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Aboriginal Youth Experiences with Cyberbullying: A Qualitative Analysis of Aboriginal e-mentoring BC

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Abstract

Technology has transformed interactions among adolescents from face-to-face to instantaneous virtual communication. Yet the use of digital media among adolescents can be potentially harmful with the risk of cyberbullying. While cyberbullying is a growing concern, few researchers have explored cyberbullying experiences among Aboriginal adolescents. The present study addresses this gap by examining qualitative data regarding cyberbullying experiences provided by Aboriginal youth participants between ages 11 and 17 in Aboriginal e-mentoring BC, which was an internet-based mentoring program in the province of British Columbia, Canada. The analysis of the data highlighted 4 themes: (1) perceptions and use of technology, (2) awareness of online safety and netiquette, (3) cyberbullying prevalence, and (4) prevention and coping skills. Transcending these themes was the importance of Aboriginal perspective and knowledge in mentoring and anti-cyberbullying initiatives. The results of the work presented in this study highlight the potential benefit of incorporating online safety and technology use in interventions to promote wellbeing among Aboriginal youth. The study findings on Aboriginal adolescents' online experiences and perceptions of online safety can assist researchers and Indigenous health providers to better understand the cyberbullying phenomenon.

Keywords

Cyberbullying, cybervictimization, Aboriginal, adolescence, mentoring, information and communication technology (ICT)

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Introduction

While there are considerable positive uses of digital media, the advent of widespread technology use raises concerns about cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010). *Cyberbullying* refers to any behaviour carried out by a group or individual through electronic devices or digital media to repeatedly post hurtful messages to others (Tokunaga, 2010). *Cybervictimization* refers to individuals or groups being a target of online aggression (Shapka & Maghsoudi, 2017). Empirical studies have shown that cyberbullying experiences (as either bully or victim) are often associated with mental health problems, such as anxiety (İçellioğlu & Özden, 2014), substance misuse (Fisher, Gardella, & Teurbe-Tolon, 2016), depression (Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2011), and suicide ideation (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013). While cyberbullying is a growing issue, there is a paucity of research focused on cross-cultural cyberbullying experiences across youth populations (Cross et al., 2015). The aim of the present study was to explore Aboriginal adolescents' perceptions about online safety and their cyberbullying experiences.

Influence of Colonialism on Aboriginal People

"Aboriginal people" is used to describe the Indigenous people of Canada who self-identify as First Nations, Métis, and/or Inuit. While there are educational and health initiatives to ameliorate devastating colonization practices in Canada, many Aboriginal people continually experience health issues, learning difficulties, and/or intergenerational trauma (Health Canada, 2014; Jongbloed et al., 2017). For example, it is possible that Aboriginal youth are targeted for bullying and other aggressive acts due to discrimination associated with their minority status (Melander, Sittner Hartshorn, & Whitbeck, 2013). Melander et al. (2013) conducted a longitudinal study among 702 North American Aboriginal adolescents in the United States exploring the link between discrimination and aggression. Their study found a positive association between perceived discrimination and aggressive delinquency, which was partially connected with feelings of anger. In Australia, Aboriginal people were more likely to be targeted for online hate speech in comparison to non-Aboriginal people (Oboler, 2012). Further, social media sites, especially Facebook, were used in online aggression targeting Aboriginal people. Given Aboriginal people were more likely to be discriminated against online, it is possible that online hate speech may also be linked with other types of aggression, such as cyberbullying, experienced by Indigenous adolescents. To the best of our knowledge, there is no research on cyberbullying for Aboriginal youth. As such, the background for this study has been guided by adolescent cyberbullying trends in general.

Hugunlht'ih (How are things?): Exploring Cyberbullying Trends

Cyberbullying is a growing public health concern that has considerable impact on adolescents, families, and communities with both immediate and long-term consequences (Carter & Wilson, 2015; Fisher et al., 2016). Yet there is substantial variability in prevalence rates of cybervictimization, ranging from a low of 6% to a high of 74% (Hamm et al., 2015). Similarly, prevalence rates of cyberbullying others vary, ranging from 6% to 29% (Hamm et al., 2015). Past findings indicate youth in Grades 8 and

9 were more likely than other grade levels to report cybervictimization (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2015).

