



## RESEARCH

# IT'S NOT THE PLAYER; IT'S THE GAME: A PILOT STUDY OF BULLYING EXPERIENCES IN CAMPUS GAMING COMMUNITIES

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*Collegiate esports communities are as prone to bullying as other campus social spaces are. This pilot study surveyed student members of competitive online gaming clubs on a midsized university campus. Participants self-reported bullying experiences both in and out of game and indicated whether they primarily play support roles or core roles within game. Results indicated that the social roles of players were similar in both in-game and out of game settings but playing support in-game did not predict social roles.*

Esports clubs and other gaming communities are becoming increasingly prevalent on higher education campuses (Engle, 2017). Schaeperkoetter et al. (2017) count 22 varsity collegiate esports teams. Some institutions are already officially sanctioning esports teams and offering scholarships to students who compete on behalf of their school (CBS News, 2017). Still others are earning their way through college by playing competitively on their own or playing for a large, online audience via streaming platforms like Twitch.tv (Farokhmanesh, 2017). As competitive esports as an industry spreads exponentially on college campuses, student affairs professionals must be in tune with the needs and challenges of this population. This study opens an inquiry into collegiate competitive gamers' self-awareness of bully and victim behaviors inside and outside of game contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer bullying in clubs and organizations on higher education campuses is common (Knudson, 2015). For example, 30% of 1,215 college marching band members have reported bullying experiences (Silveira & Hudson, 2015). While bullying is a persistent, aggressive pattern of behavior toward a victim (Whitney & Smith, 1993), cyberbullying takes place online, thereby giving aggressors greater access to the victim, and sometimes the anonymity to avoid accountability. Olweus (1993) notes that bully and victim are of unequal strength. However, the power differential may not be as obvious in online situations, except where the cyberbully is one of several, or where they are exposing or ridiculing the victim in front of several others or more as in social media, for example (Langos, 2012). Attempts to quantify the rate of cyberbullying on college campuses have yielded a wide range of results largely due to inconsistencies in the definitions of cyberbullying and differing methodologies; regardless, cyberbullying is demonstrably prevalent in higher education institutions (Baldasare, Bauman, Goldman, & Robie, 2012). Langos (2012) notes the challenge of defining cyberbullying for the purposes of research and offers an exploration of cyberbullying that addresses the uniqueness of public, Internet spaces as venues for directed aggression and how such spaces can make it difficult to assess bullying intent. Among 1368 survey respondents in Canada and the United States, victims of bullying in high school were likely to experience this in college, and bullies in that study also reprised the bully role in college (Beran, Rinaldi, Bickham, & Rich, 2012).

Collegiate bullying is not limited only to students. A survey of 346 online instructional faculty in 2013 found that 33.8% had experienced bullying by students (Minor, Smith & Brashen). In this case, the power differential of teacher-to-student was reversed as retention rates and fear of reprisal led faculty to forego reporting cyberbullying. In this way, cyberbullying has the potential to alter traditional images of bully and victim, for an evolving definition. The nonprofit National Crime Prevention Council, known widely for its *McGruff the Crime Dog* marketing, lists online messaging, distribution of humiliating media, identity theft, and using websites to harass and humiliate individuals (2017) in its definition of cyberbullying. As online video games have already been established as viable social spaces for interpersonal relationships (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), bullying in campus gaming or esports clubs merits attention among student affairs researchers.

Research on the social component of gaming has historically centered on what are known as Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMO). These are persistent, online environments with a focus on role-playing and community building. Applications of social science theory to MMOs are relatively common and cover a wide area of interest including social capital (Zhong, 2011), gender theory (Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, & Yee, 2009), lifestyles (Whang & Chang, 2004), problematic Internet use (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009) and bullying (Teng, Tseng, Chen, & Wu, 2012) through online behavior. Some studies investigate how gaming affects players' offline behavior. One line of research in this area is centered on addiction to online gaming (e.g., Byrne, Sias & Kim, 2016; Sarda, Bègue, Bry, & Gentile, 2016). With broader social implications in mind, Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut (2009) and Velez, Mahood, Ewoldsen, & Moyer-Gusé (2014) predicted offline behavior given how players' online environments were fabricated. Both studies particularly noted that group functioning in online environments carried over to offline group settings, and perceptions of gamers' online avatars significantly affected others' offline perceptions of those same individuals. One such study employed a competitive social computer game to show that prior assessments of middle schoolers' social roles (bully, victim, bystander) could in fact be predicted by student interactions within the game (Manilla-Caceres, Espelage, & Amir, 2014). Espelage additionally published a bully and victimization scale that would be adopted for the current study (Espelage & Holt, 2001).

