

Cyberbullying at a Texas University - A Mixed Methods Approach to Examining Online Aggression

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Cyberbullying is characterized by utilizing digital technology repeatedly to purposefully send information about another person to inflict harm. The objective of this mixed-methods study was to identify the prevalence for victimization and bullying behaviors, as well as to examine undergraduate students' perceptions and experiences with cyberbullying.

Participants: This study was conducted from 2011 to 2012 among undergraduate students at a Texas university (N = 286).

Methods: Prevalence of cyberbullying victimization/offending behaviors, and demographic variables were measured. Open-ended questions inquiring about personal cyberbullying experiences were included.

Results: Cyberbullying typically occurred through text message, email, and social networking sites. Approximately 32.4% of participants experienced at least two types of victimization and 16% of the study population reported victimizing others in two or more ways. Participants indicated that they were often cyberbullied due to relationship break-ups or disagreements in the dormitory. Behavioral impacts such as avoiding new friends and not trusting others were reported, as well as emotional reactions such as suicide ideation.

Conclusions: Administrators and faculty should focus on changing the campus culture to promote prevention, intervention, and enforcement of cyberbullying.

Key Words: cyberbullying, college students, mixed-methods, digital technologies, cyberstalking

INTRODUCTION

"My boyfriend's ex-wife relentlessly texts me 15 times per day, leaves multiple voice messages on my phone, and has even stalked me at college."

Cyberbullying victimization is becoming a significant issue related to how society increasingly utilizes digital technologies to communicate. According to a study among college students, 21.9% of participants reported being cyberbullied which included disseminating inappropriate pictures of someone or spreading information to harm another person's reputation or well-being.¹ Bullying occurs via digital means for several reasons, such as to intimidate and gang up on others, or even for a good laugh. While some cyberbullies may be unaware of the harm they inflict on others, research suggests that these actions can be damaging to the psychological health for victims and the bullies.^{2,3}

According to prominent research, students have historically experienced various forms of bullying while in school, ranging from name calling to physical abuse to emotional taunting.^{4,5} While traditional bullying in school often transpires in a face to face setting characterized by a bully who is bigger and stronger than the weaker victim, cyberbullying is not necessarily defined by physical traits and can take place anonymously leaving the victim wondering who was behind the attack.⁶ This type of behavior is characterized by utilizing digital technology repeatedly to purposefully send information about another person to inflict harm.^{7,8} Overcoming the idea that cyberbullying only occurs among younger students is necessary to better understand what older students may silently endure while they are pursuing higher education.^{7,9} Increasingly, university professional preparation programs are moving from a traditional classroom to

an online learning environment.¹⁰ Moreover, social networking sites such as Facebook are not only used for recreation, but may also be used to enhance or deliver portions of college classes.¹¹ Understanding that more college classes are moving online, it is critical to examine whether this may increase the likelihood for students to engage in cyberbullying behaviors.

While the majority of cyberbullying research has occurred among K-12 students,¹²⁻¹⁶ there is a paucity of research studies available examining how college students view and experience cyberbullying. An exploratory study conducted among undergraduates to determine the extent of cyberbullying, found that a large percentage of the participants knew someone who was cyberbullied.¹⁷ In another study, college students (< 25 years old) experienced cyberbullying more so than older students, especially if they were cyberbullied in high school.⁷ Similarly, one study identified certain students were likely to be bullies or victims throughout elementary, high school and college indicating that these behaviors and tendencies may persist throughout one's educational journey.¹⁸ Unfortunately, long-lasting repercussions due to cyberbullying may be problematic. Recent evidence indicates that cyberbullying among college students is associated with psychological damage, such as phobias, anxiety, depression and suicide ideation.¹⁹

Additional research is warranted to further contribute to the knowledge base and expand our understanding of how college students utilize the Internet in ways that may lead to aggression and hostile experiences. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to identify the prevalence for victimization and bullying behaviors, as well as to examine undergraduate students' perceptions and experiences with cyberbullying.

