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Cyber-Bullying Portrayals in the News Media

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**Abstract**

*Cyber-bullying is a phenomenon that is widely studied. Researches have examined the characteristics of perpetrators and victims, impacts of cyber-bullying on both the victims and offenders, the development and application of law and the development of programs to stem cyber-bullying. Despite a great amount of research dedicated to these aforementioned areas, studies examining the portrayal of cyber-bullying by news media outlets are rare. An understanding of this portrayal is important as the news media is a significant source of public opinions about a vast array of topics in society. As such, the goal of the present research is to provide both a quantitative and qualitative understanding of the ways in which newspaper articles discuss the phenomenon of cyber-bullying among middle school students in the United States.*

**Keywords:** Cyber-bullying, Perpetrators, Cyber-victims, Prevention Programs, Laws

## Review of the Literature

### Perpetrators of Cyber-bullying

The perpetrators of online harassment are the most frequently-studied subjects of existing cyber-bullying research due to an inherent necessity to understand the people behind the deviant activities, to determine what factors are present in conjunction with the behaviors, and to predict when and how the negative behaviors tend to occur. Four common trends in perpetration studies include psychological factors, influential forces, characteristics, and behavioral predictors.

**Psychological factors.** An in-depth evaluation of perpetrators' mental and psychological well-being is essential to understanding why certain individuals choose to engage in cyber-bullying behaviors; in a manner of speaking, researchers wish to determine what makes bullies tick. While one may assume that victims are the only ones who are damaged in a cyber-bullying relationship, Rice et al. (2015) explain that "perpetrators are more likely to have problems with their behavior, peer relationships, and emotions, and are less likely to be prosocial than their peers who are neither cyber-bullying perpetrators nor victims of cyber-bullying. Specifically, female cyber-bullying perpetrators express greater anxiety and depression than their female peers who are not cyber-bullying perpetrators" (p. 66). While victims tend to acquire psychological issues as a result of bullying, perpetrators often engage in bullying activities as a result of similar, yet pre-existing, psychological issues. These problems can arise from a variety of sources, including chronic mental conditions, chemical imbalances, traumatic experiences, or exposure to online material with the potential to stimulate negative behavior. Bryne et al. (2014) identified early exposure to inappropriate material to be a likely culprit for many students. "Predicting factors that increase the likelihood that parents will underestimate whether their child has been exposed accidentally or purposely to sexual imagery online is valuable. This information can enhance

understanding of how to protect children from unintended sexual exposure, as well as how to properly educate them” (p. 219). Their study not only dives into the psychological effects that result from exposure, but also identifies permissive parenting styles as an influential factor that leads to said exposure.

**Influential forces.** Though useful, psychological instabilities alone are not enough to measure how or why perpetrators do what they do; a common focus of cyber-bullying research involves a careful analysis of what external factors or influences guide or drive individuals to bully others over the internet. Byrne et al. (2014) argue that permissive parenting styles are to blame because parents or guardians “are not always aware of how much of that time [online] is spent engaging in potentially risky online behaviors and interactions. Many parents admit to having no knowledge about what their children do online, and children are aware that their parents lack this knowledge” (p. 215). Rice et al. make a similar statement in which “adolescents are increasingly confronted with content that is not suitable for their age, as they gain (mostly) unrestricted access to networked information sources via computers, mobile phones, and other networked devices” (p. 101). On one end, permissive parenting styles lead to an increase in freedom and, therefore, an increased likelihood of exposure to inappropriate material and unrestrained online communication such as cyber-bullying; on the other end, authoritative parenting styles are proven to diminish the likelihood of cyberbully activities. According to Roberto et al. (2014), “Establishing parental rules about which websites teens were allowed to visit or not visit reduced the risk of cyber-bullying” (p. 100). Specific rules, they explained, are the most effective technique to limiting risky online behavior. “Further, authoritative parents were more likely to use both evaluative (e.g., content) and restrictive (e.g., blocking) mediation techniques than both authoritarian and neglectful parents” (p. 100). Though parents have a role to play, they are not the only influencers on cyber-

bullying behavior or lack thereof. Ironically, a primary factor that drives perpetrators to engage in cyber-bullying activities is the experience of being bullied. Wegge et al. (2014) found that “offline bullying patterns affect cyber-bullying, even when controlling for other negative interaction patterns between the victim and perpetrator, such as online revenge taking or mutual cyber-bullying. Thus, strong support was provided for the notion that cyber-bullying is an extension of the bullying which occurs at school. Additionally, evidence showed that adolescents who face victimization on the internet or mobile phone tend to respond by bullying back online. It suggests that technology can “empower” online victims to respond in undesirable ways, such as cyber-bullying back” (p. 428). Revenge is a powerful motivator, and if an individual feels threatened in any way, arming oneself and attacking back can sometimes feel like the only available option. While opponents’ behaviors are common influencers, peers and social structures also impact perpetrators’ online activities. Rice et al. (2015) noted that “bullies and students who have already experienced both perpetration and victimization more often nominate aggressive friends. An aggressive atmosphere and conforming social norms therefore seem to increase the likelihood of actively participating in aggressive acts” (p. 106). Influencers come in many forms, but existing research primarily names parenting styles, exposure to inappropriate materials online, previous experiences, and group mentalities as the top influential forces that lead to cyber-bullying behaviors in perpetrators.

