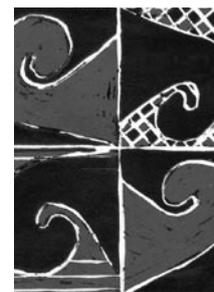


# Text-bullying among Early Adolescents



**Dr Juliana Raskauskas**  
Lecturer, Massey University

## ABSTRACT

Increased availability of cell-phones has provided new avenues through which adolescents can bully their peers. Text-bullying is an emerging form of bullying which may threaten the emotional well-being of early adolescents. In this study 565 early adolescents (10–13 years old) completed questionnaires regarding their experiences with bullying (text-message and traditional) and measures of depression and self-esteem. Findings were that: (a) 15% of early adolescents had been text-bullied in the current school year; (b) victims of text-bullying reported more depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem than non-victims, and (c) victims who experienced both traditional and text-bullying in the current school year report more depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem than those not involved or those who were bullied only at school. Text-bullying may add to negative outcomes suffered by victims of traditional forms of bullying.

## Research Paper

### Keywords

*Adolescents, bullying, depression, intermediate students, peer relationships, self esteem, telecommunications, victimisation.*

## INTRODUCTION

Today's adolescents are the first generation to have grown up in a society where cell-phones are an integral part of daily life (Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002). A recent survey found that 73% of adolescents had cell-phones and of these 23% had received text-messages that they considered offensive, abusive, or threatening (Internet Safety Group, 2005). Bullying by cell-phone text-messages is called "text-bullying". Text-bullying is bullying in which text-messages are the primary form of communication. Text-bullies send text-messages to spread rumours or secrets, call victims mean names, or to organise exclusion of victims from social activities.

Text-bullying is a relatively new way of bullying because of the boom in technology and the growing importance of cell phones in social relationships of adolescents. One of the central tasks of early adolescence is to find acceptance and belonging in peer relationships and cell-phones can be used to start and maintain relationships with peers. A national survey in the United States found that 45% of adolescents aged 12-17 years had cell-phones and 33% used text-messages to communicate with friends (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005).

Entering intermediate school seems to be a "tipping point" when many adolescents get cell-phones and start using them as primary means of communication with peers (Berson, et al., 2002; Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). Therefore, text-bullying may begin in early adolescence.

## BACKGROUND

Before the limited findings on text-bullying are reviewed, the definition of bullying and its forms will be discussed. Traditionally, bullying is said to occur when a student is the target of any behavior that is:

- (a) harmful or done with intent to harm;
- (b) repeated or occurs over time; and
- (c) characterised by an imbalance of power, such that the victim does not feel he or she can stop the interaction (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Olweus, 2001).

Carroll-Lind and Kearney (2004) found with 1,480 students from eight full primary and three secondary schools in New Zealand that 63% of students were bullied in a single year. In their sample, 46% had experienced bullying by mean teasing, 34% by having untrue or mean gossip spread, and 33% were excluded or purposely left out.

There are three main forms of bullying: physical, verbal, and relational. Physical bullying is when students physically attack one of their peers (Olweus, 2001). Verbal bullying involves insults or taunts such as teasing or name-calling (Olweus, 2001; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Relational bullying or aggression is characterised by psychological attacks (i.e. humiliation and/or manipulation of relationships) and may include physical and verbal actions as well. Relational bullies often use rumours and exclusion from activities as means of controlling and harming their victims (see Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Spreading gossip, rumours, secrets, and facilitating exclusion are forms of relational aggression. Sending insults, threats, and mean names are forms of verbal bullying. Text-bullying makes use of relational and verbal forms of bullying.

## CURRENT RESEARCH

Studies examining the prevalence and effects of text-bullying are sparse and rely mostly on convenience samples. In one survey in the United Kingdom, 14% of students aged between 12-16 years reported being victims of text-bullying (NCH, 2005). A survey of one secondary school in New Zealand found that 12% of students 13-18 years old reported being text-bullied while 47% knew personally of someone who had been text-bullied in the current school year (Raskauskas, Carroll-Lind & Kearney, 2005). More research with representative samples is needed to establish the prevalence of text-bullying, especially among young adolescents.

