

The Relationship Between Gender and Perceived Cyber-bullying Behavior

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Abstract

Technology has changed the way people live, work, and socialize, including the way people bully (Akbulut, Sahin, & Eristi, 2010; Dilmac, 2009; Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011). According to Walker et al. (2011), the prevalence of cyber-bullying in our society has brought the long-lasting detrimental effects on victims to the forefront. Feelings of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts have been described by victims of bullying (Walker et al., 2011). This cross-sectional research investigated gender differences in the perception of cyber-bullying behaviors by surveying 140 college students at a small, Midwestern university. Using the symbolic interaction theory, we hypothesized that male and female college students would interpret cyber-bullying behaviors differently because genders are socialized differently (Strong, DeVault, & Cohen, 2008). Survey data was analyzed using frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean-comparisons, independent t-tests, and a reliability analysis. Results indicated significant gender differences in four out of the ten variables. Implications for practitioners will include creating effective education and prevention programs which address the wide range of cyber-bullying behaviors and the gender differences in the perception of these behaviors. Future research would benefit from a large and randomized sample as well as qualitative interviews to capture the lived experience of cyber-bullying.

Keywords: cyber-bullying, bullying, social networks

Technology has changed the way people live, work, and socialize, including the way people bully (Akbulut, Sahin, & Eristi, 2010; Dilmac, 2009; Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011). Traditional bullying involves

face-to-face interaction in which individuals are targeted based on physical appearance, perceived weakness, and unpopularity (Dilmac, 2009). This type of bullying usually occurs in schools or during the day. Advancement in technology allows for constant social connectivity, so bullying can happen at any time of the day. Unlike traditional bullying, the messages and images used to bully in the cyber-world can be quickly spread to many people. Technology allows bullies to be anonymous in the cyber-world. Cyber-bullying is defined as “the use of interactive technologies such as social networking sites, cell phones, instant messaging, email, or other technology-based communication tools to deliberately send insulting, harassing, and obsessive messages that result in harm to the recipient” (Walker et al., 2011, p. 37). According to Walker et al. (2011), the prevalence of cyber-bullying in our society has brought the long-lasting detrimental effects on victims to the forefront. Feelings of anxiety, depression, and suicides have been outcomes of bullying (Walker et al., 2011). Since there is little research on this topic, it is important to add to the existing knowledge regarding cyber-bullying. The current study investigated gender differences in the perception of cyber-bullying behaviors in a sample of college students at a small Midwestern university.

Literature Review

A literature review was carried out to investigate the gender differences of cyber-bullying behaviors perceived by college students. Since there was little literature on cyber-bullying and college students within the United States, the search was broadened to include other countries. There was a consistent finding within the literature that behaviors defined as cyber-bullying were experienced, and often by college students (Walker et al., 2011; Nocentini et al., 2010; Akbulu et al., 2010; Dilmac, 2009; Finn, 2004).

Walker et al. (2011) studied the experience of cyber-bullying by college students in the United States. The study found that 54% of all respondents knew someone who had been cyber-bullied. The most common undesirable behaviors experienced online were pretending to be someone he or she was not, sending tokens of affection, and ‘friending’ someone to get personal information. The study also found that more than 30% of the participants had experienced unwanted communication

online, yet only 11% reported being cyber-bullied. This finding points to a discrepancy between undesirable behaviors and the label cyber-bullying.

Nocentini et al. (2010) studied students' perceptions of terms used to label cyber-bullying and the different forms of cyber-bullying in three European countries. The purposes of the study were to identify a term that best described cyber-bullying and to clarify if certain behaviors fit the cyber-bullying construct. Individuals in this study agreed that if an action affected them negatively, then the action would be considered bullying. The participants from Spain and Germany found that if a phrase or action was interpreted as a joke, then cyber-bullying did not occur.

Akbulut et al. (2010) explored the prevalence of cyber-bullying behaviors experienced among Turkish online social utility members based on different demographics. The results showed that more than half of the participants had experienced cyber-bullying victimization. The most popular cyber-bullying behaviors experienced were cursing in instant messaging programs, pretending to be someone else in order to make that person look bad, and receiving harassing emails and/or instant messages. When genders were compared, males reported more instances of cyber-bullying victimization than females.

