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Digital Self-Harm: Frequency, Type, Motivations, and Outcomes

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DIGITAL SELF-HARM: FREQUENCY, TYPE, MOTIVATIONS, AND OUTCOMES

Elizabeth Englander, PhD

This report describes research conducted in 2011 and 2012 on 617 subjects, 10% of whom reported self-cyberbullying. The report details the frequency of self-cyberbullying in boys versus girls (17% versus 8%) and the frequency of the incidents in questions. The data also reveals some of the characteristics of self-cyberbullies, their motivations for digital self-harm and the relative success of the tactic.

**DIGITAL SELF-HARM: FREQUENCY, TYPE, MOTIVATIONS, AND
OUTCOMES¹**

In 2010, following some perceptive conversations with teenagers, Dr. danah boyd [sic] published a blog in which she described incidents of “digital self-harm,” described as “teens out there who are self-harassing by ‘anonymously’ writing mean questions to themselves and then publicly answering them.”² This phenomenon was initially uncovered by the staff at a website, Formspring, which investigated some cyberbullying and found that the alleged victims had actually posted the cruel comments against themselves. I’ve referred to this phenomenon as “Digital Munchausen” (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) because of its resemblance to the psychiatric disorders known as Munchausen’s Syndrome and Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy.³ The Syndrome’s central identifying symptom is the patient’s infliction of self-harm in a quest for sympathy, attention, and admiration for their ability to cope with their (so-called) “victimization.” In 2011, I studied this type of online behavior in the Freshman Study, where overall, 9% of the subjects told us that they had falsely posted a cruel remark “against” themselves, or cyberbullied themselves, during high school.⁴ Interestingly, a higher proportion of boys (13%) admitted to this than did girls (8%). About half of these “digital self-harmers” had done this only once or very infrequently; the other half reported that they had cyberbullied themselves more regularly or had one, ongoing episode which lasted at least several months (see Figure 1).

How frequently did you cyberbully yourself?

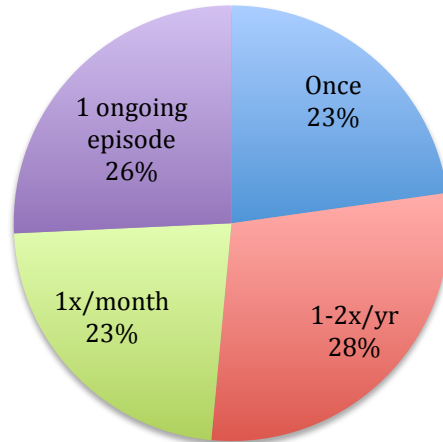


Figure 1

Motivations for Digital Self-Harm

Why might teens engage in this kind of bizarre form of self-harm? Boyd speculated on three possibilities: self-harmers might be uttering a “cry for help,” they might want to appear “cool,” or they may be trying to “trigger compliments.” In my study, both male and female subjects were most likely to say they actually did this in an attempt to gain the attention of a peer, and were least likely to have done it “as a joke” on someone else. Girls were more likely than boys to say that their motivation was “proving I could take it,” encouraging others “to worry about me,” or to “get adult attention.” Boys were more likely to say that they did this because they were mad, as a way to start a fight (presumably, they would falsely blame the person they were angry at) (see Figure 2 below).

