

The Empirical Status of Cyberbullying Research

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Empirical investigation into the topic of cyberbullying among adolescents has exploded in the last few years. Despite this expanded attention, inconsistencies in definitions, methodologies, and samples obfuscate any meaningful conclusions that could be drawn.

The current project seeks to build on two earlier efforts in 2010 and 2013 to collect, review, and synthesize all of the empirical research that has been published regarding cyberbullying, with a particular focus on comparing and contrasting research that has been done outside of the United States. Scholarly inquiry into the issue of cyberbullying in the United States has generally outpaced other countries, though it is clear that important work is being done abroad. This study seeks to evaluate the attributes of quantitative studies conducted abroad to determine relevant differences that might be useful for researchers studying this problem in the U.S.

INTRODUCTION

Technological innovations have allowed for tremendous growth in the area of communication. With the continuous development of the Internet and social media, people are finding new ways to contact one another everyday.

However, the creation of these new forms of communication have also brought about a recent phenomenon: cyberbullying.

Although cyberbullying has been studied by numerous scholars worldwide, there has yet to be a formal consensus on the definition of this relatively new form of bullying. In addition, the methods used to conduct and report research on the new phenomenon vary greatly, creating inconsistencies and making results difficult to compare.

METHOD

For the current project, over 200 studies on cyberbullying were examined. Information on the sample, methodology, and results of each study was recorded in an Excel sheet. Only studies with results reported in percentages (i.e., the percent of the sample that experienced cyberbullying) were analyzed.

Cyberbullying research has been conducted on a global scale, allowing for a wide variety of international studies. Table 1 lists the number of cyberbullying studies examined per country, with the United States presenting the most cyberbullying research of the 25 participating countries.

Country	Cyberbullying Studies
United States	75
Canada	17
Multiple (2 or more)	9
Australia	8
Germany	6
Sweden, United Kingdom	5
Finland, Spain	4
Belgium, China, Turkey	3
Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, Sweden, Taiwan	2
Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Romania	1

Table 1. The table presents the number of studies conducted in each country.

RESULTS

THE SAMPLES

When added together, the total number of participants from each study resulted in a sample of over 450,000 participants (this number does not take duplicate studies using the same data into account). Sample sizes ranged from a minimum of 13 to a maximum of 46,126 participants ($M = 2688.11$).

Approximately 48% of participants identified as female. Ages ranged from children as young as 6 to adults around 60. The average age of participants for the total sample ranged from 11.49-45.76 ($M = 16.17$, $SD = 5.26$) years. These numbers are only estimates due to many studies not providing an average age, or giving the age range of the sample in grades in school rather than years. Figure 1 portrays the number of studies that reported varying mean ages.

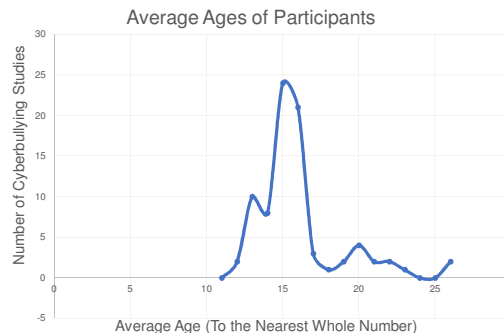


Figure 1. The graph presents the number of cyberbullying studies with an average age (rounded to the nearest year). For example, 24 studies had an average participant age of about 15 years.

Individual studies also included items such as race, average family income, and type of school attended in their demographic information.

THE METHODOLOGY

The current project observed research on cyberbullying that began collecting data between 1999-2014. Figure 2 illustrates the number of studies each year.

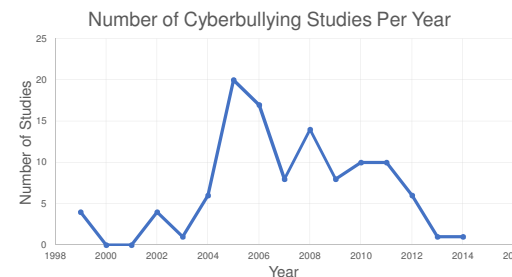


Figure 2. The graph presents the number of studies on cyberbullying conducted per year.

Of the hundreds of studies examined, several different methodologies were observed. Three types of data collection were noted most often: online data collection, telephone interview, or a standard paper-and-pencil questionnaire. As shown by Figure 3, the location of data collection also varied among studies, with the number of studies conducted in classrooms more than doubling the studies conducted elsewhere.

Cyberbullying Studies Conducted in Classrooms

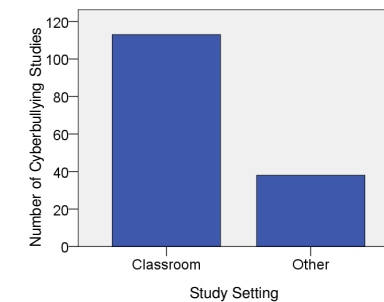


Figure 3. The bar graph displays the amount of cyberbullying studies conducted in and outside of classrooms.

Another piece of information that differed from study to study was the time frame considered for cyberbullying. Time frames varied from less than a week, to the previous few months, to the respondent's lifetime. In addition, the information that was reported varied for each study. While many articles gave percentages for cyberbullies, cyberbullies, and cyberbully-victims, many others only reported one of the three.

DEFINING CYBERBULLYING

No consensus has yet been made on a precise definition for cyberbullying, although most of the varying definitions given in the studies had common themes. Nearly all definitions distinguished traditional bullying from cyberbullying by clarifying the use of technologies such as cell phones and the Internet in cyberbullying. Many others included the need for a victim to feel threatened by the act of cyberbullying. Several studies also divided cyberbullying into separate subcategories, such as ignoring someone or spreading personal information online.

DISCUSSION

Although this project is not yet complete, early observations already suggest that there are many inconsistencies in cyberbullying research. The samples alone differ greatly in size and age. Methodologies, as well, lacked consistency in not only the form of data collection but also the information collected and reported. A definition for "cyberbullying," the integral piece which connects these studies, has not yet been formalized.

However, though there are many differences in the ways cyberbullying is studied internationally, these variations provide valuable insights into the issue. With continuing research, these differences may allow for more efficient studies and thus a better understanding of the growing problem of cyberbullying in the U.S.