

Cyber Bullying Among Female College Students: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Background and Purpose: Cyber bullying is often assumed to only occur in grades K-12, yet reports of such behaviors on college campuses and in the workplace are increasing. The U.S. Federal Government has recently called for policy development regarding cyber bullying to occur in higher education. This study explored perceptions of frequency and severity of cyber bullying among college students. Consequences of cyber bullying and the need for resources on college campuses were also explored. **Methods:** In 2011, a total of 18 undergraduate women participated in three focus groups, each lasting approximately 75 minutes. **Results:** Emergent themes revealed participants do not consider cyber bullying to be a significant issue currently, but likely will increase in prevalence among the college population. Many participants were familiar with the cyber bullying term but were unaware of its definition, nor could they provide examples. Further, the majority of participants were unaware of resources for victims of cyber bullying. **Implications:** Findings from this study reveal the need for educational programs geared toward college students about the meaning and consequences of cyber bullying. Further, resources for victims of cyber bullying should be made available on college campuses.

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Introduction

Social Communication

While people have traditionally communicated by phone, letter, and more recently email, it is evident that new breeds of social communication are growing. Within the last decade an impressive expansion of social media technologies has occurred. These technologies encompass cellular phones (including smart phones), personalized websites, blogs, and social networking websites. The utilization of such media is especially popular among American college students with 93% of young adults aged 18-29 using the Internet, and of those, 72% using social media websites (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Text or instant messaging via mobile device is a fast and popular way to communicate with other people. Additionally, many websites that offer an email service also provide instant messaging and social networking capabilities for users. Social media websites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube have millions of users and continue to

grow. Further, the ongoing development and improvement of smart phones allows users to access and update their status, profile, and email continuously throughout the day (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). As such, social media websites permit communication with others regardless of distance and time, are easy to access, and generally free of charge.

Although there are many similarities among the various types of social media websites, there are certain characteristics unique to each one (see Table 1). These various websites provide a place to connect with friends, co-workers, family, and others who share similar interests and experiences (Park et al., 2009). Among young adults aged 18-29 who use social network websites, 71% report having a profile on Facebook and 66% report having a profile on MySpace (Lenhart et al., 2010). These percentages indicate that the popularity of social network websites is so vast that some users have accounts on multiple sites. Additionally, among young adults aged 18-24, 37% have a Twitter account and 15% maintain a blog (Lenhart et al., 2010).

Table 1

Characteristics of Social Media Websites			
Social Media Website	Date Founded	Number of Current Users (as of 2011)	Characteristics
Facebook	2004	500 million	Create/share weblinks, news, stories, blog posts, notes, photos
MySpace	2004	100 million	Create share weblinks, news, stories, blog posts, notes, photos
Twitter	2006	106 million	Post status updates (“tweets”) of 140 characters or less
YouTube	2005	1 trillion views in 2011	Watch, create, upload, share, comment on videos

Cyberbullying and Social Communication

Although these social media websites help to facilitate communication between many different populations, they share certain risks. Invasion of privacy, security threats, identity theft, and cyber bullying are some examples of the current risks facing social media users (Fodeman & Monroe, 2009; Heirman & Walrave, 2008; Livingstone & Brake, 2010; McClure, 2010; Nosoko, Wood, & Molema, 2010). While all of these potential threats are serious, in the past seven to ten years cyber bullying has gained attention in both popular media and peer-reviewed research. Cyber bullying can occur through any of the previously mentioned media formats (Nemours Foundation, 2011).

Cyber bullying is defined as:

An individual or a group willfully using information and communication involving electronic technologies to facilitate deliberate and repeated harassment or threat to another individual or group by

sending or posting text and/or graphics using technological means (Nemours Foundation, 2011).

There are several key factors that make cyber bullying potentially more harmful than traditional bullying. Some of these distinctions include the possible anonymity of the bully and that bullying can occur at any place and time. The vast expansion and easy access to social media technologies provide cyber bullies the option to rapidly send threatening messages, pictures, or videos, and the opportunity to target more than one person at a time (Nemours Foundation, 2011). Through these tactics, bullies who utilize social media technologies can amplify the humiliation and embarrassment of the victims in a matter of seconds.

