Research Report

The personality profile of a cyberbully: Examining the Dark Triad

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the relationships between the Dark Triad personality traits and self-reported cyberbullying behaviors. College students ($N = 227$) completed a questionnaire and reported on their trait Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism, and the degree to which they cyberbullied (i.e., both visual and text based bullying) others in the past year. Correlations revealed that all three Dark Triad traits were related positively with cyberbullying. However, multiple regression analysis revealed that of the three Dark Triad traits, psychopathy emerged as the unique predictor of cyberbullying. These findings reinforce extant research suggesting that personality traits are important predictors of computer-mediated behavior.

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1. Introduction

Unequivocally, various forms of bullying (e.g., physical, verbal, relational, damage to property, etc.) pose a serious problem for students and society in general (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014; Smith & Brain, 2000). Thankfully, bullying is becoming less accepted as a "normal part of childhood" and instead, is now being addressed by schools as a considerable threat (Limber & Small, 2003). Because of the harmful consequences of bullying, personality researchers frequently examine and explain the bullying problem, in part, as a manifestation of individual differences (e.g., Mynard & Joseph, 1997; Sutton & Keogh, 2000; Tani, Greenman, Schneider, & Fregoso, 2003). One form of bullying, cyberbullying, is particularly problematic because as schools, parents, and communities attempt to combat it, perpetrators find new and creative ways to victimize others through the use of evolving technologies (e.g., new cell phone apps, social networking websites, messaging programs). As Menesini and Spiel (2012) pointed out, "although some consistent findings have been reached so far, there is still a lack of knowledge about developmental processes of cyberbullying and on possible predictors and correlates, such as personality" (p. 164). Therefore, the current study examined cyberbullying behavior as an expression of undesirable personality traits (i.e., the Dark Triad).

1.1. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is considered "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (Smith & Slonje, 2012, p. 249). Cyberbullying is a prevalent problem affecting between 20% and 40% of youths (Tokunaga, 2010), typically via mobile phones and the Internet (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Cyberbullying is communicated using channels such as text messages, website postings, emails, pictures, and video clips (Smith & Slonje, 2012) that attempt to harass, denigrate, impersonate, or ostracize others (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012). Students report varying motivations for engaging in cyberbullying including revenge, jealousy, boredom, and seeking approval (Varjas, Talley, Meyers, Parris, & Cutts, 2010).

Most cyberbullies spend a considerable amount of time online and engage in risky online behaviors, but there are important individual/personality differences that predict this behavior beyond characteristics of Internet use (Görzig & Olafsson, 2013). For instance, cyberbullies tend to have personalities that lack self-control and sensitivity; they tend to be higher in psychoticism (Ozden & Icellioglu, 2014) and verbal aggressiveness (Roberto, Eden, Savage, Ramos-Salazar, & Deiss, 2014) and lower in empathy (Doane, Pearson, & Kelly, 2014). Preliminary evidence suggests that personality traits do predict cyberbullying behavior. The current study was designed to determine if cyberbullies have a personality profile inclusive of the Dark Triad traits.

1.2. Dark Triad

The Dark Triad refers to three distinct, yet undesirable (to other individuals) personality traits: (a) Machiavellianism, which refers to a tendency to strategically manipulate others, (b) psychopathy, which refers to a tendency to lack empathy and engage in impulsive and thrill-seeking behavior, and (c) narcissism, which refers to a tendency to feel superior, grandiose, and entitled (Paulhus &

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Williams, 2002). These three traits are considered to be exploitative and "show an indifference to the harm they cause to others in the course of achieving their goals" (Jones & Paulhus, 2011, p. 253). Jones and Figueredo (2013) revealed that all three traits share a common antagonistic core of callousness and manipulation. Other studies have highlighted similar commonalities in these traits such as deficits in empathy (Jonason & Krause, 2013; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012) and a lack of agreeableness (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006).

The Dark Triad traits are heritable (Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008) and are associated with numerous undesirable individual differences and behaviors including vengeance (Giammaco & Vernon, 2014), anger (Veselka, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2014), aggressive humor (Martin, Lastuk, Jeffery, Vernon, & Veselka, 2012), scholastic cheating (Williams, Nathanson, & Paulhus, 2010), social dominance orientation (Jones & Figueredo, 2013), prejudice (Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009), and short term mating strategies (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). Moreover, individuals who possess the Dark Triad traits experience psychosocial costs (Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013) due to a lack of self-control (Jonason & Tost, 2010), emotional intelligence (Petrides, Vernon, Schermer, & Veselka, 2011), and equity sensitivity (Woodley & Allen, 2014).

