AN EXPLORATION OF THE CYBER BULLYING PHENOMENON AMONG TEENAGERS IN SOUTHERN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature of cyber bullying among teenagers and adolescents in southern Ghana. The objectives are to identify the forms of cyberbullying among young people in southern Ghana; to find the effects of cyberbullying on young people; to determine the causes of cyberbullying on young people; and to identify ways of controlling cyberbullying. The focus of this research was the adolescent group between the ages of 10 and 18 years in the Primary, Junior and Senior High Schools in the Western, Central, Eastern and Greater Accra regions of Ghana. A total of 233 respondents were conveniently selected from schools in the four southern regions of Ghana. Descriptive statistics were used to organize, summarize, and describe measures of the population. The results from the study indicated that majority of the adolescents access the internet at home using mobile phones therefore schools cannot do a lot in terms of monitoring cyber bullying. Again, fraping and harassment were the major forms of cyber bullying that adolescents had experienced. About a sixth of respondents had experienced cyber bullying and some of these adolescents had stopped using computers and the internet. Even though this number does not represent a majority, it is significant enough to affect the use of cyberspace for education. The paper therefore recommends that parents could be the key and should monitor the online activities of their children and set clear limits and boundaries for them. The effective way schools can curb cyber bullying is by constantly creating the awareness of the rules and regulation guiding the use of the internet through awareness creation programs, providing emotional support through counselling and internet safety training sessions.

Keywords: Cyber bullying, Adolescent, Internet safety, Technology, ICT

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is viewed as a major problem and the most pervasive form of aggression in schools and covers direct or indirect physical, verbal, gestural, psychological, and electronic formats and is considered a serious social problem requiring attention (Limber & Small, 2003; Campbell, 2005; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). With the increasing use of the internet and social media, bullying appears to have invaded cyber space. That said, there is little understanding of the phenomenon in Ghana. This paper is an exploratory research into the nature of cyber bullying in preadolescents and adolescents in Ghana.

Bullying is associated with severe adolescent problems including school violence, delinquency, suicide, depression and psychological problems, substance abuse, delinquency, weapon carrying, poor relationships between parent/guardian, offline victimization/sexual abuse and physical abuse (Uba, Yaacob, & Juhari, 2010). These issues can in turn affect academic achievement, school discipline, resistance to use of IT resources, to name a few.

Aim and Objectives

The study aimed to investigate the effect of cyber bullying among preadolescent (10–13) and adolescent (14-17) Ghanaians. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

1. Identify the forms of cyberbullying among young people in southern Ghana.
2. Find the effects of cyberbullying on young people.
3. Determine the causes of cyberbullying on young people.
4. Identify ways of controlling cyberbullying.

REVIEW ON THE NATURE OF BULLYING

Bullying is a relationship issue where one person or group of persons repeatedly use power and aggression to control or intentionally hurt, harm or intimidate another person or group. It is often based on another person's appearance, abilities, culture, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity (Olweus, 1993). It can take many forms; physical, emotional, psychological and social bullying. Some examples are name calling, put downs, threats, gossiping, spreading rumours either verbally or electronically, inappropriate images that are posted or sent to others without permission, physical cues such as eye rolling or inappropriate gestures to hurt or embarrass someone (Insightrix Research Inc., 2013; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2013).

Cyber bullying involves the use of the Internet and related technologies to harm or harass other people in a deliberate, repeated, and hostile manner. It normally occurs on social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter, as SMS/text messages, Instant Message platforms or Email (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

According to Smith et al., (2006), cyber bullying has categorized cyber bullying into seven groups: text message bullying, picture/ video clip bullying (via mobile phone cameras), phone call bullying (via mobile phones), email bullying, chat-room bullying, bullying through instant messaging and bullying via websites.

