

ANGER AND CYBERBULLYING AMONG ADOLESCENTS: FRIENDSHIP, INJUSTICE AND IMAGE IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS¹

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ABSTRACT. Cyberbullying is a growing problem, especially among the adolescent population. This phenomenon warrants scientific research that aims to explain it in as many aspects as possible, including emotions. In this context, this research deals with the analysis of anger in adolescents involved in cyberbullying situations. A study with qualitative design and the phenomenological-hermeneutic method was conducted, in which 31 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 were interviewed, involved in cyberbullying situations in the roles of victims or bystanders. Victims of cyberbullying feel angry, especially when the assaults come from people they considered their friends. This emotion is experienced along with other affections such as sadness and shame. For bystanders, anger is associated with situations of injustice and the perception that aggressors have no empathy for the victims. Adolescents recognize the negative effects that cyberbullying has on people's image in digital environments. Understanding the place of emotions in ICT-mediated aggressions is essential to generate knowledge that serves as the basis for the design and implementation of psychosocial intervention programs in cyberbullying, and to promote spaces for reflection on what intimacy, friendship, and trust mean in the digital age.

Keywords: Cyberbullying; emotions; adolescents.

IRA E CYBERBULLYING ENTRE ADOLESCENTES: AMIZADE, INJUSTIÇA E IMAGEM EM AMBIENTES DIGITAIS

RESUMO. O *cyberbullying* é um problema crescente, especialmente entre a população adolescente. Esse fenômeno merece pesquisas científicas que visam explicá-lo no maior número possível de aspectos, incluindo emoções. Dentro dessa estrutura, a presente investigação se preocupa em analisar a raiva em adolescentes envolvidos em situações de *cyberbullying*. Foi realizado um estudo com desenho qualitativo e método fenomenológico-hermenêutico, no qual foram entrevistados 31 adolescentes entre 12 e 17 anos de idade, envolvidos em situações de *cyberbullying* no papel de vítimas ou espectadores. As vítimas do *cyberbullying* sentem raiva, principalmente quando os ataques são de pessoas que consideram amigas. Essa emoção é experimentada junto com outros afetos, como tristeza e vergonha. Para os espectadores, a raiva está associada a situações de injustiça e à percepção de que os agressores não têm empatia pelas vítimas. Os adolescentes reconhecem os efeitos negativos

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que o *cyberbullying* tem sobre a imagem das pessoas em ambientes digitais. Compreender o lugar que as emoções ocupam nas agressões mediadas pelas TIC é essencial para gerar conhecimento que serve de base para o desenho e implementação de programas de intervenção psicossocial do *cyberbullying* e promover espaços de reflexão sobre o que significa intimidade, amizade e confiança na era digital.

Palavras-chave: *Cyberbullying*; emoções; adolescentes.

IRA Y CYBERBULLYING ENTRE ADOLESCENTES: AMISTAD, INJUSTICIA E IMAGEN EN ENTORNOS DIGITALES

RESUMEN. El *cyberbullying* es un problema creciente, sobre todo entre la población adolescente. Este fenómeno amerita investigación científica que apunte a explicarlo en el mayor número de aspectos posibles, incluyendo las emociones. En este marco, la presente investigación se ocupa de analizar la ira en adolescentes involucrados en situaciones de *cyberbullying*. Se realizó un estudio con diseño cualitativo y método fenomenológico-hermenéutico, en el que se entrevistaron 31 adolescentes entre los 12 y 17 años de edad, implicados en situaciones de *cyberbullying* en los roles de víctimas o espectadores. Las víctimas de ciberacoso sienten ira, especialmente, cuando las agresiones provienen de parte de personas a quienes consideraban sus amigos. Esta emoción se experimenta junto con otros afectos como la tristeza y la vergüenza. Para los espectadores, la ira está asociada a situaciones de injusticia y a la percepción de que los agresores no tienen empatía hacia las víctimas. Los adolescentes reconocen los efectos negativos que el *cyberbullying* tiene sobre la imagen de las personas en entornos digitales. Comprender el lugar que ocupan las emociones en las agresiones mediadas por TIC es fundamental para generar conocimiento que sirva de base para el diseño e implementación de programas de intervención psicossocial del ciberacoso, y promover espacios de reflexión sobre lo que significa la intimidad, la amistad y la confianza en la era digital.

