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## Correlates of direct and indirect forms of cyberbullying victimization involving South Korean adolescents: An ecological perspective

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to explore the correlates of indirect and direct forms of cyberbullying victimization across individual, microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem contexts in a nationally representative sample of South Korean youth. Data were derived from the Korean Children and Youth Rights Study, and the total sample was 10,453 adolescents. The hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted separately for both direct and indirect cyberbullying victimization. At the individual level, no variables were found to be associated with indirect cyberbullying victimization, but male sex and depression were positively related to direct cyberbullying victimization. At the microsystem level, parental neglect was related to indirect cyberbullying victimization, while parental abuse, parental neglect, and family dysfunction were associated with direct cyberbullying victimization. Poor peer relations was significant for both indirect and direct cyberbullying victimization, and teacher abuse and school victimization were associated with victims of both types of cyberbullying. Perceived neighborhood safety had negative association with indirect and direct cyberbullying victimization. At the mesosystem level, higher levels of parental abuse and poor peer relations was related to higher risk of indirect cyberbullying victimization. Also, higher levels of family dysfunction and poor peer relations were associated with higher risk of indirect cyberbullying victimization. An assessment of the risk factors for cyberbullying victimization across multiple domains is the first necessary steps towards the development of effective intervention strategies.

Victimization involving adolescents through electronic means, including cellular phones or the internet, is increasingly recognized as a serious social concern. *Cyberbullying* is commonly defined as an aggressive act carried out purposefully using electronic forms of contact repeatedly (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Smith et al., 2008). Perpetrators of cyberbullying may send harassing or threatening messages, post derogatory comments on a webpage or a social networking site (e.g., Facebook), or threatening or intimidating someone in an online setting (Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, & Hinduja, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Tokunaga, 2010; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2001). In South Korea, 97.2% of households have internet access (OECD, 2012), and according to a recent study, approximately 20% of youth surveyed nationwide reported being involved in cyberbullying (Shin & Ahn, 2015). A survey of 4000 adolescents in South Korea nationwide conducted by the National Youth Policy Institute (2014) also found that 27.7% of adolescents reported being victimized through chat rooms, social media, and online

game. Moreover, according to a survey by the Ministry of Education, cyberbullying accounts for 10% of school victimization every year (Ministry of Education, 2017). The widespread use of technology has placed South Korean youth at a serious risk of exposure to cyberbullying and other forms of online harassment (Tippett & Kwak, 2012).

Many scholars in South Korea have paid a great deal of attention to adolescent cyberbullying perpetration (e.g., Jang, Song, & Kim, 2014; Park, Na, & Kim, 2014; Shim & Shin, 2016; You & Lim, 2016). Moreover, numerous studies in South Korea has explored individual traits and microsystem level antecedents of adolescents' cyberbullying involvement (e.g., Cho & Yoo, 2016; Jung et al., 2014; Kim & Min, 2014; Shin & Ahn, 2013). One recent study applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective to explore the antecedents of cyberbullying perpetration and victimization in South Korean youth at the individual, microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels (Yun & Lee, 2017). The study found that neighborhood disadvantage, religious affiliation, self-

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control, and parental attachment were significantly related to youths' involvement in cyberbullying (Yun & Lee, 2017). The study, however, did not consider factors occurring in mesosystem level, which involves interconnectedness between two or more microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979).

Building on Yun and Lee's (2017) recent findings, the present study applies the ecological perspective to examine antecedents of direct and indirect forms of cyberbullying victimization in a nationally representative sample of South Korean adolescents. More specifically, we expand on the abovementioned study by exploring mesosystem level antecedents. The present study hypothesizes that (1) at the individual level, male sex, younger age, low socio-economic status, and depressive symptoms will be significantly associated with direct forms of cyberbullying victimization; however, female sex will be positively associated with indirect forms of cyberbullying victimization. (2) At the microsystem levels, parental abuse, parental neglect, family dysfunction, poor peer relations, teacher abuse, and victimization in school will be positively related to both forms of cyberbullying victimization. However, respectful peers, school connectedness, and neighborhood safety will be negatively associated with both forms of cyberbullying victimization. (3) At the mesosystem level, parental abuse will strengthen the relationship between poor peer relations and greater cyberbullying victimization. However, school connectedness will buffer the link between parental abuse and both forms of cyberbullying victimization. (4) At the macrosystem level, economic hardship will be positively associated with both forms of cyberbullying victimization.

## 1. Cyberbullying from an ecological perspective

The ecological perspective was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner to explain how the inherent traits of a child and his or her environment interact to influence his behavior and development. Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979) emphasized the importance of understanding children's behavior and development in the context of multiple environments, or the ecological systems. The ecological perspective has been applied to research on children's bullying and peer victimization (e.g., Barboza et al., 2009; Espelage, 2014; Lee, 2011). Scholars argue that the ecological perspective provides a useful conceptual framework to explore the combined impact of contexts and influences on children's involvement in bullying, as it offers a holistic view of adolescents' peer relations and dynamics (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Research has also adopted the ecological perspective to investigate factors that foster or inhibit children's involvement in cyberbullying (e.g., Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa, 2012; Papatraianou, Levine, & West, 2014; Soares, Brochado, Barros, & Fraga, 2015; Yun & Lee, 2017).

