Digital self–harm: Prevalence, motivations and outcomes for teens who cyberbully themselves

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What is this about?

This research report presents findings from an exploratory study about the extent and nature of digital self-harm among New Zealand teens. Digital self-harm is broadly defined here as the anonymous online posting or sharing of mean or negative online content about oneself. The report centres on the prevalence of digital self-harm (or self-cyberbullying) among New Zealand teens (aged 13-17), the motivations, and outcomes related to engaging in this behaviour. The findings described in this report are representative of the teenage population of New Zealand by gender, ethnicity and age.

New Zealand-based research on teens and online risks and harm has focused on the nature of peer victimisation incidents such as the case of cyberbullying and its impact (see Fenaughty & Harré, 2013; Jose, Kljakovic, Scheib, & Notter, 2012; Marsh, McGee, Nada-Raja, & Williams, 2010). Netsafe has also contributed to this emerging body of research by investigating topics such as the impact of unwanted digital communications on teens, including their involvement in risky behaviours

Summary of findings

- Overall, 6% of New Zealand teens have anonymously posted mean or negative content online about themselves in the past year.

- Among those teens who engaged in digital self-harm, most did it more than once (65%).

- Digital self-harm appears to be more prevalent among younger teenagers, those aged 13 and 14 years old.

- Teenagers' top reasons for this behaviour were: making a joke, wanting to show resilience, looking for friends' sympathy, and seeking reassurance of friendship.

- Girls and boys pointed out different reasons for engaging in digital self-harm:
  - Girls reported wanting to show resilience, looking for friends' sympathy, and seeking reassurance of friendship.
  - Meanwhile, for boys it was mainly about making a joke.

- There is an indication that digital self-harm is more prevalent among teens experiencing one or more disabilities.

- About a third of respondents (35%) said they achieved the outcome they looked for after digitally self-harming themselves. This was significantly higher for boys than girls.

- Teens who did not self-harm believe that those who did it mainly look for peer attention and the sympathy from friends.

such as "sexting" (see Pacheco & Melhuish, 2017, 2018c).

As outlined above, investigation about New Zealand children and teens being the target of the online aggression of other(s) is increasing. This is due to concerns that technology-mediated abuse can cause emotional distress and problematic behaviour, and affect academic achievement at school (Harel-Fisch et al., 2011) and is possibly linked to depression (Raskauskas, 2009).

Meanwhile, international media outlets have been reporting individual cases of young people's engagement in technology-mediated self-harassment[1] – also called "self-cyberbullying" (Englander, 2012) or "self-trolling" (Patchin & Hinduja, 2017). However, no New Zealand studies have explored this topic until now[2]. This situation differs from overseas where some seminal work has been conducted on the prevalence of this apparently new behaviour (see Englander, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2017).

The term digital self-harm was first used by boyd (2010) to describe those teens who "are self-harassing by 'anonymously' writing mean questions to themselves and then publicly answering them" (boyd, 2010, para. 3). boyd's observations about this phenomenon originated from anecdotal conversations with staff from *Formspring*, a social media platform that allowed anyone to ask questions to registered users anonymously. After receiving complaints from parents about their children being anonymously bullied online, the platform found that in some cases the abusive content had been sent by those children to themselves. According to boyd, teens' engagement in digital self-harm appeared to be, in part, a "cry for help" as they seemed to want attention, support and validation from their parents. Another apparent reason was teens wanting to "look cool" as being exposed to public criticism can make them look

important. A third explanation was that teens were looking for compliments and support from their friends (boyd, 2010).

The following section presents current research on digital self-harm. These studies have informed our methodological design.

