



# Examining The Effectiveness Of Academic Scholarship On The Fight Against Cyberbullying And Cyberstalking

By: **Catherine D. Marcum** and George E. Higgins

## Abstract

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# Examining the Effectiveness of Academic Scholarship on the Fight Against Cyberbullying and Cyberstalking

Catherine D. Marcum<sup>1</sup> · George E. Higgins<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Online victimization via cyberbullying and cyberstalking are plaguing our young online users. These tormenting and intrusive behaviors have infiltrated relationship formation, online communication and social identity. Friends and romantic partners have become increasingly dependent on the use of technology to initiate relationships. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the current state of these online crimes and the involvement of youth and young adults. We will consider current responses by our criminal justice system, as well as our educational and community groups. Based on what is currently implemented and its success factor, we will make our assertions about the effectiveness of scholastic work and its influence on what we are doing to combat these forms of cybervictimization.

**Keywords** Internet · Cyberbullying · Cyberstalking · Victimization

## Introduction

Online victimization can occur in many forms. Identity theft is becoming more common place. Hackers become infamous for accessing secure systems and leaking millions of records from huge entities, such as Target and Wells Fargo. Vigilante hacker groups even gain public favor for harassing scrutinized groups or persons, such as the Church of Scientology and Tom Cruise. Unfortunately, the young and vulnerable are also victims of atrocious online crimes, such as child pornography or sex trafficking as a result of the ease and efficient use of the Internet.

The cumulative cost of cybercrime costs Americans alone millions of dollars. In addition, cybervictimization in all its forms can have severe financial and emotional

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repercussions. While all forms of cybercrime can have tragic results, behaviors categorized as cyberbullying and cyberstalking are currently plaguing the Internet and increasingly becoming a frequent occurrence of the typical online user. Especially prominent in the age groups of 12–17 and 18–25 years old, these tormenting and intrusive behaviors have infiltrated relationship formation and social identity. Romantic partners have become increasingly dependent on the use of technology to initiate relationships, maintain communication, and potentially secure a future together. As an academic community, we have recognized the true repercussions of this form of victimization through countless stories of young people who have committed suicide in reaction (e.g., Tyler Clementi, Megan Meier, and Amanda Todd). Multiple studies have been performed on high school and college-aged students to provide not only frequencies of occurrence, but potential predictive factors. Many scholars have made suggestions for prevention; however, the question remains: are we making a difference?

The main purpose of this paper is to assess the effectiveness of empirical research on current responses to these forms of cybervictimization. It is first imperative the reader understands the behaviors associated with these behaviors, as well as the frequency of their occurrence. Next, we will consider current responses by our criminal justice system, as well as our educational and community groups. Considering what is currently implemented and its success factor, we will make our assertions about the effectiveness of scholastic work and its influence on what we are doing to combat these forms of cybervictimization. Based on this assessment, we will make suggestions for cyber-academics to better assist law enforcement, educational and community entities to improve our fight against cyberbullying and cyberstalking.

## **Exploring Prominent Forms of Online Victimization in Youth: Cyberbullying and Cyberstalking**

### **Cyberbullying**

In the physical world, the act of bullying is the repeated and intentional aggressive behavior with the intent to intimidate a victim (Olweus, 1993); Patchin & Hinduja, 2016). Bullies attempt to dominate a victim with tactics to induce fear, such as physical aggression, theft of personal material, or threatening comments. In addition, articulable harm (physical, emotional or mental) must occur to be considered bullying behavior. These same bullying behaviors can be performed online as well.

**Cyberbullying** is the “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and electronic devices” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Contrary to physical bullying, one direct act of cyberbullying is considered a form of bullying as it can be a continuous method of indirect victimization. For example, one nasty rumor that is posted on a social media page can be shared and reposted over and over again. Cyberbullying can occur in many forms:

- Denigration - posting untrue information;
- Flaming - hostile and insulting interaction;
- Harassment - insults or taunts with repetitive messaging or posts; and
- Outing - revealing personal information without permission.

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While the rates of cyberbullying perpetration and victimization may vary depending on the study and the sample, recent studies have indicated a rate of cyberbullying perpetration and victimization between 15% and 23% (Ang, Huan, & Florell, 2014; Marcum, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Much like bullying, this online crime can be perpetrated by any demographic. However, some research has indicated that females are more likely commit cyberbullying due to the indirect nature of the crime. While males are more likely to settle disputes with physical means, females can be as harsh and vindictive as they like with the protection of a computer screen (Marcum, Higgins, Freiburger & Ricketts, 2013). Not surprisingly, bullying and cyberbullying have been linked to many negative ramifications experienced by victims, such as anxiety, depression, low academic achievement, and suicidal ideation (Brighi et al., 2012; Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Olweus, 1994; Roland, 2002).

