

# SOCIAL MEDIA ***Shaming and Bullying***

Robert M.  
Henderson



*The Risks of* SOCIAL MEDIA



#### About the Author

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# ***The Rise of Cyberbullying***

Channing Smith's suicide has called attention to the growing problem of cyberbullying, which the National Crime Prevention Council defines as bullying "using the internet, cell phones, video game systems, or other technology to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person."<sup>6</sup> Some cyberbullying crosses the line into unlawful or criminal behavior.

According to a 2018 report by the Pew Research Center, 95 percent of teens in the United States are online, 85 percent are social media users, and most of them access the internet through their smartphones. Because this technology has become such a big part of their lives, it should not be surprising that some teens have decided to use their phones to bully others. Being constantly connected means that teens are now susceptible to bullying around the clock. And because some adults are not aware of cyberbullying or how to respond to it properly, many bullies feel they can act with impunity.

The Pew Research Center reports that 59 percent of teens have experienced some form of cyberbullying, and 90 percent of them say it is a major problem for kids their age. Meanwhile, teachers report that cyberbullying is their top safety concern in the classroom, according to a 2019 Google survey.

## ***A More Painful Form of Bullying***

Mallory Grossman was a twelve-year-old from New Jersey who loved cheerleading and gymnastics. When she began middle school, a group of children started to torment her. They took photos of her without her knowledge and posted them online. “They called her horrible names, told her you have no friends and said, when are you going to kill yourself,”<sup>7</sup> her mother reported. Unfortunately, by the time Mallory’s mother became fully aware of the cyberbullying, it was too late. On June 14, 2017, Mallory committed suicide.

Young people like Mallory who are victims of cyberbullying often experience more severe trauma than those who are bullied in person. Both kinds of bullying can be devastating, but there are several factors that can make cyberbullying seem more extreme to its victims.

The anonymous nature of the internet allows bullies to hide behind their computer screens without revealing themselves. Because they do not have to come face-to-face with their victims, bullies can act in especially malicious and menacing ways. Some bullies might not even grasp the tremendous harm they are causing because they cannot see the other person’s reaction. For the victims, not knowing who is responsible for the bullying can add to their insecurity. “In real-life bullying, you know [who is] doing it,” says fourteen-year-old Skye. On the internet, she says, “it could be someone you know, someone you don’t know—you don’t know what you know, and it’s scary because it’s really out of control at that point. Teachers tell you with bullying [to] just say ‘Stop,’ but in this case you can’t, and you don’t even know who to tell stop to.”<sup>8</sup>

Hurtful text and images posted online can easily go viral. Instead of remaining a private matter between a small group of people, online bullying can reach a large audience very quickly. “Bullied children experience shame and humiliation,” says bullying expert and author Mildred Peyton. “When they see others ridiculing them online they worry who else saw it, shared it—how far their image traveled.” Some adults say the solution to online bullying is simple—the victims should turn off their phones. But this



**“Even if a child isn’t online pictures of them can still be circulated by their peers, and they are humiliated in school when they find out.”<sup>9</sup>**

—Mildred Peyton, a bullying expert and author

does not solve the problem. “Even if a child isn’t online pictures of them can still be circulated by their peers,” says Peyton, “and they are humiliated in school when they find out.”<sup>9</sup>

Material posted on the internet is often permanent. This means that hurtful images and comments may be seen by colleges, employers, and others, now or in the future. In these cases, online shaming and bullying do not harm just the victim but can also negatively impact those participating in the bullying.

## ***Finding No Escape***

One of the most devastating effects of cyberbullying is the loss of the home as a safe space. Traditional bullying usually ends when victims enter the safety of their homes and are surrounded by family. But cyberbullying happens just as much in the home as anywhere else. “I go to school and get bullied. Go home and online and still get bullied. I can’t ever escape it,”<sup>10</sup> says one fourteen-year-old boy.

