



“Am I at risk of cyberbullying”? A narrative review and conceptual framework for research on risk of cyberbullying and cybervictimization: The risk and needs assessment approach



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 April 2015

Accepted 13 May 2015

Available online 22 May 2015

Keywords:

Cyberbullying

Cybervictimization

Risk factors

Risk and needs assessment

ABSTRACT

Bullying and its electronic evolution, cyberbullying, are widespread problems among children and adolescents. Numerous studies have been conducted that address the prevalence, nature, and possible impact of cyberbullying and strategies to prevent it (Patchin & Hinduja, 2013). Some recent papers have reviewed existing instruments designed to measure cyberbullying (Berne et al., 2013; Vivolo-Kantor, Martell, Holland, & Westby, 2014), while others have reviewed risk factors (Kowalski et al., 2014).

The aim of the present study is to present what is known about risk factors associated with cyberbullying and cybervictimization by using an ecological framework, addressing the importance of adopting a risk and needs assessment approach to identify early who is at risk and tailor interventions.

We conducted a review of cyberbullying risk factors, as well as of assessment and measurement instruments and risk and needs assessment to identify which papers fulfilled the purpose of this study. Multiple online databases (i.e., PsychInfo, SocIndex and PubMed) were searched to identify relevant studies. The keyword search criteria were: (bull* or cyberbull* or school viol* or juvenile delinquency) AND (risk* or threat* or assess*) AND (measure* or *method*) between 2000 and February 2015. Article titles and abstracts were reviewed, and all articles that appeared relevant were retrieved in full-text format and evaluated for inclusion in the review. In addition, articles accessed electronically were hand-searched for other relevant studies. A total of 7199 potential articles were located. Of these, only 53 were considered to be directly relevant and used for the purpose of the present work.

Because of the large variability of methods, construct definitions, measures and item wording used in the different studies, a meta-analysis was not possible, therefore a narrative review approach was adopted to identify risk factors according to the ecological theoretical framework.

Results regarding risk factors showed that individual as well as socio-family related factors were associated with cyberbullying and cybervictimization with some slight differences for boys and girls. The strongest risk factor that was associated with cyberbullying is school bullying. This review is of relevance because it is innovative in proposing a conceptual framework for developing a risk and needs assessment tool for cyberbullying and cybervictimization.

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1. Introduction

In the last 10 years, a growing interest has developed in the media and among researchers and policy makers in the massive development of online technology and its use and impact, and in particular in youngsters. Online communication is not only any more a daily way to work, but it is mainly used to communicate and interact with known and unknown people (peers and adults). And this is particularly of relevance for youngsters. If in 2010 the number of children and teenagers having access to the internet at home was 66% (reported by Tokunaga, 2010), this proportion is growing yearly. National UK statistics report an increase in 2012 where 21 million households (80%) had internet access, compared with 19 million (77%) in 2011 (Office for National Statistics, 2012). Competition between internet providers and reduction of prices of IT (Internet Technology) devices have decreased prices and increased dissemination especially in young people; access to a computer and/or smartphones is overwhelming. This is all good news, when thinking about the free world, and the advantages of online, technological communication and search. However, research and news reports do show another picture of web 2.0 communication. The dark side of children's use of internet and associated technology is the risk of being bullied online or bullying others, so called *cyberbullying*, leading to short and long term negative consequences (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Topçu, Erdur-Baker, & Capa-Aydin, 2008; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006) and ultimately even suicide or attempted suicide (Van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014); (for a review on consequences, Tokunaga, 2010).

Several conceptual definitions have been provided on cyberbullying, summarized by Tokunaga (2010); this author provides an integrative definition which tries to capture all relevant aspects: "Cyberbullying is 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 to others" (Tokunaga, 2010: 278). This definition as well as all the similar ones provided by other authors (Besley, 2009; Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Li, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2008; Willard, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) have similar features to the definition of traditional bullying (Olweus, 1993) with regard to intention of harming and in regard to imbalance of power. With regard to 'repeated actions', cyberbullying can differ. Some authors claim that it is enough to experience one or two actions to be defined as cyberbullying (Gámez-Guadix, Orue, Smith, & Calvete, 2013; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Li, 2007; Vieno, Gini, & Santinello, 2011; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). A single cyber-attack (a video, a comment, a picture) can remain online or in a mobile phone for quite some time, therefore prolonging the harm to the victims (Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross, 2009; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013) and increasing access to potential cyber-

bystanders who can in turn share the attack, prolonging the victim's distress (Dooley et al., 2009; Tokunaga, 2010). The problem is not online communication *per se*, but its use; as clearly stated by Kowalski and colleagues in their extensive review, "certain features of online communication including *reproducibility, lack of emotional reactivity, perceived uncontrollability, relative permanence, and 24/7 accessibility*, make it more likely for online misbehavior to occur" (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014: 2, emphasis added).

Once studies have extensively researched the nature and proportion of the problems, in the last decade they addressed characteristics linked to such problems (Berne et al., 2013; Vivolo-Kantor, Martell, Holland, & Westby, 2014), trying to answer the following questions: which are the features of those children who bully or are bullied online?

As pointed out by Tokunaga (2010) and Slonje et al. (2013), what is often missing in studies on cyberbullying is a clear sound theoretical foundation guiding studies. If based on valuable theories, then methods, variables and procedures can be adopted to test hypotheses, and reliable and coherent information can be available, helping to develop useful cost-effective intervention strategies. Kowalski et al. (2014), in their extensive review, have overcome this limitation by adopting the General Aggression Model (GAM) to review existing (supporting) studies addressing the different aspects related to this theory, adopted from studies on aggression (based on theories by Bandura, 1986; Crick & Dodge, 1994) in relation to victimization and perpetration of cyberbullying.

Another attempt to address and understand cyberbullying has been adopted in another recent review conducted by Mehari, Farrell, and Le (2014). These authors suggest that the means through which aggression takes place may be best conceptualized as a new dimension on which aggression can be classified, rather than addressing cyberbullying as a "distinct counterpart to existing forms of aggression" (Mehari et al., 2014: 2). Therefore, research on cyberbullying should be considered within the context of theoretical and empirical knowledge on aggression among youngsters.

Another useful theoretical approach is the *ecological system theory*, based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1994) extensively used in the context of school bullying in the review by Hong and Espelage (2012). The authors adopted this framework to present the relationship between different individual, interpersonal and more broadly societal dimensions to show onset, development and recurrence of bullying and victimization among youngsters. The review showed empirical findings on the risk factors associated with bullying and peer victimization at school within the context of different levels of the ecological framework, addressing risks and needs of those involved in bullying (either as victims or perpetrators), concluding that there is no one single risk factor, or cause to explain bullying, but that risk factors at all levels can have a role and influence and these vary from individual to individual, and from context to context.

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