Commentary:

RESPONSE TO THE MULTI-FACETED ISSUE OF CYBERBULLYING

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Abstract

Dr. Gerson's (2017; see this present issue of JISS) commentary on the article *Interaction Between Machiavellianism, Hostility, and Social Media Use in Cyberbullying Behavior* (Matt, 2017; see this present issue of JISS) raised several points about the importance of a multifaceted approach to the study of online behavior. The current response further explores the subject and suggests directions for further research and acknowledges the importance of understanding reasons for cyberbullying behavior in order to prevent it. In addition, it presents ideas in order to combat the original study's sampling and response biases in the future in order to increase the likelihood of producing significant results.

Keywords: Machiavellianism, social media, hostility, social psychology, personality, cyberbullying, aggression

COMMENTARY

Gerson's commentary (2017; see this present issue of JISS) on the article, Interaction Between Machiavellianism, Hostility, and Social Media Use in Cyberbullying Behavior (Matt, 2017; see this present issue of JISS) emphasizes the complexity of online interpersonal interactions. Gerson continues the discussion of potential directions for future research, highlighting the importance of determining predictors of behaviors in order to learn how to prevent or encourage those behaviors. It is also worth noting that predictors of online behavior may go not only toward preventing negative behavior such as cyberbullying, but also toward finding ways to encourage positive social behavior over the internet, such as advocacy or collecting donations for people in need.

Gerson (2017) raises an important point about the limited peer-reviewed scientific literature regarding the role of online disinhibition in cyberbullying. Given the limited existing research, this would provide an excellent direction for future research. For example, a multifaceted model that examines the disinhibition effect as it relates to personality differences would prove especially informative. While my study attempted to analyze this, future research could focus on specific traits of online interactions which lead to disinhibition, such as anonymity, as well as personality traits which may render someone more likely to experience greater disinhibition. Specific research has not been done regarding which specific traits lead to online disinhibition, but psychopathy may be connected with disinhibition due to its relationship with cyberbullying behavior (Goodboy & Martin, 2015). In addition, sadism and impulsivity may lead people to feel further encouragement to engage in certain online behaviors. Given the role of boldness in disinhibited behavior and psychopathy (Berg, Lilienfield, & Sellbom, 2017), it would also make sense for the relationship to carry on into online behavior.

In relation to bullying itself, Gerson (2017) brought up the way in which school climates have been found to interact with high self-esteem (Gendron, Williams, & Guerra, 2011). Similar studies could also be conducted in the future for online environments. For example, environmental factors could be compared between educational websites which encourage learning and cooperation but may not be heavily supervised and websites in which educational objectives are minimal or nonexistent. It would also be important to study the ways in which self-esteem interacts with the environment to predict bullying behavior. In doing so, researchers could determine whether the level of self-esteem matters more, or whether the problem stems from threats to self-esteem in competitive, hostile environments.

A significant challenge for future study of this topic will likely be sampling and response biases. As discussed in the manuscript, the lack of variance in self-reported cyberbullying prevented a robust statistical analysis of the relationship between cyberbullying and its predictors. Two likely explanations for this result exist: sampling bias and response bias. A possible sampling bias could exist such that either;

1. students majoring in psychology at a liberal arts college engage is less cyberbullying, or
2. students who volunteer to participate in research engage in less cyberbullying.

A response bias could exist such that participants who engage in cyberbullying do not self-report such behavior because they are either faking to appear more socially desirable, or possibly they are not aware that they have engaged in cyberbullying. Addressing these concerns will be vital to study in this area.

To address the sampling bias, future research could select participants at random from a pool of people of varying educational backgrounds and ages. In doing so, they would access many participants who are not college students nor majoring in psychology. Offering compensation in the form of money or a gift card would also increase the likelihood of volunteers.

To address the response bias, future research could include a social desirability scale in order to catch participants who are faking good. It may also help to avoid disclosing the ultimate purpose of the study. Such deception would be ethically allowable as long as it is necessary in order to avoid response bias. Furthermore, a questionnaire with low face validity may encourage more honest responses about cyberbullying perpetration. In addition, research could use observational methods, such as analyzing a participant's social media posts. Such a method would be time-consuming and potentially expensive, but could yield more reliable and valid results.

Overall, the study pointed toward a potentially fruitful direction for future research on computer-mediated communication. Although it had problems with sampling and response bias, such problems could be addressed in future research, especially research by individuals and institutions with the means necessary to provide compensation to research participants and access other measures of cyberbullying.

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