Cyberbullying: Adolescents' Experiences, Responses, and Their Beliefs about Their Parents' Recommended Responses

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Abstract

A total of 116 adolescents, ranging in age from 15 to 19 years, completed a questionnaire that assessed their experiences with cyberbullying, what they would do if they were a victim of cyberbullying, and what they believed their parents would recommend they do if they were a victim of cyberbullying. The proportion of adolescents who reported ever being cyberbullied was larger than the proportion of adolescents who reported ever cyberbullying another person. In addition, the adolescents reported that they were more frequently cyberbullied by same-sex peers than by opposite-sex peers. Although the adolescents' preferred response to a cyberbully was congruent with the response they believed their parents would recommend (i.e., ignore the cyberbully), the adolescents anticipated that they and their parents would disagree on the individuals from whom the adolescents should seek advice if they were cyberbullied. Specifically, whereas the adolescents anticipated that their parents would want to be the primary advice-providers, the adolescents indicated that they would be more likely to seek advice from their friends than their parents or teachers if they were a victim of cyberbullying.

Keywords: cyberbullying, adolescents, parents, teachers

1. Introduction

With more than 90% of adolescents using mobile phones, smartphones, laptops, and tablets for daily communication with peers (Lenhart, 2015), social victimization via cyberbullying is becoming an increasingly common and serious problem among adolescents (Cuervo, Martinez, Quintana, & Amezaga, 2014; Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, & Tippett, 2008; Tokunaga, 2010). Unfortunately, adolescents generally do not inform adult authorities (i.e., parents and teachers) about their experiences with cyberbullying (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009) and, therefore, often do not avail themselves of advice or emotional support that may prove helpful to them when victimized.

One explanation that has been proposed to explain adolescents' reluctance to inform and seek advice from parents when victimized by a cyberbully is that adolescents believe that parents lack experience with cyberbullying and may suggest actions that will only exacerbate the problem (e.g., Mishna et al., 2009). However, no research to date has systematically examined adolescents' beliefs about (a) what approach their parents would recommend they take if they were victimized by a cyberbully, and (b) whether their parents' presumed recommended approach is, indeed, incongruent with the approach the adolescents themselves consider reasonable and appropriate. Given the negative consequences associated with cyberbullying and the important role parents can potentially play in dealing with cyberbullying among adolescents (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007), the primary purpose of the present study was to address this proposed explanation for adolescents' reluctance to seek advice from their parents when cyberbullied.

As part of a larger project that included the examination of adolescents' experiences with and attitudes toward other aspects of social media, the present study was designed to examine male and female adolescents' (a) experiences with cyberbullying, (b) preferred responses to cyberbullying (i.e., how they would respond to a cyberbully and from whom they would seek advice if they were a victim of cyberbullying), and (c) beliefs concerning how their parents would prefer they respond to cyberbullying. After initially examining male and

female adolescents' experiences with being a victim and perpetrator of cyberbullying, the main purpose of the present study was to determine whether adolescents' reluctance to seek advice from their parents when victimized by a cyberbully is associated with their belief, suggested by some authors (e.g., Mishna et al., 2009), that their parents will recommend counterproductive reactions that are incongruent with the approach they, themselves, consider reasonable and appropriate.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

As part of the larger project approved by Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), 116 adolescents (69 females, 45 males, 2 gender unspecified) ranging in age from 15 to 19 years (M_{age} = 16.9 years; SD_{age} = 0.80 years) were recruited from a high school in northeast Kansas to participate in this study. Parental consent was obtained for each participant and each participant also provided informed assent prior to participating in the study. Participation was voluntary and no incentives were offered; only those adolescents who completed the entire questionnaire (described below) were included in the analyses.

2.2 Materials and Procedure

Adolescent participants completed a questionnaire in their regular classroom that was created to assess their (a) experiences with cyberbullying, (b) preferred responses to being cyberbullied, and (c) beliefs concerning how their parents would prefer they respond to a cyberbully. In completing the questionnaire, participants were instructed to select the one best response to each item.

