The Internet and Bullying

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Abstract

This paper discusses issues related to bullying via the Internet (also known as cyber-bulling), which has recently been garnering greater attention in Japan. In particular, this paper addresses the current state of cyber-bullying, as well as the methods and problems therein; it also offers countermeasures to cyber-bullying. In addressing the current state of cyber-bullying, the results of previous social surveys, as well as real-life cases in which cyber-bullying might have led to suicide among children, are discussed. Although cyber-bullying does not appear to be a frequently occurring phenomenon, it should not be ignored, given its potentially serious impact. In addressing cyber-bullying methods, descriptions are provided of bullying that occurs through bulletin board systems and through e-mail. Finally, problems relating to cyber-bullying are addressed, and five problems, in particular, differentiate cyber-bullying from traditional bullying: (a) cyber-bullying bears anonymity, (b) perpetrators cannot see their cyber-bullying victims' faces, which contributes to strong aggression, (c) cyber-bullying aggression can continue all day long, (d) it is difficult for people around victims to be aware of cyber-bullying, and (e) the damage sustained by cyber-bullying victims could be long-term, given the semipermanent nature of the messages involved. Some possible cyber-bullying countermeasures are offered: (a) Internet ethics education and the use of filtering systems for the prevention of cyber-bullying, and (b) creating awareness people around children that they need to be more vigilant in detecting occurrences of cyber-bullying, given how elusive its symptoms are.

Key words: Internet, Bullying, Children, Aggression

Introduction

In recent years, more and more children have started to use the Internet. Table 1 shows the results of a survey (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2007) conducted of 1,191 children aged 10–17 years; that data shows prevalence of Internet use among this demographic. Today, almost all high school students use the Internet via a cell phone; more than one-half of junior high school children do the same, followed by some 30 percent of elementary pupils. Around 60 percent of elementary school children use the Internet through a personal computer (PC), as do some 70 percent of secondary school students.

While use of the Internet can bring enjoyment and other benefits to children, there is some anxiety concerning the potential problems arising from internet use. One such problem is bullying over the Internet; today in Japan, the term *net ijime* (cyber-bullying) is part of the accepted vocabulary. Outside Japan as well, the term "cyber-bullying" has strong currency.

Even prior to the advent of the Internet, there were always many different forms of "bullying," and each constituted a serious problem. The recent proliferation of Internet use has added that form known as cyber-bullying, which has recently garnered a great deal of attention. Among such problems involving the Internet, the sexual abuse of children by pedophiles—in which

Table 1 Percentage of children who use cell phones and PCs, by school type

	Elementary	Junior high	High school
Cell phones	31.3%	57.6%	96.0%
Internet with a cell phone	27.0%	56.3%	95.5%
PCs	77.4%	81.2%	88.6%
Internet with a PC	58.3%	68.7%	74.5%

Note: Based on data from the Cabinet Office (2007). The figures show the percentage of those children who use the corresponding device/service.

victims were contacted through the Internet—was once considered a major issue of public concern worldwide. More recently, however, greater concern seems to be placed on cyber-bullying.

This paper discusses cyber-bullying; more specifically, it addresses the current state of cyber-bullying in Japan, the methods and problems inherent in cyber-bullying, and countermeasures to cyber-bullying.

The Current State of Cyber-bullying in Japan

Although Japan has yet to see many full-fledged surveys on cyber-bullying, some are available. First, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (2007a) collected some data on bullying in general from schools across Japan, including national, municipal, and private schools. This survey's results garnered some figures *vis-à-vis* recognized cases of bullying: during the 2006 school year alone, 60,897 cases of bullying were recognized in elementary schools, 12,307 in junior high schools, 12,307 in high schools, and 384 in "special education" schools (i.e., those for handicapped children and the like). This survey also aggregated cases of each form of bullying. With respect to "defamation and other harassment through the Internet, cellular phones, etc."—which constitutes cyber-bullying—there were 466 cases in elementary schools, 2,691 in junior high schools, 1,699 in high schools, and 27 in special schools. These figures account for 0.8 percent, 5.2 percent, 13.8 percent, and 7.0 percent of all cases of bullying in those kinds of schools, respectively. Although these percentages are not overly large, it is important to consider how many actual cases of cyber-bullying are recognized and thus how many are going unreported, since cyber-bullying in general is more difficult to detect than many of traditional forms of bullying.