METHODS

Participants

This study was conducted during the academic school year from 2011 to 2012 among undergraduate students at a Texas university. Participants (N = 286) needed to be classified as either first-year or second-year students to be eligible for the study. Students in their first years of college were sought because they are more likely to live on campus and in community with other students when cyberbullying may be more pervasive. In order to recruit potential participants, the researchers obtained a list of eligible students from the IT department. These students were contacted by email and informed about the online survey. We also used other strategies for recruitment, such as announcements from within classes and advertisements posted within the university registration system. When potential participants clicked on the survey link administered via Survey Monkey, a cover letter appeared with a description of the study, benefits/risks of participating, and acknowledgment that their responses were anonymous. If students agreed to join the study, they clicked on the link to view the survey items. Participants had the option to register for a drawing after completing the survey in order to win an Amazon gift card. This study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Instruments

To measure cyberbullying behaviors from both the victim and bully standpoint, we included instruments to address each perspective.

Both instruments were designed by Hinduja & Patchin and have established validity and reliability. The first instrument, *Prevalence and Type of Cyberbullying Victimization*, was utilized since it consists of 9 different forms of aggression. The instrument was designed to examine the victim's experience at the macro-level and contains some basic offenses (e.g., received an upsetting email or instant message) to more serious ones. Each item is worth up to 4 points based on the frequency of cyberbullying (Never = 0; Once or twice = 1; A few times = 2; Many times = 3; Everyday = 4), and the instrument is scored by taking the sum which ranges from 0 to 36 (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$).¹² Another instrument entitled *Prevalence and Type of Cyberbullying Offending*, examines the participation in 5 types of online aggression (e.g., posting pictures of another person online to make others laugh) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$).⁸ Similarly, each item is worth up to 4 points based on the frequency of being a cyberbully (Never = 0; Once or twice = 1; A few times = 2; Many times = 3; Everyday = 4), and the instrument is scored by taking the sum which ranges from 0 to 20. Higher values on each cyberbullying instrument indicate more experience with being a bully and/or a victim. Finally, the researchers developed a short demographics survey to identify information about the study population, such as age, ethnicity, sex and social media usage.

Statistical analysis

Analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 19 and evaluated at the 5% level of significance. Measures of central tendency were used to describe the sample on the continuous variables (i.e., age), while frequencies and percentages were used to describe the categorical variables (e.g., ethnicity). A series of ANOVAs were performed on victimization and offending scores to determine any differences on race/ethnicity, class format, GPA, and Facebook frequency.

Qualitative responses

Open-ended questions were also included to gain more insight into participants' experiences with cyberbullying. Participants were asked if they had been previously cyberbullied while in college and the perceived reasons behind the attack. The resulting data were analyzed by deductive and inductive methods, where each researcher independently examined the data from the responses as well as reviewed the current findings published in the literature. One of the researchers analyzed the data by hand (MC) and the other researcher (KC) used HyperResearch Software version 3.0.3. Codes were assigned to key phrases and were in constant comparison with other passages throughout the analysis.²⁰ Emerging themes were then identified after the codes were organized hierarchically according to the research questions, "What were the perceived reasons for cyberbullying?" and "How did it make you feel?" Once the analysis was complete, the researchers discussed the findings and came to a consensus on any discrepancies that resulted from each independent review. The interrater reliability score was an acceptable 90%, according to the literature.²¹

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the sample was female (93%). First-year (49.4%) and second-year students (50.6%) were equally represented in the sample. Approximately 39.4% of the sample was Caucasian, Hispanic (24.6%), or African-American (22.9%). The vast majority of participants had a GPA of 3.0 or higher. When asked about their technology usage, most students reported using a cell phone daily (97.6%), as well as daily use of Facebook (76.3%). The age of the students ranged from 18 to 53 years with a mean of 21.9 (SD = 8.7). The ANOVAs revealed no significant differences between groups on victimization and offending scores influenced by race/ethnicity, class format, GPA, and Facebook frequency.

