An Exploratory Study of Cyberbullying with Undergraduate University Students

By Carol M. Walker, Beth Rajan Sockman and Steven Koehn

"With the advent of affordable, user-friendly technology comes cyberbullying - bullying in cyberspace."

Abstract

Understanding the covert events surrounding the undergraduate students' experience is essential to educators' and counselors' involvement in their success. Research into bullying behaviors has documented victims' feelings of anger, sadness and poor concentration. Affordable technologies have propagated this concern into cyberspace. This exploratory study evaluated the instances of cyberbullying experienced by undergraduate students. Additionally, the forms of technology utilized in cyberbullying were queried. A 27-item survey was distributed to 120 undergraduate students in social science, technology and education departments. The majority of all respondents (54%) and 100% of male respondents indicated they knew someone who had been cyberbullied. The perpetrators primarily used cell phones, Facebook and instant messaging. The study results provide legitimate concerns regarding the undergraduate students' exposure to cyberbullying and numerous areas for future research.

Keywords: bullying , cyberbullying, cyberharrassment, technology and information systems, undergraduate university students,

Growing up, most people have experienced bullying behavior – often on the playground or on the school bus – resulting in negative memories. Consequently, it seems natural that bullying behavior became a research topic, which has evolved with the advent of new technologies. The following section reviews research focused on traditional bullying and serves as a basis for understanding cyberbullying, where bullying takes a disturbing twist.

In the late 1970's Dan Olweus led social and psychological bullying research and provided an understanding of two primary forms: direct and relational, or indirect, bullying (Smith & Gross, 2006; Chapel et al., 2006). Much of this research focused on students who were either bullies or victims. Chapell, et al. (2004) explored bullying with a sample of 1,025 undergraduates and found that 24.6% of respondents had been bullied.

Further work found a significant positive correlation between being a bully in university, high school and elementary school, with 21% having been bullied (Chapell, et al., 2006). Chapell et al. (2006) evaluated 119 undergraduate students to determine the continuance of being a bully, victim, or bully-victim from elementary school through university. Over 70% of students who were bullied in high school and elementary school bullied others in university. Forty to over 50% of students who had been bully-victims or bullies (respectively) in elementary and high school repeated the pattern in university.

The victims of bullying reported feelings of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) reported an increase of psychosocial problems in those reporting cyberbully/victim behaviors including: problem behaviors, drinking alcohol, smoking, depression and low commitment to academics. Somewhat alarming are the incidences of school

shootings where the perpetrators report suffering from bullying behavior. In addition, university counseling centers report increasing concerns of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation with the undergraduate student (Chapell et al., 2006). Research regarding incidents of bullying on campus is imperative to provide a pro-active approach for educating the 21st Century student.

With the advent of affordable, user-friendly technology comes cyberbullying - bullying in cyberspace. Haber and Haber (2007) define cyberbullying as the following:

> The use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, personal Web sites or blogs and online personal polling Web sites. The technology is used to promote deliberate, repeated and hurtful behavior by an individual or group, with the intent to harm others (p. 52). This cyberbullying is Internet harassment taking the form of comments, information or pictures posted online for others to see with the intent to harass or embarrass (Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). User-friendly technology and the proliferation of social networking have initiated new avenues for research into how technology is being used on the college campus to bully or harass. The terms cyberbullying, cyber-harassment and cyber-stalking are often discussed in tandem. However, in popular culture, cyber-harassment is linked more closely with cyber-stalking. The focus of this study was cyberbullying in which the definition is broader and can encompass harassing behaviors.

Studies of cyberbullying have primarily focused on the adolescent years with emphasis on technologies used, reactions to cyber-harassment and the extent of the experience. Li (2007) investigated the nature and extent of adolescents' experience of cyberbullying. Li's study surveyed 177 students in grade seven of an urban city. The results showed over 25% of students had been cyber-bullied and almost 15% had cyber-bullied others.

