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Investigation of the relationship between cyberbullying, cybervictimization, alexithymia and anger expression styles among adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between cyberbullying, cybervictimization, alexithymia, and anger expression styles among adolescents in terms of gender and internet use duration. A total of 1257 students of which 650 were female, 607 were male, who study at 14 high schools in Kagithane district of the Province of Istanbul, in 2012—2013 academic year participated in the study. Research findings reveal that, there is a significant difference between male and female students in terms of cyberbullying scores, in favor of male students; and there is no significant difference between male and female students in terms of cybervictimization scores. Difficulty identifying feelings and externally oriented thinking (alexithymia); anger-in, anger-out, and internet use duration can explain the increase in cyberbullying significantly. Difficulty identifying feelings (alexithymia), trait anger, and internet use duration can explain the increase in cybervictimization significantly.

1. Introduction

Although developments in information and communication technology provide people in the society with new and incredible opportunities, they also bring along some negative outcomes. This negativeness may have more impact especially on young population. Research conducted on the effect of computer and internet technologies on young people so far, have presented various results. Some researchers emphasize the numerous social and educational advantages of internet and technology (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Livingstone & Bober, 2004); while some discuss that internet and technology can have negative effects on cognitive and behavioral developments of young people (Tahiroğlu, Çelik, Bahalı, & Avcı, 2010; Varnhagen, 2011).

Computers and smart phones have become an essential part of daily lives; internet used at home, school, and social environments provide a social life in the virtual environment like the one in the real world. This caused individuals to transfer their inner worlds and emotional states in the virtual environment. This way, information and communication technologies provide new, comfortable, and effective platforms, but they also provide new and unique tools for people who demonstrate bullying behaviors (Dursun & Akbulut, 2010).

In other words, technological developments provide a platform for individuals to explore the world, learn and have fun on one hand; but they also enable easy access to violent and sexual explicit websites, provide opportunities for communication with dangerous people, drug use, and provocative searches such as terror on the other (Çelen, Çelik, & Seferoğlu, 2011). Cyberbullying is one of the harmful behaviors related to the abuse of technology. Traditional bullying in offline life found a place in online life as well, which attracted interest to the subject in the field immediately.

2. Literature review

During the last decade, there has been a notable increase in the number of research on cyberbullying, particularly in the USA and Canada (see Campbell, 2005; Li, 2008), and in Turkey (see Arıcak et al., 2008; Arıcak, 2011; Erdur-Baker & Kavşut, 2007; Şahin, Aydın, & Sarı, 2012). These research studies on cyberbullying focused on various aspects, and looked at differing variables. Since

it is a relatively new topic, the present research aims at examining the effects of various variables that haven't been studied before by the previous researchers on cyberbullying. The major axis of the present research is the relation of gender, duration of internet use, alexithymia and anger expression styles with cyberbullying and cybervictimization.

Studies that have looked at the relationship between gender and cyberbullying have found different results. According to some studies, girls are more engaged in cyberbullying (Agastson et al., 2007; Campfield, 2008; Rivers & Noret, 2010; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007) or to be exposed cyberbullying than boys (Akbaba & Eroğlu, 2013; Dehue, Bollman, & Völlink, 2008; Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, & Storch, 2009; Heirman & Shemesh, 2015; Papatraianou, Levine, & West, 2014; Rice et al., 2015; Vandebosch & VanCleemput, 2009). Moreover, there are some studies that show that girl students make more cyberbullying and they are more exposed to cyberbullying (Campbell, 2005; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Li, 2007; Smith et al., 2008). Smith (2012) found that girl students have more cyberbullying and relational bullying when they are faced with physical and verbal bullying than boys. Besides, according to other studies, boy students make more cyberbullying (Akca et al., 2015; Li, 2006; Heiman & Shemesh, 2015; Lefler & Cohen, 2015; Özden & İçellioğlu, 2014; Vandebosch & VanCleemput, 2009; Williams & Guerra, 2007) or they are more exposed to cyberbullying than girls (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009; Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2007). Other studies however found that, there is no significant difference between girls and boys in terms of engaging in cyberbullying or being exposed to cyberbullying (Balakrishnan, 2015; Baroncelli & Ciucci, 2014; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olaffson, 2011; Stys, 2004; Topçu & Erdur-Baker, 2007; Uysal, Duman, Yazıcı, & Şahin, 2014). As a result, there is no clear information related to the relationship between cyberbullying and gender. Using different samples in the studies, using different methods and historical changes would lead to different findings related to the relationship between cyberbullying and gender. Furthermore, according to some studies, some other variables can be mediator variables in the relationship between cyberbullying and gender (Slonje, Smith, & Frisen, 2013).

