

## I Can't See You, You Can't See Me: Cyberbullying: An Exploratory Study Examining this concept through the Lens of the Social Bond Theory

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### Introduction

#### Abstract

**Statement of the Problem:** Cyberbullying as the name implies is the use of cyberspace as a mechanism to bully others known or unknown to the bully. Cyberbullying has caused significant issues for those involved ranging from extreme displays of anger to suicide attempts. It has been reported that as much as eighty two percent of students have had some measure of experience with cyberbullying; as a cyberbully, as a victim or classified as both a bully and a victim. Researchers are yet to pinpoint the cause of cyberbullying and what perpetuates cybervictimization although numerous studies have investigated the relationship amongst variables such as age, gender and social psychological constructs and cyberbullying/cybervictimization. This study seeks to explore the relationship between peer and intimate partner relationships and cyberbullying/cybervictimization in the presence of anger, depression, self esteem and suicide ideation as mediating variables.

**Method:** A sample of 200 undergraduate students from two universities in Trinidad participated in the study. Students were asked to complete a self report survey which included demographic variables, a cyberbullying/ cyber victimization scale, the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale, the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale, an Anger/Aggression scale, a Sociability Scale (peer relationships and intimate partner) and a Suicide Ideation scale.

**Data Analysis:** Data were analysed using SPSS version 22 and included both descriptive and inferential statistics. Regression analysis was used to look at the influence of peer and intimate partner relationships on cyberbullying and cybervictimization with the social psychological constructs.

**Results:** Preliminary results indicate that there is a negative relationship between cyberbullying/cybervictimization and peer relationships. Anger was the most influential variable when examining peer and intimate partner relationships and cyberbullying/cybervictimization.

**Key Words:** Cyberbullying, Cybervictimization, Peer Relationships, Intimate Partner Relationships

### Introduction

Violence and hostility in schools, particularly primary and secondary schools, can take many forms (Mills, 2001; Smith, 2003). School violence according to Maharaj-Sharma (2007) has existed in Trinidad and Tobago for decades and will continue to exist. Perhaps the most traditional form of violence is bullying (Hazler, 1996). Traditional bullying includes physical fights with the victims, ostracizing the victims through name calling and rumour spreading and other forms of taunting the victim (Murray, Hewitt, Mariss and Malinatti, 2012). The victim is aware in most cases of who the bully is (Smokowski and Holland Kopasz, 2005).

Of recent, however, bullying has evolved with the technological advances of the twentieth century such as cellular phones and portable devices with internet capabilities (Keith and Martin, 2005). Traditional bullying (physical fighting, taunting, teasing) as demonstrated within the younger population has been replaced with cyberbullying among older students since it is relatively easy to commit as well as very difficult to detect (Ybarra, 2004). Cyberbullying as the name implies is the use of cyberspace as a mechanism to bully others known or unknown to the bully. According to Willard (2007), cyberbullying is "a way of being cruel to others by

sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the internet or other digital technologies” (p.1).

### **Definition of terms**

**Cyberbullying-** a way of being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the internet or other digital technologies.

**Cybervictimization-** receiving hurtful posts or other methods of damaging messages which are considered as displays of social aggression received through the use of the internet by digital technologies.

**Cyberbully-** an individual who repeatedly uses the internet or other digital technologies to post or send hurtful material to another individual known or unknown to the cyberbully. This behaviour includes:

1. Spreading hurtful comments about an individual online
2. Spreading rumours about individuals online with the intention to offend or embarrass
3. Sending emotionally disturbing texts which includes threats to individuals known and unknown
4. Sexting (sending sexually explicit messages about someone without their permission via social media with the intention to embarrass)
5. Posting photographs of individuals online without their permission with the sole purpose to embarrass or cause emotional distress
6. Online blackmail

**Cybervictim-** an individual who receives material sent with the intention of causing distress, embarrassment and psychological harm via the internet or other digital technologies repeatedly from a known or unknown person. This includes:

1. Receiving hurtful messages from persons known and unknown via social media
2. Receiving threats and harassment online
3. Sharing sexually explicit photographs without the person's permission online
4. Sharing photos without permission online with the sole intention to embarrass and cause emotional distress

**Social Bonds-** this is defined as the attachment that an individual has in the form of peer relationships and intimate partner relationships.