The role of Technology in Online harassment and cyber bullying

With the advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's), technology particularly mobile technologies are vehicles that enable social interaction. Young people use the internet, cell phones, instant messaging, and text messaging to talk to friends, seek information and practice their social skills. Their access to these communication tools is in many different places; at home, at school, at friends' houses, and even at public libraries and open Wi-Fi sites (The Harris Poll People, 2007). This widespread access to and use of technological tools has led to the increase in cyber bullying. The speed of technology can spread rumours and humiliating pictures faster and to more people (Keith & Martin, 2005) than word of mouth. Everyone receives the same message when technology is used instead of word of mouth. According to

Shariff (2008), rumours can stay on the Internet indefinitely (Shariff, 2008) and this accounts for the pervasive nature of cyber bullying.

Online harassment has increased because private messages are forwarded without permission, threatening messages are sent anonymously, rumours are spread online without any barriers and embarrassing pictures are posted without permission. Remarkably, teen ages 13 to 17 are an online population. In a study conducted by The Harris Poll People (2007) in US, seventy-eight percent of teens report that they have been using the Internet for three years or more; more than half say they have been on the Internet for five or more years and twenty-seven percent use the Internet for more than an hour daily.

Due to this widespread use of the internet by these adolescent groups, a survey of 832 teenagers conducted in February 2007 by the National Crime Prevention Council in US reported that 43% of teens ages 13-17 had experienced cyber bullying (Moessner, 2007). In another survey of 92 students in London, 22% of them had been victims of cyber bullying at least once, and 6.6% had experienced being cyber bullied more frequently over the last couple of months (Smith et al., 2006).

Surveys have also indicated that the incidence of cyber bullying is higher among females than males and is most prevalent among 15 and 16-year-olds (The Harris Poll People, 2007). Smith et al., (2006) also agree that girls are significantly more likely to be cyber bullied, especially by text messages and phone calls, than boys. In a survey in New England, out of 351 students, 72.1 percent of the females reported they had experienced cyber bullying compared to 27.9 percent for males (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009) which also confirms the fact that girls are more at risk than boys.

Motive for Cyber bullying

Young people who are seen as different are at risk of being bullied. Most teens believe that people cyber bully for one or more of these reasons; "they think it's funny" (81%); "they simply don't like the person" (64%); or "they view the victim as a loser" (45%). Nearly six in ten teens (58%) said the cyber bully "probably didn't see the action as a big deal." Nearly half of teens said that cyber bullying happens because the cyber bully doesn't perceive any tangible consequences (47%) or feels he or she would not get caught (45%) (The Harris Poll People, 2007).

A research conducted by Hoff and Mitchell (2009) reported that of the 325 students who answered a question on the motive for cyber bullying, 52 percent noted that the anonymity of cyber bullying contributed to the phenomenon because of the power it gives bullies, emboldening them beyond what they might do on a face-to-face basis. Insecurity was also noted by 29 percent. Comments that cyber bullying is due to frustration emerged 16 percent of the time (Hoff and Mitchell, 2008).

Other teenagers are thought to engage in the behaviour often motivated by anger, revenge or frustration and sometimes for entertainment or to get a reaction. It should be noted that bullying could also occur by accident where perpetrators either send a message to the wrong recipient or didn't think before they did something. Whilst the Power-hungry do it to torment others to boost their ego, the mean do it to help bolster or remind people of their own social standing with others thinking they are righting wrong and standing up for others (Compton, Campbell, & Mergler,

2014). Since the motives for cyber bullying differ, effective solutions and responses to each type of cyber bullying incident is likely to differ too.

Prevention of Cyber bullying

Children and youth who are targets of bullying and cyber bullying do not have a consistent mechanism for reporting and rapid response. Bullying is complex and there are no easy solutions (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2013). Teens believe that cyber bullying prevention needs to occur at three different levels – individual actions, online institutions, and parent education; but most notably at the individual actions level (The Harris Poll People, 2007).

In teens' views, the most effective way to prevent cyber bullying is to be able to block people who cyber bully from communicating with the victims (71%) (The Harris Poll People, 2007). At the parental level, according to Mason (2008), parents who monitor the online activities of their children can reduce the probability that they will be bullied by 50%.

