

EXPLANATIONS FOR CYBERBULLYING

ONE ACCOUNT:

- In 2007, worldwide media reported on the case of Megan, a 13-year-old who was cyberbullied on social media by a “cute boy” named Josh she had met online. The two had an intense online friendship that ended poorly, with Josh branding Megan a “liar and slut.” His last message to Megan was “you are a bad person and everybody hates you. Have a shitty rest of your life. The world would be a better place without you.” The next day, Megan committed suicide.
- The startling twist to this story was that Josh was not a teenage boy but an adult female, Lori, who was married with children, had no criminal record, and ran a successful advertising business. She told police she had intended to “mess with Megan” because Megan had fallen out with her daughter, Sarah. It was later discovered that another adult female had helped with the cyberbullying.

AND ANOTHER:

- As this case demonstrates, although cyberbullying is a growing problem with adolescents (Gannett 2013), it is also an adult phenomenon that has extended to workplace settings (Acohido 2013).
- For example, 46.2% of trainee doctors have experienced workplace cyberbullying that has negatively influenced their job satisfaction (Farley et al. 2015). In fact, it is estimated that the average online stalker/bully is 41 years old (McFarlane & Bocij 2003).
- A workplace cyberbullying case illustrates this (Pershing Square Law Firm 2013): Ralph Espinoza was mildly disabled and had no fingers on his right hand. In 2006, two of his co-workers anonymously created two personal blogs to publish malicious comments about Espinoza. They referred to him as the “one handed bandit,” labelled his right hand “the claw,” and offered a reward for photos of his hand.
- This cyberbullying campaign quickly drew attention from numerous people, including other colleagues and strangers inside and outside the workplace, who also started to cyberbully Espinoza using fictitious (anonymous) names.
- The harassment continued for over a year and caused Espinoza to take medical leave. Although the cyberbullying extended beyond the workplace, the courts awarded US\$820,000 to Espinoza because his employer did not adequately supervise its employees and did not act to thwart the cyberbullying.

TWO ISSUES:

- Although previous research has improved the understanding of the motivations behind cyberbullying, two issues require further study.
- 1. evidence consistently shows that people are more likely to bully or stalk online than offline (Marcum et al. 2014; Slonje & Smith 2007). Recently, it was even estimated that 3.4 million people over 18 years of age were harassed online in the United States annually (Baum et al. 2009).
- Although researchers acknowledge that theories and studies of traditional bullying are not applicable to cyberbullying due to differences between online and offline contexts (Dooley et al. 2009), little research has examined exactly what makes the context of cyberbullying so different.
- 2. It is recognized that cyberbullying in social media can cause more psychosocial and emotional damage than traditional offline physical bullying because of the increased volume, scale, scope, and number of witnesses (Gillespie 2006).
- Worse still, through social media, cyberbullying can spread with a rapid, broad scale that it is almost unstoppable (Huang & Chou 2010; Li 2008).

THEORY

- In the literature, articles that were theory-driven and supported by empirical evidence most frequently were SLT, social norms theory and social dominance theory.
- These theories are either macro-level (environment level) theories that explain how cyberbullying can be directly influenced by the general environment or micro-level (individual level) theories that investigate the cognitive processes of individuals when they are involved in cyberbullying.
- Akers (2011) modified underlying learning mechanisms of Bandura's (1977) cognitive SLT and introduced the concepts of imitation and reinforcement into his theory of social learning (Akers 1973; Sellers & Winfree 1990).
- The resulting theory was called the SLT of crime (Akers et al. 1979), which included "differential association, differential reinforcement, imitation, and definitions" (Akers 2011, p. 48).

THE CORE COMPONENTS OF SLT (AKERS ET AL. 1979)

- **Differential association** is the process by which individuals directly and indirectly interact and identify with others to learn deviant or acceptable behaviours (Akers et al. 1979).
- For SLT, the relevant social groups can change during an individual's development (Akers 2011). In relation to cyberbullying, differential association means that cyberbullies-in-the-making associate with different social groups (i.e., ones with cyberbullies in them) than conforming people (i.e., non-cyberbullies). SLT emphasises PEER INFLUENCE not PEER PRESSURE.
- **Differential reinforcement** refers to the positive and negative outcomes that are anticipated to result from an act based on observation of the consequences of similar behaviours performed by others. Akers (1998) suggests that differential reinforcement is considered "the core behaviour-shaping mechanism", because all the cognitive and non-cognitive elements of social learning (i.e., definitions, imitation) are first shaped largely by the reinforcement process.