Cyberbullying can be hard for parents and teachers to detect. A child can experience online bullying—or participate in bullying—

**“I go to school and get bullied. Go home and online and still get bullied. I can’t ever escape it.”<sup>10</sup>**

—An anonymous fourteen-year-old boy

without showing any outward signs. Many adults do not understand the technology well enough to recognize cyberbullying. And teens are often reluctant to tell their parents what is happening because they worry about being cut off from the internet. “Many parents do not understand how vital the Internet is to their social lives,” say Jaana Juvonen, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. “Parents can take det-

ritmental action with good intentions, such as trying to protect their children by not letting them use the Internet at all. That is not likely to help parent-teen relationships or the social lives of their children.”<sup>11</sup>



*Parents may not realize that their children are experiencing cyberbullying, and teens are often reluctant to tell their parents what is happening.*

Not only can cyberbullying seem more traumatic to its victims than traditional bullying, but there are also many more ways that kids can bully others using the internet.

Most cyberbullying falls into one of five categories: harassment; impersonation; using photographs and videos; creating polls, websites, and blogs; and interactive gaming.

## ***Harassment***

The most common form of cyberbullying is harassment, which can include name-calling, spreading false rumors, stalking, and physical threats. According to the Pew Research Center, 42 percent of adolescents report being called offensive names. About a third (32 percent) of teens have been victims of false rumors that have been spread about them online. This occurs more frequently with girls (39 percent) than boys (26 percent). About one in five teens (21 percent) report having someone other than a parent constantly asking their whereabouts and whom they are with, while 16 percent say they have been the target of physical threats online.

## ***The Number One Reason for Being Bullied***

In a 2019 survey, leading antibullying group Ditch the Label asked students who had been bullied in the previous twelve months why they thought they were bullied. More than half of the students (59 percent) said it was because of their physical appearance. Many of those same students also said it was about the way they dressed, indicating that how one looks is the most common reason for being victimized.

Teens are bullied for their weight or body shape, their hair and makeup, their height, their complexion—any part of how they look can be turned into a body flaw. The way people look is a large part of their identity. Comments about physical appearance and the way an individual dresses are not funny or trivial. They hurt very deeply.

According to Heather Widdows, a professor at the University of Birmingham in England and the founder of the social media campaign #EverydayLookism, “We need to take this form of bullying very seriously or the epidemic of body image anxiety can spiral out of control. Lookism is discrimination, and in a world where appearance increasingly matters, a particularly devastating form of discrimination. Appearance bullying is one of the most prevalent forms of bullying and one we should call a halt to.”

Quoted in Ditch the Label, “The Annual Bullying Survey 2019.” [www.ditchthelabel.org](http://www.ditchthelabel.org).

Other forms of harassment include the pranks known as warning wars and text wars. Many social media sites feature a “warn button,” which can be used to report someone who is behaving inappropriately. Teens will repeatedly click on these warn buttons as a way to get the victim kicked offline for a period. Text wars occur when teens send thousands of text messages to the victim’s phone. This leaves a victim feeling overwhelmed by often hateful messages. The victim might also face a large phone bill (if texting is limited)—and, in turn, angry parents.

### ***Impersonation***

Impersonation is when the cyberbully pretends to be someone else online. For example, if a female classmate wants to bully another girl, she can create a fake social media account in a boy’s name. The “boy” will then initiate an online relationship with the girl. Even though she has never met the boy in person, the victim



might reveal personal information about herself. The classmate who is impersonating the boy can then share this information with others, who can use it to bully, shame, and harass the victim.

Bullies can also impersonate the victim. They might create an account and pose as the victim in the chat rooms of dating sites or hate groups. The bully may even reveal the victim's personal information, such as an email address, and encourage those in the chat rooms to contact the victim personally. Bullies can also steal the password to the victim's social media account and impersonate the victim by posting mean comments about his or her friends, thus angering and offending them.

### ***Using Photographs and Videos***

A particularly damaging form of cyberbullying is when someone takes a photo or video of the victim without his or her knowledge or consent. These unauthorized images are then uploaded for the world to see and discuss or criticize. Because they can be circulated endlessly on the internet, these images can be very hard to remove. Bullies can use photos and images in a variety of hurtful situations. Sometimes, people willingly take a sexually explicit photo or video of themselves and then share it with an intimate partner. When the relationship ends, the partner may post the photo or video online as a form of "revenge porn."

