

Cyber bullying: Child and youth spirituality



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Digital culture is part of children's and adolescents' everyday lives. Digital culture has both positive and negative consequences. One such negative consequence is cyber violence that has been termed cyber bullying. Cyber bullying can cause serious emotional, behavioural and academic problems for both the victim and the bully. Although there is ongoing research on the effects of cyber bullying on children and youth in South Africa, no research has been carried out on how children's and youth's spirituality may be affected when they are cyber bullied. This article discusses the accumulative results from different South African institutes that have researched the cyber bullying effects on children and adolescents. These results point to the spiritual effects that children and youth may experience as a result of cyber bullying. This article proposes that spirituality may prevent cyber bullying and even help children and youth heal from the trauma caused by cyber bullying. This article contributes in starting a conversation that may result in more specific research being done on how the spiritual lives of children and adolescents may be affected through the trauma caused by cyber bullying.

Introduction

Digital culture is now the norm in the everyday lives of children¹ and the youth². It is part of their social and cultural framework. As information is so readily available to everyone via devices such as computers and cellphones, children and youth will immediately consult them for information or to socialise with their peers (McQuade, Colt & Meyer 2009:12). Children and youth 'are creating and representing the digital culture of contemporary youth' (McQuade et al. 2009:12). Hence, digital culture has also become a prominent element in how children and youth form their identity (Yust 2014:133). A person's identity is what makes him or her distinct from other people, and spirituality helps people seek for the purpose and reason for their existence (Eaude 2006:17).

Identity (individual character) and lifestyle are thought to nurture the development of spirituality (Witmer & Sweeney 1992:141). Hence, digital culture in children and adolescent spirituality will be prominent in how they form spirituality. Yust (2015:129) explains that 'it is imperative that scholars and practitioners of children's spirituality understand how participation in digital culture is shaping the spiritual lives of children and youth'. This kind of participation with digital culture can both nurture and damage children and youth. This article will focus on the damaging effect of cyber bullying (for the nurturing aspect of technology see Strasburger, Jordan & Donnerstein 2010:762; Yust 2015:129–138). Not all digital culture has a negative effect on children and youth; when used responsibly, digital culture may be a powerful educational tool, amongst other beneficial aspects for children and youth.

There is ongoing research on the effects of cyber bullying on children and youth in South Africa. However, there has been no research on how children's and youth's spirituality may be affected when they are cyber bullied. Hoff and Mitchell (2010:63) explain that although studies that report the mean and percentages of cyber bullying are important to help create policies that authorities might use to respond appropriately to this social phenomenon, these studies do not take into account deeper and more personal issues that may result as an effect of cyber bullying. The aforementioned studies:

may not reveal the complicated ways in which this social phenomenon [*cyber bullying*] is grounded in students' sense of self and their insecurities about how they are seen by others. (Hoff & Mitchell 2010:63)

This may include how cyber bullying is affecting children's and adolescents' spiritual lives.

1.A person between infancy and puberty (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/child>).

2.A person between adolescence and maturity (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/youth>).

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The purpose of this article is to examine the research done by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) and Youth Research Bureau of Market Research at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and consider the data they have gathered on the effect of violence from cyber bullying on children and youth. This article hopes to begin a conversation that will lead to more specific research being undertaken on how the trauma caused by cyber bullying may ultimately affect child and youth spirituality relating to both the victim and the perpetrator. I will also explore the possibility that cyber bullying may be combated by choosing to live out a spiritually conscious life.

Identity and spirituality of children and youth

The formation of identity and spirituality are connected to each other, and the process is complex and multi-layered. It involves many aspects of people's lives and everyday encounters. Identity is shaped by the interaction between a person and his or her society (Berger & Luckmann 1976:195). The same can be said for the shaping of one's spirituality. Identity is a cardinal feature of spirituality. Part of the dialectic between the individual and society is the sacred. People face the sacred 'as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet, this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order' (Berger 1969:35). Berger (1969:35) explains how in a world filled with chaos, it is the sacred that tames the dangers of constant chaos in everyday life.

