CYBERBULLYING AT THE COLLEGIATE LEVEL:

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES, REACTIONS, AND MOTIVES OF THE

BYSTANDER

By

NATALIE MARGUERITE REAK

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A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor's degree
With Honors in

Elementary Education

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

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Approved by:

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Abstract

We collected data from 168 undergraduate students at the University of Arizona through the use of the *Cyberbullying at the Collegiate Level* survey regarding the past and current state of cyberbullying at the institution. The survey asked students to share their experiences as witnesses to cyberbullying, specifically their reactions and motives as bystanders. The questions inquired about the modes of media in which the students most often witnessed cyberbullying taking place and their level of involvement, as well as the intentions behind their actions as bystanders. Contrary to expectations, the data did not show many significant differences in bystanders' usage of digital technology, their reactions, or motives based on multiple demographics. Most cyberbullying was witnessed in the realm of social media; however, the responses by demographics typically did not vary. It can be determined that although the survey did not reveal any major demographic differences in regards to cyberbullying in college, online and digital aggression does exist at the university level. Using these findings, universities and other institutions can develop methods of awareness and prevention in order to reduce cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying at the Collegiate Level: Demographic Differences, Reactions, and Motives of the

Bystander

Aggression towards others that is repeated and directed toward someone with less power, more commonly referred to as bullying, has been a prevalent and destructive element of society for centuries. Bullying can take place in a variety of settings; however, it often occurs within educational institutions as well as personal environments. The aggression may exist in either verbal, physical, or relational form, or in many cases, all three. Yet, the aggression does not have to occur with the bully face to face with the victim. Cyberbullying, in which the aggressive behavior is performed through the use of digital technology, is a highly dangerous and rapidly growing method of bullying.

Cyberbullying has been defined as "a broad range of behaviors or actions in which a person uses technology in a way that is perceived as aggressive or threatening to another person," (Wankel & Wankel, 2012, p. 293, 14). It is harassment that can take shape in a variety of formats, such as comments, photos, or personal information that is publicized by the aggressor with the intent of embarrassing or hurting another individual (Walker, Rajan Sockman, & Koehn, 2011). Essentially, it is the combination of digital technology, a negative impact, and repetition (Wankel & Wankel, 2012, p. 293, 14). Cyberbullying can take place through a multitude of modes of technology, including, but not limited to, social media websites, text messaging, online gaming, and email.

With the use of digital technology consistently being adopted across the globe, most people are vulnerable and at risk of being cyberbullied or witnessing online aggression (Li, 2006). The International Association for the Wireless Telecommunications Industry determined that the usage of wireless technology and communication in the United States increased 78%

between 1995-2009. With over 276 million subscribers, roughly 1.4 million SMS messages are sent annually (Walker, et. al, 2011). In addition to phone and text message usage, Facebook has grown to over 1.1 billion active users as of May 2013 ("Number of Active", 2013). Many classrooms, from elementary schools to universities, incorporate computers and technology usage into the classroom environment as an additional learning tool. Although there are benefits of this generation having more access to technology, such as increasing social interaction among students and allowing for more communication within collaborative learning experiences (Beran & Li, 2004), it also opens the door to a potentially dangerous environment for social aggression.

A large portion of college students' time is spent in the digital realm, due to a heavy emphasis on digital academic work and communication. This constant involvement with media and technological socializing allows for a greater presence of cyberbullying at the collegiate level, thus initiating the purpose and focus of this study.

Studies about the existence of technology and cyberbullying within universities further suggest that cyberbullying is a relevant and growing concern at higher educational institutions. In a study at a midwestern university in the United States, it was found that 38% of participants reported knowing someone who had been cyberbullied. In addition, 21.9% had been the victims of cyberbullying, while 8.6% reported being the bully in a digital setting (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010). The study examined whether or not there were demographic differences in regards to victims of cyberbullying and those performing the aggressive acts. Participants represented a variety of demographics, including gender, ethnicity, disability, and sexual identity. The study found no significant demographic differences, indicating that these demographics may not be related to the participant's role as either a victim of cyberbullying or the bully (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010).

