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Third party observers witnessing cyber bullying on social media sites

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Abstract

Cyber bullying is when individuals or groups use online communication devices to intentional and repeatedly engage in hostile behaviours online, intended to hurt and harm others (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippett, 2006). Cyber bullying on social networking sites (e.g., Myspace, Facebook, Google Plus, Twitter, Weibo, Instant Messaging, Micro-blogging websites) goes beyond boundaries of time and space. This fact alone distinguish cyber bullying from more traditional forms of bullying. A high percentage of cyber bullying goes unreported by cyber victims or third party observers. Whilst findings indicate that one quarter of cyber bullying occurs in the presence of third party observers (Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010), the number of third party observers is unlimited (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). In an attempt to reduce cyber bullying and to increase help seeking behaviours of third party observers, this study reported undergraduate students' perspectives of third party observers witnessing cyber bullying on social media sites. This study forms part of a larger study examining undergraduate students' perspectives of cyber bullying on social media sites.

In recent years electronic and computer based communication and information sharing has become a prominent part of our daily lives; some would say it has the potential to take over our lives. Many individuals view electronic communication tools as 'critical tools for their social life' (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008). While most online interactions are neutral or considered positive or neutral, one negative consequence of this evolving method of digital communication is cyber bullying (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2003; Tokunaga, 2010).

Cyber bullying has many definition variations, all with the one constant – it is carried out through the medium of electronic communication devices including email, text messages, instant messaging, mobile phone and, and social networking websites. Traditional forms of bullying have some characteristics associated with cyber bullying. Behaviours, either direct or indirect are used to threaten, reject, exclude and isolate others. Whilst cyber bullying and traditional bullying have similarities, there is one distinction: cyber space is the platform, and e-technology the medium providing opportunities for bullying to occur.

When comparing the research definitions of third party observer in real space and cyber space, there are many similarities (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Third party observers are bystanders witnessing the consequences of bullying behaviours. They may be known or unknown to the bully and victim. They may be proactive or passive in their witnessing behaviour, intervening and defending the victim, affirming the bullying, or remaining silent. If third party observers choose to they have the opportunity to escalate the event from one witnessed by 20 people to one

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circulated online, witnessed by 2 million people. Cyber bullying therefore has the potential to be almost unstoppable and is often irretrievable (Ozdamli, Hursen, & Ercag, 2011).

Whilst possible number of third party observers are unlimited (Kowalski & Limber, 2007), there is research indicating that one quarter of cyber bullying behavous occurs in the presence of third party observers (Mishna et al., 2010). Evidence suggests that at least 40%-50% of cyber victims know the identity of the bullies (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). When the identities of the cyber bullies are unknown, the sense of powerlessness associated cyber bullying can escalate significantly (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

Research indicates that 85% of teenagers and children who are cyber victims are also victims of traditional bullying (Juvoven & Gross, 2008). In some instances, the real life bullies are also the cyber bullies (Ybarra & Michell, 2007), targeting the victim on an ongoing basis, 24/7. This adds a level of urgency to addressing the impact of cyber bullying.

An analysis of research by Mishna et al.(2009) indicates that victims often find out the identity of cyber bullies from third party observers, even though this may not be till a later date. This being the case, cyber bullying is placed within the context of a social relationship, witnessed by invisible online third party observers. By placing the third party observer into the cyber bullying equation, this finding contradicts other literature maintaining cyber bullying is an anonymous behaviour. It does however correspond with the enactment of traditional bullying behaviour occurring in the presence of third party observers, and the pivotal role witnesses play in reducing or stopping this behaviour (Carter, 2009). The difference being, in the cyber world third party observers are invisible witnesses, compared with the real world, where they are visible witnesses.

Restricting access to online personal profiles, limiting the amount of personal information disclosed online, instigating stricter privacy settings, and changing user-name and or email addresses on a frequent basis, has been named in the literature as systematic ways of circumventing exposure to cyber bullying (Bryce & Klang, 2009). These researchers further suggest that whilst victims acknowledge the risks of poor online security they continue not to protect themselves online. From the child and teenager perspective, internet access is perceived as more important than protecting personal rights (Agatston et al., 2007).

Patchin and Hinduja (2006) recommend that victim take an assertive stance, confronting the cyber bully telling them to 'stop' (Aricak et al., 2008). The third party observer may play a role in coaching victims in confronting bullies and / or reporting bullying events. Threatening bullies that they will be reported if they continue bullying is mentioned as a way of frightening the bullies into stopping their behaviours.

Children and teenagers who are victims of cyber bullying, consult friends and peers for social support and directions about what to do, and this support can be invaluable in discharging some of the di-stress associated with bullying (Slonje & Smith, 2007; Williams & Guerra, 2007). This peer support may or may not be third party observers and is needed not only for victims but for bullies.

