

Cyberbullying: Impacts of Social Media, COVID-19, and Demographic Factors

By Quinne DeWorken

Abstract

The surge in technology use, particularly the widespread adoption of smartphones and the increased reliance on social media platforms, has fundamentally re-shaped the landscape in which students encounter bullying and cyberbullying. This transformation has been further compounded by the global shift towards virtual learning environments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Bullying, a persistent issue affecting students across age groups, has profound implications for their mental well-being and academic performance. Understanding the multifaceted impacts of cyberbullying is imperative for devising effective interventions to address these challenges. This research seeks to look into the intricate dynamics of cyberbullying and bullying, exploring how they relate to one another, the evolving educational landscape, and the pervasive influence of social media on students.

By critically examining both the advantageous aspects of virtual schooling and the detrimental consequences associated with heightened social media usage, this study aims to illuminate the underlying mechanisms driving cyberbullying. Through comprehensive analysis, this study has an endeavor to uncover insights that can inform strategies to create safer learning environments and equip students with the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of cyberbullying. This research is a concerted effort to unravel the complexities surrounding student well-being in the digital age and pave the way for evidence-based interventions aimed at fostering a more supportive and conducive educational environment. COVID-19, social media,

and demographics are all factors that play a role in the negative effects of cyberbullying that are examined in this study.

Introduction

In a study done in March 2023 in “Researchers Work to Combat Cyberbullying by Looking for Patterns”, roughly 75% of adults have witnessed cyberbullying, 40% of which witnessed first hand (Parker, 2023). How did the increased use of technology and social media and the virtual shift as a result of COVID-19 affect the students, and how they encounter cyberbullying? The theme of this research revolves around the issue of cyberbullying and its impact on students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the increased reliance on technology in schools and the widespread use of social media largely influenced cyberbullying and bullying among students. Cyberbullying remains a highly prevalent issue and concern, especially among students, with many inevitably experiencing its harmful effects during their time in school. Surveys have consistently revealed that individuals across various demographics report encountering cyberbullying during a school year. Despite initial concerns that the transition to virtual learning due to COVID-19 would pose a negative effect on cyberbullying, research indicates a reported decrease in such incidents among students (Bacher-Hicks), raising questions about how in-person bullying and cyberbullying are directly related. The purpose of this study is to bring the issues of cyberbullying to light, highlight the reasons behind the upward and downward trends and find possible solutions based on the benefits and disadvantages of social media, the virtual shift following the start of COVID-19, and the influence of demographics. My primary research was conducted through the use of a survey given to high school students and an interview with a high school teacher to provide first-hand information regarding cyberbullying.

This study aims to explore the impacts and the shifts on students' encounters with cyberbullying, analyzing both positive and negative effects. "Impacts of cyberbullying extend beyond the individual, affecting the entire educational community. Understanding its dynamics requires a multidimensional approach encompassing social, psychological, and technological factors." (Alismaiel, p. 1370) Cyberbullying has serious effects on students' mental-health and it is important to identify the factors of the issue in order to find ways to improve students' school and online experiences. The intersection of increased technology use, social media reliance, and the transition to virtual learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted cyberbullying among students. During COVID-19, cyberbullying decreased as schools went online, according to Bacher-Hicks, Goodman, and Mulhern (2022), while Alismaiel et al. (2023) found that more social media use led to more cyberbullying, showing how technology affected cyberbullying during the pandemic.

COVID-19's effects on bullying and cyberbullying

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant, unexpected shifts in cyberbullying trends as a result of virtual/remote classroom formats. Recent studies done by Bacher-Hicks, Goodman, and Mulhern (2022) show how the pandemic disrupted the previously proven patterns of cyberbullying. Before COVID-19, the trends of cyberbullying generally were higher during the school year following a decline during the summer. This pattern led people to believe that bullying was more likely to occur only during the school year.

However, COVID-19 caused significant shifts in the previously believed dynamics of cyberbullying. As students moved to hybrid or remote learning environments, reports of cyberbullying had a significant drop. The trends flipped from the pre-pandemic trends. The

lower cyberbullying trends presented during the school year, whereas the peak presented more during the summer. The absence of in-person schooling and in-person bullying resulted in less opportunity for students to encounter cyberbullying because they often have shown to work hand-in-hand influencing one another, one spilling over into the other's platform. The peaks of cyberbullying during the summers is most likely a result of an increased amount of face-to-face engagement allowed by more outdoor interactions.

