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Peer-group pressure as a moderator of the relationship between attitude toward cyberbullying and cyberbullying behaviors on mobile instant messengers

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the moderation effect of peer-group pressure in the context of groups chat on mobile instant messengers (MIMs). Why do adolescents engage in bullying behaviors on MIMs in opposition to their attitude toward bullying? Generally, previous research has explored modest associations between attitude toward cyberbullying and cyberbullying behaviors. However, this study focuses on the moderating role played by peer-group pressure in MIMs group chats. An interaction effect between peer-group pressure and negative attitude toward MIMs bullying is hypothesized and demonstrated based on data ($N = 424$) gathered via a survey conducted in July 2014 of randomly selected students from South Korean high schools and junior high schools in South Korea. The findings support the effect of interaction between the attitude and peer-group pressure. Adolescents with a highly negative attitude toward MIMs bullying tended not to engage in MIMs bullying regardless of the level of peer-group pressure to which they perceived themselves to be subject. However, adolescents with a neutral or positive attitude toward MIMs bullying who perceived a high level of peer-group pressure engaged more in MIMs bulling behaviors than did those with a similarly neutral or positive attitude who perceived a low level of PGP. It was concluded that self-justification or self-persuasion on the part of adolescents possibly resulting from the logic of cognitive dissonance can bring about engagement in MIMs bullying behaviors even against adolescents' attitudes toward MIMs bullying.

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1. Introduction

There is little argument that bullying results in detrimental effect on one's school life. Although prior research has examined the nature and extent of bullying, more research should attempt to understand the potential effects and underlying motivations of cyberbullying beyond the physical school environment. Cyberbullying (Hinduja and Patchin, 2009, p. 5) is defined as "willful and repeated harm" which includes denigration, outing, cyber-stalking, exclusion, mistreatment, and harassment that are inflicted via computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices. Victims of cyberbullying may experience depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation that lead to self-injury and at worst, a suicide (Wiederhold, 2014). Regretfully, with the influx of new communication technologies, such as mobile instant messengers (MIMs), bullying became

increasingly prevalent and severe. The percentage of children aged 11–16 years old who reported receiving nasty or hurtful messages rose from 8% in 2010 to 12% in 2014 (Livingstone et al., 2014). To name a few reasons, the ease of perpetrating cyberbullying through MIMs and the rapidity of a bullying message to be spread among a large group of people responsible for the prevalence of bullying. Adolescents using MIMs are also free from the surveillance of parents and teachers, which allows them to bully others anywhere regardless of the locations of perpetrators and victims.

The present study focuses on cyberbullying as it occurs through MIMs such as WhatsApp, Facebook messenger, and Kakao Talk, which are proprietary and simplified versions of Internet Relay Chat. MIMs allow two or more people to have a conversation in real time using text-based messages where context awareness (Singh, 2014) is guaranteed and anonymity is absent. Although the communication environment of MIMs is a bit similar to SNSs such as Facebook or Twitter, MIMs provide more useful and convenient functions whereby people can search for friends and create group-chat rooms. However, the same functions afford bullies for multiple avenues to easily locate and connect with their victims anywhere, any time. In this context, both bullies and victims alike may come to feel that they are sharing an actual physical space (i.e., high social presence). It appears that cyberbullying through MIMs is hard to stop or avoid.

