

“Nothing Crueler than High School Students”: The Cyberbully in Film and Television

Lauren Rosewarne, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

The Internet as a fearful place is a theme apparent in numerous film and television presentations whereby fears and anxieties about new technology are exploited and new ethical challenges are mounted. The idea that the Internet can make a person, particularly a young person, vulnerable has much traction on screen: in the context of bullying, narratives frequently demonstrate that while it was once restricted to the parameters of school—the school grounds and the school day—the Internet enables such behavior to happen at any time and for it to occur repeatedly with an infinite audience. Anybody with Internet access—be it via their laptop or smartphone—can be bullied; equally, anyone with access to such technology can become the bully. Revictimization is the starting point for this discussion and a key factor in distinguishing cyberbullying from the schoolyard terror of the pre-Web era. The public nature of many online attacks means that victims experience abuse in an ongoing fashion in turn, exacerbating and prolonging the trauma. Other themes explored include the flexibility of roles: whereas in schoolyard bullying the victim is frequently the weaker kid preyed upon by someone older and stronger; online the weaker kid can effortlessly become the bully themselves in a world where physical brawn is less important than computer prowess. Age and gender are also examined, along with emerging social concerns such as slut-shaming and revenge porn. These themes are each explored to expose the way film and television depict social concerns exacerbated by new technology.

KEYWORDS

Bullying, Cyberbullying, Internet, Revictimization

INTRODUCTION

The Internet as a fearful place is a theme apparent in numerous film and television presentations whereby fears and anxieties about new technology are exploited and new ethical challenges are mounted. The idea that the Internet can make a person, particularly a young person, *vulnerable* has much traction on screen: in the context of bullying, narratives frequently demonstrate that while it was once restricted to the parameters of school—the school grounds and the school day—the Internet enables such behavior to happen at any time and for it to occur *repeatedly* with an infinite audience. An unnamed female teen makes this point in the American drama *Cyberbully* (2011) during a group therapy session for cyberbullying victims:

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In elementary school it was like “hey there goes Jelly Donut,” you know, stuff like that. And it sucked, right? But at least I could go home and get some peace. Now it’s like I can’t even post pictures on my own profile ‘cos people want to be telling me how fat or disgusting I am. This stuff follows me home.

Anybody with Internet access—be it via their laptop or smartphone—can be bullied; equally, anyone with access to such technology can become the bully. Film and television regularly depict the Internet as a threat—particularly so in early examples when the technology wasn’t particularly well understood (Rosewarne, 2016a; Rosewarne, 2016b; Rosewarne, 2016c). In the vast majority of examples, the Internet is only so fearful because users exploit its unique properties such as anonymity, physical distance, and the perception that social media use is somehow compulsory for young people. In the sections that follow, these properties are examined as themes in cyberbullying narratives, notably involving young people.

Revictimization is the starting point for this discussion and a key factor in distinguishing cyberbullying from the schoolyard terror of the pre-Web era. The public nature of many online attacks means that victims experience abuse in an ongoing fashion in turn, exacerbating and prolonging the trauma. Other themes explored include the flexibility of roles: whereas in schoolyard bullying the victim is frequently the weaker kid preyed upon by someone older and stronger; online the weaker kid can effortlessly become the bully themselves in a world where physical brawn is less important than computer prowess. Age and gender are also examined, along with emerging social concerns such as slut-shaming and revenge porn. These themes are each explored to expose the way film and television depict social concerns exacerbated by new technology.

REVICIMIZATION

While in physical bullying recurrence and repetition are key in many definitions (Garrett, 2003; Lines, 2008), in the context of cyberbullying, a single electronic attack can have recurrent and repetitious effects. This point is illustrated well in narratives where an uploaded video goes viral. In *Cyberbully*, during the height of her bullying, the teen protagonist, Taylor (Emily Osment), attempts suicide. In the aftermath, Dr. Rilke (Marcel Jeannin) counseled Taylor’s mother, Kris (Kelly Rowan), and tried to explain Taylor’s response:

Being bullied online, that can push a kid over the edge. It’s like a group assault, very traumatic. Anyone with a computer can see it, it’s always there, 24/7. Makes the victim feel even more trapped, unable to escape from it.

On screen the public nature of much cyberbullying—be it manifesting in slurs posted on social media or in a humiliating uploaded video—exacerbates an occurrence by increasing the audience, the embarrassment, and also the sense of permanence. Dr. Rilke’s mention of a *group assault* is something that makes cyberbullying a markedly different experience to a physical attack. When Taylor, for example, asks her mother “How am I going to face going to school on Monday?” she is alluding to her suspicion that her bullying would continue over the weekend, away from school. While cyberbullying can take the form of online harassment via social media—as experienced by Taylor in *Cyberbully*—another form is via video. While this can be achieved through the uploading of private and secretly recorded videos—for example, sex tapes as discussed later in this paper—a common method portrayed on screen is where physical acts are recorded and then uploaded to a video sharing site thus creating the capacity for *revictimization*.

The drama *Girl Fight* (2011) centered on a physical assault experienced by teen Haley (Jodelle Ferland) that was committed by her “friends” and then uploaded. In the British horror-comedy *Tormented* (2009), Darren (Calvin Dean) was a victim of extensive physical bullying; he became

cyberbullied when footage of one of his attacks was posted online. In the “Bully for You” episode of the family drama *Lincoln Heights* (2006–2009), the teens Malik (Zachary Williams) and Taylor (Mishon Ratliff) were beaten by bullies in separate attacks and videos of their assaults were posted online. This same plot was at the heart of the “Perfect Storm” episode of the Canadian police-drama *Flashpoint* (2008–2012): teen Billy (Calum Worthy) was beaten and the footage was then distributed via e-mail. In the horror film *Carrie* (2013), after the title character (Chloë Grace Moretz) gets her first period in front of classmates in a locker room, not only was her terror laughed at and mocked, but the episode was recorded on a cell phone.