Apostolides (2017:2) explains how children initially engage with their parent's world to form and shape identity and spirituality. As children get bigger and as their language skills improve, they challenge their world (Coles 1998:143). As the children become adolescents, they may reject their parent's world altogether. This rejection is not necessarily permanent but part of an adolescent's exploration of who they are. Hay and Nye (1998:4) explain that children's transcendent encounters are not 'culturally constructed illusions' and that they have a quantitative reality. Hence, children's spirituality is not shaped by cultural illusions but is established in experiences that help in their search for meaning and may even help transcend and transform their ego (see Finnegan 2008; Harris 2007). As children become adolescents, their world becomes bombarded with multiple discourses taking place at the same time, all the time (especially through social media), making this part of the assimilation process from their social environment that shapes and forms their identities and spiritualities (Apostolides 2017:3).

In his *Stages of Faith*,³ Fowler (1981) explains how stage three (adolescent stage, 12+ years of age) 'becomes a permanent place of equilibrium' (Fowler 1981:172). Adolescence can be a conformist stage, as what others think of the adolescent is sometimes crucial to the adolescent; some people do not

mature past this stage of life (Fowler 1981:172). The need to conform is the reason why adolescents want to fit in with their peers (youth culture). Adolescence is the stage where the young person may first use 'operational thinking', allowing for the person to think about what they are thinking (Fowler 1981:152). Hence, adolescence is the stage where the adolescent assesses the meaning of his or her life.

Once the adolescent is ready to move to stage four (beginning at approximately the age of 21), he or she may have contradictory thoughts and conflicts with what he or she once had respect for. These conflicts are essential in the adolescent's life to assist him or her to take on the responsibility for his or her commitments and the way he or she chooses to live out his or her life (Fowler 1981:182). The above challenges may eventually help the adolescent to choose not only who he or she wants to be but also the values he or she will choose to live by as adults.

In this article, spirituality is a 'conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives' (Sheldrake [2005] 2013:1). Fowler (1981:15) describes faith in a similar way to the above definition of spirituality: 'Faith has to do with the making, maintenance, and transformation of human beings'. Spirituality has 'certain life-enhancing beliefs about human dignity, human rights, and reverence for life' (Witmer & Sweeney 1992:141). Spirituality is not exclusive to any religion. Spirituality is not religion. However, spirituality can be derived from religious practices and personal experiences from a particular religion. In such cases, people are seeking to make a connection with the mystery that envelops the sacred and a higher power, such as God (Tracey 2010:11). All people are inherently spiritual (Perrin 2007:20). A child's⁴ 'spiritual development begins at infancy and continues throughout adolescence. Changes shape and uplift all areas of a child's holistic, whole development' (Harris 2014:13). Spirituality, which involves the ultimate questions of Who? Why? and What?, does not stop evolving in adolescence but continues through a person's lifetime according to his or her life experiences (Apostolides 2017:3). However, it appears that during adolescence there may be an opportunity for spiritual awakening to be experienced (Templeton & Eccles 2006:260). This awakening may be due to the 'developmental changes that occur during and following puberty, adolescence may be a sensitive period for spiritual development' (Good & Willoughby 2008:35). Consequently, the adolescent can make decisions at this stage of his or her life that may have lifelong consequences.

A study conducted on adolescents and spirituality showed that spirituality is an essential aspect of adolescence, especially in adolescent resilience (Raftopoulos & Bates 2011:163). The

3. Fowler's (1981) *Stages of Faith* sought to understand the developmental process in human faith.

4. Child and adolescent spiritual development is a huge topic that has been researched from many different perspectives. Psychologists, psychiatrists, educators, and theologians, amongst other professionals who come into direct contact with children, write about what they have observed, or undertake studies on children and their spiritual experiences. The following works offer a handful of examples: Coles (1998); Hay and Nye (2008); Ratcliff (2004); Eade (2006); Roehlkepartain et al. (2006); Yust et al. (2006); Harris (2007; 2014); Hyde (2008); Tracey (2010); Yust (2014; 2015).

study also revealed that spirituality helps adolescents recover from the low points in their lives. The adolescents that were questioned in the study on how spirituality helped them with their low points explained that spirituality provided them with a sense of protection, security and comfort (Raftopoulos & Bates 2011:163). Hence, spirituality to these adolescents was an essential part of coping with everyday life experience.

