How Unpleasant Emotions, Morals and Normative Beliefs of Severity Relate to Cyberbullying Intentions

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Abstract: Cyberbullying is a phenomenon of worldwide concern regarding children and adolescents’ mental health and risk behavior. Bystanders of this phenomenon can help diminish the incidence of this phenomenon if they engage in pro-social behavior. However, different social-cognitive and affective bystander reactions may surface because of the lack of contextual information and emotional cues in cyberbullying situations. Hence, this study investigated how cyberbullying bystanders’ unpleasant emotions could be related to their personal moral beliefs and their behavioral intentions to cyberbully or defend the victim. It also proposed to investigate how their normative beliefs of perceived severity about cyberbullying behavior could be related to their personal moral beliefs and their behavioral intentions. Three groups of adolescents participated in this study, namely a first of group 402 students (5th – 12th graders; Mage = 13.12; SD = 2.19; 55.7% girls) to compute explorative factorial analyses of the instruments used; a second group of 676 students (5th – 12th graders; Mage = 14.10; SD = 2.74; 55.5% were boys) to run confirmatory factor analyses; and a third group (N = 397; 5th – 12th graders; Mage = 13.88 years; SD = 1.45; 55.5% girls) to perform the main analyses to test the research hypotheses. Self-report measures were used, such as the Personal moral beliefs about cyberbullying behavior questionnaire, the Normative beliefs of perceived severity about cyberbullying behavior questionnaire, the Unpleasant emotions about cyberbullying incidents questionnaires, and the Bystanders’ behavioral intentions in cyberbullying situations questionnaires. Path analysis results revealed that unpleasant emotions were mediators of the relationship between adolescent cyberbullying bystanders’ personal moral beliefs and their intentions to help the victims in cyberbullying situations. Moreover, adolescent cyberbullying bystanders’ normative beliefs of gravity were mediators of the relationship between their personal moral beliefs and their intentions to cyberbully others. These findings provide insights for the development of prevention and intervention programs that promote social and emotional learning strategies as a means to prevent and intervene in cyberbullying.

Keywords: cyberbullying, normative beliefs of perceived severity, personal moral beliefs, unpleasant emotions

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