

Teens Are Cyberbullying Themselves. Why?



By Sasha Jones

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Hannah Smith was a 14-year-old living in Lutterworth, England, when she began receiving hateful messages on the social-networking site Ask.fm. A few weeks later, she committed suicide.

Convinced their daughter was a victim of cyberbullying, her family called for the question-and-answer site to be shut down. But when Ask.fm officials investigated what happened, they found that 98 percent of the messages sent to Hannah could be tracked back to her own IP address.

Hannah had been anonymously posting the derogatory comments about herself—something known as digital self-harm.

Easy to Hide

Like cutting—a form of self-injury that some adolescents and adults engage in to try to cope with strong feelings of pain or upset—digital self-harm is a newer form of teenage expression of self-hatred and depression that is just beginning to capture the attention of school officials.

Just as youths who cut themselves can often hide their wounds and scars under clothing, digital self-harm is difficult to detect.

Moved by Hannah Smith's story, cyberbullying researchers Justin Patchin, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, and Sameer Hinduja, a professor of criminal justice at Florida Atlantic University, wanted to understand the prevalence of adolescents who bully themselves online and the reasons behind it.

They conducted a nationally representative survey of nearly 6,000 middle and high school students. Their study, "**Digital Self-Harm Among Adolescents**," revealed that 6 percent of students say they have cyberbullied themselves.

"These are youth who are knowingly and intentionally posting negative messages about themselves—and reporting that they did so to researchers. We should be deeply concerned that there are young people out there who are struggling and not getting the support that they need," researcher Danah Boyd said in an email.

Boyd, a principal researcher at Microsoft Research and the founder of Data & Society, a research institute that focuses on how technology is changing society and culture, **originally coined the term "digital self-harm" eight years ago in a 2010 blog post** that surfaced the online behavior. At the time, Boyd wrote that teens attacking themselves online while making it look like someone else was attacking them was a "very effective" way to get attention.

Published in the Journal of Adolescent Health last year, Patchin and Hinduja's study also found that males were significantly more likely to report self-harming themselves than females, with 7.1 percent compared with 5.3 percent, a finding that surprised the researchers.

While a great deal of research has been done on cyberbullying, the survey on digital self-harm is one of only two studies that have been done on the topic, Patchin said.

"It's still very early days, so even replicating our work is an important first step," Patchin said. "But what we'd love to do is that longitudinal research."

Such research would involve examining whether correlated factors, such as cyberbullying, physical self-harm, and drug use, precede or follow the act of digital self-harm, he said.

Self-Hatred

Although about 1 in 20 adolescents say they have digitally self-harmed, and almost half (48.7 percent) of those have done it more than once, schools are largely unaware of the behavior. That is mainly because of schools' inability to monitor students' actions on the internet, according to Lynn Linde, the senior director of the Center for Counseling Practice, Policy and Research at the American Counseling Association.

"Students are no longer safe anywhere, and what happens outside of schools, clearly affects students in schools," Linde said.

Even so, it can be difficult to pinpoint which students are bullying themselves online as a result of the anonymous nature of the behavior. In most cases, that would require tracking the IP address behind a post, or for a teenager to admit to posting negatively about himself or herself.

The survey gave those who engaged in the practice the option to explain why they digitally self-harmed. Of those who did explain, most said it originated from feelings of self-hatred.

"There's almost a desperate hope of being able to manipulate people into giving you a second chance. If other people feel bad enough for me, if other people think that this is what's happening to me online, they might give me a second chance, and then I can show them that I can fit in," said sociologist Laura Martocci, an expert in bullying who works with schools and professional organizations in the New York area.

Other students, however, were classified as seeking attention, with one such response being, "So people could see that people bully me too and that I could be mean to other people because 'people' were mean to me."

Some reported that they digitally self-harmed to be funny or to see the reactions of their peers.

"A parallel can be drawn between the kids who say, 'I'm going to kill myself,' " Patchin said, comparing the act of digital self-harming to be funny with other forms of self-deprecating humor that teenagers may participate in. "While it may be difficult for a parent or educator to make that difference [between potential harm and humor], professionals can easily make that difference."

Resources to Help

Although digital self-harm occurs on sites that allow anonymous messaging, such as Ask.fm, Sarahah, or Tumblr, Twitter and other popular social-media sites have taken steps to limit the glorification of self-harm and suicide on their platforms.

Twitter, according to a company spokeswoman, has updated its policy to be able to take down reported content that promotes or encourages suicide or self-harm. In the United States and Japan, Twitter has launched a new feature meant to help people who use search terms associated with self-harm. The social-media company provides information about getting support to users searching for "trigger words." The feature is being released globally throughout this year.

In March, Twitter introduced the policy by suspending accounts that had used trigger words implying self-harm or suicide, including the phrases "I want to die" and "kill myself." That resulted in criticism from Twitter users who share and post memes, expressing concern that the site may be unable to distinguish when such phrases are being used for humor and entertainment.

"I think that social media is continuing to evolve without the controls that we [counselors] or parents would like to see in place," said Linde. "It's pretty much a free-for-all."

According to an Ask.fm spokesperson, following a change in ownership and Hannah's death in 2013, the site conducted a review of self-messaging on its platform. Led by Richard Graham, a psychiatrist, the internal review found that 10 percent of questions on the site are self-asked. Of those, 1.5 percent contain "rude and cruel language and may contain encouragements to commit suicide."

Martocci argues that there are resources that schools can provide to their students, similar to those that they would provide to students being cyberbullied or physically self-harming.

"There are places online that you can go to if you're feeling pain. If you're feeling pain, even if by other people's standards you haven't been harassed, if you need support, even though you're supposed to be able to take it, you can go to sites like iHeartMob," Martocci said.

"This is a cyber ER, and we have to create more cyber ER spaces and encourage more people to volunteer in them."

Similarly, in 2017, Ask.fm partnered with the Koko service, an artificial-intelligence service that detects hurtful content, removes it, and directs users to mental-health-support services.

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