Cyberbullying: Analysing Victimization and Perpetration Pattern

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Abstract

In this technical era, the double-edged nature of technology, continuously balancing between risks and opportunities, demonstrate itself clearly in an emerging societal problem known as cyberbullying. The introduction of digital media into households means minors are now able to use ICT for the purpose of harming others. Hence the growing interest from academia in the phenomenon of cyberbullying. This reveals higher victimization and perpetration rates. This study provides not only the extent of cyberbullying among the children or students but also better insights into predictors associated with victimization or perpetration in cyberbullying. The past involvement in cyberbullying and engaging in online risk behaviour increase the likelihood of victimization, non-rejection of cyberbullying and online identity experiments augments the likelihood of perpetration. Girls are more likely to become victims of cyberbullying, whereas boys are more inclined to engage in electronic bullying. Moreover, the incidence of cyberbullying increases slightly with age. Finally, teens spending much time on the Internet, reporting higher ICT expertise and owning a computer with privileged online access share an increased likelihood of online bullying behaviour.

Keywords: Adolescents, Cyberbullying, Online-risks, Perpetration, Predictors, Victimization.

Introduction

The increased use of the Internet and contemporary technological devices as primary means of adolescent socialization has become a major issue of concern. Although Internet technology promotes socialization with peers through increasing opportunities for communication, its use has been linked to an array of online risks, including cyberbullying victimization. The introduction of digital media into households means minors are now able to use ICT for the purpose of harming others. Hence the growing interest from academia in the phenomenon of cyberbullying. Several surveys have assessed the prevalence of cyberbullying among youngsters. These studies have yielded varying outcomes. An American study reported 17% of respondents to be victims of cyberbullying and 18% perpetrators. Somewhat different estimates were obtained in a Canadian study, with 25% victims and 17% perpetrators. While researchers' understanding of the extent of the phenomenon is improving, the predictive factors of victimization and perpetration in cyberbullying remain elusive.

Bullying of school aged children is not a new phenomenon and it has been well established as a common and serious problem in society. It is likely that most children and adults have stories to share about either their own experiences of bullying or victimization or witnessing acts of aggression toward others. The age-old problem of being victimized by bullies has often been viewed as a normal part of growing up or even a "rite of passage" for children and adolescents. This outlook began to change with the innovative research on bullying and victimization that was conducted by Olweus in the late 1970s. Olweus' (1978) research shed new light on the detrimental effects on youth development that have been linked to bullying and victimization. His work spawned other research on this phenomenon, which resulted in an increased awareness of bullying and victimization as a widespread societal problem. For a number of years, research on bullying was conducted primarily in Sweden

and other Scandinavian countries. Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, other countries, including Japan, England, The Netherlands, Australia, Canada and the U.S., began studying bullying and victimization. As a result of this increased research along with an increase in attention by the mass media, society began first to recognize and then to attend to the detrimental effects of bullying and victimization on youth. The attention that bullying has received in recent years is well-deserved, as research indicates that among American school children, approximately 30% are involved as either perpetrators (13.0%), victims (10.6%), or bully/victims (6.3%) of some type of bullying.

Cybervictimization

Cyberbullying is intentional aggressive behaviour with the purpose of hurting the victim. It is different from traditional bullying as it occurs through technological means or IT tools. It can be repetitive and ongoing, and may incorporate the component of defencelessness on the part of the victim. Cyberbullying covers various acts, such as sending aggressive and threatening messages, social exclusion, spreading rumours and online identity theft etc. A prominent example is the use of SNS to publish private, inappropriate or humiliating information.

Association with Psychosocial Characteristics

Victims of cyberbullying report an array of psychopathological symptoms, including internalizing problems such as feelings of loneliness, depression and lack of self-esteem. Studies indicated that cyberbullying has a consistent effect on psychosocial wellbeing in all countries studied, although varying in magnitude. Moreover, it has been related to social anxiety and isolation, as well as to externalizing problems, illicit drug use and conduct problems.

