

# The contribution of social support to children and adolescents' self-perception: The mediating role of bullying victimization



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to report on a study that explores the linkages among self-perception, perceptions of social support, and bullying involvement among children and youth, with a focus on how bullying victimization mediates the association of social support and self-perception. We employ Harter's multidimensional model of self-esteem (1999; 2012), which highlights the inextricable link of social support to global self-esteem but does not explore the contribution of bullying involvement to this association. Our findings indicate that social support is associated with self-perception, and that traditional victimization mediates the association between social support and self-perception for three self-perception measures: social acceptance, physical appearance, and global self-worth. Contrary to our expectations, cyberbullying victimization was not found to mediate the relationship between social support and self-perception. These findings underscore the importance of exploring both traditional bullying victimization and cyberbullying victimization in relation to social support in order to understand their effect on development and wellbeing. More broadly, this study's finding that social support was a significant buffer to bullying victimization emphasizes the necessity of developing prevention and intervention strategies which are relationship-based and implemented early in young people's lives.

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between bullying and self-perception among children and youth has become an important area of study, propelled in part by societal concern and media attention about the effects associated with bullying victimization (Espelage & Swearer, 2011). The proliferation of information and communication technology (ICT) and its increasingly central role in the lives of children and youth has changed the landscape of bullying (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009). Victims of bullying tend to experience lower global self-esteem (Olweus, 1993) and have more negative social self-concepts (Andreou, 2000; Boulton, Smith, & Cowie, 2010). Social support can operate as a protective factor against bullying victimization (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Haynie et al., 2001), the effects of bullying involvement (Conners-Burrow, Johnson,

Whiteside-Mansell, McKelvey, & Gargus, 2009), and bullying perpetration (Shetgiri, Lin, Avila, & Flores, 2012). Very little research, however, has explored the associations of social support, bullying victimization, and self-perception among children and youth, and how these associations may differ for traditional and cyberbullying victimization.

The purpose of this article is to report on a study that explores the linkages among self-perception, perceptions of social support, and bullying victimization (traditional and cyber), particularly how bullying victimization mediates the association of social support and self-perception (Fig. 1). We employ Harter's (1999, 2012) model of self-esteem, which offers a theoretical basis for exploring these associations,<sup>1</sup> and explains how and why self-perception is multidimensional (i.e., multiple discrete domains – including scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct), developmentally driven, and fundamentally linked to social support (Harter, 1999; Harter & Marold, 1993; Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996). While Harter's model highlights

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<sup>1</sup> Consistent with Harter (2012, p. 24), we utilize the terms "global self-esteem" and "global self-worth" interchangeably.

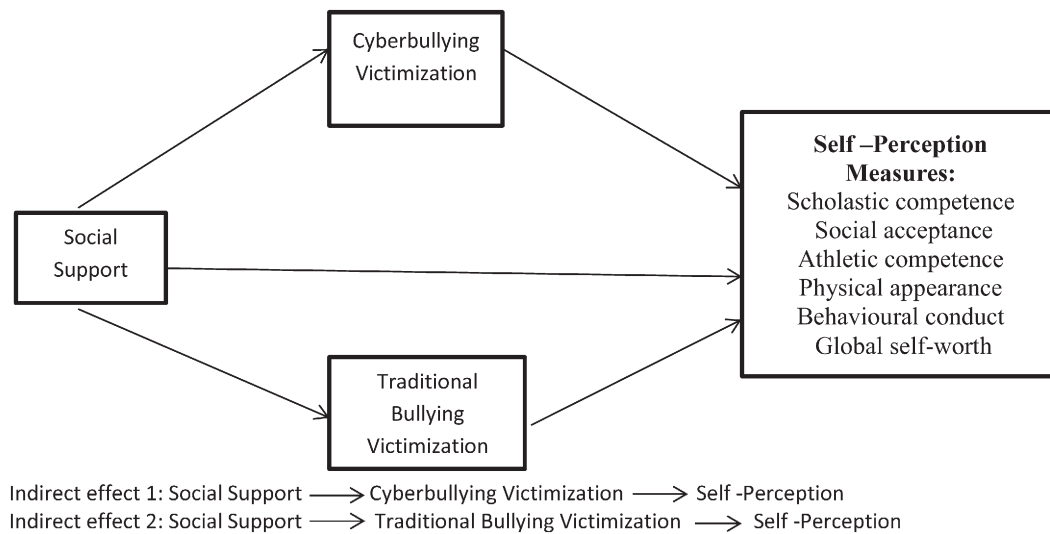


Fig. 1. Indirect effect of social support on self-perception measures through traditional bullying and cyberbullying victimization.

the inextricability of social support to domains of self-perception and global self-esteem, how bullying or cyberbullying victimization mediates this association is less clear. Understanding how perceptions of social support are associated with self-perception, and whether and how bullying and cyberbullying victimization mediates this association, may assist in informing interventions.