Table 1. Demographic variables

	N	Percentage	S.D.	Mean		N	Percentage
Age			8.7	21.9	GPA's		
18-22	214	81.7			Under 2.5	21	7.4
23-30	25	9.5			2.5 to 2.99	72	25.5
31-53	23	8.8			3.0 to 3.49	76	27.0
Missing	24				3.5 to 3.9	80	28.4
					4.0	33	11.7
Sex					Missing	4	
Female	264	93.0			Class Format		
Male	20	7.0			Face to Face	207	72.9
Missing	2				Online	13	4.6
Race/Ethnicity					Both	64	22.5
Hispanics	70	24.6			Missing	2	
Caucasians	112	39.4					
African American	65	22.9					
Asian	27	9.5					
Other	10	3.5					
Missing	2						
Facebook Frequency							
Never	18	6.5					
Daily	213	76.3					
Weekly	34	12.2					
Monthly	14	5.0					
Missing	7						

According to the victimization survey, over 50% of the participants reported that they had received an upsetting email and a text from someone they know. Additionally, 32.4% of participants reported experiencing at least 2 of the victimization behaviors described in the survey. A portion of participants were also involved in Facebook wall posts that were distressing, as well as had pictures or content posted on other websites that they did not want people to see (Table 2). The overall score for victimization ranged from 0 to 20 (Mean = 4.2; SD = 4.3) indicating there was some victimization, but it did not occur frequently for the majority of participants.

Participants reported on their experiences with cyberbullying when interacting with other college students. The most prevalent form of cyberbullying was to post a picture or story online about another person to invoke a laugh (31.8%). Other forms of cyberbullying included posting on a website to make another person angry (17.1%) or taking a picture and posting it without permission (19.5%) (Table 3). Approximately 16% of participants reported that they committed at least two of the offending behaviors listed in the survey. The overall bullying score ranged from 0 to 12 (Mean = 1.4; SD = 2.2), indicating that acting as a bully was infrequent. Interestingly, 31 participants indicated that they had suffered as a victim and also operated as a bully.

Qualitative Findings

As noted in Figure 1, data collected from the open-ended questions illuminated reasons for a cyberbullying attack, as well as specific ways in which the victim coped as a result. Approximately 24 participants reported personal experiences with cyberbullying and 54% discussed the situation with another person after the victimization (n = 13).

Threats of violence & personal attacks. When asked about the reason for cyberbullying, 5 participants reported that cyberbullying occurred after a romantic relationship ended. Several of these break-ups were violent in nature, as one participant stated an “angry

ex-boyfriend made late night calls and sent MySpace messages that were hateful and vulgar.” Additionally, friends of the ex-boyfriend/girlfriend were reported to “gang up” or carry out threats to the participants in the study. For instance, one person said “a female friend of my ex was upset with me for ending the relationship, which hurt her friend, threatened to kill me.” In another occurrence, someone reported that she “was sexually assaulted and friends of my rapist started harassing me when I pressed charges.” There were also personal attacks resulting from other relationships, such as dormitory roommates (n = 3), friends/acquaintances (n = 8), old friends from high school (n = 1), and anonymous stalkers (n = 3). For instance, someone reported that her roommate conveyed dislike of her to other friends and “they started doing mean pranks, posting nasty messages on Facebook and calling my phone and leaving prank messages, all to please the other roommate.”

“Tagging” using Social Media. Facebook was a prevalent platform to cyberbully others as several participants reported that they received negative comments on their walls or connected to pictures that were posted to their account. When someone is tagged in a post, this action calls attention to that particular post and the person’s friends can also see what was posted. Participants experienced cyberbullying from people who uploaded negative pictures and tagged them in it. For example, someone wrote that “they uploaded a drawn picture of me with profanities written on it to describe me. Then, they tagged me in the picture for other people to see.”

Cyberbullying on Facebook can be humiliating for some people since it is a semi-open forum whereby friends and family can potentially become involved in these types of scenarios. One person said “people from high school just do not like me and never have so they started to attack me on my Facebook and pretty much ganged up on me with all their friends.... They left nasty comments on the pictures that were inappropriate especially since my family is on my Facebook.”