While in *Tormented*, *Flashpoint*, and *Carrie* victims respond to their abuse by seeking violent revenge, in some examples, the assault—and notably the revictimization afterwards—leads characters to attempt suicide. The link between cyberbullying and suicide is, in fact, made in a range of examples. Mentioned earlier was the American *Cyberbully*: The public nature of Taylor’s cyberbullying led to a suicide attempt. Toward the end of the British *Cyberbully* (2015), the teen cyberbullying victim, Casey (Maisie Williams), appeared to consider the same response. In the drama *Disconnect* (2012), after a sexually compromising photo of teen, Ben (Jonah Bobo), is broadcast on social media, his school life quickly becomes intolerable and he makes a suicide attempt. In the television drama *Odd Girl Out* (2005), after a vicious campaign of online bullying, the teenager Vanessa (Alexa Vega) overdoses on pills. In the thriller *Trust* (2010), in the aftermath of Annie’s (Liana Liberato) rape, a website was established to mock her. Annie perceived herself as under group attack and attempted suicide. In an unnamed episode from the first season of *The Affair* (2014–), in a subplot it is revealed that Jody had attempted suicide after being cyberbullied. While in the American *Cyberbully* and the British *Cyberbully*, as well as in *Disconnect*, *Odd Girl Out*, *Trust*, and *The Affair*, the suicide attempts were unsuccessful, in other examples bullied teens do actually kill themselves. While Casey’s attempt in the British *Cyberbully* was unsuccessful, one of her former classmates, Jennifer (Haruka Abe), committed suicide after being systematically abused online. In *Tormented*, Darren’s bullying in real life—and then his revictimization online—led to his suicide. In the Polish film *Sala samobójców* (*Suicide Room*) (2011), in the aftermath of Dominik’s (Jakub Gierszal) cyberbullying about his homosexuality, he visited the Suicide Room website—a virtual reality site—and by the end of the film commit suicide there (and also in real life). The television drama *Sexting in Suburbia* (2012) opened with teen Dina’s (Jenn Proske) suicide: Her naked selfie had been circulated leading to slut-shaming. In the “Queen of Snark” episode of the courtroom drama *Harry’s Law* (2011–2012), Hannah (Mary Jon Nelson) had seemingly commit suicide over a blog that revealed her to be a lesbian. Something similar transpired in “The Truth about Lying” episode of the police-drama *Blue Bloods* (2010–): a teen lesbian, Amy (Christina Choe), committed suicide by stepping in front of a train after being slut-shamed online. The thriller *Unfriended* (2014) centered on the suicide of Laura Barns (Heather Sossaman) who—after an embarrassing video of her went viral—commit suicide.

The distribution of reputation-compromising materials creates a situation of repeated and inescapable abuse: each new person that sees a video contributes to a victim’s feelings of attack and their perception that continuing with their normal life is impossible. Similarly, once a video is uploaded, it is largely impossible to remove it.

THE INTERNET AS INSTIGATOR

The American film *Cyberbully* opened with Taylor exchanging snide comments with her best friend Samantha (Kay Panabaker) via social media, in turn such behavior is subtly presented as normal for female teens. The British film *Cyberbully* presented the same idea: Casey exchanged mean comments with friends online as part of ordinary social discourse. Both films showcase an almost seamless transition from use of the technology to be casually mean to becoming bullied by it. The same idea was at the heart of the drama *Girl Fight*: one of the motivations for Haley’s attack was because she had

written mean comments on social media about one of her friends; her attacker, Alexa (Tess Atkins) contended, “She deserved it. She was talking trash about me online. She hurt me!”

Partly these scenes illustrate the common “she started it”-type explanations for quarrels whereby participants will regularly deflect their complicity. Such behavior can also be construed, in part, as connected to the *girls will be girls* idea explored later in this paper. Another interpretation, however, is that the bitching and gossip that once was contained within private conversations, is now frequently conducted in public and, therefore, creates a situation whereby behavior can quickly gain an audience and take on wide-reaching connotations.

The Internet is also portrayed on screen as instigating bullying by being the medium by which it is carried out: that the Internet *creates* the vulnerability. In the American *Cyberbully*, for example, Taylor is given a computer for her birthday. In *Trust*, 14-year-old Annie is given a laptop for her birthday. In the “Web” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–), the computer technician, Ruben (Joel de la Fuente), had given a computer to his nephew. In each of these examples adults—via the gift of the Internet—put young people in peril: In *Cyberbully*, Taylor gets cyberbullied, in *Trust* Annie meets an online pedophile and is then raped and cyberbullied, and, in “Web”, Ruben’s nephew met an online pedophile and was then sexually assaulted. In *Cyberbully* and *Trust* notably, the seemingly innocent gift of a computer was presented as the tool by which well-adjusted and relatively popular girls became victims; that their lives prior to the Internet were comparatively perfect. Such examples also showcase how the Internet has thoroughly altered perceptions of safety. This idea is alluded to in several scenes in *Trust*, for example, when Annie’s father, Will (Clive Owen), and mom, Lynn (Catherine Keener), lock up the house, checking the doors and windows and set the alarm: such scenes highlight that while Will and Lynn try to prevent threats in the old-school, *physical* way, in reality, threats are now arriving via the computer that they had bought their daughter. This idea got verbalized in the “Chat Room” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, in a comment made by detective Elliot Stabler (Christopher Meloni) to his daughter: “You know how I lock up all the doors and windows? Now they’re coming in through there,” he said, and pointed to the computer.

