Appearance-related cyberbullying – a problem especially for girls
Ann Frisén & Sofia Berne

Ann Frisén and Sofia Berne begin the lecture by saying that social networking sites are examples of contexts in which adolescents' can form beliefs about their appearance. On social networking sites adolescents interact by uploading and sharing photos. On internet people are exposed to body ideals everywhere, especially teenagers are exposed to the same type of body ideals, namely, boys are exposed to the muscular ideal and girls are exposed to the thin ideal. The presentation continues by focusing on two studies about appearance-related cyberbullying made by Ann Frisén, Sofia Berne and colleagues in Sweden.

Cyberbullying and body esteem. The first study has investigated the relationship between cybervictimization and body esteem among 1,076 pupils in the fourth, sixth and ninth grades, and whether there were any age or gender differences in this relationship. The results showed that 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.

Another aim with the study was to examine how often pupils in the sixth and ninth 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 ninth graders, and when girls were cybervictims.

Appearance-related cyberbullying. The second study has explored pupils' experiences of appearance-related cyberbullying. Twenty-seven pupils in ninth grade participated in four focus groups.

The pupils perceived that it is common to be targeted in appearance-related cyberbullying, especially for girls. The content of cyberbullying can be divided into cyberbullying aimed at one's style and cyberbullying directed at one's body. The content of the cyberbullying aimed at one's style and that directed at one's body differed for boys and girls. When it comes to cyberbullying aimed at one's style, among the boys it was described as common to receive comments for looking or seeming "gay". Among the girls it was described as common to be called a "whore" or "slut". When it comes to cyberbullying directed at the body, the pupils reported that girls receive more comments about their bodies than boys do. Further, the girls talked more in their focus groups about receiving negative comments about being fat, while the boys mentioned being cyberbullied for not being muscular enough.

The pupils, especially the girls, explained that they believe the purpose of social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram is to expose oneself to get attention, but that in doing so, one risks receiving negative attention and being cyberbullied. According to the pupils appearance becomes a way to get to girls who cyberbullies for some reason want to hurt. This is exemplified in the following statement by a boy: "You tell them they're ugly, that they're fat, and then they don't have any confidence and think bad about themselves".

The pupils reported a range of reasons for why cyberbullying is directed at appearance. First, they believed cyberbullies want to attain higher status by engaging in appearance-related cyberbullying. Second, they expressed the idea that cyberbullies feel bad about themselves and therefore engage in appearance-related cyberbullying. Third, they also believed that those who differ in their appearance provoke others to cyberbully them.

The girls and boys reacted differently to appearance-related cyberbullying. Boys tended to act out or take no offence, while girls experienced lower self-esteem and feelings of depression.

At the end of their talk Ann Frisén and Sofia Berne makes the conclusion that appearance-related cyberbullying seems to be a potent strategy when attempting to hurt girls.

Summary written by: Sofia Berne