

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: 2011 AP-MTV DIGITAL ABUSE STUDY

Objectives/Background

As part of its multi-year public affairs campaign to address youth digital abuse – which has reached over 30 million on-air and mobilized over 1 million to take action – MTV once again partnered with the AP on a study that provides an in-depth look at bullying, abuse and discrimination in the digital age. This research was designed to quantify how young people are experiencing, affected by and responding to issues like cyberbullying, digital dating abuse and online slurs. It is one of the few nationally representative polls to track trending data on these issues over the course of the last two years.

Methodology

Respondents were recruited from KnowledgePanel®, the only online panel that is representative of the U.S. population, bringing unprecedented reliability and statistical projectability to online survey research. KnowledgePanel members are randomly recruited by telephone through Random-Digit Dial (RDD) sampling and by mail through Address-Based Sampling (ABS), which better accounts for the growing number of cell-phone only households in the U.S. To capture the full range of consumers, people chosen for the study who had no Internet access were given it for free.

The survey was conducted online Aug. 18-31, 2011 and is based on 1,355 interviews, including 631 teens ages 14-17 and 724 adults ages 18-24. The margin of sampling error for the poll is plus or minus 3.8 percentage points.

I. Overall digital abuse incidence

Three-quarters of youth believe that digital abuse is a serious problem, and intervention is on the rise from 2009.

According to the study, 76% of 14-24 year olds say that digital abuse is a serious problem for people their age. More than half (56%) of those surveyed say they have experienced abuse through social and digital media, up from 50% reported in the 2009 MTV-AP digital abuse survey.¹ However, compared to 2009, young people in the 2011 study were significantly more likely to intervene, with a majority now saying they would step in if they saw someone “being mean online.”

- Some of the most frequent forms of digital harassment include: people writing things online that aren't true (26%), people writing things online that are mean (24%) and someone forwarding an IM or message that was intended to stay private (20%).
- Young adults are a bit more apt to have experienced digital abuse at some point than teens (59% of young adults vs. 51% among teens), but for teens, it's more recent. Just over three in 10 say they've encountered unwanted digital behaviors at some point in the last six months, compared with 24% among those ages 18-24.
- Young women (82%) and non-whites (80%) are more apt to see digital abuse as a problem than men (70%) or whites (73%). Additionally, those 14-17 are more apt to call it a problem (80%) than their older peers (73%).

Digital abuse isn't generally the act of strangers – perpetrators are usually people known well.

Most say the perpetrators of the bad behavior are people they know very well. A majority of young people who had experienced each type of abusive behavior said it was carried out by someone they knew very well for 13 out of 16 behaviors tested.

II. Sexting and digital dating abuse

Youth are aware that sexting can be a serious problem, but still 1 in 3 have engaged in some form of sexting. Many who “sext” do so as a result of pressure.

Because of technology, this generation of young adults is navigating their sexuality and first sexual experiences in an environment unlike any before. While 71% call sexting a serious problem for people their age, youth don't always consider the potential consequences (“it won't happen to me”). One in three 14-24 year olds have engaged in some form of sexting.

- Youth are more likely to receive than send nude photos and sexually charged messages. Fifteen percent have sent naked photos or videos of themselves, 33% have received texts or online messages with sexual words and 21% have received naked pictures or videos of others. About half of those who sent a nude photo felt pressured to do so
- Sending a sext is far more prevalent among young adults (19%) compared to teens (7%)
- Among those who have sexted, 10% have done so with people they only know online, marking a sizeable decrease from 29% in 2009.

Additionally, 41% of those in a relationship have experienced some form of digital dating abuse, with about a quarter feeling pressure to constantly “check in” with their partner.

- Nearly three in 10 say their partner has checked up on them multiple times a day online or via mobile – asking where they are, who they're with or what they're doing – (27%), or read their text messages without permission (27%).
- About a quarter (24%) say they always or sometimes feel their partner pressures them to respond to IMs, emails, phone calls or texts
- In terms of social networking, 15% have been told by a current partner to remove former girlfriends or boyfriends from their social networking friend or follow lists, and 13% have had a partner ask for their online passwords.
- Five percent each say a partner has spread rumors about them online, or used information found online to harass or embarrass them.

III. Digital discrimination

Slurs are common online, and young people regularly encounter words like “slut” “that's so gay” “fag” and “retard” on social networks.

The MTV-AP study reinforced that people can be emboldened to type things they'd never say, as 71% of respondents said people are more likely to use slurs online or in text messages than in person.

- One in two regularly observes people use discriminatory language in social media.
- The groups most frequently discriminated against are: overweight (54%); LGB (51%); African-American (45%); women (44%); and immigrants (35%).
- Those surveyed said discriminatory language toward Muslims, LGB and overweight people was more often intended to be “hurtful” than similar remarks toward women, African Americans, Latinos or other groups.
- Among the words tested, the discriminatory language most-commonly used is: “that's so gay” (65%); “slut” (55%); “fag” (53%); “retard” (53%); and “nigger” (42%).

Youth know digital discrimination is a serious issue, yet many don't fully grasp the weight of discriminatory language.

About three-quarters (76%) of young people agree that digital discrimination is a serious problem, yet they have conflicting feelings about the seriousness of using discriminatory language in the digital space.

Those surveyed fall into two categories, split roughly down the middle: 51% who believe using discriminatory language online is never ok, and 46% who believe it's ok to use it sometimes, so long as you make clear you're "just kidding". Fifty-four percent also said it's ok for them and their friends to use discriminatory language because "I know we don't mean it."