Longitudinal evidence shows that attitudes, anonymity, and online behaviour are unique risk factors for later cyberbullying behaviour and attitudes (Barlett & Coyne, 2014). Cyberbullying may include utilizing technology to send threats, ostracize others on social media, and/or post abasing digital media content (e.g., text, picture, or video). Furthermore, the initial hurtful post may “go viral” if online bystanders repost, share, or forward the cyberbullying incident (Slonje, Smith, & Frisé, 2013). Cyberbullying is not restricted by time and space with the relative permanence and public availability of digital media (Tokunaga, 2010).

Some studies suggest there are several coping strategies youth may employ given their perceptions about online safety behaviours (Cerna, Machackova, & Dedkova, 2015). For example, young people commonly utilize technical coping strategies to deal with cyberbullying incidents, such as changing usernames, passwords, or mobile numbers (Cerna et al., 2015; Perren et al., 2012). Empirical evidence from a Canadian study found that adolescents who experience cyberbullying are less likely to seek help from adults or others, but if they do tell, their preference is to tell a friend, then a caregiver, and lastly school staff or a teacher (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009). These various online safety behaviours and coping strategies need to be further explored to better tailor supports for diverse adolescent populations.

Indeed, the advent of Wi-Fi and mobile devices has shifted the nature of social interactions such that concerns about online safety and cyberbullying have become a worldwide concern. Although there is a burgeoning cyberbullying literature, which has online safety implications, there is a dearth of research exploring Aboriginal adolescents’ online experiences. To better understand this complex issue, the current study explored online safety behaviours and cyberbullying reported by Aboriginal youth. Insight into how Aboriginal youth perceive the appropriateness of their online actions and engage in social media may raise awareness of a broad range of cybersafety issues. The main research questions that guided the present study included: (1) What are Aboriginal youth perceptions about online safety behaviours? and (2) What are Aboriginal youth experiences with cyberbullying?

Methods

Data Collection

The data were obtained from the Aboriginal e-mentoring BC program, an internet-based mentoring program developed with initial funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The Aboriginal e-mentoring BC research team consulted with several First Nations communities and school districts in the province of British Columbia, Canada, to partner in the program (for more information see: <http://www.aboriginale-mentoringbc.ca/about-us/our-story/>). The research design was informed through collaboration and consultation with members of partner First Nations and school districts.

Aboriginal e-mentoring BC began in 2009 with a focus on connecting Aboriginal youth with mentors in postsecondary health sciences programs throughout the province. The Aboriginal e-mentoring program is conducted on a secure, password-protected hosted on a partner platform. The mentees and mentors engaged in a curriculum, titled the “Personal Quest,” which included online modules focusing on goal setting, internet safety, study habits, and career goals for a 1- to 2-hour weekly commitment during one school year or semester. The partner platform allowed participants to register by creating usernames with no personally identifying information, and online conversations underwent an advanced automatic filtering system that removed sensitive information. This platform allowed participants the convenience of logging in at any time to participate as the program functioned in an asynchronous manner.

The data used for the present study analysis were based on discussion transcripts gathered as part of the data collection from the Aboriginal e-mentoring BC program during the 2011–2014 academic years. The relationship between the present study and Aboriginal e-mentoring BC program is that of the latter providing the former with discussion transcripts between mentees and mentors for data aimed at understanding cyberbullying and online safety behaviours reported by Aboriginal youth. The data collection for the discussion analysis occurred throughout the duration of the Aboriginal e-mentoring BC program. Discussion transcripts were downloaded from the partner platform monthly and did not include any personal identifying information. A self-report demographic survey was delivered to participants at intake into the Aboriginal e-mentoring BC program. Designed as a community-university partnership, the program established First Nations band and school district agreements to meet each partner “where they are” to adapt the delivery of the Aboriginal e-mentoring BC program in their community or school. Research agreements, with the guidance of First Nations communities, outlined the parameters of the Aboriginal e-mentoring BC program in their respective community or school. The present research received institutional approval from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Review Ethics Board.