Role of schools

Schools must be at the centre of the solution to effect change in the social climate of today's young people. Schools are in a unique position to both educate and, when necessary, take corrective action (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009).

In an action plan by Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2013), it was recommended that the school should

  i.   support students to develop responsible and appropriate online behaviour
  ii.   ensure that all students understand the lasting impact of what they post online
  iii. support the instruction of responsible and appropriate online behaviour for Kindergarten through Grade 12 students
  iv.   provide a stand-alone website for anti-bullying information and supports and
  v.   mentor older students to become role models for younger students.

Unfortunately, some teens do not view cyber bullying as an issue that should be addressed by the school. They feel that much of customary school intervention would be largely ineffective. The reason is that most harmful incidents of cyber bullying occur off campus where technology use is often not supervised by school authorities (Willard, 2008; Beran & Li, 2007; Shariff & Hoff, 2007). This makes it extremely difficult for public schools to discipline a student without crossing the line for their free speech rights (Willard, 2007b). Off-campus cyber bullying incidents have been shown to have a negative impact on school climate (Feinberg & Robey, 2008; Willard, 2007b), make it difficult for victims to function in school (Feinberg & Robey, 2008), increase the risk for psychosocial problems for victims (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007) and place students' safety at risk (Feinberg & Robey, 2008). There is however evidence that schools can discipline students for off campus behaviour: In the case between Mary Tinker and the Des Moines Independent County School District the US Supreme court ruled that a school can discipline a student for off campus speech if the speech "materially disrupts" school activities or "substantially interferes with the rights of others" (Tinker v. Des Moines, 1969).

Role of parents

Though parents are generally quite vigilant about protecting their younger children from the content of specific types of sites and put clear limits on the amount of time spent online, teens

report that they are largely unsupervised by their parents while online. Parent involvement appears to shift dramatically as children reach and move past age 13. Nine out of ten (90%) of 10-12-year-olds say their parents know where they are going online, compared with four out of ten (41%) of 13-15-year-olds. Only seven percent of 10-12-year-olds say their parents think they know their children's online destinations but really don't. But 27 percent of 13-15-year-olds report that their parents think they know their online destinations but don't. Interestingly, as teens get older, they believe that their parents should be more concerned with what the teens see and hear online (The Harris Poll People, 2007).

According to some teens, parents take a variety of attitudes toward their children's online activity. About four in ten teens (43%) report that their parents usually know what they are doing online, but do not have any rules about their activity. Twenty-seven percent report that their parents have no idea what they are doing online. About 31 percent report that their parents have rules about their online activity, however, eight percent report that they find ways around their parents' rules while 23 percent report that they follow the rules (The Harris Poll People, 2007).

In a study by Agatston, Kowalski and Limber (2007), students reported that they would be more likely to report a threatening incident of cyber bullying to their parents than to an adult at school because they do not think the adults at school could help them with the cyber bullying problem (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The focus of this research was the adolescent group in the Primary, Junior and Senior High Schools as this was deemed the age range with the highest prevalence of cyber bullying (Carr-Gregg & Manocha, 2011). According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2018), the population of primary and high school students in Ghana is 7,839,147. The study was limited to four southern regions of Ghana i.e. the Western, Eastern, Central and Greater Accra regions with a primary and high school student population of 4,320,530. A total of 233 respondents between the ages of 10 and 18 were conveniently selected from the four regions. A questionnaire comprising of multiple-choice questions as well as scaled questions on a Likert scale was administered to the sample. Some of the questions in the questionnaire were mutually exclusive whilst others were not, hence respondents were able to choose more than one response for some of the questions.

