended it to not be aggressive or truly intended it to be just a joking thing between friends, then the other person, when they say something, the perceived aggressor

> would immediately amend the mistake. If that person continues to do it, then it is obvious that it is intentional, and at that point in time it is bullying. I'm sure everybody will say something that offends somebody on accident, but they're not really bullying if they turn around and apologize immediately.

As suggested earlier, a clear indicator of cyberbullying and intent is repetition, when a sender sends multiple hurtful or offending messages. In these cases, participants agreed that the intention is clear and the potential for harm is greater than in isolated cases of aggression:

> I think cyberbullying would be more taxing on the person, like to have one person targeting you specifically over and over and over, whereas some guy coming along and saying, "I hate you." Even if it's just for one day, the hate you, well that will go away. Cyberbullies tend to work over time, like if somebody tells you I hate you every day for three weeks you're more likely to believe it than if one guy shows up and talks to you for three hours about how much he hates you.

Many participants pointed out the prevalence of unintentional harm, which occurs when a receiver is hurt by a message or posting even though the sender did not have a malicious intent. In some cases, students saw this simply as a matter of miscommunication: "Then there's also the confusion thing where we don't mean to be mean sometimes but the person might take it that way. That doesn't really make it cyberbullying that makes it cyber confusion."

Participants frequently mentioned the lack of nonverbal signals, tone, and inflection as contributors to misunderstandings in the text of communications. One method for reducing the misinterpretation is the use of emoticons (e.g., ☹) or acronyms (e.g., LOL) or group-specific norms. One student described the process that led to clearer communication on a discussion board:

> we actually had a while of where we were talking about sarcasm somebody got really mad and we were like, "we were just being sarcastic." We invented this thing called the sarcasm hand, and so if we were being sarcastic we would be like "yes my sarcasm hand is raised," and it became a thing.

Sarcasm and joking, in particular, are subject to misunderstanding without these clarifying cues. Students also gave many examples of the blurring of public and private information on social networking sites as a cause of unintentional harm. For instance, they talked about a tendency among their peers to use Facebook.com almost as an online diary, posting their every thought and activity in this semipublic realm. These impulsive postings can be misunderstood, viewed by the subject of the comment, or viewed by someone who feels excluded. For instance, one student said, "My best friend got upset 'cause I couldn't hang out and she posted something on

there and I confronted her about it and I was kind of shocked to see it.'' Carelessness, impulsive communication, sarcasm, joking, venting about frustrations in relationships, or discussions about social plans can all result in hurt feelings by witnesses or receivers. In many cases, these misunderstandings are quickly and easily resolved. A receiver may respond to the offending comment or posting and receive an apology from the sender. In other cases, the misunderstandings may escalate into conflict as the receiver, or even witnesses, retaliate against the sender.

Although the relative importance of motive versus intention was mentioned, more participants believed that the receiver's interpretation was the deciding factor because intent is not obvious in this type of communication. A female student said, ''I think maybe the definition needs to capture, like, really emphasize the way the recipient feels, not necessarily the way the person intended it.'' One student compared it to criminal activity, saying that if you accidentally steal something, it is still stealing. Other students expressed similar views that, even if it is not intentional, it is the result that matters for the receiver. For example, one said, ''I think a lot of people don't even think they are bullying. They don't think how it makes the other person feel. Some don't think they are doing it,'' and another commented, ''You could bully somebody, but you're not – you don't – like you said intentionally you're not trying to bully them, but it's just kinda how you are. And it's the view of the person that's being bullied.''

The ubiquitous nature of digital communication and the characteristics of that form of communication result in a social life that is more immediate, less censored, and more public than ever before. In this regard, members of the focus groups observed that everyone was at risk of eventually being a cyberbully, even if only by accident. Impulsive postings, miscommunication, unintentional harm, and retaliation mean that almost anyone can communicate a message that is received and interpreted as harmful by someone else. This sense of ''anybody can do it'' was pervasive among focus group participants, many of whom admitted to having already been on both the sending and receiving end.

