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Mitsunori Misawa

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, [mmisawa@utk.edu](mailto:mmisawa@utk.edu)

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## Investigating the Characteristics of Cyber-Mobbullying and the Perceptions of Undergraduate and Graduate Students on Cyber-Mobbullyism in Higher Education

Mitsunori Misawa  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

**Abstract:** This presentation will focus on the examination of undergraduate and graduate students' perceptions and characteristics of cyber-mobbullying in higher education. Practical implications for adult educators will also be provided.

**Keywords:** cyber-mobbullyism, adult and higher education, students, survey research, bullying

### Introduction

Bullying is a serious social issue in the US society because it happens almost everywhere including on playgrounds; in educational institutions such as K-12, higher education, and clinical environments; in communities; and at workplaces (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Reese, 2012; Misawa, 2016; Namie & Namie, 2009). Bullying is not just a childhood behavioral problem but continues into higher education and perhaps throughout people's lifetimes (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010; Misawa; 2015, 2016).

In addition, scholars have agreed that bullying physically and psychologically damages individuals who directly experience bullying, including perpetrators and targets and even those who experience bullying as bystanders or who indirectly experience bullying by listening to stories of it from targets and bystanders (Lines, 2008, Misawa, 2015, 2016). For some targets, they experience physical symptoms such as dizziness, rapid breathing, increased blood pressure, muscle aches, and headaches. For others, bullying negatively affects targets' cognitive and emotional abilities causing mental slowness or confusion, indecisiveness, poor concentration, nightmares, anxiety, depression, numbness, and anger. Therefore, bullying affects people negatively (Namie & Namie, 2009).

The aforementioned bullying issues mostly enshrine the traditional view of bullying, which typically happens in a face-to-face environment where the roles of perpetrators, targets, and bystanders seem to be implicitly or explicitly defined. However, a different form of bullying also exists in a cyber environment, and it is usually called cyberbullying or

cybermobbing. For the purpose of the present study, the author will use the term, cyber-mobbullying, to capture both cyberbullying and cybermobbing.

Patchin and Hinduja (2015) stated that bullying is no longer only happening in schoolyards but also online in cyber environments. Due to technological advancements and increasing usage of technology throughout society and throughout people's life-spans, bullying is moving from the face-to-face context to a cyber space and becoming even more clearly a lifelong issue. Because of the increasing number of online distance courses in postsecondary education each year, adult educators need to be aware of cyber-mobbullying and be prepared to have to deal with cyber-mobbullying incidents in their own online classroom environments.

In order to capture a general sense of cyber-mobbullying, a survey research study was conducted to examine the perceptions of undergraduate and graduate students in higher education on cyber-mobbullying and their characterization of it. The research questions that guided this study were: 1) What are the characteristics of cyber-mobbullying in higher education? and 2) To what degree do students experience cyber-mobbullying in higher education?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this survey study was Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), which evolved from Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977). It was used to investigate cyber-mobbullying in higher education. In Social Dominance Theory, those who are more aggressive and have higher rank, status, or power victimize others perceived as having lower rank, status, or power to maintain a social hierarchy within the group structure (Sidanius & Pratto, 2003). Social Dominance Theory explains how factors such as age, power, and gender classify social groups (Walker et al., 2011). The dominant groups can create ideologies of behavior or myths using Social Dominance Theory to discriminate against and/or bully those believed to be less powerful. Legitimizing these myths and ideologies of behavior can support an environment where cyber-mobbullying flourishes. Social hierarchies in cyber-mobbullying situations may not fit neatly within Social Dominance Theory because individuals may create their own identities using the Internet (Bauman, Cross, & Wilks, 2013). Thus, an individual in a lower social group may present himself or herself as someone of a higher social status and act in accordance with Social Dominance Theory principals to cyber-mobbully others they perceive as having a lower social status (Bauman et al., 2013). For the purpose of the study, the following definition to explore cyber-mobbullying:

An incident of cyber-mobbullying involves a victim who is somehow less powerful than the bully or bullies psychologically or by their sociocultural position or who fits the bully's or bullies' stereotype of a victim of bullying or harassment in a cyber environment, and perpetuate recurrent or singular; unwanted or unwarranted; publicly humiliating, intimidating, offensive, threatening or exclusionary conduct on the part of the bully that sustains the bully's position of power by intentionally maliciously utilizing email, instant messaging (IM), social networking websites, chat rooms, or digital messages or images sent to computers, cell phones, or other digital communication devices that destroys the victim's well-being, dignity, and safety or is significant enough to cause the victims physical and/or psychological harm. (Misawa, 2017, p. 284)

## **Methodology**

The methodology used in the study to examine cyber-mobbullying in higher education was survey research and the method used to gather data was a questionnaire. Survey research usually provides a quantitative description of trends by studying a sample of the population (Creswell, 2014). In this case, based on survey research of cyberbullying in higher education, the research should be able to capture the characteristics, prevalence, and impact of cyberbullying on a population in higher education (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010). This survey research methodology was chosen because it can provide a "numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions" (Creswell, 2009, p. 12) related to cyber-mobbullying by studying a sample of college populations.