These studies, among others, have made it clear that bullying, specifically cyberbullying, does exist at the collegiate level, and have closely examined both the victims and aggressors in the realm of cyberbullying. Taking these studies and their results into consideration, the researchers are interested in focusing on the role of the bystander in regards to cyberbullying. Bystanders are neither the bully nor the bullied, but are witnesses to the aggression. As stated in Coloroso's *The Bully, The Bullied, and the Bystander,* "bystanders are the supporting cast who aid and abet the bully through acts of omission and commission" (Coloroso, 2002, p. 62, 4). Their involvement in cyberbullying ranges from being idle, to actively encouraging or joining the bully in the aggression, and their motives for doing so vary as well (Coloroso, 2002). Bystanders play a critical role in a bullying setting, and have the potential to change the course of the behavior and consequences.

A study in Sweden investigated bystanders' participation in cyberbullying by simulating a situation in which bullies released hurtful or threatening material online about victims. It was determined that a majority of the participating bystanders (72%) did not assist in spreading the threatening material. Additionally, 13% of those bystanders that reported they would indeed continue spreading the material claimed they would share it only with the victim in order to inform him or her of the aggressive situation in an effort to help the victim. Only 6% reported they would share the material with the victim in order to bully them further (Slonje, Smith, & Frisen, 2012).

A survey administered in multiple junior high and high schools in London reported that "girls were significantly more likely to be cyberbullied, especially by text messages and phone calls, than boys" (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippett, 2006). Another survey conducted in a U.S. university amongst 131 undergraduate students determined that 100% of male participants

knew someone who had been cyberbullied, while only 23% of females reported knowing a victim of cyberbullying (Walker, et. al., 2011). It is unknown whether or not the participants in this study were actual witnesses to the bullying, but it suggests that there may be differences in the reactions and drive behind the bystanders' actions. We hypothesized that there would likely be differences in the reactions of the bystanders in regards to gender. Several studies have shown some differences in gender related to the victims of cyberbullying and bullies themselves; therefore, we sought to determine whether or not gender might be a critical factor in the reactions and motives of a bystander in a cyberbullying situation. With the knowledge from research that females are more likely to be bullied in an online or technological setting, we determined it is possible that females react differently than males as bystanders in a cyberbullying situation.

We were also interested in closely examining whether or not class standing was a factor in the reactions and motives of the bystanders. Research shows that brain development and maturity continues until around age 25, suggesting that there is a potential for maturity and growth in decision-making from freshman year to senior year at a university ("Brain Maturity Extends", 2011). We hypothesized that perhaps the reactions and motives of an underclassman bystander might differ significantly from those of an upperclassman based on age and maturity.

Previous studies have not shown any significant differences in cyberbullying in relation to ethnicity; therefore we did not expect major differences in the patterns of reactions of bystanders related to this demographic. However, we found it important to explore all possibilities of discrepancies amongst bystanders' reactions and motives.

To assess our hypotheses, we focused our study on the following research questions:

1.   How often do college students utilize various forms of digital technology? In which forms of media do students most often witness cyberbullying?

2.   Why do students believe these specific forms of media are frequent settings for cyber aggression?

3.   In the past, what were students' immediate reactions when witnessing cyberbullying? What factors determined these reactions?

4.   In the future, how do students anticipate they would immediately react when witnessing cyberbullying? Did their reactions change? What factors determined these reactions?

The purpose of this current study was to determine how significant the presence of cyberbullying at the collegiate level is, specifically at the University of Arizona. There was an emphasis placed upon the demographic differences of bystanders, as well as their reactions and motives in an effort to better understand the immediate actions that take place by a witness in a cyberbullying setting. If a significant difference exists in any of the realms, further methods of prevention or awareness could be implemented at the University of Arizona, as well as other higher educational institutions around the world. The specific demographics focused on were gender, ethnicity, and class standing.

