Perceived Social Support and Risk of Cyberbullying in Adolescents: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

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Keywords

adolescents, cyberbullying, perceived social support, qualitative review

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Perceived Social Support and Risk of Cyberbullying in Adolescents: A Systematic Review

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This article analyzes the main findings of studies investigating the relationship between perceived social support and cyberbullying in adolescents. We reviewed research papers published between January 2015 and January 2020, included in the Web of Science, Scopus, PUBMED, and Science Direct databases. The protocol was previously registered on the PROSPERO International Systematic Reviews database (CRD42020176938). The article follows the PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2015). Out of 1929 surveyed articles, 23 met the inclusion criteria and quality standards of scientific evidence set by Downs and Black (1998). Results reveal the types and characteristics of studies and instruments used in assessing social support and cyberbullying and show the relationship between social support and cyberbullying.

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Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have influenced people's lives and have gained popularity across different age groups due to their design, accessibility, and diversity. They also facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and experiences, generally contributing to personal, emotional, and social development on children and adolescents (Gámez-Guadix, 2014). However, children and adolescents can spend more than four hours a day online, either for leisure or school activities (Arnaiz et al., 2016), which may expose them to potential harmful and cyberbullying. The phenomenon of cyberbullying has been defined as the misuse of ICTs (social networking sites, e-mail, mobile phones, short messaging services and websites) to support malicious, continuous, and damaging behavior to cause harm to individuals (Barlett et al., 2018).

According to Willard (2007), cyberbullying consists of flaming (online conflict including profanity and hostility), slander or denigration (harming by spreading malicious rumors), harassment (repeated communication of offensive messages), and exclusion (denying access to online communities or websites), characterized by power imbalance and recurrence (Smith et al., 2012).

It is also a form of intimidation that may have the same effects as direct physical threats and can lead to the same responses in victims (Akturk, 2015). However, other studies have shown that cyberbullying may have a stronger impact than traditional bullying and cause more

serious mental health problems given the emotional and physical distance between perpetrator and victim, the physical impossibility of stopping attacks, and the rapid dissemination of the harmful content (Zych et al., 2015).

Cyberbullying is also categorized as a type of social aggression (Navarro et al., 2015), that may incorporate behaviors such as posting harmful comments on social networks, sending harassing text messages, spreading intimate or embarrassing information, harmful teasing, lying, rude or malicious comments, taunting and spreading rumors (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Victims of cyberbullying are also often victims of traditional bullying, and bullies have also been found to practice cyberbullying (Gradinger et al., 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

An efficient strategy to prevent cyberbullying is social support, conceptualized as the perception of being valued by the social environment composed by peers and relatives (Saylor & Leach, 2009). This perception creates a feeling of well-being and emotional health during child and adolescent development (Holt & Spillage, 2007). In this sense, perceived social support is an important protective factor against mental health consequences of cyberbullying victimization (Saylor & Leach, 2009; Wang et al., 2015; Wright, 2016a), and allow individuals to handle challenging situations (Cohen, 2004) In contrast, low social support is related to increased cyberbullying victimization (Park et al., 2014).

The three main sources of social support, namely family, friends, and school staff (Chu et al., 2010), have been associated with a lower risk of being bullied and cyberbullied (Kowalski et al., 2014; Zych et al., 2019; Zych et al., 2015). Social support can be classified into a structural dimension related to the size of the social network, and a functional dimension related to its utility. Functional support (Gottlieb, 1983) consists of three resources: emotional (empathy, love, and trust), instrumental (problem solving) and informative (acquisition of useful information). Perceived social support thus rests upon assistance from others during adverse situations (Cobb, 1976; Lakey & Cohen, 2000).

Social support provides additional benefits such as satisfaction with the own body (Barker & Galambos, 2003), reduced depression (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003), school dynamics and academic performance improvement (Danielsen et al., 2009), and self-esteem increase (Sakiz et al., 2012). It can also reduce drugs use as well as violent and risky behaviors (McNeely et al., 2002), mitigate the experience of being harassed, and provide supporting tools (Noret et al., 2019).

Social support by parents can also reduce adolescents' participation in traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Wang et al., 2009). By relatives, is particularly effective against cyberbullying and cybervictimization, (Fanti et al., 2012), and by friends, can buffer cyberbullying effects and increase life satisfaction, a common indicator of subjective well-being in bullying and aggression studies (Flaspohler et al., 2009; Flouri & Buchanan, 2002).

