Online correlates of cyberhate involvement among young people from ten European countries: An application of the Routine Activity and Problem Behaviour Theory

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# Abstract

Recent evidence shows that young people across Europe are encountering hateful content on the Internet. However, there is a lack of empirically tested theories and investigation of correlates that could help to un-derstand young people’s involvement in cyberhate. To fill this gap, the present study aims to test the Routine Activity Theory to explain cyberhate victimisation and the Problem Behaviour Theory to understand cyberhate perpetration. Participants were 5433 young people (Mage =14.12, SDage =1.38; 49.8% boys from ten countries of the EU Kids Online IV survey). Self-report questionnaires were administered to assess cyberhate involvement, experiences of data misuse, frequency of contact with unknown people online, problematic aspects of sharenting, excessive Internet use, and sensation seeking. Results showed that being a victim of cyberhate was positively associated with target suitability (e.g., experiences of data misuse, and contact with unknown people), lack of capable guardianship (e.g., problematic facets of sharenting), and exposure to potential offenders (e.g., wit-nessing cyberhate, and excessive Internet use). Findings support the general usefulness of using Routine Activity Theory to explain cyberhate victimisation. Being a perpetrator of cyberhate was positively associated with several online problem behaviours (e.g., having contact with unknown people online, excessive Internet use, and sensation seeking), which supports the general assumption of the Problem Behaviour Theory. The findings of this research can be used to develop intervention and prevention programmes on a local, national, and international level.

# Outcome

As expected, we also found a positive association between contact with unknown people online and cyberhate victimisation. We propose that the unknown people met online could take advantage of the vulnerability of their potential targets (e.g., in terms of young people’s search for political identity) (Bauman et al., 2021). Cyberhate victims who show a higher risk for traditional bullying and cyberbullying, including social exclusion from online and offline peer activities (Blaya Audrin, 2019; Wachs, Wright, Vazsonyi, 2019) might try to compensate the lack of social interaction by looking online for new people to socialise with. Our finding extends the extant literature showing a positive association between contact with unknown people online and exposure to hate messages (Harriman et al., 2020) and cyberbullying victimisation (Craig et al., 2020; Festl Quandt, 2016). Coherently with our second hypothesis, problematic facets of sharenting were positively associated with being a cyberhate victim. As shown above, sharenting, can be interpreted as a lack of capable guardianship, especially when parents do not take enough privacy measures and publicly share their children’s contents online (Kopecky et al., 2020). On the opposite, previous research showed that parents who appraise their children in relation to the harm of certain online activities and instruct children about the appropriateness of sharing some personal information online are less likely to be the victims of cyberhate (Wachs et al., 2021) and increase young people’s ability to cope effectively with cyberhate victimisation (Wright et al., 2021). These parents might also be more aware of online risks themselves, which could prevent problematic facets of sharenting (e.g., sharing their children’s private information online). In line with our third hypothesis, we expected that exposure to po-tential offenders in the form of witnessing cyberhate, excessive Internet use, and sensation seeking would be positively related to being a cyberhate victim. Findings partly confirmed our hypothesis. A positive correlation was found between witnessing cyberhate and victimisation. This finding corresponds to previous research (Costello et al., 2016; Wachs et al., 2021; Wachs Wright, 2018) and it signals that the higher the exposure to cyberhate, the higher young people’s chances to be victimised by hateful contents online are. An explanation could be that some young people might engage in counter speech, while giving public support to the targeted person or social group (G ́amez-Guadix et al., 2020; Wachs, G ́amez-Guadix, et al., 2020). This might expose them to the risk of becoming victims of cyberhate themselves. Another possible explanation is that young people’s behaviour in cyberhate situations changes according to the online context. For instance, young people might be either targeted or act as bystanders depending on the attributes that the perpetrator aims to target in a specific online context. In line with our hypothesis, we found a positive association between excessive Internet use and cyberhate victimisation. We propose that young people who use the Internet excessively and show social vulner-ability (e.g., lack of offline peer contacts) might become cyberhate vic-tims more easily. In accordance with the RAT (Cohen Felson, 1979), spending excessive time in online environments that could be framed as “dangerous” increase their chances to being exposed to hateful online contents (i.e., bystander). This finding extends research that revealed a positive relationship between time spent online and exposure to hate messages (Harriman et al., 2020) and it is consistent with research on excessive Internet use and cyberbullying victimisation (G ́amez-Guadix et al., 2013; Jung et al., 2014; Machimbarrena et al., 2018; Wachs, Vazsonyi, et al., 2020). Another explanation might be that young people who use the internet excessively, try to compensate lack of social peer contacts (Stodt et al., 2016) which in turn increases their risk for cyberhate victimisation.