Dilmac (2009) analyzed the relationship between cyber-bullying and the psychiatric symptoms that influenced actions of bullying in Turkish college students. The study found that 22.5% of participants said they had cyber-bullied at least once. The study also determined that hostility was correlated with cyber-bullying. Finally, the study reported that males were more likely than females to report that they would engage in cyber-bullying in the future.

Finn (2004) studied the prevalence of cyber-stalking among college students in the United States. Cyber-stalking was defined as making threats or harassing an individual online. This study examined cyber-stalking in three ways: threats, messages, and stealing someone's identity. The research found that 13.1% of college students continued to be harassed even after they asked the bully to stop. The research found that most college students who were cyber-stalked did not report the incident.

The current literature described which behaviors students considered cyber-bullying. The literature also indicated that college students experienced cyber-bullying behaviors frequently. Finally, the literature

looked at psychiatric symptoms contributing to cyber-bullying as well as gender differences in perpetration and victimization. This study explored gender differences in college students' interpretation of online behaviors to see if these behaviors fit their definition of cyber-bullying; it thus contributes to the existing literature regarding cyber-bullying and college students.

Theoretical Framework

The theory used to inform this study was the symbolic interaction theory. This theory assumes that people interact with each other through words, symbols, and gestures (Strong, DeVault, & Cohen, 2008). This theory also assumes that an interaction is reciprocal, involving two or more people. When an interaction occurs, there is interpretation by those individuals involved in the interaction. For instance, if a mother asks her son to clean his room, and he ignores her, an interaction has taken place. The mother could interpret her son's response by believing he did not hear her request. The mother could also interpret her son's response as defiant behavior. Each interpretation would elicit a different response from the mother. Individuals interpret interactions differently based on their previous life experiences, which often vary depending on gender.

As applied to this study, this theory would predict that males and females will perceive different behaviors as cyber-bullying. This theory indicates that interactions online will be interpreted differently depending on the individual. Historically males and females are socialized differently in society, so there are likely to be gender differences in the interpretation of online interactions.

Purpose Statement

The purposes of this study were (1) to explore male and female college students' perceptions of cyber-bullying behaviors, (2) to develop a survey which measures what males and females define as cyber-bullying behaviors in a reliable manner, and (3) to highlight bullying behaviors occurring through technology and further the prevention of cyber-bullying.

The research question in this study was "Are there gender differences in the perception of cyber-bullying behaviors?" We predicted that males and females would interpret different behaviors

to be cyber-bullying. The literature shows that cyber-bullying occurs when an individual interprets an interaction as offensive, and symbolic interaction theory assumes that individuals interpret situations differently (Strong et al., 2008). Since males and females are socialized differently in our society, it can be hypothesized that cyber-bullying would be interpreted differently based upon a person's gender.

Method

Participants

This study was conducted at a small, Midwestern university. The participants were 140 undergraduate male and female students.

Table 1
Demographics

	Number of Participants	Participant Percentage
GEN	48 Males	34.0%
	90 Females	64.0%
AGE	2 No Response	2.0%
	67 18-19 Year Olds	48.0%
	58 20-21 Year Olds	41.0%
	7 22-23 Year Olds	5.0%
	5 24-25 Year Olds	4.0%
	1 26+ Year Olds	1.0%
	2 No Response	1.0%
CBP	37 Yes	26.0%
	101 No	72.0%
	2 No Response	2.0%
CBV	76 Yes	54.0%
	62 No	44.0%
	2 No Response	2.0%

Note. (GEN)= Gender; (AGE)= Age; (CBP)= Have you been cyber-bullied in the past?; (CBV)= Have you ever know anyone who was a victim of cyber-bullying?

Research Design

Survey research was conducted in order to generalize to a larger population with similar characteristics so inferences could be made about the gender differences in the perception of cyber-bullying. A cross-sectional research design was used to obtain college students' attitudes at one point in time. Data was collected through self-administered questionnaires which were used because they are convenient, have a low cost, and allow data to be gathered easily.

