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Comparing electronic and traditional bullying in embarrassment and exclusion scenarios



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ABSTRACT

Electronic bullying continues to increase yet remains under-researched (e.g., Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2015). This is especially true for college populations, a group that often uses online technology (Duggan & Brenner, 2014). A paucity of experimentally designed studies have examined and compared behavioral and emotional responses to bullying situations in both electronic and traditional formats. This study seeks to elucidate differences and similarities between the two bullying formats specifically examining cognitive, strategic, and emotional responses. We utilized an experimental design with hypothetical scenarios to investigate college students' social-cognitive responses to two forms of relational bullying: embarrassment and exclusion, presented in traditional and electronic formats. Participants were 124 college-age students at a mid-size Northeastern university. Results demonstrated different emotional responses and behavioral responses depending on the medium (electronic versus traditional). Specifically, in terms of emotions, participants felt higher embarrassment in traditional bullying scenarios and higher anger in electronic bullying scenarios. In terms of behavioral responses participants were more likely to seek help in traditional bullying scenarios compared to using the avoidance strategies of joking when bullying occurred online. Additionally, qualitative responses regarding the impact of bullying medium were analyzed and significant differences were found regarding reasons for the bullying severity and impact depending on medium. This study demonstrates several important differences between electronic and traditional bullying in terms of emotional and behavioral responses as well as qualitative reports of severity.

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1. Introduction

Electronic bullying has entered national awareness as a prevalent and serious phenomenon. Numerous studies indicate the negative social-emotional outcomes associated with electronic bullying, ranging from increased rates of anger, anxiety, depression, and suicidality (e.g., Li, 2005; Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007; Tokunaga, 2010). Electronic bullying is becoming increasingly widespread, with minimum estimated prevalence rates of approximately 15% in high school students (Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012) and 8.6% in college students (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). The frequency of electronic bullying has steadily risen as the usage of the Internet and social media by children and

young adults has grown, making this a pressing and worsening concern (e.g., Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2015). Although electronic bullying has proliferated, it has remained under-researched. This is evident in the rarity of studies experimentally examining electronic bullying in college populations, one of the groups most frequently online (e.g., see Lindsay & Krysik, 2011). Furthermore, a paucity of controlled studies exists on reactions to electronic bullying and attempts to problem solve electronic bullying situations when they arise.

1.1. Electronic bullying

Bullying has been defined as unwanted, harmful aggressive acts that are repeated over time, occurring in the context of a relationship where a power differential exists (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014). Acts that are physical or verbal are categorized as "overt" while acts intended to harm the social relationships or social standing of the victim are termed "relational"

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(also referred to overt and relational aggression and victimization; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Electronic bullying is considered similar to traditional bullying, but enacted using electronic means of social contact (Sticca & Perren, 2013). This can include social media, email, text messaging, and phone calls amongst other forms of electronic communication (American Psychological Association, 2017).

The medium in which bullying occurs differentiates electronic and traditional bullying. Given the unique setting of electronic bullying, several structural and functional characteristics of electronic bullying are distinct and likely distinguish the experience from traditional bullying. While traditional bullying is defined as acts that are repeated over time (or very likely to be), a single act of electronic bullying can function as repeated and widespread aggression. By virtue of placing harmful or damaging material online where it can be viewed repeatedly, indefinitely, and by an unknown number of individuals, one act of electronic bullying can be seen as causing harm repeatedly (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009). Electronic bullying also extends to multiple environments where individuals have historically felt safe from such attacks, such as the home. This is in contrast to traditional bullying, which is restricted to environments where the aggressor and victim are in physical proximity to one another. Some evidence suggests that the extension of electronic bullying into previously “safe” environments results in an increased level of harm and disruption related to this type of bullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008).

