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Cyberbullying among college students: prevalence and demographic differences

Christine D. MacDonald[a] *, Bridget Roberts-Pittman[a]

[a]*Department of Communication Disorders and Counseling, School, and Educational Psychology, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN 47809, USA*

Abstract

Participants were 439 college students who were asked how often they had experienced each of a series of bullying behaviors since they have been in college. Results indicated that 38% of college students knew someone who had been cyberbullied, 21.9% had been cyberbullied, and 8.6% had cyberbullying someone else. It was apparent that some forms of electronic media are more commonly used to cyberbully others than are other forms. All the cyberbullying behaviors and traditional bullying behaviors were significantly positively inter-correlated. There were no significant gender or ethnic group differences in any of the cyberbullying behaviors.

Keywords: Bullying; Cyberbullying; Adolescents; College Students; Demographic differences

1. Introduction

In 1998, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development conducted a national survey known as the Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC). The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the prevalence of bullying by using a nationally representative sample of school-age children and over 15,000 students from public and private schools in the United States in grades 6-10 completed the survey. The researchers explored bullying behaviors by examining differences in gender, grade, and race. The results revealed 10.6% of children reported bullying others "sometimes" while 8.5% reported being bullied "sometimes". These findings suggest that over 1,000,000 children in the United States are either demonstrating bullying behaviors, are victims of bullying, or both. In terms of gender, bullying behaviors and being bullied were reported at a higher rate among males in comparison to their female peers. Further, males more often reported bullying in terms of physical acts such as hitting or pushing. In contrast, females reported bullying more often in terms of verbal behaviors such as rumors or sexual comments. Bullying tended to be more prevalent among middle school children than among high school children and occur more frequently among Caucasian children than Hispanic or African-American children. No differences were found when comparing children from urban, suburban, and rural areas (Nansel et al., 2001).

While the HBSC survey reveals the significant problem bullying poses in the United States, the bulk of the literature continues to focus on the K-12 school environment (e.g., Espelage & Swearer, 2003), although there have also been a number of articles on bullying and harassment in the workplace (e. g., Ferris, 2004; Glomb, & Liao, 2003). To date, only two research articles have examined bullying during the college years (Chapell et al., 2004; Chapell, Hasselman, Kitchin, Lomon, Maclver, & Sarullo, 2006). Yet, bullying behaviors do not simply come to a halt during the college years. Additionally, with the increase in availability of new technologies – social networking

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programs, text messaging, instant messaging -- there have been individuals taking advantage of these technologies to harass and bully others. One recent study (Li, 2006) reports as many as one in four junior high school students have been cyberbullied. The present research study is designed to fill in a gap in the research literature by better describing the cyberbullying experienced by college students.

2. Method

2.1. *Participants*

Participants were 439 college students enrolled at a midsize Midwestern university in the United States. The sample was 71.9% female and 28.1% male; and predominantly (81.7%) white; predominantly able-bodied (95.2%); and predominantly heterosexual (91.5%). The average age was 22.97 years (*SD* = 6.62). Eighty-seven percent of the students were enrolled in undergraduate programs, 11.4% were in graduate programs, and .7% were non-degree-seeking students.

2.2. *Measure*

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire asking how often they had experienced each of a series of bullying and harassing behaviors since they have been in college. Specifically regarding cyberbullying, students were given a definition of cyberbullying as "sending or posting harmful or cruel text or images using the Internet or other digital communication devices" (Williard, 2007, retrieved from www.cyberbully.org/cyberbully). They were then asked a series of questions beginning with the stem: "Given this definition, since you've been in college, have you ever: (a) known someone who was cyberbullied, (b) been cyberbullied, and (c) cyberbullied someone else?" Students were also asked how often they had experienced cyberbullying via a number of specific media (e.g., "had someone send you harassing or threatening text messages?"). Students were also given a definition of bullying and asked "Given this definition, since you've been in college, have you ever: (a) seen another student being bullied in college by another student, (b) been bullied in college by another student, and (c) bullied another student in college? All of these questions were answered on a 4-point Likert type scale, with 1 = Never and 4= Very Frequently. Additionally, students were asked to report demographic information, including gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Given the small numbers of students in certain minority categories, ethnicity was categorized into two groups: white, US citizen and non-white and/or foreign national. Similarly, sexual orientation was categorized into two groups: heterosexual and minority sexual orientation (including gay/lesbian, bisexual, and other).

