

## **Texting, sexting and social networking among Australian youth and the need for cyber safety education**

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### **Abstract**

Digital tools and social networking sites provide scope for a range of forms of cyber expression and social interaction. The prevalence of negative behaviours such as cyberbullying has increased over the past few years, as adolescents take advantage of the anonymity in cyberspace to victimise, marginalise, ridicule and threaten their victims. Cyberbullying, otherwise known as e-bullying, electronic bullying, mobile bullying or online bullying is now a recognised problem in Australian schools and cases have been reported in the USA, Canada and the UK. This paper explores the uptake of social networking in the lives of young people, reviews the literature on studies conducted in Australia on e-bullying behaviour and considers the challenges to schools in developing e-safety measures and programs. Data from a number of Australian studies is presented to illustrate the extent and prevalence of the problem. The findings indicate that instant messaging, mobile phones and social networking sites are contexts where cyberbullying occurs, and that girls are more likely to view cyber aggression more seriously than boys. The literature surveyed show that schools need to develop knowledge of e-safety strategies among staff and students. Recommendations are made on strategies for educating youth in media literacy skills and e-safety in order to curb the incidence and effects of cyberbullying.

### **Uptake of digital tools by youth**

Social networking continues to be a “cool new tool,” and young people world wide stay connected with networking software, with its capacity to support peer interaction and friendship, combined with its potential for connectivity and friendship building, and its psychological power. With the advent of numerous social networking sites available today the socialisation patterns of young people have changed dramatically as the Internet and mobile devices are used to mediate personal interactions and communication. Social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook are part of a larger suite of social computing tools that collectively fall under the label of Web 2.0. Extensive research indicates that these technologies are widely embraced by the younger generation, variously labelled Generation Y (Digital Natives and the Net Generation (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). SMS remains the most popular social messaging utility for adolescents between the ages of 14 – 17 (Cross, 2007), and the majority of teenagers now carry a mobile phone. These technologies break down barriers at a number of levels, such as private and public space, learning spaces and social spaces, and informal and formal communication modes. The affordances of social networking sites and mobile phones enable communication among broad circles of contacts, locally and globally, and permit the combination of activities of email, messaging, website creation, diaries, photo albums and music or video uploading and downloading. More than ever before, using social media and the Web means creating as well as receiving content, exchanging photos, resources and files, with the user in control and the capacity to rip, mix and burn media to create new meanings, images and sound bytes that can be distributed to a global audience.

Cyber technologies are also used by adolescents to access and exchange information, to communicate and to seek entertainment. Mobile phones and social network sites are media viewed by adolescents as essential and convenient means to connect with, converse and meet new friends. The online friends network (MySpace, Facebook), are the most popular sites for “friending” and it is important to understand how social networking sites operate and what distinguishes them from other social software tools such as blogs, wikis and other

forms of personal communication on the Web (Rethlefsen, 2007). For teenagers, the number and frequency of contact with one's friends on MySpace, Facebook, or similar sites is essentially a form of social currency, and is linked to adolescent confirmation of self-esteem in addition to providing an easy means to keep up to date with what one's friends are doing and where they are located. For children aged 9-15 years of age, participating in online social networks is becoming the norm, not the exception (Lenhart & Madden, 2007) and is a hallmark of social and peer acceptance.

Within the last ten or fifteen years the rapid development of the Internet, mobile devices and the increased popularity of games has spawned an intense interest in the generation who have grown up with these technologies as part of their everyday life, leading to labels such as "millennial learners" and Net Generation. The rapid uptake of technology by children and young people has led to claims about an emerging generational gap between the young tech-savvy 'digital natives' and the older generation who may be technologically challenged 'digital immigrants' (Prensky, 2001). This divide is based on different expectations about technology and its centrality to everyday communication and interpersonal transactions. Caruso, et al., (2008) observed that many students:

"[...] value IT's role in providing convenience and expect IT services to be available when they need them; they actively use multiple modes of IT to communicate, socialize and stay connected with others; they perceive themselves as net-savvy; they choose mobile technologies and use visual media; and they take advantage of Web 2.0 technologies to express themselves on the internet in varied and creative ways" (Caruso, et al., 2008, p. 16).

Societal trends in the usage and uptake of mobile devices and Web 2.0 tools are also impacting on mode as of communication and social behaviours.

