Physical Self-Schema Acceptance and Perceived Severity of Online Aggressiveness in Cyberbullying Incidents

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, physical self-schema referred to the perceived body image youths have over their physical appearance. Using a two-item online questionnaire, the study analyzed the effect of physical self-schema acceptance on perceived severity of online aggressiveness in cyberbullying. Five hundred and seven students from Belgium, Spain, Romania, and Turkey participated in the survey. The results suggest that when mapping effects of physical self-schema acceptance on perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness, the curvilinear interaction model (2%) is more robust than

the linear interaction model (0.8%), when both models are statistically significant.

In this paper, we look into the curvilinear relationship between physical self-schema acceptance and the perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness.

SELF-SCHEMA AS SELF-CONCEPT

The word schema relates to the cognitive concepts by which we define different sets of world knowledge. Thus, we have knowledge or schemas about ourselves, called self-schemas. Individuals develop a self-schema related to different aspects of themselves as persons, including physical traits, personality characteristics and interests, to the extent that they consider that dimension as a self-definition of their own. These particular beliefs include our general perceptions of ourselves along with our knowledge of past experiences in identical situations. These knowledge categories represent how we expect to think, feel, and act in specific contexts or scenarios. This becomes an adaptive mechanism by which we estimate our own status within any social group. Individuals also develop their own self-schemas about physical characteristics, interests, personality characteristics and behaviors. Individual self-schemes are distinct and strongly affected by previous relationships, experiences, society, education, and culture. The majority of individual schemes have bipolar characteristics. They are healthy versus unhealthy, active versus passive, and dependent versus independent. Yet, they actually have specific positions on a continuum inside all individualities. To shape the concept about our self, all our different self-schemes mix and interact. Our concepts of self tend to be extremely complex. We constantly evaluate and regulate ourselves and gain new understanding and experiences. By so doing, we are constantly enhancing and reconfiguring the self-schemas and self-concepts.

Besides current self-schemas, people also design self-schemas about their future selves. These future selves refer to the way we think we are going to be over the following period of time. This involves positive but also negative ideation about our future selves. Self-schemas are also known to be shaped by the different roles we assume throughout life, influencing the think-feel-act system about selves in particular situations. Multiple schemas allow

people to access rapid decisions, activate efficient and appropriate behaviors in different contexts, and also guide the interpretation and use of input information. Multiple self-schemas activate particular verbal, cognitive, and behavioral sequences, also known as action plans and scripts, allowing people to efficiently reach objectives. Self-schemas vary by circumstances, interlocutors, as well as mood. There are mood-congruent self-schemas that fluctuate along with the emotional status (Brown et al., 1986).

Self-concept is a general representation containing self-information and knowledge, beliefs about our personality characteristics, physical aspects, values, abilities, objectives, and statuses. Youth and children have self-schemas about their academic progress, appearance, sports and other activities skills, and a multitude of other different aspects. The self-schemas act like a vector, providing input data in the processing of self-relevant knowledge (Harter, 1999) that affect their social cognition. Thus, self-concept, as the core of all our schemas, possesses a crucial influence over our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Barrios et al., 2008).

Even though each individual has a unique self-concept, there are common traits that are depicted across individuals. For instance, many individuals underline physical characteristics when describing themselves. Results from earlier studies show that physical characteristics are an important aspect to our self-concept because people readily acknowledge that others use visible physical traits in order to judge them. Usually individuals mention those particular physical traits that differentiate them from other persons in both positive and negative ways, merely because they understand the salient aspect of these characteristics when used by others to judge (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978).

From the foregoing, it is evident that self-concept is a rich and complex social representation of ownership that surpasses not only inner characteristics, but also the social roles. In addition to thoughts about the present self, the self-concept also contains information about the past self. This includes references to accomplishments, failures and experiences, as well as information and about future self, including expectations, plans, and goals. (Oyserman et al., 2004). Due to this multidimensionality of self-concept, it is necessary for researchers to operationalize not just the concepts' isolated elements, but also all the interactions that exist between each element and their overall system.

