



Adolescents' moral evaluations and ratings of cyberbullying: The effect of veracity and intentionality behind the event



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ABSTRACT

The constant exposure to electronic media has increased the likelihood of adolescents experiencing hurtful events such as cyberbullying. The current study examined how adolescents' moral evaluations of cyberbullying are affected by different aspects of the event including falsity of posts, power imbalance and intention to harm. Adolescents between 12–13 years of age ($n = 77$) and 15–16 years of age ($n = 77$) read moral vignettes and were asked to evaluate the actions of the protagonist. They were also asked if the behaviour in the vignette was an incident of cyberbullying. Participants also filled out a questionnaire about their own experiences with cyberbullying. It was found that adolescents evaluated as more negative those situations depicting false stories, imbalance of power, and intention to harm; Younger children had difficulties recognizing the intentions behind on-line posts. Adolescents who have cyber-intimidated others were less severe in their evaluations and less likely to rate vignettes as cyberbullying compared to other youth.

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1. Introduction

Communication technologies are the prevalent mode of communication among today's youth. The on-line world is a new setting where youth engage with peers and adults. Engaging on-line can provide students with opportunities to develop academically, socially and their own identity. Pew Internet Research Center (Pew, 2009) reports that 93% of American teens use the internet. For example, social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook have more than 750 million active users (Facebook 2011), and more than 60% of 13–17 year olds have personal SNS profiles. The majority of research examining youth's on-line use has focused on adolescents between 14 and 16 year olds (e.g., Aricak et al., 2008; Li, 2007). However, young people's use of on-line technology is growing and expanding to increasingly include younger children under 14 years of age (Print Measurement Bureau, 2013). As a result, 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 and the risks involved.

Although most youth communicate responsibly, cyberbullying has become a significant concern of parents, educators, and policy

makers. 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, Smith, Osborn, & Samara, 2008). However, Shariff and Sheikh (in progress) explain that cyberbullying can also be unintentional as digital natives, namely, children growing up immersed in digital media (Prensky, 2001) often fail to appreciate the difference between jokes and intentional harm. Cyberbullying is an extension of traditional bullying using digital media (Li, 2007). Both result in exclusion, isolation, lost reputations, loss of self-esteem, physical and emotional harm, and in tragic cases, death from video-taped beatings or suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; McQuade, Colt, & Meyer, 2009). However, unlike traditional bullying which decreases during adolescence, cyberbullying appears to increase over the secondary school years (Smith & Slonje, 2010).

2. Review of literature

2.1. Cyberbullying and moral understanding

Research on cyberbullying has increased in recent years. Researchers have focused their interest especially on the prevalence of cyberbullying between adolescents (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010) and the co-occurrence of these behaviours and bullying in

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face-to-face interactions (Li, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007). On-line bullying includes such behaviours as using the internet or technology to send or post text and images that hurt or embarrass another person including teasing in a mean way and threatening another person (Moessner, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007).

However, there is a dearth of systematic evidence examining moral aspects of cyberbullying events or their ratings of such events as actual incidents of cyberbullying, especially among younger adolescents. It has been argued that it is important to investigate individual differences in bullying behaviour and that young people's moral understanding is an important aspect to consider when explaining the occurrence of bullying behaviours (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; Hymel, Schonert-Reichl, Bonanno, Vaillancourt, & Rocke Henderson, 2010 for review). For instance, research on traditional bullying has found that children who engage in bullying are more likely to use mechanisms of moral disengagement when evaluating bully events than victims or non-aggressive children (Bacchini, Amodeo, Ciardi, Valerio, & Vitelli, 1998; Gini, 2006; Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno, 2005; Menesini et al., 2003; Perren, Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Malti, & Hymel, 2012). Laible, Eye, and Carlo (2008) identified the level of internalization of moral values as being negatively associated with bullying behaviour. Furthermore, youth who are frequently aggressive may not view aggressive behaviour as a moral transgression (Harvey, Fletcher, & French, 2001; Tisak & Jankowski, 1998).

To date, only a few studies have explored moral aspects of cyberbullying (Bauman, 2010; Menesini, Nocentini, & Calussi, 2011; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Steffgen, König, Pfetsch, & Melzer, 2011). Similar to traditional bullying, it has been found that those who engage in cyberbullying are more likely to use moral disengagement mechanisms when evaluating on-line behaviours than non-bullies (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012). Also, it has been found that adolescent cyberbullies display lower levels of empathy than non-cyberbullies (Steffgen et al., 2011). This suggests that both perpetrators of bullying and cyberbullying share some characteristics when evaluating aggressive or potentially aggressive events.

