

**PERCEPTIONS OF CYBERBULLY VICTIMIZATION AMONG  
COLLEGE STUDENTS: AN EXAMINATION USING ROUTINE  
ACTIVITIES THEORY**

**by**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research is to examine whether cyberbullying experiences occur among college-age students; if lesbian, gay, and bi-sexual (LGB) individuals experience cyberbullying more than heterosexual individuals; and if bullied, are college students likely to report such cyberbullying to someone in authority. To examine cyberbullying, a convenience sample of 129 college students at a mid-southern university, recruited through emails, presentations, and flyers to respond to a survey. The data from this research examined routine activities theory to examine cyberbullying among college students. The strongest correlations to experiencing cyberbullying were suitability and availability.

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine whether cyberbullying experiences occur among college-age students; if lesbian, gay, and bi-sexual (LGB) individuals experience cyberbullying more than heterosexual individuals; and if bullied, are college students more likely to report such cyberbullying to someone in authority. I have based my thesis on data drawn from a convenience sample of undergraduate students attending a mid-southern university.

It was not until the last decade that bullying branched out into the cyber world. What used to be primarily a school related incident, has grown to be an anytime, anywhere act due to new and continuously available technology (Gerson and Rappaport 2011). Given this availability, bullies no longer need to resort to physical contact as an intimidation factor (Patchin and Hinduja 2006) as simply possessing the capabilities of accessing the internet, instant messages, text messages, and social networks, allows anyone with a computer or cell phone the potential and opportunity to be a bully or even a victim (Li 2006).

Cyberbullying, whether by email, instant messages (IMs), pictures, posts or videos, includes a pattern of sending hateful, harassing, insulting or slanderous messages often containing defamatory content (Patchin and Hinduja 2006). Examples of this type of cyberbullying include:

- In 2007, a Yale Law Student was the target of sexually violent rants, among other attacks, in the comments section of Auto Admit, an online college admissions discussion board (Daniloff 2009:2);
- In 2009, a Boston University student found herself the subject of public ridicule, her diction mocked and her looks likened to an “elephant fetus” in a posting on the Juicy Campus site (Daniloff 2009:4)

- In 2010, a webcam recording showed a Rutgers University freshman having an intimate encounter with another male student. After the video streamed online, the student committed suicide (Foderaro 2010:1).

Cyberbullying among college students is an important area of study for two important reasons: 1) research in this area is in its infancy particularly for college students, and 2) it is highly unlikely that electronic communication will subside (Kowalski and Limber 2007; Rivituso 2012). In fact, the use of cyber-communications is ubiquitous among specific demographic groups as a primary form of contact, sharing, and interaction (Kenworthy, Brand and Bartrum 2012). The Pew Research Center (2010) reported 93.0% of youth between the ages of 12 and 17, and 93.0% of young adults use the internet. The measuring of time on the internet for undergraduates is in hours per day not hours per week (Grugan 2009). Communication trends have shown that 8-18 year olds spend an average of 1.29 hours per day on the internet, with 25.0% of that time spent on a social networking site (SNS). College-age individuals spend on average 2.21-2.65 hours per day on the internet, while 88.0% of those individuals reported using social networking sites (Ritter 2012). This amount of usage makes it rather difficult to avoid the potential for bullying.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### Problems in Defining “the problem” of Cyberbullying

The term cyberbullying has no agreed upon definition and is often used interchangeably with terms such as cyberharassment and cyber-stalking (Fukuchi 2011; Lindsay and Krysik 2012; Wolak, Mitchell, and Finklehor 2007). Although there are

some variations in the precise definition of cyberbullying, it is most consistently defined as follows: willful information and communication by an individual or group involving electronic technologies to deliberately and repeatedly harass and/or threaten another person or group using email, texting, social networking sites, and/or posting videos or pictures (Dilmac 2009; Hinduja and Patchin 2007,2008; Hoff and Mitchell 2009; Marcum et al. 2012; Patchin and Hinduja 2006; Turbert 2009).

In contrast, for many researchers, cyber harassment (repeatedly sending nasty, mean, and insulting messages) and cyberstalking (repeated, intense stalking harassment that includes threats and/or creates significant fear) can potentially be legal issues. Further, due to First Amendment protections, using textual communication to tease, harass, or mistreat someone is generally not considered to be illegal. Consequently, unless there is a serious and substantial threat to an individual's personal safety, law enforcement does not generally get involved in cyberbullying cases (Hinduja and Patchin 2008).

Given this tendency to consider cyberbullying among young adults as “not that serious,” it is not surprising that previous research (Li 2006; Patchin and Hinduja 2006; Slonje and Smith 2008) has focused only on cyberbullying as related to adolescents, inferring that young adults do not experience cyberbullying, but instead face cyberharassment or cyberstalking. In fact, several research projects (Finn 2004; Kennedy and Taylor 2010; Lindsay and Krysik 2012) have studied undergraduate students; however, most data refer to cyberharassment or cyberstalking among young adults, not cyberbullying. One exception comes from Darby Dickerson, Vice President and Dean of Stetson University College of Law who argues that not only does cyberbullying occur to

students on law school campuses, but to faculty and deans as well (Dickerson 2005). However, studies of undergraduates and cyberbullying have generally been based on surveys with college freshman and reference a time frame prior to entering college (i.e., during high school).

Whether cyberbullying or cyberharassment, it is clear that these activities are going on, but to what extent and to what degree is unclear. For example, an Associated Press-MTV poll showed 56.0% of persons from teens to their early 20's have experienced some type of cyberharassment (Cass and Anderson 2011). Hoff and Mitchell (2009) found that 56.1% of undergraduates at the University of New England had experienced cyberharassment at some point in their lives. Lindsay and Krysik (2012) showed 43.3% of undergraduate students experienced some form of cyberharassment. Cyberharassment issues have also affected the online environment of taking classes where Vance (2010) reported 18.0% had experienced harassment at least once. Molluzzo and Lawler (2012) researched undergraduate students on their knowledge, perceptions, and victimization regarding cyberbullying. The majority (63.0%) of respondents were first year students and female (58.0%). They reported 11.0% of 121 undergraduates agree that cyberbullying is a serious issue at the university level, while reporting that 7.0% reported experiencing cyberbullying while attending the university.

Although cyberharassment and cyberbullying have at times been stated to be interchangeable (Lindsay and Krysik 2011: 705), in this instance, cyberharassment is just one of eight different facets of cyberbullying (Willard 2007:1-2). These different facets are:

- Flaming: Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.
- Harassment: Repeatedly sending nasty, mean, and insulting messages.
- Denigration: "Dissing" someone online. Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships
- Impersonation/Masquerading: Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger or to damage that person's reputation or friendships.
- Outing: Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online.
- Trickery: Talking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, then sharing it online.
- Exclusion: Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group.
- Cyberstalking: Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear.

Typically, these eight different facets of cyberbullying describe actions of adolescent cyberbullies; however, these are applicable to the overall definition of cyberbullying regarding college students. Therefore, for the purposes of my research, I examined the extent to which six of the eight forms of cyberbullying exist among young adults in college. Trickery and outing are very similar, and therefore, I chose not to inquire about trickery. Cyberstalking is also not a facet I examined, as it is punishable by law.

### Characteristics of Cyberbullying

Bullies and their victims are on any school campus of any age range, from elementary schools to colleges, and historically the act of bullying has been associated

predominately with boys/men rather than girls/women (Dooley, Pyzalski and Cross 2009; Li 2006 ). Bosworth, Espelage and Simon (1999) in their study of mild to extreme bullying behavior of 558 adolescents reported that boys engaged in bullying behavior (mean 5.50) more often than did girls (mean 3.98). Based on current research, bullying by boys is more likely to include a physical attack, whereas bullying by girls is predominately verbal and achieved through words and gossip (Li 2006). Li reported that more boys than girls were cyberbullies, while Kowalski and Limber (2007) reported that girls outnumbered boys in electronic bullying. However, drawing from a study of Swedish students aged 12 – 20 from four different schools, Slonje and Smith (2008) researched cyberbullying as bullies or victims through text messages, email, mobile phones/pictures or videos in and out of school. They reported that gender for any type of cyberbullying was not statistically significant; however, girls (mean 2.35) experienced email-bullying victimization more than did boys (mean 2.09). Research to date has not definitively concluded whether gender is an important factor in the act of cyberbullying.