Method

Participants

To conduct our research, we surveyed a sample of 168 participants, utilizing a paper survey distributed in nine different general education class sections within the College of Education at the University of Arizona campus in the Fall 2013 semester. The participants in this study were all undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Arizona. The sample represented a wide variety of demographics, including gender, ethnicity, class standing, and area of study. Seventy-nine percent of the participants were female and 21% were male. A wide

variety of ethnicities were represented in the population, with a majority of participants (66%) identifying as White. In regards to class standing, most students were freshmen (50.9%). Many colleges across campus were represented, with the majority of participants coming from the College of Nursing (14.3%) and the College of Science (12.5%).

Procedure

After obtaining approval from the Human Research Protection program at the University of Arizona, the hard copy *Cyberbullying at the Collegiate Level* survey was administered by the researcher in nine general education and major courses within the College of Education. A total of 168 surveys was collected at the end of the surveying period. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and they were not obligated to take the survey.

Measure

A survey was designed by the researcher for the purpose of this study. Most items were *true* and *false*. For each survey item in which the participant responded *true*, he or she was asked to place a check mark next to the follow-up responses that were related to the previous question. Participants were asked to mark all answer choices that applied. If participants responded *false*, they would continue on to the next question. The *true* and *false* items were coded with a 0 for *false* and a 1 for *true.* All marked follow-up response items were coded with a 1, and unmarked items were coded with 0. The survey also included one short response question in which participants were asked to provide a brief response explaining why the form of media they selected in the previous question is a frequent setting for cyberbullying. Participants were asked to limit their responses to 100 words or less. One question regarding the likelihood of specific reactions of the bystanders when witnessing cyberbullying in the future was coded using the Likert Scale. Participants were asked to rank the likelihood of various reactions using a scale of

1-5, with 1 indicating that the action was highly unlikely and 5 indicating the action was very

likely. The survey is shown in Appendix A. These items are numbers 5 and 8.

Statistical Analyses

To analyze the data collected from the survey, we used SPSS 20.0. We then conducted t-

tests and one-way ANOVA.

Results

Frequency

Each of the 168 participants surveyed claimed to "frequently utilize any form of digital

technology", indicating that they use one or more forms of digital technology at least once per

day. The most frequently used modes of technology were social media (Males: $M = .97$, $SD =$

$.17$; Females: $M = .98$, $SD = .12$), text messaging (Males: $M = 1.0$, $SD = .00$; Females: $M = .98$,

$SD = .12$), and email (Males: $M = .97$, $SD = .17$; Females: $M = .90$, $SD = .30$). Of this sample,

98.8% of students had witnessed cyberbullying in at least one form of media, with the most

common form of media in which cyberbullying was witnessed being social media (Males: $M =$

$.77$, $SD = .43$; Females: $M = .86$, $SD = .35$).

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics for the sample.

			Group Statistics		
	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1 Do you frequently utilize dig. tech. (at least once per day)?	male	35	1.00	.000[a]	.000
	female	131	1.00	.000[a]	.000
Social Media	male	35	.97	.169	.029
	female	131	.98	.123	.011
Texting	male	35	1.00	.000	.000
	female	131	.98	.123	.011
Online Gaming	male	35	.29	.458	.077
	female	131	.08	.278	.024
Email	male	35	.97	.169	.029
	female	131	.90	.300	.026
Other	male	35	.09	.284	.048
	female	130	.07	.255	.022

The survey asked participants to hand-write a short response explaining why they determined social media to be a frequent setting for cyberbullying. The most common responses were that social media removes the "face to face" element of bullying, and that the attacker can remain anonymous in many cases. It was also mentioned that in this day and age, a majority of university students have personal accounts and actively participate in digital social media communities such as Facebook and Twitter.

Demographic Variables

Gender. Contrary to expectations, the survey data revealed only a few significant gender differences in responses. One notable difference was that more males reported frequently using online gaming (Males: $M = .47, SD = .27$; Females: $M = .08, SD = .51$). More males than females also determined that online gaming environments were the most common setting in which they had witnessed cyberbullying (Males: $M = 23, SD = .43$; Females: $M = .03, SD = .18$). To observe whether observed differences between males and females were statistically significant, t-tests for independent samples were conducted. Significant differences were found for the frequency of cyberbullying being witnessed in online gaming settings ($t(33.24) = 4.07, p = .0005$.) The mean for males ($M = .29, SD = .46$) was significantly higher than the mean for females ($M = .08, SD = .278$).