What we know so far

Current quantitative research on the extent of digital self-harm is limited to a handful of overseas studies. One is a 2012 report by Englander who investigated the prevalence of digital self-harm among 617 American first-year college students (18-19 years old). She asked participants whether they had falsely posted a cruel remark about themselves during high school. The study found that 9% of students said they engaged in this behaviour. The prevalence was higher among boys (13%) than girls (8%). According to the study, participants' main motivation for posting mean online content about themselves was to gain the attention of their peers. In addition, those who engaged in this behaviour were more likely to be frequent users of drugs and alcohol (Englander, 2012). Recently, Englander has estimated that the prevalence of digital self-harm or self-cyberbullying, as she also calls it, has not only increased compared to her 2012 study but has consistently remained around 15% in the last three years (Englander, 2017).

Another American study (see Patchin & Hinduja, 2017) found that around 6% of students have anonymously posted online mean content about themselves at any point in time. In contrast with Englander's (2012) research, this study was based on nationally representative data of students aged 12-17 years old. Patchin and Hinduja (2017) also found that digital self-harm was more common among males (7.1%) than females (5.3%) and that non-heterosexual teens were three times more likely to have done it compared to their heterosexual peers. However, the authors did not find a significant link between this

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[1] See for instance https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/05e9991d-4713-4ad4-b9af-eecd47d7dfd7 or https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/04/21/604073315/when-teens-cyberbully-themselves

[2] However, like overseas, media and research interest has concentrated on traditional forms of self-harm which include inflicting self-injury (e.g. cutting or burning). See https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/108558122/why-are-our-girls-hurting-themselves

behaviour and age or race. Finally, the study also found a relationship between digital self-harm and depression, offline self-harm, and bullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2017).

As previously mentioned, there is no New Zealand-based research on digital self-harm. We believe that by exploring the nature and extent of this behaviour, Netsafe is providing the online safety community, schools and parents with insights about a complex and, to some extent, hidden phenomenon involving New Zealand teens. However, we also understand that more interdisciplinary work is needed to understand this phenomenon in order to provide support to those young people who engage in this behaviour, their families and communities.

What we did

This digital self-harm report is part of a larger research project exploring New Zealand children and teens' experiences of online opportunities, risks and challenges[3]. The project also includes the views of parents/caregivers.

An online survey was the research instrument used for this project. Quantitative data were collected between 20 July and 30 September 2018. The survey was administered by Colmar Brunton. This report only presents findings about questions related to digital self-harm asked of teenage participants aged 13-17 years old (n=1110). Our decision to focus on teenagers was supported by prior research that suggests young people in this age range are more likely to engage in self-harming behaviours and be more active online (Lewis, Heath, Michal, & Duggan, 2012). The maximum margin of error of this study for the whole sample is +/- 2.9% at 95% confidence level. The maximum margin of error of this study for the whole sample is +/- 2.9% at 95% confidence level.

The objective of this study was to explore the prevalence of digital self-harm among teens, their self-reported motivations, and the outcomes related to engaging in this behaviour. Our working definition of digital self-harm was[4]:

> The anonymous online posting or sharing of mean or negative online content about oneself.

This definition situates digital self-harm as a behaviour rather than as an illness or disorder. This is because a range of underlying factors might explain this behaviour from family issues to psychological aspects and physical illness (Skegg, 2005).

As mentioned, data collected for this study are broadly representative of New Zealand teenagers in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and region. In our sample, 16% of teenagers indicated having a disability, which included one or more experiences of a physical disability, physical illness, learning difficulty, and/or mental health difficulty.

While this study provides relevant insights about an unexplored topic in New Zealand, it also has limitations. There is a possibility that participants did not answer honestly about their engagement in digital self-harm, because, for example, they feel embarrassed about their actions. This sort of challenge is common in research that relies on self-reported data. In addition, research on offline self-harm suggests that young people tend not to disclose their behaviour (Armiento, Hamza, & Willoughby, 2014). We managed these challenges by guaranteeing participants that their responses were anonymous. Due to the nature of the questions we also provided links to support services in case the young people participating in the survey wished to seek advice or help.

