AN INVESTIGATION ON THE PREVALENCE OF CYBERBULLYING AMONGST UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA

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Abstract

Information and Communication Technologies are widely regarded as crucial enablers to communities and individuals to filter and manage information that is of interest to them. Hence, academic institutions provide students with access to the Internet. However, research has established that there is a negative side to this access such as Cyber bullying. Whilst numerous studies discuss the use of social media and bullying amongst the youth in Botswana, no study was found that investigated the prevalence of Cyber bullying amongst undergraduate students in the University of Botswana. It is in recognition of the dearth of information on this phenomenon that this study investigated the prevalence of Cyber bullying amongst undergraduate students of the University of Botswana. Furthermore, this study investigated students' involvement in collective or group cyber bullying against individuals or organizations and the reasons for partaking in such. This exploratory study adopted a critical interpretivist approach and the research data was obtained through semi structured interviews with undergraduate students in the University of Botswana. The findings of the study show that Cyber bullying is prevalent amongst undergraduate students. It is hoped that tertiary institutions will in light of the research findings, develop strategies to mitigate the antisocial behavior.

Keywords: Social Networks Usage; Undergraduates; Cyber bullying

1.0 Introduction

Whilst Social networking sites (SNS) are virtual, they are premised on the concept that society exists as a structured set of relationships between people. SNS sites provide opportunities for users to connect with others which satisfies users relatedness and self-esteem needs, social integration and emotional support needs (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Ravasan, Rouhani, & Asgary, 2014). This study focused on profile based social media that are usually used for relationship building and maintenance such as people posting messages on each other's pages, making comments on a friend's photo or updating their status to a closed circle of friends. These sites also enable active screening of friends and varying levels of privacy protection. In these platforms, through self-presentation, a user conveys his/ her interests, likes and dislikes, and personal opinions in the hope that others will gain a better understanding of him/her, and in turn will develop a deeper relationship with him/her (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

These platforms also enable those who are connected to the user to be publicly listed. These social media platforms enable users to create identifiable profiles which gives the users social presence. Social presence, which is defined as the extent to which a person is regarded as an actual real live person in an online environment is done to hopefully enable SNS users to understand each other and possibly develop deeper relationships (Pammer-Schindler, Pérez-Sanagustín, & Drachsler, 2018,)

However, having social presence makes one vulnerable to Cyber bullying. It is argued that SNS such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are Cyber bullying tools of choice because of the ability of the masses to witness and participate in the attacks (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015; Aboujaoude, Savage, Starcevic, & Salame, 2015; Olweus & Limber, 2018).Cyber bullying involves "the use of Information and Communication Technologies such as e-mail, cell phone text messages, Instant Messaging, defamatory personal web sites, defamatory online personal polling and web sites to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others" (Belsey, 2004).

McQuade, Colt, & Meyer, (2009, p.14) define Cyber bullying as "an occurrence whereby someone uses information technology to embarrass, harass, intimidate, threaten, or otherwise cause harm to individual targeted for abuse". Others like Kokkinos, Antoniado, & Markos (2014, p.204) define Cyber-bullying as an "aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or an individual using electronic form of contact, repeatedly and over time, against a victim who cannot easily defend him/herself". From the definitions, one can conclude that cyber bullying has both emotional and psychological impacts on the victims, which is made worse by the longer "shelf life" of cyber bullying text or images which exposes a victim for longer periods of time. In addition, according to Feinberg & Robey (2009), the hurtful information can be transmitted broadly and instantaneously. The attacks are also said to be more vicious as perpetrators are shielded from the consequences of their actions and as such are more likely to say things online that they would not in person. While some such as Rice & Katz, (2003) draw distinctions between mobile bullying and cyber bullying, this study will not make a distinction between the two.