1.3. Rationale/hypotheses

There is ample reason to believe that students' Dark Triad traits should predict cyberbullying behavior. First, traditional forms of bullying have been directly linked to personality traits. For instance, traditional bullying (not electronically based, but rather physical, verbal, racial/ethnic, indirect, sexual) is associated negatively with honesty and agreeableness traits (Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012) but positively with callous-unemotional traits (Ciucci & Baroncelli, 2014); those same callous-unemotional traits are also related to cyberbullying (Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa, 2012). The first study to directly investigate the Dark Triad and traditional bullying (i.e., physical and verbal) revealed that all three traits were related positively with bullying, but psychopathy was most strongly related (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012, see note). Undoubtedly, then, the extant research supports the link between personality and more traditional forms of bullying.

Second, there is empirical evidence to suggest that much like traditional bullying that is enacted face to face, cyberbullying too, should be associated with the Dark Triad traits. For instance, the Dark Triad traits predict negative Internet behavior including trolling on websites (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014), posting negatively-valenced Facebook status updates (Garcia & Sikström, 2014), and using swear words and anger expressions on Twitter (Sumner, Byers, Boochever, & Park, 2012). Given the collective findings that suggest the Dark Triad traits predict traditional bullying and negative Internet behavior, we would expect that these traits would also predict cyberbullying. Therefore, we offered three hypotheses:

H1. Machiavellianism will be related positively to reports of cyberbullying.

H2. Psychopathy will be related positively to reports of cyberbullying.

H3. Narcissism will be related positively to reports of cyberbullying.

Consistent with previous research on the Dark Triad that considers these three exploitative traits to overlap statistically (e.g.,

Baughman et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2010), we were interested in determining the unique contribution of these traits as predictors for cyberbullying. Therefore, we posed the following research question:

RQ. To what extent do the Dark Triad traits (i.e., Machiavellianism, psychopathy, narcissism) uniquely predict reports of cyberbullying?

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

The participants in this study were 227 undergraduate students (104 men, 112 women, 11 did not identify sex) who were enrolled in an introductory communication studies course. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 40 years ($M = 20.97$, $SD = 2.32$). Most participants reported being online in the past month (97.8%, $n = 222$) and owning a cell phone (98.7%, $n = 227$). Participants also reported being frequent Internet and mobile phone users which are the most common channels for cyberbullying (Slonje & Smith, 2008); they reported using a variety of websites and applications including Facebook (86.8%, $n = 197$), YouTube (95.2%, $n = 216$), Instagram (76.7%, $n = 174$), Snapchat (73.1%, $n = 166$), and Twitter (80.2%, $n = 182$). After obtaining IRB approval, participants completed a questionnaire that measured their Dark Triad traits and their cyberbullying behavior in the past year.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Dark Triad

The Dark Triad was measured using Jonason and Webster's (2010) Dirty Dozen. The Dirty Dozen is 12 items and measures trait Machiavellianism (4 items, e.g., "I tend to manipulate others to get my way"), psychopathy (4 items, e.g., "I tend to lack remorse"), and narcissism (4 items, e.g., "I tend to want others to admire me"). Participants were asked to indicate the degree each item applied to them using a 5-point response format ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much). Several validity studies have been conducted for this measure providing support for the structural properties of this measure; including Jonason and Luévano (2013) findings for construct validity and Webster and Jonason's (2013) item response theory analysis of the measure. In this study, the Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .79$, $M = 10.00$, $SD = 3.51$), psychopathy ($\alpha = .80$, $M = 7.41$, $SD = 3.35$), and narcissism ($\alpha = .82$, $M = 13.27$, $SD = 4.39$) subscales performed reliably.

2.2.2. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying was measured using Griezel, Finger, Bodkin-Andrews, Craven, and Yeung's (2012) Revised Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument (RAPRI). The RAPRI is 26 items and measures cyberbullying from both the bully's and target's perspectives. Only the 13 items (2 subscales) that measure the bully's perspective were included. These subscales included visual-based cyberbullying (5 items, e.g., "In the past year at this school, I used a mobile phone to send other students a video of a student I knew would embarrass them") and text-based cyberbullying (8 items, e.g., "In the past year at this school, I wrote nasty things about a student on a profile page"). Participants responded using a 6-point format ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (every day). Griezel et al. (2012) report evidence for the structural validity of the scale. In this study, the visual ($\alpha = .84$, $M = 8.93$, $SD = 4.29$) and text ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 11.34$, $SD = 5.13$) cyberbullying subscales performed reliably.

3. Results

Intercorrelations among variables and reliability coefficients are presented in Table 1.