THE WALK OF [BODY] SHAME: THE DETRIMENTAL REPERCUSSIONS OF CYBERBULLYING

CARLY STACEY

Within the last twenty-five years, the Internet has become a cornerstone of our society's culture and identity. Throughout the 1990s, the Internet blossomed into a platform designed to provide access to an unlimited amount of information at the click of a button. It did not take long for this technology to become an integral part of our society's social interaction. Along with easy information access, the Internet also provides a useful outlet of communication through social media. However, in recent years, as a result of the Internet's "faceless" communication and society's unrealistic physical beauty standards, the Internet allows for users to cause emotional damage to a person through cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is the act of "bullying someone through electronic means as by posting mean or threatening messages about the person online" through a variety of outlets including: the Internet, text messages, or media (Merriam-Webster). A cyberbully victim is the person receiving the mean/threatening messages online. One way cyberbullies generally use these outlets is to expose others' imperfections that do not match society's beauty expectations. This phenomenon is now called "body shaming." Body shaming is a large societal issue, and has become one of the major problems associated with cyberbullying. Furthermore, body shaming can be considered a gender issue in the media, as the media frequently highlights and publicizes more instances of women, over men, as victims of cyberbullying comments. Cyberbullying is an issue that affects both genders, as anyone can be a victim or a perpetrator of it. Cyberbullies who use body shaming to victimize, both males and females, create an online environment lacking in empathy that can lead to the victim's psychological trauma, including eating disorders and even suicide.

A large implication of the unlimited public access to the Internet is cyberbullies now have a platform to publicly humiliate people behind the privacy of their screens, thus illustrating a lack of empathy. The term "cyberbullying" emerged as the Internet's role shifted from a government tool to a public utility. As the popularity of using the Internet as a convenient method of communication increases, more and more cases of cyberbullying arise. In 2015, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported 15.5% of high school students were victims of cyberbullying that year, totaling at approximately 15,465 high schoolers (CDC, 2015). Cyberbullying primarily affects adolescents ages 14-24 due to the lack of verbal face-to-face interaction and the appearance of anonymity. Electronic-mediated communication allows for the omission of direct communication such as preverbal cues (eye contact, tone of voice, and facial expressions) and emotional feedback (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). As a result, "faceless" communication, especially on social media, allows cyberbullies to spew hateful words and leave hurtful comments that have the power to detrimentally affect a person's emotional state and self-esteem. Due to a lack of direct physical contact and in-person communication, cyberbullies are often unable to see the immediate consequences of their actions. This makes understanding and sensing the victims' thoughts and feelings extremely difficult for the cyberbullies. In a survey experiment conducted by four psychologists, a group of students had to complete an online cyberbullying questionnaire and an empathy short scale. The results illustrated that, "cyberbullies demonstrated less empathetic responsiveness than non-cyberbullies," and cyberbullies may, in fact, have "lower affective empathy" as they are able to minimize their ability to empathize (Steffgen, Pfetsch, König, & Melzer, 2011). This study analyzes a possible lack of empathy found in young adults engaging in cyberbullying; the emotional distance provided by the Internet allows these users to avoid empathetic engagement entirely and act without personal consequences. The Internet, specifically social media, is an outlet cyberbullies will frequently use to body shame their victims.

Cyberbullies use body shaming, often in the form of gaslighting, to target men and women who do not meet society's beauty standards. Body shaming is defined as, "inappropriate negative statements and attitudes toward another person's weight or size" which often lead to increased levels of body insecurity (Healthy Living Cooperative, 2015). In my opinion, our society's physical beauty standards stem from the online media conveying that being "thin" is the ideal way to look. Most women who are described as beautiful online have flat stomachs, large breasts, and rounded bottoms, while men who are portrayed as handsome are muscular, tall, and lean. Interestingly, a study conducted by British researchers gave a total of 80 heterosexual Caucasian, male and female university students the ability to design an ideal body as a "dream partner" and an ideal body for themselves. The results indicate that the desired look for a male is an "'inverted pyramid with broad shoulders and small waist," while for females an "hourglass with a small waist-to-hip ratio'" is preferred (Crossley, Cornelissen, & Tovée, 2012). Therefore, those who do not have the "ideal figures" are more likely to be subjected to body shaming comments. Using these hurtful comments, cyberbullies deflect attention from their own insecurities. Through highlighting their victim's imperfections first, cyberbullies are able to avoid their personal insecurities receiving public attention. Cyberbullies often use an emotional abuse mechanism called "gaslighting" and they display a lack of empathy when engaging this mechanism. This method of bullying is used to target a victim's perceptions, self-confidence, and self-esteem to obtain power, whether that be anonymously or not, on a public platform, often resulting in victims seeking to obtain the "ideal" body (Stern, 2008). Meanwhile, more women seek to obtain these beauty standards as a result of receiving more body shame than men. A study on body image and acceptance conducted by Yahoo Health found that out of 2,000 nationally representative respondents ages 13-64, 94%