Research conducted by Bacher-Hicks shows that when schools stayed online, rates of cyberbullying had a significant decline. But when schools reopened for in-person classes, the drop became much less. Cyberbullying went almost completely back to the pre-pandemic levels when schools went back to normal, but schools that only partly opened back up continued to have high declines. This shows that how students are taught affects bullying and could be open to further examination. The findings underscore the impact of educational methods on bullying, as revealed by Bacher-Hicks et al. (2021):

In areas where schooling remained fully remote, bullying dropped by 42 percent (−55 log points). Offering in-person schooling offsets that effect, with the coefficient suggesting that bullying only dropped by 19 percent (34–55 log points) in areas where all students were given an in-person option. Interestingly, the coefficients suggest that fully restarting in-person instruction is associated with cyberbullying nearly completely returning to pre-pandemic levels but with school bullying returning only halfway. (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021 pg. 355)

Social media's influence on cyberbullying

The widespread increased use of social media has had a significant influence on the occurrence of cyberbullying, especially among student populations. According to Alismaiel et al. (2023), “Digital media used in education has a significant influence on cyberbullying behaviors among youth students” (p. 1370). With the continuously increasing use of digital platforms and social media, there are more reports of cyberbullying. Higher rates of cyberbullying pose a serious challenge for student well-being and mental health. Younger students, in particular, are more vulnerable targets because of their increased use of digital platforms without fully understanding the risks that come with using such platforms.

The accessibility and capability to hide one's identity on social media platforms has made it easier for cyberbullying to occur as the perpetrators have less fear of being caught. Studies have shown that a significant portion of the student population is affected by some form of cyberbullying. The research conducted in “Digital Media Used in Education: The Influence on Cyberbullying Behaviors among Youth Students” suggests that over 15% of individuals experience bullying within six months of the school year, and around 2.8% are cyberbullied (Alismaiel et al., 2023). The progression of social media and other online platforms means that students are prone to encounter various forms of cyberbullying, including harassment, stalking, and online gossip, which can have serious effects on a student's mental well-being (Alismaiel et al., 2023).

Despite the prevalence of cyberbullying, many students don't have much awareness or an understanding of how to identify, react, or respond to cyberbullying issues, which inevitably causes students to be more susceptible to becoming victims of cyberbullying. The anonymity of the internet can give a false sense of security that leads individuals to unknowingly engaging in online behaviors that may make them an easy target for cyberbullies. In addition, there are other

aspects that may cause certain people to be more susceptible to certain types of cyberbullying. One of these aspects is gender. For example, females often experience more indirect forms such as gossip or exclusion, whereas males tend to engage in more direct or threatening behaviors (Alismaiel et al., 2023).

Cyberbullying Demographics

The rise of social media and smart devices in the hands of more students has allowed there to be a rise in new cyberbullying tactics that may impact various demographic groups more or less than others. According to the research reported by Vogels (2022), nearly half of U.S. teens aged 13-17 experienced at least one form of cyberbullying, with name-calling being the most prominent.

According to Vogels (2022), nearly half of U.S. teens aged 13 to 17 (46%) have reported experiencing at least one of the six cyberbullying behaviors identified in a Pew Research Center survey, including offensive name calling, false rumors, receiving unwanted explicit images, physical threats, constant monitoring, and sharing of explicit images without consent. Age and gender play a significant role in the prevalence and nature of cyberbullying among teens. For example, older teenage girls are more prone to cyberbullying with research showing that they are more likely to experience online abuse overall and specifically targeted attacks related to appearance (Vogels, 2022). The survey conducted in Vogels research also stated that “15- to 17-year-old girls stand out for being more likely to face any form of cyberbullying compared to younger teen girls and boys of any age” (Vogels, 2022). Additionally, older teen girls are more likely to report if some sort of cyberbullying occurs, showing that different genders experience it differently.

As well as gender and age, ethnicity and income also play a role in cyberbullying experiences. "Black teens are about twice as likely as Hispanic or White teens to say they think their race or ethnicity made them a target of online abuse" (Vogels, 2022). Specific types of cyberbullying are more prevalent among certain racial or ethnic groups. For example, White teens are more likely to report false rumors, whereas Hispanic teens are more likely to experience constant monitoring online. The survey also highlights that lower-income households are twice as likely to report being physically threatened online compared to those of higher-income households (Vogels, 2022).

Primary Research Method

To gain a comprehensive understanding of cyberbullying, I utilized a multifaceted primary research approach. The primary research methods that were used in this study involved a multifaceted approach, combining surveys given to high school students and interviews conducted with high school teachers. Using the survey, the data collected from students provides insight on their experiences and observations regarding cyberbullying. These surveys ask students the types of bullying encountered, the frequency it has been encountered, the types of platforms on which it has been encountered, and how students feel cyberbullying has affected their academics and mental well-being.

