Cyberbullying and Girls: A Literature Review

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This research brief provides a synopsis of selected literature that focuses on girls' experiences of cyberbullying. It serves as a companion to our recently published study: "Individual and Collective Well-Being: Ten-Year Study of Bullying-Prevention Programming in an All-Girls' School", along with "Girls and Bullying: A Literature Review."

This brief is based on a review of scholarly publications on youth and bullying that focus on students in Grades 4–12, published primarily between 2005 and 2017, with a selection of relevant articles published prior to 2005. A total of 127 books, book chapters, and journal articles about girls and bullying were reviewed. The research was predominantly conducted in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, and contains significant findings related to girls and cyberbullying.
This review summarizes cyberbullying research conducted exclusively with girls or that reveals significant differences between the experiences of girls and boys. Five articles present research conducted in single-sex schools; the other studies took place in co-ed schools.

Cyberbullying Defined

Youth today are increasingly technologically connected and engage socially through new forms of media. Bullying has moved into the online realm. Researchers tend to define *cyberbullying* as the occurrence of repetitive mistreatment that takes place online (Mishna, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012b; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Sameer Hinduja and Justin Patchin, directors of the U.S.-based Cyberbullying Research Center, inform students that cyberbullying occurs when someone ''repeatedly makes fun of another person online or repeatedly picks on another person through e-mail or text message or when someone posts something online about another person that they don't like'' (2012, p. 540). To be classified as cyberbullying, a behaviour must involve the use of technology to bully another person, cause harm or a negative impact to the target, and be repetitive (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012a, 2012b; Schneider, O'Donnell, & Smith, 2015; Williams & Guerra, 2007). The inherent nature of electronic technology ensures that any online action (e.g., posting a comment or picture) can easily be repeated by being shared and seen by a wide online audience (Campbell, 2005; Mishna, 2012; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012a, 2012b). Because technology has invaded every minute of the day, youth can bully or be bullied at any time (Mishna, 2012). Among studies of youth bullying, the reported rates of cyberbullying increase from elementary school to middle school and then decrease in high school (Nickerson, Singleton, Schnurr, & Collen, 2014).

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Cyberbullying Victimization

Research shows that 20 to 24 per cent of students report they have experienced cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012a, 2012c; Wade & Beran, 2011). For example, in a survey of more than 4,400 randomly selected 11 to 18-year-old students from 33 schools in a large school district in the southern United States, 20 per cent indicated they had been a victim of cyberbullying at some point in their life (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012).

Research findings differ on girls' likelihood of being cyberbullied, and how this likelihood compares to boys. Literature shows that the rate of girls indicating they have been bullied is as high as 38 per cent in one research sample (Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, & Hinduja, 2010) and as low as 21.8 per cent in another (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012a). A substantial body of research shows that girls are more likely to be cyberbullied than boys (Boak, Hamilton, Adlaf, Henderson, & Mann, 2015; Cappadocia, Craig, & Pepler, 2013; Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013; Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Nickerson et al., 2014; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Kowalski, Limber, & Agaston, 2008; Li, 2007; Patchin, 2015; Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012; Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippett, 2006; Tarablus, Heiman, & Olenik-Shemesh, 2015; Wade & Beran, 2011; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009).

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Research at two Canadian middle schools reveals that almost 60 per cent of cyberbully victims are girls (Li, 2007). A smaller, but noteworthy, body of research shows that girls and boys have an equal likelihood of being bullied online (Beran & Li, 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Li, 2006; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012a, 2012b; Williams & Guerra, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). An analysis of 42 international bullying studies published in peer-reviewed journals provides a quantitative picture of what these rates may look like. Specifically, results across studies reveal that girls are more likely to be bullied but, on average, only about one per cent higher than boys (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012a). Although limited, Canadian data reveal the minor differences between girls and boys: with 16 per cent of girls and 12 per cent of boys admitting to having been cyberbullied within the last five years (Statistics Canada, 2017).

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The literature also reveals: (1) the online spaces where cyberbullying is most likely to occur; (2) the identifying features of different kinds of cyberbullying; and (3) the likelihood of girls being victims of each of these types of bullying. Online victimization occurs most commonly in chat rooms, via text message and via email (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2010). Cyberbullying is most likely to involve aggressive comments but also can include name calling, spreading gossip, duplicitous behaviour, spreading confidential information, teasing and sexual harassment (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2010; Statistics Canada, 2017; Wade & Beran, 2011).

Girls in Grades 6–11 in a major Canadian city were significantly more likely than boys to have experienced the following types of cyberbullying: being called names, being made to feel bad, having rumours spread about them, having someone pretend to be them online and being solicited to engage in sexual activities (Wade & Beran, 2011). Of students in Grades 6–9 in a large metropolitan area of Canada, girls were more likely than boys to receive sexually suggestive messages, to have been harassed online because of their gender, or to be excluded from online groups (Jackson, Cassidy, & Brown, 2009).