The effect of text-bullying on victims also needs to be examined. Text-bullying may be more damaging than traditional bullying because bullies are removed from their victims and the impact of their actions (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Students may feel free to say things by text that they would never say in face-to-face interactions (Dykes, 2005). This distance may also make it easy for victims to respond immediately to harassing texts. When they respond in anger it may lead to quick escalation of text-bullying. Due to the detached nature of text-messages, students can read negative intention into ambiguous messages and read into them meaning not intended by the sender. This can make it harder for students who feel victimised to seek help and possibly escalate the situation if they respond to an ambiguous message with hostility.

Text-bullying may also pose more of a threat to emotional health than traditional bullying because it transcends school grounds into the home. Cell-phones have been described as "an adolescent's most treasured possession" and they tend to keep it with them all the time which means that text-bullies have 24 hour access such that victims are not safe even in their own homes (NCH, 2005). In fact, text-victims may also be traditional victims at school – if so, increased access could mean that bullying may be continuous, occurring both at school and after via text-messages. A study of one New Zealand secondary school found that 70% of the text-victims were also victims of verbal and relational bullying at school (Raskauskas, Carroll-Lind, & Kearney, 2005). The present study will examine the relationship between victimisation by text- and traditional bullying among early adolescents, as well as its relation to depressive symptoms and self-esteem.

Research has consistently shown that students who are bullied suffer negative effects (see Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Being a victim of bullying has been related to general emotional distress, as well as specific indicators such as heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms and a lower sense of self-worth (Grills & Ollendick, 2002; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Anxiety and feelings of depression may result in part to the fact that text-messages are permanent. That is that they can be read over and over, re-victimising the student, and that text-messages are received and stored even when their phone is turned off.

Similarly, student stories have related text-bullying to negative effects like anxiety, depressive symptoms and, in extreme cases, to suicide (Bramwell & Mussen, 2003; Hall, 2006). A recent case in New Zealand involved a 12-year-old girl who took her own life. In her suicide note she blamed months of bullying via text-messages and emails from a group of girls at her school (Hall, 2006). The mother of a boy who had jumped from a cliff after receiving text-messages harassing him for months said to reporters, "Text-messaging isn't going away. Bullying isn't going away. That combination killed my son!" (Bramwell & Mussen, 2003). The effects of text-bullying have yet to be established in research. This study will examine reports of self-esteem and depressive symptoms among victims of text-bullying.

## METHOD

The present study included 565 participants (48% male, 52% female). All participants were intermediate school students, 10- to 13-years-of-age ( $M = 11.59$ ,  $SD = .61$  years). Students were from 22 classrooms at three intermediate schools in New Zealand, 41% of students were in Year 7 and 59% in Year 8. The sample included a random selection of classrooms from each school: School 1 (6 classrooms,  $n = 143$ ), School 2 (8 classrooms,  $n = 227$ ), and School 3 (8 classrooms,  $n = 200$ ). Recruitment of participants was conducted in accordance with procedures approved by the Massey University Ethics Committee.

Classroom surveys were used to collect data from early adolescents. Students self-reported their age, gender, and year in school. They were also asked to rate the extent to which they had experienced different types of peer victimisation that year. Types included having students say mean things to them or call them names (verbal), and having students start rumours about them (gossip) or leaving them out on purpose (exclusion). Also included in this list of forms was receiving mean or harassing text-messages (text-bullying). To examine whether victims of text-bullying also experienced traditional forms of bullying students received a dichotomous score for whether or not they had been victimised that school year for each form of peer victimisation (verbal, exclusion, gossip, text-bullying). Table 1 displays the number of students in each category.

**Table 1**

*Reports of Victimisation by Traditional and Text-Bullying (N = 565)*

Form of Victimisation	N (%)
<b>Traditional</b>	<b>363 (64%)</b>
Verbal	338 (59%)
Gossip	290 (51%)
Exclusion	178 (32%)
<b>Text-bullying</b>	<b>85 (15%)</b>

Students also completed items from the *Weinberger Adjustment Inventory* (WAI: Weinberger, 1997; Weinberger, Feldman, Ford & Chastain, 1987) to assess depressive symptoms and self-esteem. The scale contained seven items to measure depressive symptoms and seven to measure self-esteem, and three validity markers. Item responses were on a 5-point scale with 1 = false and 5 = true, and an average was calculated across items for each scale. In the present study, the overall average for WAI depression was 1.12 ( $SD = .91$ ) with Chronbach alpha of .79. The average for WAI self-esteem was 1.52 ( $SD = .85$ ) with acceptable internal reliability, Chronbach alpha .70.

