



## Cyber and school bullying: Same or different phenomena?



Nafsika Antoniadou, Constantinos M. Kokkinos \*

Department of Primary Education, Democritus University of Thrace, Greece

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### ABSTRACT

According to most definitions, cyber-bullying is another type of bullying that occurs with the use of information and communication technologies. Nevertheless, a significant number of researchers dispute whether it constitutes another type of school bullying materialized with different means, or a different type of aggression that has unique characteristics and distinctive participant profiles. The present paper aimed at reviewing existing research literature regarding the similarities and differences between the two phenomena. Overall, there are three positions regarding the differences between cyber-bullying/victimization and school bullying/victimization: a) they constitute the same phenomenon, but are realized with different means, b) they are similar only in specific aspects and under certain circumstances, and finally c) they are completely distinct phenomena. The debate regarding the similarities between the two phenomena is deemed essential, since if it is established that they constitute the same phenomenon, similar prevention and intervention practices could be applied, while on the contrary, in case of significant differences, further investigation will be required for the identification of effective practices.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the last years, the study of cyber-bullying and cyber-victimization has expanded noticeably worldwide. Although school bullying and school victimization among children have been long-standing and pervasive social issues (Jones, Manstead, & Livingstone, 2011), cyber-bullying has only recently become the center of scientific attention. While as respective reviews indicate, the term “cyber-bullying” did not exist a decade ago (Notar, Padgett, & Roden, 2013), gradually, studies worldwide investigated the prevalence of cyber-bullying and cyber-victimization, their correlates (in terms of both personal and

contextual factors) (e.g., Şahin, 2012), the motives for participation, and efficient prevention and intervention practices.

As various sources suggest, bullying is not a recent phenomenon. According to academic and non-academic references, incidents resembling bullying have been evident before 1885 (Koo, 2007). Repetitive proactive aggressive behaviors manifest in all countries, among participants of varying ages and in different contexts. Although research has primarily focused on bullying in school grounds, it is a frequent behavior in other places as well, in which members interact on a regular basis (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992). Examples include families, correctional institutes, higher education institutions, etc. Among children and adolescents, experiences of such repetitive behavior have been described with the term *bullying*, whereas the term *harassment* is usually used for the respective behavior among adults (Roberts, 2008).

Conclusively, regardless the rising research activity on bullying during the last decades, the incidence of the phenomenon has not

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Primary Education, School of Educational Sciences, Democritus University of Thrace, N. Hili, GR68100, Alexandroupolis, Greece. Tel.: +30 2551030066; fax: +30 2551030020.  
E-mail address: [kkokkino@eled.duth.gr](mailto:kkokkino@eled.duth.gr) (C.M. Kokkinos).

increased, since it is assumed to have been stable and evident worldwide (e.g., Berger, 2007). What varies is the context in which the behavior takes place and its specific manifestation. The forms and types of the bullying behavior, as well as the used means, largely hinder on the individual characteristics of the participants (e.g., gender, age, social skills), as well as various contextual parameters. For example, in terms of individual factors, young children tend to employ more direct bullying behaviors, contrary to older children and girls (e.g., Tapper & Boulton, 2004). In terms of contextual factors, developments that affect the social behavior of people have a significant impact on the manifestation of bullying behaviors as well.

A recent development that has drastically affected the ways that individuals engage in interpersonal relationships, is the extended use of information and communication technologies. This rapid change in the communication and social interactions of people had significant effects, both positive and negative, the latter of which, also include cyber-bullying (e.g., Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008).

Generally, cyber-bullying has been viewed as a more convenient type of aggression, since cyber-bullies take advantage of the characteristics of the information and communication technologies (i.e., anonymity, infinite audience, limited adult supervision, etc). Due to its expediency, reasons for cyber-bullying involvement vary greatly, including willful and proactive aggression (Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010), revenge, reaction to envy, prejudice and intolerance (for disability, religion, gender), shame, pride, guilt, and anger (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Jones et al., 2011). It has further been suggested that cyber-bullying is employed by students who cannot confront their victim face-to-face, but also by students who feel restless and seek for adventure and excitement. As Kowalski et al. (2008) state, “just as there is a variety of possible motives for engaging in traditional forms of bullying, there also is a long list of reasons why adolescents might engage in cyber-bullying” (p. 79). A key element for understanding cyber-bullying involvement is online disinhibition.<sup>1</sup>

Computer mediated communication, especially in its earlier forms, had been regarded as a “poorer” mean of communication, due to the limited non-verbal cues it provides (Yao & Flanagan, 2006). The technological advancements, as well as more thorough investigations, led researchers to conclude that the quality and effects of online communication hinders on the richness of the used mean, the personal characteristics of the individual user, as well as the norms of the online community (Postmes & Spears, 1998; Yao & Flanagan, 2006). Although not all means of computer mediated communication are inherently impersonal, some of them provide the user with the ability of anonymity, and combined with the reduced social cues and adult supervision, they may lead young users to effects of de-individualization and aggressive behavior (Postmes & Spears, 1998; Yao & Flanagan, 2006).

