Seventh Graders Awareness of Cyberbullying

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**Abstract**

Cyberbullying, much like traditional bullying, has become popular in our society today for many reasons, including: cyber bullies can bully anonymously, they do not have to face their victims, and they do not always feel the same consequences as traditional bullying. The purpose of this study is to determine whether seventh graders are aware of what cyberbullying involves. The three hypotheses suggested that seventh graders are aware of what defines cyberbullying, seventh graders have negative emotions towards cyberbullying, and seventh graders would state that they had never cyberbullied another person. A study was conducted with 84 seventh graders between the ages 12 and 14 in Ontario, California. A survey was given to the seventh graders to complete. Results indicated that seventh graders are aware of what cyberbullying is, however, many indicated that they had never cyberbullied another person before. It was also found that cyber bullying causes children to have negative emotions. Limitations included generalization and accuracy of answers on the survey. Future researchers can explore additional ways to receive accurate and truthful answers by setting up interviews in a face-to-face environment.

*Keywords: traditional bullying, cyberbullying, school aged children, awareness, quantitative.*

**Introduction**

Bullying is not a new phenomenon. Traditionally, bullying begins during the early developing stages of childhood and provides assistance in building the personality of a child (Talwar, Garibello & Shariff, 2014). Cyberbullying is a form of traditional bullying that also involves bothering or harassing someone electronically on social networking sites or cell phones (Talwar, Garibello & Shariff, 2014). Cyberbullying is increasing and will continue to increase due to easy accessibility to technology and the Internet. It is becoming more common for school aged children to not only be bullied at school but now at home through electronic devices. The ability to cyberbully at any time and any place is an increasing concern for educators. Educators are finding difficulties mitigating cyberbullying behaviors and enforcing the consequences of bullying someone.

Cyberbullying can be very complicated due to it being subjective for both the bully and the victim. In some situations of cyberbullying, the bully may perceive their actions as a joke and may not realize that they are actually harming the victim. Victims of cyberbullying may feel harmed by a video, comment, or text message sent from another peer. Some psychological health and behavioral problems related to cyberbullying include low self-esteem, social anxiety, depression, lashing out, and bullying others. Understanding school aged children’s awareness of cyberbullying can help adults teach children how to reduce emotional harm and mitigate cyberbullying in general.

**General Statement of Problem**

Although it is understood that cyberbullying does exist, our group is specifically focusing on whether or not school aged children are aware of what cyberbullying entails. In order to analyze the perception of school aged children, we used vignettes to describe scenarios of potential cyberbullying. Before we discuss our findings, we will explore characteristics of cyberbullying, findings of previous research, and limitations of previous research.

**Review of Related Literature**

Some of the commonly known characteristics of cyberbullying include intent to harm another individual and repetition of the action. After questionnaires and vignettes were given to participants, researchers of previous studies found that some school aged children did not view certain situations as cyberbullying. These situations included the perpetrator intending to make jokes about another person (Talwar, Garibello & Shariff, 2014). The participants believed that intent was important in detecting cyberbullying. Motives to harm another person, for example, stating information about another person that was untrue was considered to be perceived as cyberbullying (Talwar, Garibello & Shariff, 2014). If the situation was perceived by the school aged children as truthful, it was not considered to be hurtful or cyberbullying (Talwar, Garibello & Shariff, 2014).

According to Talway, Garibello, and Shariff (2014) another characteristic of cyberbullying was a sense of power imbalance between the person bullying and the victim. It was acknowledged that participants felt more distressed and empathetic if the victim was not able to defend him or herself (Talway, Garibello & Shariff, 2014). Lastly, Talway, Garibello, and Shariff (2014) were interested in what students thought in regards to the amount of times the bully harassed the victim. Overall, the participants felt that repetition was important in judging cyberbullying and rated continuous aggressions more negative than a one-time joke (Talway, Garibello & Shariff, 2014).

Although this study was very informative, it had several limitations. The researchers acknowledged that some of the limitations of their study included the difficulty to fully understand how school aged children perceived cyberbullying. Another limitation stated that research should focus on the influence of cyberbullying through a wider range of technologies.

