

Cyberbullying:

How Physical Intimidation Influences the Way People are Bullied

Tyler Maxwell

University of West Florida

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore some of the different variables that influence people to become cyber bullies. The study seeks to answer the research question, How does the lack of the physical intimidation affect people's inclination to cyber bully? The goal is to analyze the demographics of cyber bullies and determine whether or not there is a physical influence on this growing trend.

Since the beginning of time people have always had to deal with bullies. Just like anything else, however, things tend to evolve with technology. With the evolution of social media and technology some adolescence as well as adults are simply unable to escape harassment from their peers in school and in the workplace. This social phenomenon is what has come to be known as cyberbullying. According to Willard (2004) there are eight different forms of cyberbullying, which include Flaming (online fights), Harassment (sending vulgar messages), Denigration (posting gossip), impersonation, outing (sharing peoples secrets), trickery (tricking someone into sharing secrets), exclusion, and cyberstalking.

The platforms for this to occur have become countless, from well-known social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, to smaller sites that allow you remain anonymous such as Yik Yak and ask.com. The days are gone of having to be the biggest meanest kid in the schoolyard to hurt others. Now it doesn't matter your size, age, gender, or social standing if you want to bully someone. People can now create their own anonymous personas or simply continue to bully others online after they have left school or work.

There have been several instances in the news over the last few years of people who have taken their own lives due to the constant ridicule from their peers. Because of this researchers have started to take notice of this new social issue and have performed numerous studies analyzing different aspects of cyberbullying such as the types of people who bully, the prevalence of cyberbullying, and the effects on the victims, but one thing that hasn't been studied is whether or not the lack of physical intimidation effects people likelihood to become cyberbullies.

This study is going to include extensive research into the motivations to cyberbully as well as its influence on the aggressors and victims and the relationships between the two. We will also examine the different techniques cyberbullies employ as well as the techniques that victims use in order to cope with the harassment.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Prevalence of Cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying is something that has become a new social phenomenon in today's society. It can often times leave students unable to escape their bullies and leave them feeling alone and helpless. Faucher, Jackson, and Cassidy(2014) performed a study on 1925 students across four Canadian universities that found 24.1 percent of students had been the victims of cyberbullying over the last twelve months. These shocking numbers show that nearly one in every four people have been the victims of this phenomenon. This statistic is interesting however because when compared to studies that were done amongst younger age students you see that the numbers are drastically different. Wegge, Vandebosch, and Eggermont(2014) found that among 1,458 13-14 year old students that considerably less students reported being cyberbullied. This is very similar to what Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2009) found among 2052 students in the 12-18 ranges which concluded that 11.1 percent of students had been victims of cyberbullying. This research concludes that cyberbullying appears to be more prevalent in students as they get older. Wegge et al. (2014) also noted that 30.8 percent had been victims of traditional bullying.

This raises the question as to why it seems to be less prevalent among younger students. Is it possible that they simply don't have as much access to the tools of

cyberbullying that students at the university level have, or they possibly aren't as technologically advances as their older peers? It continues to raise questions about the issue of cyberbullying as well as what classifies the perpetrators as well as what are their reasons for harming others.

**The types of people who bully.** An important factor when analyzing cyberbullying is trying to understand the types of people who are the aggressors. The first thing that needs to be discussed when analyzing this is the simple matter of gender when it comes to who is generally the aggressor. Slonje and Smith (2008) found that when it comes to cyberbullying males are more often than not the aggressors with males being reported as the cyberbully far more often than females. Slonje et al (2008) also found that 36.2 percent of students were unaware of the gender of their aggressors. This is intriguing because for one its is the same percentage as the number of males who bullied, but most importantly because it shows that over 1 in 3 students don't actually know who is bullying them, which adds to the fear and stigma that is related to cyberbullying and not being able to escape the perpetrators.

**The types of people who are victims.** Researchers have also conducted various studies on the types of people who are cyberbullied, or what is often referred to as "cybervictimology". Abeele and Cock (2013) conducted a study, which concluded that the gender of victims varied greatly depending on the form of cyberbullying. Abeele et al. (2013) found that males are more likely to be on the receiving end of direct cyberbullying while females are more likely to be the victims of indirect cyberbullying such as online gossip among peers. These findings appear to remain true to social social norms where males are viewed as more confrontational and females are often stereotyped as gossipers.