Counselling is identified as a proactive strategy for victims and bullies (Ybarra, 2004). No mention is made of counselling third party observers in empowering them to support bullies and victims in respectful online dialogue. The counselling approaches, theories and frameworks as well as location – real space or cyber space – and cultural inclusiveness of the counselling requires investigation.

Mechanisms for reporting traditional bullying are often outlined in school, community, and work based policies and the accompanying procedures are a reflection of vision and mission statements endorsing safe spaces and places for all. Within the workplace, bullying is most frequently addressed under Human Relations Grievance and / or Harassment policies. Different jurisdictions and roles in schools and organizations (e.g, Equity officer; School

counsellor) lead the implementation and management of bullying policies and procedures – including the process to follow when reporting bullying events. The systems and process for reporting cyber bullying appear less clear cut. As Tokunga (2010) notes: 'There is no clear individual or groups who serve to regulate deviant behaviours on the internet' (p. 3).

Method

Research Questions

This study forms part of a larger study examining undergraduate students' perspectives of cyber bullying on social media sites. This paper reports participant's perspectives' of the role of third party observers witnessing cyber bullying on social media sites. The research question examined in this study is:

Do third party observers have a role to play when witnessing cyber bullying on social media sites?

Subjects

Of the 259 participants who registered for the online self report measure, 254 had a sufficient completion rate to be retained for further analysis. Only a few questions were programmed to be obligatory, so many participants reached the final page without answering all of the questions. Participants were recruited to complete the anonymous online self report measure via the university Facebook page, student email accounts, and advertisements placed on campus. Incentives for completing the self report measure included an IPad, valued at S\$550 and 10 x \$10 Starbuck vouchers.

Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the University's human research ethics committee prior to conducting the study. Participants anonymously completed a 2 part online self report measure: Part 1 was based on an extensive literature review of cyber bullying; Part 2 on an adaption of the cyber victim and bullying scale developed by Cetlin, Yaman, and Peker (2011). The third party observer perspective was added to this scale. The self report measure was pilot tested for format, clarity, length, and ease of administration. The self report measure remained live for four weeks. On average the self report measure took 35 minutes to complete.

Measures

Open ended questions were included in the s to add to the researchers understanding of cyber bullying. Definitions, motivations, experiences with, support systems were anecdotally recorded, generically and specifically from multiple perspectives – bully, victim, third party observer. The self report item pool totalled 75 items, with 22 items from the adapted cyber victim and bullying scale developed by Cetlin et al. (2011). The 22 items were divided into three spheres, according to the writings of Cetlin et al. (2011): verbal bullying, identity theft, and forgery: verbal bullying (questions 1-7), identity theft (questions 8-12) and forgery (questions13-22) (Table 1). Participants responded to the frequency they instigated bullying (bully), they were victimized by (victim), and they observed (third party observer) the forms of cyber bullying behaviours. Participants' anecdotal comments gave credence to these modalities of cyber bullying behaviours (Appendix A).

The measure included items on demographics, technology use, frequency and experiences with cyber bullying from the perspective of bully, victim, and third party observer. Participants rated statements on different Likert scales, the grading for these scales including: never - always; once- not applicable; no access- considerable access.

Data Analysis

A grounded theory methodology was considered the most 'constructivist' method to analyse the actual field data, allowing the perspective of participants' to emerge as central themes (or categories) (Charmaz, 2006). It was chosen to explain participants' perceptions of cyber bullying on social media sites. The writing of the narrative story, based on participants' own words, is a subjective description of their insights and experiences. Conclusions therefore are suggestive rather than decisive. The grounded theory in this study reflects participants' perspectives. The *Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (r)* was performed to calculate the type (either positive or negative) and the strength of the demographic relationships with cyber bullying behaviours. A standard convention level of *Probability (p)* < .05 was used for evaluating statistical significance with a confidence level 95%. SPSS 16 was used for statistical calculations.