There was also a difference in how males and females reported responding to cyberbullying that occurred in the past (Males: $M = .13, SD = .34$; Females: $M = .30, SD = .46$). When asked about their reactions if they were to witness any form of cyberbullying in the future, most responses did not differ greatly between genders. However, females reported to be more likely to comfort the victim than males (Males: $M = 2.76, SD = 1.73$; Females: $M = 3.75, SD = 1.29$). In regards to future experiences witnessing cyberbullying, female bystanders were more

likely to react to the cyberbullying based on whether or not they were personally affected by the situation (Males: $M = .52, SD = .509$; Female: $M = .77, SD = .425$).

Class Standing. For these analyses, we compared responses on the subscales by six descriptions of class standing: freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, fifth-year senior, and graduate student. No significant differences were detected on any scales.

Ethnicity. For these analyses, we compared responses on the subscales by seven racial/ethnic groups: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, White, and Other. No significant differences were detected on any scales.

Aside from the differences in gender responses, no other systematic differences were detected.

Reactions and Motives of Bystanders

The survey asked participants to identify their reactions to witnessed cyberbullying in the past, as well as predict how they would most likely react to the online aggression in the future.

A large majority of the sample chose "Ignore/Not Involve Yourself" as their immediate reaction in past circumstances of cyberbullying (Males: $M = .65, SD = .49$; Females: $M = .73, SD = .44$). The only significant differences in demographic responses were that significantly more females reported comforting the victim in past cyberbullying situations (Males: $M = .13, SD = .34$; Females: $M = .30, SD = .46$). Additionally, more females than males predicted that they would be more likely to comfort a victim of cyberbullying in future situations (Males: $M = 2.76, SD = 1.73$; Females: $M = 3.75, SD = 1.29$).

Although participants' motives behind their reactions to witnessing cyberbullying did not differ much by demographics in regards to past online aggression occurrences, more females

reported their main motive for comforting the victim would be that they were personally affected by the situation (Males: *M = .52, SD = .509*; Female: *M = .77, SD = .425*). A majority of participants reported that both in past situations and future occurrences of witnessing cyberbullying, their immediate reactions as bystanders would vary based on the situation.

Discussion

Our survey and the data collecteed provideed additional information about the existence of cyberbullying at the university level, as well as explored the patterns in bystander reactions and motives. Prior to conducting the survey, we hypothesized that there would likely be significant differences in participants' responses based on gender and class standing. Contrary to our expectations, we determined that these demographics do not play a significant role in the reactions and motives of bystanders in regards to cyberbullying. The only major differences revealed in the survey were in the frequency of usage and witnessing of cyberbullying in online gaming settings. The other differences were in the willingness of the bystander to comfort the victim of the attack, and the bystanders' intervention based on whether or not they were personally affected by the situation.

More males than females reported using online gaming frequently, which further supports why more males witnessed cyberbullying in online gaming than did females. According to the data, spending time in online gaming settings is more preferable to males than females. Often times, video games and other online games are active and even violent, making them generally more enticing for males than females. A study in the United Kingdom compared the online gaming habits of adolescents and adults, and found that most users were male. Additionally, adolescents reported that their favorite component of participating in online gaming was the

violence (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004). It was not a surprise that these patterns appeared in the data.

When asked how they have responded in past situations and how they anticipate they would react to witnessing cyberbullying in the future, more females than males reported that they would likely comfort the victim. Research has shown that females tend to be more nurturing; therefore it is understandable that females would be more willing than males to reach out to a victim of cyberbullying in order to assist in the situation. In a study on gender and emotions, it was concluded that females are more likely to express emotions associated with relationships and social bonding with others than males. In addition, males were found to be less nurturing than women (Schmitt, Alcalay, Allensworth, Allik, Ault, Austers, … & Zupaneie, 2003). These findings support the results of our study and the knowledge that women are more nurturing than men.