Another survey was conducted across Japan in July 2007 by NetSTAR Inc. (2007) of seventh to ninth graders, inclusively. A total of 515 valid responses were collected in all. In the results, while around 10 percent of all junior high school students surveyed had actually either "bullied" someone or "been bullied" by someone, more than 40 percent of all students surveyed had "heard of or seen bullying." Especially notable were female ninth graders, some 60 percent of whom replied they had heard of or seen bullying. Cyber-bullying frequently took the form, among others, of "sending 'Die!' or other messages," "making fake posts in bulletin boards, etc. in the name of someone the writer wants to bully," "posting groundless rumors in bulletin boards, etc.," and "writing some personal information of someone the writer wants to bully, like his or her name, portrait, address, e-mail address, etc., in bulletin boards." In addition, NetSTAR found that more than 20 percent of the respondents replied that "they sometimes get bullied on the Internet,

though they never are in the bricks-and-mortar world." On the basis of this finding, NetSTAR states that "many cases of cyber-bullying are hard to recognize for adults. It is hard for the people around a victim to take the correct countermeasures."

This survey by NetSTAR (2007)—unlike that mentioned above, which had been conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology—collected data directly from children concerning cases of cyber-bullying. Thus, NetSTAR's survey can be expected to show much more faithfully the actual state of cyber-bullying in Japan than that conducted by the Ministry. In the coming years, it is hoped that more survey data will be captured, so that we can learn more details about cyber-bullying, as well as more information about a broader range of children—for instance, in terms of age.

Yet another survey conducted by the Ministry was dedicated exclusively to the issue of cyber-bullying (2008a). This survey focused its attention on the "unofficial web pages of schools" (commonly known in Japan as "behind-the-door school web pages"). This survey uncovered roughly 33,527 pages of this kind, which were actually displayed in the form of threads within gigantic bulletin boards like "2 Channel." In addition, there were 1,944 websites commonly known as the "personal home pages" of students, where several members of a website can have fun together; the survey called such websites "unofficial websites for a group."

Although one might say that sufficient data has yet to be captured *vis-à-vis* how many cases of cyber-bullying actually exist in Japan, one thing is certain: like traditional forms of bullying, cyber-bullying can have serious consequences—such as victim suicides—and so it cannot be ignored. In July 2007, a 12th grader at Takigawa Senior High School, located in the City of Kobe, died in a heart-wrenching suicide. This tragedy garnered considerable attention, for two reasons. One was the fact that the school's faculty, which first denied bullying as the cause of the suicide, took an "about-face" by later admitting that bullying had prompted the suicide; this about-face occurred only after the perpetrator, the victim's classmate, was arrested. In short, the faculty tried to cover up the bullying and eventually invited harsh rebukes on itself. The other reason was that cyber-bullying was suspected to have been involved as a cause of this case of suicide. The victim was harshly mistreated on the "behind-the-door school web page": some classmates had posted the victim's personal information, as well as a naked photo of the victim, on the Internet. Many suggested that these criminal acts at least partially led to his suicide. It was at this point that many in Japanese society came to know of "behind-the-door school web pages."

In October 2008, a female ninth grader in the City of

Saitama committed suicide. Shortly after the victim moved to a new school, some of her classmates wrote in her profile in the Internet such malicious messages as "Let's mistreat this girl well, and she will stop coming to school," "She makes me sick," "I never want to be in the same swimming pool with her," and so on. Her suicide note was found after her death, and it blamed those perpetrators who wrote the malicious messages. Her parents, therefore, asked her school's faculty to investigate the cause of the suicide. The mass media and others pointed out that the bullying might have contributed to the suicide. Though the faculty denied that cyber-bullying was a cause of the suicide, the parents were not satisfied with this decision, according to media reports.

It is still not precisely known, what roles cyber-bullying played in these two cases of suicide. Regardless, as long as cyber-bullying cannot be ruled out as a possible contributor to suicide, the possibility and the underlying issue itself should never be disregarded. In any case, even when cyber-bullying does not contribute to suicide among children, there is no doubt that such maltreatment creates serious pain and sorrow in the victims.

Methods and Problems Inherent in Cyber-bullying

The survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2008b) highlights a number of methods by which students execute cyber-bullying; each has recently been considered a social issue of import.