Complexity and clarity are important structural characteristics of self-concept. Although each individual has a rich self-concept, the literature reveals several specific differences in self-complexity. According to Roccas and Brewer (2002) and Linville (1987), individuals own distinct and

somehow independent strategies of comprehending their own selves. Some people envisage richer selves than other people, and these particular differences are crucial in influencing psychological outputs. As for people with a high complexity of self-concept, the different dimensions of the self are distinct, mainly because the positive and negative sides of a distinct self-dimension are not being transferred to other self-dimensions. Researchers have found that when compared with people who have a low self-complexity, people with a high self-complexity tend to live brighter outcomes. For example, they display enhanced self-esteem (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002), a larger frustration tolerance (Gramzow, et al., 2000), and lower levels of stress and illness (Kalthoff & Neimeyer, 1993). The benefit of self-complexity is that it helps in buffering against negative events and enjoying the positive experienced events. In the case of people with low self-complexity, negative outcomes related to a sole self-dimension tend to have a greater effect over self-esteem.

THE CLARITY OF SELF-CONCEPT

Similar to how individuals differ in terms of their self-complexities, people are also different in terms of clarity. The self-concept clarity represents the measure in which the self-concept is comprehended in a clear and consistent manner (Campbell, 1990). Despite the fact that the concepts of complexity and clarity are independent (a greater or less complex self-idea that is both well-defined and constant, or unwell-defined and inconsistent), results show that both characteristics have the same interactions with the well-being index. An enhanced clarity of the self-concept is more often positively and significantly associated with the concept of self-esteem (Campbell et al., 1996). Researchers suggest that individuals who score higher on the self-esteem trait are inclined to own a more stable view and well-defined perspective about their own positive characteristics, as opposed to individuals who score lower on the same trait (Ritchie et al., 2011). Individuals with a higher self-esteem tend to show greater inconsistent and unstable self-concept that in return make them much more susceptible to the negative effect of defiant situations. Consistent with this hypothesis, it can be argued that the clarity of the self-concept seems to be a mediator in the relationship between well-being and stress (Ritchie et al., 2011).

PERCEIVED SEVERITY OF ONLINE AGGRESSIVENESS

Previous research suggest that bystanders are more prone to intervene when they perceive the incident as more severe, as opposed to when they

perceive the incident as less severe (Patterson, Allan, & Cross, 2017; Kazerooni, Taylor, Bazarova, & Whitlock, 2018; Bastiaensens et al., 2014, 2015; Obermaier et al., 2016). Researchers comprehend the severity of an incident in different ways: either as an objective trait of several aggressive situations (Obermaier et al., 2016; Kazerooni et al., 2018) or as different perceptions of the severity of the same situation (Patterson et al., 2017).

Thus, moral disengagement can be considered a multidimensional construct. In the context of cyberbullying, researchers conclude that "victim blaming," meaning the tendency to associate incident's responsibility to the victim, represents a core facet of moral disengagement (Price et al., 2014; DeSmet et al., 2014). The victim blaming tendency has also been associated with acting intentionality (Weber, Schnauber, & Ziegele, 2013; Schacter, Greenberg, & Juvonen, 2016; Weber, Koehler, & Schnauber-Stockmann, 2018). Bystanders are not just background actors. Their behaviour/act critically influences the process of perpetration and victimization. In a confrontation with the perpetrator, bystanders have increased chances in interfering and preventing more aggressions (Salmivalli, 2010). Also, by showing helping behavior and by psychologically comforting the victim, bystanders increase the victim's perspectives of constructive coping with the situation (Dredge et al., 2014). The research suggests that both victims and perpetrators perceive bystanders' passivity as a consent/support for the perpetrator (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Salmivalli, 2010; Rad, et al., 2019). More often than not, a passive bystander's attitude enhances the risk of deep and long-term psychological victimization.

