ONLINE PEER SUPPORT IN CYBERBULLYING: INVESTIGATING ONLINE FORA OF YOUTH HELPLINE ORGANISATIONS

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Research aim: Investigating online social support with regard to cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a pervasive problem with adolescents. Between 2010 and 2014, European youth have reported an increase in cyberbullying victimization from 7 to 12 % (EU Kids Online, 2014; Mascheroni & Cuman, 2014). In order to prevent or diminish the mental health problems associated with cyberbullying, victims of cyberbullying can use several strategies or coping styles (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Cox & Ferguson, 1991; Holahan, Moos, & Schaefer, 1996; Steptoe, 1991). Research on (cyber)bullying has shown that seeking social support from peers and adults is a widely used coping strategy by cyberbullying victims (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olafsson, 2011) and is an effective strategy for victims to make themselves feel better, to lower depressive symptoms, and to stimulate constructive behavioral and psychological adjustment (Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2004; Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012; Matsunaga, 2011).

As cyberbullying victims can perceive various barriers for seeking social support in their face-to-face network (e.g. Baas, de Jong, & Drossaert, 2013; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Jacobs, Goossens, Dehue, Völlink, & Lechner, 2015), they can go online to seek for

social support (Walther & Boyd, 2002), for instance in online support groups (White & Dorman, 2001). In this 'netnographic' (Kozinets, 2002) study, we investigated online fora discussions about cyberbullying within two online support group fora of youth helpline organizations, examining patterns of social support according to the social support framework by Tardy (1985). This framework not only helps distinguish between different types of social support (House, 1981 in Tardy, 1985), it also takes into account reciprocal support seeking and providing in a network, evaluations of social support in terms of helpfulness, and comparisons of social support sought or provided with the realm of available social support (Tardy, 1985).

Method and sample

We collected messages on cyberbullying from the bullying sections of the online discussion fora of two youth helpline organizations: one in Belgium and one in the Netherlands. These organizations were selected because they are both involved in an international organization of youth helplines, because they operate in the same language, and because they have an online forum with a specified section on bullying, where youth can exchange information and support each other. Both online fora are freely accessible and the messages are visible without any registration. Following the AoIR guidelines for Internet research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), we first gained permission from the organizations to collect the fora messages. However, as the online fora were publicly accessible, which was also explicitly mentioned in the online fora's terms of use, we did not ask the members for consent. We also feared that asking for consent would be problematic, as it would require online fora providers to reveal the members' identities. The online fora providers themselves had already taken several measures to protect their members' privacy. Members were not allowed to reveal any personal information that could lead to identification. Nicknames, member profiles and/or messages were screened for such information and adapted or removed when necessary.

These online fora's specific sections on bullying contained 449 and 488 threads. Two researchers independently reviewed a random sample of 100 threads of each bullying section (approximately 21 % of the corpus), scoring the initial messages on two inclusion criteria: whether the messages were posted by bullying victims and whether they contained at least one element of communication technology in the bullying story. The researchers initially disagreed upon three messages and they engaged in a discussion to reach a consensus about inclusion or exclusion. One of the researchers then coded the initial messages of the rest of the threads according to the proposed inclusion criteria and the results of the final discussion. As such, 62 threads were retained, which amounts to 6,6 % of the total number of threads within the bullying sections. Within each thread, the responses of online fora members and the victims' themselves were collected. Moderators' social support responses collected as well, but moderator interventions outlining a breach of the forum rules were excluded. Following this process, we collected 62 initial victim messages, 30 moderator responses, 360 responses of other online fora members and 46 responses of the victims themselves.

For the purpose of this study, we performed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) on the initial victim messages, responses of online fora members, and victim responses

(468 messages analyzed in total) to identify patterns of adolescents' social support seeking and providing with regard to cyberbullying. We used Tardy's (1985) social support framework to identify themes, but we also searched for themes within the data that could be added to the framework.

Summary of results

In accordance with Tardy's (1985) framework of social support, we found these online fora of youth helpline organizations to be networks of social support seeking and providing with regard to cyberbullying, with victims and online fora members taking up different changing roles.

Within the messages threads, victims first told their stories about being bullied, in which cyberbullying and traditional bullying often coincided. Subsequently, they asked for social support either directly (in the form of questions) or indirectly (wishes). Social support requests were general (general request for help/support) or included more specific support-related questions, asking for information/appraisal with regard to coping strategies, specific (cyber)bullying situations and the actors involved.

As a response to victims' stories and social support requests, online fora members used various types of social support communication, as defined by House (1981 in Tardy, 1985). Members mostly provided informational support on coping strategies and appraisal support on (cyber)bullying. Appraisal support included general appraisals of (cyber)bullying as a phenomenon, appraisals of the specific (cyber)bullying situation at hand, and appraisals of the main actors involved. Emotional support was provided by, for instance, recognizing victims' emotions, expressing empathy and affection, and by making victims feel part of and supported by a meaningful network (subtype "network support"). Complementary to their messages of social support, online fora members provided information on and appraisal of their support intentions and capacities, guiding victims to make a positive evaluation of their social support attempts. When victims afterwards provided their positive feedback on members' support attempts, this could be considered as a form of reciprocated social support (Tardy, 1985). The affordances of the online fora not only allowed victims to provide feedback, they also gave victims and members the opportunity to engage in interactive discussions, generating nuanced or shared understandings of (cyber)bullying and how to deal with it.

Some online fora members told their own stories about being (cyber)bullied. These served either to provide social support to victims, or to seek social support from online fora members themselves, changing roles from support provider to support seeker within the social support network (Tardy, 1985).

Theoretical and practical implications

By using Tardy's (1985) social support framework, this study aims to add to previous qualitative studies on online support groups for young people (Giesbers, Verdonck-de Leeuw, van Zuuren, Kleverlaan, & van der Linden, 2010; Henderson, Rosser, Keogh, & Eccleston, 2012; Love et al., 2012; Smithson et al., 2011) that lacked a clear conceptual framework covering all facets of social support seeking and providing. Furthermore, this

study aimed to contribute to existing cyberbullying research that was limited to identifying social support providers (Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; e.g. Jacobs et al., 2015; Livingstone et al., 2011), by investigating the content of adolescents' (online) social support with regard to cyberbullying: what kind of social support is sought or provided and how is social support provided (what do adolescents exactly say to cyberbullying victims).

Findings from this study can be used to inform cyberbullying intervention and prevention programs. While interventions aimed at adolescent victims could adapt their social support communication to victims' preferences and to the content of adolescents' (online) social support, bystander interventions could inform adolescent bystanders on how they can formulate social support communication towards cyberbullying victims and on which coping strategies they can recommend to these victims.

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