

Routine Activity Theory Considerations for Teenage Cyberbullying Behavior

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### Abstract

The fundamental precept of the routine activity theory is focused on providing information regarding who is more or less likely to be the victim of a crime. The simplicity of the theory has proven to be an extremely useful tool in providing an enhanced understanding of general criminal victimization and offending patterns, to include traditional physical bullying activities by teenagers. However, the advent of the internet and cellular phone technologies has allowed the traditional form of physical bullying to extend into cyberspace in the form of cyberbullying. This consideration has resulted in some criminological theorists questioning whether the routine activity theory is transportable from the terrestrial world in the cyberspace. Accordingly, this research paper explores the primary elements of the routine activity theory to provide a basic determination of whether the theory can be readily applied to cyberbullying activities.

### Routine Activity Theory Considerations for Teenage Cyberbullying Behavior

The routine activity theory identifies that a criminal act results from the convergence of an available target, the presence of a motivated offender, and the absence of a capable guardian that could intervene (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Rather than looking solely at offenders, the routine activity theory attempts to rationalize why a criminal act is more likely to affect certain individuals during a given situation (Cox, 2011). Accordingly, the routine activity theory provides an effective method of designing prevention programs targeted toward both perpetrators and victims (Henson, 2010).

In the traditional sense, teenage bullying involves a victim who is exposed to adverse actions by one or more individuals that are intentionally attempting to inflict injury or emotional stress (Olweus, 2013). Cyberbullying merely extends the manner in which an individual is victimized by introducing the use of technology such as cell phones, email and social media (Feinberg & Robey, 2008). Unlike traditional bullying, this abuse of technology allows cyberbullying to occur twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Accordingly, although the number varies between different surveys, the percentage of teens have been the target of cyberbullying is typically identified as being more significant than that of traditional bullying (Kowalski & Limber, 2013).

The routine activity theory can be used to understand and prevent certain forms of aggression such as traditional bullying (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim & Sadek, 2010). However, whether the basic precepts of the routine activity theory can be readily applied to cyberbullying is unclear. Accordingly, this research activity seeks to answer the following question: Are the elements of the routine activity theory applicable to cyberbullying behaviors in the same or similar manner as can be applied to traditional forms of teen bullying?

### **Literature Review**

The advances in communication technology and online media within the past decade have dramatically impacted the manner in which individuals communicate and socialize (Clemmitt, 2013). However, aside from the benefits that technological advances have provided, a new form of cyber-victimization has emerged that uses text messaging, emails, and social media as a method of harassment (Choi, 2008). This form of cyberbullying is especially prevalent among teenagers who have overwhelmingly embraced social interaction through the use of cyber technology (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). It should then be of no surprise that studies indicate 95% of teens have ready access to internet-connected computers in the home or educational environment, and 74% are also users of cellular telephones (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan & Gasser, 2013). Accordingly, while the percentage varies among different surveys, studies have identified that upwards of 72% of teenagers had experienced at least one incident of cyberbullying (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

This somewhat startling level of cyber connectivity has resulted in an increased level of concern among parents, educators and law enforcement given that cyberbullying can result in victims feeling the same degree of emotional distress that is caused by traditional physical forms of bullying (Bossler, Holt & May, 2012). The primary distinction of cyberbullying is that the use of text messaging, emails, chat rooms, and social media occur in relative privacy that makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for an adult to detect (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Perhaps what is more disturbing is that the vast majority of teens who may be present to observe bullying through online or text-messaging activities rarely intervene or inform an authority figure (Reyns, Henson & Fisher, 2011). This apparent inability to detect instances of cyberbullying only serves to underscore the need to develop prevention programs.

### **Extension of the Routine Activity Theory to Cybercrime**

The routine activity theory came into being during the late 1979 time frame as a means of studying the causal factors associated with a general increase in predatory crimes that had occurred during the previous two decades (Cohen & Felson, 1979). The basic premise of the theory is more opportunistic, reasoning that potential offenders will commit a crime when provided with an unguarded target during routine daily activities (Bernard, Snipes & Gerould, 2010). More specifically, the routine activity theory provides a methodology for analyzing criminal acts and crime patterns by focusing on the convergence of a likely offender, an available target and absence of a capable guardian (Sampson & Dunham, 2010). Given this somewhat simplistic view that situations in which an individual encounters during in their daily lives influence crime, the routine activity has received some degree of criticism for neglecting the social aspects of criminal activity (Jaishankar, 2011). However, in actuality, the routine activity theory considers various manners in which technological advances and changes in the social fabric of modern society correlate to criminal acts (Wortley, 2008).