The Role of Technology

Focus group participants identified aspects of the technology per se that facilitate a variety of online aggressive behaviors. Referring primarily to the Internet, participants identified specific characteristics that contribute to the phenomenon of cyberbullying.

Access

First and foremost, participants noted the easy access to the Internet, via WIFI, smart phones, and portable computers. These tools are used, as the participants described them, to communicate information to a large audience quickly, and as a means of staying connected globally with "friends" and family. For example, "Like it's really easy to get something out and tell a very large group of people if something's happened." The participants described the access to the large audience as both beneficial and dangerous. They use the social networks to stay connected in ways they recognize are different from those of previous generations by having the ability to stay in touch with *all* of their friends every day. When discussing the various aspects of online aggression, however, they recognized that both intentionally and uninten tionally aggressive communications are viewed by large audiences instantaneously. The ability for communications to be viewed by large audiences contributes to escalation. One student was succinct in his description, "If you put it on Facebook, everybody knows and it explodes."

Anonymity

The anonymity of the Internet facilitates cyberbullying, according to participants. The ability to hide behind fake identities or to comment to and about strangers offers the sender a sense of empowerment. "People are much meaner when they think that you can't get back at them." Closely related to anonymity is the ability to suspend the inhibitions that limit behaviors when face-to-face: "I've seen, on Facebook, people against people say things they wouldn't say in person." Another student observed, "when you're behind a computer screen or behind a phone, and you're not interacting with the person face-to face, it doesn't feel personal. It's almost like you're bullying a machine, so it doesn't matter."

Absence of Consequences

Additionally, since sender can remain at a distance from the receiver, sender may assume there will be no consequences for their online actions. The participants suggested that the inability to trace senders means there are no real consequences. "Since there's no consequences, you feel like there's no reason not to do it at the time …" They also recognized that, when

interacting face-to-face, the sender must experience the reactions of the receiver, and be an actual part of a confrontation. Online, the sender is able to avoid or at least delay confrontation. This feature provides some senders with a feeling of safety from emotional responses or potentially physical responses. In the words of a participant, "it's safer for the bully to attack someone … It seems like there are a lot less consequences, you don't have to see their reactions, they might not even know … a safer way to bully."

Virtual Personalities

Finally, the participants identified the ability to create a virtual personality that is not like their real personality as a feature of the technology that contributes to online aggression: "some people like to create a whole new persona for themselves just online apart from how they would be in person."

Activities and Websites

Participants identified specific types of online activities and sites that encourage cyberbullying because they are designed to protect the anonymity of commenting authors, reach vast numbers of people in a single click or offer open, uncensored discussion forums. Participants made general references to blogs, chat rooms, and online gaming sites. Participants also made distinctions between websites that are created solely for negative purposes and those that can become negative but are not intended to be so. Participants identified two specific sites, "The Dirty" and "Juicy Campus" as being negatively oriented. One commented, "Probably most people at school know what 'The Dirty' is … that site is completely negatively oriented, like there is nothing on it that is positive," and another added, "'The Dirty,' it's serious … definitely hurts people's feelings, and they are not happy about it."

Participants mentioned several websites that were not designed for derogatory intent, but are sometimes used in that way. FormSpring.com, Facebook.com, YouTube.com, MySpace.com, and Twitter are all in this category. Facebook.com was described as a vehicle for spreading negativity, since it allows many additional voices to add negative comments, which can amplify the effect on the receiver. Referring to a recent widely viewed YouTube.com post by a student at UCLA, in which she made derogatory and demeaning comments about a particular racial group, one student

noted, "and now she's getting death threats … there's all sorts of Facebook jokes about her."

Who Gets Involved?