## **Results**

For this study, a convenience sample of 420 undergraduate and graduate students at a research university in the southeastern region of the United States participated. Because of the space of this conference proceeding and for the purpose of the study, only some extensive descriptive analyses will be presented in this conference proceeding.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents of the study. Of the 420 participants, 40.5% (n=170) were male and 59.5% (n=250) were female. White (n=160, 38.1%) and Black/African (n=130, 31.0%) Americans were about two-thirds of the total participants of the study. An overwhelming majority of the participants (n=300, 71.4%) were heterosexual/straight while a minority were lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) participants at 28.6% (n=120). Over one-quarter of the participants were traditional college-age students in this study (n=120, 28.6%).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of All Respondents (N = 420)

Demographic Characteristics		N	%
Gender	Male	170	40.5%
	Female	250	59.5%
Race	American Indian	10	2.4%
	Asian	40	9.5%
	Pacific Islanders	10	2.4%
	Black/African American	130	31.0%
	Latino/a	60	14.3%
	White	160	38.1%
	Others	10	2.4%
	Sexual Orientation	Straight/Heterosexual	300
	Gay	80	19.0%
	Lesbian	20	4.8%
	Bisexual	20	4.8%

Although a majority of the participants had not experienced cyber-mobbullying in the past six months, over one-quarter of them (26.1%) had experienced cyber-mobbullying in higher education in the past six months. It is crucial to point out that about 19% of those who had experienced it had at least experienced cyber-mobbullying once per month and about 5% of them had experienced several incidents of cyber-mobbullying in a week. That means that almost one in five students will experience some sort of cyber-mobbullying in higher education in a month.

Table 2. Victims of Cyberbullying (N = 420)

		Victims %(N)
Overall		26.2 (110)
Gender	Men	81.8 (90)
	Women	18.2 (20)
Education Levels	Undergraduate	36.4 (40)
	Graduate	63.6 (70)

When asked about the duration of cyber-mobbullying in the past six months, although a majority of participants did not experience cyberbullying in the past six months, about one-quarter of the ones who had been cyber-mobbullying victims (n=110, 26.2%) experienced cyber-mobbullying that lasted between one week and three months. Of those who experienced cyber-mobbullying, 9.5% of them indicated that the cyber-mobbullying they had experienced had lasted less than one week.

Table 3. Frequency of Cyberbullying in the past six months (N = 420)

	Frequency of Cyberbullying in the past six months % (N)					
	Never	Less than once a month	Once a month	2-3 times a month/Once a week	2-3 times a week	4-6 times a week
Overall	75.6 (310)	7.1 (30)	7.1 (30)	7.1 (30)	2.4 (10)	2.4 (10)
Male (150)	60.0 (90)	6.7 (10)	20.0 (30)	13.3 (20)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
Female (250)	88.0 (220)	8.0 (20)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	4.0 (10)	0.0 (0)
Gender Non-Conforming (20)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	50.0 (10)	0.0 (0)	50.0 (10)
Undergraduate (220)	77.2 (170)	4.5 (10)	4.5 (10)	9.0 (20)	4.5 (10)	0.0 (0)
Graduate (200)	70.0 (140)	10.0 (20)	10.0 (20)	5.0 (10)	0.0 (0)	5.0 (10)

### Implications for Adult Education

This study has demonstrated how prevalent cyber-mobbullying is and what characteristics cyber-mobbullying has in higher education. As mentioned, cyber-mobbullying is a serious social problem just as bullying itself has been a serious problem, and it is prevalent on campus and negatively affects undergraduate and graduate students in higher education. This study showed that students on campus feel they experience cyber-mobbullying frequently.

Adult and higher education focuses on diversity, equality, and social justice. Cyber-mobbullying is not a form of justice. It is uncivil and unjust behavior that comes not only from children and adolescents but also from adults. In order to reduce and ultimately eliminate cyber-mobbullying, it is important for educators and practitioners in adult and higher education to understand its characteristics, prevalence, and impact. This study and other

studies have shown that cyber-mobbullying has negative psychological and physical effects on adult learners. Adult educators and learners, whose job it is to bring a bright future to our society at large, will have to be ready to combat against cyber-mobbullying. Education about bullying for adults will be a key battleground in the fight against this new form of psychosocial and positional terrorism.

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