In sum, the possibility of seeking help from sources of social support is a coping strategy for victims of virtual bullying. However, it has been reported that around 50% of cyberbullying victims do not report incidents to anyone, which implies a higher risk of recurrence of virtual bullying (García-Maldonado et al., 2011). In this context, we present systematic review and critical synthesis of studies addressing the role of social support on cyberbullying among adolescents.

This review is justified given the necessity to understand the online aggressive behavior more precisely, especially considering its relationship with traditional bullying among adolescents and the damage it can cause to mental health. Thus, this research contributes to theoretical and practical knowledge of the phenomenon as well as the developing prevention actions and future research.

Methods

Study Design and Inclusion Criteria

We carried out a qualitative systematic review that analyzes the available evidence regarding our specific question in a structured, explicit, and ordered way (Letelier et al., 2005). We included any study addressing the relationship between social support and cyberbullying in adolescents, published between January 2015 and January 2020. Databases were Web of Science, Scopus, PUBMED and Science Direct. The search was conducted during November 2019 and January 2020. References from the selected articles were also included to reduce publication bias. Search terms and Boolean operators were social support AND "cyberbullying" AND "adolescents," Social support, AND Cyberbullying AND adolesc*, "Social support" AND cyberbullying, "Perceived social support" AND cyberbullying AND adolesc*, "Social support "AND cybervictimization AND adolesc*, "Social support" AND cyberperpetration AND adolesc*, "Social support" AND cyberharassment AND adolesc*.

We selected studies of adolescents between 10 and 19 years of age, in accordance with the World Health Organization definitions of adolescence; written in English or Spanish; not discriminating by geographical area; and both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs, as there was no attempt to draw causal conclusions. Reviews and meta-analysis were excluded. Articles that did not cover our target age group or investigated only traditional bullying were also excluded.

Procedure

Two independent researchers reviewed the papers for compliance with the evaluation criteria, first through assessment of titles and summaries, identifying and eliminating duplicates. Articles that met the inclusion criteria were assessed through the checklist of methodological quality proposed by Downs and Black (1998) consisting of scores on four key criteria: reporting; external validity; internal validity (bias); and internal validity (confounders). A total quality score (with a maximum value of 32) was calculated from the four scores.

After considering the quality of the articles, the authors extracted relevant information about the selected papers, including years of publication, design, scales to measure cyberbullying and social support, population, sample size, mean age, female percentage, variable definitions, results, and discussion. When papers were eligible but missing key information, we contacted authors to request the missing information. If the authors were unable to supply data, the papers were considered ineligible

For analysis, we used the methodological orientations of the Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) to create emergent categories from the information as we did not pre-settle prior themes   before the analysis. The information was classified in codes, and these were grouped in patterns, following an inductive process to answer the research question and create a conceptual model where two main categories were analyzed: roles identified in cyberbullying and social support, relationship between social support and cyberbullying. We used the ATLAS Ti software, version 8.0 for this process.

Results

In this section, we describe the characteristics of the selected studies and offer a synthesis of the main findings. A flow diagram (Figure 1) displays the selection process. A total of 1929 papers were retrieved through database search, reduced to 959 after eliminating

duplicates. After assessment through the checklist of methodological quality, 23 were scored above 50%.

Figure 1
PRISMA Flow Diagram

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┌─────────────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ 1929 studies identified      │───────▶│ 959 studies after removing       │
│ through database search      │        │ duplicates                       │
└─────────────────────────────┘        └─────────────────────────────────┘
            │
            ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ 959 screened studies         │───────▶│ 810 studies excluded             │
└─────────────────────────────┘        └─────────────────────────────────┘
            │
            ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│ 149 full-text articles       │───────▶│ 787 full-text articles excluded  │
│ assessed for eligibility     │        │ based on quality criteria        │
└─────────────────────────────┘        └─────────────────────────────────┘
            │
            ▼
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ 23 studies included in       │
│ meta-synthesis               │
└─────────────────────────────┘
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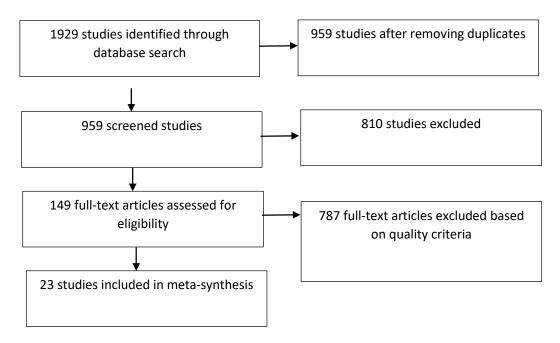
Table 1 shows that most selected studies were developed in Spain (17.4%), followed by Israel (13%), United Kingdom (13%), Belgium, Korea, and the United States (8.7%). No studies about this relationship were found in Latin America. Mean age of participants in the reviewed studies ranged from 10 to 13 years, with a higher participation of males. Heterogeneity was identified in instruments of data collection, with separate evaluation of social support and cyberbullying in most studies.