Table 2. Prevalence of Cyberbullying from Victimization Scale

	N	%
Received an upsetting e-mail from someone you know.	133	55.2
Received an instant message that made you upset.	160	50.3
Had something posted to a Facebook group or on your Facebook wall that made you upset.	128	40.2
Been made fun of in a chat room.	33	10.8
Received an upsetting e-mail from someone you did not know (not spam).	48	15.4
Had something posted about you on another Web page that made you upset.	66	23.0
Something has been posted about you online that you did not want others to see.	103	34.2
Been picked on or bullied online.	59	19.6
Been afraid to go on the computer.	23	7.3

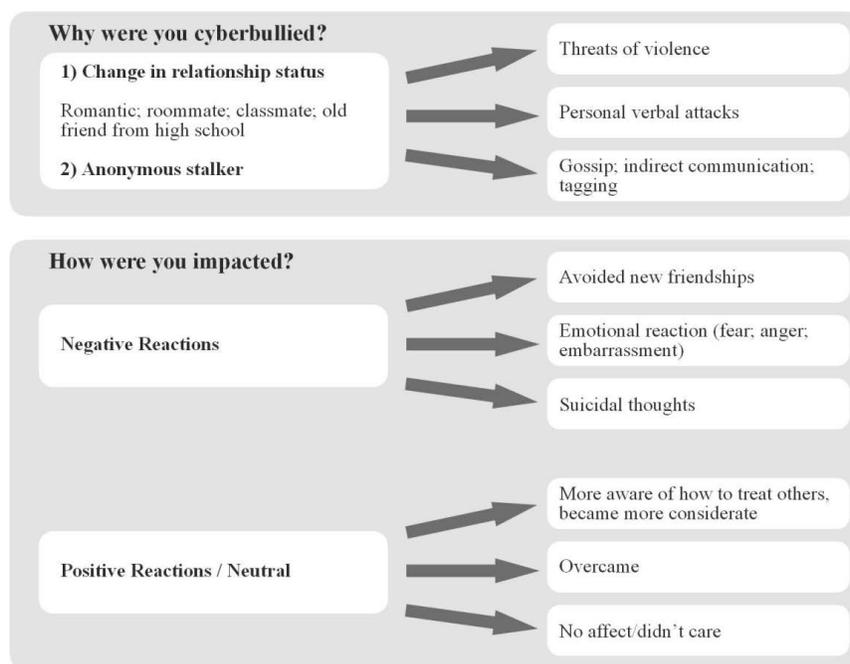
Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the participants who have ever experienced the behavior.

Table 3. Prevalence of Cyberbullying from Bullying Scale

	N	%
Posted something online about another person to make others laugh.	99	31.8
Sent someone a computer text message to make them angry or to make fun of them.	52	17.1
Took a picture of someone and posted it online without their permission.	60	19.5
Posted something on Facebook or a similar site to make them angry or to make fun of them.	35	11.8
Sent someone an e-mail to make them angry or to make fun of them.	24	8.0

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the participants who have ever experienced the behavior.

Figure 1. Qualitative findings on participants' experiences with cyberbullying



Avoided new friendships. Unfortunately, 5 participants became guarded and less likely to develop friendships as a result of being cyberbullied. For instance, one person reported, “I did not want to talk to new people for anything but casual friendship that didn’t extend past the classroom, and found it very hard to give out my number or Facebook to people.” This type of response can facilitate isolation and hinder social development instead of building more connections in preparation for future careers. Another person reported, “My trust for people was also affected because I was feeling attacked by everyone after that.”

Emotional reactions. Some situations were very serious where 4 participants reported extreme sadness as a result of being cyberbullied. One participant in particular was deeply affected by cyberbullying to the point of suicidal ideation. For example, she reported “...I didn’t see the point in living this way. When it got really bad, I didn’t see the point of living at all. I felt trapped, because I was surrounded by these girls, who wrote hate messages on Facebook....I felt very

helpless and that no one really cared.” Another person explained that she felt exasperated and that the experience “just made me cry and think about life a lot.” Approximately 5 participants reported being very angry as a result of the victimization, with one person stating that “it made me reevaluate all the people I had met at college.”