Results

There were 47.9% females and 52.1% males participants. Age span ranged from under 20 (22.7%); 20-29 (74.8%); 30-39 (2.5%); 40-49 (.4%). Most participants had considerable access to social media sites compared to those with limited or no access (Figure 1). Participants varied in the hours per day they access social media sites, ranging from one to over three hours (Figure 2). Participants' membership of social media sites ranged from 6 months to over three years (Figure 3).
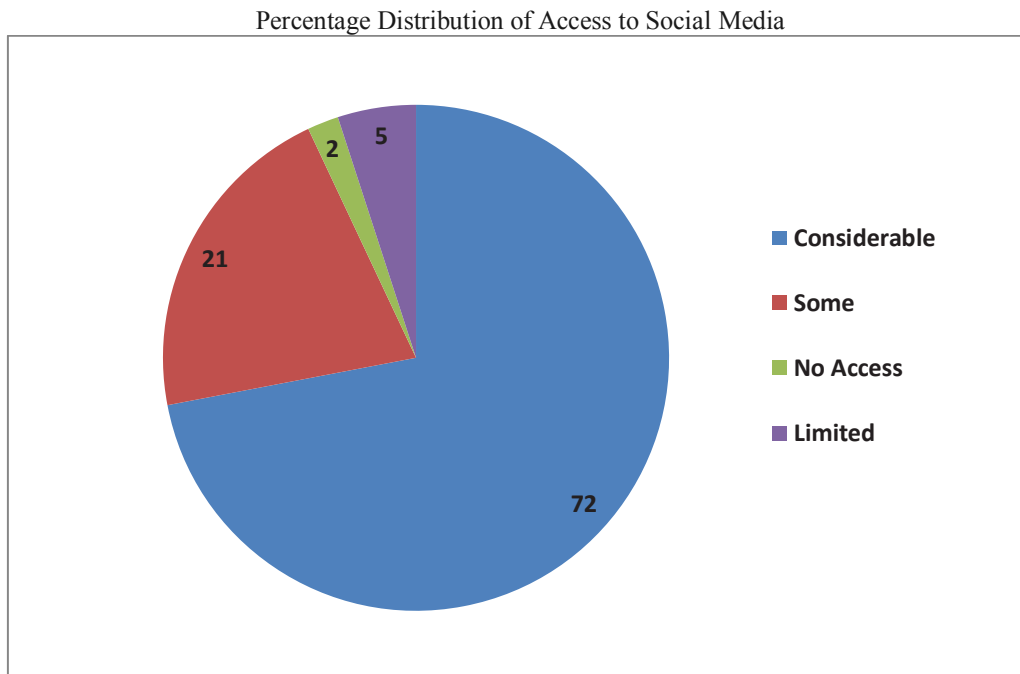

Figure 1 Descriptive Statistics - Percentage distribution of participant's reported access to social media
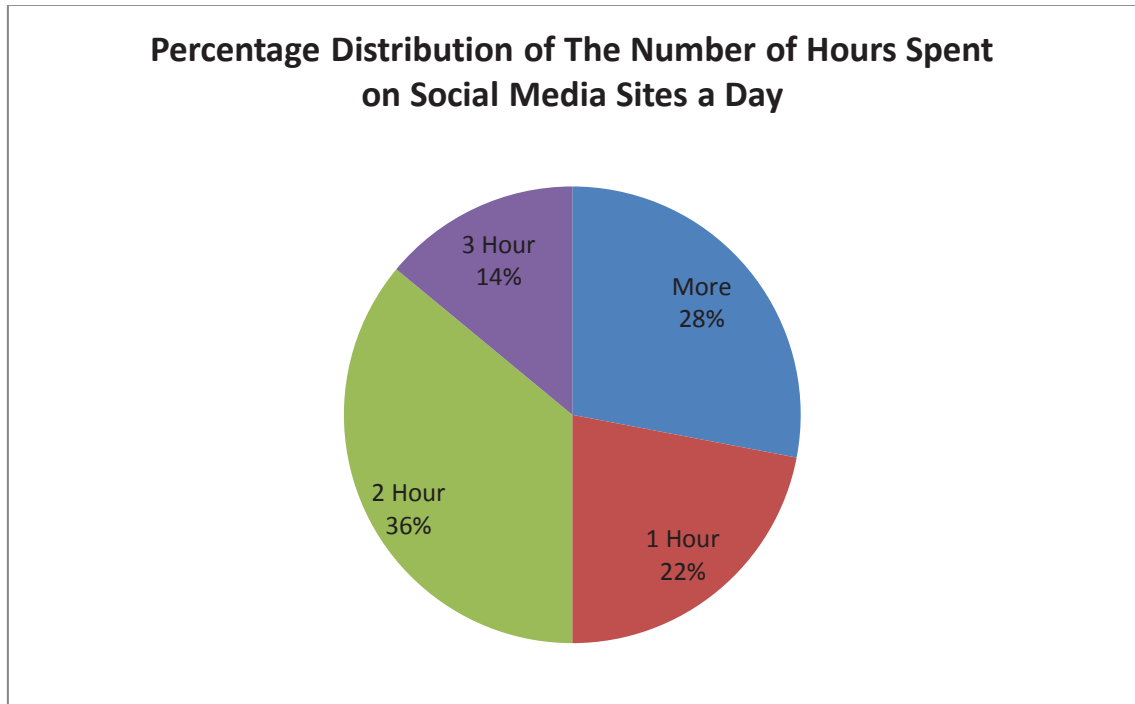
Percentage Distribution of The Number of Hours Spent on Social Media Sites a Day

- More 28%
- 1 Hour 22%
- 2 Hour 36%
- 3 Hour 14%

Figure 2 Descriptive Statistics - Percentage distribution of participant's reported hours spent on social media sites

