An Examination of the Social Level Predictors of Cyberbullying Victimisation

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Abstract: With the increasing use of information & communication technologies, and the popularity of various social media applications, incidents of cyberbullying have also increased. A number of studies have been conducted in the recent years to investigate how various social factors influence one's vulnerability to cyberbullying. This paper reviews the existing literature and develops a conceptual framework on critical social factors predicting cyberbullying victimization. Such a framework would be immensely useful for governments and policymakers as it gives a comprehensive view and understanding of the critical predictors of cyberbullying. Such an understanding is important for devising a holistic approach to addressing cyberbullying through potential victim empowerment and placement of early preventive measures. The conceptual framework developed in this paper identifies family background, school climate and peer relationships as critical social factors for cyberbullying victimization.

Keywords: Cyberbullying victimization, Critical social factors

Introduction

A. Background

During the past decade, social networking, instant messaging, and blogs have developed into more prominent tools for social interactions over telephonic or face-to-face interactions, beginning with Myspace and Yahoo chat rooms and progressing, to the now popular Facebook,whatsapp and various other web platforms (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012).

This new and rapidly growing form of communication has given way to a new form of bullying in the 21st century called cyberbullying. Hinduja and Patchin (2009) define cyberbullying as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices". According to Belsey (2004) "cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate, repeated and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others".

Cyberbullying forms a subset of online harassment and covers a wide range of conduct such as trickery, outing, trolling, catfishing, online impersonation, exclusion, flaming, denigration etc. Recent research has shown that among various forms of harassment that take place in cyberspace, a substantial number of persons are victims of cyberbullying, which leads to a wider realization that cyberbullying is becoming a serious problem (Cross, 2008; Thompson, Smith, & Goldsmith, 2008). For instance, "The Pew Internet and American Life Project on Cyberbullying" conducted in 2006, using a sample of 935 teens age 12 to 17 years-old and their parents living in continental United States, found that one out of three teens have been cyberbullied in the past year (Lenhart, 2007). These findings signify the

importance of carrying out a thorough examination of cyberbullying victimization enquiring into the root causes of it.

B. Research Objective

This article enquires into the social antecedents (risk factors) of cyberbullying victimization and discusses how certain socio environmental factors such as family background, school climate and peer relationships etc. influence a person being more vulnerable to cyberbullying victimization.

Social Factors which Predict Cyberbullying Victimization

Human behavior is shaped by the complex interactions in multiple contexts including the individual, family, peer, and school environments (Bronfenbrenner,1979). Accordingly, through a comprehensive review of literature, this part of the article aims to extend the body of research on cyberbullying victimization by determining how victimization is predicted by a person's social surrounding.

A. The impact of family background

Family is viewed as one setting embedded within broader societal and cultural settings, all of which influence the shaping of an individual's development (Marrett et al., 2018). Grusec et al. (2014) suggest that the family background of a person has an important bearing on his/her development.

It has been shown that the most important prerequisite of a child's survival is his or her connection with the parents. This connection serves many functions, but there is increasing evidence that the qualities of such early relationships influences the way a child's brain develops, particularly the part of the brain that involves physiological, emotional and behavioral self-regulation (Newman,

Sivaratnam & Komiti , 2015; Swain et al., 2007).

Similarly, in the context of cyberbullying victimization, negative family dynamics and parental characteristics serve as risk factors (Buelga et al., 2015).Thus, this part of the study aims to assess the role of five family background related strain elements, namely, Lack of parental support and poor parent child communication; Family conflict; Deprived socio-economic status and deprived employment situation; and Parental educational level as possible predictors of cyberbullying victimization.

1). Lack of parental support and poor parent-child communication

Certain studies have explored the association between parenting and cyberbullying victimization. Initial research has found that cyberbully-victims experienced less parental monitoring and reported poorer emotional bonds with their parents than children who have not experienced cyberbullying (Ybarra et al., 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Erog˘lu & Peker, 2011).Wang et al. (2009) have assessed parental support in relation to cyberbullying using four measures: (a) whether parents provided help when needed, (b) were loving, (c) understood children's problems, and (d) were able to make them feel better when upset. The authors found that most of those who were cyberbullied had a family history with a significantly less parental support.