Participants

To be eligible as mentees for the program, participants had to be in Grades 6 to 12, as well as self-identify as Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit, or Métis). Self-identification invited adolescents to voluntarily identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. Thus, no proof or documentation of heritage was required. For mentor eligibility, participants were between ages 18 and 35. Mentors needed to commit to 1 to 2 hours per week to connect with a mentee online, for the duration of one school year or semester. Mentors were enrolled in or recently graduated from a postsecondary health science program in British Columbia and desired to support Aboriginal youth in achieving personal, educational, and career goals.

The recruitment strategy involved working closely with Aboriginal communities and postsecondary institutions located throughout British Columbia to identify and encourage Aboriginal youth (mentees) and health sciences students (mentors) to participate. Members of the research team

engaged with youth in variety of ways, such as in-person visits to their school or home community, to inform them of the program and to obtain their assent to participate. Furthermore, the research team engaged with stakeholders identified by First Nations communities and school districts who acted as leads for the Aboriginal e-mentoring BC program (e.g., guardians, teachers, school administrators, chief and council, band education coordinators, and families). These stakeholders ensured that the program took into consideration cultural protocols and community needs, such as access to technology and support. The research team made every effort to obtain written consent from guardians for research participation. Adhering to Canadian Institutes of Health Research (2013) guidelines for health research involving Aboriginal people, as well as acknowledging cultural significance, guardians who were unable to provide written consent were able to give oral consent over the phone, recorded by a researcher on a hard copy of the oral consent protocol. All participants were provided with a copy of the consent form for their records. In order to protect privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Throughout the 3 academic years examined, mentees contributed a total of 4,611 unique text submissions. These “units” of conversation were related to one of several topics in the Personal Quest, each of which had a different focus, but all were generally related to exploring career goals and academic pathways in which to reach them.

A thematic content analysis of online mentor-mentee transcripts was conducted to address the research questions. During the first stage (open coding), the transcript data were chunked into small units. The research team attached a descriptor, or code, to each of the units. Then, during the second stage (axial coding), these codes were grouped into categories. In the third and final stage (selective coding), the research team developed themes that express the content or core themes of the discussion content. A codebook was created from all the data sources. Data were coded and analyzed using NVivo 9.

Results

Sample Characteristics

A total of 189 mentees and 119 mentors joined the Aboriginal e-mentoring program over a 3-year period (see Table 1) and were included in the current study. For mentees, 93 (49%) were young women and 96 (51%) were young men. In comparison, the 2011/12 British Columbia Ministry of Education statistics indicated similar rates of female adolescents (49%) and male adolescents (51%) enrolled in provincial public secondary school across Grades 8 to 12 (Province of British Columbia, 2014). Mentees were Aboriginal students in Grades 6 to 12 across urban and rural areas, including Aboriginal reserves, throughout British Columbia. The largest numbers of mentee participants were in Grades 6 and 7 (37%) at the entry of the study and from an urban community (77%). Mentors were postsecondary students or

recent graduates primarily in health sciences programs. Approximately one third of mentors identified as having an Aboriginal heritage.

Mentees logged a total of 22,179 minutes on the online mentoring platform talking to their mentors. Active mentees communicated on the Personal Quest with their mentors between 1 and 117 times ($M = 28$). Similarly, 101 mentors communicated between 1 and 96 times ($M = 20$).

