



Is Cyber-Bullying a New form of Social Cruelty in Zimbabwean Schools?

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Technology has the potential to extend the boundaries of collective intelligence. However, there are also some negatives associated with technology. This research explored the extent and forms of cyber-bullying in Zimbabwean schools. It was a mixed method survey of a purposive sample of 200 high school teenage students. The research shows that 76% of the respondents reported some form of cyber bullying. These took various forms such as sending pornographic materials; threatening messages, teasing, name calling, use of vulgar language among others. The victims experience powerfully negative effects especially on their social well-being. The research argues that cyber bullying is a new form of social cruelty that is threatening the social fabric in schools. The research recommends further researches on ways of minimizing the social effects of cyber bullying in schools. Additional research on a larger population, from a variety of age groups and cross-culturally would add another layer of understanding about cyber bullying among teens.

Keywords: Cyber bullying; technology; schools; teenage; collective intelligence; bullying; social cruelty; palmtop computers.

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1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Historian Howard Segal cited in [1] suggests that all technological developments are mixed blessings, presenting society with both tremendous benefits and unexpected burdens. This is certainly the case with technology in schools, for despite the endless opportunity and access that technology can provide for learning, it has also become a vehicle for cyber bullying, a burgeoning form of teen social cruelty [2]. Bullying is aggressive behavior that is intentional and involves an imbalance of power or strength. Usually, it is repeated over time. Traditionally, bullying has involved actions such as: Hitting or punching (physical bullying), teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying) or intimidation through gestures or social exclusion. In recent years, technology has given children and youth a new means of bullying each other. Defined as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text" [3 p.152], cyber bullying puts targets under attack from a barrage of degrading, threatening, and/or sexually explicit messages and images conveyed using web sites, instant messaging, blogs, chat rooms, cell phones, web sites, e-mail and personal online profiles [4]. Thus, in this study, "Cyber bullying is the use of modern communication technologies to embarrass, humiliate, threaten or intimidate an individual in the attempt to gain power and control over them" [5]. In this context, bullying is all about power. It is the imbalance and abuse of power. Bullying is not a personality conflict it's abuse.

1.1 Signs of Cyber Bullying

[6] made the following observations about signs of cyber bullying. However, they were quick to point out that none of these by themselves are a sure indication of being bullied, but several taken together are cause to open a discussion about cyber bullying. They mentioned that:

- Unusually long hours on the computer
- Closes windows when you enter room
- Secretive about internet activity
- Getting behind in school work
- Lack of appetite
- Stomachache
- Fear [6]

These are some of the signs of cyber bullying where cyber bullying, which is sometimes referred to as online social cruelty or electronic

bullying, has been defined as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" [6, p.376].

1.2 Who is Involved in Cyber Bullying?

There appears to be no concluding findings as to who is involved in cyber bullying. Studies undertaken elsewhere appear not to be conclusive. For instance, although some studies have found that girls are more involved in cyber bullying than boys [7-9], others have found similar rates among boys and girls [10].

When middle school students were asked about the identity of the person who cyber bullied them:

- 52% identified another student at school
- 36% said they had been cyber bullied by a friend
- 13% had been cyber bullied by a sister or brother
- 48% did not know who had cyber bullied them [8]

It appears cyber bullying is perpetrated from various sources. Other studies also found out that children and youth who are involved in cyber bullying are also quite likely to be involved in "traditional" forms of bullying such as hitting or punching (physical bullying), teasing or name-calling (verbal bullying) or intimidation through gestures or social exclusion. In a study of middle school students [11], revealed that 61% of cyber "victims" also reported being victims of "traditional" bullying; 55% of cyber "bullies" also said they had bullied others in "traditional ways." Cyber "bully/victims" (who cyber bully others and also are cyber bullied) were heavily involved in "traditional" forms of bullying—64% had been bullied and 66% had bullied others.

