Bachelor thesis

The relation between the usage of internet, gender and online victimization

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Abstract

Bullying is a topic that has been researched widely, results have shown that it can have a negative impact on the victim of bullying. With the emergence of new technology, cyberbullying has come into existence and little is known about it. The purpose of this research is to determine the relation between online victimization and how much participants use the internet and how riskily they behave online. We are also interested to see if there are differences based on gender. It was expected that there would be no gender differences for use of internet and risky online behavior. Furthermore it was expected that if the participant uses the internet more, they have a higher chance to be victimized online. Lastly, we expected that if the participant uses the internet more riskily, they have a higher chance to be victimized online. It was expected that there would be no differences based on gender. Data has been gathered from 153 Dutch 1st and 2nd year high school students. Results show that there is no difference for the usage of internet or risky online behavior based on gender. Furthermore the results showed that there is no relation between the usage of internet and online victimization. Lastly, the results showed that behaving more riskily online does increase the chance of online victimization and that girls reported higher online victimization than boys. Spending more time online does not pose any bigger risks for becoming a victim of cyberbullying, but engaging in risky behavior does.

Keywords: Bullying, cyberbullying, online victimization, risky online behavior, adolescents, gender

Introduction

Bullying has been an important topic amongst researchers since professor D. Olweus has started researching bullying and reported possible long-term negative consequences of bullying or victimization by peers (Olweus, 1994). The prevalence of bullying has been widely researched, an estimated 8 to 21 per cent of all high school students report being bullied and an estimated 9 to 17 per cent of high school students report bullying others, but there is still a long way to go (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Carlyle & Steinman, 2007; Gruber & Fineran, 2008; Seals & Young, 2003). With the emergence of smartphones and tablets, currently close to 75 per cent of Dutch children between the age of 12 and 18 have access to smartphones (Jongeren vooral online met Smartphone, 2014), a new kind of bullying came to existence which most scientists refer to as cyberbullying. Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008) simply defined cyberbullying as 'bullying via the internet'. The authors note that for the behavior to qualify as bullying it should be repetitive and intended to harm. Little is known about the similarities and differences between different kinds of bullying (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009). Bullying can have enormous negative effects on adolescents and because of this it is important to research cyberbullying as well (Sharp, 1995). This study researches the relation between the students' use of the internet, in what way they use the internet and the likelihood of being cyberbullied.

In 1978 Olweus was one of the first researchers on bullying and published the first book about this topic. He is considered to be one of the pioneers of this topic. In this book he analyzed the incidence of bullies and victims, or as he called them 'whipping boys'. He also discusses the impact of bullying and psychological and social factors that might be of influence to these statuses and created a program which still exists to date (Olweus, 1980). The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program currently offers multiple programs for schools starting at kindergarten up to

high school. Multiple researchers have tried to figure out its effectiveness but results have been inconsistent (Olweus & Limber, 2010). A lot of research has been done since and the definition of bullying has been widely agreed on. Bullying is usually referred to as a specific type of aggression with 3 conditions; The behavior is intended to harm or disturb the victim (1), the behavior occurs repeatedly (2) and one person is more powerful than the other (3)(Nansel et al., 2001). This does not mean that the bully is physically more powerful than the victim, it is also possible that this is on a psychological level. The bullying can be verbal, through for example name-calling, physical, by beating, or psychological by for example exclusion (Boulton & Underwood, 1992).

