

Tech That, Bully!

Defeating Cyberbullying With Its Own Weapons

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INTRODUCTION

As technology grows, human progression flourishes. Unfortunately, related issues also increase. One of the most worrying and alarming side effect of technology is cyberbullying.

If traditional bullying can be somehow associated with an ancient and instinctual desire to compete with others for survival (Donagan, 2012), cyberbullying is more difficult to frame. Even though both phenomena are a peculiar way for perpetrators to show their superiority, cyberbullying goes further: perpetrators are not just meant to overcome the opponents, their purpose is to psychologically annihilate them.

As Donagan (2012) reports, unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying allows the offender to mask his or her identity behind a computer. Being anonymous allows perpetrators to hurl abuses and offenses at victims without having to assist to their victim's physical reaction. This "distancing effect" leads offenders to do or say things they probably would have never said or done in presence.

Nowadays, psychology is aware that the increasing diffusion of technology (Fairburn and Patel, 2016) represents a great challenge: researchers with different backgrounds must cooperate to create a virtuous exchange "man-machine". It is fundamental that the foundations of this interaction must be solid and built following specific knowledge to make technologies useful for the human cognitive progress and for people's security (Gamberini, Chittaro, & Paternò, 2012).

BACKGROUND

Cyberbullying is defined by Bauman, Underwood and Card (2013) as an extension of traditional bullying that involves the typical behaviors of bullying perpetrated through the use of various technologies, electronic devices in particular (e-mail, instant messaging applications, social media etc.).

Another valuable definition is provided by Belsey (2004). Belsey (2004) defines cyberbullying as a form of violence that “involves the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging (IM), defamatory personal Websites, and defamatory online personal polling websites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others”.

Nowadays, cyberbullying is inducing significant socio-cultural problems and psychological disorders, which requires a rapid solution. In recent years, cyberbullying has grown and now it is getting plenty of attention due to the increasingly massive use of digital devices. According to Tokunaga (2010), 97% of young Americans are connected through the Internet, while 20-40% of young people have been victim of online bullying harassment at least once in their lifetime.

Kowalski (2014) argues that cyberbullying entails relevant psychopathological risks: victims report increased depressive symptoms (Jung et al., 2014) and social anxiety; perpetrators are more likely to show aggressive behavior, due to their lack of emotional self-regulation (Kowalski, Limber & McCord, 2018). This unconventional form of bullying towards peers is also linked to suicidal attempt among adolescents (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006). Indeed, some researches showed that certain psychological factors are crucial predictors for both being a cyberbully or a victim. As Alim (2016) reports, low self-esteem is linked to a lack of confidence in one's ability and therefore it is quite easy for a cyberbully to leverage on this to afflict the victim; depression and suicidal ideation are side effects of being a designated victim (Alim, 2016). Cyberbullying not only implies high risks for teen-agers' health (Nixon, 2014), but also substantial economic costs for the families of victims for cleaning up their children online reputation of: legal fees, safety measures, psychological counseling, public relation assistance. In a Reuters post, Amy Tannery (2016) reports that a new insurance policy has been also developed in the United States in order to mitigate the financial cyberbullying consequences.

Before deepening cyberbullying, the differences between bullying and cyberbullying will be object of discussion in order to delineate an accurate overview of the phenomenon.

TRADITIONAL BULLYING VS. CYBERBULLYING

Risks connected to cyberbullying are as damaging as those of traditional bullying. When speaking of virtual environments, the main difference is that bullies can count on further protection factors such as anonymity. As a matter of fact, the possibility of hiding personal identity triggers a *disinhibition effect* leading some kids to say things that typically they would have never said face to face (Suler, 2004). However, some research found that at least 40–50% of cyber victims know the identity of the perpetrator (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007).

Some people could probably say that the use of technology as a mean of oppression is the only relevant difference between cyberbullying and traditional bullying. Indeed, much has already been written on this topic. This may not be the right place to deepen it, yet a quick *excursus* can help the reader to frame and contextualize the main aspects that make cyberbullying so destructive and blasting.

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