1.3 How does Cyber Bullying Affect Children?

Little research has explored the possible effects of cyber bullying on children. When students are asked how they believe cyber bullying affected them, they indicate that it made them sad and unwilling to attend school [12], 2007. Psychological effects were also unearthed in other studies. For example, a survey of middle and high school students found that children who were cyber "bully/victims" (had cyber bullied

others and also had been cyber bullied) had the highest rates of anxiety, depression and school absences compared to cyber "bullies", cyber "victims" and children who weren't involved in cyber bullying. By contrast, children not at all involved in cyber bullying had the highest self-esteem and grades and the fewest symptoms of health problems [8].

Research has shown that cyber bullying can affect students' ability to learn at school [13] and that victims experience a range of emotional effects [3], so this is not a phenomenon that educators can ignore. [4] point out that adults may be unaware of the serious nature and potential harm that cyber bullying presents, adding, teachers and administrators are unlikely to see the behavior first-hand, making it more difficult to respond to than traditional forms of face-to-face bullying, and many schools lack the resources and expertise to investigate cyber-incidents. Sometimes when administrators do attempt to intervene, they may find themselves in conflict with parents of cyber-bullies, who are sometimes in denial about their child's online activity or quick to endorse their child's rights to engage in such conduct [4].

1.4 How does Cyber Bullying Differ from other Traditional Forms of Bullying?

Research and experience suggest that cyber bullying may differ from more "traditional" forms of bullying in a number of ways [8,14], including:

- Cyber bullying can occur any time of the day or night.
- Cyber bullying messages and images can be distributed quickly to a very wide audience.
- Children and youth can be anonymous when cyber bullying, which makes it difficult (and sometimes impossible) to trace [14].

An interesting study was undertaken by [5] who attempted to find out how cyber bullying differs from the regular schoolyard bullying. Some important findings were unearthed. In the first place, [5] found out that cyber bullying is more invasive since it is not bound by time or geography. He gave an example that at the end of a bad day at school a child could find refuge at home. Unfortunately for the cyber-victim, this technology allows the taunts, threats, insults and rumors to follow the child home and have access around the clock. The second distinctive feature

of cyber bullying is that it increases the audience of your humiliation. [5] argues that in traditional forms of bullying, what happened to you may have been witness by a few people and shared by word of mouth with a few others, now text-messaging, Instant Messaging, allow what was said or done to you to be shared with a huge, virtually an unlimited number of people. The third aspect that Stutzky unearthed is that cyber bullying lengthens the duration of your torment. To this end, the argument was that if the cyber bully posts something up on the web, with embarrassing photos, rumors, etc. it can remain up potentially forever. Lastly, [5] posits that cyber bullying lends itself to greater cruelty. The point being that if I'm bullying you face to face I can see the impact it's having on you, tears coming into your eyes, the lowering of your head and I might back off and end it seeing that I "got you good". This technology removes me from being able to see the impact of my actions and so lends itself to greater cruelty [5].

1.5 The Extent of Cyber Bullying

Several studies were undertaken abroad on the extent of cyber bullying in teens. One such prominent study was in a [7] survey of 13-18 year-olds who were asked how often they had ever been involved in cyber bullying. The responses given were as follows: 15% said they had been cyber bullied online; 10% had been cyber bullied by cell phone; 7% said they had cyber bullied another person online and 5% had cyber bullied another person by cell phone.

Another interesting study was a study by Fight Crime entitled Invest in Kids [15]. This study investigated how often children (6-11 year-olds) and teens (12-17-year-olds) had been cyber bullied during the previous year. One-third of teens and one-sixth of the children reported that someone said threatening or embarrassing things about them online. In a survey of middle school students, [10] found that 9% had been cyber bullied *in the last 30 days* and 17% had been cyber bullied *during their lifetime*; 8% had cyber bullied others in the last 30 days and 18% had done so during their lifetime. In a study by [8] with students in grades 6-8, 18% said they had been cyber bullied at least once *in the last couple of months* and 6% said it had happened two or more times; 11% had cyber bullied others at least once in the last couple of months and 2% said they had done it two or more times. These are very interesting findings. Sadly most of these have been undertaken in developing countries

and there appears to be very little data on the ground for developing countries like Zimbabwe. Against this background, this research set forth to find out if cyber bullying is a new form of social cruelty in schools? As cyber bullying is relatively new term, the following terms will be defined so that the contents of the research will be easily accessed by many.

