Factors associated with distressing electronic harassment and cyberbullying

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ABSTRACT

Electronic harassment and cyberbullying can take various forms and involve a range of perpetrators. This study utilised survey results from 1673 New Zealand students aged 12–19 years to explore electronic harassment on the internet and mobile phones and the distress associated with it. Overall, a third of participants reported electronic harassment in the prior year, with half (53.7%) rating it as distressing. Specific hypotheses and findings were that: mobile phone harassment would be more common and distressing than internet harassment, this was supported with 7% more participants reporting mobile phone harassment and 5.5% more reporting distress from it compared to internet harassment; females would report more harassment than males, this was supported for mobile phone harassment as females' odds of harassment was approximately twice that of males (however the hypothesis did not hold for internet harassment); females would report more distress from harassment, this was supported for both internet and mobile phone harassment, with females' odds of distress approximately twice as high as males; that some forms and perpetrators would be associated with more distress than others, again this was supported with the most distressing form of mobile phone harassment being direct verbal aggression and for harassment on the internet being rumour spreading. The study also found a preponderance of harassment from school peers. As predicted there were multiple interactions between the harassment forms and perpetrators and gender. These results highlight important differences in how harassment is delivered and experienced across the mobile phone and internet modalities. The findings point to the need to explicitly consider mobile phone harassment, as well as better ways to tailor interventions to address distressing harassment. Schools are well placed to address electronic harassment alongside other bullying interventions.

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1. Introduction

Electronic harassment describes interpersonal aggressive situations where someone is targeted online and/or on mobile phones in order to harm him or her. Cyberbullying is a subset of this phenomenon. Cyberbullying usually describes the application of Olweus' original conceptualisations of bullying (Olweus, 1980) to electronic harassment, including situations that are repetitive and involve power imbalances between the target and the producers of the harassment. The nature of electronic harassment means that certain situations may not meet the criteria for cyberbullying, particularly when the anonymity that cyberspace can allow makes it difficult to identify repetition and power imbalances. Noting this difficulty, this article seeks to explore the impact of electronic harassment on young people, whilst bearing in mind that many electronic harassment situations may also meet the criteria of cyberbullying.

In 2006 the devastating impacts of electronic harassment were made apparent to New Zealand (NZ) when high-profile media reporting linked the suicide of a 12 year old girl to "text bullying" (O'Rourke, 2006). Suicide concerns are not the only negative outcome ascribed to electronic harassment. The USA Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS) demonstrated that male participants (aged 9–19 years) who disclosed being targeted by online harassment were more likely to report borderline and clinically significant social problems (Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006) and were approximately three times more likely to report major depressive symptoms (Ybarra, 2004) than participants who did not report online harassment. The Growing up with Media survey in the USA also found that targets of online harassment were significantly more likely to truant and carry weapons to school (Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007).

In addition to the negative associations mentioned above, these researchers also assessed how young people felt about their experiences of electronic harassment. Both iterations of the YISS found that around a third of harassment targets reported significant emotional distress (self-rated as "very or extremely upset or afraid") after harassment on the internet (Ybarra, 2004; Ybarra et al., 2006) . Using the same criteria, the Growing up with Media survey found that around 25% of participants reported that their experience of internet harassment was distressing (Ybarra et al., 2007). Hasebrink, Livingstone, and Haddon's (2008) review of 200 European studies on risk in cyberspace, suggested that young people who reported feeling distressed, uncomfortable or threatened by a challenge, perhaps represented those "for whom risk poses a degree of harm" (p. 24). Building on this contention, the current analysis will explore feelings of distress from electronic harassment as a proxy measure of harm. Distress is operationalized in this research as the degree to which participants reported feeling upset as a result (Ybarra et al., 2006).

Qualitative findings from the broader research project conducted with NZ young people (Fenaughty, 2010) suggest that such distress may be differentially associated with the modality of harassment, with mobile phone harassment perceived as more distressing than internet harassment. For instance, some participants said that the always-available nature of mobile phones, and their single point of contact (cf. the multiple contacts provided by the internet), made them "more personal" than the internet, which may explain this finding. The significance of this finding is underscored by the proliferation of mobile phone activity in NZ, which was reported by 93.1% of participants ($n = 1655$) in the broader project. Other NZ research with 9107 secondary school students found that three times as many of them reported harassment on mobile phones compared to the internet (Clark et al., 2009). Together these research findings emphasise the potential for harassment to be a significant issue for countries where many young people use mobile phones.