Social Implications of Bullying and Cyber Bullying

Victims of these behaviors report anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts (Gini and Pozzoli, 2013; Sourander, Jensen, Ronning, Niemela, Helenius, Sillanmaki, et al., 2007). While the news media draws attention to the tragedies due to bullying, these connections tend to be anecdotal (“Cyber bullying”, 2013; Mahoney, 2010). However, a prospective study published in *JAMA Psychiatry* (2013) was the first to explore the association between peer victimization in childhood and adult psychiatric diagnosis and suicidality. According to the study, bullying victims were at significantly greater risk for young adult psychiatric disorders such as general anxiety, panic, and agoraphobia than their non-victim peers. Further, there was a significantly greater risk of suicidal thoughts among the bullying victims. Interestingly, the perpetrators of the bullying also experienced increased risk of depression and suicidal thoughts (Copeland, Dieter Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013).

Recent media attention in the United States has shed light on several cyber bullying victims, berated to the point that they took their own lives (“Cyber bullying”, 2013; Glor, 2010; Mahoney, 2010). Many of the victims who committed suicide were in middle or high school and research has focused particularly on cyber

bullying within these populations (Johnson, 2010; Slonje and Smith, 2008). According to Lenhart (2007), 32% of teenagers reported having been the target of several types of cyber bullying, and teenage girls were most likely to be victimized.

Cyber Bullying in College

While it is often assumed that cyber bullying only occurs in grades K-12, reports of such behaviors on college campuses nationwide are increasing. In 2004, Chapell and colleagues explored bullying in a sample of 1025 undergraduate students and found that 18.5% reported being bullied by a fellow student once or twice with an additional 1.1% being bullied very frequently. More recently, an exploratory study of cyber bullying among undergraduate students identified that 54% of respondents knew someone who had been cyber bullied while in college (Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011). These findings are consistent with the growing literature based which shows that adults bully adults in the workplace (Cooper, Einarsen, Howel, & Zapf, 2003; Vega & Comer, 2005) including bullying of faculty in the academic setting (Chapell, Hasselman, Kitchin, Lomon, MacIver, & Sarullo, 2006; Halbur, 2005; Simpson & Cohen, 2004; Westhues, 2006). Overall, bullying and cyber bullying have the potential to impact the welfare of undergraduate students and the overall educational environment on college campuses.

Harmful cyber activities have drawn the attention of the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Violence Prevention (2012). This federal agency released a report strongly encouraging college- and university-level policies to be put in effect that address the specific issue of cyber bullying. While cyber bullying among American youth has been reported in the scientific literature for about a decade, there is a significant lack of information pertaining to cyber bullying among college students.

Purpose of the Current Study

The purpose of this study was to explore whether cyber bullying is perceived as an issue among college students and to investigate perceptions of frequency and severity of cyber bullying among this population. Additionally, consequences of cyber bullying and the need for resources on college campuses were explored.

Methods

Participants

A convenience sample of undergraduate students attending a medium-sized liberal arts university in the Pacific Northwest participated in this study. No specific exclusion criteria were imposed for participant selection. Participant recruitment occurred in twelve classes with a total of 24 students self-selecting as participants for the study. Two students later chose to not participate and only four male students agreed to participate. With such a small number of male participants, it was not possible to conduct qualitative data verification. Thus, the results presented in this paper reflect the responses of the 18 self-selected female participants.

Measures

With a lack of previous research regarding cyber bullying among college students, investigators searched CINAHL, PubMed, EBSCO, and ERIC to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature regarding cyber bullying among adolescents. The review of these articles assisted with the development of measures used for the current study. Common themes and issues reported among adolescents and young adults from four studies in particular were effective in aiding with the development of an eight-prompt focus group moderator guide and a four-item pre-session questionnaire for the present study.

Pre-Session Questionnaire

The pre-session questionnaire was used to assess participant awareness of cyber bullying and its definition as well as the participant's ability to accurately identify scenarios that met legal criteria to be defined as cyber bullying. Items for this instrument were developed in response to findings in several studies.

Our research team solicited participant-constructed responses on the pre-session questionnaire by asking each person to define cyber bullying and to describe what cyber bullying means to them personally. These inquiries were necessary based on the results from Griggs' study (2010) with adults regarding instant messaging and cyber aggression. That study reported a general lack of knowledge of accurate definitions of cyber bullying and cyber aggression among adults. The exploration of personal definitions of cyber bullying in the current study helped to prepare participants for the focus group discussions.

