



# The impact and response to electronic bullying and traditional bullying among adolescents



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## ABSTRACT

With adolescents' frequent use of social media, electronic bullying has emerged as a powerful platform for peer victimization. The present two studies explore how adolescents perceive electronic vs. traditional bullying in emotional impact and strategic responses. In Study 1, 97 adolescents (mean age = 15) viewed hypothetical peer victimization scenarios, in parallel electronic and traditional forms, with female characters experiencing indirect relational aggression and direct verbal aggression. In Study 2, 47 adolescents (mean age = 14) viewed the direct verbal aggression scenario from Study 1, and a new scenario, involving male characters in the context of direct verbal aggression. Participants were asked to imagine themselves as the victim in all scenarios and then rate their emotional reactions, strategic responses, and goals for the outcome. Adolescents reported significant negative emotions and disruptions in typical daily activities as the victim across divergent bullying scenarios. In both studies few differences emerged when comparing electronic to traditional bullying, suggesting that online and off-line bullying are subtypes of peer victimization. There were expected differences in strategic responses that fit the medium of the bullying. Results also suggested that embarrassment is a common and highly relevant negative experience in both indirect relational and direct verbal aggression among adolescents.

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## 1. Introduction

Concern about school based bullying has recently grown to include peer aggression that occurs through social media. With the dramatic increase in adolescents' use of social media and the time spent in unsupervised interaction on social media, there is a concurrent rise in opportunity for bullying within this medium. Prior to the rise of social media, bullying was typically conceptualized as the result of an exchange between at least two people, a bully and a victim, in direct *face-to-face* contact with each other. Given the scope of bullying and the potential damage to healthy development, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Education have recognized it as a significant public health concern. The CDC has provided a uniform definition to support effective scholarship, prevention and intervention:

Any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners

that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014, p. 7).

Bullying that occurs through social media popularly referred to as "cyberbullying" is labeled "electronic bullying" by the CDC. Social media is an often-used form of interaction among adolescents with 95% of 12–17 year olds reporting utilization of the Internet (Lenhart et al., 2011). It should be noted that in electronic bullying the unwanted aggressive behavior may be perceived by the victim as repeated not due to repeated acts of the bully but rather, due to the enduring nature of electronic content with repeated viewings and potential for being shared widely. Given the distinct qualities of electronic bullying, questions arise regarding the nature and intensity of emotional and strategic responses of youth to electronic vs. traditional bullying.

Being a victim of traditional bullying is connected to a number of negative academic, social, and psychological consequences (e.g., Nansel et al., 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1991). Similar negative consequences have been reported through survey research for victims

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of electronic bullying, including school avoidance, truancy, eating disorders, depression, poor self-esteem, and suicidal ideation or suicide (e.g., Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). However, despite the tragic examples of electronic bullying reflected in the media, little experimental research distinguishing electronic bullying from traditional bullying has been completed (for exceptions, see Pieschl, Porsch, Kahl, & Klockenbusch, 2013; Sticca & Perren, 2013). The present research is one of a few initial efforts to move beyond correlational and retrospective designs by providing adolescents with specific hypothetical scenarios in order to examine how adolescents conceptualize and strategize about bullying and electronic bullying.

The negative behaviors involved in bullying are often identified as direct, including overtly aggressive behaviors such as physical acts (e.g., pushing, punching) and verbal acts (e.g., insults, teasing), or indirect, which includes relationally aggressive acts designed to damage social relationships (e.g., spreading rumors, social exclusion). Similar to traditional bullying, most electronic bullying requires an intentional act committed by an individual or group in order to cause harm or distress to another individual or group but done through electronic communication technologies (Beran & Li, 2005; Mason, 2008). In one recent study, respondents were asked about different types of electronic bullying they were exposed to (Aricak et al., 2008) with 19% reporting threats while 81% reported some form of embarrassment (e.g., teasing, insults, rumors, or pictures displayed by others without consent). Although electronic bullying also requires a power differential between the bully and the victim (Mason, 2008), across online and off-line contexts the source of a bully's strength and the reasons why a victim feels defenseless may vary considerably. As opposed to traditional bullying in which bullies often rely on a combination of attractiveness, local popularity, and physical strength as a source of power, it has been hypothesized that in electronic bullying the power is based more exclusively on a bully's social connectedness and prestige all of which are visible on social networking site profiles (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). For adolescents, who are especially concerned about what others think of them and are more likely to believe others are always watching (Elkind, 1967), electronic bullying that interrupts relationships, can be seen by many, and remains visible over time may be particularly upsetting. In the present research, the social media of Facebook was approximated and the numbers of "liked", tagged photos, and "friends" were all considered with the bully appearing more popular than the victim.