Senders

The next topic of discussion was the characteristics of people who are involved in cyberbullying, and the active or passive nature of audience involvement. Many participants believed that *anyone* could be the sender of negative communications. The nature of digital communication facilitates the misinterpretation of messages, the causing of unintentional harm, easy retaliation, and quick role reversals between sender and receiver. In the words of a participant, "I'd say like usually bullying is the bigger kid or like the older kid, but now it can be anyone – and you don't have to defend yourself." Additionally, participants recognized the fluid nature of roles in this communication medium. A sender can post something that is a joke; the receiver may or may not interpret it as a joke, and then someone in the audience interprets it as offensive and attempts to defend the original receiver. One student explained:

> So my roommate's theory is that sarcasm is really hard to detect online, so people take it really seriously if you say something sarcastic, and they say something mean and then somebody else thinks you were being not sarcastic and defends you and suddenly it gets into this big fight.

This comment illustrates a theme that was central to the focus group discussions – roles are fluid in the cyber world, and often switch quickly between sender, receiver, and audience.

Group participants identified motivations for intentional cyberbullying that are similar to the motivations recognized in conventional bullying. Specifically they talked about exclusion, jealousy, individual and group differences, discrimination, gossip, and self-empowerment. They also expressed the view that in cyberspace, people who are less powerful in the real world can become the most powerful in the virtual world, providing an opportunity to exact retaliation and revenge that would elude them in the real world. As one student put it, "my roommate, not so much. She's pretty scrawny, she can't really defend herself so the technology gives her a new kind of powerfulness."

Focus group participants consistently identified women as being more involved in cyberbullying than men. They offered several reasons for this,

including that men are taught to be more physical and to settle disputes through physical confrontation and fights, whereas women are taught to "use their words to settle disputes." Two female students made the following observations: "I think it's also generally more accepted for us to be catty toward someone whereas guys are supposed to hang together and bros before hoes and all that sort of garbage," and "I think it's cuz guys are taught to take it out physically and face-to-face … we have to figure out some mental way to get to them and the Internet or technology provides an easier way to use words against people."

In addition to gender, the students said that groups of people who share some affiliation are often the participants in inter- and intragroup online aggression. Specific groups mentioned included students who live in residence halls, students in fraternities and sororities, entitled/rich students, and honors students. This opinion is exemplified in the following comment:

> those sites that are mostly gossip-based. It's like, "This person is great for sleeping with because she'll sleep with anything." It's usually just frat boys and sorority girls who are going at it. So, it does seem to be isolated to groups most of the time.

The students also identified a series of behavioral characteristics that describe potentially aggressive senders, including being good students, being frequent users of technology, and being cowardly, attention seeking, or impulsive. They also suggested that those who have bullied in the past and those who have been bullied previously are more likely to send aggressive messages. For example, a participant commented on the good students who engage in cyberbullying, "The ones who bully … are on completely the opposite scale where they have so much expected of them because they're supposedly the best and brightest that they release that tension by taking it out on others."

Receivers

In addition to sender characteristics, focus group members also identified likely characteristics of receivers, beginning with people who are different in some way. Being different covers a range of characteristics but often is about appearance: "Like when I was different … I came to school different one day and they, I just got so many texts from people I didn't even know … so I just kind of changed how I look."

The individual characteristics of receivers included race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, disability status, religion, and politics. A participant said, "Sexual orientation is one thing that is the first thing on my mind, also political and religious affiliations." In addition, participants noted that some

individual behaviors increased vulnerability. For example, seeking attention by posting personal information or images was considered to be the equivalent of outrageous behavior offline. Focus group members also identified groups that are unintentionally vulnerable, such as high profile students on campus. The focus groups specifically mentioned student athletes and student leaders in this category, saying, "especially with student leaders being in a position of leadership, especially when you're involved in a political organization … even an organization that pertains to a specific racial group. I think the leaders can be targets." An example was offered: "For example was it ASU, that football lost to, when [well-known athlete] missed the kick? Looking at the football blogs and people directing comments right at [well-known athlete], like, that's just bad."