Cyberbullying ranges in severity from simply making fun of, or insulting peers, all the way up to threats of physical harassment (Rivers & Noret, 2010). When viewed from a bystander's perspective, a situation of threats of physical assault perceived as more severe tends to be frequently considered to be an emergency situation and included in the severe alert zone (Allison & Bussey, 2016). As Obermaier et al. (2016) concluded, the perceived severity of a bullying situation, meaning the level of harassment used, is a significant predictor of bystanders noticing the victim's severe situation, as well as the extent to which bystanders felt responsible for intervening. Similarly, Bastiaensens et al. (2014, 2015) and Patterson et al. (2017) concluded that a cyberbullying incident perceived as more severe affected the enrichment of intervening intentions in bystanders. As Bastiaensens et al (2014) explained, the intervening acting intentionality was explained to a greater extent by bystanders' perceived severity, as opposed to the incident's objective severity

RESEARCH METHOD

The data for this study were drawn from the micro research project, entitled "Keeping youth safe from Cyberbullying." The project was developed and financed by Erasmus+, in collaboration with experts in the field. Its broad aim was to further understand the complex phenomenon of cyberbullying amongst youth and adolescents.

Participants

A total of 507 youths from Spain, Romania, Turkey and Belgium participated in the investigation. This sample was chosen voluntarily, as follows: 98 from Romania, 130 from Belgium, 224 from Turkey and 50 from Spain. Demographically, the students were distributed as follows: they were aged between 17 and 19, and residents of both urban and rural settings. Fifty-one -point -four percent (51.4%) were females and the rest (48.6%) were males.
    The participants responded to a two-item online questionnaire that sought descriptive data, general perception about cyberbullying, the perceived safety of online environments, and some self-reports focused on self-efficacy perceptions. To measure self-schema acceptance, the participants responded to the following single item, "I am pleased with my physical aspect", on a 5 point Likert scale, with 1 representing "Fully Agree" and 5 representing "Fully Disagree". The perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness was determined by responses to the question, "Do you believe that cyberbullying is a severe problem?"

RESULTS

The results presented here were limited to the psychological implications drawn from the curvilinear relationship between self-schema acceptance and perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness in youth, when facing cyberbullying incidents. Two single item measures were applied to this association. In order to elevate any statistical procedure used to highlight the mediation or moderation effects between the involved concept, first we tested whether the relationships were linear or not. Then we determined the extent to which the nonlinearity yielded more statistical inputs to better comprehend what was going on in this particular critical incident, like participating in cyberbullying.

One of our preliminary assumptions was that there was a statistical difference between youth perceiving cyberbullying a severe threat or not, depending on their actual perceived physical self-schema. In order to test our hypothesis, we conducted an ANOVA analysis. To test for the differences, we calculated an ANOVA coefficient of F=4.767, which was statistically significant at a p<0.01. The youths who rated 1, meaning they fully agreed with physical self-schema acceptance had a mean of m=1.74 on agreeing with perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness. Those who rated 2, meaning they disagreed with physical self-schema acceptance had a mean of m=1.95 on agreeing with perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness.

The youth who rated 3, meaning they had neutral feelings about physical self-schema acceptance had a mean of m=1.95 on agreeing with perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness. Those who rated 4, meaning agreeing with physical self-schema acceptance had a mean of m=1.97 on agreeing with perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness. Lastly, the youth who rated 5, meaning they fully agreed with physical self-schema acceptance had a mean of m=1.95 on agreeing with perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness.

Finally, to test the curvilinear relationship hypothesis, we used SPSS' multiple regression analysis for curvilinear effects, with physical self-schema acceptance as the dependent variable.

The distribution of the responses to the statement, "I am pleased with my physical aspect", was as follows: Fully Agreed (3.7%), Agreed (11.4%), Neutral (19.7%), Disagreed (30.4%) and Fully Disagreed (33.7%). To the questions, "Do you believe cyberbullying is a serious problem?", 5.3% responded "Yes" and 94.7% responded "No".