The widely acknowledged difference between bullying and cyberbullying is the lack of physical interaction during the aggression. Awareness of harm is noticed less when it done online because the bully may not feel as guilty seeing that they are not facing the victim nor does the bully have to see the victim’s reaction (Park, Na & Kim, 2014). Although school aged children might understand what is right and what is wrong, cyberbullying may occur when a child’s own beliefs interfere with the moral standards of society (Park, Na & Kim, 2014). These children’s actions give them self-satisfaction and a sense of self-worth, therefore they excuse themselves from the harm they have caused their victims.

Park, Na, and Kim (2014) were interested in understanding why it was easier for some children to feel less guilty after cyberbullying. It was found that felt less guilt because they were not faced with consequences. School aged children felt less obligated to follow moral rules because an educator/parent was not enforcing the consequences to their actions (Park, Na & Kim, 2014). They also found that it was easier for school aged children to participate in cyberbullying because of the levels of anonymity in social networks and having the ability to pose as another person when harassing the victim (Park, Na & Kim, 2014).

Further research should be done in regards to studying the frequency of Internet usage and the relationship between the level of parental supervision and the rate of cyber bullying within each home. Also, perhaps assessing the relationship between parental styles and moral reasoning in order to understand if parent involvement is actually relevant to how a child interacts with his or her peers online.

**Assumptions**

People might assume that all types of bullying, such as traditional bullying and cyberbullying are the same thing. They may also assume that children can define cyberbullying and children are aware of when they have been a victim of cyberbullying. people may even assume that cyber bullying does not emotionally affect children the same way traditional bullying does.

**Research Questions, Hypothesis, or Foreshadowing Problems**

For our research paper, we collected data by conducting a survey with seventh graders to understand their perception of cyberbullying as well as their awareness of what cyberbullying involves. Our first hypothesis stated that seventh graders would be aware of what is to be considered cyberbullying. Our second hypothesis stated that cyberbullying would affect the school aged children with negative emotions. Our third hypothesis stated that school aged children would claim that they have never participated in the act of cyberbullying another child.

Asking seventh graders to participate in a survey may result in several issues and limitations. Due to using a survey, self-disclosure is entirely up to the student and he or she might not be completely honest. Even though the survey is anonymous, the students might feel as if they answer it the wrong way, they might get in trouble. The problem with this is that the data would not be accurate if falsified. Another factor that can cause a foreshadowing conflict in the research is that we were only able to distribute the survey to the seventh graders. Therefore our results are very narrow, with that being said it is hard to know if these results can accurately answer our hypothesis questions.

**Definition of Terms**

For this study, the following definitions apply; cyber bullying, bullying, smart phones, online gaming environment, and seventh grade children.

* **Bullying** is an aggressive behavior towards an individual that involves a real or perceived power imbalance (Goldsmid & Howie, 2014). For example, bullying can be physical or be done in a verbal manner.
* In **traditional bullying**,you're usually working with a bully, victim or bystander but that's not the case in cyberbullying (Lohmann, 2012). The bully have direct contact with the victim.
* **Cyberbullying** is a form of traditional bullying that involves bothering or harassing someone electronically on social networking sites or cell phones (Talwar, Garibello & Shariff, 2014). Technology usage that involves in cyber bullying includes social media websites (facebook, twitter, instagram), instant messaging, blogs, text messaging, video games and other electronic sources.
* Technology usage also includes **smart phones**, is an advance mobile phone with computing capability and connectivity than regular cell phones. It allows you to sign into your social media sites, read and respond to emails and connects to the Internet wherever you are, depending on your location (Harwood, Dooley, Scott & Joiner, 2014). Not only can messages be sent through messages but also can be used in an online gaming environment.
* **Online gaming environment** is very popular and it’s an environment where people play video games over some form of computer network (Lisk, Kaplancali & Riggio, 2012).
* **Seventh grade** children age ranges between thirteen to fourteen years old.