In a study done to explore the experiences and meanings adolescents associate with spirituality, it was found that some adolescents identified spirituality with well-being and good self-esteem (Spur, Berry & Walker 2013:228). Hence, those adolescents who chose to live out spiritual values seemed to have a positive approach to their self-worth.

Bullying/Cyber bullying

Bullying is not a new phenomenon at schools. However, the added factor of technology has resulted in a different and more disturbing and destructive type of bullying, namely, cyber bullying (Sabella, Patchin & Hinduja 2013:2704).

Bullying

Bullying is when school-aged children and youth physically or verbally abuse another person or group of people. The behaviour is aggressive and occurs repeatedly. Bullying includes actions such as spreading rumours, threatening and physical attacks (Stopbullying.gov n.d.:1).

Cyber bullying

Cyber bullying entails bullying that occurs through communication technology such as texts, instant messaging, online forums and so on, 'to harass, threaten or humiliate another child or teen' (South African Police Services n.d.:1). Hindjun and Patchin (2012:5) define cyber bullying as the 'willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other devices'. As most people always keep their cell phones with them, this is the medium typically used for cyber aggression (Burton & Mutongwizo 2009:5). Sax (2010:60) explains that the bullying of previous generations differs in two ways with cyber bullying: (1) it is non-stop, and the victim cannot escape (people always carry their phones with them) and (2) the bully can easily remain anonymous. This anonymity means that where a bully was previously identified by the victim, the cyber bully can easily remain hidden from their victims. Added to this list is the possibility created by social media for the bully to have a 'larger audience at a higher speed and has the ability to create and alter images' (Tustin, Goodness & Basson 2014:13). The fact that the bully can be anonymous and cause such vicious damage to another has a more disconcerting effect than conventional bullying. Limber (2005:1) points out that often youth do not report incidents of cyber bullying as they fear that their devices will be confiscated by their parents.

Cyber bullying can lead to, amongst numerous problems, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, isolation, loneliness,

bunking from school and so on (Popovac & Leoschut 2012:5). Cyber bullying can in extreme situations lead to suicide. However, Sabella et al. (2013:2705–2706) have pointed out that there is no conclusive evidence to link suicide incidents directly to cyber bullying, but it is often part of a larger life circumstance that may aggravate the suicide.

Sexting

Sexting is 'the sending of sexually explicit messages or images by cellphone'.⁵ Sexting will be included in this article as sexting may be used to cyber bully another person (Badenhorst 2011:3). Sometimes after a break up, adolescents may post on the Internet the nude pictures they have received from an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend as revenge (Badenhorst 2011:3). In these cases, sexting crosses over to cyber bullying. Sexually explicit images of minors, even if they are sent by themselves, or the images are saved on their phones, may be considered as child pornography and 'is a contravention of legislation prohibiting the possession, distribution, creation or production of child pornography' (Badenhorst 2011:3). As this is illegal, the child or adolescent may be prosecuted.

On 18 May 2015, the Department of Basic Education in South Africa posted an urgent call to schools and parents to educate adolescents on sexting (South African Government 2015:1).

This call came after 20 naked photos of schoolboys from Pretoria were posted on a fake Twitter account and cyber forensic specialists revealed that 200 Grade 11 pupils from Johannesburg were sending or receiving naked images of themselves and classmates.

The damage done to adolescents from sexting may have dire consequences. Once the pictures go online and then viral 'the adolescents are within hours exposed to millions of viewers, leaving them in immense distress, embarrassed, humiliated, and deeply ashamed, even to the point of suicide' (South African Government 2015:1).

