



Risk factors for involvement in cyber bullying: Victims, bullies and bully–victims[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose of the current study was to examine the frequency of cyber bullying among youth by distinguishing among the three categories of involvement in cyber bullying: victims, bullies, and bully–victims, to compare these to a fourth category of students who are not involved in the three categories of cyber bullying and to explore the factors that contribute to involvement in cyber bullying.

Method: This study utilized a large and diverse sample of 2186 middle and high school students, who completed self report questionnaires during class time. We performed a Multinomial Logistic Regression to examine the relationship between the cyber bullying categories and our independent variables (gender, age, technology use, parental involvement and safety).

Results: Over 30% of the students in this study identified as involved in cyber bullying, as victims or perpetrators, and one in four of the students (25.7%) reported having been involved in cyber bullying as both bully and victim during the previous three months. Students who were involved in cyber bullying were more likely than others to report perpetration of violence toward peers, to use computers for more hours a day, and to give their password to friends. Other risk factors, such as gender, age and safety, were found to be specific only for one category of cyber bullying.

Conclusion: The findings revealed that students are highly involved in cyber bullying. Several unique characteristics emerged regarding the frequency and risk factors of students' involvement in cyber bullying. In traditional bullying the category of bully–victims represents the smallest and most vulnerable group of children, whereas in the current study the bully–victims category emerged as common. In addition, females were more likely than males to be bully–victims, in contrast to research on traditional bullying, in which more males than females are typically involved as bully–victims. In addition, several risk factors were common among the three groups of children, including the amount of hours per day students use the computer, and giving passwords to a friend. These results point to the need for further examination and to focus on the risk factors for students' cyber bullying involvement in each of the three categories.

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1. Introduction

Evidence indicates that 98% of Canadian youth access the Internet and communication technologies on a daily basis (e.g., social networking sites, instant messages) (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009; Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010). Similarly, 93% of American youth between the ages of 12 to 17 go online occasionally, and nearly two thirds (63%) go online daily (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zichuhr, 2010). Three of four American teenagers own a cell phone, with 88% of these individuals text messaging (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010).

The cyber world provides young people with unprecedented opportunities for communication with others both in and out of their

existing face-to-face social networks (Cassidy et al., 2009; Gross, 2004; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Mishna et al., 2010) and with unparalleled opportunities for learning and self-exploration (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008; Brown, Jackson, & Cassidy, 2006). Despite the many benefits of cyber interactions such as social support, identity exploration, and cross-cultural interactions (Jackson et al., 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), there are risks for youth, in particular the risk of bullying involvement (Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002; Gasser, Maclay, & Palfrey, 2010), as youth spend more time online than ever before (Li, 2007; Shariff, 2009).

Students who are cyber bullied report feeling sad, anxious, afraid and unable to concentrate on school (Beran & Li, 2005; Juvonen & Gross, 2008) and may report social difficulties, drug and alcohol use, and eating disorders (Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Fosse & Holen, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007). Victimized youth are more likely to skip school (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007), to have detentions or suspensions, or to take a weapon to school (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007).

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Youth who cyber bully are likely to engage in rule-breaking and to have problems with aggression (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007). A longitudinal study found that involvement in cyber bullying as perpetrator or as victim affects the wellbeing of youth, over and above traditional bullying. More specifically, perpetrating online bullying predicted a significant increase in substance use whereas online victimization predicted decreased quality of life related to sense of wellbeing and belonging (Blais, 2008).

Cyber bullying often occurs in the context of social relationships (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; National Children's Home, 2002) which challenges the commonly held assumption that it is anonymous (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008, 2009; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Shariff, 2009) and is consistent with understanding bullying as a relationship issue (Craig & Pepler, 2007). Previous research found that one quarter of cyber bullying occurs in the presence of witnesses (Mishna et al., 2010) corresponding with evidence that most traditional bullying occurs in the presence of peers who play key roles (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig & Pepler, 2007). The possible number of online observers is unlimited (Kowalski & Limber, 2007).

