



The relationship between online activities, netiquette and cyberbullying



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ABSTRACT

While cyberbullying shares characteristics with face-to-face bullying, there is a uniqueness of online interaction that makes it more pervasive and the impact longer-lasting. Cyberbullying should be understood within a broader context of online activities and how adolescents perceive of what is permissible in the online space. This study investigated the relationship between levels of online activities and cyberbullying behavior, while examining the moderating impact of netiquette. Communication with parents, age, gender and location were also considered. A face-to-face survey was conducted on a nationally representative sample of 12 to 15 year-old adolescents (N = 1200) in South Korea during April and May, 2013. The results show that frequent users of the Internet and SNS are more likely to engage in, become victims of and witness cyberbullying behavior. On the other hand, studying online, netiquette, and communication time with parents were negatively correlated to cyberbullying behavior. Knowing the mechanism of social interaction online and the awareness about the consequences of their behavior are important factors that shape young people's online behavior. This suggests that a more proactive approach to prevent and mitigate negative behavior online is needed. The results add to the knowledge that informs cyberbullying prevention methods.

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1. Introduction

Cyberbullying and traditional bullying share some commonalities in that they start occurring during adolescence, are aggressive behaviors towards someone perceived as weaker, and involves peer group interaction. However, there are some unique characteristics of cyberbullying that are linked to young people's online behavior and their perception about the online world that differentiates it from face-to-face bullying. Adolescents spend an enormous amount of time online, engaging in various activities and interacting with other people, which has become an essential part of their everyday lives. Cyberbullying can be understood within the context of these online activities (Festl & Quandt, 2013; Walrave & Heirman, 2011; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008).

As the time spent online increases, so do the risks and opportunities adolescents encounter (see Livingstone & Helsper, 2010). If we limit adolescents' use of the Internet, then it may reduce the benefits as well as the risks. Instead of trying to stop what young people encounter online, we need a proactive approach that equips them with the ability to filter and alleviate the impact of negative content. Borrowing insights from research on traditional bullying as well as Internet research, this study investigated factors that are related to cyberbullying and suggested ways to reduce cyberbullying behavior. Misbehavior such as bullying can be explained by the concept of moral disengagement, which is a

process of justifying misconduct by selectively applying moral norms. This logic is applicable to online misbehavior but the range of actions that adolescents perceive of as unethical or immoral may differ from the offline world. To account for the differences, we introduce the concept of "netiquette"—a broad term that encompasses the moral and ethical values that people exercise online.

A nationally representative sample of 12 to 15 year-olds in South Korea was surveyed by using a face-to-face method. We explored the relationship between the amount and types of Internet use, moral norms specific to the online environment, and the ways in which these factors influence exposure to, and practice of, cyberbullying. South Korea is one of the countries with the highest broadband and mobile Internet penetration in the world and provides a good case study of how young people behave in the online space in a well-connected environment.

1.1. Characteristics of cyberbullying

As Internet penetration increases, cyberbullying is growing in prevalence. In the U.S., for example, 20–40% of young people have experienced cyberbullying at least once in their lives (Tokunaga, 2010). EU Kids Online reports a smaller figure: Across Europe, 6% of 9- to 16-year-old Internet users have been bullied online in the past year (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, et al., 2011). An equivalent study of Australian youth reports that 16% had experienced cyberbullying (Green, Brady, Ólafsson, et al., 2011). Bullying behavior during adolescence is not a new phenomenon. As a part of growing up, adolescents explore social relationships, during which some may encounter bullying or become bullies, both face-to-face and online. This may, however, lead to detrimental consequences—such as depression, decreased self-worth and suicide—in both bullies and victims (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

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Bullying is an intentional behavior to harm someone through repeated aggression, commonly in a relationship with an imbalance in power (Levy, Cortesi, Gasser, et al., 2012; Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013). When this behavior occurs through electronic means, it is deemed cyberbullying. Smith et al. (2008) defines cyberbullying as “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (p376). Due to the increased methods of electronic communication, the scope of cyberbullying is broader than that of traditional bullying. Perpetrators can remain anonymous, and one-time acts of aggression may elicit unintended ramifications.

