

Cyberbullying at university a major issue for women

Yet nearly two-thirds of universities don't try to police online behaviour, says researcher

June 4, 2013, Victoria – Young men and young women in university get cyberbullied in pretty much even numbers, a new study shows.

But the study also shows that women are much more concerned about it.

Margaret Jackson, Wanda Cassidy and Chantal Faucher, all of Simon Fraser University, had studied cyberbullying in middle and secondary school. They wanted to know how the phenomenon played out at university, and so they distributed questionnaires to students and staff at four universities.

Jackson and Faucher will be presenting the results of the first part of their study – the responses from 1,055 students and 157 staff at a single university – at the 2013 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences.

The researchers were surprised to see how interested university women – both students and staff – were in the issue.

Faucher, a post-doctoral fellow at SFU, said three-quarters of the responses they received from students were from female students. Female staff members were also keen, with 70 per cent of staff responses coming from women.

The researchers explain the overwhelmingly female response by saying that men and women use the Internet in different ways.

Roughly speaking, said Faucher, women tend to use the Internet to develop, build and nurture relationships. Men, on the other hand, tend to use the Internet for information-sharing, exchanging files or playing games.

Roughly one student in 10 – the rates were close to equal for men and women – reported experiencing cyberbullying.

But because of the way they use the Internet, men seemed to be able to shrug off cyberbullying more easily, said Faucher.

Women, on the other hand, see cyberbullying as a bigger threat because they see it as affecting their interpersonal relationships.

Faucher says there's a clear consensus on what should be done about cyberbullying: Universities need to be able to counsel victims, develop anti-cyberbullying policies, and address issues like competition, which affects both students and teaching staff.

Yet she says things are not moving fast enough.

Faucher worked on another study analyzing the codes and policies in place at universities to deal with online bullying. The study examined things like codes of conduct, policies on electronic communication, and policies on harassment and discrimination. All told, 475 policies in 74 universities were reviewed.

Faucher says that only about one-third of those policies – 35 per cent – attempted to regulate online behaviour.

Given the amount of time students spend online – whether for courses, research or on their smartphones – that represents a gaping policy hole, she said.

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