Characteristics of Cyberbullying Among Native and Immigrant Secondary Education Students

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ABSTRACT

This article details the results of a descriptive study that analyzes the characteristics and impact of cyberbullying among native and immigrant students enrolled in secondary education. Results indicate that immigrant children experience higher levels than native students of cyberbullying victimisation and they also perpetrate bullying to a greater degree through digital media; there were significant differences in the majority of cases analysed (immigrant students had higher levels of victimisation and perpetration than native students in 27 of 33 cyberbullying incidents studied). In addition, the study found that immigrant students considered being a native of another country to be an explanatory factor in their experiences with cyberbullying. Both groups showed similar frequencies in the explanation given for perpetrating cyberbullying: they bullied in response to being provoked.

KEYWORDS

Cyberbullying, Immigration, School Violence, Secondary Education, Youth

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of electronic media and their speedy adoption by minors has swiftly caused profound changes for them in areas such as socialisation processes, communication strategies among peers, learning styles and forms of leisure (Sureda Comas & Morey, 2010). As a result of these changes, young people have considerably new opportunities, but they are also exposed to complex and multivariate risks. Some of these are related to access to inappropriate content and contacts, while others stem from the commercial use of the Internet or are related to behavioural issues, such as addiction and social skills. In any case, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to intimidate, humiliate, threaten and bully is one of the most important risks. However, ranking the severity and frequency of such incidents is difficult and always relative (The Internet Safety Technical Task Force, 2008), what seems certain is that its prevalence has been increasing rapidly over the past few years (Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2006).

ICTs have facilitated the emergence of a new form of bullying or harassment: cyberbullying (also known as electronic bullying, e-bullying, digital bullying, cyber harassment, etc.), a specific form of deliberate, repeated attacks based on the disparity of power between the victims and the bullies (Nansel & Overpeck, 2003). Cyberbullying has been identified as a problem in education and public health.
(Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007) that affects the psychosocial balance of millions of children (Abada, Hou & Ram, 2008). Because it is a recent phenomenon, many questions about the characteristics, causes and effects of cyberbullying remain unanswered. Although three of the latest papers on the subject (Kiriakidis & Kavoura, 2010, Schrock & Boyd 2008; Tokunaga, 2010) agree on its definition, the concept of cyberbullying still does not have a clear, generally agreed upon definition. In this sense, Tokunaga’s characterisation, based on an analysis of the most common definitions, may be a good starting point to analyse the issue: “…any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others” (Tokunaga, 2010, 278). Furthermore, it should be noted that the bully’s identity may or may not be known by the victim and the attacks may occur in multiple scenarios and on numerous platforms.

What seems clear is that the use of ICT, especially mobile phones and the Internet, increases the effects of traditional bullying -a phenomenon that has been studied since the 1970s- because it provides anonymity for bullies and blurs the temporal and geographical boundaries in which the attacks take place. Indeed, in many cases, ICTs greatly amplify the potential audience because the attacks can be viewed with no limit of time by a massive number of people that escape the control of both the bully and the victim (Sureda, Rigo & Comas, 2009).

Among other aspects, the relationships between this phenomenon and age, gender or cultural differences due to student origins have been analysed to ascertain whether certain personal or group characteristics are involved in generating and sustaining cyberbullying. The results of studies analyzing the relationship between age and cyberbullying are mixed. Some studies suggest that the incidents among children increase with age (Walrave & Heirman, 2011; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004), while others suggest that cyberbullying is more common in the early stages of secondary education than in later stages (Álvarez-García et al., 2011; Slonje & Smith, 2008). In any case, most studies refute the relationship between age and the phenomenon of cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010). On the other hand, in terms of gender, most studies, in agreement with Li’s often quoted work (2006) suggesting that gender plays a significant role in cyberbullying, indicate that girls tend to be victimised more often than boys and are less often the perpetrators of cyberbullying (Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón & Padilla, 2010; Erdur-Baker, 2010; Lenhart, 2007; Ortega, Calmaestra & Merchán, 2008; Sureda, Rigo & Comas, 2009; Walrave & Heirman, 2009; Wang, Iannotti & Nansel, 2009; Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007). Li posits that the most plausible explanation may be that cyberbullying is a manifestation of violence in affective relationships, the so-called “dating violence” (Erickson, Gittelman & Dowd, 2010) that is especially prevalent in adolescence and of which females are the main victims. In this regard, it is illuminating that 1.4% of Spanish adolescents—females—revealed that they had received insulting or threatening messages on the Internet or a mobile phone from the boys they are dating, have dated or wanted to date (Díaz-Aguado, 2010). The high incidence of victimisation among lesbians, gays and bisexuals is also significant (Mishna, Newman, Daley & Solomon, 2009; Poteat & Rivers, 2010). However, as is the case with age, the existing literature on the relationship between gender and cyberbullying is not unequivocal, and some studies have not noted significant differences in this variable (Álvarez-García et al., 2011; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Williams & Guerra, 2007).

Studies analysing the correlation between cyberbullying and immigration (ethnic, cultural and religious difference) are even more scarce (Larochette, 2009), to the extent that the reviews of Schrock and Boyd (2008), Kiriakidis and Kavoura (2010) and Tokunaga (2010) make no reference to the subject. Nevertheless, existing studies make a clear distinction between works that analyse and compare the prevalence and/or characteristics of cyberbullying in different countries or regions on the one hand, and on the other hand, studies that investigate cyberbullying among young people of different cultures who interact within the context of a single country or region.

Of note among the studies that analyse and compare the prevalence of cyberbullying in young people from various countries is Li’s study (2008), which on the basis of a questionnaire applied to 157 Canadian minors and 202 Chinese children between the ages of 12 and 15, concluded that
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