

Exploring Cyberbullying Through Visual Narratives

Leanne Bowler
University of Pittsburgh
lbowler@sis.pitt.edu

Eleanor Mattern
University of Pittsburgh
lbowler@sis.pitt.edu

Cory Knobel
University of California Irvine
cknobel@uci.edu

Patrick Keilty
University of Toronto
p.keilty@utoronto.ca

Abstract

This study examined the use of visual narratives as a method to explore young people's views about cyberbullying. Two focus groups – a group of five teens in high school and a group of undergraduates– used storytelling and sketching to frame their perceptions of cyberbullying around a narrative and to propose design features that might afford young people the time to pause and reflect on their actions in social media before they participate in cyberbullying.

Keywords : social media, cyberbullying, adolescents, narrative inquiry, design

Introduction

In the hands of young people who are still developing their impulse control and are particularly vulnerable to peer-pressure, social media can allow for "online expressions of offline behaviors" and facilitate negative and damaging activities, one of which is cyberbullying (O'Keefe et al., 2011, p. 800). This poster abstract reports on a study that examined the use of visual narratives to explore young people's views on cyberbullying and for generating design interventions that would combat mean and cruel behavior online. Since social media technologies both embed social values, as well as provide a platform for the constraint and enablement of personal value expressions, we saw these two areas as promising indicators toward technological redesign (Friedman 1996, Knobel 2011).

Two focus groups – a group of five teens in high school and a group of undergraduates– used storytelling and sketching to frame their perceptions of cyberbullying around a narrative and to propose design features that might afford young people the time to pause and reflect on their actions in social media before they participate in cyberbullying. Four "cyberbullying stories" were constructed by the participants, each one revealing two sub-plots – the story that "is" (as perceived by these participants) and the story that "could be" (were certain design interventions embedded in social media). Our focus in this poster abstract is on the story that "is".

Background

Bullying is a historic problem, but 21st century technologies have introduced new tactics for aggressive behavior (Juvonen and Gross, 2003). "Cyberbullying," as a distinct form of bullying, has consequently entered the vernacular, with scholars characterizing cyberbullying behavior as the intentional use of technology as a means to hurt another individual. While the traditional discourse surrounding bullying has suggested that it is merely a rite of passage for young people (Elinoff et al., 2004) the scholarly literature and popular media reveal that bullying behavior both on- and off-line may have lasting and devastating consequences. Juvonen, Graham, and Schuster (2008) characterize bullying as a "major public health concern facing youth," describing adjustment difficulties, mental health challenges, and violent behavior as among its effects. The online environment provides an apposite set of

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factors for bullying to occur. Current research in online behavior and cyberbullying suggests that people with depression (which often affects bullying perpetrators and targets) tend to prefer online social interaction, which may drive more behavior into the “cyber” context of bullying (Caplan 2003).

Efforts have been made to combat cyberbullying through intervening measures. The literature suggests that these interventions can be classified into three types: 1) law and policy; 2) curriculum and campaigns; and 3) technological responses. This study explored the third category of interventions, technological responses, and employed narrative inquiry to prompt user-generated narratives and design solutions.

Methodology

This study examined the use of visual narrative inquiry to explore cyberbullying and design interventions. A qualitative methodology most commonly employed in education research, Connelly and Clandinin (2006) define narrative inquiry as “the study of experience as story” (p. 375). Researchers who employ this approach are united in viewing the narrative as both the object of study and the method (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Our implementation of narrative inquiry departed from the general use of this approach as a means to uncover the experience of our participants and instead probed our participants’ perceptions of the cyberbullying experience as they imagined it would be for someone else. This was done so as to avoid potentially embarrassing any participants who might have not have wished to self-identify as victims of cyberbullying.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain that the techniques for data collection in narrative inquiry vary and might include field notes, journals kept by participants, and interviews. Bach (2008) speaks to the use of visuals as a data source in narrative inquiry and characterizes this process as “visual narrative inquiry.” While Bach’s focus is on photography as an added layer to a narrative, we used sketching as a data collection technique. Tversky (2011) argues that visual communication is a valuable complement to spoken words, conveying information and meaning through “marks on a page, virtual or actual, and spatial relations, proximity and place on a page” (p. 502).

Procedures

Two focus groups were conducted in the spring of 2012. The first focus group consisted of five female undergraduates: two sophomores, two juniors, and one senior. The second focus group consisted of three boys (ages 14, 15, and 17) and one girl (age 15). Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants.

The first session with the undergraduate students lasted three hours, with equal portions of storyboarding and group storytelling. Realizing that three hours may be too long for teens, we shortened the protocols with the teen group, focusing more on the sketching and less on the group storytelling. In addition to the participants, there were three investigators in the classroom. Two of the investigators interacted with the participants and the third investigator observed and took notes.

