



Association between online harassment and exposure to harmful online content: A cross-national comparison between the United States and Finland



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ABSTRACT

The key focus in this article study is to examine the association between online harassment and exposure to websites related to self-harm or negative self-image, along with several other independent variables. Our data were collected from two countries, the U.S. and Finland, thus providing a chance for a cross-national comparison regarding these associations. According to the results, significant association between online harassment and most notably exposure to websites relating to eating disorders was found. Furthermore, subjective wellbeing (SWB), age and gender were significantly associated with online harassment. There were only minor differences between U.S. and Finland, indicating certain levels of cultural homogenization regarding the online space.

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1. Introduction

The use of the Internet and other new information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become vastly popular in most Western societies, offering a number of different opportunities and advantages, both in a professional, and in leisure and social context. As a result of this transformation into online societies, the online and offline space have become increasingly interconnected, with many of the traditional offline activities, such as socialization or self-expression having become popular online activities. However, despite all the advantages and opportunities associated with the Internet, it is evident that not all online content and behavior is positive (Caplan, 2003; Gerstenfeld, Grant, & Chiang, 2003; Lewis, Heath, Sornberger, & Arbuthnott, 2012; Livingstone & Helsper, 2010; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2010). In fact, much of it can be described as disturbing, hateful and potentially harmful. Our particular interest in this paper is to focus on the more negative aspects of online behavior.

Various concerns associated with increasing Internet use received much attention in earlier research, focusing particularly on issues including socialization, sociability and the relationship between offline and online social ties (Boase & Wellman, 2006; Kraut et al., 1998; Räsänen & Kouvo, 2007; Söderström, 2009).

However, much of the focus of these earlier studies was on questions concerning whether new technologies had a negative effect on traditional offline activities. Nonetheless, researchers have also established the bi-directional nature of offline and online behavior. For instance, negative offline behavior such as bullying or harassment, overlaps and transfers into similar negative behavior online (e.g. Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Priebe & Svedin, 2012; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). Online grooming (notably among under-age users), harassment and cyberbullying have been examined extensively (e.g. Hazelwood & Koon-Magnin, 2013; Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012; Kierkegaard, 2008; Li, 2006; Priebe & Svedin, 2012), providing descriptive information about the victims, the different socio-psychological implications, and suggestions on legislative issues.

Although cyberbullying has been perhaps the most common of these topics, in this paper we focus on online harassment with the intention of providing new information concerning victims of such behavior. For this, purpose we examine the association between being a victim of online harassment and accessing harmful online content. In this study, harmful online content refers to websites linked to eating disorders, self-harm and ways of committing suicide. This type of content is related in particular to negative self-image. We will also examine the association between online harassment and respondents' perceived subjective wellbeing (SWB), social media activity, offline social activity, as well as age and gender. According to a study by Wolak, Mitchell, and

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Finkelhor (2007), most incidents of online harassment were not actually distressing to the victims. Therefore, we are interested in examining further whether this is in fact the case or whether being a victim of such negative behavior has serious implications.

One of the main strengths of our study is that we have data from two countries, the U.S. and Finland, for the purposes of a cross-national comparison. Although the U.S. and Finland are both advanced Western societies, their societal and cultural characteristics are relatively different. That is, besides the sizeable differences in population, the two states differ with respect to their levels of welfare provision. Finland is a classic Nordic welfare state in which the state provides its citizens with universal and generous coverage of old age pensions, sickness insurance, occupational injury insurance, child allowance and parental leave (e.g. Bent, 2007; Esping-Andersen, 1990).

By comparison, the American welfare model is based on minimal state interference, and the U.S. state becomes involved in welfare provision only when the market, voluntary organizations, and the family fail to provide services (e.g. Gilbert, 2002; Hacker, 2002). Also in terms of population characteristics, relative to Finland, the United States is significantly more heterogeneous and racially diverse, with much larger income differences between population groups compared to Finland (Sennott, 2013). From an ICT perspective, Finns were notably more active adopters of new technologies than were Americans in the early 2000s (Castells & Himanen, 2002) and continue to record slightly higher ICT user statistics (ITU, 2013). In addition, when comparing crime statistics, the United States has higher crime rates for most crimes than Finland (see e.g. Harrendorf & Heiskanen, 2010).

Finally, in terms of online misbehavior, the characteristics of online hate speech have received increasing attention in recent times. Yet as of present, only ethnic agitation is prohibited in Finland and defined in the penal code (Ministry of Justice, Finland, 2012), whereas in the U.S. courts routinely strike down any attempt at banning hate speech by referring to the constitutional protect of free speech (see e.g. Van Blarcum, 2005).

