CYBERBULLYING

Fact Sheet

By Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. and Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D.

What is cyberbullying?

A new permutation of bullying has recently arisen and become common: tech-savvy students are turning to cyberspace to harass their peers. In short, cyberbullying is *willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text*. Traditional bullying is commonly associated with "malicious intent," "violence," "repetition," and a perceived or actual "power differential" and are similarly appropriate when attempting to define this new variation.

To be sure, cyberbullies are malicious aggressors who seek implicit or explicit pleasure or profit through the mistreatment of another individual. Violence is often associated with aggression, and corresponds to actions intended to inflict injury (of any type). One instance of mistreatment, while potentially destructive, cannot accurately be equated to bullying, and so cyberbullying must also involve harmful behavior of a repetitive nature.

Cyberbullying is willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text.

Moreover, due to the very nature of the behavior, cyberbullies have some perceived or actual power over their victims. While "power" in traditional bullying might be physical (stature) or social (competency or popularity), online power may simply stem from proficiency. That is, youth who are able to navigate the electronic world and utilize technology in a way that allows them to harass others are in a position of power relative to a victim.

There are two major electronic devices that young bullies can employ to harass their victims from afar. First, using a personal computer a bully can send harassing emails or instant messages, post obscene, insulting, and slanderous messages to online bulletin boards, or develop web sites to promote and disseminate defamatory content. Second, harassing text messages can be sent to the victim via cellular phones.

Issues to consider

First, electronic bullies can remain "virtually" anonymous. Temporary email accounts and pseudonyms in chat rooms, instant messaging programs, and other Internet venues can make it very difficult for adolescents to determine the identity of aggressors. Individuals can hide behind some measure of anonymity when using their personal computer or cellular phone to bully another individual, which perhaps frees them from normative and social constraints on their behavior.

Further, it seems that bullies might be emboldened when using electronic means to effectuate their antagonistic agenda because it takes less energy and fortitude to express hurtful comments using a keyboard or keypad than with one's voice.

Additionally, supervision is lacking in cyberspace. While chat hosts regularly observe the dialog in some chat rooms in an effort to police conversations and evict offensive individuals, personal messages sent between users are viewable only by the sender and the recipient, and therefore outside their regulatory reach. Furthermore, there are no individuals to monitor or censor offensive content in electronic mail or text messages sent via computer or cellular phone.

Another contributive element is the increasingly common presence of computers in the private environments of adolescent bedrooms. Indeed, teenagers often know more about computers and cellular phones than their parents and are therefore able to operate the technologies without worry or concern that a probing parent will discover their participation in bullying (or even their victim-ization).

14 year-old girl from New Jersey:

"Being bullied besides over the internet is worse. It's torment and hurts. They say 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' That quote is a lie and I don't believe in it. Sticks and stones may cause nasty cuts and scars, but those cuts and scars will heal. Insultive words hurt and sometimes take forever to heal."

In a similar vein, the inseparability of a cellular phone from its owner makes that person a perpetual target for victimization. Users often need to keep it turned on for legitimate uses, which provides the opportunity for those with malicious intentions to send threatening and insulting statements via the cellular phone's text messaging capabilities. There may truly be "no rest for the weary" as cyberbullying penetrates the walls of a

home, traditionally a place where victims could seek refuge.

Finally, electronic devices allow individuals to contact others (both for prosocial and antisocial purposes) at all times and in almost all places. The fact that most adolescents connect to the Internet from home indicates that online bullying can be an invasive phenomenon that can hound a person even when not at or around school.

14 year-old girl from Illinois:

"I still cry when I think of what she said. After awhile you start believing all of the things people tell you that aren't true. When I look in the mirror I wonder if I'm fat (I'm not) after what my ex-friend said."

Relatedly, the coordination of a bullying attack can occur with more ease because it is not constrained by the physical location of the bullies or victims. A veritable onslaught of mistreatment can quickly and effectively torment a victim through the use of these communications and connectivity tools.

Nature and extent of cyberbullying

In the Spring of 2005, we conducted a survey of approximately 1,500 Internet-using adolescents who reported their experiences with cyberbullying. Almost 80% of respondents reported that cyberbullying occurs online, while 32% of males and 36% of females reported experiencing cyberbullying. Specifically, almost 40% were disrespected, over 12% were threatened, and about 5% were scared for their safety. Negative emotional responses included significant amounts of frustration, anger, and sadness.

A significant number of males (32 percent) and females (36 percent) reported experiencing cyberbullying.

Most commonly, respondents reported that they were bullied in chat rooms (56%) and through computer text messages (49%). Twenty-eight percent of youth indicated that they had been bullied via email. Interestingly, over 40% of youths who were cyberbullied did not tell anyone about the incident. The study also found that cyberbullying crosses gender and racial lines, and appears to be associated with other, more traditional adolescent problem behaviors, including schoolyard bullying.

What can be done?

It is hoped that this harmful phenomenon can be curtailed by proactively addressing the potentially negative uses of technology. Parents must regularly monitor the online activities in which their children are engaged. They must also encourage an open dialog with their children regarding issues of safety and responsible Internet use. Teachers, too, must take care to supervise students as they use computers in the classrooms and should consider incorporating discussions of issues related to cybersafety in their curriculum when appropriate. "Hands-on" activities and role-playing exercises may be particularly useful for introducing this topic to youth. School liaison officers and law enforcement officials must investigate all instances of harassment – including electronic bullying – and hold responsible parties accountable.

In short, community members and leaders must develop an awareness and appreciation of cyberbullying, and must equip themselves with the knowledge and tools to competently respond to this problem before significant victimization occurs. Familiarization with the following will be useful in this regard:

- "netiquette" and culturally-acceptable rules of participation in online interaction
- the psychological, emotional, and behavioral reasons why cyberbullying occurs
- pertinent terms, abbreviations, and online lingo
- de-escalation and conflict resolution strategies
- online communication skills to cope with textual harassment and mistreatment
- digital evidence preservation

Conclusion

Victimization on the Internet through cyberbullying is increasing in frequency and scope. This negative experience not only undermines a youth's freedom to use and explore valuable online resources, but also can result in severe functional, psychological, and emotional ramifications. It is hoped that this Fact Sheet will make further headway in society's overall understanding of the etiology and effects of harassment in cyberspace.

Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida Atlantic University. Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Together they lecture across the United States on the causes and consequences of cyberbullying and offer a comprehensive workshop for youth, parents, teachers, counselors, mental health professionals, law enforcement and others concerned with addressing and preventing cyberviolence.

For more information, visit http://www.cyberbullying.us