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'I was bullied too': stories of bullying and coping in an online community

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'I was bullied too': stories of bullying and coping in an online community

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The American Academy of Pediatrics has identified bullying as a serious health risk for adolescents. In today's age of social media and smartphones, this health risk has taken on new forms and extended its reach. Strategies to reduce the prevalence of and negative consequences associated with both traditional bullying and cyberbullying require knowledge of victims' lived experiences as well as the coping strategies they employ – both effectively and ineffectively – to respond to their tormentors. This article presents findings from an in-depth content analysis of the entire set of 1094 comments from a viral blog post about cyberbullying in which people shared their personal stories of bullying and coping. These stories included a mix of both traditional and online forms of victimization, as well as more general reflections about the distinct qualities of networked publics that serve to magnify, spread, and exacerbate the effects of bullying. The findings suggest that victims of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying are often targeted because they do not conform in one way or another to mainstream norms and values. Victims employed similar coping strategies to respond to their online and offline tormentors. Common behavioral strategies included seeking social support, ignoring/blocking, and finding a creative or expressive outlet. The two most commonly cited cognitive strategies were self-talk and taking the bully's perspective. Not all strategies were judged to be effective. The findings have relevance to researchers seeking to understand bullying from the perspective of victims and to practitioners seeking to develop effective interventions to support bullying victims.

Keywords: cyberbullying; bullying; victimization; coping strategies; internet

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Introduction

In October 2012, 15-year-old Amanda Todd took her life after years of being tormented by strangers and peers over a topless photo of her that was circulating on the internet (Grenoble, 2012). Just a few months later, singer songwriter Amanda Palmer – herself the frequent target of online hate speech – was, in her own words, 'ego-surfing' online. 'i typed "hate a … " into google' explained Palmer on her blog (Palmer, 2013a, para 7). 'i was going to type "hate amanda palmer" into the rest of the field to see what came up, but Google auto-filled for me. It auto-filled "amanda todd"' (Palmer, 2013a, para 7). Palmer soon found the video that Todd had posted on YouTube about her bullying experiences before she committed suicide (Todd, 2012). She was struck by the fact that she had posted a similarly styled video around the same time, though the content was considerably different.

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The parallels between the two Amandas moved Palmer to write a series of blog posts about bullying and online hate speech (Palmer, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). In the first post, she made an appeal for readers to share their stories of bullying and how they coped. Signaling the magnitude and strong emotions surrounding bullying and its online counterpart, the post soon went viral and received over 1000 comments within three days (Palmer, 2013a).

Our research team conducted an in-depth content analysis of the entire set of 1094 comments from Palmer's initial blog post (Palmer, 2013a). The analysis focused on the types of bullying stories shared by commenters, their reflections on technology's role in bullying, and the variety of coping strategies they endorsed and warned against. The anonymity provided by the internet, as well as the sense of being in a community of like-minded individuals, likely contributed to the feeling that this particular environment was a safe space in which to share uncensored reflections and feelings about painful bullying experiences. As a result, this study provides a unique and authentic glimpse into past and ongoing experiences of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying that may often be lacking in respondent-based studies such as interviews and surveys.

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Research context

Traditional bullying and the emergence of cyberbullying

Attention to the phenomenon of bullying has grown in recent decades, and it is now widely recognized as detrimental to psychological development. Indeed, the American Academy of Pediatrics identifies bullying as a serious health concern for US adolescents (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2009). Though rates of bullying have declined in recent years in the United States (Finkelhor, 2013; Molcho et al., 2009), there are still too many youth who are bullied. One study involving a nationally representative sample of 11–15-year-olds found that nearly 3 out of every 10 youth (29.9% of boys and 29.2% of girls) reported experiencing occasional victimization, and approximately 1 out of 10 youth (11.9% of boys and 10.9% of girls) reported experiencing chronic victimization (Molcho et al., 2009). Another national study of 6–17-year-olds in the United States found that 25% of youth said they were bullied at least monthly (Ybarra, boyd, Korchmaros, & Oppenheim, 2012).

The arrival of smartphones and social media has introduced a new form of this age-old scourge. One study found that rates of reported online harassment among US internet users aged 10–17 years increased by 83% over the last decade, from 6% in 2000 to 9% in 2005 to 11% in 2010 (Finkelhor, 2013; Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012). Other studies suggest that online meanness is even more widespread than that. One national study found that 49% of 14–24-year-olds in the United States said they have experienced verbal abuse through social media (Tompson, Benz, & Agiesta, 2013), while another study of social-media-using teens aged 12–17 years showed that 88% said they had witnessed other people being mean or cruel on a social networking site (Lenhart et al., 2011).