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[3] The study is part of Netsafe's contribution as an active member of the Global Kids Online (GKON) network. See http://globalkidsonline.net/

[4] This definition as well as our research approach were informed by available research and analysis conducted overseas (see boyd, 2010; Englander, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2017).

What we found

This section presents the main findings of the study including insights based on key demographics, when relevant. Also, as the Approved Agency under the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015, Netsafe holds unique professional and operational experience within the online safety domain. For this reason, we asked our Contact Centre team, which directly and daily deals with a number of technology-mediated incidents affecting New Zealanders, to contribute with comments on the findings and to reflect on their implications which are included in this section.
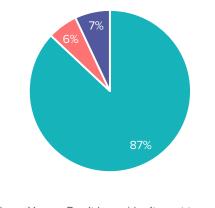
Note that percentages in figures/tables may not total exactly 100% due to rounding or because survey participants were allowed to choose multiple answers to some questions.

FREQUENCY OF DIGITAL SELF-HARM

The digital self-harm questionnaire started by asking the 1110 teenage research participants (aged 13-17) whether they have anonymously posted or shared online mean or harmful content about themselves in the past year.

To measure prevalence our response scale included: "Never", "Once", "A few times (2-4 times)", "Many times (5 or more times)", "I don't know", and "Don't want to answer".

After aggregating participants' responses, our data show that a large majority of participants (87%) said they did not engage in digital self-harming. However, 6% indicated they posted anonymously negative comments about themselves while the remaining 7% said they did not know or did not want to answer the question – see Figure 1.
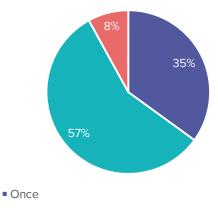

■ No ■ Yes ■ Don't know/don't want to answer

Figure 1. Overall frequency of digital self-harm among teenagers

Base: All teenage participants aged 13-17 (n=1110)

Of the teenagers who engaged in digital self-harm in the last year (n=66) most had done so more than once. Specifically, our results show that 57% anonymously posted mean online content about themselves "A few times (2-4 times)" while 8% did so "Many times (5 or more times)". Teens who engaged in this behaviour only once represented 35% – see Figure 2.
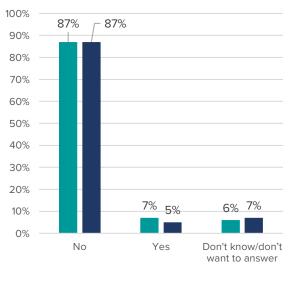

■ Once

■ A few times (2-4 times)

■ Many times (5 or more times)

Figure 2. Frequency of digital self-harm among those who have done this

Base: Teenagers aged 13-17 who have shared mean/harmful content about themselves in the prior year (n=66)

The difference regarding gender was not statistically significant in our results. However, it is noteworthy that the prevalence of digital self-harm was slightly higher among boys (7%) than girls (5%) – see Figure 3 for details.

Figure 3. Frequency of digital self-harm among teenagers by gender

Base: All teenage participants aged 13-17 (n=1110)

Interestingly, our findings also reveal some differences regarding the prevalence of digital self-harm among specific age groups. For example, the percentage of younger teenagers, those aged 13 and 14 years old, who engaged in digital self-harm was 7% and 9%, respectively[5]. From there the trend started to decrease. The prevalence of digital self-harm for 15-year-olds was 6%, and 5% for those aged 16 years old. A lower occurrence of digital self-harm was registered among 17 years old (4%). See Figure 4 for further details. Note that the labels "Don't know" and "Don't want to answer" are not included to facilitate graphical interpretation of the frequency of digital self-harm by age.
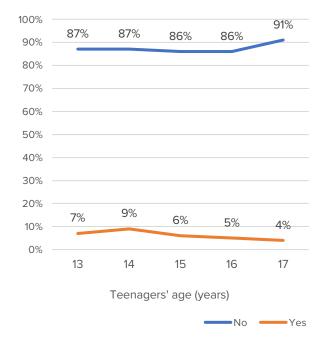

Figure 4. Frequency of digital self-harm among teenagers by age

Base: All teenage participants aged 13-17 (n=1110)

Our data does not show significant differences in regard to ethnicity.