The rapidly growing body of research on electronic harassment and cyberbullying, as reviewed by Tokunaga (2010), demonstrates the variety of forms that such harassment may take. Research has explicitly explored the reception of harassing messages (Clark et al., 2009; Cross et al., 2009; Livingstone, 2004; Ybarra, Mitchell, & Korchmaros, 2011) and images (Cross et al., 2009; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2008), theft of the target's electronic identity (Cross et al., 2009), having harassing information, rumours, or images about the target distributed electronically (Ybarra et al., 2006; Ybarra et al., 2007), ostracism (Cross et al., 2009), and threats of harm (Cross et al., 2009; Ybarra et al., 2007). This literature highlights the potential for overt and covert electronic harassment.

Covert forms of harassment (sometimes called relational or indirect harassment) rely on harming the target by diminishing their social standing and peer relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Cross et al., 2009), thus undermining their ability to relate others in positive ways (Archer, 2005). Relating to others positively is a critical requirement for positive adolescent development, as so many developmental tasks at this age rely on relationships (developing identity, developing intimacy, etc.) (Roberts, Henriksen, & Foehr, 2009). Thus, compared with overt harassment (sometimes called direct harassment), even when it involves threats and real physical confrontations, covert harassment is associated with more enduring negative outcomes for young people (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Rigby, 2003).

Electronic media can be a powerful tool for such covert harassment, particularly as digital data can be used to widely distribute sensitive information (e.g., videos) about the target, potentially increasing harm by increasing the audience to their humiliation. This would suggest that forms of harassment that reach more

bystanders may be more distressing than direct messages sent to the target. Smith and colleagues' research (Smith et al., 2008) with 360 Swedes (aged 12–20) demonstrated that forms of harassment that distributed sensitive images of the target online were rated as more likely to be distressing than other forms of online or offline harassment. Additionally, multiple instances of electronic harassment have also been associated with distress (Ybarra, 2004; Ybarra et al., 2006).

Distress has also been hypothesised to be increased when young people experience anonymous harassment, because the anonymity that the internet can enable may inflate feelings of powerlessness in the target (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008) and limit their ability to take action against an unknown harasser. Conversely, distress may also be increased when harassment involves particular categories of harassers well known to the target. For instance, electronic harassment from peers (Beran & Li, 2007; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009) may be associated with increased distress if peers allow the target no respite from face-to-face harassment during school hours or electronically when they get home. Ybarra et al. (2006) also found that electronic harassment inflicted by adults was more likely to be distressing than peer abuse, perhaps reflecting the increased power adults may have compared to young people. Finally, the increased role of electronic communication in adolescents' sexual relationships (Lenhart, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004) indicates that some young people may be harassed by romantic partners. The media makes it clear that such harassment may involve the distribution of sexual images of the target, which may increase chances of distress (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

Although the literature differs widely in how it conceptualises the modalities, forms, and producers of this harassment, analyses of gender differences are almost universal (Tokunaga, 2010). The broader harassment literature demonstrates that young women and girls are more likely to report covert forms harassment than the overt and physically aggressive forms of harassment more common to young men and boys (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997; Leckie, 1997; Rigby, 2007). As covert harassment is amenable to electronic delivery (Cross et al., 2009), particularly the distribution of rumours, some argue that young women may in turn be more likely to harass (and be harassed) electronically than young men (Jackson, Cassidy, & Brown, 2009). Interestingly, Card, Stucky, Sawalani, and Little's (2008) off-line-bullying review found little support for gender differences in rates of covert harassment. Tokunaga's (2010) review was unable to determine whether gender differences were present in electronic harassment prevalence, with some studies producing these and others not.

2. Research questions

Our study aims to explore the prevalence and characteristics of electronic harassment via the internet and mobile phones, as well as exploring how distress is associated with particular characteristics of the harassment situation in each modality. Additionally, given that gender may well play a role in how harassment is conduced and experienced, each of the following questions will include a gender analysis.

2.1. Are there any differences in the prevalence of electronic harassment on mobile phones vs. internet?

Based on the most recent NZ data (Clark et al., 2009) we would expect more reports of mobile phone harassment than internet