As with traditional bullying, a number of negative consequences have been associated with electronic bullying. Self-report data indicate that adolescents who are victims of electronic bullying experience a number of emotional consequences (e.g., feelings of sadness, depression, anxiety, fear), as well as behavioral difficulties (e.g., missing school, difficulty concentrating, losing trust in peers, and falling grades; Beran & Li, 2005; Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007) that are similar to traditional bullying (Bauman & Newman, 2013). Utilizing a retrospective self-report methodology with college students, Bauman and Newman (2013) found that perceived distress at a bullying situation was not consistently related to the form of bullying (i.e., electronic or traditional), but rather related to the factors involved in the specific situation. Similarly, Sticca and Perren (2013) note that "cyberbullying is not a priori perceived as worse than traditional bullying" (p. 739), but that certain factors (e.g., publicity of the bullying) determine adolescents' perceived level of distress. Therefore, the present two studies examine adolescents' emotional and strategic responses to bullying in distinct online and off-line scenarios.

In a large self-report study, 1852 adolescents between the ages of 4 and 19 who had been bullied participated in an online survey about responses to traditional bullying (Craig, Pepler, & Blais,

2007). Youth were presented with 12 possible strategies to cope with peer victimization (e.g., telling parents, telling other students, standing up to the bully, distraction, ignoring bullying), and asked to endorse which strategies they had utilized. The most frequent response, endorsed by approximately 50% of the respondents, was that they had tried to ignore the bullying.

Smith et al. (2008) utilized large-scale surveys and focus groups to assess 11–16 year-olds' beliefs regarding the best ways to stop electronic bullying. When provided with a list of possible ways to cope with electronic bullying, the most commonly endorsed strategies were to block messages/identities (75%), tell someone (63%), change email address/phone number (57%), and ignoring the behavior (41%). In traditional bullying prevention programs, telling an adult is often a recommended strategy. However, there is evidence to suggest that traditional victims are more likely to tell others than victims of electronic bullying (Smith et al., 2008). In research examining who victims tell about electronic bullying, the most frequent responses are to tell "no one" or "friends", with parents and teachers reported far less often (Aricak et al., 2008; Dehue et al., 2008; National Children's Home, 2005; Slonje & Smith, 2008). It is possible that adolescents are more willing to tell friends (as opposed to parents or teachers) about both electronic and traditional bullying, as friends are an important source of social and emotional support during this developmental period. In addition, a substantial number of adolescents do not think school staff would or could do anything to stop electronic bullying (47%). These findings highlight the need to better understand if adolescents would respond differently to comparable bullying situations across off-line and online contexts in order to provide parents and professionals with guidance on how best to help those being bullied.

## 2. The present studies

The present two studies build on the existing research by examining 9th and 10th grade adolescents' perceptions of the impact and ways to respond to electronic bullying vs. traditional bullying. As mentioned above, the majority of research to date has used self-report survey methodologies, which have notable limitations (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). The current research uses a design that allows adolescents to respond to specific hypothetical scenarios one focused on a situation involving threat of overt aggression (OA), and the other focused on a situation involving relational aggression (RA). These were chosen as prior research has suggested that threat of OA and RA (specifically, embarrassment) situations are the most commonly experienced types of bullying for adolescents (e.g., Aricak et al., 2008; Huang & Chou, 2010; Lenhart, 2007). Adolescents viewed the same scenarios in both traditional and online formats to make direct comparisons possible.

Since December 2007, Facebook has become one of the most frequently used social networking sites (Smith, 2009b). Because of Facebook's popularity among adolescents, the present research was designed to mimic this social networking site. The present research is divided into two distinct studies: the first study examined male and female adolescents' responses to two scenarios, OA and RA, with female characters only. The second study replicates the OA scenario and adds the examination of male and female adolescents' responses to an OA scenario with male characters (as opposed to female characters). Analyses focus on adolescents' ratings of their emotional reactions and problem solving strategies in response to the bullying scenarios. We hypothesize that the bullying scenarios involving OA will elicit more negative emotion and distinct strategies in traditional vs. electronic platforms. In contrast, with RA, we hypothesize a more negative emotional impact online. We also predict that males will be more distressed by the OA bullying scenarios and females by the RA scenarios.

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