A study by King (1996) shows that the amount of children that bully others or get bullied differs greatly amongst different countries. The study found that, for example, in Germany, Austria, Denmark and Belgium around 60 per cent of the students have been bullied at least once that school year. While in countries such as Wales, Sweden, Ireland this was a lot lower ranging from 10-20 per cent. This corroborates the rest of the research as the students who bullied someone at least once that school year in those countries are similar. It is expected that for Dutch students the number are similar to those of German and Belgium students, as the cultures these countries have are quite similar. While those are shocking numbers to keep in mind, those do not all meet the requirements as stated by Nansel et al. (2001), the behavior does not occur repeatedly. Although it does not meet these requirements, the numbers are still relevant because the participants self-reported victimization. It gives insight into how many students feel like they are being bullied, and currently it is unknown what the effect of this is on the victim. While most likely the effects are not as bad as being bullied according to the guidelines of Nansel, it might still have a significant negative impact on the student. As mentioned before, more recent studies

which do measure bullying according to the guidelines from Nansel et al. (2001), show numbers that are significantly lower than those found by King (1996).

The effect of bullying has also been widely researched and most of the research has been conducted in western countries. Victims of bullying might experience effects such as nervousness in school, poor mental health, depression and low self-esteem depending on the extremity and how often the bullying occurs (Sharp, 1995; Barker, et al., 2008). Victims of bullying are more likely to have suicidal ideations at 13 years old. Between 11.6 to 14.7 per cent of victimized 13 year olds have suicidal ideations. This compared to the 2.7 to 4.1 per cent of 13 year olds that have suicidal ideation who have not been victimized. On top of that, 5.4 to 6.8 per cent of 15 year old victims of bullying have attempted suicide, in contrast to 1.6 to 1.9 per cent of 15 year olds that have not been victimized. Thus, victims of bullying are almost 4-6 times more likely to either have suicidal ideations or have attempted to commit suicide (Geoffroy, et al., 2016).

The most prevalent methods of cyberbullying are phone calls and text message bullying (Smith et al., 2008) and sending pictures through websites such as Facebook (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008). Up to 11 per cent of middle school students report they have been cyberbullied, 7 per cent indicated that they were both victims and bullies and 4 per cent admitted to bullying somebody else online (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Other research has shown that close to 5 per cent of adolescents are victim of cyberbullying (Cappadocia, Craig, & Pepler, 2013; Riebel, Jäger, & Fischer, 2009). Erdur-Baker (2010) conducted research amongst 276 adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18. He found that 32 per cent of students were victims of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying and 26 per cent of the students bullied others online and physically. The study also revealed that frequent and risky usage of internet caused a higher

chance to being cyberbullied, but the size of the effect differed based on gender. Multiple researchers have found different results regarding gender, Erdur-Baker found that males were more likely to bully others online than females. According to this research, males were also more likely to be victim of cyberbullying than females. Other researchers have found that girls are more likely to engage in cyberbullying than males (Keith & Martin, 2005), while for example Patchin and Hinduja (2006) did not find a significant difference for gender. Multiple researches did not find any gender differences for victims of cyberbullying (Li, 2006; Subrahmanyam & Gloria, 2007). Gross (2004) has shown that boys and girls use the internet similar, if you look at the different ways they use the internet. If you look into actual time spent online, children that play games increase the time spent online significantly. Since most of the gamers are boys, the time spent online for boys is in general higher than for girls. In this research the questionnaire is focused on different ways the participants use the internet, so similar effects are expected to be found in the current research. Due to the fact that there are multiple researchers finding different results about gender, it is an interesting factor and will be taken into account in this research. There seems to be more research corroborating the fact that gender is not related to the chance of being victimized online, so it is expected that in this research gender will not be a significant factor.

According to Valkenburg and Soeters (2001), adolescents are more at risk to become a victim of cyberbullying than older people but also more at risk than younger people, due to the fact that they are more likely to use the internet for social interactions about relationships and sexual activity. Young people are more likely to make very personal information public (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008), which increases the likelihood they will be victimized online. Liau, Khoo and Hwaang (2005) have shown that 16 per cent of adolescent internet users have had a face-to-face

