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THE PHENOMENON OF CYBER BULLYING IN ALBANIAN CONTEXT: AN EXPLORATIVE STUDY OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT: Exponential growth of technology usage has further expanded the concept of an information age. In the prolonged transition of Albania society the perception of the virtual freedom has changed radically. During the last years the Albanian government implemented the extension of Internet connectivity in the rural and urban schools. On the other hand, private cell mobiles companies extended the internet connectivity offering it with affordable fees for the mass population. These initiatives changed the usage of virtual freedom making its usage massive for everyone. Despite the variety of age frequencies everybody can have access to virtual communication by simple gadgets to sophisticated ones. This freedom of communication has affected many social aspects which one of them is cyber bullying. Cyber bullying is defined as using electronic communication to torment others through devices such as Internet, e-mail, text messages or even social networking sites. Most people do not recognize the symptoms of being stalking online and the techniques a cyber stalker employs to target them. The purpose of this exploratory study is to give a brief overview of current knowledge in the literature about cyber bullying. Also, this paper will look at the perceptions of Albanian college students regarding issues related to cyber-bullying phenomenon based on descriptive data gathered out from a comprehensive questionnaire. Alternative tactics for preventing this phenomenon in the field of education were discussed in this study.

Key words: Technology, transition, internet extension, cyber bullying, education.

INTRODUCTION

During the last years the Albanian government implemented the extension of Internet connectivity in the rural and urban schools. On the other hand, private cell mobiles companies extended the internet connectivity offering it with affordable fees for the mass population. These initiatives changed the usage of virtual freedom making its usage massive for everyone. Despite the variety of age frequencies everybody can have access to virtual communication by simple gadgets to sophisticated ones. This freedom of communication has affected many social aspects which one of them is cyber bullying. Cyber bullying is defined as using electronic communication to torment others through devices such as Internet, e-mail, text messages or even social networking sites.

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Electronic bullying is different from traditional bullying because the anonymity provided by technologies removes the bully from the consequences caused by their actions. Since cyber bullies are virtually removed from their victims, the opportunities for feelings of regret, remorse or sympathy for the victim are removed (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Three main roles that someone may take in an instance of cyber bullying are being *the bully*, the *target*, or *the bystander* (Willard, 2007a). *The bully* is the person who harasses or puts down other people. Individuals may also be *the targets*. These are the people who targeted by the cyber bully, and they are sometimes also known as the victim. Although many individuals may think they are not participating in bullying behavior, being a bystander also means that one is involved in a bullying act.

Willard (2007a) identified two types of bystanders, *helpful bystanders* and *harmful bystanders*. Helpful bystanders are individuals who take action to stop the bully by either protesting against the bullying act, by providing both physical and emotional support for the target, or by seeking the help of an adult to intervene in the situation. Hurtful bystanders, on the other hand, are involved either by supporting and encouraging the bullying behavior or by simply doing nothing to intervene or seek help for the target.

The definition of cyber bullying illustrates that, while it is a form of and involves all of the non-physical attributes of bullying, it is carried out through devices capable of electronic communication. Cyber bullying can assume many different articulations, thus it is difficult to define in a simple sentence (Kowalski, et. al., 2008). However, there are six forms of cyber bullying that are most common:

Harassment: Repeatedly sending offensive, rude, and insulting messages. *Denigration*: Distributing information about another that is derogatory and untrue through posting it on a Web page, sending it to others through email or instant messaging, or posting or sending digitally altered photos of someone. *Flaming*: Online “fighting” using electronic messages with angry, vulgar language. *Impersonation*: Breaking into an email or social networking account and using that person’s online identity to send or post vicious or embarrassing material to/about others.

Outing and Trickery: Sharing someone’s secrets or embarrassing information, or tricking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information and forwarding it to others. *Cyber Stalking*: Repeatedly sending messages that include threats of harm or are highly intimidating, or engaging in other online activities that make a person afraid for his or her safety (depending on the content of the message, it may be illegal) (Willard, 2007). Although persons involved in cyber bullying identify other persons engaged in similar behavior and believe this behavior is acceptable, cyber bullies are negatively impacting cyber-victims (Brown et al, 2006). Cyber bullying can also be perpetrated through exclusion or ostracism. Examples of this include obviation from groups, chat rooms, or websites that can be the result of another person changing their password, exclusion or omission from a buddy list, and/or being ganged up on by other members (Kowalski et. al, 2008, pp. 49-50).