A majority of both males and females agreed that their reactions to witnessing cyberbullying would depend on the situation at hand, but a majority of females responded that one factor determining their reactions and interactions was whether or not they were personally affected by the situation. Yet, the most common reaction to witnessing cyberbullying, by both females and males, was to ignore the situation or not involve oneself. This indicates that females will only involve themselves if they are personally affected by the cyberbullying. Otherwise, they would most likely ignore or not become involved. If a female is personally affected by the cyberbullying, she will most likely involve herself in various ways in order to assist the victim, as well as herself, according to the data from the survey. If she is not personally affected, she will most likely not involve herself, perhaps due to fear of repercussions. One study by the National Crime Prevention Council determined that only about 15% of girls speak up when

witnessing bullying because they are afraid that they will become the bully's next victim ("Girls and Bullying", 2014). Although the study examined the responses of adolescents, the same may be true for women at the collegiate level.

Limitations

Although the survey and procedure of this study were carefully designed, there are some limitations that should be taken into account.

One possible participant misconception could have been overlooking the directions included within the survey, which asked participants to limit their responses to their experiences within the university setting. Many responses could have been from earlier years in elementary, junior high, and high school experiences. If participants incorporated data from experiences in years prior to their time at the university, the data may not be as accurate as if all responses were related to experiences within the university. However, the data still support the notion that cyberbullying exists in educational institutions of multiple levels and bystanders of different demographics still have similar reactions to the cyberbullying and motives behind their reactions.

Another potential error could be misinterpretation by the researchers of participants' hand-written short responses included in the survey. When reading a participant's created response as opposed to listening to a response or providing limited response choices, it is possible to interpret the meaning of the response in a way that is different from the original intentions of the participant. Emphases on words may be misplaced, allowing for misreading. Additionally, a participant's responses may have been mistakenly transposed when being transferred from a hard copy to a digital format of the data.

Additionally, the population of respondents was predominantly freshmen (49.4%). The next largest population in relation to class standing was sophomores at 29.8%. With such a high

population of underclassmen, it is difficult to compare differences in response patterns based on

the class standing of the participants. However, there were no indications of discrepancies

between responses from freshmen and sophomores, and upperclassmen. Maturity and age do not

appear to be critical factors in the role of the bystander, including their actions within a

cyberbullying setting.

The second limitation is the small sample size. We administered and collected 168

surveys throughout various courses within the College of Education at a university with a student

body population of over 40,000. This group of participants represents such a miniscule fraction

of the entire student body, allowing room for hesitation when making generalizations about the

reactions and motives of bystanders across campus when faced with cyberbullying.

Implications and Recommendations

According to the results of this study about the reactions and motives of bystanders in

cyberbullying situations, there are generally no significant differences in the patterns of data

based on the demographics of gender, class standing, ethnicity, or area of study at a university.

Using this knowledge, we determined that it is not essential for higher educational institutions to

individualize their anti-cyberbullying advertising based on any of the previously mentioned

demographics.

However, there was a clear difference in gender responses about the domain in which

bystanders most often have witnessed cyberbullying occur. More males reported utilizing online

gaming, as well as witnessing acts of online aggression in gaming settings. The researchers

would recommend that institutions focus on addressing males in an effort to reduce

cyberbullying in online gaming situations. One effective method of targeting anti-cyberbullying

advertising in relation to online gaming towards males would be placing the messages in areas in

which males frequent, such as men's restrooms or men's locker rooms at university fitness centers.

Aside from focusing solely on males and online gaming patterns, universities should develop a policy on bullying of all types and incorporate a strict discipline system for aggressors and instigators. Students have the right to feel safe at their university, and should be aware of their resources if they should feel threatened, whether in person or in a digital setting.

A suggestion for future research would be to conduct another study using a similar survey among students at the collegiate level. It is recommended that the researchers collect responses from a larger sample size, as well as administer the survey and conduct the research at multiple institutions around the world. A larger sample size and a variety of institutions will provide a wider data set to analyze. The larger sample size may also reveal demographic differences in bystander reactions and motives that were not revealed in this study.