In addition to the student surveys, an interview was conducted with a high school teacher to gain a different perspective on what the educators have witnessed interacting with students everyday. These interviews focus on gaining the teachers' perspectives on cyberbullying in the school environment, how it outwardly affects student behavior, and how often it is noticed.

Gaining insights from the student and teacher perspectives will provide a better understanding of the prevalence, nature, and impacts of cyberbullying in school settings.

Primary Research Results

In conducting my primary research, I utilized both surveys and interviews to find the most accurate results from the student and teacher perspectives. I thought that it was important to not only hear what the students have to say about cyberbullying but the teachers too because they have the unique outside perspective of witnessing how it affects students in the classroom which isn't always something that a student will bring up.

As my first method of primary research, I conducted an interview with Ms. Bonnie DeWorken, a Ninth-grade English teacher at Grafton High School in York County School Division. In my interview with Ms. DeWorken, I was able to ask her some questions about how she sees cyberbullying in her classroom and how she sees it affecting her students. In talking with Ms. DeWorken about how often she has seen cyberbullying happening among her students she stated that though it isn't something she physically sees happening it is an issue from outside of the classroom that is often brought up weekly. Ms. DeWorken also discussed that she has, most often, seen or heard about the use of false rumors or name calling being discussed in her class. When asked about how she thinks cyberbullying affects student academic performance and mental well-being, Ms. DeWorken responded that she doesn't think that it is "severely hindering anything" regarding academics, but that it does affect their behavior in the classroom. Ms. DeWorken shared that usually before and after classes she often will hear some of the conversation taking place about something that happened outside the classroom on some platform and it does generally carry over to that classroom environment. I also discussed with

Ms. DeWorken how she feels the shift to virtual learning caused by COVID-19 influenced cyberbullying among students. In response to this, Ms. DeWorken stated “If it didn’t raise how often it occurs, it raised how powerful it is.” Ms. DeWorken shared that the current class of freshmen got sent home for COVID-19 in fifth grade stating, “A lot of that social development portion of their schooling career happened during virtual learning with COVID.” Ms. DeWorken further explained that not being around people and relying more on social media and social platforms being the primary mode for their socialization, students became more “free with their words and digital conversations, which leads to a lot more things getting said that people would not say face to face.” I asked Ms. DeWorken a question to further elaborate on social media's influence on the issue of cyberbullying. Ms. DeWorken stated that the reliance students have on social media now is astounding, and she is constantly telling students to get off of their phones or social media. Ms. DeWorken explained, “They put a lot of pressure on that social media presence and their interaction with it carries a lot of weight personally and interpersonally.” When asked whether schools should play a role in educating students on how they properly identify and deal with cyberbullying, Ms. DeWorken shared that most schools do have some sort of digital education on the matter, but it is the same thing every year that students don’t take seriously. Ms. DeWorken further shared that she believes there should be more personalized education and better ways to report it so that “students don’t feel like they are sending their friends to the police.” One thing that Ms. DeWorken stated that I believe is very important and impactful about what schools can do is to provide “a way for students to be able to get support about cyberbullying and report it in a way that they don’t feel like they are going to become a social outcast because they’re standing up for the right thing.”

In my second method of primary research, I provided a simple eight question google form to the students of Ms. Bonnie DeWorken's ninth grade English classes, with students ranging in ages 14-15. The results that I received from this survey were about what I expected based on my secondary research. I surveyed 20 students, and of those twenty 80% answered that they have encountered or witnessed cyberbullying, 15% have not, and 5% are unsure.

Have you ever witnessed/experienced cyberbullying?
20 responses

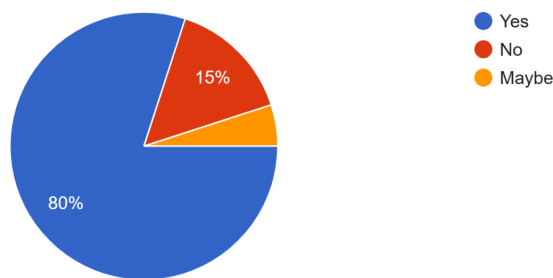


Figure 1 - Results of question about ever experiencing cyberbullying

I asked the students what types of cyberbullying they most commonly have seen and the ones with the most responses were offensive name calling (82.4%) and false rumors (94.1%). Though these were not the only ones that received responses; they had the highest percentage. Some of the other percentages included 35.3% receiving unwanted explicit images, 41.2% also receiving physical threats, 17.6% constant monitoring, and 41.2% sharing of explicit images without consent. A constant between the majority of the students who answered this question was the offensive name calling and false rumors.

