

“Nip This Crap in the Bud”: Using Social Media to Understand Bullying in Graduate School

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Abstract. Graduate school experience is regarded as a *period of professional infancy* in which graduate students rely on a successful socialization process to help them develop a professional identity within the profession. Unfortunately, the socialization process has also emerged as a hotbed of academic bullying. In this study, 621 online public social media written posts were analyzed to further understand graduate students’ experiences of academic bullying. Based on a thematic analysis, three themes emerged – “mental gymnastics,” hammering on all sides, and “nip this crap in the bud.” Implications for academic leaders will be discussed.

Keywords: graduate students, bullying, socialization, professional identity

Commitment to any profession is cultivated through a socialization process. In graduate school, interpersonal relationships serve as agents of socialization through which graduate students acquire knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that are vital to fostering a commitment to the profession (Liddell et al., 2014; Weidman & DeAngelo, 2020). Unfortunately, the socialization process has also emerged as a hotbed of hostility and academic bullying. This study aimed to explore academic bullying and its impact on graduate student socialization. The guided questions were as follows:

1. What are some bullying behaviors that graduate students’ experiences in the academy?
2. What are the positions of bullying that graduate students experience in the academy?
3. How do graduate students cope with academic bullying?

The above section introduced the research problem, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. Next, the literature, method, and major themes will be reviewed. Lastly, implications for academic leaders will be discussed.

Literature Review

Graduate Student Socialization

For this empirical study, the literature review is situated around two relevant areas – graduate student socialization and academic bullying. Graduate school requires not only an investment of time and money but also opportunity costs, such as a loss of income to pursue a graduate degree (Cassuto & Weisbuch, 2021). Nevertheless, U.S. graduate school admission is rising (U.S. Council of Graduate Schools, 2023). The organization reports that admission to U.S. graduate schools increased almost 4% between Fall 2021 and 2022. Graduate education prepares adult learners for an array of aspirations, such as learning for *knowledge's sake*, research, teaching, professional service, professional development, entrepreneurship, enhanced reputation/credibility, and career beyond academia (Cassuto & Weisbuch, 2021). Graduate school experience is considered a *period of professional infancy* (Bruss & Kopala, 1993) in

which learners rely on a successful socialization process to help them adopt necessary norms, knowledge, competencies, values, and attitudes to develop a professional identity within the profession (Liddell et al., 2014; Weidman & DeAngelo, 2020). While the socialization process is different among graduate students, the culture of higher education plays an essential role in its process (Weidman & DeAngelo, 2020). Sadly, the convergence of both a toxic culture and socialization process can create a space of hostility and bullying in the academy.

Academic Bullying

Bullying is a skeleton in the closet across the higher education landscape. There is no single definition of bullying; however, there are three consistent characteristics. First, bullying occurs over a *duration of time*, at least six months. Leymann's (1993) clinical research set forth a six-month benchmark that suggests that an isolated incident cannot be described as bullying; however, it *can* escalate and have a long-term traumatic impact. These isolated incidents are often defined as aggression, incivility, degrees of social stress, and/or interpersonal conflict (Twale, 2018). Bullying is a *repetitive practice*, typically weekly, in which an individual encounters negative and unwelcome acts from one or more individuals, which aims to exclude, demean, and disrupt norms and productivity (Keashly & Neuman, 2013). Finally, bullying is a psychological violence that naturally manifests *power differences* between the target and perpetrator (Hollis, 2018). Perpetrators exert power and/or perception of power because of organizational culture, social characteristics, and recognized vulnerabilities (Twale, 2018). Bullying can happen to anyone, yet research reminds us that graduate students are more vulnerable to bullying (e.g., Goodboy et al., 2015; Moss & Mahmoudi, 2021; Yamada et al., 2014). Reasons include the competitive nature of higher education and power imbalance (Yamada et al., 2014). Furthermore, several graduate students may be abused or exploited because they rely on their advisors and supervisors for grades, research scholarships, assistantships, letters of recommendation, references, and career opportunities (Moss & Mahmoudi, 2021). Bullying impacts graduate students by imperiling their professional identity development (Liddell et al., 2014), hindering their ability to achieve academic goals, limiting access and resources (Goodboy et al., 2015), and harming their mental health (Woolston, 2019).

