



# Cyberbullying victimization and fatalism in adolescence: Resilience as a moderator

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## ABSTRACT

The present study used quantitative data to address two gaps in cyberbullying research. First, to examine the relationship between fatalism and cyberbullying victimization in an adolescent sample not previously explored. Second, despite investigating these relationships from a main effects perspective, the present study extended research by examining fatalism from an interaction effects perspective. Specifically, this study examined adolescents' resilience as a moderator of the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and fatalism. A total of 643 adolescents ( $M_{age} = 14.56$ ;  $SD = 1.45$ ) from grades 7 to 10 of compulsory education participated in this study. Cyberbullying was associated with higher levels of fatalism. The key finding was that resilience was a moderator of the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and fatalism. These findings emphasize the importance of the protective function of resilience in cyberbullying victimization outcomes.

## 1. Introduction

There is increasing concern about the relationship between psychological well-being and cyberbullying victimization. This is reflected in the growing coverage of this topic in both empirical and review research (Ang, 2015; Simão et al., 2017). According to Patchin and Hinduja (2006) cyberbullying refers to “willful and repeated harm inflicted through computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices”. David-Ferdon and Hertz (2009) defined it as “any type of harassment or bullying that occurs through e-mail, a chat room, instant messaging, a website (including blogs), text messaging, or videos or pictures posted on websites or sent through cell phones”. These operational definitions highlight the electronic nature of bullying and focus on behaviors that are deliberate, occur over time and result in harm. Cyberbullying comprises direct forms of aggressive behavior, such as verbal (sending threatening messages) and photo harassment (posting harmful images) in social networks like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, and indirect forms of aggressive behavior, such as stalking or trolling (Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Lehto, 2016).

Prevalence rates show a wide variation across studies, but the cyberbullying victimization rates range from 2% to 57%. For example, the meta-analysis conducted by Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, and Runions (2014) with 80 international studies found that frequency of being involved in cyberbullying victimization was 15%. Hamm et al. (2015) reported cyberbullying victimization median rates of 23%. The use of different definitions has affected the prevalence rates reported

for cyberbullying (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014).

Research has regularly linked cyberbullying victimization to emotional distress, symptoms of depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, social isolation, absenteeism from school, poor academic performance and suicidal ideation (Cross, Lester, & Barnes, 2015; Kowalski et al., 2014; Landstedt & Persson, 2014; Larrañaga, Yubero, Ovejero, & Navarro, 2016; Tsitsika et al., 2015). However, cyberbullying victims are not only vulnerable to having poorer mental health outcomes (Låftman, Modin, & Östberg, 2013), but victimization also negatively impacts the internal strengths that make life worth living. Indeed previous studies have found that children who suffer victimization are considerably more likely to report less subjective well-being (Moore, Huebner, & Hills, 2012; Valois, Kerr, & Huebner, 2012). One particularly significant finding is the negative predictive value of victimization on optimism and life satisfaction (Alcantara et al., 2017; Navarro, Ruiz-Oliva, Larrañaga, & Yubero, 2015). That is, exposure to cyberbullying has consistently been found to be a salient stressor in the lives of adolescents, which is partly due to its damaging influence on psychosocial resources (Schacter, White, Chang, & Juvonen, 2015; Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Lehto, 2016).

The current study was planned to enhance comprehension about the mental outcomes linked with cyberbullying victimization, specifically with fatalism. Fatalism include ideas, like us having no power to influence the future or our own actions, we are powerless to do anything other than what we actually do, and an attitude of resignation in the face of future or actual events (Blanco & Díaz, 2007). We theorize that

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cyberbullying victimization may be linked to fatalistic beliefs. The present study also explores resilience as a possible moderator of this relationship. We theorize that resilience can help to handle cyberbullying victimization, as well as the psychological harm associated with it.

### 1.1. Fatalism

Previous research has shown that a history of victimization, rejection or ostracism can impact one's perception of life's meaning or one's sense of purpose and, therefore, one develops fatalistic beliefs (Welton, Vakil, & Ford, 2014). Fatalism has been operationalized as the tendency to believe in the efficacy of environmental, rather than personal, forces in understanding the causes of life outcomes, including one's success and failure, and involves negative expectations about future outcomes (Scheier & Bridges, 1995; Wheaton, 1983). Fatalism has also been analyzed as a potentially adaptive response to uncontrollable life situations (Díaz, Blanco, Bajo, & Stavrakí, 2015). Accordingly, fatalistic views relate with the inability to prevent or cope with stressful events, and negatively impact psychological adjustment.