Cyber Bullying/Victimization

Little is known about the incidence rates or prevalence of cyber bullying. Concerns about this new form of bullying/victimization have escalated in the past few years as evidenced by a letter to the editor that appeared in the July, 2003 issue of the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry indicating that there were currently "no reports in the literature of the use of the Internet as a vehicle for bullying". This letter further stated that references related to this topic were not found in a Medline search and that only 32 references on "internet bullying" were found when searching the web site http://www.google.com. Although there are still very few empirical studies published about this phenomenon, a current Google search resulted in 230,000 results for the search term cyber bullying and 8.28 million results for the term internet bullying. The overall results indicate that this new form of peer maltreatment is an emerging public health problem that warrants attention and further research. Awareness of Internet bullying and victimization as an emerging problem has increased tremendously within the past several years. While it is a well-known fact that technology has numerous benefits for youth (e.g., providing them with information, social connections, and entertainment), it appears that the benefits can sometimes be overshadowed by the "dark side" of technology. In addition to independent organizations' research reports, television news and newspaper reports describing the details of bullying experiences among youth are on the rise. The most in-depth report on online victimization comes from a US national telephone survey entitled Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth that was funded by the U.S. Congress through a grant to the National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children One of the nation's leading researchers on child victimization, Dr. David Finklehor, led his research team in surveying a national sample of 1,501 young people between the ages of 10 and 17. Among those surveyed in the Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS), 74% had access to the Internet at home and 13 19% identified themselves as regular Internet users, which was defined as using the Internet at least once a month within the past six months either at home, school, or some other location. The focus of the study, was to assess online victimization of youth, including sexual solicitation, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and online harassment. Harassment was defined as "threats or other offensive behaviour (not sexual solicitation), sent

online to the youth or posted online about the youth for others to see". Threatening behaviour included such acts as e-mails threatening to harm the youth or their family or friends, threats to embarrass or humiliate the individual by sending messages about them to other people, or threats to post degrading stories or pictures of them on the Internet. Youth who had parental consent were interviewed over the telephone for 15 to 30 minutes about their online experiences. Results indicated that 6% of youth experienced online harassment, and for about a third of these victims the experiences were described by the individuals as extremely distressing. Five or more symptoms of depression were reported by 18% of the victims at the time of the interview. Results indicated that 28% of victims were able to identify who the perpetrators were. Most of the perpetrators (63%) were other children or adolescents. The primary methods of online harassment were instant messages (33%), chat room exchanges (32%), and e-mails (19%) and most episodes occurred in the individuals' homes. Some of the episodes of online harassment or cyber bullying that were described in the report included the posting of an online "hate page" about a female, the posting of a fourteen-year-old female's note from her boyfriend on a web site and then sending it by e-mail throughout her school, and the posting of a web site that included sexual name-calling of a twelve-year-old female. 14 Data from the YISS was used to further examine online victimization in several follow-up studies. Another study found that among the 19% regular Internet users who were reportedly involved in online aggression within the past year, 12% reported being online aggressors, 4% reported being targets of online aggression, and 3% identified themselves as aggressor/targets. A large percentage (84%) of the aggressors knew their victims while only about 30% of the targets reported knowing the harasser. A follow-up survey (Online Victimization of Youth: Five Years Later) to the first Youth Internet Safety Survey was conducted by the same research team. Again, a large sample (n = 1,500) of children and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 17 were interviewed about

their Internet experiences. Results indicated that the rate of reported Internet harassment increased from 6% in the previous YISS to 9%. The number of youths who reported that they had harassed someone online increased from 14% in the first YISS to 28% in the most recent YISS. Approximately the same percentage (58%) of perpetrators as in the first survey (66%) was other young people. The same percentage (3%) reported that the incidences of online harassment were distressing, and females were more likely (68%) than males (32%) to experience distress, embarrassment, or fear. As in the first survey, many of the harassing incidents had sexual aspects such as spreading sexual rumours or posting explicit photographs of the victims. Females outnumbered males in each of the categories of bullying and victimization.

