Cyberviolence and Victim -Blaming in the Lives of New Brunswick Youth

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Cyberviolence can occur in the lives of New Brunswick's youth 24 hours a day with no relief as they are continually connected to social media, and even when disconnected, the cyberviolence can continue as text and photos can still be shared and commented on. Home is no longer a safe space as social media is ever-present. Recent data has shown that the popularity of social media and the proliferation of mobile phone technologies, including camera-enabled smartphones, has coincided with the increased cyberviolence affecting youth (Statista, 2021). While research demonstrates the prevalence of cyberviolence, there is a paucity of research on how youth experience cyberviolence and what strategies they find beneficial when reporting cyberviolence to adults and educators. Schools still frame cyberviolence as bullying when implementing and designing education and preventive measures to assist youth, which overlooks the criminal element of cyberviolence (Akca & Aydin, 2021; Crooks, 2018; Eikren & Ingram-Waters, 2016; Jung, 2018; Smith et al., 2018; Wick, Nagoshi, et al., 2017). This framing of cyberviolence as bullying is precarious as responding to this violence using bullying strategies results in the violence being downplayed or ignored, which overlooks the severity and criminal elements of cyberviolence. Cyberviolence must include the crimes of gender hate speech, non-consensual intimate photo distribution, harassment, blackmail, stalking, doxing, swatting, and misogyny to ensure these cyber-crimes are considered criminal acts. While there is no definitive definition for cyberviolence, distinguishing between cyberviolence and bullying is critical. When using the term bullying, we do not encapsulate cyberviolence's criminal side, which is problematic due to the severity and criminality of the perpetrator's actions being diminished.

My current research focuses on offering an alternative framework for secondary schools to move away from the problematic "bullying" approaches used in schools to ensure that the criminal elements of cyberviolence are not suppressed.

This paper will provide an overview of the project I am completing that will work in conjunction with schools, educators, and youth to enable youth to have a voice and agency when discussing and learning about cyberviolence in the classroom. This student learning and agency will be accomplished with learning modules that work congruently with the film *Social Proof* (2019) to provide alternative strategies for learning and educating about cyberviolence. This learning will be delivered in a meaningful way for all involved to make certain victim-blaming, and paternalistic/patriarchal attitudes are not used to assist youth when responding to cyberviolence.

Following the traditional format of an academic presentation, with "Context," "Problem," "Theoretical Framework," "Research Question," and a "Moving Forward" section acting as the paper's conclusion, this paper will provide an overview of my current project.

Context

The learning modules I am creating will work alongside the film *Social Proof* (2019), which documents the cyberviolence experienced by a young girl who died by suicide. Her death was

directly related to the cyberviolence and victim- blaming she experienced after her intimate photo was shared online by her schoolmates. This film, meant to open conversations, is centered around cyberviolence and victim-blaming to assist educators, parents, and youth in identifying and recognizing how the current paternalistic/patriarchal and victim-blaming strategies used by adults when assisting youth with cyberviolence are pernicious. Recently, many real-life examples of cyberviolence have been in the media that unfortunately have ended in death by suicide for many youths, including Amanda Todd, Rehtaeh Parsons, Allem Halkic, Christopher J. Dawley, Matilda 'Tilly' Rosewarne, Liu Xuezhou, McKenai Adams, and Giovanni Bourne. This list is not exhaustive, as many more youths have died by suicide directly caused by cyberviolence.

My project is designed to include youth in implementing the learning modules, discussions, and research. Ensuring youth voices are heard and included is paramount. As identified by Waite and Conn (2015), "when the most marginalized themselves are engaged in identifying the issues that affect them and the possible solutions for addressing them, the interventions are more likely to work" (Benjamin-Thomas et al., 2019, p. 2). Without including marginalized individuals and groups in research, we can fall prey to speaking for these groups rather than speaking with them, resulting in not hearing what issues are important to them. As demonstrated in the earlier phases of their research, the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Foundation for Family Violence, 2015, noted that youth often encounter paternalistic approaches to dealing with serious issues such as stalking, harassment, exploitation, blackmail, and hate speech. Examples of paternalistic approaches used when dealing with the above cyber-violent crimes include telling youth to disconnect from social media, telling youth that exhibiting any sexual agency is wrong, and punishing youth for posting images that result in cyberviolence, and dictating how youth should conduct themselves online. I posit that these patriarchal attitudes affect boys and girls differently. Girls are told to guard their sexuality and be good girls. Boys are encouraged to seek out girls and images they often use for bragging rights and the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity within their peer group. Paternalistic attitudes often result in youth being told what to do or not to do rather than having their agency respected. Youth are also often excluded from developmental and educational programs directly affecting them (Chowa et al., 2021). Because of their age, this marginalization also prevents them from decision-making processes due to the structural, procedural, economic, social, and political barriers society has in place. These barriers result in many youths not having access to the programs and support they need, which directly results in their voices not being heard (Chowa et al., 2021).