Defining traditional bullying and cyberbullying

The wide variation in cyberbullying rates reported above is likely attributable in part to the lack of scholarly agreement on its precise definition (Levy et al., 2012). Indeed, as the previous discussion suggests, the term is often used interchangeably with internet bullying (Williams & Guerra, 2007), social media meanness (Lenhart et al., 2011), digital abuse (Associated Press-MTV, 2011), and online drama (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Moreover, when scholars use these terms, they often leave them undefined (Finkelhor, 2013; Lenhart et al., 2011; Molcho et al., 2009). In defining

cyberbullying, we take as our starting point the common definition for traditional bullying, which includes three key features: (1) intentionally hurtful actions that are (2) repeated over time and (3) involve a power imbalance between perpetrator and victim (Olweus, 1978, 1993, 2003). Specifically, we draw on Patchin and Hinduja's (2012) definition of cyberbullying as 'when someone repeatedly harasses, mistreats, or makes fun of another person online or while using cellphones or other electronic devices' (p. 15).

While our definition of cyberbullying is rooted in traditional bullying, the distinct properties of online environments – such as asynchronous communication, round-the-clock connectivity, the ease of anonymity, and an ill-defined, potentially large audience (boyd, 2007; Walther, 1996) – introduce new dynamics that distinguish cyberbullying from the offline variety (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009; Levy et al., 2012). For instance, the always-on nature of networked communication makes it difficult to escape one's tormentors, while the ability to post anonymous content online makes it difficult to identify them. The former elevates the second feature of traditional bullying – repetition – to a new level of intensity. The latter has the potential to complicate the power dynamic between perpetrator and victim. Despite these unique qualities, existing research indicates that cyberbullying is often rooted in offline peer dynamics (Erentaite, Bergman, & Zukauskiene, 2012; Levy et al., 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012; Tokunaga, 2010), and that victims typically know their online bullies from offline contexts like school (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Ybarra, Mitchell, & Espelage, 2012).

Cyberbullying appears also to share similar effects to traditional bullying. These effects are well documented and include negative financial, health, behavioral, and social outcomes later in life (Wolke, Copeland, Angold, & Costello, 2013). Similarly, research on the negative consequences of cyberbullying points to a greater likelihood of experiencing depression, social anxiety, substance abuse, lowered academic performance, and diminished quality of family relationships (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007; Tokunaga, 2010).

Why are kids bullied?

In order to understand how and why youth are bullied, it is necessary to understand the distinct social contexts and peer dynamics within which bullying occurs. Bronfebrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory accounts for the multiple factors that influence an individual's experiences within a given context. According to Bronfenbrenner, youth grow up within a series of nested socio-cultural systems that impact their development, either directly or indirectly. The most immediate and directly influential system is the microsystem, examples of which include the family, school, and after-school settings. Connections between microsystems are referred to as a mesosystem, for instance, when parents become involved in various aspects of their children's school experience. The exosystem includes contexts that youth do not experience directly but which nonetheless affect them, such as their parents' workplace. Finally, the macrosystem refers to the broad cultural context that shapes people's behaviors in their various social contexts.

Traditional bullying typically occurs within microsystems such as school and after-school settings that contain distinct peer group dynamics. Extant research points to a variety of personal, social, and contextual factors within these microsystems that predict whether a young person will be bullied. Bullying victims tend to be more insecure, sensitive, and anxious (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Olweus, 1993; Zapf & Einarsen, 2011). Among boys, victims are also more likely to display physical weakness (Olweus, 1993). With respect to interpersonal predictors of victimization, youth who have few friends, who are lonely, and who experience peer rejection are at greater risk of being bullied (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Olweus, 1993).

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This constellation of personal and interpersonal predictors of bullying victimization paints a picture of individuals who do not fit the mainstream in one way or the other. Indeed, youth are often bullied for not conforming to dominant social norms, whether for reasons of physical appearance, the presence of a disability, or sexual orientation. In one study of bullying among 10-year-old youth, researchers found that nearly one-third of the sample (30%) had experienced appearance-based teasing (Lunde, Frisen, & Hwang, 2006). This teasing, in turn, was related to poor body image. In another study of a nationally representative sample of US students in grades 6–10, overweight and obese youth were more likely to be victims of verbal bullying than normal weight and underweight youth (Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2010).

Youth with disabilities are also at an increased risk of peer victimization (Knox & Conti-Ramsden, 2003; Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993). One study of youth aged 16–20 years found that those with a chronic disease or physical disability were more likely to be victims of bullying and more likely to be victims of two or three forms of bullying (Pittet, Berchtold, Akre, Michaud, & Suris, 2010). Similarly, in their study of US middle school students ($N = 1009$), Rose, Espelage, Aragon, and Elliott (2011) found that students placed in special education classes were more likely to experience bullying than students in general curricula classes.

Sexual orientation is another risk factor for bullying victimization (Rivers, 2001). Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, and Bryn Austin (2010) used survey results from US adolescents aged 14–22 years ($N = 7559$) to investigate the relationship between sexual orientation and experiences of bullying. Respondents were asked about their victimization experiences in the past year as well as to identify themselves as heterosexual, mostly heterosexual, bisexual, or gay/lesbian. Compared to heterosexual youth, the sexual minority youth were more likely to report that they had been the victims of bullying in the past year.