Juvonen and Gross (2008) provided data from an anonymous Web-based survey (http://bolt.com; conducted in 2005) to determine the extent of online bullying experienced by youth between 12- to 17-years-old (N = 1454, mean age = 15.5, SD = 1.47). Respondents indicated experiences of bullying described by the researchers as "*mean things,*" defined as "anything that someone does that upsets or offends someone else." There was no requirement of a repetitive nature to the "*mean thing*." Five forms of bullying were reported: insults (66%), threats (27%), sharing embarrassing pictures (18%), privacy violation (25%), and password theft (33%). Almost one-fifth of respondents reported repeated experiences, and 72% reported at least one online bullying encounter during the past year.

Two studies addressed aspects of cyberbullying on the university level. Finn (2004) documents 2002 survey results in which 10 to 15% of 339 students at the University of New Hampshire reported experiencing repeated e-mail or Instant Messenger messages that "threatened, insulted, or harassed" and more than half of the students received unwanted pornography.

Psychological need as a predictor of cyberbullying was also evaluated with surveys distributed to 666 students in the Faculty of Education at Selcuk University, Turkey. The primary focus of this research was to assess the psychological needs of the cyberbully. The results indicated that aggression ("engaging in behaviors which attack or hurt others") and succorance ("soliciting sympathy, affection and emotional support from others") positively predicted cyberbullying, whereas interception ("engaging in attempts to understand one's own behavior or the behavior of others") negatively predicted it (Dilmac, B., 2009, p. 1313). Additionally, 22.5% of the students reported cyberbullying another at least once and 55.3% reported being a victim of cyberbullying at least once in their lifetime (Dilmac, 2009).

The Social Dominance theory may be applied to better understand bullying. Pratto, Sidanius and Levin (2006) assessed fifteen years of research that evaluated this theory. Social groups are divided into three classifications: *age system*, adults have social power over children; *gender system*, men have disproportionate power compared to women; and *arbitrary-set system*, arbitrary groups have access to things of positive and negative social value. Arbitrary-set groups may be defined by social distinctions meaningfully related to power. Discrimination that favors dominant groups over subordinate groups is the primary dynamic that produces these group-based social hierarchies. It is the ideologies shared by society, or *legitimizing myths,* that permit discrimination (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006).

Discrimination by individuals is also prevalent. *Social dominance orientation* (SDO) defines the psychological orientations that delineate dominant and subordinate group relations. Although these intergroup processes produce better outcomes for dominants than for subordinates, both groups justify their actions and relative positions with *legitimizing myths* (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006).

Bullying may be the result of *legitimizing myths* that allow the *gender* and *arbitrary-set systems* to delineate this power struggle. Technology allows this struggle to exist surreptitiously away from the watchful eye of the educator.

As technology becomes more accessible to today's youth more questions arise. CTIA, International Association for the Wireless Telecommunications Industry (2010), indicated that wireless penetration in the U.S. increased 78% from 1995 to 2009, with 276.6 million subscribers and 1.36 trillion annualized SMS messages. Facebook (2010) has more than 350 million users with more than 3.5 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) shared each week.

Additional research is necessary to address the upsurge of technology, and its impact on the age-old events of bullying. Questions that are important to address include: What impact does the cell phone have on the interactions of undergraduate students as they maintain their status according to the Social Dominance theory?, How do social networking sites affect these students?, and Has the ability to reply instantly, without personal contact, augmented the bullying scene? This study explores the extent of cyberbullying on the university campus to address the questions:

1. What instances of cyberbullying do undergraduate students experience, and what role does gender play in cyberbullying at the undergraduate level?
2. What forms of technology do undergraduate students use to perpetrate or receive bullying, and how often does it occur?

Method

Four department chairs were contacted to obtain permission to distribute surveys in a U.S. University with an undergraduate population of less than 10,000 students. The selection was designed to diversify the respondents in four divisions of study. Ultimately, surveys were distributed in three departments: social science, technology and education.