The study was an exploratory research and descriptive and inferential statistics were used to organize, summarize, and describe measures of the population. Respondents revealed their gender, age, and high school level which allowed for comparisons by categories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the total respondents of 233, 135 of them were males representing 60.5% whereas 88 of them are females representing 39.5%. Most of the respondents were between the ages of 14 and 17 representing 93.7% whereas those 18 years and above were 5.8% and only 0.4% were between the ages of 10 and 13. Most of the respondents were from Senior High Schools representing 77.6% and 22.4% from Junior High Schools.

The medium that most respondents used for connecting to other users was phone call (93.7%), followed by social networks (77.6%), then text messages (75.3%) and World Wide Web

(65.9%). The technologies that were least used by respondents were email, instant messaging and chat rooms representing 52%, 43.6% and 42% respectively.
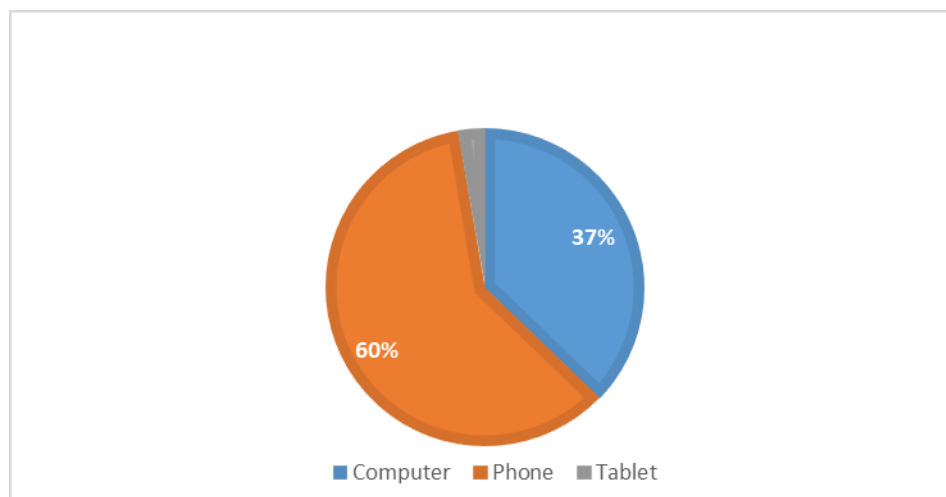

Figure 1: Mode of Accessing the Internet

From Figure 1, it can be observed that most respondents access the internet with their mobile phones representing 60.1% whereas access to the internet using a computer represented 37.2% and a tablet recorded just 2.7%. With regards to where respondents access the internet, 63.2% of the respondents said they access the internet at home whiles 31.8% also access the internet at the internet café. Only 4.9% of them accessed the internet at the school's computer laboratory. This therefore means that about 36.7% of teenagers are exposed to cyber bullying in places other than in school and control and supervision of internet use will likely not be done by authorities in their school.

Table 1: Frequency in Accessing the Internet

Frequency in Accessing Internet	No of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Always	70	31.4
Often	73	32.7
Sometimes	77	34.5
Rarely	2	0.9
Never	1	0.4
Total	**223**	**100**

With regards to the frequency in accessing the internet, the table above shows clearly that 98.7% are regular users of the internet whilst a minority 1.3% rarely or never use the internet. From the responses, about 98.6% of respondents are average to heavy users of the internet.

Table 2: Reasons for Using the Internet

Reason	No of Responses	Percentage (%)
To Study	209	93.7
To Chat with Friends	187	84.6
To Access News	143	64.1
To Play Games	115	52.0
To Listen to Music and Watch Movies	137	62.0

From Table 2, most responses indicated that majority of the students use the internet to study and they represent 93.7% whereas others used it to chat with friends representing 84.6%. This use of the internet is undeniable because most respondents subscribed to Facebook and Instagram which represented 91.9% and 64.3% respectively. With respect to twitter, responses showed that approximately half of the respondents 50.7% subscribed to it. This further confirms that teenagers are regular users of the internet and social network sites. This exposure will also make them more prone to cyber bullying from friends.