On the other hand, while our data are not representative of the teenage population with a disability, there is an indication from the findings that teens experiencing one or more disability are more likely to engage in digital self-harm, in particular those teens having a physical disability, a behavioural disability and mental health issue[6].

MOTIVATIONS FOR DIGITAL SELF-HARM

We also wanted to explore the motivations of the teens that reported digital self-harming in the past year. This involved asking these participants the question: "What was the reason(s) that motivated you to post or share anonymously mean or harmful content online against yourself?". To answer the question, participants were presented with a list of possible reasons. They were able to choose one or more options.

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[5] Note the error for this age-related data is 4.2% (at 10%/90% agreement).
[6] Note that teenage participants in our survey were not directly asked whether they have a disability. We asked their parents this question.

According to the teens who engaged in digital self-harm the four top reasons explaining their behaviour were: making a joke (33%), wanting to show others "I could take it" (24%), looking for friends' sympathy (23%), and wanting to know if someone was "really my friend" (22%) – further details are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Main motivations for digital self-harm

Motivations	%
It was a joke	**33%**
I wanted to show others I could take it	**24%**
I was looking for sympathy from friends	**23%**
I wanted to see if someone was really my friend	**22%**
I don't know why I did it	18%
I was looking for attention	12%
I was looking for help	8%
Another reason (please explain)	5%
Don't want to answer	2%

Base: Teenagers aged 13-17 who have shared mean/harmful content about themselves in the prior year (n=66)
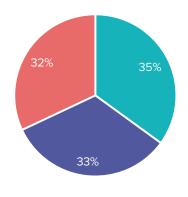
Interesting differences were found regarding teens' gender. For boys (41%), engagement in digital self-harm to make a joke was significantly higher than girls (21%). However, in relation to other top reasons, it was more common among girls to say that they anonymously posted mean content online to show others "I can take it" (29%), look for their friends' sympathy (31%), and seek reassurance of friendship (29%). Boys rated these reasons significantly lower – see Table 2 for further details.

Table 2. Main motivations for digital self-harm by gender

Motivation	Boys	Girls
It was a joke	**41%**	21%
I wanted to show others I could take it	21%	**29%**
I was looking for sympathy from friends	17%	**31%**
I wanted to see if someone was really my friend	17%	**29%**
I don't know why I did it	14%	24%
I was looking for attention	14%	9%
I was looking for help	10%	6%
Another reason (please explain)	5%	5%
Don't want to answer	2%	3%

Base: Teenagers aged 13-17 who have shared mean/harmful content about themselves in the prior year (n=66)

SUCCESS IN ACHIEVING THE DESIRED OUTCOMES THROUGH DIGITAL SELF-HARM

Participants who shared mean/harmful content online about themselves were also asked about the outcomes of their behaviour. Specifically, we asked them whether they achieved what they wanted after posting the mean content online.

■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know/Don't want to answer

Figure 5. Success in achieving the desired outcomes of engaging in digital self-harm

Base: Teenagers aged 13-17 who have shared mean/harmful content about themselves in the prior year (n=50)

As Figure 5 shows, just over a third of these participants (35%) responded "Yes". Meanwhile, 33% indicated they did not achieve the outcome they looked for. Those who said they did not know or did not want to answer the question comprised 32% of the results. Interestingly, boys and girls reported different outcomes regarding the sharing of mean content online about themselves. The percentage of boys (48%) indicating they achieved what they wanted was significantly higher compared to girls (16%). This result might be explained by the motivation behind this behaviour reported by boys, who indicated that, in most cases, the action(s) was a joke. The differences between boys and girls are highlighted in Figure 6.
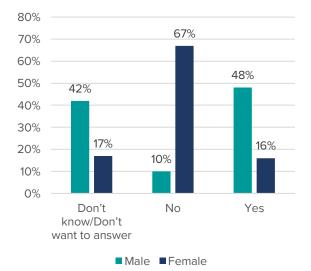