Table 1
Summary of Reviewed Studies

Authors	Year	Country	Sample size	Females (%)	Scales
Akturk, A. O.	2015	Turkey	433	44%	Cyberbullying Sensitivity Scale (CSS) and Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS-R)
Cross, D., Lester, L., & Barnes, A.	2015	Australia	1504	Not specified	Peer support at school scale (adapted from the 24-item Perceptions of Peer Social Support Scale (Ladd et al., 1996)
Heiman, T., Olenik-Shemesh, D., & Eden, S.	2015	Israel	472	55%	Self-report questionnaires (cyberbullying, perceived feelings of loneliness, self-efficacy, and social support)

Jones, L. M., Mitchell, K. J., & Turner, H. A.	2015	USA	791	51%	II National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV II)
Navarro, R., Yubero, S., & Larrañaga, E.	2015	Spain	1058	48%	Cyberbullying Questionnaire (CBQ; Calvete et al., 2010), social companionship, affectionate and emotional information scales (Leung, 2011)
Olenik-Shemesh, D., Heiman, T., & Eden, S.	2015	Israel	1094	48%	CB questionnaire (Smith et al., 2008; adapted from Hebrew by Olenik-Shemesh, Tarablus, and Heiman); Multidimensional Scale for Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988)
Sevcíková, A., MacHáčková, H., Wright, M. F., Dědková, L., & Černá, A.	2015	Czech Republic	451	68%	Survey of EU children online II
Frison, E., Subrahmanyam, K., & Eggermont, S.	2016	Belgium	1621	48%	Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al. 1988)
Machackova, H., & Pfetsch, J.	2016	Germany	321	44%	Basic Empathy Scale (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006),
Ortega-Barón, J., Buelga, S., & Cava, M. J.	2016	Spain	1062	48%	Adolescent victimization through mobile phone and internet scale (CYBVIC; Buelga et al., 2012)/ Norm 5 Self-concept scale (AF-5; García & Musitu, 1999); Family Environment Scale (FES; Spanish adaptation by Fernández-Ballesteros & Sierra, 1989).
Romera, E. M., Cano, J. J., García-Fernández, C. M., & Ortega-Ruiz, R.	2016	Spain	505	47%	Social Support Scale for Children (Harter, 1985). European Intervention Project Cyberbullying Questionnaire (Del-Rey et al., 2015)

Wong, N., & McBride, C.	2016	China	312	66%	Cyberbullying victimization (Leung & McBride-Chang, 2013); Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988).
Wright, M. F	2016	USA	867	51%	Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988); Cyber victimization scale (Wright, 2016a).
Cho, Y.-K. Y. K., & Yoo, J. W. J.-W.	2016	Korea	400	Not specified	Cyberbullying behavioral intentions; Cyberbullying behavioral intentions adapted from Pabian and Vandebosch (2014); Perceived social support (Zimet et al., 1988)
Kwak, M., & Oh, I.	2017	Korea	11117	48%	"Korean cyberbullying type" (Cho, 2013); Social Support Appraisal Scale (SSAS; Dubow & Ulman, 1989), modified and verified by Mo et al. (2014)
Olenik-Shemesh, D., & Heiman, T.	2016	Israel	204	48%	Student Survey Questionnaire of Cyberbullying (Campbell et al., 2012); Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988).
Larrañaga, E., Navarro, R., & Yubero, S.	2018	Spain	1062	54%	Subscale of perceived social support from friends from AFA-R scale (González & Landero, 2014).
Noret, N., Hunter, S. C., & Rasmussen, S.	2019	UK	3737	50%	Measure of perceived social support developed in collaboration with LEA (Rigby & Slee, 1999)
Pabian, S.	2019	Belgium	2128	53%	Self-reported cyberbullying victimization (Olweus, 1993)
Shaw et al.	2019	UK	5286	Not specified	Olweus bullying questionnaire (Solberg & Olweus, 2003); Classmate and teacher support assessed by HBSC international network scales (Inchley et al., 2018; Torsheim et al., 2000)