With the widespread adoption of the internet and digital media technologies, new forms of microsystems have emerged, giving rise to new contexts for bullying. Because of their networked nature and anytime-anywhere access, these online microsystems are often connected to and embedded in offline microsystems, such as the family and school. Such connections create a mesosystem linking online and offline microsystems. Moreover, online microsystems are embedded within an overarching macrosystem that defines certain physical and social traits as more desirable than others. It is therefore not surprising that reasons for cyber-victimization appear to parallel those for offline victimization to a large degree. For instance, previous studies have found that adolescents who experience cyberbullying have fewer mutual friends, lower friendship satisfaction, and are more likely to report loneliness (Gofin & Avitzour, 2012; Leung & McBride-Chang, 2013). Youth with disabilities and sexual minority youth are also at an increased risk of experiencing cyberbullying (Didden et al., 2009; Kowalski & Fedina, 2011; Pascoe, 2011). In one study, researchers found that nearly twice as many LGBT teens reported cyber-victimization compared to heterosexual students (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). Wang et al. (2010) identified one notable difference between predictors of cyberbullying and traditional bullying. Whereas body weight predicted traditional forms of bullying, there was no such relationship between body weight and cyber-victimization.

Coping strategies

Ultimately, strategies to reduce the prevalence of and negative consequences associated with both traditional bullying and cyberbullying require knowledge of victims' lived experiences of bullying. Also necessary is insight into the coping strategies that victims employ – both effectively and ineffectively – to respond to their tormentors. Without good coping strategies, youth are at greater risk of long-term victimization (Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001).

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Previous research on victims' coping strategies has distinguished between problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused strategies involve confronting the situation, seeking social support, and making concrete plans. Emotion-focused strategies involve control of one's feelings, reappraisal of self, escape/avoidance, and distancing. Lazarus (1999) suggests that problem-focused strategies are generally more effective than emotion-focused strategies. However, he and other scholars note that the particular context will determine to a large degree the success of any given strategy (Kochenderfer Ladd & Ladd, 2001; Lazarus, 1999). For instance, while Salmivalli, Karhunen, and Lagerspetz (1996) found that retaliation was an ineffective coping strategy among their sample of 12- and 13-year-olds, Smith and Shu's (2000) study of 10–14-year-olds found fighting back to be somewhat successful. Evidence for the effectiveness of ignoring bullies is similarly mixed (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Mahady, Craig, & Pepler, 2000; Smith & Shu, 2000).

Mahady et al. (2000) distinguished between problem-solving and aggressive coping strategies. Their research suggested that problem-solving strategies (used by 52% of the youth in their sample) were more likely to de-escalate bullying situations, while aggressive strategies (used by 43% of youth) were more likely to prolong bullying episodes. They further subdivided problem-solving strategies into active and passive, mirroring the approach and avoidance categories identified by other scholars (Kochenderfer Ladd & Ladd, 2001; Roth & Cohen, 1986). Mahady et al. observed that while passive strategies tended to de-escalate bullying situations, they also reinforced bullying behavior and, consequently, placed victims at risk of future victimization. Active problem-solving strategies like seeking social support, on the other hand, both de-escalated the current situation and prevented future victimization. Unfortunately, only 16% of all strategies they observed were classified as active problem-solving strategies.

Cyberbullying victims also employ a variety of coping strategies to deal with their tormentors. Parris, Varjas, Meyers, and Cutts (2011) distinguish between reactive coping strategies that include avoiding, accepting, justifying, and seeking social support, and preventive strategies that include talking in person to prevent misunderstanding and increasing one's technical security and awareness. Other researchers have identified similar strategies, including confiding in friends and teachers, staying offline, not using websites/software used by the bully, and blocking the bully (Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Price & Dalgliesh, 2010; Šleglova & Cerna, 2011).

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This study

A considerable portion of existing research on both traditional bullying and cyberbullying has utilized respondent methods such as interviews and surveys. At their best, these methods provide insight into participants' experiences and perspectives. For a topic as personal and sensitive as bullying, however, participants in such studies may be reluctant to share their candid thoughts with researchers. Respondent methods have other limitations for research on bullying, such as their tendency to elicit socially desirable responses and their distance from individuals' social context and lived experience (Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Roulston, 2010; Walford, 2007). As an alternative to interviews, Potter and Hepburn (2005) call for the utilization of naturalistic records that are generated in a situated, authentic context, such as diaries, medical records, and videos of people in their everyday settings. The internet provides an abundant, publicly available source of such naturalistic records. Hookway (2008) identifies blogs as a particularly rich source of online data. Though bloggers write for a public audience, Hookway observes that the anonymity provided by the online context reduces self-consciousness and self-censorship. In this way, blogs possess the authenticity of diary research without the constraints of accessibility.

This study was designed to provide a new perspective on victims' lived experiences of traditional bullying and cyberbullying by taking advantage of the naturalistic data available on blogs. Our research team conducted a content analysis of the bullying stories and coping strategies shared in the comment section of Amanda Palmer's 5 January 2013 blog post about 15-year-old Amanda Todd's suicide following years of online and offline harassment (Palmer, 2013a). By analyzing the stories shared spontaneously within this online community, we provide an authentic glimpse into past and ongoing experiences of bullying that interviews and surveys are hard-pressed to match.

Our investigation is guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What types of bullying stories (e.g. traditional bullying, cyberbullying, hybrid) were shared in response to Amanda Palmer's blog post?