Figure 6. Success in achieving the desired outcomes of engaging in digital self-harm by gender

Base: Teenagers aged 13-17 who have shared mean/harmful content about themselves in the prior year (n=50)

PERCEIVED REASONS FOR OTHERS' ENGAGEMENT IN DIGITAL SELF-HARM

The last question explored teens' perceived reasons for why other people would engage in this behaviour. Only those teenage participants who said they did not post anonymously online content about themselves (n=978) were asked this question: "Why do you think some people would post or share anonymously mean or harmful content online about themselves?". The response scale used to explore the motivations of teens engaging

in digital self-harm – see Table 2 – was adapted.

The insights from this question show a mismatch between perceived and actual reasons behind digital self-harm behaviour among teenage participants. For these respondents the most common reasons were getting peers' attention (42%) and receiving their friends' sympathy (41%). These results contrast with the responses from those who actually posted mean content online about themselves (see Table 3).

Table 3. Perceived motivations for others' engagement in digital self-harm

Perceived motivations	%
To get their peers' attention	**42%**
To get sympathy from friends	**41%**
To see if someone was really their friend	24%
I don't know why they do it	24%
To get help	20%
It was a joke	20%
To show others they could take it	12%
Another reason	3%
Don't want to answer	2%

Base: All teenagers aged 13-17 who have not shared mean/harmful content about themselves (n=978)

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Contact centre reflections on cases and queries

Since November 2016 Netsafe's contact centre team has received two reports of cases known to involve self-cyberbullying, and several in which it may have been involved. We also have received a few queries about the topic from concerned parents. However, this is a much lower reporting rate compared to other online risks young people experience such as abuse or harassment.

In both confirmed cases the teenagers involved clearly experienced a high degree of distress and/or harm. However, it was also apparent that their self-cyberbullying behaviours were just one aspect of a more complex situation involving a range of online and offline factors.

In our experience parents and other caregivers cannot always determine whether this is in fact self-inflicted behaviour. Sometimes, as impartial observers experienced in understanding and addressing online risks and challenges, the contact centre team are better placed to identify where self-cyberbullying may be occurring. However, rather than 'calling out' that behaviour, which the teen and/or those around them may not want to admit to, we instead try to focus on helping that person change how they are interacting online which is more constructive in the long term.

Finally, perhaps because of the lack of cases we have received, this research has raised Netsafe's awareness of this phenomenon, and the need to develop our understanding of what is involved.

Concluding remarks

This report has presented findings from an exploratory study about the prevalence of digital self-harm among New Zealand teens, including the motivations and outcomes related to engaging in this behaviour.

Based on data collected from a nationally representative sample, the study found that 6% of New Zealand teens aged 13-17 years old have anonymously posted mean or negative content online about themselves in the past year[7]. It is noteworthy to mention that digital self-harm or self-cyberbullying was slightly more common among boys compared to girls and that prevalence was particularly higher among 14-year-old teens (9%), and lower among their peers aged 17 years old (4%).

Findings about teens' reasons for engaging in digital self-harm are also revealing. Those who posted mean content online about themselves pointed out that they mainly did it as a joke, wanted to show resilience, looked for friends' sympathy, and/or sought reassurance of friendship among other reasons. However, and more interestingly, there are distinctive differences in girls' and boys' motivations. For girls, engagement in this behaviour seems motivated by the need (and perhaps pressure) for peer recognition and validation but also the consolidation of close social connections. In this respect, and as our data describe, wanting to show others that they can take aggression online or wanting to make sure someone else was indeed their friend were motivations rated higher by girls. In contrast, for boys, making a joke was largely the reason behind digital self-harm. At first glance, boys' behaviour can be seen as a naïve act. However, it is also plausible that seeking to be funny or cool might also be another form of looking for peer attention and validation. In short, teens' motivations for digital self-harm vary but they seem to fall under the scope of looking for support and attention.

