

# How Theoretical Frameworks Inform the Understanding of the Relationship Between Gender and Cyberbullying

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, bullying has received considerable attention, with scholars, educators, parents, and youths expressing their concerns regarding bullying at school. While studies suggest that bullying is relatively common in elementary, middle, and high schools, bullying also occurs outside of schools. The Internet, as well as other forms of technology, provide a platform that allows bullying to extend beyond face-to-face peer interaction. Scholars identify this form of bullying as *cyberbullying*. Cyberbullying refers to intentional, aggressive behaviors that are perpetrated through mediated communication, such as email, text messages, social media, or other online websites (Sticca & Perren, 2013). Cyberbullying not only affects school-age youth and adolescents, as recent literature suggests that technological advances have also contributed to an increase in workplace cyberbullying among adults (D'Souza, Forsyth, Tappin & Catley, 2018; Vranjes, 2018).

While both bullying and cyberbullying have gained national attention, research remains uncertain regarding the link between gender and various forms of bullying. Seals and Young (2003) suggest that like most crime, males are more likely than females to both perpetrate and be the victim of bullying. Yet, other researchers argue that both males and females are equally likely to engage in bullying, but there are gender differences in the ways in which boys and girls engage in bullying (Day & Kahle, 2014). Other research specifically focuses on gender differences in regard to cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. For example, Li (2006) found that among a sample of 256 youths, 22% of males reported engaging in cyberbullying as perpetrators, compared to 11.6% of female youths. However, there was little difference between male (25%) and female (25.6%) youths in relation to being the *victim* of cyberbullying (Li, 2006). More recently, using an online questionnaire to ask youths about their experiences with cyberbullying (N=208), Wong, Cheung, and Xia (2018) found that compared to female youths, males were more likely to be both the perpetrators *and* victims of cyberbullying. While these studies are valuable contributions to research on cyberbullying, they also suggest that research is inconclusive concerning the relationship between gender and cyberbullying perpetration and victimization.

Scholars recognize the importance of understanding the relationship between gender and various forms of bullying because there may be unique consequences for male and female victims of cyberbullying. For example, drawing from a sample of 1,222 youths across 15 schools in the United States, Carbone-Lopez, Esbensen, and Brick (2010) found that girls tended to experience a broader range of consequences related bullying than their male counterparts, including more severe psychological and health problems.

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The authors also found that being the victim of indirect or relational bullying had a negative effect on girls' self-esteem, while for boys, this form of bullying was not associated with variations in self-esteem.

Therefore, in this article, the authors argue that to better (1) help individuals cope with their experiences with cyberbullying victimization and (2) prevent individuals from engaging in cyberbullying, scholars, educators, and policymakers need to better understand patterns and trends associated with online bullying. This article contributes to research on gender and cyberbullying by merging insights from criminology, sociology, and gender studies to review prior literature on bullying and more specifically, cyberbullying. Additionally, the authors present how theoretical perspectives, including the "doing gender" perspective and an intersectional approach may help shape our understanding regarding the relationship between gender and cyberbullying. Following this, the authors consider implications for policy development and future research.

## **BACKGROUND**

Scholars identify bullying as intentional, repeated actions meant to harm a victim and perpetuate an inequity of power (Olweus, 1991). Traditional forms of bullying take place in-person, typically occurring in a specific location, such as schools and workplaces. Bullying encompasses both overt and relational forms of abuse and harassment manifested in a multitude of ways, including physical altercations, taunts, gossip, or exclusion from specific groups or certain activities that cause relational damage (Thomas, Connor, & Scott, 2014). Research on traditional bullying distinguishes that these actions occur without the assistance of technology; the harassment is often face-to-face or, in the case of gossip, circulated directly from person to person.

Over the last decade, bullying has evolved alongside the technological revolution of computers, cell phones and other communication devices. Deliberate, overt or covert behaviors perpetrated through digital technology is referred to as *cyberbullying* (Mendez, Bauman, & Guillory, 2012). Like traditional forms of bullying, cyberbullying also takes several forms including sending hurtful or threatening text messages or emails, spreading rumors through emails and private messaging, forwarding private pictures to unintended recipients, and posting derogatory comments and pictures on social media. Cyberbullying may take place anonymously or the bully and victim may know each other as peers or even co-workers (Vranjes et al., 2018).

The incidence of cyberbullying has increased as the Internet and communication technologies have grown (Aivazpour & Beebe, 2018). Following this, there has been a surge of research on cyberbullying (Zych, Farrington, & Llorent, 2018). One example is Carter and Wilson (2015) who surveyed a sample of 367 adolescents from the Midwest, asking about their participation in cyberbullying. The authors found that among their sample, 17% reported that they had been the victim of cyberbullying. Carter and Wilson concluded that the already high prevalence of cyberbullying would continue to rise with technological advances. Another example is Wilton and Campbell (2011) who explored the reason why youths engage in cyberbullying. They found that adolescents were more likely to partake in the virtual harassment of their peers for reasons of emotional self-satisfaction. The authors argued that virtual or online bullying may become a more popular alternative to traditional bullying as it allows perpetrators to disassociate from "real" life and provides bullies with a sense of anonymity.

Recently, Gofin and Avitzour (2012) argue the Internet has the ability to connect both friends and complete strangers, and it may blur the lines between actions and direct negative outcomes. Consequently, cyberbullies may not perceive their online behaviors as bullying because of the mediated communication

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