Audience

Focus group participants acknowledged the role of the audience in cyber communications. They talked about the intentional cyberbully counting on the large audience to increase the harm to the receiver. A participant offered,

> if you say something embarrassing to someone in person just the people around who happen to be there hear it. But it's a lot more devastating if it stays on Facebook for a couple of days and anyone who looks at the Facebook page can see it. So it has the appeal of I guess being more embarrassing …

This thread of discussion emphasized that the audience participates in the cyberbullying either actively or passively. For example, some suggested that intervening might make matters worse for the receiver, or that audience members might also be subject to the cyber-confusion and misinterpretation inherent in online environments. As one student said, "If I didn't know any of the people I probably would not report it because I wouldn't know the intent behind it." Another claimed: "I think for me, just being kind of neutral … whoever has the most support wins, so if you don't support anyone, they just let it go and they can't win."

Other students were clear that audience members have a responsibility to do what they can to stop the cyberbully, as expressed by this student: "I think that it's more of a social responsibility than an actual, 'Hey, you have to do this,' kinda thing."

Consequences

Participants shared their perceptions of the consequences of cyberbullying for senders and receivers. They reflected on the effect of anonymity on the consequences, although they were divided on this issue. Some believed that anonymity intensified the reaction because the receiver could suspect almost anyone, or the receiver might feel that the anonymous voice spoke for everyone. On the contrary, some students felt that a cruelty inflicted by a friend or someone they know would be more harmful because it involves a betrayal of that relationship. When there is no known relationship (anonymous sender) the act can be more easily dismissed or ignored.

Other factors were noted that affect the impact of cyberbullying. When the identity of the sender is known, the importance of the relationship is salient. When the receiver values the relationship, the impact is greater than when the relationship is not particularly important. For example, one participant said, "I mean, like if my mother told me my photography was crap, I would probably cry. Somebody I don't know telling me it's crap, their opinion has less value so it softens the blow somehow." Students believed that the affiliation of the sender i.e., whether or not he or she was in one's circle (social group), would moderate the impact of the action, with those outside the group causing less distress. The nature of the relationship to the sender also mattered – a romantic partner would have a different effect on a receiver than would a classmate. Participants noted that the topic or content of the message or posting was an important element. If the topic was a sensitive one to the receiver, the damage would be greater. In a public posting (e.g., a nasty comment on someone's Facebook wall), additional comments affect the emotional response of the receiver. If the comment is dismissed or challenged by others, the impact is minimized, but if others add to or support the negative intent, the harm is much greater. Participants also observed that the prior mental health status and emotional stability of the receiver account for variations in the impact of an act of cyberbullying. "Some people can shake it off, but others are affected by it and may consider harming someone else or themselves," suggested one participant. Another commented,

> Depending on what kind of person you are, I think the recipients are going to be scarred psychologically because they take it seriously and they'll actually think that what this perpetrator is saying is true. That's the worst case scenario.

Also noted to be relevant was the importance of his or her social life to the receiver. Clearly, individuals whose social life is more central to their

self-concept will be more vulnerable than those for whom the social world is less so.

Sender

Participants identified both positive and negative outcomes for the sender. They suggested that he or she can derive a sense of satisfaction from accomplishing a goal (hurting someone else) and may value the exposure and attention garnered as a result of the action. The negative consequences mentioned were more numerous: reduced self-esteem, guilt about the harm inflicted on the receiver, or a damaged reputation and loss of respect of others. Students noted that the damage to one's reputation could occur because of misinterpretation of a comment or message. That is, even if the intent of the sender of the message was not to harm (e.g., the intent was to be funny), if the effect was hurtful to someone else, the sender could be seen as a callous or insensitive person at best. One participant suggested, "There could be instances where two people are sharing an inside joke, so they completely understand what is meant but it could be in a public place where people who wouldn't get the joke would see it and they might take it the wrong way." Another illustrated that concern:

> If people who don't really care for you are saying negative things about you, you probably don't mind that much because you're probably not in those relationships with them. But with having it online I would be more concerned with them saying that and then someone I do care about seeing it and changing their opinion of me. It's not necessarily the people making the comment that hurt you but the repercussion of other people's opinion about you.

Thus, the sender may experience regret when the impact of the action is experienced. Finally, the possibility of legal action was noted as possibly the most serious consequence for the sender.