Palabras clave: *Cyberbullying*; emociones; adolescentes.

Introduction

Cyberbullying is a deliberate and repeated form of aggression that occurs through a wide range of digital technologies. Individual actors involved in cyberbullying are often categorized into the following roles: victim, victim-aggressor, aggressor, and bystander (Patterson, Closson, & Patry, 2019). It is a social problem and, although the specialized literature regarding this phenomenon has increased, there is insufficient knowledge about how it fits into a broader conceptual framework about aggression among adolescents (Barlett & Helmstetter, 2018). Cyberbullying raises concern in professionals and institutions, due to its high prevalence and its serious consequences for the psychological and social well-being of adolescents (Matos, Vieira, Amado, Pessoa, & Martins, 2018).

There are different forms of cyberbullying: creation and replication of offensive memes, spread of rumors, lies and malicious jokes, creation of false profiles on digital

platforms to deceive, take advantage of or harm other people, among other variations (De Tejada, Muñoz, & Rus, 2018). In short, it is a type of intentional, systematic, and repeated aggression, through information and communication technologies (ICT) (Marín-Cortés, Hoyos, & Sierra, 2019; Linne & Angilletta, 2016).

While research on emotions and cyberbullying is not the most prominent, let alone qualitative research, some academics have addressed anger in relation to the phenomenon of cyberbullying. Among the studies reviewed as part of the state of the art of this research, it is reported that problems related to sleep quality indirectly predict the perpetration of cyberbullying by increasing feelings of anger (Erreygers, Vandebosch, Vranjes, Baillien, & De Witte, 2019). On the other hand, it has been found that victims with greater rumination of anger and strong beliefs about injustice may be more vulnerable to the negative impact of cyberbullying on their mental health (Zsila, Urbán, & Demetrovics, 2018). In addition, people who face cybervictimization show higher levels of anger, although most adolescents who are subjected to aggression have difficulties in identifying this emotion (Arikat, & Ozbay, 2016). On the other hand, negative emotional regulation increases expressions of anger in cyberbullying. In other words, adolescents who use negative strategies to cope with their anger, carry out more cyberbullying behaviors than those who use other types of strategies (Den Hamer & Konijn, 2016). Finally, the inability to express anger appropriately can increase the potential of victims to harass others in the future (Ak, Özdemir, & Kuzucu, 2015).

Anger is an emotional state made up of feelings of irritation, annoyance, madness, anger, or rage (Stets & Turner, 2006). Anger, wrath, fury, rage, madness, resentment, and indignation can hardly be distinguished from one another. Which is why, in much of the academic literature, they are used as synonyms. For the purposes of this research, we opted for the term anger to group vernacular expressions such as anger, rage, or annoyance, as it is the concept that is most widely found in the psychological literature.

The state of the art, mentioned above, as well as the prevalence rates of cyberbullying in the world, which reaches 10.9% among adolescents (Cheng & Li, 2014), justify research on the subject in Latin America. Especially when there are few studies on this problem in our region (Herrera-López, Romera, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2018). In this framework, the objective of this research is to analyze the emotion of anger related to cyberbullying situations in adolescents involved in the roles of victims and bystanders.

Method

The results presented in this article are part of a broader investigation on emotions and cyberbullying among adolescents. It is a research with qualitative design, whose characteristics are to be flexible, open and in which the actions of the researchers are oriented according to what was found in the field work (Salgado, 2007). The method that guided the study was the phenomenological-hermeneutical; This focuses on the study of the meanings and senses that phenomena have for the subjects (Ayala, 2008).

Participants

A non-probabilistic and intentional sample was formed of 31 students from public and private schools in Medellín (Colombia), of both sexes (54.8% female), between 12 and 17 years of age and belonging to middle sectors⁴.

