Youth, Social Media, and Cyberbullying Among Australian Youth: “Sick Friends”

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Abstract
Cyberbullying is a relatively recent phenomenon that can have significant consequences for young people’s wellbeing due to the specific technological affordances of social media. To date, research into cyberbullying has been largely quantitative; thus, it often elides the complexity of the issue. Moreover, most studies have been “top down,” excluding young people’s views. Our qualitative research findings suggest that young people engage in cyberbullying to accrue social benefits over peers and to manage social pressures and anxiety, while cultural conventions in gender performance see girls engage differently in cyberbullying. We conclude that cyberbullying, like offline bullying, is a socially constructed behavior that provides both pleasure and pain.

Keywords
cyberbullying, social media, youth

Introduction
People kill themselves over it [cyberbullying]. It’s always on the news. Kids die because someone picks on them and that isn’t something to joke about. I believe if it is bad enough the first time they could kill themselves even if it doesn’t happen again. Well, it can’t happen again and that’s probably why they do it [suicide]. But really, heaps of people at our school get depressed over cyberbullying, why wouldn’t you? (Larson, 15, male)

This article reports on research with some Australian youth and their teachers about social media use and cyberbullying. The focus here is on adversarial peer relations online and how the school bullying policy deals with cyberbullying. The research questions for the study were as follows: What are some sociological patterns in cyberbullying among young people at school? What effect does cyberbullying have on young people’s emotional wellbeing? The analysis of data in the article is theoretically framed using Bourdieu’s productive notions of field, social capital, and cultural capital, representing an interpretive innovation in the sociological field of cyberbullying studies. Two important fields for the young people here are the school and the online domain of social media. Social capital refers to the effectiveness or otherwise of their social networking to shore up bonds of friendship and status in both the online and the offline field. Cultural capital refers, first, to the demonstrated capacity to operate social media and online connections successfully and, second, to the knowledge of what is currently considered “cool” in talk, attitudes, and information by their peers in both fields.

Background

Bullying and Cyberbullying
Bullying can be defined as intentional behavior to harm another, repeatedly, where it is difficult for the victim to defend himself or herself. It assumes an imbalance of power (Ringrose, 2008, p. 510). Cyberbullying can be defined as an aggressive act or behavior by electronic means against a certain group or an individual repeatedly and over time, online (Smith, 2012). However, cyberbullying has some other identifiable features that distinguish it from offline bullying. These include technological expertise, potential for anonymity, relative distance, complex bystander roles, status gained/
proved indirectly, and difficulty in escaping from harassment (Smith, 2012, p. 94). Cyberbullying impact is magnified by invasion of the private domain (Price & Dalgleish, 2010, p. 51) so as to seem inescapable. It “follows you home from school” (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 277).

The “affordances”—potentials, opportunities—of social media (boyd, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010) are crucial to the practice of cyberbullying. There are some specific “digital stressors” in youth social media interactions (Weinstein & Selman, 2014, p. 8). Of these, receiving mean and harassing personal attacks, and public shaming and humiliation, are also offline experiences of bullying. Others, such as hacking into accounts and devices, impersonation, and feeling pressure to comply/reply, appear specific to the online environment. Moreover, the impact of cyberbullying may be more severe (see Burns, Cross, & Maycock, 2010; Price & Dalgleish, 2010) due to the much wider online audience in which public humiliation can occur. This is referred to by boyd (2014, p. 3) as “spreadability.” There is also permanence of defamatory material online.

Weinstein and Selman (2014, p. 13) claim that online impersonation, personal attacks, public shaming, and humiliation represent social “meanness and cruelty” moving into the digital space. In short, digital tools offer powerful, yet potentially damaging ways for young people to communicate and respond. For example, the study by Patchin and Hinduja (2006) of young people under 18 reported being ignored, disrespected, called names, threatened, picked on, made fun of, and having bad rumors spread about them. These experiences might suggest little difference from face-to-face bullying (see Olweus, 2012). Yet, cyberbullying inheres in the capabilities of “new electronic technologies, primarily mobile phones and the internet” (Smith, Steffgen, & Sittichai, 2013, p. 3). In that sense, the technological affordances of social media augment the propensity for long-term, private suffering from peer bullying.

**Young People and New Media**

Young people today are often described as a “digital generation” (Buckingham, 2013, p. 1). This refers to the original claim by Tapscott (1998) that technology has changed the way they think. However, Buckingham (2013, p. 2) refutes such technological determinism, pointing out that what young people do with new media is an extension of their face-to-face social activities, such as connecting with friends, gossiping, flirting, showing off, quarreling, and so on (see Ito et al., 2009). Yet, as Papacharissi (2014) points out, “online technologies thrive on collapsing public and private boundaries” (p. 94). So private confidences offered online can suddenly be disseminated to a vast audience of peers for their amusement. Similarly, adversarial peer relations at school can easily relay into cyberspace harassment and back again into escalated conflicts at school. Similarly, peer conflict that starts on social media can extend into the face-to-face realm in the schoolyard and even get physical.

We know that “young people have always devoted attention to the presentation of self. Friendships have always been made, displayed and broken” (Livingstone, 2008, p. 394). In relative terms, there have always been winners and losers in the offline peer social stakes, so it is no surprise that peer interaction sometimes erupts into bullying online just as it does offline: “Life online, like life offline, involves opportunities for enhancing relational closeness and enacting relational hostility” (Weinstein & Selman, 2014, p. 3). Where it involves online victimization, the latter has been termed “cyberbullying” (Levy et al., 2012).