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

Throughout, the following terms are used:

“*Cyber bullying*” is used to refer to harassment, embarrassment or threats online or by text message.

“*Cyber bullies*” is used to refer to teens who have harassed, embarrassed or threatened others online or by text message.

“*Sexting*” is used to refer to sending sexually suggestive text messages or emails with nude or nearly-nude photos.

“*Sexters*” is used to refer to U.S. teens ages 13-18 who have sent, received or forwarded a sexually suggestive text message or email with a nude or nearly-nude photo.

“*Sext Senders*” is used to refer to teens who have sent sexually suggestive text messages or emails with nude or nearly-nude photos of themselves

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Educators are increasingly faced with the challenge of keeping students safe at school— not only in their physical space, but also in a virtual world that has become a very dangerous environment, with few rules and very little oversight [4,13]. This phenomenon might be silently creeping into Zimbabwean schools and victims are suffering silently. Thus this research seeks to answer the question:

Is cyber bullying a new form of social cruelty in Zimbabwean schools?

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions that guided this inquiry included:

1. What is the extent of cyber bullying in Zimbabwean schools?
2. What types of cyber bullying do students face?
3. How does cyber bullying effect students personally, socially and/or academically?

4. To what extent is cyber bullying affecting the targets and schools performance?

4. METHODOLOGY

The research described in this paper was undertaken using a critical event narrative inquiry method. The method was outlined by [16]. It was further refined with focus on the area of technology with particular attention to the cyber bullying in the research study described in this paper. Narrative inquiry as such is not a completely new method; it has existed in various forms in a range of fields for more than two decades [16,17]. However, the various narrative inquiry approaches have been quite “disjointed,” embedded in the particular disciplines where they have been applied. Thus, [16] developed a critical event narrative inquiry with its proposed application across a wide range of disciplines. The critical event narrative inquiry method was found well suited to investigation of human-centred and complex areas, such as cyber bullying. As a qualitative research method, it was argued, it is capable of focusing on aspects of cyber bullying which would be frequently overlooked when using quantitative research methods. In relation to other qualitative research methods, it was argued that it is more efficient in dealing with large amounts of qualitative data, through its targeted focus on eliciting of critical events in professional practice, in this instance, of school children [16].

To explain the concept of a “critical event,” it is an event which would have significantly impacted on professional practice of, for instance, an academic. Such an event might have entirely or considerably changed the academic’s perception of their professional practice, or even their worldview. “Critical event” can only be identified retrospectively and such an event would have happened in an unplanned and unstructured manner. The causes of a “critical event” might be “internal” or “external” to professional practice of an individual or entirely personal. A “critical event” has a unique, illustrative and confirmatory nature in relation to an investigated phenomenon.

4.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the extent, pervasiveness, types and causes of cyber bullying, the psychological impact on students and the responses to cyber bullying from high school students. The goal is to give the public,

school leaders and education authorities a greater understanding of this phenomenon and suggest steps to deal with this challenging issue. Armed with this information, schools should be able to do a better job with remedies that prevent and respond to cyber bullying, an issue that today's school leaders find increasingly challenging and difficult to ignore.

4.2 Participants

The data were collected from 200 teenage high school students between the ages of 13 to 19 using a survey, which contained limited choice, scaled response and open-ended questions. The participants were secondary school students who use a cell-phone, e-mail or other electronic gadgets. They were asked to report on any cyber bullying incidents they had experienced in their daily interaction with technology. Richness of cyberspace background and willingness to participate in completing a questionnaire were the primary considerations in identifying participants for this study. Thus purposive sampling was used in order to select willing information rich participants.