**Significance of the Proposed Study**

It is important to study this issue now because technology is being used more each day and cyberbullies have utilized the internet to target their victims. It is easier to cyber bully than to perform traditional bullying due to that cyberbullying, you don’t have to come face-to-face with the victim. Cyber bullying has increased especially among pre-teens and teenagers. According to Twyman, Conway, Taylor, and Comeuax (2010), studies estimated that 4% to 15% of children engage in cyberbullying, with more cases reported in late middle school and high school. The use of social media, texting, emailing, instant messaging, and blogs have been very popular in the 21st century. Cyber bullying is a simple thing to do, it’s a push of a button, and the bully can be anonymous. Those who do not want to face the consequences of bullying can simply do it online using a different identity. It can cause long-term emotional damage to the victims and the bullies. It can also lead to suicide, unfortunately. It can also affect their academics, their relationship with their family, and they way they see themselves. It is important for children to be educated on what defines cyberbullying and how they can receive help when faced with bullying situations.

This study may lead to important findings by determining if students are aware of the term cyberbullying and if they actually know what it entails. This is an applied research approach.We surveyed seventh graders in Ontario, California to see if they were aware of the term cyberbullying and what it involves. It consisted of eight items, including questions about what cyberbullying is and whether or not they could identify cyberbullying in specific scenarios.

The information that we get in Ontario will not generalize all seventh graders because our survey was only given to seventh graders from one particular school in Ontario, California. By studying these children, we will only be able to generalize our findings to the seventh graders at that particular school. This is field oriented because we are specifically surveying a particular age group on a particular topic in education.

**Design and Methodology**

Several of the quantitative research articles related to cyberbullying used surveys with questionnaires and gathered data in order to reveal statistics relevant to the perception of cyberbullying. The researches provided self-disclosing surveys in which the participants were asked very direct questions, such as how often they engaged in online activities and the type of technology they used the most.

Other studies used qualitative research methods, including observations and informal interviews. These researchers believed that children would feel morally obligated to state the truth when given a face-to-face interview opposed to being given a survey. Many of the items, similar to ours, included vignettes in which participants would rate the level of bullying in each scenario. These studies were based on opinions and beliefs of cyberbullying and were presented face-to-face.

**Subjects**

The participants in the study were 84 students in the seventh grade between the ages of 12 and 14. All are students at a middle school in the Inland Empire of Southern California. The students represent approximately one-fourth of the seventh grade population of the middle school. Students come from a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds. The majority come from socio-economically disadvantaged homes. The school’s percentage is 99.7% according to the 2012-2013 School Accountability Report Card issued by the State of California’s Department of Education. Approximately 40% of the participants are second language learners from primarily Spanish-speaking families.

Participants were given access to the survey during the math period of their school day. Therefore the survey was administered to four different groups of students based upon their schedules. The first group consisted of 21 participants (Female n=8; Male n=13). The second group consisted of 17 participants (Female n=6; Male n=11). The third group consisted of 28 participants (Female n=18; Male n=10). The final group consisted of 18 participants (Female n=8; Male n=10).

Parents were notified of the voluntary survey by letter that was translated in English and Spanish. No parents refused to allow their students to participate in the process. All students were told the topic of the survey and told that participation was voluntary. A small period of time was allotted for students to ask questions regarding the nature of the survey. All students voluntarily participated in the study however they were not required to answer all of the questions.

**Instrumentation/Data Collection**

The participants completed an 8 item survey created in an online format. Each participant completed the survey on a school laptop. Participants were not required to provide any materials nor were any other materials required to complete the survey.

An eight question survey was developed to measure the participants’ beliefs about cyberbullying (Appendix A). The survey was published in electronic format using an online survey resource. The purpose of the survey was to collect data regarding participants’ self-reported levels of participation in and beliefs about cyberbullying. Items were designed based on real life examples from the internet and scenarios were created to test whether participants were able to identify situations in which cyberbullying was taking place.

