



## Full Length Article

# Cyberbullying at work: The mediating role of optimism between cyberbullying and job outcomes



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## ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying has become a prominent concern as technological advancements provide bullies with an alternative medium through which they can target their victims. Recently, this phenomenon has been investigated among adult populations with findings indicating that cyberbullied employees suffered great strain and poor job outcomes. Despite important recent findings in this area, not much is known about the underlying mechanism responsible for cyberbullying among adult workers. The aim of this study was to investigate the mediating role of optimism in the relationship between cyberbullying and job related outcomes. To achieve this, an online survey was conducted with white collar employees in Australia. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to investigate the relationships between cyberbullying and job outcomes. Results indicated that optimism partially mediated the relationships between cyberbullying and stress as well as job satisfaction. Implications and future directions were discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent times, cyberbullying has become a prominent concern as the applications and uses of information technologies grow exponentially (Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer, & Khoury-Kassabji, 2012). Information technologies are currently used for communication through email, instant messaging, video calls, online social networking, shopping, banking, advertising and online business operations (Mishna et al., 2012; Piazza & Bering, 2009). Despite the many advantages, technological improvements and access to communication devices has provided bullies with an alternative medium through which they can target their victims (Privitera & Campbell, 2009; Tokunaga, 2010).

### 1.1. The nature of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon and there is much debate in the literature as to what really constitute cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010; Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros, & Oppenheim, 2011). For instance, internet harassment, online harassment and electronic aggression are all forms of aggressive acts conducted through cyberspace. However, these acts do not necessarily

constitute bullying because we do not know if the negative acts are conducted repeatedly over time or if the perpetrator has the power to cause real harm to his or her victim. In the traditional bullying approach, the three criteria of intentionality, power imbalance and repetition must be present between perpetrators and victims for negative acts to be defined as bullying acts (Langos, 2012; Pyżalski, 2012; Ybarra et al., 2011). However, these three criteria may not always be present in cyberbullying (Law, Shapka, Domene, & Gagne, 2012; Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013; Ybarra et al., 2011). Despite these ongoing debates, the majority of studies in this area defined cyberbullying as, “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic form of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376).

Besides the traditional bullying approach, the media approach emphasises three unique characteristics of cyberbullying. The first characteristic, anonymity occurs when the victim does not know the identity of the perpetrator (Li, 2007; Pettalia, Levin, & Dickinson, 2013). The anonymity associated with the use of a computer offers perpetrators a certain level of freedom from social constraints and from moral responsibilities (Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010). In addition, unlike traditional bullying where size matters, cyber bullies can be small in stature and physically weaker than their victims (Li, 2007, 2008). Consequently, anyone can become a bully in cyberspace.

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The second characteristic is publicity. Cyberbullying can involve a very large audience such as when video clips are circulated on the internet (Langos, 2012; Pettalia et al., 2013). Harmful messages can also reach huge audiences at an incredible speed causing maximum damage to targets quickly (Meredith, 2010). Finally, cyberbullying can occur at any time of the day and in any place (Li, 2008). Cyber bullies have unrestricted access to their victims in the form of email, mobile phones, social networking sites and instant text messaging (Pettalia et al., 2013; Tokunaga, 2010). Therefore, it is difficult for individuals to escape the perpetrators without giving up the use of these technologies (Meredith, 2010; Pettalia et al., 2013). Consequently, the “bullying” continues even when victims are away from their work (Farley, Sprigg, Axtell, & Coyne, 2013). Researchers have found that because of the unique characteristics of cyberbullying, a single offensive act is sufficient to constitute bullying behaviour (Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross, 2009; Pettalia et al., 2013).

### 1.2. Prevalence of cyberbullying in the adult workplace

Cyberbullying in adult populations is a relatively new phenomenon and has yet to be substantially investigated. However, two recent international studies (Sprigg, Axtell, Farley, & Coyne, 2012; AVG Technologies, 2014) have revealed that cyberbullying is a concern among adults in the workplace. These studies indicated that the increase in cyber bullied adult employees is directly associated with the increased in digital technologies used in the workplace (AVG Technologies, 2014; Sprigg et al., 2012).

Using Digital Diaries to investigate the impact of digital technologies on all stages of an individuals' life span, AVG Technologies (2014) found that cyberbullying is not just a phase in childhood or adolescence. Cyberbullying can be carried forward into adulthood and into the working lives of adults. A recent online survey conducted with 4000 adult workers across ten different countries (USA, UK, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Czech Republic, Australia and New Zealand) found that 90% of participants believed that sending offensive or aggressive remarks via digital media constituted cyberbullying (AVG Technologies, 2014). This global survey study also found that 53% of participants felt that social media had eroded privacy within the workplace, 11% of participants had embarrassing photos or videos from a work related event posted on social media, 9% of participants had experienced aggressive or offensive behaviour online by a colleague, and almost 10% of participants had experienced a manager using information from social media against them or witnessed information being used against a colleague (AVG Technologies, 2014).