Research Question 2: What perspectives did commenters offer about technology's role in bullying?

Research Question 3: What coping strategies did commenters describe, and which strategies did they identify as being effective?

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Method

Data description

Amanda Palmer's 5 January 2013 blog post about 15-year-old Amanda Todd's cyberbullying-related suicide received 1094 comments (Palmer, 2013a). All of these comments were analyzed for this study. The entire set of comments was extracted from Amanda Palmer's website and formatted for use with the qualitative software program Atlas.Ti. This formatting process preserved key metadata, including the commenter's username, timestamp of the post, and post points (a measure of the post's popularity among readers). The nesting structure was also preserved so that researchers could identify which comments were responses to previous comments and which were standalone comments.

Sample demographic characteristics

Due to the ability to post comments anonymously, it is not possible for us to provide complete demographic characteristics for all commenters in our sample. We were, however, able to determine the gender and approximate age of the majority of commenters. Fifty-eight percent of the commenters shared information about their gender. Of these, 82% were female. Forty-one percent of the commenters provided sufficient personal information to be able to classify them as either a teen or an adult/emerging adult (over 18 years). Of these, only 6% identified as a teen. These demographics reflect the makeup of Amanda Palmer's fan base.

Data analysis

Using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), we developed codes both etically – by drawing on our research questions and existing literature – and emically – by identifying themes that emerged inductively from reading the blog comments (Maxwell, 2005). With respect to the former, three researchers applied a 'start list' of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) independently to the first 20 comments on the blog. These etic codes were developed from our research questions and existing literature on bullying. For instance, *Research Question One* led us to identify a

priori three categories of bullying stories: traditional bullying, cyberbullying, and hybrid stories. The research team met to compare coding decisions, discuss areas of disagreement, and surface questions we encountered during the coding process. We used this discussion to clarify and refine the definition of codes, as well as add additional emic codes that emerged directly from the data. For instance, after reading the first 20 comments on the blog, we enumerated the types of coping strategies employed, such as ignoring/blocking the bully, seeking social support, self-talk, and retaliation. We repeated this process of code development and refinement three times, covering the first 40 blog comments. This approach of collaborative coding ensured that codes were representative and applied consistently and accurately throughout the sample (Smagorinsky, 2008).

The codes for this analysis represent themes related to the type of bullying story shared (traditional, cyberbullying, or a combination of both), reasons for being bullied (e.g. appearance, sexuality, interests), and type of coping strategy (e.g. seek social support, self-talk, retaliate). We also coded statements relating to the role of technology – particularly the internet – in bullying. These statements were coded as positive, negative, or neutral with respect to the writer's perspective on technology's influence on bullying.

Through a process of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we identified two broad categories of coping strategy: behavioral and cognitive. Behavioral coping strategies include seeking social support, retaliation, and self-harm. Cognitive coping strategies include taking the bully's perspective, self-talk, and looking to role models. Recognizing that some coping strategies were identified as recommended and effective, whereas others were shared as examples of ineffective responses to bullying, we further coded each coping strategy according to whether it was recommended and effective, not recommended and not effective, effective but not recommended, and unclear or ambivalent.

In the second stage of coding, we used the final codebook to code a randomly selected group of 100 comments and their 19 associated replies. To conduct the random selection, we assigned a number to each standalone and initial comment (i.e. not a response comment) in the dataset. We then used an online random number generator to a sample of 100 comments. If a comment included one or more responses, we coded the responses as well. Consequently, the total number of comments that were coded was 119.

One researcher assumed the role of primary coder and applied the coding scheme to all comments in the sample. A second researcher assumed the role of shadow coder and reviewed all coding decisions made by the primary coder. All questions and areas of disagreement were documented on a shared group wiki. A second shadow coder reviewed comments flagged by the first shadow coder, and the three researchers met regularly to come to consensus on the most appropriate coding decisions.

In the final stage of coding, the researchers divided the codes among them and coded the remainder of the dataset, which included 1094 comments in total. As in the second stage of coding, researchers met regularly to discuss specific comments that raised questions about the most appropriate codes to apply.

Findings

Types of bullying stories

Of the 1094 comments in the dataset, 482 (44%) included descriptions of bullying stories. The other 612 comments focused on sharing coping strategies, reflecting on the role of technology in bullying, and offering advice and words of encouragement to others who had shared their bullying stories. A small number of these comments (15 total, or 1% of the entire dataset) were

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classified as spam. With respect to the reasons commenters cited for being bullied, some stories mentioned more than one reason and some did not mention any reasons. Consequently, the percentages reported below do not total 100.

Of the 482 bullying stories shared, 59 (12%) were cyberbullying stories, 362 (75%) were traditional bullying stories, and 61 stories (13%) discussed both cyberbullying and traditional bullying. The preponderance of traditional bullying stories is unsurprising in light of the fact that the majority of commenters were adults reflecting on past experiences of bullying, before the emergence and widespread use of the internet, social media, and mobile devices.