In predicting the curvilinear relationship between the two variables in the study, we assumed that the relationship between two variables will grow together until they reach a plateau (positive relationship). Thereafter, one of the variables increases while the other decreases (negative relationship) or vice-versa. Represented graphically, this relationship would appear in a shape of a U or an inverted U. The Inverted U Hypothesis suggests that optimal physical self-schema acceptance occurs at an intermediate level of perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness while both low and high levels of perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness will result in impaired physical self-schema acceptance. The association between our research variables was computed in a Scatterplot, using Linear and Quadratic representations of the regression line to indicate significant curvilinear effects. Figure 1 presents the inverted U shaped scatter plot diagram, showing the curvilinear relationship between physical self-schema acceptance on the

horizontal axis and perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness, on the vertical axis.
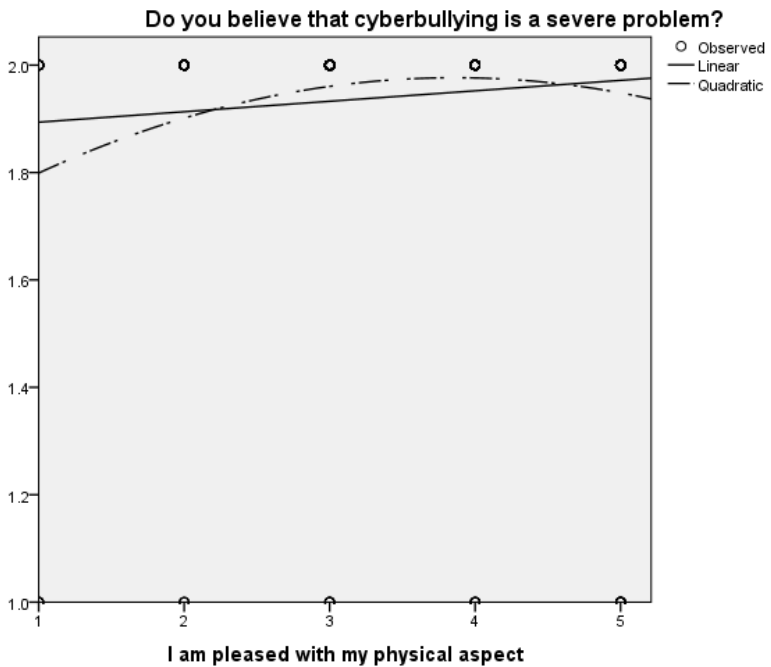

Figure 1: The curvilinear relationship between physical self-schema acceptance and perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness.

There was a very high correlation coefficient between physical self-schema acceptance (m =3.80, SD =1.14) and perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness (m=1.95, SD=0.22) of r =.100, significant at a p <.05. This allowed us to compute the multiple regression analysis for depicting curvilinear effects. In our regression model, the dependent variable was the perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness. The independent variable in step 1 was physical self-schema acceptance, and in step 2 it was physical self-schema acceptance and squared physical self-schema acceptance.

Table 1 presents the fitting of both models, linear (Model 1) and quadratic (Model 2). In Model 1 which tested the linear relationship, physical self-schema acceptance accounted for 0.8% of the variance in perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness with a F=5.072 significant at a p<.005. In the 2nd Model that supposed a curvilinear relationship, physical

self-schema acceptance accounts for 2% of the variance in perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness with a F=7.119 significant at a p<.001.

Table 1: Regression models for physical self-schema acceptance and perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness

One-Way Analysis of Variance

Model		df	SS	MS	F	Sig.
	Regression	1	.248	.248	5.072	.025[b]
1	Residual	500	24.406	.049		
	Total	501	24.653			
	Regression	2	.684	.342	7.119	.001[c]
2	Residual	499	23.969	.048		
	Total	501	24.653			

a. Dependent Variable: Do you think that cyberbullying is a severe problem?

a. Predictors: (Constant), I am pleased with my physical aspect (ItemB)

b. Predictors: (Constant), I am pleased with my physical aspect, *Sqrt Item B*

Model		B	SE B	β	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.874	.034		54.694	.000
	I am pleased with my physical aspect	.019	.009	.100	2.252	.025
2	(Constant)	1.653	.081		20.461	.000
	I am pleased with my physical aspect	.167	.050	.862	3.360	.001
	Sqrt Item B	-.022	.007	-.773	-3.014	.003

a. Dependent Variable: Do you think that cyberbullying is a severe problem?