Percentage Distribution of The Number of Years Accessing Social Media Sites

- 6 Months 1%
- 3 Years 18%
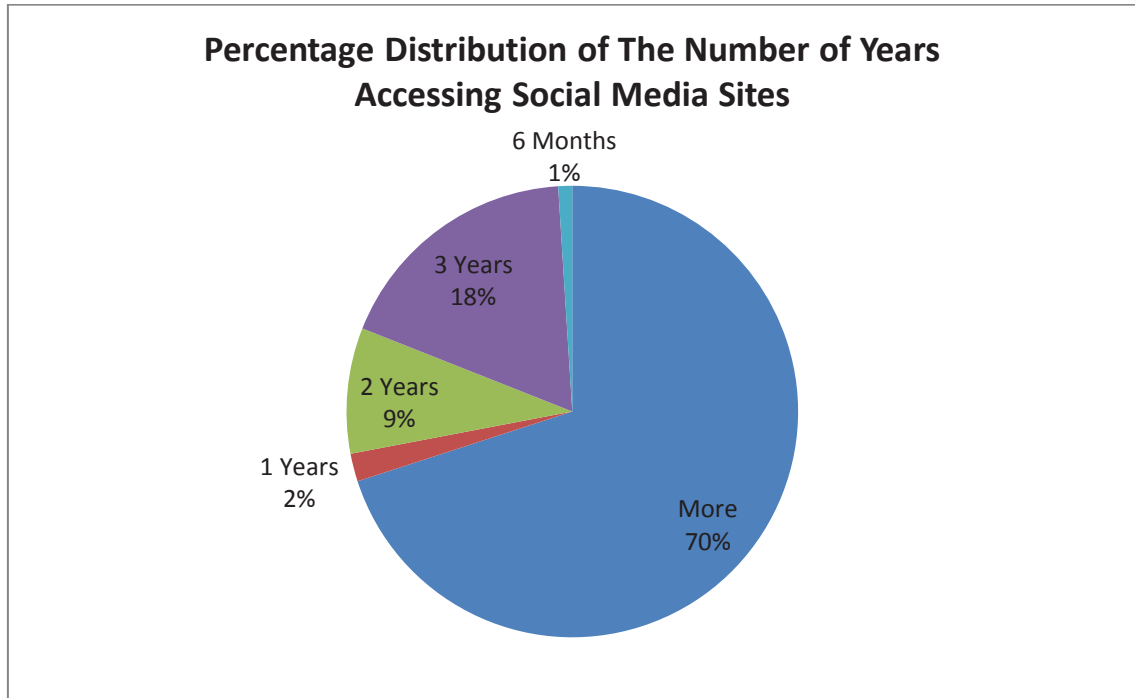- 2 Years 9%
- 1 Years 2%
- More 70%

Figure 3 Descriptive Statistics - Percentage distribution of participant's reported years accessing social media sites
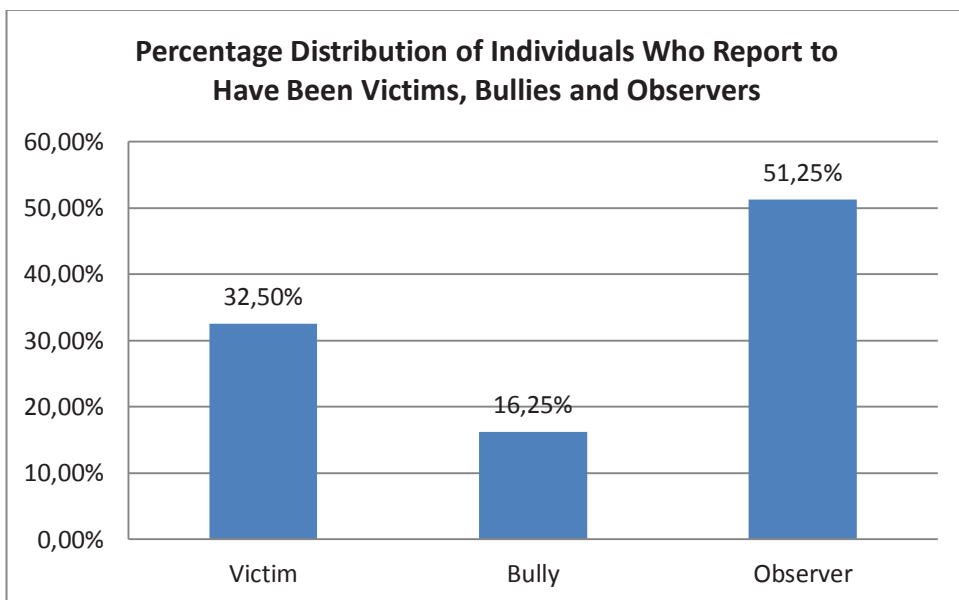
There was no significant correlation between access to social media and reported victimization and observation. Only bullying had a significant correlation: r= -.19, p <.05. The more access individuals have to social media sites, the less likely they are to bully. No significant correlation was reported between the numbers of hours spent on social media sites and reported victimization, bullying and third party observer behaviours. No significant correlation was reported between the number of years spent on social media sites and reported cyber bullying, victimization, and observation. The correlations for age show that the bully and observer groups were significant: bully - r= 18, p <.05; observer - r= 18, p <.05. As participants increased in age the less likely they reported being a bully or a third party observer (Table 1).