### **A new digital divide?**

Emerging expectations and social practices with Web 2.0 tools are indicative of a widening digital divide between adults who may not be attuned to the modes of communication and socialisation that are prevalent in online social sites and teenagers who prioritise the creation and maintenance of friendship networks and identity online. The very language of social relationships is being reframed and a new vocabulary marks the divide between youth and their parents. Today, adolescents go online to construct their 'profile', make it 'public' or 'private', they 'comment' or 'message' their friends on their 'wall', they 'block' or 'add' people to their network and so forth (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). While such activities may appear harmless, there are nevertheless risks of victimisation and harassment from online predators. In addition, young internet users may lack strategies for managing privacy and ethical aspects of online exposure where personal details are made public in cyberspace, thus exposing them to further risks.

One form of risky behaviour that has become more frequent in Australia is known as 'sexting' a word which is a play on 'texting'. Sexting involves taking pictures of oneself alone or with others in a 'sexy pose', engaging in intimate behaviour, or exposing a body part. The photographs, taken with a mobile phone are then distributed to peers or even a global audience by posting them on a social network site. The consequences of this risky behaviour is detailed by the NSW Government in their 'fact sheet' to parents, *'Safe Sexting: No such thing'* (2009). They highlight the dangers, including public humiliation, cyberbullying and even in some cases, sexual assault. The subject of such digitally distributed photos may be harassed, victimised or ridiculed when the photos are made public without their knowledge or consent (Ling & Yttri: 2005).

### **Risk on social networking sites and with mobile phones**

The recent explosion in online social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and others has attracted considerable interest from educators parents and young people themselves, with concerns about the time and attention given to these activities and the importance attached online socialisation. Educators and parents need to understand more about how youth construct identity and develop peer relations, and how and why they engage in communication on social networking sites. This "digital divide" between generations makes the problem of dealing with cyberbullying more acute, as conversation about the importance of online socialisation is unlikely to happen.

Several researchers have commented on the power of Web 2.0 tools to engage adolescents, leading them to create profiles where they describe personal feelings and emotions and then invite comments on such postings from a wide and often anonymous audience (Lenhart and Madden, 2007). Though the user's privacy settings

determine whether they can be contacted by strangers or friends, many youth may not realise or use these privacy settings, thus exposing them to online predators (Wolak, et al, 2007).

In today's wired world, a raft of communications technologies enable easy and fast communication and social exchanges to be established between people and groups. Mobile phones also facilitate nomadic, instant kinds of communication, which may challenge traditional face-to-face socialisation patterns where context and visual cues are part of the process of making friends. It is clear that teenagers prefer the private, unsupervised individualized access that mobile phones allow compared to landline phones, because they provide greater freedom to act and new possibilities for peer-to-peer and group interaction (Nichol, 2007). However, along with the ease of use and "twenty-four-by-seven connectivity" there is a downside: the growing phenomenon of cyberbullying, along with online aggression, electronic violence and abuse. Simply put Social Networking Sites (SNS) are part of the digital world of young people and their use and abuse of these media to threaten intimidate and abuse others is a cause of growing concern. Along with the ubiquitous uptake of social networking tools, there has been an alarming increase in cyber misconduct and cyberbullying, and discussion of how to combat these problem behaviours is high on the agenda of educators, parents and school communities worldwide (Sharif, 2008).

The challenge of how to counteract negative cyber behaviours such as cyberbullying is becoming more urgent and pronounced, as educational institutions are facing digital age students with experiences that have been shaped by intense and early interactions with various social technologies. Consequently, educators, parents, policy makers and legal scholars are scrambling for resolutions to this worrying and pervasive problem that is present among Australian school children (reference?)

### **Defining electronic bullying**

Cyber-bullying and cyber harassment are now common forms of negative behaviours in virtual communication environments and a range of media are used by the perpetrators, leading to distress, psychosocial trauma among victims. Children and adolescents have taken schoolyard bullying to an entirely new level by utilizing the electronic medium to bully. Cyber-bullies use emails, text messaging, chat rooms, mobile phones, social networking sites, blogs, and so on, to spread derogatory and offensive comments about other students, teachers and other individuals (Belsey, 2006; Campbell, 2005, Shariff, 2008; Willard, 2006).