Mentioned in 91 (25%) of the traditional bullying stories, physical appearance emerged as the most frequently cited reason for being bullied offline. One commenter reflected: 'I spent all my school years being bullied for looking and being [a] bit different.' Weight was the most common aspect of physical appearance discussed. One commenter reflected on her experiences of being bullied due to her weight: 'I was bullied in high school because of my weight. I was laughed at and ridiculed. I was awkward and didn't fit in.'

Sexual orientation was the second most common reason cited for being bullied, with 35 of the traditional bullying stories (10%) referencing this reason. One commenter shared:

> I was bullied severely throughout middle school. I was kicked out of the closet by friends I thought I had and it was a constant struggle. Some girls thought it would be funny to spray paint dyke on my locker. I was an easy target.

Other reasons for being bullied offline included pursuing non-mainstream interests (5%), exhibiting a form of mental illness (5%), and having an introverted, 'nerdy' personality (4%). For instance, one woman reflected on her experience of being bullied for her interest in learning:

> Then I got picked on all through school. I had stuff thrown at me, people tried to trip me up, I got called names (including 'boffin' just because I liked learning and schoolwork was my outlet and the one thing I enjoyed).

Another woman recalled being bullied for her non-mainstream interests: 'I was regularly made fun of and put down for everything from being a vegetarian to being a writer.'

One hundred eighty-five of the traditional bullying stories (51%) did not reference a specific reason for being bullied. For instance, one commenter shared this general experience:

> Throughout elementary school all the way to high school, I was bullied and harassed. Bullied by people I thought were cool up until the point they opened their mouth and started spewing insults at me. Harassed by people I thought were friends, but all they wanted was someone to take advantage of easily.

The cyberbullying and hybrid stories followed a similar pattern, with appearance, sexual orientation, and pursuing non-mainstream interests among the most frequently cited reasons for being bullied. Of the 59 cyberbullying stories, 9 (15%) addressed appearance, 8 (14%) addressed sexual orientation, and 8 (14%) involved pursuing non-mainstream interests. Of the 61 hybrid stories, 19 (31%) addressed appearance, 12 (20%) addressed sexual orientation, and 7 (11%) involved pursuing non-mainstream interests. The primary difference between the cyberbullying-only and hybrid stories pertained to having an introverted, 'nerdy' personality. Whereas 27 hybrid stories (44%) referenced this as a reason for being bullied, none of the cyberbullying stories did. The findings reported in this section are summarized in Table 1.

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Table 1. Reasons for bullying.

	Total data set
Total comments	1094
Comments without bullying story	612
Bullying stories	482
Traditional stories	362 (75%)
Cyberbullying stories	59 (12%)
Hybrid stories	61 (13%)
Reasons for bullying	
Physical appearance	119 (25%)
Traditional	91 (25%)
Cyberbullying	9 (15%)
Hybrid	19 (31%)
Sexual orientation	55 (11%)
Traditional	35 (10%)
Cyberbullying	8 (14%)
Hybrid	12 (20%)
Introverted, '*nerdy'*	40 (8%)
Traditional	13 (4%)
Cyberbullying	0
Hybrid	27 (44%)
Non-mainstream interests	32 (7%)
Traditional	17 (5%)
Cyberbullying	8 (14%)
Hybrid	7 (11%)
Mental illness	20 (4%)
Traditional	17 (5%)
Cyberbullying	0
Hybrid	3 (5%)
Social situation	15 (3%)
Traditional	7 (2%)
Cyberbullying	2 (3%)
Hybrid	6 (10%)
Religion	11 (2%)
Traditional	7 (2%)
Cyberbullying	1 (2%)
Hybrid	3 (5%)
Physical disability	5 (1%)
Traditional	3 (1%)
Cyberbullying	0
Hybrid	2 (3%)
Other	75 (16%)
Traditional	43 (12%)
Cyberbullying	17 (29%)
Hybrid	15 (25%)
Non-specific experience	224 (46%)
Traditional	185 (51%)
Cyberbullying	24 (41%)
Hybrid	15 (25%)

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Technology's role in bullying

Though only 25% of the bullying stories referenced cyberbullying experiences, many commenters reflected more generally on technology's role in bullying. In total, 414 comments addressed the influence that new media technologies – such as the internet, social media, and mobile devices

– have had on the nature of bullying. Of these comments, 269 (65%) judged technology's influence as predominantly negative, 102 (25%) judged it as positive, and 43 (10%) judged it as neutral (Table 2).

Among the negative remarks made about technology, several commenters reflected on how their traditional bullying experiences would have been magnified if they had occurred in today's digital era: 'If the facebook/twitter had been around when I was in school, I have no doubt that I would not have survived it.' Another commenter observed:

> I barely made it through 1990 when half the country still didn't have cable, much less texting and internet social media sites...with real live trolls. If I could have OD'd on live feed streaming negative comments about myself back then, oh my fucking god!

