



A process model of cyberbullying in adolescence



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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying is an emerging form of aggression that utilizes information and communication technologies (ICTs). While cyberbullying incidents attract considerable attention, research on the causes and psychosocial predictors of cyberbullying is still limited. The present study used an integrated theoretical model incorporating empathy, moral disengagement, and social cognitions related to cyberbullying. Structured questionnaires were administered to 355 randomly selected adolescents ($M = 14.7$, $SD = 1.20$). Linear regression analysis showed that social norms, prototype similarity and situational self-efficacy directly predicted cyberbullying expectations. Multiple mediation modelling indicated that normative influences mediated the effects of moral disengagement and affective empathy on cyberbullying expectations. These findings provide valuable information regarding the effect of both distal and proximal risk factors for cyberbullying in adolescence, highlight the relationship between normative processes and moral self-regulation, and set the basis for related educational and preventive interventions.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying¹ is an emerging form of aggression that takes place in cyberspace and is utilized by contemporary information and communication technologies (ICTs). Unlike traditional face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying provides total anonymity to the aggressor, and can reach a wide audience (e.g., a humiliating video against another person posted on social networking or file sharing websites can become visible to millions of web users; Beran & Li, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Most importantly, cyberbullying can have a significant psychological impact on the victim, by leading to withdrawal and social exclusion, lower self-esteem and academic achievement, or even depression and suicide ideation and attempts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; Li, 2007). The rates of cyberbullying range between 12% and 25% in Europe, USA, and Canada, while the overall rates of other forms of online aggression may be even higher (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

Because cyberbullying has only recently attracted research attention (most empirical studies on the subject being published after 2008), there are still important questions to be answered and accordingly inform evidence-based preventive strategies (Li, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). One such question is whether cyberbullying can be explained solely by individual characteristics and traits, or by the interplay between traits and social cognitions that facilitate behaviour initiation. So far, empirical research has feed out some relevant traits for cyberbullying, such as empathy, and has also identified the role of cognitive processes like moral disengagement, and personal beliefs, including attitudes, normative beliefs, and demographic characteristics, such as age and gender (Ang & Goh, 2010; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Walrave & Heirman, 2011). Nevertheless, researchers have yet to examine the interplay among these risk factors, and, accordingly provide an integrated behavioural model for cyberbullying in young people.

1.2. Empathy

Empathy is a cardinal aspect of human behaviour that facilitates and eases social interaction by allowing people to identify and communicate each other's emotions (Cohen & Strayer, 1996; Davis, 1994; Preston & de Waal, 2002). Researchers have argued that empathy should be treated as a relatively stable attribute in a person's life time that may affect different types of social behaviours (Loudin, Loukas, & Robinson, 2003; Strayer, 1987). Studies have shown that empathy comprises two rather distinct processes: a cognitive process reflecting one's ability to identify and cognitively process another person's emotional states, and an affective process

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¹ The term cyberbullying used in this manuscript is based on Olweus (1993) definition of bullying, and is therefore defined as intentional and repeated form of aggression from individuals or groups of people against a victim or a group of victims utilizing contemporary ICTs (see also Dunkels, Franberg, & Hallgren, 2011; Slonje & Smith, 2008).

that facilitates emotional understanding and communication through an emotional and less cognitively-bound channel, also termed “vicarious emotional sharing” (Davis, 1983; Shamay-Tsoory, Aharon-Peretz, & Perry, 2009).

In relation to bullying, several studies have shown that lower levels of empathy are associated with higher frequency of bullying behaviours in children and adolescents (Bartholow, Sestir, & Davis, 2005; Endresen & Olweus, 2002; Joliffe & Farrington, 2006; Lovett & Sheffield, 2007; Olweus, 1993). In a similar fashion, recent studies confirmed that empathy plays an important role in cyberbullying behaviour. Specifically, Ang and Goh (2010) showed that both male and female adolescents with lower empathy levels, reported higher cyberbullying scores, and Schultze-Krumbholz and Scheithauer (2009) found that both cyberbullying perpetrators and victims reported lower empathy levels, as compared to individuals not involved in cyberbullying. In a similar vein, Steffgen, König, Pfetsch, and Melzer (2011) found that cyberbullies had significantly lower scores on empathy than non-cyberbullies. It is noteworthy that the aforementioned studies did not employ the same measures of empathy. Thus, the findings actually show that the relationship between cyberbullying and empathy is independent of the methods used to assess this effect.