Many teens also report receiving unwanted sexually explicit images on their phones because the sender thinks it is funny or even enticing. Those who receive these images, though, might view the act as threatening. According to the Pew Research Center, girls are more likely than boys to report receiving explicit images (29 percent versus 20 percent). Older girls, ages fifteen to seventeen, are especially vulnerable to this type of bullying—35 percent of girls in this age group report having received unwanted explicit images, compared to 20 percent of the boys. Parents are particularly concerned about this kind of bullying. More than half (57 percent) report being worried about their children either getting or sending explicit images, according to a Pew Research Center survey of parents.



*One particularly damaging form of cyberbullying occurs when someone takes a photo of the victim and posts it without permission.*

The photos and videos that are used to bully do not have to be sexual in nature. For example, Ashawnty Davis, a ten-year-old from Colorado, confronted her bully in the schoolyard one day. A fight broke out between them, and another student filmed the incident and uploaded it to the smartphone app Musical.ly, which is popular with elementary children. Ashawnty was devastated, her mother said: “My daughter came home two weeks later and hanged herself in the closet.”<sup>12</sup>

### ***Creating Polls, Websites, and Blogs***

Another popular cyberbullying method is to create an online poll about the victim. Questions typically revolve around criticism of the person’s appearance, weight, intelligence, or sexuality. Polls are easy to create and can attract the interest of many teens. Cyberbullies can also create websites or blogs for the sole purpose of bullying someone. These sites might feature unflattering photos of the victim, contain screenshots of cruel texts or comments, or expose personal information. “I’ve had at least 10 hate pages made about me,” says fifteen-year-old Annie. “I know some were made in a row

by the same person, but some were from different people. They say really nasty things about you, the most outrageous as possible.”<sup>13</sup>

## ***Interactive Gaming***

Playing video games is one of the most popular activities among teens, with 72 percent saying they game online. Many play online with friends, classmates, and strangers. Players often use avatars to create fictional versions of themselves, which is part of the fun. But the anonymous nature of gaming can also lead to cyberbullying. Teens can gang up on a player by sending negative messages or excluding the player from the game.

Girls can experience more harsh forms of bullying while gaming than boys. The bullying they receive tends to be gendered, meaning other players will use sexually explicit language that is often demeaning and violent. For this reason, many girl gamers do not reveal their gender and play with their mics off.

## ***Celebrities Also Get Cyberbullied***

Celebrities are not immune from the cruelty of cyberbullies. In fact, many of the biggest stars in show business have been victims of cyberbullying, including Selena Gomez, Zayn Malik, and Lorde.

Selena Gomez was the fifth most-followed person on Instagram in 2020, but she does not always enjoy using the app because of the negative comments. “Imagine all the insecurities that you already feel about yourself and having someone write a paragraph pointing out every little thing, even if it’s just physical,” she says.

Zayn Malik suffered abuse from cyberbullies while in the band One Direction. Most of the bullying concerned his race. “Nasty things [were said] like I’m a terrorist, and this and that.” What affected him the most was when the bullying reached members of his family. “When it starts to upset people I care about or I hear about it from my mum, then that’s a problem.”

Lorde has sold millions of albums, but in the early days of her career she experienced fierce cyberbullying concerning the way she looked. “The way I dress and carry myself, a lot of people find it strange or intimidating. . . . I’m not completely impervious to insult. I’m a human being.”

Quoted in BBC Radio 1, “7 Stars Who Have Personal Experiences of Online Bullying.” [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk).

