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## Adolescent Predictors of Young Adult Cyberbullying Perpetration and Victimization Among Australian Youth

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The purpose of the current article was to examine the adolescent risk and protective factors (at the individual, peer group, and family level) for young adult cyberbullying perpetration and victimization.

**Methods:** Data from 2006 (Grade 9) to 2010 (young adulthood) were analyzed from a community sample of 927 Victorian students originally recruited as a statewide representative sample in Grade 5 (age, 10–11 years) in 2002 and followed-up to age 18–19 years in 2010 (N = 809). Participants completed a self-report survey on adolescent risk and protective factors and traditional and cyberbullying perpetration and victimization and young adult cyberbullying perpetration and victimization.

**Results:** As young adults, 5.1% self-reported cyberbullying perpetration only, 5.0% reported cyberbullying victimization only, and 9.5% reported both cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. In fully adjusted logistic regression analyses, the adolescent predictors of cyberbullying perpetration only were traditional bullying perpetration, traditional bullying perpetration and victimization, and poor family management. For young adulthood cyberbullying victimization only, the adolescent predictor was emotion control. The adolescent predictors for young adult cyberbullying perpetration and victimization were traditional bullying perpetration and cyberbullying perpetration and victimization.

**Conclusions:** Based on the results of this study, possible targets for prevention and early intervention are reducing adolescent involvement in (traditional or cyber) bullying through the development of social skills and conflict resolution skills. In addition, another important prevention target is to support families with adolescents to ensure that they set clear rules and monitor adolescents' behavior. Universal programs that assist adolescents to develop skills in emotion control are warranted.

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### IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

To date, few studies have examined the adolescent predictors of young adult cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. In this study, 19% of young adults have experience with cyberbullying. Potential prevention targets include adolescents' social, emotion control, and conflict resolution skills, as well as family rule setting and monitoring of adolescent behavior.

The existing research literature on bullying is vast, and research on cyberbullying is rapidly growing, reflective of global concern about these phenomena. The main focus of bullying

research has been on school contexts, until the emergence of cyberbullying. Remarkably, less research has focused on (young) adult experiences of bullying. However, there is recognition that adults can be exposed to bullying in the workplace and in tertiary education. Hence, it is important to understand the extent of cyberbullying perpetration and victimization in young adults. MacDonald and Roberts-Pittman [1] reported in a U.S. college sample that 22% of students had been cyberbullied and 9% had

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cyberbullied someone else. Also in the United States, Kowalski et al. [2] reported that 21% of their participants had been cyberbullied once or more in their lifetime, with 4% cyberbullied 11–20 times. Walker et al. [3] found that 11% of their sample had experienced cyberbullying at the University and 54% knew someone who had been cyberbullied. Compared with matched control participants, college students who experienced cyberbullying reported negative impacts, such as depression, anxiety, and higher levels of distress, as well as suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts [4]. The aim of the current article was to examine the adolescent predictors of young adult cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. Through identifying predictors of later cyberbullying perpetration and victimization, prevention and early intervention programs can be developed to target these predictors.

Typically, three main features of school-based or “traditional” bullying are identified: (1) aggressive or hostile acts perpetrated by one or more individuals toward a victim with intent to harm; (2) these actions occur repeatedly; and (3) there is a power imbalance between the perpetrator(s) and the victim(s) [5]. This power imbalance may be physical (e.g., the perpetrator is stronger than the victim) or sociological (e.g., the victim belongs to an ethnic minority group). Bullying can be covert (e.g., exclusion, spreading rumours) or overt (e.g., verbal and physical abuse). The measurement of bullying can be challenging, particularly when trying to capture power imbalances, and the criterion of repetition is often overlooked [6].