### **Literature Survey**

Cyberbullying as the name implies is the use of cyberspace as a mechanism to bully others known or unknown to the bully. The use of social networking sites has significantly increased the probability and possibility of cyberbullying and cybervictimization (Sengupta & Chauduri, 2011). Cyberbullying and cybervictimization occurs through social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter (Kift, Campbell & Butler, 2009). It can also occur through the use of text messages sent via mobile phones (Beale & Hall, 2007).

The use of internet capable devices has become common place particularly amongst the young adult population in Trinidad and Tobago. Although as suggested by Kift, Campbell and Butler, (2009) Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter are the most common networking sites for cyberbullying and cybervictimization to take

place, this present researcher included Instagram, Snapchat and Whatsapp Status updates as media through which cyberbullying and cybervictimization would take place.

These media all allow for pictures and captioned messages to be circulated anonymously which forms an integral facet of cyberbullying and cybervictimization. Social media platforms such as Whatsapp direct messaging allows the receiver of messages to see a telephone number (which can be traced) along with the message if the person is not an established contact and this may deter persons from using this medium as a means of cyberbullying.

In Trinidad and Tobago, secondary school students have been given laptops to assist with their learning. According to Kamalodeen, and Chaitoo (2015), these laptops have afforded students with the means as well as the opportunity to cyberbully others as well as become victims of cyberbullying. Given the exponential increase in digital devices, cyberbullying has become increasingly easy to do under the hood of anonymity in most cases (Juvonen & Gross, 2008, Kowalski, Limber and Agatson, 2008) and it is fairly easy to become a victim. False accounts using fake credentials and names can be set up on these social networking sites making it easy to target victims of cyberbullying without the cyberbully being detected (Kowalski et al. 2008).

The emerging phenomena of cyberbullying and cybervictimization have become causes for concern since the effects range from suicide to psychological disorders such as chronic depression and anxiety (Aricak, Siyahhan, Uzunhasanuglu, Saribeyogly, and Ciplak; 2008; Yilmaz, 2009; Finn & Banach, 2000). Cyberbullying and cybervictimization transcends age, culture, socio economic status, gender and a host of other social classification variables (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho & Tippett, 2006). The severity of the effects of cyberbullying and the relatively easy way of carrying out acts of cyberbullying makes this a social problem worth examining (Ackers, 2012).

Cyberbullying and cybervictimization have several negative consequences (Feinberg & Robney, 2008). For the cyberbully, this may mean prosecution by the law if the law allows for such (Branner & Rehberg, 2009). It can also illustrate that the cyberbully is not apt to deal with psychological problems that he or she may be faced with and in order to cope, cyberbullying seems to be the most viable option as a form of transferring lack of social control over oneself by having to engage in violence against another person (Price and Dalgleish, 2010).

Cyberbullying has given rise to a number of psychological problems which the cybervictims have to deal with including low self esteem, suicide attempts, depression, stress and extreme displays of anger/aggression (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007, Aricak et al. 2008). Cyberbullies also present with some of these problems as well and there is usually an overlap between cyberbullies and cybervictims (Price and Dalgleish, 2010).

Cyberbullies operate in the presence of peers as well as alone (Spears, Slee, Owens and Johnson, 2009). Cyberbullies tend to be more open to self disclosure and act out more frequently and with more intensity when they are in the presence of peers than on their own or when having face to face conversations which can be considered as verbal bullying (Suler, 2004). Persons who describe

themselves as being cyberbullies get the support of their peers and often times they do nothing to stop their friends from engaging in such deviant behaviour even though they see the effects (Spears et al., 2009).

