



Blocking Cyberbullying

Findings from a national study on
cyberbullying among youth

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Cyberbullying Among Youth

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About the Authors

YTH is a non-profit organization founded in 2001 and based in Oakland, CA. Using innovative technologies and new media, YTH supports and empowers young people to make informed decisions about their health, thereby enabling them to become powerful self-advocates.

About Vodafone

The Vodafone Foundations are committed to connecting communities around the world to improve lives. The Vodafone Foundations use the companies charitable giving, their fundraising capability and privileged access to Vodafone networks, technology, customers and employees to connect people with the necessary tools to make a difference in the world.

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INTRODUCTION

Facebook. OKcupid. Kik Messenger. Apps and social media outlets like these are nothing new to young people. In fact, these platforms are particularly useful for connecting youth to friends, family, and the world. But there is a drawback with this mass connection. We are seeing higher and higher rates of cyberbullying, which can lead to social media interactions and online experiences that are not always positive. This national study delves into the state of cyberbullying: how it's happening, when it's happening, and how young people are dealing with it.

CURRENT CYBERBULLYING LANDSCAPE

General Overview

A non-systematic review of published reports through 2010-2016 was conducted using research databases and journals focused on health, mHealth, adolescents, cyberbullying, and mental health connections. Databases included Pew Internet Studies, the Cyberbullying Research Center, stopbullying.gov, press releases, and peer-reviewed articles. These studies and reports present a troubling picture and illustrate the rise of cyberbullying across the board.

Cyberbullying is defined as “an aggressive act or behavior that is carried out using electronic means by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend his or herself”.¹ According to the Cyberbullying Research Center, cyberbullying has four aspects:²

- ***Willful:* The behavior has to be deliberate, not accidental.**
- ***Repeated:* Bullying reflects a pattern of behavior, not just one isolated incident.**
- ***Harm:* The target must perceive that harm was inflicted.**
- ***Computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices:* This, of course, is what differentiates cyberbullying from traditional bullying.**

As social communication becomes more and more digitized, cyberbullying in the form of harassment, digital stalking, and threats has been on the rise. As compared to face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying is especially harmful because it has the ability to follow youth into their homes.^{3,4} Cyberbullying is so prevalent that nearly 88% of youth have witnessed someone being mean or cruel to another person on the internet,⁵ and an estimated 20-40% of youth have been cyberbullied.^{6,7} In a 2015 report by Vodafone, 43% of teens think that cyberbullying is a bigger problem than drug abuse, and 51% of teens think that cyberbullying is worse than face-to-face bullying.⁸

Experiencing cyberbullying can have real consequences. Cyberbullying has been connected to detrimental psychological and physical effects on victims,⁹ and harassers have the means to prolong the cyberbullying by immortalizing pictures and videos on social media platforms.¹⁰ Youth who experience cyberbullying are more likely to report

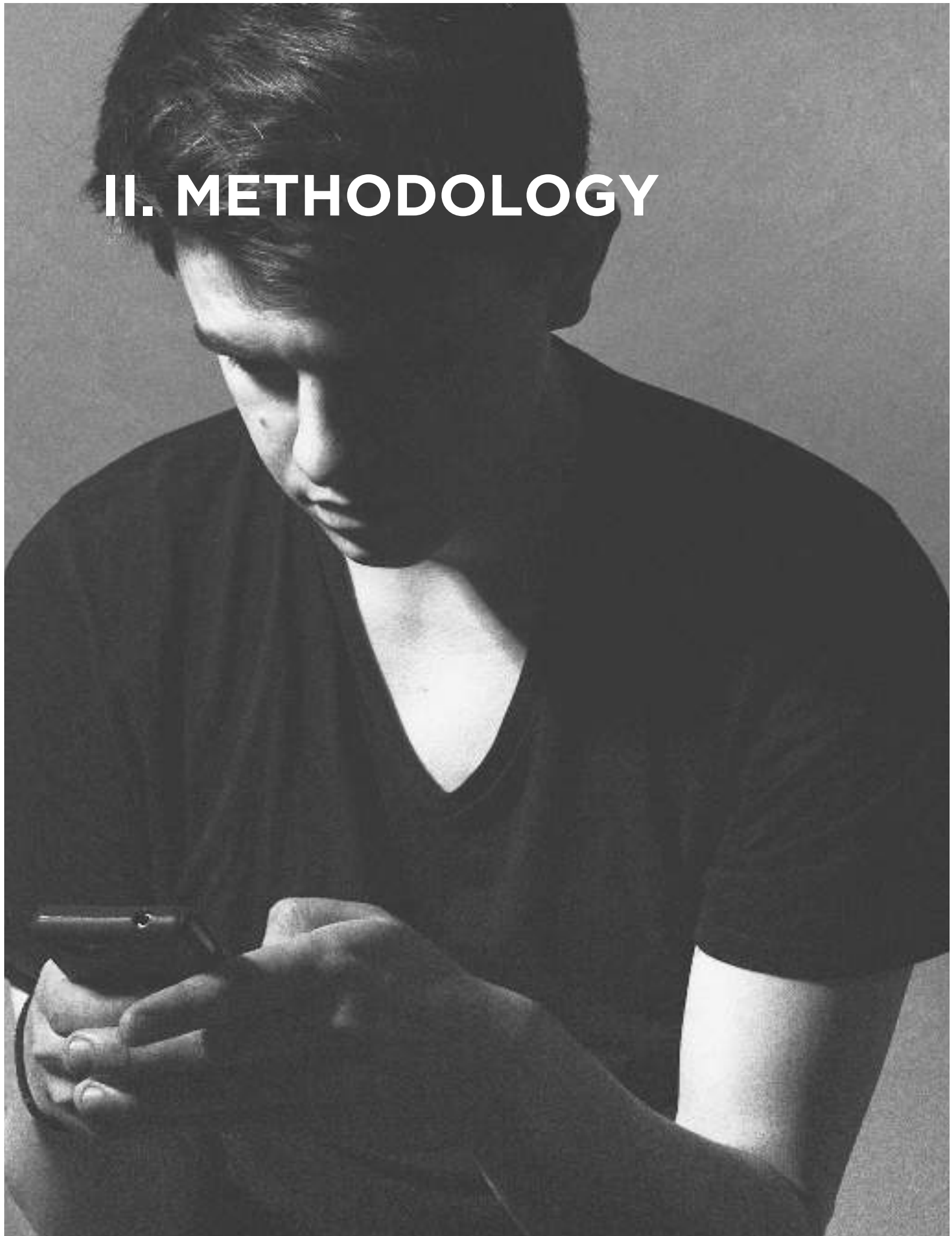
suicidal ideation than youth who have not experienced it.^{11,12,13} They are also more likely to skip school,¹⁴ report aversion to school, have poor concentration, have lower grades, have lower self-esteem,¹⁵ and report relationship problems with peers.¹⁶ Minority groups have particularly nuanced negative experiences with cyberbullying, with 78% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth experiencing some form of digital harassment on the basis of their sexual orientation.¹⁷ LGB youth also have higher rates of cyberbullying than their heterosexual counterparts.¹⁸ Some research has found that young girls are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying and online harassment,¹⁹ but some research studies have found that cyberbullying appears to happen across the board with all youth who access technology.²⁰

With the increasing accessibility of smartphones, youth also have the ability to send anonymous messages. This increases the incidences of cyberbullying via text due to anonymity and lower risks of being caught.²¹ Anonymous chatting sites and apps—like YikYak or the messaging app Kik—have been connected to increased rates of cyberbullying and suicidality among youth.²² And, as youth are accessing technology and smartphones more frequently and at far earlier ages, the majority of cyberbullying instances have occurred with youth under the age of 18, happening the most during middle school—particularly eighth grade.²³ The nature of cyberbullying also means that youth can be cyberbullied at all hours of the day, and is not solely isolated to in-school situations.²⁴ Even when it happens at school, youth do not believe that adults can help alleviate cyberbullying.²⁵ As this phenomenon creeps into the homes and phones of countless youth, it is vital that we address these concerns and map out where and how cyberbullying is happening.

