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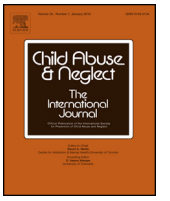

Research article

Connections between online harassment and offline violence among youth in Central Thailand☆

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ABSTRACT

Increasing evidence indicates that face-to-face (offline) youth violence and online harassment are closely interlinked, but evidence from Asian countries remains limited. This study was conducted to quantitatively assess the associations between offline violence and online harassment among youth in Central Thailand. Students and out-of-school youth (n = 1,234, age: 15–24 years) residing, studying, and/or working in a district in Central Thailand were surveyed. Participants were asked about their involvement in online harassment and in verbal, physical, sexual, and domestic types of offline violence, as perpetrators, victims, and witnesses within a 1-year period. Multivariable logistic regression was used to assess independent associations between different kinds of involvement in offline violence and online harassment. Perpetration and victimization within the past year were both reported by roughly half of the youth both online and offline. Over three quarters had witnessed violence or harassment. Perpetrating online harassment was independently associated with being a victim online (adjusted odds ratio [AOR] = 10.1; 95% CI [7.5, 13.6]), and perpetrating offline violence was independently associated with being a victim offline (AOR = 11.1; 95% CI [8.1, 15.0]). Perpetrating online harassment was independently associated with perpetrating offline violence (AOR = 2.7; 95% CI [1.9, 3.8]), and being a victim online was likewise independently associated with being a victim offline (AOR = 2.6; 95% CI [1.9, 3.6]). Online harassment and offline violence are interlinked among Thai youth, as in other countries studied so far. Interventions to reduce either might best address both together.

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Abbreviations: AOR, adjusted odds ratio; CI, confidence intervals; USD, U.S. dollar; WHO, World Health Organization.

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Introduction

Defining youth violence and bullying

World Health Organization (WHO) (2011) defines youth violence as including "a range of acts from bullying and physical fighting, through more severe sexual and physical assault to homicide." Overall, the various types of youth violence "not only contribute greatly to the global burden of premature death, injury and disability, but also have a serious, often lifelong, impact on a person's psychological and social functioning" (WHO).

Bullying is most often defined as a subset of aggressive behavior, characterized by not just engaging in behaviors intended to cause injury or discomfort to another individual (which defines aggressive behavior overall), but also by repetition and a power imbalance between the bully and the victim (Olweus, 2013). However, sometimes "results from studies based on questionnaires designed to measure general aggression are reported as being research on bullying" (Olweus, 2013 p. 761), which Olweus has cautioned causes confusion in the field. Olweus has emphasized the importance of maintaining a clear "distinction between a bullying perpetration/bullying victimization research line on the one hand and a general aggression/general victimization line on the other" (p. 760). This distinction is reflected in the World Health Organization (WHO) (2011) definition of youth violence, which includes bullying a subtype (rather than as a synonym) of youth violence.

However, such a distinction is by no means universally made in the field. A systematic review has recently found that only 4 of 41 reviewed bullying measures corresponded to all expert-defined criteria in their operationalization of the topic (Vivolo-Kantor, Martell, Holland, & Westby, 2014). The extent to which bullying is thought to be distinct from youth violence thus varies from study to study, and sometimes no distinction is made at all. In this article, we do distinguish between the two, following Olweus' (2013) definition of bullying as aggression in a context of power imbalance and repetition.

Defining online harassment and cyberbullying

Research in the last 10 years has documented the emergence of intentionally hurtful acts committed by youth using digital communications technologies, such as mobile phones and the Internet. These behaviors have variably been conceptualized as cyberbullying (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattaner, 2014), digital bullying (Olweus, 2013), online bullying (Microsoft, 2012), Internet harassment (Tokunaga, 2010), electronic aggression (Hertz & David-Ferdon, 2008), electronic bullying (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007), cyber aggression or c-aggression (Pornari & Wood, 2010), or as online harassment (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007).

These terms reflect differences in how the phenomenon is defined (Tokunaga, 2010). Many studies have defined the phenomenon using the three criteria borrowed from traditional bullying (or offline bullying) literature: intent to harm, power imbalance between victim and perpetrator, and repetition (Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross, 2009; Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2010; Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012; Olweus, 2013; Tokunaga, 2010). Smith, del Barrio, and Tokunaga (2012) have discussed the issue at length and argued that these three criteria are largely appropriate for the study of cyberbullying.

Others have argued that the criteria may be overly restrictive (e.g., Wolak et al., 2007). Only including repeated acts overlooks single incidents that have lasting negative consequences if the material involved remains online and may be forwarded on and on by others (Dooley et al., 2009; König, Gollwitzer, & Steffgen, 2010; Olweus, 2013). Furthermore, victimizing others online may not require greater power, whereas in the offline world it is often crucial (Dooley et al., 2009; Shariff, 2008). However, some have asserted that the criterion of power imbalance is meaningful for cyberbullying if it is understood as "differences in technological know-how between perpetrator and victim, relative anonymity, social status, number of friends, or marginalized group position" (Smith et al., 2012, p. 36) rather than the more traditional forms of power imbalance, such as those related to bigger body size or greater physical strength.

As in the traditional bullying literature, intentionally hurtful online behaviors comprise a larger phenomenon of intentionally hurtful behaviors per se, and a narrower subset of such behaviors that occur in the context of power imbalances and are typically repeated (Olweus, 2013). Olweus has argued that to avoid confusion, the term "bullying" should be reserved for the narrower subset of behaviors-in-context. Correspondingly, Wolak et al. (2007) introduced the term "online harassment" to refer to the larger phenomenon of intentional behaviors to harm others through the Internet or mobile devices that may or may not involve power imbalances and repetition. We follow their usage (see Ojanen et al., 2014), reserving the term "cyberbullying" for intentionally harmful behaviors that occur in the context of power imbalance and repetition, except when referring to works of other authors using the term.

Linkages between online and offline forms of aggression

A number of studies have investigated the overlap between traditional bullying and cyberbullying (e.g., Beran & Li, 2007; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Sourander et al., 2010; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). One online survey of students in the United States (Juvonen & Gross, 2008) found that 85% of youth who reported at least one incident of online bullying also reported at least one school-based incident in the past year. Furthermore, students who experienced repeated school-based bullying were almost seven times more likely to also experience repeated online incidents (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). A longitudinal study conducted in Australia found that being both a victim and perpetrator of cyberbullying in young adulthood was predicted by perpetration of traditional bullying, perpetration of cyberbullying, and cyberbullying victimization four years

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