Table 1. *Summary of correlations between the reported victim, bully and observer based on demographic information's*

		Age	Gender	Access	Hours Spent	Years Accessing
Total Victim	r	-.13	-.17	-.11	-.06	-.09
	Sig. (2-tail)	.16	.07	.25	.54	.34
Total Bully	r	-.19*	-.18*	-.19	-.11	-.10
	Sig. (2-tail)	.04	.05	.04*	.24	.28
Total Observer	r	-.19*	-.052	.07	.03	-.09
	Sig. (2-tail)	.03	.56	.46	.77	.30

*Correlation is Significant at the .05 Level (Two Tailed)

More third party observers reported witnessing cyber bullying compared with those who reported instigating the bullying and those victimized by the bullying (Figure 4a). Findings further indicated that more participants knew someone who was a cyber victim, compared with observing and instigating cyber bullying (Figure 4b).
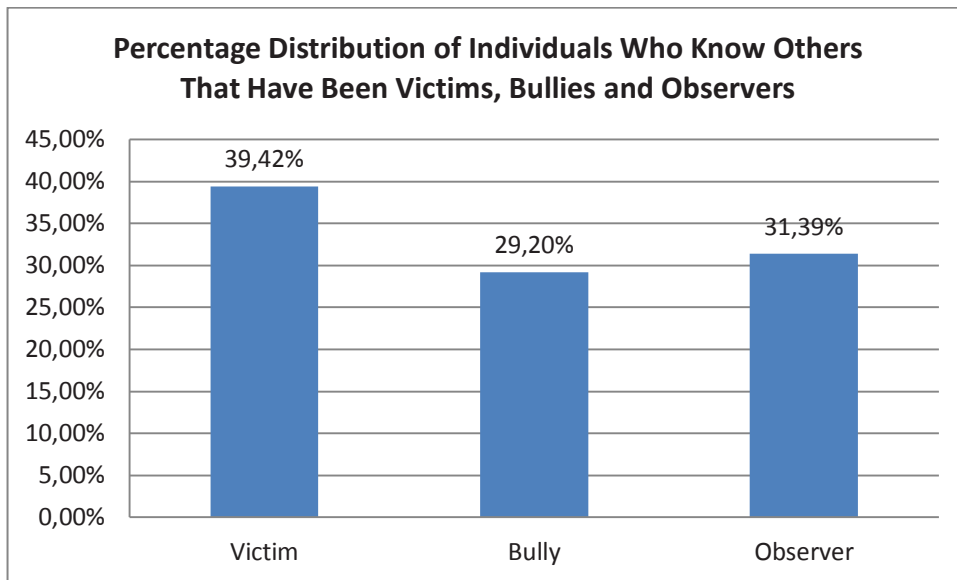

Percentage Distribution of Individuals Who Report to Have Been Victims, Bullies and Observers

Percentage Distribution of Individuals Who Know Others That Have Been Victims, Bullies and Observers

Figure 4. Comparison between participants who report being a bully, victim or observer and participants who know others who have been a bully, victim or observer
Figure 4a. Descriptive Statistics – Percentage of participants who report to have been a bully, victim or observer
Figure 4b. Descriptive Statistics – Percentage of participants who report to have known others who have been a bully, victim or observer.

Facebook was reported as the most utilized social media site compared with other sites. Facebook reported the highest rate for cyber bullying. A significant correlation for the use of Facebook and reported bullying was reported, but no significant correlation for the other social media site and reported bullying.

When comparing the means of the three groups based on the defined groups from the Celtin et al. (2011) scale, observers showed highest observed means, followed by victims and then bullies. There was no significant difference in terms of reported bullying, victim and observer behaviour in comparison to the hours spent on the internet; the years spent surfing the internet; and access to the internet.