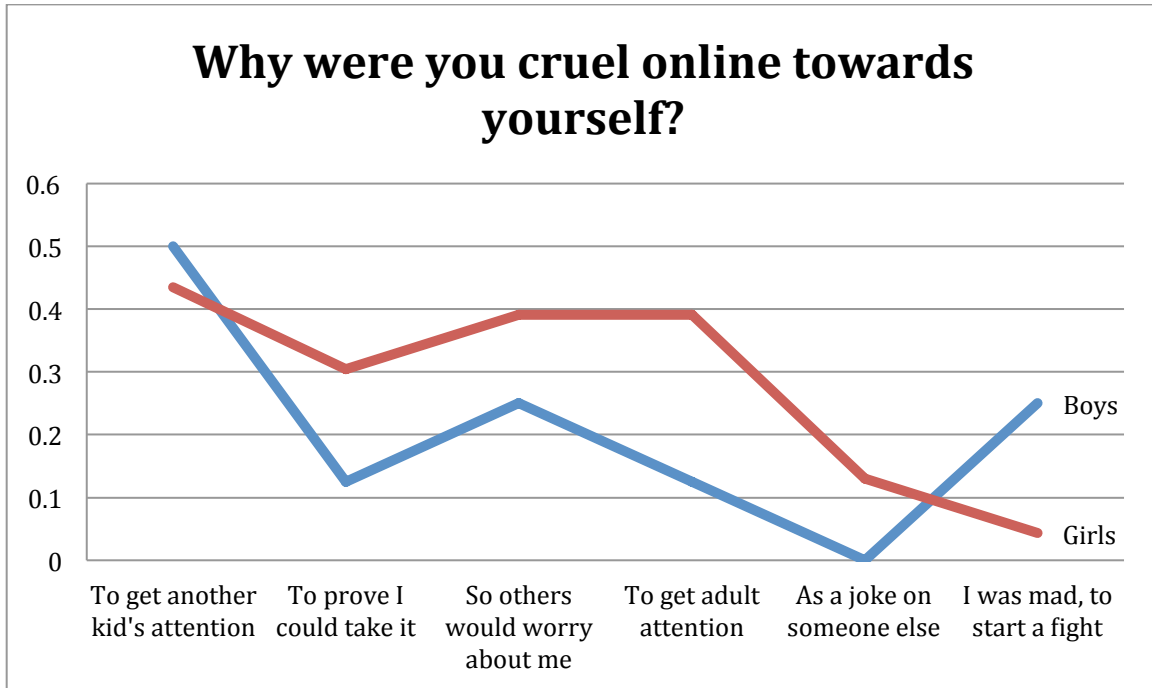


Figure 2

If Digital Self-Harmers are uttering a “cry for help,” we might expect them to be more likely to have other psychiatric issues. There is some evidence for that. There weren’t differences between Self-Harmers and Non-Self-Harmers for depression and anxiety, but Digital Self-Harmers were more likely to have had three or more psychiatric issues during high school and they were also more likely to report being frequent users of drugs and alcohol. Does digital self-bullying work? It may be effective, at least sometimes. For both boys and girls, about 35% said that the self-cyberbullying strategy was successful for them, in that it helped them achieve what they wanted to achieve, and they felt better because of it.

Whether you call it “digital self-harm” or “digital Munchausen,” the fact that some students do stage their own cyberbullying is an issue that educators should be aware of. I’ve noticed in the field that most of us accept printed transcripts as absolute proof of cyberbullying, but this phenomenon suggests that we may be too innocent in this regard. Short of a confession or the utilization of digital forensics (beyond the desire or the capacity of almost all schools and parents), it may in fact be hard to know when a case of cyberbullying is “real” or not. But this issue may have a silver lining. Since a schools’ jurisdiction over the online bully is limited anyway, what this phenomenon really does is reinforce the need to focus on the targets of online abuse. When a student claims to be a victim of cyberbullying, they need our support and attention. That need should be front and center, regardless of whether the cyberbullying is real or manufactured. In fact, students who self-cyberbully may be among those who need our attention most of all.

As more analyses are completed, this report will be updated.

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² Boyd, D., “Digital Self-Harm and Other Acts of Self-Harassment.”

³ American Psychological Association. and LeAdelle Phelps, *Health-related Disorders in Children and Adolescents a Guidebook for Understanding and Educating* (Washington :: American Psychological Association,, 1998).

⁴ Elizabeth Englander, “Preliminary Report: Bullying and Cyberbullying in Massachusetts 2011-12” (presented at the Workshop: PCP Interventions, Freehold, NJ, 2011).