Cyberbullying Research Summary
Victimization of adolescent girls

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Research on the victimization of adolescent girls often focuses on crimes involving physical violence, such as sexual assault and child abuse. The increasing victimization of adolescent girls through cyberbullying, however, highlights the need to empirically investigate instances of harassment that occur through the use of electronic media. Cyberbullying is defined as "willful and *repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.*" Cyberbullying typically involves sending text messages making fun of, threatening, or otherwise harassing another person. Other examples include creating a web page or social networking profile spreading hurtful information about another.

The nature and extent of cyberbullying victimization among girls has not been fully explored, and the current study seeks to help fill this void. In the text below, we summarize findings based on four primary research questions.

The Study

Quantitative and qualitative data from 3,141 Internet-using female respondents under age 18 were analyzed. Participants were invited to participate in an online study of Internet use that was linked to several adolescent-oriented Web sites. Data were collected in the spring of 2005. Respondents ranged in age from 8 to 17 years old, with most girls falling in the 13 to 17 range (mean = 14.6 years). The majority of girls (69.1%) were high school students in grades 9 through 12, disproportionately Caucasian/white (78%), and from the U.S. (75%).

What Cyberbullying Behaviors Do Adolescent Girls Experience?

Over one-third (38.3%) of the sample responded positively to the statement "I have been bullied online." Interestingly, when asked later in the survey whether they had experienced several specific behaviors, including being disrespected and ignored by others online, a greater number of girls responded affirmatively. This finding further supports the distinction between "cyberbullying" and the less insidious "online harassment" behaviors that appear to occur with some regularity among adolescent girls. Indeed, the two online victimization behaviors reported most frequently were being ignored (45.8%) and

being disrespected (42.9%), both of which are relatively mild behaviors. Still, it is important to note that some girls did report serious behaviors like being threatened (11.2%) that likely are more indicative of cyberbullying than online harassment. Finally, online victimization of any kind occurred most commonly in chat rooms (26.4%), via computer text message (21.7%), and via email (13.5%).

Online victimization behaviors identified in the qualitative data overlap with those identified in the quantitative data. For example, name-calling was commonly reported by the girls in our study, who described being called "fat," "ugly," "slut," "bitch," and a host of other unpleasant names.

> ### *11th grader from New York:*
> *My ex-boyfriend and his friends leave disgusting comments in my guestbook at [an online diary-hosting Web site]. Though I have locked my diary so that they no longer have access to it, they continue to leave hurtful comments in my guestbook. They have threatened bodily harm, and have even gone so far as to say that they would "kill me in my sleep." They have also OPENLY admitted to being "obsessed" with me while taking an online survey. I feel disgusted.*

Similarly, the spreading of gossip – including lies and rumors about the victim – was a very common occurrence. These themes make sense as examples of "being disrespected by others," a behavior reported by over forty percent of the sample. Finally, the narrative responses lend support to the idea that adolescent girls do receive online threats, ranging from vague warnings ("she threatened to get me") to threats that are very specific ("she said she would knock me out and bash my head in") and very serious ("she [instant messaged] me saying that she would kill me").

The narrative data also revealed behaviors that were not captured by the quantitative data. First, many respondents described behaviors involving duplicity, or cyberbullies' use of misrepresentation of self. Second, many girls reported instances in which bullies used electronic communication devices (instant messages, chat rooms, e-mail) to reveal confidential or sensitive information about them to others. Third, many victims

were teased by online peers for sharing their opinions. Finally, the data revealed many examples of sexual harassment directed at adolescent girls, which appear to occur frequently in incidents involving strangers or anonymous sources. Behaviors mostly involved unsolicited sexual advances ("[I] was online playing a game and a guy asked me if [I] wanted to 'suck his ****'"), including requests for the victim to "cyber" (i.e., engage in cyber sex with) the aggressor.

Who Cyberbullies Adolescent Girls?