2.2.1 Adolescents' Experiences with Cyberbullying

To assess their experiences with cyberbullying, the adolescents were asked to indicate whether they have ever been cyberbullied and whether they have ever cyberbullied another person. In addition, the adolescents were asked to rate, on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*always*), how frequently they have been cyberbullied by boys and by girls, and how frequently they have cyberbullied boys and girls.

2.2.2 Adolescents' Preferred Responses to Being Cyberbullied

To assess their preferred responses to being cyberbullied, the adolescents were asked to rate, on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 5 (*very likely*), how likely they would be to seek advice from various individuals (i.e., mother, father, teachers, friends) about how to deal with a cyberbully, and how likely they would be to respond to a cyberbully in various ways (i.e., ignore, act friendly, act angry, complain).

2.2.3 Adolescents' Beliefs Concerning Their Parents' Preferred Responses to Cyberbullying

To assess their beliefs concerning how their parents' would prefer they respond to cyberbullying, the adolescents were asked to rate, on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 5 (*very likely*), how likely they think their mother and their father would be to encourage them to seek advice from various individuals (i.e., mother, father, teachers, friends) about how to deal with a cyberbully, and how likely they think their mother and their father would be to encourage them to respond to a cyberbully in various ways (i.e., ignore, act friendly, act angry, complain).

3. Results

3.1 Adolescents' Experiences with Cyberbullying

To determine whether the adolescents had ever been a victim and/or a perpetrator of cyberbullying, and whether these experiences differed between boys and girls, a series of chi-square analyses were conducted. Results indicated that the proportion of males (33.3%) and females (47.8%) who reported ever being cyberbullied did not differ, $\chi^2 = 2.30$, $p = .13$, and the proportion of males (24.4%) and females (23.2%) who reported ever cyberbullying another person did not differ, $\chi^2 = .02$, $p = .88$. However, the proportion of adolescents who reported ever being cyberbullied (42.0%) was significantly larger than the proportion of adolescents who reported ever cyberbullying another person (23.7%), $\chi^2 = 8.57$, $p < .01$.

To examine the frequency with which boys and girls had been cyberbullied by other boys and girls, a 2 (Gender of Adolescent) x 2 (Gender of Cyberbully) mixed-ANOVA was conducted on the adolescents' estimates of how frequently they have been cyberbullied by boys and girls. Although the main effects of Gender of Adolescent and Gender of Cyberbully were not significant (*p*s > .10), results yielded a significant interaction of Gender of Adolescent and Gender of Cyberbully, $F(1, 111) = 5.72$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. Although the frequency ratings were generally quite low, simple effects tests indicated that the males reported being cyberbullied more frequently by

males (M = 1.31) than by females (M = 1.18), whereas the females reported being cyberbullied more frequently by females (M = 1.53) than by males (M = 1.29).

3.2 Seeking Advice about How to Deal with a Cyberbully

Separate 2 (Gender of Adolescent) x 4 (Source of Advice) mixed-ANOVAs were conducted on the adolescents' ratings concerning (a) how likely they would be to seek advice from the various individuals about how to deal with a cyberbully, (b) how likely they think their mother would be to encourage them to seek advice from the various individuals about how to deal with a cyberbully, and (c) how likely they think their father would be to encourage them to seek advice from the various individuals about how to deal with a cyberbully. Although no consistent pattern of results involving gender of adolescent was found across the three analyses, the findings indicated that the main effect of Source of Advice was significant across all three analyses (see Table 1). Post hoc analyses revealed that, as expected, the adolescents' pattern of response for seeking advice was *different* than the pattern of response they believed their mothers and fathers would recommend. Given the purpose of the present study, it should be noted that whereas the adolescents indicated that they would be more likely to seek advice for dealing with a cyberbully from their friends than from adult authorities (i.e., their parents and teachers), they expected that their mothers and fathers would be more likely to encourage them to seek advice from them (i.e., their parents) than from their teachers or friends.