meeting with someone they first encountered online without their parents knowing about the meetup. Studies that are similar to the current research, have shown that also computer proficiency and time spent online were positively related to cyberbullying, both to bullying others and being victimized (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to research the association between the use of the internet and online victimization. First, based on previous research, I expect that boys use the internet the same amount as girls do. Furthermore it is also expected that boys use the internet in equally risky ways as girls do. Then the relation between the amount a student uses the internet and the likelihood of being a victim online will be looked into. The third hypothesis is that students that use the internet more have a higher chance of being victims of cyberbullying. Finally, I will look into the relation between how riskily the student uses the internet and the likelihood of being a victim online. It is expected that if the student uses the internet in a more risky way, they have a higher chance of being a victim of cyberbullying. As mentioned before, for both of these hypotheses gender will be taken into account. I am interested to see if the relation between usage of internet and/or risky online behavior and victimization online are different for boys or for girls. Due to the multiple researches finding different results, but most of them not finding any results I also do not expect to find any differences between males and females.

Method

Participants

The research had 157 Dutch high school students as participants, but due to missing data 4 were excluded from the statistical analysis. Of these 153 remaining participants, 64 were male and 89 were female. The students indicated their year of birth, so it is not possible to determine their exact age. Based on their year of birth, 4 participants were 16 or will turn 16 year old this

year, 38 participants were 15 or turned 15 years old this year, 76 participants were 14 or turned 14 this year and 39 participants were 13 or turned 13 years old this year. Of the participants, 63 were first year students and 90 were second year students. Furthermore, 135 participants reported studying at VMBO level, 17 on HAVO and 1 on VWO. Lastly, 126 participants were Dutch, 8 were Moroccan, 8 were Turkish and 11 indicated having another ethnicity.

Procedure

High schools were contacted with the question if they were willing to participate in research. This paper is part of a bigger research about bullying which means that more than only the tests used in this paper have been included in the study. Together with the schools classes were selected that were available for testing. Before the testing took place, both the participant and their parents were informed through a letter that this research would take place and if they did not wish to participate they were able to reply and notify the school. First the students started with filling out a questionnaire on paper in class, and afterwards they started working on a computer to complete the other questionnaires. All the questionnaires used in this paper were completed on a computer. All of the tests combined took approximately 45 minutes to complete. Not all participants were able to finish all the tests, because they had to leave for their next class. After the tests the students were debriefed and informed that the questionnaire was about bullying, both online and offline, personality and relationships with others.

Instruments

While the entire research consisted of more than these questionnaires, only the Victimization Online and Internet Behavior questionnaire are relevant to this paper.

The Victimization Online – Cyberbullying Questionnaire was administered to the participants, which measures how much a student is a victim of online cyberbullying (Calvete, Orue, Eststévez, Villardón, & Padila, 2010). It consists of 18 questions. Nine of these questions are aimed to measure how often the participant has the role of victim in an online situation, examples of these questions are '*How often do you receive threatening or insulting e-mails or texts'* and *'How often do jokes, rumors or gossips about you get posted on the internet'*. The last 9 questions are aimed to measure how often the participant has the role of bully in an online situation. Examples of these questions are *'How often do you post secrets from others on the internet'* and *'How often do you make or send pictures or movies from somebody getting violently assaulted to other people'*. This questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'Never' (1) to 'Very often' (5). The bully scale has a range from 9 to 45, where a higher score indicates that the participant shows online bullying behavior more often. The victim scale also has a range from 9 to 45, where a higher score indicates that the participant is victim of online bullying more often. The Cronbach's alpha for the victim scale is 0.725, which indicates a good reliability.