Additionally, it was found that both the cyber and traditional victims of bullying more often reported having authoritarian or neglectful parents. (Conor, 2016; Dilmaç and Aydoan, 2010). Authoritarian parenting includes imposing strict rules in an obedience-valued environment; for instance, authoritarian parents commonly use corporal punishment in order to modify their child's behavior (Baumrind, 1966). Studies by Baldry and Farrington

(2000) and Wang et al. (2009) show that increased parental pressure will predict significantly higher rates of cyberbullying victimization. Similarly, Dehue et al. (2012) who examined the relationship between cyberbullying victims and parenting characteristics, reported victims of cyberbullying having parents who were less responsive to their needs, but were also more demanding.

A study by Bornstein & Bornstein (2014) shows that authoritarian parenting style minimize opportunities for children to learn to cope with stress. According to them, too much control and demandingness may limit children's opportunities to make decisions for themselves or to make their needs known to their parents. Furthermore, authoritarian parents were found to display low level of engagement and trust toward their children. They most often discourage open communication and make strict control of a child's behaviour (Hoskins, 2014). According to Nijhof and Engels (2007), the authoritarian parenting style is related with the lower level of ability and self-confidence to employ coping mechanisms among adolescents and thus restricts a child to explore his/her capabilities and social interactions, eventually resulting in the child's dependence on parental guidance and direction. Hence, it can be argued that these inherent features are the reason which makes a person brought up in an authoritarian parenting environment more vulnerable to cyberbullying victimization.

Similarly, parent-child communication also has been one of the most studied dynamic variables and there is a fairly high degree of agreement between the researchers that it is one of the most important variables influencing cyberbullying victimization. On the one hand, Boniel-Nissim and Sasson (2018) found that a poor parent–child communication was associated with

cyberbullying victimization. Larranaga et al. (2016) also found that a poor quality of family communication, avoidant, not open, and with difficulties in general, is related to a greater probability of becoming a cyberbullying victim. These finding coincides with the results of the research by Shapka et al. (2010) who point to the importance of communication-based parent-child relations; accordingly, a child revealing or disclosing information about his/her online behavior to his or her parents or to a family member was found to have a negative correlation with cyberbullying victimization. On the other hand, both positive mother–child communication and father–child communication were associated with lower risks of cybervictimization (Boniel-Nissim and Sasson, 2018). These results agree with the previous findings of the research conducted by Doty et al. (2017), who found that parent–child communication offered direct protection for students, thus reducing the likelihood of them being cyberbullied.

As aforesaid, lack of family support, parental care and parent child communication is evidently a predictor of cyberbullying victimization. This is because the relationship and communication that exist within a family play a key role in an individual's socialization as it is the main the way in which he/she learns to interact with others (Bavelas & Segal, 1982; Checkland, 1999). Parent–child relations are among the most important protecting factors against unfavorable circumstances for children (Wallen & Rubin, 1997). Effective parent–child communication parental support help adolescents to develop the necessary problem-solving skills (Noller, 1995) and enables them to deal more effectively with the problems and challenges they face. Such communication is therefore more likely to encourage the development of positive self-

concepts. Studies indicate that positive parent– child communication is associated with less compulsive Internet use (Van den Eijnden, Spijkerman, Vermulst, van Rooij & Engels, 2010). Further on, positive communication with parents constitutes a protective factor against the development of psychological problems; specifically, positive parent–adolescent communication has been associated with higher levels of adolescent psychological well-being (Lam, Shek, Tang & Lee, 2003).