Cyber communication can take many forms, and instances of online harassment by students using social networking sites that involves targeting teachers and school officials is less often reported than peer cyberbullying. Activities such as posting offensive jokes about teachers, modifying photographs and inviting abusive comments from other students and community are examples of cyberbullying by students. While bullying has several definitions that vary by culture and context, perhaps the most accepted and most cited definition is based on Olweus' (1993) original research on bullying programs in Norway. Olweus contends that there are particular features that appear to be universal across all types of bullying, including cyberbullying. First, the behaviour is not a onetime occurrence, but is instead is a series of repeated aggressive actions; second, bullying may be an individual, collective or group action, and finally, there must be a power imbalance (whether physical or otherwise) between the bully and victim, and both must interpret the behaviour as unwanted, threatening or negative.

If one adopts this definition, it becomes clear that several Australian studies of cyberbullying among youth have been conducted recently, and the results indicate that Australian youth are at risk.

### **Why does cyberbullying occur?**

According to Hinduja & Patchin (2009, p.35) "cyberbullying is the unfortunate by-product of the union of adolescent aggression and electronic communication, and its growth is giving cause for concern". It could be the case that the affordances and characteristics of social media increase the likelihood that they will be used by youth for both positive and negative forms of interaction. Youth have shown that cyberspace is a place which can nurture their social interactions and that is often beyond the reach of adult supervision. Mobile phones and personal computers offer opportunities to individuals to act in secrecy, take on new identities and to behave anti-socially. For example, perpetrators who harass others in chat rooms can remain unseen and anonymous. The ease of creation of e-mail accounts and pseudonyms in games and virtual worlds, instant messaging programs, and other Internet venues can make it very difficult for internet users to determine the identity of aggressors.

Nevertheless, technology itself is not the underlying cause of cyberbullying. The research on cyberbullying has suggested an array of possible causes underpinning cyberbullying, from biological to environmental factors. According to McNeely Nonnemaker & Blum, (2002), students who feel cared for, respected and safe at their schools are far less likely to engage in or cyberbullying behaviours. Olweus (2002) conducted an international study and found that bullying behaviours starts early and persists into adulthood. He found that both genders tend to become more assertive and aggressive around the first onset of puberty and throughout mid teens (from 9 to 15 years of age). Nevertheless, developmental psychologists are increasingly looking at psycho-social and environmental factors that may contribute to deviant behaviour, including the role of gender, culture, early socialisation and peer-to-peer interaction (Li, 2007; Raskaukas & Stoltz, 2007). In view of the complexity of the problem of cyberbullying, schools need to be proactive in investigating the causes and frequency of occurrences of electronic bullying, and the technologies used by offenders.

### Studies of cyberbullying in Australia

Empirical studies of cyberbullying in Australia are described and explored in the following section to emphasise that it has the potential to become as problematic as traditional bullying—particularly with society’s increasing reliance on technology. To provide a picture of what the extent of the problem, results collected from various studies are explored to illuminate what is happening in Australia, including rural and regional schools. Empirical studies have been conducted during the past 5 years across a range of ages and contexts that reveal the extent of the problem in schools.

An unpublished study by Campbell (2005) found that over 25% of the 120 eighth grade students in Brisbane who were surveyed knew someone who had been bullied by a technological means, 11% revealed they had engaged in cyberbullying, and 14% said they had been targeted, most often by text messages. In addition Campbell (2005) and Nichol (2007) have investigate the prevalence of mobile phone bullying and describe aggressive behaviours such as sending offensive and intimidatory messages, forwarding emails and ‘sexting’ pictures to a wider audience and distributing offensive and abusive comments. A more recent study by Cross (2007) indicated that up to 10% of students had been bullied via electronic devices including chat rooms, email and mobile devices. The *Australian Psychology Society* also conducted a survey of 258 Melbourne and Sydney students in years 7 to 12, and found that 83% of the sample had mobile phones. Ten percent of participants reported receiving threatening messages on their mobile phone (Australian Psychological Society, 2004).

Table 1 provides an overview of studies of cyberbullying conducted on Australian youth.

**Table 1: Studies of cyberbullying in Australia**

Year	Age Group	State	Author(s)	Main finding
2005	Yr 8	Qld	Campbell and Gardner	25% of participants knew somebody who had been cyberbullied.
2007	13-17 yr olds	ACT	Nichol	70% of participants reported that they had cyberbullied others using mobile phones.
2007	unspecified	WA	Cross	SMS and email used, 57% of children pretended to be somebody else, and 17% said they were mean to someone online.