Bullying can be distinguished from simple aggression in that it is a behavior that is repeated over time and implies a power imbalance between the bully and victim (Olweus, 1994). It usually occurs within the social context of peer group interactions (Williams & Guerra, 2007). Past research indicates a link between traditional and online bullying (Almeida, Correia, Marinho, et al., 2012; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Livingstone et al., 2011) and a strong correlation between people's propensity to misbehave online and offline (Selwyn, 2008). While most of the behavioral aspects of bullying and cyberbullying are similar, there are some fundamental differences (Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross, 2009; Werner, Bumpus, & Rock, 2010; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007) and the consequences greater online (Låftman et al., 2013). First, the power imbalance can play out quite differently online, regardless of the power relationship in real life (Vandebosch, 2008). This is because in cyberspace, the relationship between the bully and victim is not always asymmetrical. Victims can retaliate and become bullies themselves. Also, bystanders can easily participate in the bullying. Second, the fact that the action can be anonymous heightens the threatening nature of cyberbullying (Dooley et al., 2009; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009). As a result, the roles of victims, bystanders, and perpetrators become interchangeable. A person can be involved in multiple roles that are fluid over time, changing across different situations. While adolescents differentiated among the role of bullies and victims in an offline environment, this was less evident online (Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2012).

1.2. More Internet use leads to more risks

Contrary to the common belief that better information and communication technology (ICT) skills help reduce the risk that people encounter online, some studies show that online risks are positively associated with both Internet skills and use (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010). Finding the link between the ways that young people spend their time online and the types of risks that they are exposed to is essential to keeping a safe and healthy online environment. Equally important is the manner in which they deal with the online risks that they encounter.

Internet users who are more skilled and whose usage is narrowly focused are exposed to greater negative content online (Park, 2009). Similarly, Leung and Lee's (2012) work confirmed that the higher the information literacy and usage level, the more likely that users are to encounter online risks. Social networking site (SNS) users among children (9–16 years) who have more digital competence are exposed to more risk online (Staksrud et al., 2013).

Higher levels of ICT use and skills are correlated with cyberbullying behavior: the results of a longitudinal study indicated that among early teens, ICT skills significantly increased cyberbullying (Kumazaki, Suzuki, Katsura, Sakamoto, & Kashibuchi, 2011); meanwhile, according to Floros, Siomos, Fisoun, Dafouli, and Geroukalis (2013), cyberbullies tended to spend more time online, engaging in activities such as online discussions, downloading content, gambling, and pornography. Risky SNS use, such as disclosing personal information or befriending strangers, led to more exposure to cyberbullying (Kwan & Skoric, 2013). The pervasive use of SNS particularly raises concerns of young people being more exposed to online risks because SNS allows users to disclose their personal information, share location information and link with strangers.

Young people are spending more time online than ever before. A large portion of what they learn about social interaction and relationships is acquired through online networks. Investigating how youths perceive online social norms and how they act may help us reduce or mitigate negative online behaviors, such as cyberbullying.

1.3. Moral disengagement and netiquette

Cyberbullying is related to other forms of violence and aggressive behavior (Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010). Social and emotional learning, in particular empathy, can reduce aggressive behavior (Castillo, Salguero, Fernández-Berrocal, & Balluerka, 2013; Gini, Albiro, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007; Steffgen, König, Pfetsch, & Melzer, 2011). While morality is a different concept from empathy, it shares an important component—awareness of others and the society that surrounds us. Morality refers to an individual's conception of what is right or wrong; it is usually formed through an interactive process of communicating and reproducing social structures (Fuchs, Bichler, & Raffl, 2009). According to Bandura's (1991) Social Cognitive Theory of the Moral Self, moral reasoning leads to moral action and that people go through an affective self-regulatory mechanism that sets their behavioral base. Moral disengagement is related to transgressive behavior, while negatively related to self-regulatory efficacy (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001).

