Defining Cyberbullying: A Qualitative Research into the Perceptions of Youngsters

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ABSTRACT

Data from 53 focus groups, which involved students from 10 to 18 years old, show that youngsters often interpret “cyberbullying” as “Internet bullying” and associate the phenomenon with a wide range of practices. In order to be considered “true” cyberbullying, these practices must meet several criteria. They should be intended to hurt (by the perpetrator) and perceived as hurtful (by the victim); be part of a repetitive pattern of negative offline or online actions; and be performed in a relationship characterized by a power imbalance (based on “real-life” power criteria, such as physical strength or age, and/or on ICT-related criteria such as technological know-how and anonymity).

INTRODUCTION

The literature about cyberbullying is still relatively scarce and characterized by a lack of conceptual clarity. The phenomenon is defined in different ways (usually—implicitly or explicitly—starting from definitions of “traditional” bullying),1-7 and the distinction from other forms of “deviant” cyber activities, such as cyber harassment,4 flaming,8 and cyberstalking,9 is often very vague.

Different perspectives about exactly what cyberbullying is have also led to different kinds of operationalizations. Cyberbullying is mostly studied by means of online surveys4,10,11 or school surveys among youngsters.5,6,12 In these types of surveys, researchers directly or indirectly measure the respondent’s experience with a range of cyber activities, which are assumed to represent forms of cyberbullying (e.g., insulting or threatening somebody via e-mail or instant messaging; intentionally sending a virus to someone).11

The existing studies about cyberbullying have produced inconsistent results. The estimations for the prevalence of cyberbullying, for instance, vary greatly. These differences seem to be the result (at least in part) of the definitions and operationalizations of cyberbullying that are used in different studies. Surveys that rely on both indirect and direct measurements of cyberbullying12 further suggest that cyber activities perceived as “forms of cyberbullying” by the researchers are not always considered cyberbullying by the respondents.

The above-mentioned problems call for the development of a clear definition of cyberbullying, which is congruent with the perceptions of the re-
search participants. In this article, we take a first step in this direction by presenting the results of a qualitative research into the experiences and views of youngsters with regard to cyberbullying.

**METHOD**

To gain deeper insight into the perspectives of youngsters with regard to cyberbullying, focus groups were organized. This method was chosen because it was expected that the interaction among youngsters about a conversation topic that is part of their everyday (social) life—namely, ICT—would reveal detailed information about their concrete Internet and mobile phone practices and their individual and group norms and values with regard to electronic communication. Given the deviant topic of the research, the interviewers applied a gentle approach: starting from youngsters’ everyday (positive and negative) experiences with ICT, the interviewers moved on to the topic of cyberbullying and catered for general opinions about and personal experiences (as a bystander, victim, or perpetrator) with this phenomenon.

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, the aim was to reach a heterogeneous audience of youngsters to obtain a wide range of opinions about and experiences with cyberbullying. To involve students from different ages, sexes, and educational levels, classes ranging from the last year of elementary school to the last year of secondary school; classes from general, technical, and vocational education; and classes with both boys and girls, were asked for their cooperation.

The focus group conversations were all tape recorded and literally transcribed. The texts were then imported in Atlas-Ti (a program for the analysis of qualitative data) and coded. The analyses focused on the detection of general trends as well as on possible differences in answers between subgroups (based on sex, age, and education level).

**RESULTS**

Background characteristics of the respondents

Two hundred seventy-nine youngsters participated in the 53 focus groups that were organized in 17 classes of 10 different schools. Of them, 142 (50.9%) were boys, 137 (49.1%) girls. The mean age of the respondents was 14.1 (the youngest was 10 years old, the oldest 19), SD = 2.098. One hundred nineteen respondents (42.7%) followed general secondary education; 85 respondents (30.5%), technical secondary education; and 31 respondents (11.1%), vocational secondary education.

Of the respondents, 98.6% said they made use of the Internet, and 90.3% appeared to have a mobile phone.

Negative aspects of the Internet and mobile phones

In the first part of the focus groups, the youngsters were asked to mention some of the positive and negative aspects of information and communication technologies. Looking at the number of times that certain negative aspects associated with the Internet and with mobile phones were mentioned during the focus groups gives us a rough idea about the problems and dangers that most concerned the youngsters. These were (in order of diminishing frequency) being contacted by strangers (mentioned 52 times), computer viruses (49), hacking (38), pedophilic attempts (22), cyberbullying (20), threats (17), spam (17), stalking (14), e-advertising (14), sexual intimidation (12), pornographic Web sites (11), people who turn on their webcam unwanted (10), the cost of the communication (10), technical failure (10), health-related problems (5), and the content of certain Web sites (3).

What is cyberbullying?

General descriptions (cyberbullying is Internet bullying) versus a summation of Internet and mobile phone practices. When asked to provide a description of cyberbullying, most students seemed to equate it with “bullying via the Internet,” or they mentioned Internet practices they regarded as examples of cyberbullying. These examples were sometimes extreme cases that had been discussed in the media. More often, however, students had personal or interpersonal experiences with Internet and mobile phone uses that in some instances could be considered forms of cyberbullying.

Most of the interpersonal examples of cyberbullying were practices related to instant messaging. Several students admitted that they (or somebody they knew) had been the victim of hacking. In those instances, someone else had broken into their MSN account, for instance, and changed their password, deleted their contact list, and sent insulting or strange messages to their contact persons. The most common reaction of victims to hacking was changing their e-mail accounts and passwords. Another MSN practice often mentioned by the respondents was being contacted by strangers. These intrusions were often unwelcome and therefore blocked or deleted.
The respondents also reported other forms of Internet bullying, such as sending huge amounts of buzzers or winks to someone, copying personal conversations and sending them to others, spreading gossip, manipulating pictures of persons and sending them to others, making Web sites with humiliating comments about a student, sending threatening e-mails, misleading someone via e-mail, humiliating someone in an open chat room, and sending messages with sexual comments.