Thus, a cross-national comparison will provide information regarding how the Internet reflects the countries' cultural characteristics, especially with respect to negative online behavior.

2. Online harassment in information societies

Being a victim of harassment has commonly been associated with sexual harassment, with women being by far the most likely victims (Hendrix, Rueb, & Steel, 1998; McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2012; Polce-Lynch, Myers, Kliever, & Kilmartin, 2001). Online harassment, however, could be argued to have taken a more extensive role, particularly since it is commonly examined in the context of adolescents and young adults. Mitchell, Jones, Finkelhorn, and Wolak (2014) define [online] harassment as "Threats or other offensive behavior (not sexual solicitation), sent online to the youth or posted online about the youth for others to see." They also discuss more extreme, yet more rare, forms of online harassment labeled as distressing [online] harassment, where episodes of harassment result in victims being "extremely upset or afraid" (Mitchell et al., 2014). In our study, however, focus will only be on the less intense form of online harassment.

In the research literature, the terms online harassment and cyberbullying tend to overlap as they are, by definition, constructed from much the same elements. According to Lindsay and Krysik (2012) the term cyberbullying is commonly referred to when examining adolescents, whereas harassment is a more common term concerning adults. Wolak et al. (2007) also agree that online harassment and cyberbullying contain many of the same characteristics, but they suggest that in the case of harassment the victim was perhaps less likely to know the perpetrator,

whereas in the case of cyberbullying the aggressor is more likely to be an existing offline connection. O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson (2011) argue that online harassment is a more common form of online misbehavior, whereas cyberbullying is rarer, but also more serious offense which tends to have greater negative consequences.

Past research has attempted to establish whether certain types of behavior will increase one's chances of being a victim of online harassment. Such potential for victimization has commonly been examined from two perspectives; firstly from the perspective of users' risky online behavior such as person's information being freely accessible to other users, or whether they possess socio-demographic characteristics that are associated with risk (Helweg-Larsen, Schütt, & Larsen, 2012). According to a study by Staksrud, Ólafsson, and Livingstone (2013), children who use different social networking sites face more risks than non-users. Furthermore, those more digitally able are more at risk (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010), indicating that digital ability itself does not necessarily protect users from online harassment or risks. Secondly, potential victimization has been gauged by the sort of implications online harassment (or cyberbullying and cyberstalking) has on victims' wellbeing (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006). Ybarra and Mitchell (2004a, 2004b), Ybarra, Alexander, and Mitchell (2005), Ybarra and Mitchell (2007), Ybarra and Mitchell (2007) have studied online harassment and bullying extensively from the perspective of the harassers, establishing that youth who harass others are often victims of harassment themselves. Those harassing others, both online and offline tend to report several psychosocial and behavioral issues, including negative family relationships, substance abuse, and delinquency (Ybarra, Alexander, & Mitchell, 2005; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Ybarra et al., 2007).

As noted earlier, the majority of online harassment research focuses on youth, mostly among high school or college students (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013; Lindsay & Krysik, 2012; Lwin, Li, & Ang, 2012; Sengupta & Chaudhuri, 2011). Our study is comprised of data from participants aged between 15 and 30 years old, thus making it possible to conduct a more comprehensive comparison between different age groups.

3. Exposure to harmful online content in the US and Finland

Implications from exposure to negative or harmful online content have not yet been examined adequately, with Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, and Ólafsson (2011), Ybarra, Mitchell, and Korchmaros (2011) being notable exceptions. Exposure to other types of harmful media content, however, is not a new research area, as violent movies and games have been the subject of extensive research over the past couple of decades. Although not universally accepted, many researchers claim that violent games are associated with negative behaviors among youth (Anderson, 2004; Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Engelhardt, Bartholow, Kerr, & Bushman, 2011; Fischer, Greitemeyer, Kastenmüller, Vogrincic, & Sauer, 2011; Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, & Baumgardner, 2004; Uhlmann & Swanson, 2004). Although it is possible to argue that violent movies and games serve merely as fictitious entertainment, the same argument does not apply in the context of the Internet, where users themselves produce much of the negative content. Nonetheless, the increasing use of the Internet and resulting potential exposure to hateful or disturbing material online has become a growing issue and as such many of the old concerns commonly associated with games and movies have been revisited (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 2013). We will approach these questions from a comparative perspective, acknowledging the institutional differences between the U.S. and Finland.

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