Cyberbullying: Eliciting harm without consequence

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ABSTRACT

Students (N = 260; M age = 12.88 years) reported their involvement in cyberbullying as well as their perceptions of the likelihood of cyberbully behavior eliciting harm, being reported, and the initiator receiving consequences. Also, students' scores on the Basic Empathy Scale were examined. The majority (67%) of students reported participation in cyberbullying and girls were more likely than boys to self-report cybervictimization and cyberbully-victimization. Students rated the likelihood of cybervictims being hurt significantly higher than the likelihood of cyberbullies receiving consequences. Furthermore, self-reported cybervictims and cyberbully-victims scored higher than students not involved in cyberbullying on the cognitive empathy scale and cyberbully-victims scored higher than cyberbullies and not-involved students on the affective empathy scale. These results suggest that youth are knowingly engaging in harmful behavior on the internet that they believe is unlikely to receive consequences.

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1. Introduction

The primary purpose of the present study was to examine youth's perceptions of the impact and risks associated with cyberbullying. Youth reported on the likelihood that cyberbully behaviors would elicit harm for the victim as well as the likelihood that the cyberbully would be reported and receive negative consequences. The influence of empathy on cyberbully participation and perceptions was also assessed. Bullying, and more recently cyberbullying, is associated with many maladaptive outcomes, particularly for those who are victimized (e.g., Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Researchers have focused their attention on the consequences experienced by victims of bullying, although very little is known about the consequences experienced by bullies. Insight into the consequences experienced, or perceived to be experienced, by youth who initiate bullying behaviors can contribute to our understanding of the motives and outcomes of bullies. The present study is one of the first assessments of youth's perspectives on the negative consequences cyberbullies face following their behavior. The results provide novel and important insight into youth's thoughts and experiences and have the potential to inform prevention and intervention strategies in combatting the occurrence of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is commonly defined as intentional and harmful behavior inflicted through technological mediums such as cell phones or the internet (e.g., Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Factors such as repetition and power imbalance, which are commonly regarded as criteria in the identification of offline bullying, are debated in cyberbully research as their application is more obscure in an online context (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009). For example, posting an embarrassing photo on an internet site may be defined as a single act of aggression; on the other hand, this photo may be seen by many people over many days, consequently repeatedly inflicting harm on the victim (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Vandebosch & VanCleemput, 2008). In regards to power imbalance, bullying researchers have traditionally referred to advantages that bullies may have over victims that may make victims feel powerless, such as the bully's physical stature or social status. In cyberspace these power differences are far less salient; although, very different advantages such as technological skill or anonymity may make a cyberbully seem more powerful (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Vandebosch & VanCleemput, 2008).

Regardless of the way it is operationally defined, researchers are in agreement that cyberbullying is a prevalent and concerning issue. In line with previous researchers (e.g., Kowalski & Limber, 2007), the present study uses the term cyberbully to represent individuals who have bullied via electronic media on at least one occasion. Likewise cybervictims are individuals who have been the recipient of cyberbullying on at least one occasion. Cyberbully-victims are those who have initiated cyberbullying and have also been the victim of cyberbullying, and not-involved are those who do not report initiation or victimization of cyberbullying. Recent studies estimate that 4.5–35% of adolescents are victimized by cyberbullies (Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, & Kift, 2012; Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Huang & Chou, 2010; Kowalski & Limber,

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2007; Li, 2007; Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchán, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009; Vandebosch & VanCleemput, 2009; Wachs, 2012; Ybarra, West, & Leaf, 2007) and 4.1–44.1% of youth perpetrate cyberbullying (Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010; Dehue et al., 2008; Gradinger et al., 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Huang & Chou, 2010; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Li, 2007; Vandebosch & VanCleemput, 2009; Wachs, 2012; Williams & Guerra, 2007). These rates include several large scale surveys conducted in the United States (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Williams & Guerra, 2007), Spain (Calvete et al., 2010; Ortega et al., 2009), the Netherlands (Dehue et al., 2008) and Australia (Campbell et al., 2012). To date, the results of sex effects on cyberbullying have been mixed. Some researchers report that boys are more likely to be cyberbullies (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Huang & Chou, 2010; Wachs, 2012) and cybervictims (Huang & Chou, 2010; Erdur-Baker, 2010), while others found that girls are more likely to be cyberbullies (Smith et al., 2008) or cybervictims (Ackers, 2012; Brighi, Guarini, Melotti, Galli, & Genta, 2012; Campbell et al., 2012; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Navarro & Jasinski, 2012; Olenik-Shemesh, Heiman, & Eden, 2012; Ortega et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2008). Also, some studies indicate that there are no significant sex differences in the perpetration (Ackers, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008) or victimization (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008) of cyberbullying. Prevalence rates and sex effects were measured in the present study.