Revenge or getting back at peers and anger are some of the main reasons persons engage in cyberbullying (Konig et al. 2010). Cyberbullying is quite common in instances where intimate and peer relationships undergo stress such as a sudden breakup, envy and intolerance of others because of minor indifferences (Hoff and Mitchell, 2009). It is also common for victims to experience problems that are related to their social well being (Hoff and Mitchell, 2009). These and other studies have shown a direct relationship between peer and intimate partner relationships and cyberbullying and one's predisposition to becoming a victim of cyberbullying.

There is also evidence which suggests that there are factors or mediating variables (Sabella, Patchin & Hinduja, 2013), which bridge the gap between peer and intimate partner relationships and cyberbullying/cybervictimization. As the results of the present study indicate, anger is one such factor which increases the likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying or becoming a victim of cyberbullying in the presence of peer and intimate partner relationships.

This present study seeks to examine the link between social bonds in the form of peer and intimate partner relationships resulting in feelings of anger, depression, low self esteem and suicide ideation and the increased likelihood of persons engaging in cyberbullying or becoming victims of cyberbullying.

### Theory

Within contemporary societies, ways of committing violent acts can be considered as having evolved in many of the same ways as the society itself. Persons commit crimes for a variety of reasons and several theories have been purported which seek to explain engagement in criminality. The theory of social bonding as purported by Hirschi (1969) is one such modern theory of criminology. The main tenet of the social bond theory is that "the lack of social bonds or self-control increases criminal involvement" (Hirschi, 1969).

Social bonds according to Hirschi (1969) are considered as relating to the interactions and relationships which persons have with one another. According to Katz and Fox (2010) in a study of youth criminal gang involvement in Trinidad and Tobago, it was found that belief systems and some form of peer attachment had significant impacts on deviant/delinquent behaviours.

Hirschi (1969) purported four elements of his social bond theory. These are attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. Hirschi (1969) suggested that, "attachment to others is the extent to which we have close affection ties to others, admire them and identify with them so that we care about their expectations." The more insensitive we are to others' opinions, the less we are con-

strained by the norms that we share with them; therefore, the more likely we are to violate these norms. In addition, the more committed and involved individuals are, the more likely they are to refrain by becoming involved in criminality. The fourth element, belief, plays a less significant role in this study since in the traditional sense; cyberbullying and cybervictimization do not fall within the realms of traditional societal norms and values.

The theory seems to lend support to the following hypotheses; persons with low social bonds (lack of peer relationships and intimate partners) will be more likely to engage in cyberbullying and become cybervictims and persons with high social bonds (solid peer relationships and intimate partners) will be less likely to become victims of cyberbullying and engage in cyberbullying. The social bond theory however does not offer any explanation for those persons with high social bonds who engage in cyberbullying or general deviant behaviour nor does it account for persons with low social bonds who refrain from engaging in cyberbullying.