The current study expanded on the work of Manilla-Caceres and colleagues (2014) by examining whether a university esports club member's social role in a competitive online gaming environment was predictive of bullying both on and offline. Further literature on cyberbullying in higher education is available (e.g., Watts, Wagner, Velasquez, and Behrens 2017), but the current study added esports to the discourse on cyberbullying. This study was necessitated by a paucity in current research to examine esports environments regarding online and offline social interactions.

## OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

As this study tested hypotheses across different games and communities, it was important to clearly define in-game roles that are sufficiently general enough to be applicable across different games.

**1. Support**—support is a role within a competitive game that focuses on actions that enable other players on the team. Primary responsibilities include providing healing capabilities, offering utility to the team, hindering enemy players, or generally sacrificing one's avatar to enable other players on the team to accomplish objectives that win the game. An analogy within traditional sports is a goalkeeper or defender in soccer. These players hinder the opposing team and enable forwards and midfielders to accomplish objectives that lead to victory: scoring goals.

**2. Core**—core is a role within a competitive game that focuses on actions that directly lead to winning the game. The support roles enable these roles, and their primary responsibilities are acquiring in-game resources, accomplishing objectives, and defeating enemy players. An analogy in traditional sports would be the forwards and midfielders in soccer. It is their primary responsibility to score goals and win the game, and they are supported by the goalkeepers and defenders who pass the ball to them while hindering opposing forwards from scoring.

**3. Bullying/bully**—is the experience of engaging in verbal and physical abuse, or actions which generally and intentionally harm or hinder other students' quality of life. It is important to recognize that bullying online and offline take different forms. For this study, bullying in an online setting is defined as flaming (hateful, negative

communication), intentionally losing the game to attack players on the team, or actions that generally and intentionally reduce the enjoyment or efficacy of other players.

**4. Victim**—is the role that an individual reports experiencing as a target of bullying behavior (Manilla et al., 2001).

**5. Competitive esports**—games in which the players on opposing teams use avatars to contend as the central design of the game, which is played online. For the current study, this definition includes both casual and league-based gaming. The games represented in this study are *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013), *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009), and *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016).

## METHODS

This quantitative, cross-sectional survey study extended on the work done by Manilla-Caceres and colleagues (2014), employed modified versions of their bullying and victimization scales, and examined groups on campus that have formed around competitive esports games. Roles within the game (support or core) were expected to correlate with social roles (bully or victim) outside of the game. The following questions were addressed:

1. Are students' frequencies of bullying out-of-game correlated with frequencies of being victimized in-game?
2. Are students who play support roles most frequently in-game more likely to be victimized than those who less frequently play support roles?

### Participants

Participants were convenience sampled from the various gaming communities present at a mid-sized university, who self-selected and gave informed consent prior to their participation. An email was sent to the presidents of university gaming communities who disseminated the email to club members. Social media posts on Facebook with a link to the study were also posted to each club's page. A sample of 42 participants was collected for the first part of the study: 39 of the participants identified as Cisgender Male, and three identified as Cisgender Female. Thirty participants primarily played *Dota 2*, 9 participants primarily played *League of Legends*, and three participants primarily played *Overwatch*. Participants fulfilled the following criteria: they are active members of their gaming community, their game of choice is competitive and takes place online, and their community has offline interactions (i.e., socials, LAN events, etc.). 31 identified as White, one as Black, 14 as Asian, one as Pacific Islander, and five as Hispanic. Subject ages ranged from 18 to 26 years old.