In one of the final scenes of the Internet-themed thriller *Perfect Stranger* (2007), the journalist Rowena (Halle Berry) wrote in an article, “[The Internet] is a world, you think, where actions have no consequences, where guilt is cloaked by anonymity, where there are no fingerprints.” Rowena highlights an important feature of the Internet in the context of bad behavior such as cyberbullying: that anonymity fuels it. The ability to disguise identity online proffers both positive *and* negative attributes. For the purposes of this discussion, however, the ability to go online and bully is an example of the bad. The ability to conceal identity means that stopping spates of cyberbullying is made substantially more difficult given that identifying the perpetrator is often impossible.

In the sections that follow, the role of anonymity in the context of cyberbullying is explored.

ANONYMITY AND BAD BEHAVIOR

The social scientist Ian Greener identified that “people taking part in research can behave in remarkably dishonest ways when the assurance of anonymity is in place” (Greener, 2011, p. 52). The dishonesty Greener referred to highlights that being anonymous online provides people the opportunity to act in ways that they wouldn’t if exposing their identity—or, as Rowena in *Perfect Stranger* put it, having their *fingerprints* on it—was the cost; such acts are incongruous with their public self. The Internet, therefore, exists as a kind of unreal space whereby an individual doesn’t feel the same level of connection to, ownership of, accountability for, or embarrassment over their interactions; existence online is conceptualized as different from reality. While this idea has been extensively discussed by psychologist Sherry Turkle (1984, 1995) in realms such as gaming, this idea is also examined in literature on cyberbullying. Psychologists Robin Kowalski, Sue Limber, and Patricia Agatston (2012) for example, identified that, “Without the threat of punishment or disapproval, people may carry their actions much further than they normally would” (p. 86). Psychologists Noam Lapidot-Lefler

and Azy Barak (2012) similarly contended that “the psychological restraints that often serve to block or conceal emotions and undisclosed needs are found to be lowered in cyberspace in various online interpersonal behaviors” (p. 434). Inherent in these analyses is that cyberspace creates a situation where people act in ways that are inconsistent—if not actively *at odds*—with their real-life self. In the American *Cyberbully*, for example, when cyberbullying victim and perpetrator Samantha was asked about the bullying that she had engaged in, she admitted, “It’s hard to picture myself like that.” For Samantha it was difficult to reconcile the impression she held of herself with the person she had become online. This same dynamic transpired in the British *Cyberbully*: for most of the film Casey was unable to rationalize that her own online activity—mean comments on uploaded videos, etc.—also made *her* a cyberbully; her self-perception was markedly different.

While anonymity is one aspect of this, another is the Internet conceived of as a place separate from real life. A theme apparent in academic discussions about the Internet is the idea of cyberspace as a world of its own: that online life is often conceived of as different from other parts of life—time moves differently, people act differently, and different rules apply—and thus, anonymity or alternate identities can be considered as something not only separate from reality and from the real self, but also akin to a kind of game (Rosewarne, 2016a; Rosewarne, 2016b; Rosewarne, 2016c). While this idea has relevance to actual computer-gaming in a pre-Web world—whereby an individual enters another world, dons a different identity, and different rules apply—given that going online involves the same hardware that has long been used for gaming, it is conceivable that for some people the entire online experience is construed as life in another dimension. Different rules, needless to say, can be part of the explanation for the Internet serving as an instigator in online bullying.

One theory that helps to illuminate these concepts is *dissociative imagination*, something that happens when, as cultural theorist Kishonna Gray (2014) explains, “users make the mistake of assuming virtual worlds are make-believe spaces . . . suggesting that their virtual life is a game where the rules don’t apply to real life” (p. 42). In the drama *Men, Women & Children* (2014), Internet safety crusader, Patricia (Jennifer Garner), applied these ideas to compulsive gaming in a conversation with another parent, Kent (Dean Norris): “Your son has created an avatar of himself . . . When he’s plugged in, your son thinks that that world, the world of *Guild Wars* is the real world. Our world doesn’t matter anymore. His friends don’t matter. School doesn’t matter. You don’t matter.” In the first season of the political drama *House of Cards* (2013–), Francis (Kevin Spacey) is shown playing an online first-person shooter game in a conscious effort to escape his real world. In the “Bullseye” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, Jeff (Daniel Stewart Sherman) and Amber Sarmonsky (Melissa Rain Anderson) appeared to have dissociated from their real world while compulsively gaming. Psychologists Dorothy Espelage, Mrinalini Rao, and Rhonda Craven (2013) specifically discussed dissociative imagination in the context of cyberbullying, noting that the theory explains “the belief that the personas one creates in cyber-environments remain in an online world, limiting responsibility for real-world consequences” (p. 54). This notion of separating online activity from real-life consequences plays out in numerous examples. In the “Babes” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, cyberbullying initially seemed to have led to a pregnant teen’s apparent suicide. The adult cyberbully, Peggy (Debi Mazar), was unwilling to accept her responsibility: “I didn’t tie a rope around the bitch’s neck. I only typed words on a computer.” Peggy perceived a clear separation between behavior conducted online and in real life. Such themes were also apparent in *Perfect Stranger* when Rowena commented, “It’s a world, you think, where actions have no consequences.” Dissociative imagination allows a cyberbully to rationalize that their behavior is just “play.” This idea is illustrated in scenes where cyberbullies verbally excuse their behavior with language associated with gaming rather than aggression. In the American *Cyberbully*, for example, Samantha attempted to explain her cyberbullying, “You can’t see the other people, and you can do or say anything and it doesn’t seem to matter. It doesn’t feel real.” In a scene from *Chatroom*, one of the teenage characters, William (Aaron Taylor-Johnson), spoke of just “messing” with Emily (Hannah Murray); something that involved coercing her to engage in uncharacteristic antisocial behavior. Such ideas were also

evident in *Disconnect*: After his acts of cyberbullying led to his target's suicide attempt, Frye (Aviad Bernstein), explained, "It was supposed to be a joke . . . We were just trying to mess with him . . . We didn't think he'd hurt himself." The teen cyberbully Whitney (Julia Goldani Telles) made a similar claim in *The Affair*: "It was just a joke."