Even while cyberbullying increases, youth are digital natives and are not likely to eliminate their use of social media and online networks.²⁶ In addition, social media can actually be a positive experience where young people often find solace and support.²⁷ This complicated relationship between youth and online spaces make cyberbullying interventions complicated and multi-faceted.

This white paper provides an overview of our mixed methods study on cyberbullying across the nation. We highlight locations of cyberbullying, experiences of young people who have been cyberbullied, and the effects of cyberbullying. With this knowledge, we also provide recommendations and opportunities for blocking cyberbullying in our digital future.

II. METHODOLOGY





1. Quantitative Methods

A national online survey hosted on Qualtrics was taken by 1,355 youth, ages 13-24. Respondents were located using PeanutLabs, an online panel company with a database of users that participate in online surveys in exchange for virtual currency. The online survey link was sent to eligible participants

through the PeanutLabs server, where participants could click the link and complete the survey through their web browser. An incentive of three dollars was offered for survey completion, and is a typical incentive for online panel companies. To be eligible, participants had to be 13-24 years old and living in the United States. The study protocol was approved by the Quorum Institutional Review Board. All participants clicked to sign an electronic consent form, and a waiver of documentation of consent was secured for the quantitative portion of this study. **Please note:** Percentages across this report may not equal 100% due to rounding or participants selecting multiple options.

DEMOGRAPHICS

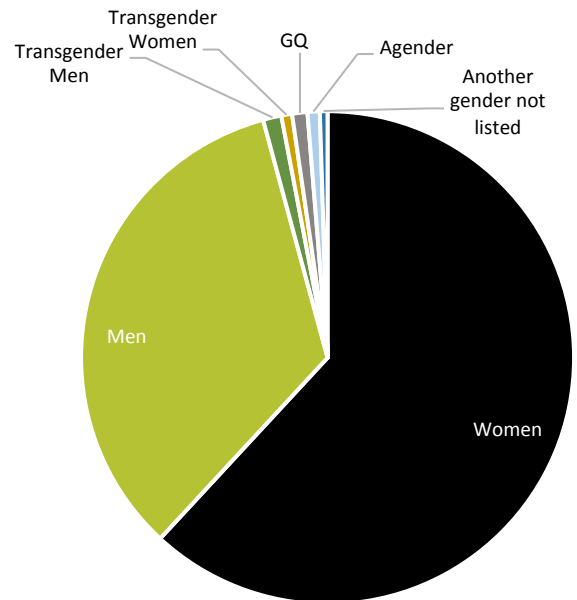
Of these respondents, 1.9% (n = 27) were 13 years old; 2.9% (n = 40) were 14; 5.3% (n = 72) were 15; 7.5% (n = 102) were 16; 5.9% (n = 81) were 17; 11.3% (n = 154) were 18; 10.7% (n = 145) were 19; 9.9% (n = 135) were 20; 10.7% (n = 146) were 21; 11.4% (n = 155) were 22; 11.5% (n = 157) were 23; and 10.4% (n = 141) were 24.

The gender of the sample was 61.7% women, 33.8% men, 1.2% FTM/transgender men, .7% MTF/transgender women, 1% genderqueer, .8% agender, and .5% another gender not listed.

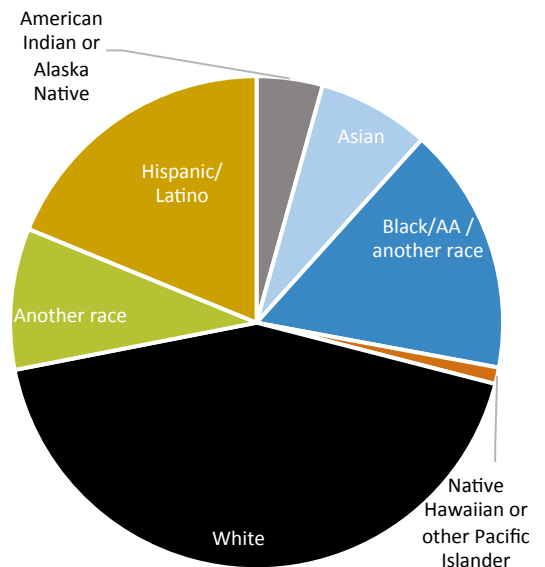
Participant-generated responses under another gender included genderfluid, agender/FTM, demigirl, and demiwoman. About 7.3% of survey respondents identified within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) spectrum.

The race breakdown of survey respondents was 5.6% (n = 76) American Indian or Alaska

Gender Breakdown



Race/Ethnicity Breakdown



Native; 9.5% (n = 130) Asian; 21% (n = 285) Black or African-American; 1.4% (n = 20) Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; 55.5% (n = 752) White; 12% (n = 163) Another race. About 24.3% (n = 330) of respondents were Hispanic/Latino/Latina.

Survey respondents were 16.9% (n = 230) unemployed; 41.4% (n = 561) full-time students; 6.4% (n = 87) part-time students working more than 30 hours per week; 5.7% (n = 78) part-time students working less than 30 hours per week; 11.7% (n = 159) working part-time; 20.52% (n = 278) working full time; 1.1% (n = 15) contract, freelance, or temporary employee; 2.5% (n = 35) self-employed; 1.7% (n = 24) homemaker/at home full-time without children; 3% (n = 41) stay-at-home parent; and 2.8% (n = 38) none of the above. Highest educational level obtained included 5.5% (n = 75) junior high or middle school; 14.8% (n = 201) some high school; 29.5% (n = 400) high school diploma; 2.6% (n = 36) technical school; 30.3% (n = 411) some college/university; 10.1% (n = 137) undergraduate degree; and 7% (n = 95) graduate degree.

1. Qualitative Methods

Focus groups were conducted across seven regionally diverse cities across the United States during April 2016-July 2016. These cities included Oakland, CA; Berkeley, CA; Birmingham, AL; Chicago, IL; New Orleans, LA; Tunica, MS; and Newark, NJ. Focus groups were facilitated by YTH's Program Coordinator, Digital Innovations Officer, and the Director of Programs. In each location, young people between the ages of 14 and 24 were recruited via community partners (see acknowledgments section) through online social media pages, listservs, and posters at community partner sites. A total of 66 youth participated in the focus groups. At each site, two focus groups occurred (one for above 18 participants, one for under 18 participants). The study received human protections approval from Quorum Institutional Review Board. All participants were required to sign a consent form (if minors, participants were required to have consent forms signed by parents/guardians). Focus groups were audio-recorded, then transcribed and de-identified in order to protect

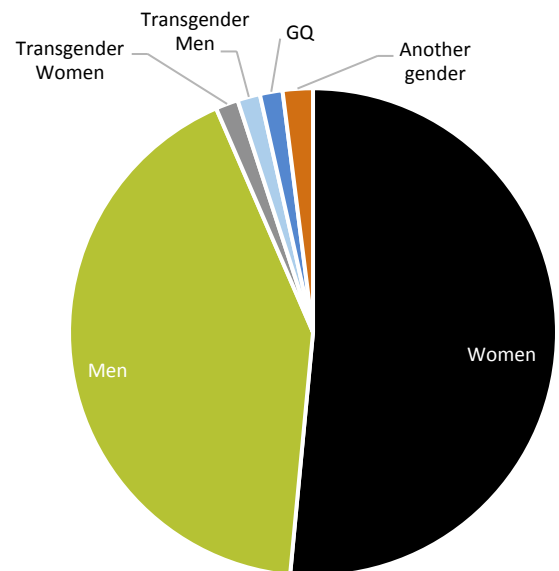
participant confidentiality. An emergent coding approach was used to code and identify themes with two team members, which were then broken into subgroups. These codes included violence in videogames, sexual violence, suicide, mental health, body image, and gender/sexuality/race.