Table 1. Adolescents' mean likelihood rating of their advice seeking, their mothers' recommended advice seeking, and their fathers' recommended advice seeking from various individuals for how to deal with a cyberbully

	Source of Advice				
	Teachers	Father	Mother	Friends	F(3, 324)
Adolescents	1.29[a]	1.62[b]	1.89[c]	2.54[d]	34.34***
Mothers	2.01[a]	2.69[b]	3.35[c]	2.00[a]	32.66***
Fathers	1.91[a]	3.00[b]	2.81[b]	1.91[a]	25.95***

Note. Means in the same row with different superscripts differ at p < .05 as determined by the LSD post hoc test. ***p < .001.

3.3 Responses to Cyberbullying

Separate 2 (Gender of Adolescent) x 4 (Type of Response) mixed-ANOVAs were conducted on the adolescents' ratings concerning (a) how likely they would be to respond to a cyberbully in various ways, (b) how likely they think their mother would be to encourage them to respond to a cyberbully in various ways, and (c) how likely they think their father would be to encourage them to respond to a cyberbully in various ways. Although no consistent pattern of results involving gender of adolescent was found across the three analyses, the findings indicated that the main effect of Type of Response was significant across all three analyses (see Table 2). Post hoc analyses revealed that the adolescents' pattern of preferred responses to a cyberbully was *similar* to the pattern of responses they believed their mothers and fathers would encourage them to make to a cyberbully. Given the purpose of the present study, it should be noted that the adolescents indicated that their preferred response was to ignore a cyberbully, and they also indicated that their mothers and fathers would be most likely to encourage them to ignore a cyberbully.

Table 2. Adolescents' mean likelihood rating of their response, their mothers' recommended response, and their fathers' recommended response to a cyberbully

| | Type of Response | | | | |
	Complain	Act Friendly	Act Angry	Ignore	F(3, 324)
Adolescents	1.80[a]	2.35[b]	2.52[b]	3.33[c]	21.75***
Mothers	1.87[a]	2.90[b]	1.74[a]	3.81[c]	49.83***
Fathers	1.78[a]	2.34[b]	2.22[b]	3.71[c]	29.06***

Note. Means in the same row with different superscripts differ at $p < .05$ as determined by the LSD post hoc test. ***$p < .001$.

4. Discussion

After initially examining male and female adolescents' experiences with being a victim and perpetrator of cyberbullying, the main purpose of the present study was to determine whether adolescents' reluctance to seek advice from their parents when victimized by a cyberbully is associated with their belief that their parents will suggest responses that are incongruent with the approach they, themselves, consider a reasonable and appropriate recourse to being cyberbullied.

Initial analyses examining the extent to which male and female adolescents have experiences with cyberbullying were generally consistent with those reported in prior research (see Chisholm & Day, 2013 for review). For example, studies have tended to indicate that (a) male and female adolescents are equally likely to be perpetrators of cyberbullying and equally likely to be victims of cyberbullying (e.g., Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, & Hinduja, 2009; Williams & Guerra, 2007), and (b) peer victimization is more likely to occur among adolescents of the same than opposite sex (e.g., Paquette & Underwood, 1999). However, it is noteworthy that the proportion of adolescents who reported ever being a victim of cyberbullying (42.0%) was quite high in the present sample. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2014) of the Cyberbullying Research Center, "estimates of the number of youth who experience cyberbullying vary widely (ranging from 10-40% or more) depending on the age of the group studied and how cyberbullying is formally defined" (p. 3). Considering that (a) the incidence of cyberbullying among adolescents increases with age (Chisholm & Day, 2013), and (b) adolescents in the present study were provided with a rather broad definition of cyberbullying (i.e., "*Cyberbullying is bullying someone through any form of technology by sending or posting hurtful messages or pictures.*"), it is not surprising that the proportion of adolescents who reported ever being cyberbullied was at the top end of the range cited by Hinduja and Patchin (2014). Although it could be argued that the proportion of adolescents who admit to ever being a cyberbully should also be relatively high given the age range of the present sample and the definition of cyberbullying provided, research has indicated that adolescents' self-reports of the extent to which they cyberbully others tend to be influenced by social desirability concerns (Chisholm & Day, 2013). Therefore, in the context of the current study, it is understandable that a higher proportion of the adolescents reported being cyberbullied than being a cyberbully.