Given cyberbullying is a recent phenomenon, there is still debate about how it is defined. For example, Menesini et al. [7] concluded that intentionality and power imbalance were essential features of cyberbullying; however, it is unclear at this stage whether repetition is a core feature of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying has also been described as an extension of “traditional” bullying, with similar defining features except that electronic media such as computers, tablets, and mobile telephones are used by young people to bully, embarrass, exclude, or humiliate others, via methods such as e-mail, chat rooms, social networking sites, instant messaging, websites, telephone calls, video, and text messaging [8]. Cyberbullying can be overt (e.g., deliberate cyberstalking, sending derogatory or hate mail, being abusive toward others using technology [9]) or covert (e.g., being removed from social network sites). In the current article, we measured cyberbullying perpetration and victimization using examples of behaviors, an approach that is similar to that used elsewhere [10].

#### *Predictors of cyberbullying perpetration and victimization*

In the current article, the predictors of young adult cyberbullying perpetration and victimization are referred to as prospective “risk” or “protective” factors. A risk factor increases the likelihood of a person developing poor outcomes or problematic behaviors such as bullying [11]. Protective factors both directly decrease the likelihood of antisocial behavior [12] and mediate or moderate the influence of risk factors [13]. Bronfenbrenner [14] ecological systems theory emphasizes the influence of environmental factors on development, with the identification of five environmental systems with which the individual interacts. The system most proximal to the individual, the microsystem, includes the groups that most directly impact on development such as family and peers. In addition to intrapersonal factors, the modifiable risk and protective factors selected for inclusion in this article were drawn from the microsystem.

Relatively few studies have focused specifically on young adult experiences of cyberbullying perpetration and victimization, and there are even fewer on the predictors of cyberbullying. Therefore, the literature on adolescent experiences of bullying and cyberbullying has also been reviewed. Generally, there have been few studies comparing the predictors of school-based bullying and cyberbullying. However, Katzer et al. [15] reported similarities (e.g., negative self-concept, characteristics of the parent–child relationship) and differences in the predictors of Internet chat room victimization and victimization at school (e.g., popularity, bullying behavior). For intrapersonal factors, the frequency of online communication has been shown to predict cyberbullying others [16]. Prior exposure to bullying and related behavior predicts subsequent bullying perpetration. Chapell et al. [17] found that >70% of students who were bullied in elementary school and high school bullied others at university. Similarly, an Australian study showed that Grade 9 cyberbullying perpetration was predicted by Grade 7 relational aggression (e.g., spreading rumors about someone, excluding another person from the group) [18], and other studies of school students have reported that antisocial behavior (traditional bullying and rule breaking) predicts cyberbullying perpetration [16]. Associations have also been found between being a perpetrator of cyberbullying and a victim of the same behavior [2]. Gender has been examined as a predictor of cyberbullying with mixed results reported in terms of whether females are more likely to be victims [19–22].

Several intrapersonal factors related to school have been studied. Being connected to school is associated with a lower risk of involvement in bullying perpetration [21]. There is also an association between low academic performance and school-based bullying perpetration [23]. In contrast, there have been mixed research findings regarding whether there is a link between academic performance and being bullied [24]. Some studies have shown that having poor social skills and low social competence is associated with being bullied, particularly when students also experience low self-regard [25,26]. In the present study, a measure of students’ emotion control is included (e.g., controlling one’s temper when someone is angry at him/her) which assesses some aspects of social competence.

As recognized in Bronfenbrenner theory [14], family risk factors influence young people’s development. High levels of parental support are related to young people experiencing less bullying (physical, verbal, relational, and cyber) [27]. Having a poor emotional bond with a caregiver increases the likelihood of being involved in online bullying perpetration [28]. Family conflict is an established predictor of youth violence, physical aggression, and bullying perpetration [29]. Further, children residing in home environments characterized by violence and marital conflict [30,31] and maltreated children [32] are more likely to be bullied by their peers at school. Poor family management (reflected by lack of clear rules and monitoring of students) is also an established risk factor for violent and antisocial behaviors [29] and is likely to be predictive since cyberbullying can occur anytime and anywhere, including in the family home; parent monitoring and rule setting may be key. Research has demonstrated that family members can exacerbate, interfere with, or discourage cyberbullying [9].

Peers are another important social context during adolescence. A well-established finding is that antisocial peer influences increase the risk of violence and antisocial behavior [29]. Online peers can easily become bystanders for

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