of teen females versus 64% of males had experienced body shaming online (Miller, 2016). This body shaming documented by alarming statistics, can lead to eating disorders and declining mental health in both women and men.

A large repercussion of online body shaming is that it can lead to poorer self-image in victims, and even eating disorders. Eating disorders are serious mental illnesses that can sometimes be fatal, as they disrupt normal eating behaviors. Men and women both suffer from eating disorders that generally lead to obsession over their body shape and weight. The most common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa (starving oneself), bulimia nervosa (purging), and binge-eating (over-eating) disorder (National Institute of Mental Health). A study conducted in Gothenburg surveyed students from 21 different schools and found that cyberbullying victims reported "poorer body esteem" than those who were not victimized; additionally, girls, specifically, felt that cyberbullies' comments were directed toward body appearance. As a result, many females develop higher susceptibility to an eating disorder (Frisén, Berne, & Lunde, 2014). Many women feel pressure to strive for society's adorned body, leaving those who are unable to fulfill these standards extremely depressed. In an interview conducted by the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), Rachel Taylor, a young woman victimized because of her weight, claims she received hate mail and death threats on a public post on Reddit. Taylor claims the harassment she received from cyberbullies prompted her low self-esteem, lack of self-worth, and eating disorder. In her interview, she included an astounding statistic gathered by the NEDA, which states, "as many as 65% of people with eating disorders say bullying contributed to their condition" (NEDA, 2015). Unfortunately, victims of body shaming often share the negative experience of receiving hurtful comments just as Rachel did. For many victims, these berating and humiliating comments can leave psychological "scars," which can influence the onset of an eating disorder as these victims strive to reach a desired weight goal and body shape through extreme measures. Many psychologists are testing a possible psychological treatment that involves the separation of oneself from the body. Dissociating oneself from his/her body diminishes any subjective experience and feelings of inadequacy, as the person is unable to internalize their body image in a negative way. A person's vulnerability alters his/her body image and society's standards for physical beauty, which can lead to body dissatisfaction. The psychologists noted that if their patients with eating disorders could feel and remember these disappointing feelings of body dissatisfaction, then they would feel overwhelmed "forever." The most detrimental effect for patients feeling body image dissatisfaction is the constant fear of always having dreadful feelings about themselves. Having these feelings constantly can bring about the idea that not existing—essentially suicide—is the only solution (Petrucelli, 2016). While eating disorders are one of the more harmful effects of cyberbully-induced body shaming, suicide is by far the most heartbreaking outcome.

The reason I chose to write my paper on cyberbullying, specifically on body shaming, is because it is a major societal issue that affects both males and females with potentially permanent, and even fatal, results.
For the privacy of the family, I used an alias in the following narrative. Josh's story is one of many pertaining to the tragic results of cyberbullies' use of body shaming. I will never forget the phone call my dad received from our family friend and his co-worker, Dan, on September 30, 2010. My dad I were in the on the drive home when the phone rang. He answered the phone on the car's Bluetooth speaker and motioned for me to be quiet. When he answered the call, all we could hear were inconsolable sobs and gasping for air on the other end of the line. Two minutes passed by before we could get a recognizable answer of what had happened. Dan's voice cracked as he said, "Josh (his son) shot himself in the attic." My stomach dropped. Josh was only 15-years-old, in high school, and had dreams of following in his dad's footsteps of becoming a firefighter. He was an excellent student, a competitive swimmer, and had a heart of gold. We became friends almost instantly and spent the past four Firefighter Christmas parties together laughing while accompanying our dads on the fire engine. I was utterly shocked and dumbfounded when I asked my dad, "Why would this happen? Do you think it was accidental or intentional?" We both did not know the answer and knew it would be wrong to ask that early on. His parents did not have social media accounts so they did not know the source of the problem.