As I have noted, the majority of research on cyberbullying has focused on middle to high school students creating a gap in the literature. Due to this gap regarding collegiate cyberbullying, my thesis relies heavily on the research conducted with adolescents. Nevertheless, there are a few studies examining cyberbullying among college students.

Dilmac (2009) conducted a study in Turkey of 666 undergraduate students regarding whether students ever engaged in cyberbullying; they found that 22.5% of students reported engaging in cyberbullying at least one time. Nearly four percent of the undergraduates surveyed reported that they would engage in cyberbullying again, and

15.3% were unsure if they would or would not continue to cyberbully in the future. A study of 339 undergraduates at the University of New Hampshire found that 10.0% to 15.0% of those students surveyed reported some type of online (email and instant messaging) harassment while at the university (Finn 2004). This study examined situations considered online harassment rather than cyberstalking. Dooley et al. (2009:183) reported that the damage done by “cyberbullying may be largely social and emotional in nature and is exacerbated by the potential scale of the damage inflicted.”

From intermediate schools to universities, institutions are utilizing the Internet more than ever before in classrooms and computer labs (Li 2006), as such, these institutions are making students sign terms of usage. Thus, many intermediate and high schools have rules regarding the definition of bullying and the consequences of doing such; however, university’s rules about cyberbullying are vague. Additionally, when it comes to cyberbullying, how best to study and advocate for change becomes a gray area (Hinduja and Patchin 2008). In an attempt to understand how universities deal with this gray area, I examined the current cyberbullying policies of four different universities in the mid-south region (University of Kentucky, University of Alabama, University of Tennessee, and University of North Carolina). My examination revealed only policies pertaining to harassment. Not one of the four university policies stated anything about bullying or cyberbullying. As might be expected, many universities do not have policies in regards to cyberbullying because it is a gray area tied in with the First Amendment’s protection of freedom of speech as well as the difficulty in defining cyberbullying (Hinduja and Patchin 2008; Marden 2010). The only type of cyberbullying that is

punishable under current law and not protected by the First Amendment is 'cyberstalking' (Hinduja and Patchin 2008).

### "Being a Bully": What's in it for me?

Cyberbullying is hard for an individual, or authorities for that matter, to stop once it has started given that a person is often "connected" through technology at all hours of the day. This connectedness creates the possibility that bullies can hide behind the invisibility and anonymity afforded them through that very technology (Dickerson 2005; Hoff and Mitchell 2009; Slonje and Smith 2008). This technological connection allows a situation where "the bully gains a sense of power and control when s/he bullies their target" (Marden 2010:10). Given this anonymity, when an individual that bullies enters the online environment, that bully "engages in behavior that is seen as risky in the outside world and expects no consequences or accountability" (Ritter 2012:29). Hoff and Mitchell (2009) reported that 52.0% of respondents bullied behind anonymity due to the power they felt.

Bullying through e-mails and social websites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter, and IM's, as well as texting through cell phones empowers the cyberbully due to the sheer size of a potential audience (Marden 2010). According to Patchin and Hinduja (2006:154), experts regarding adolescent cyberbullying, "supervision is lacking in cyberspace." Personal and private messages between users are not monitored which allows a user to send any type of content. Public forums and chat rooms have minimal monitoring, and abusive comments can cause a user's IP address to

be banned (Patchin and Hinduja 2006). However, this will not necessarily stop a user from finding alternate means to gain entrance into that forum again.

Temporary e-mail accounts and pseudonyms in chat rooms, IM programs, and other Internet venues free individuals (potential bullies) “from normative and social constraints on their behavior” (Patchin and Hinduja 2006:154). A link between cyberbullying and other youth behavioral problems of adolescents has been identified by Hinduja and Patchin (2007). Their findings indicate the effects exhibited by youth who bully are “decreased academic achievement” ([stopbullying.gov/at-risk/effects/](http://stopbullying.gov/at-risk/effects/)), an increase in tardiness and truancy (Gerson and Rappaport 2011), dropping out of school (Waters 2011), as well as, assaultive conduct, substance abuse, and even traditional bullying (Hinduja and Patchin 2007). Slonje and Smith (2008), suggest that cyberbullies have less empathy and remorse, as well as reduced feelings of consequences because they can no longer see the fear in their victim’s eyes. Technology empowers the bully with a “greater sense of invincibility and inhibits their fear of being caught and punished” (Dickerson 2005), but to this point there is no existing literature that has studied the consequences as it relates specifically to the cyberbully. Furthermore, Gerson and Rappaport (2011:68), state, “cyberbullying is easy, anonymous, and requires little by way of planning, skill, physical size or social finesse”; nevertheless, “most often, the same youth who are bullies at school act aggressively online, and the same students are victimized in both places.”

## Victimization

While there are few direct consequences known for the perpetrators of cyberbullying unless identified to authorities, there are multiple and vast consequences for the victims of cyberbullying. Not all recipients of cyberbullying consider themselves victims; yet, for those that do, the effects are not always instantaneous. In some instances, cyberbullying can begin with a single comment that the bullied individual brushes off and attempts to ignore. However, a singular act of uploading an embarrassing picture one time to the Internet “can result in continued and widespread ridicule and humiliation for the victim” as he or she experiences it repeatedly (Dooley et al. 2009:183). Furthermore, a single episode can spawn additional comments that at first are contained within the cyber world but can branch out to a youth’s school and home life (ABC Family 2011).

The Annenberg Public Policy Center (2010:1), queried 600 young people through phone surveys examined cyberbullying over the past year, as repeatedly making fun of someone online, or through email, text messaging, or photo sharing, reported that “1 out of 7 or 14.0% of adolescents and young adults had experienced being a victim of cyberbullying.” Examples of this type of bullying/harassment reported by undergraduates include:

- Someone has made a website about me saying I’m gay with a lot of gross pictures that are images of me, but it’s not me. I don’t know who’s doing this, but now I’m getting hate messages (Hoff and Mitchell 2009:656).
- Someone thought I was trying to steal their date for a homecoming dance, and sent me messages that were cruel and degrading (Hoff and Mitchell 2009:656).

Bullied individuals sometimes know who is cyberbullying them. The cyberharassment study of Lindsay and Krysik (2012) utilizing undergraduates, determined that 31.6% of respondents experiencing cyberharassment knew or barely knew their harasser. Walker, Sockman, and Koehn (2011) looked at what undergraduate's experiences with cyberbullying at the university level, reporting that 50.0% of bullies were classmates. David-Ferdon and Hertz (2009) publication for The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) quoted Kowalski and Limber (2007) whose research determined that the anonymity of the internet created a situation where perhaps as many as 46.0% of adolescent victims were unaware of their aggressor, and 22.0% of cyber harassers reported not knowing the identity of their victims. Likewise, a study of 339 undergraduates at the University of New Hampshire examining cyberharassment, reported that 6.8% of students that reported cyberharassment were more likely to experience email harassment from strangers (Finn 2004).

Just as bullies feel free to engage in email, texting, and online harassment, victims are reluctant to tell anyone they are experiencing these situations. Therefore, no one outside of the bully and the victim are aware of what is occurring. Slonje and Smith (2008), reported 50.0% of adolescent victims of cyberbullying (i.e., email, texting, phones), never reported the harassment to anyone. However, this study did not state whether the victims were knowledgeable of who the bully was or was not. Whereas in 2006, Patchin and Hinduja indicate that approximately 29.0% of adolescent victims never reported the bullying to anyone. Adams and Lawrence (2011) found undergraduate victims did not report the bullying due to being in college, felt no one would listen, or the bullying would go away on its own. Lindsay and Krysik (2012) found that 27.5% of

undergraduate respondents stated the cyberharassment did not end. In an examination of undergraduates, Vance (2010:59) found that 43.0% of victims did not report the offense due to doubting that authorities could help, 10.0% did not know to whom they should report the offense, and 10.0% of victims feared retaliation.

Often victims will avoid reporting the harassment, due to the belief that the experience of cyberbullying or cyberharassment is not very serious (Finn 2004; Kennedy and Taylor 2010). According to Hoff and Mitchell (2009), 65.3% of undergraduate victims believed the cyberbullying would end on its own. Unfortunately, it continued to get worse and only 16.7% of undergraduates reported the abuse to school officials (Hoff and Mitchell 2009). Finn (2004) reported 27.2% of undergraduate respondents asked for the harassing emails and IMs to stop. Additionally he found that 37.5% of students felt that the harassment was not serious enough to report, 19.5% just ignored it, and 12.5% handled it themselves.