Worsley, J. D., McIntyre, J. C., & Corcoran, R	2019	UK	476	54%	Multidimensional scale of perceived social support (MSPSS; Zimet et al. 1988); Cyberbullying victimization (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008)
Zambuto, V., Palladino, B. E., Nocentini, A., & Menesini, E.	2019	Italy	524	53%	Florence Bullying-Victimization Scales (FBVSs; Zambuto et al., 2015); Italian version of Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Busoni & Di Fabio, 2008; Zimet et al., 1990; Zimet et al., 1988).
Hellfeldt, K., López-Romero, L., & Andershed, H.	2020	Sweden	1707	47%	Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support; Cyberbullying and cybervictimization items from the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ)

Roles Identified in Cyberbullying and Social Support

Three roles can be identified in cyberbullying: victims, perpetrators, and bystanders who may support either victims or perpetrators.

Cyberbullying victims experience higher levels of depression and anxiety and report more self-statements indicative of attachment anxiety than bullying victims. This, due to the uncontrollable nature of social media, the permanence of content shared on these social platforms, a larger audience, and the degree of difficulty to escape online bullies. "Victims of cyberbullying report significantly more social difficulties, and higher levels of depression and anxiety, than victims of traditional bullying" (Worsley et al., 2019, p. 2).

Perpetrators are characterized by a higher exposure to aggression and violence, and reduced self-control. While traditional bullies harass victims based on a superior social status, power imbalance and reinforcement by bystanders, cyberbullying can occur regardless of power imbalance or social support (Smith et al., 2008). Accordingly, adolescents with lower social status may be more likely to practice bully in cyberspace. This is explained by the fact that in traditional bullying, perpetrators harass victims using their superior social status and support to reinforce their power and popularity with bystanders: "However, cyberbullying can occur regardless of an imbalance of power or social support as perpetrators are in a secluded space where the social status and therefore bystanders, have a minor role" (Kwak & Oh, 2017, p. 13).

Regarding bystanders, we found that their supportive behavior might be influenced by the type of relationship between victims and perpetrators (friendship, negative friendship, or non-relationship) either offline or in cyberspace. In addition, "the temporal, technical, and psychological proximity of cyberbystanders to the involved persons (cyberbullies, cybervictims, and other possible cyberbystanders) influences their trend to offer help" (Machackova & Pfetsch, 2016, p. 173).

Moreover, two behavioral patterns in bystanders were identified: passive (no provision of help to cybervictims) and active (provision of social support to victims after witnessing cyberbullying). In the passive role, more than half of the bystanders, 55.4%, are passive and do

not provide any help to cyber-victims, either because they think the incident is not their business or because they are afraid to act. Regarding the rest of the bystanders, "44.6%, are active and help the cyber-victim, either through direct help or by telling an adult" (Olenik-Shemesh et al., 2015, p. 14).

In the specific context of cyberbullying, there is no concrete evidence of a "bystander effect", whereby observers fail to offer direct help to cybervictims due to the presence of larger number of other bystanders. Although the bystander effect is more pronounced online, some researchers have concluded that the bystander effect "exists also in acts that take place on Internet forums and chats, and sometimes they may even be more powerful as the number of people present in forums and chats are bigger, it takes more time for people to get or give help" (Olenik-Shemesh et al., 2015, p. 7).

On the other hand, peer rejection decreased the likelihood of social support seeking, while cyber-victims' positive attachment to parents increased its likelihood. This means that a positive relationship between someone who is a victim of cyberbullying, and his parents is a protective factor in cyberbullying. Sevcíková et al. (2015) found that "cyber-victims who had poor relationships either with peers or parents were less likely to ask others for help. Furthermore, the likelihood of social support seeking was especially low among those cyber-victims who reported poor parental attachment and simultaneously an increased extent of harm" (p. 178).