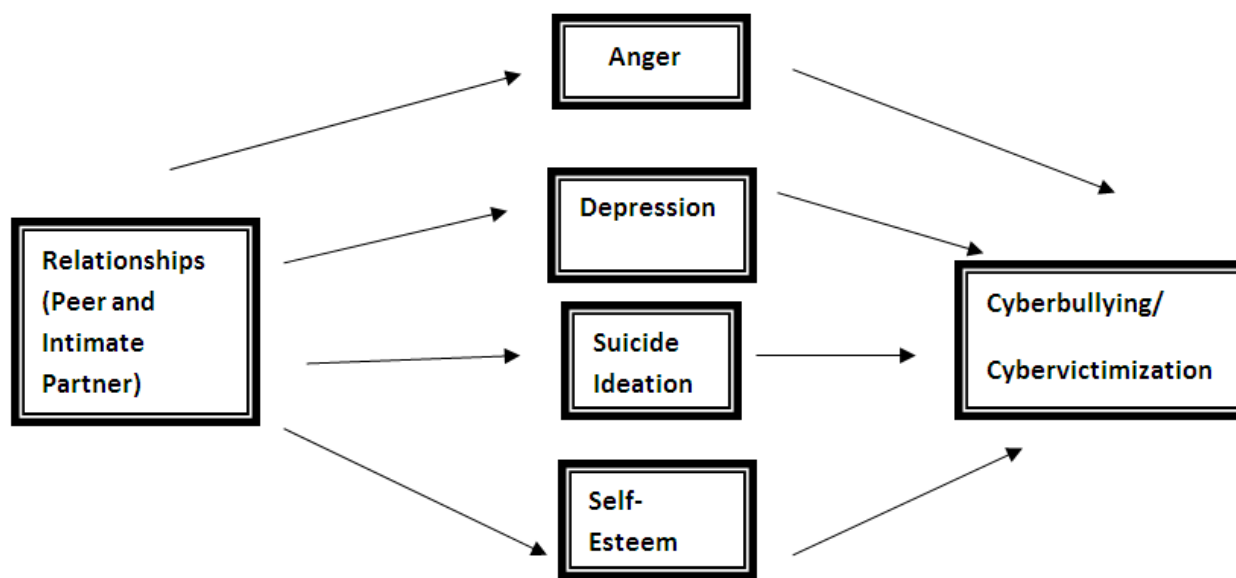
Cyberbullying has slowly infiltrated the psyches of young individuals as a means of gaining social and emotional gratification at the expense of others, which can have detrimental effects. What may appear innocent and undetectable based on law enforcement principles is cause for concern as it is only a matter of time before physical violence becomes tied in to cyberbullying in an already violent society. Obtaining substantial evidence through the findings of this research can help address and perhaps to an extent curb the upsurge of violence which may be perpetrated by young adults where mediating variables in addition to social bonds exist.

This study will attempt to provide plausible explanations through the use of mediating variables in an attempt to account for persons who do not fall stringently within the realms of the main tenet of the social bond theory. The relationship between social bonds and engagement in cyberbullying or becoming a victim of cyberbullying is somewhat obvious according to the social bond theory but there may be other mitigating factors which may also affect the likelihood of becoming involved in criminality. The study attempts to provide possible modifications to the existing social bond theory through the intervention of mediating variables which may be quite influential in determining who becomes a cyberbully and who becomes a cybervictim in the presence of peer and intimate partner relationships.

A study such as this has never been done within the Caribbean. Studies exist on cyberbullying/cybervictimization but to date; the majority remains exploratory as they primarily explore the relationships between cyberbullying/cybervictimization and outcomes in terms of depression, suicide ideation, low self esteem and anger.

### Conceptual Model

Title: Conceptual model outlining the relationship among and between the variables within the study



### Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach as the key method used in obtaining data. The research design in this study can be described as correlational. This design is defined as a quantitative approach which is used primarily to investigate and identify relationships which may exist amongst variables. This study goes beyond the simple bivariate cause-effect relationship and seeks to determine what bridges the relationship between peer and intimate partner relationships and cyberbullying/cybervictimization.

The study utilized primary data. Data were collected from over two hundred university students. An A-priori (derived from deductive reasoning) sample size calculator was used to determine an appropriate sample size. The calculator takes into account four elements; anticipated effect size which is the quantitative measure of the relationship between variables and the regression coefficient, the desired statistical power level, the number of independent variables and the confidence level. The appropriate sample size was a hundred and thirty four. However, based on the population size, generalisability of the results would not be possible, even with the inclusion of sixty six more respondents (the sample size in this study was 200 respondents). In order to overcome this severe shortcoming in the research, it is the intention of the researcher to collect more data to improve the possibility of generalisability of results. The researcher intends to target the new student intake at the two major faculties in the upcoming semester at both universities.

Both purposive and cluster sampling were used in the study. Purposive sampling was employed based on the results of the pilot study which showed that the majority of participants who indicated that they were either victims of cyberbullying or were cyberbullies were from the faculties of education and social sciences. This was on par with studies done by Walker et al. (2011).

The measurement instrument used in this study was a questionnaire. The data collection instrument was comprised of nine scales; cyberbullying and cybervictimization (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004), suicide behaviours questionnaire (Osman et al. 1999), self esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), depression, anxiety and stress (DASS 21), anger (Spielberg, 1985) and peer relationship. Of these, only the peer relationship scale was non-standardized. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .809.