DEMOGRAPHICS

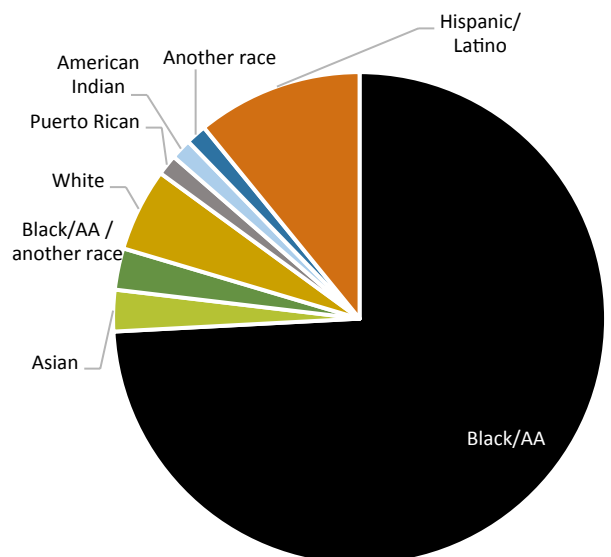
Age breakdown was 6% (n = 4) 13 years old; 6% (n = 4) 14; 10.6% (n = 7) 15; 7.5% (n = 5) 16; 12.1% (n = 8) 17; 16.6% (n = 11) 18; 6% (n = 4) 19; 4.5% (n = 3) 20; 7.5% (n = 5) 21; 6% (n = 4) 22; 7.5% (n = 5) 23; and 9% (n = 6) 24. The gender breakdown was 51.5% (n = 34) women; 42% (n = 28) men; 1.5% (n = 1) genderqueer; 1.5% (n = 1) transgender man/FTM; 1.5% (n = 1) transgender woman/MTF; and 1.5% (n = 1) another gender not listed.

Participants self-identified and labeled their race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. The sexual orientations of the sample were 4.5% (n = 3) bisexual; 4.5% (n = 3) gay; 4.5% (n = 3) lesbian; 3% (n = 2) queer; and 83% (n = 55) straight. The majority of focus group participants identify as Black or African-American (81.8%, n = 54), 4.5% (n = 3) as Black or African-American and American Indian; 3% (n = 2) as Asian; 6% (n = 4) as White; 1.5% (n = 1) as American Indian; 1.5% (n = 1) as Puerto Rican; and 1.5% (n = 1) as Another Race. Twelve percent of focus group participants (n = 8) identified as Hispanic/Latino/Latina.

Gender Breakdown



Race/Ethnicity Breakdown





III. QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS



QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Whether on social media or phones, cyberbullying is definitely happening. Just over 42% of youth reported experiencing cyberbullying and digital harassment, and nearly 60% of youth have witnessed someone else being harassed or cyberbullied online. Some youth reported the cyberbullying, but even after telling the cyberbully to stop harassing them or deleting/blocking the cyberbully, nearly 50% of the respondents continued to be harassed. Seven percent did not attempt to delete, block, or tell the cyberbully to stop harassing them. These cyberbullying events ranged from sending or posting

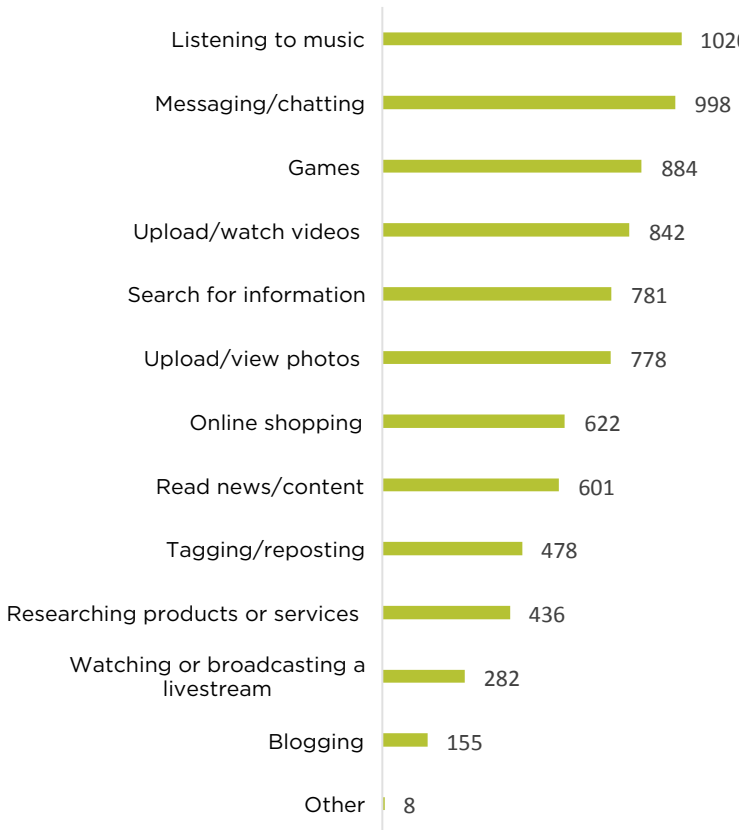
mean messages—privately or publicly—to another person, stalking a person online, or threatening them through message or voice chat on video games.

Considering that nearly 87% owned smartphones and 67% owned a laptop, these high rates of cyberbullying can be concerning. Massive smart phone and PC ownership means that youth often have 24/7 access to the internet and social media, which can make cyberbullying that much more of a threat.

Youth reported that they listen to music most often, but they also message and chat others frequently. Nearly 75% reported that they message and chat on social media platforms weekly. Other prominent activities were playing games, uploading or watching videos, and uploading or viewing photos.

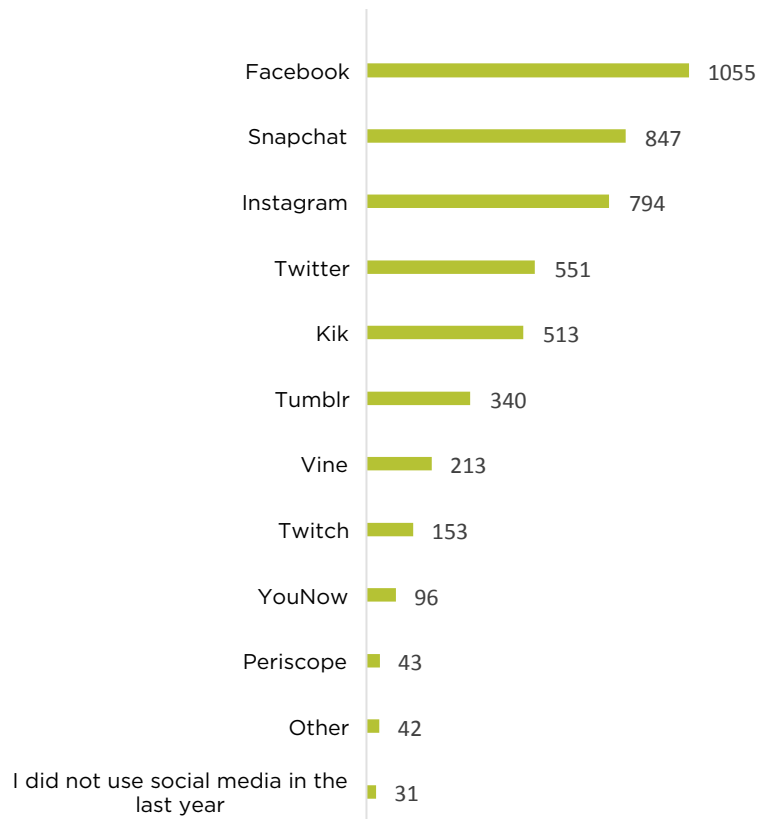
Quantitative Survey

*Which of the following are you doing ONLINE weekly?
Check all that apply.*



Quantitative Survey

*Select the social media platforms that you used in the
LAST YEAR. Check all that apply.*

