

From bullying to relationships: Mapping our online communications

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When we typically think of kids who are the victims of school bullying, what comes to mind are isolated youth who do not fit in. A new study, however, shows that when that harassment occurs online, the victims tend to be in mainstream social groups at the school – and they are often friends or former friends, not strangers.

The research is part of a burgeoning field of study into the effects of social media on everyday relationships and behavior. Personality and social psychologists are finding surprising ways in which people's online environments and relationships reflect and influence their real-world ones, as presented today at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP) annual meeting today in New Orleans.

"Researchers have known for a while that individuals give unique cues about who they are with the things they own, clothes they wear, things they say and do. However, though these cues are informative to knowing who someone truly is, they were not always so easily accessible to our entire social network," says Lindsay Graham of the University of Texas, Austin, one of today's presenters. "Now with much of our lives being lived online, and the boundaries having been blurred between who sees these cues and who doesn't, it is all the more important to pay attention to the kinds of impressions we are giving off to those around us."

The emerging image of the cyber-bully

Some statistics indicate that as many as 160,000 students a year skip school just to avoid being harassed, and texting and social media are making it easier than ever to harass classmates. Victimization from schoolmates has been correlated with everything from depression and anxiety to thoughts of suicide and struggles with academics.

To study so-called "cyber-aggression" – harassment that occurs online – Diane Felmlee of the Pennsylvania State University and Robert Faris of the University of California, Davis, studied 788 students at a preparatory school in Long Island. They mapped the students' social network structure relative to online harassment: asking students to name their close friends, which schoolmates they have picked on or been mean to, and which schoolmates had picked on them.

What they found was that cyber-aggression occurs in the mainstream of the school and largely among friends, former friends, and former dating partners. They also found that non-heterosexual students were more likely to be the victims. Examples of the types of harassment found online were posting humiliating photos, texting vicious rumors, posting that a student is gay and making fun of him, and pretending to befriend a lonely person.

"Cyber-aggression occurred most often among relatively popular young people, rather than among those on the fringes of the school hierarchy," Felmlee says. "Those engaging in cyber-aggression also were unlikely to target strangers but often were in close relationships with their victims at one point in time, close enough to know how to harm them."

The researchers found that some of the processes that contribute to aggression in school include jockeying for status, enforcing norms of conformity, and competing for girlfriends or boyfriends.

How our online image affects our relationships

Even more innocuous online interactions can prove problematic for offline relationships, psychologists are finding. One new study shows that disclosing more about ourselves online actually lessens intimacy and satisfaction among romantic couples.

"We found that contrary to the research on offline self-disclosure, which shows that more offline disclosure leads to higher intimacy and relationship satisfaction between both romantic couples and friends," says Juwon Lee of the University of Kansas, "online self-disclosure was negatively associated with intimacy and satisfaction between couples."

In a series of studies, Lee and colleagues found that greater usage of Facebook predicted lower satisfaction in romantic relationships but not in friendships. In one study, the researchers created two different mock Facebook walls: one that had a high degree of self-disclosure (e.g., many personal pictures and personal status updates such as "Just had a fight with Mom" or "Pretty interesting training at work today") and one that had a low degree of self-disclosure (e.g., neutral status updates such as "Nice weather today"). They asked the participants to imagine that one of the walls was their partner's and then measured their relationship intimacy and satisfaction. Those who had the walls with high levels of self-disclosure reported less intimacy and satisfaction with their relationships compared to those with the more minimal walls.

"Disclosing a high degree of personal information online, regardless of whether or not the information is related to your partner or relationship, will likely negatively affect your romantic relationship," Lee says. How our online image matches us offline Researchers are also investigating how closely the information we disclose online mirrors who we are offline. In two new sets of studies, psychologists looked to World of Warcraft players and to profiles of people who frequent cafes and bars.

"With more and more of our lives being lived both in the physical and virtual worlds, it's important to understand the kinds of impressions we give off to others through the traces we leave behind in our environments," says Graham of the University of Texas, Austin, co-author of the studies with Sam Gosling. "Whether we're creating a screen name or avatar for ourselves, or broadcasting that the bar or coffee shop down the street is one of our frequent hangouts, we are inevitably telling those

around us something about who we are as individuals."

In the study about World of Warcraft players, the researchers found that although people can make consistent judgments about a player's personality, those impressions do not match how the players view themselves. In the second set of studies, they examined 50 randomly selected cafes and bars in the Austin area and looked at the profile pictures of people who frequent those establishments using the social networking site Foursquare.com. Just by looking at the profile photos of the frequent patrons for each location, observers were able to assess the personality the typical patron (e.g., extraverted, likeable, narcissistic), the activities likely to occur at the establishment (e.g., drinking, surfing the web, flirting), and the atmosphere or "vibe" of the location itself (e.g., sophisticated, clean, kitsch-y).

For comparison, the researchers sent a second set of observers to the same locations to make the same assessments in person. "Interestingly, we found that when we compared the impressions formed from just the profiles with those formed from the establishments themselves, there was quite a bit of overlap," Graham says. "Impressions were consistent no matter what type of stimuli an observer sees - suggesting there is some cohesion in the types of people who go to certain places and the places themselves."

How communication channels shape what we say

Aside from creating images of ourselves online, people increasingly use social media - including Twitter, Facebook, and blogs - to communicate a variety of information, including about consumer products. Exactly which modes of communication we choose, online versus offline, affects how we talk and what we talk about, a new study finds.

Jonah Berger of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and colleagues analyzed more than 21,000 everyday conversations on- and offline. They found that online posts and texts provide people the opportunity to take pauses in conversations, and thus more carefully craft what they say. As a result, those conversations tend to be more interesting than conversations face-to-face or over the phone.

The researchers measured interest by "coding" the conversations, which came from the Keller Fay Group, a research marketing firm that tracks which brands and products consumers talk about. Brands such as Christian Dior and products such as the Audi A6 scored as highly interesting, while brands like Ross and products like insurance scored as not at all interesting.

"These findings shed light on how communication channels shape interpersonal communication and the psychological drivers of word-of-mouth more broadly," says Berger, who is author of the upcoming book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*. "They underscore the old maxim of thinking twice before you open your mouth."

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