Permission was sought from the relevant bodies at both academic institutions to gain access to their students. A pilot study was carried out two months before actual data collection began. This was done to assess the viability of the study. A total of sixty respondents participated from the two universities. The results of the pilot study were used as justification to modify the questionnaire.

There are two main independent variables in this study. They are peer relationships and intimate partner relationships. The mediating variables are self esteem, anger, depression and suicide ideation. The main dependent variables are engagement in cyberbullying and becoming victims of cybervictimization.

Data was analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies and crosstabulations were done under descriptive statistics in an attempt to show the various compositions of data and the proportions of participants who fall within the various categories of independent variables. With regards to inferential statistics, path analysis was chosen since it allows for the dissecting of complicated interrelationships among various variables on the dependent variable. Mediating variables were also examined. According to Hayes (2013), it is commonplace to run linear regressions when looking at mediation. Mediation establishes the extent to which one putative variable (peer or intimate partner relationships) causes a change in the outcome variable (cyberbullying and

cybervictimization) through the intervention of another variable (anger, self esteem, suicide ideation and depression) which causes the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable to increase.

**Limitations**

This study was delimited to a purposive sample of tertiary level students enrolled in the faculties of social sciences and education at two major universities in Trinidad and Tobago. While it would have been ideal to include all the students enrolled at the universities, these faculties were selected simply on the basis of not wanting the research to become impossible to complete based on population number, accessibility, and response rate. In addition, the faculty of social sciences and education were the two largest facul-

ties at the two tertiary level institutions. Moreover, results from the pilot study indicated that students from these two faculties were the most likely to engage in and become victims of cyberbullying. Another limitation is based on researcher bias. As a student of one of the institutions used in the study and being aware of instances of cyberbullying and cybervictimization amongst peers, there may have been some level of personal/cultural biases which may have been reflected in the research.

**Results/Data analysis**

The following table shows the Means, Standard Deviations and Cronbach's Alpha of Cyber Victimization, Cyber Bullying, Self Esteem, Anger, Depression, Suicide Ideation, Stress and Peer Relationship Scales

	Cybervictimization	Cyberbullying	Self-Esteem	Anger	Depression	Suicide Ideation	Stress	Peer Relationship
<b>Valid</b>	200	200	198	198	195	195	198	198
<b>Missing</b>	0	0	2	2	5	5	2	2
<b>Mean</b>	14.6700	12.0350	17.8939	25.6364	3.4192	4.9077	5.3889	11.6111
<b>Std. Deviation</b>	3.76990	2.72966	5.21457	6.15280	4.29035	3.15276	4.37752	2.31422
<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	0.895	0.785	0.822	0.989	0.951	0.886	0.930	0.809

As illustrated in the table below, 60% of the respondents were between the ages of 18-25 years. 18.5% of the respondents were between the ages of 26-33 years and 12.5% were between the ages

of 34-41 years. The lowest percentage of respondents, 9%, were 42 years and older.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<b>18-25 years</b>	120	60.0	60.0	60.0
<b>26-33 years</b>	37	18.5	18.5	78.5
<b>34-41 years</b>	25	12.5	12.5	91.0
<b>42 years and older</b>	18	9.0	9.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	200	100.0	100.0	



According to the results in the table below, the gender distribution of the sample varied quite a bit. 63.8% of the respondents were females and 36.2% were males. These findings seem to be similar

to the actual gender disparities which exist at the two universities specifically in the selected faculties.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	72	36.0	36.2	36.2
Female	127	63.5	63.8	100.0
Total	199	99.5	100.0	
Missing	1	.5		
Total	200	100.0		

The table below shows that 11.5% of the respondents indicated that they never engaged in cyberbullying while 88.5% admitted to engaging in some form of cyberbullying. When looking at cyber-