As data in the Table show, all Beta standardized coefficients (β= .108; β=.862; β=-.773) were significant at p<.05, providing high statistical

consistency to both linear and quadratic models. Negative Beta coefficients indicated that the effect increased in the opposite direction, meaning that the relationship between physical self-schema acceptance and perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness was curvilinear. Altogether, the additional predictive capacity of 1 %, resulting from adding the squared physical self-schema acceptance that accounts for the curve of the regression line, indicated the curvilinear relationship between physical self-schema acceptance and perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness. This curvilinear relationship, assumed based on the inverted U hypothesis, suggests that the optimal perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness occurred at an intermediate level of physical self-schema acceptance while both low and high levels of physical self-schema acceptance will result in impaired perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our finding of a significant curvilinear relationship between physical self-schema acceptance and perceived severity of online aggressiveness in cyberbullying incidents is consistent with previous research findings, which indicate that indirect aggressive competitive behavior is associated in a significantly and positively manner with body image in female population (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2002; Cashdan, 1998; Martin, 1997; Werner & Crick, 1999; Hines & Fry, 1994).

The findings contribute to the existing literature by noting that youth may compete with peers, using for example online aggressive strategies in the physical self-schema field, as a result of their negative appearance self-perception. In terms of physical self-schema insecurities, youth self-perceptions of physical unattractiveness, when comparing themselves to peers, may make them more prone to engage in online aggressiveness, as a strategy to ruin peers' reputation and to enhance their own self-esteem and feelings of superiority. Previously, Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2002) hypothesized that young individuals with dysfunctional self-physical schemas, who are exposed to commercials where appearance criteria is dominant, would lead to a higher physical image dissatisfaction. They found that participants presented with images of ideal physical models reported increased feelings of physical self-schema dissatisfaction, when compared to the participants in the non-appearance condition. Harter (1999) and Cash (2002; 2003) demonstrated a significant negative association between body image and self-esteem.

IMPLICATIONS

As the adaptive function theory suggests, the appeal of online aggression might be a catalyst to the aggregation of inner and outer social groups. Online aggression can be considered an adaptive strategy because it actually facilitates connections for individuals in that particular social group, even if it may lead to disconnections for outer group youth. Taking into account the prerogatives of normative social behavior, negative relational perpetrators might actually develop a self-image and feel more connected to young peers than if their aggressive behavior is discouraged. Some young people may choose to incorporate internet aggression into their skills repertoire as a way to compensate for the power imbalance, and eventually be more competitive and prosperous in a culture that values male-dominated features. Thus, the effects of such behavior may be rewarding, such as enhanced self-esteem or social status, if it is supported by youth settings. Consistent with the findings of Perez and colleagues (2005), we also found a significant curvilinear association between physical self-schema and perceived severity of online aggressiveness. It should be noted, however, that we did not encounter measures of extremely low and extremely high degrees of physical self-schema acceptance in relation to perceived online aggression. This might have affected the reduced, but statistically significant, size effect of the coefficients found.

This research had several limitations, including the use of a purposive sample, the simplicity of the information collection process, and the limited scope of this micro-exploratory inquiry, including the insufficient operationalization of the main constructs in this study. The participants in this study were youths exclusively enrolled in an educational system in both rural and urban areas. Therefore, the findings presented here should not be generalized to a larger and more diverse target group, like "Not in Education, Employment, or Training" (NEETs).

The operationalization of terms in the study may be insufficient. Even though the existing literature describes several variables associated with indirect aggression, we restricted our focus to exploring the connection between physical self-schema acceptance and perceived negative effect of online aggressiveness among youth. In addition, a moderate range of scores on both measures were recorded by youth respondents in this study. Restricting range issues may have affected the outcomes of this research in particular. Therefore, the relationship between these two constructs might have been more significant and the effect size greater if there was a vaster range in scores.

Still another limitation was that the possible sequential and contextual

relationships between the two concepts might not have been taken into account. Because of lack of studies on the construct of perceived online aggression is not yet understood. It is unclear whether perceived severity of online aggressiveness leads to physical self-schema acceptance, or whether it precedes it, and under what circumstances these assumptions appear. Future studies should provide more comprehensive data on the causal relationships between physical self-schema acceptance and perceived severity of online aggressiveness.

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