### Data Collection

Participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, which included age, gender identity, year in school, major, race, ethnicity, and gaming community membership. Participants also indicated the percentage of time spent playing a support role using a sliding scale from 0-100 percent with 0 meaning "I only play core" and 100 meaning "I only play support." The first part finally asked participants to take two modified versions (see Appendix A) of the Illinois Bully Scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001), a survey that measures the degree to which respondents are bullies, bully-victims, or bystanders. One version measured offline interactions and removed the survey items which dealt with physical bullying, and the other was modified to reference the same bullying behaviors in online contexts.

### Data Analysis

Incomplete results were discarded from the dataset. Descriptive statistics were generated for bully and victim scores, as well as for the support and core sliding scales. Based on a sample of 42, the authors were not concerned about data normality (Hogg, Tanis & Zimmerman, 2014). A Pearson correlation was used to test the hypotheses and to seek other relationships in the data.

## RESULTS

The Illinois Bully Scale (Espelage & Holt, 2001) and its modified in-game component had a combined Cronbach Alpha of  $\alpha = .906$ . Measurements of being a victim in-game were neither positively correlated with playing

support, nor found to be significant at the .05 level. Being a victim in-game was positively correlated with being a victim out of the game ( $n = 42$ ,  $r = .464$ ,  $p < .005$ ), and being a bully in-game ( $n = 42$ ,  $r = .708$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Measurements of being a bully in-game were found to be negatively correlated with frequency of support play ( $n = 42$ ,  $r = -.412$ ,  $p < .01$ ), with being a bully out-of-game ( $n = 42$ ,  $r = .365$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and with being victimized outside the game ( $n = 42$ ,  $r = .572$ ,  $p < .0001$ ).

## DISCUSSION

In line with Manilla-Caceres and colleagues (2014), this study predicted that the social roles participants fulfilled out-of-game would be reflected in-game. The researchers further asked whether the roles of support and core, unique to games, could also be predicted against the roles of bully and victim. The results showed that both bully and victim roles out-of-game were found to be reciprocated in-game as predicted. Our findings indicate that other social roles may be recreated in online venues of gaming community interactions.

Perhaps the most interesting result is the significantly positive, moderate ( $r = .572$ ) correlation between being a bully in-game and being a victim out-of-game. This correlation suggests that individuals who experience bullying in offline experiences may enact negative emotions online as bullying behavior- or it may mean that engaging in bullying makes one more aware of bullying when directed toward them. As gaming provides a unique platform for individuals to exercise measurable power over others, it may be the case that victims of bullying feel powerless in real life and vent frustration by abusing other players using the built-in mechanisms of the game they play. In tandem with the strong ( $r = .708$ ) correlation between in-game bullying and in-game victimization, this may indicate a cycle whereby players who are bullied out-of-game could go on to bully others in-game, which in turn may increase the amount of bullying they receive in-game. This cycle seems particularly damaging when campus gaming communities are taken into account, as most of the individuals in these communities are playing with each other and instigating these bully/victim cycles. While the sample was large enough ( $n = 42$ ) for a correlative procedure (Hogg, Tanis & Zimmerman, 2014), its generalization to campus esports overall is not prudent. The high Cronbach Alpha of  $\alpha = .906$  indicates that both the original (Espelage & Holt, 2001) bullying instrument and modified gaming bullying instrument were internally consistent for use with this study.

## LIMITATIONS

As this study was conducted at one university, the results of this study may not reflect the culture of gaming communities at other institutions. The racial/ethnic make-up was not representative of the university, featuring more white males and fewer underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. Esports tend to be characterized as a male-dominated culture, despite womxn making up nearly half of gamers (Entertainment Software Association, 2019; Macdonald, 2018). Such characterization may explain the hesitation that non-males could feel in not identifying with gamer communities. Future studies may collect additional data from other universities to identify any potential differences and compare experiences across race and gender identities, which was not possible given this study's data; and between games. The sample size of this study was too small to run factor analysis, and so the extraction of subscales was impossible. Finally, while the Espelage & Holt (2001) bullying instrument is considered a gold standard for measuring bully/victim roles, it is based on self-report responses.

