Cyberbullying: Investigating the Roles of Power and Communication Medium

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is a relatively recent phenomenon that is increasing in frequency and severity. Its devastating affects impact children and adults. While there has been a recent uptick in research pertaining to cyberbullying, we still have yet to fully understand it to the point where we can develop early detection systems, intervention mechanisms, reduce recidivism, and develop successful recovery programs. This research explores the role the power differential between offenders and victims plays in the onset and continuation of cyberbullying, as well as the role the specific communication medium plays in the relationship. We develop a theoretical model explaining the role power and communication medium play and propose a research study to empirically validate the model.

Keywords

Cyberbullying, social exchange theory, power, ICT.

Introduction

As Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have increasing become an integral part of our daily routines, the incidence of cybercrime has also increased. While there are many benefits to the use of ICTs, cyberbullying has emerged as a potential harm enabled by ICTs, raising the question of why people engage in this deviant behavior. While prevalence statistics about cyberbullying vary (BBC news January, 2018; Australia’s National Center Against Bullying 2018; Kowlaski et al. 2014), a 2016 report from the Cyberbullying Research Center indicates that 33.8% of students between 12 and 17 have been victims of cyberbullying in their lifetime. Further, 11.5% of students between 12 and 17 indicated that they had engaged in cyberbullying behavior. Cyberbullying is not just a teenage problem; it is also common among adults (Lowry et al. 2016), involving behaviors such as, online harassment, cyberstalking, (Willard 2006), threat of physical violence, death threats, sexual harassment, threats to home/family, and menacing chain messages (Rivers and Noret 2010). Cyberbullying in the work place can negatively affect employee performance and job satisfaction (Snyman et al. 2015). The impact can be even more dire. In multiple cases, cyberbullying lead the victims to commit suicide. For example, as reported by cbsnews.com in December 2, 2016: “Cyberbullying pushed Brandy over the edge, leading her to shoot herself in the chest. Her father said she had been receiving abusive text messages for months from bullies using an untraceable smartphone application. Someone made a fake Facebook page of her, creating another cyberbullying medium.”

Despite the recent uptick in academic cyberbullying research, there remain unexplored aspects of cyberbullying and questions that still need to be answered. For example, are certain communication mediums or applications more attractive than others for cyberbullying purposes? How does power differential affect the cyberbullying-cyber victimization relationship? The proposed study attempts to address these questions.
Literature Review

In their meta-analysis study, Kowalski et al. (2014) identify four characteristics of bullying in digital world: 1) it occurs between a perpetrator and a victim who are unequal in power; 2) the harm is repeated; 3) there is an intention to harm; and 4) it has been carried out using ICTs. Accordingly, the cyberbullying definition adopted in this study is as follows: “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Smith et al. 2006, p.376). Tokunaga (2006) shows that cyber bullying literature suffers from a theoretical foundation problem: “Research on cyberbullying has been conducted largely in the absence of theory. Theory neither guides the hypotheses that are derived nor are there faithful attempts made at theory building in the cyberbullying literature (Tokunaga 2006, p.283)”. Recently, scholars have begun to address this problem. Lowry et al. (2016) apply social learning and social structure theory to explain the behavior, specifically focusing on the role anonymity plays in cyberbullying behavior. They discuss cyberbullying as a learned behavior through interactions in social media, wherein anonymity impacts the perpetrator’s learning process. Kowlaski (2014) uses a general aggression model (GAM) to better understand cyberbullying among students. Their model explains how a cyberbullying victim can turn into a cyberbully offender, and vice versa, through thoughtful or impulsive actions.

Despite the recent uptick in academic attention, no one has yet investigated the role of power as a significant antecedent to explain cyberbullying behavior. Without power imbalance, the victim could withstand the aggression, and the bullying behavior would cease quickly (Salin 2003). Unlike in physical environments, power in cyberspace is not a physical attribute, potentially enabling a larger, more complex set of potential cyberbullies. In fact, cyberbullies may even be physically weaker than their victims (Li 2007). Therefore, it is important to study this differential concept of power in cyberspace in the context of cyberbullying. In line with Lowry et al. (2016), we believe the role power plays in cyberbullying necessitates further theoretical development and research.