Problem/Issue

In society, the terms cyberviolence and cyberbullying are often used interchangeably (The Muriel McQueen Fergusson Foundation of Family Violence, 2015), even though there must be a significant difference in the definition of the two terms. Framing the issues identified above as a form of cyberviolence draws better attention to the power and gender dynamics at play and the harmful and criminal elements that stem from these actions.

The term *cyberbullying*, popularized in 1999, refers to using electronic communication and technology to bully others repeatedly and intentionally using humiliation, slander, gossip, harassment, and threats (Englander et al., 2017; Kazan, 2020). Cyberviolence also intentionally uses technology to cause harm in the same way as cyberbullying, but cyber-violent behaviors online are far beyond simple bullying and are forms of violence and criminal in character and need to be defined as violence, not bullying.

Another element overlooked when referring to cyberviolence as cyberbullying is the broader questions about power, privilege, marginalization, oppression, institutions, discourses, and society that get ignored. When we do not consider broader social forces like sexism, racism, heteronormativity, ableism, and transphobia as forms of violence, we miss the opportunity to understand what forces drive the intentional infliction of harm through cyber-violent acts (Goldberg, 2019). Control and power need to be included in the definition of cyberviolence to illustrate how societal forces validate imbalances of power between the individual targeted and the perpetrator(s) of cyberviolence.

Documented by DoSometing.org (2020), their worldwide statistical research illuminates the ubiquity and prevalence of cyberviolence in the lives of youth aged 12-17 as it reports 37% of these youth have been affected by cyberviolence. This statistic is problematic in two ways; the first is the percentage of youth experiencing cyberviolence may be higher than reported, as DoSometing.org (2020) suggests that there are many more youth experiencing cyber-violent acts, but only one in ten of these youth will inform a parent and/or adult about their abuse. The second reason this statistic is problematic is that research has consistently shown that cyberviolence can often lead to depression, self-harm, suicide, and suicide ideation by those experiencing cyberviolence (Citron, 2014).

Illustrating the prevalence of cyberviolence occurring on social media platforms, Kristof's (2020) research on the global occurrence of cyberviolence on social media platforms mirrors the work presented on DoSomething.org (2020) demonstrating the severity and frequency of cyberviolence in the lives of youth. For example, Kristof's (2020) findings show that in 2019 Facebook removed 12.4 million images related to child exploitation in three months, and Twitter closed 264,000 accounts in 6 months for engaging in the sexual exploitation of children. Goldberg (2020) addresses how COVID-19 has contributed to the increase in these numbers; she reports how, since 2019, there has been an increase of 50% in non-consensual intimate photo distribution cases and a 75% increase in the number of underage victims affected by sex crimes. These statistics demonstrate why education and support are needed to assist individuals affected by these brutal, unrelenting cyber-crimes.

Theoretical Framework

My project's theoretical framework focuses on the crimes of cyberviolence and how these criminal attacks directly contribute to victim-blaming discourses when paternalistic/patriarchal ideologies and attitudes are the foundation used to assist those experiencing cyberviolence.

Cyberviolence is structured around power and control, resulting in the ideological belief and practice of victim-blaming. Stroble (2010) refers to victim-blaming as a "secondary victimization" due to third parties' problematic reactions and actions that exacerbate the victims' original suffering. Building on Stroble's (2010) definition, Hafer et al. (2019) explain, "victim-blame occurs when individuals attribute a victim's plight to a cause that is perceived as to be under the victim's control, even in the absence of obvious cues regarding the cause of the victim's fate" (p. 3). By blaming the individual, the perpetrator/s shifts the blame for their crimes and places it back on those affected by them. This shift in accountability is directly related to gender stereotypes that dictate women and marginalized individuals are naïve and deserving of the crimes that happen to them (Citron, 2014). These gender stereotypes dictate individuals' expected characteristics, traits, and social positions they must fit into based on their identified gender. When an individual does not fit into these unrealistic gender expectations, victim-blame

often occurs. Victim-blaming statements include comments and thoughts such as: why did you take the photo in the first place if you did not want it shared? Why did you wear that outfit if you did not want to receive sexual comments? What did you expect to happen posting a photo like that on your Facebook?

