



## Original article

## Stakeholder Perceptions of Cyberbullying Cases: Application of the Uniform Definition of Bullying

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## A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** The Uniform Definition of Bullying was developed to address bullying and cyberbullying, and to promote consistency in measurement and policy. The purpose of this study was to understand community stakeholder perceptions of typical cyberbullying cases, and to evaluate how these case descriptions align with the Uniform Definition.

**Methods:** In this qualitative case analysis we recruited stakeholders commonly involved in cyberbullying. We used purposeful sampling to identify and recruit adolescents and young adults, parents, and professionals representing education and health care. Participants were asked to write a typical case of cyberbullying and descriptors in the context of a group discussion. We applied content analysis to case excerpts using inductive and deductive approaches, and chi-squared tests for mixed methods analyses.

**Results:** A total of 68 participants contributed; participants included 73% adults and 27% adolescents and young adults. A total of 650 excerpts were coded from participants' example cases and 362 (55.6%) were consistent with components of the Uniform Definition. The most frequently mentioned component of the Uniform Definition was Aggressive Behavior ( $n = 218$  excerpts), whereas Repeated was mentioned infrequently ( $n = 19$ ). Most participants included two to three components of the Uniform Definition within an example case; none of the example cases included all components of the Uniform Definition.

**Conclusions:** We found that most participants described cyberbullying cases using few components of the Uniform Definition. Findings can be applied toward considering refinement of the Uniform Definition to ensure stakeholders find it applicable to cyberbullying.

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IMPLICATIONS AND  
CONTRIBUTION

The Uniform Definition of Bullying is meant to streamline assessment, intervention, and policy. Previous work suggests adolescents have concerns with applying this definition to cyberbullying. Study findings indicate stakeholders' examples of cyberbullying cases had alignment with the Uniform Definition, but that language around power imbalance and repetition may benefit from revision.

**Conflicts of Interest:** None of the authors have conflicts of interest to report.

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Bullying is a public health, education, and criminal justice problem that occurs throughout the world and peaks during the adolescent years [1–3]. Current estimates are that traditional, or in-person, bullying affects between 18% and 31% of youth, and cyberbullying affects between 7% and 15% of youth [4]. Bullying and cyberbullying are both associated with significant physical and mental health consequences for both targets and perpetrators [5,6]. The impact of stress related to bullying has been shown to affect the developing brain, and to be associated with changes

to the stress response system linked to risks for future health and academic difficulties [7].

Although bullying is not a new problem, it is only recently that researchers have endeavored to define, measure, and intervene in bullying behavior. Although an early definition of bullying was proposed by Olweus over three decades ago [8], it was not until 2014 that a committee was formed to develop a consensus-driven “Uniform” definition of bullying sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and U.S. Department of Education. This Uniform Definition of Bullying is as follows:

Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm. [9]

In this definition, cyberbullying was considered a context in which bullying occurs.

The Uniform Definition represented a major contribution to the literature in applying evidence to generate an evidence and consensus-driven conceptualization of bullying; however, its application to cyberbullying presented some issues in the research literature. First, some researchers focused studies on cyberbullying and suggested that findings illustrated distinct characteristics of cyberbullying compared to bullying [10–12]. These findings suggested that cyberbullying may be more than just a context for schoolyard bullying. However, other studies investigated both bullying and cyberbullying and found that these types of bullying often co-occur [2,13,14], and that interventions targeting one type of bullying often have effects on the other [15]. A meta-analysis described significant relationships and theoretical overlap between cyberbullying and traditional bullying [16]. These findings support the similarities and overlap in these types of bullying.

A second issue is that the Uniform Definition focused on school-age youth; it did not account for college-age bullying. However, among the collegiate age group, cyberbullying has been shown to be an important, common, and consequential form of bullying [17–22]. Thus, youth and adult stakeholders in the collegiate arena are without clarity on whether the Uniform Definition could or should be applied to cases of cyberbullying in college.

It remains unclear whether the Uniform Definition is perceived as applicable to cyberbullying by those involved in bullying scenarios, such as educators and adolescents themselves. A previous study of adolescents and young adults (AYAs) found that participants had reservations about applying the Uniform Definition to cyberbullying. For example, AYAs voiced concerns regarding whether cyberbullying represented an inherent power differential between perpetrators and targets. Participants argued that in a cyberbullying situation, a physically or socially weaker target may use technology to gain power over a stronger perpetrator. These participants perceived that cyberbullying involved less emphasis on aggression, intention, and repetition compared to traditional forms of bullying, and concluded that they believed the Uniform Definition was not applicable to cyberbullying [19].

The issue of similarities and differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying was revisited in the 2016 National Academies Report, “Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy and Practice” [23]. This consensus report concluded that traditional

bullying and cyberbullying are “more alike than dissimilar,” and that the Uniform Definition should be updated to ensure its applicability to cyberbullying. The purpose of this study was to apply a qualitative case approach, including mixed methods analyses to understand stakeholder perceptions of cyberbullying cases, and determine areas of alignment with the Uniform Definition and content that may benefit from revision.

## Methods

### Study setting and design

This study was conducted in Washington State and incorporated stakeholders from academic and community settings. The Western Institutional Review Board approved this study.

### Participants

To understand views of stakeholders involved in cyberbullying, we recruited two groups: AYAs between the ages of 12 and 25 years, and adult stakeholders. Our youth sample was older than many studies of traditional bullying, and we recognized that youth over age 18 were not the focus of the Uniform Definition. However, the older adolescent/young adult age range was important to include since this study was focused on cyberbullying, which is most common among high school and collegiate-aged youth [24,25]. Among adult stakeholders, we were interested in views of parents who often serve as gatekeepers for whether or not a bullying experience reported by their child is escalated to the school or authorities. We were also interested in the views of professionals such as health professionals who may be faced with youth who report their experiences to them. Participants were recruited between March 2013 and December 2015.

We used purposeful sampling; this included contacting youth groups, parent organizations, schools, and clinics to identify participants. Additional eligibility criteria included speaking in English. Each adult participant gave written consent for participation; parental consent and adolescent assent was obtained for participants under 18 years.

### Study procedure

Our goal was to understand individuals’ perceptions of a typical or example cyberbullying case. Bullying can be a stigmatizing topic; thus, we wanted data collection to allow for individuals to provide data privately, but benefit from group discussion. To achieve this study goal, data collection occurred in groups. Groups were organized by participants with similar background; for example, AYA were in groups with other AYAs of similar age. At the start of the session, participants were provided a paper survey to complete individually. Participants were then invited to discuss the topic in an open discussion led by a facilitator. At the end of the discussion, participants were invited to review or edit their written answers and turn them in once they were satisfied with their responses. Discussions lasted between 15 and 45 minutes.

### Measures

The survey included two open-ended prompts. The first prompt asked participants to “provide an example of cyberbullying/electronic harassment.” The survey explained that this example could be from any source, including a news story,

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