## IMPLICATIONS

With an increase in campus esports (Schaeperkoetter et al., 2017), both casual and competitive, gaming is now a legitimate part of campus culture. This study is a first in examining the unique properties of one campus gaming community through a bully/victim role lens. Although Manilla-Caceres and colleagues (2014) provided a predictive framework for this study, there is no one theory that clearly and distinctly addresses the estuary of interaction in a dual online/offline community among higher education populations. This study is the first step in thorough examinations of campus gamer culture, a mainstay population across institutions of higher education in the immediate future.

The findings of this study suggest that there might be a complex cycle of social development: changes in the social dynamic of the game environment have predictable and measurable effects on the non-game environment and vice versa. Student affairs professionals are potentially missing a substantial portion of campus gamers' developmental spheres: both as a place to meet student needs, and as a laboratory in which to apply leadership and bystander skills. Research is needed to differentiate bullying from cyberbullying, as well as to subclassify the phenomenon within cyberbullying. Olweus (1993) ranks bully and victim as differentiated by strength, but in social media, anonymity or exposure may comprise strength. In esports, the use of game-based mechanics or game-bound status (such as in-game rank) indicates strength.

Institutions should explicitly include bullying interactions within games as part of their definition of cyberbullying. The appropriateness of reporting structures for abuse and harassment in collegiate esports game settings must also be emphasized in training mandated reporters on college campuses. Codes of conduct and charter documents for campus esports organizations can also be explicit about in-game behavior. Campus activities professionals and advisors can train participants and student leaders in bystander advocacy for in-game bullying as they would for out-of-game bullying.

## CONCLUSION

Social role as an influencer in both online and offline environments poses a unique opportunity for student development using games as a platform. Engagement with games is very high among this population (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), and any intervention which uses game communities in a significant way could potentially be effective in eliciting social development. As the games in this study were all team-based, objective games, there is certainly room for leadership and cooperative development interventions. As esports is a burgeoning industry, the research opportunities for its place in student affairs will continue to grow over time.

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## APPENDIX

### Survey Instrument: Illinois Bully Scale and Modified Online Scale

How often did you do the following over the last 30 days?

[Select boxes: (Never, 1 or 2, 3 or 4, 5 or 6, 7 or more)]

1. I upset other students for the fun of it.
2. In a group, I teased other students.
3. I spread rumors about other students.
4. I started (instigated) arguments or conflicts.
5. I helped harass other students.
6. I threatened to hurt or hit another student.
7. I encouraged people to fight.
8. I teased other students.
9. I was mean to someone when I was angry.

How often did these things happen to you over the last 30 days?

[Select boxes: (Never, 1 or 2, 3 or 4, 5 or 6, 7 or more)]

10. Other students picked on me.
11. Other students called me “gay.”
12. Other students called me names.
13. I got hit and pushed by other students.
14. I was threatened by other students.
15. Students spread rumors or told lies about me.
16. I was excluded or kept out of a group of friends on purpose.

Considering interactions while gaming only, how often did you do the following in-game, over the last 30 days?

[Select boxes: (Never, 1 or 2, 3 or 4, 5 or 6, 7 or more)]

1. I upset other players for the fun of it.
2. In a group, I teased other players.
3. I spread rumors about other players.
4. I started (instigated) arguments or conflicts in-game.
5. I helped harass other players.
6. I threatened to hurt or hit another player.
7. I encouraged players to fight.
8. I teased other players.
9. I was mean to another player when I was angry.

Considering interactions while gaming only, how often did the following happen to you in-game, over the last 30 days?

[Select boxes: (Never, 1 or 2, 3 or 4, 5 or 6, 7 or more)]

10. Other players picked on me.
11. Other players called me “gay.”
12. Other players called me names.
13. I was *griefed* (using game mechanics to hinder, player-kill, or otherwise exploit) by other players.
14. I was threatened by other players.
15. Players spread rumors or told lies about me.
16. I was excluded or kept out of a group/team on purpose.