Preliminary research has also sought to elucidate differences in the experience of victims of traditional versus electronic bullying. Unlike traditional bullying, Waasdorp and Bradshaw (2015) found that victims of electronic bullying often believed the perpetrator to be a friend. Furthermore, electronic bullying was more likely to include relational aggression compared to traditional bullying. Relational aggression can be easily conveyed via cellular phones, social networking sites, and email, and frequently occurs between two individuals with pre-existing relationships (e.g., within one friend group; e.g., Lindsay, Booth, Messing, & Thaller, 2015). While these relationships may differ, the negative emotional outcomes of electronic bullying have been shown to be similar to or, in some cases, more severe than traditional bullying. Initial evidence suggests that victims of electronic bullying have lower self-esteem, higher levels of depression, and lower psychosocial adjustment compared to victims of traditional bullying (Mitchell et al., 2007; Tokunaga, 2010). Victims of electronic bullying are more likely to also be victims of traditional bullying, even though the negative psychological results of the each type of bullying were independent of one another (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Dempsey, & Storch, 2011; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2015). Previous studies indicate that electronic bullying has allowed traditional bullying victims to now be harassed in a variety of media, perhaps compounding the emotional distress associated with bullying (e.g., Dempsey et al., 2011; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2015). The literature furthermore demonstrates that electronic bullying is an increasingly prevalent occurrence with a wide range of negative, serious outcomes (e.g. Tokunaga, 2010).

1.2. Bullying in college settings

College students represent a relatively under-studied population in the literature for both traditional and electronic bullying. Individuals age 18–29 spend substantial amounts of time online and are the most active Internet users in the United States (Lindsay et al., 2015). Adding to this, social networking sites, popular in both younger and older adolescent populations, were started on college campuses, indicating that this age group is particularly well versed

in online communication. In addition, college students typically come directly from high schools, where traditional and electronic bullying are known to be prevalent and problematic (Mitchell et al., 2007; Nansel et al., 2001). Chapell, Hasselman, Kitchin, and Lomon (2006) found that 40% of elementary or high school perpetrators or victims of bullying remained in this position in college. Thus, it may be that those victimized by electronic bullying in high school experience similar victimization in college, akin to the trajectories of those who are victims of traditional bullying. Prevalence of electronic bullying in college settings have ranged, most likely as a function of researchers' varying definitions, from 8.6% to 52% for electronic bullying and 3.7%–40% for cyberstalking (Lindsay et al., 2015). This high prevalence warrants further focused research on electronic bullying among emerging adults in educational settings.

Furthermore, peer relationships are extremely important in the college population. Peer groups provide a sense of belonging and dyadic relationships allow for intimacy and validation (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). When adolescents transition to college, they typically are no longer with their core peer group that provided support and friendship during high school. Adolescents frequently move away from home to attend college, resulting in a diminished level of instrumental support previously provided by one's nuclear family. Because of these changes, Storch, Bagner, Geffken, and Baumeister (2004) argue that college students, perhaps more than high-school-age adolescents, rely primarily on their peers for a variety of forms of support, including social, emotional, and instrumental support.

In addition to the increased importance of peer relationships and support among college students, students transitioning to college are in a new social environment where they likely do not have established social groups. The process of navigating a novel social environment and solidifying new roles within peer groups may increase both peer aggression and vulnerability (Pellegrini, 2004; Rospenda, Richman, Wolff, & Burke, 2013). Therefore, college students may be particularly susceptible to bullying and rejection by their peers. Due to the lack of established peer groups, Werner and Crick (1999) have argued that indirect, or relational aggression is particularly important to study in this age group. Of note, high levels of relational aggression appear to be associated with higher levels of a number of negative psychosocial factors for college students, such as social anxiety, depressive symptoms, hostility, and antisocial and borderline personality features (Leenaars & Lester, 2011; Leenaars & Rinaldi, 2010; Storch et al., 2004; Werner & Crick, 1999).

Thus far, the majority of work on relational aggression in college student populations has been focused on retrospective, self-report measures. These retrospective measures typically ask students about their own experiences with peer victimization, with a focus on prevalence, victim and aggressor characteristics, and type of electronic bullying (e.g., Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014). Although further research is needed, these studies have demonstrated several important findings. Previous studies have indicated that relational aggression and relational victimization (being the recipient of relational aggression) are related for high school and college students similarly. For example, college students who report high levels of relational victimization often also report high levels of relational aggression (e.g., Leenaars & Lester, 2011; Leenaars & Rinaldi, 2010). This is consistent with research on younger populations indicating significant overlap in the groups of children who perpetrate and are victimized by peer aggression (Haynie et al., 2001; Kumpulainen & Räsänen, 2000). Sticca and Perren (2013) conducted one of the few experimentally designed studies on electronic bullying. The authors found that severity of the emotional experience of bullying depended less on just the medium itself and more on the publicity (higher publicity indicated

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