What the South African research says on cyber bullying

Here I will look at four studies that were done between 2009 and 2014 in different provinces, regions and cities of South Africa.

A study was done in 2009 by CJCP on 1726 youth from Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Port Elizabeth. This pilot study was conducted to determine if a more extensive study needed to be conducted on cyber violence. The study employed an urban sample from the four largest cities in South Africa. The study involved children and youth between the ages of 12 and 24 from random socioeconomic backgrounds and made the following findings (Burton & Mutongwizo 2009:1–12):

⁵<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sexting>

1. A total of 48% of the children and youth reported cyber aggression such as being harassed via their phones.
2. A total of 37% of the children and youth reported being cyber bullied.
3. Of the children and youth interviewed, one out of three had reported some form or other of cyber aggression at school.
4. Electronic aggression was often experienced via voice calls, text messages, instant messaging, emails, videos and photographs (these are in order of frequency).

The study also found that cyber bullying could have more damaging and longer lasting effects on children and youth than face-to-face bullying, as anything posted online may be permanent and can, therefore, come back to haunt the victim later on in life. The victims experience loneliness and are prone to depression that has been directly linked to cyber violence. 'Such acts also undermine the victim's formation of positive, healthy and pro-social relationships with peers' (Burton & Mutongwizo 2009:8). Cyber violence is often connected to some psychosocial behaviour and risky behaviours. Burton and Mutongwizo (2009:8) also reported that those who commit cyber bullying might also commit other acts of violence such as sexual abuse or physical violence.

A study was done in 2011 by the Youth Research Bureau of Market Research at UNISA on cyber bullying and sexting involving high school youth found the following (Badenhorst 2011):

1. A total of 21% of the youth said they had been approached by unwelcome sex talk.
2. A total of 18% of the youth said they had received emails with links to X-rated websites.
3. A total of 17% of the youth said they had opened messages with naked people or people having sex.
4. A total of 14% of the youth said they had been harassed or threatened online.
5. A total of 10% of the youth said they had been asked to do something sexual (Badenhorst 2011).
6. More male than female youth were prone to participate in unsafe online activities, such as accessing X-rated websites. This online activity also puts youths at a greater risk of online victimisation.

Research was done in 2012 in Gauteng by the Youth Bureau of Market Research by UNISA. The study was on bullying involving children and youth between the ages of 12 and 25 from random socioeconomic backgrounds found the following (Zulu & Tustin 2012:1–25):

1. While bullying remains prevalent, there is an increased number of cyber bullying incidents, particularly sexting incidents.
2. Cyber bullying and sexting take place mainly through cell phones.
3. Cyber bullying takes place mostly, but not exclusively, through SMSs, social networks and MXit, and contain messages that are upsetting – the victim is called names, and false statements are made about the victim. On a

- lesser scale, children and youth had also received threatening messages, messages of unwanted sex talk or suggestive photos.
4. Youth are aware that technology is creating a platform where they can bully and be bullied.

Research was also done in 2014 by the Youth Bureau of Market Research in Gauteng and the Western Cape. The study focused on the emotions experienced from cyber bullying. The research was conducted on children and youth between the ages of 13 and 18 from random socioeconomic backgrounds. The research found the following results (Tustin et al. 2014:13–25):

1. While physical and emotional bullying remains prevalent, incidents of cyber bullying are on the increase.
2. One in every five learners falls victim to cyber bullying.
3. Cyber bullying has a lasting emotional effect on the affected learners.
4. The victims of cyber bullying were between the ages of 15 and 18 and these learners experienced upsetting messages, rumours, gossip and sexual remarks. However, 13-year-olds and 14-year-olds fell victim to name calling.
5. More male learners fell victim to unflattering, suggestive photos or photos and videos distributed of them online. More males received threatening and upsetting messages. However, the analyses revealed that the proportion of male and females being cyber bullied is not statistically significant (Tustin et al. 2014:20).
6. Cell phones are the most popular communication medium for cyber bullying via SMS and MXit.
7. Emotional consequences are: Depression is the most common consequence of cyber bullying expressed as feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Victims also felt angry, irritable and degraded. Depression is one of the main risk factors for suicide (Tustin et al. 2014:23).
8. The study also revealed that victims reacted by avoiding social networks and chat rooms.
9. In this last study, perhaps the researchers have taken into account the emotional and psychological consequences of the victims. This gives us some notion of the spiritual effects that may occur from cyber bullying.

