

CYBERBULLYING VS. TRADITIONAL BULLYING – DO VICTIMS REACT DIFFERENTLY?

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Abstract

Bullying is a deliberate use of force or coercion to abuse or intimidate others. Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place in the virtual space over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. In view of the differences between physical and virtual spaces, it can be presumed that differences would be found between the bullying victims' coping strategies. This study hypothesized that children who are victims of traditional bullying tend to report it at school, whereas cyberbullying victims use the characteristics of the virtual space (anonymity, invisibility, lack of eye contact) to retaliate against their aggressors. The sample included 1,295 3rd- to 9th-graders, of which 955 responded that they had been victims of at least one type of bullying (either traditional or cyber). The study found that victims of traditional bullying tended to act to break out of the situation more than cyberbullying victims did. Moreover, it was found that victims of traditional bullying tended to report it at school, and cyberbullying victims tended to report it to parents. However, the hypothesis that victims of cyberbullying would use cyber characteristics to retaliate was not supported. Additionally, a link was found between the victims' age and their use of anti-bullying strategies: The younger they were, victims of traditional bullying tended to react.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, traditional bullying, victims, school, action strategies.

1. Coping strategies of victims of traditional bullying and cyberbullying

The literature links bullying behaviors and victimization behaviors, so that the victim may at times exhibit bullying behavior and vice versa (Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012; Völlink, Bolman, Dehue, & Jacobs, 2013). Consequently, another action strategy available to the victim is causing harm, whether to the bully or to others. A study conducted on children and adolescents (aged 8-18) found a significant relationship between victims' online behavior and bullies' online behavior (Boniel-Nissim & Dolev-Cohen, 2012). Furthermore, evidence indicates that cyberbullying victims, mainly boys, perform antisocial behaviors as observers of cyberbullying (Cao & Lin, 2015). Victims who choose action strategies of repaying in the same coin, called in the literature bully-victim, tend to express emotions (for instance anger or nervousness) and to respond more aggressively to stressful situations, and usually do not opt for solution-oriented response strategies (Völlink et al., 2013). Conversely, response strategies characterized by assertiveness and seeking support were found to moderate the relationship between cyberbullying victims and depression symptoms. Namely, the more victims were active and positive about changing their situation, the lower levels of depression they exhibited (Machmutow et al., 2012).

In view of the paucity of research literature on action strategies, and the greater understanding that there is a difference between bullying phenomena in various spaces, which might require different response strategies, the aim of this study was to examine children's response strategies to traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Based on the research literature, it can be assumed that a significant difference would be found between the uses of action strategies in the various spaces. It is expected that the supervision in the education system would encourage the use of seeking help and problem-solving with the help of the school staff when the bullying occurs on school grounds. Additionally, the face-to-face encounter with the bully, which increases the likelihood of physical harm, would increase the use of avoidance strategies. On the other hand, unsupervised cyberspace, which is characterized by disinhibition, would increase the use of retaliation through the virtual space.

Hence, this study hypothesized that a significant difference would be found between strategies employed by victims of cyberbullying as opposed to victims of traditional bullying.

1. Victims of traditional bullying tend to report to the education system more than victims of cyberbullying do.
2. Victims of traditional bullying tend to use avoidance more than victims of cyberbullying do.
3. Victims of cyberbullying tend to use bullying behavior towards the bully, via the internet, compared to victims of traditional bullying.

2. Methods

The data were gathered online through ‘Small-talk’ panel during February-March 2015. ‘Small-talk’ panel is a children’s internet panel, operated by a research institute, which enables examining opinions and conducting surveys among young children (ages 8-14; elementary and middle school). The panel includes about 1,500 Hebrew-speaking members, whose parents signed the legal regulations and agreed to let their children answer questionnaires, which they receive through an online link. The panel is run under strict Esomar guidelines.

A notification to the parents about the survey was published on the panel with a link to the questionnaire. After agreeing to participate, any panel member (child) could access the link and answer the questionnaire. The child could leave the questionnaire at any stage. The children were given the option to be helped by a parent if the questions were unclear. The questionnaire opened with a question about age and school grade in order to facilitate a sample limited to the required age. The quota sampling method was used; namely, when it reached the target number of respondents that answered fully and properly, the questionnaire was removed. The required quota was 1350 children. Fifty-five children partially completed the questionnaire and therefore were removed from the total sample.