Similarly, a study by Sprigg et al. (2012) found that 14–20% of UK employees experienced cyberbullying at least once a week. In addition, eight out of ten respondents had experienced cyberbullying on at least one occasion in the past six months (Sprigg et al., 2012). More importantly, Sprigg et al. (2012) measured the impact of cyberbullying on the mental strain and well-being of employees; and found that those who had experienced cyberbullying tended to report greater mental strain and lower job satisfaction than those who had experienced traditional workplace bullying (Sprigg et al., 2012). This finding is further supported by Farley et al. (2013) study. Farley et al. (2013) suggested that cyberbullying has a more detrimental impact than traditional bullying because cyber bullies can use communication devices to maintain contact with their victims throughout the day (Farley et al., 2013). Findings from these studies (Farley et al., 2013; Sprigg et al., 2012) suggest that cyberbullying can detrimentally affect a worker's psychological and physical well-being. When this happens, employees' levels of job satisfaction and stress can be adversely affected.

### 1.3. The importance of stress and job satisfaction

Workplace mistreatment is a major occupational stressor and is highly stressful for many employees (McAvoy & Murtagh, 2003). While stress is a normal human response to threatening or challenging situations, excessive or prolonged stress can be harmful to the physical, emotional and mental health of an individual (Anderson, 1998; Baum & Polsusny, 1999; Lifeline, 2014). Research has also found that stress negatively impacted on an employee's motivation, task performance, concentration and energy (Glasø & Notelaers, 2012; Gustafsson & Skoog, 2012; Staude-Muller, Hansen, & Voss, 2012; Sypniewska, 2014). Furthermore, costs related to psychological injuries sustained in the workplace, such as workplace stress has sky rocketed in recent years (Clarke & Cooper, 2000). Consequently, stress is no laughing matter.

Stress has been conceptualised as the response experienced by an individual when they perceive themselves to lack the ability or resources to cope with the demands of an external event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Contemporary advances in the explanation of stress takes into account the interaction of an individual and their environment and so ascribe a more active role to the person (Cox & Griffiths, 2010, p.36). According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Cognitive Appraisal Model (CAM), individuals conduct two cognitive appraisals namely, primary appraisal and secondary appraisal to determine whether an event is or is not stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; MacCann, 2014). The primary appraisal involves an evaluation of a specific stressor upon its initial presentation and at this phase, individuals fundamentally decide whether the stressor is considered to be a threat or not (Chang, 1998; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If the stressor is perceived to be harmful, then the secondary appraisal is utilised. The secondary appraisal involves evaluating whether one has the skill and resources to effectively deal with the stressor (Chang, 1998; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Generally, a positive stress will perpetuate constructive behaviours and a negative stress (e.g., cyberbullying) will lead to destructive behaviours or outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Cyberbullying is a negative stress because it is highly threatening (e.g., complete perpetrator anonymity, unrestricted access and unlimited audience) and long lasting (Farley et al., 2013; Glasø & Notelaers, 2012). As a result, victims of cyberbullying are likely to experience stress. Therefore, we hypothesised that:

**H1.** Cyberbullying is positively related to stress.

In addition to stress, employees' job satisfaction may be impacted by cyberbullying experiences. Job satisfaction refers to the general attitude a person holds towards his or her job and can be considered from a cognitive or affective perspective (Glasø & Notelaers, 2012; Thompson & Phua, 2012). Cognitive job satisfaction focuses on what a person thinks about their job; for example, an individual may think that they have a good job and is satisfied because the job pays well (Thompson & Phua, 2012). In other words, cognitive job satisfaction provides an evaluation of the various facets of a job. In contrast, affective job satisfaction concentrates on what a person feels about their job. For instance, an employee may actually like what he or she is doing on the job or that he or she enjoys the interaction with his or her colleagues (Thompson & Phua, 2012). Job satisfaction is important because it is integral to the success of an organisation. In other words, satisfied employees participate in and help to build an organisation's success (Sypniewska, 2014).

A study by Baruch (2005) which investigated whether cyberbullying can affect employees' job satisfaction found a highly significant negative relationship between cyberbullying and job outcomes. Specifically, the experience of being cyberbullied

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