First, the following methods are observed in bulletin boards: (a) posting messages that defame a victim; (b) spreading personal information of a victim; in this way, the perpetrator hopes to create some opportunities for the victim to be exposed to some danger; (c) another, very sophisticated method, in which one uploads a fake web page in the name of the victim, which says something like, "I have nothing to do. Please give me a call." Then, some people actually call the victim in some cases, according to reports.

Other methods of bullying, many of which involve e-mail messages, include the following: (a) the perpetrator sends malicious messages to a victim, with the perpetrator's name either hidden or shown, (b) the perpetrator uses chain e-mails to spread a victim's personal information and/or malicious messages to the victim broadly, and (c) the perpetrator sends malicious messages to a victim from many different addresses, to make the victim feel like he or she is being attacked by a group. In addition to these aforementioned bullying methods, many bullying perpetrators refuse to acknowledge e-mails from their victims.

Such forms of cyber-bullying lead to problems not found with other, traditional forms of bullying. For one,

anonymity is a major feature of cyber-bullying, and it often results in perpetrators never facing any criminal allegations. Victims who do take a stand against their perpetrators can, as a result, find that little justice is served; in fact, once perpetrators are released due to a lack of evidence, victims can be mistreated even more harshly. From the standpoint of the victim, if he or she cannot identify the perpetrator(s), it will be very difficult to institute countermeasures.

Second, with cyber-bullying, the perpetrator does not see the victim face to face. For this reason, he or she cannot directly witness the agony that the victim experiences. Such nonverbal communication, in traditional bullying, can result in a feeling of empathy or pity towards the victim, and thus mitigate bullying behavior; with cyber-bullying, however, this lack of nonverbal communication can lead to an intensification of mistreatment.

Third, there are no time restraints with cyber-bullying abuse. With traditional forms of bullying, a victim is usually freed from the agony once he or she goes home after school. Cyber-bullying, however, can persist after the victim goes home; in fact, it can carry on 24 hours a day.

Fourth, cyber-bullying is difficult to detect. It is difficult for many adults in the lives of victims of traditional forms of bullying to recognize when it is occurring; indeed, this is a serious problem with bullying in general. Many children—not just the perpetrators, but even the victims as well—try to conceal bullying from adults. Still, adults are much more likely to discover instances of traditional bullying than those of cyber-bullying.

Fifth, cyber-bullying can involve many third parties. Over the Internet, malicious messages can spread over the globe in an instant, allowing many users to know of such messages addressed to the victim. Those messages do not disappear easily—in fact, e-mail servers store messages of all kinds for several years; the seemingly permanent nature of cyber-bullying messages means that they can disturb the victim for a long time in the future. In some cases, such malicious messages could adversely affect a victim's future employment. More and more, companies are gathering online "intelligence" on job applicants; if they perform a search for an applicant's name and find malicious and disturbing messages associated with it, they might think twice before hiring that applicant.

Such problems inherent in cyber-bullying—which reflect the unique characteristics of the Internet—might also affect other forms of bullying. One notable feature of bullying today, as Yamawaki (2006) points out, is that no one is a bystander: a single victim tends to be bullied by the rest of his or her class. This problem might have been created, or at least exacerbated, by the spread of the Internet in children's lives. The Internet is believed

to be an egalitarian forum where hierarchies do not easily arise; thus, in relationships among people who are connected via the Internet, anyone can be a superior and anyone can be a subordinate. In such relationships, therefore, anyone is at risk of being bullied. On the Internet, some people can form an alliance overnight to bully someone. For this reason, to avoid being bullied, children must always appear to side with the perpetrators; being mere bystanders renders them susceptible to bullying themselves. Although the veracity of this hypothesis remains to be seen, any victim who is being bullied by everyone else must experience unimaginable agony at feeling alone and hopeless. In addition, as discussed, if a child feels compelled to partake in bullying on account of self-preservation, the psychological implications of such an act must also be considered.

Countermeasures to Cyber-bullying

To date, some efforts have been made to counteract cyber-bullying, especially as people have grown more concerned about its potential results and consequences. For example, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (2007b) launched in September 2007 the "Blue Ribbon Panel for Creating a System to Protect and Raise Children," which discussed some effective measures to prevent "bullying over the Internet." In June 2008, the Ministry compiled the "Second Conclusions of the Blue Ribbon Panel for Creating a System to Protect and Raise Children," followed by a leaflet summarizing those conclusions, which was distributed to the general public at the beginning of July 2008.