Of research that examines patterns over time, cyberbullying victimization of girls seems to increase from elementary school to junior high (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009) but declines from junior high

to high school (Landstedt & Persson, 2014; Mishna, 2012; Wade & Beran, 2011; Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, & Del Ray, 2015). A study of students in a large Canadian city found that girls in Grades 6 and 7 were more likely than boys to be cyberbullied, but in Grades 10 and 11 no differences emerged (Mishna, 2012). Younger girls are more likely than boys to have rumours spread about them or to have someone pretend to be them online, whereas older girls were more likely than boys to be sent unwelcome sexual pictures or requests to do something sexual (Mishna, 2012). Among girls, those who are "sexual minorities" (e.g., LGBTQ+) are more likely to be bullied online (Schneider et al., 2012; Schneider et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2015).

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Cyberbullying Perpetration

As with cyberbullying victimization, there are gender differences related to cyberbullying perpetration. Patchin and Hinduja's (2012a, 2012c) review of cyberbullying research reveals that about 17 per cent of students admit to having cyberbullied others in the past; about the same as those who indicate they have been victims of bullying. Research analyzing cyberbullying perpetration and gender provides mixed findings. Some research suggests that girls are less likely to be cyberbullies than boys (Floros, Simos, Fisoun, Dafouli, & Geroukalis, 2013; Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2013; Lapidot-Lefler & Dolev-Cohen, 2015; Tanrikulu & Campbell, 2015; Tarablus et al., 2015; Zych et al., 2015). A Canadian study of students in three junior high schools in a large city reveals that 12 per cent of girls (as compared to 22 per cent of boys) reported being cyberbullies (Li, 2006). A U.S. study of over 4,000 students in Grades 6–12 shows that older youth (and males) are slightly, but significantly, more likely to be involved in cyberbullying perpetration (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). Other studies show no significant difference, with boys and girls being equally likely to be cyberbullies (Cappadocia et al., 2013; Holfeld & Leadbetter, 2015; Li, 2007; Misha, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012b; Wade & Beran, 2011). One Canadian study indicates that girls cyberbully at higher rates than boys (29.4 per cent vs. 21.4 per cent) (Jackson et al., 2009). Research and media attention to cyberbullying has been critiqued because girls receive significantly more coverage than boys for engaging in cyberbullying, although the majority of research suggests they are less likely or equally likely as boys to be perpetrators (Crooks, 2016).

Just as girls are more likely than boys to have rumours spread about them online (Wade & Beran, 2011), Mishna's (2012) study of students in Grades 6–11 in a large Canadian city reveals that girls who were cyberbullying perpetrators were more likely than boys to spread rumours about someone. A longitudinal study of over 20,000 middle- and high-school students in the United States found that girls involved in cyberbullying are more likely to post mean comments online, whereas boys are more likely to post hurtful pictures or videos (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Girls in Grades 6–9 in a Canadian study were more likely than boys to engage in cyberbullying for the following reasons: because it was "fun," because the other person upset them, or because they did not like the victim (Jackson et al., 2009). Girls' cyberbullying has been attributed to the fact that they have more intensive online social activity than boys, as well as greater online contact with strangers (Festl & Quandt, 2016; Kowalski et al., 2008). However, girls are also victimized by peers. A large American study of over 3,000 girls between ages 8 and 17 shows 80 per cent of cyberbullied girls knew the bully, and the bully was most likely another student or friend from school, or someone from a chat room (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2010).

Cyber Victim-Bullies

The term *victim-bully* refers to youth who bully others but who are also victims of bullying. About 10 per cent of students in Hinduja & Patchin's (2012) large southern-U.S. study said they had been both a victim and an offender (e.g., victim-bullies). Recent research on girls who are cyber victim-bullies (e.g., both perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying) is limited, but a recent study of over 1,200 middle-school students in Los Angeles reveals that girls were 2.5 times more likely to be a cyber victim-bully than boys (Rice et al., 2015). In contrast, study of over 500 students in Israel suggests that boys are more likely to be cyber victim-bullies, with 2.7 per cent of girls in the study reporting cyber victimization and cyberbullying, compared to 5.9 per cent of boys (Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2015). In addition, the Israeli researchers discovered that students with learning disabilities were more likely to be cyber victim-bullies (Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2015).

Two studies reveal that cyberbullied girls respond to online victimization by "cyberbullying back" (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2010; Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2015). In the study of over 3,000 American girls between ages 8 and 17, over one-quarter of cyberbullied girls reported retaliating after being cyberbullied (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2010). Likewise, a study of British Columbia students reveals that girls are more likely than boys to bully back if they are bullied first (Jackson et al., 2009).

