Factors That Influence Mobile Bully-Victim Behaviour on Social Media: The Case of Facebook

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Abstract—Mobile bullying on social networks is a growing problem in South African high schools. Mobile technology is widely used than conventional methods to commit anti-social behaviours today, and our understanding of mobile bullying is still limited. While studies on bullying in general have been conducted, there has been limited focus on one type called bully-victims. The present study examines the factors that influence the behaviour of mobile bully-victims on Facebook in South Africa. Bully-victims are adolescents that swing between being a bully and a victim and are difficult to identify. Research shows that there is rapid growth in suicidal cases which is one of the leading causes of death among adolescents in South Africa. While suicide has not been associated with bully-victims in South Africa, international studies link adolescent suicidal tendencies with bully-victim behaviour. We chose Facebook because it is the most popular and commonly used social network by adolescents. Extensive literature on the potential causes of mobile bully-victim behaviour was reviewed and a conceptual model of the influencing factors developed. This model will assist schools understand the potential causes of bully-victim behaviour and guide the development of appropriate interventions for this form of aggression.

Index Terms—mobile bully-victims, behaviour, Facebook, social networks, influencing factors

I. INTRODUCTION

Bully-victims are not well known in South Africa [1] because most studies have focused on other forms of bullies. Today bullies use electronic devices such as computers, mobile phones and social network platforms to continuously bully their victims, which are termed cyber bullying [2]. The emergence of technology has introduced new ways young people use to communicate and bully their peers [3]. Facebook is one of the most popular social network used in the world with over 500 million registered users [4], [5]. Bully-victims use Facebook to attack other adolescents, and the influence behind their behaviour is not clearly known.

With limited understanding of mobile bully-victims behaviour in South African high schools, it becomes a challenge to identify adolescents who are at risk on social media like Facebook. In addition, there are limited interventions for managing bully-victim behaviour on social networks in general. The focus tends to be on either victims or bullies but not on those possessing both attributes. Therefore, this paper attempts to fill these gaps by reviewing literature from various disciplines to identify factors which influence mobile bully-victim behaviour. It also develops a model that will guide further investigations into this area.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, we provide some background to social networks and Facebook which shares similar features of a social network in general. We discuss the theoretical work that explains bully-victim behaviour on social networks and identify factors that influence the behaviour on Facebook.

A. Social Networks-Definitions and Theory

Technology has erased the olden platforms of communication. Today social networks are used as platforms for communication. Social networks have various definitions used to explain them. Social networks are defined as connections of socially relevant nodes which may represent an individual, an organisation or a group of people [6]. The social network theory also explains how these nodes interact within a network [7]. The interaction is the relationship between these nodes. The attributes that these nodes regularly share strengthens their ties, such as their location, trust [8], demographics, understanding [8], tacit knowledge, and social capital. An actor’s agency within a network determines the type of resources they receive and when they get them [9]. The value of the ties between these nodes is dependent on the strength of their relationship in the network. The location of a node could determine the ties it would have with other nodes [7].

An Ego is described as a person or a node that is at the centre of the network and who is closely in touch with his associates [10]. The friends that an Ego has also have friends who then become associates with the Ego. As the associates grow bigger, weak ties become unimportant to the Ego but remain an essential bridge between the densely-joined masses of friends [10]. The growth of a network has both positive and negative impacts in a social network [11]. While social networking sites may
be connecting people to their friends, fans and co-workers [11], they also harbour resentment combined alongside peace. A node, which is located at the centre of the network, would have more ties than a node on the outer edge of the network, which could have only one link to the network [7]. As the network grows with more interactions, there is a possibility of random people joining the network [10]. Although social network theory explains how random people meet, the ties between them can be subjective [7].

The sharing of information based on trust strengthens the relationship even outside the social network platforms. The theory also explains that the network grows with more people connecting into it but those who are far from the network receive diluted information [6]. The more people on the network, the less their identity will become a factor and becomes difficult to detect their behaviour. However, it is also important to note that the diluted information received by the people outside the social network group could, in turn, be used to hurt the people inside the network. For instance, when someone leaks the group information, they break the trust built between the members [12].

