



The emotional impact of cyberbullying: Differences in perceptions and experiences as a function of role



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ABSTRACT

Research is accumulating to confirm adverse consequences of cyberbullying. Less is known about the perceptions, expectations and reactions of those involved as a function of their different roles (e.g., as bullies, victims, bully-victims) and how this relates to their experiences of traditional bullying. We examined whether cyberbullies' beliefs about the impact of their actions reflects the impact as reported by cybervictims themselves. We tested also whether the emotional reactions to cyberbullying differed depending upon whether the victim was or was not also a victim of traditional bullying behaviours. Participants were 1353 Spanish adolescents. Approximately 8% reported experiences of cyberbullying (compared to 12% reporting experiences of traditional bullying). Cyberbullies believed that their victims would experience more discomfort than cybervictims actually reported experiencing. Those who had experienced victimization in both traditional and cyber contexts evaluated cyberbullying as having greater negative impact than did those who had experienced victimization only in cyber contexts. Perceptions differed according to role and the context(s) in which bullying has been experienced. Findings are discussed in relation to the ways in which technologically delivered aggression may differ from traditional bullying.

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1. Introduction

Bullying and peer aggression are widespread in children's lives (Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009). Bullying involves the repeated use of aggressive behaviours toward one's peers, in a context where there is an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim, and where the aggressor intends to cause harm or distress (Olweus, 1993). Traditional bullying behaviours include physical (e.g., kicking), verbal (e.g., calling someone nasty names), and relationship-focused (e.g., exclusion) aggression (Whitney & Smith, 1993). However, contemporary children and young people also now utilize mobile phone technology and other electronic media to perpetrate bullying behaviours (Fenaughty & Harré, 2013; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008). This latter phenomenon, known as *cyberbullying*, has been defined as "being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the internet or other digital technologies" (Willard, 2007, p. 265).

Although incidences vary across studies, reports from North American, European, and Australian investigations show that involvement in or observation of cyberbullying are common experiences for many young people (Beran & Li, 2007; Estévez, Villardón, Calvete, Padilla, & Orue, 2010; Görzig, 2011; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; ISEI-IVEI, 2009; Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013; Keith & Martin, 2005; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). In Tokunaga's review (2010) of 25 peer-reviewed articles on cybervictimization, the average of students victimized online once was 20–40%. This raises important questions about the impact of the experiences and, in particular, about the perceptions, expectations and reactions of those involved.

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Age and gender variables have been widely examined in investigations of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Monks, Robinson, & Worlidge, 2012; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Slonje, Smith, & Frisé, 2013; Smith et al., 2008; Tokunaga, 2010). The emotional impact of each form of bullying has also attracted a lot of research interest (Ackers, 2012; Anderson & Hunter, 2012; Beran & Li, 2005; Dehue, Bolman, & Völinck, 2008; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). The findings to date have been inconsistent. In some cases, boys tend to be overrepresented as bullies, cyberbullies and bully/victims (Ackers, 2012; Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010; Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Dehue et al., 2008; Gradinger et al., 2009; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Slonje & Smith, 2008); in other cases, girls have been reported to be the most involved in cyberbullying (Jones et al., 2013; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012), generally as cybervictims (Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, & Kift, 2012; Estévez et al., 2010; Görzig, 2011; Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchán, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009), and in still others, there are no gender differences (Beran & Li, 2005; 2007; Monks et al., 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008). With respect to age, the overall pattern of findings is somewhat clearer, indicating a curvilinear line with the high cut-off point in middle adolescence lower incidences later in high school (after 17–18 years old) (Tokunaga, 2010).

Emotional impact is equally controversial. Several studies have reported symptoms such as depression, fear, sadness, anxiety, suicidal ideation, remorse, worry, stress, embarrassment, and loneliness in all students involved (Arseneault et al., 2006; Biebl, DiLalla, Davis, Lynch, & Shinn, 2011; Campbell et al., 2012; Gradinger et al., 2009; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Kumpulainen & Rasanen, 2000). However, while some researchers have found differences in emotional impact, internalizing and externalizing problems by age, gender, type of aggression (bullying/cyberbullying) or by role (Monks et al., 2012; Ortega et al., 2009; 2012; Schultze-Krumbholz, Jäkel, Schultze, & Scheithauer, 2012). Perren and Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger (2012) did not obtain significant associations between any of these variables and involvement in traditional bullying or cyberbullying.