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Intervention and Reporting

Gender differences are observed in bystanders' willingness to intervene when they see cyberbullying taking place, and in victims' willingness to report being cybervictimized. Girls are more likely than boys to witness cyberbullying and to intervene (Jackson et al., 2009; Nickerson et al., 2014). Cyberbullied girls are also more likely than boys to report that they have been victimized (e.g., tell an adult); more often this is a parent or non-school adult (Jackson et al., 2009; Li, 2006; Schneider et al., 2012; Schneider et al., 2015). Girls who are sexual minorities are less likely to tell someone if they are cyberbullied (Schneider et al., 2015).

Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, and Hinduja's (2010) large-scale study of U.S. girls reveals that in absolute numbers, very few cyberbully victims reported that they informed a parent or another adult after being cyberbullied. Girls were more likely to confide in a friend either online or offline and many felt pressured to stay offline as a result of being bullied. However, one-quarter of girls said they did nothing different as a result of being cyberbullied (e.g., they neither reported nor changed how they used technology).

"The psychological impact on victims can be profound."

Effects of Cyberbullying

The psychological impact on victims can be profound. All cyberbullied students between ages 10 and 17 in a Canadian study reported high levels of anxiety, depression and externalizing (e.g., anger, irritability, missing school, violence toward others) in response to being called names and threatened. Compared to boys, girls reported a more severe psychological impact (Nordahl, Beran, & Dittrick, 2013). Likewise, girls reported higher levels of depression in response to having rumours spread about them online (Nordahl et al., 2013). Other types of cyberbullying were equally distressing for both sexes, including being asked to do something sexual, being sent sexual information, being impersonated, or having a private picture sent to others (Nordahl et al., 2013). Cyberbullying also has negative effects on students' self-esteem, and for bullies, victims, and victim-bullies, this leads to negative perceptions of learning and school (Betts, Spenser, & Gardner, 2017; Burgess-Proctor et al., 2010).

In a study of almost 2,000 middle-school students, those who had experienced cyberbullying (as victims or offenders) had significantly lower self-esteem than those who had little or no experience of cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010).

In Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, & Hinduja's (2010) study of more than 3,000 internet-using girls between ages 8 and 17, of the almost 40 per cent of girls who reported having been bullied online, over 20 per cent indicated that this experience affected them at home or at school, and over one-third felt angry, sad, or frustrated, as well as other negative emotional effects such as depression (Burgess-Proctor et al.,2010). Yet data indicates that more than half the survey respondents (55 per cent) reported no negative effect of cyberbullying, which suggests that the majority of girls experience healthy resilience in the face of bullying (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2010). Girls in a study of students in five British Columbia schools also reported being less afraid than boys when threatened through electronic media (Cassidy et al., 2009). Of students who are cyberbullied, girls indicate they have more social support than boys—from friends, family and others (Tarablus et al., 2015).

Girls' Understanding of Cyberbullying

A study of Canadian youth shows that cyberbullied girls believed they were targeted because of their sexuality, gender, or appearance, whereas boys attributed being bullied for race or disability (Mishna, 2012). Scholars such as Crooks (2016) have identified two major research gaps in the area of girls and bullying: (1) research studies neglect to include the voices of girls; and (2) researchers do not use intersectional frameworks to understand girls' experience of cyberbullying. Communication between adults and youth also needs greater attention when these groups work together to create strategies to combat cyberbullying (Crooks, 2016).

Conclusion

A review of the relevant literature offers some insights into the phenomena of cyberbullying. The available research also marks potential areas for future exploration on the group nature of bullying and the location of cyberbullying. The relevant literature describes cyberbullying as an individual-to-individual phenomenon; however, more data is needed regarding whether and how group bullying occurs. The available research focuses on how many students have been bullied (victimization) and the psychological effects that stem from this, but few studies offer information on where the behaviour happens and the relationship between bullies and those being bullied.

Future research could probe girls' developmental (psychological) stages and map these in relation to the likelihood that instances of bullying would be lower in elementary school, increase through middle school and then decrease in high school. Also worthy of research are any correlations between students' use of cellphones, experiences of bullying, and the time of day in which children are online without adult accompaniment.

In combination, the literature reviews prepared by Branksome Hall's Chandaria Research Centre on face-to-face bullying and on cyberbullying offer important information regarding interactions among youth in virtual worlds. Educators and parents need to be mindful of the distinct experiences girls encounter as they engage in social media and online. The goal is to provide girls with the tools to promote positive online interactions and at the same time to prevent threatening or negative impacts from cyberbullying.

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