On one hand, these comments can be likened to any physical bullying where such behavior is downplayed or rationalized as less serious and more so reflective of bullies construing their actions as "just a joke" and that accusations made by their victims are simply about their inability to "take a joke" (Rooney, 2011). While determining the degree to which a bully actually believes this or is just saying it is impossible to ascertain, certainly such an excuse has greater plausibility in cyberspace where the real world/fantasy world often blurs; something discussed by communications theorists Michel Walrave and Wannes Heirman (2010), "Cyber-perpetrators who argue this way may be genuinely convinced that they are not doing anything wrong, since they consider cyber-bullying to be an imaginary act of bullying" (p. 41).

Another theory explaining cyberbullying, and in turn depictions thereof—particularly in the context of anonymity and technology coercing bad behavior—is the *online disinhibition effect*, a concept that explains how an individual's sense of self online can be perceived as separate from real life; something Barak and Liat Hen (2008) explained:

The online disinhibition effect is assumed to be a product of several psychological factors that operate in cyberspace and have a great impact on people's behavior. The main factors are considered to be anonymity, invisibility, lack of eye contact, neutralization of people's status, asynchronicity as a major mode of communication, and textuality of communication. As a result of these factors . . . an individual goes through a disinhibition process, whereby behaviors (including verbal expressions) not normally displayed in the physical environment, or not as intensively or prevalently, are expressed and become more frequent on the internet (p. 135).

Samantha in the American *Cyberbully*, who was both a victim of cyberbullying as well as a perpetrator, explained this well: "You know, I'd always thought of bullies as people at school who pick on you. But when you do it online, you don't even realise you're doing it." While anonymity and disinhibition enable acts of bullying to transpire, the concept of *dissociative anonymity*—or more, commonly, the "you don't know me" idea—helps to explain how the Internet specifically facilitates conduct that would be unlikely to transpire offline; something psychologist John Suler (2004) outlined:

When people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting-out. Whatever they say or do can't be directly linked to the rest of their lives. In a process of dissociation, they don't have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online/offline identity. The online self becomes a compartmentalized self.

As Samantha in *Cyberbully* explained: "You can't see the other people, and you can do or say anything and it doesn't seem to matter. It doesn't feel real."

While anonymity motivates people to do things they wouldn't do in a face-to-face situation, it also—and perhaps even more worryingly—can also *increase* the severity of the behavior engaged in: that not only are people willing to do and say things online that they wouldn't do in real life, but the dynamics of the Internet can *amplify* the levels of aggression and vitriol (Kowalski et al., 2012).

ANONYMITY AND EXAGGERATED EVIL

Alluded to earlier was the idea of the potential for good to come from online anonymity. As related to disinhibition, anonymity can help to create bonds and facilitate intimacy in ways that people often struggle with offline. Cyberbullying, however, is an example of a specific type of disinhibition that boasts no such positives. Suler coined the term *toxic disinhibition* to describe online behavior that is primarily about using the technology for bad:

We witness rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats. Or people visit the dark underworld of the Internet—places of pornography, crime, and violence—territory they would never explore in the real world. We may call this toxic disinhibition (p. 321).

While toxic disinhibition is detected in numerous scenes discussed throughout this paper, it is actually referenced in dialogue in the “Generation of Vipers” episode of the British crime-drama *Lewis* (2007–). The episode centered on an online dating video that a feminist professor had recorded and that got leaked to a college humor website prior to her murder. Reading through the comments posted under the leaked video, the detectives Lewis (Kevin Whately) and his colleague Hathaway (Laurence Fox) appeared shocked by the level of vitriol:

Lewis: Who are these people?

Hathaway: Welcome to the world of Internet trolling. Leave your inhibitions at the door.

Lewis: Leave your humanity at the door, more like.

The screen offers a variety of examples whereby the technology facilitates a character’s departure from humanity and from the self-control of real life and whereby the perceived *different rules* of the Internet encourage toxic conduct. In *Trust*, in the aftermath of Annie’s rape by a cyberpredator, she was harassed online by classmates: her head was transposed onto a body of a porn star captioned with “Annie loves dick” and “whore.” Annie’s cyberbullies had no personal grievance with her—such bullies likely would never physically act out their abuse offline—but the anonymity of the Internet motivated her peers to act horribly simply because they could do so with little consequence.

Whereas in schoolyard bullying the roles are fairly fixed in regard to those who bully and those who get bullied, online there is greater fluidity with victims also participating in bullying and vice versa.

NEW BULLIES AND NEW VICTIMS

In the American *Cyberbully*, Taylor and her best friend Samantha each fulfilled the roles of being cyberbullies as well as being victims of it. The same thing transpired for Casey and her anonymous cyberbully in the British *Cyberbully*: Both characters held bullying *and* bullied roles.

While there is cross-over in regard to victims of bullying in real life and those who are targeted online and equally so in regard to the old school perpetrators versus Web-era ones (Ybarra, Diener-West & Lead, 2007; Gradinger, Strohmeier & Spiel, 2009), the unique properties of the Internet mean that people who wouldn’t normally bully—perhaps because they are adverse to confrontation or are normally rule-abiding—are given a means to do so because their identities are not exposed and thus where the consequences of their actions are mitigated. Equally, the Internet is able to help render vulnerable people who would not normally be victims of schoolyard bullying due to the capacity for stealth attacks.

New Bullies

While as noted, the Internet can make bullying easy, more specifically it can encourage bullying activity by people who would otherwise not do so offline.