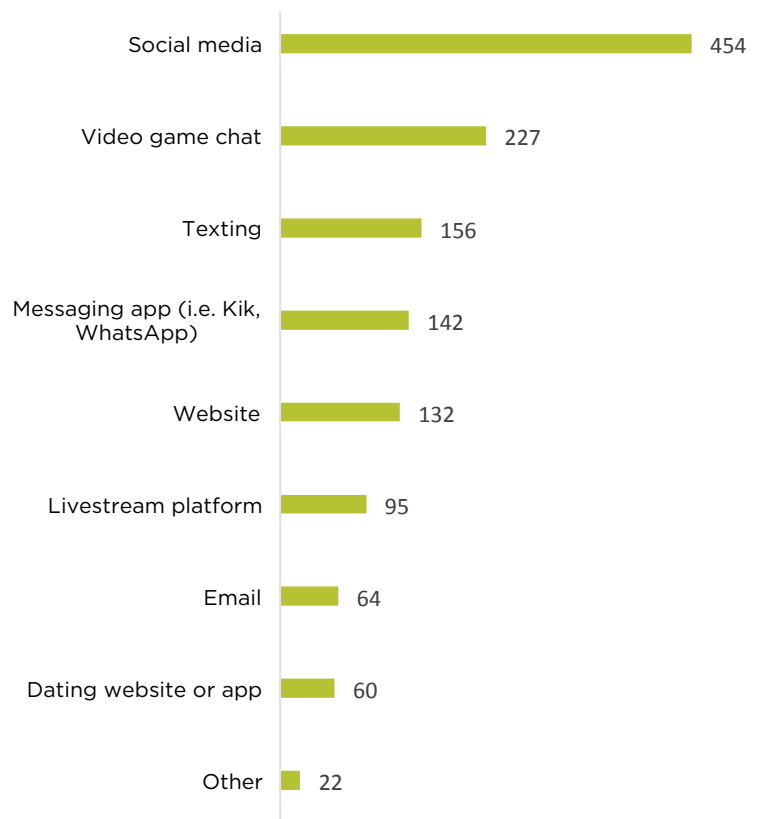


Youth are still using Facebook at high rates, but Snapchat is a close second and has been growing in popularity. This can have serious implications for cyberbullying—a study in 2014 found that Snapchat was the most popular social media platform for teens.²⁸ Snapchat has been so connected to cyberbullying experiences that the company released a filter and campaign to combat cyberbullying.²⁹

The majority of youth who have experienced cyberbullying have had it happen to them via social media. Of those that had experienced cyberbullying, 80% of the instances were on social media through Facebook, Tumblr, Reddit, and Snapchat. A close second to social media sites is video game chat, where nearly 40% of cyberbullying instances occurred. Other online venues where cyberbullying is ripe include text (27%), anonymous messaging apps like Kik or WhatsApp (25%), website forums or blogs (23%), email (11%), dating websites or apps (11%), and other participant-generated websites, including Chat Roulette, Club Penguin, Imvu, YikYak, and Chatango. And, with the development of more recent livestream technology, nearly 17% of cyberbullying instances have occurred via livestreaming platforms like Periscope or Meerkat.

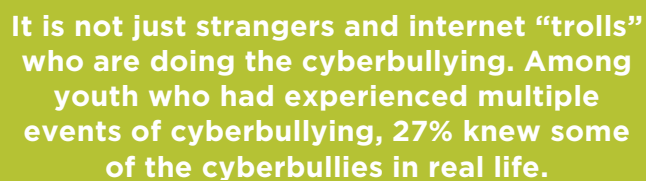
Quantitative Survey

You mentioned that you have experienced digital harassment/cyberbullying. Where did you experience this? Please check all that apply.



Just over 42% of youth report experiencing cyberbullying and digital harassment, and nearly 60% of youth have witnessed someone else being harassed or cyberbullied online.

But who exactly is *doing* the cyberbullying? Of the youth who reported experiencing cyberbullying at some time in their life, 35% said that they knew who the person was in real life, and 36% did not know the person in real life. So in reality, it is not just strangers and internet “trolls” who are doing the cyberbullying. Among youth who had experienced multiple events of cyberbullying, 27% knew some of the cyberbullies in real life, but not all of them.



It is not just strangers and internet “trolls” who are doing the cyberbullying. Among youth who had experienced multiple events of cyberbullying, 27% knew some of the cyberbullies in real life.

Of those that reported experiencing cyberbullying, 68% were young women. Although young women experienced cyberbullying at higher rates than young men, more young men (56%) than young women (54%) reported being cyberbullied or harassed through video games via in-game chat. Of gender non-conforming or transgender-spectrum youth participants (including transgender men/FTM, transgender women, MTF, genderqueer, and self-entry gender identities), nearly 70% had experienced cyberbullying. In terms of sexual orientation, nearly 43% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) youth had experienced cyberbullying. White participants reported much higher rates of cyberbullying (nearly 80%) than youth of color (nearly 40%). Future research should consider these nuances and work to grow more robust samples to find additional patterns across race, gender, and sexuality.

Most importantly, these instances of cyberbullying do not go unnoticed by youth. The effects of being cyberbullied are real, and are often detrimental to the health of young people. As a result of cyberbullying, 65% of participants reported lower self-esteem, 55% reported becoming depressed or anxious, 30% reported not being able to sleep, 29% experienced in-person bullying, 21% skipped school, 16% used alcohol or drugs, 17% received poor grades in school,

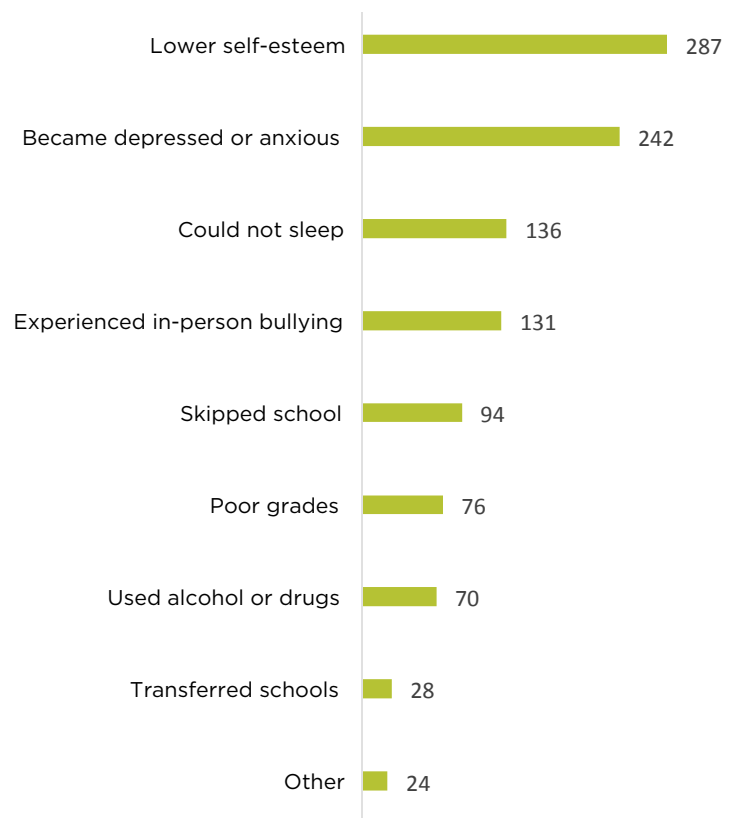
6% transferred schools, and 5% reported other effects from the cyberbullying. These other effects included suicidal thoughts or feelings, eating disorders, self-harm, avoiding places or events like graduation or parties, or becoming aggressive themselves towards the bully or others. For those that reported aggressive responses to cyberbullying, some stated that they became angry, dated the bully's ex-partner for revenge, "roasted" the bully online, and in one case, wanted to rape someone.