Adams and Lawrence (2011) researched college students, and determined that the students bullied in high school or middle school exhibited characteristics of bullying victimization in college. The study reported that these students continued to experience name-calling, exclusion from class activities as well as physical abuse. Furthermore, these students also exhibited feelings of isolation, loneliness, and felt that because they were college students no one would listen to them.

For those individuals that identify as a sexual minority, studies suggest that these individuals may incur higher incidents of cyberbullying. Finn (2004) notes that students that identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and/or Transgender (LGBT), were twice as likely to experience cyberharassment, as were students who did not identify as such and

approximately one third of the LGBT students reported that their cyberharassment was through email. Although insightful, Lindsay and Krysik (2012), who duplicated Finn's study, did not find any indication those respondents that identified themselves as members of the LGBT community experienced greater online harassment than did other students. The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network surveyed 444 individuals on their mailing list between the ages of 11 and 22. They reported more than half (55.2%) of individuals who identified as LGBT experienced online harassment (Kosciw et al. 2011).

Cyberbullying experiences affect people in different ways; some people do not let it affect them, while others may see themselves as victims. When people feel they are victims of cyberbullying they may begin to see themselves in the negative light painted by others leading to an increase in depression (Gerson and Rappaport 2011; Rigby and Slee 1999; stopbullying.gov). The victim becomes aware of rumors and comments and begins to question if others around them believe these rumors and comments. Patchin and Hinduja (2006:155) point out that "social acceptance is crucially important to a youth's identity and self-esteem," and cyberbullying has the potential to permanently damage that social acceptance and cause "psychological, emotional, and social havoc" for the victim.

Although some individuals view cyberbullying as "not that serious," for others the victimization experience is traumatic. People who see themselves as victims experience many different negative emotions such as shame, embarrassment, fear, panic attacks, insomnia, and depression to name a few (Dickerson 2005). Depression, sadness, and social ostracism can increase suicidal ideation in victims and the possibility of suicidal

behavior and attempted suicides (Carney 2000; Gerson and Rappaport 2011; Klomek et al. 2007; Rigby and Slee 1999; stopbullying.gov; Waters 2011).

According to Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston (2008:1) “bullying creates memories that often last a lifetime.” These acts also have the effect of prolonging a person’s depression and thoughts of suicide beyond adolescence and into adulthood (Marden 2010). Those bullied in their youth are at risk in their adulthood, due to socio-emotional scars, to be bullied/harassed in their work environment (Marden 2010). Unfortunately, as there has been little long-term cohort analysis, the long-term effects of cyberbullying are a matter of supposition (Hinduja and Patchin 2007).

An unintended consequence of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying is when the victim becomes the bully. Some victims of cyberbullying turn inwards and deal with the name-calling and insults without speaking out or turning towards revenge. Others choose to retaliate against their aggressors. Hinduja and Patchin (2008) stated that victims of traditional forms of bullying sometimes become the cyberbully as a way to get back at those who have harassed them. Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008) indicate that for adolescents who experienced bullying either in “real” life or in the cyber world, cyberbullying is revenge.

Social networking sites (SNS) are also important to understanding bullying/harassment. The amounts of usage time (hours per day) on the internet makes it rather difficult to avoid the potential for bullying. Walker et al. (2011) reported that 56.0% of cyberharassment came through the social network of Facebook. One reason for this high percentage may be attributable to the number of friends one has on the social network site. According to Grugan (2009:28) 49.6% of students with a Facebook page

had more than 250 “friends,” reporting these Facebook “friends” caused most cyberharassment. Grugan (2009:6) further reported, “86.0% of all undergraduate students accessed the internet,” while 92.0% have used a social networking site, some time in their life. Lindsay and Krysik (2012) reported that the more time undergraduate students spend on SNSs, the more likely they are to experience harassment by someone they know. Despite the potential for bullying and the harassment a user may receive from supposed friends, these users continue to use social networking sites on a daily basis.

## **THEORY**

### Routine Activities Theory

Technology advancements may very well have opened the door to greater opportunities for bullies to alter their form of aggression. With the use of internet and social networking sites being routine for today’s generation, the opportunity to experience cyberbullying in any form has grown. Individuals today have made a habit, or routine, of being on social networks and other internet sites on a daily basis. The Routine Activities Theory (RAT) developed after WWII as an attempt to explain different rates of criminal victimization (Marcum 2008). I am applying RAT to cyberbullying in an attempt to explain the victimization of individuals in the world of cyberspace. This theory states that a crime is more likely to occur when 1) there are motivated offenders, 2) there is an accessible target, and 3) there is an absence of capable guardians to guard against a violation (Cohen and Felson 1979). The use of applying RAT in predicting the likelihood of cyberbullying has not yet been determined in studies to evaluate

cybercrimes (Navarro and Jasinski 2012). Although I am not studying crime, Marcum (2008) reported that RAT was useful when analyzing adolescents and cyberbullying experiences. Relevant for my analysis and based on the principles of RAT, Marcum (2008) found that the more time people spent online communicating and sharing personal information with other individuals the greater the likelihood of becoming a victim of online harassment.

With technology in a constant state of change, society is continuously changing their activity patterns to keep up (Marcum 2008). According to Ybarra and Mitchell (2004), the risk of experiencing cyberbullying online is more frequent when someone who is confident in their computer/internet skills accesses the internet frequently. As noted previously, 93.0% of youth between the ages of 12 to 17, and young adults were using the internet in the year 2010 (The Pew Research Center). According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2012), 34.0% of adults ages 18 and older in the U.S. own tablet computers like iPads, Samsung Galaxy Tab, Google Nexus, and Kindle Fire, almost double the 18% in the previous year. Additionally, 91.0% of adults in America own some kind of cell phone with more than half accessing the internet via their phones. Society has become accustomed to its technology and as such, it has become a routine of people's daily lives to be on their cell phones, check the internet, and send emails and instant messages.

These now routine activities may actually expose individuals to risks of cyberbullying. The internet provides at least three ways for expanded risk. The first is an opportunity structure, the second is that it allows like-minded groups to come together, and the third is that it provides learning of deviance. Furthermore, because the internet

can provide the bully with anonymous communication and interaction, this may actually increase the deviant behavior of certain individuals (Durkin 2012). According to Walsh and Hemmens (2011:78), “Routine Activities Theory looks at crime from the points of view of both the offender and crime prevention.” When the motivated offender, the cyberbully, believes they have found a person to victimize who is lacking in capable guardianship, only then will a predatory offense occur (Walsh and Hemmens 2011).

Absence of capable guardians does not necessarily mean that there must be a parent or monitor constantly watching what someone does. Guardianship is also being cognizant of what one says on the internet. Talking via the internet allows for the absence of witnessing another’s emotions and reactions to what is being said, thereby removing a person’s own self-guardianship. No longer conversing face to face, technology has allowed a situation in which the norm to consider others feelings has diminished if not been eliminated altogether.

The combination of Routine Activities Theory with cybercrimes is still under exploration. A study conducted by Mesch (2009) of 935 teens ages 12 to 17 and their parents indicated that their finding were consistent with RAT, stating that odds of victimization increased with some types of internet activities (i.e., active profile on SNS, participation in chat rooms and YouTube). Holt and Bossler (2009) found two factors related to cybercrime, 1) “regular use of chat rooms and other forms of computer-mediated communications increased victimization risks, possibly by increasing exposure to motivated offenders,” and 2) “committing computer-based deviance increases one’s risk of on-line victimization” (20). These areas are consistent with routine activities theory that individuals no longer have to leave their home to explain victimization.

Navarro and Jasinski (2011) found that RAT was useful in explaining cyberbullying, finding that people that utilized SNS had a higher rate of cyberbullying (39.4%) than individuals who were cyberbullied (22.5%) elsewhere. Routine Activities Theory is a neoclassical theory that believes all people have the capacity for “crime” unless deterred. The internet has become such an aspect of people’s everyday lives that RAT appears to be exceptionally helpful in explaining and understanding cybercrimes (Durkin 2012).