Despite the large number that use the internet, quite a number of respondents do not have any idea about cyber bullying which represented 42.1% and those who were aware represented 40.7% whereas 17.2% were not sure of what cyber bullying was.

Respondents who haven't experienced cyber bullying before represented 60%, those who were not sure represented 24% whilst those who had experienced cyber bullying represented 16%. This clearly indicated that most respondents have no experience with cyber bullying. Another 12.6% had cyber bullied someone.

Table 3: Forms of Cyber Bullying Experienced by Respondents

Form of Cyber Bullying	No of Responses	Percentage (%)
Exclusion	33	14.8
Harassment	79	34.5
Posting Info About Persons Without Their Consent	73	32.7
Cyberstalking	50	22.4
Fraping	67	50.0
Use of Fake Profiles	52	23.3
Dissing	41	18.4
Trickery	53	23.8
Trolling	46	20.6
Catfishing	39	17.5

From Table 3, 50% of those who had prior experience of cyber bullying have experienced fraping, followed by harassment (34.5%) and outing or posting of personal information without the person's consent (32.7%). Frapping is therefore the most predominant cyber bullying amongst respondents.

Table 4: Frequency of Cyberbullying

Frequency of Cyber Bullying	No of Responses	Percentage (%)
Everyday	16	7.2
Once or Twice a Week	28	12.6
Once or Twice a month	24	10.8
Monthly	25	11.2
Never	127	57.0

From the results in Table 4, 57.0% of the respondents have never experienced cyber bullying before. A significant percentage of 7.2% experience cyberbullying daily. This indicates that cyber bullying among the Ghanaian teenagers is low.

Table 5: Effect of Cyberbullying

Effect	No of Responses	Percentage
Change in Mood	106	57.0
Become Fearful	54	32.0
Close Down Social Media Account	49	28.8
Stop Using Computers and Internet	25	16.2
Become Inattentive in Class	22	13.6
Drop Out of School	16	10.4
Receive Poor Grade	27	17.5

Describing how cyber bullying affects them, 28.8% indicated that it causes them to close down their social media account whilst 16.2% says they stop using the computers and mobile devices altogether. Whilst those who stop using their computers might not be a majority, they are significant enough to impact the likelihood of these students to use ICTs for their studies.
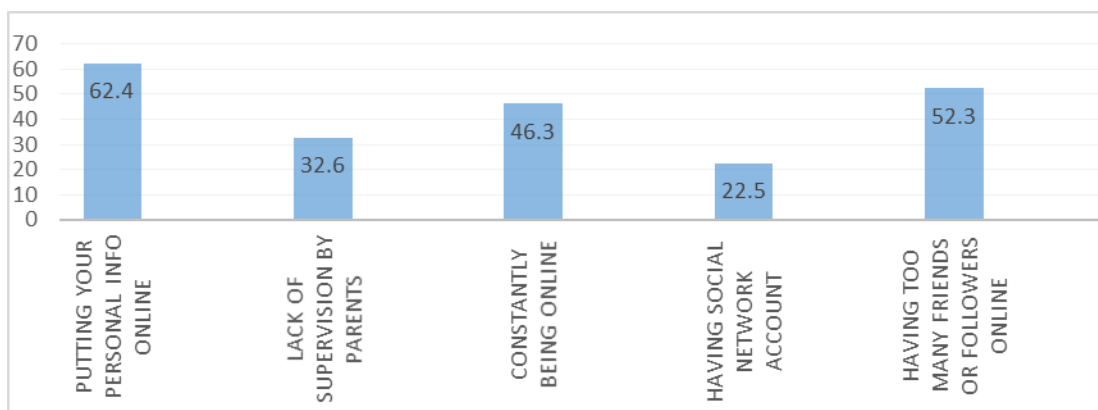