Our aim in the present study was therefore to extend the existing empirical literature in two ways. First, we examined whether cyberbullies' beliefs about the impact of their actions accurately reflects the impact as reported by cybervictims themselves. Second, we tested whether the emotional reactions to cyberbullying differed depending upon whether the victim was or was not also a victim of traditional bullying behaviours.

1.1. Emotional impact of traditional and cyber peer aggression

Abundant evidence confirms that traditional bullying has negative psychological consequences, not only for those on the receiving end (Biebl et al., 2011; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kochel, Ladd, & Rudolph, 2012; Kumpulainen & Rasanen, 2000) but also for bullies themselves, for those who experience both roles (bully-victims), and for bystanders (Garaigordobil & Oñederra, 2010; Gradinger et al., 2009; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Marttunen, Rimpelä, & Rantanen, 1999; Rivers & Noret, 2013; Roland, 2002; Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, & Neale, 2010). Evidence is also accumulating to indicate that cyberbullying is harmful (Beran & Li, 2005; Campbell et al., 2012; Dehue et al., 2008; Gradinger et al., 2009; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Ortega et al., 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Slonje et al., 2013; Tokunaga, 2010; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). While it is true that victims of cyberbullying are often also victims of traditional bullying (Olweus, 2013), cyberbullying has a number of distinctive features, including greater ease of anonymity for aggressors, potentially large audiences, persistence of actions over time (e.g., a YouTube video being available for people to view for weeks, months, or even years), and the relative invisibility of victims' experiences and reactions (Dredge, Gleeson, & de la Piedad Garcia, 2014).

While the growing body of work noted above has shown that cyberbullying does have negative effects, to date few studies have examined how the perceptions and evaluations of emotional impact might vary with role and context, i.e., depending who the cyberbully is or the anonymity of the incident(s) (Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). This issue is important because it informs our understanding of motives and interpretations, which in turn may affect subsequent behaviour, such as bullies' readiness to repeat their behaviour (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2004; Dodge & Somberg, 1987) and victims' strategies and capacities for coping (Bellmore, Chen, & Rischall, 2013; Fenaughty & Harré, 2013; Hunter, Durkin, Heim, Howe, & Bergin, 2010). In this paper, we examine the beliefs of bullies, bully-victims, and victims about the emotional outcomes of cyberbullying.

In a pioneering investigation of children's own perceptions in this domain, Monks et al. (2012) found that individuals varied in terms of how impactful they believed cyberbullying to be, compared to traditional bullying: 24.5% felt that it was less upsetting for the victim than traditional bullying, 36.2% regarded it as of similar effect, and some 39.3% judged it to be more upsetting than traditional modes. Sticca and Perren (2013), working with Swiss adolescents, found a slight bias to perceive cyberbullying as more upsetting but the effect sizes were small and there were stronger effects for the public nature of the assault and the anonymity of the assailant, irrespective of medium. Fenaughty and Harré (2013), based on a large sample of New Zealand adolescents, found that approximately 50% of those who had experienced cyberbullying regarded it as upsetting, very upsetting or extremely upsetting. These findings suggest that there is considerable variation in how young people perceive the impact of cyberbullying. It is possible that their own involvement in such aggression (for example, as bully or as victim) may influence their perceptions of its impact. Monks et al. (2012) were concerned with the perceptions of children irrespective of their actual involvements and acknowledged that they did not examine how victims actually felt. The present study addressed this issue by contrasting the perspectives of cyberbullies, cybervictims and cyberbully-victims.

1.2. Bullying and perceptions of its consequences

Children and young people often underestimate the impact of their behaviour on other young people. Boulton and Underwood (1992) report that victims aged 8- to 12-years old are significantly more likely than bullies and uninvolved children to think that bullies feel good, happy, brilliant, or clever when they pick on other children. Some 64% of victims felt that bullies would feel this way, while only 35% of children who used bullying behaviours reported experiencing those emotions. Differences between victims' and bullies' perceptions were also reported by Kochenderfer-Ladd (2004), with non-victims of bullying systematically under-estimating how upsetting victimization was. Though not directly related to emotions, it has also been reported that young people differ in their attributions of blame depending on their bullying role, the duration of victimization (Camodeca, Goosens, Schuengel, & Terwogt, 2003), whether the victim is an in- or out-group

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