## 2. Social support and self-perception

Research has demonstrated the importance of social support during childhood and adolescence for achieving important developmental outcomes and wellbeing (Davidson & Demaray, 2007). Social support, understood here as the “perceived support and regard which significant others manifest towards the self” (Harter, 2012, p. 1), predicts many positive outcomes, including body satisfaction (Barker & Galambos, 2003), lowered depression (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003), better school adjustment and academic achievement (Danielsen, Samdal, Hetland, & Wold, 2009), and higher self-esteem (Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy, 2012). In contrast, lower perceived social support is consistently associated with emotional difficulties (Herman-Stahl & Petersen, 1996).

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in exploring the relationship between social support and self-perception among children and youth. Self-perception refers to children’s “domain-specific judgments of their competence, as well as a global perception of their worth or esteem as a person” (Harter, 1985a, p. 5).<sup>2</sup> As identified by Marshall, Parker, Ciarrochi, and Heaven (2014), determining whether self-perception is a consequence or an antecedent of social support in childhood and adolescence is a valuable yet understudied area of research. In particular, the lack of longitudinal studies in this area, with many studies focused on relationship quality rather than social support, has impeded insight into the temporal ordering of these constructs (Marshall et al., 2014).

Despite the lack of research that explores the causal relationship between social support and self-perception among children and youth, a significant proportion of existing studies indicate that social support may have a causal impact on self-perception. Research in this area has suggested that both perceived social support (Goodwin, Costa, & Adonu, 2004) and the quality of social relationships (Laible, Carlo, &

Roesch, 2004) are associated with higher self-perception among children and youth. Harter and colleagues (1999; Harter & Marold, 1993) similarly found that peer approval is linked to greater feelings of competence in important domains of self-perception, including physical appearance, peer likability, and athletic competence. The longitudinal (e.g., Denissen, Penke, Schmitt, & Van Aken, 2008) and experimental (e.g., Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) studies that do exist suggest that social relationships influence self-esteem insofar as research indicates “people are not motivated to maintain their self-esteem per se; rather, they are motivated to increase their value and acceptance in relation to others” (Marshall et al., 2014, p. 1277). Asendorpf and Van Aken’s (2003) study on the relationship between self-esteem and relationship quality among 230 adolescents, measuring each youth at the age of 12 and again at 17, similarly found that relationship quality predicted self-esteem but not vice versa. Based on this literature we hypothesize that adolescent self-perception is predicted by social support and the study aims to expand this literature by exploring whether this association is mediated by victimization of children by traditional or cyberbullying.

## 3. Bullying, social support, and self-perception

Bullying is defined here as a form of aggression that occurs in the context of a relationship, involves a power imbalance, is repetitive, and can include physical, verbal, psychological, or relational acts (Craig & Pepler, 2007; Olweus, 1991). Following Smith, Del Barrio, and Tokunaga (2013), we define cyberbullying as comprised of three elements: intent to harm, a specific target, and a power imbalance. What makes cyber bullying distinct is the use of electronic communication technology as the means through which to threaten, harass embarrass, sexually harass or socially exclude (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Schrock & Boyd, 2008; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Traditional and cyber bullying are common problems facing the schools and are prevalent among students. For instance, in a study of 15,686 students in the US 41.1% of the participants reported having been traditionally victimized by others (Nansel et al., 2001). With respect to cyberbullying, in their study of 4441 adolescents from 33 schools in the US, Mitchell, Jones, Turner, Shattuck, and Wolak (2015) found that 17% of the participants had been victimized by cyberbullying.

Given the significant number of children and youth affected by bullying and cyberbullying, and the considerable negative outcomes associated with bullying and cyberbullying involvement for children and youth (Beran & Li, 2005; Mishna & Van Wert, 2015; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007), it is important to understand whether and how bullying and

<sup>2</sup> Our utilization of the term “self-perception,” encompasses the domains commonly referred to as “self-competence”, “self-worth”, “self-concept,” and “self-esteem”. The interchangeable use of these terms and the various measurement tools utilized may disadvantage the contributions of many studies (Demaray, Malecki, Rueger, Brown, & Summers, 2009; Harter, 1999).

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