4.3 Design/Methodology/Approach

This qualitative/quantitative design enables collection of data from a large population along with rich qualitative data that expand and explain students' experiences. This mixed-method, qualitative/quantitative design [18] enabled the collection of data from a large population, along with rich qualitative data in which participants expanded and explained their experiences. This method, therefore, provided a comprehensive picture of the nature and causes of this phenomenon, the psychological effects on targets and insights into students' responses to the bullying.

4.4 Instrument

The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire with open-ended questions. It was preferred because of the sensitivity of the topic, it guarantees anonymity. The nature of the survey was that it was able to reach a large audience.

4.4.1 Research limitations/implications

This is self-reported data collected from a group of students in thirty institutions, who were asked to recall instances from their experience. Additional research on a larger population, from a variety of age groups and cross-culturally

would add another layer of understanding about cyber bullying among teens.

4.5 Data Analysis

Since, this was exploratory data analysis, descriptive statistics were used to organize, summarize and describe measures of the population. First the quantitative data were tabulated using SPSS. Participants revealed their gender, age and high school form which allowed for comparisons by categories. Next, the open-ended responses were transcribed and coded, first across research questions and then into categories, which were later clustered into four broad themes. These were compared to the findings of the broader quantitative data. And finally, both the quantitative and qualitative data were compared and contrasted according to the gender, age and grade point average of respondents, which allowed us to uncover congruencies and incongruencies among participant groups.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was upheld in this study. This means to say in this study, no information will be released that in any way will reveal the identity of a research informant. Authorization was sought and obtained from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture to conduct this research in schools. Our authorisation is required for any publication of the research findings or their implications.

4.7 Findings

4.7.1 How common is cyber bullying?

Cyber bullying is amazingly prevalent, affecting 86 percent of the students in this study, with quite a large difference in the victimization of females and males. In this study, 89% of females reported they had experienced cyber bullying compared to 83 percent for male. An interesting observation from the findings in this study is that the number of students in this study reporting incidents of cyber bullying is higher than reported in previous years [3], suggesting that cyber bullying may be increasing among teens. Further evidence of this was indicated by the fact that 89 percent of the females reported knowing a friend who had been targeted compared to 72.1% [4].

Other research studies have produced different answers to the question of how common cyber bullying is in schools. Rates of cyber bullying vary depending on the definition of cyber bullying that is used, the ages and characteristics of children surveyed and the time frame involved [8].

4.7.2 Cyber bullying experiences

Students in the study were asked to give a specific example of a cyber bullying incident they had experienced or had firsthand knowledge of and 118 of the students provided such examples. This appears to be an indication that cyber bullying is widespread among today's teens, with over 59% having experienced it, engaged in it or know of friends who have been targeted.

Some of the more popular examples given include.

4.7.2.1 Sexting

In this sample, about one in six teens have engaged in sexting—sending, receiving or forwarding sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photos through text message or email—and some of these know of a friend who has sent or received these kinds of messages. Most sext senders say these messages are most commonly sent to boyfriends/girlfriends because it's asked of them or to have fun. Disturbingly however, about 10 sext senders say they have sent these messages to people they don't even know.

4.7.2.2 Ways of cyber bullying

Some of those frequently mentioned in this study include sending political party slogans, pornographic materials; threatening messages, teasing, name calling, use of vulgar language among others. Studies elsewhere revealed that some ways of cyber bullying are:

- Sending mean, vulgar or threatening messages or images
- Posting sensitive, private information and/or lies about another person
- Pretending to be someone else in order to make that person look bad
- Intentionally excluding someone from an online group [19].