Receiver

Consequences for the receiver also included both positive and negative outcomes. The positive results mentioned were an increase in psychological strength from coping with an incident, including greater confidence and a feeling of power and control. A member opined:

> They've been bullied to a point and then they stop. And then they break and they're like, no, this is a turning point, you know, I'm done. I don't want to be that pushover. I don't want people to walk all over me anymore. I'm gonna stand up a little straighter …

An additional benefit is an awareness of the true character of the sender. If the sender is a friend or acquaintance who is trusted, the action can

expose the less appealing traits. The negative consequences mentioned by participants were suicide, depression, inability to concentrate on schoolwork, and decreased self-esteem. Some participants felt that incidents involving sexual orientation were more likely to lead to suicide.

> A kid at a high school was being bullied and cyberbullied at the same time because of his sexual orientation. Well, he committed suicide because of that. Like you were saying, it gets in your head, and people think it's not worth it anymore, they think it's true. That's the big result. He killed himself. It can get in your head.

Receivers may also cope with negative attacks by leaving a group (forum, chat room, game, etc.), which is a form of self-imposed ostracism that may lead to feeling disconnected from peers. For example,

> Back to my roommate, when she was cyberbullied she had to leave the forums because the preceptor [student assistant in a class] wouldn't do anything. And she did have friends on those forums but she couldn't take it anymore so there was also some kind of alienation and ostracization [sic] where you have to leave.

The negative material posted online could cause a sender to lose out on a job opportunity or promotion. Finally, the receiver may lash out at attackers in frustration, becoming a sender.

Student Recommendations for Universities

Focus group participants initially claimed that the university should not be involved when cyberbullying occurs on campus. Their replies are illustrated in the following quotes: ''It's none of their business at the university,'' ''The person needs to speak up,'' ''Don't invade a person's life,'' ''Outside sources should not get involved with personal life,'' and ''You have to fend for yourself.'' However, probing by the focus group facilitator generated many ideas and suggestions for how the university could more effectively address cyberbullying. Their recommendations described below.

Resources and Education/Awareness

The most prevalent recommendation was to provide the student body with resources and education, such as informative workshops, about cyberbullying. Additionally, students proposed special training programs for clubs and organizations, faculty and staff, and residence life personnel in order to better equip them with both prevention and intervention plans. Another approach was to use freshman orientation as an opportunity to educate incoming students on this important topic. Other notable recommendations

included offering intervention/mediation services, counseling services for receivers, distributing posters and pamphlets, airing commercials and public service announcements, providing an informational link on the university's website, and using technology as a resource (i.e., anonymous email reporting, online cyberbullying quizzes, etc.). One student suggested:

> I think it would be more interesting if they had something set up for if since they have other services, for when you're depressed or in legal trouble. They have people who know how to use technology … it seems like they're mostly using those for education which is good but they could also use those to protect us.

University Policies

Nearly every focus group called for an update of the university policies to explicitly address cyberbullying. Many students expressed their dissatisfaction with the current policies. For example, "Everyone gets the school policies or the student handbook when you first come to the university and there is not a word, not one word on social behavior on the Internet." Students agreed the lack of clear consequences contributes to the prevalence of cyberbullying, and believed that publicized sanctions for digital misbehavior would serve as a deterrent.

Online Learning Environments

The topic of online learning environments emerged as an important theme in our focus group discussions. Students recounted several instances of online aggression taking place in these environments. General consensus was reached that a zero tolerance policy should be in place for any kind of online misbehavior taking place in an online learning environment. This could be specifically addressed in the course syllabus. Students also suggested a way to flag and/or report inappropriate behavior in online classes. Students said: "Say it in the beginning of the class," "on discussion boards in class, between classmates, say it there, everyone should be respectful and give general guidelines," and "I've had online classes, some with it in the syllabus, specifically say that you are encouraged to disagree but be respectful."

The Role of the Audience

The role of the audience became a prominent theme in many groups. Disagreement emerged as to the level of responsibility that should be placed on the audience; some arguing they should only be involved at the request of the receiver, others arguing they should be empowered to take a stand. Nonetheless, a possible intervention strategy was discussed to engage

prominent student leaders to speak up about the issue in order to increase peer accountability.