H1. We expected that adolescents that have engaged in cyberbullying would give more positive ratings and less likely to view on-line interactions as cyberbullying.

2.2. Influence of age on moral understanding

In terms of moral understanding, developmental trends indicate that with age children increasingly understand morally relevant situations like transgressions, teasing and peer harassment as negative behaviours, judge them as wrong, and are able to anticipate the emotions of the persons involved (Krettenauer, Malti, & Sokol, 2008; Malti, Gasser, & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010). Thus, research on moral development has found that such behaviours are judged as falling within the moral domain and are considered unfair and hurtful (Horn, 2005). However, moral judgments are also affected by the context of the peer relationship (Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor, 2002).

Research on bullying also suggests that with age youth become more tolerant of bullying and less empathetic towards the victim (Menesini et al., 1997). Research with focus groups of elementary school children between the ages of 9–12 years and high school youth (ages 13–17) confirms these findings (Shariff & Sheikh, 2012). Not only were the elementary school children more sympathetic; they also expressed the desire for a more friendly, supportive and socially responsible online environment. Thus, examining

moral evaluations of young people's attitudes to cyberbullying is important, as acts of aggression are often viewed as moral transgressions. Such an examination will lead to an improved understanding of how adolescents' moral evaluations connect with their on-line intentional victimization behaviour (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004). However, little is known about the role of developmental trends in youth's evaluations of different events or their evaluations of different types of events as being cyberbullying rather than harmless teasing or unintentional acts.

H2. We expected that there would be developmental differences between early adolescents (12–13 years of age) who would be less likely to attend to the intention to harm when evaluating behaviours compared to the older adolescents (15–16 years of age).

2.3. The influence of event characteristics

Several elements have been explored as the most salient when it comes to evaluating the severity of face-to-face traditional bullying events. It has been found that adolescents and adults evaluate as more negative those events of physical rather than relational bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Monks & Smith, 2006). Additionally, aggressions repeated over time were rated as more negative than those that happened once (Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001). In the case of cyberbullying, evidence suggests that adolescents consider as more severe those events involving graphic information (videos or pictures) displaying violent acts or private scenes (Menesini et al., 2011). However, there is no consideration of what other characteristics of bullying apart from repetition over time play a role in cyberbullying. These can include power imbalance and intention (or lack of intention) to harm, which might have significant negative impact during online communications. Also recent qualitative research suggests many youth fail to discriminate real aggressions from harmless fun acts (Shariff & Sheikh, unpublished report). These findings are especially important as cyberbullying is a form relational aggression that is not face-to-face and thus may be harder for youth, especially younger youth, to evaluate.

In face-to-face interactions, one can sometimes determine the intention of another by using contextual behavioural cues (e.g., sticking out one's tongue, laughter, singsong chants, smirking) to infer teasing or deception (e.g., fidgeting, shifting eye gaze). Research suggests that children's and adolescents' abilities to use such behavioural cues and inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal expressive behaviour increases with age (e.g., Rotenberg, Simourd, & Moore, 1989). Thus, the ability to judge the intentions and falsity of statements may be further exacerbated by the nature of on-line communications which do not have the same contextual information that face-to-face interactions have.

It remains unclear how youth view such behaviours as teasing and lying on-line. Research on children's lie-telling shows that from an early age they appreciate the differences between lying for antisocial purposes (i.e., for personal gain, for self-oriented reasons) and prosocial purposes (i.e., to help another) (e.g. Bussey, 1992; Bussey, 1999; Walper & Valtin, 1992). Their teasing can also be with the intention of being harmful or playful (Barnett, Burns, Sanborn, Bartel, & Wilds, 2004; Warm, 1997). While playful teasing can help youth develop social skills and foster positive interpersonal encounters (Eisenberg, 1986), hostile harmful teasing increases as children and adolescents become more aware of the social context and social norms leading to a focus on norm violations within peer groups (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001). With age, children are increasingly able to judge the intentions of others when assessing the acceptability of their statements and actions (Heyman, Sweet, & Lee, 2009; Keltner et al., 2001).

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