2) Family conflict

A negative family climate, where there are frequent conflicts among the family member specially between parents where they argue about the same things over and over, have serious arguments, or often insult or yell at each other (Hemphill et al.,2014), has been positively related to cyberbullying victimization (Cava, Musitu, & Murgui, 2007; Lereya et al., 2013; Martínez-Ferrer, Moreno, Amador, & Orford, 2011, Buelga et al. 2017; Chen et al. 2018). In a study by Marret and Choo (2017) using students from randomly selected public secondary schools in the state of Negeri Sembilan, Malasia (using a sample of 1487 students between 15 years and 16 years of age) found out that students who experienced high levels of parental conflict were twice as more likely to be cyber-victims. Shams et al. (2017) discovered that children who had witnessed violence between their parents were more likely to show cyberbullying victimization behaviors. However, Le et al. (2017) found that witnessing violence between their parents was a significant predictor of cyberbullying perpetration, but not in case of victimization.

Frequent and intense conflicts or fighting between parents has a negative impact on children's sense of safety and security which affects their relationships with their parents and with others. Parental conflict violent, intense or poorly resolved, that focuses on children is also linked to adjustment problems, particularly when children blame themselves for their parents' problems. Accordingly, in families where there is a high level of conflict and animosity between parents, children are at a greater risk of developing emotional, social and behavioral problems, as well as difficulties with concentration and educational achievement (Harold , 2013 ; Castro & Priegue , 2019). Children who are placed in the middle of their parents' dispute (by either parent) are more likely to be angry, stressed, depressed or anxious, and have poorer relationships with their parents than children who are not used in this way, and thereby create individual who have more vulnerable to get victimized to cyberbullying (Buelga, Ferrer & Cava, 2017; Cross et al., 2015). Hence it is evident that the aforementioned behavioral and emotional problems which are triggered by family conflict, ultimately result creating an individual who will become an easy prey of cyberbullying victimization.

'Good quality parenting', or parenting that provides structure, warmth, emotional support and positive reinforcement in contrast to a family with constant fighting and irreconcilable arguments, has been found to reduce the aforesaid impacts of conflict (Chen & Liu, 2012). Thus, providing children with an environment in which they feel physically and psychologically safe is critically important for their wellbeing and must be given high priority as a measure against cyber victimization.

3) Deprived socio-economic status and poor employment situation

Regarding parental employment situation and economic status, Bevilacqua et al. (2017) found that a low socio-economic status was associated with a greater risk of being a cyberbullying victim. In addition, Jansen et al., (2012) found that children

belonging to low-income families experienced cyber bullying more than those from moderate-income families. Chen et al. (2018) have also found low family income and father's unemployment to be associated with cybervictimization. To the contrary, Uludasdemir and Kucuk (2018) found no relationship between parental employment situations and cyberbullying victimization. Shaheen et al. (2018) also stated that the parents' job did not have an impact on the adolescents' cyber victimization experience. However as mentioned above, despite of a few studies, socio-economic status and lower employment situation of the family, to a greater extent, is shown to have a positive link with cyberbullying victimization.

It has been found that this is mainly due to the fact that socio-economic status of the family and parental employment situation is a powerful predictor of many facets of a child's personality. These facets of personality may encompass elements such as cognitive ability, risk preferences, and resilience etc. (Huisman et al, 2010).

For an instance, children and adolescents with a lower cognitive ability or those who lack the mental capability that basically involves the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly and learn from experience etc. have a lower resilience to adverse circumstances than children and adolescents with greater cognitive ability (Gottfredson,1997). Studies have disclosed that the reason for this might be the fact that the individuals with a greater cognitive ability are more successful in finding solutions for stressful situations or learn more quickly how to avoid them and to regain functioning—to 'rebound or recoil'—in the face of adversity than those who do not possess that ability (Decker et al, 2015; Huisman et al., 2010).

Moreover, deprived parental employment status and low parental socio-economic position is also believed to be an important risk factor for the development of both personality and internalized problems in the child. Internalized problems which are associated with a group of emotional symptoms of an individual reveals more prevalent effortful control of behavior, feelings of sadness, low self-esteem, behavioral inhibition, and fears (Novak and Mihić, 2018). Previous studies reveal that this is because it reflects exposure to a disadvantageous social environment during important developmental phases in the early life course. Such disadvantaged environments may be characterized by economic hardship, heightened levels of stress, poor parenting, and child abuse within the family, or by neighborhood factors such as poor housing, substance abuse and delinquency (Huisman et al.,2010; Burger et al.,2008; Xu et al., 2019).In the light of the above substantial evidence as provided by former studies, it can be suggested that these outcomes which is a direct result of having a deprived employment and socio-economic status lead to an increased vulnerability to cyberbullying victimization.

