

CYBERBULLYING IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

- Assessment, Coping, and the Role of Appearance

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Avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligens försvaras fredagen den 13 juni klockan 10.00, 2014, sal F1, Psykologiska Institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Donna Cross ed, The University of Western Australia, Telethon Kids Institute

The thesis is based on a summary of the following papers:

- I. Frisén, A., Berne, S., & Lunde, C. (2014). Cybervictimization and body esteem: Experiences of Swedish children and adolescents. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology, 11*(3), 331–343. doi:10.1080/17405629.2013.825604
- II. Berne, S., Frisén., & Kling, J. (2014). Appearance-related cyberbullying - A qualitative investigation of characteristics, content, reasons, and effects. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- III. Frisén, A., Berne, S., & Marin, L. (2014). Swedish pupils' suggested coping strategies if cyberbullied: Differences related to age and gender. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- IV. Berne, S., Frisén, A., Schultze-Krumbholz, A., Scheithauer, H., Naruskov, K., Luik, P., Katzer, C., Erentaite, R., & Zukauskienė, R. (2013). Cyberbullying assessment instruments: A systematic review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 18*(2), 320–334. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2012.11.022



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Abstract

Berne, Sofia (2014). *Cyberbullying in Childhood and Adolescence - Assessment, Coping, and the Role of Appearance*. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Cyberbullying is a relatively new form of bullying that is conducted through modern information and communication technology. This thesis examines different aspects of cyberbullying, and is comprised of three parts. The first part (including Studies I and II) aims to extend our understanding of an almost unexplored area – the relationship between cyberbullying and appearance – using self-report questionnaires and focus groups. The aims of **Study I** were twofold. The first was to explore the relationship between cybervictimization and body esteem among 1,076 pupils in the 4th, 6th and 9th grades, and whether there were any age or gender differences in this relationship: cybervictims reported a poorer view of their general appearance and of their weight than non-cybervictims, and girls who were victims of cyberbullying reported a poorer view of their general appearance compared to boys who were victims of cyberbullying. The second aim was to examine how often pupils in the 6th and 9th grades believed that cyberbullying was directed at the victim's appearance, and moreover, whether pupils' views on these matters varied with gender and age: this belief was more common among 9th graders, and when girls were cybervictims. **Study II** used a different sample and approach than Study I. Twenty-seven 9th-grade pupils participated in four focus groups, divided by gender. The aim of this Study was to explore pupils' experiences of appearance-related cyberbullying by examining characteristics of the cybervictims and cyberbullies as well as the reasons for and the content and effects of the cyberbullying. The pupils stated that cyberbullying was often directed at the victim's appearance, especially when the victim was a girl, and that appearance-related cyberbullying is considered to be a potent strategy when attempting to hurt girls. Girls often received comments about being fat, while among boys who were cyberbullied it was common to receive comments about looking or seeming "gay." The pupils reported different reasons for writing mean things about someone's appearance, for example jealousy or a desire to attain higher social status. The negative effects associated with appearance-related cyberbullying differ for boys and girls. Boys tend to act out or not take offense at all, while girls reported taking greater offense. Girls also described the effects as sometimes being irreversible. The second part of this thesis, **Study III**, investigated the coping strategies that 697 pupils in the 4th and 6th grades suggested they would use if they were cyberbullied, with a special focus on whether there were differences in these strategies related to age and gender. The most commonly suggested coping strategy was telling someone (70.5%), especially parents (39.5%) and teachers (20.2%). Surprisingly, few pupils reported that they would tell a friend (2.6%). Differences in suggested coping strategies were found related to age and gender. The third and final part of this thesis, **Study IV**, aimed to offer a representative overview of instruments designed to assess the prevalence of cyberbullying. There is a lack of consensus regarding the term cyberbullying and its definition, and most of the included instruments had limited reports of reliability and validity testing. In sum, this thesis indicates that appearance-related cyberbullying may be gendered. It also showed that differences in suggested coping strategies were found related to age and gender, thus indicating that these aspects need to be considered when developing prevention strategies. Finally, this thesis reveals a need for investigating the validity and reliability of cyberbullying instruments, and resolving the conceptual and definitional fluctuations related to cyberbullying.

Keywords: cyberbullying, body esteem, appearance-related cyberbullying, coping strategies, gender differences, instrument review

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