What types of cyberbullying have you witnessed/encountered?

17 responses

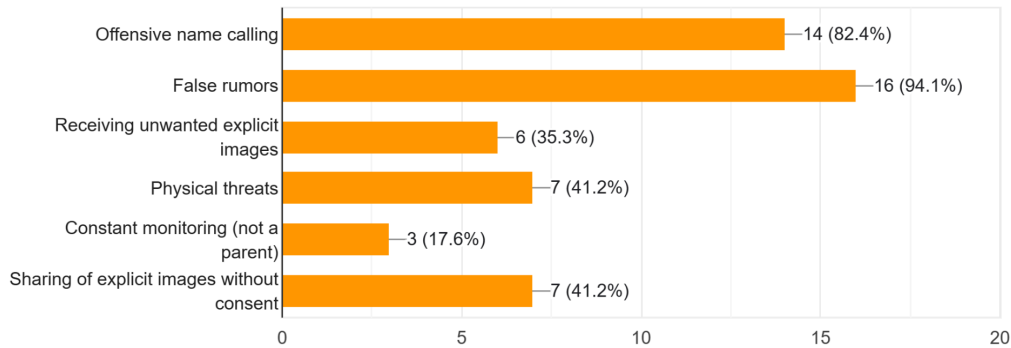


Figure 2 - Results of question about types of cyberbullying

Next, I asked students to select the platforms on which they have seen or encountered cyberbullying, providing the answers of social media, messaging apps, and online forums also providing a spot for their own answers. 88.2% of the students answered yes to social media, 64.7% selected messaging apps, 11.8% answered yes to online forums, and 5.9% filled in video games. Social media surpassed the next highest percentage by over 20% showing how much more social media has an effect on cyberbullying.

What platforms have you witnessed/encountered cyberbullying?

17 responses

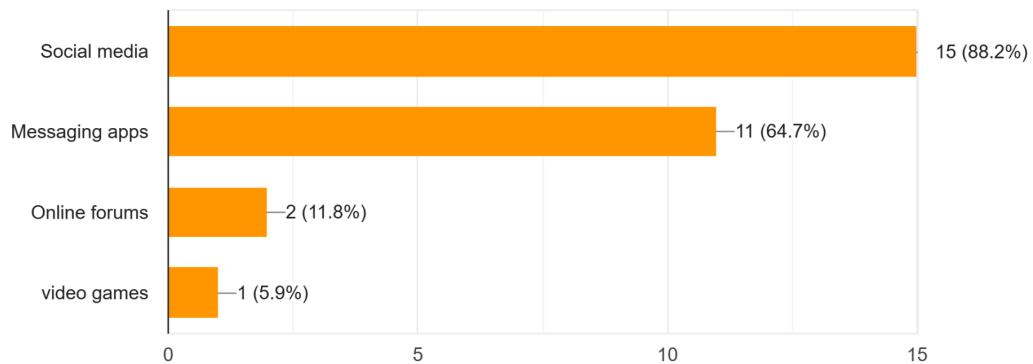


Figure 3 - Results of question about where cyberbullying is encountered

The next survey question asked the students how frequently they have seen cyberbullying in the past 6 months, giving them a scale 1-5 of never to always. Moving up the scale, 15% of student said that they have not encountered cyberbullying in the past 6 months, also lining up

with the 15% who answered no to the first question if they've ever witnessing or experiencing cyberbullying. 25% selected 2, being that they hardly ever have encountered cyberbullying in the past 6 months. The highest percentage selected was answer 3, being that they have occasionally encountered cyberbullying, being at 45%. Only 5% stated that they frequently encounter cyberbullying and 10% selected that they have always encountered cyberbullying over the past 6 months.