An American study by Low and Espelage (2013) found that 10%–33% of youth aged 11–19 years reported being bullied online and 15% of youth identified themselves as having conducted cyberbullying. Similarly, Li’s (2006) research in Canada found that one in four junior high students had been cyberbullied. An Australian study (Hemphill & Heerde, 2014) found 5.1% of young people self-reported they cyberbullied, 5% reported being bullied online only, and 9.5% reported both cyberbullying perpetration and being bullied.

The effects can be serious. Each year some young people commit suicide as a result of cyber harassment (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013). Yet, the main empirically established impacts of cyberbullying remain similar to those for face-to-face bullying. These impacts are lowered self-esteem, emotional alienation, poor school attendance, poor learning outcomes, and diminished capacity to form relationships (Englander, Mills, & McCoy, 2009; Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Kowalski & Limber, 2013). Consequently, schools are very concerned to deal effectively with the impacts of peer cyberbullying, which is regarded as often worse than face-to-face bullying. They wish to identify perpetrators and sanction them accordingly. Schools therefore have discipline policies that recognize cyberbullying. Teachers are supposed to implement policy by encouraging students to report if they have been victimized online by fellow pupils.

Yet in fact, school policies that recognize cyberbullying often falter at the point of effective identification of key actors and events. First, most social media interaction between young people involves peers they know offline, so it is difficult to separate offline and online harassment because they tend to reinforce each other. Second, as boyd (2010) argues, “measuring ‘cyberbullying’ or Internet harassment, is difficult, in part because both scholars and teens struggle to define it” (p. 107). Supporting the spirit of this claim, the research reported here found that high school students and teachers defined cyberbullying quite differently. Finally, social media technology is handled with evident generational expertise by the students, to the extent that the teachers seem to be left behind in trying to implement policy.

**Schools Dealing With Cyberbullying**

As Erdur-Baker (2010) points out, “peer bullying now goes beyond school borders” (p. 110). Yet a primary problem for
schools in dealing with cyberbullying comes from reliance on traditional understandings of what constitutes bullying. Søndergaard (2012) claims the standard school definition is typically blind to the relational nuances and complexities that characterize cyberbullying: “Individuals identified as victims are understood simply as such; individuals identified as aggressors are merely aggressors. However, as we have seen, such characterizations may fall far short of the full story” (p. 365).

Certainly, two criteria in the standard definition of bullying falter in regard to cyberbullying: “repetition, and power imbalance” (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013, p. 26). As Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2009) argue,

> It is uncertain whether the “repetition criterion” is necessary in the case of cyberbullying, given the constant nature of certain types of electronic communication. For example, a website with denigrating comments on a person might be online for weeks or months, while denigrating comments that are made in a face-to-face context “disappear” after they have been spoken. (p. 1351)

In regard to power relations, the power imbalance between face-to-face bully and victim is often based (for boys anyway) on physical strength or age. Consequently, Vandeboch and Van Cleemput (2009) argue that cyberbullying relies far less on physical intimidation. Yet since there is such a close connection between peer harassment online and offline, while actual male physical intimidation might not take place online, the threat of it certainly does. Perhaps Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) are closer to the mark when they claim that “one’s ability to keep his or her identity unknown is a unique method of asserting dominance online that conventional bullying disallows” (p. 1313). A cyclical cultural effect has also been demonstrated:

> respondents who perpetrate acts of cyberbullying have also experienced cyberbullying as victims or bystanders and vice versa. This may be an indication of the existence of counter or chain reactions in cyberbullying, whereby perpetrators become victims and victims perpetrators, ultimately resulting in a culture of cyberbullying. (Vandeboch & Van Cleemput, 2009, p. 1368)

Such an everyday cultural cycle further complicates observations of distinct domination/subordination relations in peer conflicts online, posing a challenge for teachers and schools as they try to implement bullying policies.

**Gender Differences**

In the following discussion, we make reference to studies that report on differences between male and female young people in regard to cyberbullying. Ethically, we have engaged in reflexive consideration of whether we might be reinforcing gender essentialisms around young people’s sociality by discussing them. However, given the nature of our ambivalent findings for both sexes, we do not see gender distinction to be problematic since it is important for demonstrating how our research engages critically with these prior studies.

The teachers we quote below seemed sure that cyberbullying was mainly something girls did. In fact, the research literature is divided on the subject of gender and cyberbullying. Some empirical studies have found that in cyberspace, boys are more involved in bullying than girls (e.g. Li, 2006) and that girls are more often victims (e.g. Wang, Ionnotti, & Nansel, 2009). Others claim that girls cyberbully more than boys (Slonje et al., 2013), given the potential of online affordances for indirectness and anonymity. Conversely, another study reports that boys cyberbully significantly more than girls (Erdur-Baker, 2010). However, Lapidot-Lefler and Dolev-Cohen (2014, p. 1) found that while Israeli boys reported using cyberbullying more frequently than girls, according to their data on cyberbullying from 465 junior high school students, there was “no correlation between gender and victims or gender and audience” in quantitative terms.

