Adolescent cybervictimization — Who they turn to and their perceived school climate

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study was to understand how adolescent cybervictims perceive their school climate and whether telling school community members, such as teachers, play a significant role in these perceptions. Another objective was to understand whether age and gender played a significant role in the relation between whom cybervictims told and their perceived school climate. The *Cybervictims Scale for Adolescents and Children* and the *Perceived School Climate Scale* were applied to 3525 Portuguese students of whom 218 were cybervictims attending 6th, 8th, and 11th grades. Results showed that even though adolescent cybervictims reported cybervictimization more to friends and parents, those who told teachers about their experience, tended to report more positive perceptions of their school climate. Gender and age did not play a significant role in the relationship between cybervictimization and perceived school climate. Implications of the findings are discussed with regards to the role of teachers and in-service training in preventing cyberbullying.

Introduction

The quality of life of adolescents may be influenced by how satisfied they are with school (Wachs, 2012). Therefore, studying how they perceive their school climate (i.e., the quality and character of their school life) and bullying issues within their educational environment is vital because these variables may determine student behavior (Bayar & Uçanok, 2012; Souza, Veiga Simão, & Caetano, 2014). For instance, the literature has revealed a strong relation between aggressive behavior at school and acts of cyberbullying (Fletcher et al., 2014). Similarly to traditional bullying, cyberbullying consists of someone deliberately and repeatedly posting or sending harmful messages or engaging in other forms of social aggression

with the use of digital technologies with the aim of hurting someone else (Belsey, 2005; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Willard, 2004). Preventing these incidents is a complex task since it requires the support of members of a broader community in diverse contexts such as in the home and in schools (Brown, Jackson, & Cassidy, 2006; Smith & Slonje, 2010).

The literature has highlighted the need for research to focus on psychological factors in school, as well as on the interactions between school community members, such as students, teachers and parents, to work on positive school cultures and thus, prevent acts of aggression, such as cyberbullying (Baraldsnes, 2015). For instance, positive emotional support and peer relations (e.g. especially having friends) can help prevent such problems (Souza et al., 2014), but relationships among peers may constitute a risk factor if they engage in negative interactions (Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2012; Menesini, Nocentinni, & Paladino, 2012). Therefore, since teachers witness many interpersonal relationships develop among adolescents in school grounds (DeSmet et al., 2015; Eden, Heiman, & Olenik-Shemesh, 2013), it is essential to develop an open, inclusive, respectful and supportive school culture, so that the latter feel comfortable enough to tell their teachers about such incidents (Cross, Pintabona, Hall, Hamilton, & Erceg, 2004; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Moreover, the type of communication that is established between adolescents and their parents is also crucial in protecting them from and in incidents of cyberbullying (Elgar et al., 2014). In sum, it is fundamental to investigate adolescents' experiences at school, their perceived school climate and whom they turn to for support when involved in cyberbullying, because these incidents occur both outside and during school hours and have an impact on the school day (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Olweus, 2012a).

Adolescent cybervictims' perceptions of their school climate

Research on perceptions of school climate and violence is necessary, since the climate of learning environments has been found to determine adolescents' behavior (Bayar & Uçanok, 2012; Souza et al., 2014). Some research has focused on the importance of providing a positive school climate for adolescents (Chan & Wong, 2015) and how cyberbullying incidents may affect their behavior at school (Souza et al., 2014). For instance, adolescents with a low sense of belonging are likely to present more aggressive behavior at school (Farrington, 1991; Jenkins, 1997; Richard, Schneider, & Mallet, 2011), and online because cyberbullying incidents often start among peers within the same school grounds (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

Bayar and Uçanok (2012) emphasized that those who were involved in incidents of cyberbullying reported their perceptions of their school less positively. Accordingly, Sourander et al. (2010) found that victims and aggressors of cyberbullying felt less safe at school. Souza et al. (2014) concluded that adolescents who were not involved in bullying and cyberbullying, perceived their school more positively than the aggressors and victims. Ultimately, the implications of a poor perceived school climate and cybervictimization may entail student social withdrawal and other negative consequences, such as school dropout (Nickerson, Singleton, Schnurr, & Collen, 2014; Wachs, 2012). Furthermore, although some of these studies have provided important contributions, research regarding school climate and the incidence of cyberbullying is still scarce (Völlink, Dehue, Guckin, & Jacobs, 2015). Therefore, and since evidence has shown that negative perceptions of school are related to bullying experiences (Harel-Fisch et al., 2011) and that aggressive behavior at school are related to acts of cyberbullying (Fletcher et al., 2014), we aim to understand how adolescent cybervictims perceive their school climate. Thus, we propose to answer our first question and test our first hypothesis, namely:

Question 1. *How do adolescents perceive their school climate when they have been victims of cyberbullying?*

Hypothesis 1. *The experience of being a cybervictim will be negatively related to perceived positive school climate.*

Reporting incidents of cyberbullying to a school community member

Adolescents tend to conceal their involvement in incidents of cyberbullying because they often consider it difficult to prevent these situations from occurring (Francisco, Veiga Simão, Ferreira, & Martins, 2015; Gustainiene & Valiune, 2015; Li, 2006). Adolescents who decide to report incidents, often confide in their peers or in no one (Slonje & Smith, 2007). Nonetheless, cybervictims have shown dissatisfaction with their peers because even when they report the incident to them, the cyberbullying often continues (Bilic, Flander, & Rafajac, 2014; Gustainiene & Valiune, 2015). The same dissatisfaction appears to be present when telling teachers for instance, because it usually takes too long for the situation to be resolved (DeSmet et al., 2014). Thus, cybervictims are in many instances hesitant when it comes to reporting cyberbullying because they believe that adults (both parents and teachers) are unable to help in these situations (Willard, 2004). Other motives for not disclosing these incidents of distress to adults, include wanting to protect others and themselves, and not wanting to make a "big deal" of situations that might not be considered severe by others (Mishna, Schwan, Lefebvre, Bhole, & Johnston, 2014).

For instance, teachers and adolescents' perspectives regarding cyberbullying issues may differ due to the contact and information they have about the phenomenon (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009). Research has investigated that even though teachers play an important role in the resolution of cyberbullying incidents because they often witness interrelationships among peers at school, they have a lack of training, skills and confidence in dealing with the problem (DeSmet et al., 2015).