2009	10-17 yrs	Victoria	Stacey	Social networking sites and synchronous chat sites where cyberbullying most commonly occurred, and email and texting on mobile phones also used for bullying. Grades 8 and 9 most often reported cyberbullying episodes.
2009	Yrs 7-10	ACT and regional NSW	McLoughlin, Burgess and Meyricke	24% of students surveyed had been victims of cyberbullying; that instant messaging, mobile phones and social networking sites are contexts where cyberbullying occur, and that girls are more likely to be victims than boys.

The recent research published by McLoughlin, Burgess and Meyricke (2009) was based on a sample of students drawn from regional, urban and rural schools. The incidence cyberbullying versus bullying from their research is shown in Table 1.

	Bullied in school	Cyberbullied
<b>Yes</b>	46%	22%
<b>No / Not sure</b>	53%	78%
<b>Blank</b>	1%	0%

Table 1: Percentage of rural students bullied and cyber bullied

Across rural and urban schools, the results point to a clear conclusion: between 22% and 24% of all students have been cyberbullied. The focus group discussions revealed that students were often cyberbullied by friends out of school, as this comments indicates *“It happens between students from the same school but done at home, because students know there is a greater chance of being caught at school”*.

Most of the cases of cyberbullying reported by students happened via email or in a chat rooms. In relation to the frequency of the cyberbullying, 65% said that they had been bullied less than four times, 17% said four to 10 times and only 13% said over 10 times. These results indicate that cyberbullying is occurring to many students in school and at home. Most of the students who were cyberbullied were bullied by their peers. These results, which are corroborated by the findings of Stacey (2009), Campbell (2005) and Cross (2007) show that cyberbullying is a real issue for schools, and that measures to counteract it are needed.

### Student perceptions of cyberbullying behaviours

Another aspect investigated by McLoughlin Burgess & Meyricke (2009) was students’ perceptions of cyberbullying behaviours and the severity of a number of behaviours that involve using some form of technology to inflict harm or pain on another person. In order to understand students’ views of typical cyberbullying actions, students were asked to rate eight types of behaviour from 1 (not cyberbullying) and 5 (severe cyberbullying). Students were asked the following question:

*Consider the following situations and rank them using the scale 1-5 below. For example, if you think sending an SMS to a person saying mean and hurtful things is cyberbullying, then circle the number you feel is appropriate. Do the same for each of the following questions.*

1----- 2----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5

**Not cyberbullying**

**Severe cyberbullying**

1. Sending emails to another person saying mean and hurtful things or making fun of them.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Sending emails saying mean and hurtful things or making fun of a person to other people.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Sending mobile phone messages or photos to another person saying mean and hurtful things or making fun of them.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Sending mobile phone messages or photos saying mean and hurtful things or making fun of a person to other people.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Posting private photos of another student on the web.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Videoing or photographing a person being bullied and posting this on the web.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Excluding a student from your social networking site (eg, <i>MySpace</i> , <i>Facebook</i> , etc).	1	2	3	4	5
8. Spreading rumours about another person on social networking sites (eg, <i>MySpace</i> , <i>Facebook</i> , etc).	1	2	3	4	5

Analysis of the survey of student perceptions showed that students considered that students had the following perceptions:

- sending mean or hurtful emails was rated 3.4 on average and was just as bad as sending mean or hurtful mobile phone messages, which was rated 3.5 on average.
- sending mean or hurtful messages straight to somebody to be just as severe as sending mean or hurtful messages about someone to others. (I.e. questions 1 and 2 and questions 3 and 4 have the same average response, 3.4 and 3.5).
- posting embarrassing photos on the web or posting videos or photos of a person being bullied was seen as more severe bullying than sending mean or hurtful messages, as the average rating of these scenarios was 3.7 and 3.9 respectively.
- excluding a student from your social networking sight was not seen as bullying by many students and, overall, was rated below average severity at only 2.4.
- spreading rumours about someone on a social networking site was just as severe (3.5) as sending mean or hurtful emails to them or about them via email or mobile phone.