The population for this study was the university student population. The sample was the male and female students in general education courses. The study used a non-random purposive sampling design which allowed the researchers to be inclusive in the classroom and access a balance of male and female students. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Data Collection Instrument

The survey was designed to investigate gender differences among college students' perceptions of cyber-bullying behaviors. The survey included a description of the study, definitions of cyber-bullying, interactive technologies, perception, risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality, voluntary participation, contact information of the research team and supervisor, and instructions for completing the survey. The survey asked demographic questions about age, gender, and experiences with cyber-bullying. Also included in the survey were 10 closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the participants' perceptions ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Finally, the survey included two open-ended questions about the motivation of cyber-bullies and prevention of cyber-bullying. The survey statements and questions were informed by cyber-bullying literature.

The survey instrument has both face validity and content validity. Face validity is the extent that each survey statement is logically linked with the research question and concepts in the literature. The survey showed face validity because the survey statements were based on literature, and thus reflected the relationship

between gender and perceived cyber-bullying behaviors. Content validity refers to how well the survey statements cover the full range of concepts in the literature. The survey statements covered the wide range of cyber-bullying behaviors described within literature. The survey was piloted to two college females; both individuals stated the survey was clear and easy to understand.

Procedure

The data for this study was collected from two general education classrooms. A purposive sampling design was used, which led to general education courses because these courses would have a balance of male and female students. The researchers did not randomize because inclusiveness was needed in the classroom.

Students in both general education classes followed along as specific parts of the informed consent were read. Students were instructed to keep the first two pages of the document and put the completed survey in an envelope in the front of the classroom. The researchers expressed appreciation and left the classroom along with the professor to ensure the students did not feel pressured to take the survey. The finished surveys were collected and stored in the supervisor's office until data analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

Data was "cleaned" and then checked for missing data. The "cleaned" surveys were "coded" using acronyms for each variable. Since groups were compared, the independent variable was gender. The demographic questions were given three letter acronyms: Gender of the respondents (GEN); Age of the respondents (AGE); Have you been cyber-bullied in the past (CBP); Have you ever known anyone who was a victim of cyber-bullying (CBV). Each survey statement was also given a three letter acronym: I consider cyber-bullying to be: Sending threatening messages via interactive technologies (STM); Falsely representing oneself as a different person or gender via interactive technologies (FRD); Sending demanding messages such as pressuring to see someone or aggressively requesting a date with someone via interactive technologies (DMP); Harming

another person's reputation by spreading rumors through interactive technologies (HRS); Using discriminatory language such as slut, fag, man-whore, etc. in a joking manner via interactive technologies (DLJ); Posting an embarrassing picture on social networking sites, such as Facebook, without that person's consent (PEC); Adding a person as a 'friend' on a social networking site to gain personal information about another person (AFS); Purposefully excluding someone from an online group or event (PEO); Sending personal nude pictures or videos without that person's consent via cell phone (SPC); and Sending unwanted text messages of affection such as suggesting a sexual relationship (UTS).

The level of analysis of this study was the individual. The data was analyzed using the computer program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Since groups were compared, the data analysis included frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean-comparisons, independent t-tests, and a reliability analysis, the Cronbach's Alpha.

Results

A frequency distribution analysis was run. The category 'self-identify gender' was deleted from the independent variable because none of the participants identified under this category. Four participants were eliminated from the sample because of missing data in their surveys. One participant was eliminated for confidentiality reasons. The final number of participants used for this study was 135.

Cross-tabulations were run with the independent variable GEN. There appeared to be gender differences for the variables FRD, DLJ, and PEC. For FRD and DLJ, the majority of females either agreed or strongly agreed, while the majority of males neither agreed/disagreed. For PEC, females had a higher percent who agreed or strongly agreed than males. For STM, DMP, HRS, AFS, PEO, SPC, and UTS, there appeared to be no difference between genders.

An independent samples t-test was run to compare mean scores for males and females. There were four significant mean differences between the genders for the variables FRD, HRS, DLJ, and AFS at $p < .05$.