Arıcak (2009) conducted a research on adolescents in which he found that the most important predictors of cyberbullying are anger and hostility symptoms. Findings of the research conducted by Şahin et al. (2012) are also in agreement with these findings. Depression, somatic symptoms and anger increase on people that are exposed to cyberbullying. (Fu, Chan, & Ip, 2014; Garaigordobil & Valderrey, 2015; Lonigro et al., 2015; Nixon, 2014). Also, it is known that people who experience cyberbullying join hatred groups in social networks (Akca et al., 2015). As it is known, anger is an important feeling that triggers aggressive instinct (Nangle, Hansen, Erdley, & Norton, 2010). Aggression occurs especially as a result of threat, rage, anger and disappointment. Bullying is considered as a form of aggression (Olweus, 1995). Anger is a feeling that can be caused by many life experiences and personality features. Alexithymia is one of the personality features known to effect anger (Erden, 2005; Sayar, Güleç, & Topbaş, 2004). People who have alexithymic behavior are more prone to using self-destructive behaviors (Norman & Borrill, 2015). Especially individuals who have difficulty in expressing their feelings experience frustration and as a result they present anger symptoms.

Sifneos (1973) used the concept of alexithymia to define a group of symptoms related to emotional problems. According to Sifneos (1973), the most important reason for using the concept of alexithymia is the difficulty in identifying feelings and the inability of expressing these; which are also the most important features of individuals who suffer from alexithymia. Young people who cannot express themselves and therefore cannot be understood by the people; may present discordance, aggression, rage and even suicidality when they cannot cope with anger and other feelings of adolescence (Yılmaz, 2004).

According to Erden (2005), individuals who are likely to present alexithymia symptoms have low levels of anger management. Individuals who suffer from alexithymia cannot get to the bottom of problems generally and they deal with problems only superficially. This case of making a judgment without getting to the bottom of problems causes increase in anger levels unavoidably. Since they cannot establish cause and effect relations and involve their feelings in this process, anger levels increase inevitably (Atasayar, 2011).

Kesen, Deniz, and Durmuşoğlu (2007) revealed in their research conducted on adolescents that levels of aggression, and anger increase with age. Various experiences effecting individuals in adolescence, along with adolescence-specific problems can cause very intense and frequent anger experiences (Serin & Genç, 2011). Yavuzer (2010), states that multilateral change and developmental difficulties experienced in adolescence in which individuals encounter various and troublesome problems may cause aggression. Similarly, research on anger in adolescents revealed that adolescents demonstrate more aggressive behaviors than primary school children (Singer et al., 1999).

Another concept studied in the current research is cybervictimization. Previous research on the subject field have focused on the concept of cyberbullying, and haven't paid adequate attention on the concept of cybervictimization. Guzzo, Pace, Lo Cascio, Craparo, and Schimmenti (2014) found that, cybervictimization is related to post-traumatic stress disorder and alexithymia. There is direct positive relationship between cybervictimization and expression of anger as internal and external, but there is indirect positive relationship between cyberbullying and expression of anger as inner (Ak, Ozdemir & Kuzucu, 2015). On the other hand, these researchers agree that individuals exposed to bullying (victims) are in the risk group in terms of many psychological variables (Craig & Pepler, 2003).

Previous research in the literature report that roles of individuals as victim, bully or bystander are obviously affected from many other existing psychopathologies (Twemlow, Sacco, & Williams, 1996). Many previous research revealed that bully-victims present higher rates of depression (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Rantanen, & Rimpelä, 2000), anhedonia (Kumpulainen, Rasanen, Henttonen, Almqvist, Kresanov et al., 1998), somatization (Forero, McLellan, Rissel, & Bauman, 1999), and reference to psychiatric clinics (Kumpulainen et al., 1998) than pure bullies or individuals who are not involved in bullying. Besides, it was reported that bullies and victims have the higher rates of behavioral problems than non-bully-victims (Austin & Joseph, 1996; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000). In addition, it was found that, bullies and victims suffer from psychosocial problems including interpersonal problems significantly (Nansel et al., 2001). When the level of cyberbullying is investigated according to psychological indications, it is found that there is positive relationship between cyberbullying level and anger, hostility, depression, interpersonal sensitiveness and psychotism (Batmaz & Ayas, 2013). Moreover, Twemlow et al. (1996), claim that in addition to many psychopathological effects caused by bullying, alexithymia also effects the reactions of bullies, victims and bystanders.

In this regard, the purpose of the present study is to examine the effects of gender, anger expression styles and alexithymia in particular, on cyberbullying and victimization. The present study is considered to fill an existing gap in the literature. Within the frame of this research, the answers to the following research questions are sought: