

Scientists stress lifelong effects of cyberbullying

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Dr. Marion Underwood and Dr. Samuel Ehrenreich. Credit: University of Texas at Dallas

In a new article, a University of Texas at Dallas dean said cyberbullying among adolescents can be so traumatic that it can impact individuals for years, even if it happens only once.

Dr. Marion Underwood, dean of the Office of Graduate Studies, said she penned the article in *American Psychologist* because she thought that bullying on social media and the web is often misunderstood. *American Psychologist*, the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association, is widely read by scientists and practitioners.

"I wrote the piece because I felt like people who were trying to understand cyberaggression and cyberbullying were missing some of the real risks of adolescent involvement in social media and digital communication," she said.

The paper draws on established research to argue that there are two points that need to be better understood: The impact of cyberbullying and the risks associated with lurking on social media.

The co-author of the article is Dr. Samuel Ehrenreich BA'07, BS'07, MS'11, PhD'12, a research scientist in the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences, who has worked with Underwood as an undergraduate research assistant, a doctoral student and as a primary, postdoctoral researcher in Underwood's lab. He said cybervictimization can be so traumatic that young people can hurt for years, even if it happened to them only once.

"The impact of even a single episode is potentially extremely serious because the behavior is immediately viewed by hundreds of friends and followers and is preserved forever in digital form," he said.

The other issue discussed in the article is the risk associated with the time that young people spend scrolling social media feeds. Underwood

said it is called lurking, which is reading anonymously without posting.

"Because so many adolescents have smartphones, the minute they have a second of downtime, they pick it up and start scrolling through social media. What they see could be very exciting and affirming for some teens, those at the high end of social status, but could be very distressing for those who are a little lonely or who might not have the strongest peer connections," she said.

Underwood said that most young people only post their highly curated, most appealing pictures on social media.

"My fear is that those who are a little bit lonely or depressed look at [social media](#) and they see all the fun that everybody else is supposedly having. Then they compare their experience to everybody else's best social times. And that that could make teens who are already vulnerable feel even worse," she said.

The National Institutes of Health has been funding Underwood's research in this area since 1995. Much of the current data has come from the [Blackberry Project](#), a long-term longitudinal study, led by Underwood and Ehrenreich, of how adolescents use digital communication and what it means for their relationships and adjustment.

Underwood and Ehrenreich said the article was intended to alert psychologists that they need to pay attention to the online social world in which many adolescents spend so much time. The researchers said there usually is no distinction between online and offline relationships.

"The online world isn't separate or less important from the rest of their world. If anything, it might be more important because it's more public and more visible. And it's a scorecard for popularity," Ehrenreich said. "Young people are very sensitive to the number of likes and comments

their posts get in relation to those of their peers. So it's a whole new world that means a lot to them."

Underwood said that researchers and psychologists must pay attention to what young people are doing online.

"Psychologists need to rise to the challenge of systematically studying the content of adolescents' [digital communication](#), testing established theories in this context and developing new ones if needed, and bringing our methodological expertise to understanding [adolescents'](#) online lives," she said.

More information: Marion K. Underwood et al. The power and the pain of adolescents' digital communication: Cyber victimization and the perils of lurking., *American Psychologist* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/a0040429](#)

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