

Research Note

Adolescents' Evaluation of Cyberbullying Events

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Educators and other professionals working with adolescents have grown increasingly concerned about how technology affects social relationships given the amount of time that is spent engaging in online activities. Cyberbullying has sparked the interest of many researchers due to the tragic events reported in the media, relating to the online victimization that adolescents have experienced.

Cyberbullying has been defined as any intentional and aggressive message, repeated over time against someone who is not able to defend him or herself using electronic communication devices (Menesini & Nocentini, 2009; Smith et al. 2008). This definition is similar to the classical definition of bullying, which includes three elements: intention to harm, repetition over time, and power imbalance (Olweus, 2001). Similar to the research on the disastrous effects of direct and indirect aggression in children and adolescents (Juvonen, Nishina & Graham, 2001), cyberbullying has also demonstrated negative effects on victims. The sequelae of cyberbullying include: distress, negative emotions, and frustration (McQuade, Colt, & Meyer, 2009). Although there is an increased interest in cyberbullying, most of the current research is focused on the frequency of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Li, 2008; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007) and on co-occurrence of bullying in school settings and online (Li, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Ybarra, Mitchel, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007). Regarding the moral evaluation of cyberbullying, it has been found that cyberbullies display low levels of moral values and emotions (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012). Investigating moral aspects of cyberbullying is important so that we can understand why adolescents engage in these kinds of actions. By knowing how adolescents judge events online, educators can design more effective interventions aimed at preventing cyberbullying.

The purpose of the current study was to examine children's moral evaluations of cyberbullying. Additionally, this study was interested in understanding which characteristics of cyberbullying adolescents consider crucial to be classified as a bullying event. Our hypotheses were as follows: (1) adolescents would evaluate situations that surround lying and intention to harm as more negative, and (2) girls will evaluate cyberbullying as more negative than boys.

Methods

Our sample included 115 participants (39.1 % females) between the ages of 12 and 17 ($M = 15.03$, $SD = 1.87$). Participants were asked to evaluate eight vignettes that can occur over the Internet. The vignettes included two characteristics of bullying described by Olweus (2001) (i.e., intention

to harm, power imbalance) as well as situations dealing with telling the truth or lying (i.e., false rumours, falsely altered photos). Each vignette included two characters: a potential victim, and perpetrator of a cyber-aggression. Children were asked to evaluate each vignette and decide whether the action of the perpetrator was good or bad, using a 5 point Likert scale (1 = very bad; 5 = very good). Additionally, participants were asked about the intentions of the characters and the motivations behind their actions. In total, the instrument consisted of eight stories portraying online situations. Finally, participants answered questions regarding the frequency and types of internet use they engage in and their personal experience with cyberbullying.

Results

Results indicated that a high proportion of participants (67%) use the internet at least once per day. Additionally 90% of participants are users of social networking websites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter). It was found that gender is related to whether participants navigate the internet alone, in groups or both $\chi^2(2) = 10.96; p < .05$. Boys navigate more in groups than girls; conversely, girls use the internet either alone or in a group.

Approximately 65% of participants have experienced at least one instance of cyberbullying. The most frequent content of cyber-threats were attacks against physical appearance (23%), followed by attacks against ethnicity (22%). In the sample, 11.3% of adolescents reported having cyber-bullied others.

Adolescents' evaluations of the vignettes differed significantly for all bullying dimensions. They rated stories where there was an intention to harm more negatively, $t(97) = -16.47; p = .00$. Additionally, they rated stories where the perpetrator posted false statements as more negative $t(97) = 8.28; p = .00$. Finally, they rated vignettes where there was a power imbalance as more severe $t(97) = 6.463; p = .00$.

There were also gender differences in children's evaluations of the vignettes. Girls rated events where there was a power imbalance and lying as more serious ($t(99) = 2.56, p = .01$, $t(99) = 1.97, p = .05$, respectively).

The results from this study indicate that a high proportion of participants have been victims of electronic aggression. As in face-to-face interactions, characteristics of cyberbullying threats are related to personal features such as physical appearance and ethnicity. Surprisingly, boys tend to navigate more in groups on the internet as opposed to girls who seem to prefer to engage in online activities alone. Additionally, it was found that girls evaluate online events that involve power imbalance and lying more negatively than boys. This finding is consistent with gender differences in perceptions of bullying events (Siann, Callaghan, Glissov, Lockhart, & Rawson, 1994) and gender differences in perception and report of cyberbullying situations (Li, 2006). The current study found that children and adolescents considered events in which harm was involved as most serious. This finding is consistent with the definition of bullying (Olweus, 2001) and previous research looking at teachers' and students' perceptions about bullying (Bauman & Hurley, 2005; Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001). Likewise, results suggest that those events which involve lying by perpetrators or fabricating rumours are considered more serious than those situations in which characters tell the truth.

Conclusion

Overall, results from this research suggest that a significant proportion of adolescents have experienced or witnessed cyberbullying events. The content of cyberbullying is no different from

that which occurs in face to face interactions. Educators can target these specific features of cyberbullying that are unique to each gender in terms of intervention. Finally, since the characteristics considered most salient to adolescents for assessing cyberbullying are intention to harm and lying, educators can take these factors into account when designing effective strategies to prevent cyberbullying.

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