

## Chapter 22

# Preventing Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

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### ABSTRACT

*The prevention of online harassment and cyberbullying is an important priority in offices, schools, businesses, and society-at-large. As the world becomes more connected, there is the unfortunate opportunity for harassment and bullying to occur in online environments. Sometimes this is related to offline interactions and sometimes it is solely online. Online harassment and bullying is an unethical and sometimes illegal behavior, which will be discussed in this chapter through the lens of interpretivism and using cognitive dissonance theory and spiral of silence theory. In addition, there are opportunities to proactively take action, which can reduce the likelihood of our online connections turning into harassing environments.*

### BACKGROUND

The prevention of online harassment and cyberbullying is an important priority in offices, schools, businesses, and society-at-large. As the world becomes more connected, there is the unfortunate opportunity for harassment and bullying to occur in online environments. Sometimes this is related to offline interactions and sometimes it is solely online. Online harassment and bullying is an unethical and sometimes illegal behavior, which will be discussed in this chapter through the lens of interpretivism and using cognitive dissonance theory and spiral of silence theory. In addition, there are opportunities to proactively take action, which can reduce the likelihood of our online connections turning into harassing environments. Thus, this chapter proposes proactive prevention and intervention strategies for cyberbullying and online harassment including offline tactics, community-engaged approaches, and details the laws and policies that guide this process.

Bullying and harassment negatively impact productivity, mental health, physical health, and civility in the workplace (Berry et al., 2012; Gardner et al., 2016; Hague et al., 2010; Mata et al., 2016) and can have sweeping consequences on both the individual and the organization. Behavior is communication (Dennett, 1983). So then, what might be the communication shared when a person bullies or harasses

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-4912-4.ch022

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others online? Sadly, online harassment or bullying has been linked to escalations of offline violence in some studies (Sari & Camadan, 2016) which highlights the need for immediate prevention and intervention strategies. How might this idea of behavior as communication inform prevention strategies? The connection between online bullying and harassment and this idea of behavior as communication will be explored in depth through the worldview of interpretivism (Greef, 2015) and in the theoretical framework of spiral of silence theory (McDevitt, Kiouisis, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2003) and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 2009).

By using this conceptual framework, a deeper understanding of online bullying and harassment can be connected not just in practice but also through theories that help to explain the phenomena as observed in an examination of the laws, policies and strategies for prevention.

There is a need to better understand and study the prevention of cyberbullying and online harassment. While there are countless studies on bullying prevention (Allison, et al., 2017; Berry, et al., 2012; Gardener et al., 2016; Hague et al., 2010; Mikkelsen et al., 2011; Triccio, et al., 2018) and numerous other studies on cyberbullying effects on or by the environment (Cetin et al., 2011; Gardener, et al., 2016; Gimenez Gualdo et al., 2015; Oksanen et al., 2020; Piccolli, et al., 2020) there is less academic research specifically on cyberbullying prevention strategies (Hayashi & Tahmasbi, 2020; Kowalski, et al., 2018; Marzano, 2000; Mata et al., 2016; Slonje et al., 2013) thereby meaning that some of the important information benefits from extrapolation of the overlap from either cyberbullying effects studies and/or corresponding bullying prevention strategies, which will be detailed out below have also been identified in other seminal cyberbullying prevention studies (Kowalski et al., 2018; Slonje et al., 2013). In addition, of the existing cyberbullying prevention studies, many investigate younger age groups or student populations (Marzano, 2000; Slonje et al., 2013). However, while research and policy may differ or be fragmented at times, the laws are very clear, and tend to apply equally to online bullying and harassment as they would apply offline.

Overall, communication is essential (Ferris, 2004) to building and fostering an environment where online harassment and bullying can be prevented, or if it occurs, can be identified and acted upon through law and policy.

## **LAWS**

Laws pertaining to online bullying and harassment can be at the federal, state or local levels. The patchwork of laws depends on a person's residency, where the cyberbullying took place and where the organization's headquarters are, along with additional factors. No matter where the location, a few overarching policies guide this process. It is always a good idea to consult with a legal professional if considering a claim, but below is an important overview to the laws related to online bullying and harassment. Many of the laws listed are referenced specifically in terms of discrimination, with inferred or stated implications regarding harassment as specified. While discrimination and harassment are different, harassment or bullying can be an indicator of discrimination. For instance, if a person is denied promotion for years while also being teased online, there may have been a hostile work environment that triggered mental health episodes, all of which can add up to discrimination, online bullying and harassment under the law. It is important to keep this in mind in relation to the laws identified below.

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