**Perpetrator characteristics.** Although each individual is unique, a significant portion of research is usually dedicated to establishing connections and identifying similarities. Festl and Quandt (2013) noted that existing studies “have focused on individual characteristics found in the personality of adolescents such as extraversion and emotional instability and demographics such as gender or age differences. In addition, some studies analyzed shared features of traditional

(offline) bullying and cyber-bullying. Altogether, previous studies revealed that persons with specific personal characteristics are more or less strongly prone to cyber-bullying” (p. 102). One such study is that of Vanden Abeele and de Cock (2013), which links popularity statuses and perceived likability with cyber-bullying activities. They define popularity as something that is typically assigned, not chosen, though there are consistent behaviors that set popular students apart from everyone else. “While some popular adolescents are associated with prosocial behaviors, others are (also) associated with antisocial, coercive behaviors towards their peers, such as bullying” (p. 108). Demographic measurements are also a common way to pinpoint cyberbully characteristics. Rice et al. (2015) found that “students who were female, white, or smartphone owners and those who reported high levels of texting and Internet use had a positive association with being a cyberbully perpetrator-victim” (p. 68) and “white youths in the present study were more likely to report being a cyberbully perpetrator-victim and fewer Black or African American youths reported being a victim” (p. 69). The general conclusion of their study was that white females were more likely to be both perpetrators and victims, and heterosexuals were more likely to engage in cyber-bullying activities as opposed to their LGBTQ counterparts, who are more likely to be victims.

**Behavioral predictors.** A large part of cyber-bullying research applicability is the capacity to not only draw patterns and conclusions, but also to use the collected data to make predictions that could be useful in the ongoing struggle against perpetrators and the damage they inflict. One common pattern researchers tend to agree on is the tendency of cyberbullies to target people they know. According to Wegge et al. (2014), “Electronic forms of bullying often take place between individuals who know one another in real life, such as schoolmates, implying that they may be involved in multiple kinds of social as well as bullying interactions” (p. 428). This implies cyber-

bullying is an extension of traditional bullying, and such an assumption is consistent with existing studies. “The results showed that victims tend to be cyberbullied by the same pupils who bully them offline, that is, the patterns of school bullying are related with who bullies whom in the online context” (p. 428). Though perpetrator/victim affiliation is common, it is not unheard of to find bullying patterns emerge between strangers as well. According to Rice et al. (2015), “Cyber-bullying perpetrators of middle-school victims were most often a classmate or a stranger; cyber-bullying perpetrators most often reported that they cyberbullied classmates, friends, and strangers” (p. 67). Festl and Quandt (2013) had similar findings, in which “bullying behavior in an offline context was found to be highly predictive for the corresponding cyber-bullying behavior ( $\beta = .74$ ;  $p < .001$ ). This correlation can be explained by a constant bullying atmosphere within a class. Obviously, if there are many students who bully and are bullied, the class has many cases of cyber-bullying” (p. 117). The study conducted by Byrne et al. (2014) examined students’ home environments to find predicting factors relating to permissive parenting styles. “At the micro level, variables include parenting style and the level of communicative difficulty between parents and children. Additionally, patterns of home computer use are part of the microsystem, such as children having access to a private computing space. At the exosystem level, it is important to assess household perceptions of media uses and effects generally, including beliefs such as third person perceptions and parental attitudes toward the internet. The concept of the chronosystem suggests that the amount of time a child spends online is an important consideration. Therefore, a closer consideration of critical variables at these subsystem levels is important to understanding this phenomenon” (p. 216). This research team took all of those variables into account when collecting predictions for cyber-bullying behavior as related to students’ differing environments and exposures. On a more action-specific level, Roberto et al. (2014) studied behavioral patterns



such as verbal aggression, deliberate harm, repeated or risky behaviors, parental involvement, and demographics such as gender. “Given that trait verbal aggression has been linked to cyber-bullying perpetration as well as other types of verbally and physically aggressive behavior, this is a noteworthy contribution to the literature and one that may provide fruitful avenues of research in the future” (p. 105).

### **Victims of Cyber-bullying**

Cyber-victims fall into one of the most heavily-studied areas of existing cyber-bullying research, second or equal only to the perpetrators. Three common trends in cyber-victim research include the impacts of cyber-bullying, influential features that lead to victimization, and factors of the behaviors themselves.

**Impacts of cyber-bullying.** Because cyber-bullying consistently causes psychological damage to victims, most researchers at least mention the impacts on the victims even if that is not the primary focus of their studies. Farrell (2012) argues that, contrary to the popular belief that physical inflictions are the only truly painful forms of bullying, “words can and do hurt in many ways” (p. 26). Due to the stigma against expressions of emotional or psychological distress, many students keep quiet about cyber-bullying attacks unless they escalate, and even then, many individuals go their entire lives without telling anyone or, in extreme situations, end their lives rather than seek help. Despite the lack of reports, many students display certain abnormal behavior patterns as a result of the psychological impacts, including “academic struggles, a desire to avoid school, eating disorders, or a desire to commit suicide. These changes in victims may be a result of the painful feelings that develop from bullying exposure” (Farrell, 2012, p. 26). There seems to be a general consensus among researchers that cyber-bullying has a negative effect on victims’ mental health and wellbeing. According to Rice et al. (2015), “cyber-bullying may have a greater

effect on depression and suicidal ideation than traditional offline bullying. Both perpetration and victimization are associated with mental health consequences, including lower self-esteem, recent depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation” (p. 66). Though the victims’ reactions to cyber-bullying vary greatly depending on the individual who is being bullied, they are generally more likely to have mental health issues such as low self-esteem than their counterparts who do not experience bullying of any kind.