The procedure began with the recruitment of schools. Early adolescents at three intermediate schools in New Zealand were invited to participate in this research. Random selection of eight classrooms at schools from three suburban centers on the lower part of the North Island were selected and the teachers approached to participate. Twenty-two teachers consented to participate and consent letters were mailed home to the parents of students in participating classrooms. Passive consent was used such that parents who did not want their child to participate removed them from the study instead of providing written consent for participation. Across the three schools only seven students were removed by parents. Students were also given the opportunity to consent on the day of data collection.

In each classroom, researchers distributed surveys in the classrooms with students completing the measures quietly on their own. For most students the survey took 15-20 minutes to complete. Students were provided with an anti-bullying hotline number. Approval for this research was obtained from the Massey University Ethics Committee.

## RESULTS

Prevalence of text bullying among the early adolescents in this study is reported in Table 1, and shows that 15% of participants had experienced text-bullying within the current school year, which is similar to prior research with New Zealand secondary students (Raskauskas, et al., 2005). More girls ( $n = 57$ ) than boys ( $n = 28$ ) in this sample reported being victims of text-bullying and slightly more Year 8 students ( $n = 52$ ) than Year 7 ( $n = 32$ ) were victims of text-bullying during the current school year.

To see whether students involved in text-bullying were also bullied at school through traditional means (experienced any of the following: mean name calling, exclusion, and gossip spreading), chi-square analyses were used. Text-bullying victims were also found to be traditional victims, based on a significant chi square  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 1, N = 482$ ) = 19.998,  $p < .001$ . The number of text-bullying victims who also experienced traditional bullying (95%,  $n = 76$ ) was larger than those who did not (5%,  $n = 4$ ). This relationship indicates an overlap between text-bullying and traditional victimisation.

It was also of interest to see whether text-bullying was related to student scores on depressive symptoms and self-esteem (Figure 1). As shown in Figure 1, T-test comparing text-victims ( $M = 1.57, SD = .96$ ) and non-victims ( $M = 1.00, SD = .86$ ) on depressive symptoms,  $t(462) = 5.20, p < .001$ , indicated that text-victims reported more depressive symptoms. T-test comparing text-victims ( $M = 1.24, SD = .78$ ) and non-victims ( $M = 1.59, SD = .86$ ) on self-esteem,  $t(448) = 3.32, p < .001$ , also showed that text-victims reported lower levels of self-esteem. These comparisons indicated that text-bullying may have negative effects on victims similar to traditional bullying.

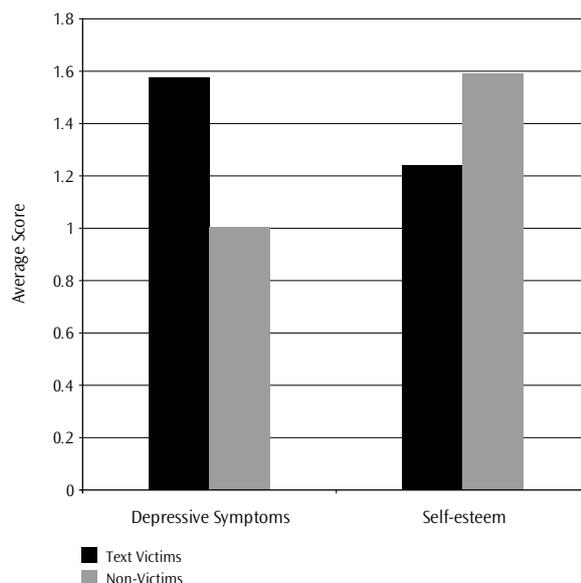


Figure 1. T-test mean differences in depressive symptoms and self-esteem between Text-victims and Non-Victims ( $N = 462$ ).

Due to the large overlap between victims of traditional and text-bullying, students were also organised into the following categories for analysis: *Not Involved* ( $n = 115$ ), *Traditional Victim Only* ( $n = 287$ ) and *Both Traditional and Text-bullying Victims* ( $n = 76$ ). To compare groups on depressive symptoms and self-esteem measures ANOVA analyses were used. Depressive symptoms and self-esteem were entered as dependent variables with the student's victim classification as the independent variable.