According to the students surveyed, excluding a person from your social networking site was considered to be much less severe than the other scenarios, and many did not consider it to be cyberbullying. Another finding was that female students rated the behaviours depicted in Table 1 more highly than boys, indicating that they considered episodes of cyber bullying more seriously. This gender difference is also of importance given that studies in Australia and elsewhere that girls are more likely to report experiences of being cyberbullied than boys (Chisholm, 2006). In the US study, thirty eight percent of online girls reported being cyberbullied, compared with 26 percent of boys (Lenhart & Madden, 2007).

## Responding to the threat of e-bullying: E-safety programs for schools

While bullying has historically only affected students at school, at the bus stop, travelling to and from school, in the playground and sometimes in other public places (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006), the development of new technologies has brought about new challenges for the policies and programs already in schools and placed considerable pressures on schools to remain informed and vigilant to the developing phenomenon of cyberbullying. Across Australia, measures are being taken to counteract the negative effects of cyberbullying and to educate students, parents and teachers about preventive action and strategies to combat cyberbullying (Cross, 2007). Given the current escalation of the problem, the goal for many schools is to develop an anti-bullying awareness program for parents, children, and school staff to communicate the desired message to children.

At the local level a comprehensive school-wide preventative program would involve different stakeholders in schools. This might include the principal, teachers, students, parents, school counsellors and pastoral carers. All members of the school community need to be committed to a comprehensive approach in promoting a safe school environment. The main goals would be to integrate anti-bullying strategies across the school curriculum and to establish clear school anti-bullying rules, resource guidelines and policies that are regularly reviewed and up-dated. These rules, resource guidelines and policies need to be clearly understood, accessible and utilised by all stakeholders.

Media coverage, education, and social marketing campaigns that can be used to support behavioural change and are all part of the community level engagement in the field. Internationally, there have been numerous programs and policies developed to reduce bullying in schools and a number have resulted in successful outcomes with reductions in bullying evidenced (Olweus, Limber & Mihalic, 1999; Smith & Ananiadou, 2003).

In the United Kingdom, the British Educational Communications and Technologies Agency (BECTA), the Government's primary agency for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in education, has developed a number of e-safety resources for policy makers, schools and their teachers, teaching assistants and ICT support staff. As it is pointed out on BECTA's website, in today's world, '[p]rotecting young people (and adults) properly means thinking beyond the traditional school environment. Where once the desktop computer was the only way to access the internet, now many mobile phones and games consoles offer broadband connections' (BECTA). BECTA provides information and recommendations for designing and implementing Acceptable Use Policies, effective use of firewalls and other technical controls, ways to minimise the incidence of cyberbullying and approaches for educating young people about safe online behaviours. They advocate a whole-school approach towards developing curricula, including awareness raising, effective policies and procedures for dealing with cyberbullying episodes and pedagogies to develop safe use of ICT, otherwise known as 'e-safety'.

### Conclusion

School policy guidelines currently being circulated in the United Kingdom highlight considerations that would be worthy of consideration for Australian schools and educators. Already, several initiatives have been undertaken by The *Department of Broadband and Telecommunications* to ensure that teachers, students and parents are aware of risks associated with online communication and social networking tools. The development and adoption of e-safety means that schools must decide on how to supervise and control internet access while setting rules and educating students for responsible use of ICT applications and social media. Another focus of cybersafety strategies noted by Shariff (2008) is that students need to develop the skills they need to protect themselves from risky behaviours or predatory communication.

A number of approaches to develop cybersafety awareness and protective measures have been suggested by researchers and educators as follows (Olweus, 1993; Willard, 2007);

- Educating students in media literacy and in the skills of how to critique and evaluate social media may increase awareness of the risks of social networking sites
- Coordinated strategies that involve teachers, students, parents and communities, with flexible approaches that can tackle the varied forms of cyberbullying are likely to achieve more than isolated measures;
- Creating school policies and learning environments that foster positive behaviours among children may increase prosocial behaviours;

- Developing acceptable use policies that outline the ways in which technologies can and cannot be used by students, and the sanctions that might apply if these rules are broken.

The reality is that technologies will continue to evolve into more interactive, mobile and ubiquitous applications, so it is pointless for schools to restrict access to social computing tools that are part of the digital world of youth and are an essential part of the development of social and digital literacy skills. Nevertheless, due to the negative impact of cyberbullying on youth and the evidence of how it affects children's well being self-esteem and interaction with peers, action is needed to mitigate and prevent occurrences of cyberbullying.

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