While not many studies look at the gender of the victims many studies do research things such as the characteristics of the victims. Faucher et al. (2014) found that there were numerous reasons that people felt they were the victims of cyberbullying such as their personal appearance, interpersonal problems, as well as simply having discrepancies about their views. Davis, Randall, Ambrose, and Orand (2015) also conducted a study about victims and their demographics, which looked at the reasons people, were cyberbullied. Some of the results in the Davis et al. (2015) study addressed other reasons for being bullied in which they found that 14 percent of victims had been bullied because of factors such as their sexual orientation.

These are all very important because it fits the profile of the traditional bully that many people envision but it shows that it transfers over into the cyber world as well. This leads on further questions about the relationship between the two and how the cyberbullying is influencing where and how the harassment is continuing.

**The relationship between bully and victim.** The relationship between aggressor and victim is also something that has been heavily research among professionals. Beran and Li (2007) conducted a study that involved 432 middle school students and concluded that just under half of the studnets had been victims of cyberbullying as well as traditional bullying. This is true across multiple studies. Wegge et al. (2014) also concluded that people who were bullied in traditional manners had a much higher likelihood to become victims of cyberbullying. Another interesting relationship between bully and victim is that studies have also shown that people who are victims are likely to become aggressors in the online world. Beran et al. (2007) confirms this by stating, “students who are bullied through technology are likely to us technology to bully others”.

Faucher et al. (2014) also found similar results claiming that male and female students decided to bully people online because they were bullied first.

Research has also been done that looks at how the bullies find their victims. Wegge et al. (2014) studied the perpetrators preferences in victims and found that 27 percent were in the same grade, 14.2 percent were in different grades and a staggering 49.6 percent were not schoolmates of the bullies. This evidence somewhat contradicts that of the other studies that state victims are generally bullied at school and at home because it shows that nearly half of the bullies prefer to bully people they don't go to school with and possibly have do not know at all. This continues to build and add to the idea of cyberbullying in that it allows bullies to create their own personas and images in order to try and intimidate and influence others without actually providing a physical intimidation factor.

### **Effects of Cyberbullying**

The first part of this literature review focused on the demographics of the bullies and their victims, but now we will focus on the lasting effects and the trauma it brings to the victims as well as the different forms of cyberbullying. While the platforms used are different the lasting effects that the bullying has on the victims are very similar. Faucher et al. (2014) concluded that one of the main effects that cyberbullies had on university students was that they were unable to accomplish some of their school assignments. While many people think of effects of bullying to be simply depression or low self esteem this study brought light to a much different more unexpected issues. Beran et al. (2007) also found similar responses from victims of cyberbullying claiming that they often didn't achieve the same marks in school and had lower concentration. These

findings indicate that the lasting impact that a cyberbully has on their victims is often more harmful than what most people can see on the surface.

Pieschl, Porsch, Kahl, and Klockenbusch (2013) found that cybervictims generally were less distressed during the second confrontation with a cyberbully. This interesting finding indicates that victims of cyberbullies may actually become desensitized to the aggression over time lessening the effects of the bullying.

**Victims coping techniques.** When being faced by a bully it is important that victims learn to cope and move on from their experiences in order to prevent them from suffering in their personal and professional life like some of the victims in previous studies. Davis et al. (2014) conducted a study on victim coping techniques where they broke the techniques into two distinct categories, which were behavioral and cognitive strategies. Davis et al. (2014) found that 74 percent of participants preferred behavioral strategies and of those 74 percent, 69 percent of those people found the strategies to be effective. These behavioral strategies included seeking social support, making a creative outlet, or ignoring and blocking the bully. Because of the growing trend of cyberbullying there have been people who have developed different programs to help raise awareness for cyberbullying as well as offer help to the victims. One of these programs is known as Cyberprogram 2.0. Garaigordobil and Martinez-Valderrey (2015) conducted a study testing the effectiveness of this program and found that it was effective in decreasing the amount of traditional as well as cyberbullying, but also and more importantly it raised empathy among classmates towards the victims of these actions. This is a big step in combatting bullying because peers are constantly influencing each other. If the general consensus among the class is that bullying is not funny and not right because they



empathize with the victims than it can go a long way in changing the social norm. If the attention is not longer given to the bully by classmates and victims it could potentially cut back on the frequency of this act.

