



Appearance-related cyberbullying: A qualitative investigation of characteristics, content, reasons, and effects



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore 15-year-old adolescents' experiences of appearance-related cyberbullying. Twenty-seven adolescents participated in four focus groups. The adolescents in this study perceived that it is common to be targeted in appearance-related cyberbullying, especially for girls, and that appearance-related cyberbullying is considered to be a potent strategy when attempting to hurt girls. Girls often received comments about being fat, while among boys, it was common to receive comments about looking or seeming "gay." According to the adolescents, an important reason for engaging in appearance-related cyberbullying was to attain higher social status in the peer group. The girls and boys reacted differently to appearance-related cyberbullying. Boys tended to act out or take no offence, while girls experienced lower self-esteem and feelings of depression. Findings in this study contribute to research on cyberbullying as well as to research on girls' body esteem development.

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Introduction

Adolescence is a period when individuals spend an increasing amount of time with peers, and it is therefore characterized by an increased striving for acceptance by, and popularity with, the peer group (Steinberg, 2011). Moreover, concerns over how one's body is perceived by peers preoccupy the minds of a majority of adolescents (Jones, 2012). Peers thus have a major impact in shaping adolescents' thoughts about their bodies (Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2013). Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace) are examples of new contexts in which adolescents can present themselves, and also compare their appearance with others (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). Social networking sites are also commonly used forums for cyberbullying behaviour (Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010). Cyberbullying is a form of bullying that is conducted through modern information and communication technology (Smith, 2009). Two studies of cyberbullying among adolescents have found that appearance is the most commonly reported reason for being cyberbullied (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009; Mishna et al., 2010). It should be noted that these studies included appearance as one variable among many others (e.g.,

sexuality, ethnicity), but that neither of them focused solely on appearance-related cyberbullying. No other studies have to our knowledge studied adolescents' experiences of appearance-related cyberbullying. The aim of the current study was, therefore, a qualitative investigation of appearance-related cyberbullying among adolescents, with a focus on characteristics of the cyberbullied and cyberbullies, and the content, reasons, and effects of the cyberbullying. However, there have been some studies in related areas; these are presented in the next section.

Although the studies by Cassidy et al. (2009) and Mishna et al. (2010) did not focus solely on appearance-related cyberbullying, they have reported some results about appearance-related cyberbullying. More specifically, one of those studies (Cassidy et al., 2009) found that over one third of the adolescents reported being cyberbullied because of their size or weight. The other study (Mishna et al., 2010) found that one in ten of the adolescents reported that they were bullied online because of their appearance. It is important to gain a more thorough understanding about what appearance-related cyberbullying revolves around. Moreover, Friséen, Berne, and Lunde (2014) also investigated whether adolescents' views on who is the victim of appearance-related cyberbullying differ according to gender. They found that a majority of the adolescents thought that cyberbullying more often revolves around the victims' appearance when girls are cyberbullied compared to when boys are cyberbullied. This finding indicates that girls to a greater extent than boys might be targeted for cyberbullying that puts the victim's appearance in focus. Therefore, there is a need to find out more

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about what characterizes adolescents who are involved as victims or bullies in appearance-related cyberbullying.

It should be noted that in an offline context, a common reason, according to adolescents, for bullying is deviant appearance (Frisén, Holmqvist, & Oscarsson, 2008; Frisén, Lunde, & Hwang, 2009; Thornberg, 2011). For instance, Frisén et al. (2008) found that the most common response adolescents gave as to why adolescents are bullied was that the victims have a deviant appearance, such as being ugly, fat, small, wears braces, or look different. Studies of a related concept, appearance-related *teasing*—a term that does not have the strict criteria that the term bullying has—found that the targets of appearance-related teasing had low body esteem (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Lunde, Frisén, & Hwang, 2006; Rieves & Cash, 1996; Sweetingham & Waller, 2008; Thompson, Covert, Richards, Johnson, & Cattarin, 1995), dietary restraint (Halvarsson, Lunner, Westerberg, Anteson, & Sjöden, 2002), and depressive symptoms (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Paxton, 2006). In the context of the cyber world, a recent study by Frisén et al. (2014) found that victims of cyberbullying reported lower body esteem than non-cybervictims. Furthermore, there are two studies that have examined the connection between social networking sites and body esteem among adolescent girls. Tiggemann and Miller (2010) showed that exposure to the Internet is associated with lower body esteem. Actually, they concluded that it is not the use of the Internet per se that influences body esteem negatively, but the use of specific social networking sites, such as Facebook. Meier and Gray (2014) revealed that adolescent girls who used Facebook photo applications reported lower body esteem than girls who did not. While such research has resulted in an understanding about how the Internet and the use of social networking sites influence body esteem, understanding of the problems of appearance-related cyberbullying is still very poor.