Predicting Victimization and Perpetration

A literature review of cyberbullying was conducted to determine which variables to include in the analyses. The following variables were retained: gender, age, culture, educational level, past involvement in cyberbullying, attitude towards cyberbullying, online risk behaviour, ICT use and expertise. Subsequently, for each of the selected variables, hypotheses were formulated and tested in the further analyses. Gender Research findings on gender differences in cyberbullying diverge somewhat. Several studies in the US and Sweden found that teenage girls are equally likely as boys to cyberbully. A Canadian study observed no significant gender difference in victimization, although more boys were found to be perpetrators. According to a Turkish study, boys are more involved in cyberbullying, both as perpetrators and as victims. However, other UK and US studies conclude that girls are more likely to be victimized, while boys are more likely to perpetrate. This predominance of girls as cyber victims and boys as cyberbullies is confirmed in Belgian research. Other research in the UK and the US observed no significant age differences. Culture Research thus far is inconclusive on how culture and cultural values interact to affect bullying and victimization. Various comprehensive reviews report large national and

regional variations in bullying frequency. For instance, an intercultural study by Qing Li found that Chinese pupils were more likely to be victims, while Canadian students were about four times more likely to be cyberbullies. In Dutch speaking Belgium, victimized pupils are outnumbered by perpetrating students, whereas in French-speaking Belgium more victims than bullies are reported. It was found that the highest-level pupils (general secondary education) are significantly less involved in cyberbullying than pupils in other types of secondary education (technical, artistic and vocational training). On this basis, it is hypothesized that cyberbullying is more prevalent among pupils in lower educational levels than among those in the highest level. Past involvement in cyberbullying Previous research has found evidence that cyberbullies often become cyber victims themselves. Similarly, cyber victimization increases the likelihood of perpetration.

Attitude towards Cyberbullying

Cyberbullies tend to minimize the gravity of their acts, while victimized students describe those acts as hurtful. The three principal reasons for engaging in cyberbullying according to American youngsters admitting to such behaviour are 'revenge', 'he ⁄ she deserves it' and 'for fun'. The same study stresses that most cyberbullies underestimate the harm they are causing.

Online Risk Behaviour

Previous research has revealed that cyberbullies are more likely than non-bullying students to use instant messaging, blogs and chatrooms. Moreover, they tend to use such media in a risky way, posting personal information online. In comparison with non-victims, targets engage more in e-mailing, Instant Messaging, authoring personal pages, online shopping, blogging, web surfing and gaming. Therefore, teenagers using open and closed chat applications are expected to be more exposed to cyberbullying than teenagers not engaging in chatting. Furthermore, teenagers who chat with strangers are expected to be more likely to be victimized. Teenagers who assume a different identity online ('identity fluidity') are expected to share an increased likelihood of

perpetrating acts of cyberbullying. ICT use and expertise Cyberbullies and cyber victims are generally heavy Internet users. A report says that Over 50% of cyberbullies claim to be expert Internet users, compared to just one-third of bully free pupils. Most cyberbullies and cyber victims attach great importance to the Internet. In an American study, approximately one in three bullying-involved pupils rated the Internet as extremely important in their lives, compared to just one in six among bully free youngsters. In the present study, it is expected that teenagers are more likely to engage in cyberbullying as their Internet use intensifies and their self-reported ICT expertise increases.

Conclusion

The present study has mapped out a number of factors that are associated with cyberbullying victimization in seven European countries, pinpointing important social differences that may affect the prevalence of this phenomenon. These findings have important implications for both clinical and educational settings: the psychosocial impact of cyberbullying needs to be acknowledged and dealt with, as it is related to distress and psychopathological symptoms. The absence of studies that could explain different rates of cybervictimization between countries limits our ability to account for the present findings, but also indicates that this field has substantial potential for exploration. Educational settings would benefit from integrating ICT education into their curricula, especially in countries where use of the Internet has risen abruptly. Future research would gain from studying cyberbullying victimization from a socio-ecological perspective, to better establish the relationship of societal norms and macro changes in Internet use behaviour to the expression of violence amongst adolescents.

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