Given that the routine activity theory provides a basis for explaining why crime is more prevalent for certain groups, as well as why certain types of crime occur more often than others, it has become a viable method of analyzing predatory crimes (Boetig, 2006). Accordingly, in consideration that a fundamental aspect of the routine activity involves technological advances in society, the extension of the theory to the area of cybercrimes would seemingly be a natural evolution. However, some skeptics argue that the routine activities theory is limited in the ability to provide a basis for explaining cybercrime (Yar, 2005). Despite the apparent reluctance by some criminological theorist, application of the routine activity theory has generally been advanced into the world of cybercrimes (Choi, 2008).

**Routine Activity Theory Considerations for Victimization**

The routine activity theory has been used extensively to study the risks associated with various aspects of non-violent victimization (Miethe & Stafford, 1987). Accordingly, the routine activity theory has also proven to be an effective method of analyzing victimization as it relates to cybercrimes (Holt & Bossler, 2009). This attention to the role of the victim in explaining the causes of crime readily leads to the application of the routine activity theory to study teenage cyberbullying activities. However, research activities that have been conducted predominantly involve the completion of surveys to provide data regarding the prevalence of cyberbullying among teenagers rather than the more traditional form of physical bullying (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2013). This consideration not meant to imply that scholarly research is absent for cyberbullying. Rather, by all indications, that there has been minimal research effort expended that specifically applies the concepts of the routine activity theory to cyberbullying. This relative absence of any substantive research using the routine activity theory is somewhat surprising considering that both physical bullying and cyberbullying result from the convergence of an available target, the absence of a capable guardian that could intervene and the presence of a motivated offender converge (Groff, 2008). However, even though studies that do exist may disagree with applying the routine activity theory to crimes in cyberspace conceded that the basic concepts might only need to be adapted to apply to cybercrime (Yar, 2005). Regardless of whether the concepts of the routine activity theory requires adaption for application in cyberspace, the theory has already been successfully used in analyzing and predicting incidents of cybercrime (Mesch, 2009). Further, application of the basic components of the routine activity theory has resulted in new insights for the development of prevention programs targeted specifically to cyberbullying activities (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008).

### **Application of the Routine Activity Theory to Cyberbullying**

Bullying in the traditional sense has been characterized as an act which involves a repeated and systematic deliberate abuse of power through physical, verbal and relational aggression (Olweus, 1999). With respect to the routine activity theory, the consensus of criminologists is that there is a readily identifiable correlation between victimization in cyberspace and the traditionally recognized form of physical bullying (Bossler et al., 2012; Cook et al., 2010; Choi, 2008; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Henson, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Miethe & Stafford, 1987; Reyns et al., 2011). The application of this perspective to cyberbullying becomes readily apparent given the manner in which technology has provided new methods of communication and new opportunities for social interaction (Mesch, 2007).

Studies have indicated that the psychological and emotional trauma that results from acts of aggression inflicted by the traditional physical form of bullying continues to impact victims throughout their adult lives (Wolke, Copeland, Angold & Costello, 2013). Similarly, acts of aggression through the use of technology in the form of cyberbullying inflicts the same degree of psychological and emotional stress upon victims as does bullying in the traditional sense. This deliberate abuse of power through cyberbullying only differs from traditional bullying in that the act can be instantaneously distributed to a wide audience through the use of the internet and cellphone technology (Bossler et al., 2012; Clemmitt, 2013). Accordingly, while past research of the routine activities theory has generally focused on the more overt form of physical aggression associated with traditional bullying, recent studies have shown that the primary conceptual elements of the routine activity theory can be applied to acts of cyberbullying aggression perpetrated through the use of the modern technology (Henson, 2010; Holt & Bossler, 2009; Navarroa & Jasinskia, 2012; Reyns et al., 2011; Yar, 2005).