Yet as pointed out by Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2007), there are gender differences in the way female and male social interactions at school play out and are handled by peers. Thus, expressions and effects of bullying are handled “quite differently” by boys and girls (Ringrose, 2008, p. 509). So, it would be reasonable to expect gender differences in cyberbullying in the form of practice (see Kofod & Ringrose, 2012). Male bullies often assert their masculinity in physical terms. In contrast, young women are more likely to use covert and discriminatory ways to assert dominance over female peers (Hutzell & Payne, 2012, p. 371) and over males deemed inferior. For example, girls can aggressively sanction female peers judged to be sexually promiscuous, labeling them “sluts” (see Skeggs, 1997). Alternatively, girls who do not meet an ideal body image or perhaps lack the right taste in clothing can be “ignored, belittled and excluded” (Hutzell & Payne, 2012, p. 382). Young women may also spread slander and “gossip.” Another common feature of girls’ bullying is through “bitchiness,” defined as “maintaining power or status through the use of malevolence by virtue of being malicious, spiteful or nasty in order to cause emotional harm” (Schippers, 2007, p. 95). Some may implicitly recreate the discourse of “emphasised femininity” (Connell, 1995, p. 78) by teasing and deriding girls who depart from this ideal—those girls displaying “pariah femininities” (Schippers, 2007). In brief, it seems that while both male and female high school students might be engaged in cyberbullying, the form and circumstances of the practice are certainly distinguishable by gender.

**Framework of Analysis**

**Bourdieu: Field and Forms of Capital**

From the relevant literature considered above, it seems that the realm of cyberspace and the domain of the school operate
as simultaneous arenas of social interaction for young people. In this regard, Bourdieu’s concept of field can help us analyze interactions that co-occur and loop back and forth between cyberspace and school in regard to young people’s use of social media. A field is defined as an accumulation of systems, rules, categories, arrangements, and positions, all of which establish an objective hierarchy, as well as produce and allow particular discourses and actions to take place within semantic or other socially constructed boundaries (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 821). A field is a site of struggle. In the “field” of cyberspace, young people build and maintain status and intimacy, but also dispute such claims and expressions with their peers as forms of struggle between agents in the field. The school is also a field. Here, forms of struggle between agents also take place over matters of status and intimacy. Contestations in the two fields between the same agents can take place simultaneously and sequentially and are deeply entwined. Thus, both good and bad peer interactions in the field of cyberspace are amplified into the field of school, and the reverse, with struggles at school folding back into social media space where they are further magnified. We propose that it is often forms of capital and truth claims that are at stake in these mediated contestations.

Given that the achievement of status and intimacy are key concerns for young people using social media, we use Bourdieu’s notion of social capital. Social capital is defined as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 250). Social capital links deliver benefits to those so bonded. Social capital here describes binding connections between individuals that establish and maintain mutual understanding within the fields of cyberspace and school. Thus, individuals who are valued, admired, and ranked higher than others in the status stakes accrue significant amounts of social capital. This may be seen, for example, through the status games of collecting Facebook friends or Twitter followers. Those who have fewer friends or followers implicitly lose out in the status stakes. Facebook “likes” and “tags” operate in the same way. Moreover, social capital is consolidated by trust between close affiliates, with confidentiality and loyalty highly valued. So when some agents in the linked fields of cyberspace and school break bonds of trust with targeted others, while maintaining solidarity with selected others in the same circle, this degrades the social capital of some peers while elevating the social capital of others. The principle of reciprocity and payback in these highs and lows fosters ongoing struggles for status and intimacy between the same agents in the two fields.

To cleverly negotiate the two fields at once, while building up social capital with peers, requires both social and technological know-how. Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of cultural capital describes certain sets of knowledge that are highly valued in a particular field and operate as a kind of currency to open up opportunities. So cultural capital as a term is productive for analyzing the accumulation and demonstration of productive knowledge in the co-located fields of cyberspace and school. In this instance, cultural capital refers to knowledge of the “right” social acumen, tastes, and fashion sense that pertain to a privileged cultural position in both fields. Attainment of cultural capital presupposes investment of time dedicated to learning appropriate capacities and personal investment in oneself. These are both processes strongly constituted through continual use of social media. A young person with low levels of cultural capital relevant to use of social media may not yet have obtained appropriate knowledge of either the technology (e.g. privacy settings) or, on the other hand, what is socially acceptable or “cool” to be posted. They may pay a social penalty of being teased, mocked, or shamed—online and face-to-face—for their apparent ignorance (lack of appropriate knowledge). This is a form of symbolic violence. Symbolic violence describes the experience of taking part in social struggles where your capacities and needs never seem to quite fit with the demands and wants of the field (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167).

To summarize, in the cyber realm and in the schoolyard, individuals without the “right” cultural knowledge and tastes can be harassed or belittled by age peers who assert superior status due to their demonstration of privileged cultural capital. Their social capital bonds suffer and degrade, while the social capital of those who convincingly assert their privileged knowledge and status rises and is consolidated. It is important to recognize the gendered dimension of this interplay of capitals, and we dedicate some discussion to this aspect in our treatment of the data below.