The Internet Behavior questionnaire is developed to measure compulsive internet behavior amongst adolescents (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). It consists of 11 questions. Examples of items in this questionnaire are *'Surf on the internet'*, *'Talk to strangers online'* and *'Send sexual messages, pictures or videos through the internet (for example through WhatsApp, e-mail or Snapchat)'*. The questionnaire uses a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from *'I have never done this'* (1) to *'I have done this very often'* (4). This questionnaire will be used to determine how much the participant uses the internet in different ways by taking the sum of question 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8, this scale will be named 'Usage internet'. The scale 'Usage internet' has a range

from 6 to 24, where a higher score means the participant uses the internet in more ways. Furthermore question 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11 will be used to measure to what length the participant uses the internet in a more risky way, this scale will be named 'Risky online behavior'. The range of the usage of internet scale is from 5 to 20, where a higher score means the participant uses the internet more. For the risky online behavior scale the range is from 4 to 16 where a higher score means that the participant uses the internet in a more risky way. Cronbach's Alpha is unknown for both scales used in this study.

Data Analysis

First the hypothesis that boys use the internet more than girls will be tested using an independent T-test with gender as independent variable and the usage of internet as dependent variable. Secondly the hypothesis that boys use the internet more riskily will also be tested with an independent T-test with gender (male = 0; female = 1) as independent variable and risky online behavior as dependent variable. The third hypothesis, that if the participant uses the internet more he/she has a higher chance of being victimized online, will be tested using a multiple regression. The regression will have online victimization as dependent variable, adding usage of internet as independent variable in the first step, gender in the second step and an interaction of the two previous variables in the third step. The formula for the regression will be: Victimization = $a + b_1 *$ Internet usage $+ b_2 *$ gender $+ b_3 *$ internet usage * gender. Internet usage is measured through number of ways the participant reports using the internet. Lastly to test if risky online behavior has an influence on victimization online another multiple regression will be used. This regression has victimization online as dependent variable, but now adding risky online behavior in the first step as independent variable, gender in the second step and an interaction of the two previous variables in the third step. Here the formula for the regression

will be: Victimization = a + b_1 * Risky online behavior + b_2 * gender + b_3 * risky online behavior * gender. Here, risky online behavior is measured in number of ways the participant shows risky behavior.

Results

In *Table 1* descriptive statistics are shown of the primary outcome measures including mean, standard deviation and range.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics

	Mean	**SD**	**Min**	**Max**	**Range**
Victimization Online	10.86	2.77	9	27	18
Usage of Internet	19.35	2.71	7	24	17
Risky Online Behavior	6.40	1.63	5	13	8

In line with the hypothesis, there was no significant difference (t (151) = -.58, p = .56) between boys (M = 19.20, SD = 2.52) and girls (M = 19.46, SD = 2.85) in the usage of internet. The independent T-test for the second hypothesis showed no significant difference (t (151) = 1.77, p = .08) for risky online behavior between boys (M = 6.67, SD = 1.45) and girls (M = 6.2, SD = 1.73). One could say there is a 'trend', that boys use the internet more risky than girls, due to the fact p is smaller than .10.

As can be seen in *Table 2*, the interaction variable is not significant (p > .05), which means there is no interaction between gender and the use of internet and thus we can interpret the variables separately. Furthermore we can see neither of the independent variables calculated with

the multiple regression are significant. In contrast to the hypothesis, there is no relation between how much a student uses the internet and the likelihood of being victimized online, nor is there a significant difference for boys or girls.

Table 2

Results of Multiple Regression Analysis about Usage of Internet, Gender and Victimization Online

	B (SD)	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**	**ΔR^2**
Usage of Internet	.14 (.08)	.02	.01	.02
Usage of Internet	.13 (.08)	.04	.03	.03
Gender	.85 (.45)			
Usage of Internet	.19 (.14)	.04	.02	.00
Gender	.84 (.45)			
Usage of Internet * Gender	-.10 (.17)			

* = p <.05

Table 3 shows the multiple regression for risky online behavior. The table shows that the interaction variable is not significant (p > .05), which means there is no interaction between gender and risky online behavior. The multiple regression was significant (F (3,149) = 3.23, p = .02) with an R^2 of .06. The predicted score on the victimization online questionnaire is equal to 10.21 + .50 (Risky online behavior) + 1.06 (Gender) - .31 (Risk * Gender). The model explains 6 per cent of the total variance. Both predictors are significant where, as predicted by the hypothesis, if the child behaved more riskily online he/she more often reported being a victim of cyberbullying. On top of that the multiple regression shows that girls were more often victimized online than boys, which is in contrast to the hypothesis that did not expect a difference for boys and girls. The effect size for this analysis (d = .06) was, considering the guidelines set by Cohen (1988), small.