**Cyber-victim characteristics.** A second common trend in cyber-victim research includes the features and characteristics victims tend to have in common. Ringrose (2011) argued that young women are more likely to be the targets of online bullying than young men because “girls appear to be more likely to be upset by offensive, violent and pornographic material, to chat online with strangers, to receive unwanted sexual comments and to be asked for personal information, though they are wary of providing it to strangers” (p. 122) Racism and sexism are very prevalent online, she explained, which pinpoints young black women as the highest-risk recipients of racist/sexist attacks online. Rice et al. (2015) found homophobia to be another common trend online, and that “more than half of sexual-minority middle- and high-school students nationally report being a cyberbully victim during the previous year, with almost one fifth reporting often or frequent victimization” (p. 66). Rice et al. (2015) concluded that women are more likely than men to be victims of cyber-bullying, through women are also more likely to play the perpetrator role as well. Festl and Quandt (2013) found that “perpetrators are often perceived as being popular in school, much in contrast to victims—an effect that was especially notable for girls” (p. 105). Because many school girls tend to be cliquish and superficial, it is common for girls with status to antagonize their counterparts who have been labeled as outcasts who do not fit into the set of characteristics the popular group has established. Boys, who are usually more direct in their attacks

against other boys, would be less likely to engage in cyber-bullying activities than girls, who are known to use underhanded methods rather than physical violence to undermine their targets.

**Cyber-victim behavior.** Along with commonalities in victim characteristics, researchers try to find trends within cyber-bullying behaviors in order to determine which factors apply across the board. According to Arntfield (2015), “We need to believe that the hazards are real, the risk of victimization is high and the safeguards low, and yet account for why there remains some other incentive to commit to Facebook as a routine activity in spite of the known risks” (p. 381). Despite having a complete understanding of the risks involved in social media, victims choose to continue engaging in the activities that ultimately lead to psychological harm. Arntfield’s study applies Routine Activities Theory to cyber-victim research in an attempt to explain why victims accept the risks despite the known consequences. In many cases, the risks are higher because “the act of bullying can be identified by repeated behavior over time, imbalanced power between the victim and the bully, and intentional behavior by the bully” (Farrell, 2012, p. 25). Because most cyber-bullying incidents are repetitive, which most researchers seem to agree, victims are more likely to be aware of the risks of putting themselves in a cyber-bullying situation if they are the unfortunate targets of repeat offenders. Nevertheless, most students continue their routine activities with the full understanding that recurring attacks from online peers are inevitable. Rice et al. (2015) found that “even though cyber-bullying takes place in a virtual space, most cyber-bullying perpetrators know their victims and vice versa. Moreover, 73% of victims reported being “pretty sure” or “totally sure” about the identity of their cyberbully, with 51% of cyber-bullying perpetrators identified as a classmate, 43% as someone who they only knew online, and 20% as an inperson, nonclassmate relation” (p. 67). Festl and Quandt’s (2013) study, which primarily focused on a correlation between social status and cyber-bullying, had similar findings; cyber-bullying tends to

occur within certain social settings, like classmates. When making the connection between cyber-bullying behavior and social standing, they found that many cyber-victims are not only likely to bully others, but also tend to have the highest likability if they are or have been in both roles, because “aggressors and especially targets can be seen as unpopular, whereas people who have experienced both sides have more central positions. We suspect that this reflects the skills of the victim/perpetrator group in dealing with both situations and their possession of a certain mental dexterity, which makes it easier to maintain social contact with various groups” (Festl & Quandt, 2013, p. 120). That being said, the most common factors researchers found in cyber-victim behavior are risk-taking routine engagement, victimization by familiar repeat offenders, and a balancing act among individuals who bully and have been bullied.

### **Cyber-bullying Law**

Three common trends in existing research regarding cyber-bullying law are free speech, definition difficulties, and enforcement complications.

**Free speech.** Those who study possible legal solutions to cyber-bullying often discuss the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment Rights to free speech and expression as a thorn in the side of anyone who wishes to criminalize or develop legislation regarding cyber-bullying and online harassment. Henry (2009), who studied approaches to combating and recognizing user-generated hate speech on the internet, recognized the reputation of the United States for its stubborn protection of citizens’ First Amendment rights. “That tradition of free speech has been extended to the Internet and hate speech. As such, the United States will likely continue to be a safe-haven for hate speech websites” (p. 241). Although the technicalities of the First Amendment make cyber-bullying criminalization difficult, Ainsley’s (2011) study aimed to determine ways in which legislators can adapt technologically and contend with deviant behaviors online without infringing

upon individuals' free speech rights. While addressing the First Amendment as “a major concern when drafting policies aimed at combating cyber-bullying,” he points out instances in which “the court has taken occasion to impose limits on First Amendment speech on students” (Ainsley, 2011, p. 333). In such cases, the Supreme Court determined schools are capable in certain circumstances to discipline students whose disruptions relate to school operations, functions, and abilities to provide education to its student body.

**Cyber-bullying definitions.** Beyond the issue of free speech, legislating cyber-bullying has proven challenging at best. On its surface, cyber-bullying may seem relatively straightforward, but legislators need a detailed definition in order to make decisions about its legality. Because cyber-bullying comes in so many forms and has a wide variety of case types, it is difficult to come to a consensus on what actions and behaviors constitute cyber-bullying and what legal actions are optimal to apply in differing situations within the broad category of online harassment. Gillespie's (2006) study provided a loose definition through the attachment of obscenity and indecency which, in a legal system, are “to be judged objectively according to contemporary standards of decency” (p. 126). In order to criminalize a cyberbully, a court must determine—as it does with many cases—what qualifications a reasonable person would attach to a message in order to define it as indecent, obscene, offensive, distressful, harassing, etc.