1.1. Consequences received by cyberbullies

A fundamental principal of many treatment approaches is the identification of target behaviors that warrant modification or termination. In the case of cyberbullying, cyberbullying behaviors such as sending mean messages would characterize such behavior. In order to successfully change this behavior, though, it is important to understand what is driving the behavior (i.e., the rewarding outcomes of participating in the behavior) as well as what types of things would eliminate participation in the behavior (e.g., threat of punishment). Few studies to date have thoroughly examined the motives or rewards of cyberbullying (i.e., the positive consequences of cyberbullying) and no known studies have measured the negative consequences experienced by cyberbullies. The negative consequences experienced by cyberbullies are the primary focus of the present study. In particular, youth were asked to rate the likelihood that cyberbullies would receive negative consequences for their behavior. Assessing the degree to which cyberbully participants and bystanders believe that cyberbullies will receive negative consequences for their behavior provides fundamental information on the appeal of cyberbullying. For example, should youth believe that cyberbullies will not receive negative consequences for their hurtful behavior, a motivation (e.g., cyberbullying is a way to hurt someone without experiencing consequences) and an avenue of prevention (e.g., implementation of consequences) may be identified.

1.2. Identifying and reporting cyberbullying

Before cyberbullying can be addressed, it must be identified; however, since many cyber activities are unsupervised by adults (King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007), adults often rely on children to report it. Previous research suggests that cyberbullying incidents are underreported (e.g., Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007). Most youth report that when they do seek help for cyberbullying they turn to their friends more frequently than parents, guardians, or other adult figures (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Dehue, Bolman, and Vollink (2008) surveyed 1211 students (*M* age = 12.7 years) and 831 parents regarding their participation in (students) and awareness of (parents) cyberbullying. The researchers reported that 80% of parents indicated that they had implemented rules for their children regarding conduct on the internet; however, over 85% of the students indicated that they cyberbullied from their home. What's more, 4.8% of parents knew that their child had engaged in cyberbullying while 17.3% of students admitted to cyberbullying others. These results suggest that youth are often unsupervised on the internet and that they are not reporting cyberbullying to their parents. Slonje and Smith (2008) reported similar findings. These researchers surveyed 360 Swedish students (*M* age = 15.3 years) about their experiences with, and reactions to, cyberbullying. Of the students who reported cybervictimization, 50% stated that they did not tell anyone about it whereas 35.7% told a friend, 8.9% told a guardian, 5.4% told someone else, and no one reported telling a teacher. Additionally, students believed that cyberbullying conducted via text message, email, or phone call would be much less likely to be noticed by parents than cyberbullying conducted with the use of pictures or video clips. In Canada, Li (2007) reported slightly higher rates of reporting to adults in that 34% of victims told adults about cyberbullying and 35% of bystanders reported it to adults. It is not clear why participants in Li's (2007) study were more likely to report cyberbullying to adults, but it is noteworthy that 67% of the students in this study also believed that adults tried to stop the cyberbullying when they were informed.

A more recent study by Dooley, Gradinger, Strohmeier, Cross, and Spiel (2010) provides some insight into sex differences in reporting as well as the relationship between reporting cyberbullying compared to traditional bullying. The researchers analyzed data collected from the Child Health Promotion Research Centre in Australia and the national intervention evaluation study in Austria. Their total sample size was 7489 students in grades five through nine. The majority (85.1%) of Australian students reported that they had asked for help in bullying situations; although, a significant sex difference for help seeking was reported in both the Australian and Austrian sample: Girls were more likely than boys to seek help. Students who were cybervictimized in Australia reported seeking help from friends most often followed by guardians, teachers, and other family members; whereas, cybervictims from Austria most commonly reported seeking help from guardians followed by friends, teachers, and other family members. The authors reported a significant relationship between help-seeking and traditional victimization, but not cybervictimization.

Thus far, researchers agree that cyberbullying is underreported, but it is unclear as to whether youth are aware of this. Underreporting indicates that many cyberbullying behaviors may go unidentified by adults; thus, making it unlikely that cyberbullies would be held accountable. In the present study youth were asked whether they believed that incidents of cyberbullying would be reported and, if so, to whom. It was hypothesized that if youth do not believe that cyberbullying is likely to be reported to adults, then they may also be under the impression that cyberbullies are unlikely to receive consequences.

1.3. Harm experienced by cybervictims

One reason cyberbullying may not be reported to adults is because it is not taken as seriously as other forms of harassment or abuse; perhaps youth believe it is relatively harmless. Previous research clearly lends support to the notion that victims of cyberbullying have the potential to suffer serious maladaptive outcomes; however, whether or not youth are aware of this is debated.

For example, Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, and Kift (2012) surveyed 3112 students (*M* age = 13.96 years) from Australia. Approximately 59% of self-reported cybervictims and 50% of cyberbully-victims perceived cyberbullying to be harsh or very harsh. Furthermore, female cybervictims rated the harshness of