More awareness of others & overcoming. Interestingly, there were a few positive reactions after becoming a cybervictim. Some participants stated that they became more aware of how they treated others and therefore made attempts to avoid hurting people’s feelings. While some participants were very hurt by cyberbullying, one person said, “I rose above it. Once they realized I wasn’t going to retaliate, it seems that they stopped.” The hurtfulness of this behavior was dependent on who was sending the messages. According to a participant, “some messages were lame so I didn’t pay attention, others from exes were hurtful and definitely rendered an emotional response.”

No response. While many participants struggled as a result of being victimized, there were 2 participants that were unaffected, reporting that “they could care less about what was said.”

DISCUSSION

In this study, 16% of participants admitted to engaging in two or more cyberbullying activities while in college, and it appears that this behavior was intentional as a way to either make others laugh or to take revenge on another person (i.e., posting pictures or sending inappropriate texts). Similar results were reported in that cyberbullying behavior was a form of entertainment, in addition as way to get back at others.²² Furthermore, some people are even bolder online as opposed to in person and may be prone to bullying each other more aggressively. As noted by researchers cyberbullies may lack empathy for others when they are unable to see visual cues resulting from the messages that are sent.²³

Some participants acted as a cyberbully and a victim, and this supports the notion that there are not “pure” bullies or victims, but rather a “victim-bully” phenomenon where it is likely that people retaliate once they are victimized. In the open-ended responses, one participant reported that she ignored the hurtful messages from others, unless it was from an ex-significant other. In order to avoid becoming a bully after being victimized, college students may require more support and training on how to manage relational difficulties with good communication skills. Techniques on how to diffuse tense situations with others may be useful to reduce the ongoing “bully-victim” relationship dynamic.

The prevalence instrument indicated that certain behaviors, such as receiving upsetting instant messages, emails, and Facebook posts, may be associated with victimization experiences. In order to be proactive before situations escalate, it is necessary to better understand how the communication break-down occurs in relationships. Many of the participants were negatively impacted as a result of cyberbullying, and reported difficulty trusting people after being victimized. The emotional upheaval as a result of cyberbullying afflicted several of the participants, and our findings aligned with another study in which victims avoided new relationships as a coping mechanism.¹⁹ Some participants who had experienced a recent break-up also received extremely violent threats which escalated in into cyberstalking. However, there were some participants that were not impacted or who viewed the situation in a positive light by growing from the experience. Since it is necessary to possess coping skills in order to manage cyberbullying,^{24,7} perhaps some students were better equipped than others.

Limitations

Cyberbullying is an under-observed phenomenon in the college setting. This study has demonstrated that college students may face emotional and physical harm as a result. Specific participants were greatly impacted by cyberbullying and these findings may be used to direct appropriate counseling services on college campuses. As in all research studies, there were some limitations. Participants self-selected to join the study, and we do not know if they are different from the students who chose not to participate. Also, the university where the study was conducted draws non-traditional students with the majority being female. Some of the participants were much older than typical college-age students. For these reasons, the results may not be generalizable to a larger population.

CONCLUSIONS

Because technology is constantly changing, revisions to instruments that measure cyberbullying behaviors should be frequently revised in order to keep pace with emerging technologies. To expand upon

the instruments employed in this study, researchers should conduct an assessment to determine the most widely used digital platforms (i.e., text, cell phones, SNS, etc.). Additionally, consideration should be given to how some forms of cyberbullying are more impactful than others, such as an impolite email versus a life threatening phone call.²⁵ Creating a tool that weights different types of cyberbullying would be beneficial to determine more precisely how people are affected.

Social change is necessary to understand how cyberbullying occurs among college students before campus-wide policies can be developed to protect students.²⁶ Future studies should be conducted at several Texas universities to develop a better understanding of cyberbullying. Administrators, faculty, and staff should focus on changing the campus culture – both online and in the physical classroom- to promote prevention, intervention, and enforcement of cyberbullying since this is a form of school violence that could potentially escalate into other incidences involving hazing, fighting, sexual violence, self-harm and suicide.²⁷ Ultimately, scientific findings, university policies, digital citizenship and a greater awareness at the societal level are all key factors in preventing harm from cyberbullying.

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