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### Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Rates of Cyberbullying in a University Sample

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## Introduction and Purpose

Cyberbullying refers to when an individual or group harasses, mistreats, or mocks an individual or group using an electronic device in a way in which the victim(s) do not feel capable of responding or defending themselves (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2014). The victim(s) perceives such acts as intentional, offensive, derogatory, harmful or unwanted (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2014).

Cyberbullying is common among college students with prevalence rates ranging from 10% (Smith & Yoon, 2013) to 29% (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). This is concerning because research has shown that cybervictimization is associated with higher rates of substance misuse, depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation, anxiety, delinquency and lower attendance and academic achievement (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014).

During the pandemic, concerns about cyberbullying expanded because of the potential impact increased isolation, internet usage, and electronic usage may have had. One study found that participants aged 20+, reported increased television and internet usage since the pandemic (Colley et al., 2020). Another study revealed troubling findings that showed a 200% increase in visitations to websites where hate group(s) displayed hate speech and blogposts targeted at the Asian community. Additionally, the study revealed a 70% increase in hate speech among youth in online chats (Light, 2020).

By sampling students at the University of Montana, the current study added to the field's limited knowledge of cyberbullying among college students. Moreover, this study investigated whether cyberbullying may have been impacted by increased reliance on online platforms to support distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Participants and Procedures

- Participants ( $n = 135$ , 8 invalid responses;  $Mode = 19$  years old; 74% women, 85% White, and 43% freshman) were college students recruited from the University of Montana using the university's research recruitment system (SONA).
- The 47-item survey was administered remotely using Qualtrics – an online survey platform – and included items inspired from previous works including the self-report Participant Role Questionnaire (PRQ; Bushard, 2013), the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ; Olweus, 1996), and the Cyberbullying Experiences Survey (Doane et al., 2013). The survey took on average 10 minutes to complete.
- Participants reported their age, race/ethnicity, gender, class standing, involvement in student groups, experiences with cyberbullying, perceived rates of cyberbullying since the pandemic, and personal participation in cyberbullying.

## Results

Using Likert scales from 1 to 5 (1 = No, a lot less, 2 = No, a little less, 3 = About the same, 4 = Yes, a little more, 5 = Yes, a lot more), the sample personally endorsed greater online activity since university classes went remote in April, 2020 ( $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = .90$ ), decreased cyberbullying behavior ( $M = 2.09$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ), and decreased cybervictimization ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ). However, on average, participants did not report believing that remote/online education had impacted rates of cyberbullying ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = .74$ ). Open-ended responses revealed some participants' rationale for their beliefs regarding the changes in cyberbullying since April 2020.

Rationale for Increased Cyberbullying:

- "I think it is due to irritability of individuals having to spend so much time on the computer...as well as...anonymity."
- "Online school just makes me irritable and gives me more access."
- "More people are at home and [bored] and unhappy so they have opinions about everything and express feelings that they would not in person."

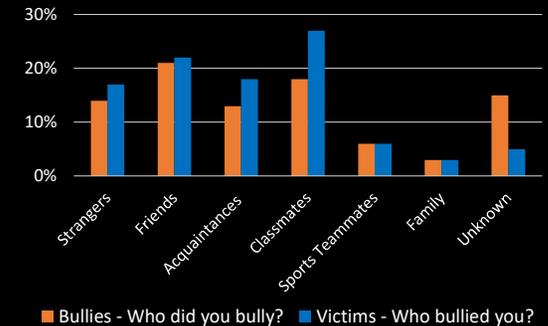
Rationale for Decreased Cyberbullying:

- "There is more of a sense of community now that we have all been through a common misfortune."
- "Now a days, things are tough for everyone and this world could really benefit from spreading positivity right now, especially through social media since that's people's main source of everything these days."
- "The world needs people to be kind to each other right now, and I have matured a lot during this time."
- "I know what it's like to go through that and everyone should feel safe in a time like this and not have to stress about sticking up for themselves."

Cyberbullying others since April 2020 was most strongly linked with endorsements of being cybervictimized since April 2020 ( $r = .735$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, lifetime reports of being a cyberbully and cybervictim positively correlated ( $r = 0.373$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as did being a cyberbully and cybervictim "within the last couple months" ( $r = .227$ ,  $p = .012$ ).

An ANOVA showed no significant differences between gender and cyberbullying ( $F(2, 126) = 2.655$ ,  $p = .074$ ) or cybervictimization ( $F(2, 126) = .180$ ,  $p = .835$ ). However, when looking at lifetime prevalence of cyberbullying by class standing, a main effect was found ( $F(3, 120) = 5.512$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and indicated that juniors endorsed greater lifetime cyberbullying than all other groups (freshman,  $p = .001$ ; sophomores,  $p = .005$ ; and seniors,  $p < .001$ ).

## Who is involved in cyberbullying?



## Discussion

As expected, participants reported greater online activity since the university transitioned to distance learning in April 2020. However, most participants did not view increased online learning as a catalyst for cyberbullying. In fact, on average, participants reported that their involvement in cyberbullying had decreased during this period. Qualitative data revealed that while a minority thought the pandemic had increased cyberbullying due to greater boredom, irritability, and opportunities to be online or on social media, the majority thought cyberbullying decreased due to an increased sense of community, empathy, or compassion.

Results also revealed that perceived cyberbullying motives and the parties involved in these incidents vary based on the perspective of the reporter. In other words, perceptions regarding why cyberbullying occurs, who the perpetrators are, and who the victims are may vary based on whose perspective is being gathered, the cyberbullies' or the cybervictims'.

Lastly, results revealed a consistent overlap in self-reported cyberbullying and cybervictimization during the participants' lifetimes, since April 2020, and "within the last couple of months." These significant patterns suggest that a subgroup of people consistently take on both roles. Further research should seek to shed light on the actions and perceptions related to cyberbullying in this important subgroup.

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## Why do people cyberbully?