In other studies, [4] report that the second relationship tension that emerged was cyber

bullying stemming from envy. Some respondents said this emerges when people are romantically attracted to others who reject or ignore them. Others said this envy arises when a person seeks friendship or a romantic relationship, but the other person is involved with someone else. Still others pointed to jealousy over characteristics or achievements that enable another to be more admired among teammates/classmates or more popular in school. In all cases, the cyber bully seemed unable to cope with the relationship envy and resorted to cyber bullying as a way to vent frustration [4].

4.7.3 Teens in this study cyber-bullied each other through

Social networks, e-mails, instant messaging and TXT messages send on cell phones. Of these, the most popular was the TXT messages send on cell phones. These accounted for 93% of those who confirmed having experienced cyber bullying, engaged in it or know of friends who have been targeted.

Studies elsewhere [20,8] appeared to have a similar pattern as the following were reported:

- Text or digital imaging messages sent on cell phones
- Social networking sites
- Web pages
- Blogs
- Chat rooms or discussion groups
- Other cyber technologies

Bullying via instant messaging appears to be particularly prevalent [20,8].

There are also positives to be derived from the responses on the ways in which cyber bullying is conveyed. Ten of the respondents confirmed that they visited social networking sites. What it means is that there are now teens in high schools in Zimbabwe who are now benefiting from social software tools. [21] says the term Web 2.0 or "social software" covers a range of software tools which allow users to interact and share data with other users, primarily via the web. Blogs, wikis, social networking web sites, such as Facebook and Flickr and social bookmarking-sites, such as Delicious and 3D environments such as Second Life are examples of some of the tools that are being used to share and collaborate in educational, social and business contexts [21]. The key aspect of a

social software tool is that it involves wider participation in the creation of information, which is shared.

4.7.4 Victim experiences

The victims in this study experienced powerfully negative effects especially on their social well-being, their social life, their academic life, their gender, their ethnicity, their facial outlooks and their neighborhood. In this regard, victims rejected it outright saying it is, in the words of one of the respondents.

Cyber bullying is a form of social cruelty

However, 31 respondents in this study justified cyber bullying. The researchers suspected some of those supporting it were the actual perpetrators. In the words of one of the respondents, it was justified as:

Bullies usually justify their actions by saying they are getting back at someone or because the person deserved it.

The most damaging thing about these findings is that cyber bullying or bullying online is easier to get away with than bullying in person. Similar to traditional forms of bullying, cyber bullying is often deliberate and relentless, but it can be even more unnerving because of the anonymous nature of the assault [4].

4.7.5 Reasons for cyber bullying

The respondents were also asked to indicate the reasons for cyber bullying. Among others, the following stood up above the rest. Of the 125 students who answered this question, 5The majority noted that:

The anonymity of cyber bullying contributes to the phenomenon because of the power it gives bullies, emboldening them beyond what they might do on a face-to-face basis.

Some example comments included:

*Cyberspace gives them more courage. They don't have to do it face to face. It's easier for them to torment.
The cyber-bullies are bold because they don't think anyone can catch them. They hide the identity of their numbers.
They are weak and cowardly.
Low self esteem.*

*They are lonely and insecure.
Desperation.
Resentment.
Sexual Frustration.*

The language the students used to explain the reasons all show that cyber bullying is a social problem. Earlier on we quoted a respondent indicating that it is a form of social cruelty. [4] also found out that the responses from students in their study pointed to a gap in students' abilities to handle social tensions, particularly those that center around relationship issues. Contributing to this there seems to be a pervasive lack of self-worth, which can manifest itself in targeting others through cyber bullying. These attacks can have devastating effects, which coincidentally was one of the research questions and is discussed below.

