



Adolescents' perception of the characterizing dimensions of cyberbullying: Differentiation between bullies' and victims' perceptions



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ABSTRACT

Being aware of the adolescents' perceptions on cyberbullying is one of the main factors that determine the real prevalence of this phenomenon and allows the adequacy of intervention programs. The objectives pursued in this study were: (a) to determine the perceptions adolescents have about cyberbullying and cyber abuse; and (b) to analyse the influence of experiences of cybervictimization and cyberaggression on the perception of cyberbullying and its various forms. The sample consisted of 1753 adolescents of 12–16 years in age. The instrument used to acquire the data was a questionnaire. The results reveal that, of the 5 identifying criteria of cyberbullying, Spanish adolescents have recourse to just three: intent to hurt, imbalance of power, and advertising. Also, this study shows that verbal and visual aggressions, far from being interpreted as forms of cyberbullying, are considered to be mechanisms that foster and facilitate their communication and interaction. Although the victims and aggressors allude to the same set of identifying criteria, the aggressors emphasize the imbalance of power criterion as against the intent to hurt. For the victims, the intentionality being the primary factor, followed by advertising, while the imbalance of power is relegated to a background role.

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1. Introduction

Technological growth and easy access to Internet enables the creation of new cyber scenarios that foster novel forms of communication and interpersonal relationships, in which, at times, conflict and violence impose themselves upon balance and harmony. The aggressions that occur in these scenarios have generally been grouped under the term cyberbullying, an emergent concept that researchers are still debating (Aboujaoude, Savage, Starcevic, & Salame, 2015; Heirman & Walrave, 2012; Law, Shapka, Domene, & Gagné, 2012; Pieschl, Porsch, Kahl, & Klockenbusch, 2013).

Some authors consider cyberbullying to be an indirect form of bullying that needs technological resources to be carried out (Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2012; Li, 2007; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Werner, Bumpus, & Rock, 2010). Others researchers

define it as bullying developed through electronic media (Vivolo-Kantor, Martell, Holland, & Westby, 2014). Brewer and Kerlake (2015) state that definitions of cyberbullying vary, due to the recency of the phenomenon and the rapid technological advances which influence the frequency and form of electronic communication. However one widely accepted definition refers to cyberbullying as “any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicate hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others” (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278). Thus, the two phenomena, bullying and cyberbullying, share the same defining criteria: intent to hurt, imbalance of power, and repetition (Pieschl et al., 2013). Other authors argue, however, that they are two different concepts, each with its own characteristics that define and differentiate it (Casas, Del Rey, & Ortega, 2013). In this sense, there seems to be agreement in research on the conceptualization of cyberbullying about the existence of certain characteristics or criteria that enable one to differentiate between cyberbullying and other acts of aggression carried out through technological and cyber means (Aboujaoude et al., 2015).

One of these criteria is related to the aggressor's intent to hurt – to inflict pain, fear, or harm on the victim. In the cyber con-

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text, the detection and application of this criterion involves certain difficulties related to the lack of face-to-face communication, the ignorance in many cases of the identity of the aggressor, or the aggressor's ignorance of the consequences that their actions have for others (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008; Menesini & Nocentini, 2009; Naruskov, Luik, Nocentini, & Menesini, 2012). Talwar, Gómez, and Shariff (2014) stand out the difficulty that children and adolescents, the 'digital natives', have in distinguishing between a joke and a deliberate act aimed at causing harm. The lack of face to face communication causes biases in interpreting the meaning of the message, and this in turn leads to frequent confusion about the intentionality of the person with whom they are interacting or exchanging messages. However, despite these difficulties in identifying the intentionality of cyber behaviour, Crosslin and Golman (2014) note that adolescents consider the intention to harm to be a major factor for an episode of aggression to be cyberbullying.

Another criterion identifying cyberbullying is also taken from the classical bullying phenomenon – the repetition of the aggression. Nevertheless, in the case of cyberbullying, repetition does not necessarily imply a succession of violent acts from the same attacker. Slonje, Smith, and Frisé (2013) believe that the victim can experience a single aggression on numerous occasions due to the permanent and public nature of virtual communication. Even though private and compromising material owned by the victim may be sent only once, it may be seen and then broadcast by several people, causing the victim more pain, and lasting a longer time (Embarrassing videos that achieve “virality” are an extreme example) (Del Rey et al., 2015; Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009; Kowalski et al., 2008; Menesini et al., 2012; Nixon, 2014). Moreover, Langos and Mcoml (2012) relates repetition to intent in cases of direct cyberbullying, understanding that when abuse occurs again and again it is clearly shown not to be an isolated or inadvertent act, but an intentional one.