> A main person from a social group, writing, "that wasn't very funny," and that would instantly make someone think about it. Someone that has status in the group. I know that if I wrote something and an older girl on my team said something like, "That was weird," I'd be embarrassed. That would totally make me think about it.

Engage Campus Constituents

Lastly, students suggested that key campus constituents be invested in the efforts to address cyberbullying. The stakeholders most often mentioned were residence life personnel, Dean of Students Office, campus police, the campus counseling center, the campus health center, and university faculty and staff. This would allow for a more comprehensive and holistic approach to prevention and intervention.

Positive Aspects of Technology

The students identified several aspects of today's technology that support and enhance their ability to accomplish college related activities: continuous access to faculty, use of discussion boards, completing homework, specific software, easy organization, and taking online classes. They also provided insight into how the Internet and portable devices and access are positive in their lives outside of their college endeavors. What they value about the technology and what aspects of technology facilitate cyberbullying are very similar.

DISCUSSION

Our qualitative study revealed unique aspects of the phenomenon of cyberbullying among college students that had not been addressed in the extant literature. These elements would have been impossible to identify in survey research because researchers could not develop items to assess characteristics that are unknown to them.

Our definition of cyberbullying was considered acceptable to most focus group participants, because it included a broad array of behaviors and acknowledged the primacy of the receiver's reaction. However, the findings suggest that the term "cyberbullying" is still insufficient because the notion of unintentional harm is not captured. The term *bullying* also seems to have

a connotation of juvenile behavior to these students, and so the use of this term in surveys is likely to underestimate prevalence.

Suler's (2004) concept of online disinhibition received support from our data. We found that, in addition to other factors, online disinhibition is encouraged by *impulsivity* and *instant gratification*, both fostered by the increasing portability of the tools. Because computers and cell phones with texting capabilities are no longer separate devices, and those devices are generally carried by students, there is no need to carefully consider an impulse before sending something out in cyberspace; even the few minutes it once took to get to a computer and log on to a social networking site, for example, are no longer needed, allowing the impulse to be expressed instantaneously. This is related to instant gratification – if the impulse is to retaliate against a perceived attack, or to gain attention, that is accomplished with a few clicks.

The responses of focus group participants were paradoxical in two important ways. First, although they said cyberbullying is not a problem at our institution, they proceeded to describe a wide range of behaviors, experiences and social situations in which online aggression is occurring. There are several possible explanations for this apparent contradiction. First, the term cyberbullying, as demonstrated in the results, is ambiguous to students. Several participants explained that the language of bullying is associated with middle and high school settings. The term also does not fully describe the range of behaviors or consequences they eventually identified as being or resulting from problematic online behavior.

Early in each discussion participants made reference to high profile cases of cyberbullying that had been sensationally presented in the popular media. These flagrant cases are often reported in terms of conventional bullying, presented as one perpetrator consistently, intentionally and repeatedly targeting the victim. The victim is embarrassed, ashamed, and powerless to make the harassment stop. The victim internalizes the bully's assertions, becomes depressed and takes drastic action. Although these cases are rare, students used the media portrayal as a basis for their definitions. Thus, the media contributes to the perception that cyberbullying, defined in extreme terms, is a problem occurring occasionally and is not a serious problem in our community.

The second paradox is that, initially, students said they did not believe there is anything that institutions could, or should, do to prevent or intervene in incidents of cyberbullying. In each group, members said institutions were powerless, because of the anonymity of the Internet, lack of control over the sites where much of the activity occurs, and because of

the constitutional protections for free speech. When probed, the participants offered a long list of suggestions for institutions to consider. Prime among those suggestions was the need for education about cyberbullying, focused on three key aspects. First, what is it? Students are clearly seeking guidance on how to recognize cyberbullying in the context of rapidly changing technology. The issue of intentional and unintentional harm makes this recognition particularly challenging. Second, they are seeking direct access to information and resources that might assist them in the event they find themselves in a "sticky situation." These situations may require simple guidance on how to get clarification on a potentially misinterpreted message or how to respond, report, and get support if they are in an extreme situation of cyberbullying. Third, they are looking for training programs and online resources that inform them about responding in a socially responsible way when they identify cyberbullying incidents as audience members.