Cyberbullying in videogames, as can be seen in the qualitative portion of this report, is often considered a norm among youth. For many, cyberbullying is labeled as talking trash to opponents or "trolling others". However, for those who reported experiences with videogame cyberbullying, nearly 30% were tracked by their cyberbullies off game and onto other websites and social media platforms, where the harassment continued with rude, mean, violent, or offensive messages.

Sexual harassment also occurs within video games. About 22% of participants reported being sexually harassed while playing video games, which included receiving unwanted sexually suggestive comments, photos, or statements. Young women were slightly more likely to be sexually harassed through videogames (25%) than young men (20%). Even when respondents told the person to stop sexually harassing them, or tried blocking them or reporting them, 46% continued to be sexually harassed. Young men

Quantitative Survey

During the time that you were harassed online or cyberbullied, did any of the following happen BECAUSE of the cyberbullying? Check all that apply.



who had been cyberbullied were more likely to experience lower self-esteem, and young women were more likely to become depressed or anxious.

While these numbers are certainly alarming, they do little to illustrate the actual experiences of young people and cyberbullying. The next section on qualitative focus group findings highlights what it actually feels like to experience cyberbullying, the effects it can have on communities, and the platforms where cyberbullying is felt the hardest.

III. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS



A black and white photograph of a young woman with her hair in braids, wearing a headwrap, looking down at a smartphone in her hands. The image is partially obscured by a black rectangular area on the right side, which contains the text 'QUALITATIVE FINDINGS'.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS


EXPERIENCING CYBERBULLYING

The Youth Perspective

The majority of participants had been affected by cyberbullying, whether experiencing the aftereffects themselves or seeing their community deal with the tragic events connected to the cyberbullying. For many, cyberbullying was a reality that all youth dealt with, mostly in the form of “online trolls” and “noobs”. For some, however, cyberbullying was a more serious and devastating issue that carried real life consequences.

Some instances of cyberbullying take place between strangers and popular icons like celebrities, singers, and actresses/actors. While these are certainly noteworthy to young people, the most impactful cyberbullying usually occurred when strangers, friends, or acquaintances left messages on participants' social media pages. Cyberbullying was particularly harmful if the messages were not anonymous, but from people they actually knew from school and other social spaces.

Most participants stated that cyberbullying occurs at such high rates because the cyberbully is protected by anonymity and their screen. Because of this, retribution is highly unlikely, and it only encourages other people behind screens to join in on the cyberbullying.




“I feel like the mentality behind [cyberbullying] is hiding behind this computer, that you’re not gonna hurt me physically.”


Cyberbullying occurs most often through social media, and a number of participants stated that they refused to participate in social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, or Reddit due to cyberbullying experiences or stories from their friends. When asked what being cyberbullied was like, a number of participants acknowledged the potential harm of cyberbullying, but also stated that cyberbullying was due to people who were bored, wanted to get reactions out of people, did not mean what they said and were harmless, or were trying to be funny without realizing the potential harm they were inflicting on others.



“You can have a hundred likes on one video, one photo and then you have that 2 or 3 people who dislike it for no reason, they’ll leave hateful comments just because they can get away with it.”




“They get on there and it’s like you know you wouldn’t say that, like I don’t say anything that I’m not gonna say to someone in person. I see it [cyberbullying] every day.”



“...people are so obsessed with the internet and social media that I think people, you say things that you don’t mean or that you think are funny or other people will think are funny just to get reactions out of people.”

For others, cyberbullying had a very negative effect on their life and the lives of their friends. In some instances, physical harm and violence came about due to issues that began with cyberbullying. One participant describes his experience here, when he lost a close friend due to relentless cyberbullying that eventually led to a physical fight, death, and imprisonment:



“You only speak up when it’s too late. And it’s too late because the child’s gone. You know you’re grieving over two and three kids because his parents just lost a child through death, and the other two are going to jail for the rest of their life... You lost three lives.”

When this participant spoke of this experience, the rest of the participants began avidly adding to this conversation, demonstrating the gravity of this case of cyberbullying and the subsequent effect it had on the community. Their classmate had committed suicide because of comments being made about him on a Facebook page. Participants reported that this situation was unfair, unwarranted, and completely preventable. The focus group felt as though more could have been done to prevent the tragic outcome, particularly on behalf of the parents and teachers of their community. At the time of the incident, the entire community was aware, and yet no one had stepped up to do anything about it.



“It could have been avoided. Someone could have been here... A lot of what-ifs.”

This situation was not unique to one city. Across all the cities we visited, cyberbullying was an extremely relevant topic to participants. Many of the youth felt that their communities were helpless to stop cyberbullying, despite the potential it had for real harm. Many participants agreed that more should be and could be done, but were not sure of what a successful intervention might look like. It appeared as though cyberbullying had such a negative impact on communities that they were too paralyzed to identify solutions.




“It’s a lose-lose situation.”

SUICIDE

For many participants, posting to social media and interacting with friends was the crux of their daily life. Selfies, in particular, were a popular topic to post on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. However, selfies were highly likely to be criticized by peers, and in some cases led to extreme cyberbullying.


A number of focus group participants across three cities had experienced a community-based event in which a person had been cyberbullied into depression and anxiety, and in some tragic cases, suicide. Participants attributed these suicides to instances around body image, selfies, and sexual violence. Many participants noted that young women were particularly harassed online via Snapchat, where sexual harassment and violence, rape, body shaming, and revenge porn (or, non-consensual pornography, in which sexually graphic images of individuals are distributed publically without their consent³⁰) often led to tragic events where young women took their lives.

However, despite these extreme situations, participants believed this violence was a common daily occurrence and came along with participating in social media.




“It happens so often. It’s happening too much really. I’ve seen a lot of times where teens or young adults, they’ve been bullied online and they go out and they take their lives.”

Even when participants were not the ones being cyberbullied, they were affected by their friends’ and acquaintances’ experiences with cyberbullying. As one participant stated, her experience of helping her friend cope with the depression and suicidal ideation that stemmed from being cyberbullied scared her and made her worry for her friend’s life.



“Me and my best friend were on a bus and he told me that he was getting cyberbullied. He was writing on a piece of paper because he was too scared to say it on the bus. He said, ‘I’m gonna miss you.’ And I was like, ‘What do you mean you’re gonna miss me?’ And he said ‘I think I’m gonna commit suicide.’ And I was just... like, no, so scared. The hell you’re not. And all because of the cyberbullying!”


As learned from one participant, the inability to stop cyberbullying against a friend or loved one is a frustrating and helpless experience. For many, cyberbullying is a relentless force with very little chance of intervening.



“You know how you go through it with your friends, like you’ve been with your friends so long and you have that unbreakable chain, and then your friend tells you they’ve been cyberbullied? That’s the worst feeling ever. Like what do you do?”