Respondents also were asked how often they knew the person bullying them online. Of the 1,203 girls who reported being the victim of online bullying, 1 in 5 (20.5%) "never" knew who was bullying them. Thus, most victims appear to know the bully, and report that the bully was most often a friend from school (31.3%), someone else from school (36.4%), or someone from a chat room (28.2%). The qualitative analysis revealed several accounts of girls being cyberbullied by their ex-boyfriends, which typically involved name-calling and, in some cases, threats. Also, many girls reported victimization by strangers, usually someone with an unfamiliar screen name.

> ### 9th grader from South Carolina
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> *My friend's cousin has lately been bullying me quite a bit. She calls me all sorts of bad things and curses me out...is sarcastic in everything she says to me and really is absolutely terrible to me. Through talking to me online while her cousin was watching her type she destroyed my friendship with my friend. The bullying and torment on [AOL Instant Messenger] and on my Web sites made me feel absolutely terrible...I was very upset even offline after it had happened, and it destroyed the friendship of what used to be my closest and most reliable friend.*

How Do Adolescent Girls Respond To Being Cyberbullied?

Many girls responded to online victimization by retaliating or "cyberbullying back" (27.3%). Relatively few victims of cyberbullying informed a parent (13%) or another adult (7%) about their experiences with online victimization. Instead, victims were more far more likely to confide in an online buddy (46.5%) or another friend (18.4%). Some respondents felt forced to stay offline for a period of time (17.3%), while others did nothing different as a result of the victimization (24.5%). Finally, a significant number of

girls did not respond to the victimization, reporting that they told nobody (35.5%) or that they did nothing at all (24.5%).

The narrative responses also confirmed that a few girls responded by taking official action, such as contacting the Internet Service Provider (ISP), their parents, or friends, whereas others responded to their online victimization by curtailing their Web use, such as avoiding particular Web sites, chat rooms, or message boards where they had been harassed. To note, contacting law enforcement was never mentioned in the narrative the responses, even though certain severe cyberbullying behaviors (such as death threats) are criminal acts.

How Does Being Cyberbullied Affect Adolescent Girls?

Of the 1,203 girls who were bullied online, 27.1% reported being affected at home while 22.7% reported being affected at school. Over one-third (35%) reported feeling angry, over 30% felt sad, and 41% were frustrated by being cyberbullied. Indeed, adolescent girls who responded to our survey reported a wide variety of emotional effects of cyberbullying, including feeling "sad," "angry," "upset," "depressed," "violated," "hated," "annoyed," "helpless," "exploited," and "stupid and put down." Some girls described how the victimization made them feel unsafe: "It makes me scared. I [sometimes don't] know the person so that makes me wonder if [I] have a stalker, and that gets me pretty scared." Other girls reported having extreme emotional responses to being victimized, including suicidal ideation.

However, the quantitative data also indicate that being cyberbullied had no negative effect for over half (55%) of the respondents. The narrative responses are particularly useful at explaining this finding, as they reveal that many girls exhibited attitudes of dismissal. Many girls shared the belief that cyberbullies are merely "stupid," "pathetic," "bored," "just trying to amuse themselves," and "don't have anything better to do" with their lives.

Further, it appears that attitudes of dismissal are particularly common in cases of online harassment rather than cyberbullying. From the narrative responses, it is clear that many girls who experience name-calling, gossiping, and other common forms of adolescent harassment perpetrated online exhibit healthy resilience to this behavior. With that said, the concern remains if and how victims of more problematic cyberbullying behaviors are similarly able to ignore what they experience online.

Conclusion

This research has sought to identify patterns in girls' experiences with cyberbullying and online harassment, and highlight themes that can help broaden our understanding of this type of victimization as it ranges from trivial to serious in scope. While much of the electronic victimization adolescent girls experience involves relatively minor forms of online harassment, other examples underscore the severe emotional and psychological consequences of cyberbullying for adolescent girls.

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