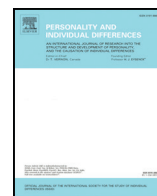




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How the human is the catalyst: Personality, aggressive fantasy, and proactive-reactive aggression among users of social media

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ABSTRACT

Technology users frequently experience online aggression in the forms of cyberbullying and/or trolling (Pew Research Center, 2014), but there exists only a limited understanding of what promotes these negative behaviors. The current study focuses on reasons why individuals may act aggressively in an online environment. Specifically, two types of online aggression (proactive and reactive) were examined across individual differences including personality and the presence of aggressive fantasies. Findings show that the personality characteristics of extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability predicted proactive aggression, while agreeableness and emotional stability predicted reactive aggression. Further, agreeableness, emotional stability and intellect predicted aggressive fantasies, and aggressive fantasies predicted both proactive and reactive aggression.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of literature has begun to examine antisocial behaviors such as cyberbullying (i.e., repeated online victimization; Stockdale, Coyne, Nelson, & Erickson, 2015) and trolling (i.e. online harassment; Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014) in users of online technology. These aggressive acts are quite common; the Pew Research Center (2014) reports that 73% of adult internet users have witnessed online harassment and 40% have personally experienced it. These high levels of online aggression may be due to the computer-mediated nature of social media, which provides an opportunity for individuals to morally disengage due to a scarcity of socio-emotional cues (Runions & Bak, 2015) and/or because of the shielding effects of anonymity in social interactions (Christopherson, 2007; Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2016). However, understanding of the manner in which individual differences might contribute to these aggressive online actions is limited. The current study seeks to fill this literature gap by examining the relationships among aggression type, personality, and aggressive fantasies through the framework of the Social Information Processing (SIP) model. This information may provide insight into a profile for individuals who are aggressive online.

2. Type of aggression and the social information processing model

The Social Information Processing (SIP) model posits that an individual's behavior derives directly from their interpretation of social situations (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Dodge, 1991). Within this model, Proactive Aggression (PA) refers to “cold” aggression that results in aggressive actions that are intentional and goal-oriented (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Gardner, Archer, & Jackson, 2012). Individuals with Proactive Aggression consistently believe that their actions will result in a socially effective manner of achieving a desired outcome (Crick & Dodge, 1996; Dodge, 1991). Behaviors often associated with PA include coercion, dominance, and bullying; PA-related actions demonstrate power and authority over an intended victim (Dodge & Coie, 1987; Law, Shapka, Domene, & Gagn, 2012; Olweus, 1978). An example of proactive aggression within a social media environment might be what Buckels et al. (2014) describe as “trolling” for sadistic pleasure, or posting inflammatory comments in an online forum in order to provoke an emotional response.

Alternatively, Reactive Aggression (RA) refers to a “hot” form of aggression that is considered to be emotionally driven (Gardner et al., 2012). RA may manifest because the individual misjudges social cues after poorly interpreting ambiguous stimuli (Dodge & Coie, 1987; Miller & Lynam, 2006; Poulin & Boivin, 2000). RA is frequently associated with impulsivity through the individual's propensity to attribute hostile intent in the actions of others, and is often seen as a form of retaliatory aggressive behavior (Little, Jones, Henrich, & Hawley, 2003). Although problematic, RA is especially distressing when the individual manifests it impulsively after erroneously judging another individual's action to be a threat (Dodge & Coie, 1987). For example,

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such an individual might misinterpret neutral comments in an online forum, and in response, post reactionary statements of attack.

3. Personality typology and aggression

Previous research demonstrates how the intra-individual differences of personality typology relate to aggression (see Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006). Specific findings show that personality and other externalizing behaviors relate to aggressive actions such as antisocial behavior (Krueger, Markon, Patrick, Benning, & Kramer, 2007) and criminal behavior (Miller & Lynam, 2001). However, this personality literature does not differentiate between proactive and reactive aggression types.

Miller and Lynam (2006) provide the only study found in a comprehensive literature search that examined associations between both the type of aggression and personality typology. Their results found associations between the personality variables of neuroticism and agreeableness, and both RA and PA. Neuroticism was positively correlated with reactive aggression and negatively correlated with proactive aggression. Agreeableness was negatively correlated with both forms of aggression. Using this study as a foundation, it can be theorized that levels of emotional (in) stability and (dis) agreeableness may be distinguishing factors between proactive and reactive aggressive actions in a real-world environment (Miller & Lynam, 2006). Despite the importance of this study, its findings do not generalize to explain aggression types among technology users in an online environment.

4. Aggressive fantasies and aggression

Recent research examined how the intra-individual difference of aggressive fantasies (i.e., hostile mental images) may contribute to aggression (Smith, Fischer, & Watson, 2009). Aggressive fantasies allow for unrestrained rehearsal of aggressive acts, resulting in an encoded aggressive script (Nagtegaal, Rassin, & Muris, 2006), normalization of aggressive beliefs (Smith et al., 2009), and possibly lead to increased perceptions of threat. Based on this theory, individuals with aggressive fantasies may come to believe in the social effectiveness of aggressive acts, resulting in PA, and/or overly attribute hostility in emotionally ambiguous situations, resulting in RA (Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002).