4) Parental educational level

Furthermore, in relation to the parents' education level, there are different findings in the existing literature. Cakir et al. (2016) discovered that students with parents possessing a low level of education were more likely to be cyber victims. However, in the study conducted by Chen et al. (2018) only the mother's low level of education was associated with cyberbullying victimization. In Soydas and Ucanok's (2014) study, they find that the daughters of the mothers whose education level is low are more often vulnerable to cyberbullying. Further it has been shown that students whose mothers do not have or drop out

high school education have more cyberbullying victimization behaviors compared to the students whose mothers have high school education or completed higher education (Eroglu et al.,2015). Conversely, some other studies report that parents with a high level of education increased the likelihood of cyberbullying victimization (Uludasdemir and Kucuk, 2018; Laftman, Modin and Ostberg, 2013).

Parental knowledge and awareness of online bullying is also associated with parental educational level. To be more specific, higher the parents' educational level, greater the parents' willingness to be informed of the safer use of new technologies by their children and to adopt a proper parenting style. Specifically, this provides guidance for parents as a first step to know the risks that children may be faced with. Likewise, parents should learn about the nature and forms that cyberbullying take place, as well as the resources, materials and organizations where they can find help to deal with cyberbullying (Navarro & Serna,2015).Thus, it can be said that parental lack of awareness as to these aspects can also form a risk factor for cyberbullying victimization.

Accordingly, despite of a very few research findings, there is a considerable consensus amongst most of the available literature on the positive association between parents with a lower educational level and the risk of being cyberbullied.

B. School climate

It is increasingly recognized that school climate—the quality and character of school life— affects children's development, learning and achievement. School climate includes the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures that comprise school life (National School Climate Council, 2007). There is evidence that school factors, such as poor school climate (students' sense of belonging to school and respect for and fair treatment of students by school staff), are associated with greater rates of cyberbullying victimization (Williams & Guerra,2007). Sourander et al. (2010) incorporated measures of school environment in their research, finding that cyberbully victims felt significantly less safe at school, and were more likely to report that their teachers did not care about them. Kowalski et al. (2014) also observed that it is possible that negative school climate could increase the vulnerability to cyber victimization among the schools' students.

On the other hand, Williams and Guerra (2007) found that positive school affiliation and a perception of the climate as trusting, fair and pleasant had protective impacts for both cyber harassment, violence and bullying (Calmaestra- Villen, 2011; Cappadocia, 2009; Taiariol, 2010; Kowalski et al., 2014).

The following is explanatory of what makes a negative school climate increase the vulnerability to cyberbullying victimization: When a child is being educated in such a surrounding there is a high probability that he or she won't be immune to cyberbullying victimization. This is mainly due to the fact that inhospitable school surroundings do not cater to the creation of an individual who is socially, mentally and physically active, since it lacks a climate related to connectedness, belongingness, safety, school spirit and good morale (Hinduja,2013). Moreover, non-supportive school climate thwarts any attempt made by an individual to develop his/her cognitive skills, problem solving skills, skills about group life including learning to express and integrate their own feelings etc. (Berzoff et al.,2016) which ultimately creates an individual child who lacks the

ability to fight against cyberbullying because he has not learnt the basic skills of life from the school, the next place after family, which ought to enable all children to find positive pathways to adulthood. Thus, the facts mentioned above suggest that, a person who studies or who emerges from a school setting which is non-supportive, such a person has a tendency to be more vulnerable to cyberbullying victimization since such school environment act as a barrier for the development of one's intellectual, interpersonal and social skills.

C. Peer relationships

Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin (1994) states that having high quality friendships have been shown to offer support and feelings of connectedness and security and also to act as a buffer against negative impact that result from cyberbullying victimization experiences. However, it should also be noted that reduced and unhealthy peer support or loneliness emerges as a predictor of cyber harassment victimization in children and youth (Pavri,2015).