### **Cyberstalking**

Online partner monitoring has become more prominent in relationships between young adults and adolescents (Chaulk & Jones, 2011; Marcum, Higgins & Nicholson, 2017; Marcum, Higgins, & Nicholson, 2019). This goes beyond looking at a Facebook or Instagram page to determine likes and dislikes, political preference or demographic information. An individual interested in a specific person as a romantic partner, or a current romantic partner, may explore a person's social media presence to determine where he or she is located, or who he or she is with at the current time. Frequent checking and review of a person's online presence has also been termed "interpersonal electronic surveillance" (IES), where romantic partners will spend large amounts of time monitoring another person's online behavior without his her direct knowledge (Elphinston & Noller, 2011; Fox & Warber, 2013; Marshall, 2012; Tokunaga & Gustafson, 2014). Ex-partners have a distinct advantage if they remain online "friends" with their ex, as they can still monitor behaviors, travel locations or new love interests. This is often called "creeping" or "Facebook stalking."

When this monitoring behavior becomes intimidating or fear-invoking, it becomes an issue that involves the criminal justice system. Termed "cyberstalking," it is the use of the Internet and other technological devices (e.g., computers, cellular telephones, pads) to monitor or harass another person in a threatening way (Bocij & McFarlane 2003; Reyns, Henson and Fisher 2012). Cyberstalkers may gather personal information to harass a victim, or continuously send unwanted emails or text messages. These offenders may hack into social media or email accounts to impersonate their victims, or even monitor their location with listening devices, cameras or spyware. Victims of cyberstalking are more often females and between the ages of 18 and 30 years old (Holt & Bossler, 2009; Baum, Catalano, & Rose, 2009; Marcum et al., 2017, 2019). Research has found cyberstalking prevalence rates varied between 19% and 45%. In addition, 25% of offline stalking victims were also stalked online.

Cyberstalking and the term "cyber dating abuse" are often used interchangeably and recognized as a consistent problem between adolescent and young adult romantic partners (Borrajó, Gamez-Guadix, Pereda, & Calvete, 2015; Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, & Cratty, 2011; Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013). Behaviors considered cyber dating abuse often mirrors the same behaviors identified as cyberstalking: monitoring and surveillance of a partner (Burke, Wallen, Vail-Smith, & Knox, 2011; Lyndon et al.,

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2011); sending threatening or rude emails and messages (Bennet, Guran, Ramos and Margolin 2011; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Kellerman, Margolin, Borofsky, Baucom and Iturralde 2013; Zweig et al., 2013); and posting humiliating photographs (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Lyndon et al., 2011). Approximately 12–17% of young adults admitted to committing cyber dating abuse (Bennet, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011; Korchmaros, Ybarra, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Boyd, & Lehart, 2013), and depending on the study, between 11 and 31% have been victimized in this manner (Bennet, et al., 2011; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Zweig et al., 2013). These abusive behaviors can cause serious repercussions for victims, including distress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse and suicidal ideation (Prospero, 2007; Shorey et al., 2011, 2012).

Recent work by Marcum et al. (2017, 2019) and Marcum, Higgins and Poff (2016b) have provided more insight into these behaviors through the examination of not only perpetration, but also perception of the repercussions. Multiple waves of data collected from a university setting asked undergraduate and graduate students about their cyberstalking and cyber dating abuse behaviors. Questions were asked about unauthorized monitoring, access of personal accounts, tracking via GPS, and other offending behaviors, as well as theoretical predictors and demographic information. Individuals with low self-control were more likely to participate in the behaviors such as unauthorized monitoring and access of password-protected accounts of their significant others. Offenders do not consider the long-term repercussions, and instead satisfy an immediate desire to control a romantic partner and be aware of their activities and whereabouts. In addition, a high frequency of offenders believed their friends were also participating in the same behaviors, potentially influencing their own perceptions as it being acceptable behavior.

