



Who does that anyway? Predictors and personality correlates of cyberbullying in college



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ABSTRACT

Less is known about cyberbullying behaviors in college populations because studies on this topic traditionally have focused on adolescent populations, have not measured correlates of this behavior within college samples, or have methodological weaknesses limiting their findings. By using a more comprehensive measure of cyberbullying behaviors and examining what is associated with its occurrence, the current study aims to extend the knowledge about cyberbullying behaviors in college. Results showed that approximately 52% of college students report engaging in cyberbullying behaviors and indicated that victims of CBB and individuals high on a subclinical measure of psychopathy were more likely to report having engaged in CBB. It was also found that victims of CBB, men, and individuals high on subclinical psychopathy engaged in a wider range of cyberbullying behaviors. Age was the only factor associated with a decrease in CBB.

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1. Introduction

Instances of cyberbullying have been widely studied in adolescent populations (Li, 2006; Li, Smith, & Cross, 2012; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Adolescence is an important period of study because the most severe consequences of cyberbullying have typically been experienced within this population (e.g., Megan Meiers committing suicide due to experiencing harassment online; ABCNews, 2007). Based on these studies and others, cyberbullying behavior has been theorized to peak in early adolescence and then to decrease significantly after high school (Tokunaga, 2010), with studies that have examined cyberbullying in college finding rates ranging from 8% (Slonje & Smith, 2008) to a high of 9% (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010) compared to 44% reported in adolescent populations (Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010). However, rates of victimization have been higher, ranging between 22% (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010) to over 50% (MTV, 2011). Given the discrepancy between the reported rates of victimization and bullying, and the lack of attention in this population generally, more research is needed to examine the occurrence of cyberbullying behaviors on college campuses.

1.1. Who engages in cyberbullying behavior?

Many studies have attempted to create a profile of individuals who engage in cyberbullying behaviors (Li, 2006; Slonje, Smith, & Frisé, 2013; Tokunaga, 2010; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a, 2004b). However, the majority of these studies focus on adolescent samples, and the applicability of these factors to college-aged samples have not been established. It is important to include factors that are not only established in previous literature but also theoretically relevant to describing individuals who engage in cyberbullying behaviors.

One such theoretical idea was introduced by Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen (1992) when they proposed that aggressive behavior does not decrease over time but instead individuals engage in different types of aggressive behavior dependent upon their abilities. This theory was refined to suggest that individuals engage in a risk/benefit analysis, such that they engage in aggressive behaviors that provide a high level of benefits (e.g., distress of a target) at relatively low risk (e.g., social exclusion or physical harm; Björkqvist, 1994; Björkqvist, Osterman, & Lagerspetz, 1994). For individuals that can accurately read social situations, this means a movement towards more covert/indirect (e.g., manipulating an individual to 'explode' causing them to lose face in front of their peers) or relational (e.g., spreading gossip or otherwise attacking another's social relationships) forms of aggression. The age of an individual, their gender, past experience with

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specific types of aggressive behavior, as well as personality traits may play an important role in determining an individual's abilities, and thus the type of aggressive behavior that they engage in.

1.1.1. Age

Physical forms of bullying typically decrease as a function of age, however, rates of relational bullying tend to remain stable or increase (Björkqvist et al., 1992). Compared to adolescents, adults typically engage in different forms of aggressive behavior (Björkqvist, 1994; Björkqvist et al., 1994). However, studies that have examined cyberbullying behaviors have found mixed evidence supporting this idea. Some studies have found that as age increases cyberbullying behaviors decrease (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Williams & Guerra, 2007) while other studies find stable (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006) or increasing rates (Smith et al., 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009) of cyberbullying behavior across ages 11–18. Beyond this age range there is little information regarding the rates of cyberbullying behaviors so it is important to determine an accurate rate of the behavior in an older population.

1.1.2. Gender

Women and men have been shown to engage in gender specific ways of engaging in relational aggression with men engaging in more overt forms (e.g., calling someone derogatory names to their face) and women engaging in more covert forms (e.g., spreading gossip about someone; Björkqvist et al., 1994). Rates of cyberbullying may mirror rates of relational aggression, with rates remaining relatively stable for women but increasing in men (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Björkqvist et al., 1992; Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006).

