AN EXPLORATION OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CYBERBULLYING ON TIKTOK

Eve Sylvain[1], Medha Talpade[2]

[1]Clark Atlanta University

[2]Full Professor of Psychology, Clark Atlanta University

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the motivations of cyberbullies and characteristics of cyberbullying on TikTok. Past research explains that a key indicator of cyberbullying is moral disengagement. Researchers found that the lack of empathy is a factor in cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can negatively influence the mental health of people according to research, and is oftentimes correlated with depression. However, these studies only focus on social media as a whole and do not highlight the comment culture of TikTok and the content of these comments. Therefore, a content analysis was conducted to analyze the words and creators used to convey hate. This study answered the following research question: "What are the characteristics of cyberbullying on TikTok based on the comments left on the content creator's posts?" The sample was selected through purposeful random sampling and the participants were split into two groups: the content creators and the commenters. There were 7 content creators and 37 comments. The content of the comments were coded and organized into eleven relevant codes. These codes were then categorized into three themes: *Comments Regarding Creators' Appearance, Comments Regarding Creators' Intellect, and Comments Impacting the Creators' Psychological Well-Being.* To ensure the validity of this study the codes were peer reviewed and rich thick descriptions are provided to uphold the integrity of these comments. Commenters mainly used mockery as a way to humble content creators especially when the content creators were trying to uplift themes. The majority of these commenters utilize profile pictures that did represent themselves most likely to avoid the consequences of their comments. The population most comfortable commenting as themselves was black women, especially when it was under posts of other black women. The demographics of this study was limited and would be best if there was more diversity, the nature of comment sections based on ethnicities could have an influence on the hate comments. This study could be useful for the education system and parents because they deal with adolescents who may be experiencing cyberbullying on the popular social media site, TikTok.

Keywords

Cyberbullying, Tiktok, Shaming

Introduction

Within the past five years, TikTok has become one of the most popular social media platforms used by many people of all ages. Anyone can become a content creator on TikTok, but that does not mean everyone will be protected from cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is not a novel concept, some people have no problem stating their opinions, even if harsh, online. This study will explore what is promoting the idea of cyberbullying on TikTok. As well as what are the characteristics, whether shared or different, of TikTok content creators who fall victim to cyberbullying. Cyberbullies are often referred to as people who lack empathy research studies by Morgan and Fowers (2022) and Li et al. (2023) introduce the idea of cyberbullies having moral disengagement. Moral disengagement is when someone's morals do not align with their immoral acts, this is a characteristic that can predict a potential cyberbully.

Social media is a great way of communication that can quickly and conveniently spread information. This leads to a pathway for negative content to quickly spread by sending "aggressive" and "offensive" messages. (Modryński, 2021). Social media is consumed daily, so cyberbullying is a common occurrence. While it is known that cyberbullying is not rare, there is limited information on what characteristics cyberbullies share. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the postings by individuals on TikTok to answer the following questions: Are there any certain characteristics content creators have that draw in cyberbullies? Do these characteristics have anything to do with race? What are the motivations behind these cyberbullies?

Literature Review

Social Media and Adolescents

The introduction of the smartphone meant that people could access the internet at the user's command. Various social media apps can be accessed via the smartphone. In the United States of America, 95% of adolescents have access to a smartphone (Véronneau et al., 2021). Adolescents use social media for a variety of activities, but the most popular use is communication. This does not mean that all communication is positive communication. The Longobardi study (2020) found that in Europe 20% to 40% of teenagers have experienced some form of cyberbullying. Oftentimes adolescents utilize social media to cyberbully their peers. Adolescents demonstrate their aggressive social media behavior through cyber-victimization by leaving hurtful comments and private messages (Modrzyński, 2021), the online environment and being able to hide behind a screen may also promote these behaviors (Morgan & Fowers, 2022).