Respondents were also asked to answer questions about their perception of how a victim would react if they discovered the stalking and/or abusive behaviors (Marcum et al., 2019). Older respondents believed their partners would react negatively to the discovery of unauthorized monitoring or tracking via GPS, most likely ending the relationship or initiating revenge. However, the study found that respondents who used social networking websites on a frequent basis were less likely to believe their partners would be angry. As social networking websites use is so commonplace with this age group, Marcum and colleagues (Marcum et al., 2019) asserted these individuals find these cyberstalking behaviors as acceptable behavior, expected of relationship maintenance as that information is so readily available to them. Much like underage drinking is often recognized as illegal but not deviant, so could be cyberstalking behaviors.

## **Assessment of the Current Reactions of the Criminal Justice System and Educational Systems: Is Empirical Research Making a Difference?**

This section will present a summary of the efforts currently made by the criminal justice system and educational and community organizations to cyberbullying and cyberstalking. In addition, empirical findings and assertions of appropriate reactions by these entities will be weighed. Based on the evidence presented, the authors will then make the determination if the findings from academic scholarship have made an effective difference in the approach against these forms of cybervictimization, or if there is still work to do.

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## Effectiveness of Criminal Justice Responses

Our criminal justice system has tackled the increasing problem of online victimization via cyberbullying with the enforcement of relevant statutes. In the wake of these behaviors increasing in frequency, all states have legislation to specifically address stalking, bullying and harassment behaviors online. Some states have added electronic language to existing legislation, while other states have developed separate legislation specifically addressing these online cybercrimes. However, the language and application does vary depending on the state (Hazelwood & Koon-Magnin, 2013). Approximately 20 states provide for a criminal sanction to address bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2016).

While states are making admirable strides in codifying criminal responses to cybervictimization, enforcing these laws can be difficult. Reporting victimization via cyberbullying and cyberstalking to law enforcement can be a frustrating experience for both officer and victim. Small law enforcement agencies may not know how to handle reports of these crimes, or are trained in methods to investigate evidence of online harassment, monitoring and abuse, as not all law enforcement officers are trained in this type of crime investigation (Marshak, 2017). Furthermore, there may be law enforcement officers who trivialize the incident, as they may not have a complete understanding of how posting nasty comments or threats on a social media website can lead to identity theft, loss of employment, mental distress, or suicidal ideation.

However, law enforcement agencies as a whole are becoming more involved in physical and cyberbullying incidents. Research on the effectiveness of school-based law enforcement officers has had mixed results. While presence of police officers at schools may increase perceptions of safety by the majority of staff and students (Brown, 2006), their presence may also cause distrust of police due to involvement in matters often considered minor offenses that could have been handled by the school (Theriot, 2009, 2016). In other words, students may view police as adversaries for formally handling an issue that does not involve violence or other serious matters. Patchin and Hinduja (2016) questioned 1000 middle school students about their bullying and cyberbullying activities, as well as their perception of punishment of the behaviors. Findings revealed that formal efforts by police officers had no significant impact on either form of bullying. Instead, informal efforts by school and parents had a greater impact on deterring future behavior. Findings such as these, as well as those mentioned previously, support the push for informal sanctions by officers rather than formal sanctions that cause embarrassment, judgment, and distrust (Patchin & Hinduja, 2016).

Victims of cyberbullying and cyberstalking can also attempt to obtain civil protections during cybercrime investigations, but that process can include barriers to success as well. Many states will grant a restraining or protective order against an offender with minimal identifying information. Some states require a course of conduct for harassment convictions in order to obtain a protective order. However, these protective orders must be served on a defendant and if the offender cannot be located or identified (as is often possible with the anonymity the Internet provides), it is impossible to proceed (Marshak, 2017).

Based on the information presented above, the authors believe that empirical research is not yet effectively influencing criminal justice responses to cyberbullying and cyberstalking. While criminal justice entities have obviously recognized these behaviors are a serious issue, we believe this is due more to media publicity affiliated with suicides

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and school shootings. The current strategies used to address cyberbullying and cyberstalking are more reactionary, and very limited. In addition, while more law enforcement agencies are implementing training on cybercrime investigation and management, it is often for a select group of officers (or one officer) rather than included in basic training. Furthermore, studies like that of Patchin and Hinduja (2016) have found that formal responses are not effective with younger individuals, indicating the need for the development of informal programming involving youth and law enforcement.

