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## Cyberbullying victimization, counterproductive work behaviours and emotional intelligence at workplace

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### Abstract

As a new and inquiring concept, cyberbullying has attracted many researchers from a variety of disciplines. However, a specific context of the cyberbullying concept, workplace cyberbullying and its impact on employees' behaviors has rarely been theoretically reported in the literature. Addressing this particular gap in the literature, we develop a conceptual model encapsulating the relationship between workplace cyberbullying and counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) and the role of employees' emotional intelligence on this relationship in particular. This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, the theoretical framework proposed highlights the effects of workplace cyberbullying on employees' CWBs (i.e. CWB towards people (CWB-P) and CWB towards organization (CWB-O)). Hence the focus is, on distinguishing workplace cyberbullying from other cyberbullying types, and building a theoretical background for the relationship of workplace cyberbullying and CWBs variables. Second, based on Wong and Law's model this study aims to assess the possible role of emotional intelligence to eliminate undesirable behaviors at work. Thus we propose that having a high degree of emotional intelligence (EI) gives the employees the ability to handle workplace stressors better. Third, this research integrates organizational behavior literature to the emotional intelligence literature through offering a theoretical framework where employees' emotional intelligence is a process consisting of 1) others' emotion appraisal, 2) use of emotion, 3) self-emotion appraisal, and 4) regulation of emotion which allow them to deal with cyberbullying as a negative organizational behavior.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the last decade information and communications technology (ICT), which refers to the umbrella term that includes any communication device or application (e.g. cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software) (Lugeiyamu, 2013), has completely changed the way employees communicate with each other in the workplace, which provided bullies an alternative way to target their victims (Zhang and Leidner, 2014; Lim and Teo,

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2009). This new phenomenon was described as cyberbullying (Privitera and Campbell, 2009). While previous studies typically framed definitions of cyberbullying as a youth problem (Kowalski et al., 2014), a few studies addressed cyberbullying in adults (Aboujaoude et al., 2015). Specifically, recent findings suggested that the increase in cyberbullying victims in workplace is a serious problem which is directly associated with the increased use of ICT (Snyman and Loh, 2015). In this sense, little research has been conducted on adult cyberbullying experiences and especially on workplace cyberbullying, which makes it a greenfield area for research (Madan, 2014).

In the contemporary hi-tech work environment, there is considerable evidence that cyberbullying has morphed into the preferred mode or style of harassment amongst employees (Piotrowski, 2012). Due to the complexity and relative newness of this phenomenon, there is an ongoing debate on the definition of workplace cyberbullying in the previous studies. Workplace cyberbullying can be defined as being exposed to repeated negative treatment from colleagues by electronic forms of contact over a long period of time. Workplace cyberbullying causes high levels of stress on many employees. Stress is a natural human response to threatening or challenging situations, but excessive levels can be harmful to the physical, emotional and mental health of an employee, as well as negatively affecting his/her motivation and performance (Snyman and Loh, 2015).

Counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) is the intentional endangerment of workplace outcomes and normal functioning and it has been shown that CWB is associated with productivity and efficiency. Workplace conflict is known to be associated with elevated levels of CWB, as it results in employees looking for revenge on the perceived perpetrators of the conflict (Madan, 2014). As nowadays workplace cyberbullying is the rising star of workplace conflict, it would be appropriate to consider it as an impulsion for CWB.

Many researchers imply that when employees are exposed to undesired behaviours from other individuals in workplace they use their emotional intelligence to overcome the stressful situation (Gohm, Corser and Dalsky, 2005). Indeed, emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to respond emotional, social, and environmental conditions. Previous research revealed that employees with high levels of emotional intelligence were more positive and creative (Jung and Yoon, 2012). Workplace cyberbullying victimization experience causes excessive stress which has hazardous effects on employees, resulting in a way of protest through CWBs. But employees with high levels of EI might seek for an alternative solution other than deviant workplace behaviours.

In this regard, this paper aims to point at the relationships among workplace cyberbullying, CWB and EI. Therefore, this paper investigates theoretically: 1) workplace cyberbullying and its distinctive characteristics, 2) the relationship between workplace cyberbullying and CWBs, and 3) the role of EI in the relationship between workplace cyberbullying and CWBs.

## **2. Background and Relevant Literature**

### *2.1. Workplace Cyberbullying Victimization and Consequences*

In today's technology driven organizations, the power of ICT is available on each desktop and to any level of the organization ladder. While ICT spells productivity and profitability, unchecked and unregulated, it can include all of the ingredients for disaster. As today's workplace is changing, harassment is also changing. While the basis of work and harassment has not changed, technology is changing the way both are done (Borstorff, Graham and Marker, 2007). The resulting phenomenon of workplace cyberbullying is accepted as an elevating and urgent problem being faced by employees and employers (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2013). Zhang and Leidner (2014) defined workplace cyberbullying as "occasions where an employee is systematically exposed to repeated negative treatment from supervisors, colleagues or subordinates by electronic forms of contact over a long period of time, in a situation in which the perpetrator has more power than the target". Although workplace cyberbullying is closely related to traditional workplace bullying, it has many distinguishing features. It is hard for victims to avoid the cyberbullying as they have to receive e-mail or text messages for their work. Cyberbullying may happen at any time of the day and in any place. It is hard for the victims to avoid the perpetrators without abandoning ICT. As a result, cyberbullying lasts even when victims are away from their work (Zhang and Leidner, 2014; Ak, Özdemir and Kuzucu, 2015). Additionally, some cyberbullying behaviours, such as posting an inappropriate picture of someone in social media, may extend a much larger audience. As every post triggers responses of other individuals, a ripple effect occurs which

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