Some studies have found that men are more likely to report engaging in cyberbullying behaviors (Calvete et al., 2010; Li, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009) whereas other studies have found that women are more likely to engage in cyberbullying behavior (Dilmac, 2009; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Rivers & Noret, 2010; Sourander et al., 2010). Still other studies fail to find a significant gender difference in who reports engaging in the behavior (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Reese, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008). Drawing from the risk/benefit model proposed by Björkqvist et al. (1994) it is more likely that there is no significant gender difference in who engages in cyberbullying behaviors, however, most of the studies that have examined this have done so in younger (11–18) samples.

1.1.3. Past experience

It is likely that one way that one way individuals gauge the potential risk/benefit ratio of aggressive behavior is by observing others engage in the behavior first (similar to the principles of observational learning proposed by Bandura, 1978). If a behavior is met with high levels of consequences but has no observable benefit, then that behavior is not likely to be repeated. However, if the behavior has little to no observable consequences and is perceived to cause the desired outcome (in this case distress), then the likelihood of that behavior being repeated would increase.

In much the same manner, past experience with cyberbullying behavior (both perpetration and victimization) may be an important factor for predicting those individuals who engage in cyberbullying behaviors. Studies have found that previous experience with cyberbullying behaviors was a significant predictor of current cyberbullying behaviors in adolescents (Kraft & Wang, 2010; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a) as well as future cyberbullying behaviors in college students (Barlett et al., 2013).

1.2. The Dark Triad and cyberbullying behavior

Given cyberbullying's antagonistic nature, three personality characteristics, typically labeled as the Dark Triad, may be associated with its occurrence. The Dark Triad (DT; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) consists of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, all measured at the subclinical level (i.e., these traits are typically measured in non-clinical or non-forensic populations). It is not correct to assume, however, that these traits are any less damaging to others and the individual than the same traits measured within a clinical population (Ray & Ray, 1982). All three personality styles are theorized to be distinct from each other, although all are related to general social malevolence (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Importantly, each trait may influence the perception of risk/benefit associated with engaging in aggressive behaviors.

1.2.1. Machiavellianism

Individuals who endorse more Machiavellian traits are characterized by cold and manipulative behaviors (Christie, Geis, & Berger, 1970) and engage in negative behaviors (physical or other forms of aggression) in order to gain and/or maintain influence over others. These individuals are also more likely to suspect ulterior motives of others (Rauthmann, 2012) and have been characterized as having the 'darkest' of the DT personalities (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). In relation to CBB, social group manipulation can be accomplished through relatively anonymous threats of real world aggression (e.g., threatening to seriously injure the victim in real life) or cyber-aggression (e.g., threatening to post humiliating images to a social network).

Following from theoretical perspectives on Machiavellianism, individuals high on this trait may engage in CBB to solidify, maintain, or establish their place within their social network due to the relatively low risk associated with these types of behaviors and potentially large influence on their social network. As there is no established link between CBB and Machiavellianism, it is important to understand what influence these personality traits have on engagement of CBB in a college sample.

1.2.2. Narcissism

Theoretical views about the traits associated with subclinical narcissism include feelings of grandiosity, a sense of entitlement, dominance and superiority over others (Raskin & Hall, 1979). Specific factors of this trait (i.e., narcissistic exploitativeness and entitlement) have been linked to physical aggression (Reidy, Zeichner, Foster, & Martinez, 2008), to anti-social behaviors on Facebook (Carpenter, 2012) as well as cyberbullying behaviors in adolescents (Ang, Tan, & Mansor, 2011). It is possible that individuals high on narcissism may engage in CBB because they feel socially invulnerable (i.e., they believe that their social status is such that there is a relatively low level of social risk associated with the behavior). Although established in adolescent samples, the relationship between narcissism and aggressive behaviors within a college population has not been established. It is thus important to understand what influence, if any, narcissistic personality traits have on engagement of CBB in a college sample.

1.2.3. Psychopathy

Traits associated with subclinical psychopathy include high impulsivity and engagement in thrill seeking behavior, as well as low levels of empathy and low social anxiety (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Subclinical psychopathy has been linked to traditional bullying behavior in adults (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012), and the low levels of empathy exhibited by these individuals has been linked to both reactive and proactive aggressive behaviors (Fanti, Frick, & Georgiou, 2008), which

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