In addition to those efforts, many cyber-bullying countermeasures have been proposed to date. Below, the following details the issues unique to cyber-bullying that require special attention. As with traditional forms of bullying, three counteractive phases to cyber-bullying can be considered: prevention, detection, and handling detected cases.

First, for prevention, education in information ethics is crucial. Such education includes several essential messages that must be communicated to children. One of them is that "bullying is not justified in any case." Moreover, this education needs to teach children that while malicious messaging and the divulging of personal information are crimes in themselves, these crimes can lead to even more serious crimes. Children should also be aware that: (a) simply acting as an intermediate in the dissemination of criminal chain e-mails can qualify one as a perpetrator, (b) although some might believe they can fully conceal their identity on the Internet, this is not in fact true, and (c) in cases where one is bullied or witnesses bullying, one should inform an adult about it.

In addition to the provision of information ethics education, filtering activities that restrict "behind-the-door school web pages" and other criminal pages can also assist in the prevention of cyber-bullying.

Next, with respect to detection, as with the traditional forms of bullying, both the perpetrators and the victim try to conceal bullying from adults. Victims are often embarrassed by the fact that they are being bullied, while others do not want to cause their parents anxiety. Furthermore, Yamawaki (2006), who counsels children as a child psychiatry specialist, points out that many victims are afraid that bullying will escalate as a result of engaging adults, since most perpetrators will be angered by it. Even during child counseling, which children undertake with regard to their own psychological and physical problems, Yamawaki finds it difficult to coax victimized children to speak honestly about the bullying they are experiencing. For this reason, the counselor tries to uncover cases of bullying by asking children indirect questions such as, "Do you ever feel you are bullied?" To a question such as this, the victim can provide his or her own subjective views and need not state whether, in fact, bullying is occurring.

As described earlier, most conventional forms of bullying are difficult to detect, but it is even more difficult with cyber-bullying. In this respect, with cyber-bullying, detection is a very important issue. Adults seldom witness an instance of this new form of bullying. Furthermore, while traditional forms of bullying bear some hallmark signs—such as "the child stops talking about his or her school," "the child often gets injured," "the child loses things often," "the child asks for more money," and so on—such signs do not accompany cyber-bullying. Thus, adults have fewer means of detecting a case of cyber-bullying.

Finally, what should an individual do, upon learning of a case of cyber-bullying? First, a victim should record all the malicious messages sent to him or her. He or she should resist the urge to erase such messages immediately, because the solving of such cases requires detailed records. Therefore, we as adults need to educate children to record those messages; having said that, with regards to defamation or the dissemination of personal information on a bulletin board and other web pages that many viewers can easily access, the victim should record it with print-outs or screen captures and then quickly erase it before a third party sees it. If left undeleted, such defamation or personal information can harm the victim for many years to come; it could even adversely affect his or her employment opportunities. The more time that passes until such deletions take place, the more broadly the defamation or information can spread, making it even more difficult to erase. The victim should consult the administrator of the bulletin board; if this does not result in a satisfactory outcome, the victim should then consult

the bulletin board's Internet service provider, an organization specializing in Internet issues, the police, the Legal Affairs Bureau, and the like.

To victims of any kind of bullying, we need to provide psychological care. At the same time, perpetrators need to be identified; subsequently, they need to receive instruction and, if necessary, punishment. Classroom teachers need to explain to their classes what happened and what is wrong with it, while trying to instill normalcy in the classroom and prevent recurrences of bullying.

Particularly in the case of cyber-bullying, we need to be very careful in treating perpetrators. A child who was previously a victim can counter-attack his or her perpetrators over the Internet; given the anonymous nature of and power dynamics inherent in the Internet, such an inversion can easily take place there. Therefore, we as adults need to be careful not to see a counter-attack in isolation and treat the perpetrator, who was once a victim, as a "bad guy." We need to acquire a "bigger picture" of what has happened. Furthermore, some children might defame someone just for fun, without being fully aware of the potential harm wrought by the nature of the Internet. In cases like these, harsh punishments for first-time perpetrators may not be appropriate. In any case, the provision of a sound education in information ethics is essential for all students, and harsh punishments should be considered only for those perpetrators who have committed cyber-bullying crimes after having received such education.

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