Social media is another outlet outside of school where adolescents can gain popularity. Adolescents will engage in "social grooming" to make their online persona most suitable for popularity, which will satisfy their peer validation needs (Morgan & Fowers, 2022). This is supported in the Véronneau et al. (2021) study, where it is explored that adolescents seek acceptance from their peers and this ideology seeps from online interactions into real life. Adolescents seek validation from each other and have a certain set of expectations from their peers. Anyone who deviates from these norms may be subjected to cyberbullying, which is detrimental to the victim and the bully (Véronneau et al., 2021).

Adolescents who are cyberbullied are at a higher risk of suicide and other psychological illnesses (Li et al., 2023). Adolescents are in a critical developmental stage and the increased use of smartphones can cause disturbances in their growth. Increasing smartphone use at night can cut into adolescents' sleep time because it alters the production of melatonin (Modrzyński, 2021). Their physiological health is not the only risk, their mental health is at risk as well. Since adolescents seek validation from their peers they become dependent on social reassurance, if this is not meant it could lead to cases of depression (Véronneau et al., 2021).

Adolescents are at a vulnerable age and social media has become a tool to instill harm towards each other. Around 20% to 40% of teenagers experience cyberbullying through aggressive posts and private messages. People who tend to deviate from societal norms are the typical victims of this form of bullying, as teenagers typically strive for validation it is easy to push aside and hurt the ones who do not reach those expectations. When this becomes excessive it can become harmful to their mental health.

Mental Illnesses Linked to Social Media

Mental illness development or exacerbation is not exclusive to adolescents. Anyone who receives hate on social media or anyone who excessively consumes social media may be putting their mental health at risk. Statistical testing has shown that women's anxiety levels positively correlate to their smartphone addiction. (AlQaderi et al., 2023). This study also reports that depression had a positive correlation of medium effect with smartphone addiction. Internet addiction is positively correlated with stress and cyberbullying (Chu, 2023). Cyberbullying also is moderately correlated with depression (Balta et al., 2020; AlQaderi et al., 2023). Excessive social media consumption can also negatively impact a consumer's body image.

Body image dissatisfaction (BID) is related to both depression and cyberbullying (Balta et al., 2020). A total of 33% of participants in the Schlüter (2023) explorative study found that there are similarities between cyberbullying and body shaming. Some participants in the Muir study (2023) find that online shame (slut shaming, body shaming, etc.,) is the new norm and should not be taken seriously; 36% of participants in the Schlüter (2023) study associate "trolling" with body shaming. These participants do agree that body shaming does affect the victim's body image.

Excessive social media usage is harmful to one's mental state and can lead to cases of depression and anxiety. Immense social media consumption can corrupt an individual's views of their body image. While this is becoming a concern for social media users it does deter individuals from body shaming or leaving similar hate comments because it has become normalized and not taken as seriously as it should be.

The Moral Disengagement of Cyberbullies

A predictor of a cyberbully is their level of moral disengagement (Muir et al., 2023; Morgan & Fowers, 2022; BakioÄlu & Çapan, 2019). Empathy is also low in cyberbullies and shares a negative correlation with moral disengagement (Muir et al., 2023; BakioÄlu & Çapan, 2019). Moral disengagement is used in the BakioÄlu and Çapan study (2019) as a predictor of cyberbullying, which is positively correlated while moral disengagement and empathic tendencies are negatively correlated. Individuals with moral disengagement are moderately correlated to online shaming factors (Muir et al., 2023) which leads to beliefs that victims of cyberbullying deserve it.

Research Question

TikTok has become one of the most popular social media platforms and many people of all ages engage with the app daily. With so much traction on the app, it should be a safe place for all individuals to feel comfortable posting. Despite TikTok's community guidelines, there is still a plethora of hate comments on the app. This study will aim to explore and describe the typical signs of this hate. Therefore, the research question for this study is, "What are the characteristics of cyberbullying on TikTok based on the comments left on the content creator's posts?"