Table 3

Results of Multiple Regression about Risky Online Behavior, Gender and Victimization Online.

	B (SD)	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**	**ΔR^2**
Risky Online Behavior	.25 (.14)	.02	.02	.02
Risky Online Behavior	.29 (.14)*****	.05	.04	.03
Gender	1.02 (.45)*****			
Risky Online Behavior	.50 (.24)*	.06	.04	.01
Gender	1.06 (.45)*			
Risky Online Behavior * Gender	-.31 (.29)			

* = p <.05

Discussion

The goal of this research was to gain a better insight into the relation between the use of internet, the behavior shown on the internet and the likelihood of being victimized online. I also wanted to find out if there was a different relation between the previous variables for boys or for girls. As is in line with the first hypothesis, there is no difference in the usage of internet between boys and girls. Secondly, there is no difference between risky online behavior for boys and girls, which confirms the second hypothesis. In partial contrast to the third hypothesis, there was no influence of usage of internet on online victimization. There was however no different effect from usage of internet on online victimization for boys or girls, which is the same as expected. The last hypothesis predicted that if the participant behaves more riskily online he/she would also report more victimization online and that this was similar for both boys and girls. Results show that there is a positive relation between risky online behavior and online victimization, but this differs for boys and girls. Girls are more likely to be victimized online than boys, which is in contrast to the hypothesis that stated there would be no differences based on gender.

As was expected, boys and girls use the internet in similar ways. For both boys and girls the scores were quite high, which means that they use the internet a lot. This can be explained by the fact that all students come from the Netherlands, where being online and using the internet is not only very easy but for example even necessary for most high schools.

Then the hypothesis which stated that there would be no difference in risky online behavior was confirmed. In offline situations it has been found that there was no difference for victimization based on gender (Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann, & Jugert, 2006). It seems logical that this is the same for online victimization. It is interesting to find however, that in general the students reported low risky online behavior. All of the participants in this study were adolescents, which according to Valkenburg and Soeters (2001) show the most risky online behavior compared to both older and younger people. One could hypothesize that the participants gave socially desirable answers and for example did not want to admit they send sexual pictures from themselves or others via the internet.

The third hypothesis stated that children that use the internet more also have a higher chance of becoming a victim of cyberbullying, has been proven wrong. Using the internet more does not mean that the child has a higher risk of becoming a victim of cyberbullying, which is a result that is quite interesting for parents. This can be partly explained by the fact that even if you use the internet in many different manners, this does not mean that you get into situations where you can be bullied online. It all depends to the kind of situations the child puts himself or herself into online.

The last hypothesis showed some interesting findings. As the hypothesis stated, children that show more risky behavior online have a higher likelihood of being victimized online. In

contrary to the second part of that hypothesis, girls do have a bigger chance to become a victim of cyberbullying than boys. It seems logical that if you use the internet in more risky ways, so if you post pictures of yourself online and talk about personal life, there is a higher likelihood of becoming a victim of cyberbullying. This is in line with similar studies that have also found that risky online behavior was related to online interpersonal victimization (Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007). Amongst Dutch high-school students it has been found that girls use the internet more for social contacts and chatting than boys do. Boys have been found to use the internet significantly more for games (Verdurmen, et al., 2011). This is a possible explanation for the gender differences that were found. In this research, risky online behavior has been measured through different ways the participant engages in social contact where they reveal personal information about themselves or share pictures from themselves or others. As girls use the internet more in this way, it is possible to imagine this is the reason they have a higher chance to become a victim of online bullying compared to boys.