**Enforcement.** The idea of school responsibilities are limited, however, to jurisdiction. Because cyber-bullying occurs online and, in most circumstances, outside of the school's hours of operation, it is difficult to argue a school's ability to monitor and discipline the perpetrators. According to Ainsley (2011), “The question of whether a school has jurisdiction is more complicated for cyber-bullying than it is for traditional bullying because cyberbullies impact their victims through the use of a telecommunication device, and thus do not have to be proximate to

their victims in order to harm their victims” (p. 336). Even if there was a straightforward way to enforce it, cyber-bullying identification is difficult in its own right, particularly due to a lack of reports. Conn (2011) discovered that “statistics on the extent of cyber-bullying among students vary, but generally depend on the ages and characteristics of the students studied. Anywhere from 15-33% of students aged thirteen to eighteen years of age report being cyberbullied on a consistent basis” (p. 231). The statistical data in her study, which primarily consisted of quantitative measurements on different types of cyber-bullying that occurred in different settings, can only represent incidents that were reported. Students who do not report being cyberbullied or admit to perpetrating the behavior remain unrepresented in any and all studies relating to the frequency and demographics of the phenomenon.

### **Programs for Cyber-bullying Prevention**

Though prevalent in many schools and news reports, cyber-bullying prevention programs are not a heavy focus in existing cyber-bullying research. Studies on the subject primarily focus on the effectiveness of the prevention programs and whether or not there is a correlation between the programs’ implementation and the rates of reported bullying incidents. Rigby and Smith’s (2011) study found that cyber-bullying has increased while traditional bullying has decreased, which is “consistent with reports of significant but small reductions in peer victimization following the implementation of anti-bullying programs in schools world-wide” (p. 441). The findings in their study about bullying prevalence, they explained, are mostly on an individual basis and cannot generalize “what changes have been occurring in the overall prevalence of school bullying around the world” (p. 442), though the popular hypothesis leans toward steady increases in both types of bullying. Though the effectiveness of prevention programs across the board is uncertain, Rigby and Smith (2011) found that said programs have increased dramatically in number over the past

twenty years because “many governments and educational jurisdictions mandated the adoption of anti-bullying policies by schools” (p. 452).

Simply implementing a program is not enough; in order to keep the levels of victimization down, programs cannot cease their efforts after inception. Quality programs and continuous maintenance are required in order to ensure optimal effectiveness. Because different programs have different approaches, it is difficult to measure the general correlation between cyber-bullying prevalence and the existence of prevention programs. Resultantly, most researchers take a more manageable approach by analyzing particular programs or particular schools. Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey, and Casas (2012) analyze the ConRed Cyber-bullying Prevention Program, which “addresses cyber-bullying and other emerging problems linked with the use of the internet and seeks to promote a positive use of this new environment” (p. 303). This particular program, they observed, uses methods that are proven to be successful, including proactivity, competencies within the school community, protectiveness within the school environment, and partnerships between schools and families. The researchers contend that “programs are needed that are capable of combining bullying prevention procedures of proven efficiency with initiatives geared towards the prevention of cyber-bullying and its associated contextual risks” (Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey, & Casas, 2012, p. 304). ConRed’s prevention strategies, they concluded, fulfill this need.

### **Cyber-bullying Portrayals in the News Media**

Existing research in this area is scarce, which simultaneously grants the current study little in the way of precedence. The limited studies that exist primarily focus on singular aspects of media portrayals, such as that of Ringrose and Barajas (2011), which investigates female identities and gender portrayals in the media, specifically related to sexual content online. Though they only connect cyber-bullying to their article through descriptions of sexualized cyber-bullying, their

study is, in many respects, relevant because digital phenomena such as cyber-bullying and news portrayals play a large role in women's identities and the ways in which they perceive themselves. They found that "in addition to adult sexual predators, there is also the problem of peer sexual attacks via digital technologies. Some research suggested girls are more at risk of cyber-bullying, although the way this manifests in social networks is still largely unknown. The risk of sexual/sexist attacks online is also something we explore in this article, suggesting that the ways sexual attacks manifest in social networks, instant messaging and mobile phones are interconnected and can also influence physical attacks at school" (p. 126). Sexist media portrayals, the authors argue, play a part in altering female identities and, albeit indirectly, instigating sexist cyber-bullying attacks. Because the news media is an influential component of society, many people draw their ideologies from consuming information this medium portrays. As such, the ways in which cyber-bullying in the news media is presented to the public and which topics related to this category of crime and victimization are given the most attention by the press is an important area to study.

### **Data and Methodology**

To analyze modern media portrayals of cyber-bullying among middle school students, a meta-analysis of news articles written about cyber-bullying in the United States was conducted using the LexisNexis Academic database. The keywords "cyber-bullying" and "middle school" were entered as search terms, and the specified time period of the publications was 1994-present. The original search generated 1,962 results but, after specifying deletions of identical articles, LexisNexis indicated that 1,807 remained. Further analysis of the new sum revealed lingering duplicates, irrelevant articles written outside of the United States, and coverage that did not include cyberbullying and/or middle schoolers. In order to eliminate articles that were written outside of



the U.S., a search was generated in Microsoft Word using the following key words: China, Korea, India, Tokyo, Japan, British Columbia, Alberta, New Brunswick, Canada, Asia, Poland, Bangladesh, Toronto, UAE, Abu Dhabi, New Zealand, Australia, Pakistan, Ontario, Montreal, Quebec, Africa, Huddersfield, Ireland, Queensland, and Sheerness. After fully combing through the data for articles that were written outside of the United States and not focused on cyberbullying or middle school, such articles, which totaled at 532, were systematically removed with a remaining count of 1,275. In order to collect a random sample for analysis, the final count was divided by 200 with a final result of 6. Every sixth article—which yielded a final sample size of 128 random articles—was then analyzed to determine emergent themes in the media’s coverage of cyber-bullying among middle school students in the United States. Following that, a search was generated in Microsoft Word to determine the appearance frequency of the following words relating to digital platforms: Facebook, Myspace, Cell phone (or cellphone), Instagram, and Twitter. Another search was conducted in Microsoft Word to determine the appearance frequency of the following terms: parent, cyberbully (or cyber-bully), suicide, and presentation (assembly and seminar were also included in the final word count).