People experiencing de-individuation, frequently do not act as individuals, but contrary they go along with whatever the group is doing, including negative behaviors such as cyber-bullying. Due to the absence of accountability cues, the user's concerns regarding the reactions of others are reduced (Joinson, 1998). Combined, online disinhibition and de-individuation may empower cyber-bullies to act more harshly than they might in a face to face situation. Due to the lack of physical and social cues, cyber-bullies may feel that since they are not personally confronted with the victims, they will not have consequences for their actions, thus exhibiting aggressive and impulsive behavior (Dehue, Bolmon, & Vollink, 2008).

Despite the increasing scientific attention on cyber-bullying, results of studies differ largely, mainly due to the lack of conceptual clarity regarding the phenomenon (Tokunaga, 2010; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). Since according to most definitions, cyber-bullying is a sub-category of bullying which occurs within digital mediums

(Wong-Lo & Bullock, 2011), most studies on cyber-bullying have been mainly framed by the same theories as school bullying. Nevertheless, a significant number of researchers disputes whether cyber-bullying/victimization constitutes another type of school bullying/victimization materialized with different means, or a completely different type of aggression due to the characteristics of the information and communication technologies (anonymity, alias, etc.), with distinctive participant profiles, motives, personal characteristics, and roles. Overall, there are three main positions regarding the conceptualization of cyber-bullying/victimization: a) both cyber-bullying/victimization and school bullying/victimization constitute the same phenomenon, but are realized with different means, b) cyber-bullying/victimization is a somewhat similar phenomenon to school bullying/victimization, but only in specific aspects and under certain circumstances, and finally c) cyber-bullying/victimization is a completely distinct phenomenon from school bullying/victimization.

The debate regarding the similarities between cyber-bullying/victimization and school bullying/victimization is deemed essential, since if it is established that they constitute the same phenomenon, similar prevention and intervention practices could be applied, while on the contrary, in case of significant differences, further investigation will be required for the identification of effective practices (Bauman, 2013).

### 1.1. Cyber-bullying/victimization and school bullying/victimization: similar phenomena

The significant high correlations between cyber-bullying/victimization and school bullying/victimization (e.g., Hinduja & Patchin, 2008), have led some researchers to question whether these phenomena differ, while it has been suggested that a small number of students is actually involved only in cyber-bullying/victimization (Olweus, 2012). Based on large scale studies conducted in U.S.A. and Norway, Olweus states that factor analytic techniques indicate a common factor for cyber-bullying and school bullying. Similarly, Bauman and Newman (2013), found that factor analyses did not differentiate survey items in terms of cyber-bullying/victimization and school bullying/victimization but contrary in terms of type of behavior (e.g., general harassment, use of offensive language, harassment using images), a finding which, as Bauman (2010) suggests, demonstrates that cyber-bullying/victimization is in fact a variant of school bullying/victimization.

Studies concluding that students who participate in both phenomena simultaneously adopt the same role, support this argument (Dempsey, Haden, Goldma, Sivinsk, & Wiens, 2011; Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009; Kowalski et al., 2008; Pornari & Wood, 2010). For example, Twyman, Saylor, Taylor, and Comeaux (2010) found that the vast majority of cyber-bullies were simultaneously school bullies. Furthermore, students experiencing school victimization are more likely to be victims and online (Katzer et al., 2009; Kowalski et al., 2008; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Raskauskas, 2010; Smith et al., 2008; Twyman et al., 2010).

Involvement in cyber-bullying has been found to be predicted by school bullying (Casas, Del Rey, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2013). Nevertheless, not all studies support these arguments, since other findings indicate that not all students participating in cyber-bullying have previous involvement in school bullying (e.g., Hemphill et al., 2012), while longitudinal analysis has revealed that the two phenomena have significantly less overlap than simple bivariate analyses indicate (Low & Espelage, 2013). Students' involvement in both phenomena can be linked to their problematic social skills and peer relations. According to Seepersad (2004), although computer mediated communication can have beneficiary social effects for the user, students with problematic offline relations are unlikely to experience the positive effects of the Internet. For example, students who have incompetent social skills may face even greater difficulty in interpreting others' messages when connecting to the Internet, due to the limited social cues that the computer mediated communication provides. Furthermore, similarly to

<sup>1</sup> A user's tendency to behave in a different manner online than s/he would normally do in a physical context (positively or negatively), due to the aforementioned ICT characteristics (Suler, 2004).

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