The pre-session questionnaire was further utilized to describe participant perceptions of cyber bullying victimization, perpetration, and prevalence among college students. Based on their personal definition of cyber bullying and what the term meant to them, each participant was asked to record if they thought they had been a victim of cyber bullying while in college, if they thought they had been a perpetrator of cyber bullying while in college, and how frequently they thought cyber bullying occurred among college students. These inquiries were in response to findings reported from a study conducted at the University of New Hampshire (Finn, 2004). According to that study, undergraduate student perceptions regarding victimization, cyber bullying perpetration, and prevalence did not align. Researchers from that study identified a lack of a common definition of cyber bullying as one of the possible factors influence this absence of congruence.

For the current study, ten scenarios were created with seven of the ten meeting the legal definition of cyber bullying. Participants were asked to place a check mark next to any of the scenarios they considered to be cyber bullying. These scenarios were created in response to a study conducted by Smith and colleagues in 2005. Researchers for that study reported that perceptions of cyber bullying varied depending upon the technological modality being used. As such, the current research team created cyber bullying scenarios highlighting different methods including text messaging, email, and

websites. Examples of scenarios included "Posting rumors about someone on a discussion-based website" or "Taking a degrading video or photo of someone on a cell phone and forwarding it to other peoples' phones".

Focus Group Moderator Guide

The objectives for each focus group session were to:

1. Establish a definition of cyber bullying as it occurs among college students (Grigg, 2010);
2. Explore perceived frequency and severity of cyber bullying among college students (Finn, 2004; Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippett, 2005);
3. Determine consequences of cyber bullying (Finn, 2004; Grigg, 2010); and
4. Assess the need for resources to address cyber bullying on college campuses (Willard, 2007).

For the current study, the establishment of a definition of cyber bullying occurred through the pre-session questionnaire but also within the focus group discussions. During each focus group session, participants were asked to "Describe how cyber bullying compares to traditional bullying". Further, participants spent time discussing the similarities and differences of their personal definitions of cyber bullying. The exploration of disparities among personal definitions and the perceived variations between cyber bullying and traditional bullying were in response to findings from the study by Grigg (2010). Findings from that study indicated that adults cannot adequately define cyber bullying and do not consider certain practices via instant messaging to be cyber bullying.

During the focus group sessions in the current study, participants were asked to describe a situation in which they were familiar with a cyber bullying incident while in college (could be personal or with someone they knew). Any participant who offered to talk about such a situation was asked to describe the length of time the cyber bullying occurred, the various methodologies through which the cyber bullying occurred, and to describe the impact on the victim to the best of their ability. The inclusion

of this prompt and probes were necessary based on the findings regarding victimization perpetration, and prevalence found through a survey about online harassment conducted at the University of New Hampshire (Finn, 2004).

To explore the possible need for resources to resolve cyber bullying, participants in the current study were asked to describe “Why people participate in cyber bullying” and to “Describe any known available resources or ideal resources that could assist with the prevention of cyber bullying”. The creation of these prompts were in response to the work of Willard (2007). Findings from that study revealed a possible need for campus resources to assist students with the navigation of and safety with using various electronic mediums.

Procedures

All procedures for this nonexperimental study were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the authors’ institution. A standard invitation script was read aloud in twelve health education classes ranging in course enrollment from 35 to 75 students. The courses ranged from general university requirement courses to those with only community health majors. Interested parties were encouraged to provide their name, e-mail address, and self-identified biological sex on a sign-up sheet. Investigators then contacted each person to assess their willingness to participate in a focus group. Based on a focus group guide by Grudens-Schuck and colleagues (2004), groups were homogenous according to the self-reported variable of biological sex.

Investigators chose to keep each focus group to less than 12 participants based upon Larson and colleagues (2004). The greeting and props utilized in the focus group sessions such as name tags, the use of fictitious names, a definition poster, audio recorder, refreshments, questionnaire copies, chairs, and writing utensils were adapted from Kreuger (Denver STD/HIV Prevention Training Center & Kreuger, n.d.).

A total of three homogenous focus groups of women were conducted during the winter and spring 2011 quarters. Each focus group lasted

approximately 75 minutes and was audio recorded for transcription.