Programming that uses law enforcement to provide curriculum and instruction, such as the Gang Resistance Education and Training program, has found success and could be mimicked with instruction on cyberbullying and cyberstalking (Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Osgood, 2012). In a multi-week instructional program targeted at specific age groups, police officers could provide detailed information on the following concepts:

1. Methods of cyberbullying and cyberstalking
2. Detrimental effects of the behaviors
3. Resources to report these behaviors
4. Education on forming positive relationships online and resisting inappropriate behaviors.

Adolescents and young adults are currently immersed in a culture where these behaviors are viewed as acceptable, or at the very least, expected (much like gang members in urban areas). Law enforcement is actively providing a new option for prosocial online behavior, as well as creating positive bonds with young people, without resorting to formal criminal justice procedures.

The amount of cybercrimes is continuing to increase, yet the volume of cybercrime prosecutions and convictions has remained constant for nearly a decade. There is also a gap between prosecutions and actual convictions, as approximately one-fourth of filed charges are either acquitted, dismissed or diverted, so they do not result in a successful prosecution (Mayer, 2016). Utilization of the above-referenced law enforcement sponsored programming has precedence in successfully reducing behaviors and has the potential to do the same with cyberbullying and cyberstalking, decreasing the amount of cases directed to an already overburdened judicial system.

### **Effectiveness of Educational Programs**

School programs are challenged with combatting a constantly increasing world of digital technology and the reliance of young people on it for communication. Cyberspace fosters an environment where individuals feel more uninhibited with emotions, words, and behaviors. They feel empowered to say and do things they normally would not in the physical world, including acts of bullying and abuse. In order to decrease abusive behaviors, Olweus promoted the “whole-school” method of bullying prevention (Olweus, 1993). In other words, all individuals who interact with potential victims of bullying need to be educated and trained: faculty, administration, and parents. Simply educating youth will not serve as an effective deterrent for cyberbullying and cyberstalking.

Multiple studies have indicated the importance of positive parenting practices as a method of decreasing deviant behavior. Negative actions addressed during early childhood and adolescence will decrease levels of adult criminality. Constantly used

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elements of support, communication, and involvement focused on prosocial behaviors are effective methods of instruction that will affect behavior throughout a lifetime (Hoeve et al., 2009; Simons-Morton, Hartos & Hayne, 2004). In addition, parents must convey they will not tolerate abusive and deviant behaviors, such as cyberbullying and cyberstalking, as an addition.

Schools are also prime locations to educate and induce social conformity with the properly implemented tools. Studies have indicated schools that provide clear rules with detailed explanations of appropriate and inappropriate conduct, as well as punishments administered as a result of breaking the rules, help with the reduction of deviant behaviors (Catalano, Oxford, Harachi, Abbott, & Haggerty, 1999; Youniss, Yates, & Su, 1997). Behavioral expectations for students are a primary protective factor against bullying behaviors (Smith et al., 2012; Smith, Smith, Osborn & Samara, 2008). Patchin and Hinduja (2016) found in a study of middle school students that informal efforts by educators and teachers was an effective deterrent. Furthermore, positive school climates allow for educators to accomplish their daily goals of academic achievement and low absenteeism. Students feel more comfortable and supported by their teachers, receiving instruction on engaging in healthy relationships and staying insulated from the effects of harassment and victimization (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory & Fan, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011).

An example of a successful training program for educators is offered by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC), utilizing in-service trainings and through the Train-the Trainer model school sites. This three hour workshop focuses on the perceptions of bullying by students and adults, using interactive training that takes faculty through actual scenarios. The majority of faculty who participated reported positive outcomes in regard to learning about bullying and cyberbullying, addressing conflicts, and recognizing warning signs of the behaviors (Englander, Parti, & McCoy, 2015). There is no reason why utilizing similar programs nationwide for primary and secondary schools would not be beneficial. Curriculum for faculty could address dealing with cyberbullying, as well as cyberstalking issues, and fostering positive relationships online. In addition, faculty could be provided resources on how to help parents handle these issues more comfortably at home.

Based on the information presented above, the authors find that empirical research has been somewhat influential in influencing educational responses to cyberbullying and cyberstalking, but there is still room to improve. In our opinion, current educational programming is developed from a combination of general knowledge, antedoctal evidence, and some statistical findings about cyberbullying and cyberstalking. However, it does not appear as if scholarly findings from advanced analysis that reveal predictors of the offending and victimizing behaviors are properly being applied with the formation of these programs. Programs like MARC could also be modeled to suit the developmental needs of students in a higher education setting. Students in this educational setting are in dire need of programming that educates them on healthy relationship behaviors (Marcum et al., 2017, 2019). Focus groups of university students have indicated that this group recognizes the implications of certain behaviors online that can increase the likelihood of cyberstalking, such as constantly posting their current location and other personal information (White & Carmody, 2016). Participants in these focus groups also noted that many incoming students (especially the younger students) lack boundaries when posting personal information, pictures and videos online.