Summarised results

The above research and findings for the studies done in South Africa follow the trend of research and findings gathered from countries such as the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom and China on cyber bullying (see Sabella et al. 2013; Strasburger et al. 2010; Triantoro 2015).

From the above research, we see that cyber bullying is on the rise. Most youth are aware that technology can be used to bully and also be bullied. Cell phones are the devices that are mostly used to send out sexual, aggressive and malicious content to a person and about a person. The victims are harassed, often continuously, as children and youth tend to keep their phones on their person at all times. The children and youth that are abused through their cell phones exhibit feelings of depression, anger, irritability, hopelessness and

anxiety. Cyber bullying is a direct attack on a person's identity, challenging how they perceive themselves once they are attacked. Cyber bullying is degrading and traumatising with long-term emotional effects. The victim's ability to form positive, healthy and good social relationships may be hindered thereafter. One study found that sometimes the perpetrator may also commit other acts of violence and may exhibit psychosocial and risky behaviours. The perpetrators seem to use cyber bullying to revenge their anger. Research done in Massachusetts in the United States found that the perpetrator's primary motive was anger and the need to revenge that anger, while the second reason was doing it for fun (Englander 2008:8). Those who cyber bully for fun do not seem to 'make the connection between their online behavior and the offline consequences' (Sabella et al. 2013:2707).

The trauma cyber bullying may have on children and adolescent spiritual lives

Cyber bullying has serious consequences for both the bully and the bullied. The cyber victim is degraded, embarrassed and humiliated, emotionally and sometimes publically. Adults sometimes try to handle a situation by saying that bullying and cyber bullying is something that adolescents do and that the adolescent needs to deal with it to help them toughen up. Sabella et al. (2013:2706) point out that bullying and cyber bullying are in no way a rite of passage that most adolescents experience at some point. Being hurt or hurting someone in such a traumatic way cannot be minimised.

When a child or youth is bullied through technology, there is a sense of dehumanisation of the other person. The perpetrator is objectifying his or her victim, and this may lead to not caring about a person's emotions, as the victim is behind the screen. As was said above, some of the perpetrators cyber bully for fun, and do not seem to connect their actions with the outcome (Sabella et al. 2013:2707).

People seem to become objects that can be used and discarded. This is especially so with sexting that is put out to take revenge on a person publically. As was said above, most adolescents are self-conscious of what others think of them (Fowler 1981:172). Nude images that are out on the Internet that the adolescent cannot ever get rid of or continuous harassment will only serve to challenge how the child and adolescent may perceive himself or herself. The trauma and depression expressed as hopelessness and helplessness cannot serve spiritual growth but on the contrary debilitate it. Spirituality is not only about the ultimate questions (who? why? and what?) being answered but also about transformation, a connection to the divine, human dignity, and respect for life as was said above. There is no respect for human dignity when the perpetrator posts nude pictures to take revenge on another person or publicly humiliates his or her victim for fun.

The study done by Raftopoulos and Bates (2011:163) that concluded that spirituality was essential as a coping skill to

adolescent resilience may be a good way to help children and adolescents recover from feelings of depression, anger, irritability, hopelessness and anxiety. The adolescents that participated mentioned that the reason that spirituality was so vital in their lives was that spirituality gave them a sense of protection, security and comfort.

