Full length article

Cyber-harassment victimization in Portugal: Prevalence, fear and help-seeking among adolescents

CrossMark

Filipa Pereira [a, *], Brian H. Spitzberg [b], Marlene Matos [a]

[a] School of Psychology, University of Minho, Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal
[b] School of Communication, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Dr, San Diego, CA 92182, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Cyber-harassment is one of today's problems in adolescent health. This study aimed to determine the prevalence of cyber-victimization among Portuguese adolescents. It also explored its nature, patterns and victim's reactions of fear and help-seeking. A representative sample of 627 adolescents, aged 12—16, enrolled in schools from northern Portugal and Azores answered an online survey. Cyber-victimization was widely experienced by these adolescents, mainly among older adolescents. Results evidenced a high prevalence rate of adolescents (66.1%) double involved as both cyber-victim and cyber-aggressor. Although not all adolescents reported fear (37%) or sought help (45.9%), persistent victimization increased fear. In turn, fear increased help-seeking behaviors. Cyber-victims were more afraid encountering unknown cyber-aggressors (vs. acquainted) and when victimized by older males (vs. younger females cyber-aggressors). Younger girls reported more fear and more help-seeking behaviors while older boys were more often victim-aggressors. The subgroup of victim-aggressors was both the target of a higher diversity of cyber-victimization behaviors than the victim-only subgroup and also engaged in fewer help-seeking behaviors. Those adolescents who sought help considered it helpful. Implications for educational, social and political practices are discussed.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Most adolescents in developed countries have been brought up in a technologically dependent world, eager adopters of multiple technologies in order to satisfy personal needs for interaction and exploration (Boyd, 2014; Madden et al., 2013). Consistent with these trends, Portugal has experienced a continuous increase in Internet access (Internet Live Stats, 2014). Most children up to 15 years old (90%) have Internet at home and 87% of them use it via broadband (Statistical National Institute, 2014). The first access to the Internet for Portuguese children and adolescents (9—16 years old) averages about 10 years of age (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). More than 50% of them use Internet and laptops daily, 35% use smartphones and 31% use tablets, with increasing rates among boys and older adolescents (Ponte, 2012; Simões, Ponte, Ferreira, Doretto, & Azevedo, 2014).

Despite the many benefits that the time spent online can provide, high levels of information and communication technologies (ICTs) use have been associated with greater online exposure to and experience of ICT-mediated harassment, intrusion and surveillance mediated (e.g., Brake, 2014; Livingstone & Helpser, 2010; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Adolescents are not the only ones using ICTs to stay in touch with others, share files, learn about sex, test intimate experiences or even harass others (Finn, 2004; Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; Madden et al., 2013; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002), as well as commit crimes (APAV, 2015; Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2013). However, the unique features of online technology use (e.g., lack of physical boundaries, anonymity, efficiency, comfort and ease, degree of distress) and the unique perceptual and conceptual challenges of adolescence (e.g., lack of maturity, life experience and cognitive ability, tendencies to push boundaries and underestimate the possible costs of their behaviors; Erikson, 1963; Johnson, Blum, & Giedd, 2010), clarify why research focused on cyber-harassment among adolescents is essential.

1.1. Cyber-harassment among young people

Cyber-harassment refers to any kind of repeated, persistent and

---

unwanted ICT-mediated interpersonal aggression (Bilic, 2013; Bocij, 2004; Hazelwood & Koon-Magnin, 2013; Pereira, Matos, & Sampaio, 2014). Estimates from the U.S. Youth Internet Safety Surveys (YISS) concluded that online harassment increased from 6% in 2000 to 9% in 2005 and 11% in 2010 (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013). Victims were mostly female and older in age, whereas cyber-aggressors tended to be boys and people known to the victims (e.g., friends; Jones et al., 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007). The Pew Internet Project revealed that 15% of adolescents, aged 12–17, received an improper sexual image, 19% were cyber-bullied and 4% were aggressive with someone online (Lenhart, 2007; Lenhart et al., 2010; Lenhart, Madden, Smith, Purcell, & Rainie, 2011). Up to 15% have received peer-to-peer sexual messages or images, 12% of 11–16 year olds were bothered or upset with something online, and 3% have sent or posted such messages (Livingstone et al., 2011). For example, Zweig, Dank, Yahner, and Lachman (2013) found that 26% of adolescents from 7th–12th grades had experienced cyber-dating abuse. Invading online privacy, harassing sexually, monitoring and controlling were the most common and accepted behaviors reported by adolescents (Draucker & Martsolf, 2010; Zweig et al., 2013). As such, this kind of cyber-harassment often overlaps with more serious forms of cyber-stalking and cyber-obsessional relational (ORI)[1] (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Research on harassment and stalking among intimate partners have been associated with victimization and a greater probability of being targeted for the longest periods (McEwan, Mullen, & MacKenzie, 2009; Pereira & Matos, 2015b).