A comparison of the adolescents' ratings about their, and their parents', anticipated responses to a cyberbully yielded an interesting pattern of results. Whereas the adolescents indicated that they would be more likely to seek advice from their friends than from their parents if they were a victim of cyberbullying, they expected that their parents would be most likely to encourage them to seek advice from "mom and dad". Despite the adolescents' belief that they and their parents would not see "eye to eye" with regard to the individuals from whom the adolescents should seek advice about how to deal with a cyberbully, the adolescents' preferred response to a cyberbully was found to be congruent with what they believed their parents would recommend (i.e., ignore the cyberbully). Therefore, although the adolescents demonstrated that they would be reluctant to ask their parents for advice if they were victimized by a cyberbully, the adolescents anticipated that their parents (a) would want to be sought out for advice, and (b) would offer a recommendation that is congruent with the adolescents' own preferred response to a cyberbully. Thus, the present results suggest that adolescents' reluctance to confide in their parents is not due, as some authors have proposed (e.g., Mishna et al., 2009), to adolescents' beliefs that their parents would suggest counterproductive reactions that may only exacerbate the problem.

Although the present findings cannot explain why the adolescents favored their friends over their parents as advisors in dealing with victimization by a cyberbully, it seems reasonable that adolescents may perceive their friends as having more experience with social technology and cyberbullying, and as being better prepared than their parents to suggest a range of potential strategies for dealing with a cyberbully. More generally, adolescents may have age-related reasons (e.g., striving for independence from parents; see Collins & Steinberg, 2006 for review) that motivate them to seek out their friends for advice and emotional support when confronted with a broad range of interpersonal problems, including victimization by a cyberbully.

It is noteworthy, and somewhat troubling, that the adolescents' advice-seeking ratings indicated that they would be least likely to seek advice from teachers if they were a victim of cyberbullying. Although it is unclear why the adolescents appear to be especially reluctant to seek out their teachers for advice concerning cyberbullying, prior research suggests that adolescents tend to hold a rather cynical view concerning their school's ability to deal with cyberbullying (Cassidy et al., 2009). More specifically, adolescents tend to believe that (a) "tattling" on a cyberbully to a teacher may only exacerbate the problem (Parris, Varjas, Meyers, & Cutts, 2012), and (b) their teachers' recommendations on how to deal with a cyberbully are not particularly effective (Cassidy et al., 2009; Mishna et al., 2009). Unfortunately, adolescents are not necessarily alone in these beliefs. For example, research examining high school teachers' attitudes concerning cyberbullying indicates that although they view cyberbullying as a significant problem (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O'Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2013), they are relatively uncertain how they should handle cyberbullying, especially when it occurs outside of the school (Stauffer, Heath, Coyne, & Ferrin, 2012).

5. Conclusion

Despite the adolescents' awareness that their parents want to help and would provide advice that is congruent with their own preferred response (i.e., ignore a cyberbully), the adolescents still reported being less likely to seek advice for dealing with a cyberbully from their parents (and their teachers) than from their friends. Therefore, the present study serves as a reminder to parents and teachers that although an adolescent may not report or seek advice from them when cyberbullied, this does not guarantee that cyberbullying has not occurred. Given that social victimization via cyberbullying is becoming an increasingly common and serious problem among adolescents (e.g., Smith et al., 2008; Tokunaga, 2010), it is imperative that research conducted in more naturalistic settings continue to explore adolescents' beliefs about how to respond to a cyberbully and the reasons for their reluctance to seek assistance from adult authorities (i.e., parents and teachers) who may be in a more powerful position than their friends to stop a cyberbully's attack.

Acknowledgments

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