Data Analyses

All data collected from each focus group session were transcribed by the investigators. Approximately 25% of the transcribed data was further evaluated to verify accuracy of the transcription. Data from the three female focus group sessions was reviewed by each investigator to identify emergent themes. Once reviewed individually, researchers convened to come to consensus on identified themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2001). Data collected from the pre-session surveys were entered into SPSS (v.17). Simple frequency measures and percentages were calculated.

Results

Definition of Cyber Bullying

Three themes emerged regarding the definition of cyber bullying. More than 80% of the participants were familiar with the term cyber bullying, yet the vast majority (n=17, 94%) of participants were unable to provide an accurate definition of cyber bullying. Furthermore, more than 90% (n=17) of participants were unable to accurately identify scenarios of cyber bullying from the pre-session questionnaire. See Table 2.

... like what you were saying, people don't really know the definition of cyber bullying. It's kind of a new term...people don't realize a lot that they are cyber bullied.

Perceived Frequency and Severity of Cyber Bullying

Two themes emerged regarding the prevalence of cyber bullying among current college students. The majority of participants indicated that cyber bullying gets more media attention among younger populations, which may or may not indicate a problem among college students. Other participants believe cyber bullying is unknowingly common because some college student may not know they are perpetrators or victims of cyber bullying.

Table 2

Thematic Responses for Definitions of Cyber Bullying

Prominent Themes
(n = # of responses, % of participants)

Cyber Bullying is Well-Known Term (n=15, 83.3%)
Participants in this group were able to clearly articulate they were *familiar* with the term cyber bullying.

Cyber Bullying is a New term (n=3, 16.6%)
Participants in this group were unfamiliar with the term cyber bullying. These participants indicated they were probably unfamiliar with the term as they had not been a victim of such behavior.

Accurate Cyber Bullying Definition (n=16, 88.9%)
Participants in this group were unable to provide an accurate definition of cyber bullying as including intention to cause harm or embarrassment to the victim.

A third theme regarding frequency of cyber bullying was related to future prevalence. Most of the participants in the current study believed that cyber bullying will be a more significant issue in the next few years as current middle and high school students reach university level. With the incoming generations of cyber savvy youth, the problem of cyber bullying will increase.

I think [cyber bullying] is something more people should start being aware of because I think it is going to become a bigger problem later on and as much as technology is advancing it could be at a whole new level.

Table 3

Thematic Responses for Perceived Frequency and Severity of Cyber Bullying Among College Students

Prominent Themes
(n = # of responses, % of participants)

Cyber Bullying is Uncommon Among Current College Students (n=11, 61.1%)
Participants in this group believed cyber bullying gets more media attention among young populations, which may or may not indicate a problem among college students. These participants perceived the problem to be uncommon because of the lack of media attention or attention from university leadership.

Cyber Bullying is Prevalent in College (n=7, 38.9%)
Participants in this group believed cyber bullying is prevalent in college. However, they believe cyber bullying is not reported because people perceive it is happening to everybody or students do not know to who they should report the issue. Other participants believe college students may not know they are perpetrators or victims of cyber bullying due to a lack of knowledge about cyber bullying.

Future Prevalence of Cyber Bullying will Dramatically Increase (n=14; 77.7%)
Participants in this group believed cyber bullying is something more people should be aware of because they think this type of bullying will become a bigger problem in the coming years as technology advances. These participants also believe that the generations of college students coming after them are savvy with social networking and will be more familiar with using the technology to their advantage to cyber bully.

Cyber Bullying is Socially Acceptable Behavior (n=5, 27.7%)
Participants believed cyber bullying is becoming more pervasive as it becomes more socially acceptable. These participants cited incidences between celebrities who say negative things about one another through their Twitter® accounts or through their Facebook® pages. These participants indicated the practices of cyber bullying are becoming part of our social culture and thus will be difficult to address.

Another theme that arose from the data was related to social acceptability. Several participants believed cyber bullying was becoming more socially acceptable due to the increase in stories regarding celebrity behavior involving cyber bullying practices. See Table 3.

...I think our generation, like the 20-25 year olds right now, grew up when social networking, texting, and Facebook or MySpace were still brand new. I feel like we were just getting familiar with them and we didn't have as much time to explore these tools and figure them out. I feel like kids now are in the time when those social networks and texting and whatever, has been figured out. Now they can use [the technology] to their full advantage and be a cyber bully if they want to.