Clearly, there is a lack of research when it comes to the understanding of appearance-related cyberbullying. This study, therefore, aimed to explore adolescents' experiences of appearance-related cyberbullying, by addressing the following questions: (1) what characterizes adolescents who are involved as victims or bullies in appearance-related cyberbullying? (2) In what specific ways are adolescents cyberbullied about their appearances? (3) Why is cyberbullying directed at appearance? (4) What effects are associated with appearance-related cyberbullying?

Method

To gain deeper insight into the experiences of adolescents with regard to appearance-related cyberbullying, focus groups were organized. This method was chosen in order to progress our understanding of appearance-related cyberbullying by listening to how the adolescents themselves speak about these matters.

Participants

The data collection took place during the autumn of 2012 and the adolescents were recruited from one private and one public school in Gothenburg, Sweden. The two schools represented different socioeconomic areas in the city of Gothenburg, Sweden. Twenty-seven adolescents in the ninth grade (15 years of age) participated in four focus groups. The focus groups consisted of: Group 1: $n = 8$ girls; Group 2: $n = 9$ boys; Group 3: $n = 5$ girls; Group 4: $n = 5$ boys. With the aim of making the adolescents more comfortable to talk freely, each focus group was homogenous, meaning that the participants in each focus group shared gender, grade, and school.

Initially, two ninth grade teachers were contacted and both agreed to let their classes participate. The adolescents were given a written information letter about the purpose of the study. The

letter included information that all participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time and that their answers would be treated anonymously. The letter also informed the adolescents that it was not necessary to have first-hand experience of cyberbullying as a victim or a bully in order to be part of the focus groups, since the aim of the study was to learn more about adolescents' general experiences of cyberbullying.

Shortly thereafter, the first author and the third author visited the classes during school hours. The first author verbally informed the adolescents about the study and gave them the possibility to ask questions about the upcoming focus groups. After receiving the letter and the verbal information, the adolescents were able to volunteer to participate in the focus groups. The sample is therefore to be considered as a convenience sample. All of the volunteering adolescents followed through with the focus groups, even though they were free to discontinue at any time.

Procedure

The first author (a female clinical psychologist) led all four focus groups, accompanied by a female co-moderator, the third author, who was finishing her Master's degree in Clinical Psychology. Both the moderator and co-moderator had received training in semi-structured interviewing. The focus groups took place in separate rooms at each of the two schools during school hours. The focus groups lasted 45–60 min, and discussions were audio recorded. All the adolescents actively participated in the discussion. Given the sensitive topic of the research, the moderator was attentive to whether the adolescents showed any signs of concern or stress. Their well-being was always regarded as more important than the research questions.

Every focus group ended with a dialogue about the adolescents' experiences of participating in the group. In addition, all adolescents in every class received written information about where to turn to if they were cyberbullied or knew someone who was. This procedure was approved by the regional ethical review board.

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was created to ensure that the questions asked addressed the aims of the study. After the first two focus groups (one with boys and one with girls) had been completed, the two moderators discussed whether the interview guide needed alteration. Both moderators agreed that there was no need to adjust the interview guide.

The interview guide started with one vignette, developed by the authors, to stimulate discussion: "Sara (or Jonas; a girl in the girl groups and a boy in the boy groups) has posted a new photo of herself on Facebook. When she checks Facebook later that evening, she sees that someone has commented on the photo by posting nasty and mean things about how she looks." After reading the vignette, the adolescents were asked questions about what characterizes adolescents who are involved as victims or bullies in appearance-related cyberbullying: in what specific ways are adolescents cyberbullied about their appearance? Why is cyberbullying directed at appearance? What effects are associated with appearance-related cyberbullying? The same questions were asked in all focus groups, with various probes, depending on the adolescents' answers and the need for clarification.

Analysis

The recordings from the four focus groups were transcribed by the third author. As the area in question is under-researched and the design of this study was exploratory, a thematic, semantic (i.e., looking at the explicit or surface level of speech) analysis was

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