

# Digital Drama



How do kids experience social drama online? In many cases, it is in ways that you might not notice – even if you're looking closely.

Explicit cases of cyberbullying have garnered considerable attention from the adult community over the past several years. To be sure, cyberbullying can be deeply troubling and distressing for everyone involved. But many teens who experience stressful social issues online don't actually consider their experiences "cyberbullying." In this conversation case, we consider a range of different forms of digital drama and cyberbullying. The goal is not necessarily to label particular cases as cyberbullying (or not), but instead to start to think in a more nuanced way about the challenges teens face as their friends and foes from offline life connect with them through new mediums.

## The Case

The following excerpts are from an article written by a high school student named Justin Fowler. The piece is titled "The Powerful Subtweet."

### The Powerful Subtweet

#### Emotions tend to be popular among 13-17 year old high school students.

I'm a senior in high school. I have friends my age, I hang out with them, talk to them, all that stuff. But as I've started to follow them on social media, something has come up, and it isn't too pretty.

I'd like to start off by saying that I am not complaining. I can very easily remedy this situation for myself (the unfollow button is a click away), it isn't a big deal for me. I just fear what my friends and other teens are doing to themselves.

#### The Subtweet

Not everyone knows what a subtweet is, but you've probably seen one. Urban Dictionary puts it nicely: "It's the shortening of 'subliminal tweet' which is directly referring to a particular person without mentioning their name or directly mentioning them". These tweets typically call someone out for an undesirable action, attribute, or decision without directly placing any names. I'm starting to see this all the time from some of my friends. The odd part is that I get these sort of updates (I see this behavior on Facebook, too) from some people who I didn't think would be the type of person to subtweet. I will say that I see more of these emotionally charged updates from the females in my class, but I also see some of them coming from the guys. It's odd seeing one type of behavior being expressed online and quite another being expressed offline.

Subtweets are a bad way to deal with issues or problems we have with other people. First of all, these issues should be kept off of social networks, or even completely private. Instead, these problems are being broadcasted to the world for potential employers, college recruiters, and friends to see. **Strong negative emotions and social networks do not mix well.** Subtweeting never solves problems. Unless, for you,

your problem is having too many friends. On the off chance that the person who is being talked about does see the update in question, what help is it going to do? If the problem is serious enough, one should simply speak with the person in question about that particular problem. I'll admit, it isn't easy. I've never had to confront a friend in such a way, but I can tell you that it would be a little awkward for me. I'm usually awkward, though. If someone has serious problem with someone else, communication is going to be key. With that said, I don't think subtweets are meant to solve problems. I think the writer is simply venting to a social network, which is never a good idea. The writer is simply hurting their reputation with their own friends and anyone who sees the update. **The biggest victim of the subtweet is the author.** I see these updates. Parents see the updates. Emotional pleas do not belong on social networks, so please stop. There are much better ways to vent and confront others.

### **Complaining is the Worst**

Social media provides a unique outlet. I can post anything on my Twitter (or Medium!) account without thinking twice. No teacher is going to reprimand me. I've found that some people can act completely differently on social media than in the real world. Everyone knows that nobody likes someone who complains. A lot of people still complain (I know I do) despite that fact. I find that people sure do like to use social media as a way to complain about just about anything, but the main topics typically have to do with other people. The lack of a boyfriend or girlfriend has been the loudest, lately.

Let me make this clear: **If a behavior is typically regarded as undesirable in the real world, that also applies to social media.** And no, I'm not complaining. That sure would be ironic, though. I've yet to see a complaint fix a single problem. In some cases, complaining sure can hurt yourself. Complaining about not having a boyfriend sure isn't getting you one. Heck, I'd even say it hurts your chances. I understand posting legitimate complains to your social accounts, especially when the story is notable. Just as in real social situations, there is such thing as too much complaining. It drags people down. It gets old. It depreciates your self image.

[...]

### **Social Media Solutions**

At a young age I was told not to interrupt people's conversations. I was taught that hitting my brother was not a good idea. I was shown how to share my toys and make friends. I learned many of these social behaviors from my parents and other adults in my life, and later through experience. But who is going to tell today's teens that what they are doing on social media is hurting themselves? There's not really an authority on social media, which is probably why teens flock to it in the first place.