Methodology

Given the topic of cyberbullying among young people at school and their emotional wellbeing, a qualitative research approach was chosen to allow face-to-face explanation (see Drew, Raymond, & Weinberg, 2006, p. 8). The method was semi-structured interview. A draft interview protocol was developed after careful reading of highly relevant insights generated by the qualitative approaches of Ringrose (2008), boyd (2010), Price and Daigleish (2010), Kofoed and Ringrose (2012), and Weinstein and Selman (2014). The draft protocol was then worked through with two senior students from School X who were not involved in the actual study. They were asked to read over the questions critically. On their feedback, the interview questions were modified. More specific questions on experiences were included to elicit individual stories, and a careful ordering of questions took place.

The first interview question asked the young person to define in their own words bullying and then cyberbullying. This question positioned them as experts on their own life experiences and stories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 6). Subsequent questions were first framed impersonally, such
as “have you seen or witnessed bullying when you have been at school?” Later questions asked about personal experiences, for example, “have you ever experienced, or been involved with, online harassment?” The chosen method of semi-structured interviews meant that the researcher had opportunities to pursue new themes which emerged during the interview.

Interviews were carried out with 10 students aged 15–18 years, 5 males and 5 females, and also with a male teacher and a female teacher in order to gain an institutional perspective on the topic. Teacher interviews asked about experiences of cyberbullying among their students and how they and the school dealt with it. Before the student interviews, it was established that the 10 students had home access to the Internet and their smartphones had online capability. Moreover, all 10 students had their own personal profile on one or more of the following social media sites: MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, Instagram. These sites were checked at least once a day and often much more frequently. All confirmed they knew about ask.fm. These verifications were possible because the first author was acquainted with students from School X through her part-time position as a youth worker at a local drop-in center. The interviews were conducted out of school time.

The setting of the research was a systemic Catholic high school\(^1\) in an urban area of New South Wales, Australia. It is not an elite religious school, although the pupils must pay enrollment fees and the ethos is Catholic. The students vary widely in academic ability and socio-economic status. The researcher position of the first author was somewhere between insider and outsider (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Her role as a 22-year-old local youth worker meant that she had some prior contact with students from School X and was known to the teachers. She lives locally. This gave her some insider status. On the other hand, she was an outsider because she is outside the school and outside the pupils’ social media contacts. She has not experienced cyberbullying. Thus, she aimed to gather data using her partial insider status while assuming that she knew little to nothing about the cyberbullying experiences of local youth. Since she was not part of the social networks of the local teenagers, a form of bracketing could take place (Asselin, 2003). Interview recordings were transcribed by the first author. The data were analyzed for prevalent themes and issues, and then these were coded for further analysis. This two-step process allowed comparison of “similarities and differences” between the participants’ interpretations of the same phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 6).

**Findings**

**Bullying and Cyberbullying**

**Defining Bullying.** As indicated above, student interviewees offered their own ideas about bullying. They were quite clear about it, for example:

Bullying is making someone feel like crap. It’s hurting them, putting them down and maybe even causing them to hate themselves. Bullying can be something that happens to someone once or many times from the same or different people. (Carly, female)

We may contrast this with the official definition of bullying at School X:

Bullying is a pattern of uninvited behaviour directed by a more powerful person or group to intentionally or unintentionally hurt, injure, embarrass and/or distress a less powerful person or group. Bullying may be physical, verbal, psychological or social. Power in bullying situations can be physical dominance but also includes forms such as those resulting from higher order social skills, intellectual dominance, larger majorities or groupings, etc. (School X policy on bullying, our emphasis)

Notably, while the school definition emphasizes a “pattern” of repeated behavior, Carly’s definition includes the possibility of a one-off bullying incident. This is one loophole that students exploit to avoid the school taking action against them for bullying. Another student had more to say about this:

Everyone knows that it has to happen heaps for the teachers to be able to punish you. If you only do it once you probably won’t even get in trouble. That I suppose sucks for the kid getting picked on because heaps of different people can just do it once and nothing will get done so they probably just don’t tell the teachers or anything. (Tania, female)

The teachers endorsed the school policy definition that bullying was repeated behavior. One teacher implied students sometimes misinterpreted one-off negative peer interactions as bullying:

I don’t think there is as much bullying here as there is often reported. I think there is a misconception as to what’s poor social interaction, and what is actually bullying. [ . . . ] they are reporting stuff that I wouldn’t describe classically as bullying and often it’s just two kids having a personality clash. (Greg, teacher)

The school’s definition of bullying refers narrowly to a certain set of repeated circumstances. Yet as Larson below points out, a single instance of bullying can be significant in other terms:

Even if it’s the first time they have ever called me fat or ugly, I still tell the welfare teacher that they are bullying me because I am sick of it happening. (Larson, male)

In other words, to a frequently bullied pupil like Larson, what matters most is not so much exactly who is doing it and how often, but the fact that it keeps happening, even if not by a consistently identified person or group over time.
So before we even get to cyberbullying, the student-favored definition of bullying subverts the school definition of bullying used by teachers. In relation to harassment within the school field, contested definitions permit the practice of one-off bullying without sanction. If a field is a social arena of struggle over the appropriation of certain kinds of capital (Bourdieu, 1984), modulated by relational differences in positions of key players (Bourdieu, 1993), then bullying within the field of school constitutes one of these distinctive struggles. Key agents comprise the pupils who bully, those who are bullied, and the teachers who try to stop it. The struggle for capital is constituted in attempts to shore up social and cultural capital by exercising bullying without being caught, for those pupils positioned authoritatively. For pupils who are bullied, the challenge is to survive in the social stakes while accruing sufficient social and cultural capital to combat the negative effects, and perhaps reverse the polarity. We are aware that in the shifting power relations that characterize the field of school over time, “rather than the singularities of either bully, victim, or by-stander [. . . ] Desires, positions and subjects are displaced, dispersed and moved around” (Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012, p. 16). In other words, as the years go on, the bullied may become the bullies.