### Results

The thematic analysis yielded 36 unique trends covered by media outlets on the subject of cyber-bullying in middle schools. Each trend was pulled from the data sample and tallied as a 1 next to articles that contained this trend either directly or through comparable context clues, or a 0 next to articles that did not contain this trend at all. The results of the trends are listed below.

<b>Trend Name</b>	<b>Number of Articles</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Percentage out of Sample</b>
Bigger Playground	17	128	13.28%
Blame Technology	46	128	35.94%
Campaigns	19	128	14.84%
Combat with Kindness	17	128	13.28%

Definition	27	128	21.09%
Familiar	14	128	10.94%
Female Focus	7	128	5.47%
Follows You Everywhere	17	128	13.28%
Free Speech	5	128	3.91%
Hide Behind Screen	32	128	25.00%
Homicide	3	128	2.34%
Ignorance	15	128	11.72%
Impact	61	128	47.66%
Name-Calling	23	128	17.97%
Jurisdiction	22	128	17.19%
Legal	71	128	55.47%
On the Rise	37	128	28.91%
Parents	77	128	60.16%
Physical Appearance	14	128	10.94%
Presentation	48	128	37.50%
Prevention Programs	70	128	54.69%
Privacy	28	128	21.88%
Race	9	128	7.03%
Religion	2	128	1.56%
School Districts	57	128	44.53%
Sexting	17	128	13.28%
Sexual Harassment	33	128	25.78%
Sexuality	14	128	10.94%
Signs to Detect	6	128	4.69%
Statistics	50	128	39.06%
Suicide	50	128	39.06%
Tell Stories	63	128	14.22%
Threats	25	128	19.53%
Tips	24	128	18.75%
Under-Reported	10	128	7.81%
Worse than Face-to-Face	15	128	11.72%

*Bigger Playground* refers to the idea that cyberspace is an extension of bullying on school grounds instigated in a larger space. In her article entitled “Cyberbullying is the Topic of Local Workshop,” Judy Peterson with the *Los Gatos Weekly-Times* quotes a marriage and family therapist on this matter. “‘The playground has gotten much bigger,’ said marriage and family therapist Holly Pedersen, who spoke at an April 24 workshop sponsored by Congregation Shir Hadash in Los Gatos. ‘Cyberspace is the new neighborhood.’” Jonathan Turley uses a similar

analogy in his article: “With the advent of the Internet, YouTube and MySpace, bullying is becoming more prevalent and more lethal—allowing bullies to move from playgrounds to cyberspace in pursuit of their prey” (Bullying's Day in Court; From Hall Monitors to Personal Injury Lawyers: Parents Send a Message by Forcing Bullies from the Schoolhouse to the Courthouse).

*Blame Technology* is a theme in which articles either directly or indirectly name technology as the enabler for cyber-bullying activities that is to blame for the phenomenon. Rich Drolet with the *Providence Journal* was very clear in the introduction to his article: “I would like to share with you a relatively new danger targeting the welfare of our children: Facebook. I wonder if you are aware of the risks it presents. Facebook has infiltrated the lives of many of our school-aged children. I believe that there is absolutely no educational value in its use by young adolescents. From vast experience dealing with students who have been hurt by messages or posts on Facebook, I have found that kids prefer this medium to insult or bully a classmate” (Parents, Let’s Keep Young Adolescents off of Facebook).

*Campaigns* involves a group of people coming together to raise awareness through one or more anti-bullying campaigns. “No Name Calling Week (NNCW) is a national bullying prevention campaign developed by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and is co-sponsored by the Safe Schools Round Table of the Hudson Valley. It includes various educational activities that raise awareness of bullying issues in schools and promotes kindness” (New York: Ulster County Executive Mike Hein Recognizes Student Artwork That Was Done In Conjunction With “No Name Calling” Week In Ulster County).

*Combat with Kindness* involves one or more individuals putting forth an effort to counter cyber-bullying by encouraging acts of kindness instead. Carolyn Olivier with the *Brattleboro*

*Reformer* cited an instance in which a group of students brainstormed ideas at a leadership conference. “There was no shortage of ideas for taking action. Collectively, middle school students considered initiatives such as: welcoming and befriending new students; developing a buddy or mentoring system to help specific students at recess, lunch, or on the bus; discussing the climate surveys with students in their schools; conducting additional research to understand reasons for the results; developing skits and role plays that demonstrate the effects of positive and negative behaviors; increasing recognition and appreciation for positive behaviors; and holding assemblies, discussions in class, or monthly school-wide themes about kindness and the values that support inclusion” (Brattleboro: Middle school leadership program in its 7th year).

*Definition* is an instance in which the article provides a definition of cyber-bullying. Linda Trimble with the *News-Journal* in Florida covered a school’s discussion of new policies. “The conduct code amendments also call for the addition of cyber-bullying—using technology and cyberspace for repeated, intentionally harmful aggressive behavior that occurs without provocation” (School Looks at New Cyber-Era Rules). Two words that are commonly used throughout the data pool to describe bullying and cyber-bullying are “intentional” and “recurring.”

*Familiar* refers to the idea that cyber-victims are often bullied by people they know. Lizette Alvarez with the *New York Times* used a well-known example of a teen who committed suicide as a result of harassment from schoolmates and, eventually, former friends. “The police said the older girl began to turn Rebecca's friends against her, including her former best friend, the 12-year-old who was charged. She told anyone who tried to befriend Rebecca that they also would be bullied, the affidavit said” (Felony Counts for 2 in Suicide of Bullied 12-Year-Old).