3. Sample

The sample included 1,295 respondents aged 9-14 (3rd to 9th grade) who answered the questionnaire fully. Of them, 955 reported that they had been subjected to some kind of bullying (traditional or cyber). Nine hundred and thirteen children were affected in the physical space (95.6%), 605 were affected in cyberspace (63.3%), and 548 (57.4%) reported having been victimized in both. Most children were in elementary school (3rd grade – 9%, 4th grade – 27%, 5th grade – 26%, 6th grade – 18%, 7th grade – 8%, 8th grade – 7%, 9th grade – 5%). Forty-one percent were boys.

4. Measures

Personal details: age, grade, gender

Traditional bullying (Lev-Wiesel, Sarid, & Sternberg, 2013): twenty six items concerning social rejection by other children at school. Each item is phrased as a statement that expresses a form of bullying/social rejection, answered on a Likert scale of 1 (never) to 5 (every day or almost every day). The questionnaire addresses five kinds of bullying: Rejection (for example, “Friends ignored me”); physical harm (for example, “Friends threw things at me”); insults (for example, “Friends called me names”); accusations (for example, “Friends blamed me for bad things that had happened”); and manipulation (for example, “Friends threatened me”). The questionnaire was examined by means of Cronbach’s alpha internal consistency coefficient, and high reliability was found ($\alpha=0.96$).

Cyberbullying (Menesini, Nocentini, & Calussi, 2011): A list of 16 situations of cyberbullying, answered on a Likert scale of 1 (never) to 5 (every day or almost every day). Cyberbullying situations relate to four types: Public humiliation (for example, “Someone changed my picture in a negative way and published it”); cruelty (for example, “Someone cursed me online”); deception (for example, “Someone deceived me online”); and harassment (for example, “I received unwelcome sexual messages from someone I know”). The instructions made it clear that the virtual space included the internet, social networks and smartphone apps. The questionnaire had high reliability ($\alpha=0.92$).

Action strategies (Rolider, Lapidot-Lefler, & Levy, 2000): The questionnaire raises action possibilities when the child experiences bullying. The items include reporting action (seeking help from a parent/friend/school staff); offensive actions based on disinhibition and retaliation (“harm the bully”, “harm other children”, “use the internet to retaliate”); avoidance actions (“stay at home”, “do nothing”, distance myself physically or disconnect from the bully”); and direct communication with the bully (“ask the bully to stop”). The questionnaire includes 13 items on a yes/no scale and was presented separately for traditional bullying and for cyberbullying.

5. Findings

Traditional bullying (at school): Sixty-nine percent of the respondents reported some form of bullying over the last year. The percentage of bullying at school was significantly higher among 3rd-4th grade children than among 5th-6th grade and 7th-9th grade children ($\chi^2=35.23$, $p < .001$). Eighty-three percent of the 3rd-4th grade children reported having experienced bullying and harassment at school, 69% in 5th-6th grade, and 62% in 7th-9th grade. No significant difference was found in bullying frequency between boys (70%) and girls (68%).

Cyberbullying: Forty-eight percent of the children reported occurrences of cyberbullying. A significant difference was found between boys (40%) and girls (52%) ($\text{Chisq.}=17.87$, $p < .001$). No

significant differences were found between the age groups victimized by cyberbullying, which ranged between 45% and 48%.

Action strategies of victims of traditional bullying: of the respondents who experienced traditional harassment (N=913), 6% stated that they would do nothing. Hence, 94% used at least one strategy to cope with bullying. The frequency of the various strategies, from the most frequent to the least frequent, was: seeking help from someone at school (59%), distancing oneself from the bully (55%), telling the bully to stop (51%), seeking help from a family member (46%), seeking help from a fellow student (24%), retaliating against the bully (23%), going to the police (4%), staying at home (4%), harming the bully via social networks (2%), and harming other children (2%). In general, it seems that reporting actions are more frequent in cases of bullying at school, as are avoidance actions (distancing oneself from the bully).