Long considered a school-based problem (Craig & Pepler, 2008), electronic communication tools have extended bullying into the realm of the cyber world. There is not a universally accepted definition of cyber bullying however, or a strong theoretical model for how this phenomenon compares with traditional bullying. Both are necessary to establish (Vaillancourt et al., 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Still, several definitions and elements have been used in order to study the phenomenon. Similar to traditional bullying, cyber bullying has been defined as "willful and repeated harm inflicted" (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009, p. 5) towards another. What makes cyber bullying distinct is the use of electronic communication technology as the means through which to threaten, harass embarrass, or socially exclude (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Cyber bullying can encompass the use of an electronic medium to sexually harass (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Shariff & Johnny, 2007), including distributing unsolicited text or photos of a sexual nature or requesting sexual acts either online or offline (Schrock & Boyd, 2008). What constitutes repetition in cyber bullying is complex. As it occurs in the public domain (Wendy Craig, personal communication, February 25, 2009), by its very nature cyber bullying involves repetition because material such as email, text, or pictures can be viewed far and wide, can be distributed not only by the perpetrator but by anyone who has access (Campbell, 2005; Slonje & Smith, 2008), and can be difficult or indeed impossible for the victimized child or youth to remove (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). There is increasing research and academic literature devoted to this new form of bullying (Berson et al., 2002; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Wolak et al., 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a, 2004b) including large surveys to determine normative data on the prevalence and character of cyber bullying.

The purpose of the current study was twofold: 1) to study the prevalence of cyber bullying among youth by distinguishing among the three categories of involvement in cyber bullying: victims, bullies, and bully-victims and to compare these to a fourth category of students who are not involved in cyber bullying; and 2) to examine factors that contribute to involvement in each of the cyber bullying categories in comparison to students that are not involved in cyber bullying.

Previous research examining cyber bullying has primarily focused on two categories of involvement, those who are victims and those who are perpetrators. These studies typically found prevalence rates of cyber bullying to range from approximately 10 to 35% (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Agatson, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Li, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Williams & Guerra, 2007), whereas others have found significantly higher rates (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Mishna et al., 2010; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

Much of the previous research has attempted to identify risk factors for cyber bullying focusing on demographic and behavioral factors. Inconsistent findings have been reported regarding gender and age difference (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Smith et al., 2008). Examining the behavioral factors, research has shown that intensive use of Internet emerged as a risk factor for child cyber harassment (Wolak et al., 2007). Furthermore, the location of the computer in the home was found to be a predictive factor of cyber victimization. Children who use the Internet in private places at their home (e.g., bedroom) were at higher risk to be victimized than children who used computers in a public space in their home (Sengupta & Chaudhuri, 2011). Installing a monitoring system in the computer however, was not associated with level of cyber harassment or bullying (Sengupta & Chaudhuri, 2011). In addition, children who are involved in cyber bullying have been found to be less aware of the risks involved in particular uses of the Internet, such as sharing passwords with others or talking with individuals they did not know in their offline lives (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Sengupta & Chaudhuri, 2011).

An additional risk factor that has been discussed in previous research refers to a child or youth's involvement in school violence and bullying. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004a) found that students who were physically victimized at school were more likely to be perpetrators of Internet harassment. These findings were not supported by Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007), who found that traditional victims were not more likely to bully electronically, but rather to also be victimized by electronic means. They found that youth who were considered traditional bullies were more likely to be bullied and to bully through cyber means.

To the best of our knowledge previous studies have distinguished youth who are victims from those who are perpetrators of cyber bullying, but have not focused on youth who are both victims and perpetrators of cyber bullying as a distinct group. Children who both bully and are victimized in traditional bullying are the most severely rejected by peers and have particularly serious adjustment problems (Pellegrini, 1998; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). They have also been found to be easily angered and provoked (Olweus, 1978; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997) and to be more victimized by school staff (Khouri-Kassabri, 2009). Consequently this group might also be targeted more for maltreatment by peers (Dodge, 1991). Thus, relying on these finding the purpose of the current study was to examine risk factors for cyber bullying involvement among students who are in the bully-victim category, in addition to those students who are bullies and who are victims.

2. Method

This study employed an exploratory, cross-sectional survey design to examine cyber bullying among students in grades 6, 7, 10 and 11, attending schools in a large Canadian city. These grades were chosen to reflect middle/junior and high school students, respectively, as the participating school boards believed that sampling from grades five to twelve would prove too unwieldy for participating schools. The study received approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board and the External Research Review Committee of one of the School Boards, which is one of the largest School Boards in Canada. The other School Board, which is significantly smaller, did not require further ethics approval.

2.1. Sample

To ensure an inclusive representation of this student population, the survey used a stratified, clustered random sampling design in which the school was the sampling unit. The sample was stratified by geographical region and Board of Education. The study included two School Boards. Ten middle/junior high schools and eighteen high schools were

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