*Female Focus* specifically emphasizes female involvement and victimization. Lynne Hendricks with *The Daily News of Newburyport* cited Dr. Elizabeth Englander, a cyber-bullying

expert who gave a presentation to parents in a Massachusetts school district. “She recommended parents hold off on allowing texting until their children are in high school if they want their kids to enjoy an easier transition through the middle school years. She said that rule goes especially for young girls, who are more likely to be bullied by a friend who has their cellphone information than boys” (Cyberbullying Expert Speaks to Parents).

*Follows You Everywhere* reflects on the inability of victims to escape from bullies due to the ubiquitous nature of digital technology. According to Jennifer Brett with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, “The ADL's Southeast Regional director, Bill Nigut, said cyberbullying can be even worse than face-to-face bullying because it follows children home from school” (Bullies’ Reach Grows Online).

*Free Speech* focuses on a bully’s right to free speech in cyberspace. Articles that mention the First Amendment usually refer to a school’s inability to police online activities for that reason specifically. “Many victims never find out who's behind electronic threats or harassment. Free speech issues make prosecution difficult” (Anonymous@e-bully.net).

*Hide Behind Screen* is usually a jab at the cowardice of bullies due to the ability to feel empowered by making statements in cyberspace that they would not dare make in person. Leslie Pappas with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* cited Tim Feinberg, the assistant executive director of the National Association of School Psychologists “But the safety of a computer screen can embolden even those who are otherwise meek, he said. In fact, many cyber bullies are former victims who use the computer to turn the tables on their tormentors” (High-Tech Harassment is Hitting Teens Hard; Bullying is Nothing New, But it Takes on a New and Ominous Tone in Cyberspace; Adults are Catching on).

*Homicide* involves individuals who commit, attempt, or consider homicide in conjunction with or as a result of cyber-bullying. This is a less-common trend in the news media as it rarely occurs. Mary Niederberger with the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* recalled a tragic school shooting that was reportedly a result of bullying. “Then came school attacks and highly publicized suicides by students who were said to be bullied, including the April 1999 shooting deaths of 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. The 17- and 18-year old gunmen committed suicide in the school's library” (Teacher Shares Bullying Expertise).

*Ignorance* refers to the idea that cyber-bullies are unaware of the depth of impact they are having on their victims. In his article, Warren Kagarise with *The Issaquah Press* cited Michelle Bennett, a King County Sheriffs Office captain and national expert on cyberbullying. “I think the important thing to mention is that these perpetrators probably didn't realize the consequences of their actions” (Internet Exposes Issues about Cyberbullying; Issaquah Girls, 11 and 12, Charged in Facebook Case).

*Impact* articles mention the repercussions of cyber-bullying on victims. Katie Ryan with *The Jamestown Sun* listed some of the repercussions that commonly occur as a result of cyber-bullying. “Schools want to reduce incidents because cyberbullying can lead to depression, assaults, disorderly conduct and like Prince, suicide” (Students to Learn about Cyberbullying). Depression and anxiety are terms that are regularly used by the media to describe what the victims go through.

*Name-Calling* refers to or gives examples of nasty names bullies call their victims. Jackie Bridges with *The Star* in North Carolina quoted students who told her which topics they wanted a bullying presentation to cover. “Name calling: Especially so loosely calling someone “retarded” or “gay” or a “faggot” or any other word similar to these can be very offensive to people in many

different ways. People really need to think before speaking. Words have an effect” (County Organizations Partner to Present National Expert with Anti-Bully Message).

*Jurisdiction* refers to the ability of schools to enforce activities—such as cyber-bullying—off school grounds. Marc Charisse with *The Evening Sun* used an example of a student and her parent who tried to find help from school officials only to find them unable to help. “Alexandria’s parents went to the police, who said they could do nothing because no crime had been committed. They went to Cobb County school officials, who suspended the miscreants for two days for using cell phones to take pictures at school but also lacked the authority under Georgia law to discipline them for off-campus activities” (Nothing to Like about Facebook Libel Suit).

*Legal* articles mention laws, bills, arrests, crimes, etc. that are connected to cyber-bullying and online harassment. Caitlin Heaney with *The Times-Tribune* explained, “There can be legal ramifications for bullies. Bullying laws in about 31 states mention electronic forms of bullying, and six or seven directly refer to cyberbullying” (Bullies’ Sting Just as Strong Online).

*On the Rise* refers to the idea that cyber-bullying is a rising epidemic that is getting out of control and must be stopped. According to Chris Kieffer with the *Charleston Gazette*, “The court will deal with traditional forms of bullying, such as pushing and shoving, but it can also be used to help with cyberbullying, which experts say is on the rise” (Bully Court Relies on Peer Pressure).

*Parents* is a category that focuses on or mentions parental involvement in cyber-bullying incidents, prevention, presentations, etc. According to Chris Olwell with *The News Herald* in Florida, “Parents need to be aware of what their children are doing online and keep open lines of communication so they can spot potential problems and intervene if necessary. If a bullying situation does rise to a level that requires adult intervention, a parent should notify school officials

right away, and there are plenty of ways to make school officials and law enforcement aware of it” (Bay Schools Have Zero Tolerance for Bullying).

*Physical Appearance* involves one or more individuals who are bullied as a result of his or her physical appearance, such as weight. Meagan Pant with the *Dayton Daily News* used a real-life example in her article to demonstrate how damaging some comments can be. “Krista Hooten saw terror in her daughter's eyes as they started back-to-school shopping for seventh grade. Her daughter, Kelsey, had been bullied the previous year. It started emotionally: other girls called her ugly and spread rumors about her” (Bullied Students Turning to Online Schools; Virtual Academy Enrolls 12,600 Students Across State).