Participants

A total of 131 students (73 female and 57 male) were surveyed from seven undergraduate classes during the 2008 spring semester. Survey questionnaires were distributed to students in class. Students were informed that they were not obligated to complete the surveys, and they were instructed to check a box and not complete the packet if they had done so in another class. An Information Sheet was provided, with Haber and Haber's (2007) cyberbullying definition and the location and hours of operation for campus counseling and security. Anonymity was guaranteed with instructions not to record their names on the survey; packets were also returned face down in a box provided that was placed away from the surveyor.

Measures

The authors adapted surveys from Li (2006) and Spitzberg and Hoobler (2002) to develop a 27-item survey. Spitzberg and Hoobler's research evaluated incidences of "cyberstalking." During IRB review, concerns were expressed regarding the utilization of the term "cyberstalking" in college research. The ethical and moral dilemma of conducting an exploratory study to fully understand what college students are experiencing, combined with the legal implications of the term "stalking," led the authors to combine the information under the term "cyberbullying."

Closed questions addressed demographic data and asked about instances of hearing about and experiencing cyberbullying at the university. An open-ended question was included to allow respondents to offer other instances of cyberbullying experienced.

A pilot study was conducted with twelve undergraduate students ranging in age from 19 to 22. The participants reviewed the information sheets and completed the study privately. Then, a group forum was utilized to discuss the survey content. The authors obtained valuable input that was taken into consideration as the final 27-item survey was created. The questions from the cyberstalking survey were accepted as fitting the cyberbullying definition, and the additional question of "friending someone to get personal information" was recommended.

When the survey was finalized, participants received the six-page survey packet. Respondents were directed not to write their names on the survey papers and were directed to keep the information sheet.

The second page provided information to the participants regarding the researcher and the purpose of the research. Also included was a discussion of the risks, the voluntary nature of the study, and informed consent.

The survey contained a demographic questionnaire to determine gender, age, living arrangements, ethnicity, school grade average and hours of technology use per day. Data were analyzed from 120 students (70 female and 50 male) ranging from age 18 to 24. Two percent classified themselves as Asian, two percent Hispanic, seven percent Black, one percent Indian, 85 percent White and three percent Other. When queried about living environ-

ment, 16% lived at home with parent/guardian; 53% lived in campus housing; and 31% lived off campus but not at home.

Academic grade averages were reported at 51% in the A-B range, 47% in the B-C range, and two percent reported grades in the C-D range. No respondents reported a lower than D range.

No respondent reported daily use of technology (computer, cell phone, PDA, etc.) below one hour. Fourteen percent of students use technology between one and two hours daily, 31% between three and four hours, and 55% of respondents use technology more than four hours daily.

Gender	n	%
Female	15	23
Male	50	100
Totals (N =120)	65	54

Table 1: Number of Students Reporting Knowing Someone who has been Cyberbullied.

Item	Technology	n	%
A	E-mail	23	19
B	Cell Phones [text, pictures, video, or messages]	54	45
C	Video cameras, web cam	8	7
D	AOL Instant Messaging (AIM)	52	43
E	Facebook	67	56
F	My Space	37	31
G	Blogging	11	9
H	Twitter	1	1
I	Chat Rooms	5	4

Table 2: Technology Students Report Hearing of Being Used to Bully / Harass (N = 120)

Twenty-one questions were utilized to gather data. Respondents specified their knowledge of students being cyberbullied and technologies used. Their direct experience with cyberbullying was analyzed based on technologies used, who perpetrated the bullying, the frequency of cyberbullying, and whether they told a parent/guardian or other adult. The survey was concluded with fourteen specific instances of undesirable and obsessive communication via computer or other electronic means.

Results

Fifty-four percent of all respondents indicated knowing someone who had been cyberbullied (Table 1). One hundred percent of male respondents knew someone who was cyberbullied.