In summary, it is clear that cyberbullying exists among adolescents, and research is just now beginning to explore this phenomenon among young adults in college. Adolescent research indicates that traditional bullies utilize technology and have become today’s cyberbullies. According to Adams and Lawrence (2011:9), “bullying continues to occur at all levels within the educational environment.” It is further reported, that cyberbullying incidences “will increase with age as greater access and use of communication technology is increased” (Kenworthy et al. 2012:88). What has not been fully explained is to what degree cyberbullying, as defined earlier, is actually occurring in the university setting among students, and if it is, who are the “victims.” Do college students even see themselves as victims of cyberbullying? Do university students see cyberbullying merely as a form of annoyance, or something else?

My thesis research examines cyberbullying of university students at a midsized university in Tennessee. The purpose of my research is to examine three questions: 1) Does cyberbullying occur within the collegiate setting? 2) Are individuals who identify with the LGBT community experiencing cyberbullying more than those who do not? 3) Are college students likely to report being cyberbullied to someone in authority?

## METHODS

### Sample

Along with posting fliers throughout the college campus, I emailed different departments and organizations such as Greek Life, Student Life, SAFE, the Lambda Organization, the Sociology and Anthropology Department, Women and Gender Studies, and the Business Communications Department about my study. I also gave presentations in five different sociology classes as well as asking attendees at a symposium event to fill out surveys. Further, I provided a link to my survey (SurveyMonkey®) which I had posted on the university's website exclusive to faculty and students. Via the online survey that I posted during October and November 2013, I was able to draw data for this study from 129 students.

### Measures

My survey (see Appendix A) consisted of 52 items including yes/no, open-ended, and Likert scale questions and was separated into five sections. The first section contained general questions about cyberbullying while attending this university. The second section presented questions specific to the separate facets of cyberbullying. Section three consisted of general questions about cyberbullying prior to attending the university. Section four regarded attitudes toward cyberbullying, and section five included demographic and social networking information.

### Dependent Variables

I used the term cyberbullying as the overarching theme for this research; however, cyberbullying was broken down into six different facets: flaming, online harassment, denigration, masquerading, outing, and exclusion. Definitions to each facet provided further clarification to the respondents. The different facets of cyberbullying allowed me to measure the dependent variable, cyberbullying, in several different ways. The first manner in which I measured cyberbullying was by asking the following questions: 1) have you ever been cyberbullied at this university, 2) have you known someone who has experienced a cyberbullying incident while attending this university, and 3) have you ever witnessed a cyberbullying incident while at this university. An additional variable measured the relationship between cyberbully victim and offender by asking whether the person knew who was bullying them.

Another set of variables measured responses and reactions to the cyberbullying incident; essentially, what were each person's responses and reactions to being cyberbullied. These items were coded individually and included the following:

- 1) Avoid being on the computer or social networking site
- 2) Retaliate by cyberbullying the person who is cyberbullying you
- 3) Tell someone in authority
- 4) I will just deal with the cyberbully on my own
- 5) Cyberbullying is no big deal, just ignore it and it will go away
- 6) Not cyberbullied

The second manner in which I measured the dependent variable was by breaking down the facets of cyberbullying. Again, the facets are: 1) flaming, 2) online harassment,

3) denigrations, 4) masquerading, 5) outing, and 6) exclusion. These facets were also binary coded. If a respondent answered yes to any of these facets I considered the respondent to have been cyberbullied. For the purposes of my analysis, I collapsed all six facets into one dummy variable, representing either that the respondent experienced cyberbullying in some form or did not experience cyberbullying. By summing the responses to these six facets (range 0 – 6), I was also able to examine whether a person experienced one facet of cyberbullying or multiple facets of cyberbullying. In addition, I examined how often a victim of cyberbullying experienced one or more facets of cyberbullying: 1-2 times, 3-5 times, and more than 5 times.

In addition to measuring experiences with cyberbullying, I also measured via a 5 point Likert Scale, the respondent's general attitudes toward cyberbullying. These were broken down into thirteen statements and responses could range from strongly agree to strongly disagree. For analysis purposes, I collapsed strongly agree and agree into one response and strongly disagree and disagree into one response, resulting in a modified 3-point Likert scale where agree =1, neutral = 2, and disagree = 3. A few of the thirteen statements utilized to measure attitudes included: 1) cyberbullying is no big deal; I don't know what everyone is in an uproar over; 2) If someone is being hurt by cyberbullying, it is important to tell someone; 3) I would never retaliate against someone who said defaming things against me; and 4) bullies don't change; they have just changed how they bully by using the internet.

### Independent Variables

I used three key independent variables to test suitability, availability, and guardianship, which are concepts central to Routine Activities Theory. First, I asked respondents to identify the social networking sites they utilized; responses included Facebook, twitter, chat rooms, blogs, Instagram, and ‘other’. The use of SNS provided a measure of suitability since cyberbullying occurs more often among people using these sites. For analysis purposes, the question identifying SNS was collapsed into a composite variable. In addition to looking at the types of social networking sites, I asked respondents how many hours per day they used each type of SNS. The actual hours per day equaled the availability aspect of the routine activities theory (RAT), or the time that a respondent was open to a potential attack by a cyberbully. Finally, to measure guardianship respondents answered the following question, “If you were being cyberbullied, would you report the incident of cyberbullying to someone in authority?” Although a victim reporting cyberbullying does not represent an external form of guardianship (e.g., parents, teachers, authorities, etc.), it does gauge a level of “self-guardianship.”

Finally, I examined several other variables including sexual orientation, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, and bisexual, (LGB); gender; year in college, (“first year” or freshman) to “five plus years” (fifth year seniors and graduate students); age of respondents; and living arrangements.

### Analytical Strategies

Descriptive statistics for the overall sample as well as frequency distributions for the dependent and the key independent variables examined the extent of cyberbullying at this university. Bivariate analyses compared characteristics of those who experienced cyberbullying and those who did not. These analyses entailed conducting an independent samples t-test and chi-square tests to evaluate association between components of routine activities theory and cyberbullying. Chi-square tests also provided tests of associations between cyberbullying and gender, sexual orientation, year in school, and living arrangements.

## **RESULTS**

As shown in Table 1, the sample included 129 university students, whose ages ranged from 18 to 66 years with the average age of respondents at 24.5 years. Respondents consisted of 25.2% men, 74.8% women, with a sexual orientation makeup of 88.1% heteronormative, 11.9% LGB. The racial composition was White (75.7%), Black/African American (19.4%), and other races (4.9%). Although 10.0% of the sample were second year students (i.e. sophomores), the distribution for other year's in school was equally divided with roughly 20.0% in each category for year in school.

I examined the demographics of my sample in relation to the demographics of the university as a whole. The last class profile created for this university was for the Spring 2011 semester; therefore, this is the reference used. My sample was approximately 25.0% men and 75.0% women. However, the university had a population of 46.5% men and 53.5% women. Nevertheless, the racial breakdown of my sample is more in line with

that of the university. My sample was approximately 76.0% white and 19.0% black and the university was 72.8% white and 16.6% black.

**TABLE 1: Description of Sample (n=129)**

	Mean	SD	Range	Percentage
Age	24.5	9.076	18 - 66	
Gender (woman = 1)				74.8
Heteronormative				88.1
Race				
White				75.7
Black				19.4
Other				4.9
Year in College				
First Year				19.8
Second Year				10.4
Third Year				21.9
Fourth Year				27.1
Fifth Plus Year				20.8
Live Alone				24.8

### Prevalence and Characteristics of Cyberbullying Incidents

To help address whether or not cyberbullying exists in the university setting, respondents indicated if, while attending this mid-southern university, they had ever been cyberbullied. Of the 129 respondents to the survey 11.6% (n=15) answered yes they had been cyberbullied at the university. In response to the question have you known someone who has experienced cyberbullying, 19.3% of respondents answered yes; 17.5% of respondents reported that they have witnessed a cyberbullying incident while at this university.

To further examine cyberbullying at the university level, respondents were asked to answer questions as to whether they had ever been flamed, online harassed, denigrated, masqueraded, outed, or excluded while attending this mid-south university. More students answered yes to these different facets of cyberbullying than they did for the initial, general question about cyberbullying. In fact, when looking at those who answered yes to any of the facets the number of respondents who experienced some form of cyberbullying was 44 students (34.1% of the sample) (see Table 2). Most respondents who experienced one or more facets of cyberbullying did so with a frequency of only one or two times.