The thematic content analysis of all conversations resulted in a total of five themes which included 19 distinct categories. The current study is an initial analysis of discussion transcript data gathered from the Aboriginal e-mentoring BC program. The results are focused on one of the themes that emerged—cyberbullying. Units of analysis in this theme included written responses by mentees that included one of the following relevant search terms: bully ($n = 67$), bullies ($n = 6$), cyberbully ($n = 14$), netiquette ($n = 8$), online ($n = 56$), technology ($n = 5$). A total of 156 units were included in the analysis. The following results highlight mentees' experiences with cyberbullying and are organized into four subthemes: (1) perceptions and use of technology, (2) awareness of online safety and netiquette, (3) cyberbullying prevalence, and (4) prevention and coping skills. Each is operationally defined below in relation to how mentees discussed them, and illustrative quotes are provided.¹

Themes

Perceptions and use of technology. This theme includes mentees' reported use of technology and online resources, frequency of going online, and purposes of going online. Youth reported spending anywhere from 2 to 8 hours online per day. The amount of time per day increased when youth were bored, or when the internet provided resources related to a specific interest of theirs (e.g., gaming). By far, the most reported purpose of going online was to use social networking sites including Facebook, Tumblr, and Snapchat. One mentee stated, "I spend about 2 or 3 hours a day on the internet, except when I'm bored it could be anywhere around 5–8 hours. I have a Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, and Snapchat" (emilytara1, line 3102).

On rare occasions, mentees mentioned that their parents monitored what they posted online, but many youth reported they had at least some independence when it came to their use of technology and social media.

Awareness of online safety and netiquette. This includes mentees' self-reported perceptions on the safety of their behaviours online, whether mentees shared personal and/or identifiable information online, and whether they understood the potential career repercussions of sharing personal information online.

¹ Note that some spelling errors within quotes have been edited for clarity.

Mentees generally reported they were aware of online safety concerns. Indeed, not a single mentee said they didn't understand what online safety is. One mentee stated: "I try to be careful about what I release on to the internet, I'm well aware that once it is out there, it's always out there" (2sarah2, line 12).

Table 1
Aboriginal e-mentoring BC Program: Mentee and Mentor Demographics

Characteristic	Sample size	
	<i>n</i>	%
Mentees^a	189	100%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	93	49%
Male	96	51%
<i>Participants by year</i>		
2011/12	63	33%
2012/13	45	24%
2013/14	81	43%
<i>Grade level (at entry)</i>		
6	38	20%
7	33	17%
8	22	12%
9	30	16%
10	14	7%
11	16	8%
12	23	12%
<i>Geographic location</i>		
Rural	44	23%
Urban	145	77%
	<i>n</i>	%
Mentors	119	100%
<i>Heritage</i>		
Aboriginal	40	34%
Other	79	66%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	80	67%
Male	39	33%

^a Differences in sub-total proportion reflect those participants that did not respond to items.

Mentees were also able to recite principles of online safety, including "only talk with people that you know well, don't give out your personal information to strangers, don't insult people online"

(unknownperson3, line 4368). Some mentees were also adept at implementing strategies to ensure they remained anonymous. For example, one youth stated that they alter their information:

Mainly I use fake birth dates, not too far off, but close enough. I never post anything mean, although I will defend myself any way necessary (should the need arise). I never give my [address] (unless it's a trusted site). (Epsilon, line 587).

However, occasionally, even when mentees knew about netiquette principles, they discussed breaking their own guidelines.

I must admit that in the past, when I was young and less mature, I did break some netiquette rules. Now however, I wonder how in the world I was so immature. I have also experienced some bad netiquette myself, a lot in fact. (Tiger2014, line 513).

Mentees also expressed an awareness of the implications of using technology inappropriately, stating that it could hurt their chances of securing employment, or affect the way other influential adults perceive them (e.g., teachers).

Things that people write such as personal information, posting pictures, and swearing or using inappropriate language in their statuses can keep them from getting jobs because nowadays businesses look at their employees' profiles. (amysharon, line 147).

Also, things you post online could affect how peers and teachers think of you too, because if you post a bunch of stupid things like videos of you drinking or smoking weed they'll think that you're not a serious person and shouldn't be hung around with. (LeeshaF, line 1123).

Cyberbullying prevalence. This theme includes mentees' experience with cyberbullying, including self-reports on whether they had been the victim of online bullying by a peer or stranger. Although many mentees articulated an awareness of online safety and netiquette, mentees did report instances of either experiencing or witnessing face-to-face or online bullying. Only 34 mentees stated that they had no experience with bullying of any sort. While some mentees simply stated they had experienced cyberbullying, 13 youth spoke specifically about their experiences with being victimized by online bullying.