2.3. *Procedure*

Survey data was collected three ways: (a) via large section undergraduate classes, (b) by setting up a booth in the food court of the student union, and (c) by posting a link to the online survey. Additional questions regarding specific types of cyberbullying, as well as sexual orientation and physical ability/disability were added to the survey after the first round of data collection, so data on these is only available for 357 participants.

3. Results

3.1 *Prevalence Rates*

In order to examine prevalence rates for these behaviors, frequencies and percentages for each of the responses (never, once or twice, frequently, very frequently) for each the cyberbullying behaviors (known someone who was cyberbullied, been cyberbullied, cyberbullied someone else) were compiled for the entire sample, as well as by gender and ethnic group (See Table 1). Results indicated that 38% of college students reported knowing someone who had been cyberbullied, 21.9% reported having been cyberbullied, and 8.6% reported cyberbullying someone else.

When gender was examined, the prevalence rates for males and females were comparable. Of the male students, 37.4% reported knowing someone who had been cyberbullied, 21.9% reported having been cyberbullied, and 11.4% reported cyberbullying someone else. Of the female students, 38.5% reported knowing someone who had been cyberbullied, 22% reported having been cyberbullied, and 7.6% reported cyberbullying someone else. There also did not appear to be differences between the rates for white US citizens and non white or foreign national students. Of white students who were US citizens, 39.2% reported knowing someone who had been cyberbullied, 21.5% reported having been cyberbullied, and 8.4% reported cyberbullying someone else. Of nonwhite or foreign national students, 32.1% reported knowing someone who had been cyberbullied, 23.7% reported having been cyberbullied, and 9.9% reported cyberbullying someone else.

Next, the specific media through which college students had been cyberbullied were examined. In this sample, 25% of the college students reported having been harassed or threatened through a social networking site; 21.2% reported that someone had sent them harassing or threatening text messages; 16.1% reported receiving harassing or threatening email messages; 13.2% had received harassing or threatening Instant Messages (IMs); 9.9% had had someone write negative or embarrassing things about them in a chat room; and 6.8% had had someone post negative information or images of them on a website. Based on these results, it is apparent that some forms of electronic media are more commonly used to cyberbully others, with social networking and text messages being the most common, and chat rooms and other websites the least common.

Table 1 Frequencies and Percentages of Cyberbullying Behaviors for Entire Sample and by Gender and Ethnic Group, N = 439

Never	Once or Twice	Frequently	Very Frequently	
Entire sample				
known someone who was cyberbullied	271 (62.0%)	142 (32.5%)	20 (4.6%)	4 (.9%)
been cyberbullied	342 (78.1%)	82 (18.7%)	12 (2.7%)	2 (.5%)
cyberbullied someone else	400 (91.3%)	36 (8.2%)	1 (.2%)	1 (.2%)
Male (n = 123)				
known someone who was cyberbullied	77 (62.6%)	41 (33.3%)	4 (3.3%)	1 (.8%)
been cyberbullied	96 (78.0%)	23 (18.7%)	3 (2.4%)	1 (.8%)
cyberbullied someone else	109 (88.6%)	13 (10.6%)	0	1 (.8%)
Female (n = 312)				
known someone who was cyberbullied	192 (61.5%)	101 (32.4%)	16 (5.1%)	3 (1.0%)
been cyberbullied	244 (78.0%)	59 (18.8%)	9 (2.9%)	1 (.3%)
cyberbullied someone else	289 (92.3%)	23 (7.3%)	1 (.3%)	0

White US citizens (n = 358)				
known someone who was cyberbullied	218 (60.9%)	122 (34.1%)	16 (4.5%)	2 (.6%)
been cyberbullied	281 (78.5%)	67 (18.7%)	9 (2.5%)	1 (.3%)
cyberbullied someone else	328 (91.6%)	28 (7.8%)	1 (.3%)	1 (.3%)
Non-White and/or Foreign National (n = 79)				
known someone who was cyberbullied	53 (67.1%)	20 (24.7%)	4 (4.9%)	2 (2.5%)
been cyberbullied	61 (76.2%)	15 (18.8%)	3 (3.7%)	1 (1.2%)
cyberbullied someone else	72 (90.0%)	8 (9.9%)	0	0

Note: For each item, the stem was "Since you have been in college, have you ever:" Not all students answered all questions, so the number of responses may not sum to 439.

3.2. Correlations

Correlations were performed to determine the interrelationships between cyberbullying, "traditional" bullying, and demographic variables including gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The results are presented in Table 2. All of the cyberbullying behaviors (including all of the questions about specific media) and the traditional bullying behaviors were significantly positively correlated. Thus, it appears that those who are involved in cyberbullying (either as a bully, as a victim or both), may also be involved with traditional bullying as well. The correlations ranged from .22 to.65, indicating overlap in these behaviors as measured by r^2 ranging from .05 to .42.