Many of the negative judgments about technology referenced distinct qualities of networked publics, such as anonymity, round-the-clock communication, and the ability to reach wide audiences. One commenter reflected: 'The level of anonymity is exceptionally high on the web so it takes far less willpower to call someone fat and ugly when you are typing at your computer than it does when doing so in the "real world."' With respect to constant connectivity, one woman said: 'But I have a little sister who's 11. She deals with all of the internet bullcrap that I missed. She also has unrestricted access to the internet … and doesn't resist the temptation any better than I would have.' Another commenter observed that such constant connectivity makes it difficult to escape bullying: 'The danger of being so connected through the web is that you are reachable wherever you go.'

In addition to round-the-clock connectivity, the internet makes it possible for bullies to reach a larger, wider audience. One commenter reflected on how this aspect of the internet has altered teens' social experiences:

> … can't imagine being a teenager in this day and age, the High School hierarchy is was and always will be prolly [sic] the worst situation for a teen to deal with while going through puberty. it so backwards and wrong and so detached from what the real world is socially, yet for these kids it is there [sic] entire world. And now with social media it can be broadcast to the world.

Among the positive comments made about the internet, one commenter said that she experiences the internet as a safe space for self-expression:

> The internet for me is a safe space, a space where I get to express myself with my little photos and my little stories and my little blog, and where my friends and I can keep in contact over the distances that separate us.

In addition to self-expression, several people spoke about the social support they have found online. One commenter reflected: 'If I was bullied, made fun of, or outright ignored in high school … it was mitigated by the fact that I came home and I had my friends on the internet.'

Table 2. Technology's role in bullying.

	Total data set
Total comments made about technology	414
Negative	269 (65%)
Positive	102 (25%)
Neutral	43 (10%)

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Similarly, this commenter related: 'My home life was garbage. And, back then … I had the internet to turn to and get LOVE.' Another commenter reflected more generally on the social support that can be found online: 'the internet helps as much as it hurts when it comes to the teen years. There are so many other people out there who will welcome you as one of their own.'

Coping strategies

Classifying coping strategies

From our sample of 1094 posts, we coded 1758 distinct coping strategies that were shared by commenters. Of those strategies, 111 (6%) referred to cyberbullying stories, 205 (12%) referred to hybrid stories, 928 (53%) referred to traditional bullying stories, and the remaining 514 (29%) were not associated with a specific bullying story but instead offered as general advice for coping with bullying.

We identified two broad categories of coping strategy: cognitive and behavioral. Cognitive strategies focus on the victim's internalized thoughts and/or attitudes. They include taking the bully's perspective, self-talk, looking to role models, and forgetting/dissociating. In contrast, behavioral strategies focus on the victim's active, externalized responses. Behavioral strategies include seeking social support, pursuing a creative and/or expressive outlet (such as through drawing, listening to music, or physical exercise), actively ignoring or blocking the bully, retaliating, self-harm, and setting a better example than the bully through one's actions.

Behavioral strategies. Commenters were considerably more likely to share behavioral coping strategies than cognitive strategies (Table 3). Of the 1758 coping strategies coded, fully 1304 of them (74%) were classified as behavioral. Overall, seeking social support was the most common behavioral strategy, accounting for 32% of all behavioral strategies. One commenter recalled the support he received from his family: 'The only people I could truly depend on were my family, and they have helped me with many of my problems in life.' Another commenter reflected on the important role of friends: 'The only thing that helped was finding other geeks and freaks who were worth having as friends. Just the simple knowledge that being different wasn't only not a bad thing but was something worth celebrating was enough.' Social support was also a popular strategy for coping with cyberbullying. One commenter related her experience of having an embarrassing video of herself posted on Facebook and the threatening, hurtful comments that circulated with it. She reflected on the support she received from her friends and family: 'If I hadn't had my friends during that time – or my mum and family – I'm nore [sic] sure I would have been strong enough to not do something drastic.'

Table 3. Coping strategies.

	Total data set
Total coping strategies	1758
From non-bullying stories	514 (29%)
From traditional	928 (53%)
From cyberbullying	111 (6%)
From hybrid	205 (12%)
Behavioral strategies	1304 (74%)
Seeking social support	418 (32%)
Creative outlet	204 (16%)
Ignore/block bully	236 (18%)
Cognitive strategies	454 (26%)
Self-talk	222 (49%)
Take bully's perspective	126 (28%)

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The next most common behavioral strategies included finding a creative or expressive outlet, such as listening to music or physical exercise (16% of all behavioral strategies), and ignoring or blocking the bully (18% of all behavioral strategies). With respect to the former, several commenters said they turn to Amanda Palmer's music to help them cope, as this woman does:

> To be honest, one of the ways I cope with this is through your music. Your music has helped me keep myself safe and out of harm's way through manic highs and depressed lows. I just put in my headphones or turn on my stereo and crank it up.

With respect to ignoring/blocking bullies, one commenter said that he dealt with bullying throughout high school by '… learn[ing] to ignore the slings and arrows lobbed at me daily.' When recommending ignoring/blocking as a strategy for dealing with cyberbullying, one commenter offered: 'When you are being bullied on the internet, GET OFF THE GRID.' In addition to disconnecting oneself from the internet, blocking bullies online was also identified as a strategy for handling cyberbullying: 'I blocked them all on facebook. I ignored them whenever I saw them. I moved on.'

