



Original article

Digital Self-Harm Among Adolescents

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Despite increased media and scholarly attention to digital forms of aggression directed toward adolescents by their peers (e.g., cyberbullying), very little research has explored digital aggression directed toward oneself. “Digital self-harm” is the anonymous online posting, sending, or otherwise sharing of hurtful content about oneself. The current study examined the extent of digital self-harm among adolescents.

Methods: Survey data were obtained in 2016 from a nationally representative sample of 5,593 American middle and high school students (12–17 years old). Logistic regression analysis was used to identify correlates of participation in digital self-harm. Qualitative responses were also reviewed to better understand motivations for digital self-harm.

Results: About 6% of students have anonymously posted something online about themselves that was mean. Males were significantly more likely to report participation (7.1% compared to 5.3%). Several statistically significant correlates of involvement in digital self-harm were identified, including sexual orientation, experience with school bullying and cyberbullying, drug use, participation in various forms of adolescent deviance, and depressive symptoms.

Conclusions: Digital self-harm is a new problem that demands additional scholarly attention. A deeper inquiry as to the motivations behind this behavior, and how it correlates to offline self-harm and suicidal ideation, can help direct mental health professionals toward informed prevention approaches.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

This study empirically explores digital self-harm behaviors among middle and high school aged youth with a large nationally representative sample. Several significant covariates were identified, including experience with bullying, depression, and adolescent problem behaviors.

Over the last decade, teens have embraced and exploited social media and the online world to engage in self-expression and self-construction, explore the boundaries of their identity,

and come into their own [1–3]. During this transformative season of life, many youth are using communications technology in predominantly positive and productive ways to meet certain psychological, emotional, social, and relational needs [4]. Others, however, are meeting those needs in maladaptive ways that trouble the professionals and families who care for them. One newly identified online behavior of concern—digital self-harm occurs when an individual creates an online account and uses it to anonymously send hurtful messages or threats to oneself. These behaviors first entered the public spotlight in 2013 when it was learned that 14-year-old Hannah Smith, from Leicestershire, England, had anonymously sent hurtful messages to herself on the social media platform Ask.fm in the weeks leading up to her suicide [5].

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Much attention in clinical, school, and community settings has been given to traditional forms of self-injury among teens (e.g., cutting and burning) [6], not only because of the damage that is physically done and the internal turmoil it betrays, but also because self-harm has been linked to suicide [7–11]. The online variant of self-harm—also known as self-cyberbullying, cyber self-harm, or self-trolling—has only recently been identified and has therefore not yet been adequately examined despite preliminary evidence that a nontrivial amount of youth have engaged in the behavior [12,13]. We use the term “digital self-harm,” which we define as the “anonymous online posting, sending, or otherwise sharing of hurtful content about oneself.” This conceptualization encompasses self-harm as it occurs through SMS, email, social media, gaming consoles, web forums, virtual environments, and any other online platform yet to be conceived.

In the text that follows, we briefly summarize the extant literature on adolescent self-harm with particular focus on prevalence rates and motivations. This serves as the backdrop for the current work, which utilizes a nationally representative sample of U.S. youth to determine the extent to which those aged 12–17 years are engaging in digital self-harm. Apart from parsing out how certain demographic variables differentiate participant behaviors, we examine the relationship to several salient covariates such as bullying and cyberbullying victimization, drug use, participation in traditional forms of deviance, and depressive symptoms. After discussing the findings, we provide suggestions for future work to help society better understand and address this emerging behavior.

The nature and extent of adolescent self-harm

Research among general samples of adolescents across the world suggests that approximately 13%–18% engage in self-injurious behaviors during their lifetime and that this behavior has been on the rise over the last two decades [14,15]. To be sure, prevalence rates have varied based on what behaviors are considered. Typical conceptualizations include cutting, scratching, biting, or hitting (oneself); abusing pills; eating disorders; and/or reckless or bone breaking behaviors [16].

An adolescent's decision to self-harm may not be as much a call for help as a demonstration of felt pain and distress. Indeed, an analysis of studies examining self-reported reasons for physical self-harm—including those featuring adolescent samples—found a widespread theme of affect regulation. Specifically, top reasons endorsed were the desire to stop bad feelings (such as emptiness, abandonment, guilt, or desperation), to release tension and stress, or because the respondent was unhappy or depressed [17]. Other explanations include self-hatred and self-punishment and to a lesser extent antidissociation (the desire to feel something other than numbness), interpersonal-influence (to get others to act differently or to care more), sensation seeking (to feel excitement or stimulation), to prevent suicidal behavior or attempts, or to exert control and ownership over one's body [18].

Social media researcher boyd [13] first wrote about digital self-harm in a blog post in 2010 and speculated that it may reflect a cry for help, a desire to look cool, or an effort to trigger compliments as others defend against the harassment. A year later, Englander [12] explored the phenomena among a sample of 617 college students and found that 9% had done so in high school (13% of boys and 8% of girls). This study also found that while

depression did not differentiate between those who engaged in digital self-harm, drug and alcohol use did [12]. Englander [12] found that both males and females engaged in digital self-harm mostly to gain the attention of peers. Interestingly, girls did it to prove they could handle it, encourage others to worry, or get attention from adults, while boys did it because they were mad at someone and wanted to start a fight [12].

It has also been suggested that digital self-harm might relate to empathy seeking, serve as a way to demonstrate a measure of toughness and strength, help clarify whether certain negative perceptions of them are universally shared by others, and make their pain more visible and, consequently, more real [19]. That is, pain may be not only something they feel, but something they perform in order to elicit a desired response from others [19]. The ubiquity of social media and the way in which youth present and represent themselves in order to obtain attention, validation, and feedback from an audience may enhance the likelihood they choose online spaces as the preferred venue through which they can affect and reach others.

The current study seeks to expand upon these early observations by systematically examining digital self-harm among adolescents. We inquire both about participation in digital self-harm and motivations for such behavior. In addition, we examine if certain correlates identified in offline self-harm research also apply to digital forms of self-harm. We discuss their relevance before detailing how research on digital self-harm might further develop to better inform our understanding and response.

Methods

Data

Data for the current work came from a survey administered to a nationally representative sample of English-speaking 12- to 17-year-old middle and high school students residing in the U.S. A survey was distributed digitally between August and October 2016 that examined perceptions of, and experiences with, bullying, cyberbullying, and related teen behaviors. Parental consent and child assent were obtained for all participants, and the survey took 23 minutes to complete on average. Three separate research firms were contracted with to distribute the instrument through four different sample sources via email. Although this data collection practice is not well entrenched in the history of survey research, such a cost-effective and comparatively efficient approach has been utilized in recent years by other researchers [20]. Furthermore, it seems especially appropriate for exploratory inquiries into relatively new phenomena among youthful populations.

With regard to the sampling design, nested age, sex, and region quotas were used to ensure a diverse sample of respondents that was representative of students across U.S. After the data were cleaned, the final sample size totaled to 5,593 adolescents. The final response rate for this survey was approximately 15%. Admittedly, this is lower than other methods of data collection and not ideal [21,22] but still satisfactory for a preliminary inquiry to an understudied problem. It is worth mentioning that findings from the current study on other measures (e.g., cyberbullying) were comparable to previous research we have conducted using different methodologies [23]. We are therefore more confident in the results obtained. Nevertheless, the relatively low response rate, and limitations to the methodology

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