A reliability analysis was run to indicate if the dependent variables were a reliable measure of the relationship between gender and

perceived cyber-bullying behaviors. Cronbach’s Alpha is a measure of reliability, and the analysis was 0.886. This value indicated the survey statements were a reliable measure of the major concept.

Table 2
Cross-Tabulations

STM

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	4.2%	2.1%	10.4%	35.4%	47.9%	100.0%
Female	4.6%	1.1%	1.1%	27.6%	65.5%	100.0%

FRD

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	10.4%	10.4%	39.6%	27.1%	12.5%	100.0%
Female	2.3%	6.9%	34.5%	39.1%	17.2%	100.0%

DMP

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	2.1%	10.4%	12.5%	45.8%	29.2%	100.0%
Female	4.6%	4.6%	13.8%	37.9%	39.1%	100.0%

HRS

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	4.2%	0.0%	8.3%	37.5%	50.0%	100.0%
Female	3.4%	0.0%	1.1%	18.4%	77.0%	100.0%

DLJ

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	4.2%	27.1%	43.8%	12.5%	12.5%	100.0%
Female	6.9%	6.9%	17.2%	23.0%	46.0%	100.0%

PEC

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	2.1%	12.5%	33.3%	27.1%	25.0%	100.0%
Female	5.7%	6.9%	19.5%	32.2%	35.6%	100.0%

AFS

GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	16.7%	20.8%	39.6%	18.8%	4.2%	100.0%
Female	5.7%	16.1%	46.0%	24.1%	8.0%	100.0%

Table 3
Independent T-tests

Variable	Gender				
	Males	Females	t	df	Sig.
FRD	3.21 (1.13)	3.62 (0.93)	-2.28	133	*0.024
HRS	4.29 (0.94)	4.66 (0.82)	-2.34	133	*0.021
DLJ	3.02 (1.04)	3.94 (1.24)	-4.59	112.02	*0.000
AFS	2.73 (1.09)	3.13 (0.97)	-2.18	133	*0.031

Note. FRD =Falsely representing oneself as a different person or gender via interactive technologies; HRS =Harming another person's reputation by spreading rumors through interactive technologies; DLJ =Using discriminatory language such as slut, fag, man-whore, etc. in a joking manner via interactive technologies; AFS =Adding a person as a 'friend' on a social networking site to gain personal information about another person.*significant @ $p < .05$, two tailed. Standard deviations appear in parenthesis below mean.

Discussion

The hypothesis that male and female students would interpret cyber-bullying behaviors differently found mixed support. Statistically significant mean differences ($p < 0.05$) were found for the statements: *Falsely representing one's self as a different person or gender via interactive technologies; Harming another person's reputation by spreading rumors through interactive technologies; Using discriminatory language such as slut, fag, man-whore, etc. in a joking manner via interactive technologies; and Adding a person as a friend on a social networking site to gain personal information about another person.* These findings are supported by the symbolic interaction theory which assumes, when an interaction occurs, there is interpretation by those involved in the interaction (Strong et al., 2008). Since males and females are socialized differently in society, this may have influenced the difference in perception of cyberbullying behaviors.

In the cross-tabulations, gender differences were found in three of the survey statements. The majority of females agreed that cyber-bullying includes falsely representing one's self as a different person or gender via interactive technologies and using discriminatory language in a joking manner via interactive technologies, while the majority of males neither agreed/disagreed. The majority of males and females

agreed that cyber-bullying includes posting an embarrassing picture on social networking sites without that person's consent. However, the response rate was higher for females who agreed than for males. These gender differences were supported by the symbolic interaction theory (Strong et al., 2008). For example, females may have been more likely to view the intent of posting an embarrassing picture online without consent to cause harm. Thus, each gender may have defined this behavior differently based on their interpretation of the intent.