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[7] This percentage is similar to an American study which also relied on data from a representative sample (see Patchin & Hinduja, 2017).

Young people's internet safety is a critical issue not only for parents but also broader society. However, while digital tools provide young people with a range of opportunities for learning, socialising and being informed among others (Pacheco & Melhuish, 2018a), there are risks and potential harm due to their use and misuse. As previous Netsafe research shows, the negative impact of harmful digital communications is higher among young people compared to adults (Pacheco & Melhuish, 2018c). Thus, supporting teens to develop healthy online behaviours is also key for their general safety and wellbeing.

In such a context, this study provides insights about a type of behaviour that, until now, had received little attention in New Zealand. The fact that there is a group of teens engaging in digital self-harm or self-cyberbullying for different reasons demands raising awareness about this phenomenon and reflecting on its implications.

As teenagers go through a complex process of personal development and identity formation, understanding their behaviour can help to comprehend teenagers' everyday experiences, needs, and concerns. In this respect, prior Netsafe research shows that parents and friends are young people's first line of support when they face an online risk or challenge (Pacheco & Melhuish, 2018b). Thus, by being aware and informed about this behaviour, we will be able to provide them with the attention they look and ask for through this anonymous behaviour.

However, we also need to be aware that technology allows teens (and adults) to easily construct multiple online personas and identities for different purposes such as self-presentation and self-promotion (Belk, 2013; van Dijck, 2013). As this study shows, this includes self-cyberbullying where teens essentially put on a 'mask' to the outside world enabling them to post anonymous negative content while presenting themselves as the apparent target of others' online aggression. This makes identifying and managing incidents

of digital self-harm among teenagers a challenging task. Also, it is difficult to determine whether these teens experience any harm as a result of their actions. All these issues make digital self-harm more likely to be involuntarily misunderstood and/or reported as a case of cyberbullying or another form of peer victimisation by parents, friends, teachers or support services. Furthermore, we need to consider the collateral effect of digital self-harm such as the distress that parents and friends might experience once they realise that the young person they care for is self-cyberbullying. Another issue is, as Stanford (2017) points out, that there seems to be concerns in society that talking about self-harm in general will encourage this behaviour among young people.

Similarly, it is necessary to understand that while technology-mediated abuse can be the means for self-harm (Hay & Meldrum, 2010), technology can also play a therapeutic role[8] or provide young people with access to peer support networks to mitigate harmful behaviours (Daine et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2012). The latter seems to be, in part, the case in our study as a third of those who engaged in digital self-harm reported they had received the attention and support they were looking for after posting negative content online.

While this study contributes to the body of knowledge, further research is still needed. Our contribution to the literature and practice is in raising awareness of the prevalence, motivations and outcomes of digital self-harm on the basis of key demographics. However, there is still a need for research about risk factors such as family issues, socio-economic disadvantage, social and cultural aspects, and psychological and health issues (e.g. depression, substance abuse, and anxiety disorders) which have only been explored in the context of traditional forms of offline self-harm (see Skegg, 2005). Studying all or part of these aspects is a next research step to better understand the nature and extent of digital self-harm in New Zealand.

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[8] See for instance https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/02/suicide-memes/582832/

What's next?

Throughout 2019 Netsafe will be publishing reports based on nationally representative data of New Zealand children and teens (aged 9-17). These forthcoming reports will provide a range of insights into young people's experiences with digital technologies in the context of topics related to digital self-harm and other challenges but also the opportunities provided by these tools. This work is Netsafe's contribution as an active member of Global Kids Online, an international network of researchers and academics dedicated to the study of digital technologies and young people.

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