Although findings on online harassment victimization and peer relationships are limited, victims of cyberbullying have been found to rate their friendships they had before victimization as being less trusting, caring, and helpful (Williams & Guerra, 2007). One study that focused on 12–17-year-old cyberbullying victims showed that among other factors less support friends was a significant predictor of being negatively affected by cyberbullying. (Ortega, Elipe & Monks,2012).

Children rejected by peers and without friends have been also considered at risk for victimization and also it has been suggested that being socially isolated could be a risk factor (Hodges et al., 1997; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Schwartz, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1999).

As shown above, although there is a visible connection between having poor peer relationships and increased susceptibility to cyber bullying victimization, further research need to be carried out in this regard since most of the available literature focus on the area of peer support being a protective factor which can be used to remedy the negative impact of cyber bullying victimization rather than focusing on poor peer relationships as a predictor of cyber victimization.

Conclusion and Implications

A. Conceptual framework.

This study examined how various components of the society (e.g.: -parents, school, peers etc.) act as predictors of cyber harassment victimization by taking into consideration selected literature on the subject. Findings from this study indicate how factors such as lack of parental support, conflicts within the family, struggle for employment of the parents and educational level of parents contribute towards exposure to victimization whereas the risk is no less depending on one's school climate and peer relations and the amalgamation of these parameters can be indicated in a conceptual map as follows.
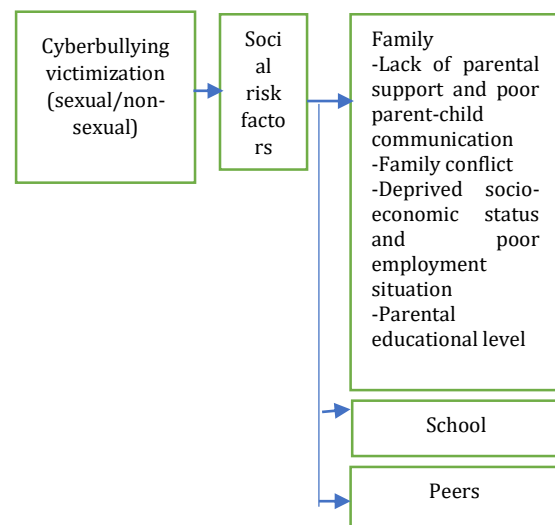

Figure 1: Social Level Predictors of Cyberbullying Victimization

B. Implications for governments and policy makers

The above analysis reveals that negative family background, weak peer relationships and negative school climate have significant positive correlations with cyberbullying victimization, implying the fact that in order to change the ongoing pattern of cyberbullying victimization, the transformation should start from within the society.

Accordingly, schools could make use of the above findings to create a favorable school climate where there is a supportive and close relationship between the school and its students and equip the school with necessary techniques to make the school staff and its students ready to face this form of victimization by incorporating those into the school curriculum and by training the school staff to handle such situations etc. Moreover, as evident form the above review children learning through interactions with parents provide the foundation for later literacy and life learning process. Thus, it is also suggested that parents can utilize the above findings as an opportunity to talk and interact with their children and to strengthen the bond and understanding between them, as the relationship of a parent to a child – the emotional quality of their interaction, the experiences they share, the adult's beliefs about the child's capabilities – helps motivate young children's cognitive development and inspire their self-confidence.

Moreover, the abovementioned correlation between various social factors and cyberbullying victimization can be utilized by governments and policymakers in formulating a mechanism through which cyberbullying victimization can be remedied. This includes empowering individuals who are potential targets of cyberbullying and implementing early preventive measures which include social involvement, in conjunction with the traditional approach centered on technical remedies and deterrence of the perpetrator by imposing penalizing provisions.

The above findings contribute to a better understanding of the cyberbullying phenomenon, thus, opening up new directions for the analysis of antecedents and predictors of victimization in cyberspace, eventually creating a society immune to cyberbullying.

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