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Along with the participants in the study by White and Carmody (2016), the authors advocate for mandatory prevention education for all incoming students at the college and university setting. Incoming freshmen often participate in a weekend-long orientation upon entry to higher education. This orientation should have a scheduled session educating students on proper online behaviors, as well as warning signs of unhealthy relationship behaviors with technology. In addition, small group discussion and upperclassman-freshman mentoring relationships would be beneficial. These peer mentors could help identify problematic behaviors and guide them toward the proper resources for help.

## **Moving Forward**

Our assessment of the effectiveness of academic literature on reducing cybervictimization of youth and young adult populations is mixed, which indicates that we as cyberscholars have a responsibility impressed upon us. Rather than assume that publishing our findings is enough, we need to become active with its dissemination and connect with our community partners. We currently have a huge base of research that has revealed multiple predictors of cyberbullying and cyberstalking. Not surprisingly due to the ease of access, the majority of the studies are with adult samples (often college students). It would be extremely beneficial to perform replication studies with various age groups to compare findings. In other words, surveying and interviewing the different age subsets (i.e., middle school students, high school students, undergraduate populations, middle-aged adults, and seniors) to determine if predictors of cyberbullying and cyberstalking are similar and, therefore, whether. Programming should be different for each group.

In regard to community activism, we as academics need to have an active agenda. First, we need to reach out to our law enforcement agencies to help with development of mentoring and educational programs for students rather than relying on formal sanctions as a method of deterrence. Success in programming targeted at gang membership reduction could be replicated for these types of crimes. Students need to view police officers as trusted members of the community, people who can be advocates against this type of victimization and one who have resources to assist.

In addition, we need to partner with law enforcement to help obtain grants to allow for resources for specialized training and additional manpower dedicated to combatting victimization. Marcum, Higgins, Ricketts and Freiburger (2010) and Marcum, Higgins and Ricketts (2011) found that law enforcement agencies with specialized cybercrime task forces and higher numbers of officers dedicated to cybercrimes had increased investigations and arrests. We as academics can contribute to improving law enforcement capabilities in this field by working with our local law enforcement to apply for grants that would allow for the purchase of equipment, increase training and hiring dedicated sworn officers.

While more of our empirical work is reflected through the efforts of educators and community organizations, there is still more we can do to help. Academics that specialize in cybervictimization, as well as other fields related to deviancy and youth behaviors, should reach out to school principals and superintendents in their community to offer educational workshops or assist with other projects to benefit the students. Marcum, Higgins and Ricketts (2014) surveyed high school students in rural North Carolina regarding their online offending and victimization behaviors, finding

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low self-control and deviant peer association as strong predictors of multiple forms of online offending (including bullying and stalking). With similar studies emulating the same findings, we as academics could assist with the youth-centered programming that provides information on the legal repercussions of these crimes, as well as the physical and emotional toll it takes on peers. In addition, alternatives to healthy online communication and dispelling the “thrill” associated with cyberbullying and cyberstalking would be extremely beneficial for our students.

It is important to note that the role of the school counselor is extremely vital in addressing cybervictimization of students. In July 2014, Marcum, Higgins and Mackinnon (2016a) surveyed high school counselors across the United States. The findings indicated a strong need for increased resources and training for this group. New methods of bullying and stalking online appear constantly, often on new apps or other online forums that are unknown to counselors. Cyber-academics should utilize their knowledge on these methods of victimization to better equip counselors, as well as allow them to have the ability to better help the student cope with what is occurring.

The authors of this piece completely recognize they too must become more active participants in the application of their own research. Rather than waiting for law enforcement agencies and educational entities to seek us out for assistance, all cyber-academics must be proactive in the fight against cyberbullying and cyberstalking. The grasp of the Internet on our daily lives will only continue to grow, and in turn, it becomes a vehicle for exploitation and victimization. A community collaboration between all parties can only improve our chances to make the Internet a less hostile place, especially for our young people.

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