## ***Where Does Cyberbullying Take Place?***

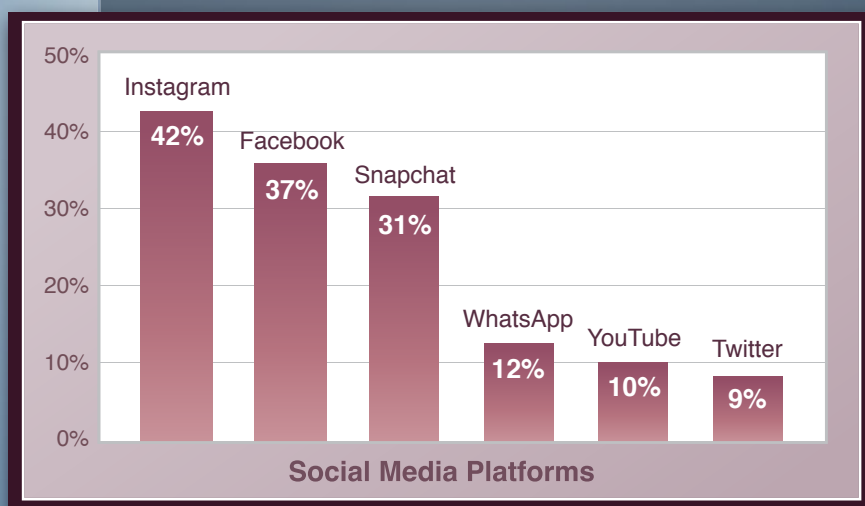
A lot of cyberbullying takes place on social media platforms. According to Ditch the Label, one of the world's leading antibullying groups, 42 percent of teens report being bullied on Instagram, compared to 37 percent on Facebook and 31 percent on Snapchat. These results are not surprising. Facebook and Instagram (which is owned by Facebook) have struggled in recent years to control the tremendous amount of toxic content and misinformation found on their services.

Millions of teens visit Instagram regularly to check on their peers. According to a 2018 survey, 85 percent of teens said they used Instagram at least once a month. The site is perfectly designed to give users FOMO, or the “fear of missing out” on some

### **Social Media Sites Where Teens Report Cyberbullying**

A leading antibullying group called Ditch the Label surveyed over ten thousand teenagers in the United Kingdom in 2017 to learn about their experiences with cyberbullying. According to the survey results, the social media platforms where teens most often experience cyberbullying are Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat.

#### ***Where Are Young People Cyberbullied?***



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2. Quoted in Allyson Chiu, "A Teen's Intimate Messages to Another Boy Were Leaked by Classmates. Hours Later, He Killed Himself, His Family Says," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2019. [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).
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12. Quoted in Marwa Eltagouri, "A 10-Year-Old's Schoolyard Fight Was Posted on Social Media. She Hanged Herself Two Weeks Later," *Washington Post*, December 1, 2017. [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).
13. Quoted in Lorenz, "Teens Are Being Bullied 'Constantly' on Instagram."
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## Organizations and Websites

### **American Association of Suicidology (AAS)**

[www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

Founded in 1968 by Edwin S. Shneidman, the AAS promotes research, public awareness programs, public education, and training for professionals and volunteers. In addition, the AAS serves as a national clearinghouse for information on suicide. Its mission is to promote the understanding and prevention of suicide and support those who have been affected by it.

### **Cybersmile Foundation**—[www.cybersmile.org](http://www.cybersmile.org)

The Cybersmile Foundation is an award-winning nonprofit organization committed to digital well-being and tackling all forms of abuse and bullying online. It works to promote kindness, diversity, and inclusion by building a safer, more positive digital community.

### **Ditch the Label**—<https://us.ditchthelabel.org>

One of the largest antibullying nonprofit organizations in the world, Ditch the Label provides digital online support programs through its website and partnerships with online games and social networks. Its mission is to combat bullying by tackling the root issues and to support young people ages twelve through twenty-five who are impacted.

### **End to Cyber Bullying (ETCB)**—[www.endcyberbullying.org](http://www.endcyberbullying.org)

The ETCB is a nonprofit organization founded by Samuel Lam and David Zhao in 2011 in the hopes of creating a social networking world devoid of cyberbullying. The ETCB hopes to help teens, parents, educators, and others to identify, prevent, and ultimately stop cyberbullying.

### **STOMP Out Bullying**—[www.stompoutbullying.org](http://www.stompoutbullying.org)

The leading national antibullying and cyberbullying organization for kids and teens in the United States, STOMP Out Bullying works to reduce and prevent bullying, cyberbullying, and other digital abuse. It teaches effective solutions for responding to all forms of bullying as well as educating kids and teens in school and online.

### **StopBullying.gov**—[www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov)

A federal government website managed by the US Department of Health and Human Services, StopBullying.gov provides information from various government agencies on what bullying is, what cyberbullying is, who is at risk, and how best to prevent and respond to bullying.

## For Further Research

### **Books**

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J.A. Hitchcock, *Cyberbullying and the Wild, Wild Web*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

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