**Defining Cyberbullying.** In the eyes of interviewees, face-to-face bullying was closely linked with cyberbullying, for example:

Bullying would be entering someone’s comfort zone, both mentally and physically, and cyberbullying is when you can also do it in writing or images over the internet. (Tyler, male)

It is interesting that Tyler uses the concept of a “comfort zone” as a space which is entered by bullies. This allusion resonates with Bourdieu’s framing of fields as a metaphorical arena for social struggle. Tyler’s contention about mental and physical imposition, achieved through writing or images online, indicates the meaningful materiality of cyberbullying that is typically undermined in school policies, although teachers such as those quoted here seem to have an accurate sense of its pervasiveness.

The claim above by Tyler also supports the findings of Wegge, Vandebosch, and Eggermont (2014) and other relevant research on contemporary school bullying. For instance, at school, bullying “typically occurs face-to-face.” Then, it is “continued through the social media networks, from whence it is again redirected into the physical realm” (Lapidot-Lefler & Dolev-Cohen, 2014, p. 11). In other words, social media can serve to amplify peer aggression by facilitating and perhaps amplifying harassment back and forth between the field of school and the field of the online peer domain. One of the students drew attention to this movement of abuse between fields:

It like never ends and heaps more people see it and can even get involved as well. Then if it’s not enough just on Facebook they do it at school after, so it ends up like never ending bullying online and at school with heaps of people seeing it and knowing about it but not doing anything to stop it. (Sasha, female)

Notably, the student interviewees frequently claimed that cyberbullying is worse than face-to-face bullying:

Cyberbullying is worse. Because, umm, people can join in and the person getting bullied can leave their Facebook and probably go and do something else but the bullying is still happening and that’s not right. (Amy, female)

Well it depends. I mean physical bullying between males can be worse if they have long term injures and all that, but cyberbullying overall is worse. More so cyberbullying I think, because it lasts longer and you kind of never get away from it. (Zane, male)

One girl was adamant that cyberbullying has worse effects:

Cyberbullying is the worst type of bullying because it affects every part of you, not just your body. It makes me pissed off that one person can cause so much harm over something like a smart phone. People can say things online that make someone more afraid, feel more worthless than if they were just being physically threatened. (Carly, female)

This implies that cyberbullying turns the bullied student inward on themselves in a highly negative way. Even the teachers thought cyberbullying was worse:

Cyberbullying is worse because it can be anonymous, because at least with schoolyard bullying you know who the perpetrator is and you can ignore, walk away and report. (Rio, teacher)

Stories were told about the kind of comments made in cyberbullying attacks, for instance:

A girl told my sister, Jen, that she should go kill herself on Facebook. And even though she only said it once, it’s still a hugely hurtful thing to say, like the worst thing you could ever say to someone. (Sasha, female)

It seems this was a one-off incident, supporting the point made above about significant bullying that does not follow a pattern of ongoing dominance by one individual or group. Curiously enough, while Sasha described how her sister had been hurt by cyberbullying, she admitted that she herself cyberbullied others. She gave some examples of her favorite cyberbullying comments: “like yuck you’re a slut, or you’re a huge nerd or that dress is fucking gross.” In other words, within the linked fields of struggle where bullying and cyberbullying are inscribed, struggles over the appropriation of cultural and social capital are expressed in forms of harassment. Moreover, in Sasha’s apparently contradictory accounts, we see the shifting power relations of “bully, victim, or bystander” identified by Kofoed and Ringrose (2012, p. 16).
Both teachers confirmed that the School X bullying policy cited above is supposed to automatically apply to cyberbullying. Thus, the field of the school now allows recognition—and sanction—of harassing actions taking place in the field of cyberspace. However, as the data below suggest, there is a kind of authorial displacement and blurring in the use of social media for peer harassment. The technological affordances in social media of anonymity and extensive relaying mean it is difficult for teachers to use the standard school bullying policy to deal with cyberbullying, even when it is reported. When it comes to reporting to teachers from the student side, there may be uncertainty about exactly who at school is conducting the online harassment and who might have seen it. Notably, as the teacher Greg said, “I know you can disconnect someone from your Facebook but kids seem to be so reliant on friendships that they don’t do so.” In the following section, we explore the mixed benefits of social media for young people.