These groups were found to differ on both variables: Depressive Symptoms,  $F(2, 436) = 39.376, p < .001$ ; and Self-esteem,  $F(2, 425) = 5.811, p < .01$ . Specifically, victims experiencing both traditional and text-bullying ( $M = 1.60, SD = .88$ ) reported significantly higher number of depressive symptoms than traditional bullying only ( $M = 1.17, SD = .88$ ) or were not involved in victimisation ( $M = .52, SD = .55$ ) this school year. Victims of both text-bullying and traditional bullying ( $M = 1.25, SD = .82$ ) during the school year reported lower self-esteem ( $p = .002$ ) than those who were not involved ( $M = 1.71, SD = .84$ ). Traditional victims only ( $M = 1.56, SD = .87$ ) differed significantly from both traditional and text victims ( $p = .03$ ). Traditional only victims did not differ significantly from not involved students. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 2.

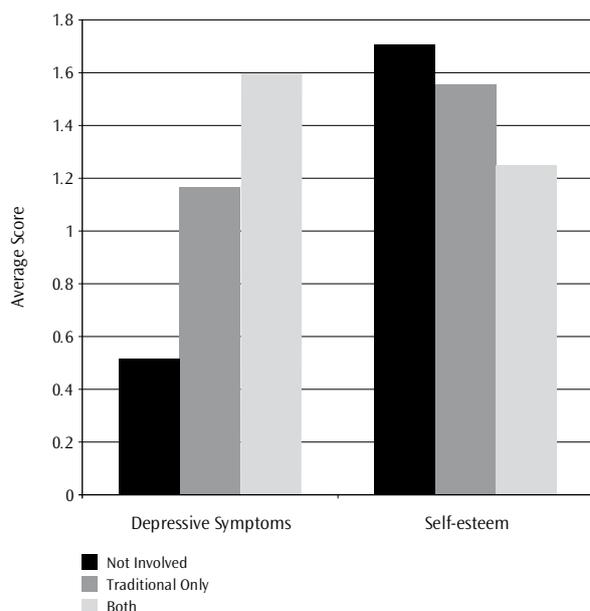


Figure 2. ANOVA mean differences in depressive symptoms and self-esteem between Not Involved, Traditional Victim only, and Both Traditional and Text victims classifications (N = 438).

### DISCUSSION

The number of adolescents with cell-phones is increasing in New Zealand (Internet Safety Group, 2005). Unfortunately, this access to cell-phones has provided adolescents with new methods of bullying. Text-bullying is a concern because of the potential threat to emotional well-being starting in early adolescence. This research increases our understanding of text-bullying in early adolescence.

This is one of the first studies to examine text-bullying among early adolescent students and 15% of students across the three schools had experienced text-bullying. Early adolescence may be the best time to implement prevention efforts and cell-phone education since this is when most adolescents get cell phones and start to use them in relationships (Lenhard, et al., 2005). Text-messaging requires the use of personal phone numbers so if adolescents could be taught to protect their numbers it may reduce some of the incidence of text-bullying. Helping students learn not to respond to harassing text-messages might also reduce negative effects since responding with hostility to bullying messages may escalate the situation. More research is needed to evaluate these suggestions and identify strategies for text-bullying education and prevention.

This research also examined the relationship of text-bullying to the emotional effects of depressive symptoms and self-esteem. In the present study, early adolescents who had been text-bullied reported more depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem than those who had not. This is similar to findings from traditional bullying research which have consistently shown that being a victim of bullying at schools is associated with reports of depression and self-esteem (Adair, Dixon, Moore, & Sutherland, 2000; Grills & Ollendick, 2002; O' Moore & Kirkham, 2001).

The majority of text-bullying victims were also victimised by similar forms of bullying at school. The overlap between traditional and text-bullying is important because it means that some students are facing bullying both at school and outside school. This overlap is also concerning because of the findings that students who experienced both traditional and text-bullying reported more depression and lower self-esteem than only those bullied at school or those not involved. A cumulative effect is indicated such that text-bullying adds to the risk from traditional bullying. Since the majority of text-bullying victims were also traditional victims no conclusions can be made about the independent contribution of text-bullying since outcomes reported by text-victims in this study may also be partially due to co-occurring traditional bullying.