Research concerning negative fantasies identified positive associations among power/vengeance, withdrawal/protection, and those suffering specific types of psychopathology, including problem anger and endless thinking (Greenwald & Harder, 1997). Additional research conducted by White and Turner (2014) found anger-based ruminations to be positively associated with both proactive and reactive aggression.

The current study was designed to explore how the individual differences associated with types of aggression, personality typology, and presence/absence of aggressive fantasies, interrelate among users of social media. Specifically, this study focused on three main questions:

- 1) Does personality predict proactive and/or reactive aggression among users of social media?
- 2) Does personality predict aggressive fantasies among users of social media?
- 3) Do reported levels of aggressive fantasy ideation predict proactive and/or reactive aggression among users of social media?

5. Methods

5.1. Subjects

A power analysis ($f^2 = 0.15$; level = 0.8; $p = 0.05$; Cohen, 1992) indicated a minimum of 91 subjects was needed to analyze the largest model. For this study, 118 participants completed the surveys; however, 12 were removed due to incomplete data. As a result, a total of 106 participants were included in the data analysis.

Gender demographics for the sample comprised 54 males, 49 females, and three transgender participants. The sample was predominantly white, with a relatively even distribution of other racial backgrounds (78% white, 2% black or African-American, 9% Asian, 2% Native American or Alaska Native, 6% who reported two or more races, and 3% who reported other). The ethnic background of the sample was 6% Hispanic. The average age of the sample was 25 ($sd = \sim 7$) years old. Further, to better safeguard against issues associated with reading comprehension of the instruments, all who participated in the study had at least a high school education or equivalent (GED: $n = 9$; High School: $n = 44$; Bachelor's Degree: $n = 37$; Master's Degree: $n = 11$; p.H.D./J.D./M.D.: $n = 5$).

5.2. Procedures and instruments

Subjects were recruited from micro-blogging (i.e. Twitter), social news (i.e., Reddit), and social sharing (i.e., Facebook) sites in order to provide a broader sample of social media users. Recruitment consisted of an advertisement, seeking participants willing to participate in a study examining aggression among users of social media. This was an unpaid, completely voluntary research study. Participants were directed to the survey website, where they were asked to read an online consent form linked to the survey. The survey consisted of four parts. The first part gathered the demographic data as reported above.

The second part of the study consisted of the *IPIP Big 5 Personality Scales* (Goldberg, 1999), which is a 50-Item, 5-point, Likert-type survey. The author (Goldberg, 1999) of the *IPIP Big 5 Personality Scales* (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations) provided psychometric data indicating good reliability with internal consistency coefficients ranging from 0.65 to 0.85. Concurrent validity data provided by the author (Goldberg, 1999) correlated the *IPIP Big 5 Personality Scales* with the NEO-PI, resulting in an average coefficient of 0.73.

The third assessment consisted of a 7-Item, 5-point, Likert-type *Scale of Aggressive Fantasies* (Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn, & Behrens, 2005; Nadel, Spellman, Alvarez-Canino, Lausell-Bryant, & Landsberg, 1996; Rosenfeld, Huesmann, Eron, & Torney-Purta, 1982). The *Scale of Aggressive Fantasies* (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations) was created to measure the frequencies of fantasies about performing aggressive acts. The *Scale of Aggressive Fantasies* was originally designed for use with children grades 6 to 8. However, subsequent research has demonstrated it to be an effective measure when used with adults (Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003). Previous internal consistency coefficient data was reported as $\alpha = 0.69$ or sufficient (Nadel et al., 1996). For this study, the internal consistency coefficient was $\alpha = 0.84$ or strong. No normative data for the scale were provided.

The final assessment was a 23-Item, 3-point, Likert-type *Scale of Proactive-Reactive Aggression* (Dodge & Coie, 1987). Although this scale (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations) was originally designed for a study involving male students ages 7–16, past research has demonstrated its effectiveness with adults (Miller & Lynam, 2006). Previously reported internal consistency data found that coefficients for the Proactive Aggression subscale fell between 0.86 and 0.91, while the Reactive Aggression subscale fell between 0.84 and 0.90 (Dodge & Coie, 1987). No normative data for this instrument were provided.

However, because previous research (Brown, Atkins, Osborne, & Milnamow, 1996; Cima & Raine, 2009; Lobbestael, Cima, & Arntz, 2013) indicates high correlations between the Proactive and Reactive subscales and the current study yielded similar results for both ($r = 0.884$; see Table 2 for complete correlation matrix), there was a need to verify construct validity. The verification process was completed by following the exploratory factor analysis procedures laid out by Lobbestael et al. (2013). As such, an oblique rather than orthogonal factor rotation (i.e., Promax) was used to more accurately differentiate the two factors (Costello & Osborne, 2005).

Based on the results of the exploratory factor analysis, Adjusted Proactive and Reactive Aggression subscales were then created. The

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