THE CORE COMPONENTS OF SLT

- **Imitation** takes place when observing behaviours and consequences and then deciding to do the same (Akers 2011). Pondering the consequences of a behaviour links imitation to reinforcement. It is crucial to SLT that when people are exposed more to deviant role models than to non-deviant role models, they are more likely to imitate the deviant role models (Sellers & Winfree 1990).
- The learning mechanisms (imitation and observation) explain not only how people become deviants but also the maintenance and desistance of deviant behaviour (Akers 2011).
- However, imitation is “more important in the initial acquisition and performance of novel behaviour than in the maintenance or cessation of behaviour once established” (Akers & Sellers 2004, p. 89).

THE CORE COMPONENTS OF SLT

- In SLT, **definitions** “are orientations, rationalizations of the situation, and other evaluative and moral attitudes that define the commission of an act as right or wrong, good or bad, desirable or undesirable, justified or unjustified” (Akers & Sellers 2004, p. 86).
- Definitions arise from the vicarious experience of differential reinforcement and the direct experience of imitating others. Definitions can strengthen behaviour and play a key role in explaining it.
- Akers (2011) distinguished among three types of definitions: positive, negative, and neutralizing. Positive definitions result in the approval or acceptance of deviant behaviour, negative ones result in the disapproval of such behaviour, and neutralizations result in behavioural justification, which at a minimum is a form of positive, temporary approval.
- Akers links neutralizations, originally proposed by Sykes & Matza (1957), to definitions. Akers views neutralization as an extension of differential association theory because neutralizations are learned from deviant peers. Using neutralization techniques, deviants accept deviant acts as “all right under certain conditions” that are seen as “exceptional” (Akers 2011, p. 36).

THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED ANONYMITY

- There are five sub-constructs of perceived anonymity established by Pinsonneault & Heppel (1998) which are foundational to explaining how social media artefacts change the social structure that influences social learning: lack of identification, diffused responsibility, lack of proximity, lack of knowledge of others, and confidence in the system's functionality.
- According to Lowri et al (2013) –
- **Lack of identification** is the degree to which potential cyberbullies believe their personal identities will not be revealed by the social media system;
- **Diffused responsibility** is the degree to which potential cyberbullies believe they will not be held accountable for their cyberbullying on social media;
- **Lack of proximity** is the extent to which potential cyberbullies believe others are not physically close enough to their computer to observe their cyberbullying;
- **Lack of knowledge of others** is the degree to which potential cyberbullies believe others in the social media system do not know them well enough to recognize them; and
- **Confidence in the system to function** is the degree to which potential cyberbullies have confidence that the social media system will not malfunction, involve secret monitoring, or have “back doors” that will reveal their identity against their wishes.

ANONYMITY, DISINHIBITION & SLT

- Li (2007) argues that anonymous CMC “not only fosters playful disinhibition but reduces social accountability,” leading to more engagement in aggressive acts.
- Consistent with this claim, Delmonico & Griffin (2008) suggest that online disinhibition explains “why the Internet is an ideal venue for problematic sexual behaviour”. Lapidot-Lefler & Barak (2012) have also used online disinhibition to explain flaming behaviour and suggest that the disproportionately high occurrence of deviant behaviours such as “violence, incitement, flaming, and verbal attacks” on social media should be attributed to online disinhibition.
- Specifically, online disinhibition occurs when individuals feel free to perform behaviours in cyberspace that they feel inhibited from performing offline (Lowry et al. 2013).

ANONYMITY, DEINDIVIDUATION & SLT

- Deindividuation, is “the loss of one’s sense of individuality and personal responsibility” (Valkenburg & Peter 2011, p. 122). Research shows that anonymity in online or offline settings is one of the major causes of deindividuation (Silke 2003). Anonymous conditions facilitate deindividuation by causing a loss of self-awareness (Silke 2003).
- The social identity model of deindividuation (Reicher et al. 1995) also proposes that “anonymity promotes a shift in self-awareness from the personal to the group” (in this model, the process is also called depersonalization) (Lea et al. 2001, p. 527).
- The “sense of responsibility for actions online” will be inhibited (Brink 2014, p. 4), and individuals may convince themselves that they are not responsible for their online behaviours (Freestone & Mitchell 2004; Harris & Dumas 2009).
- In addition, depersonalization caused by anonymity magnifies the influence of group norms and thereby makes it easier for individuals to learn negative definitions from peers (DeHue et al. 2008).