For the statement, *I consider cyber-bullying to be, using discriminatory language in a joking manner via interactive technologies*, females agreed more often than males. However, the literature stated if a behavior is interpreted as a joke, then the interaction is not considered cyber-bullying (Nocentini et al., 2010). The data from this study did not support research findings in the literature. Females may have believed that using discriminatory language even when joking can result in harm, and so they categorized this behavior as cyber-bullying. The majority of males neither agreed/disagreed with this statement. This could be because using discriminatory language in a joking manner among friends is socially acceptable for males. According to symbolic interaction theory, individuals interpret interactions differently based on previous life experiences which often vary by gender (Strong et al, 2008). Males may interpret the use of discriminatory language as an acceptable way to interact.

The majority of males and females agreed that cyber-bullying is sending threatening messages via interactive technologies and posting embarrassing pictures on social networking sites without that person's consent. The findings from this study were congruent with the existing literature. Nocentini et al. (2010) found that Italian, Spanish, and German participants considered written-verbal behaviors and visual behaviors to be forms of cyber-bullying. Written-verbal behaviors were defined as harassing phone calls, text messages, emails, instant messaging, social networking communities, and websites. Visual behaviors were defined as posting, sending or sharing compromising pictures and videos. Exclusion was defined as purposefully excluding someone from an online group. In the current study, the majority of participants agreed that purposefully excluding someone from an online group or event is cyber-bullying. This is inconsistent with Italian participants in Nocentini's

study (2010), but consistent with Spanish participants in the same study.

For harming another person's reputation by spreading rumors through interactive technology, the majority of males and females agreed. These findings are reflected in the literature. In a study by Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2007) cited by Dilmac (2009), participants reported experiencing instances of cyber-bullying, defined as using interactive technologies to hurt or embarrass another person, within the last year. Hurting or embarrassing another person can result in a negative reflection of that person's reputation.

The majority of males and females agreed that sending nude pictures or videos without that person's consent via cell phone and sending unwanted text messages of affection are cyber-bullying. These findings are congruent with the symbolic interaction theory (Strong et al., 2008) because individuals may have learned that it is wrong to send nude pictures and thus gave a negative meaning to this behavior from past knowledge. For sending unwanted text messages of affection, individuals may have interpreted this behavior as a form of sexual harassment which individuals learn can cause harm, and so they interpreted this behavior based on past knowledge.

Walker et al. (2011) found when participants were asked about their experiences with undesirable and obsessive communication in the cyber world, 'friending' people you know to get personal information about you, and sending excessively 'needy' or demanding messages were two of the top behaviors reported. While participants reported experiencing these behaviors, only a small percentage reported also experiencing cyber-bullying. This may indicate that participants were unsure whether these behaviors qualify as cyber-bullying. In our study, the majority of males and females neither agreed/disagreed that adding a person as a 'friend' on a social networking site to gain personal information about another person is cyber-bullying. However, the majority of participants in our study agreed that sending demanding messages via interactive technologies is cyber-bullying which is not consistent with the existing literature.

For three of the survey statements, a large percentage of both males and females neither agreed/disagreed. The statements in which this trend occurred were *Posting an embarrassing picture on social networking sites without that person's consent*, *Adding a person as*

a 'friend' on a social networking site to gain personal information about another person, and Purposefully excluding someone from an online group or event. This trend may have resulted from participants interpreting the intent of the behavior under different contexts. For example, posting an embarrassing picture without that person's consent could be intended to be humorous, or it could be intended to harm the recipient. Thus, the behavior may be interpreted differently depending on the context. The survey statements did not address the intent of the behavior, so this could explain the indecisiveness of the participants.

Qualitative Analysis

For the open-ended questions, a content analysis was done to identify general themes from the participant comments (Esterberg, 2002). When participants were asked how they had been cyber-bullied, the most common theme was *mean comments/discriminatory language*, consisting of 11 out of the 21 responses. This theme also held true when participants were asked how people they knew had been cyber-bullied; in 32 out of the 58 responses, participants indicated the use of *mean comments/discriminatory language*. The next most reported themes used to cyber-bully people participants knew were *threatening messages*, with 9 responses, and *harming reputation through rumors*, with 8 responses. Our findings reflected the themes sending threatening messages and harming another person's reputation by spreading rumors, which the majority of participants agreed are cyber-bullying behaviors. However, our participants were more divided when asked about discriminatory language used in a joking manner, which may point to the importance of the intent behind the behavior.