How frequently have you witnessed/encountered cyberbullying in the past 6 months?
20 responses

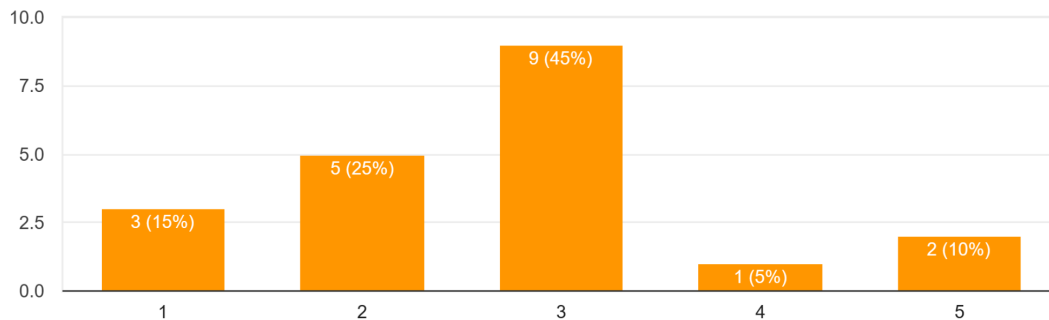


Figure 4 - Results of question about cyberbullying frequency over 6 months

The survey asked students how they felt cyberbullying affects their academics and mental well-being. I provided the students with a scale ranging from 1-5, 1 being no effect/impact and 5 being a negative impact. 25% of students who answered selected that they do not believe cyberbullying has an impact on their academics or mental well-being, 10% selecting a slight impact at a 2, 10% selecting a 3, 45% choosing a 4, and 2% choosing 5 at negative impact.

How do you think cyberbullying affects your academics and mental well-being?

20 responses

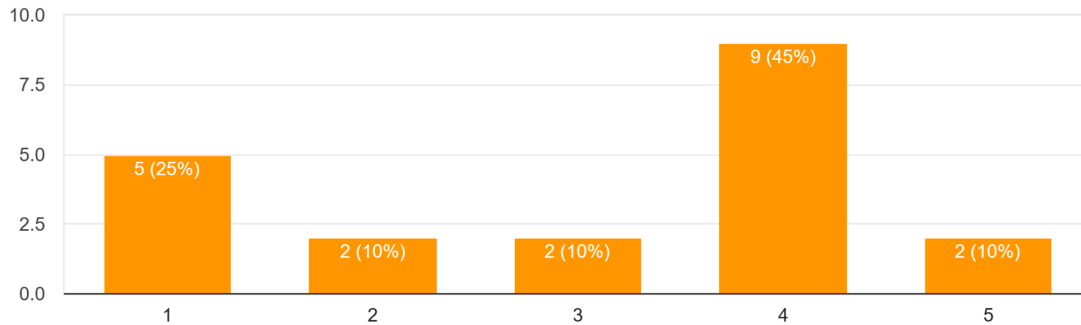


Figure 5 - Results of question about how cyberbullying affects students

I next asked students about whether or not they would feel comfortable reporting it if they did encounter cyberbullying. The results to this question were more surprising to me as I expected more students to not be comfortable with it. The highest selected answer was maybe (45%), then yes (30%), no (20%), and one student decided to take a different route with their answer filling in the 'other' box with "get banned nerd" (5%). I found the response of this one student interesting, because in the survey about cyberbullying they decided to take the approach of cyberbullying me, even if it were in a joking manner.

If you were to encounter cyberbullying, would you feel comfortable reporting it?

20 responses

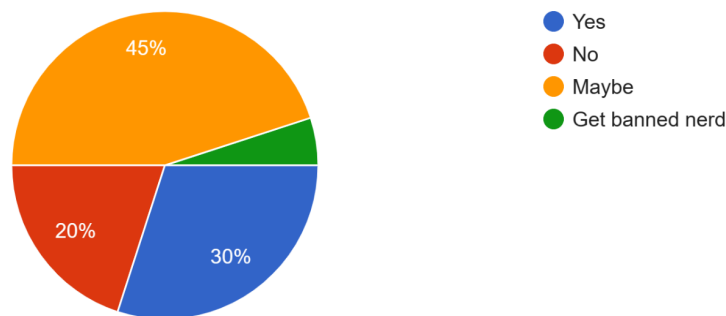


Figure 6 - Results of question about students' comfort reporting acts of cyberbullying

My next question asked if schools helping students to learn how to identify cyberbullying will help with the issue. The majority of students stuck with the yes, no, maybe answers with

45% saying that they do think that would help, 35% saying that it might, and 10% saying no. 10% of the students provided their own answers, one saying that if a student does not want to report then learning it won't help. And the other student stated that it depends on if it is taken seriously or not.

