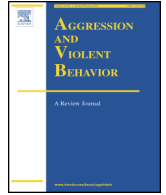




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Aggression and Violent Behavior



Cyber violence: What do we know and where do we go from here?

Jillian Peterson^{a,*}, James Densley^b^a Hamline University, USA^b Metropolitan State University, USA

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the existing literature on the relationship between social media and violence, including prevalence rates, typologies, and the overlap between cyber and in-person violence. This review explores the individual-level correlates and risk factors associated with cyber violence, the group processes involved in cyber violence, and the macro-level context of online aggression. The paper concludes with a framework for reconciling conflicting levels of explanation and presents an agenda for future research that adopts a selection, facilitation, or enhancement framework for thinking about the causal or contingent role of social media in violent offending. Remaining empirical questions and new directions for future research are discussed.

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* Corresponding author at: Hamline University, 1536 Hewitt Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105, USA
E-mail address: jpeterson68@hamline.edu (J. Peterson).

1. Introduction

In a little over a decade, social media has become “a vector for youth violence,” and dramatically changed the landscape for aggressive behavior (Patton et al., 2014). There is a growing body of literature concerned with understanding “electronic aggression”, which has been described as an “emerging public health problem” (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). Perpetrators of in-person aggression have begun using social media in the furtherance of violent activity. Research suggests street gangs and drug cartels, for example, use social media to incite violence (Moule, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2013; Moule, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2014; Pyrooz, Decker, & Moule, 2015; Womer & Bunker, 2010). Terror groups utilize social media to project force (i.e., videos showing assassinations, torture, threats), and recruit into violent extremism (Holt, 2012; Kennedy & Weimann, 2011). Hate groups use online chat-rooms to encourage interracial violence (Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002). The customers of prostitutes solicit illicit sexual services online (Holt & Blevins, 2007) and pedophiles and sexual predators access the Internet to gain access to vulnerable potential victims (Goldsmith & Brewer, 2015; Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010; Quayle & Taylor, 2002).

At the same time, social media has introduced new forms of aggression and violence that occur exclusively online. Studies find cyber-bullying and harassment, including threatening or sexual messages delivered via social media, for example, are common among juvenile populations (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008, 2009; Lim, Chan, Vadrevu, & Basnyat, 2012). Despite the above, the scientific fields generally concerned with violent behavior—namely criminology, psychology, and sociology—have produced very little research on the prevalence or etiology of various forms of cyber violence (Brown, 2015). Some argue the study of “virtual criminality” is merely “old wine in new bottles” (Grabosky, 2001) or a “technological variation of ordinary crime” (McQuade, 2006, p. 6), thus is already explained via existing social science theory (e.g., Choi, 2008; Williams, 2008; Yar, 2005). Yardley and Wilson (2014), for example, found when perpetrators of homicide used social networking sites in their crimes, it was in ways largely typical of general homicide offenders. Others suggest current theories of in-person violence may not apply to the rapidly changing world of cyber violence (e.g., Jaishankar, 2008). Clarke (2004), p. 55 argues, for instance, the Internet has created “completely new” opportunities and environments for “traditional crimes” to “take new forms”.

This paper asks what we know about cyber violence and highlights what we do not know, but need to. It aims to review and organize the extant literature on the relationship between social media and violence. In doing so, we offer one of the first comprehensive reviews of a relatively young but burgeoning literature (c.f., Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013), but also readily identify the gaps in existing knowledge to advance an agenda that might reconcile the “level of explanation problem” (Short, 1985, 1998) currently present in research on cyber violence. To this end, we ask whether the relationship between social media and violence is explained by selection, facilitation, or enhancement, thus evoking a framework of testable hypotheses more commonly associated with the positive correlation between offending and gang membership (Pyrooz, Turanovic, Decker, & Wu, 2016). Our aim is to discuss (1) the individual-level correlates and risks associated with cyber violence, (2) the group processes involved in cyber violence, and (3) the macro-level context of online aggression, so that future research may disentangle them.

2. What do we know about cyber violence?

One of the most cited typologies of cybercrime, developed by Wall (2001), suggests four forms of offending that exist in virtual environments: deception/theft, pornography, violence, and cyber-trespass. This paper is concerned primarily with violence, or what Holt (2011) describes as “cyber violence”. Further, this review focuses attention on violence via social media and social networking sites, broadly defined

as “public mediated spaces” such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram (Boyd, 2014, p. 137). Social media represents a shift toward a more “user-centred” (Van Dijck, 2013) and “user-generated” (Boyd, 2014) Internet, characterized by “spreadable media” (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) and “participatory” youth culture (Burgess & Green, 2009). Multi-platform or “polymedia” use is common, whereby individuals use different social media platforms for different forms of communication (Madianou & Miller, 2013). Burgess and Green (2009, p. 102) argue that even YouTube has evolved into a social networking site, “one in which videos (rather than friending) are the primary media of social connection between participants”.

2.1. Prevalence of cyber violence

Cyber violence is difficult to define, let alone systematically track. As a result, prevalence rates are largely unknown. There have been a number of large-scale, national surveys of youth that examine cyber bullying and cyber dating violence. For example, one study used a large national telephone survey ($N = 4561$) of youth ages 10–17 during 2000, 2005, and 2010 (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013). The rate of online harassment nearly doubled in a decade, from 6% in 2000 to 11% in 2010. Girls made up 69% of victims, an increase from 2000, and were more likely to report the incident occurred on a social networking site like Facebook. The reported rates of cyber-bullying in another national survey of 1588 youth ages 10–15 in 2008 were much higher (Ybarra, Mitchell, & Korchmaros, 2011). This study used a national, online survey of randomly selected households. In the last wave of this study, nearly 40% of the sample reported being victimized at some point and nearly 25% of the sample reported perpetrating harassment online.

Whether or not there is a gender difference in cyber aggression and violence is also unclear. Lowe and Espalogue (2013) posit males typically have higher rates of physical bullying, but females may actually display higher rates of cyber aggression. Ybarra et al. (2011) found no gender difference in rates of cyber-bullying in their national survey. However, a recent cyber-bullying meta-analysis by Barlett and Coyne (2014) examined 122 effect sizes to explore whether or not there is a gender difference in prevalence rates. The results showed that girls were more likely to engage in cyber bullying during younger age (mid-adolescence) and boys were more likely to engage in cyber-bullying during later years (late adolescence).

Girls also are more likely to experience cyber-dating violence. In a survey focused on relationship violence among 5647 youth, over 25% of participants who were in a current or recent relationship experienced a form of cyber dating abuse victimization that year, with higher rates among girls (Zweig, Dank, Yahner, & Lachman, 2013). One out of 10 participants in this study reported perpetrating cyber-dating abuse. Unfortunately, beyond these studies in adolescence, there are virtually no prevalence studies of experiencing or perpetrating cyber aggression and violence in adulthood. Prevalence rates of traditional criminals using social media to facilitate violence (i.e. gang members, terror group members, sex offenders) are few and far between (e.g., Moule et al., 2013).

2.2. Overlap with traditional violence

Cyber violence can lead to similar levels of fear and distress as real-world violence (Bocij, 2004; Finn, 2004; Wall, 2001). One important question is whether or not the same individuals who perpetrate traditional forms of aggression and violence perpetrate cyber violence? Is the Internet simply a new place for antisocial individuals to carry out aggressive acts, or do social media attracts a new and distinct group of aggressors, who are violent exclusively online? Research in this area is still in its early stages.

One survey of 1672 middle school students used cluster analysis to examine the overlap between overt, relational, and cyber aggressors (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Dempsey, & Storch, 2011). The data did show

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