**Building Social Capital**

Some of the young people either explicitly or implicitly defended peer teasing online as means of building social capital with friends and classmates, for instance:

It’s really easy. Plus, it’s a good way to make yourself look good, like people think you’re funny and that, especially if you’re doing it to someone no one likes at school over Facebook or something. (Carly, female)

Carly implies how easy it is for young people to engage in acts of cyber harassment to build status and consolidate social capital by amusing their friends (bystanders) at someone else’s expense. She takes an authoritative position in the twin fields of school and the online social domain by advancing this claim. According to Bourdieu (1984), social agents subscribe to a particular field by their practical acknowledgement of the stakes, implicit in the very way they play the game. Cyberbullying as a strategy to raise one’s own social stakes can be easily played out if the victim already suffers from peer disapproval. That is, he or she lacks observable social capital bonds with peers and therefore does not occupy a strong position in the field of struggle. In the online domain constituted by social media, popularity tends to be measured as a form of symbolic capital by the number of “friends” you have and the number of “likes” you attract:

Social status wars, the more friends you’ve got, the more social status you have. Even if you have never met them and you don’t know them in person, they still make you more popular. Popularity breeds popularity [. . .] if a kid doesn’t have a social media profile, the kid might as well not exist and if they don’t keep their profile and don’t keep their online identity up-to-date they get left behind and can be bullied for that. (Rio, teacher)

The description by Rio echoes Bourdieu’s (1986) inference that the workings of social capital can be seen when individuals who already enjoy a position of privilege maintain that position by maximizing connections with other privileged individuals.

It seems clear that some students build their social capital through Facebook by mocking and belittling classmates with fewer friends or who lack “cool” attributes. When they do this, they include their chosen “privileged” friends as bystanders and exclude the abject bullied. Through cyberbullying and “getting away with it,” they project their elevated status back into the field of school, and the reverse (see Cote & Levine, 2002). As Berriman and Thomson (2015) argue, within this landscape, young people are driven by a dual emotional imperative: seeking to navigate between the potential emotional pleasures derived through praise and recognition, whilst simultaneously attempting to avoid the anxiety and distress of being exposed to criticism and derision. (p. 13)

The alluring potential for building and increasing social capital with peers is one of the reasons that even harassed students might keep coming back to social media and might also be reluctant to report to a teacher if they do become victims on occasion.

**Cyberbullying and Cultural Capital**

In writing about cultural capital, Bourdieu (1984) described people making judgments of classification which in themselves classify those doing the judging. Cyberbullying can be seen as a judgment of classification, which classifies those who cyberbully as possessing more cultural capital than those who are bullied. The relevant cultural capital inheres in two demonstrated knowledge capacities that carry high status. The first is the cultural knowledge of what is most trendy and desirable in contemporary youth culture. Using this knowledge, cyberbullies can pinpoint in vulnerable peers those aspects of appearance, sexuality, and social behavior that are most sensitive in terms of fitting in. The second is the ability to cleverly operate social media technology to best advantage. Desirable capacities of information and communication technology (ICT) expertise include photoshopping, cartooning, hacking, connecting between devices, adjusting the privacy settings of self and others, guessing passwords, and so on. However, the most important cultural capital overall was technical knowledge about how to manipulate online anonymity so as to maximize in-group solidarity and amusement at the expense of a harassed peer who could not identify the person doing the bullying. For example,

You can cyberbully anonymously and all your mates know you’re the one doing it but just not the person being bullied. That happens a lot, when people’s so-called best friends are the ones cyberbullying them online and not telling them who they are and...
everyone else in the group knows and laughs about it behind their back. Sick friends. (Sasha, female)

Sasha’s description of how anonymity works to abdicate responsibility and sharpen the harm offers a useful insight into the potency of cyberbullying to do harm. One girl carefully explained how one popular social networking site for teenagers—ask.fm—seemed to facilitate anonymous bullying:

With ask.fm you have to be friends with them on Facebook to add them and ask them something. But, yeah like, you know them in person but on there they can ask you a question and it can be anonymous. So it’s someone you know personally but on that site they can be anonymous and call you a slut or whatever so them and all their friends can all laugh about it because you didn’t know who it was. (Emily, female)

This is a specific technological affordance of concealment and denial that ask.fm seems to thrive on. Another girl made the same point:

On ask.fm they do it anonymously so them and their friends know, but the person they are like picking on doesn’t know who it is. It becomes like a big joke to them and their friends and the person never knows until everyone else at school knows first. Then they are laughed at for being dumb and not knowing who it was. They say really nasty things because they are anonymous like “kill yourself you know no-one wants you alive, you’re an oxygen thief.” It’s much worse when they are hiding their identity. (Amy, female)

In interviews, one of the most striking points of difference between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying in student interviews was deniability. The two forms of cultural capital—operational knowledge in the field of cyberspace and familiarity with peer vulnerabilities in the field of the school—appear germane to successfully achieving denial.

Another key feature of social media that favors deniability is the lack of visual-corporeal cues such as irony, gesture, and mode of articulation. This means that cyberbullies can throw responsibility back to the person being harassed online that they failed to find the humor. A relatively common excuse was that they were just joking. As Amy said, the inference is that “you should get over it because they didn’t mean it and it’s funny.” Sasha confirmed this: “you would only say it like twice and then be like, by the way I was only joking like within a minute of writing it.” She emphasized that lack of face-to-face contact in cyberbullying permits distancing from the harm caused:

Even if they cry or cut themselves over it, you don’t have to see it. But, people who saw what was said online will know you’re the one who had it over them. So you get more popular without having to know the pain you’ve really caused. (Sasha, female)

Yet another technological affordance of social media that further favors deniability is the “hacking” provision. Sasha described how this excuse can be used:

They can always use the excuse of “oh yeah my friend was just hacking me,” as a cover up [. . . ] they continually harass you and even if you block them and that—they continue to do it on other people’s accounts. (Sasha)

The inference of hacking again poses an obstacle for the school in identifying perpetrators of peer cyberbullying.