The role of third party observers was emphasized as a justifiable medium of support for bullies and victims. This role was identified more as a proactive and a protective factor, rather than as a neutral agent:

People who observe cyber bullying must take an active role in showing the bully that bullying is not acceptable online ... Have people who spot cyber bullying online and refer them for counseling. (Participants)

Have third party observers who spot cyber bullying encourage the victims to tell ... Help the victim to block such messages and threats; Encourage them to be less affected by the bullying, and to stand up for their rights as a social media consumer; Provide them confidential and yet, accessible methods to turn to for help - for example, anonymous chat line or sms service ... Tell the victims to ignore the threat if it occurs only once or twice; however, if the threat seems serious and occurs more than twice, it must be reported to the police. (Participants)

Criticize acts of bullying on the internet and know the consequences of cyber bullying, so that they are able to tell the bully that it is wrong ... Increasing awareness about the actions leading to cyber bullying, and the help available for victims, and who to approach when encountering cyber bullying. (Participants)

The third party observer was perceived as monitor of cyber safety and reporter of cyber bullying. The question asked repeatedly by participants was to whom do third party observers make these reports, where, how, and when, in a way that ensures they remain safe online:

The third party observer should actively seek to help the victim ... Stop the cyber bully if possible or get help in stopping the cyber bully immediately; They should report the bully to the site so that the bully no longer will be allowed to use the site ... Inform someone of a higher authority or with the power to assist ... We should be aware where to complaint if we see something happens; They might be the only one who could help the victims because the victim would usually not to tell anyone about their problem, so an observer could play a huge part in helping them ... Do not just watch, they need to stop this behaviour ... A third party observer should be a good citizen and should try to do every possible steps he can do to stop cyber bullying attacks on the internet.(Participants)

Participants repeatedly commented that internet service providers had a responsibility for online safety. Third party observers could be the link between the internet service providers and the victims and bullies, reporting the event themselves or encouraging the victims to report the bullying:

Social media sites themselves may need to impose more stringent terms of use, and monitor posts made by users in order to remove/weed out bullies from social media sites ... Have social media watchdogs to look out for cyber bullying, especially towards young people ... Give warnings for those who engage in cyber bullying, fine those who give cyber bully continuously ... Social media sites should be able to alert, identify and track down any form of cyber bullying happening and ban the person immediately ... Report and (service provider) block the ID of cyber bully ... Delete all information from such abuse or ban the user. (Participants)

Have a link or page on the social media site for third party observers to denounce the cyber bullies ... Upgrading security system, use weird password, changing password regularly ... Step up on privacy measures for the victim to determine who can access their social media sites .... (Participants)

Educating victims and bullies in the responsible use of e-technology and internet safety and security were recognized as action for third party observers to pursue:

Third party observers could instruct the people to never give out their passwords (not even to friends). Tell them how to block cyber bullies on social networking sites ... Victims should be aware enough that they are using the social media sites in a proper manner and are communicating with only those persons whom they know properly and personally ... It is very necessary to lock all your personal information's (full names, mobile phone numbers, e-mail addresses, photos) on your social networks. (Participants)

Many participants maintained bullies remain disconnected from and are oblivious to the impact of their behaviours on their cyber victims. This mindset contributes to the mistaken assumptions that no harm has resulted from cyber bullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Media campaigns raising and increasing the awareness in the community of cyber bullying – definitions, impact, consequences – was therefore identified by participants as a possible course of action that third party observers could lead, advocate for, and endorse:

Provide banner campaign, that a government unit is watching over social media's ... Showing the fines which can apply for cyber bullying ... Increase their social awareness of alternative venues in which they can properly

vent their frustration … Create awareness about the consequences of cyber bullying as a result of the bully's action … Create awareness of coping mechanisms. (Participants)

Information available on the government websites … Increasing public awareness about actions which are deemed as cyber bullying … Develop public awareness … Set a campaign to stop the cyber bully showing possibilities how to report the bullying … Increasing awareness about any help available for bullies, victims and observers. (Participants)

Law enforcement and punitive interventions were identified as a logical consequence for and response to cyber bullying. Whilst third party observers could highlight these consequences as part of their role in curbing cyber bullying, action needs to occur at a system policy level.

Announcing law penalties … Legislative restrictions … Government should create law and policy to reduce cyber bullying. For example, police and mobile companies should connect to each other to help customers find the bully … The government should set up a special Information technology department to tackle and observe the social media. (Participants)

Prosecute through the social website itself, and have the bully account closed … Government to have online watchdog … Government should create law and policy to reduce cyber bullying. For example, police and mobile companies should connect to each other to help customers find the bully. (Participants)

Support, including formal counseling and informal pastoral care, was nominated as a course of action observers could direct bullies and victims to. Sharing their bullying experience with others, formally and informally, was repeatedly reported as a valid mechanism of support for bullies, victims, and observers:

Give them counseling … Professional help must be given … Court--ordered counselling for the bully and family. (Participants)
Third party observers might be the only one who could help the victims because the victim would usually not to tell anyone about their problem, so an observer could play a huge part in helping them. (Participants)

<u>Discussion</u>

The recent phenomenon of adult cyber bullying has emerged with the '*popularization of the internet'*. Conceding that virtual communities, in particular social media sites, are becoming a predominant forum for adults to communicate with one another, there is a dearth of research surrounding the role of third party observers witnessing cyber bullying on these sites. Much attention has concentrated on cyber bullying in schools. There are limited studies specific to adults' perceptions of and experiences with cyber bullying. This study examined the role of third party observers witnessing cyber bullying on social media sites.