It is notable that the non-anonymous quality of MIMs may foster peer group pressure. Given that peer group pressure (PGP) is the influence of a social group on individuals' behavior (Hinduja and Patchin, 2013; Sampson and Laub, 1995; Simons et al., 2005), the social norms of MIMs could lead an adolescent to engage in bullying even that behavior does not accord with his or her own attitude. In addition, the lack of anonymity in cyberbullying (Salmivalli, 2010) calls for consideration in the context of MIMs. That is, the non-anonymous conversation environment of MIMs may raise PGP which in turn, intensifies cyberbullying on MIMs platforms. Given these features of MIMs, it is reasonable to expect cyberbullying behavior in this context to be considerably more powerful than bullying behavior in conventional contexts on the Internet. Previous studies (Heirman and Walrave, 2012; Hinduja and Patchin, 2009, 2012; Wiederhold, 2014) have contributed to the understanding of a nature, risk, and extent of cyberbullying behaviors. However, only a few studies have focused on the fundamental causes underlying cyberbullying, especially in the unique context of MIMs. Furthermore, the findings have been inconsistent. Research findings can vary widely from one study to the next, largely due to different ways of defining cyberbullying behavior, different samples used, and different methods of analysis used (Tokunaga, 2010).

Overall, the present study focused on the relationship between PGP and cyberbullying in the MIMs space (MIMs bullying). The purpose of the study was to determine whether a favorable attitude toward MIMs bullying would increase MIMs bullying behaviors in MIMs group chats, to explore whether perceptions of a high level of PGP would result in more MIMs bullying behaviors than would perceptions of a low level of PGP, and to examine the moderation effect of PGP between attitudes toward MIMs bullying and MIMs bullying behaviors.

It is generally thought that a person's attitude toward something is an important factor in shaping his/her behavior relevant to it. For example, a person's attitude toward his/her colleagues is relevant to how he/she works with them. Similarly, a person's attitude to given media is related to his/her choice of media, and a person's attitude toward cyberbullying predicts his/her behavioral intention in regard to cyberbullying. The theoretical framework that supports this idea is the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). The theory posits that attitude plays a crucial part in a person's affective evaluation of a behavior. Along with this theoretical framework, many recent studies on cyberbullying have focused on identifying proximal determinants of cyberbullying such as attitude, normative beliefs (Pabian and Vandebosch, 2014), risk perception (Salmivalli, 2010), and perceived norms. These studies demonstrated that one's behavior is determined by his/her attitude toward that behavior. Therefore, based on the previous findings, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1. In group chats on MIMs, a favorable attitude toward MIMs bullying is positively associated with MIMs bullying behaviors.

However, there are other external factors that induce MIMs bullying among adolescents. As discussed, PGP can cause a shift in a person's attitude. For example, the pressure exerted by a peer group encourages a person to change his/her attitudes, behaviors, tastes, morals, and even overall outlook on life, for the sake of conformity with one's peer group (Brown et al., 1986), such as a political party, union, church, or school. Research has also verified that peer group pressure plays an important role in both setting bullying in motion and sustaining it (Craig, 1998). The tendency of PGP to produce social conformity (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Sharp and Smith, 2002; Whitney and Smith, 1993) is considered to have a substantial impact on the likelihood of a person's participating in a range of behaviors, including bullying. Social conformity (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004) herein refers to a change in behavior in order to match the behavior of others. According to previous research (O'Connell et al., 1999), bullying often takes place in the presence of others within social groups. In addition, it is thought that this is the case because people fear that not participating may cause themselves a negative consequence, for example, becoming a victim of the bullying. In this context, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. In group chats on MIMs, PGP focused on MIMs bullying is positively associated with MIMs bullying behaviors.

A person's behavior is not always consistent with his/her own attitude toward that behavior, however. In this context, adolescents may engage in cyberbullying although they are not in favor of it (Hinduja and Patchin, 2009). For example, when adolescents participating in a MIMs group chat perceive themselves as subject to only a low level of peer pressure, they commonly behave in accord with their own attitudes toward bullying. However, if they feel a high level of peer group pressure to bully others, discrepancy between their attitude and behavior may result. In other words, adolescents who feel a high level of social pressure in favor of bullying may behave in support of bullying in the context of MIMs chats even though they are against bullying. That is, PGP in MIMs chat rooms may influence the relationship between attitudes toward bullying and behaviors associated with bullying. Related research (e.g., Bastiaensens et al., 2014; Salmivalli, 2010) shows that although