There are several ways in which cyber bulling takes place and these include hacking of social media profiles and accounts, threatening, insulting, harassing, sexting, morphing, virtual rape, revenge porn, exclusion, flaming, harassment, public shaming from posted content, exclusion and cyber stalking, undesirable sexual solicitation, sexual harassment, voyeuristic behavior, obscene comments and spamming (Behm-Morawitz & Schipper, 2015; Kota ,Benson, Schoohs,& Moreno, 2014).

2.0 Prevalence of cyber bullying in Education Institutions

Cyber bullying is said to be prevalent and growing due to amongst other reasons "the reliance on new connectivity tools to the point where many would rather tolerate negative effects than be disconnected and the continued rise of online disinhibition, often related to anonymity" (Aboujaoude et al, 2015). The 2017 Pew Research Center established that almost 40% of Americans have experienced online harassment. Furthermore, the 2017 Pew Research Center extrapolated that nearly one in five (18%) Americans will experience more 'extreme' harassment such as physical threats, stalking, and online sexual harassment based on their political views, physical appearance, race, gender and sexual orientation (Pew Research Center, 2017). In the United Kingdom, 31% of youth were said to have experienced cyber bullying, in Canada 34% of students, Japan 45% of high school students had experienced cyber bullying, whilst in China 60% of students had experienced cyber bullying (Aoyama & Talbert 2010).

A study done by Zulu & Tustin (2012) in South Africa, established that almost three in every ten learners (34.4%) who participated in their study were victims of bullying whilst four in every ten learners (38.1%) were aware of a friend being bullied. Furthermore, 23.3% of their respondents admitted having bullied other learners. Almost half the learners who were cyber bullied had received upsetting messages, experienced gossip and rumors spread about them and were called names. Other cyber bullying incidents

reported included exposure to sexual remarks (24.5%), unflattering and suggestive personal photos posted online (13.3%) and being bullied, recorded and photos/videos distributed online (8.7%). In addition, Chukwuere, Chukwuere & Khumalo (2017) established that academic research which focused on cyber bullying against female students in South Africa was limited. Kyobe, Mimbi, Nembandona, & Mtshazi, (2018) investigated Mobile bullying in high schools in rural South Africa. However, studies have established that students tend to give misleading information about their involvement in acts of Cyber bullying (Francisco, Simão, Ferreira & Martins, 2015).Research has also established that a number of different factors such as the age, high rate of availability of electronic media that enables easy and regular dissemination of abusive materials, competency in using technology, gender, anonymity, perception, attitude, gratification after mobile bullying affect predisposition to cyber bullying.

Whilst numerous studies discuss the use of social media and bullying amongst the youth in Botswana, no study was found that investigated the prevalence of cyber bullying amongst undergraduate students in Botswana nor in the University of Botswana. It is imperative to carry out such studies as cyber bullying does not only occur during adolescence, but studies have established that it also occurs during the University years (Akbulut & Eristi, 2011). In addition, tertiary education students are said to predominantly use Facebook and Instagram which are regarded as "the worst offending platforms of cyber bullying" (Reischman,2018). Furthermore, studies have shown a relationship between traditional bullying and cyber bullying and the presence of bullying in schools in Botswana has been acknowledged (Selemogwe, Nomagugu-Setlhare & Mphele, 2014).

It is in recognition of the dearth of information on this phenomenon that this study investigated the prevalence of cyber bullying amongst undergraduate students of the University of Botswana. Furthermore, this study investigated students' involvement in collective or group cyber bullying against individuals or organizations and the reasons for partaking in such. This is in recognition of the fact that Social media can be used to mobilize people for or against an individual or an organization thus facilitating "collective action" (Baringhorst, 2008). The study did not investigate the factors that predispose students to cyber bullying.

3.0 Methodology

The selected study location, the University of Botswana, is a government funded institution located in Gaborone, Botswana. The University comprises eight faculties, namely: Business, Education, Engineering and Technology, Health Sciences, Humanities, Medicine, Science, and Social Science (UB Annual Report, 2017). Since this was an exploratory investigation the study sample comprised 100 randomly selected female and male undergraduate students drawn from the faculty of Humanities. A pilot study was carried out during the month February 2018 and the primary data was collected by the researcher during the months of March 2018 to May 2018.