With that being said it raises the question instead of trying to cope, why not just remove yourself from the situation all together and not give the bully what they desire? Arntfield (2005) discussed the risk associated with using social media and concluded that “intrinsic rewards that were not tied directly to winning as much as they were to fantasies of power, celebrity, sexuality, and elevated social status that came with participating, win or lose.” This conclusion is one that is very accurate and relevant to the way adolescence as well as university level students think in today’s society. The fact of the matter is in order to fit in and be considered “cool” amongst your peers you need to be on social media to understand many of the things that are talked about amongst students. Whether it be trending hashtags, viral videos, or popular memes these are all things that are commonly shared and talked about between peers. While students may run the risk of being bullied on these sites, they also run the risk of being bullied for not knowing the newest updates in our culture, it is truly a viscous cycle.

**Forms of cyberbullying.** Cyberbullying gives the bully a much larger spectrum to choose from when it comes to how exactly they want to intimidate their victims which may be why it is often easier for them to carry out the act. Of all the different ways to cyberbully Faucher et al. (2014) found the most common platforms for cyberbullying to be social media, text messaging, and email which were used to bully students about half of the time followed up by blogs forums and chat rooms which were 25 percent. This is no surprise that social media is the most common platform for cyberbullying because it

can allow for the bully to remain completely anonymous to your average victim. This allows people who may not fit the mold of your average bully to create a fake account and build their own persona in order to bully others. Multiple studies also address a critical factor of using social media or the Internet to bully others, which is that; the photos or hurtful comments, can remain in cyberspace virtually forever. Davis et al. (2014) mentions how they received viewed several responses that talked about “how their traditional bullying experience would have been magnified if they had occurred in today's digital era”. Faucher et al. (2014) also talk about how cyberbullying has a longer “shelf life” than your average bullying. This plays such a huge role because with the aggressive material on the internet it can often be revisited and the pain can constantly be brought back to light for the victims making the experience that much more traumatic.

Social media is very prevalent among cyberbullies but there is also extensive research done on cell phones and the role they play in the act of cyberbullying. Abeele et al. (2013) studied various aspects of mobile phone bullying and found that the most prevalent type was gossiping via text message, followed by gossiping over the phone, and concluded with threatening others over text message. Abeele et al. (2013) also found that girls were more often than not the perpetrators of gossiping while boys made slightly more threats via cell phone. These numbers tend to lean towards the stereotype of females being more of gossipers and males generally being more aggressive and physical. This is also interesting because it shows that society's stereotypes appear to remain true even in a cyberworld.

RQ1: How does the lack of the physical intimidation effect people's inclination to cyber bully?

### **Method**

If I were to conduct this study I think the best way to do so would be by a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. I would choose to use survey research as well as focus groups in order to study these behaviors and why they happen as opposed to traditional bullying. By using survey research I would be able to uncover whether or not people are actually inclined to cyberbully due to physical factors and the focus groups would be beneficial in trying to understand why people become cyberbullies. By using the two different types of research it also will allow for the study to be more diverse and look at different angles of cyberbullying, which will result in having a better understanding of this phenomenon.

### **Sample Selection**

For my sample I would choose to use a convenience sample. The age I want to study would be 15 to 23 year olds. I would reach out to the local high schools as well as the local universities and use the students who were willing to participate in the study. Based on the number of students in Escambia county between high school and college aged students I would like to have five thousand survey responses and two thousand five hundred volunteers for focus groups. I would allow students to participate in both aspects of the study if they were interested in doing so.

### **Procedure**

For my study it will be important to base a 10-15 question survey on more than simply if a student is a cyberbully or how often they bully others but rather physical aspects of the bully. The survey would be completely anonymous and would ask questions about whether they have cyberbullied someone before, followed up with

questions about gender, body size, and the gender and body types of their victims. For the focus groups I would split the participants up in groups of 6-8 based on age and gender. I would focus on questions about why they may or may not be inclined to bully others online. I would then combine the data I collected and use it in order to answer my research question.

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