In addition to power, the ICT medium inherently plays an important role in cyberbullying. For instance, Twitter enables perpetrators to target multiple victims simultaneously, while ICTs used in sexting (sending sexually explicit messages) tend to be limited to one target at a time—a media characteristic known as synchronicity. It is also reasonable to posit that other media characteristics, such as media richness (the ability to reproduce information) may impact cyberbullying, since such characteristics are widely known to impact information transfer effectiveness and communication involvement. In Brandy’s case, for instance, communications sent through text-only messaging applications versus posts to a fake Facebook page varied in terms of information richness. The former was limited to textual information, while the latter could include text, photos, and videos. It is natural to inquire how these varied levels of richness might impact the perceived power differential, or power imbalance, and thereby empower the perpetrator, or adversely affect the victim. In this paper, we discuss how social exchange theory can help explain cyberbullying behavior, particularly with respect to the power imbalance component. Further, we discuss how communication medium itself can be a source of power in cyberbullying.

Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory: Concepts of Power and Costs-Benefits Analysis

Social exchange is defined as the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons (Cook et al. 2013). Social exchange theory can therefore be adopted to explain abusive social relationships, such as between spouses, or in our case, between bullies and victims in cyberspace. Homans (1961) developed five key propositions that demonstrate how individuals’ behaviors are reinforced by each other in an exchange through cost-benefit analysis. According to Homans (1961) the stimulus and value propositions, behavior that creates positive outcomes, is rewarded, or is considered to be valuable, is likely to be repeated. In other words, the behavior that is costly is less likely to be repeated. The frequency of cyberbullying for example depends on the consequences of act. According to rational choice theory, perpetrators tend to weigh the costs of crime against its benefit, and therefore avoid costly behavior. General deterrence theory also argues that the severity of punishment can prevent the deviant behavior. This is linked with the value proposition. Therefore, we suggest that:
Proposition 1: Cyberbullying frequency is affected by the costs of cyberbullying (if the costs outweigh the benefit, the act is unlikely to be repeated).

Both rational choice theory and the ‘motivated offender’ component of routine activity theory posit that the benefit obtained from exploiting the target (money or goods, status or approval, happiness or self-esteem, enjoyment, revenge, etc.) is also a critical component linked with the value proposition. With regard to value proposition we propose that:

Proposition 2: Cyberbullying frequency is affected by the benefits of cyberbullying (if the benefits outweigh the costs, the act is likely to be repeated).

According to the stimulus proposition, negative reinforcement by victims and bystanders to the bullying behavior can decrease the likelihood of the repetition by the offender. Blocking, unfollowing, and reporting are common negative reinforcements that can be applied by the victims, while victim neutrality, re-sharing, and expressions of positive feedback (e.g., ‘liking’ the post, or giving the post a ‘thumbs-up’) from bystanders can positively reinforce bullying. Accordingly, we suggest that:

Proposition 3: Cyberbullying frequency is affected by victim reaction (positive and negative reinforcement).

Proposition 4: Victim reaction affects costs of cyberbullying.

Proposition 5: Victim reaction affects benefits of cyberbullying.

Social exchange theory has the advantage of bringing power, as the capacity to exploit, in a single analytic framework since power can affect the frequency of exchanges between actors. Power is defined as an individual’s ability to influence another person, or other people (Anderson et al. 2012). Alternatively, according to Cook et al. (1978): the power of A over B is the potential of A to obtain favorable benefits minus outcomes at B’s expense in any exchange relation. Power is not limited to the legitimate use of authority; actors may impose punitive sanctions, or facilitate negative outcomes against another. Power may also be exercised via control over punishment resources (Molm 1990, 1997). Anderson et al. (2012) suggest that power in a given context is related to particular personality traits, such as dominance and extraversion, and control over resources. For instance, a smart car can empower the owner if only he/ she has the ability and knowledge to use its features efficiently.