The two sessions were divided into five parts:

- a) *Setting the Stage*: Round of introductions and a “setting the stage” discussion.
- b) *Storyboard/Sketching activity*: Participants divided into small groups of two or three and then, together, sketched a storyboard that told a story of cyberbullying. Participants decided to situate their story within Facebook. Four large sheets of self-adhesive paper were stuck side-by-side to the walls of the classroom, creating a canvas for the storyboards.
- c) *Sticky-note Activity*: Participants were asked to draw on sticky notes an object or an action that might make people in their story stop and think. Both groups were asked to add a second note explaining why the intervention might work. Notes were placed on the large sketches at a point in the narrative showing where the intervention would happen.
- d) *Group Discussion*: Participants and investigators gathered around the sketches and each group narrated their story. The investigators asked clarifying questions. The discussion was audio-recorded and later transcribed.
- e) *Debriefing*: Participants were asked for feedback on the study’s methods.

Results

The combination of narrative inquiry, sketching, and group discussion proved to be a powerful, non-threatening tool for revealing aspects of the participants' cyberbullying stories. Four stories were constructed by the participants, each story revealing two sub-plots – the story that “is” (as perceived by these participants) and the story that “could be” (were certain design interventions embedded in social media). Our focus in this abstract is on the story that “is”. Figure 1 below shows one of the storyboards completed by an undergraduate group.

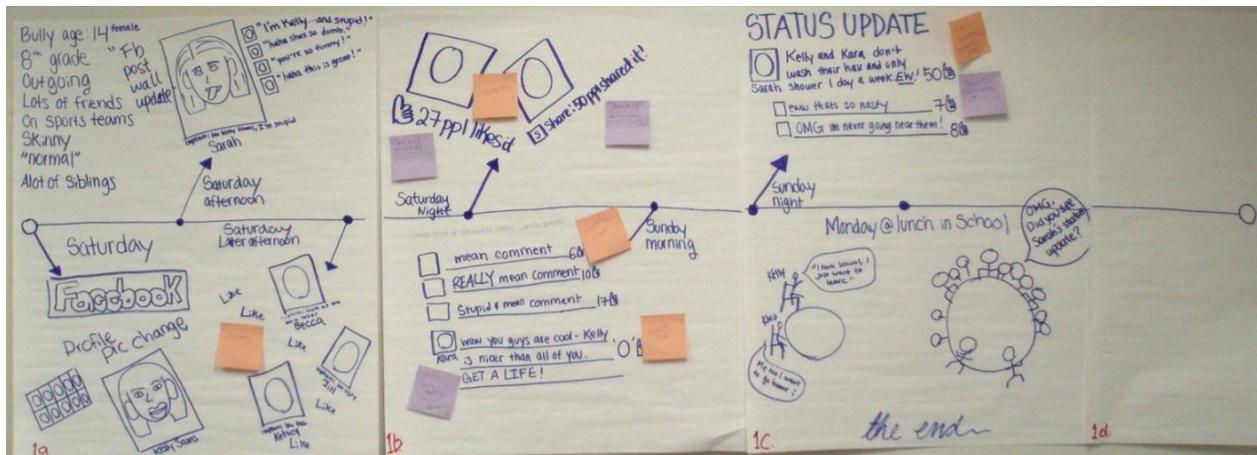


Figure 1: A cyberbullying story

Preliminary findings

- The use of narrative inquiry might suggest that the participants would produce linear plots with a clear beginning, middle, and an end. However, the “plots” were messy, littered with dead ends, unresolved problems, and indeterminate conclusions.
- These were stories that featured a wide cast of characters, revealing a social network that went well beyond the binary relationship of “bully/victim”, a simple narrative structure that is often presented in mass media. The bully’s followers, as well as defenders, bystanders and witnesses, all played a significant role in the outcome of the story.
- Shape-shifting between roles frequently occurred. Defenders became victims, victims turned into observers, and bullies turned into the bullied.
- Adults played a particularly important role, as either heroes or villains. In contrast to the teens, the undergraduate stories did not include any adults. One of the undergraduates conceded that parents *could* have a role but only “from the outside”. This may reflect the undergraduates’ new autonomy from their own parents, or perhaps, an increased awareness of cyberbullying in the adults who surround today’s teens.
- The boundaries between what happens face-to-face and in social media were invisible. In these stories, the story stretched beyond the school *and* even the social media environment, into the personal lives of the victim (unlike in many bullying studies, where the story seems to end at the school yard gates).
- Within the shared narratives, as well as the ensuing discussion, participants indicated a wide range of values at play: establishing identity, responsibility and accountability, seeking help and support, empathy, social acceptance, justice and fairness, retribution, and the tension between individuality and conformity. Interface and interaction design, then, must take into account and seek to mediate a complex ecology of social values to have an effect on cyberbullying behaviors.

Conclusion

Narrative Inquiry is a form of storytelling and, as with many stories, it can be a conduit for lessons about life. Asked to tell a cyberbullying story, the participants uniformly presented one key message: Cyberbullying is a story of power and those who choose to defend others risk becoming the victim if they have no power themselves. Although the participants were asked to propose design interventions that would encourage reflective thinking, in actuality they went beyond this instruction to suggest functionality that would redress the balance of power, giving the victims of cyberbullying, as well as the circle of people who surround them, more leverage for solving the cyberbullying problem. These design interventions and others will be explored in future papers.

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