Most research to date has focused on victims of cyber-harassment. There is increasing recognition, however, that victims are sometimes also aggressors of online and real space bullying and harassment (i.e., double involvement or overlapping; e.g., Jennings, Piquero, & Reingle, 2012; Law, Shapka, Domene, & Gagné, 2012; Matos, Simões, et al., 2012; Posick, 2013). Contextual variables may be linked to the double involvement in cyber-harassment, such as reactionary online negative reciprocity after experiencing negative emotional strains (i.e., Coie & Dodge, 1998; Crick & Dodge, 1996), with the aim of revenge or to retrieve the dominant position of the cycle of violence (Law & Fung, 2013; Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012; Sontag, Clemans, Graber, & Lyndon, 2011). In fact, evidence-based studies have found a clear link between being reactively aggressive and experiencing a higher level of victimization (Crick & Dodge, 1996), corroborating the idea that higher exposure to violence causes more violence (Baldry, 2003; Bandura, 1973; Coie & Dodge, 1998; Diaz-Aguado & Arias, 1995). In other cases, cyber-aggression may reflect a defense mechanism or coping strategy, especially if more discursive skills or means are deficient (Roberto, Eden, Savage, Ramos-Salazar, & Deiss, 2014). There is little research on victims' and aggressors' meanings that they attribute to such phenomena. Quantitative studies are also sparse concerning both the breadth and seriousness of such phenomenon, and the research to date has mostly been restricted to the cyber-bullying dimension. Kowalski and Limber (2007) studied cyber-bullying among 3767 U.S. middle school students and found that 7% were cyber-bullies/cyber-victims. Mishna et al. (2012) found that one quarter of adolescents aged 10–17 ($N = 2186$) were involved in cyber-bullying as

both bully and victim. Previous data found that boys and older adolescents are those who more often reported double involvement (Aricak et al., 2008; Law et al., 2012; Matos, Simões, et al., 2012). Such findings suggest a significant role of normative beliefs about the justification of violence – that violence may be an acceptable form of conflict management (Calvete, Orue, Estevez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010). Substantial proportions of adolescents may have difficulty recognizing the seriousness of cyber-victimization consequences and in recognizing such behaviors as inappropriate and criminal. Compared to victims-only, cyber-aggressors may be more motivated to engage in aggressive behaviors across a variety of encounters and simultaneously increasing their own online risks and vulnerability. There are few investigations exploring fear, double involvement, and its distinctiveness compared to victims-only (Sampson & Laub, 1990).

In Portugal, knowledge about adolescent involvement on cyber-harassment is still nascent. Even so, scholars concur that Portuguese adolescents face especially high risks for violence and victimization. Livingstone et al. (2011) found that 7% of Portuguese, aged 9–16, experienced one or more risks online, with higher rates among girls and older adolescents from low socio-economic families. Ferreira, Martins, and Abrunhosa (2011) found that the cyber-stalking was the third most cited risk online faced by Portuguese adolescents (age 10–18) and as many as 16% of adolescents have been cyber-bullied (Matos, Vieira, Amado, & Pessoa, 2012). Recent data (Novo, Pereira, & Matos, 2014) indicated that 33.1% of Portuguese adolescents perpetrated broader cyber-harassment while 18.2% perpetrated typical behaviors of cyber-stalking (e.g., monitoring, sending exaggerated messages of affection and excessively 'needy', disclosive or demanding messages). The double involvement as aggressor-victims was of 93.3%.

The percentage of Portuguese adolescents bothered online appears to have increased from 7% in 2000 to 10% in 2014 (Simões et al., 2014). However, national awareness campaigns are rare, occasional (e.g., APAV, SaferInternetPT, Adventura Social, MiudosSegurosNa.Net) and national plans against specific forms of online victimization are currently non-existent. Given a dearth of research regarding cyber-harassment on adolescence and its behavioral heterogeneity (e.g., online sexual harassment, cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking, cyber-ORI), this study seeks a deeper understanding of the general phenomenon of cyber-harassments, in national context.

The present work analyzes the prevalence of victimization by specific items related to cyber-bullying (e.g., receiving insulting messages) and cyber-stalking phenomena (e.g., monitoring behaviors), as well as broader cyber-risks (e.g., receiving sexual messages, exposure to pornographic images). The present research, however, adds the focus on items related to cyber-ORI victimization against adolescents (e.g. exaggerated messages of affection). Further, this study adds an in-depth and contextualized view of the double-involvement phenomenon and its relationship with online vulnerability. Finally, analyzing how fear and victim's help-seeking are related to cyber-aggressor profile and to double involvement will add to the limited international research base on such phenomena.

1.2. How is cyber-harassment affecting adolescents' daily life?

Previous studies (e.g., Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Mitchell, Ybarra, Jones, & Espelage, 2015) have documented that cyber-harassment is associated with serious public health problems. Consequences of cyber-harassment include significant psychological and emotional problems for victims, including fear, discomfort, threat, anger and sadness (e.g., Fenaughty & Harré, 2013; Livingstone et al., 2011). These symptoms tend to be worse for

---

[1] Both constructs are defined as a process of unwanted pursuit of intimacy, caused by incompatible relationship goals and definitions between victim and stalker (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014). Compared to ORI, stalking implies a greater sense of fear or threat (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Stalking may also be motivated by the end of relationship (including the victim death), whereas ORI is expressly motivated by the pursuer intent to achieve a greater level of (typically romantic) intimacy (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998).