These frequency patterns were roughly equivalent across cyberbullying, traditional, and hybrid stories, with minor differences. Ignoring/blocking the bully was mentioned as frequently as seeking social support in relation to cyberbullying stories. With respect to hybrid stories, ignoring/blocking the bully and finding a creative outlet were mentioned slightly more frequently than seeking social support.

Cognitive strategies. The two most frequently mentioned cognitive coping strategies across all types of bullying stories were self-talk (49% of all cognitive strategies) and taking the bully's perspective (28% of all cognitive strategies). With respect to the former, one commenter offered the following advice: 'Coping mechanisms? Just be the person you need to be to make yourself happy I guess, and know that the world needs that person. You can't feel responsible for how other people are.' Taking the bully's perspective can be considered a specific form of self-talk that focuses on understanding and empathizing with the bully's point of view. For instance, one commenter reflected:

> I realized that they weren't making fun of me they were just trying to blow off steam from their lives (or I hope they were) and getting all bent out of shape about it wasn't going to do anything to the world.

As this quote illustrates, taking the bully's perspective involves recasting bullies as individuals who may be using bullying as a means of coping with stressors or circumstances of their own. These findings are summarized in Table 3.

Recommended vs. non-recommended strategies

Coping strategies were further classified by how they were evaluated by their authors. This classification took the form of four possibilities: the coping strategy was recommended/effective, not recommended/not effective, effective but not recommended, and unclear or ambivalent. Across cognitive and behavioral strategies, recommended/effective coping strategies were offered considerably more frequently than the other three categories (Table 4).

Among behavioral strategies, 896 (69%) were classified as recommended/effective, 205 (16%) were classified as not recommended/not effective, 52 (4%) were classified as effective but not recommended, and 151 (11%) were classified as unclear or ambivalent. Reflecting the different perspectives and experiences of commenters, some strategies appeared in more than

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Table 4. Effectiveness of coping strategies.

	Total data set
Total coping strategies	1758
Behavioral strategies	1304 (74%)
Recommended/effective	896 (69%)
Not recommended/not effective	205 (16%)
Effective/not recommended	52 (4%)
Unclear/ambivalent	151 (11%)
Cognitive strategies	454 (26%)
Recommended/effective	370 (81%)
Not recommended/not effective	30 (7%)
Effective/not recommended	18 (4%)
Unclear/ambivalent	36 (8%)

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one category, such as ignore/block the bully and retaliate. Unsurprisingly, the majority of not recommended/not effective strategies related to self-harm, such as the following memory shared by one commenter: 'I used to hide in the school toilets crying and cutting myself, especially in P.E. lessons because they were the worst for the bullying.' The following comment represents an example of an effective but not necessarily recommended behavioral strategy: 'What's hard is learning when the shell is protection and when it's keeping you from letting another extraordinary soul in to your life.' Here, the commenter observes that creating a shell may protect effectively against bullies, but it also cuts one off from other, potentially rewarding forms of human connection.

Among cognitive strategies, 370 (81%) were classified as recommended/effective, 30 (7%) were classified as not recommended/not effective, 18 (4%) were classified as effective but not recommended, and 36 (8%) were classified as unclear or ambivalent. The instances of effective but not necessarily recommended cognitive strategies typically related to forgetting or dissociating from the bullying experience. The unclear or ambivalent strategies involved taking the bully's perspective, self-talk, and forgetting or dissociating. These findings are summarized in Table 4.

Discussion

The results from this analysis provide a unique perspective on the lived experiences of bullying victims, as well as the coping strategies they employed to respond to their tormentors. Though Amanda Palmer's original blog post was about cyberbullying (Palmer, 2013a), the majority of bullying stories (75%) pertained to offline bullying. This finding likely reflects the fact that most commenters were adults who were reflecting on their past experiences of bullying, before the emergence and widespread adoption of the internet, social media, and mobile devices. It also suggests that bullying – no matter what form it takes – has a long-lasting psychological impact on victims. The remaining bullying stories were fairly evenly split between cyberbullying-only stories and stories that touched on both cyberbullying and traditional bullying. When considered in light of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), these hybrid stories suggest that online microsystems are embedded in and connected to offline microsystems. Indeed, the connections between online and offline microsystems create a mesosystem in which people's actions in one context will affect their experiences in the other.

Consistent with previous research, physical appearance and sexual orientation emerged as the most frequently cited reasons for traditional forms of bullying (Berlan et al., 2010; Lunde et al., 2006; Pittet et al., 2010; Rivers, 2001; Wang et al., 2010). Pursuing non-mainstream interests

emerged as another popular reason for being bullied within the cyberbullying and hybrid stories. The primary difference between the cyberbullying-only and hybrid stories related to having an introverted, 'nerdy' personality: while this was the most frequently cited reason for being bullied in the hybrid stories, it was not mentioned at all in the cyberbullying-only stories. Overall, these findings confirm earlier research suggesting that bullying victims – both online and offline – do not conform to mainstream conventions or values (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Olweus, 1993; Pittet et al., 2010; Rivers, 2001). Ecological systems theory again helps to explain these observed patterns. The macrosystem of cultural values and norms surrounding people's social contexts shape their behaviors within their online and offline microsystems. Thus, if the culture values certain physical attributes, personalities, and interests and not others, any deviations from these standards will affect how people treat each other in all microsystems, whether online or offline.