Item	Technology	n	%
A	E-mail	3	21
B	Cell Phones [text, pictures, video, or messages]	6	43
C	Video Cameras, Web cam	0	0
D	AOL Instant Messaging (AIM)	6	43
E	Facebook	9	64
F	My Space	4	29
G	Blogging	0	0
H	Twitter	0	0
I	Chat Rooms	0	0
Frequency of Experiencing Cyberbullying (N = 14)			
Item	Frequency	n	%
1	Less than 4 times	8	57
2	4 – 10 times	4	29
3	Over 10 times	2	14

Table 3: Number of Students Who Reported Experiencing Cyberbullying and the Technology Used (N = 14)

Specific examples of technologies used to cyberbully were also delineated (Table 2). Of the items listed Facebook (56%), Cell phones (45%) and AIM (43%) were most frequently reported.

Eleven percent of the respondents indicated having experienced cyberbullying at the university (Table 3). Of those, Facebook (64%), Cell Phones (43%) and AIM (43%) were the most frequent technologies used. Of the respondents who were cyberbullied, 57% were bullied less than four times, 29% were cyberbullied four to ten times and 14% over 10 times. Students indicated that 50% of the cyberbullies were classmates, 57% someone outside of university and 43% did not know who was cyberbullying them. Seventy-one percent of the students replied they had told a parent/guardian or other adult about the cyberbullying incident(s).

When participants were queried regarding the extent of undesirable and obsessive communication through computer or other electronic means (Table 4) four areas were reported at or above 30%: sending tokens of affection (33%); sending excessively 'needy' or demanding messages (30%); pretending to be someone he or she wasn't (34%); and 'friending' in order to obtain personal information (31%). Several other areas of undesirable and obsessive communication ranged from 10 to 28%. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare these categories. There was no significant difference in scores for males and females.

A one-way, between groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore the impact of living environment on whether

Item		Description		n		%
A		Sending tokens of affection (e.g. poetry, songs, electronic greetings, praise, etc.)		40		33
B		Sending exaggerated messages of affection (e.g. expressions of affections implying a more intimate relationship than you actually have, etc.)		33		28
C		Sending excessively explicit messages (e.g. inappropriately giving private information about his/her life, body, family hobbies, sexual experiences, etc.)		31		26
D		Sending excessively 'needy' or demanding messages (e.g. pressuring to see you, assertively requesting you to go out on a date, arguing with you to give him/her 'another chance,' etc.)		36		30
E		Sending pornographic/obscene images or messages (e.g. photographs or cartoons of nude people, or people or animals engaging in sexual acts, etc.)		28		23
F		Sending threatening written messages (e.g. suggesting harming you, your property, family, friends, etc.)		15		13
G		Sending sexually harassing messages (e.g. describing hypothetical sexual acts between you, making sexually demeaning remarks, etc.)		14		12
H		Sending threatening pictures or images (e.g. images of actual or implied mutilation, blood, dismemberment, property destruction, etc.		3		3
I		Exposing private information about you to others (e.g. sending e-mail out to others regarding your secrets, embarrassing information, unlisted numbers, etc.		14		12
J		Pretending to be someone he or she wasn't (e.g. falsely representing him/ herself as a different person or gender, claiming a false identity, status or position, pretending to be you, etc.		41		34
K		Sabotaging' your private reputation (e.g. spreading rumors about you, your relationships or activities with friends, family, partner, etc.)		19		16
L		Sabotaging' your work/school reputation (e.g. spreading rumors about you, your relationships or activities in organizational networks, electronic bulletin boards, etc.		8		7
M		'Friended' people you know to get personal information about you		37		31

Table 4: Number of Students Reporting Being Undesirably and Obsessively Communicated With via Technology (N = 120)

respondents felt their private reputation had been 'sabotaged' via rumors spread with computers or other electronic means F (2, 117) = 3.9, p = .02; eta squared = .06). An ANOVA was also conducted to evaluate the effect of hours of technology use and being cyberbullied at college F (2, 117) = 3.16, p = .05; eta squared = .05). These tests were run to explore relationships between the various demographic and bullying responses. However, the sample size (N = 120) prohibits generalization of any nature. Future research with a larger, nationwide sample is recommended.