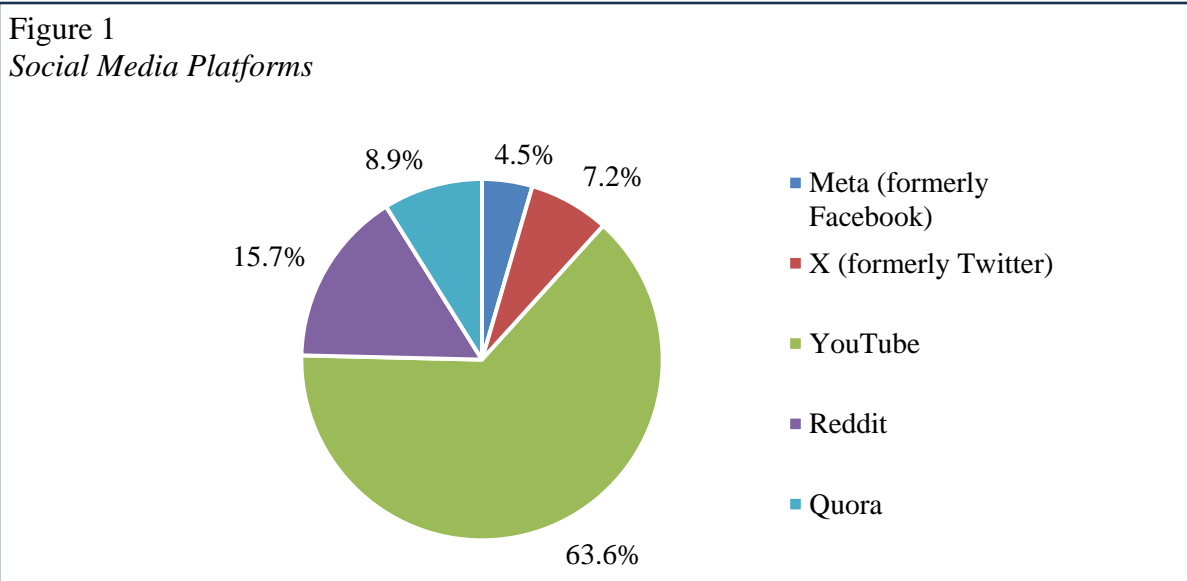
Method

As a non-traditional method, social media can capture a phenomenon in real time and offers scholars a new lens into individuals' worlds, experiences, and insights (McKenna et al., 2017). Individuals' willingness to publicly share experiences creates a wealth of data that can be gathered, analyzed, and interpreted to understand a phenomenon. Qualitatively, this social media project was constructed to understand how graduate students made sense of their academic world and the bullying they experienced.

Data Collection

Without any constraints, the initial round produced 11,124 online public written posts on bullying; therefore, I created a more manageable dataset. First, I purposefully selected public social media platforms so I could access them without paying a fee or becoming a member. This parameter yielded 6,539 online public written posts. To be included, the data had to center on graduate students and be within the higher education setting—the second parameter generated 2,321 online public written posts. Lastly, the parameter focused on a timeframe between May 1, 2013, and April 30, 2022. This period was selected to show that the public conversations around

graduate students' experiences of academic bullying has rapidly risen over the last decade. Based on the last parameter, 621 online public written posts were eligible for this study. Figure 1 shows that nearly 64% of the eligible data were collected for YouTube, followed by Reddit (15.7%), then Quora (8.9%).



Themes and Discussion

Based on a thematic analysis, three major themes emerged – hammering from all sides, *mental gymnastics*, and *nip this crap in the bud*.”The following section aims to 1) present themes to answer the research questions and 2) discuss those themes as they relate to literature.