Additionally, two questions addressed whether a victim of cyberbullying knew or did not know the identity of the cyberbully. Of those 15 respondents who responded yes to the question regarding general cyberbullying, 46.7% knew the bully while 66.7% did not. Note that because respondents may have experienced multiple incidents of cyberbullying, percentages exceeded 100%. A respondent may have known the identity of the cyberbully in one experience, but not in a separate experience.

**TABLE 2: Distribution of Sample: Measures of Cyberbullying (n=129)**

	Percentage	<i>n</i>
Are you aware of cyberbullying at your university (yes = 1)	19.3	24
Have you witnessed cyberbullying at your university (yes = 1)	17.5	23
Have you experienced cyberbullying (yes = 1)	11.6	15
Facets experienced (yes = 1)		
Flaming	14.2	17
Online Harassment	15.0	18
Denigration	15.8	19
Masquerading	10.8	13
Outing	10.8	13
Exclusion	13.3	16
Any type of Cyberbullying experienced (yes = 1)	34.1	44

Respondents also indicated how they handled an incident of cyberbullying. There were five options given and respondents could choose multiple responses. Of the 15 respondents who answered yes to the general question about cyberbullying, 46.7% indicated they avoided being on the computer. Additionally, 26.7% told someone in authority and another 26.7% indicated that cyberbullying was no big deal and just ignored it hoping it would go away. Eighty percent reported they dealt with the

cyberbully on their own in some way; however, none of the respondents indicated that they retaliated against the bully.

As shown in Table 3, the bivariate results revealed associations between select key variables (i.e., gender, sexual orientation, mean age in years, living alone, and year in college) and cyberbully victimization. Of the five variables, only one showed a statistically significant association—sexual orientation. Respondents in the LGB category were over represented among those experiencing cyberbullying. While 34.1% reported some experience with cyberbullying, 66.7% of those in the LGB category experienced cyberbullying ( $p < .05$ ). Respondents were equally likely to experience cyberbully victimization regardless of gender, year of college (1<sup>st</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup>+ years in college), or age. The average age of those who experienced cyberbullying was 22.8 years, whereas, the average age of those who have not experienced cyberbullying was 25.5 years. Of those that lived alone, only 21.9% experienced some form of cyberbullying, which indicates that living alone you are less likely to experience cyberbullying.

**TABLE 3: Bivariate Comparison of Key Sample Characteristics and Cyberbullying Victimization**

	Experienced Victimization			
	<u>No</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>Total</u>	
<b>Sex/Gender</b>				
Woman	47 (61.0%)	30 (39.0%)	77 (100%)	$X^2 = .560$ (1)
Man	18 (69.2%)	8 (30.8%)	26 (100%)	$p = .454$
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>				
LGB	4 (33.3%)	8 (66.7%)	12 (100%)	$X^2 = 5.29$ (1)
Heteronormative	60 (67.4%)	29 (32.6%)	89 (100%)	$p = .021$
<b>Mean Age in Years</b>				
( $n = 104$ )	25.5 years (10.39)	22.8 years (6.09)	24.5 years (9.08)	$t = 1.444$ (102) $p = .152$
<b>Year in College</b>				
$(n = 96)$				
1 <sup>st</sup> year	13 (68.4%)	6 (31.6%)	19 (100%)	$X^2 = 6.92$ (4)
2 <sup>nd</sup> year	5 (50.0%)	5 (50.0%)	10 (100%)	$p = .14$
3 <sup>rd</sup> year	16 (76.2%)	5 (23.8%)	21 (100%)	
4 <sup>th</sup> year	17 (65.4%)	9 (34.6%)	26 (100%)	
5 <sup>th</sup> year +	8 (40.0%)	12 (60.0%)	20 (100%)	
<b>Living with Others</b>				
$(e.g., \text{roommates, parents})$				
No	25 (78.1%)	7 (21.9%)	32 (100%)	$X^2 = 2.83$ (1)
Yes	60 (61.9%)	37 (38.1%)	97 (100%)	$p = .09$
<b>TOTAL</b>	85 (65.9%)	44 (34.1%)	129 (100%)	

### Routine Activities and Cyberbullying

Table 4 presents results of the bivariate analysis for cyberbully victimization and use of any social networking sites (SNS) (suitability), mean hours/day using any SNS (availability), and if a respondent would report cyberbullying (guardianship). In regards to suitability, 76.0% of respondents used at least one type of SNS, with the most frequently utilized SNS being Facebook (70.5%). Average time spent on at least one SNS by respondents was 3.86 hours per day, although there was wide variation in usage (range 0-30 hours per day). Approximately 46.0% of respondents indicated they would report an incident of cyberbullying.

For suitability, a crosstabulation revealed a statistically significant association between use of SNS and cyberbully victimization, indicating that those individuals who use SNS sites were more likely to be cyberbullied. Of those individuals who did not use SNS, only 19.4% experienced cyberbullying.

The second aspect of RAT is availability, measured by hours per day spent on at least one SNS. An independent samples t-test showed that for those respondents, who have been cyberbullied, the mean hours per day spent on one or more SNS was approximately 5.6 hours. The mean hours per day for respondents, who were, not cyberbullied was approximately three hours per day. The difference in means was statistically significant at alpha level of .05 (two-tailed test). Thus, those who were cyberbullied used SNS, on average, at nearly double the number of hours/day compared to those who were not cyberbullied.

The final aspect of RAT is guardianship, measured by whether or not respondents would report cyberbullying victimization. A crosstabulation revealed that only 26.4% of

the respondents who would report cyberbullying have actually experienced cyberbullying. Essentially, those who would report were less likely to actually experience cyberbullying.

**TABLE 4: Routine Activities and Cyberbully Victimization**

Routine Activities	Experienced Victimization			
	No	Yes	Total	
<u>Suitability</u>				
(Used any SNS)				$X^2 = 3.95 (1)$
No	25 (80.6%)	6 (19.4%)	31 (100%)	$p = .047$
Yes	60 (61.2%)	38 (38.8%)	98 (100%)	
<u>Availability</u>				
(SNS mean hours/day (SD))	2.947 hours (4.44)	5.59 hours (6.57)	3.86 hours (5.38)	$t = -2.690 (127)$
				$p = .008$
<u>Guardianship (report cyberbullying)</u>				
No	35 (55.6%)	28 (44.4%)	63 (100%)	$X^2 = 4.05 (1)$
Yes	39 (73.6%)	14 (26.4%)	53 (100%)	$p = .04$
TOTAL	85 (65.9%)	44 (34.1%)	129 (100%)	

#### General Attitudes toward Cyberbullying

To measure the respondents' attitudes about cyberbullying I used 13 different statements. Table 5 presents the percentage distribution for responses on each of the

items. For three of the attitude statements, respondents agreed that cyberbullying is an issue; however, they also appeared resigned that “cyberbullies are a part of the world and aren’t going anywhere.” Specifically, in question one, 85.6% of respondents disagree that cyberbullying is no big deal, meaning that the vast majority think cyberbullying is a problem. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of respondents (64.2%) disagree with the statement that “cyberbullying is normal and there is nothing anyone can do” (item #7). Conversely, 61.8% of respondents agree, “bullies don’t change;” (item 10). While respondents are indicating that cyberbullying is not normal and should not happen, they are also saying that bullies exist and will always exist.