In the “Perfect Storm” episode of *Flashpoint* discussed earlier, after the video of Billy’s bullying went viral, he took his father’s gun to school and filmed himself seeking revenge on one of his bullies, Tony (Kyle Mac). While this revenge scenario happens in several bullying narratives that don’t include the Internet as a specific theme, the digital recording of the initial assault on Billy appeared to egg the bullies on further; they played up for the camera and their attack was potentially more brutal for the imagined audience (the same thing that transpired in *Girl Fight*). The fact that Billy then decided to record his own revenge highlights both the role such technology can play in such attacks as well as the idea of the Internet aiding in the creation of new bullies; the idea of getting *public* revenge for *public* abuse was undoubtedly a motive driving Billy. Discussed earlier was *Chatroom* whereby through her participation in online chat rooms, meek and mild Emily was manipulated into engaging in uncharacteristic bullying; the influence of William and the unreal properties of the Internet facilitated this unusual behavior. In the British film *Cyberbully*, after her ex appeared to send out a mean Tweet about her, Casey became a bully by hacking his Twitter account and using it to send out embarrassing Tweets in revenge. The American *Cyberbully* provides a similar example. While perhaps not as meek and mild as Emily, nevertheless Samantha is presented as a conservative, conscientious student. Samantha became a victim of nasty remarks from classmates in a school chat room, and at the same time she created an alternate persona online to befriend her best friend Taylor and then spread rumors about her on a social media site; Samantha is both bullied *and* a bully. Something similar transpired in the family comedy *Shredderman Rules* (2007): Middle school student Nolan (Devon Werkheiser), like many of his classmates, was a victim of Bubba’s (Andrew Caldwell) physical bullying. Nolan, however, turns the tables and anonymously creates the “Shredderman” website to display secretly recorded footage of Bubba to publicly expose his bullying. The site also included a game where players could dunk Bubba’s head in toilets; something that graphically replicates the kind of bullying Bubba inflicted on his victims: Nolan was both bullied and a bully.

Just as Jared in *Luther* and Miles in *Perfect Stranger* highlighted the ease by which technology can make cyberbullies out of men who probably wouldn’t have been bullies in “real life,” equally Emily in *Chatroom*, Samantha in *Cyberbully*, and Nolan in *Shredderman Rules* were assisted in becoming unlikely schoolyard bullies with the help of technology; the Internet can create *victims* out of those who wouldn’t normally be picked on.

New Victims

In the “We Are Everyone” episode of *Elementary* (2012–), Sherlock (Jonny Lee Miller) explained to his colleague Joan (Lucy Liu): “If you keep a discrete digital footprint like I do, you’re less vulnerable to the harassment which is everyone’s stock in trade.” Here, Sherlock highlights the idea that using social media can create a situation of vulnerability for users. While anonymity can make bullies out of people who would never bully in real life, this equally works in reverse where the Internet can also be complicit in creating new victims; something that Sherlock alluded to in *Elementary* and something Menesini and Spiel (2012) outlined:

Internet and other new technologies may have increased the chances for harassment for youth who might otherwise not be targeted. Probably for a proportion of the cyber-victims the use of new forms of multimedia technology has created a vulnerability that they may not have typically experienced elsewhere (p. 13).

Chatroom illustrated this well. William, who got such pleasure from “messing” with Emily and encouraging her to cyberbully, also set out to “crucify” Jim (Matthew Beard). William achieved this

by encouraging Jim—via the anonymous and self-revelatory properties of chat rooms—to not only talk about his parents and upbringing but to get actively angry. William then planted seeds in Jim’s mind about guns, about holding guns, and about dwelling on his pain, and then led Jim to a suicide-themed chat room. Jim, who had seemingly not previously experienced bullying—nor, for that matter, suicidal ideation—became a victim of William’s cyberattacks.

One interpretation of these portrayals is the capacity for arms length attacks.

ARM’S-LENGTH ATTACKS

In the American *Cyberbully*, after Samantha’s online bullying was exposed, she attempted to explain her actions: “When you do it online, you don’t even realize you’re doing it. You can’t see the other people and you can do or say anything and it doesn’t seem to matter. It doesn’t feel real.” Here, Samantha highlights some psychological qualities more specific than mere anonymity: *you can’t see the other people and* thus, it doesn’t feel quite real. An interesting finding from psychologists Robert Slonje, Peter Smith, and Ann Frisé’s (2012) research is that cyberbullies feel less remorse than other kinds of bullies. The inability to actually see one’s victim is potentially a key component of this.

A theory pioneered by the psychologist Albert Bandura is *moral disengagement*, which describes the process by which an individual elects to disengage or *turn off* their moral standards to participate in behavior that is commonly thought of as bad (Bandura, 1999). While research has linked physical bullying with moral disengagement (Hymel, Rocke-Henderson & Bonanno, 2005; Hymel, Schonert-Reichl & Bonanno, 2010; Obermann, 2011; Pozzoli, 2012), in recent years studies have also argued that moral disengagement is linked to cyberaggression (Pornari & Wood, 2010). The reasoning is that because of the absence of direct contact—and the apparent “invisibility” of the victim (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012)—disengaging morally and unguiltily from a situation is made easier. This is something that Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston (2012) discussed, noting that because bullying “occurs via technology, as opposed to via face-to-face interactions, perpetrators cannot see the emotional reactions of their victims” (p. 87).

In the American *Cyberbully*, it was quite clear that Samantha was emotionally unsettled when she was confronted with the pain of her friend Taylor, who she had been bullying online: When faced with her friend’s real tears Samantha was clearly distressed. Equally, in the British *Cyberbully*, when Casey was forced to watch a video made by one of her cyberbullying victims, Jennifer, prior to her suicide, she was similarly shaken. During their actual acts of bullying, however, both Samantha and Casey were able to type mean words and completely dissociate from the pain they were causing.