The fact that in the first model gender was not related to online victimization and in the second model was related to online victimization is an interesting result. A possible explanation is that the power of this study was too low to detect actual differences, due to the sample size being too small.

Something to keep in mind when we evaluate the results of this research is that the average scores of online victimization as well as risky online behavior were quite low. This means that, for online victimization, very little victimization was experienced by the participants. The problem is that if all scores of online victimization are low, it could mean that participants do not feel like they are a victim of cyberbullying, even those who show risky behavior online and reported significantly higher online victimization. Furthermore the explained variances by

the models in the multiple regressions are all small. If you add this to the fact that the reported online victimization is low, we have to be careful to draw conclusions from these results. A weakness of this research is that the current study bases the score on risky online behavior on 5 different questions. It has been found that it was not important if the participant engages in specific kinds of risky behavior, but more in how many different ways the participant behaves riskily online. To clarify, it does not mean that engaging in, for example, sending personal information online significantly increases the likelihood of being victimized online compared to sending pictures of yourself through the internet. Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak (2007) found that it was more important how many different kinds of risky behavior the participant engages in. They found a tipping point around 4 different kinds of risky behavior. This means that if you show 4 or more different kinds of risky behavior, you have a significantly higher chance to be victimized online than if you show 3 different kinds of behavior or less. The fact that possibly too few questions have been used to determine this kind of behavior might cause biased results.

The practical implications of the outcomes are hard to determine. Something that is definitely an interesting outcome is the fact that using the internet in more different ways does not mean that there is a higher likelihood for adolescents to become a victim of cyberbullying. Even though it does not increase the likelihood of being cyberbullied, this does not mean it is okay to let adolescents use the internet as much as they want. It is important to monitor the internet use of adolescents, as it has been proven that over-users and people addicted to the internet tend to be more neurotic, socially anxious and emotionally lonely (Hardie & Tee, 2007). How this should be done is still unsure. Children that received an intervention about online risk awareness and behavior reported more risky online behavior than children that did not receive an

intervention (Schilder, Brusselaers, & Bogaerts, 2016). This means that if you want to reduce children behaving riskily online, it is better to not intervene and inform them about this as the group that received the intervention is more aware of online risks, but also shows the risky behavior more online.

Cyberbullying and online victimization are relatively new topics to researchers and very little is known yet, there are many topics where progress can be made. Further research should improve the way risky online behavior is measured amongst adolescents. It is important to determine how many kinds of risky online behavior the adolescent engages in and compare this to the reported online victimization. The questionnaire should consist of more questions to accurately measure how riskily the adolescents' behavior is that they show online. Another topic that can be more accurately researched is the reported online victimization. As has been mentioned before, the reported online victimization by the participants is relatively low. While there are significant variables that are associated with online victimization, it should be studied if there are practical differences. Do the participants that score higher than others in this research, which is still quite low if you look at the entire scale of possible scores, actually feel like they are being cyberbullied? Does the group that reports the highest online victimization also experience a negative impact of this in their lives or does this not have an impact on their live whatsoever. Something that can be studied as well is a topic that this research does not differentiate in, namely in which way victims experience cyberbullying. We know cyberbullying can be done through harassing through phone calls, but also by spreading rumors online and sending pictures. We also know that in offline situations, there is a difference between boys and girls. For example, in offline situations boys are more often victim of physical bullying than girls are (Rivers & Smith, 1994). It would be good to know if there is a difference between the way boys

are being victimized online and girls are victimized online. If this would be the case, this could also imply that there are different risk factors for boys and girls.

This research stipulates that adolescents that use the internet more, do not have a higher chance to be a victim of cyberbullying, but they should be careful in what way they use the internet. Behaving risky online can have an impact on the likelihood of online victimization. While the internet has brought many positive influences into our lives, we should further research the possible negative effects it can have and make sure to reduce the potential harm that can be done.

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