

Young people engaging in anti-social behavior online seek social approval, study finds

May 24 2023



The authors suggest that empathy-building strategies and interventions that aim to make people think about their actions before posting online could help mitigate cyber-aggression. Credit: un-perfekt, Pixabay, CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/)

Young adults engage in online anti-social behavior for fun and social approval, and those who perpetrate this behavior tend to have lower cognitive empathy scores than average, according to a new study published this week in *PLOS ONE* by Felipe Bonow Soares of University of the Arts London, UK, and colleagues.

Anti-social behavior on social media, such as harassment and bullying, is on the rise. For victims of cyber-aggression, the behavior can lead to several negative outcomes including mental and emotional stress and reduced online participation that leads to further isolation.

In the new work, the researchers surveyed [undergraduate students](#) at Toronto Metropolitan University who signed up for a Student Research Participation Pool. 557 students participated in the survey between March 9 and April 18, 2022, providing information about their involvement in cyber-aggression or cyber-victimization as well as [personality traits](#) including their disinhibition, [self-esteem](#), empathy, and possible motivations for cyber-aggression. 359 students were included in the final analysis.

Overall, three factors were associated with the perpetration of online anti-social behavior: recreation, reward and cognitive empathy. Reward and recreation were found to be motives for the behavior, suggesting that [young people](#) engage in online anti-social behavior for fun, excitement and social approval. Cognitive empathy was negatively associated with the perpetration of such behavior, suggesting that perpetrators have lower capacity to comprehend the emotions of others, and a lower understanding of how their targets might feel.

The authors conclude that empathy-building strategies and interventions that aim to make people think about their actions before posting online could help mitigate cyber-aggression.

More information: Felipe Bonow Soares et al, To troll or not to troll: Young adults' anti-social behaviour on social media, *PLoS ONE* (2023).
[DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0284374](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284374)

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