B. Anonymity

The Social Identity model of De-individualisation Effects (SIDE) is described as the change in behaviour of people when a crowd as opposed to when they are closer to the network or the group [13]. It examines how these individuals hide their identity with the intention to engage in anti-social behaviour in the group. On Facebook, identity presentation is important as the user may choose to display or hide their identity [5]. Researchers have found that Facebook users tend to enhance their profiles by exaggerating or reducing their looks [5]. Also, Facebook itself does not provide a setting that limits a number of accounts a person can create [5], thus, affording an opportunity for adolescents to create as many accounts using different identities [4]. Bullies can, therefore, hide their identity by creating many fake accounts using their victim’s information to be accepted by network groups [4] and eventually attack the victims [14]-[19]. Facebook is however different from other social networks in that, online friendships result from friendships that existed outside the application [5]. Therefore, there is a possibility of victimisation being escalated beyond the platform. Facebook anonymity could also result in the victimisation of the perpetrator.

C. Lack of Social Integration

Social integration is described as the achievement and maintenance of peaceful social relations between participating members in a dialogue for a dynamic and organized process [14]. However, when it comes to bully-victims, they tend to struggle to balance their social life with their peers because they are victimised and may feel rejected. This lack of social integration leads to bullying behavior [15]. Other researchers claim that the insufficiency of social popularity in online and offline situation projects victimisation [15].

As bully-victims try to establish their social status, they dominate their peers through aggressive behaviour. Some studies show that on Facebook, adolescents edit their profiles by adding filters on their pictures and share content to look more attractive and popular [5]. When adolescents have many followers on Facebook, it is easy for them to become arrogant and bully other peers because of their popularity [4].

D. Power

A bully can use various powers against their victim. Power is an important factor in bullying as it distinguishes a perpetrator from a victim. A bully may possess both explicit and implicit powers to build and maintain their status within a group, where explicit power is obtained through forceful actions, by being aggressive towards the victim. Implicit power is described as the power obtained by being a good leader, attractive or having social skills which are admired by other peers. The number of followers is said to affect the identity of the profile of the user [5] especially if they write on the wall of the user On Facebook. When a user gets more wall posts from followers, it is viewed as attractive [5], and attractive users have the power to spread rumours [14], bad pictures [15] or delete posts from unattractive users [4]. Such users randomly block other peers as they prefer more followers even if they do not like them [4], [5]. These aspects reshape the behaviour of a bully-victim to be that of a bully, such that even when an adolescent who appears to be attractive shares negative content, they will get likes and it will be shared on other wall posts [4].

E. Group Culture

Another theory that describes the behaviour on social networks is the theory of Social identity. This theory predicts definite intergroup behaviours based on perceived group culture [16]. This perception includes different statuses, legitimacy, and ability to move within these groups [15]. Groups created can be public or closed on Facebook, which limits the kind or number of people that want to join a group [4]. Some researchers argue that the role of culture on Facebook reflects issues that are impacting on the self-presentation outside Facebook [5]. This improves how adolescents perceive themselves from other peers who are not in the group [17]. This provides a possibility of a closed group being created for adolescents to misbehave without being seen by other peers [5].

About 44% of adolescents who were surveyed in 2012 said that they bully other peers when their friends are all online [18]. For instance, the power of bully-victims is augmented when other marginalized peers join their group. This bond becomes so strong that individual opinions are rejected [6]. To maintain group culture, members of the peer group must agree to what is being said [17]. Additionally, Facebook allow friends to tag each other on posts [5] to share and interact in the same content thereby amplifying bully-victim behaviour [5].

F. Peer-Pressure

Peer pressure is outlined as one of the factors that shape adolescents’ decision-making when they are within the group of their peers [18]. It is described as the persuasion of friends to conform to their behaviour [16]. For instance, bully-victims that befriend other bullies,
they are likely to adopt the bullying behaviour. Peer pressure affects bully-victims even when they are not with other bully-victims [16]. The behaviour learned on Facebook extends even when bully-victims are not online [4]. For instance, the terminology and language used by Facebook users, will not be understood by peers who are not familiar with Facebook [4]. Victims of bullying will distance themselves from peers who are not on Facebook [16].