The research strategy used for this study was case study to enable the study to get in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within its context (Cavaye, 1996; Benbasat, Goldstein & Mead, 1987). Data was collected using semi structured interviews, as this approach enabled the researcher to follow up on emerging topics thus allowing the study to include issues that had not been anticipated by the researcher (Green & Thorogood, 2009). In order to conceal the identity of the participants, respondents were coded as CB1 up to CB100.

The participants were informed about what the study sought to uncover before data collection to help them decide whether or not they wished to participate in the study. Research participants were made aware that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participation in the study during the interview or request that the data they gave not be used. In addition, it was clarified to participants that taking part in the study posed no harm or threat to them. Data analysis was based on themes that emerged from the data (Clarke &Braun, 2013). In line with the process of data analysis in thematic analysis, all data was collected prior to data analysis (Chamberlain et al., 2004; Clarke &Braun, 2013).

4.0 Findings

Participation and Exposure to cyber bullying

This exploratory study established that cyber bullying is prevalent amongst undergraduates. Students indicated that they had been

- Teased online.
- Threatened online.
- Excluded from Online groups as punishment.
- Subjects of rumors online.
- Victims of a deliberate campaign to turn people against them on line or by phone.
- Stalked online.
- Humiliated by others who shared embarrassing photos.
- Humiliated by others who shared embarrassing audio recording.
- Humiliated by others who shared embarrassing private conversation.

When asked how they handle posts with sensitive information, one undergraduate student (CB11) stated that "*Usually if I'm to come across posts I'm not comfortable with, its either I block the poster, I unfollow him/her or I just ignore it*" whilst one student (CB9) stated *"I report accounts that post sensitive stuff like nudity, or praising abuse"*. Other students were however indifferent. For instance, one student (CB26) said *"I know that people will always have negative thoughts about some sensitive information I post as they have emotion, I always ignore them and express my own feelings"*. In addition, students stated that almost every time they went online they were more likely to be unintentionally exposed to pornographic content.

When asked if they ever participated in humiliating, shaming, criticizing or exposing someone online, some students stated that they too had participated as they found it "*humorous*" (CB1) or as another student stated (CB4) "*because the person was spreading rumors*". Another student (CB5) stated that she too had humiliated another student as "*I had to rebuke the person, she was getting out of hand*".

In instances where they had been attacked on social media, the students stated that it made them unhappy and sad. One student (CB16) stated that "*It was terrifying and made me feel annoyed*" while another (CB 45) stated *"it made me feel bad, because I didn't know what to do, we are different people and view things differently and have our own beliefs"*. Similarly, research has shown that victims of cyber bullying suffer feelings of sadness, anger and fear (Amado, Matos, Pessoa, & Jäger, 2009; Langos, 2013; Francisco et al., 2015).

Students responded that when cyber bullied they were more likely to attack back. One student (CB 26) *stated "I react really badly, with insults*". Other students tended to seek for clarification in order to understand why, as CB20 stated that "I *confronted the person to know why they did that"*. Similarly, research done to date has shown that in efforts to dissuade perpetrators of cyber bullying, victims may confront the perpetrators either offline or online (Francisco et al., 2015). This is called avoidant-focused coping (Raskauskas & Huynh, 2015; Jacobs, Goossens, Dehue, Völlink, & Lechner, 2015; Young & Quan Haase, 2013).

The study established that when students themselves were confronted by those they had spoken negatively about in social media, they reacted in different ways. Some students reported that they deleted the hurtful comments without arguing or justifying themselves. One student (CB41) stated that "*I felt very guilty and shameful*" when confronted. Student (CB71) stated that "*I deleted the comment as I did not want to be implicated, therefore I withdrew my comments"*. One student (CB 11) stated, *"If caught out in a lie and I was wrong, I apologize but if I did nothing wrong I say it again"*. Others ignored their victims as one student (CB33) stated that *"I don't care, I never care about them"*. This study also established that some students got confrontational when confronted by those they spoke negatively about in social media. Student (CB12) stated, "*I would insult more and justify myself*". Another student stated, "I *respond back especially when I have got all the facts from the right sources thus authentic and reliable ones*".