The participants were selected through the application of the ICIB School Cyberbullying Instrument (Baquero & Avendaño, 2015), which is validated for the Colombian school population. The questionnaire was used with the intention of filtering adolescents interested in the investigation, to guarantee that they had been involved in cyberbullying situations in the roles of aggressors, victims and / or spectators. After applying the screening and data generation instruments, only adolescent victims and bystanders participated, whose emotional experience of anger was directly related to cyberbullying. No abusive adolescents were found whose participation in this phenomenon was related to the mentioned emotion. It is important to point out that the roles in cyberbullying do not operate as static categories, but rather that the same person can move between different roles. This article looks at the experience of anger from the point of view of victims and bystanders.

Instruments

Within the framework of the Computer Assisted Web Interview strategy (Sowa et al., 2015), unstructured interviews were carried out through the instant messaging apps Messenger, WhatsApp, and Skype. The interview protocol included two topics: description of the cyberbullying situation and the emotions related to the mentioned experience.

Procedure

The call for participants was made in private and public schools in Medellín, as well as in the researchers' social media accounts. There the objectives, methodology and impact of the research were announced. Later, there was a meeting with the adolescents and their parents in which the study was explained in detail, as well as its risks. Subsequently, the interested adolescents gave their assent and their parents signed the informed consent document. Subsequently, the ICIB questionnaire was used (Baquero & Avendaño, 2015), from which the sample was formed (N = 31). Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour.

The interviews were copied from the chat app and pasted into a Word file. Participants were asked to delete the chat content after the interviews were over. Likewise, the researchers deleted the generated data from their social media accounts. Prior to the analysis, any data that made it possible to recognize the participants or any other person involved in the cyberbullying situation was deleted. Finally, all the participants were identified with an alphanumeric code, with the purpose of recovering their data, if necessary.

⁴ According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics of Colombia (DANE), the middle sectors are made up of families in which their income is greater than US \$ 132 and, in addition, they do not have assets that exceed US \$ 293,000. Likewise, they are expected to be inhabitants of socioeconomic strata 3 and 4.

Analysis of data

A rigorous inductive logic guided the data analysis. The microanalysis strategy was used, through which the interviews were segmented, and 770 codes were generated. Of which, 584 codes (75.9%) refer to the cyberbullying situation and 186 codes (24.1%) are related to the emotions of the participants. Anger, as a category of analysis, was constructed under the criterion of conceptual density. Finally, the codes that made up each category were linked, and the two large categories were theoretically related. The Atlas Ti v.7.0 software was used throughout the data analysis process.

Regarding the care of the rigor in the validity of the results, each phase of the analysis was carried out in two moments: initially, each researcher carried out the process independently; Then, each product of the analysis was submitted to the review of a larger team made up of six researchers on emotions and cyberbullying, among whom were the authors of this article. The entire team reviewed the quality of the process and compared the following relationships: between segments and codes; between codes and descriptive categories; and between descriptive categories and axial categories. This process was guided by validity criteria in qualitative research (impartiality, critical intelligence, and openness) (Moral, 2006).

Ethical considerations

The Bioethics Committee of the University of San Buenaventura Medellín evaluated and endorsed the project. Law 1090 of 2006 of the Republic of Colombia, which regulates the psychological exercise and the development of psychological research with humans, served as the legal framework for this study. This research was carried out based on respect, dignity and well-being of the adolescents who participated in it, complying with the professional standards set forth in the regulations.

The characteristics of the study, the rights and the risks were communicated to the participants and their parents. The adolescents then gave their assent and the parents signed the informed consent. Being a study that deals with issues that affect people's mental health, there was the possibility of accompaniment by two psychotherapists with more than ten years of clinical experience, who were available to attend to adolescents who requested clinical consultation. The formalization of this provision was made through a letter signed by the psychotherapists, which was delivered to the Bioethics Committee of the university, the adolescents, and their parents. This service was not required by the participants, nor by their parents.

Results

The anger of cyberbullying victims

According to research on cyberbullying, 45.4% of cyberbullying is carried out by people whom the victims considered their friends (De-Barros, Rodríguez-García, & Sola, 2018). Above all when it comes to the type of cyberbullying called 'data plowing'. Which refers to the dissemination of digital material that contains private and sensitive information of someone else, which is used to embarrass the person involved (Lanzillotti & Korman, 2018). In the case of this study, adolescents consider that the breakdown in trust by former friends is one of the expressions of cyberbullying. Especially, when it comes to sharing

intimate matters with other people, and whose dissemination is done with the purpose of hurting them. This fact generates disappointment and anger in victims of cyberbullying. Which produces a perception of lack of security in relationships between peers, since the idea that privacy is fragile and personal information can be disseminated on the Internet is installed. In this regard, one of the participants expresses the following: “[referring to something that happened over the Internet] Once I told a friend something personal and he told it to another person. It made me angry and I was disappointed” (Sara, 15 years old, excerpt from an interview).