The most popular social media site reported by participants in this study was Facebook. Facebook was also the site where the most bullying behaviour was reported. As Facebook usage is higher than other social media sites, it would be expected that bullying rates are higher on this site compared with other sites. Facebook, like other social networking sites, has a Report Abuse page with instructions on reporting inappropriate content including cyber bullying. How aware victims and observers are of this report button or how prepared they are to activate it is questionable, warranting further investigation. Notifying users as they log on to the computer, to be alert to the impact of cyber bullying, could work in conjunction with the 'report abuse' button.

As participants' increased in age, the likelihood of reported bullying and third party observer reports of cyber

bullying decreased. Caution is required when interpreting this finding as the number of participants in each age group was significantly different with a large number of participants concentrated within the 20-29 year range. It would be timely to investigate the prevalence rate of cyber bullying with a larger participant pool of older adults (30 – 60 years of age).

The more access participants had to social media sites, the less likely they were victims, engaged in or observed cyber bullying. The social media activities individuals pursue when on social media sites require further investigation. What specific things do adults do when on social media sites e.g., watch video clips, write blogs, update their profile, listening to music)? Does this vary with culture, age and gender? Are individuals so engrossed with their social media activities they see cyber bullying as a distraction and as a consequence choose not to engage as bully, victim or observer? Does academic engagement on social media sites deter cyber bullying behaviours? Are individuals who persist with social media activities, more resilient in responding to or ignoring cyber bullying? Do cyber bullies target victims at certain time intervals – the longer bullies are on the Internet, the less they choose cyber bullying?

Many participants stated that individuals choose to engage in online bullying because of a mistaken belief that they are anonymous, are undetected and can not be identified. There was also a perception that the cyber world frees bullies from traditional social, moral and ethical protocols, as well as real world consequences. This finding is supported in the work of Hinduja and Patchin (2008). Third party observers intervening in the bullying event immediately elevates the anonymous platform of the bullies.

> *They may feel that they are more protected as they don't have to stand face to face with the person they are bullying ... They may think that it is not serious problem threatening someone over the internet (especially social media) ... They cannot be seen so they can remain anonymous doing whatever they like ... The anonymity affords them some ease to express themselves in a way they cannot do so in real life ... Allows the bullying to be impersonal thus allowing the bully to feel reduced ethical responsibility ... It is easy to avoid being punished by law ... With cyber bullying a bully can pick on people with much less risk of being caught. (Participants)*

In relation to the revised scale of Cetlin et al. (2011), victims, bullies and observers reported greater verbal bullying followed by identity theft and then fraud. Analysing the responses of the third party observers in this scale highlighted a higher frequency of observers witnessing cyber bullying compared with victims and bullies reporting it. Further investigation is required to confirm this finding as it is based on descriptive observations and is inconclusive.

Participants repeatedly maintained that third party observers had a positive role to play in breaking the cycle of cyber bullying.

> *The bully should in some way be stopped. However most people choose to stay put of situations like these because they believe it will sort itself out. However they are unaware of the consequences of not intervening ... Third party observers might be the only one who could help the victims because the victim would usually not to tell anyone about their problem, so an observer could play a huge part in helping them. (Participants)*

Participants recommended third party observers reporting cyber bullying to online law enforcement officials and government regulatory bodies as legitimate courses of action. How willing government authorities are in taking these reports seriously and acting on them immediately was open to debate. Examining the effect of civil litigation against bullies may be a pathway worth exploring. Unless government policy dictates cyber bullying as an offence it is unrealistic to expect a proactive response to bullying complaints.

> *Report the case to the police. Seek advice from various government departments. The government should create law and policy to reduce cyber bullying. The government should set up a special information technology department to tackle, monitor and observe the social media. (Participants)*

Being a third party observer was viewed more in the role of defender of internet safety rather than encourager and supporter of bullying. Educating and empowering third party observers to take a stand and be proactive in providing assistance to victims and report bullying events was suggested. This is an area requiring further study. Where and to who to report was open to interpretation.

> *Third party observers should be able to flag bullies anonymously … Alert any support group … Do not just watch … report bully ASAP … Call 999 … They should report the bully to the site so that the bully no longer will be allowed to use the site. (Participants)*

> *Giving mental supports for the victim to get through the embarrassment; Recognizing and addressing the solution early by approaching either bully or victim and approaching external sources … The third party observer should actively seek to help the victim … Give them (bullies) advice to stop their bad attitude … Approach for constructive discussion to hopefully settle issue(s) in an amicable way. If that fails, seek advice and submit to the relevant authorities on the matter. (Participants)*

Counselling support for cyber bullies, victims, and witnesses was recommended by participants. This support would be directed at building capacity to regulate social and emotional behaviours, respecting and honouring diversity, in conjunction with empathy training, social problem solving, conflict negotiation and resolution.