### CONCLUSIONS

This research highlights the fact that text-bullying is an issue for early adolescents. Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin (2005) make the argument that adolescents' relationship with cell-phones begins in middle or intermediate school. In this research some early adolescents had experienced text-bullying and suffered negative effects. This indicates that education about text-bullying should start in intermediate school or even before.

It is important to note the limitations of this study. This study uses primarily self-report data for all forms of victimisation. A single item was used to identify victims of each form, so the use of multiple items in replication studies will strengthen these findings. These data are correlational so the relationships may be interpreted in both directions (i.e. it is possible that being depressed may make students more at risk for experiencing both text and traditional bullying) and causality can not be inferred. Despite these limitations these findings provide needed information on text-bullying and associated effects among early adolescents. This research is a necessary first step in examining the overlap between text-bullying and traditional bullying at school.

### REFERENCES

Adair, V. A., Dixon, R. S., Moore, D. W., & Sutherland, C. M. (2000). Ask your mother not to make yummy sandwiches: Bullying in New Zealand Secondary Schools. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 35(2), 207-221.

Berson, I. R., Berson, M. J., & Ferron, J. M. (2002). Emerging risks of violence in the digital age: Lessons for educators from an on-line study of adolescent girls in the United States. *Journal of School Violence*, 1(2), 51 – 72.

Bramwell, S., & Mussen, D. (2003, November 20). Boy text bullied to death. *Star Times*, p. A1.

Carroll-Lind, J., & Kearney, A. (2004). Bullying: What do students say? *Kairaranga*, 5(2), 19 – 24.

Dykes, M. (2005, April 23). Bully boom. *Manawatu Standard*, p. B21.

Espelage, D. L., & Swearer, S. M. (2003). Research on school bullying and victimization: What have we learned and where do we go from here? *School Psychology Review*, 32(3), 365-383.

Grills, A. E., & Ollendick, T. H. (2002). Peer victimization, global self-worth, and anxiety in middle school. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 31*(1), 59-68.

Hall, S. (2006, March 20). Alex's Story. *60 Minutes New Zealand*. Retrieved June 10, 2006, from <http://www.tv3.co.nz/60minutes>

Internet Safety Group (2005). *The text generation: Mobile phones and New Zealand youth*. Auckland: Author.

Lenhart, A., Madden, M., & Hitlin, P. (2005). Teens and technology: Youth are leading the transition to a fully wired and mobile nation. Retrieved June 9, 2006, from [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Teens\\_Tech\\_July2005web.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Tech_July2005web.pdf).

NCH (2005). *Putting U in the picture: Mobile bullying survey 2005*. Retrieved September 20, 2005, from [http://www.nch.org.uk/uploads/documents/Mobile\\_bullying\\_%20report.pdf](http://www.nch.org.uk/uploads/documents/Mobile_bullying_%20report.pdf)

O'Moore, M., & Kirkham, C. (2001). Self-esteem and its relationship to bullying behavior. *Aggressive Behavior, 27*, 269-283.

Olweus, D. (2001). Peer harassment: A critical analysis and some important issues. In J. Juvonen & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in school: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized* (pp. 3-20). New York: Guilford Press.

Raskauskas, J., Carroll-Lind, J., & Kearney, A. (2005). Text-bullying: Is it related to relational or verbal aggression? *SET: Research Information for Teachers, 3*, 7 – 10.

Weinberger, D. A. (1997). Distress and self-restraint as measures of adjustment across the life span: Confirmatory factor analyses in clinical and nonclinical samples. *Psychological Assessment, 9*(2), 132-135.

Weinberger, D. A., Feldman, S. S., Ford, M. E., & Chastain, R. L. (1987). Construct validation of the Weinberger Adjustment Inventory. Unpublished manuscript, Stanford University.

Ybarra, M. L., & Mitchell, K. J. (2004). Youth engaging in on-line harassment: Associations with caregiver-child relationships, internet use, and personal characteristics. *Journal of Adolescence, 27*, 319-336.

**Juliana Raskauskas**



#### **AUTHOR PROFILE**

Dr. Juliana Raskauskas is a Lecturer in Human Development at Massey's College of Education. She has a doctorate in Educational Psychology from the University of California, Davis, USA. She has conducted research on bullying for seven years in both the United States and New Zealand. Her research interests include anti-bullying policy and programme evaluation, fostering resiliency, and electronic/text-message bullying.

#### **Email**

J.L.Raskauskas@massey.ac.nz