**TABLE 5: Attitudes Toward Cyberbullying (n=129)**

	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
1. Cyberbullying is no big deal; I don't know what everyone is in an uproar over	7.5	6.6	85.6
2. What I do and say online is no one's business but my own	19.8	27.4	52.8
3. If someone is being hurt by cyberbullying, it is important to tell someone	71.3	6.2	3.9
4. I would report cyberbullying incidents, only if I could do so without anyone knowing I reported it	45.3	23.6	31.1
5. I can say anything I want online, even if what I say hurts someone's feelings or violates their privacy	0.9	12.3	86.8
6. If I were cyberbullied, I would cyberbully that person right back	16.0	17.0	67.0
7. Cyberbullying is a normal part of the online world, there is nothing anyone can do about it	12.3	23.6	64.2
8. Posting derogatory comments about others is no big deal	0.0	2.9	97.1
9. I would never retaliate against someone who said defaming things against me online	23.5	23.5	51.0
10. Bullies don't change; they have just changed how they bully by using the internet	61.8	17.6	20.6
11. It is okay to post a private conversation publically	0.0	8.8	91.2
12. There is nothing wrong with posting an embarrassing picture online for everyone to see	1.0	7.8	91.2
13. A video embarrassing my friend on the internet is no big deal as everyone posts videos of others doing stupid things	2.9	11.8	85.3

## DISCUSSION

My thesis explored whether college students were cyberbullied and whether or not they experienced any of the facets (flaming, online harassment, denigration, masquerading, outing, and exclusion) of cyberbullying while attending the university. Although consistent with previous literature, my study brings new information to the literature with the regards to defining cyberbullying and specifically, six different facets of cyberbullying. In response to the first research question of whether cyberbullying occurs within the collegiate setting, my findings indicate that 44/129 of the respondents had at least one experience with one of the six facets of cyberbullying. My study focused on whether college students experienced any of six different facets of cyberbullying outlined previously as well as generally defined cyberbullying. When considering a general definition of cyberbullying, the survey results indicate that approximately 11.6% of respondents were being, or had been, cyberbullied while attending the university. Similar studies (Molluzzo and Lawler 2012; Vance 2010) with small sample size, noted that cyberbullying occurs at a rate of about 7.0% to 18.0%. However, some of these previous studies utilizing college students focused primarily on cyberharassment or cyberstalking (Finn 2004; Kennedy and Taylor 2010; Lindsay and Krysik 2012).

In response to the question of “have you ever been cyberbullied while attending this university,” only 11.6% responded that they had been cyberbullied versus when asked if they experienced one or more of the facets of cyberbullying, 34.1% responded yes. It appears that college students do not see themselves as victims of cyberbullying when asked outright about being a victim of cyberbullying. However, when asked if a person had “*experienced*” either flaming, online harassment, denigration, outing,

masquerading, or exclusion more students seemed willing to admit they had “experienced” a form of cyberbullying. This study only inquired about the cyberbully victimization experienced by students and did not ask whether students were themselves a cyberbully.

### Victimization

Lindsay and Krysik (2012) found that 31.6% of victims knew the cyberbully while Walker et al. (2011) reported that students identified 50.0% of bullies as their classmates. My study found that 46.7% of respondents who answered positively they were cyberbullied at the university knew the bully. It is important to note here that “victims” may have experienced multiple incidences of cyberbullying and may have known the identity of the cyberbully in one experience, while not knowing the bully in a separate experience. Even though an individual has knowledge of who is doing the cyberbullying that knowledge does not determine how people handle or perceive victimization. As stated previously, not all individuals that experience cyberbullying or a facet of cyberbullying see themselves as victims. Therefore, how individuals go from experiencing cyberbullying to believing themselves a victim, if at all, is an area that needs further examination.

A study utilizing college students conducted by Adams and Lawrence (2011) determined that the students who were previously victims still exhibited characteristics of cyberbully victimization such as feelings of isolation, loneliness, and helplessness. My study collected qualitative responses from students that experienced cyberbullying at the university, who appear to see themselves as victims. These responses give a short

narrative on how being cyberbullied made them feel. The following are a few of the answers I received.

I was sexually harassed through a social media site by a former [university] student; they made sexually explicit fake pornographic pictures of me and created a profile linked to my email address and humiliated me in front of all my friends on the internet. In the aftermath of the incident, I felt a constant humiliation and shame when I was on campus, I felt like at any moment someone would give me a dirty look or laugh at me because of their exposure to the pictures. I still feel that I can't walk on campus without someone noticing me from the online pictures, even though I've gone completely dark with social media I still get emails from people seeking my service. (White woman, straight, 25)

Trapped and helpless. It was difficult to escape a cyberbully because it is easier for them to gain access to you. (White woman, lesbian, 33)

Had someone saying derogatory remarks to me online and telling me to hurt myself. It made me feel insignificant and worthless. (White woman, pansexual, 19)

Helpless. Alone. Worthless. (White woman, straight, 19)

Along with what was identified in previous research (Patchin and Hinduja 2009:155) these responses help to confirm that cyberbullying can cause permanent damage to someone who sees themselves as a victim, losing feelings of social acceptance and does appear to cause “psychological, emotional, and social havoc.” Previous studies refer to cyberbullying victims; my research, though, found a disconnect between experiencing the facets of cyberbullying and perceiving those acts as victimization. Thus, it may not be at all appropriate to refer to all who experience cyberbullying as victims of cyberbullying. One important question to ponder is when does an act of

cyberbullying cause a person's attitude to alter so drastically? On the other hand, is it possible that an act of cyberbullying was just a final catalyst that causes a person's attitude to alter?

Finn (2004) found that individuals who identified as LGBT were twice as likely to experience cyberharassment, as were heteronormative individuals. Research by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network also indicated that LGBT individuals experience cyberbullying more than do heterosexuals. Within my research, nearly 12.0% of all respondents reported being members of the LGBT community. My study found that 66.7% of respondents identifying as lesbian, gay, and/or bisexual experienced some form of cyberbullying. These findings indicate that members of the LGBT community do experience cyberbully victimization nearly double, what heteronormative individual's (32.6%) experience. It did not appear that age, gender or living arrangements had an impact on whether a person experienced cyberbully victimization.

Regarding my last research question, my study indicated that 26.7% of respondents who experienced cyberbullying reported the incident to someone in authority; however, 80.0% of respondents decided to deal with the incident of cyberbullying on their own in some way. Lindsey and Krysik (2012) reported that 50.0% of victims never reported the incidents to anyone, while Patchin and Hinduja found that 29.0% of victims never reported the bullying to anyone.

Cyberbullying victimization goes hand in hand with the final research question, which addressed whether college students were likely to report being cyberbullied to someone in authority (guardianship). My findings show that 45.7% of respondents indicated they would report cyberbullying to someone in authority. However, those who

would report were actually less likely to experience cyberbullying. In fact, of the 15 respondents who were actual “victims” of cyberbullying (responded positively to being cyberbullied), only four (26.7%) reported the incident. It seems then, when actually faced with being cyberbullied, reactions on how to handle the situation differ from original convictions.

### Social Networking Sites and Routine Activities Theory

Concerning the routine activities theory showing suitability, availability, and guardianship I found that there is a lack of guardianship, as the majority of those respondents who were cyberbullied would not report the incidents. The measures of suitability (hours per day on the internet) and availability (social networking sites) appeared to support RAT.

Navarro and Jasinski (2011) found that SNS had a higher rate of cyberbullying (39.4%) than individuals who were cyberbullied (22.5%) elsewhere. My research found that those individuals who are cyberbullied are spending nearly double (5.6 hours/day) the amount of time on one or more SNS than those who are not cyberbullied (2.9 hours/day). However, there are those slim few (19.4%) who are cyberbullied but do not use one of the specified SNS sites. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) indicated that the risk of experiencing bullying online increases with the frequency of internet use and internet skills. Therefore, those who spend more time on SNS are more likely to experience cyberbullying.

As previously, mentioned, actual victims were less likely to experience cyberbullying or provide self-guardianship. Those who have never experienced or been a

victim of cyberbullying indicated that they would report the incidences, while actual victims were much less likely to report incidences of cyberbullying or provide less “self-guardianship.” The findings in this study are consistent with the findings of Mesch (2009) concerning RAT that indicate the odds of victimization increase with some type of internet activity. However, it is important to note that the guardianship factor of routine activities theory is lacking or does not exist when it comes to college students. In this instance, college students are not adolescents, and generally not living with their parents at this stage of their life. Therefore, college students are not likely to experience monitoring of their online activities (guardianship). College students may have roommates, dorm mates, but monitoring what they do on the internet is not occurring. In fact, those who live alone are less likely to be cyberbullied than those who live with others. Therefore, there is a lack of guardianship among college students increasing the likelihood of cyberbullying.

#### General Attitudes toward Cyberbullying

It is interesting to note that questions asking respondents about general attitudes regarding cyberbully actions, showed there was a consensus that cyberbullying is a problem; however, respondents appear resigned that “cyberbullies are a part of the world and aren’t going anywhere.” Respondents agreed (85.6%) that cyberbullying is a big deal, that cyberbullying (64.2%) is not a normal part of the online world, and that there *should* be something people can do about it. However, 61.8% of respondents agreed that bullies have adapted by utilizing the internet. Thus, it appears that people agree that cyberbullying is an issue, but they feel resigned about the likelihood of positive change.

## LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

As straightforward as the data appears, there are also limitations to it. This research is a convenience sample of students attending a mid-southern university, and not generalizable to a larger population of this university or another university. Nevertheless, this study indicates the need for further research in the area of cyberbullying among young adults in college. The small sample size of this current research indicated that there is a cyberbully issue occurring at the university level; however, further research on a larger scale would allow a more extensive look at the pervasiveness of the issue. What I did not examine was how these experiences made individuals feel, and when an incident of cyberbullying made an individual believe they were a victim instead of just experiencing an incident. What makes someone feel victimized? Is cyberbullying and its impact something that changes with maturity? These are all issues that need further research, ideally from a cohort group. A longitudinal study of a cohort group may actually allow researchers to determine when an experience of cyberbullying changes over to cyberbullying victimization. Following a group of individuals over a period of ten to fifteen years, would benefit research in understanding the effects of cyberbullying more clearly.

This research indicates further that gender may be a factor and I recommend future research examine gender regarding cyberbullying. The surveys completed in this research were completed by mostly women (74.7 %), as compared to men (25.2 %), indicating that 1) there is a need to try to obtain a more balanced sample and 2) to help determine if gender is truly a contributing factor in understanding cyber victimization.

## CONCLUSION

This research attempted to answer three core questions: does cyberbullying occur within the collegiate setting, do LGB individuals experience more cyberbullying than heterosexual individuals, and will victims of cyberbullying tell someone in authority about the cyberbullying. Previous literature has shown that victims of cyberbullying, no matter their age, experience continued humiliation and often depression. When examining the responses of college students who were cyberbullied at this mid-southern university, the findings corroborate previous research done with adolescents' experiences of emotional, psychological, and social havoc. As the respondents who commented on being a victim of cyberbullying say their feelings were ones of "constant humiliation and shame," feelings of being "trapped and helpless," and "helpless, alone, and worthless." College students appear to view cyberbullying differently from adolescents; however, they are no less susceptible to being cyberbullied. However, not all respondents who experienced some form of cyberbullying saw themselves as victims. Therefore, the question remains as to what leads an individual to believe they are a victim or that being bullied is just a part of being in the online environment. Does maturity of that individual experiencing a form of cyberbullying play a part in how the experiences are perceived?

This research appears to have created more questions for future research. I would recommend a longitudinal study that examines a specific cohort over the course of their college career. This type of study would benefit from looking at how attitudes of individuals who experience cyberbullying may or may not change due to these events.

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**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A: Survey

Cyberbullying is generally defined as: “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic means” (Source, date). This questionnaire is about your experiences with cyberbullying while attending MTSU. Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey.

### **Part I. General questions about cyberbullying while attending MTSU**

1. While attending MTSU, have you ever been cyberbullied?

- Yes
- No

1b. If yes, please describe this incident and how it made you feel?

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2. Have you been cyberbullied by someone you know while attending MTSU?

- Yes
- No
- Not cyberbullied

3. Have you been cyberbullied by someone you **do not** know while attending MTSU?

- Yes
- No
- Not cyberbullied

4. If you have been a victim of cyberbullying at MTSU, how have you handled it?

Check all that apply.

- Avoid being on the computer or social networking site
- Retaliate by cyberbullying the person who is cyberbullying you
- Tell someone in authority
- I will just deal with the cyberbully on my own
- Cyberbullying is no big deal, just ignore it and it will go away
- Not cyberbullied

5. If you have been a victim of cyberbullying while at MTSU, what are your perceptions of this incident? Check all that apply.

- I don't think anyone would understand or believe me
- I don't think the school would or could do anything to stop it
- I could get myself into trouble, because I could also be at fault
- The cyberbully could get back at me and make things even worse
- Other students could make fun of me
- My internet access might be restricted
- Not cyberbullied

6. By which electronic means did you experience cyberbullying while attending MTSU?

Check all that apply.

- |                                         |                                               |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Email             | <input type="radio"/> Social Networking Media |
| <input type="radio"/> Instant Messaging | <input type="radio"/> (please specify)        |
| <input type="radio"/> Text Messaging    | <input type="radio"/> Facebook                |
| <input type="radio"/> Web posts         | <input type="radio"/> MySpace                 |
| <input type="radio"/> Blogs             | <input type="radio"/> Linked In               |
| <input type="radio"/> Twitter           | <input type="radio"/> Other _____             |
|                                         | <input type="radio"/> Not cyberbullied        |

7. Is someone currently victimizing you through cyberbullying?

- Yes
- No

8. Have you ever witnessed a cyberbullying incident while at MTSU?

- Yes
- No

9. Have you ever known about someone who has experienced a cyberbullying incident while attending MTSU?

- Yes
- No

9b. If yes to either witness or known about a cyberbullying incident, please describe that incident.

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10. If you have witnessed or known about a cyberbullying incident while attending MTSU, what was your reaction? Check all that apply...

- |                                                                   |                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Join in and cyberbully too                  | <input type="radio"/> Did nothing.                 |
| <input type="radio"/> Encourage the cyberbully                    | <input type="radio"/> Other actions you might take |
| <input type="radio"/> Watch, but do not participate               | _____                                              |
|                                                                   | _____                                              |
| <input type="radio"/> Leave the online environment                | _____                                              |
|                                                                   | _____                                              |
| <input type="radio"/> Try to help the victim                      | _____                                              |
| <input type="radio"/> Stand up to the bully                       | _____                                              |
| <input type="radio"/> Report the bullying to someone of authority | _____                                              |

11. I know of someone who has been really hurt by cyberbullying

- Yes
- No



12c) If yes, please explain the circumstance and your thinking.

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13. If you were being cyberbullied, would you report the incident to someone in authority at MTSU?

- Yes
- No

## **Part II. Specific Cyberbullying Actions**

1. **Flaming:** Sending angry, rude, vulgar messages about a person to an online group or one particular person via e-mail or other text messaging capabilities.

a. Have you ever been flamed while at MTSU?

- Yes
- No. If no, skip to 1d.

b. If yes, how often have you been flamed while at MTSU?

- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- more than 5 times

c. If you have experienced flaming, what was or is your reaction?

- Not upsetting at all
  - Somewhat upsetting
  - Very upsetting
  - Don't care one way or another
- Other
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

d. In your opinion, how often do you believe a person is likely to be flamed at MTSU?

- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- more than 5 times
- never

2. **Online Harassment:** Someone either known or unknown who repeatedly sends you offensive messages via e-mail, text messaging, or social networking sites?

- a. Have you ever been harassed online through email, text messaging, or social networking sites while at MTSU?
- Yes
  - No. If no, skip to 2d.

b. If yes, how often have you been harassed online?

- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- more than 5 times

c. If you have experienced online harassment, what was or is your reaction?

- Not upsetting at all
  - Somewhat upsetting
  - Very upsetting
  - Don't care one way or another
- Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

d. In your opinion, how often do you believe a person is likely to be online harassed at MTSU?

- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- more than 5 times
- never

3. **Denigration (put-downs):** Sending harmful, untrue, or cruel statements about a person to other people or posting such information online.

a. Have you ever experienced denigration while at MTSU?

- Yes
- No. If no, skip to 3d.

- b. If yes, how often have you experienced denigration?
- 1-2 times
  - 3-5 times
  - more than 5 times
- c. If you have experienced denigration while at MTSU, what was or is your reaction?
- Not upsetting at all
  - Somewhat upsetting
  - Very upsetting
  - Don't care one way or another
  - Other
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- d. In your opinion, how often do you believe a person is likely to be denigrated at MTSU?
- 1-2 times
  - 3-5 times
  - more than 5 times
  - never

4. **Masquerade:** Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material that makes another person look bad.

a. Have you ever experienced masquerading while at MTSU?

- Yes
- No. If no, skip to 4d.

b. If yes, how often have you experienced masquerading?

- 1 -2 times
- 3 – 5 times
- more than 5 times

c. If you have experienced masquerading while at MTSU, what was or is your reaction?

- Not upsetting at all
  - Somewhat upsetting
  - Very upsetting
  - Don't care one way or another
  - Other
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

d. In your opinion, how often do you believe a person is likely to be masqueraded at

MTSU?

- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- more than 5 times
- never

5. **Outing:** Sending or posting material about a person that contains sensitive, private, or embarrassing information, including forwarding private messages or images.

a. Have you ever experienced outing while at MTSU?

- Yes
- No. If no, skip to 5d.

b. If yes, how often have you experienced outing while at MTSU?

- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- more than 5 times

c. If you have experienced outing while at MTSU, what was or is your reaction?

- |                                                     |                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Not upsetting at all          | <input type="radio"/> Other |
| <input type="radio"/> Somewhat upsetting            | _____                       |
| <input type="radio"/> Very upsetting                | _____                       |
| <input type="radio"/> Don't care one way or another | _____                       |

d. In your opinion, how often do you believe a person is likely to be outed at MTSU?

- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- more than 5 times
- never

6. **Exclusion:** Being cruelly excluded from a group by the members of the group ignoring you or saying you are not welcome anymore within the online world.

a. Have you ever experienced exclusion while at MTSU?

- Yes
- No. If no, skip to 6d.

b. If yes, how often have you experienced exclusion while at MTSU?

- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- more than 5 times

c. If you have experienced exclusion while at MTSU, what was or is your reaction?

- Not upsetting at all
  - Somewhat upsetting
  - Very upsetting
  - Don't care one way or another
  - Other
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

d. In your opinion, how often do you believe a person is likely to be excluded at MTSU?

- 1-2 times
- 3-5 times
- more than 5 times
- never

**Part III. General Question about Cyberbullying PRIOR to Attending MTSU**

1. Have you ever been cyberbullied **prior to attending MTSU**?
  - Middle School
  - High School
  - College or University other than MTSU
  - Work place
  - Other
  
2. What types of cyberbullying have you experienced **prior to MTSU**? Check all that apply.
  - Flaming
  - Online Harassment
  - Denigration (put downs)
  - Masquerading
  - Outing
  - Exclusion
  
3. What were the electronic means of your cyberbullying experience **prior to attending MTSU**?
 

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Email</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Instant Messaging</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Text Messaging</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Web posts</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Blogs</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Twitter</li> </ul>	<p>Social Media (please specify)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Facebook</li> <li><input type="radio"/> MySpace</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Linked In</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Other</li> </ul> <hr/> <hr/>
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4. If you have been a victim of cyberbullying **prior to attending MTSU**, how did you handle it?

Check all that apply.

- Avoid being on the computer or social networking site
- Retaliate by cyberbullying the person who is cyberbullying you
- Tell someone in authority
- I will just deal with the cyberbully on my own
- Cyberbullying is no big deal, just ignore it and it will go away

5. If you have been cyberbullied **prior to attending MTSU**, what was the social networking venue?

- |                                       |                                              |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Instant Message | <input type="radio"/> MySpace                |
| <input type="radio"/> Email           | <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify) |
| <input type="radio"/> Facebook        | _____                                        |
| <input type="radio"/> Twitter         | _____                                        |
| <input type="radio"/> Linked In       | _____                                        |

6. If you have witnessed or known about a cyberbullying **prior to attending MTSU**, what was your reaction? Check all that apply...

- |                                                     |                                              |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Join in and cyberbully too    | <input type="radio"/> Stand up to the bully  |
| <input type="radio"/> Encourage the cyberbully      | <input type="radio"/> Report the bullying to |
| <input type="radio"/> Watch, but do not participate | someone of authority                         |
| <input type="radio"/> Leave the online environment  | <input type="radio"/> Other actions you took |
| <input type="radio"/> Try to help the victim        | (please specify)                             |

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7. If you have been a victim of cyberbullying **prior to attending MTSU**, what were your perceptions to the incident? Please check all that apply.

- I don't think anyone would understand or believe me
- I don't think the school would or could do anything to stop it
- I could get myself into trouble, because I could also be at fault
- The cyberbully could get back at me and make things even worse
- Other students could make fun of me
- My internet access might be restricted

8. Do you think you have intentionally or un-intentionally cyberbullied anyone **prior to attending MTSU**?

- Yes
- No

8b. If yes, please explain the circumstance and your thinking.

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8c. If yes, How often?

- 1 – 2 times
- 3-5 times
- more than 5 times

	<b><u>Part IV: Attitudes Toward Cyberbullying</u></b>	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	Cyberbullying is no big deal; I don't know what everyone is in an uproar over.					
2.	What I do and say online is no one's business but my own.					
3.	If someone is being hurt by cyberbullying, it is important to tell someone.					
4.	I would report cyberbullying incidents, only if I could do so without anyone knowing I reported it.					
5.	I can say anything I want online, even if what I say hurts someone's feelings or violates their privacy.					
6.	If I were cyberbullied, I would cyberbully that person right back.					
7.	Cyberbullying is a normal part of the online world, there is nothing anyone can do about it.					

8.	Posting derogatory comments about others is no big deal.					
9.	I would never retaliate against someone who said defaming things against me online.					
10.	Bullies don't change; they have just changed how they bully by using the internet.					
11.	It is okay to post a private conversation publically.					
12.	There is nothing wrong with posting an embarrassing picture online for everyone to see.					
13.	A video embarrassing my friend on the internet is no big deal as everyone posts videos of others doing stupid things.					

**Part V: Demographic and Other Information**

1. What social networking sites do you use? Check all that apply.

- Facebook
- MySpace
- Twitter
- Chat rooms
- Blogs
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

2. How many hours a day do you estimate you use the following?

- Facebook \_\_\_\_\_ hours per day
- MySpace \_\_\_\_\_ hours per day
- Twitter \_\_\_\_\_ hours per day
- Email \_\_\_\_\_ hours per day
- Chat rooms \_\_\_\_\_ hours per day
- Blogging \_\_\_\_\_ hours per day
- Other electronic means: (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ hours per day

3. What is your major at MTSU?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. How many years have you attended MTSU

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5. What is your year in college?

- 1<sup>st</sup> year
- 2<sup>nd</sup> year
- 3<sup>rd</sup> year
- 4<sup>th</sup> year
- 5<sup>th</sup> year or higher
- Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Please check which living arrangement best describes yours.

- Living on MTSU campus in the dorms
- Living on MTSU campus in family housing
- Living on MTSU campus apartments
- Living off campus in an apartment
- Living off campus in a house
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you live with anyone? Please check all that apply

- Spouse
- Partner
- Roommate
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

8. What is your age in years? \_\_\_\_\_

9. What is your gender?

- Man
- Woman
- Trans Man
- Trans Woman
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

10. What is your sexual orientation?

- Straight
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Other

**11.** Please check the Race categories you identify with most:

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian Indian
- Chinese
- Filipino
- Japanese
- Korean
- Other Asian
- Vietnamese
- Native Hawaiian
- Pacific Islander
- Some Other Race
- Self-Identify\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey.

## Appendix B: IRB Approval



September 17, 2013

Courtney Barnicoat  
Sociology & Anthropology  
cab8r@mtmail.mtsu.edu  
Protocol Title: "Cyberbullying @ MTSU: Prevalence, Vulnerable Groups, and Responses"  
Protocol Number: 14-050

Dear Investigator(s),

The MTSU Institutional Review Board, or a representative of the IRB, has reviewed the research proposal identified above. The MTSU IRB or its representative has determined that the study poses minimal risk to participants and qualifies for an expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110 Category 7.

Approval is granted for one (1) year from the date of this letter for 300 participants.

According to MTSU Policy, a researcher is defined as anyone who works with data or has contact with participants. Anyone meeting this definition needs to be listed on the protocol and needs to provide a certificate of training to the Office of Compliance. If you add researchers to an approved project, please forward an updated list of researchers and their certificates of training to the Office of Compliance (Box 134) before they begin to work on the project. Any change to the protocol must be submitted to the IRB before implementing this change.

Please note that any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918.

You will need to submit an end-of-project form to the Office of Compliance upon completion of your research located on the IRB website. Complete research means that you have finished collecting and analyzing data. Should you not finish your research within the one (1) year period, you must submit a Progress Report and request a continuation prior to the expiration date. Please allow time for review and requested revisions. Your study expires **September 16, 2014**.

Also, all research materials must be retained by the PI or faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) for at least three (3) years after study completion. Should you have any questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cyrille Magne", written over a light blue dotted grid background.

Cyrille Magne  
IRB representative  
Middle Tennessee State University