Spreading negative comments on social media also provokes anger in teens. This emotion is related to aggressive behaviors, which are unable to perform, because of the anonymity that characterizes Web 2.0. It is a type of resentment that does not find specific objects of aggression, since on many occasions it is unknown who published the shameful or humiliating content on the Internet. In this case, anger is related to the type of cyberbullying called ‘defamation’, which consists of damaging the good reputation of a person in digital environments (Lanzillotti & Korman, 2018). One of the adolescents interviewed states that: “Why did He have to put those things on that page and not tell me up front? He preferred to defame me than to show his face. I felt very impatient, stressed, and wanted to find the guilty one and hit him ” (Santiago, 16 years old, excerpt from an interview).

Cyberbullying victims understand digital attacks as provocations to generate anger. However, the emotional reactions of adolescents depend on the content of the attacks, as well as the possibilities of action they must stop them. When it comes to uncomfortable comments on their social media profiles, teenagers turn to the tools they offer to prevent such attacks from occurring, modifying their privacy settings, or blocking contacts they consider annoying. However, when it comes to offensive messages received via chat, teens indicate that anger is inevitable.

When someone wants to fight me over something they do not like, I usually block and report those accounts. And voila, everything clean. But when they write me messages like: What are your chocks? pirobo [despicable person]? or What's wrong with me, fag? Then it does make me angry (Alex, 17 years old, excerpt from an interview).

Finally, the anger of cyberbullying victims is not presented as a closed and disjointed category to other emotions related to the situation of online bullying. Along with this emotion are sadness and shame, which are linked to the digital exposure that adolescents face. In addition to this, cyberbullying generates effects on face-to-face interactions experienced in spaces such as school, among which are bullying, school dropouts and isolation. So then, the set of emotions related to cyberbullying makes the experience of the victims to be signified as negative. One of the participants points out: “Researcher: Could you please describe to me all the emotions you felt when you saw that publication. Participant: I felt anger, sadness and shame” (Ana, 14 years old, excerpt from an interview).

The anger of cyberbullying bystanders

The publications that adolescents make on their social media profiles generate questions about the public or private nature of the content. Added to the fact that in social media there is no control over what other users do with those contents. In relation to this issue, adolescents involved in cyberbullying situations as spectators feel anger when the

aggressors make judgments on the victims' social network profiles. This situation presents a characteristic: social networks are designed for interaction between users and the publication of content, of which contacts are expected to validate what is published. Anger appears in bystanders when criticism and unpleasant comments made by cyberbullies are presented. One of the participants reports the following: "I felt angry because it is my friend's Facebook account and she has every right to publish what she wants and if the other person does not like it, then ignore her publications" (Mariana, 15 years old, excerpt from an interview).

The core of an emotion is made up of a set of bodily sensations. Thus, the subject finds a correspondence between the emotional experience and what is manifested in the body as an indicator of the emotions experienced (Melamed, 2016). Cyberbullying bystanders express that anger can be differentiated from other emotions, due to the intensity perceived in the body. This is how adolescents recognize this emotion in specific body areas. It is a feeling of tightness in the chest, which is the main indicator for its recognition. A teenager says: "I feel the anger like a pressure on my chest, but stronger" (Ana, 13 years old, excerpt from an interview).

Bystanders of cyberbullying experience anger as a reaction to a perceived injustice in the digital world. This emotion mobilizes adolescents to help victims, particularly in situations of defamation on social networks. Anger related to the search for justice is understood as outrage. Indignation is far from attitudes such as indifference, which is also associated with situations of injustice, but in which, on the contrary, disinterest prevails. One of the young people interviewed commented: "When they sent me the videos on WhatsApp, I told the person who sent them to me: Hey, that's not right to be done, please don't keep sending that, shame on that girl, stop those stuff right away" (Camilo, 15 years old, excerpt from an interview).