The literature identifies two reasons for victim-blaming discourses: the defensive attribution hypothesis and the just-world theory. Shaver's (1970) defensive attribution hypothesis suggests that when an individual experiences an adverse event, observers will blame the victim for these adverse events as a way of protecting themselves from possible future victimization. This defense mechanism directly contributes to victim-blaming as individuals find it easier to blame the individuals experiencing cyberviolence rather than think it could happen to them. Placing blame allows individuals to believe cyberviolence cannot happen to them as they would be more careful than the individual experiencing cyberviolence, which removes any responsibility for the crime from the perpetrator(s), placing blame on the individual experiencing cyberviolence.

Just-world theory, defined by Mckinlay and Lavis (2020) as "the tendency for people to believe the world is just and orderly and people get what they deserve (e.g., "that wouldn't have happened to her if she did not deserve it") (p. 391) is the second theory used in literature as a possible reason for victim-blaming. Combined, both theories are harmful as they blame the youth experiencing the cyber-violent acts, which diminishes or removes the focus from the criminal acts of cyberviolence. This myopic focus on blaming the victim is directly related to the adverse emotional harm and secondary victimization of the individual experiencing cyberviolence.

Research Question and Proposed Methodology

Two central questions guide my proposed project. The first guiding question is how can a youth-made-participatory film be used in a meaningful way to engage educators and youth in discussions about cyberviolence and victim- blaming in New Brunswick's secondary classrooms? The second question guiding this project is what concepts are essential for youth and teachers when addressing cyberviolence in an equitable and socially just way in schools?

Responding to these above questions, this project assumes that dealing with non-consensual images, stalking, doxing, hate speech, and harassment in schools as cyberbullying is problematic. To offer an alternative to problematic 'bullying' approaches in schools, this project proposal outlines a series of learning modules in secondary schools intended to address the above issues. This project also aims to end the patriarchal/ paternalistic attitudes that contribute to victim-blaming.

The research will be completed by visiting secondary schools in New Brunswick to witness the themes and conversations identified by educators and youth when faced with cyberviolence. Ensuring the classroom would be a positive, safe learning environment for youth is paramount. The learning modules will be designed to promote a "flipped learning classroom" defined by Brewer and Movahedazarhouligh (2018) as a space for youth to collaboratively engage in discussion with the teacher and each other rather than have the teacher be the only "expert." Including youth will allow youth to have a voice and agency in their learning. This flipped-classroom approach to teaching allows youth to have a voice and agency in discussions surrounding their experiences with cyberviolence. The flipped-classroom approach will use open-ended questions and guided conversation, designed by myself using relevant data, to encourage students to share their experiences. Allowing students to decide what to share and how to share

this information is critical for them to feel safe and supported in discussing the cyberviolence they have experienced or witnessed. This research will work to dismantle current approaches used when dealing with cyberviolence and youth. To ensure all students are safe, I will be recommending that a guidance counselor be available, so any traumatic, serious, or criminal issues that arise are handled according to school policies.

Moving Forward

In completing these learning modules and witnessing them being used in the classroom, my project will work in three ways. First, it will aim to end the problematic discourse of using the term cyberbullying in schools to encapsulate cyberviolence. Reframing cyberbullying as cyberviolence will ensure that cyberviolence's criminality is recognized and the severity of the crime is evident, so the cyberviolence is not trivialized or disregarded when reported. Second, my project will offer education and conversation around victim-blaming attitudes, which will work to dismantle the ideological belief in victim-blaming for teachers and youth. Lastly, my project will research how youth view, process, report, and wish to be assisted when experiencing cyberviolence without using patriarchal/paternal attitudes and victim-blaming discourses.

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Shannon is also currently working on learning modules to be used in New Brunswick's secondary schools to aid in teaching about cyberviolence in a meaningful way and to gather relevant research on how the province's youth wish to be educated and treated when experiencing these cyber-crimes.