Methods

Role of Researcher
I, in no way condone cyberbullying. I firmly believe it is best to say nothing at all rather than say something to hurt someone's feelings. As a consumer of social media, especially TikTok, it is unavoidable to see negative comments against my better wishes. My bias against cyberbullies is that they are insecure and that leads them to put others down on social media. They more often than not hide behind a profile picture that does not represent them, which allows them to be hateful while maintaining the balance of their real-life social status. To negate my biases, my data has been peer-reviewed by other Clark Atlanta University students who understand the inner workings of qualitative research.

Participants
The participants of this study can be split into two subgroups: the content creators and the commenters. The content creators of this study were randomly selected, but they had to have hate comments to fit the study's criteria. There were seven content creators selected for the study. The study was primarily women, but there was one man who was subjected to hate comments. The sample consisted of two white women (participants 5 and 7), three black women (participants 1, 2, and 6), one Hispanic woman (participant 3), and one white man (participant 4). The ages of the participants were not disclosed.

Sampling Procedure/Ethical Considerations
The comments sections of these posts were extracted from the social media platform, Tiktok. Thirty-seven hate comments in total were used to create codes and later categorized into themes. This study is a content analysis that utilizes the social platform, TikTok, which is a public forum. Therefore there is no need to obtain a consent form from these participants, but their privacy will be protected by concealing their identities. The data presented here has been subjected to peer review by colleagues at Clark Atlanta University who possess significant expertise in qualitative research. Additionally, my instructor, Medha Talpade Ph.D., has peer-reviewed it. Rich thick descriptions will be provided to ensure the credibility of this study.

Results

The comments extracted from TikTok were uploaded to Atlas Ti 7.6.3, and from here codes were created. Eleven relevant codes were created and were categorized into three themes. Some quotes had multiple codes and fell into one or more themes. Quotes that were coded as "criticism" will be considered for all three themes. The three themes of this study are as follows: *Comments Regarding Creators' Appearance, Comments Regarding Creators' Intellect, and Comments Impacting the Creators' Psychological Well-Being.*

Comments Regarding Creators' Appearance
There were seven codes used to create this theme. The most prominent codes for this theme were codes regarding "body image" and "body shaming." These comments fell on a spectrum from backhanded comments to outright malicious comments. The TikTok posted by Participant 3 was about her discussing how she dresses herself as a plus-size woman and a commenter replied with "just a question for you how get you gain weight easy I am trying to gain weight but nothing is work can you please help me," which is not cyberbullying, but is impolite. Whereas other users had obvious mal intentions, "u remind me of a rhinoceros [slightly frowning emoji]," this quote is one of many that were coded as derogatory language. Many comments were coded as "body shaming" and "criticism" simultaneously, such as "if it were up to me u would walk everywhere no matter how far u want to go," and "If you lost back belly he could zip it [laughing-crying emoji]." A couple more codes for this theme were "disapproval" and "sarcasm" which many commenters shared their disapproval through sarcasm, "Not everything for everybody.........." This comment was made when Participant 1 posted a TikTok of her struggling to zip up her dress. The last code for this theme was "negative attitude," which is demonstrated in the following comment, "I'm going to be sick [nauseated face emoji]." This was commented on a post by Participant 7 (a plus-size woman) eating her breakfast.

Comments Regarding Creators' Intellect

Many users of TikTok mock the intellect of the content creators, this could be regarding their "shopping habits" or the comments just had "dismissive attitudes." There were four codes for this section, the previous two stated as well as "criticism" and "disbelief." Participant 1 received the most hateful comments regarding her intellect. One commenter not only criticized her as a person, but her shopping habits as well. "stop buying these cheap ass $2leggins knowing Damm well you going to the corner mart for chips not the gym [3 rolling on the floor laughing emojis]." On the same post, a user left a comment that stated "If y'all really think some pants is going to do that without working out. Something is really wrong upstairs, [male shrugging emoji]," which was coded as "dismissive attitude" as well as "disbelief." Another example of a quote being coded as "disbelief" was in Participant 4's case when he stated he would not date plus-size women, "He wants a muscle mommy, having no muscle himself. Make it make sense.."