Consequences of Cyber Bullying

Participants identified psychological abuse as a major consequence of cyber bullying. Prominent themes identified feelings of embarrassment, humiliation, anger, frustration, and lack of confidence or self-esteem. While each of these feelings was not identified as universal among all the participants, each of these was identified by a majority of the participants.

Those bad thoughts in your brain when somebody implants them; it's kind of like a seed and it grows into something ugly. You are always thinking so you're always going to be thinking about what was said unless you have something to distract yourself.

I feel like [cyber bullying] can also be damaging because it can go for such a long period of time. If something was posted about you 5 years ago or even, 10 years ago, it could still surface anytime. You can't erase it once you've written something or posted something; it is always going to be out there and it could spread to not only your school and community, but it could spread anywhere.

Several participants (n=5) discussed their experiences with cyber bullying while in college. They talked about 'rolling with the punches' and feeling 'so alone.' A few participants (n=3) also discussed their frustration about being unable to explore their electronic

communication forums without being 'bothered' by others (both known and unknown to them). These participants expressed the desire for greater privacy as they navigate their personal electronic communication forums. See Table 4.

If someone is on the internet and you are online and they see you, there is only so much you can do ... so my point is [the victim] probably just feels so helpless because there is nothing that they can do because [the perpetrator] always sees them.

Table 4

Thematic Responses for Consequences of Cyber Bullying

Prominent Themes (n = # of responses, % of participants)	
Embarrassment (n=12, 66.7%)	Most participants indicated that embarrassment experienced by the victim is one of the most prominent consequences of cyber bullying. The posting and re-posting of pictures or rumors can cause a lot of embarrassment. Additionally, since the information or data can spread so quickly the embarrassment is exponential as compared to such information or data being shared by non-electronic means.
Lack of Confidence/Self-Esteem (n=11, 61.1%)	A majority of participants believed one of the main consequences of cyber bullying was a loss of confidence or self-esteem. Participants reported that victims of cyber bullying would likely experience damage to their self-esteem and that the experience may change the way the victims see themselves. These participants believe that the planting of a bad thought in the victim's head by a cyber bully can grow into significant challenges to a victim's self-esteem.
Permanence/Repeated Affliction (n=11, 61.1%)	Most participants believed the permanence of electronic data is a significant consequence of cyber bullying. Material posted on the Internet is part of an individual's cyber tattoo and as such is permanent. Due to the permanency of this material, it can come back and continue to inflict pain, embarrassment, and frustration for the victim in future years.
Anger/Frustration/Lack of Control (n=10, 55.5%)	Many participants indicated that victims of cyber bullying experience anger and frustration due to the general lack of control with the situation. With cyber bullying, it is possible the victim does not know the perpetrator. Additionally, it is difficult to stop the distribution of pictures or rumors before significant damage to one's reputation occurs. With the anonymity and rapidity of cyber bullying, participants believe victims of cyber bullying feel like they have no control to stop the bullying.

Need for Campus Resources

Every participant in the current study believed that victims of cyber bullying have no recourse against the perpetrator. These participants were unfamiliar with state or federal laws in place to protect victims of cyber bullying. Further, participants were unaware of existing resources on campus or in the community to increase awareness of cyber bullying or to assist victims of cyber bullying. However, all 18 participants agreed that campus policies should be created and education campaigns should be implemented now in light of potential future increases in cyber bullying incidences on college campuses.

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine whether cyber bullying is an issue among college students. While it is clear that cyber bullying is a problem among adolescents (Johnson, 2010; Lenhart, 2007; Slonje et al., 2008) and continues to increase in its prevalence, the investigation of this topic among college students is insufficient in the research literature. By conducting focus groups, we attempted to gain insight into college students' perceptions of prevalence, severity, and consequences of cyber bullying.

Despite the popular use of social media technologies in college (Lenhart et al., 2010; Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011), participants did not consider cyber bullying to be a major current issue. However, participants strongly believed that the rates of perpetration and victimization will increase as younger generations, who are more closely connected to social media technologies, matriculate to the higher education environment. Most participants were unclear what cyber bullying meant and some realized during the discussion that perhaps they had been a victim or a perpetrator of cyber bullying based on the definition presented during the discussion session.