Figure 2: Causes of Cyberbullying

A majority of 62.4% belief that putting personal information online gives rise to cyberbullying. In addition, 52.3% and 43.6% are of the view that having too many friends or followers online and constantly being online respectively gives rise to cyber bullying.
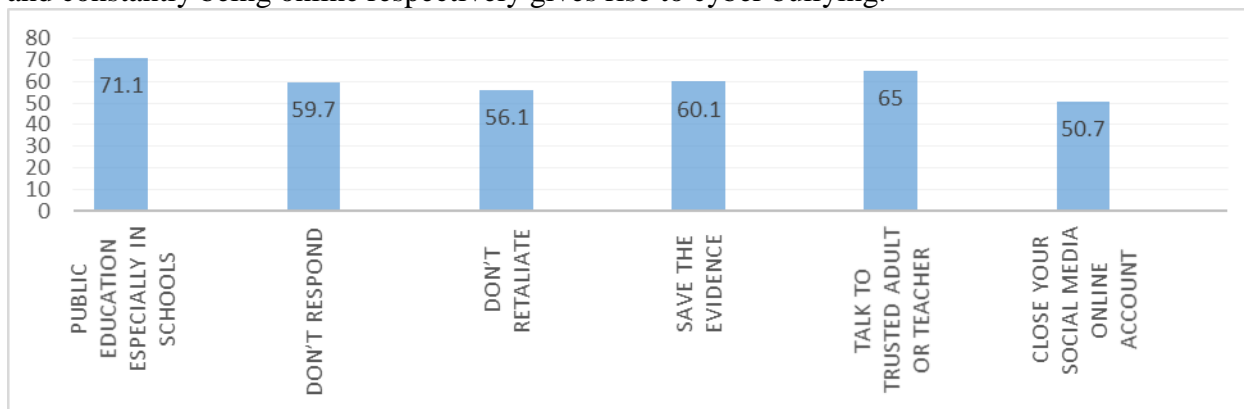

Figure 3: Ways to Control Cyberbullying

Figure 3 shows that ranking from the highest to the least, respondents view public education in schools as the most effective way of controlling cyber bullying representing 71.7%, followed by talking to trusted adult or teacher representing 65%, saving the evidence (60.1%), not responding to cyber bullies (59.7%), not retaliating to cyber bullying (59.7%), and finally closing social media account (50.7%).

CONCLUSION
The results above indicate that most of the adolescents access the internet at home predominantly using mobile phones. This implies that if parents ensure effective monitoring of their children's use of mobile phones at home and guide them, it could reduce the prevalence of cyber bullying among these young ones. The results of this research also support the fact that schools are disadvantaged in the prevention of the spread of cyber bullying through monitoring and prevention as shown above that a minority of 4.9% of adolescents access the internet at the school's computer laboratory. The effective way schools can curb cyber bullying is by constantly creating the awareness of the rules and regulation guiding the use of the internet through public education and providing damage control through counselling and internet safety training sessions.

In addition, a majority of the adolescents use the internet to chat with friends on social networking sites. It can be deduced therefore that majority of cyber bullying occurs on social networking sites as opposed to email, SMS, phone calls or chat rooms. Fraping and harassment were the major forms of cyber bullying these adolescents had experienced before. This means that young ones should be careful who they accept as friends on social networking sites since some pose as harmless yet are sexual predators with the intent of sexually harassing these young ones. Again, it is recommended that adolescents have strong passwords and keep them safe from exposure to avoid unauthorised access into their accounts while offline. Sensitive information should not be posted online to the public to reduce attacks by cyber bullies.

The results also clearly depicted that more than half of the adolescents have never experienced cyber bullying before. This is quite encouraging but there will be a need for awareness so that those who have no idea of what cyber bullying is will be on the lookout and prevent it.

Concerning the effect cyber bullying has on the adolescents, the response indicated that change in mood, fearful, closing down social media account, recording poor grades and stopping the use of computers and internet rated high. Therefore, parents and teachers should be quick to identify these signs and assist young ones accordingly.

Technology experts should be much concerned because the long-term effect on these adolescents is that many will lose interest in using ICT especially for learning.

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