As suggested by Dooley et al. (2009), one source of power for the perpetrators in a virtual world is the difficulty of removing or avoiding the offensive materials in cyberspace, increasing a victim’s sense of powerlessness. Accordingly, characteristics of the communication medium used by perpetrators can affect the severity of harassment and victimization. These differences in characteristics can be explained through media richness theory (MRT), media synchronicity, and anonymity. Ybarra et al. (2007) noted that 12.6% of victims of frequent Internet harassment did not know the identity of the person who was harassing them. Perceived anonymity widens the pool possible cyberbullying perpetrators. Perceived anonymity also leads to a disinhibition effect that, in-turn, leads people to say and do things anonymously that they would not consider saying and doing in face-to-face interactions (Kowalski et al. 2014). It follows that power in cyber space is not necessarily the result of physical strength, but rather can be the result of the perception of being in a more secure zone where the bully has more control options over the situation and resources (e.g., YouTube channels and Instagram accounts with thousands of followers), and the bully can leverage advanced technology that provides increased anonymity. Molm (1990, p.427) makes arguments that: “the macro level of power is the structure of control that provides the opportunities and constraints within which the micro level of power, [which is] the strategic behavior of actors, operates. Two levels of power affect the frequency of exchange outcomes (through actors’ costs- benefits analyses).” Communication medium characteristics facilitate macro-level power in cyber space. In cyberbullying context, the two main actors (the bully and the victim) weigh costs of their actions against their benefits, based on the availability and control over their macro-level power resources. Hence, we posit that:

Proposition 6: Communication medium characteristics affect costs of cyberbullying.

Proposition 7: Communication medium characteristics affect benefits of cyberbullying.

Proposition 8: Communication medium characteristics affect victim reaction.
Furthermore, as discussed by Bandura (1999): the technological world in which youth socialize may be a social context that promotes moral disengagement, explaining why people write offensive comments online that they would not say face to face. Pornari and Wood (2010) found moral disengagement positively predicted cyberbullying perpetration. But what causes moral disengagement in cyberspace? Moral intensity is a construct that captures the extent of an individual's perception of situation-specific issues on decision-making in ethical situations. Moral intensity is multidimensional, consisting of six components: “1) magnitude of consequences - the aggregate harm or benefits of the act; 2) probability of effect - the likelihood that the act will cause harm or benefits; 3) temporal immediacy – the length of time between the act and its consequences; 4) concentration of effect – the number of people affected by the act; 5) proximity – the social distance between the decision maker and those affected by the act; and 6) social consensus – the degree to which others think the act is good or evil” (Goles et al. 2006, p.87). Moral intensity has shown negative relationship with deviant behavior in many studies (Goles et al. 2006; Chatterjee et al. 2015). Therefore, we expect that individuals that maintain higher value for morality are less likely to engage in cyberbullying. Additionally, with regard to Homans propositions, moral intensity as part of the actors' costs-benefits analyses toward the situation can affect the frequency of bullying. Hence:

**Proposition 9:** Moral intensity affects costs of cyberbullying.

**Proposition 10:** Moral intensity affects benefits of cyberbullying.

**Proposition 11:** Cyberbullying frequency is affected by moral intensity.

With regard to these six perceived moral intensity components, perpetrators perceive things occurring in cyberspace as being less of a moral issue than in the physical world, which we contend brings us back to the disinhibiting impact of anonymity. “The anonymity associated with the use of a computer offers perpetrators a certain level of freedom from social constraints and from moral responsibilities” (Snyman and Loh 2015, p.165). Additionally, as discussed earlier with regard to media richness, perpetrators' understanding of the impact of bullying on victims is largely dependent upon the platform used for cyberbullying (e.g. on Skype individuals can see each other whereas in texting, communication is carried out through words). Based on this, coupled with the argument made earlier, we propose that:

**Proposition 12:** Communication medium characteristics affect moral intensity.

**Future Research and Proposed Research Model**

As seen in Figure 1, we represent communication medium characteristics through three features: media richness, media synchronicity and perceived anonymity. We represent the stimulus and value components of Social Exchange Theory as the cost-benefit analysis that informs cyberbullies’ decision to repeat the offending acts. Our plan for this research includes an empirical investigation of the proposed propositions and hypotheses development. To this end, we plan to conduct a systematic review of prior literature to identify key indicators for measuring the eventually developed constructs. Our review to date suggests that
a mixed-method approach involving laboratory experiment and survey methodology might be most appropriate to investigate the phenomenon of cyberbullying.

References


