



# Informing aggression–prevention efforts by comparing perpetrators of brief vs. extended cyber aggression



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## ABSTRACT

As debate continues over the definition of cyberbullying, an important endeavor is identifying aggression–prevention efforts likely to impact reasons for cyberbullying and the broader phenomenon of cyber aggression. No empirical research has examined whether there are useful prevention-related distinctions between perpetrators of cyberbullying vs. perpetrators of brief cyber aggression. Using an online survey, this study explored perpetrators' beliefs, emotions, and behaviors related to 72 brief vs. 128 extended episodes of cyber aggression. The most pronounced difference was that more extended-episode perpetrators reported having been hurt by something that happened in cyberspace. One pronounced similarity was that if there had been a news story about the perpetrator doing it, 79% or more of both groups said they would not have felt proud; whereas 63% or more said they would have felt ashamed. Among both groups, 76% or more did not agree with the assertion that there should be no offline consequence for online behavior. The findings support prevention efforts intended to do the following: encourage respect and empathy, facilitate adaptive communication and decision-making skills, promote socially appropriate ways of coping with anger and conflict, and increase knowledge and application of relevant rules and laws.

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## 1. Introduction

Cyber aggression exists when a sender initiates cyber communication or cyber action intended to harm a target. Cyberbullying is a type of cyber aggression, although there is currently no commonly accepted definition of cyberbullying (Kiriakidis & Kavoura, 2010; Langos, 2012; Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2012b; Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, Shattuck, & Ormrod, 2011). One well-reasoned cyberbullying definition includes requirements that it occurs over a longer period of time than 1 day, is repeated, and comes from a sender who is more powerful than the target (Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros, & Oppenheim, 2012). There is no consensus, though, regarding the second and third criteria. Those features can be seen as inherent in cyberspace because, once posted, aggressive material may be repeatedly viewed or communicated (Law et al., 2012b; Slonje, Smith, & Frisen, 2013) and because anyone in cyberspace has the power to inflict significant harm (Law, Shapka, Domene, & Gagne, 2012a; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012).

Duration of the sending activity is the only definitional feature that cannot be seen as inherent in cyberspace. Extended cyber

aggression lasting more than 1 day typically includes every instance of what studies recognize as cyberbullying, and brief cyber aggression on just 1 day typically is not considered to be cyberbullying (e.g., Kiriakidis & Kavoura, 2010; Langos, 2012; Ybarra et al., 2012).

Whether there are useful distinctions between cyberbullying and other forms of cyber aggression is currently being debated (Slonje et al., 2013). Findings that could inform the debate include comparisons between perpetrators of brief vs. extended cyber aggression, since most definitions of cyberbullying view it as being different from brief cyber aggression. No empirical research has examined whether perpetrators of extended cyber aggression have beliefs, emotions, and behaviors that differ from those of brief cyber aggression perpetrators. The initial purpose of this study was to identify differences and similarities between perpetrators of brief vs. extended cyber aggression with regard to their beliefs, emotions, and behaviors. The ultimate purpose was to relate the findings to aggression–prevention efforts.

### 1.1. Effects of cyber aggression

Increasing what is known about brief and extended cyber aggression is important because such knowledge can be used to reinforce or improve efforts intended to prevent what has become

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a frequently encountered source of hurt and pain. Targets of cyber aggression have experienced anxiety, depression, sadness, frustration, anger, embarrassment, fear, discouragement, feelings of isolation, and suicidal thoughts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Kiriakidis & Kavoura, 2010; Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Tokunaga, 2010), and some have killed themselves (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Murray, Hewitt, Maniss, & Molinatti, 2012; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012).

### 1.2. Prevalence of cyber aggression

The prevalence of cyber aggression depends in large part on the instructions presented to respondents. One well-designed project (Ybarra et al., 2012) investigated 12-month prevalence rates of cyber aggression in 6–17 year-old youth by surveying a total of 2400 individuals in two studies. Instructions in both studies specifically excluded one-time occurrences of cyber aggression. In the first study, instructions that used the word *bully* and provided a definition of bullying obtained prevalence rates of 11% for text messaging and 16% for online communication. When the instructions contained only a definition of bullying and did not use the word *bully*, the prevalence rates were 23% for text messaging and 23% for online communication. Similar patterns were obtained in the second study. Instructions that used the word *bully* and provided a definition of bullying obtained prevalence rates of 14–15% for text messaging and 15–22% for online communication. When the instructions contained only a definition of bullying and did not use the word *bully*, the prevalence rates were 33% for text messaging and 33% for online communication.

Like the Ybarra et al. (2012) study, most research on cyber aggression has focused on children, adolescents, or young adults, but there is evidence that cyber aggression is also an issue in the adult population. For example, Privitera and Campbell (2009) investigated cyber aggression among members of a labor union. The instructions to participants used the word *bullying* and provided a definition of bullying that specifically excluded one-time occurrences. The survey instrument asked about “cyberbullying modalities of e-mail, SMS [Short Message Service], and mobile or landline telephone calls” (p. 396). The study found a 6-month prevalence rate of 11%. That percentage was the same as the 12-month text messaging rate among youth receiving the *bully*-plus-definition instructions in the first study by Ybarra et al. (2012).

