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Cyberbullying victimization in higher education: An exploratory analysis of its association with social and emotional factors among Spanish students



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ABSTRACT

Few studies have analyzed cyberbullying victimization among university students in comparison to research conducted in other educational levels. The main purpose was to analyze the associations between the cyberbullying victimization and social and emotional factors such as involvement in traditional bullying victimization and perpetration, loneliness, self-esteem and perceived acceptance by friends. The results from a sample of 243 university students from social sciences confirmed the presence of cyberbullying victimization in the university context. Logistic regression revealed that perceived acceptance by peers was found to be significantly associated with cyberbullying victimization, such that those with low perceived acceptance were most likely to report experience of cyberbullying. Involvement in traditional bullying victimization during previous educational levels was also a risk factor for cyberbullying victimization, such that as involvement in traditional victimization increase, likelihood of cyberbullying victimization increases. Research and practice implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, given the increase in the use of ICTs across the globe, concern has been growing among researchers, authorities and practitioners about the Internet's potential for what seems to be an evolved manifestation of traditional bullying. Cyberbullying is defined as “any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others” (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278). Like traditional bullying, cyberbullying has been described as an aggressive act characterized by imbalance of power, negative intentions on the side of perpetrator and repetition. Research has provided evidence that being the target of cyberbullying influences mental health increasing the risks of psychological and social problems (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Tsitsika et al., 2015). Indeed, the National Institutes of Health (2010) reported that the impact of the

cyberbullying could be even more damaging than traditional bullying, due to its own characteristics: 1) cyberbullying may reach a large audience rapidly; 2) it is difficult to escape from cyberbullying because it happens wherever the victim goes online; 3) perpetrators do not have to deal with the immediate emotional effects on their victim because they are separated by technology; and 4) victims have higher difficulties to escape from the perpetrators' actions given anonymity and the widespread diffusion of the victimization over the Internet (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013).

Although there is a growing body of research about cyberbullying among primary and secondary school students, cyberbullying among university students has been less explored, and most of the studies conducted to date have attempted to know the prevalence of cyberbullying behaviors in higher education institutions without analyzing risk or protective factors (Crosslin & Golman, 2014; Smith & Yoon, 2013). For that reason, this article focuses on the issue of cyberbullying victimization at one Spanish university analyzing how cyberbullying victimization is associated with previous involvement in traditional bullying and also with different social and emotional factors.

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1.1. Cyberbullying prevalence in higher education

Qualitative research has revealed that many university students do not believe cyberbullying is a serious problem in higher education and assure its incidence is lower in comparison to other educational levels (Baldasare, Bauman, Goldman, & Robie, 2012; Crosslin & Golman, 2014). Nevertheless, when asked about specific behaviors, nearly all admit they had some personal experiences at university. In this sense, university students believe that cyberbullying at high school is geared by appearance differences or hierarchy inside peer groups, whilst cyberbullying at university may originate in issues regarding sexuality, politics or social problems, which turn to be aggressive and finally result in cyberbullying (Kota, Schoohs, Benson, & Moreno, 2014).

Quantitative research has shown that the prevalence of cyberbullying victimization in higher education ranges from 8% to 56% and may include receiving threatening text messages, sexually harassing messages, spreading rumors and faking someone's identity. As shown in Table 1, the majority of the studies analyzing cyberbullying among university students have been conducted in the United States, followed by European countries (9 studies, with 4 in Turkey and 2 in Spain). The first study was conducted by Finn in 2004, whose results revealed that between 10% and 15% of the 339 participants from the University of New Hampshire had experienced cyberbullying through e-mail and instant messaging platforms. Later, starting in 2009 and mainly in 2010, there was an increase in studies regarding cyberbullying in different universities from United States after the death of two students that ended their lives as a result of the attacks they were receiving via the Internet. Studies in other countries began to appear from 2011 and, specifically in Spain, from 2015. Victimization prevalence rates in Spain are among the highest median with percentages between 52.7% and 56%.