This study adds to what has previously been researched in regards to cyberbullying. A majority of bullying and cyberbullying research is limited to elementary, middle, and high school; however, this study provides a closer look at the existence of cyberbullying at the collegiate level. The study identified multiple demographics and typical bystander responses and motives as witnesses to online aggression. It allows researchers to analyze and interpret the reactions and motives of bystanders who have witnessed cyberbullying or may witness it in the future as a university student. It can be determined through this study that there are no significant differences in the reactions and motives of the bystander in regards to class standing and ethnicity. There are few differences in responses based on gender worth noting, but none were contrary to expectations. The study also concluded that cyberbullying does indeed exist at the collegiate level, and that bystanders play a critical role within cyberbullying settings.

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Appendix A

Survey:
<u>Cyberbullying at the Collegiate Level</u>

Please completely fill in the bubble(s) with your response to questions 1-3.

1. Gender:
   o   Male
   o   Female

2. Ethnicity:
   o   American Indian or Alaska Native
   o   Asian
   o   Black or African American
   o   Hispanic or Latino
   o   Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   o   White
   o   Other

3. Class Standing:
   o   Freshman
   o   Sophomore
   o   Junior
   o   Senior
   o   Fifth-Year Senior
   o   Graduate Student

4. College/Major: _____

• •

Please circle your response(s) for the following questions.

5. Are you familiar with the term "cyberbullying"?
   a) Yes
   b) No

Cyberbullying can be defined as "a broad range of behaviors or actions in which a person uses technology in a way that is perceived as aggressive or threatening to another person" (Wankel & Wankel 2012). Essentially, it is the combination of digital technology, negative impact, and repetition (Wankel & Wankel 2012). Cyber bullying can take place through various forms of technology, including social media sites, text messaging, online gaming, email, and more.

6. Do you frequently utilize any form of digital technology?
    a) Yes (Please mark all that apply)
        ___ Social Media
        ___ Text Messaging
        ___ Online Gaming
        ___ Email
        ___ Other
           Please specify: _____

    b) No

7. Have you ever witnessed any form of cyberbullying?
    a) Yes
       If yes, in which type of media have you witnessed cyberbullying occurring? Please mark all that apply.
           ___ Social Media (facebook, MySpace, The Dirty, blog, etc.)
               Please specify: _____
           ___ Text Messaging
           ___ Online Gaming
           ___ Email
           ___ Other
               Please specify: _____

    b) No

8. If you have witnessed cyberbullying, what was your immediate reaction? Please mark all that apply.
        ___ Defend/Join the bully
        ___ Defend/Join the victim
        ___ Comfort the victim
        ___ Get help from an outside party
        ___ Ignore/Not involve yourself
        ___ Other
           Please specify: _____
        ___ Not Applicable

9. If you were to witness any form of cyberbullying in the future, what do you anticipate would be your immediate reaction? Please rate the likeliness of each response (1- not likely, 5- very likely).

___ Defend/Join the bully
___ Defend/Join the victim
___ Comfort the victim
___ Get help from an outside party
___ Ignore/Not involve yourself
___ Other
      Please specify: _____

10. Does your reaction to cyberbullying depend on the situation at hand?
   a) Yes, it depends on the situation
     If yes, which factors affect the way in which you react to cyberbullying?
       ___ My friend(s) is/are involved
       ___ I believe one of the parties involved is "right"
       ___ I am personally affected by the situation
       ___ I care about the issue
       ___ Whether or not I think I will face consequences
       ___ I believe the victim needs help
       ___ Other
          Please specify: _____

   b) No, I generally react the same way despite the situation

11. What is the form of media in which you have most often witnessed cyberbullying? Please mark all that apply.
      ___ Social Media (facebook, MySpace, blog, etc.)
         Please specify: _____
      ___ Text Messaging
      ___ Online Gaming
      ___ Email
      ___ Other
         Please specify: _____

12. Why do you think this form of media is a frequent setting for cyberbullying? Please respond in 100 words or less.