I personally have been cyber bullied, I guess. A couple of months ago a friend of mine and I took funny pictures of the two of us. I asked her not to put them

on [social media site], but she did anyways and about 12 of my friends posted a very unattractive photo of me as their profile pictures. (amysharon, line 444).

Other mentees discussed not personally being cyberbullied, but witnessing it happen to someone else. Sometimes witnessing cyberbullying occurred on almost a daily basis:

When you look on [social media site], every single night you will notice a lot of the youth are being so rude to each other, posting pictures of someone and letting everyone comment rude things about them, where it comes to the point you see statuses on [social media site] where young people are talking about hurting themselves or how much they hate their life. It's embarrassing knowing that you know those people who are doing the bullying, even worse when you feel the embarrassment from other people writing comments about that one person they don't like, it's almost like you can feel what the victim is feeling. (wordless1, line 444).

One youth articulated the severity of the issue:

I actually think that this is a big issue for a lot of teens in this generation because we were born into technology, and because of that we rely too much on it. Which means we take advantage of it, it gets used for homework, studying or doing such things as e-mentoring but it's also used to bully and harass people in a rude and inappropriate manner. (wordless1, line 4476).

Mentees were quick to realize that one of the reasons why people are more likely to bully others online is because of the anonymity and distance that the internet provides: "I've noticed that people are more open online because they think that no one will ever know it's them doing the talking, or they think that what they post won't affect them in any way" (Line 1123, LeeshaF).

Prevention and coping skills. One question in the Personal Quest asked mentees to report what they would do if they were cyberbullied or witnessed someone else being cyberbullied. Within this question, some mentees talked about the negative impact cyberbullying had on them, including its being "very stressful and it was just downright horrible" (Kendra12171, line 925). One mentee acknowledged how difficult it was at the time, but that they gained perspective over time:

I was once the victim of cyberbullying. Now that I look back, I realize it wasn't that big of a deal, but at the time it seemed like the worst possible thing that could happen to me. The girl was in my class, and she acted like nothing was going on while we were in the same room, but as soon as I left she'd spread

*rumours and then harassed me on [social media site] and via text message.
(LeeshaF, line 1125).*

Mentees reported various coping strategies, including the following: reporting the post to a friend or adult (e.g., teacher, parent, principal, school counsellor, police), deleting their account or enhancing their security settings so that people were not able to post things about them, ignoring the person completely until they got bored with a lack of response, or standing up for themselves by “talking to the person in the nicest way possible that it is wrong to talk about people online” (deerbear103, line 74). One mentee talked about how they stood up for themselves in the past:

*Yes, I have been cyber bullied online, and I've won most of the fights because
of the ways of handling it. With me, it's talking back, not rudely, but with logic,
do it in a calm way, and don't give them anything to use against you.
(Naktarra, line 1396).*

One mentee also suggested that everyone should think before they post and not post anything they may regret later. Another suggested that a presentation made by youth would be helpful:

*I think it would just be good if there was actually a presentation made by a
youth and presented by youth about these problems because we hear this all
the time and how it's bad, but when something so negative is presented by a
student to others I think it actually hits us. (wordless1, line 10).*

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to focus on cyberbullying experiences among Aboriginal youth in addition to their perceptions of technology, netiquette, and online safety. The findings highlighted four themes: (1) perceptions and use of technology, (2) awareness of online safety and netiquette, (3) cyberbullying prevalence, and (4) prevention and coping skills.

First, for perceptions and use of technology, we found these Aboriginal youth spent 2 to 8 hours online per day, increasing to the upper end of the range when they were bored or when accessing the internet related to their personal interests (e.g., gaming or social networking sites). Balakrishnan (2015) found adolescents who spent 2 to 5 hours online per day were more likely to be involved in cyberbullying in comparison to teens who spent less than an hour online each day.