Though cyberbullying accounted for only 25% of the bullying stories, commenters had much to say about technology's role in bullying. Sixty-five percent of the 414 comments coded addressed negative aspects of technology. Specifically, commenters identified distinct properties of online microsystems that serve to magnify, spread, and exasperate bullying. These properties include anonymity, round-the-clock communication, and the ability to reach a wide audience. The observations made by commenters resonate with both theory and empirical research related to the distinct nature of computer-mediated communication (boyd, 2007; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Walther, 1996).

Commenters also reflected on the positive experiences they have had and the affirmation they have received online. In particular, they related experiences of finding supportive communities online that served as an escape from and buffer against bullies, whether online or offline. These experiences reflect the optimistic side of connectivity; the ability of the internet to connect people across space and time makes it easier than ever to commune with people who share one's interests and values (Gardner & Davis, 2013).

Our analysis surfaced two primary types of coping strategies: behavioral and cognitive. These forms of coping are similar to the problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies identified by Lazarus and Folkman (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Behavioral strategies were considerably more common than cognitive strategies for both traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Among the behavioral strategies used in response to traditional bullying, seeking social support was the most commonly cited followed by finding a creative or expressive outlet and ignoring/blocking the bully. These three strategies were also popular among cyberbullying and hybrid stories, though ignoring/blocking the bully was mentioned as frequently as seeking social support for the cyberbullying stories, whereas finding a creative or expressive outlet and ignoring/blocking the bully were mentioned slightly more frequently than seeking social support for the hybrid stories. The two most popular cognitive strategies across all forms of bullying were self-talk and taking the bully's perspective. Taken together, these strategies are evidence of individuals taking the initiative to shape their microsystems in positive ways and draw on the supportive resources they find within them.

Most coping strategies were offered as recommended, effective ways of dealing with traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Cognitive strategies were somewhat more likely to be endorsed as recommended and effective than behavioral strategies. This difference is likely due to the fact that the most commonly cited not recommended/not effective strategy was self-harm, a type of behavioral strategy. It is worth noting that some strategies were offered as recommended/effective by certain commenters and not recommended/not effective by others. For instance, this was true for retaliation and ignoring/blocking the bully. This divergence of opinion reflects the varying personalities and social circumstances of commenters, and underscores the importance of taking into account the particular microsystem within which bullying

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occurs when seeking the most appropriate coping strategy (Kochenderfer Ladd & Ladd, 2001; Lazarus, 1999).

Our analysis of coping strategies has important implications for intervention efforts aimed at supporting victims of bullying. For instance, the distinction between cognitive and behavioral strategies suggests that intervention efforts should focus on developing both the external and the internal resources of victims. Among external resources, it is important that victims receive adequate social support and experience the self-efficacy and self-affirmation that comes with learning and exercising a skill or talent. With respect to internal resources, it appears that perspective taking is a valuable skill to develop in order to understand the motivations behind a bully's actions. Armed with such an understanding, the victim is able to understand that the problem does not reside in them.

Limitations and future directions

This analysis represents an exploratory study that answers the call of Potter and Hepburn (2005) to utilize naturalistic methods that are generated in a situated, realistic context. As such, it provides an authentic perspective on victims' lived experiences of bullying that is considerably more difficult to attain through the more commonly used methods of interviews and surveys. However, the study is not without its limitations. While we are confident that the findings are representative of the experiences and perspectives of bullying victims who read and responded to Amanda Palmer's blog post (Palmer, 2013a), we cannot generalize the findings to all bullying victims. The lack of explicit demographic information adds to the difficulty of assessing the degree to which blog commenters are similar to or different from the broader population of bullying victims. In light of the distinct context of this data source, it is likely that some systematic differences do exist. For instance, Palmer fans may be more inclined to turn to music as an outlet to bullying; and, by virtue of their contributions to Palmer's blog post, they may also be more inclined to turn to online communities for social support. Future research should sample from other online communities in order to include perspectives from a broader range of people.

Conclusion

Such a personal and sensitive topic as bullying makes it challenging for researchers to elicit unfiltered, authentic responses from victims about their bullying experiences. The comments shared spontaneously on Amanda Palmer's blog (Palmer, 2013a) provide an authentic view into one group of victims' experiences with and reflections on bullying. The findings suggest that victims of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying are often targeted because they do not conform in one way or another to mainstream norms and values. Victims employed a variety of cognitive and behavioral strategies to respond to their tormentors, such as seeking social support, ignoring/blocking the bully, finding a creative or expressive outlet, self-talk, and taking the bully's perspective. Though similar strategies were used to respond to both online and offline bullying, commenters reflected on the distinct qualities of networked publics that serve to magnify, spread, and exacerbate the effects of bullying. These findings have relevance to researchers seeking to understand bullying from the perspective of victims and to practitioners seeking to develop effective interventions to support victims of both online and offline bullying.

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