In the case of the participants in this study, the anger felt by cyberbullying bystanders is related to the affective bond that adolescents have built with the victims. The participants state that when cyber victims are part of their group of acquaintances, they feel sorry for them, due to the appreciation they have for the person affected. Furthermore, anger is not experienced as a pure and indistinct emotion, but rather is amalgamated with other affects. In cyberbullying, anger, pity, and affection are part of the same affective experience.

I felt anger for the love I had for that girl. The girl was the granddaughter of a friend of my grandmother and I hardly spoke to her, but I did love her. I knew everything they had done for the girl to integrate and live a normal life, and I think it is not necessary that they were doing all this to her (Laura, 17 years old, excerpt from an interview).

Empathy, understood as a prosocial behavior, is made up of cognitive and affective elements. Affective empathy refers to the emotional response that one subject feels in relation to the experience of another person. Instead, cognitive empathy is the ability that a person has, to put themselves in the place of the others. To put it in another way, it is the ability to understand the emotional states of another person (Tur-porcar, Llorca, Malonda, Samper, & Mestre, 2016). Now, adolescents are aware of the dimension of the damage that cyberbullying generates in the victims. Anger appears when bystanders perceive that cyberbullies do not contemplate the psychological and social consequences of their actions, both in the short and long term. In other words, what generates anger in adolescents is the lack of empathy of the aggressors towards the victims. A capacity that, on the contrary, they do acknowledge having in themselves. A participant reports the following: "I felt immense

anger, because of her mental blindness and not realizing what this could bring for my friend” (Sofía, 17 years old, excerpt from an interview).

Bystanders understand the aggressors' lack of awareness as a lack of empathy with the victims' emotional experience. Among the consequences of cyberbullying that adolescents experience are feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, migration of social networks and fear of going out in public. In short, adolescents recognize the seriousness of cyberbullying and its negative effects on mental health.

It makes me angry to know that people do not think how others feel, and because of this the people affected have their self-esteem lowered. Besides, when I saw that photo, I also felt sorry for her (Pablo, 15 years old, excerpt from an interview).

Finally, cyberbullying bystanders feel anger when cyberbullying is carried out by the victims' friends. Friendship supposes related qualities such as trust, intimacy, care, support, among others. However, what adolescents reject is the fact that cyberbullying violates the idea they have about friendship. And although the cyberbullying situation ceases, the participants believe that online attacks cannot be forgiven when they come from friends. In these cases, anger turns into resentment.

It made me angry to know that the girl's friends were the ones who laughed at her. For the time being, I think that everything has already been arranged, but one must also be left with a certain anger when knowing that in a situation like this, friends made fun of one (José, 15 years old, excerpt from an interview).

Discussion

Cyberbullying does not only occur on digital social networks. Also, it is common for it to happen through instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp. Thus, although several of the participants in our study do not have the minimum age to open accounts on social networks such as Instagram (13 years) or Facebook (14 years), they do become victims and / or spectators of online harassment, through other technologies.

Our research found that anger is one of the most significant emotions experienced by adolescents who are victims of cyberbullying. This emotion is associated with interpretations of the situation as unfair, especially when defamatory expressions or unfair acts are carried out by friends. These findings coincide with the study conducted by Souza, Veiga Simão, Costa Ferreira, Paulino and Francisco (2016), who report that anger, despair, and frustration are common emotions among cyber victims.

The fact that friends take advantage of the trust placed in them to harm someone else produces emotions such as anger in victims and bystanders of cyberbullying. Our findings coincide with those found by Goretti, Ardian, Yuliawanti, Bethari and Maharani (2019), who affirm that a poor quality of friendship is highly related to cybervictimization. Although adolescents consider classmates or neighborhood acquaintances as their friends, they sometimes attack them in digital environments. Since, on many occasions, such links are not established with a sufficient sense of mutual care. The above, added to the conventions established in social networks in which simple contacts are named as friends and followers, often confuse young people regarding the differences between simple acquaintances with whom they interact and those people in whom they can trust, as is the case with friendship.