The second theme, awareness of online safety and netiquette, revealed all participants understood what online safety involves. Study findings suggest that these Aboriginal youth often voluntarily overshared personal information in online contexts. Aboriginal teens have made decisions about sharing personal information on social media sites based on their perception of public accessibility by employers

and others. Past research found anonymity and publicity moderates the severity of cyberbullying (Dredge, Gleeson, & de la Piedad Garcia, 2014). Aboriginal youth participants shared that not knowing who can access personal information online as well as observing what their peers post online influenced their perceptions of the appropriateness of online behaviour.

The third theme of cyberbullying prevalence revealed that Aboriginal youth have an awareness of cyberbullying. Participants shared either experiencing or witnessing face-to-face or online bullying. Those that did share about online interactions reported witnessing cybervictims talk on social media about self-harm and an unhappiness with life. Consistent with empirical evidence, cyberbullies and cybervictims commonly report depressive symptomatology, and in extreme cases, suicide ideation (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013) or suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Our findings suggest a troublesome concern related to young Aboriginal people's wellbeing and cyberbullying victimization.

Finally, the prevention and coping skills theme revealed Aboriginal youth utilized various strategies, such as problem-focused (e.g., seeking help from others or confronting the cyberbully), technical (e.g., enhancing security settings), and avoidant (e.g., ignoring the person). Further, as in other research, factors found to safeguard youth included interpreting the experience as a joke and believing that others experience cyberbullying (Dredge et al., 2014). Our findings indicate Aboriginal youth respond to the threat of cyberbullying by using a combination of cognitive and behavioural coping strategies.

Future Directions and Limitations

Implications of this study's findings have the potential to make meaningful transformations in the lives of many Aboriginal adolescents as healthcare providers and educators shift how they engage Aboriginal youth in health promotion strategies and educational programs. In terms of applied implications, by training healthcare providers and educators working with Aboriginal communities to recognize and respond to technology use by teens, they may be better able to engage Aboriginal youth in innovative social support services, such as online mentoring programs. Moreover, investigating the link between online safety behaviours and cyberbullying has meaningful implications for understanding how Aboriginal teens reveal themselves to others on social networking sites.

Further research exploring the relationship between cyberbullying and online safety behaviours reported by Aboriginal adolescents can provide insight into the coping strategies teens use to safeguard against and appraise the threat of cyberbullying. Yet further research on the help-seeking behaviour of Aboriginal youth faced with cyberbullying is needed. Gaining further insights into the relationship between how Aboriginal adolescents respond to and cope with cyberbullying is essential for health and school programmers if they are to help teens navigate privacy concerns about sharing personal information and how to safeguard against online risks.

This study provides insights into Aboriginal youth cyberbullying and cybervictimization experiences. Yet there are potential study design aspects that may limit conclusions. For instance, only transcript data were obtained and not direct measures of cyberbullying behaviour. As well, the results do not provide insights into the casual or correlational associations between negative online experiences and coping strategies. Longitudinal research is needed to explore the relationship between negative online experiences, coping strategies, and Aboriginal youth wellbeing. Given educational and healthcare efforts to raise awareness about issues of online safety behaviours, longitudinal research can provide insight into coping strategies and online risks (e.g., cyberbullying or cybervictimization) to better inform how we are educating Aboriginal youth.

The seeming ubiquity of sharing digital media content (e.g., pictures, texts, videos) online among young Aboriginal people, its link with cyberbullying, and the continued rise in technology use make culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate interventions an urgent matter. Additional research on Aboriginal youth's online experiences is needed to better inform the creation of culturally appropriate educational resources.

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide a better understanding of Aboriginal youth's cyberbullying experiences and privacy concerns. The findings revealed Aboriginal youth are often aware of online safety and netiquette. Yet several Aboriginal youth in the study experienced or witnessed cyberbullying and/or cybervictimization on social media. Additional rigorous investigation of young Aboriginal people's cyberbullying experiences as victims and/or bullies is needed. Overall, to raise awareness of diverse cybersafety issues, there is a need to better understand how Aboriginal youth mobilize social resources and use digital media in the face of cyberbullying.

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