Moral judgments play a significant role in both traditional and online bullying behavior (Gini, 2006; Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Menesini, Nocentini, & Camodeca, 2013).

Bullying behavior is often self-justified with moral reasoning. For example, those with stronger normative beliefs about aggression are more likely to engage in bullying behavior (Burton, Florell, & Wygant, 2013; Williams & Guerra, 2007). When a person's moral principles and his or her conduct are not consistent, moral disengagement serves as a mediator (Bandura, 2002). Moral disengagement is a mental process of legitimizing an action by selectively applying moral censure. When online, perpetrators can exercise moral disengagement easily because consequences are less likely to seem immediate or real. This disengagement is reinforced by the fact that it is easier to mask the origin of one's actions through the Internet's anonymizing features. Indeed, research has demonstrated that those who participated in cyberbullying felt less guilty had less conscience than those who engaged in traditional bullying (Wachs, 2012). Elledge et al. (2013) found that higher scores on pro-victim attitudes, which has a component of netiquette, lower frequencies of cyberbullying.

Selwyn (2008) suggests that young people feel less inhibited to misbehave online due to the disjunction they feel between the offline and online worlds. The disembodied nature of online interactions with other users may lead individuals to lower their inhibitions regarding misbehavior (Denegri-Knott, 2006). Those who engage in cyberbullying may, therefore, do so because they cannot observe the immediate impact of their actions (Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012). Studies have shown that young people rate the likelihood of cyberbullies being hurt significantly higher than the likelihood of cyberbullies receiving consequences. They also tend to engage in harmful behavior on the Internet if they believe that it is unlikely to result in immediate consequences (Pettalia, Levin, & Dickinson, 2013). For example, knowing that the teacher might intervene reduces cyberbullying behavior (Elledge et al., 2013).

Differences in the offline and online experiences result in what young people believe to be the boundaries of social action. These are reflected in what people perceive to be permitted actions. Netiquette is a broad concept that captures the sense of morality and ethical values that are applied to the online world. This concept acknowledges that the cyberspace has its own set of beliefs or standards, separate from the physical world, which are used by Internet users as moral criteria, when they decide “what is, what can be, how to feel, what to do and how to go about doing unethical things on the net” (Freestone & Mitchell, 2004). Kumazaki et al. (2011) found that good netiquette—a higher awareness of desirable manners online—has a moderating effect on cyberbullying.

2. Research questions and methodology

The Internet has increased the opportunities for social interaction and wider online social networks, while simultaneously exposing young people to various web-related risks, such as cyberbullying. Little is known, however, about the way that online activities influence their online misbehavior. Based on the literature review above, we set up three research questions;

- RQ1 Are the amount and type of online activities associated with cyberbullying behavior?
- RQ2 Are moral values and moral disengagement related to cyberbullying behavior?
- RQ3 Does netiquette have a moderating impact on cyberbullying behavior?

We examined all aspects of cyberbullying including perpetration, victimization and witnessing among adolescents.

2.1. Procedure and sample

We conducted a face-to-face survey of 1200 adolescents from April 16, 2013 to May 15, 2013, in South Korea, using a multi-stage stratified random sampling method. In order to prevent residents in large cities from being over-sampled, we used the proportionate square root of the actual population proportion to calculate the quota for each neighborhood selected. Among the 1200 participants, 585 (48.8%) were female and 615 (51.3%) male. Regarding location, 21.8% (n = 261) lived in rural areas, 34.9% (n = 419) in midsized cities, and 43.3% (n = 520) in metropolitan areas (see Table 1). This is representative of the national distribution in the 12- to 15-year-old age group.

Trained interviewers were sent to schools and private tutoring institutions in neighborhoods that were randomly selected based on the clusters. The interviewers recruited students in front of the schools or institutions. After confirming the age and gender based on the allocated quota, the respondent was taken to a nearby café, bench or

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