One question addressed demographic information. One question asked whether or not the participant had been the perpetrator of cyberbullying. One question addressed whether or not the participant had been the victim of cyberbullying. One question addressed the participant’s perception of cyberbullying based on a five point likert-type scale identifying whether or not the participant perceived an act as cyberbullying. Two questions addressed the same concept with a possible response of “yes, no or I’m not sure.” One question addressed an alternate platform for cyberbullying. The final question addressed the participants reactions to several examples of cyber messages on a 5 point scale of positive feelings to negative feelings.

Participants were given access to the survey during the math period of their school day. Therefore the survey was administered during several sessions throughout the day. All participants had familiarity with the laptop computers and the hosting website. Each group was asked to access the site using the web address. The questions were read aloud to each group of participants to accommodate participants’ varied reading levels. The participants were given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. There were no questions asked during any of the sessions. The participants were given one to two minutes after each question was read to respond before the teacher would read the next question. Participants had as much time as they needed to complete the task, however, no group took longer than 20 minutes. Participants were reassured at the end of each session that their responses were confidential. All responses were recorded by the website tracker and verified by the research team.

**Data Treatment Procedures**

The data was collected using an electronic online survey resource. The data was automatically tabulated by the online resource. Percentages and averages for scale questions were calculated by the website. “Yes, No, I’m not sure” questions were tabulated and percentages were calculated by the website as well. Since data was collected electronically, measures of central tendency were difficult to calculate. We were able to find mean and mode for each of the questions presented, however, median was not available.

**Presentation of Findings**

**Fig. 1**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Cyberbullying is…** | **Strongly Disagree (SD)** | **Disagree (D)** | **Neither Disagree Nor Agree**  **(N)** | **Agree (A)** | **Strongly Agree (SA)** | Mode | Mean |
| **when a student bullies another student on the internet.** | **2.41%**  2 | **3.61%**  3 | **2.41%**  2 | **36.14%**  30 | **55.42%**  46 | SA  46 | 4.39 |
| **when a student sends a mean text message to another student.** | **2.41%**  2 | **6.02%**  5 | **9.64%**  8 | **42.17%**  35 | **39.76%**  33 | A  35 | 4.11 |
| **when a student calls another student inappropriate names online.** | **2.44%**  2 | **2.44%**  2 | **4.88%**  4 | **51.22%**  42 | **39.02%**  32 | A  42 | 4.22 |
| **when a student uses another student's cell phone to get him/her in trouble.** | **12.05%**  10 | **16.87%**  14 | **32.53%**  27 | **19.28%**  16 | **19.28%**  16 | N  27 | 3.17 |
| **when a student pretends to be another student online.** | **16.67%**  14 | **8.33%**  7 | **21.43%**  18 | **26.19%**  22 | **27.38%**  23 | SA  23 | 3.39 |

The figure above describes different potential scenarios of what cyberbullying might look like. The seventh graders rated these scenarios on a five point scale consisting of, strongly disagree, disagree, neither disagree nor agree, agree, or strongly agree. These scores were then calculated into percentages to determine what scenarios children would consider cyberbullying.

According to the data, the participants correctly identified the following forms of cyberbullying: When a student bullies another student on the internet, when a student sends a mean text to another student, and when a student calls another student inappropriate names online. Participants were less able to identify indirect forms of bullying with regard to impersonation online.

When presented with scenarios of cyberbullying, participants also had difficulty identifying cases of cyberbullying (fig. 2). Although more than half of the students correctly identified the scenarios (59.44%) as cyberbullying, 20 participants were unable to decide whether or not it was cyberbullying.

Fig. 2

|  |
| --- |
| A boy has written a poem for his crush and decides to send it in a private message on Facebook. The girl then forwards it to all her Facebook friends. The next day at school, all of the kids are making fun of him and his poem. Is this an example of cyberbullying? |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Answer Choices | Responses | Percent |
| Yes | 49 | 59.04% |
| No | 14 | 16.87% |
| I'm not sure | 20 | 24.10% |
| Total | 83 | 100.01% |

Finally, the participants were asked to assign feelings to different cyber comments/texts. The students were able to identify corresponding feelings for all of the scenarios. There was some discussion in the classes after this part of the activity. Many students wanted to have a discussion after being asked to identify the feelings. This part was the most difficult for students to complete. Specific discussion was raised over the items which implied criticism of a person’s appearance.

