Predicting Online Aggression:
The Net Bully, Net Power, and Net Importance Scales

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ABSTRACT

This study develops and validates measures of traits and attitudes for predicting online aggression. Over 362 participants ranging from 18 to 71 years in age completed online surveys on their attitudes, feelings, and experiences regarding online interactions and activities, in addition to reporting on several pre-established personality tests and demographic information. Participants also reported their own engagement in a variety of antisocial and prosocial online behaviors. Respondents' positive attitudes and tendencies toward online bullying (the Net Bully scale) and feelings of power and control when online (the Net Power scale) predicted their aggressive online behaviors (the Hostile Net Behaviors scale). Conversely, feelings that online interactions and activities are personally important (the Net Importance scale) predicted prosocial online behaviors (the Net Friendly scale). The merit of these scales to serve future research on online aggression and bullying is discussed.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, schools, companies, and government agencies have become increasingly alarmed about cyber-bullying, online privacy violations, and internet crimes (Duggan, 2017). School authorities and parents report young people engaging in harassment of classmates via emails, social networking sites, and internet forums (Hoffman, 2010; Sengupta, 2013). Companies and agencies have seen an increase in malicious online security breaches and criminal violations (Deutsch & Ax, 2014; Heilman, 2011; Marks, 2018; Nakashima, 2010). According to a 2009 CDC study, rates of cyber-bullying appear to be increasing annually (e.g., from 2000 to 2005, the rate increased 50%; David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2009). Over 40 U.S. states have enacted legislation outlawing cyber harassment (NCSL, 2013).

Little prior research has studied the specific attitude or personality factors that underlie a variety of online aggression. The research that has been done has focused primarily on situational or demographic variables related to online harassment and bullying (e.g., Williams, & Guerra, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a). This study had two goals: (1) to ascertain the relationship between personality traits, social attitudes, and aggressive online interactions, and (2) to develop scales that could serve as valid predictors of a person's likelihood to engage in aggressive online activities.

Varieties of Online Aggression

This research uses the more general term "online aggression" to denote a variety of aggressive acts conveyed via electronic means, typically the internet (Olweus & Limber, 2018). Prior research, using the terms online harassment, cyberbullying, electronic bullying, and internet aggression, have found that such aggression commonly takes the form of insulting, demeaning, and humiliating messages and/or spreading malicious gossip over a variety of media, including email (e.g., Jones et al., 2013; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Lenhart, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a), text messaging (Jones et al., 2013; Menesini, Nocentini, & Calussi, 2011; Raskaskaus & Stoltz 2007) defaming websites (Raskaskasus & Stoltz, 2007), instant messaging (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Lenhart, 2007), and especially social networking, such as Facebook (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2009; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a). Other methods include posting embarrassing pictures and videos of the victim (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Menesini et al., 2011; Raskasus & Stoltz, 2007; Sugarman & Willoughby, 2013). Although less common, online physical threats, sexual harassment, and sexual predatory behaviors have also been reported (Maas et al., 2003; Jones et al., 2013; Palfrey, Sacco, Boyd, & DeBonis, 2009; Raskasus & Stoltz, 2007; Wolak et al., 2008).

Prevalence

Estimates of the prevalence of online aggression have varied with different definitions of aggression, different time frames under consideration, and different age groups studied (Volk, Veenstra, & Espelage, 2017). One U.S. government review of prevalence studies found that from 4% to 46% of teenagers studied reported victimization from online aggressors (Palfrey, Sacco, Boyd, & DeBonis, 2009). A study by the CDC on 10-17-year-olds found that 9% of those surveyed experienced online aggression in the past month in which they were surveyed (Hertz & David-Ferdon, 2008). In a study conducted later with American high school students, a CDC Youth Behavior Risk Survey found that over 14% of respondents indicated they had been bullied electronically in the past 12 months (Kann et al., 2014). Later using the same methodology and instrument, that number rose to over 15% (Kann et al., 2016). A Pew telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 12-17-year-olds found that 32% had been the victims of online aggression at least once in their lives (Lenhart, 2007). In another survey of a similar age group, Jones, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2013) found that 11% reported being harassed online in 2010. While there is a considerable range in prevalence estimates, all seem to agree that the rates of online aggression are increasing with time. The CDC study (Hertz & David-Ferdon, 2008) found that rates of reported online aggression incidents increased from 6% in 2000 to 9% in 2005, and Jones et al. (2013) found that rates increased from 6% in 2000 to 11% in 2010. Reports of being repeatedly harassed online increased from 2% in 2000 to 5% in 2010, and reports of especially distressing harassment, as defined by the victims, increased from 3% in 2005 to 5% in 2010. A Pew Research Center study of American adults found that 41% of respondents experienced online harassment, ranging from "offensive name-calling, purposeful embarrassment, physical threats" to "sexual harassment or stalking" (Anderson, 2017).

Correlates of Online Aggressors

Much of the research on factors associated with individuals who aggress against others online has focused on poor psychosocial functioning. This is in following with research on traditional bullying, which has found that young people who are bullies tend to have poor family relations (Olweus, 1995; Olweus & Limber, 2018). Similarly, studies of online aggressors have found that they tend to have poor parent-child attachment, a history of romantic relationship conflict, a negative school social environment and low commitment to school, and poor peer social support (Schnurr, Mahatmya, & Basche, 2013; Williams & Guerra, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a, 2004b). Other studies of online aggressors have found disruptive or aggressive family dynamics, poor parental involvement, delinquency including drug and alcohol abuse, poor academic performance, and poor psychological health, such as depression (Kowalski & Limber 2013; Low & Espelage, 2013).

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