Factors associated with young people's successful resolution of distressing electronic harassment

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ABSTRACT

Electronic harassment is a pervasive phenomenon among young people, however relatively little is known about actions that targets of harassment may undertake to manage such abuse, and whether particular actions and personal characteristics are associated with successful resolution of such harassment. This mixed methods research identified whether particular actions or characteristics are associated with the resolution of distressing electronic harassment situations. Study one used focus groups interviews with 36 New Zealand (NZ) students (aged 13–15) to explore strategies used to manage electronic harassment. Study two drew on these findings, in conjunction with literature reviews, to construct a questionnaire delivered to 1673 students (aged 12–19). Over half of participants used more than one strategy to try and resolve the abuse. Ignoring abuse was the most popular strategy, followed by confronting and fighting strategies. However, multivariate logistic regression showed ignoring did not predict resolution, and nor did received adult or family support. However a sense of efficacy in approaching adults did predict resolution. The quality of intervention, rather than the type of intervention per se, seems to be critical in the successful resolution harassment. Reflecting on both studies we suggest the need to increase young people's confidence in actively dealing with harassment as well as supporting adults and peers to provide effective support.

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1. Introduction

Electronic harassment involves the use of the Internet or mobile phones to intentionally harass another person. Cyberbullying refers to a subset of this phenomenon (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007), and while variously defined (Tokunaga, 2010), usually addresses electronic harassment that is repeated and involves a power imbalance between the target and the person(s) producing the bullying. Electronic harassment and cyberbullying have been associated with distress, including symptoms of depression (Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009; Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2011; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004), social problems (Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006), truancy, carrying weapons to school (Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007), and social anxiety (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). There is considerable variation in estimated rates of such harassment (Internet Safety Technical Task Force [ISTFF], 2008; Tokunaga, 2010), however a number of larger studies in the USA, the United Kingdom (UK), and New Zealand (NZ) indicate that around 10–40% of young people report electronic harassment annually (Clark et al., 2009; Cross et al., 2009; Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Livingstone & Bober, 2004; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009; Williams & Guerra, 2007; Wolak et al., 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008; Ybarra, Mitchell, & Korchmaros, 2011).

Young people may use social support, technological measures, retaliation, or ignore the situation, when responding to electronic harassment (Cross et al., 2009; Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Wolak et al., 2007). To date, no research has been carried out to assess to what extent these strategies are associated with *successful* resolution of the situation. Successful

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resolution may reflect a variety of outcomes, including the simple cessation of the harassment, consequences for those doing the harassment behaviours, or some restorative justice process (Morrinson, 2007).

The ability to successfully manage challenges may depend on young people's levels of family support as well as their self-efficacy in developing peer support and seeking adult help. The coping literature emphasises the importance of positive relationships in the management of challenging situations (Wyman, Sandler, Wolchik, & Nelson, 2000), particularly relationships that provide social support (Werner, 1995) as well as love and trust (Compas & Reeslund, 2009; Rutter, 2000; Werner). Additionally, communication skills and social self-efficacy (Werner), a willingness to seek help, and the ability to obtain information and guidance (Compas & Reeslund), have all been identified as factors that help young people cope with serious challenges. Research has yet to explore if these factors are associated with successful resolution of harassment (c.f. associations with less harassment – i.e., Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009; Wang et al., 2009).

A number of studies have explored how electronic harassment and cyberbullying experiences differ by gender. In general boys report more overt aggression and more normative beliefs about the legitimacy of overt aggression than girls (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). However this gender differential may only apply to overt aggression. Societal expectations about the inappropriateness of overt aggression amongst girls and young women may mean that forms of aggression (e.g., covert aggression) that are not so heavily proscribed, may be more popular among girls (Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001). This could produce situations where girls are more likely produce and face more covert forms of harassment, including electronic harassment. Some studies indicate that young women and girls are more likely to report electronic harassment (e.g., Dehue et al., 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Wang et al., 2009; Ybarra, Diener-West, et al., 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008), while others find no gender differences (e.g., Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Wolak et al., 2007; Ybarra, 2004). Our own study (Fenaughty and Harré, submitted for publication) demonstrated gender differences in particular forms and producers of harassment and we are interested to explore whether gender differences are associated with successful resolution of electronic harassment situations.

The first study described here involved focus groups with young people to explore what strategies they used to resolve harassment. A quantitative survey then examined if the strategies identified in the focus groups were associated with successful resolution. In keeping with findings from previous research discussed above, self-efficacy, adult help seeking, and family support, and gender differences in the successful resolution of distressing electronic harassment were also examined in the survey.

2. Study one: focus groups

Study one involved eight focus groups with three to seven young people in each from diverse schools (see Table 1). Participant ($N = 36$) ages ranged from 13 to 15 years with 44.5% males and 55.5% females.

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on how participants' would, or did, respond to cyberbullying. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with names changed to protect identities. As advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006), Chamberlain (1999), and Morgan (1988), the analytic approach involved reading through the transcripts and building up themes that described points of interest. Three themes captured participants' management of electronic harassment.

The first theme was social support. Three main sources were identified: parents and caregivers, other adults and peers. Despite the key role that parents and other primary caregivers play in nurturing children's development (Compas & Reeslund, 2009; Rutter, 2000; Werner) the majority of participants reported that they would not communicate with their parents about most experiences of electronic harassment. They worried about overreaction, being blamed and having their mobile phone confiscated or being banned from the Internet. For example, one girl commented, "It's straight taking you off the phone and say 'you're not going to get this phone anymore and that's why I told you you're not ready to get cell phones'." In every group, at least some participants agreed it would have to be extremely serious before they would involve their parents. The minority who indicated they would talk to their parents anticipated an attentive, sympathetic approach with useful strategies for managing the situation.

Attempted support from other adults, including school staff, extended family, and employers was also considered problematic by most participants for similar reasons to those expressed in relation to their parents, and was seen as useful only if an issue if it was very serious, especially if physical violence had already occurred. In contrast to their ambivalence about adult assistance, the overwhelming majority of participants said that they used forms of peer assistance in managing harassment, even at the early stages of a potential threat and even if they also sought adult help. Unlike adults, peers were seen as not "out of touch" and likely to overreact. Peers were also perceived to have more expertise with these issues. Additionally, peer preference may reflect the increased time young people spend among peers relative to parents, sometimes, as Felix (FG 5) pointed out it can just be a matter of who is around: "It is more comfortable talking to people that have the same problems or whatever and that you spend – because you spend more of your day with your mates than with your parents because obviously you are here [at school] for most of the day."

The second theme was attempting to solve the problem directly. When facing electronic harassment, participants sometimes described confronting or retaliating against those involved. Retaliation could involve electronic and/or face-to-face means (e.g., harassing them back on a mobile phone as well as physically fighting). Some described getting their friends to assist, for example by harassing them with a bombardment of texts. Technical solutions were another strategy. This included blocking communication, reducing the amount of private information they had on social network sites and changing online account names or email addresses to avoid harassment.

The third theme centred around ignoring harassment, in the hope that it would fade out of significance or to show it was not "getting to them". For example, one participants said: "Because then if you text them back the first time it's like they've won, probably."

2.1. Summary and discussion of study one

In being reluctant to approach adults, these New Zealand young people highlighted an interesting conundrum in the literature in this area. As discussed previously, in theory, positive family relationships and the ability to seek and get support from adults should help young people resolve challenging situations. However, international studies have found, as we did, that adult help is considered a last resort. For instance, the second Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS2) study of 1500 10–17-year-old participants in the USA found that only 12% of young people who were sexually harassed online told a parent about the situation (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). Even fewer (9%) YISS2