Suggestions on addressing cyber bullying

Ideally, measures should be taken that prevent cyber bullying at school and home. However, this is not always possible as technology is part of life. Children and adolescents should not avoid technology once they are cyber bullied. The victim should be able to use their device without fear and be helped to cope with the content sent to them (Sabella et al. 2013:2707). By deleting the content, it does not mean that the incident is over or erased from the victim's mind, as once something is seen it cannot be unseen. Many children and youth may at some point in their school career be confronted with cyber bullying. Therefore, it would be of great value for children and adolescents to have coping tools. Tustin et al. (2014:23) recommend:

1. In order to 'address and prevent cyber bullying, a holistic approach focusing on prevention programs must ideally involve learners, family and the community'.
2. There is a need for early identification services for the victim and perpetrators. This means that if a student is seen to be deteriorating in school performance, not coming to school, partaking in substance abuse or showing other emotional symptoms, he or she should be offered an intervention programme/therapeutic programme. These programmes would be able to prevent dysfunctional behaviour of the victim and give the perpetrator the opportunity to take responsibility for his or her actions.
3. As there is a high level of cyber bullying taking place amongst learners, the implication is that of a teamwork approach. This would involve educators, social workers, psychologists, law enforcement and so on.
4. Tustin et al. (2014:23) concluded that it is vital that intervention goes beyond the traditional form. Bully reporting and online counselling are recommended along with a South African hotline dedicated to cyber bullying alone.

For the above to be a truly holistic approach to help children and youth cope with cyber bullying, the spiritual aspect of a person's life needs to be included. Spirituality, as was explained above, is a vital part of human existence. Nowsky (2007:166) explains that spirituality is important to the identity development of children and adolescents, as they will be:

1. concerned with the meaning of their lives,
2. be mindful of the relationships they have,
3. ask others for help and in turn help others (interdependency),
4. be charitable and generous,
5. be grateful.

While there is no correct way to attain spirituality, the above ways of being can be chosen to enrich a person's life. These practices need to be implemented and followed through. Choosing to ponder on the meaning of life, showing concern towards others, learning to ask for another person's help and being grateful for what you have as opposed to wanting what others have, puts perspective into your life that may allow for spiritual transcendence. Here, parents play a vital role (as well as guardians, teachers, ministers) in the spiritual lives of children and adolescents. Parents, teachers, ministers and all adults who deal with children and youth need to be involved in teaching children and youth coping skills, to learn to responsibly deal with, to respond appropriately when confronted with, and not to engage in traumatising others through cyber bullying and sexting.

I propose that the spiritual qualities, such as those mentioned above, be incorporated into children and youths' everyday lives (in the home, the classroom and the playground). This incorporation needs to be a community effort. This may be done from a religious perspective or a non-religious perspective as the basic values involved are the same. The spiritual qualities of the meaning of life: showing concern towards others, learning to ask for another person's help and being grateful, may make children and youth more sensitive and mindful of how they treat others and themselves.

Without adult guidance, explains Sax (2010:184), children and adolescents may struggle to find their spiritual expression. Nowsky (2007:170) warns parents (as well as guardians, teachers, ministers) to lead by example by living (as much as possible) a balanced life, between the 'spiritual and nonspiritual'. Children and youth that are concerned with the above may be more mindful about abusing technology, themselves and others. Digital culture also has to be put into perspective in the home life and the role it plays in detracting from conversations and time spent together as a family unit.

Concluding thoughts

This article has discussed the accumulative results from different South African institutes that have been done on how cyber bullying affects children and adolescents. These results point to the spiritual effects that children and youth may be experiencing as a result of cyber bullying. This article has proposed that spirituality may be a way to prevent cyber bullying and even help children and youth heal from the trauma caused by cyber bullying. Spirituality may also help children and young people to be more resilient in the hardships that life may present them with. This resilience will impact on how these children and youth form identity and spirituality, and how they participate in society. A person who is hopeless, angry and anxious from trauma may struggle to cope in his or her social context, even if he or she no longer participates on the sites that caused the trauma. It is essential that more research is done with South African children and youth to see if children and youth who participate in religious activities or have a spiritual way of leading their lives cope better with cyber bullying than those

who do not. More specific research needs to be done on how the trauma caused by cyber bullying may ultimately affect child and youth spirituality. More research will put the phenomenon of cyber bullying into perspective.

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