Do you think that helping students learn to identify cyberbullying will help with the issue?
20 responses

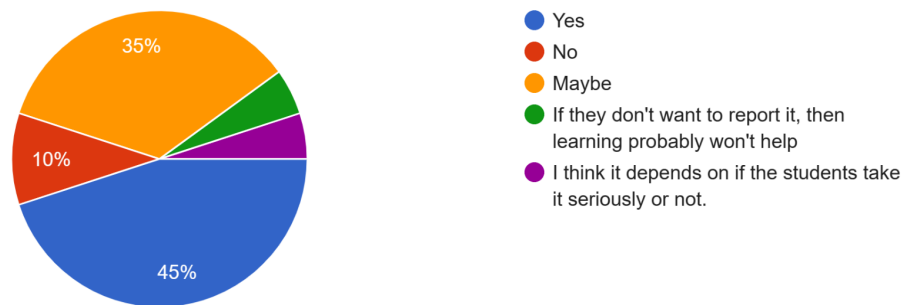


Figure 7 - Results of question about what can help with cyberbullying

In addition to the survey results listed, I also asked students ways that they think would help to prevent cyberbullying. I received a variety of different answers from the students who decided to respond regarding what they think can be done to help. Some students provided responses stating that there isn't really a way to prevent the issue and others provided answers of what they believe could be done. There were a few simpler answers from students such as just "being nice to people" or "harsher punishment" and a few just suggesting no social media or simply blocking and reporting. But, some of the more in depth answers include suggestions about better educating students on the issue, enforcing rules and consequences if something is witnessed and not reported, or making sure parents are informed what kids do online. Though some of these suggestions are harder to enforce, such as no social media, this question received 10 responses, 50% of the students who took the survey provided some sort of a solution that they think could help the issue or saying why they don't think it can be prevented. 80% of the

students who took the survey have witnessed or encountered cyberbullying, and 80% of the students who took the survey believe that informing students about the issue will or might help prevent the issue. The opinions of the students should be taken into account regarding the issue of cyberbullying. Supporting students' opinions and using students as a resource on ways to better engage them in learning about the issue instead of just sitting them down for the same repetitive information, adapting what is taught to students based on where the issue is most commonly seen, such as social media. Ultimately, incorporating students' insights and experiences into prevention strategies can lead to more targeted and impactful interventions in combating cyberbullying.

Discussion of Results

In further analyzing the findings of my primary research, it is clear that cyberbullying is a definite issue among students. Ms. Bonnie DeWorken shared insights into how cyberbullying has affected students in the classroom, mentioning common occurrences of false rumors and name-calling in particular. Students, surveyed through a Google Form created on cyberbullying, also showed the most common types of cyberbullying as name-calling and false rumors through their answers, further proving Ms. DeWorken's observations. Students also suggested that cyberbullying is most commonly encountered through social media platforms. Students also answered through the survey that even with the effects of cyberbullying some are hesitant when it comes to reporting it, and as Ms. DeWorken mentioned, a better system is needed. Some of the students who took the survey also proposed diverse solutions and possible strategies for preventing cyberbullying including more personalized education, enforcement/stricter rules, and

parental involvement. These findings show the significance of integrating student insights into preventative measures, following a collaborative approach with teachers and students addressing cyberbullying in an educational way that can vary with trends.

Conclusion

This examination of cyberbullying through COVID-19 and the effects social media and demographics have on it underscore the importance of gaining a further understanding of the topic to address cyberbullying in educational settings. The research findings show how technological advancements, virtual learning environments, and bullying behaviors have affected cyberbullying among students. Examining the impacts of cyberbullying across different demographic groups and the experiences of students and teachers provides valuable information on the issue of cyberbullying.

Through the research in cyberbullying demographics, studies have highlighted the disproportionate impact on certain groups, such as older teenage girls and students from lower-income households, as indicated by Vogels (2022). Vogels' research underscores that older teenage girls are more susceptible to targeted attacks related to appearance and overall online abuse. Furthermore, Alismaiel et al. (2023) emphasize the significant influence of social media on cyberbullying behaviors among students. Their study reveals that the pervasive presence of social media platforms has provided avenues for cyberbullying to thrive, often without students fully comprehending how to effectively navigate and respond to online harassment and abuse. This lack of awareness contributes to the vulnerability of students, particularly those who are already marginalized or disadvantaged.

The primary research methods conducted in this study, including surveys administered to high school students and interviews conducted with teachers, have provided valuable insights into the impact of cyberbullying on students in school settings. By looking into both student and teacher perspectives on cyberbullying, it provides this research with a better understanding of the nature of cyberbullying and its effects on student academics and mental well-being.