Comments Impacting the Creators' Psychological Well-Being

There were two codes for this theme, which were "mockery" and "criticism." These were embedded in every individual's post. Many users use humor to be hateful in TikTok comment sections. This is harmful because it usually attracts other users to make similar comments and the immense hate definitely can take a toll on the psychological well-being of the content creators. Participant 5 was in a TikTok ranking women from most attractive to least attractive. She had ranked herself highly among the other women, but when ranked by the male contestants she was moved to the bottom of the list and comments similar to "baymax got a reality check," were left mocking her. Participant 6 also received comments mocking her appearance, "Most definitely is [rolling on the floor laughing emoji]" when she posted a video saying she is not the ugly ex.

Use of Emojis

Most of these comments utilize emojis to convey their hate. They are not outright angry emojis, but they are more so used as comedic devices while they are mocking the participants. The most common emojis used are the "laughing crying emoji" "rolling on the floor laughing emoji" and various sick face emojis. These emojis are used to make the audience laugh while hurting the content creator. On Participant 6's post she was stating that she is not the ugly ex, a comment simply left four laughing crying emojis. Participant 7 shared a post of her in a dress saying that traveling is for everyone a nauseated face emoji combined with two vomiting emojis. These comments show how people are able to convey hateful messages without needing to use actual words.

Discussion

TikTok users seem to need to humble TikTok content creators. The comment sections with a surplus of hate comments are usually under posts when the content creators are uplifting themselves. This was primarily seen in the comment sections of Participants 2 and 6. Participant 2's post had 2 million views and ninety-two thousand likes and Participant 6's post had 1.2 million views and about fifty-four thousand likes. This ratio suggests that many users are looking at the post as a form of amusement rather than uplifting these ladies. The comment sections being flooded with hate comments support the findings of Muir (2023) where the participants of that study find cyberbullying to be a "norm" that should be taken seriously.

Some of these hate comments are made to add to the surplus of hate comments but also are made to increase the popularity of the commenter. TikTok commenters may strive to receive the most likes on their comments, this is how mockery comments, disguised as humor, have become so common. Many people just want the likes and do not care for the well-being of the TikTok content creator. Cyberbullies tend to have moral disengagement (Muir et al., 2023; Morgan & Fowers, 2022; BakioÄlu & Çapan, 2019), so being hateful on the internet would not phase them, especially if they can receive a bit of popularity. This would explain the influx of repeated/similar comments. "Big bro got humbled," was left under Participant 5's post and that comment received 137.7 thousand likes and was posted on December 5th, 2023. Similar comments have been made since then, such as "baymax got a reality check," which received eleven thousand likes and was posted on January 11th, 2024. A majority of these comments were left by users who had their profile pictures of something random or people who were not them. This could also explain why users are not fearful when leaving hate comments. Morgan and Fowers, (2022) also found that people are more comfortable leaving any type of comments if they can hide behind a screen. When they log off they bear no long-lasting consequences from their comments.

It is worth noting that the black participants primarily received hate comments from black women who did not conceal their identity. Regardless of their ethnicity, TikTok creators had similar hate comments, the more gruesome were left in comment sections of plus-size women. The most notable difference is that black women freely leave hate comments in posts of other black women, whereas the other participants received hate primarily from people who were concealing their identity through profile pictures that did not represent them.

Limitations

The sample for this study was diverse, but the sample was concentrated more so towards black and white individuals. The sample did not accurately represent society. It would be ideal if this study could be expanded and focused on the differences in comments based on ethnicities. This does not have to be just hate comments, but the environment of the comment sections would change based on the content creator's ethnicity. This current study does serve its purpose of providing insight of the potential characteristics of cyberbullying on TikTok. This information could be useful to parents and their children, since social media is so common it is important to be aware of the potential cyberbullying that could entail on TikTok. The education field may find use to study because many students use TikTok, sometimes during class, and cyberbullying can transform into real life bullying for these students

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