During the funeral service I, along with everyone in attendance, heard from a classmate that Josh's classmates had viciously attacked and humiliated him on social media, primarily for his weight. I remember he was relatively shorter than most of the guys in his class and was quite overweight. During the last Christmas party, he shared with me that he took up swimming to lose weight, which I only later realized was a result of the incessant fat jokes he was receiving online. Dan allowed the classmate to share with the funeral attendees some of the incredibly painful comments Josh received online. The comments claimed that, "he was unattractive, short, they would always remember him as "Chubby Tubby Josh" no matter how hard he attempted to lose weight, and people assumed he was probably gay because he never had a girlfriend before.

During my research, I found a study conducted in 2014 that coincided with my narrative. Many cyberbullies accuse other males of being gay in an attempt to diminish their self-esteem. As in most appearance-related cyberbullying cases, many of the comments received among boys pertain to "looking or seeming gay" (Berne & Kling, 2014). Likewise, a study conducted in 2013 found that "[t]easing about body weight was consistently associated with low body satisfaction, low self-esteem, high depressive symptoms, and thinking about and attempting suicide" (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer,

& Story, 2003). The night before Josh decided to end his life, a large Facebook post about him circulated his high school classmates' newsfeeds. An older and extremely popular girl jokingly convinced Josh that she wanted him to ask her to the Homecoming dance. This girl demonstrated a lack of empathy, as the entire week before his death she built him up and created a false of hope that she had romantic feelings towards him when, in reality, she planned to humiliate him. Josh was so overjoyed that the most beautiful girl wanted to go to the dance with him. Dan remembered Josh's enthusiasm as he exclaimed what a big deal it was because she was the most popular girl in school. On September 30, 2010, Josh asked that girl to the dance and she loudly exclaimed in front of those who walked by that he was crazy for ever thinking she would go to the dance with "someone like him." Given the situation, she probably agreed with the spiteful comments posted online about his looks and persona, which I can only imagine was the tipping point that completely devastated him, causing him to take his life. As Josh's father stated, "He went home that evening, walked up to the attic and shot himself." Josh's death made me realize how the lack of empathy some people show towards others, especially through toxic online comments, have serious ramifications that can result in a devastating tragedy. Research suggests the harmful comments of cyberbullies can be one of many prominent factors in suicide. In 2015, a nation-wide study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) used "The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System" (YRBSS) survey on high school students and found that 14.8% of high school students were electronically-bullied; and 8% of those bullied actually committed suicide (CDC, 2014). Unfortunately, there are many more online stories of adolescents and young adults, like Josh, committing suicide as a result of the despicable comments posted about them online.

The Internet, specifically social media, provides many platforms for people to connect with others; however, the Internet also creates opportunities to make hurtful comments about body image. Cyberbullies who body shame on a public platform create an online environment that lacks empathy, as they cannot physically see the immediate reactions of the person they are hurting. This method enables cyberbullies to have the power to publicly berate and destroy their victim's self-esteem, essentially causing their victim to feel extremely humiliated, while the perpetrator takes no responsibility for his/her actions. Although I am sure there are more "types" of body shaming cyberbullies, the two types I have witnessed online include those looking for power and control over their victim and those who bully for the sheer joy of inflicting pain and humiliation onto a person. These two "types" of cyberbullies damage their victim's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, leading to many stories of victims resorting to eating disorders, like Rachel Taylor, and suicides, like Josh. Josh's suicide made me realize that his death could have been prevented if someone showed him compassion and empathy. Life is too short to not communicate to people every day, regardless if they struggle with an eating disorder or are contemplating suicide, just how important and loved they are by someone in this world. That is why it is important to promote positive body image (regardless of society's physical beauty standards) in adolescents and young adults, as there are ruthless cyberbullies who spread toxic comments that exploit a victim's privacy, cause severe humiliation, and ultimately, traumatic psychological responses like eating disorders and suicide.

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