The qualitative comments regarding the question "What is your perspective on the motivation of individuals who bully someone in cyberspace?" reflected three main themes: *The bully feels bad about themselves*, with 42 out of 127 responses; *The bully is afraid of face-to-face confrontation*, with 27 responses; and *The bully feels powerful when victimizing others*, with 21 responses. Dilmac (2009) found that engaging in behaviors which hurt others and gaining sympathy, affection, and emotional support positively predicted cyber-bullying. Dilmac's (2009) study reflects the qualitative findings that cyber-bullies are able to gain

power through hurting others. Also, cyber-bullies may feel bad about themselves, motivating them to look for sympathy, affection, and emotional support through bullying. The theme that individuals are motivated to cyber-bully because they are afraid of face-to-face confrontation was not mentioned in the literature. This may be the case because, unlike the other two themes, which may also be considered motivation for traditional bullies, fear of face-to-face confrontation is unique to cyber-bullying.

The qualitative comments addressing prevention of cyber-bullying resulted in two main themes: *The need for education in schools*, with 24 out of 125 responses, and *Ban/block the cyber-bully while also being selective of whom you add as a 'friend,'* with 31 responses. Many participants recommended educating students about cyber-bullying. If cyber-bullying becomes an issue on social networking sites, participants recommended blocking the cyber-bullies. One participant stated, "Be smart about what you do/who you talk to online. You don't have to add every person on Facebook just because they request you."

The qualitative comments showed that mean comments or discriminatory language are most often used to cyber-bully. Participants believed low self-esteem is the main reason why individuals cyber-bully. In order to prevent cyber-bullying, participants recommended banning or blocking cyber-bullies and carefully choosing one's 'friends' on social networking sites.

Limitations

A limitation to this study is the small sample size and the non-random design. Also, the number of female participants was greater than male participants. Using a 1-through-7 Likert scale instead of a 1-through-5 scale would have allowed for more variation of responses, thereby decreasing the number of "neither agree nor disagree" responses. Another limitation was that participants were given the survey at the beginning of class, thus time restrictions may have contributed to potential pressure to complete.

Implications for Practitioners

This study has implications for future research in that it raises the issue of perception of cyber-bullying by gender, which could lead to more knowledge for practitioners including educators and

school counselors. The results from this study could be used to develop more effective education and prevention programs by defining the wide range of cyber-bullying behaviors and highlighting the gender differences in the perception of these behaviors.

The implications to be considered from this study would include mandating cyber-bullying curriculum for middle and high school students. This curriculum should include the definition of cyber-bullying, information on the different types of cyber-bullying behaviors, along with the serious consequences for victims. This curriculum should also address the different interpretations of cyber-bullying behaviors by males and females, so individuals are better able to understand how their actions online may be perceived by the opposite gender.

Implications for Future Research

For future research, a large and randomized sample is recommended in order to generalize the findings to a larger population. In order to decrease the number of neither agree/disagree responses, it may be helpful to increase the Likert scale to include seven categories instead of five.

Since the findings from this study show gender differences in the interpretation of cyber-bullying behaviors, research on specific behaviors males and females most commonly use to cyber-bully would be helpful to increase knowledge. Further research about the gender differences surrounding cyber-bully is needed to increase understanding about why males and females cyber-bully and what can be done to decrease these behaviors. Qualitative research on this topic such as in-depth interviewing would be helpful in clarifying specific gender differences in the interpretation of cyber-bullying behaviors.

Conclusion

Bullying in the cyber world is becoming more prevalent in our society. With the rapid advancement of communication through technology, continuous research on cyber-bullying is needed to keep up with the latest trends. Cyber-bullying has the potential to cause public humiliation on a large scale and can have detrimental effects on victims such as suicidal thoughts. This study demonstrates the importance of understanding the interpretation of cyber-bullying behaviors. In

some cases, individuals may not realize their online behaviors are perceived as harmful by others. We hope that with additional research, education and awareness about cyber-bullying will increase in schools and universities, and cyber-bullying behaviors will decrease as individuals begin to think about their actions in the cyber world.

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