These findings lead the study to conclude that cyber bullying is prevalent amongst undergraduates of the University. Undergraduate students were involved either as victims, perpetrators or bystanders. Similarly, Caravaca, Romero, Navarro-Zaragoza, Ruiz-Cabello, Frantzisko, &Maldonado (2016), Gahagan, Vaterlaus & Frost (2016) also established that Cyber bullying was prevalent in the colleges. Yubero, Navarro, Elche, Larrañaga, & Ovejero (2017) established that predominantly, cyber bullied students were mainly victims of dissemination of lies and rumors online which are amongst the experiences cited by students. This study also concludes that students use both offline and online strategies to deal with Cyber bullying. These findings are worrisome as Cyber bullying is said to have adverse physical and mental health consequences such as inability to focus on academics, avoiding individuals or groups because of victimization, low self-esteem, and loss of trust (Abreu & Kenny, 2018).

Role Undergraduate Students Play as Bystanders of Cyber bullying

Since Cyber bullying is regarded as a social phenomenon that takes place in the context of a large network of bystanders, students were asked to state the role they played when someone they knew was being cyber bullied. When asked if they ever spoke out in defense of someone who was being humiliated, shamed, criticized or exposed online, predominantly, students reported that they did not "*as it does not involve me"* (CB1). One student (CB71) stated "I *don't do anything about it*" whilst another (CB77) said, "*I don't care unless they approach me about it***.** Others clarified that they did not comment to avoid being bullied too if they spoke in defense and one student explained that she "*did not want the attention on me*" (CB41). However, when they met someone they knew was being bullied in Social Media offline, students stated that they would "*try to apologize and comfort them and tell them to avoid social media a bit*" (CB2). Others, especially the male students said they would ask them about what happened to lead to such cyber bullying and laugh about it.

Very few students who spoke out in defense of someone who was being cyber bullied stated that they did so to defend the one who had been attacked or to try to make the victim feel better *"because it is not nice to have everyone on your case"* (CB 56). One student (CB 57) stated that he spoke out to "*curb bad intentions and behavior*". Others stated that they tried to "*comment positively and try to get everyone to drop the issue"* (CB 87). When asked what they would do if they wanted to comment negatively too in instances where someone was being publicly shamed but wanted to conceal their identity, some of the students stated that they were more likely to create a fake Facebook profile or if it's on twitter, a fake twitter account whilst others stated that "*I never do anything that forces me to hide my identity"* (CB77) which led the study to conclude that some were okay with their identity being known whilst Cyber bullying.

Similarly, Gahagan, Vaterlaus & Frost (2016) established that a majority of college students who witnessed Cyber bullying on SNS did nothing to intervene. Similar conclusions were drawn by Paullet & Pinchot (2014) who stated that predominantly students who were witnesses to Cyber bullying would read posts related to Cyber bullying and not comment or leave the SNS. Very few students stood up to the bully. Francisco, Simão, Ferreira, Martins, *(*2015) also established that many observers of Cyber bullying rather than confront the bullies resorted to other means such as giving advice to the victim.

Social Media Forms of Exclusions

Students stated that they had blocked friends or "unfriended" friends as online coping strategies when cyber bullied. One student (CB41) stated, "*when you slander my name I block you*". This seemed to be a key strategy for most students as another one (CB 88) stated "*I have no intention of keeping in my life anyone who does not bring positivity in my life*". They stated that they blocked friends if they had had arguments or if they had spread rumors about them. Other reasons for blocking former friends include "*when I am no longer in contact with the person or cleaning out the friend list*" (CB41). However, very few students stated that they don't block friends as they would not like to be blocked whilst another stated "*blocking shows that I am a coward, I must face them when they have been mean to me or angered me"* (CB51). Students stated that being blocked made them sad and angry which might explain why students stated that when they meet people who blocked them they either ignored them or confronted them.