Suicidal ideation and stories of suicide due to cyberbullying are well known by participants. Many focus group members were able to think of stories they had heard of young people taking their lives due to cyberbullying. One participant mentioned


that even if you receive positive feedback online, cyberbullying can often outweigh the good and become unbearable.




“There was an issue where this one online streamer actually, [...] they basically killed themselves that night after streaming online, because it was just, they couldn’t take it, like everything was too bad. They were having a bad day then they go and play this game and even if they have maybe a hundred or so viewers that they think enjoy watching them play, [...] those words hurt and they affect that person.”

Sexual Violence

Some focus group participants shared violent stories. Across three separate focus groups in three separate cities, youth shared stories of rape, sexual violence, and sexual harassment that happened to some of the young women they knew at school. Some of these instances were solely digital, as described by this participant, who had experienced seeing naked pictures posted online of some young women he knew at school:




“I’ve seen people like they take people’s naked pics and they put them up... That’s bad, that’s bad. That like for real gets people. You know, like that’s their body and they don’t want everybody seeing it. So you know that has a big effect on people.”



“Basically at my 8th grade school, they made, they called it a ‘thot’ [that ho over there] page, of the whole school. So whoever you were, you had some type of picture, it’s getting posted up there no matter what.”


Sexual violence and intimate partner abuse is also hosted on social media, particularly revolving around the termination of romantic relationships. While

social media can be an outlet to share feelings or connect with others after the end of a relationship, it can also be an opportunity to target someone who has hurt you. Additionally, if this happens while you are still in the same school or network with this person, photos and messages can circulate through the campus very quickly. Participants said having intimate details of a relationship exposed online can lead to feelings of embarrassment and fear that your reputation is ruined:




“It goes around the entire school and this isn’t high school but you can’t unsee that or unhear that and stuff like that. But then even I was at lunch today and someone was talking about this couple that was dating for three years and then he said the girl went crazy and she put on Facebook like the sex videos that they made together for like everyone to see and that’s like life ruining these days. People will hide from life because of embarrassment because of something online and that’s just not how it should be.”

In other instances of sexual violence, cyberbullying exacerbated the situation. One participant spoke about a rape that had happened to a young woman, and that the rape was recorded through Snapchat and sent to the entire school. The videos were then immortalized and posted online:



“...this girl, she went to my school and she was at these boys’ house and then they were smoking and then they laced her weed [...] They recorded on Snapchat, like she was naked and she was like sucking one dude and another dude was doing her from the back and it was recorded, and it went from Snapchat to Facebook. [...] Somebody at the school made a page and everybody that got the pictures and videos, they put them on Facebook. Like they put everybody’s pictures, messages, everything... This one girl, I don’t know her name, but she was trying to kill herself cause her stuff got put up.”

Social media has the power to immortalize and publicize very personal moments, particularly those related to your sexuality. Due to the invasion of privacy, humiliation, and sharing of personal and private activities, participants stated that victims may feel that they have no other choice but to take their life.




“This girl was bullied because she was at this party and I think she like slept with someone or something like that and she was drunk or something. And her whole school, and it was all over social media and there were photos of her naked and like all these different things and she committed suicide because of how awful it was.”

Regardless of whether sexual harassment, violence, and even cases of rape occur on social media, the effects of this type of cyberbullying are often both extreme and long-lasting. Victims have to deal with not only the physical effects of these instances, but also the mental health effects that plague them when these moments become public and an opportunity for peers to further bully them.

MENTAL HEALTH

In our discussions, mental health emerged as both a contributor to and effect of cyberbullying. Many participants stated that mental health issues could contribute to a person’s likelihood to cyberbully another person. In particular, a bully’s insecurities may lead them to cyberbully someone else as a way to grapple with their own low self-esteem or unhappiness. Participants believed that cyberbullies often took those negative feelings out on others as a way to exert power over someone else, bring someone else down to their emotional level, to process their own mental health challenges, or to cope with personal

issues. Regardless, cyberbullying is seen as misplaced, unwarranted, and generally not understood as an excuse:




“That’s the motive behind bullies...they’re angry and they’re mad and they don’t like themselves...they want someone else to suffer that feeling with them.”




“Insecurity is the biggest part... a lot of people are unhappy with themselves.”

When comments do turn into harassment and cyberbullying, participants voiced that it’s nearly impossible to be immune to the hateful words. Combined with the fact that cyberbullies are anonymous and defended behind a screen, cyberbullying creates a general fear among young people about their social media uses. Some participants stated that they thought of cyberbullying often when logging on to social media, hoping it would not happen to them.




“Everyone gets affected by the things people say about them whether it’s in person or online...but it’s easier for someone to be mean not face-to-face.”

In addition, being cyberbullied does not simply end when you log out, turn your phone off, or close your door at home. Participants shared that the experience of being cyberbullied weaves itself into many aspects of your life and beyond your social networks. Healing cyberbullying does not translate to a simple “log out”; in fact, many young people feel that it affects their friendships, school interactions, and family relationships in the long-term. Such hurtful and harassing words stick with victims throughout their day, and are hard to shake.




“These bullies can log off, but these people, mentally, they can’t log off.”



“Cyberbullying is more than what happens on social media... it actually comes in your front door, in your house, in the living room with you... It’s there. It’s everywhere.”

When cyberbullying happens, it can be difficult to process and hard to understand why it happened in the first place. Many participants stated that the effects of cyberbullying can be insidious, hard to detect, and impossible to heal, which makes it more difficult to offer support. This hopelessness can often lead to not asking for help.



““...After you say what you say, that person takes it and consumes it. Versus you, where you’re like the bully and say whatever you wanna say, and then you’re like okay that’s it. Like I hate you, kill yourself. And then, this person probably feels like that about their family, this is how my friends feel about me, and they take it like well no one likes me. And [...] certain people that do think suicidal, they kinda want to reach out to someone but they don’t reach out. Like I had a friend where it’s like they’ll reach out but it’s very subtle, so it’s not like saying ‘I want to do this,’ but it’s the little subtle things and certain things that you can kind of feel like they need help but they don’t know how or who or what.”

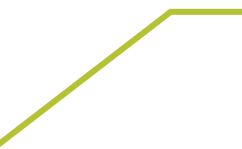
This omnipresence of cyberbullying—or even the potential to be cyberbullied—creates an unhealthy level of anxiety, stress, and depression among young people. On top of daily stressors related to school, employment, and relationships, young people are also feeling unsafe in their digital lives. In this way, cyberbullying can contribute to all-consuming mental health issues.



“I don’t think it is something that will ever go away.”

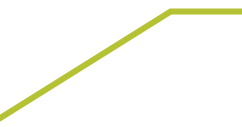
BODY IMAGE

Focus group participants shared that a young person's physique was identified as a common source for cyberbullying attacks, particularly for young women. Young women in particular are targeted for their body, which also shifts their own perspective of their body image. At such a critical age for self-confidence, particularly in relation to their own bodies, girls are experiencing cyberbullying and body shaming from both boys and girls. This can greatly affect their perceptions of their bodies, and what they "should" or "should not" show online.




"Have you guys ever seen those pictures where like this really cute girl, she's like not thin right, and she's like wearing shorts and there's at least a hundred comments on it saying like um, if you're over 200 pounds you shouldn't be wearing shorts like that."

Peer perceptions and opinions can often influence a young person's self-image. Participants voiced that it can be particularly demeaning when they post an image where they are proud of how they look and end up receiving a stream of harassing comments.



"It'd be random things they're saying and people think it's funny. Like to that person it really hurts because you thought you actually looked good in that picture. And for people to think that you don't look good, it really hurts."

Those who observed this type of online body shaming were shocked at the audacity of the bullies, particularly around such a sensitive topic. According to participants, many young people struggle with their changing bodies and identities. This makes singling out a person's body and image particularly hard to watch, and makes participants hesitate to post anything about themselves for fear of similar treatment.