**Accessibility of a Target.** Studies of cyber-related activity have indicated that upwards of 90% of teenagers from 12 to 17 years use the internet at least once per week with more than 60% going online at least once per day (Navarro & Jasinskia, 2012). In general terms, the mere presence of an individual online increase the odds that cyberbullying will occur. While the purpose of online activities includes activities such as conducting research and checking email, the of odds of becoming the victim of cyberbullying increase significantly when an individual uses social media, instant messaging, or participates in chat rooms or online games (Navarro & Jasinskia, 2012). It is also important to note that victimization as a result of using the internet is only part of the cyberbullying issue. With more than three-quarters of teens now owning cell phones, the use of text messaging has been identified as the primary method in which teenagers communicate with their friends and has surpassed email, instant messaging and voice calling as the communication tool of choice (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Purcell, 2010).

**Presence of a Motivated Offender.** Studies have found that there is little difference in the outcome of cyberbullying and traditional physical bullying (Wang, Nansel, & Ionnatti, 2011). However, cyberbullying offenders are distinctly different from traditional bullying aggressors in that the ready availability of the internet and pervasive use of text messaging among teens provides physical separation of the offender and target (Dehue, Bolman & Völlink, 2008; Smith, 2008). This physical separation inherent to cyberbullying only serves to strengthen the sense of anonymity on the part of the aggressor and reinforce inappropriate behaviors that would likely never be accomplished in face-to-face interaction (Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Heirman & Walrave, 2008). Accordingly, it is not surprising that 88% of teenage social media users have observed intentional acts of intimidation intended to inflict some measure of embarrassment or stress upon another individual (Lenhart, Madden & Purcell, 2011).



**Absence of a Capable Guardian that Could Intervene.** The original concept of a capable guardian concerning the routine activity theory has been interpreted and expanded upon during research activities that have occurred during the last three decades (Hollis, Felson & Welsh, 2013). Guardianship continues to imply a human element, which considers that a physical presence will deter an offender. However, the concept guardianship also includes electronic monitoring capabilities such as closed-circuit television cameras, which are monitored by educators, law enforcement and other officials (Hollis et al., 2013).

From the perspective of using the internet, filtering devices and monitoring applications can be used to supplement the oversight of online activities by a parent or other adult. When a guardianship is applied using filtering and monitoring devices, 64% of teens identify that they have still participated in online activities that would not meet with their parent's approval (Hitlin, Lenhart & Madden, 2005). However, when parental monitoring through a looming physical presence is used, teens were less likely to disclose personal information that could be of value to an offender in search of a potential target (Rosen, Cheever & Carrier, 2008).

Concerning the use of text messaging a parent may be inclined to take away or restrict the use of a teen's cellphone. However, not only does this action fail to prevent a teen from being the target of cyberbullying, the fear of parental reprisal is a significant factor in why teens do not report incidents of harassing text messages (Dehue et al., 2008). An additional aspect of guardianship is that filtering devices and monitoring applications commonly available to block unwanted internet related interactions have not achieved the same degree of prevention for cellphone technology (Ybarra, Mitchell & Korchmaros, 2011). These considerations are of particular concern given studies which identify that text messaging victimization increases significantly over time (Ybarra et al., 2011).

### **Conclusion**

As proposed during the 1970s, the routine activity theory stipulated that for a crime to occur there must be a convergence of an available target, motivated offender and absence of a capable guardian that can intervene. Using this approach, criminologists readily applied the routine activity theory to teenage bullying to develop prevention measures. However, the ideology associated with the routine activity theory was postulated during a time when cyber technologies were nonexistent and would not begin to permeate society in earnest for more than two decades. Therefore, this research activity was undertaken to determine if the elements of the routine activity theory applied to cyberbullying behaviors in the same or similar manner as can be applied to traditional forms of teen bullying.

Based upon the analysis of information identified during the literature review it is readily apparent that the elements of the routine activity theory can be extended from a physical presence in the terrestrial world into the virtual world of cyberspace. This consideration allows for the component of an available target to be readily available for cyberbullying victimization given the manner in which teens have embraced the use of technology as a method of social interaction. Similarly, a motivated offender has the same access to technologies and can participate in the same virtual social activities as their intended victims. The routine activity theory triad is fulfilled when the somewhat impossible task of providing constant guardianship of cyber technology is considered. Accordingly, this research effort concludes that elements of the routine activity theory can be effectively applied to cyberbullying in the same manner as traditional bullying. Perhaps future research can assist in applying the routine activity theory to the development of preventative programs directed towards offenders who may otherwise avoid traditional bullying activities, but do not hesitate to engage in cyberbullying activities.

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