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When students were given the opportunity to express individual experiences with being undesirably pursued through computer or other electronic means, three students responded. One recalled the following event:

> *I have a friend who was dating a boy named Jim on my space for an entire year. She met Jim though a friend on the basketball team we will call LL. For a while it was going very well with my friend and Jim. Then he started getting obsessive. He was never home when she tried to see him. Finally, after a year and being in love with Jim she finds out that Jim and LL are the same person. She was heartbroken because LL created the perfect guy and is a girl. So, my friend was harassed by LL for a long while and then the cops were involved. LL sought help. In the end, my friend lost her senior year to false promises and hope.*

Additionally, a respondent discussed a random person who signed in to a chat room and pretended to be the respondent to harass the respondent's friends. This occurred on several occasions before the person quit. A third participant stated they were "rick rolled." Defined by Wikipedia (2010) as being directed to a Web link for the Rick Astley music video, "*Never Gonna Give you Up.*"

Discussion

This study explores a little-examined area of the undergraduate experience. The dearth of literature in this area left the authors with only two similar studies to evaluate. The preliminary analysis of the 120 participants indicated that the majority (54%) of respondents knew someone who had been cyberbullied.

Eleven percent had personally experienced cyberbullying, with 57% having been cyberbullied less than four times, 29% four to ten times, and 14% over ten times. Finn's (2004) findings support the results; 10 – 15% of his respondents received email or instant messaging that "threatened, insulted, or harassed."

When specific examples of incidents of undesirable and obsessive communication through the computer or other electronic means were queried, 33% of respondents had received unsolicited tokens of affection, 34% had someone pretend to be someone he or she was not, and 30% experienced excessively 'needy' or demanding messages. Twenty-three percent of respondents had received pornographic or obscene images. This is relatively lower than Finn's (2004) finding of 58.7%. Finn did not query if the pornography was sent directly to respondent or via group messages.

The findings bring to light a discrepancy. Interestingly, 30% or more students indicated they had experienced incidents of undesirable and obsessive communication. Based on the operational definition of cyberbullying given in the student survey, these incidents are *forms* of cyberbullying. One would expect that all of those who indicated that they had experienced these incidents would have also reported yes to cyberbullying. Instead, only 11% reported "yes" to being cyberbullied. One questions why these undesirable incidents are higher than the 11% that responded yes to being cyberbullied.

It is possible that students consider the undesirable and obsessive communication instances as accepted behaviors of harassment that occur within "online" social life. Therefore, the students may not consider them to be cyberbullying. In addition, if students consider the undesirable and obsessive communication acceptable acts, legitimizing myths may be active (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006). This would need to be studied further since neither the research questions nor survey questions aimed to address legalizing myths.

From the data, 71% of the respondents indicated they had told a parent/guardian or other adult about the cyberbullying experience. Upon reflection, the researcher questions whether a respondent considers a university peer to be an "other adult."

To better understand who was doing the cyberbullying, question four queried if the respondent was cyberbullied by classmates (50%), someone outside of university (57%), or "I don't know" (43%). The combined percent-

age of greater than 100% raises the question of whether the victims were being bullied by more than one person.

When studying traditional bullying at the university level, the findings produce smaller results than this research. Chapell, et al. (2004) explored college bullying with a sample of 1,025 undergraduates and found that 24.6% of respondents had been bullied. Other research conducted by Chapell, et al. (2006) found a significant positive correlation between being a bully in university, high school, and elementary school, with 21% having been bullied. This exploratory research indicates an increase of bullying, via a cyberbullying format, to up to 34%. The availability of affordable technology may contribute to this increase.

Students report feeling angry, sad, and hurt when cyberbullied. Poor concentration and low school achievement is also a concern (Beran & Li, 2005). Chapell et al. (2006) report on a number of studies that found that most school shooters had been bullied. This supports a concern that further campus violence is possible due to this relatively new form of bullying. University educators and counseling centers need to be aware of the ability of undergraduate students to surreptitiously bully victims via technology.