As found by Zsila et al. (2018), our research found connections between cybervictimization and the perception of injustice. Adolescents consider that online assaults, especially those that undermine the dignity of another person on the Internet, are inherently unfair, because they cause severe damage to the mental health of the victims. These types of situations generate anger and shame in the victims, and anger and indignation in the spectators.

In addition, adolescents who have been victims of cyberbullying and who cannot identify the person who sent the hostile messages through the Internet, feel a type of anger that cannot be processed, because they do not know who to express it to, due to the anonymity possibilities offered by the Social Web. If the foregoing follows the line proposed by Den Hamer and Konijn (2016), not finding strategies to cope with anger could lead to victims becoming future aggressors. This coincides with Caetano, Freire, Veiga Simão, Martins and Pessoa (2016), who found that the desire for revenge is one of the most frequent emotional experiences among victims of cyberbullying.

De-Barros et al. (2018) found that almost half of the adolescents who have been victims of cyberbullying reported having received defamatory digital attacks. In our study, defamation cases are closely related to anger. The reasons that adolescents mention is related to the fact that their image before others, especially when it comes to a wide audience, is deteriorated. Although, most people who reach the content have no relationship, and do not even know, the victims.

Victims of cyberbullying of the type of data extraction suffer attacks in which personal information is used, which has been disseminated on the Internet without their consent. When it comes to private data that, when made known to a digital audience, generates emotions such as shame and anger. Among the most perpetrated behaviors on the Internet is the violation of privacy suffered by many adolescents (Redondo-Pacheco, Luzardo-Briceño, Inglés-Saura, & Rivas, 2018). This type of cyber-aggression is present in both investigations, thus confirming that it is one of the attacks that occurs repeatedly in digital environments and it is suffered by the victims. As well as online defamation, data looting negatively affects the digital image of adolescents and, even when the information obtained has a sexual connotation, it can be used to carry out much more serious actions such as sextortion or revenge porn (Estébanez, 2018), causing serious damage to personal and social identity, as well as to the mental health.

Digital social networks are designed so that their users expose their daily life to their followers and contacts, with the particularity of obtaining interactions that demonstrate approval of the constructed digital image, through likes, reactions or emojis. When cyberbullying situations occur in adolescents' social media profiles, they are interpreted as disruptive events that go against the logic expected in social networks. This study found that anger is the main emotion that emerges when this occurs. Which is consistent with recent research that indicates such emotion is an expected reaction to the cyberbullying that occurred on these platforms (Ak et al., 2015).

Bystanders of cyberbullying are aware of the damage it causes to victims. This is indicative of an empathic position that involves various emotions, such as pity and anger. Our results show that for adolescents what happens on the Internet is not virtual, but real; at least, in terms of the effects they have on people. Especially when it comes to online attacks that damage one's image in digital environments. Which has effects on the personal and social identity of adolescents.

Final considerations

In cyberbullying, attacks transcend digital spaces, as they generate emotional, psychological, and social effects on the victims. They also affect their performance in the school context. Kowalski and Morgan (2017) indicate that while bullying occurred during the school day, cyberbullying can happen if there is access to a device with an Internet connection. This aspect is very important, since currently a large part of the world population uses mobile devices with Internet connectivity.

The prevention and intervention of cyberbullying should not be considered only in the framework of social media, but in any context in which ICTs are used, including video game consoles with Internet connection. In addition, it is necessary for psychology professionals to generate spaces for discussion and reflection with adolescents about what friendship means in times of social networks and the Internet. Another practical consideration resulting from this research is that psychologists can create psychosocial care protocols for the various actors involved in cyberbullying situations. Furthermore, it is important that educational institutions, both basic and university education, create agencies in charge of designing and executing prevention and intervention programs for this problem. Finally, psychological research on our behavior on the Web has the responsibility of constructing conceptual frameworks that allow the installation of cyberbullying in theories about violence and aggression in the digital age.

Among the limitations of the study, it is important to highlight the absence of adolescents involved in the role of cyberbullies who reported anger as an emotion associated with cyberbullying. Future research might focus on studying such emotion from this role and complement the findings presented in this article. Another limitation of the present research is the channel used to carry out the interviews, because since it is a digital means of written communication, a communicative aspect of affective life, such as the facial gesture, was left out.

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