

# Cyber-bullying in School Settings: A Research Citation Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Research on the topic of cyber-bullying has proliferated over the past decade, particularly on its impact on school-aged children. Thus, it would be of interest to examine the scope and extent of research interest in the topic in scholarly publications. This paper reports on a reference citation analysis of the database PsycINFO, using 'cyber-bullying' in a keyword search. In rank order, the major foci of the research involved the issues of intervention or treatment, profile of offenders, comparisons to traditional bullying, legal implications, risk factors, social dynamics, gender, prevalence, and measurement factors.

## Introduction

Mobile communications are undoubtedly a ubiquitous feature of modern life, particularly since the advent of the cell phone (Goggin, 2006; Hamill, 2005; Levinson, 2004). Despite advances in communications technology, 'Cyber crimes' are proliferating at an exponential pace. Cyber-bullying, a component of Cyber-abuse, encompasses online abusive interpersonal behaviors that are overly aggressive in nature (Kowalski et al., 2008). Moreover, the intent is to threaten, harass, embarrass, or socially ostracize a specific, intended victim. Recent research shows that the prevalence of cyber-abuse of children and youth is growing dramatically in the U.S., with detrimental effects on both psychological and educational functioning (see Mishna et al., 2011, for a review). Over the past decade, there has been a proliferation of research attention on the onerous issue of cyber-bullying (Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2010). At the same time, much of the literature on cyber-bullying has focused on the impact, abuse, and victimization of school-aged children (Jimerson et al., 2010; Mason, 2008).

Students who are cyber-bullied have reported negative emotional responses such as sadness, fear, anxiety, and humiliation. One result of such affective states is the inability to concentrate and study, thus directly impacting grades and social relationships in children (Beran & Li, 2007). Previous research has indicated that students who are cyber-aggressive tend to be identified as socially inept, showing problems at home and with school authority. Moreover, these abusive students also exhibit substance

abuse patterns and delinquency. For these reasons, cyber-bullying has evolved as a major source of concern for parents and professionals, particularly today's educators.

The area of the behavioral and social sciences is a discipline involved in studying 'cyber-bullying' as a specific investigatory topic in research studies. The database PsycINFO indexes a large number of journals in the field of education. For this reason, the current research design utilized this major database to survey research trends in the literature on the specific topic of cyber-bullying. In addition, previous studies have illustrated the benefits of research designs that involve trend analysis approaches (Garfield, 1979; Piotrowski & Gallant, 2009; Reynolds & Sundberg, 1976; White & White, 1979). The present study aims to obtain an overview of the scope and research emphasis of the issue of cyber-bullying. To that end, a reference citation analysis of published literature was performed, using a keyword search strategy (Piotrowski & Perdue, 1986).

### Method

A keyword search of the term 'cyber-bullying' was performed in PsycINFO, as this research file is considered the most regarded and leading database in the behavioral and social sciences (see Brand, 1979; Piotrowski & Perdue, 1986). The search was conducted on October 30, 2011. This procedure yielded 157 reference citations to empirical studies, commentaries, books/chapters, and dissertation summaries. Based on the abstract of the noted reference, the author tagged the reference with a descriptor that best represented that main topical focus of the research. A frequency tally, across the main categories, was maintained until all 157 references were scored. These scores were then tabulated for frequency counts on each descriptive category.

### Results and Discussion

The current bibliographic citation analysis indicates that a sizeable minority (40%) of the literature on the topic of Cyber-bullying is general in scope or commentary. However, there are several major aspects of this topic that have received much research attention; i.e., examining the profile or characteristics of abusers, comparing traditional vs. cyber-bullying, legal concerns, and the role of school personnel in controlling pupils' behaviors. As noted in Table 1, there seems to be investigatory efforts to determine the most efficacious approaches or interventions in either abating or mitigating the onerous outcomes associated with cyber-bullying. At the same time, several factors (that appear to play a key role in the occurrence and maintenance of this problematic, enigmatic behavior) seem to be largely ignored by researchers, such as gender and age factors. Moreover, there is a dearth of studies with a focus on family issues and socio-economic factors. Overall, there seems to be an equal emphasis on the level of educational setting. That is, researchers have focused across all 3 major school levels: middle school, high school, and college.

One area that has been largely ignored is the elementary level, where there is the potential to promote preventative measures during their early developmental years. For example, both teachers and school personnel could incorporate some seminal training on the proper use of mobile tech devices, both at school and elsewhere. Violations of school standards could be referred to school counselors.

Furthermore, it is apparent from the present literature, that educators are challenged by the moral and legal implications of cyber-bullying. Perhaps, initiatives to promulgate 'Best Practices' at the national level would not only address the concerns of parents, teachers, and school administrators, but also provide a legal framework for local school boards.

Finally, although there have been concerns about the use of citation analysis, the current study illustrates that examining research trends in the literature can be a useful and functional tool to obtain a systematic view of the major topical areas of research emphasis in the field. This paper reviews the scope of research on an urgent contemporary topic of concern to both parents and educators.

Table 1. Rank order of the most frequently researched topics in Cyber-Bullying research (N=157)

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Topical focus	Frequency/Percent
Interventions/treatment	22 (14%)

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Abuser profile/personality characteristics	11	(7%)
Traditional bullying issues	10	(6%)
Legal implications	9	(6%)
Impact of school personnel	9	(6%)
Social dynamics	5	(3%)
Risk factors	5	(3%)
Measurement issues	5	(3%)
Prevalence statistics	5	(3%)
Social networking factors	4	(2.5%)
Family issues	4	(2.5%)
Special education students	3	(2%)
Peer influence	3	(2%)
Suicide	3	(2%)
Other general or idiosyncratic topics (e.g., rural schools and book reviews)	62	(40%)

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