Among the demographic variables, gender correlated significantly negatively with bullying other students (r =-.15, n = 427, p = .002), indicating that men were more likely than women to bully others in traditional formats. Interestingly, this correlation was not replicated for cyberbullying. Ethnicity was not significantly correlated with any of the cyberbullying or bullying variables. Sexual orientation was significantly positively correlated with knowing someone who had been cyberbullied (r =-.13, n = 437, p = .007), having had someone post negative information or images on a website (r =-.17, n = 356, p = .002), and having bullied someone in a traditional format (r =-.15, n = 429, p = .003). For each of these, having a minority sexual orientation was associated with higher rates of the behavior.

Table 2Correlations between Cyberbullying, Traditional Bullying, and Demographic Variables

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Known Cyber	.62**	.45**	.42**	.37**	.35**	.36**	.37**	.30**	.40**	.36**	.22**	.02	-.01	.13*
2. Been Cyber	--	.58**	.64**	.61**	.54**	.50**	.46**	.42**	.32**	.48**	.32**	-.00	.04	.03
3. Cyberbullied		--	.45**	.40**	.41**	.41**	.51**	.37**	.28**	.33**	.37**	-.07	.01	.10
4. Social Networking		--	.65**	.51**	.51**	.52**	.42**	.28**	.38**	.33**	.04	.05	.04	
5. Text Messages				--	.65**	.57**	.45**	.41**	.32**	.41**	.40**	.01	.01	.09
6. Email					--	.57**	.39**	.28**	.27**	.30**	.26**	-.04	.00	.09
7. IMs						--	.51**	.45**	.30**	.36**	.32**	-.04	-.03	.12
8. Chat Room							--	.55**	.32**	.36**	.44**	-.09	-.01	.13
9. Website								--	.37**	.41**	.52**	-.09	.01	.17*
10. Seen Bullied									--	.45**	.35**	-.05	-.05	.12
11. Been Bullied										--	.44**	.06	.07	.01
12. Bullied											--	-.15*	.02	.15*
13. Gender												--	.05	-.11
14. Ethnicity													--	-.04
15. Sexual Orientation													--	

Note. Known Cyber = known someone who was cyberbullied; Been Cyber = been cyberbullied; Cyberbullied= cyberbullied someone else; Social Networking = been harassed or threatened through a social networking site ; Text Messages = been sent harassing or threatening text messages; Email = been sent harassing or threatening email messages ; IMs = been sent harassing or threatening IMs ; Chat Room = had someone write negative or embarrassing things about you in a chat room ; Website = had someone post negative information or images of you on a website; Seen Bullied = seen someone bullied by another student; Been Bullied = been bullied by another student; Bullied = bullied another student.

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

4. Discussion

In general, reported rates of cyberbullying were low, but not non-existent. Rates of cyberbullying found in the present study were quite comparable to previous research, including that of Li (2006), who examined rates among Canadian middle school students. Li found that 25% of middle school boys and 25.6% of middle school girls reported having been cyberbullied. This is quite similar to our rates of 21.9% and 22%, respectively. Similarly, Li found that 22.3% middle school boys and 11.6% of middle school girls reported having cyberbullied someone else. The present study found rates of 11.4% and 7.6%, respectively. It is interesting to note the trend that the middle school students were both the victim and the bully via electronic means only slightly less often than the college students in the present study. It might be expected that all bullying would be less normative with age. Further, it would be expected that middle school students who are both more open to peer influence and perhaps more technologically savvy, would experience much higher cyberbullying rates than college students. However, this does not appear to be the case.

Interestingly, there were neither gender nor ethnic group differences in any of the cyberbullying behaviors examined. This was surprising, as past the literature has suggested than women and students of color do experience more harassment on college campuses than do men and white students (Rankin & Reason 2005; Reason & Rankin 2006). The literature also suggests that students with a minority sexual orientation experience more harassment than do heterosexual students (Bieschke, Eberz, & Wilson 2000), a finding which was supported in the present study.

Specifically, a minority sexual orientation was associated with higher frequencies of knowing someone who had been cyberbullied and having had someone post negative information or images on a website. Yet these students did not report higher levels of being cyberbullied overall. It may be that negative online interactions are relatively common for this group of students, so that they may not perceive the behaviors they experience as cyberbullying. This may suggest that students with minority sexual orientations may be particularly vulnerable to cyberbullying, and in particular need of interventions in this area.

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