A third criterion attributed to the definition of cyberbullying is the existence of an imbalance of power between the aggressor and victim. According to Grigg (2010), in the cyber context the imbalance is materialized in situations where the victim can not easily defend themselves. This asymmetry of power between the aggressor and victim does not refer to the physical, emotional, or psychological superiority of the aggressor, but to an asymmetry in the ICT domain (Slonje et al., 2013; Smith, 2012; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Knowledge of and competence in using ICT tools provides access to the victims' hitherto private virtual spaces, so as to disseminate the information or materials stored there, steal their identity, create obstacles against identifying the aggressor, etc. (Casas et al., 2013). Grigg (2010) also alludes to a social imbalance caused by the difference in status in favour of the aggressor, which is augmented by the support of the group or social network in which the aggressor may be very popular. Other authors interpret the imbalance of power in a symbiotic relationship with other criteria, such as the intent to hurt (Nocentini et al., 2010) or the anonymous or public nature of the aggressor (Dooley et al., 2009; Slonje & Smith, 2008).

A fourth criterion which would facilitate the differentiation between a cyberaggression and an episode of cyberbullying is the anonymity which protects the aggressor. The possibilities of concealment offered by technological and cyber media without the need for any very advanced technical knowledge can significantly influence the way people resolve their conflicts. Specifically, Kowalski et al. (2008) argue that anonymity may encourage some people to act in a way that they would never do in real life. Anonymity can lead to magnified aggression because the perpetrator may feel out of reach and immune to retribution (Aboujaoude et al., 2015). The perception of the impunity that identity conceal-

ment allows favours the adoption of ethically reprehensible behaviour, including the perpetration of aggression and other types of cybercrime (Compton, Mergler, & Campbell, 2014). Nevertheless, while anonymity is considered a specific criterion of cyberbullying (Nocentini et al., 2010; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008), there are studies that show that most of the victims recognize their cyberaggressors and identify them as peers belonging to their school or to their closest social environment (e.g., Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; Slonje et al., 2013).

The final defining criterion of cyberbullying corresponds to the open and uncontrolled dissemination of the aggressive behaviour, i.e., advertising it. Despite this being one of the most widely occurring criteria in acts of cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Slonje & Smith, 2008), some researchers caution that it should not be considered an essential characteristic defining and delimiting an act of cyberbullying, although they do recognize its relevance in reflecting the seriousness of the aggression (Nocentini et al., 2010).

1.1. Adolescents' perception of cyberbullying

The study of the dimensions and characteristics specific to cyberbullying allows one to redefine this construct so as to design tighter and more effective prevention and intervention programs. The numerous controversies and contradictions that still exist about the boundary defining this phenomenon show the need to undertake further research focused on the perception that parents, educators, and adolescents have of cyberbullying. If the perception of those involved in this type of cyberaggression is very different from how researchers conceptualize it, this will not only mean that we are faced with the description of quite different realities, but also that the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs will be undermined.

Previous studies have shown that the interpretations that researchers and adolescents make of both the bullying phenomenon and the ways in which it is manifested are very different, and that sometimes adolescents define as bullying some behaviours that researchers would classify as occasional aggressions, or, vice versa, adolescents consider as social interaction behaviours that researchers would classify as bullying (Cuadrado, 2011).

Our review of the scientific literature on the perception that adolescents have of cyberbullying found only a sparse occurrence of publications, and the existing studies present results that can only be considered exploratory. Some researchers warn of the difficulty that adolescents (Mishna et al., 2009) and adults (Grigg, 2010) have in differentiating a cyberaggression from an episode of cyberbullying. In a study of 38 pupils of US grades 5–8, Mishna et al. (2009) conclude that the type of involvement in cases of cyberbullying significantly influences the defining criteria considered for this construct. They also note that, as the age of the pupils increases, the anonymity criterion becomes more relative and loses importance. Similarly, Dredge, Gleeson, and de la Piedad (2014), in considering the role of victim, argue that experiences of victimization shape the perceptions that adolescents have of cyberbullying.

Other studies have addressed the establishment of first- and second-order criteria by analysing whether the combination and interaction of some of them could be key indicators to differentiate cyberbullying from cyberaggression. Thus, Bass, de Jong, and Drossaert (2013) focus on the intent and repetition criteria, analysing their use by 287 children aged 11–12. Their results show that the perception of these criteria in the cyber context is ambiguous and arbitrary, and it is therefore impossible to determine whether the relationship between the two is the criterion most often used to define cyberbullying. Nevertheless, Nocentini et al. (2010) and Menesini et al. (2012) find that European adolescents

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