Limitations

Some of the limitations involved in this research included who I could provide my survey to, what questions I was able to ask, the section size of who the survey was provided to, limitations of the data collected. Expanding on the limitations, I was constrained in terms of the participant pool as the survey was only distributed to students in Ms. DeWorken's classes, limiting the diversity of perspectives. Additionally, due to the nature of the survey being concise and tailored for high school students, questions had to be more generalized and modified to make sure students would be comfortable answering, possibly affecting the depth of inquiry into certain aspects of cyberbullying. Furthermore, the restricted scope of the survey, confined to a single teacher's classes, may have implications for the broader applicability of the findings beyond this specific context.

Purpose/Significance

As this study concludes, it is essential to underscore the significance of understanding cyberbullying in today's digital age. The rise of smartphones and social media platforms has reshaped how students interact and, consequently, how bullying manifests. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic's shift to online learning has further highlighted the importance of

addressing cyberbullying. By shedding light on the multifaceted impacts of cyberbullying and exploring effective solutions, this research contributes to creating safer and more supportive educational environments. Understanding the influence of demographics, social media, and virtual learning on cyberbullying is crucial for implementing evidence-based strategies that promote student well-being and academic success. This study serves as a stepping stone toward fostering a more positive digital experience for students and mitigating the harmful effects of cyberbullying.

Appendix

Have you ever witnessed/experienced cyberbullying?
20 responses

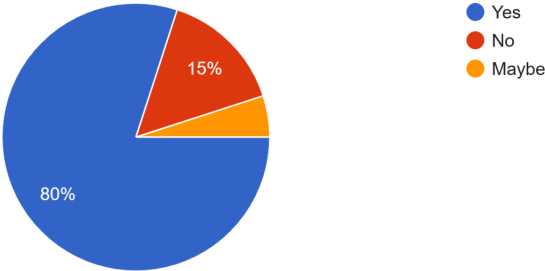


Figure 1 - Results of question about ever experiencing cyberbullying

What types of cyberbullying have you witnessed/encountered?

17 responses

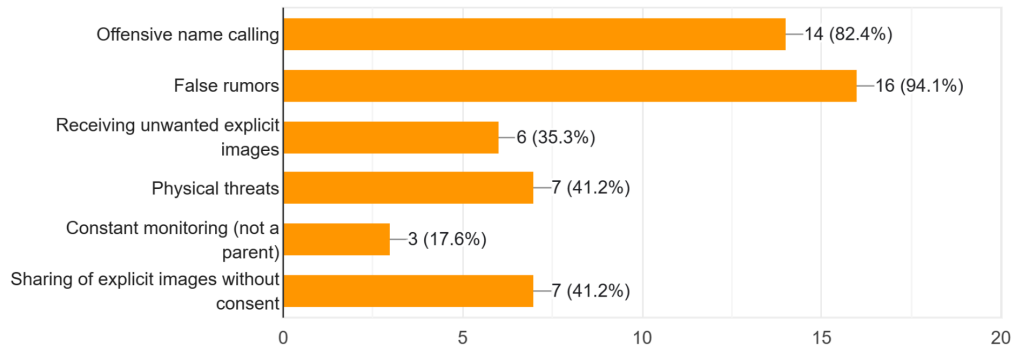


Figure 2 - Results of question about types of cyberbullying

What platforms have you witnessed/encountered cyberbullying?

17 responses

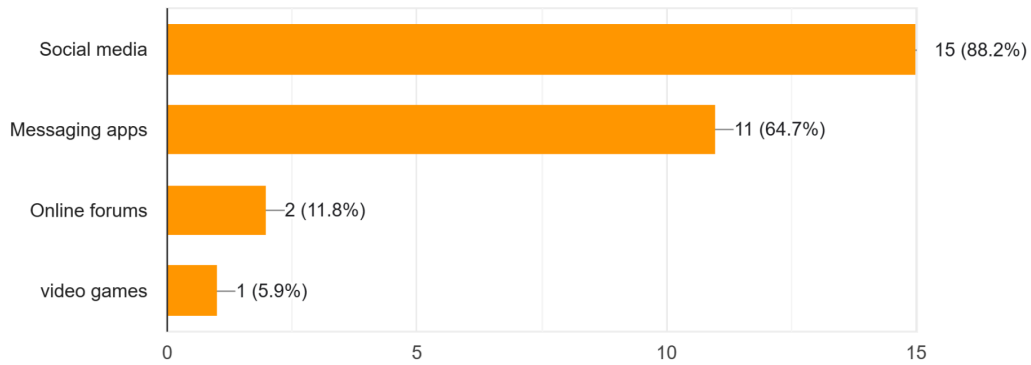


Figure 3 - Results of question about where cyberbullying is encountered

How frequently have you witnessed/encountered cyberbullying in the past 6 months?