I've considered the idea of some sort of social media behavior class. I don't know how well that would work out with teens, but it is certainly an option. And maybe I need to confront my friends myself about their habits, but that's going to be very difficult. Perhaps we should just allow for teens to keep making these mistakes. It is very possible that the consequences suffered will be very small or minimal. **So, Medium, I'm asking you. How should we solve the problem of social media misbehavior?**

Full article can be accessed at: <https://medium.com/tech-talk/the-powerful-subtweet-3a3aa44aebda>

## Consider

- Have you ever heard of sub-tweeting? What is your reaction to reading about this type of online sharing?
- What do you think is the appeal of sending a sub-tweet rather than confronting someone directly?
- Do you think sub-tweeting is an issue that merits parents' attention or is it just a case of teens being teens?
- Were you surprised to read that both males and females in Justin's high school engage in this kind of behavior? Why or why not?
- How would you react if another adult sent a sub-tweet about you? Would you confront him or her – or would you just let it go?
- Justin suggests the idea of a social media behavior class. What do you think about this idea? What would it look like in practice (What kinds of topics would you want covered? Where and how often would it meet?). Do you think social media etiquette is something that should be covered at school or at home?

## The Case, Continued: Other forms of cyberbullying and digital drama

Beyond sub-tweeting, there are a number of other ways that teens experience and perpetuate drama online.

**"Vaguebooking"** is the Facebook equivalent of sub-tweeting. This essentially involves writing a status update on Facebook about someone to call them out without actually naming them. For example, a teen may post: "I hate it when people in English class suck up and say they've finished the book." If you were just in English class and raised your hand to share that you finished the reading, you would likely know that this post was about you. However, because the post did not "tag" you, include your name, or explicitly call you out, the poster has plausible deniability if and when they are confronted.

There are other ways to get sneaky about acting out frustration or embarrassing someone. Online, teens can hurt each other by impersonating one another. **Impersonation** happens mainly in two ways: either by hacking onto the individual's profile and producing fake posts "as them" or by creating new fake profiles ("**fake pages**") using their information. Either way, impersonation can be hard to defend against.

These two types of impersonation are illustrated by the following two personal accounts, which were both posted to MTV's A Thin Line platform (a place where teens can share their own stories and get feedback from others): *"I was 14 & there was this boy I really thought liked me I told him a lot of personal stuff about me that no one knows. We were really close to, & then one day he asked me out & I told him no, so he hacked my fb and posted a lot of mean stuff.."* In this story, the teen describes someone hacking into her account and posting as her.

A second version of impersonation involves creating new accounts. For example, *"so someone created a fake fb and twitter account saying they were me now almost everyone hates me for what they wrote."* Whereas the first story involves someone breaking into her account, the second involves someone creating new accounts (on Facebook and Twitter) and using the poster's information – name, and likely his or her picture – to pretend to be the victim. Sometimes fake pages are created "as a joke," other times the intention is less benign. Either way, they can quickly complicate the impersonated teen's reputation and relationships.

Teens also experience digital drama through **direct messages**, sent to them by text, instant messaging services, or privately through social media accounts. These messages don't have an audience, but they allow the person bullying to interrupt and creep into home life with hurtful messages. In this case, they may or may not know who is behind the messages. Even if a text comes from a particular friend's cellphone number, that person might claim the next day that someone else was texting from his or her phone.

**Shaming**, on the other hand, does involve an audience. A Facebook group called "100 reasons why we hate Sara James" isn't sent directly to Sara, nor is it impersonating her – but it capitalizes on the public or semi-public nature of social media sites in order to embarrass and shame Sara. For this type of explicit bullying, teens can officially report pages, groups, or sites to the platform (e.g., Facebook) and request that they are taken down.

Another type of digital drama may be even less clear: when a teen sees something, perhaps a picture online, and feels instantly excluded. For example, if a teen sees a picture of a group of friends together, he or she may not know whether or not they were excluded intentionally. Regardless of the intention, however, the teen may understandably be upset and hurt.

To review, several features influence how teens might experience and respond to drama and cyberbullying. These include (1) whether or not there is an audience or they are the sole recipient of the message, (2) whether or not they know who is behind the message, (3) whether or not the attack is explicit (as in the case of the public shaming Facebook page) or implicit (as in the case of a sub-tweet), and (4) whether or not they interpret the attack as intentional or unintentional and as joking or purposely cruel.