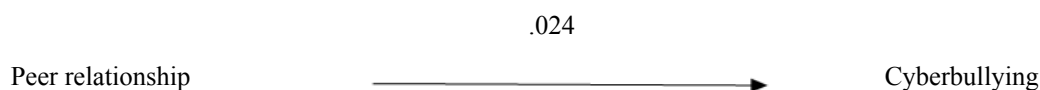
victimization, 71.5% of the respondents indicated that they were never victims and 28.5% indicated that they have fallen prey to cyberbullies.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Never Cyberbullied	23	11.5	11.5	11.5
Engaged in Cyberbullying	177	88.5	88.5	100
Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Never been Victimized	143	71.5	71.5	71.5
Victimized	57	28.5	28.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

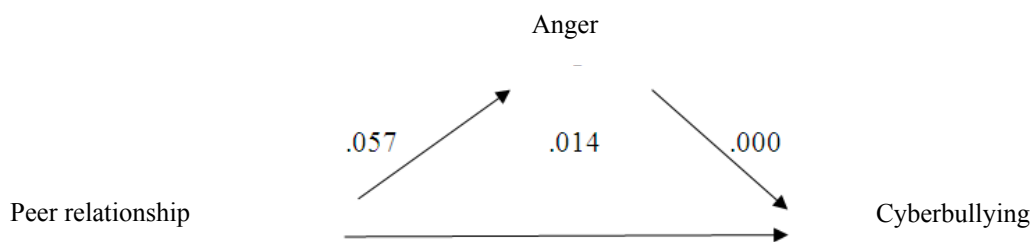
The table below shows the coefficients for the regression analyses amongst the variables of peer relationships, age, gender, anger, depression and suicide ideation.

Model 1	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficient		
	Beta	Standard Error	Beta	t	Sig
Constant	13.401	1.521		8.809	.000
Peer Relationship	-.211	.085	-.171	-2.468	.014
Age	-.319	.199	-.115	-1.604	.110
Gender	-.806	.393	-.141	-2.050	.042
Anger	.131	.034	.288	3.808	.000
Depression	.043	.052	.067	.826	.410
Suicide Ideation	-.109	.066	-.124	-1.636	.104

The level of influence that the variable peer relationship had on cyberbullying was .024.



When the variable anger was introduced, the significance increased to 0.014



**Discussion**

The preliminary results indicated that cyberbullying and cyber-victimization are present at alarming rates at tertiary level institutions. These findings are on par with those of Cassidy, Jackson and Brown (2009); Kift, Campbell and Butler, (2009) and Ang and Goh, (2010). University students are engaging in cyberbullying and are victims of cyberbullying but the self reports of cyberbullying seem to outnumber the self reports of cybervictimization. This finding was similar to that of Suler’s (2004) who suggested that cyberbullies act out more frequently and with more intensity in the presence of their peers and are more likely to admit to engaging

in bullying behaviour than cybervictims are likely to admit being victimized.

Unlike the majority of studies which show direct and indirect links amongst cyberbullying/cybervictimization and social psychological constructs namely self esteem, suicide ideation and depression (Hay and Meldrum, 2010; Raskukas 2010; Olweus, 2012; Sabella, 2013), the results of this study showed that while there is some measure of influence, they are not the most significant variables when looking at cyberbullying or cybervictimization. The results of this current study indicated that anger is the key mediating variable when looking at peer relationships and cyberbullying and cy-

bervictimization. Anger seems to have such a strong influence on cyberbullying that even in the presence of strong social bonds in the form of peer relationships and intimate partner relationships, deviance takes place (Grigg, 2010; Sabella et al., 2013; Caravita, Colombo et al., 2016).

This poses a challenge since it is difficult to adequately address such an issue, particularly amongst adults who may lash out by engaging in cyberbullying and after committing the act, no longer feel angry and their behaviour desists and restarts the next time they feel angry. The harm of cyberbullying in most instances is already done and cannot be retracted. Appropriate measures need to be made available for persons at tertiary level institutions to appropriately deal with anger. Having peers who are willing to listen and offer proper advice can perhaps assist. Social bonds do play integral roles but from these findings, they are not enough to deter tertiary level students from engaging in cyberbullying. Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) rightly suggest that their theory should not be taken in isolation of other factors when looking at deviance.

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