It is notable that Sasha, who admitted she cyberbullies, implies experiencing some online aggression herself. The implication is a back-and-forth exchange of online teasing and possibly hurtful images among the young people at School X. Tyler also referred to the phenomenon of reciprocal bullying, but this time between the fields of school and the online domain:

Some people that are able to use technology more efficiently, they may become the bully or the aggressor online. So what I am trying to say is, someone who gets picked on at school, may become the aggressor online or the bully online because they know how to use social media better and in ways that shame the other person more. (Tyler, male)

We know that cultural capital is knowledge which can be acquired (Bourdieu, 1984), and technological expertise in social media is no different. Tyler claimed that a young person being bullied face-to-face within the field of school could wreak revenge by operationalizing to advantage his or her technological know-how within the field of cyberspace to (cyber)bully back.

In brief summary, cyberbullying accounts from the student interviewees point to their engagement with a complex set of social and cultural capitals. These may deploy not just in the field of cyberspace but simultaneously in the field of school. The fluidity of agency in the online field of social media exacerbates peer anonymity and deniability. This blurring of responsibility increases the challenge of applying the standard bullying policy in the field of the school. Overall, there was ample opportunity for School X pupils to connect socially and to accrue and deploy peer-valued capitals through the technological affordances of social media. While the pleasures of extended social networking were obvious, the downside was the risk of being teased or cyberbullied by peers, especially where this was targeted cruelty carried out by anonymous individuals.

Gender Differences and Relations

In our interviews, the students were sure that boys bullied face-to-face while girls bullied more online, for example:

Sasha (f): Well boys are more likely to bully at school and physically fight the person they are picking on.
Another girl made the same observation:

Boys definitely bully more in the schoolyard because they are all rough and tough and they like punch each other and all that stuff and get dirty, but girls go on Facebook and call each other sluts and do all that crap because girls are bitches. (Carly, female)

Teachers were equally certain about gendered bullying behavior:

Yep, the style is different [. . .] Boys would be very physical and get it over and done with and girls would mostly be social stuff and verbal. Since the introduction of social media, girls have moved on there more to bully and harass. (Greg, teacher)

Yet we found that both male and female students had been cyberbullied. For example, Emily complained that female peers online were “calling me and other girls sluts and saying that we sleep around and putting us down.” This is not very different from Zane (male) reporting “negative comments like ‘you’re ugly’ or ‘you’re useless’ and all that” online.

Girls certainly experienced cyberbullying in sexualized reference to their bodies:

Well last year a photo of me was stolen off my Facebook profile, it was a picture of me in my bikini and someone stole it, edited it and added words above it saying “School X’s local slut.” It was so embarrassing so I reported it and had it removed but it was too late. Facebook removed it but everyone had already saved it to their own phones and even now it still gets uploaded again and again to different meme pages, online sites and people’s profiles. (Amy, female)

This example is instructive because Amy did report the cyberbullying to teachers and the image was duly removed from Facebook. However, it did not really disappear and is still used by School X peers due to the multiple sharing capacities of social media devices. This demonstrates boyd’s (2014) point about the social media affordance of “spreadability,” as well as the permanence of defamatory material. Amy’s story mirrors other relevant findings. For example, Kofoed and Ringrose (2012) found intense sexualization of girls in online harassment. Their interviews with girls in two European countries were “characterized by high speed and high emotional pitch. The transcripts present a whirlpool of sexualised drama and affectivity, all of it rife with the contradictions of living sex and gender in the temporality of teenage life” (Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012, p. 11). Our female interviewees reported harassment about appearance and body size (“ugly” and “fat”). Perloff (2014) claims that peer mockery on social media can have a marked impact on young women with existing body image concerns.

It should be noted that not all cyberbullying by female students relies on direct harassment. There are other ways to humiliate, as one of the teachers pointed out:

Girls mainly use social media these days, and the way they use it is by, well they can do a lot of bullying just simply by ignoring, not allowing someone to be part of the group online, or by ignoring them all together by not responding to their comments. Casting them off so to speak, such as not inviting them to key events over Facebook. (Rio, teacher)

In other words, traditional mechanisms of social exclusion and inclusion by female age peers (Nilan, 1991) are enacted in the practice of cyberbullying (see Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012) and are further amplified by the extent of public awareness about that exclusion (boyd, 2014).

Boys were found to be cyberbullied by other boys in reference to their successful accomplishment (or not) of heterosexual masculinity, for example:

The other day, I seen this guy from my school, who has about 3000 Facebook friends cause he is an awesome footy player, cyberbullying this other guy at my school—who has like 50 friends—over a photo the nerdy guy posted of himself playing backyard footy. The footy player said “why would you post that picture you dickhead, you can’t play footy for shit” and because everyone likes the footy player they all got involved as well and started laughing at the poor nerdy bloke. (Tyler, male)

In this account, the popular boy had already established his social capital at school by excelling at football, a form of skill/knowledge that is admired within that social context. He then elevated his social standing further by cyberbullying a fellow male student who is perceived to possess less social capital (fewer Facebook friends) and cultural capital (nerdy, can’t play football) than him. By doing so, he simultaneously elevates his hegemonic masculine status in the fields of school, cyberspace, and football. It was, however, not all about boys harassing other boys, for example:

I was told over Facebook last year that I’m a mass creep and will never get a girl, all because I tried to say something nice on a girl’s photo. Ever since those six or whatever girls said that, it constantly plays on my mind. It’s affected my self-esteem and confidence and I haven’t really tried to get a girlfriend since. I actually physically get sick now, like want to vomit if I have to talk to girls at school now because I’m scared they will think I’m creepy. (Rhys, male)

Notably, in this instance it was girls rather than boys who mocked and belittled Rhys in sexualized terms. Rhys goes on to explain how cyberbullied boys might feel:
Depressed, they don’t feel right in themselves, they aren’t mentally right and they just can’t put up with it anymore so they commit suicide because that’s the only way to really get away from it for good. Or if they can’t do that they take it out on themselves because they think they aren’t good enough. (Rhys, male)

The possible meaning of Rhys’ comment “they take it out on themselves” was clarified by a female student. Self-harm may seem a way of managing negative emotions generated by ongoing harassment:

I know people who have been cyberbullied and because they are, they cut themselves. (Amy, female)

Interview talk about self-harm (cutting) and suicide in reaction to cyberbullying implicitly included both girls and boys.

The gender order of cyberbullying is clearly different for female and male students. Yet whether it is the discourse of emphasized femininity1 or hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) that is being enacted, online harassment in both cases concerns the achievement and maintenance of positions of legitimacy and authority vis-a-vis age peers deemed inferior in normative terms. However, as Ringrose (2008) points out, standard definitions of bullying do not work very often in addressing the indirect aggression operationalized in cyber-space, although it is potentially more damaging. First, the stereotyped definition of male bullying in primarily physical terms mitigates against effective recognition of boys harassing other boys online. Second, the categorical distinction between dominant perpetrator(s) and subordinate victim does not fit necessarily well with the cycle of girls’ friendships and disputes, where status positions might rapidly reverse at different times. While School X is rightly concerned about the damage that cyberbullying causes to its pupils, the bullying policy at present does not address the core affordances and potentials of new social media as they continue to evolve.

Conclusion

This article has reported research on cyberbullying that explored how young people themselves understand and explain the phenomenon. Their accounts confirm that cyberbullying can have dire effects on the wellbeing of students because it “follows you home from school” (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 277) and into the privacy of the teen bedroom. This finding supports the claim by Papacharissi (2014) that online technologies can collapse public and private domains. It also supports the idea that forms of struggle between agents in the imbricated fields of cyberspace and school take place over matters of status and intimacy. Online contestations fold and magnify into the field of school, and the reverse also happens into the online field. Individuals need to know how to “play the game,” as Bourdieu (1993, p. 73) puts it, across both fields to successfully shore up social and cultural capital among their school peers. In the rise and fall of the peer social stakes of status, intimacy, and trust, those with the highest stocks of social and cultural capital have the capacity to determine who will be subject to cyberbullying and thus endure symbolic violence, and who will be included in the charmed circle of eligibles, even if only temporarily. In this article, we have recognized the gendered dimension of this interplay of capitals. Although some of our findings echo the findings of other researchers on girls bullying girls, we did find at least one instance of girls bullying a boy and another instance of a sports star boy cyberbullying another boy of lesser status for the amusement of his online and schoolyard “in-crowd.”

Notably, school authorities could not readily deal with the unique characteristics of cyberbullying such as spreadability, deniability, anonymity, and permanence. The social media expertise of the cyberbullies facilitated their avoidance of bullying sanctions at school, and they easily avoided responsibility for online actions. We know that teachers “are most likely to notice direct aggression toward a passive victim” (Søndergaard, 2012, p. 363). Given the distinctive features of cyberbullying and the fact that students prefer to keep their distressing social network troubles secret from adults (Mishna, Schwan, Lefebre, Bhole, & Johnston, 2014), it is difficult for schools to diagnose cyberbullying and devise effective sanctions and interventions.

In the case of School X, cyberbullying was rather unproductively framed as a subset of standard bullying. We argue that it must be seen in its own light as a specific form of harassment with a different set of capacities and potentials that may not be readily managed within ordinary school discipline procedures. The young people showed a strong awareness of the significant impact of cyberbullying on themselves and their classmates, yet also seemed to accept that it would continue as a core practice in their youth culture milieu. We feel that both students and teachers need clear guidance for reporting and dealing with instances of cyberbullying. Moreover, there could be productive discussions during personal development (PD) classes on cyberbullying that highlight the dimensions of social capital and symbolic violence. Young people would benefit from grasping how symbolic violence is partly exercised on a person with their “complicity” in that they misrecognize social status divisions as natural, rather than socially constructed (Bourdieu, 1992). Such knowledge might diminish the apparent “fault” of the recipient of the harassment and assist the development of an improved culture of resilience.

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Notes
1. It should be noted that this research project was carried out in the study program of a year-long Honours degree, the limitations of which do not allow for a large-scale study.
2. A system of relatively low-cost Catholic schools is found across Australia. There are numbers of them in every city and many in large country towns. They offer a parallel experience of religious-based schooling to the secular state schooling system.
3. See also “hegemonic femininity” (Schippers, 2007).

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