ANONYMITY & LURKING BEHAVIOUR

- Anonymity allows for “lurking” behaviours in which one can observe offensive behaviours online committed by others without any public or social responsibility to speak out against them.
- In the Ralph Espinoza case no one—including management—spoke out against what was happening.
- Through social media, you can witness offensive cyberbullying, but no one has to know that you were a witness. This can be seen as an online version of the **bystander effect**. This effect has been documented to occur in physical environments in which bystanders do not offer any help to a victim, and it tends to increase the more people are present because of a sense of diffused responsibility, ambiguity, and cohesiveness (Darley & Latané 1968) and the case of Kitty Genovese.
- Preliminary research indicates that such effects could occur online in chat rooms as people see more users being added to a room (Markey 2000).

PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF CYBERBULLYING

- When people experience differential reinforcement that artificially increases perceived cyberbullying benefits and decreases perceived costs, they are more likely to commit cyberbullying.
- Neutralization theory (Sykes & Matza 1957) argues that people who engage in delinquent behaviour “believe in the norms and values of the community in general” but are temporarily suspending them by using neutralization techniques in order to avoid guilt (Siponen & Vance 2010, p. 489).
- People involved in cyberbullying see it as harmless fun and a way to “blow off steam.” They do not recognize the immorality of their behaviour or the psychosocial damage it could cause.
- Worse, the more people who join in on the abuse, the more acceptable it becomes because “everyone is doing it.”

SOCIAL DOMINANCE THEORY SIDENIUS & PRATTO (2001)

- Sidenius and Pratto (2001) proposed their Social Dominance Theory, which posits that human societies are predisposed toward arrangements that maintain and perpetuate group-based hierarchical systems of social organization.
- In this connection, researchers argue that the mere recognition of two groups into dichotomous social categories is sufficient for hostility — group membership itself has profound effects on psychological functioning, irrespective of personality types and other individual differences.
- It is thought that the individual is transformed in group situations. People will show favouritism toward the in-group and hostility and discrimination toward the out-group even:
 - 1) when group membership is random and anonymous,
 - 2) in the absence of intergroup interaction,
 - 3) where there is no history of explicit intergroup competition, enmity, conflict, or status concerns, and
 - 4) where no self-interest is involved.

MINIMAL GROUP PARADIGM

- The so-called “minimal group” studies demonstrate that group members will compete with perceived out-groups even when there is no rational reason to do so. This is acted out not only in face-to face encounters, but also through cyberspace.
- Tajfel & Turner (1986) explain this: an individual’s self-esteem is connected to the position of their group (collective self-esteem) and that even within these, “minimal groups,” there is implicit competition for valued status.
- According to Crocker and Luhtane (1990), collective self-esteem is defined as the extent to which one evaluates group membership positively.
- The “minimal group” discriminatory factor was one of the conclusions stemming also from Sherif, et al. (1961) summer camp studies.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY (TAJFEL & TURNER, 1986)

- Tajfel's and Turner's overall "Social Identity Theory" attempts to explain the minimal group findings by proposing a three-pronged psychological process (social categorization, social identification, and social comparison) linking a group member's need for a positive self-image to discriminatory intergroup behaviours.
- **Social Categorization:** Bruner (1956) states that "the main function of categorization is to reduce the complex object world to a more simple and manageable structure" i.e. stereotyping.
- **Social Identification:** Tajfel defines this as the knowledge that one belongs to a group, along with the emotional and value significance attached to the membership.
- **Social Comparison Theory :** states that identity is organized and maintained through intergroup comparison. It is the process by which individuals will pursue a positive self-identity by comparing one's sense of self with the relevant out-group, and in the process clarifying and crystallizing one's self identity. Therefore, for the individual to feel positive about membership in a social group, they must first feel positive about that social group.

SOCIAL RANK THEORY

- A number of strategies have been suggested to counter perceived social support for unethical actions both in real life and in cyberspace. One in particular of these theoretical foundations has come to be known as "Social Norms Theory (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986).
- SRT is based on the premise that behaviour is often influenced by erroneous perceptions of how other members of a social group think and act. What an individual believes others think and do (in social norms theory called a "perceived norm") and what in fact are others' real attitudes and actions (an "actual norm") are often at odds.
- The distance between a perceived and an actual norm is referred to as "misperception." For example, Perkins and Berkowitz (1986) found that college students often overestimated the extent to which their peers supported unhealthy drinking behaviours, and that these misperceptions predicted how individuals drank.

YOUR TASK:

- Select one topic from the list below and in your group prepare a 5 minute PowerPoint to explain your findings to the rest of the class.
- 1. The bystander effect – the case of Kitty Genovese (Darley & Latane, 1968)
- 2. The minimal group paradigm (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).
- 3. Sherif (1961) –Summer Camp studies.
- 4. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).
- 5. Social Norms Theory (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986) and interventions to reduce cyberbullying.