Throughout the focus groups, we had a clear sense from the students that a unique feature of cyberbullying is that "anybody can do it." Unlike conventional bullying, where the roles are more static, in cyberbullying those roles are fluid. The prevalence of cyber-confusion and the characteristics of digital communication make it likely that most students will, at some point, be perceived as an aggressor, whether or not that was their intent. This contributes to the paradox of cyberbullying because the experience is so commonplace that it has become normalized and is therefore not considered problematic.

The subjective nature of intent versus interpretation was a central issue about cyberbullying. Much like art or pornography, the power for determining what messages are cyberbullying rests more with the receiver than with anyone else. Members felt this makes it difficult to label a specific behavior as cyberbullying.

The presence of an audience on the Internet plays a critical role in the dynamics of cyberbullying. The audience can be active or passive, can be global, can intervene, or make it worse. Cyberbullying does not follow a simple communications model; the presence and active engagement of the audience amplifies every message, and communications streams can quickly escalate into events where an individual feels as if everyone in the world has turned against him or her. The online audience has a tendency to "bandwagon," adding their own comments to a discussion and exacerbating the harm done to the intended receiver. On the contrary, roles can be quickly reversed when a receiver retaliates and the victim can become a bully. The audience, too, plays a critical role in this dynamic when they sympathize with an intended receiver and retaliate on his or her behalf.

In addition to what participants said about cyberbullying, what they did not say is also informative. We were surprised that some potential consequences of cyberbullying were mentioned very little or not at all. One risk of being targeted is that the negative content can then be accessed by potential employers or graduate programs (and even potential romantic partners, who are likely to Google prospective dates). Yet, this potential problem was virtually absent from the dialogue. This suggests that such information needs to be included in training material or publicity about the problem so that students are better informed about these potentially serious consequences. They also need information about how to remove or report defamatory content or images to reduce the potential for this kind of damage.

Participants also did not raise the possibility that some receivers are so distressed that they make decisions such as dropping a class (where a classmate targets others on discussion boards or uses the class list as a source of persons to target in other ways), leaving school entirely, relocating to another residence hall, or resigning from organizations and clubs in which the person believes he or she is vulnerable to attack. All of these consequences have been reported to the authors outside of this study; these effects did not appear to be on the radar of our participants.

Because they said they believed that cyberbullying is very difficult to detect and/or prove, little attention was devoted to a discussion of formal action by the university. Participants noted an absence of applicable or specific university policy. They also considered digital communications to reside in the personal rather than the institutional domain which, in their view, makes the policing of these activities outside the purview of the university. They did not seem aware that they rely on institutional resources for access to these communications, in most cases. Participants also expressed the opinion that these behaviors are so pervasive that the university lacked both the authority and the resources to address them.

Limitations

Because participants were drawn from only one university, findings cannot be generalized to other institutions. In addition, recruitment from some populations was challenging, and participants may not be representative of the campus as a whole. Fraternity and sorority members, members of student government, and those who attend several multicultural centers were not represented. Because members of these groups were identified by

other participants as likely to be involved in cyberbullying, it is important to pursue their input in future research.

Implications

The implications of our study are a call to action. Online misbehavior is not confined to middle or high school; rather it is an issue in higher education as well. The following are action steps we recommend universities committed to tackling this issue.

University Administration

First and foremost, university policies must encompass cyber etiquette. This will send a strong message that students will be held accountable for their online activity. Within these policies, clear consequences should be established. The presence of consequences is the first step to deterring students from engaging in this behavior. During the development of these policies, all stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and students, should be involved, and the final results should be widely publicized on campus.