Action strategies of victims of cyberbullying: of the victims of cyberbullying (N=605), 10% stated that they would take no action. On the other hand, 90% employ various strategies (at least one) against their situation. The frequency of the various strategies, from the most frequent to the least frequent, was: seeking help from family (44%), telling the bully to stop (36%), disconnecting or blocking the bully (33%), seeking help from school staff (26%), hurting the bully (15%), seeking help from a fellow student (14%), going to the police (9%), harming the bully via cyberspace (6%), staying at home (2%), harming other children (1%), and damaging other children's property (1%). Contrary to the hypothesis, it seems that the strategy of retaliating via cyberspace was reported at a very low frequency.

Action strategies of victims of traditional bullying and cyberbullying by gender: we found a significant difference between boys and girls regarding retaliation against and harming the bully. A higher percentage of boys who were victims only of traditional bullying retaliated than girls did (25% vs. 7%). Girls who were victimized by both traditional bullying and cyberbullying responded more than boys did by distancing themselves from the bully (19% vs. 11%). Girls sought help from someone at school and from fellow students more than boys did.

When examining the differences between boys and girls in the physical space, it is obvious that the strategy of retaliating was more frequent among boys (37%) than among girls (10%). Conversely, distancing oneself from the bully was more characteristic of girls (62%) than of boys (48%). Reaching out for help from a family member was more common among girls (50%) as opposed to boys (42%), as was seeking help from school staff – 64% for girls and 53% for boys.

The differences between boys and girls maintain a similar trend when examining cyberbullying victims (see Table 2). The strategy of retaliating was more frequent among boys (26%) than among girls (7%). Seeking help from a family member was more frequent among girls (48%) than among boys (37%), as was seeking help from school staff (31% and 19%, respectively). On the other hand, the strategy of disconnecting from the bully by means of blocking him/her online was equally frequent among boys and girls (33%).

Action strategies of victims of traditional bullying and cyberbullying by age: when the harm is in physical space, a strategy of retaliating and hurting the bully was more common among 3rd-4th grades and 7th-9th grades. In all three age groups, responses were less when the bullying only took place in cyberspace. It was also found that seeking help from school staff was frequent in instances of traditional bullying, and decreased the older the victims were. Seeking help from family members also decreased the older the victims of traditional bullying were. Conversely, the use of this strategy increased when they were victims of cyberbullying.

When examining the differences between victims of traditional bully by age groups, it is obvious that the strategy of retaliating was more frequent among 7th-9th grades (30%) than among 3rd-4th (19%) and 5th-6th grades (18%). Seeking help from school staff decreased significantly with age: in 3rd-4th grades 70% sought help at school, whereas in 5th-6th grades 58% and in 7th-9th grades 52% did so.

When the harm was inflicted in cyberspace, the strategy of retaliating against the offender also increased with age: 18% in 7th-9th grades versus 14% in 5th-6th grades and 9% in 3rd-4th grades. The strategy of doing nothing was more frequent in lower grades: 15% in 3rd-4th grades, 11% in 5th-6th grades, and only 8% in 7th-9th grade. It should be noted that the opposite happened when the bullying took place in physical space.

Comparison between action strategies of traditional bullying and cyberbullying victims: the use of action strategies by victims of cyberbullying was less than the use of action strategies by victims of traditional bullying. The findings indicated a statistically significant difference in most response strategies to traditional bullying versus cyberbullying. In general, the percentage of respondents that employed an action strategy was higher in instances of traditional bullying. The strategy that was more frequent among cyberbullying victims was to retaliate through cyberspace. Additional strategies that were significantly higher in cyberspace victims were “does nothing” and “does something else” (i.e., an action that was not specified in the questionnaire). There were only two action strategies for which no significant difference was found between traditional bullying and cyberspace victims – staying at home and seeking help from the family.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Victims of cyberbullying are less inclined to act than victims of traditional bullying are. These findings are supported by previous research that shows that cyberbullying victims tend not to report these transgressions (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2012; Parris et al., 2012). The reasons for not reporting are varied and include, among others, fear of losing access to technology (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009); fear that adults would not really be able to help, the bully's anonymity that makes concrete reporting difficult, mistrust of educators to understand or take the problem seriously, fear of being blamed for their aggressive reaction toward the bully, embarrassment, and fear of being labelled a victim (Agatston et al., 2012; Cassidy et al., 2009; Smith, 2012; Smith & Slonje, 2010).