Use of Social Media to Mobilize Collective Action against Individuals or an Organization

In recognition of assertions by Carter (2013) that Cyber bullying can be carried out by an individual or a group against an individual, organization or a group of people, students were asked about their participation or mobilization of collective action against individuals or organizations. Undergraduate students stated that that they had taken part in cyber mediated collective action with the intention to speak out against

- Xenophobia
- Lies
- Violence
- Injustice
- Theft
- Tribalism
- Disrespect for other people's religions
- Intimidation.
- Criticism

- Child abuse
- Mistreatment of a certain group of individuals
- Gender based violence
- Paying for auditions
- Corruption
- Rape.
- Irresponsible leadership
- Unjust treatment.

They explained that when they speak out against any of the above, their intentions are to promote the interests of one's group or to speak out against the violation of important moral standards. The students stated that they took part to "*express outrage and confront the offender*" (CB10). They stated that they are more likely to take part in collective action "*If I know accurately and in real time what other people are doing or if they know how many other people have commented*" (CB10).

Similar conclusions were drawn by Lee (2014) who also found that the use of the Internet boosted social mobilization as it enabled large numbers of people to instantaneously have access to information, share information, generate collective intelligence, connect and mobilize each other. Bacallao-Pino, (2014) also established that social media is used for emotional mobilization of individuals during collective action. This study therefore concludes that students use SNS for easy access to self- organization and mobilization for collective actions.

Importance of Social Media

Students stated that the advantage of social media is that *"we interact, it expresses everybody's view of things, allows them to air their views and one can be able to conclude what people want or do not want*" (CB11). Social media is also according to students, an easy form of communication that "*rallies massive population making a wide coverage of information"* (CB12). Furthermore, undergraduate students were of the view that Social media is important as "*it raises awareness as more youth are active on social media,* thus it has a wider global reach and it helps spread information quickly and keeps people posted. They stated that social media is important because it helps people come together to fight either for what they believe in or against what they do not like. The study therefore concludes that in the opinion of students, SNS are a more affordable option to get access to information and to spread information.

Strategies That Can Be Used to Protect Students from Cyber bullying

Students proposed the following strategies that could be used by individuals, SNS and authorities to protect them and others from cyber bullying.
Individuals
Blocking people from social media
Training people about cybercrimes *SNS*
Social media should prevent certain things to be posted publicly
Social media should not allow information that is sensitive and has the potential to hurt others to be posted publicly.
Develop applications that block cyber bullies from social media *Authorities*
Cyber bullying should be reported to relevant authorities and action shall be taken

There should be cyber bullying policies

One student (CB 70) stated that people should "*Stop posting unnecessary information on social media, keep your profile private*". Similar sentiments were expressed by Carter, (2013) who established that students felt that there should be a "system for identifying offensive content and restricting the bully access to sites including tightening of internet privacy settings and limiting the amount of personal information shared online".

5.0 Conclusion

The findings of the study show that undergraduate students of the University of Botswana experience cyber bullying in a variety of ways and it also affects them differently. Consequently, it will be counterproductive for students or the University to ignore the presence of Cyber bullying. There is need for both, individual and institutional interventions to protect those likely to fall victims of cyber bullying. The findings show that there is need for further studies to investigate the prevalence of Cyber bullying across the University. In addition, the findings show that there is need for the University to have Cyber bullying prevention and intervention programs and modules pertaining to Cyber bullying and Digital Citizenship as part of the curriculum in courses that address the use of technology in the University of Botswana. Such initiatives are said to be effective in improving knowledge and curbing perpetration of students Cyber bullying practices (Doane, Kelly & Pearson, 2015).

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