Another theory relevant to interpreting the ways by which the Internet enables an individual to engage in brutal behavior in cyberspace is psychologist Phillip Zimbardo’s work on deindividuation. *Deindividuation* posits that if people can’t identify a victim, they are less likely to feel shame or guilt (Zimbardo, 1969). While Zimbardo’s work long predates the Internet, the relevance of it to cyberbullying has been of great interest to scholars, and is highly relevant to discussing this behavior off screen (Slonje, Smith & Frisé, 2012). In the British *Cyberbully*, for example, Casey sees little consequence to the videos she makes mocking girls who make haul videos: Casey interprets these girls not as individuals but as stereotypes of “mean girls” who would look down on someone like her in real life. In the “Make Love, Not Warcraft” episode of *South Park* (1997–), Jenkins, the griever, was killing off scores of characters with no regard for the impact that this was having on other players’ enjoyment. First, Jenkins was able to do this because he was just playing the game, and even though such activity was not in the spirit of play, could be rationalized. Second, Jenkins was not able to *see* any of his victims. While Jenkins was not a well-developed character—so it is impossible to determine whether he would have been guilt-ridden had he actually known the identity of his victims—nonetheless, in cyberspace, not knowing the identity helps markedly in emotionally detaching and bullying without things like *humanity* curtailing conduct.

One reason that cyberbullying is so often presented on screen as inextricably linked to youth is because of the social media focus: that for young people social media is not construed as a recreation *option*, but as something compulsory.

MANDATORY SOCIAL NETWORKING

Psychologists Petra Gradinger et al. (2012) spotlight some of the unique aspects of cyberbullying that distinguish it from physical bullying: “a cyber-victim might be able to stop certain kinds of repeated harassment in the cyber space easily (e.g., blocking a perpetrator on social network sites or chat rooms, or changing his/her identity in cyberspace.)” (p. 132). While in theory this is certainly possible, in real life and on screen, this doesn’t always transpire: something that the American *Cyberbully* illustrates well. In an early scene, Taylor had just read the awful things that had been written on her social media page and she was crying and the following exchange transpired with her mom, Kris:

Kris: I’ve looked around this website, it’s completely inappropriate for someone your age. There are no boundaries. You need to shut down your profile.

Taylor: Come on!

Kris: Look at you! You’re in tears after one day, just shut it down. It’s not worth it.

Taylor doesn’t shut her profile down and the bullying exacerbates to the point where she makes a suicide attempt. Afterward, Kris visits Senator Evans (John Maclaren) to petition him into drafting anti-cyberbullying legislation. In her conversation Kris spotlighted how different the *theory* of avoiding cyberbullying is from the reality for young people:

Senator: I don’t want to try to legislate the Internet. I don’t go online myself if I can help it. My staff does that for me.

Kris: But these kids are on the Internet all the time. And they’re vulnerable to these bullies who hide behind anonymous user names.

Senator: No one’s making them go online now, are they?

Kris: Excuse me?

Senator: Well they do have delete buttons on computers.

Kris: I thought that too until I almost lost my daughter. You can’t keep these kids off the Internet. It’s their world.

While the Senator is positioned in this exchange as old-fashioned and out-of-touch, Kris spotlights that for young people, simply opting out of social media often seems impossible. A good screen illustration of the perceived inescapability of social media is evident in the British *Cyberbully*. For the duration of the film, Casey is at her computer negotiating with an anonymous cyberbully who is threatening to leak her private photos. It is not until the very last scene that it finally occurs to her that she can actually log off; that she doesn’t *have* to be a part of these exchanges. In *Unfriended*, something similar transpires whereby a group of teens are kept at their computers by an anonymous cyberbully. For Casey in *Cyberbully* and the teens in *Unfriended*, participating in social media is construed as compulsory, regardless of the negative consequences.

In the vast majority of examples discussed thus far, girls are both the victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying; something explored in the next section.

THE ROLE OF GENDER

The research on the gender breakdown of bullying in real life is mixed: while Kowalski and Limber (2007) contend that more cyberbullying is conducted by girls, the psychologist Qing Li (2006) conversely argued that more boys are the perpetrators. Other research fails to identify any gender difference at all (Finn, 2004; Slonje & Smith, 2008). While data is contested, on screen both boys and girls are shown to participate.

In her work on bullying on screen, Oppliger (2013) notes that “girl bullies are rather unusual in mass media presentations. Producers are more likely to write girls as mean, perpetuating stereotypes of females” (p. 15). Oppliger’s discussion, however, centered largely on physical bullying and, therefore, given dominant gender stereotypes, it stands to reason that displays of female physical aggression are rare. Cyberbullying, however, largely eliminates the physical component in turn leveling the playing field in regard to a character’s ability to participate and not be seen as traversing any gender rules; while teen girls aren’t generally portrayed as thuggish, they are certainly stereotyped as bitchy. One significant trend in the way cyberbullying is presented on screen is in the context of it being part of the (presumably) natural behavior of girls.

Girls Will Be Girls

In her book *Dealing with Bullies, Cliques, and Social Stress*, Jennifer Landau (2013) makes an interesting point about perceptions related to the gender of schoolyard bullies:

There’s a lot of talk about mean girls in the press . . . All this talk might make you think that relational aggression is a normal part of growing up for girls. Have you heard the phrase “boys will be boys” to describe their rough and tumble, physically aggressive behavior? Now it seems like “girls will be girls” equals girls will be mean (p. 30).