## Consider

- In some forms of cyberbullying or digital drama, the victim may know exactly who posted the offensive content. In others, the victim may have no idea who is behind the cruelty. And still in others, the victim may suspect a particular person is cyberbullying them, but may be unable to "prove it." Consider these three different scenarios for a few minutes: first, knowing who did it and having proof; second, not knowing who is responsible; and third, suspecting someone is responsible but lacking the evidence. How might you respond differently as a parent to each of these situations?
- Which of these three situations concerns you most? Why?
- Now, consider a situation in which it's not even clear if the sender or poster was actually intending to hurt your teen's feelings, as in the example of seeing a picture online and feeling left out. How would you respond similarly or differently to this type of situation? What could you say to try and support your teen?
- What do you want your teens to know about digital drama? How do you share your values about how to treat others in the context of online communication?

Fowler, Justin. 2014. "The Powerful Subtweet." *Medium*, September 2, 2014.  
<https://medium.com/@SomewhatJustin/the-powerful-subtweet-3a3aa44aebda>

Note – Examples and definitions for this case are adapted from:

Weinstein, Emily C., and Robert L. Selman. "Digital stress: Adolescents' personal accounts." *New Media & Society* (2014).

# Digital Drama

When it comes to discussing social media, it's important that adults and kids speak the same language. What grown-ups think of "cyberbullying" might be explained away by kids as "digital drama." But it's not trivial. Digital drama brews in the offline world and simmers online when kids feel emboldened to say or do things that they wouldn't face-to-face. Checking in with kids and observing them as they interact with technology can ensure your conversations are productive and helpful.

- **Ask how they are ... then ask again.**

It may seem simple, but ask your kids how they are doing on a daily basis. Also, watch for telltale signs that they are suffering from digital drama — a change in mood or behavior — as your kids interact with their phone and other devices. They may be absorbing subtle social messages in not-so-healthy ways. Ask lots of questions to determine how your kids view media and interact with technology. What are their favorite tools? Why do they value technology? What are some benefits as well as pitfalls of our 24/7 world?

- **Hit the pause button.**

If your child is on the receiving end of someone else's hurtful online behavior, encourage him to "take it offline." It may be tempting to continue the conversation online; however, face-to-face can be more constructive. The lack of body language, facial expressions, and tone with online communication easily can lead to misunderstandings. Encourage kids to "walk in another's shoes" to make sure that they are considering all perspectives. At the very least, "taking it offline" will give your child time to process how to act — rather than just react.

- **Read between the lines.**

With the popularity of photo sharing, kids often receive evidence that they were not included ... which then leads to feelings of exclusion. Imagine your child seeing a photo of friends at dinner and realizing that she was not invited. While it is true that no one is included in everything, it is a hard rite of passage for kids to learn — and often they just need a sympathetic ear or an alternative social activity. Unfortunately, some kids use online photos to intentionally tag the kids who weren't invited — a not-so-subtle message of exclusion. In these cases, let your children know that they are supported, and talk about strategies to mend a rift or dispel a fight.

## Digital Drama

Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

### Impersonation

Erin was home sick from school watching a movie when she looked down at her phone and saw her screen filled with text messages written in capital letters and punctuated with exclamation points. "I HATE YOU!!! HOW COULD YOU?!" Erin panicked: she had no idea why she was receiving the flood of vicious text messages. She frantically texted two of her friends, but both were in class, and her calls went to voicemail. A few hours later, Erin pieced together what had happened. Someone had hacked onto her best friend's Facebook page, acting as her, and sent perverted messages to her best friend's boyfriend. Her best friend was furious and was convinced that it was Erin, since Erin was the only person who had her password. Erin hadn't been at school to defend herself, so their other friends had already heard about the incident and were mad at Erin, too.

- ❓ What is your gut reaction to this story?
- ❓ Is sharing passwords something that people who you know do? Who would you share your Facebook password with and under what circumstances?
- ❓ What would you do in this situation if you were Erin?
- ❓ Is impersonation something you ever see on social media? Are there ever situations when it is funny or just a joke?