The ecological perspective comprises five levels of analyses, which are posited in an effort to understand antecedents of direct and indirect forms of cyberbullying victimization in South Korean adolescents. These levels are (a) *individual*, (b) *microsystem*, (c) *mesosystem*, (d) *exosystem*, and (e) *macrosystem* levels.

### 1.1. Individual level

Abundant amount of research found that *biological sex* plays an important role in face-to-face bullying. Traditionally, boys are more likely to be involved in bullying (Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann, & Jugert, 2006; Seals & Young, 2003), as males are regarded as the more aggressive sex (Coe & Dodge, 1998). Unlike face-to-face bullying, however, it is unclear whether boys are more likely to be involved in cyberbullying than females, as study findings have been inconsistent. Some studies suggest that boys are more likely to be both bullies and victims in cyberspace (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Lee & Lee, 2013), while others find that girls are more likely to be cyberbullied (Aoyama, Barnard-Brak, & Talbert, 2011; Guo, 2016; Walrave & Heirman, 2011) and engage in cyberbullying (Balakrishnan, 2015). Lee and Lee's (2013) study, which included a sample of high school and college students in

South Korea, found that boys reported engaging in cyberbullying and being victimized in cyberspace more than girls. Also, a large body of research finds no sex difference in cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Lee, Lee, & Yang, 2014; see Tokunaga, 2010, for a review). Lee and colleague's (2014) study, which comprised a sample of 522 fifth and sixth graders in three elementary schools in South Korea, reported that boys tend to be more victimized face-to-face, but there appears to be no sex differences in terms of cyberbullying victimization. It is conceivable that females may be more involved in cyberbullying than face-to-face bullying given that cyberbullying is more covert in nature (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009), and they are more likely to utilize text messaging and email than their male counterparts (Blair, 2003).

Studies have also frequently explored whether *age* is a significant predictor of cyberbullying victimization. Cyberbullying can arise among all age groups, and a significant amount of studies demonstrate that age is not linked to cyberbullying victimization (e.g., see Tokunaga, 2010). However, few studies found significant differences in cyberbullying according to age in being a target. For instance, one study found that adolescents (12–19 years) and young adults (20–26 years) were more frequently victimized online compared to older respondents (Ševčáková & Šmahel, 2009). Another study reported a significant incidence of cyberbullying in lower secondary schools and less in colleges (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Balakrishnan's (2015) findings from a sample of 393 Malaysian young adults (17–30 years of age) also found that younger respondents were more involved in cyberbullying (i.e., victims and perpetrators) than were older respondents.

Psychosocial problems, such as *depression* can place adolescents at an elevated risk of cyberbullying victimization, as indicated in three study findings (Didden et al., 2009; Gamez-Guadix, Orue, Smith, & Calvete, 2013; Ybarra, 2004). Findings from Ybarra's (2004) study revealed from a sample of U.S. youth between the ages of 10 and 17 ( $N = 1501$ ) that male adolescents who reported symptoms of major depression were more than three times as likely to be cyberbullied than those with mild or no symptoms of depression. In Didden and colleagues' (2009) study, which comprised a sample of 114 students with intellectual and developmental disability, there was a significant, positive correlation between depressive feelings and being a victim of cyberbullying. Adolescents with depressive symptoms may have challenges in effectively identifying social cues and relating to and interacting with peers (Kazdin & Marciano, 1998), which can increase their likelihood of being bullied.

### 1.2. Microsystem level

The first layer of social influence is the *microsystem*, in which the individual adolescent reciprocally transacts with different microsystems, including family, peer group, school, and the neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As recognized in Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) ecological perspective, because family influences adolescents' development, *parental abuse* and *neglect*, for instance, significant risk for maladaptation (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005), and being exposed to violence in the home can increase adolescents' risk of being bullied (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001). Few studies have also reported a significant link between youths' relationship with a caregiver and cyberbullying victimization. Using a sample of 1498 young internet users in the U.S. (ages 10 to 17), Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) found that infrequent parental monitoring was significant in the odds of reporting cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. A more recent study, which consisted of a sample of 200 college students in Mainland China, also reported that childhood psychological maltreatment by parents has a significant direct and indirect effect on cyberbullying involvement (Lyu & Zhang, 2017). It has been theorized that negative relationships acquired in an abusive environment can adversely affect the structures that are pertinent for positive peer relations (Cicchetti, Lynch, Shonk, & Manly, 1992).

*Peer relations* is one of the most frequently identified risk and

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