> *Victim should also tell someone, and not just deal with the bullying by them self. Someone should be aware of what they are going through not to only to help them but to prevent it from occurring again. (Participants)*

Participants recommended having a 27/7 contactable hotline for reporting cyber bullying– accessible to third party observers and victims.

> *You witness the theft … then you call 999. You witness cyber bullying then call? Show me the number please … Counselling hotline for cyber bullying … Seek help from the hotline where is available around the world … Try online chat groups to disclose problems if talking to someone is hard. (Participants)*

> *Maybe 24h online controllers that can immediately assist the victim on the occurring problem may be helpful. The victim, once recognizing the danger, must be able to communicate with a human being, not a machine. (Participants)*

Participants proposed linking in with friends for support, acknowledging that there may be complications as the cyber bully may be a 'friend' or the bullying event has marginalized them from their friends. The third party observer may have a role to play here, either as the support person or as the person alerting victims and bullies to this avenue of support.

> *Approach friends, and family if needed to help counsel and restore the victim gently … Be brave and do not afraid of seeking help from friends or family … Try to get some help from others if u get bullied, and try to defend yourself … Complaint or talk to your near and dear ones … Talking to your family, friends or other people that you know well … (Participants)*

Media awareness campaigns promoting safe behaviour online were repeatedly suggested by participants. Websites with online forums that educate adults about cyber bullying, including what it is, the impact, and where to

seek help was identified. Highlighting the role of observers in curbing cyber bullying was seen as central in these campaigns. Many social media sites have a function that enables the user to 'block' others so they cannot view personal profiles or read messages. Promoting this function in cyber safety media campaigns is a further way of increasing security and potentially decreasing exposure to cyber bullying.

> *Increasing public awareness about actions which are deemed as cyber bullying; Show them videos of the consequences they might face and show them what victims may go through from their bullying ... Show ads to remind third party observer to not turn a blind eye on cyber bullying. Create awareness of coping mechanisms. (Participants)*

Education specific to the ethical use of computer usage and online security and safety, including privacy violations, limiting and shielding the amount of personal information shared online, was named as a preventative measure to addressing cyber bullying on social media sites. This finding echoes that of Hinduja and Patchin (2009); Patchin and Hinduja (2009); Patchin and Hinduja (2010).

Limitations and Future Work

Research on the perspective of adults witnessing cyber bullying on social media sites is in its infancy. Findings from this study have contributed to this research, in particular the role of third party observers witnessing bullying on social media sites.

Limitations associated with this study include the web based format and the anonymous self report measure. As Camodeca and Goossens (2005) argued some participants may have misreported or misperceived disrespectful comments said in jest with no intention to bully, but to be amusing. Some participants may inaccurately perceive their status, not acknowledging or realizing their actions are in the realm of bully, victim, third party observer. Others may be unclear as to what constitutes cyber bullying behaviours and respond accordingly. Consequently they may underreport or over report bullying events (Raskauskas & Stolz, 2007). Bias may exist in the sample with cyber victims and third party observers being more likely to participate in the study, resulting in inflated findings.

Participants may have completed the self report measure through a multi-perspective lens – bully, victim, and third party observer. This fact and the participant sample may limit the ability to generalize the findings. It would be beneficial to replicate this study with other between group adult populations. Expanding the qualitative data collection instrument beyond the self report measure to include open-ended interviews, and quantifying qualitative data (numbers and text) would add rigor and persuasiveness to the findings.

Further examining the role of the adult third party observer in cyber bullying is advisable - are they defenders of internet safety or promoters of bullying behaviours? Findings would add value to a dearth of research in this area. Longitudinal data is crucial to examining the impact of third party observers' curbing adult – adult cyber bullying. Most research and resources are directed at school age children and not the adult population. Strategies proposed in this study require longitudinal empirical testing to identify their effectiveness in reducing cyber bullying on social media sites.

Privacy settings for social media sites give users control and choice over who has access to their sites. People accepted as virtual 'friends', automatically have access to personal information disclosed on profile pages. Giving only friends known to the user in real space, access to their personal sites may lower public access which in turn may prevent or reduce the occurrence of cyber bullying by individuals or groups not known personally to the individual. Researching what defines 'friends' and 'strangers' in the cyber world is worthy of attention. Restricting access to real space friends compared with cyber space friends is also valuable research. Further research is fundamental to scrutinize the impact of the users 'friend' status and cyber bullying.

Conclusion

To date, minimal research has been conducted examining adult third party observers witnessing cyber bullying on social media sites. This preliminary study identified the potential role third party observers have in curbing cyber bullying on social media sites. The diversity of their role as recommended in this study requires more detailed exploration thus ensuring they remain safe when intervening, promoting and advocating for respectfully communication online.

Acknowledgement

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