4.7.6 Effects of cyber bullying

Broadly, the effects mentioned by respondents in this study were put into three categories. The first is psychological effects. Targets experienced high levels of anger, powerlessness, sadness and fear. The second were social. It was able put across by one respondent who claimed that:

Physical bullying is far much better because it end at school. With cyber bullying (Huri wose na Katsande nomumvura nomumvura). Meaning they follow their targets anywhere anytime! The third effect was academic as respondents indicated that cyber bullying is:

*A distracter
I became less confident in my ability
I failed to do my homework because I was crying.*

Thus cyber bullying has far reaching effects on targets. [4] appear to capture this well by claiming that these heightened psychological effects are somewhat unique to cyber bullying. Since perpetrators can hide behind technology, it is the perfect medium to heighten fear and powerlessness in the victim. This makes cyber bullying more than just a modern day form of school-yard bullying, but in fact more in line with victimization, where the intent is to terrorize and assert dominance. It can lead to dangerous and unproductive reactive behavior.

5. CONCLUSION

Technology has the potential to extend the boundaries of collective intelligence. However,

there are also some negatives associated with technology. Cyber bullying is the fastest growing trend in bullying among teens. Technology in itself is not “good” or “evil”, as with most things of this nature it’s in how it’s used. The problem isn’t the technology; the problem is that we’ve allowed a culture of meanness and abuse to thrive in our schools among our children. It’s in the soil of meanness that the seeds of revenge and violence take root and grow. The major finding appear to be the high percentage of students being affected by cyber bullying and the content of the messages revealed in this study suggest that cyberspace can be a graphic, scary, threatening and generally pretty unsettling virtual world with few laws or norms for socially acceptable behavior.

While technology continues to evolve human nature seems to remain the same. We have always had bullies with us however; these new means of communication have enabled today’s bullies to become more effective in terrorizing and tormenting their targets. Thus, cyberspace operates as a new form of social cruelty in schools because students’ lives are being negatively affected by a very uncivilized virtual world that is spilling over into their real lives. The added dilemma is that cyber bullying is easier because of the anonymity of the attack and it is more pervasive, with high numbers of students participating, by-standing, and/or being targeted. Cyber targets can feel helpless. The anonymity of the perpetrator and students’ skill in using technology have made it more difficult for schools to take preventative steps or track down cyber-bullies in response to problems.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations emanating from the study are a result of learning from other studies that include [2,22-24,20,3,5] [15b] among others. There message was clear as there was agreement that we must educate our children and provide them with strategies to effectively deal with 21st century bullying techniques because the best defense against cyber bullying isn’t electronic it’s relational.

- Since cyber bullying has far reaching effects on targets, having a healthy personal relationship, two-way communication with a trusted adult, especially a parent is the best bully prevention program there is.

- For the students targeted by cyber bullies, they need not respond or engage to the abuse. Rather they must talk to someone about it. They need not keep it to themselves since ignoring bullying only leads to its escalation.
- Targets need to keep records/print off messages if possible, to help identify bully. It may be necessary to get a new number, account, give it out one person at a time and keep a diary daily to record any abuse, your tormenter may be closer than you think.
- For parents, if your child is being cyber bullied, make this topic a talk able subject, place and keep the computer in an open, common space, inform Internet Service Provider (ISP) or cell phone service provider of abuse and do not erase messages; keep for evidence.
- For schools, there is need to have anti-bullying policies that include text messaging, cell phone use and online bullying.
- Schools need to make a commitment to educate teachers, students and parents about cyber bullying and make sure parents know whom to contact at the school if there is a problem.
- Young children should never allow a known incident of bullying to pass unchallenged and not dealt with.
- The government can also play a part by passing legislation to encourage and empower schools to take bullying seriously, funding of anti-bullying efforts and creating a national anti-bullying hotline.

Now it is the time to start talking about the issue of cyber bullying and the responsible use of this technology before it becomes a problem of epidemic proportions.

6.1 Practical Implications

Technological advances have created new challenges for schools in keeping students safe. This paper has implications for educational policy and practice, including steps school leaders can take to curtail cyber bullying.

6.2 Originality and Value of the Research

This research builds on a small body of research on cyber bullying and focuses on the extent of underlying causes, categories of psychological

effects and specific remedies to cyber bullying from a small sample of thirty-two schools in Zimbabwe.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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