### 1.3. The importance of perpetrators' beliefs, emotions, and behaviors in theories, research, and prevention efforts related to cyber aggression

Maladaptive beliefs, emotions, and behaviors set up individuals for future difficulties (Caplan, 2010; Igarashi, Motoyoshi, Takai, & Yoshida, 2008; Mai et al., 2012). Decreasing the risk for future difficulties within a population can be seen to involve three kinds of prevention relevant to maladaptive beliefs, emotions, and behaviors (Caplan & Caplan, 2000). Primary prevention occurs before the maladaptive event ever takes place and seeks to keep it from happening. Secondary prevention begins soon after the initiation of a stressor and seeks to shorten the duration and severity of the episode. Tertiary prevention addresses longstanding maladaptive conditions with the intent of restoring the person to the highest level of functioning realistically possible.

In terms of formulating and implementing prevention efforts, cognitive behavioral approaches are influential. For example, within clinical psychology doctoral programs in North America, cognitive behavioral is the most common therapeutic orientation of faculty members (Heatherington et al., 2013). Shared features of such approaches include identifying beliefs and emotions associated with maladaptive behaviors, formulating ways of adaptively dealing with problematic beliefs and emotions, and supporting

individuals in developing skills necessary to implement those strategies with a sense of self-efficacy (e.g., Kim, Han, Lee, & Renshaw, 2012). As is true of behavior change in general, the prevalence of such approaches can also be seen within efforts intended to understand and prevent aggression (Charlton, 2009; Hobbs & Yan, 2008). For example, one cognitive behavioral model that has been applied to cyberbullying is the General Learning Model (Barlett & Gentile, 2012). It emphasizes that behaving in certain ways is related to attitudes, which link emotions and beliefs to behavioral dispositions. More generally, developing and supporting adaptive attitudes and behaviors is a common focus of efforts intended to prevent cyberbullying (Mason, 2008).

Approaches that identify cyberbullying as their focus may be excluding briefer forms of cyber aggression. Such exclusion in prevention programs could be easily justified if perpetrators of brief vs. extended cyber aggression were found to have meaningfully different beliefs, emotions, and behaviors related to episodes of cyber aggression. In the absence of such differences, rationales for excluding brief cyber aggression would need to recognize the missed opportunity for decreasing this form of aggression.

There is no uniformity in how research has conceptualized cyber aggression with regard to its modes and perpetrators (Fenauhty & Harré, 2013). Though when reporting on an episode of cyber aggression with regard to features relevant to the perpetrator, previous research has examined a number of beliefs, emotions, and behaviors. Some studies have explored perpetrators' beliefs. For example, Hinduja and Patchin (2009) investigated several “reasons for cyberbullying” that included “to get revenge”, “because others were doing it”, and “because they picked on me at school” (p. 72). Hinduja and Patchin (2008) asked whether participants had ever “made other kids scared of them” (p. 139). Mishna et al. (2010) indicated that some perpetrators reported they engaged in the aggression because of the target's “appearance”, “race”, or “sexuality”, and that for some the episode of aggression left them with a sense of being “powerful”, “popular”, or “funny” (p. 365). Regarding episode-related emotions of perpetrators, Mishna et al. (2010) included a perpetrator response option of “feeling guilty” about the aggression (p. 365). Research has also examined behaviors of perpetrators. Categorizations of the mode of cyber aggression have included email, instant messaging, Internet, cell phone text and images, blogging sites, social networking, and other websites (Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Mishna et al., 2010). An example of the mode being linked to motivation is the observation by Ybarra, Mitchell, and Korchmaros (2011) that since text-messaging facilitates instantaneous communication regardless of physical location, it may enable quick exchanges that are often involved in cyber aggression. The number and anonymity of perpetrators have been examined. For example, Hinduja and Patchin (2009) included an option of “many people” in a section on the “victim/offender relationship” (p. 58) and in response to Mishna et al. (2010) asking about the “experience of being cyber bullied” (p. 364) some of the respondents indicated the perpetrators were “unknown” (p. 365). Relevant measurement approaches employed in those studies included questionnaires containing items with predefined answer options.

Many phenomena have been found to affect the risk of engaging in cyber aggression. Some factors have involved perpetrators' social environments, including perceived social support from family members, peers, and school personnel (Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010; Casas, Del Rey, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2013; Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa, 2012); acceptance and rejection by peers (Calvete et al., 2010); exposure to violence at home, at school, in the community, and in media (Calvete et al., 2010; Fanti et al., 2012); and being a target of cyberbullying (Bauman, 2010). Other factors have involved perpetrators' beliefs, such as views on the

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