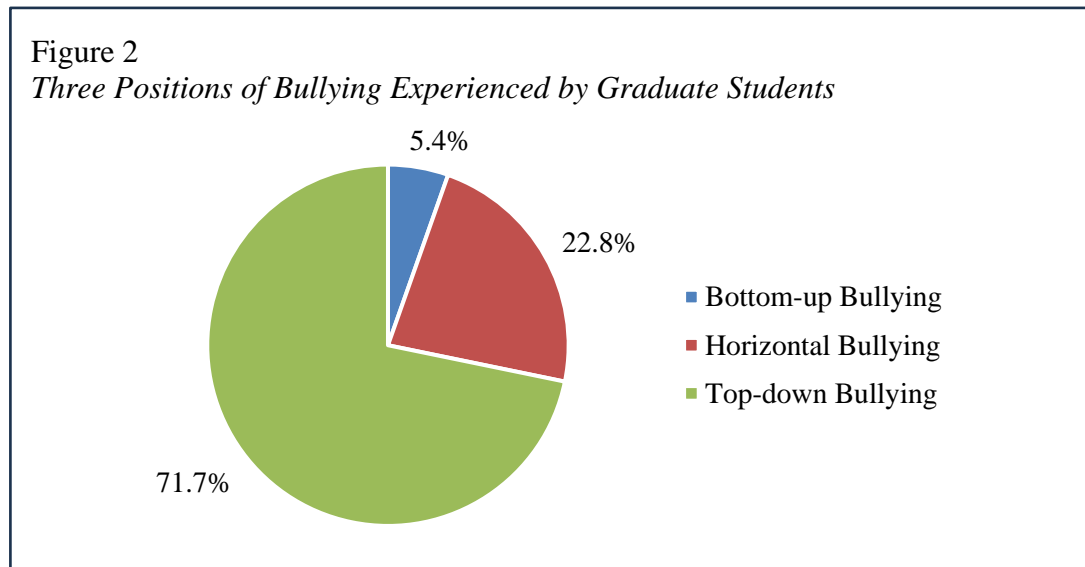
Hammering From All Sides

In response to the question, *what are the positions of bullying that graduate students experience in the academy?* My analysis revealed that targets were hammered by acts of bullying from all sides: top-down, horizontal, and bottom-up. Top-down bullying occurs between a target and a perpetrator who is in a position of authority, such as an advisor/supervisor-to-graduate (Goodboy et al., 2015). Horizontal or peer bullying happens when the target experiences bullying from a peer, like graduate to graduate (Yamada et al., 2014). Lastly, bottom-up bullying arose when the target was bullied by a perpetrator who held a lesser position, such as undergraduate to graduate (Busby et al., 2022). Nearly 66% (403) of the dataset expressed or implied the position of the perpetrator. Figure 2 illustrates that graduate students were at least 13 times more likely to experience top-down bullying (71.7%) than bottom-up bullying (5.4%) and over three times more likely to experience horizontal bullying (22.8%).

“Mental Gymnastics”

In reply to the question, *what are some bullying behaviors that graduate students' experience in the academy?* It was revealed that graduate students were subject to *mental gymnastics* while navigating challenging relationships with their perpetrators. For example, CK suggested that their academic supervisor acted maliciously by withholding information that affected their professional career. The post read:

My supervisor was either too lazy or didn't bother to read my thesis draft for more than a year. I keep chasing her for my final seminar with less than 6 months to go toward the end of my 6-year study journey. She pulled a fast one and stated that my thesis failed her expectation. What? After 6 long years, I submitted it to her constantly for review and this is the stunt she is pulling on me right now. I just had enough of the mental gymnastics with her.



In another example, Coco suggested that they reported their experience with bullying to the institution's Ombudsman, but their experiences were minimized. Coco shared:

My advisor bullied me for years, and telling the ombudsman was a total joke. He just shrugged it off by telling it a "rite of passage" and basically said, "get over it." I'm bullied into silence and scared to speak up.

Coco's experience is all too familiar across the higher education landscape in which several academic community members engage in a rite of passage mentality. This mentality suggests that individuals must endure emotional and psychological abuse as a necessary requirement of academic life (Hollis, 2021). Most importantly, it can normalize the bullying culture and become complicit in the mistreatment of others. Also, it was revealed that graduate students were subjected to other academic bullying behaviors, notably from their advisors/supervisors, such as taking credit for their work, gossiping about them, adding excessive pressure to produce work, emasculating work efforts, and changing the rules of the game without notification.

"Nip This Crap in the Bud"

An individual who experiences bullying "ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts" (Einarsen et al., 2003, p. 15). So, the final question remains: *how do graduate students cope with academic bullying?* Several graduate students said they coped with bullying by recording/journaling their stories, establishing boundaries, adding a co-advisor/supervisor, and joining networks and banding resources. Ladybard suggested that the only way to "nip this crap in the bud" was to seek legal assistance. They stated:

See a lawyer. That'll nip this crap in the bud. Costly but cheaper than years of therapy and unemployment – not to mention loss of self-confidence.

Often, the acts of bullying create such a horrendous environment some targets decide to exit the institution (Hollis, 2018). This was true for Metalic. The post read:

The bullies do great damage to our confidence and career prospects, while enjoying the fruits of success that we are largely excluded from. I'm getting too old for this and I'm tired of being poor for no good reason after all of these years. With a heavy heart, I now leave the professional field that I've always wanted to work in.

While Ladybard and Metalic developed coping mechanisms, academic bullying had already impeded and derailed their self-confidence, career opportunities, and socialization process. Thus, this results in an unhealthy professional identity (Liddell et al., 2014). An unhealthy professional identity includes a lack of commitment to the field or fulfillment in expanding knowledge and competencies, limiting success in professional roles (Goodboy et al., 2015; Liddell et al., 2014).

Recommendations and Conclusion

While many higher education institutions strive to create an academic culture of civility, mutual respect, and caring, little has been done to protect graduate students from the prevalence of academic bullying. The following three recommendations are offered to academic leaders to disrupt bullying. First, establish a task force to clearly define academic bullying, set forth consequences, develop reporting forms, identify mandated reporters, etc. Also, establish a culture change entity that deals with and responds to bullying behaviors. Third, implement mandatory professional development courses to educate the academic community on bullying and its consequences, triggers, and ways to disrupt it.

In conclusion, graduate education aspires to develop adult learners as future leaders, scholars, intellectuals, and professionals within countless disciplines. Successful socialization processes create a space for learners to gain the knowledge, skills, and values fundamental for successfully entering a profession. Regrettably, the socialization processes have been weaponized to perpetuate bullying. When a bullying culture is tolerated and often normalized, everyone loses. Therefore, disturbing bullying is an “all hands-on-desk” approach that requires but is not limited to creating awareness, establishing anti-bullying interventions, creating an inclusive culture, and reporting acts of mistreatment.

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