It is possible that the actual prevalence of cyber bullying occurring in college is greater than the perceptions of these participants. With so many

cyber bullying practices becoming part of the social norm, it may be difficult for a young person to delineate between the risks and benefits of participating in certain cyber activities. With terms such as 'Facebook stalking' becoming a part of the American lexicon, the potential implications of one's behaviors are marginalized. Further, when national icons are engaged in behaviors that are considered cyber bullying and are then discussed in the popular media, the social norm of acceptability for such behaviors occurs. For example, when socialites feud via Twitter (like Rose O'Donnell and Donald Trump), anyone who follows these individuals gets involved in the bullying behavior. These occurrences can make it seem acceptable for a young person to engage in such behavior with other individuals.

It was clear from the discussions with study participants that they knew cyber bullying was wrong. However, these same young people were unable to clearly identify examples of cyber bullying. While a definition of cyber bullying exists, it is not useful if an individual cannot characterize behaviors that would be categorized as such. The overall inconsistency of legal regulation and enforcement of cyber bullying contributes to this escalating problem. Although there are fifteen states with cyber bullying regulations, college students are often not included in these policies with a focus being placed on school-age youth (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012). Additionally, college students are typically overlooked because they have greater freedom to access social media without parents or teachers who monitor their use (Grant, 2009).

Although there is a limited amount of anti-cyber bullying legislation, the issue is attracting increased legal and media attention. The American Bar Association recently adopted an anti-cyber bullying resolution which called for the adoption of federal and state policies and laws designed to prevent and respond to cyber bullying; identification of victims and enhancement of appropriate interventions; and the funding of programs, research, and evaluation that address prevention and responses to cyber bullying (Anti-Defamation League, 2011). President Obama and First Lady Michelle

Obama have recently called attention to this issue as well. In a question and answer discussion on MTV, President Obama mentioned that harassment in any form is unacceptable and schools must adopt a zero-tolerance cyber bullying policy (MTV, 2010). Only with a standard definition of cyber bullying will preventative educational programs be developed to address online safety and etiquette.

A valuable next step would be for colleges and universities to develop policies regarding cyber bullying in response to the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education Center for Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Violence Prevention's call to action (2012). In addition to instituting such policies, campuses should assess student perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes regarding cyber bullying in order to create effective educational and behavioral campaigns that address the various socio-ecological factors of this public health problem.

When students establish healthy online behavior, know how to protect themselves, and are internet savvy, the rates of cyber bullying will decrease. Educational strategies such as teaching students how to appropriately respond to a cyber bully, document threats, recognize online predators, and use proper online etiquette will allow students to achieve online safety (Feinberg & Robey, 2009).

Limitations of the Current Study

This study had several limitations. All participants for this study were solicited from health education classes. While results that may be generalized are not something sought in a qualitative study, the students who self-selected to participate in the current study may have been more interested in the topic based on material being discussed within these courses. Further, the low level of participation from the solicited group may be a result of students who take health education courses potentially experiencing less cyber bullying compared to students who do not enroll in health education courses. Further, it is possible that students interested in health education may be more proactive in protecting themselves from cyber bullying and thus may not have found the topic

of high importance to warrant their participation. As such, the students who chose to participate in the focus groups may have different perspectives than other college students as several of the participants in these discussions knew of someone who had been a victim of cyber bullying.

Another limitation is that the results of this study are limited to females, who tend to report higher rates of cyber bullying victimization (Zacchilli & Valerio, 2011). As such the themes from these discussion groups may not be the same among men. Nonetheless, the data from these groups, in context with other research regarding cyber bullying (Walker et al., 2011) and the implications of bullying in adulthood (Copeland et al., 2013; Sourander et al., 2007), support the need to further investigate the issue and potential implications of cyber bullying among college students.

Implications

With the current study identifying 39% (n=7) of participants knowing someone who was cyber bullied in college, other research reporting nearly 54% of college students knowing someone who had been cyber bullied in college (Walker et al., 2011), and 35% of the U.S. workforce reporting being bullied at work (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2010), it is clear these negative behaviors do not cease after adolescence. Findings from these focus groups suggest the need for definition awareness among the college population. Further, a consistent definition is needed for legislators to re-evaluate, improve, and/or create policies and for educators to implement effective preventative programs regarding cyber bullying. Young people should be educated about online safety and etiquette as well as the legal and health-related consequences of cyber bullying. Finally, more research should be conducted to effectively assess the prevalence and severity of cyber bullying among college students. Such research will help guide the development of programs to address this public health issue. While this study focuses on college students, data from this and other studies with adolescents outline the need to address cyber bullying across age and education demographics.

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