Avoidance strategies are used at a different frequency when the bullying occurs in the physical space in contrast to the virtual space. Six percent of the victims of traditional bullying (at school) stated that they would not do anything against the bully versus 10% of cyberbullying victims. Since the literature has indicated that the impacts of cyberbullying on victims is similar to those of traditional bullying – and include depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches and sleeping problems (Menesini & Nocentini, 2012; Olweus, 2012; Smith, 2012) – it can be assumed that the high incidence of “do nothing” does not stem from a feeling that cyberbullying is less severe. It could be that children are more threatened by taking action online, or lack the appropriate tools to defend themselves. Moreover, it would seem that they act in other ways that were not mentioned in the questionnaire, because a considerable percentage replied that they “do something else”.

The hypothesis that victims of traditional bullying are more likely to seek help at school was supported. It should be noted that although seeking help from school staff is the most frequent choice of traditional bullying victims, it is the fourth most frequent choice, and at a significantly lower percentage, of cyberbullying victims. Perhaps, cyberbullying victims do not experience school as the place for aid and assistance, because the bullying did not take place on school grounds. Schools do conduct interventions on the issue of cyberbullying, but it seems that unlike traditional bullying, children do not perceive cyberbullying as the school's responsibility.

However, whereas seeking help from parents is the most common choice of cyberbullying victims, this strategy is in fourth place when it comes to traditional bullying victims. It is possible that this mirror image is due to the data on seeking help at school. Namely, the natural turning for help to the school staff when bullying occurs on school grounds reduces the need to tell parents. Correspondingly, in instances of cyberbullying, the lessened seeking of help at school increases the need to tell parents and ask for their help. The ranking of this strategy is different for the physical and virtual spaces, but the frequency of seeking help from parents by victims of traditional bullying and cyberbullying is not significantly different.

As expected, victims of traditional bullying respond primarily by seeking help at school (59%) and by physically distancing themselves from the bully (55%). Concerning victims of cyberbullying, it seems that the option to strike back online (in view of the internet's disinhibition features) was not corroborated in this study, showing low frequency (6%) relative to other possible action strategies. However, it should be noted that comparing the response strategies of victims of traditional and cyberbullying revealed that victims of cyberbullying tend to retaliate against the bully online at a significantly higher frequency than victims of traditional bullying do.

In cases of cyberbullying, it seems that disconnecting or blocking the bully is the most common strategy (33%). This finding is supported by a study that found that in cases of cyberbullying, those involved are afraid to be perceived as ‘informers’, and also feel that there is not much that can be done about it, so they prefer avoidance strategies (such as deleting messages) over using other response strategies (Parris et al., 2012).

In this study, the frequency of sharing and seeking help from one's peer group was low (14%), nevertheless research has shown that the victim's best chance to receive effective help is from friends who come to his/her assistance (Li, 2010). Furthermore, strategies of seeking help following victimization in the physical space are more frequent the younger the victim is. The findings show that 70% of 3rd-4th grade children seek help from school staff as opposed to 52% of 7th-9th graders, and 52% of 3rd-4th grade children go to someone in their family for help as opposed to 41% of the older children (7th-9th grades). Additionally, girls were found to use more action strategies than boys do, except for actions that involve retaliation against the bully, in which boys showed higher frequency. On the other hand, unlike victims of traditional bullying, no differences were found between the various age groups of cyberbullying victims. But, the gender distinction was maintained here as well: girls tend to use more action strategies than boys do, except for actions that involve retaliation against the bully, in which boys showed higher frequency. It could be that the reason for this is that bullying among girls is usually concerned with damaging one's reputation rather than using physical force, and as such fits the definition of cyberbullying (Smith, 2015). Moreover, most incidences of cyberbullying occur on social networks, which girls use more (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015).

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