Figure 3

|  |
| --- |
| **How would you feel if you recieved the following texts?** |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very Negative  (VN) | Negative (N) | Neither Negative Nor Positive (NN) | Positive (P) | Very Positive (VP) | Mode | Average Rating |
| You're hot! | 9.76%  8 | 13.41%  11 | 30.49%  25 | 19.51%  16 | 26.83%  22 | NN  25 | 3.40 |
| Don't be soft. | 9.88%  8 | 28.40%  23 | 40.74%  33 | 14.81%  12 | 6.17%  5 | NN  33 | 2.79 |
| Um... is that your best picture? | 24.39%  20 | 47.56%  39 | 14.63%  12 | 7.32%  6 | 6.10%  5 | N  39 | 2.23 |
| You're the "biggest" talent. | 13.25%  11 | 24.10%  20 | 27.71%  23 | 15.66%  13 | 19.28%  16 | NN  23 | 3.04 |
| You're such a nerd. | 34.15%  28 | 34.15%  28 | 15.85%  13 | 8.54%  7 | 7.32%  6 | N  28 | 2.21 |
| You're amazing! | 2.47%  2 | 3.70%  3 | 7.41%  6 | 32.10%  26 | 54.32%  44 | VP  44 | 4.32 |

**Limitations of Design**

Although our research design was well laid out, there were also a number of limitations to our design. One limitation was the amount of time given to do the study. Ten weeks was not a lot of time to research previous findings, create our own research study, perform the study, then calculate our findings. If more time was given to do the project, we could have cut down the number of limitations in the study. Another limitation involves the inability to collect information about the seventh graders we studies. We did not have permission to receive information about ethnicity, gender, orientation, and etc. Other limitations of our study also involve only surveying seventh graders at one school and not knowing whether the information in the surveys are accurate.

**Conclusion**

Cyberbullying, another form of traditional bullying, has become very popular for many different reasons. One reason has to do with the fact that the perpetrators can bully anonymously and they do not have to face the same consequences as traditional bullying (Park, Na & Kim, 2014). Cyberbullying, just like traditional bullying, cause many mental health problems that can permanently damage a child. Although we know cyberbullying is happening on a day-to-day basis, we don’t know whether children are actually aware of cyberbullying. We conducted this study to find out whether seventh graders were aware of what cyberbullying entails. We started with three hypotheses that addressed the awareness of cyberbullying, the emotional impact of cyberbullying, and the belief that the seventh graders would claim to have never been a perpetrator of cyberbullying. The seventh graders that we studied expressed through the survey that they did know what cyberbullying consists of. We also found that cyberbullying has a negative affect on the children's emotions. Most children strongly disagreed when asked if they had ever cyberbullied anyone. These results tell us that although children know what cyberbullying is, they are still unsure about whether they have been a victim or perpetrator of cyberbullying. The results we obtained based off our study may not be accurate due to the number of limitations present.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

There are several recommendations for future research regarding cyberbullying and school aged children that need to be acknowledged. The main thing future researches can look at when replicating a study similar to this one is improving the accuracy of the answers given by the children. Moreover, having the researchers conduct face-to-face interviews can potentially improve the responses of the children. Another recommendation for improvement is the technology being studied. Most researchers looked at social media cyberbullying by providing the students with vignettes and scenarios online, however, more research should be done on cell phone usage. More and more school aged children have a phones at hand throughout the entire day and are exposed to constant bullying. Therefore, it is important to further look into cyberbullying through SMS and how this is affecting the self-esteem of children.

Lastly, it seems that most children understand what consists of cyberbullying but it is still unclear the number of children who actually report it or if they know what to do if they see it happening. Another recommendation to improve our understanding of cyberbullying and school aged children would be to study the level of understanding in children in regards to telling a teacher, a parent or a school counselor when he or she is being bullied or knows of someone who is being bullied.

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