Relationship Between Social Support and Cyberbullying

Peer support, security in attachment relationships, and support in positive coping strategies can mitigate the effect of cyberbullying victimization on mental health. Although family support was one of the most important predictors of mental distress, it did not significantly attenuate the association between cyberbullying victimization and depression or anxiety. "One explanation for this is that young people tend to spend more time with their peers and less time with their parents during adolescence and as a consequence, they may choose to turn to their peers for support when faced with challenges online" (Worsley et al., 2019, p. 11).

Perceived social support may be a factor reducing cyberbullying perpetration and victimization, while low social support is a predictor of cyberbullying in adolescence. Olenik-Shemesh and Heiman (2016), found a negative correlation between cybervictimization and social support, highlighting the importance of the "personal and social circles in teens' everyday lives" (p. 8). In contrast, "cyber victimization is correlated with social difficulties: low social support (family and friends support) and low social self-efficacy. These results show that higher reported levels of cyber victimization are significantly correlated with low levels of body esteem, social support, and social self-efficacy" (p. 11).

As for bullying reinforcement, some studies have highlighted a trend in cyberbullies toward greater social support and higher popularity targets (Romera et al., 2016). This means that cyberbullying can be both prevented and elicited by social support. Among the ways to promote it, it was found that certain peer groups or contexts constituted based on immoral norms accept aggression as a way to gain acceptance within the group (Berger & Caravita, 2016; Cho & Yoo, 2016).

Discussion and Conclusions

The main objective of this article was to analyze the relationships between perceived social support and cyberbullying based on a systematic review of the literature. Despite the abundant literature on cyberbullying, empirical research on links between cyberbullying and social support is still limited, especially in Latin America. Among our main findings, we found

that social support can contribute to reducing cybervictimization (Saylor & Leach, 2009; Wang et al., 2015; Wright, 2016b); that the behavior of bystanders plays a key role in cyberbullying; and that supportive behavior can significantly affect the feelings and sense of well-being of victims as well as preventing new episodes of harassment (Jone et al., 2015; Machackova & Pfetsch, 2016; Olenik-Shemesh & Heiman, 2016; Zambuto et al., 2019).

Major knowledge gaps remain regarding the factors determining when a spectator takes active or passive behavior toward cyberbullying. Bystanders close to victims may increase harm by leaking secrets, violating privacy, exposing texts, humiliating, and embarrassing photos, or instead they may stop, eliminate, or report cyberassaults. Adolescents can interpret online peer behaviors as a sign of negative peer evaluation or social exclusion, which can create a diminished sense of belonging (Frison et al., 2016). On the other hand, peers showing compassion and empathy may become protective and oppose bullying (Jones et al., 2015). Therefore, perceived social support, particularly from family and teachers at school, can reduce the negative effect of cyberbullying and anxiety on psychosocial well-being (Hellfeldt et al., 2020). Social support by peers is equally important to the well-being of victims, but their ability to spare adolescents from the consequences of online bullying may be limited. Factors such as security in close relationships and support for positive coping strategies can mitigate the positive relationship between cyberbullying and mental health issues (Worsley et al., 2019).

We identified three main sources of support: (1) family, which provides protective factors such as self-esteem and cohesion; (2) friends and peers; and (3) educational institutions, where academic self-esteem, teacher help, feeling of affiliation and involvement in school tasks favor the perception of social support (Chu et al., 2010). Unfortunately, a large fraction of studies focused exclusively on analyzing the role of the first two actors, even though the role of parents and teachers is nonetheless essential (Ortega-Barón et al., 2016), as they train and educate adolescents on how to avoid online abuse. Therefore, future research should dedicate more effort into investigating the role of schools as providers of social support against cyberbullying.

As in traditional bullying, cyberbullying was shown to cause negative effects on the emotional, social, and academic development of victims. Although the experience of bullying and aggression varies extensively among peers, our review has identified a significant association between social support and cyberbullying, where functional social support in adolescence can provide protection against online bullying.

In conclusion, the virtual world is an environment that provides the freedom and motivation required by individuals adopting violent behaviors, mostly by allowing perpetrators to hide their identity. Cyberbullying is thus more difficult to detect than traditional bullying, as it is carried out anonymously and virtually (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006), and often occurs outside of the school environment (Smith et al., 2008). Due to those two factors, the access of victims to potential providers of social support is often dramatically curtailed.

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