20 responses

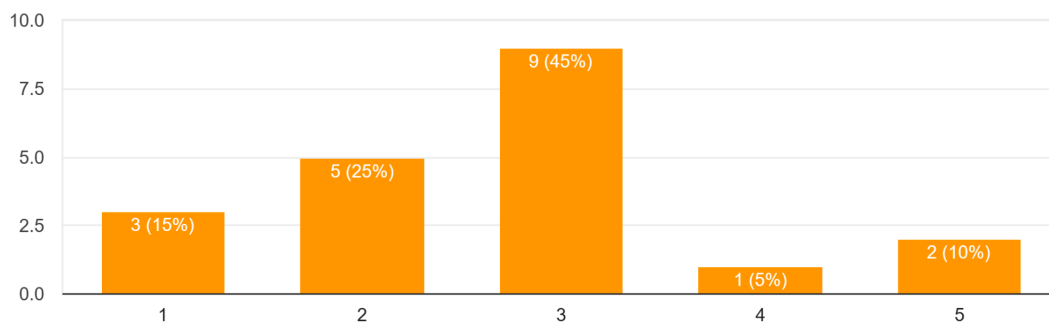


Figure 4 - Results of question about cyberbullying frequency over 6 months

How do you think cyberbullying affects your academics and mental well-being?

20 responses

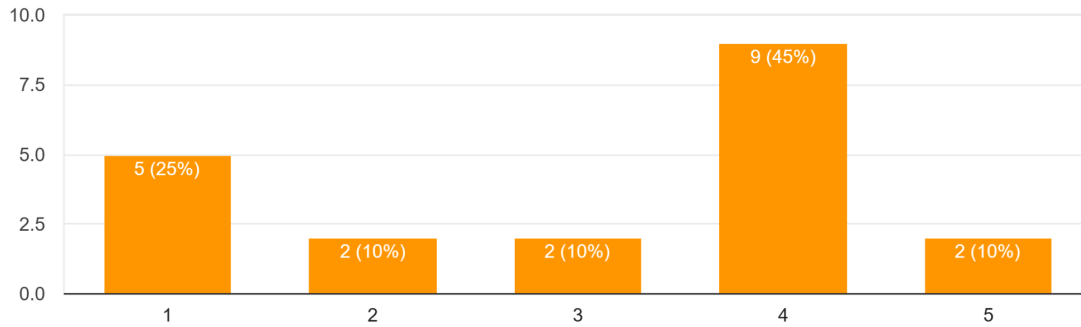


Figure 5 - Results of question about how cyberbullying affects students

If you were to encounter cyberbullying, would you feel comfortable reporting it?

20 responses

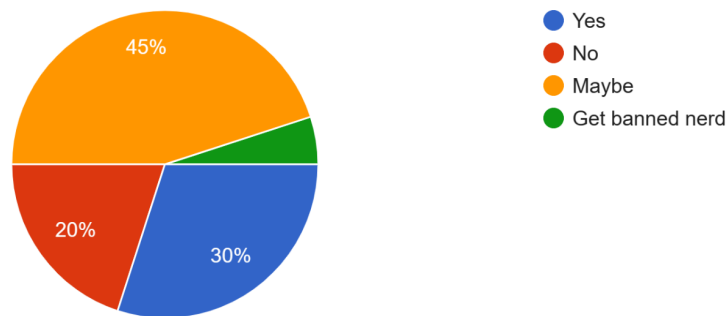


Figure 6 - Results of question about students comfort reporting acts of cyberbullying

Do you think that helping students learn to identify cyberbullying will help with the issue?

20 responses

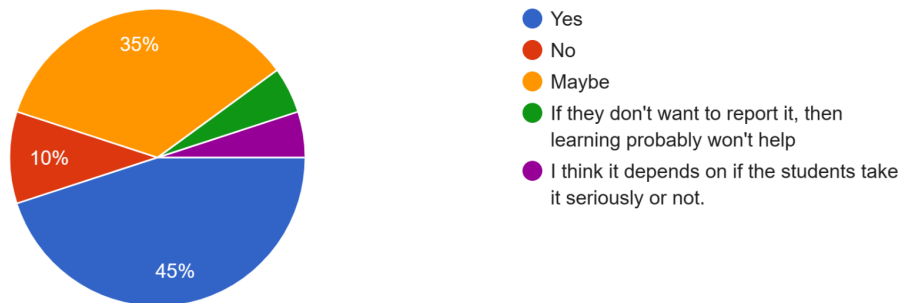


Figure 7 - Results of question about what can help with cyberbullying

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