Education theorist Lyn Mikel Brown (2003) also discusses this idea, spotlighting—and critiquing—“that prevailing assumption that girls will be girls, that they will naturally betray, reject, and undermine one another” (p. 201). Certainly these sentiments are articulated widely on screen. In the “Babes” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, Detective Tutuola (Ice T) candidly remarked, “Nothing crueller than high school students.” In *Sexting in Suburbia*, Skylar’s mother Patricia (Judith Hoag), similarly rationalized cyberbullying, claiming, “It’s high school, that’s what people do.” In the British *Cyberbully*, Casey’s standard refrain is that *everybody* trolls each other online. This idea is presented with a more gendered slant in *Odd Girl Out* when the father (Michael Arata) of one of the female cyberbullies, Stacey (Leah Pipes), tells his son: “Son, listen, this is important. Girls are brutal. They hurt each other’s feelings and tear each other to bits over the smallest things. Guys, smack each other. And then go and get a beer.” In the same film this idea was reiterated when the mother (Lisa Vidal) of the bullying victim, Vanessa, goes to the school to get help and is told: “So we’re talking about verbal abuse? Teasing? Taunting? . . . This type of non-physical conflict is common amongst girls at this age. Unfortunately there’s nothing much we can do . . . We cannot regulate what girls say to each other.”

The *girls will be girls* idea is often discussed in academic work. In their survey of bullying literature, for example, Stan Davis and Julia Davis (2007) note, “bullying among girls is more likely to be a part of an ongoing relationship than bullying among boys” (p. 190).

While theorists like Landau and Brown each critique the *girls will be girls* idea, on screen this idea often plays out as a cultural truth. Feminist theorist Naomi Wolf (1993) notes how “TV and the press love a good cat-fight” (p. 109) and feminist media theorist Susan Douglas (1994) makes a similar point spotlighting that the catfight is “a staple of American pop culture” (p. 221). On one level, narratives where women bully each other is simply part of the mediascape where women are depicted as competitive and bitchy, often for the affections of men (Rosewarne, 2015). Certainly this theme

is well illustrated when cyberbullying is conducted against a love rival; something that transpired in *Sexting in Suburbia*, the Canadian television drama *Selling Innocence* (2005), in the television drama *Betrayed at 17* (2011), and in the “Lost and Found” episode of *Stalker* (2014–2015). While such narratives fit neatly into a Zeitgeist where girl fights are acceptable as entertainment, it is worthwhile acknowledging the politics underpinning this frame; something I have discussed previously:

The quickest and cheapest way to discredit a woman is by saying she’s bitter, that she’s jealous, that she’s clawin’ for a catfight. Women know this malarkey. It’s how men dismiss us. It’s how we dismiss each other (Rosewarne, 2014, n.p).

In gender researcher Rhonda Hammer’s (2002) work, the catfight frame is examined as a media example of the backlash against feminism whereby women’s concerns are painted as petty and personal:

This divide-and-conquer strategy tends to neutralize, trivialize, and reduce the real multidimensional and urgent issues associated with the feminist terrain that need to be addressed in a public forum (p. 14).

The catfight frame, akin to the *girls will be girls* idea, works to downplay, if not completely dismiss women’s aggression toward one another, and all the while packages it as an entertainment product: something certainly evident in the examples discussed thus far.

Another gendered way that cyberbullying is framed on screen is in the context of a slut-shaming narrative whereby bullying has an explicit connection to the demonizing of female sexuality.

Slut-Shaming

In the Australian crime drama *The Killing Field* (2014), during the investigation into teenager Becky’s (Taylor Ferguson) murder, one of her male school friends, Bruno (James Fraser), called her a “slut.” His “proof” was a video she had made of herself stripping, which he had on his iPad and which had, apparently, been “doing the rounds” at school. In the comedy *Sex Tape* (2014), in the aftermath of the accidental release of their sex tape Annie (Cameron Diaz) and Jay (Jason Segel) argued about the consequences:

Jake: You know what, Annie, I’m on there, too.

Annie: Who gives a shit? Nobody cares about you. Nobody wants to watch you having sex. You said it yourself. Nobody cares about the guy! It’s the woman that has to live with it forever.

In the British *Cyberbully*, a similar point is made when Casey’s anonymous cyberbully threatened to leak sexy photos of her: The bully verbally reminded her of what happens to girls when explicit photos of them are released. The same warning is given by the sleazy photographer Malcolm (JR Bourne) in *Selling Innocence*, after the teen model Mia (Sarah Lind) asked him to remove the salacious photos of her from his website:

You think you can make this girl go away because you suddenly decided to be respectable? This girl has been copied, traded, bought, sold, cut and pasted, faxed and emailed. She is out there in the ether. And when you are seventy, when you have grandchildren, she’ll still be out there . . . She will haunt you.

Bruno’s comments in *The Killing Field*—and something Annie, Casey’s bully, and Malcolm each referred to are attitudes and behaviors that have come to be known as *slut-shaming*; a concept explained well by communications theorist Kate Zittlow Rogness (2015):

Slut shaming is the act of criticizing someone for acting like who society considers to be a slut. A slut is someone who is, or has the appearance of being, sexually promiscuous. The notion of promiscuity is highly subjective and contextual. One may define it liberally, having casual sexual encounters with multiple partners, or more conservatively, as having intercourse for reasons other than procreation . . . Slut shaming evolved out of norms that govern appropriate, or so-called normal, gender performance (p. 125).

While slut-shaming can be detected throughout culture, it is behavior that is most easily witnessed online (Citron, 2014; Tanenbaum, 2015). In a range of Internet-themed screen narratives, slut-shaming has a distinct presence.