Cyber bullying is secretive and may spread information rapidly from one person to another (Li, 2006). Results from a study conducted by Ybarra and Mitchell (2004a) found that aggressive adolescents frequently targeted people they knew in conventional environments; 84% of the aggressors indicated knowing the target in person. Cyber bullies may target individuals in their social group, knowing the target’s address, phone number, or email due to their past friendship which they use to send threatening messages (Besag, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a). Online and offline bullying are rooted in aggression, which may suggest that the internet may simply be an extension of school bullying (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a). Six major means through which cyber bullying may occur are: instant messaging, e-mail, chat rooms or bash boards, small text messaging, web sites, and voting booths (Beale & Hall, 2007). Messaging devices are allowing cyber bullies to attack their victims through means of instant messages. These devices allow users to add other people to their user lists (Beale & Hall, 2007). The devices notify the user when someone comes online, allowing them to initiate a conversation with them. However, cyber bullies can easily switch screen names that hide their true identities, allowing for potential cyber bullying to continue. Cyber bullies are able to send threatening e-mail messages to their victims through e-mail (Beale & Hall, 2007). Although most e-mail programs allow for particular individuals to be blocked, these screening devices are limited. Although it may be easy to identify where an e-mail originated, it is nearly impossible to actually prove who wrote and sent the message. The loss for accountability is one thing that may draw cyber bullies to using this mean. Another form through which cyber bullies harass their victims is through chat rooms or bash boards (Beale & Hall, 2007).

METHODS

This research study is a descriptive exploratory study. Descriptive research is used to describe characteristics of a population or phenomenon being studied. The purpose of this descriptive study is to give a brief overview of current knowledge in the literature about cyber bullying. Also, this paper aims to analyze the perceptions of Albanian college students regarding issues related to cyber-bullying phenomenon based on descriptive data gathered out from a comprehensive questionnaire. The study was designed based on this research questions:

1. What is the perception of cyber bullying phenomenon and what are the symptoms?
2. What is the perception of the consequences of cyber bullying?
3. What kind of cyber bullying form is more used?
4. What is the most used Internet application for cyber bullying?
5. What is the perception for preventing cyber bullying?

Data for this study was gathered using both mixed methods. For the first phase it was used quantitative method that was based on delivering o a self-designed comprehensive questionnaire which was based to determine the level of comprehension about cyber bullying phenomenon. It was filled out completely from 572 students from four different Albanian public universities, who were selected participants by using convenience sampling that is used for both the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study. Participants were assured that individual responses would never be identified and were only be used for research purpose only. For the second phase of the study only 382 students who scored an average level of cyber bullying knowledge were recruited to continue being participants of the research , 48 students dropped out and in total $n = 334$ students participated in the second phase by conducting individual in depth interview via email.

FINDINGS and CONCLUSIONS

What really helped in giving a consolid interpretation of the difference level perception of students was the interview codification . Albanian students perceptions about how cyberbullying occurs is not well defined. They have problems in explaining the definiton of term “ cyberbullying” by focusing only in few symptoms such as: mocking and using fake identities to denigrate. Girls reported being a cyber bully mostly with girls who they know in high school and very few reported to bully girls from their home university. On the other hand, boys mostly cyber bully girls than boys who they know from their home university. For girls the type of bully that it was used most was denigration and harassment but for boys was flaming and impersonation. According to the analysed of gatherd data , 1 in 2 reported being bullied at least once via facebook which was the most frequent way for cyberbullying followed by messenger and cell phone sms. For the section of cyberbullying prevention during the first phase 72% declared that education and media were powerful mediator for informing and sensibilizing cyberbullying phenomenon. But, few alternatives were given in opened-questions for the prevention of cyber bullying by limited it in training and media awareness campaign. In general students reported that the consequences of bullying were based in emotional conseguations such as; anxiety, anger and low self – esteem. These findings should be considered for further long–term studies. This explorative study is a baseline study for further researches of digital stress in the context of academe life. Researchers tend to expand their research in all public universities of Albania. Also, a more detailed examination of variables such as gender, status, type of faculties and individual features such as locus of control etc will be considered to be examined stastically with types of cyberbullying e experienced from technology usage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This phenomenon it's a new one for Albanian society and there are just a few empirical studies about cyber bullying. In order to find out the prevalence of this phenomenon in schools, researchers from public and private institutions should be encouraged to develop accurate scientific researches. According to our findings, it is necessary to provide student education about cyber bullying in which extra curriculum trainings would incorporate cyber bullying into life skills or bullying prevention classes. Education policymakers should review policies and procedures related to Internet and mobile communication devices, which may include restricting the use of mobile communication devices during the school day and monitoring of Internet use. Collaboration between multiple resources and personnel is essential in utilizing this phenomenon and understanding ways to deal with cyber bullying within the home and school setting. Education policy makers can utilize prevention

efforts involve the education of students about safe Internet usage, collaborating with support personnel to help victims of cyber bullying cope, and establishing firm school policies to prevent cyber bullying..

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