Pratto, Sidanius and Levin's (2006) evaluation of *arbitrary-set systems, gender systems,* and the *legitimizing myths* that permit such discrimination may provide a basis of understanding for the cyberbullying actions of the undergraduate student. In the stressful environment of a university, students may feel they must dominate to succeed. The relative ability to feel control of a situation as the dominant bully may allow the cyberbully to justify their actions. Dilmac (2009) supported this theory with the finding that aggression and succorance positively predict cyberbullying.

The authors faced several limitations. Data gathered from 120 participants inhibits the ability to generalize to either the entire university being studied, much less to a national level. The convenience sample format may not have provided a widely diversified study group. Finally, standardization of the surveying procedure was not possible; the researchers did not administer the survey to every group.

Further research is needed to expand our understanding of cyberbullying at the university level. More detailed gender data would be valuable to determine if the males who responded they knew someone that had been cyberbullied were referring to men or women. Are they more often the confidant of fellow female students? In addition, more information needs to be gathered to determine if one or more perpetrators are victimizing those being cyberbullied. When one considers the relatively high percentage of respondents who told a parent/guardian or other adult about being cyberbullied, it would be valuable to know if these respondents are considering university peers as the "other adult." Finally, a nation-wide survey of undergraduate students would provide valuable data.

Conclusion

This exploratory study examines the extent of cyberbullying that undergraduate students experience and provides a basis for future research in cyberbullying on the college campus. The ability of individuals to surreptitiously bully others via technology combined with results indicating 54% of respondents knew someone who had been cyberbullied, and up to 34% had been cyberbullied themselves, indicates a need for such research.

In addition, while the cyberbullying definition of Haber and Haber (2007) was utilized to initiate this research the authors feel the definition should evolve for future studies. Cyberbullying should be considered the use of interactive technologies such as social networking sites, cell phones (text, video, voice, or picture messaging), instant messaging, or other newly developed technology-based communication tools. These tools are used to deliberately and repeatedly deliver slanderous, harassing, obsessive, or obscene messages that *result* in harm to the recipient. It is only the individual being harassed that can determine the extent of harm, whether the harasser intends to harm or not. This expanded definition may more readily provide counselors and other professionals the ability to intercede on behalf of the victim.

"University educators and counseling centers need to be aware of the ability of undergraduate students to surreptitiously bully victims via technology."

The academic college setting values the mature, eschewing the sophomoric behavior of bullying, but even the university is not safeguarded from cyberbullying in a technological age. Those concerned with the welfare of students need to keep abreast of their cyber troubles.

***Carol M. Walker**, MA, MEd, (c.m.walker4@iup.edu) is a Ph.D. candidate in Communications Media and Instructional Technology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and an adjunct professor in the Communications Department at Northampton Community College. Her research in cyberbullying began while earning her master degree at East Stroudsburg University. She has presented cyberbullying research data at the Association for Educational Communication & Technology and Laurel Highlands Communication Conferences. In addition, she provided cyber safety education for middle school students for several years. Her research interests include the impact of technology on education, cyberbullying, and web-based distance education.*

***Beth Rajan Sockman** Ph.D. (bsockman@po-box.esu.edu) teaches as a professor at East Stroudsburg University, which she joined after 10 years of pubic school teaching and doctoral work at the Pennsylvania State University. Her projects include researching one-to-one computing environments, cross-cultural peace work, and creatively addressing teaching and learning to build and assess 21st Century skills. All projects are guided through the lens of educational systems thinking.*

***Steven C. Koehn** Ph.D. teaches as a professor in the Department of Mass Communications at the Gulf University for Science and Technology in Kuwait. His research interests revolve around three main areas. One area is "parasocial relationships" and their impact upon society. He is investigating the influence of interactive video and its ability to connect very different cultures with one another through groups versus individuals. In addition, he has a keen desire to know how "digital children" are learning in this new technological time. Lastly, the communication that occurs in the classroom context is very important to him because of the future abilities we have to "green screen" a classroom and create virtual reality environments.*

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