In the pilot of the sitcom *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015), Mark (Paul Schneider) circulated via e-mail an upskirt photo of his colleague—and the show’s protagonist—Leslie (Amy Poehler). While fallout from the video was not explored in the episode, the idea that someone—a man—would circulate such an image is an example of the kinds of slut-shaming that occurs in many examples whereby images of women are considered not only as entertaining but a commodity to be distributed to achieve certain ends ranging from arousal and harassment through to character assassination. In *Sexting in Suburbia*, after Dina’s naked photo was circulated, school vandalism described her as a slut and a Facebook page was set up titled “Dina van Cleve is a slut.” After Dina’s suicide, her gravestone was vandalized with similar-toned abuse. In the “Babes” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, prior to her apparent suicide, pregnant Fidelia (Jessica Varley), was harassed, with trolls accusing, “UR A dumb whore.” In the aforementioned “The Truth about Lying” episode of *Blue Bloods*, some of the cyberharassment Amy had received prior to her suicide involved messages posted on her social media including, “You’re a filthy whore” and “Everyone knows you’re a skank.” In the “David & Ellie” episode of the British series *Dates* (2013), it was revealed that there were rumors on Facebook speculating that Ellie (Montanna Thompson) had left school because she was pregnant. In the “Lost and Found” episode of *Stalker*, high school student Jenny (Cole Bernstein), responded to an online poll by naming her coach, Coach Baker (Andrew W. Walker), as the teacher she’d most like to have sex with. Her quote ended up on her school’s “Tattler” gossip blog—accusations of her being pregnant, along with fake sex tapes, went up onto the site and she was shamed as a slut. Something similar happens in the “Like a Virgin” episode of *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007) when, after the results of a supposedly private online purity test were exposed, the student body responded by celebrating the male “studs” and condemning the female “sluts.” In *The Affair*, part of the bullying of Jody involved use of a fake Twitter account called @skankhojodymanko. In *Selling Innocence*, when Mia’s classmate discovered that she had been making money posing for sexy photographs online, printouts of her images were posted around the school and she was bullied and called a “Web slut.” In *Betrayed at 17*, Lexi (Amanda Bauer) had sex with Greg (Andy Fischer-Price) while he secretly filmed it. Greg’s ex-girlfriend Carleigh (Katie Gill), who was still obsessed with Greg, found the video on his phone and sent it out to his contacts with the subject header “Lexi the Slut.” In the British *Cyberbully*, as mentioned earlier, a Tweet was (seemingly) sent from the ex of the teen protagonist, Casey, that read: “I guess its no surprise Casey Jacobs is on antidepressants. I spent one night with her and it fucking depressed me.” Slut-shaming was also a topic explicitly spoken of in the same film.

In each of these examples, girls are bullied on the grounds of sexual reputation. The underpinning is that a girl is entitled to less respect the more sexual partners she is assumed to have. Such scenes, of course, are perfectly illustrative of the well-established double-standard whereby women are judged, and condemned, based on their sexuality while men are rewarded for the same behavior.

While not common, a kind of sexuality shaming of men also transpires. Discussed earlier was *Sala samobójców* (*Suicide Room*) where cyberbullying transpired based on Dominik’s assumed homosexuality. Something similar happened in the “Exiles” episode of *Blue Bloods*. Photos of the homosexual Balatazar (Walid Amini) had been posted on Facebook: “If I get sent home I’m a dead gay man,” he admitted, knowing his relatives in Syria had seen the photos. In the “Web” episode of

Law & Order: Special Victims Unit something similar occurred when a classmate discovered that Teddy (Connor Paolo) had been posing on a child porn site; as occurred in *Selling Innocence*, printed images from the site were pasted over the school to shame him. In *Disconnect* a similar narrative played out when a sexually compromising photo of Ben was distributed via social media leading to his suicide attempt. In these examples, however, the shaming is not centered on men being “sluts”, but in fact centered on the demonizing of nonheterosexuality. In these male examples, deviations from heterosexuality—and from hegemonic masculinity more broadly—are policed and punished. These scenes, however, can be likened to the slut-shaming that transpired in the female examples in one key way: In all of them expressions of sexuality other than male heterosexuality were disciplined.

While the examples discussed thus far center on female slut-shaming as connecting to bullying, worth noting is such behavior transpiring as connected to other kinds of online behavior engaged in by women. In the Taiwanese drama-romance *Ci qing (Spider Lilies)* (2007), for example, one of the employees at the Cyber Investigations Bureau—a unit apparently intent on protecting victims of cybercrime—commented to a colleague, “These young women can play people better than you. They pretend. Pretend to be an innocent girl. They are all flirty and snobbish inside. They cheat money out of men to buy famous brands . . . There’s not a good one amongst them . . . These women need a man to teach them a lesson.” Interestingly, the same kind of “explanation” for cybercrimes against women transpired in *Selling Innocence*, when one of the netsafety investigators, James (Fred Ewanuick), explained: “After a while you begin to see a pattern. You begin to see the truth. So you can say that men are the bad guys all you want, but who’s tempting them in the first place? Who are they tangling with? See, it’s not the men who are evil, Mia, it’s the girls.” In each of these examples bullying occurs not just on the basis of gender but on sexuality; that women are being judged for their capacity to, apparently, tempt men who can’t have them. While the problems with slut-shaming have received extensive attention (Khazan, 2014; Tuohy, 2015; Lindin, 2015), in fact, these scenes don’t challenge such behavior, but in fact contribute to it by framing the lead up to such behavior as a cautionary tale, in turn, positioning the victim as somehow complicit in her attack.

CONCLUSION

Ubiquitous Internet use off screen—the second-nature way in which we each turn to Google for information, to social media to see our friends, to netporn and Netflix for recreation—is a reality largely absent from the screen. Instead, popular media tells a tale of the Internet as a thing, a place, a tool, worth fearing; of Internet users as somehow different, scarier, more strange, awkward, nefarious and duplicitous than everyone else. Cyberbullying however, is a more complicated story. Depictions are both in sync with a long history of media depictions that present the Internet as a kind of frightening and lawless place where users fall into one of two categories: victims or victimizers. On the other hand, the screen does depict the reality of the technology used by young people to taunt and harass. This reality raises a range of ethical issues for users and policymakers and reflects the kind of problems exacerbated by new technology.

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