“They were like attacking her for her body and the way she looked and I was like that’s really messed up, and you shouldn’t say things like that, cause you wouldn’t like anyone doing it to you.”



“Who are you to body police her?”

Navigating one’s body image is an ever-evolving process, particularly during young adulthood. Even if participants had not experienced cyberbullying themselves, it was clear that they had seen instances that became cautionary tales. Witnessing these events made participants doubt themselves, question their looks, and spend more time considering what they would post. This “social media anxiety” became apparent due to the ubiquity of social media in their lives, but particularly around the rise of the selfie and social media networking.


VIOLENCE IN VIDEO GAMES

Video games were played by nearly every focus group participant. Whether mobile-based casual gamers or “hardcore” console and PC gamers, participants cited video games as a source of leisure, fun, and connecting with friends online. While video games were a popular medium of entertainment for the majority of focus group participants, it was common knowledge that video game chats and forums often—almost always—led to verbal harassment and violence. For those who played video games online with others, it was unanimously accepted that you should expect to come face-to-face with violent threats and harassment from other players.




“Cause that’s what they do. Gamers just pick on people.”


This was particularly true for combat-based and competitive videogames like Call of Duty, League of Legends, and Overwatch. Many times, participants expected verbal threats and harassment from other players, but still expressed shock at the things people said to them online.



“Yeah and they’re like ‘I f-ed your mom’ and I’m like ‘What?!’ And I’m like this is so intense like you have no control over it. And there are funny videos you see of people just going at each other and it’s like y’all don’t even know each other, you don’t know this person’s mom.”




“In things like video games, it gets very competitive so it brings up a lot of raw emotions and anger and everything. Especially if you’re losing, so if you’re losing and you spout all your anger then it’s gonna breed more anger and everyone is just spouting out anger at everything. And it’s just this whole big conflict. People’s accounts get banned and people get suicidal or homicidal, it’s like really crazy.”




“And I do believe that like the gaming world is way worse cause when I go to my friend’s house, just like being on a game for that hour or so, just like hearing what people say it’s like how can they just blatantly, like they say the craziest stuff [...] on the gaming thing people say whatever they wanna say.”

The gamer streaming platform, Twitch, was also a hot spot for cyberbullying. For many participants, they noticed that harassment occurred to many players who were live streaming their gameplay on Twitch.



“There was an incident where some Twitch streamers I watched, Twitch.tv like a website where people stream games. Looking at games in general it’s a really toxic community because people on voice chat or people even just on type-in chat, you see things like ‘Oh you’re bad at this game. You should quit’, but then it gets further and like ‘You should go kill yourself. Why are you even on here?’ ”

Some participants had decided to stop playing videogames altogether due to verbal harassment, while others just decided to play without using headsets or by silencing other players' headsets. For many young women gamers, violent harassment also included sexist remarks and sexual harassment while they played online. Considering the recent cyberbullying, violent threats, and sexual harassment of the "Gamer Gate" controversy, in which a female game developer was targeted online due to her gender, it was no surprise that young people, particularly young women, were well aware of the potential online harassment from other players.³¹



"I've heard sexism, like 'Oh you're a girl. Girls can't...' Like it's just stuff that they'll say like 'Go play with your period pad.' Like 'Hey mami come here let me carry you.' And you're like 'No bro, stop.'"


GENDER, SEXUALITY, & RACE

The internet has often been cited as a space to find similar peers, networks, and cultures, particularly for sexual minority youth.^{32,33} For participants who identified within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) spectrum, the internet was often a respite from heteronormative culture. Social media—particularly Tumblr—was cited as a space for connecting with similar peers and creating relationships. Participants who identified as LGBTQ often cited social media as a way to share experiences and avoid homophobic or transphobic people. Young people of color noted that they could find more supportive social groups online. However, homophobic, transphobic, racist, and sexist comments can be pervasive, particularly on public forums where the demographic profile of a person is known.

Online dating was largely mentioned among LGBT participants, particularly those who identified within the transgender spectrum (including but not limited to those who identified as transgender women, transgender men, and genderqueer


individuals). Online dating was a place to find accepting partners, but violence also occurred through anonymous messaging. For some, threats against their gender identity and sexuality was sent to their inbox daily. Despite these threats, online dating and social media was often the only way to connect to similar others, especially if their community or parents were unsupportive of their gender identity.

Despite mentioning that online dating allowed her to connect with open-minded people, one participant who identified as a transgender woman was frustrated with the frequent cyberbullying and online harassment that she received through the online dating platform she was using.




“The scary about it, and my thing is like... The thing about online dating is like, you came up to me, I didn’t come up to you. You were attracted to me and then you wanna say like “Oh it’s a man.” And like blast me. You came up to me, I didn’t come up to you!”

Racist remarks were also prevalent on video game platforms, with many participants stating that other players frequently said racist remarks or harassed them if they found out their race online.




“I was playing Call of Duty with some friends and some guy [...] he was like ‘You know I’m tired of this. Every time I throw a flash grenade it’s like a pillow case, but when somebody throws one at me it’s like some big black guy named Laquis put a pillowcase over my head and punched me in the face’. I’m like what? It was so weird and random that it was sort of funny to think about, but that was kind of like just hurtful to a lot of people. We kicked him out of the game and we just sat there and was like what?”

One participant who identified as African American noted that many of the cyberbullying events she had seen were based on race. Although she lived in a predominately supportive culture, her friends faced many racist cyberbullying attacks online. In this instance, the cyberbullying became so severe that location tracking and physical harm were threatened.



“I defended a girl that was being cyberbullied cause she just posted her personal opinion on Instagram and all these people would tag their friends and comment on it and it was a race issue. It was talking about hanging people. They were talking like ‘I’m part of the KKK and I hate black people.’ And I was like are you serious? I blocked all those people. Cause they were so serious, it got to a point where they were talking about trying to track people’s locations and stuff, it was crazy.”

A black and white photograph showing the back of a woman's head and shoulders. Her dark hair is pulled back into a ponytail. She is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved t-shirt. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with other people. Overlaid on the upper left portion of the image is the text "IV. FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS" in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

IV. FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS



FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Cyberbullying is so pervasive that a number of participants felt disheartened and did not believe that interventions could be created, and that cyberbullying will be a reality as long as technology remains the focus of their lives.


“I don’t think it’s something that’ll ever go away. As long as the world is constantly advancing [...] it’ll never stop.”

For some participants, they believed that future programs should work with schools to stem the violence that occurs from cyberbullying by offering sensitivity trainings. This idea largely came about from participants who felt that their teachers undermined cyberbullying by not believing that it was a real issue. Some participants had experienced situations in which teachers and advisers diminished the cyberbullying, and the only advice they were offered was to turn off their computers and not let the cyberbullying “get to them.”




“I think they need to do sensitivity trainings with teachers around these issues like cyberbullying.”

When asked for ideas on how to stop cyberbullying before it even begins, participants truly wanted to see more of an emphasis on the positivity of their lives and their networks. Participants wanted to boost the resilience of themselves and their peers by focusing on the good aspects of the internet and social media, rather than the cyberbullying, negativity, and trolling.



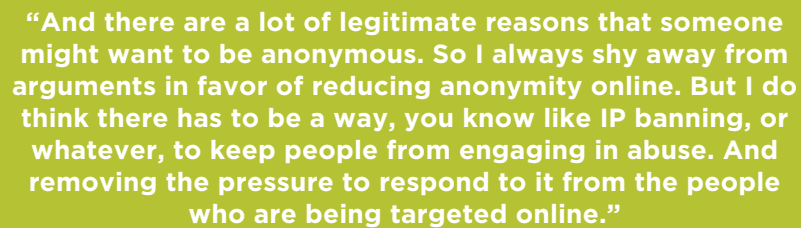
“It’s kind of inevitable that we’re all going to become really reliant, like everybody relying on their technology more than we are now so [...] how can I make this a safer place but also how can as a community, as a whole, as a people, how can we use [the internet] and bring more of that positivity that we rarely see?”