Prevalence rates across the globe show that cyberbullying does not take place in certain parts of the world exclusively. Cyberbullying is a global phenomenon cutting across cultural groups and contexts (Ang, Huan, & Florell, 2014). Nevertheless, prevalence of cyberbullying vary from country to country. This variability is a consequence of the influence of cultural factors, but also due to

different methodological issues (Brochado, Soares, & Fraga, 2016). First, the criterion used to consider participation in cyberbullying. For example, participants being asked if they were targets or perpetrators of specific events (e.g. Akbulut & Eristi, 2011; Faucher et al., 2014; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009) or participants being asked if they feel as victims or perpetrators of different behaviors (e.g. Mateus et al., 2015; Molluzzo & Lawler, 2011; Schenk et al., 2013). Second, different cyberbullying measurement instruments used. Some of them including only one question asking if participants were or were not involved in cyberbullying, whereas other instruments including different behaviors that participants should rate according with the frequency of their involvement. These last scales have been proved to find more affirmative answers among participants than those including a direct question about participation in cyberbullying. Third, differences in the period of time considered by researchers in what the cyberbullying took place: during participants' whole life (e. g. Akbulut & Eristi, 2011; Dilmaç, 2009; Mateus et al., 2015), during the last year (e. g. Aricak, 2009; Faucher et al., 2014; Tomsa et al., 2013), the last six months (e. g. Zacchilli & Valerio, 2011) or at the current time (e. g. Poullet & Pinchot, 2014).

The high variability among all the studies included in the review reveal that the heterogeneity compromise comparability across countries and we should not just transfer the knowledge gained in other countries to different cultural contexts. Additionally, the fact that there are few studies on cyberbullying among university students in Spain indicate the importance of investigate whether empirical evidence from other countries is generalizable to our country.

1.2. Theoretical framework and cyberbullying

The majority of cyberbullying research among university students has been mostly atheoretical and descriptive. Recently, different researches made specific predictions regarding the antecedents of cyberbullying derived from the socio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) understanding that cyberbullying victimization is likely to originate or be maintained over time as a result of

Table 1
Summary of the studies analyzing cyberbullying prevalence among university students.

Authors	Country	Participants	Incidence (%)		
			Perpetrators	Victims	Mixed
Akbulut and Eristi (2011)	Turkey	254		81	
Aricak (2009)	Turkey	695		36.7	17.7
Caravaca et al. (2016)	Spain	543		52.7	
Dilmaç (2009)	Turkey	666		53	
Elipse, Mora-Merchán, Ortega-Ruiz, and Casas (2015)	Spain	636		54	
Englander, Mills, and McCoy (2009)	USA	283	3	8	
Faucher, Jackson, and Cassidy (2014)	Canada	1733		55 ¹	
Hoff and Mitchell (2009)	USA	351		56	
Kokkinos, Antoniadou, and Markos (2014)	Greek	430	14	11	33
Kraft and Wang (2010)	USA	471		10	
MacDonald and Roberts-Pittman (2010) ¹	USA	439	9	25	
Mateus, Veiga, Costa, and das Doreis (2015)	Portugal	519	8	27.4	
Molluzzo and Lawler (2011)	USA	110	3.6	9	
Poullet and Pinchot (2014)	USA	168		9	
Schenk and Fremouw (2012)	USA	799		8.6	
Schenk, Fremouw, and Keelan (2013)	USA	799	7.5		2.4
Selkie, Kota, Chan, and Moreno (2015)	USA	265	3	17	7.2
Smith and Yoon (2013)	USA	276		10	
Tomsa, Jenaro, Campbell, and Neacsu (2013)	Bulgaria	92	2.2	8.7	
Turan, Polat, Karapirli, Uysal, and Turan (2011)	Turkey	579		60	
Walker, Sockman, and Koehn (2011)	USA	120		11	
Washington (2014)	USA	140		12	
Whittaker and Kowalski (2015) ¹	USA	244	12	18.2	
Zalaquett and Chatters (2014)	USA	613		19	

¹ The data corresponds to social networks.

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