*Presentation* articles primarily function as announcements of upcoming assemblies, seminars, or presentations about cyber-bullying. According to Carolyn Olivier with the *Brattleboro Reformer*, “On Sunday afternoon, Aug. 2, Williams, Brattleboro Police Department's Detective Erik Johnson and Lt. Michael Carrier gave a short informational presentation about bullying (including explanations of physical, verbal, relationship, and cyberbullying). Following this exchange, students watched two short videos focusing specifically on cyberbullying” (Brattleboro: Middle school Leadership Program in its 7th Year).

*Privacy* refers to the lack thereof online. Lynne Hendricks with *The Daily News of Newburyport* cited Dr. Elizabeth Englander, a cyber-bullying expert who gave a presentation to parents in a Massachusetts school district. “For kids who make a strong case for their rights to privacy, Englander suggests there lies parents' opportunity to bring home their point ‘Don't you get it? There is no privacy on that kind of site,’ she suggests telling them” (Cyberbullying Expert Speaks to Parents).



*Race* involves one or more individuals who are bullied as a result of his or her race or ethnicity. According to Paul Levy with the *Star Tribune*, “Bullying online—cyber bullying—remains rampant and vicious, according to all two dozen students interviewed by the Star Tribune this week at Champlin Park High, one of five high schools in the district. The cruel comments—usually on Facebook or Twitter, according to Carlson and the students interviewed—attack kids for their appearance, race, national origin and perceived sexual orientation” (Anoka-Hennepin Makes Inroads Against Bullying).

*Religion* involves one or more individuals who are bullied as a result of the religion s/he practices. According to Eliza Lefebvre with *Buffalo News*, “If you feel like you can't communicate or relate to people because they are of a different ethnicity or religion or have a different lifestyle than you, then that's how you develop prejudices against different people” (Teens Speak Up about Bullying).

*School Districts* refers to the ways in which school districts handle or respond to cyberbullying in their respective communities. Connor Makem with *Foster's Daily Democrat* cites Jill Mahan, a school guidance counselor. “We are being proactive by trying to make students more aware of what cyberbullying is and encourage students to let an adult know when they are victims or witnesses of bullying. The reality is that many kids are texting all day long which only serves to escalate problems both in and out of school. Spaulding High School has a zero-tolerance policy for any type of bullying. Any student, who is being bullied through text, e-mail, websites, or any other form, should re-port it immediately” (The Modern-Era: Taking its Toll on Our Children).

*Sexting* articles specifically mention or focus the phenomenon of sexting. Makem also addresses this issue in his article. “When teens, hormones and technology are involved, there are likely to be problems. Sexting—the act of sending sexual photos or comments over phones or the

Internet—has become a national problem, and many students are unaware of the legal consequences involved” (The Modern-Era: Taking its Toll on Our Children).

*Sexual Harassment* involves sexual harassment either online or in person as a result of online interactions. According to Kamala Harris with *San Jose Mercury News*, “As many as 56 percent of teens report being cyberbullied, and certain groups, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender teens, are targeted more than others. Teenagers who are cyberbullied are more likely to struggle with depression and substance abuse. They are at a higher risk offline to be victims of sexual harassment and physical assault” (We’re Just Beginning to Make Progress against Cyberbullying). This quote from Harris also applies to the *Sexuality* category, which involves one or more individuals who are bullied as a result of his or her sexual orientation or identification.

*Signs to Detect* refer to the warning signs that an individual gives off when s/he is either a cyber-bully or a cyber-victim. According to Erika Capek with *The Brunswick News*, “Other signs parents should look out for include suicide threats, previous suicide attempts, depression, out-of-character behavior and final arrangements” (School Hosts Suicide Prevention Presentation).

As the name implies, the *Statistics* theme includes articles that cover cyber-bullying statistics. According to Cody Switzer with the *Erie Times-News*, “An Ophelia Project study of three Erie County schools showed that 24 percent of the 140 sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders surveyed had cyberbullied someone else, and 22 percent said they were the victims” (Bullies Go High-Tech).

*Suicide* involves the mention of the concept and/or the story of an individual who attempted or successfully committed suicide in correlation to cyber-bullying. According to Katie Ryan with *The Jamestown Sun*, “Cyberbullying drew attention recently when a young girl in Massachusetts committed suicide after she was reportedly harassed and teased by her peers online. And although

officials believe cyberbullying is not as severe or common here, officials say Jamestown is not immune to its effects” (Students to Learn about Cyberbullying).

*Tell Stories* involves the use of real-life examples within the article. Many authors use them as an extension of news angles about cyber-bullying, whereas others focus the story entirely on the stories of victims and perpetrators. According to Kamala Harris with the *San Jose Mercury News*, “Last year, Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old in Massachusetts, committed suicide after fellow students stalked and taunted her on social networking sites. Here in California, sixth-grader Olivia Gardner, of Novato, experienced traumatic harassment online that followed her through three schools on an “Olivia Haters” page on a popular networking website” (We’re Just Beginning to Make Progress against Cyberbullying).

*Threats* refers to the mention of the concept or the making of threats by instigators and/or victims of cyber-bullying. Ashley Surdin with *The Washington Post* cited a particularly extreme example of this in her article. “As it is, schools may discipline students for actions outside of class if they disrupt the educational process, said Kim Croyle, a West Virginia lawyer who represents several school boards and lectures nationally on cyber-bullying. If, for instance, a student calls in a bomb threat from outside school or threatens another student so badly that they avoid school, the school could take action” (In Several States, A Push to Stem Cyber-Bullying; Most of the Laws Focus on Schools).

*Tips* is a category in which articles present tips relating to cyber-bullying. Katie Ryan with *The Jamestown Sun* listed some tips by Nick Hardy, a school resource officer. “Parents can help, officials said. Hardy offered these tips: Talk to children about what they do at school and online and keep tabs on their computer work. Keep the computer in a high-traffic area. That way, students are less likely to try risky behaviors if they feel their parents are watching. Limit a child's access

to cell phones and computers. In most cases, any student in elementary school is too young. Don't put personal information like addresses, phone numbers and birthdates online and avoid using provocative screen names” (Students to Learn about Cyberbullying).