Organizational partners on this study also called for an increase in research, particularly on the long-term effects of cyberbullying. Little is known about the long-term effects of cyberbullying, particularly in extreme cases.



“We see signs of depression and anxiety are the two typical mental health issues. We also find in some cases even evidence of PTSD but these are extreme, just like the suicides that we see. So we certainly see short term mental health outcomes but there is very little long term research.”

Community partners did not endorse reducing anonymity to reduce cyberbullying, but did advocate for other technological measures to insure that cyberbullies are stopped. Some of these technological interventions included more advanced IP banning, reporting systems, and boosting the resilience of young people prior to the onset of cyberbullying.



“And there are a lot of legitimate reasons that someone might want to be anonymous. So I always shy away from arguments in favor of reducing anonymity online. But I do think there has to be a way, you know like IP banning, or whatever, to keep people from engaging in abuse. And removing the pressure to respond to it from the people who are being targeted online.”

With these findings in mind, the following recommendations have been built around community partner ideas, expert conversations, and issues brought up by youth through focus groups. Each recommendation is built around a question that focuses on specific issues surrounding cyberbullying as highlighted in this report. Non-profits, organizations, communities, parents, teachers, and leaders should consider these questions when brainstorming and building interventions.

Overall, our **number one recommendation** is to always include young people in the brainstorming process if you are aiming to reduce cyberbullying. Youth are experiencing cyberbullying at alarming rates, and are often the most familiar with the mechanisms of cyberbullying and the new platforms where cyberbullying exists. Including their voices in interventions and projects could be a vital component in making truly successful programs.

1. How might we empower communities to tackle the issue of cyberbullying?

Almost all participants agreed that communities have the power to tackle cyberbullying, but are not equipped to do so. There was a feeling of helplessness regarding cyberbullying throughout the focus groups, particularly in communities where there had been tragic results (i.e., suicide and murder) due to instances of cyberbullying. In those tragic cases, youth agreed that “something more should have been done”. During community-wide cyberbullying events, participants did not know where to turn, and did not believe that their schools, families, or communities would be able to tackle the problem. This question presents an opportunity for communities to have discussions and brainstorm locally relevant solutions, such as an anti-cyberbullying task force that brings together schools, police, and families to ensure that instances of cyberbullying are taken seriously.

2. How might we build youth resilience to reduce the impact of cyberbullying?

Participants voiced concern over the lasting mental health effects of experiencing cyberbullying. Victims experienced stress, anxiety, and depression related to instances of cyberbullying, and in more extreme and tragic cases, suicidal ideation and suicide. This is an opportunity to preemptively strike against cyberbullying by examining how we talk to young people about resilience, conflicts with peers, and building empathy. By starting these conversations earlier and more intentionally, the impact of future cyberbullying is reduced, with fewer cases of tragic results. Consider working with organizations and young people to create programs focused on building these resilience strategies for the future.

3. How might we use technology to educate youth to be safe online in order to reduce the number of cyberbullying victims?

While technology and social media are the spaces in which young people are being bullied, there is also an opportunity to harness technological power for good. Technology—particularly social media—may offer a platform for young people to engage with topics related to digital privacy, cyberbullying, and online harassment in a consistent and safer manner. Materials online have the potential for broad reach, and can offer a place for young people to have questions answered confidentially and free of shame. Such materials online should include best practices for how to protect yourself, how to interact with others online, and what to do if you find yourself in a cyberbullying situation. Some ideal resources include safety online activities from the Cyberbullying Research Center (cyberbullying.org)³⁴ and How to Report Cyberbullying from stopbullying.gov.³⁵

4. How might we use technology to support young people in the moment when cyberbullying happens?

When harassment happens online, victims should not be expected to delete their profiles and shut their online presence down. In fact, participants shared that cyberbullying weaves its way into every aspect of life, so simply exiting out of the app or logging off social media does not necessarily eliminate the effects of cyberbullying. In the same way that technology could be used to educate young people, it also has the power to be a resource right when it happens. Technology offers the speed, network of resources, anonymity, and the potential to allow victims to reach out for help and receive what they need. Consider aggregating online resources like emergency chat, reporting systems, and positive peer networks into a one-stop database for youth.

5. How might we increase the capacity of teachers and school administrators to support victims of cyberbullying?

Many participants voiced that while parents, teachers, and school counselors are people they would turn to if cyberbullying happened to them, they were concerned that these adult allies did not have the ability to actually stop the harassment. In other words, they felt as though these trusted adults had little control of the problem. Schools are prime spaces to have conversations about cyberbullying, and have the potential to drastically reduce instances of cyberbullying by systematizing the way cyberbullying cases are processed and dealt with. School meetings, rallies, campus-wide events, parent teacher nights, and school boards have the opportunity to provide information and recommendations, implement “triage” methods to stop cyberbullying cases, and create places where students can seek support safely and confidentially.

6. How might we provide ongoing mental health support to victims of cyberbullying?

Mental health is a long-lasting effect of cyberbullying, often leading to anxiety and depression. In some cases, participants shared stories of extreme cyberbullying that led to suicide. Cyberbullying not only affects victims—it has serious implications for the communities involved. Even after an instance of cyberbullying is “resolved”, it is not truly resolved until the victim—as well as their family and friends—feel safe again. With the increased number of young people experiencing cyberbullying, there is an opportunity to establish connections among youth who have experienced cyberbullying, further helping them to process and heal from the trauma. Consider how to connect young people to resources and places to receive more extensive support, such as counselors, support groups, or therapists. Technology could also be involved by developing an online platform for survivors of cyberbullying, which could double as a peer-support network.

7. How might we better understand cyberbullying and the effects it has on youth?

A lack of long-term research makes understanding cyberbullying difficult. Very little research exists on the long-term effects of cyberbullying, patterns, and consequences. Researchers should consider partnering with organizations and youth to focus on cyberbullying development, trends, and patterns over time in order to better understand the unique mechanisms of cyberbullying. In addition, long-term studies should consider different social media mechanisms (Facebook, Reddit, Instagram, Snapchat) in order to consider the commonalities and differences between platforms.



CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying is a growing issue among young people across the nation. Many young people are impacted by cyberbullying; whether they are directly being targeted, supporting a friend who is experiencing it, or are a part of a community that is recovering with the loss of a person's life due to such harassing comments. To make matters worse, young people also feel that this issue is out of control, and even the trusted adults they might go to for help are not equipped to handle the issue. Communities do not know how to unravel such a pressing and serious issue for their young people. Technology is constantly changing and weaving itself into our daily lives. Every day this is a new app, new hashtag, new website, or new social media trend. With this rapidly growing realm of online relationships, people can feel more connected, and also more polarized. Technology is moving at a rate faster than we can figure out how to handle the drawbacks that appear.

It is clear that more research needs to be done to understand the nature of cyberbullying, and how it plays out for both the bully and the victim. With more

information, we can better understand some of the root causes as a way to potentially prevent cyberbullying from happening in the first place. We also can understand the way young people process and handle cyberbullying, so that we might better support them during and after these instances occur. Finally, there is an opportunity to harness the power of young people to ideate and design new programs and solutions that work for them. When we design with and for young people, we honor their experiences by allowing them to drive solutions to a problem they understand wholly. While cyberbullying may not completely stop, we have an opportunity to empower young people to maintain their sense of self and wellbeing both online and offline.

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