G. Self-Perception

Self-perception is described as the way people develop attitude by observing their behaviour and determine the kind of attitude that might have caused it [19]. Self-perception allows adolescents to interpret surrounding information according to their understanding. When a person uploads a picture of themselves on Facebook, they expect to get likes and good comments about the picture as it is the nature of Facebook. Facebook allows for self-verification [19] when people share their information about themselves. Self-verification is described as that behaviour where people prefer to be viewed and understood in the same way they see themselves [5]. Facebook allows self-verification [16] when people share their information about themselves. Self-verification is where people prefer to be viewed and understood in the same way they see themselves [20]. When self-perception is biased to one self, it changes how they view things from a positive perspective. It may worsen the behaviour of bullies, more so when they justify it as acceptable. Victimisation may arise from followers who constantly misinterpret another peer’s content.

H. Facebook Usage Frequency

Research studies show that rapid growth of mobile adoption and internet usage has attracted a lot of Internet Service Providers (ISP) to offer more online services. Service providers tend to compete for same customers and offer free services to keep them satisfied [21]. Easy access to these applications increases the usage especially among the adolescents, which escalates the problem of bullying behaviour on Facebook [3], [21]. Excessive usage of Facebook was found to be positively associated with Facebook victimisation [19].

The review of the literature provides some factors that influence bully-victim behaviour on Facebook. A conceptual model is developed in Fig. 1 above, and propositions which can be tested in future studies are made.

I. Propositions

Anonymity improves the prominence of social identity which provides an opportunity for bullies to express what they would not say if their identities were to be revealed [13] and that Facebook allow adolescents to create many accounts using different identities [4]. Therefore, we propose:

1) Proposition 1: Facebook enhances anonymity resulting in bully-victim behaviour

Bully-victims are reluctant when they must interact with peers outside Facebook because of fear of rejection leading to lack of social integration [15]. However, on Facebook, adolescents will edit their profiles by adding filters on their pictures, share content to look more popular [5] and portray themselves as friendly while integrating with other adolescents online. Hence:

2) Proposition 2: Mobile bully-victims will be more popular among their peers and command social resources

Since implicit power is obtained by having skills that peers admire, bullies use this power to control resources and maintain their status on social platforms. When a bully has more followers, and appear as attractive [14], every content they update will increase their popularity by being shared and updated on other walls, even if the content has negative message about someone else [5]. Hence:

3) Proposition 4a: Mobile bully-victims on Facebook will develop implicit power through social competence, control of social competence, control of social resources, and popularity

4) Proposition 4b: Bully-victims will only update negative content about their victims to maintain their popularity of Facebook

Bully-victims group becomes more amplified when other marginalised peers join. Also, individual opinions may be rejected when they conflict with the group culture. Facebook allows friends to tag each other on posts [5] to share and interact in the same content thereby amplifying bully-victim behaviour. We therefore propose:

5) Proposition 5: Mobile bully-victim behaviour on Facebook is amplified by group opinions

Bully-victims that befriend peers who are also bully-victims, are likely to adopt bullying behaviours [4] because their decision-making is influenced by their peers [17]. We therefore propose:

6) Proposition 6: Mobile bully-victims will attack peers who are not bullies or bully-victims

Biased self-perception worsens bully-victim behaviour when bully-victims justify their actions [16]. We propose:

7) Proposition 7: Negative self-perception influence mobile bully-victim behaviour

8) Proposition 8: Easy access to and frequent usage of applications like Facebook increases mobile bully-victim behaviour among the adolescents

![Conceptual model: Factors that influence mobile bully-victim behaviour on Facebook.](image-url)
III. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the factors that influence mobile bully-victim behaviour on Facebook. Literature from various disciplines was reviewed to identify common influencing factors. A conceptual model with propositions was developed which can further guide researchers in understanding the behaviours of bully-victims on Facebook and other social networks in general. The study will assist in the development of appropriate interventions. This paper therefore contributes to the body of knowledge on mobile bullying by advancing theory on bully-victim behaviour and providing more understandings of bully-victim problem among the adolescents.

REFERENCES