Faculty

Any faculty delivering instruction partially or fully online should also incorporate expectations regarding cyber etiquette in their class syllabi. The university should provide a model statement so that students receive a consistent message. A zero tolerance policy is recommended in order to create an atmosphere of respect and trust among students. All faculty members should be educated on how to handle incidents of cyber aggression if and when they occur in their courses. Lastly, online discussion boards must be monitored closely for inappropriate content or aggressive exchanges between students, such as attacks on students whose contributions are devalued by other students.

Student Affairs Divisions

These divisions are capable of making a significant impact through raising awareness and providing educational resources. Workshops on how to recognize and handle cyberbullying can be offered to students, faculty, staff, and clubs and organizations in order to increase the community's effectiveness. Primary training targets include women, high profile students, students living in residence halls, honors students, and tight-knit communities such as fraternities and sororities. Student affairs should also incorporate

cyberbullying education into the new student orientation curriculum and residence life programming. Additionally, the division may be in charge of coordinating counseling services, heading up the marketing plan, or overseeing the reporting of online misbehavior.

Information Technology

The IT department should take the lead in offering online technical support for individuals experiencing cyberbullying. This may include assisting individuals in adjusting their privacy settings, blocking unwelcome senders, or reporting aggressive online behavior. The IT department may be able to create an anonymous reporting system for the university's online courses. A tool for students to anonymously flag inappropriate content will have a considerable impact on the quality of online learning environments.

Students/Peers

Because students are more aware of these activities than university personnel, they are positioned to play an important role in harm reduction in the digital world. Effective training should increase students' sense of social responsibility and empower them to safely take action rather than be passive bystanders.

CONCLUSION

Our findings make it clear that cyberbullying should not be conceptualized as a singular construct; rather, the behaviors occur along a continuum of severity, ranging from misinterpreted jokes to criminal behavior (Anne Collier, personal communication). Cyberbullying may or may not reflect the components of conventional bullying: intent to harm, repetition, and an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the target. Responses to incidents of online misbehavior, whether by individuals or institutions, should take the range of severity in behaviors into account. Institutions should also take into consideration that students are grappling with the question of whether cyberbullying is a problem in their communities and whether institutions can effectively intervene.

The student voices emphasized the fluidity of roles and the speed at which role switching occurs. This process is fueled by several factors, including the opportunity for instant gratification and the absence of obstacles to acting impulsively in the digital environment. Additionally,

college students perceived many of the text-based messages online to be ambiguous. This ambiguity leads to "cyber-confusion," where the sender's intention and receiver's perception often work at cross-purposes in the communication process. Education and awareness programs on college campuses focusing on improving digital communication should teach strategies for all roles: sender, receiver, and audience.

It is also clear from these findings that individuals vary both in vulnerability and resiliency. Although it is clearly impossible on large university campuses to identify all particularly vulnerable students and equip them with strategies to handle incidents that may occur, counseling centers could be alerted to inquire about cyberbullying in individuals with diagnoses such as depression. In addition, high profile students, such as athletes and student government officers, should be alerted to the possibility that they will be targeted in cyberspace and helped to develop strategies to protect themselves.

Regardless of the label we use, harmful communications are transmitted using digital technology. The easy accessibility, large audience, and potential for misunderstanding and escalation means that the psychological safety of college campuses is sometimes compromised for students who engage in frequent digital communication. Although much of the harmful communication is of relatively minor severity, the degree of distress experienced by the receivers varies by many individual and contextual variables. Consequently, it behooves colleges and universities to develop and publicize policies and programs to prepare and assist students in order to preserve a respectful and safe campus climate.

Although concern about cyberbullying at the K-12 level has led to the development of a number of excellent guidelines and recommendations for schools (see Bernard & Milne, 2008; Childnet International, 2007; Cowie & Colliety, 2008), colleges and universities have no such models. The differences in the structure and organization of secondary and post-secondary educational environments require unique approaches for the college context. Given the evidence from this study and others documenting the existence of cyberbullying beyond high school, it is imperative that experts and colleges work together to create materials that can be widely disseminated, and that colleges and universities take immediate steps to implement policies, education, and intervention procedures on all campuses.

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