1.3. Moral disengagement

In their course of life, individuals engage in behaviours that are in discord with their moral or personal values. In order to cope with and resolve this dissonance they cognitively re-process the moral values attached to the behaviours and accordingly initiate a moral disengagement mechanism (Bandura, 1986, 1991). This strategy allows the cognitive moralization of actions that would otherwise be considered immoral or against personal moral norms (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2006). Thus, moral disengagement can ‘soothe’ the mental discomfort associated with disputes, arguments, and even more extreme forms of aggressive behaviours that may occur in the course of social interaction. Indeed, several studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between higher levels of moral disengagement and higher levels of aggressive behaviours (Bandura, 2002; Bandura et al., 1996). In relation to bullying behaviour, the findings are mixed with some studies reporting that moral justification predicted only traditional bullying but not cyberbullying (Bauman & Pero, 2011; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012), whereas others have reported a significant correlation between moral disengagement and both traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Pornari & Wood, 2010). Given that cyberbullying studies have only recently emerged, further research is needed in order to establish the role of disengagement in the process of cyberbullying.

1.4. Attitudes, norms, regret and intentionality

Cyberbullying is defined as a goal-directed behaviour that is intended to hurt others (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Pyzalski, 2011). Cyberbullying may include a wide range of actions, including posting offensive and insulting messages on the web, harassment and mistreatment with online means (e.g., texting, instant messaging) altering or hacking personal accounts and information in social networking sites, and even posting embarrassing videos online, or creating libellous blogs against someone (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Li, 2007). At the very least, such actions require some sort of strategic delegation of time and effort. Thus, intentionality plays a key role in the occurrence of cyberbullying, and distinguishes cyberbullying from other more general forms of aggression in adolescence (Pyzalski, 2011; Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Goal intentions, and their psychosocial predictors, are important in understanding premeditated behaviours. Research on the

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1991, 2002) has shown that attitudes, social norms, and self-efficacy beliefs explain a great deal of intention-formation across behavioural domains in adolescence (Conner & Armitage, 1998; Hamilton & White, 2008; McMillan & Conner, 2003), including aggressive acts like peer sexual harassment and abuse (Li, Frieze, & Tang, 2010). Nevertheless, the correspondence between intentions and actual behaviour is far from being perfect (e.g., Webb & Sheeran, 2006). Therefore, researchers have suggested that the traditional TPB approaches are enriched with theory-driven variables that can explain specific behaviours in specific situations and social contexts (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Conner & Armitage, 1998).

To this end, several studies have shown that the tripartite of attitudes-social norms-self-efficacy can better predict intentions and behaviour if additional variables are assessed, such as anticipated regret, which reflects the feeling of remorse from following (or abstaining from) a specific course of action (Abraham & Sheeran, 2004; Conner, Sandberg, McMillan, & Higgins, 2006). Anticipated regret predicts intentions, and strengthens the link between intentions and behaviour (Abraham & Sheeran, 2004; Conner & Armitage, 1998; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001).

Also, considering the role of descriptive norms (i.e., judgments of frequency and prevalence of target behaviours) over subjective norms (i.e., perceived social approval of target behaviours), might further enhance the predictive validity of normative influences on intentions (Rivis & Sheeran, 2003a). Normative influences can be understood in terms of stored social representations or prototypes, whereby more favorable evaluations of these prototypes predict stronger intentions to engage in prototype-relevant behaviours (Rivis & Sheeran, 2003b). Prototype evaluation has been studied in the context of TPB (e.g., Norman, Armitage, & Quigley, 2007; Rivis, Sheeran, & Armitage, 2006), and is also a main component of the Prototype/Willingness Model which is used to predict adolescent risk taking (Gerrard, Gibbons, Stock, Vande Lune, & Cleveland, 2005; Gibbons, Gerrard, Blanton, & Russell, 1998).

Finally, researchers have argued that the intention concept itself needs to be changed in order to better understand adolescent risk-taking. In particular, instead of asking questions referring to concrete plans (e.g., I intend to do X), it is advisable to assess intentionality through questions of behavioural expectations (e.g., I expect to do X), because “people often do not expect what they intend to do, and vice versa” (Davis & Warshaw, 1992, p. 392). Unlike personal planning, therefore, when asked about the perceived likelihood of performing a target action, adolescents may consider potential barriers to action, external influences, and personal skills and competences; thus, making behavioural expectations more valid predictors of future behaviour, than behavioural intentions (Davis & Warshaw, 1992; Rhodes & Matheson, 2005; Warshaw & Davis, 1986).

1.5. A process-model approach to cyberbullying

“Psychologists often conduct research to establish whether and to what extent one variable affects another. However, the discovery that two variables are related to each other is only one small part of the aim of psychology. Deeper understanding is gained when we comprehend the *process* that produces the effect.” (Preacher & Hayes, 2008, p. 717)

Preacher and Hayes (2008) assertion is highly relevant to the study of cyberbullying for the following reasons. Firstly, related research has already identified some psychosocial correlates of cyberbullying, but we need to put these associations in context in order to better understand the causal processes and mechanisms

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