On the other hand, several respondents (especially the older ones) seemed to have negative experiences with mobile phones (e.g., getting calls in the middle of the night, being threatened through the telephone). Some also admitted they had done this to others.

These Internet and mobile phone practices were given as examples of cyberbullying. The respondents noticed, however, that the same practices could be interpreted in other ways, depending on the precise circumstances. Following are a few “crucial” characteristics of cyberbullying that were suggested by the respondents and indeed seem to overlap to a high degree with criteria used to define traditional bullying.

Intended to hurt by the perpetrator (and perceived as hurtful by the victim). According to the respondents, cyberbullying was clearly different from teasing via the Internet or mobile phone. One huge distinction, according to the youngsters who participated in the focus groups, was that the perpetrator of cyberbullying really wanted to hurt the feelings of another person. Cyber jokes, on the other hand, were not intended to cause the victim negative feelings—they were meant to be funny. The respondents acknowledged, however, that there might be a difference between the way things were intended and the way things were perceived. What some perpetrators considered an innocent joke might be considered an aggressive attack by the victim (or even the other way around).

Asking students why they did things via Internet or mobile phone that might be perceived as hurtful by others revealed a wide range of motives. In some instances, the perpetrator’s intent to harm was quite clear. Some said, for instance, that they took revenge on those who had bullied them (in real life or in cyberworld) or attacked and harassed another person via Internet or mobile phone because they had an argument with or just couldn’t stand the person. In other instances, things were done just for fun because the youngsters felt bored or because they wanted to display their technological skills and power.

The way in which Internet or mobile phone practices were actually perceived by the victims appeared to depend on the kind of practice and the relationship between the individuals involved. Some respondents mentioned, for instance, that receiving computer viruses (especially those sent by strangers) was not really bullying, but being threatened, scared, or insulted was. The degree to which the individuals felt personally attacked thus seemed to play an important role. On the other hand, the line between what was and what was not perceived as a personal attack was often very vague. One girl said, for instance, that being called “ugly” on MSN was acceptable to her, but being called “a whore” was certainly not. The relationship between the perpetrator and the victim also played an important role in the way messages were interpreted. Getting a message from a friend that might be considered an insult (and a form of cyberbullying) by a third party was often regarded as a joke, a sign of common understanding, or a kind of playful interaction between friends.

Repetition

Another aspect that students mentioned spontaneously when describing the difference between cyberbullying and cyber-teasing was that cyberbullying implied repetition. However, this criterion did not necessarily imply several instances of electronic bullying. A single negative act via Internet or mobile phone that followed on traditional ways of bullying was also considered cyberbullying.

Power imbalance

The interviews showed that the respondents who admitted they had done things via the Internet or mobile phone that might be hurtful to others indicated that they had mostly operated anonymously or disguised themselves and that their victims were often people they also knew in the real world. In real life, these victims were perceived by the perpetrator as weaker, of equal strength, or stronger. The weaker victims were usually also the target of traditional bullying. These students were described as “strange,” “shy,” “small,” and so on. Cyber actions aimed at these youngsters were almost unanimously considered cyberbullying. On the other hand, there were people whom the perpetrators considered equals. These could be friends or former friends. The same Internet or mobile phone actions that were considered cyberbullying in the case of the more vulnerable targets were in the latter instances more often described as “cyber-teasing,” “cyber-arguing,” or “cyber-fighting” (although a
considerable number of students thought of the last phenomenon as “cyberbullying”). In some instances, persons who were perceived as more powerful in real life were the target of cyber attacks. The anonymity of the Internet and mobile phone and knowledge of ICT applications\(^{13}\) indeed seemed to empower those who were unlikely to become real-life bullies or who were even victims of traditional bullying.

From the side of the victim, not knowing the person behind the cyber attacks was often frustrating and increased the feeling of powerlessness. Knowing the individual(s) behind a certain action, on the other hand, made it possible to put the action into perspective (and to perceive it as negative or not) and to react accordingly. The focus groups showed that in the case of friends, the initial anonymity was often given up by the perpetrators themselves.

**Familiar persons versus strangers, individual, or group attacks**

While many Internet and mobile phone practices that might be hurtful to others were directed to people whom the perpetrators also knew in person, other practices were aimed at total strangers. Some students mentioned, for instance, that they dialed a random mobile phone number and started insulting the person who picked up the phone. Others took on another identity and misled persons whom they met in chat rooms or sent insulting or threatening messages to the e-mail address of an unknown person. The victims, in these cases, functioned as an individual but random target. In some instances, the perpetrators made a more strategic selection (which resembles the way traditional bullies choose their victims) based on the (presumed) real-life characteristics of the persons they met online. In these instances, they targeted weaker strangers (e.g., younger, inexperienced persons, girls).

From the part of the receiver, the anonymity of the sender often made it difficult to know whether the person was someone they actually knew or a stranger. But in many instances, the victim did have a clue about the identity of the perpetrator (e.g., because of the content of the messages, the way others in their environment behaved) or was informed of the identity by the perpetrator or a third party.

Furthermore, the focus group interviews showed that certain Internet and mobile phone practices were not only aimed at individuals or groups but also performed by individuals or groups. This aspect, however, does not seem to be unique to cyberbullying. Teasing or arguing via the Internet, for instance, can also imply multiple senders and receivers.

**REFERENCES**


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