*Under-Reported* refers to the idea that cyber-bullying is not often reported, often due to a fear of repercussions. According to Stacy Becker with *The Telegraph Herald*, “Erin Hefel, student-needs facilitator at George Washington Middle School, said students who have been bullied can be reluctant to admit they were bullied until they feel it's safe to report” (Fear Factor: Few Kids Report Bullying to Adults).

*Worse than Face-to-Face* includes articles that directly or indirectly consider cyber-bullying to be worse than traditional bullying. According to Jennifer Brett with *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, “The ADL's Southeast Regional director, Bill Nigut, said cyberbullying can be even worse than face-to-face bullying because it follows children home from school” (Bullies’ Reach Grows Online).

Further analysis named five digital platforms as the most common tools for cyber-bullies to use against their victims. Due to its emerging popularity, Facebook was the most heavily-mentioned in the data sample.

<b>Digital Platform</b>	<b>Number of Mentions</b>	<b>Total Mentions of All Platforms</b>	<b>Percentage of Mentions</b>
Cell Phone	91	390	23.33%
Facebook	189	390	48.46%
Instagram	15	390	3.85%
Myspace	66	390	16.92%
Twitter	29	390	7.44%

Finally, the table below shows four additional concepts the news articles commonly used throughout the data sample.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of Mentions</b>	<b>Total Mentions of All Categories</b>	<b>Percentage of Mentions</b>
Cyberbully	333	942	35.35%
Parent	433	942	45.97%
Presentation/Assembly/Seminar	67	942	7.11%
Suicide	109	942	11.57%

### **Discussion**

The heavy presence of legal components and prevention programs as the top three trends to emerge in the media support the notion that these topics are popularly-connected to cyber-bullying in the news as well as existing cyber-bullying research; however, listing parents as the highest trend was not expected. While parents obviously play a role in the lives of their children, it was surprising to see how much of a focus the media puts on parental involvement or the necessity of parents to start getting involved where involvement is lacking.

On the lower side, it was not unexpected to see the categories of homicide and religion emerging so little; however, the extremely low results for free speech, definitions, race, signs to detect, and unreported cases were surprising. Ordinarily, a phenomenon is properly defined in the introduction portion of an article; however, many authors chose to assume their readers already understood the concepts of the news stories. The other listed themes are typically connected to cyber-bullying, so it was interesting to see how under-portrayed they were.

Three elements that fell in the middle—suicide, telling stories, and providing statistics—were closely related, which is to be expected. If an individual commits suicide as a result of cyber-bullying, the media will likely focus on his or her story as well as the statistical facts surrounding suicide and cyber-bullying.

While some themes were predictable in that no study about cyber-bullying would be complete without them (i.e. suicide, prevention programs, school districts), some emergent themes

were not so typical. Sexting, for example, was mentioned quite frequently, as well as the jurisdiction schools have over activities that occur off-campus. While there are some concepts that are almost always directly tied to cyberbullying, the news does not always cover the same angles.

### **Limitations**

In the initial stages of the data-gathering process, two LexisNexis errors occurred, though they did not present themselves until far later. Firstly, the database did not completely eliminate all duplicate articles from the original sum, which left a significant number of matching articles scattered throughout the final count with no precise method available to thoroughly and properly eliminate every single one from the pool of data. Secondly, the number of articles provided by LexisNexis was inaccurate. It stated there were 1,807; therefore, after keeping a thorough record of each irrelevant article that was deleted (which amounted to 532), the final number of articles following the cleaning process should have been 1,275. With the original intent to take a random sample of 200 by dividing 1,275 by 200 (which yielded 6.35) and including every sixth article in the sample, the final sample size should have been close to 200. However, the final number was 128, suggesting a numerical error at some stage in the research.

The cleaning process presented a few issues in that there was no clear-cut method to eliminate articles that were written outside the United States, duplicates that were missed by LexisNexis, or irrelevant articles that do not meet the criteria of cyber-bullying in middle school. Skimming provided an opportunity to eliminate such articles that presented red flags at first glance, though the deletion decisions were, in some respects, subjective due to the possibility of different judgments on what characteristics constitute articles as irrelevant or worthy of deletion if the study was repeated. Additionally, despite LexisNexis highlighting “cyberbullying” and “middle school” each time the respective words appear, different spellings or circumlocutions of cyber-bullying

may have led to accidental deletions due to a lack of specific terms that would mark the article as relevant. This is particularly prevalent in articles that mention cyber-bullying or its synonymous concepts in a single sentence amidst paragraphs of irrelevancy (i.e. articles that detail school board meetings that mention an internet safety seminar in a single sentence before moving on to unrelated topics). This furthers the subjectivity of selecting articles for deletion because some researchers may deem those articles relevant while others may not. A repeat of this study would likely produce different results for this reason especially.

The subjectivity extends to the thematic analysis as well. While some emergent themes are straightforward (such as whether or not an article provides a definition of cyber-bullying), many are not. If an article does not expressly state the name of the theme, it does not necessarily mean it does not exist; readers must identify context clues to tie the theme into the article, but one individual's interpretation can and will be completely different from another's. That being said, the names of the themes that emerge and the nature of the context clues that tie a theme to an article can and will lead to different results in repeat studies. The human element must not be overlooked, either; it is highly possible that, due to the large volume of content, themes and tie-ins were missed as well as deletions.

It is crucially important for anyone who chooses to conduct this research to not only specify what their themes are, but also what the reasoning was that led them to tie certain themes to certain articles. Additionally, future research would do well to pull themes from all recovered articles rather than a random sample.

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