IV. Effective responses & awareness of consequences

Youth point to some tactics as helpful in ameliorating digital abuse, particularly limiting the perpetrator's access to their social network accounts, passwords and digital contact info.

In terms of combating digital abuse, asking the person who did it to stop was effective for 47% who tried it, although 14% said it made things worse and 27% said it had no effect. In terms of effectiveness, there are a few techniques that stand out as being particularly helpful, each of which had to do with limiting access:

- 80% said changing their passwords made the situation better.
- 67% reported that changing their email address, screen name or cell phone number made things better.
- 59% said deleting their social networking profile ameliorated the situation.

The next most effective responses all entailed asking for help: asking a friend (53% success rate), reporting the person to the police (50%) and telling parents (49%).

Compared to two years ago, young people today are more aware of the potential negative impacts of posting information online and more likely to intervene when they see peers experiencing digital abuse.

With enhanced media attention and education focused on cyberbullying the last year, young adults are increasingly likely to intervene in digital abuse. The study shows they are more likely to intervene if they see someone being mean online than they were in 2009 (56% in 2011 versus 47% in 2009) and a majority say they would intervene if they saw someone using discriminatory language on social networking sites (51%).

Some additional positive gains made from 2009 include:

- A 19-point drop in sending "sexts" to people that respondents only know online (10% in 2011 versus 29% in 2009).
- A 14-point jump in respondents who have thought the information they posted online could get them in trouble with a boss (43% in 2011 versus 29% in 2009).
- A 5-point increase in respondents who have thought the information they posted online could come back to hurt them (up to 55%).

V. Impacts and risk factors

Digital Abuse is not something to be dismissed as "no big deal." Most (53%) of those who have encountered abuse online say the experience was deeply upsetting.

Young people's digital identity is an important part of their reputation and social standing, so having rumors spread about you in the digital space or mean comments posted on your wall can be devastating

- Majorities say they were extremely or very upset when people exhibited traditional mean behaviors using new technology: someone used email, IM or cell phone text messaging to spread rumors about them (56%) or someone wrote something about them on the Internet that was very mean (53%).
- Similarly, 45% were very upset when someone wrote something about them on the Internet that wasn't true, 46% were upset by someone using electronic communications to threaten to harm them physically, and 49% were upset when someone threatened to share private information, true or untrue, if the respondent didn't "do as they demanded."
- Electronic sharing caused deep upset for sizable numbers: 46% were upset when someone shared an email or IM that they did not want shared.

Association seen between digital abuse and mental health. ²

- As the study revealed in 2009, those who are victims of digital abuse are more apt to have received treatment from a mental health professional (14% vs. 5% among others) and are more apt to have considered suicide in the past year (also 14% vs. 5%).
- The difference between young people who have sexted and those who have not is even larger. Nineteen percent who have sexted have also received mental health treatment, compared with 6% among those who have not. And those who have sexted are four times as likely to have considered suicide (20% vs. 5%).

Other risky behaviors are associated with digital abuse. ²

- Behaviors such as smoking, drinking, illegal drugs or sexual activity were more common among those who have suffered from digital abuse. The sharpest differences are smoking (21% of those who have experienced digital abuse have smoked in the past week, compared with 8% among those who have not) and sexual activity (35% among youth who have experience digital abuse vs. 17% among others).
- Whether young people have sexted or not yields similar behavior patterns (Notably, nearly half who have sexted, 46%, had sex in the past week, compared with 19% among non-sexters).

Students engaged in sexting or who are victims of digital dating abuse are more likely to consider dropping out of school. ²

- Students who have engaged in sexting were more likely than others to say they have considered dropping out of school (12% vs. 3%).
- Those who have been the victim of digital dating abuse were more likely to have considered transferring schools (17% vs. 10%) or dropping out (11% vs. 5%).

Whether rich or poor, black or white, digital abuse touches young people from all parts of society.

- Digital abuse is as much an issue in the city as the suburbs, and targets young people of all races, socio-economic backgrounds and regions of the country.
- Academic achievement also does not have an effect – A students are just as likely as C students to be targeted.

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¹ Targets report having had at least one of the following happen to them: 1) Someone wrote something about you on an Internet page that wasn't true 2) Someone shared/sent to another person an email or IM you had sent them that you didn't want shared 3) Someone wrote something about you on an Internet page that was really mean 4) Someone used email, IM or cell phone text messages to spread rumors about you that weren't true 5) Someone used an e-mail message, IM or cell phone text message or post on an Internet page to threaten to harm you physically 6) Someone impersonated you by logging into your email account or Facebook, MySpace, Twitter or other Internet account without your permission 7) Someone spied on you by logging into your email account or Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, or other Internet account without your permission 8) Someone put embarrassing pictures or videos of you on an Internet page without your permission 9) Someone used email, IM, text messaging or a site like Facebook or MySpace to say they were interested in dating you, and later told you they were only pretending 10) Someone found embarrassing information about you on the Internet and used it to tease you in person 11) Someone videotaped or photographed you doing something embarrassing without your knowledge and shared it with other people 12) Someone threatened to send e-mail, text messages or post things on sites like Facebook or MySpace telling other people private things about you, true or untrue, if you didn't do as they demanded 13) Someone found some embarrassing information about you on the Internet and shared it with other people without your permission 14) Someone sent you email, IM or cell phone messages encouraging you to hurt yourself 15) Someone impersonated you by creating a fake Facebook/MySpace profile for you 16) Someone took photos or videos of me in a sexual situation that I was not aware were taken and shared them with others 17) Was pressured by someone to send them naked pictures or videos of myself

² Though an association has been observed, it does not prove causation in these cases