There is no single generally accepted standardized tool available to assess fatalism. The literature search by Esparza (2005) found 51 different scales, all purported to measure fatalism. More recently, Abraído-Lanza et al. (2007) have explained that there is limited evidence for the validity of existing measures, and that the different scales may have tapped different fatalism constructs, which suggests a need to develop valid and reliable fatalism measures. Based on past research, Esparza, Wiebe, and Quiñones (2015) developed a multidimensional fatalism scale. The factor structure was cross-validated and measurement invariance was assessed simultaneously in English and Spanish. The study can be used interchangeably in both languages. Research with the multidimensional fatalism scale has found negative correlations between fatalism and optimism, whereas positive correlations have been found among fatalism, depression, paranoid thinking and post-traumatic stress (Carrillo, Montañez, Esparza, Gutiérrez, & Gurrola, 2017; Esparza et al., 2015).

### 1.2. Fatalism and bullying behaviors

No prior studies have examined the effect of adolescents' exposure to cyberbullying victimization on the development of fatalistic beliefs. However, research has found that peer victimization and traditional bullying are associated with higher levels of fatalism about life. For example, the longitudinal study conducted in Australia by Johnson and Howard (2008) showed that, due to the ineffective implementation of an anti-bullying policy at school, victims develop fatalistic beliefs. They expressed that bullying escaped their control and they could do very little to stop or escape the situation. Similarly, the study conducted in Ireland by O'Neil and Dinh (2013) revealed that bullied students who face the inability to avoid such pervasive threats developed feelings of powerlessness, and adopted a fatalistic response in the hope that the problem would go away itself. In the United States, Schacter et al. (2015) found that over time, peer victims shared the perception that one cannot do anything to solve bad experiences. In a longitudinal study, Turner, Shattuck, Finkelhor, and Hamby (2015) showed that poly-victimization was associated with a declining belief that one's life is under one's own control in contrast to feeling fatalistic ruling. In a series of experimental studies, Stillman et al. (2009) found that social exclusion was related to a perceived lack of meaning in one's life.

Previous findings have suggested that fatalism can be an outcome learned from frequent and repeat exposure to negative life experiences. Specifically, peer victimization and past traditional bullying may lead victims to develop a sense of loss of control over present events (fatalistic), and believe that they are quite unable to do anything to cope with bullying (Li, Chen, Chen, & Wu, 2015). Indeed fatalism has been associated with an external locus of control, low self-esteem, poor

future expectations, hopelessness, and generally negative emotionality (Stolarski, Matthews, Postek, Zimbardo, & Bitner, 2014). Considering the above findings on face-to-face peer victimization, there are reasons to suspect that cyberbullying victimization may have a strong link with fatalism. Cyberbullying victimization may reduce the extent to which one regards one's life chances as being under one's own control. This underscores the importance of a better understanding of the pathways to fatalism to help intervention and prevention efforts. For this reason, our study explores the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and fatalism among adolescents.

### 1.3. Resilience

In recent years, more emphasis has been made on adolescent resilience as a factor that may protect adolescents in a potential risk context. According to Fergus and Zimmerman, resilience refers to the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, successfully coping with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative courses associated with risks (2005, p. 399). Resilience has been defined as a relatively permanent personal resource that helps effective adaptation to stressful situations and to cope with unfortunate events (Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004; Luthar, 2006).

Resilience theory recognizes that the factors which can help youths avoid the negative effects of risks may lie within individuals or be external to them (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Prince-Embury, 2013). The protective factors identified in previous research include personal qualities, such as self-efficacy, coping skills, autonomy, sociability or autonomy. The external resources that help adolescents face risks and prevent negative outcomes include family warmth, cohesion, positive styles of attachment, positive school experiences or good peer relationships (Hornor, 2017; Liu, Reed, & Girard, 2017).

The theoretical framework that we have followed posits that resilience may represent an interpersonal trait or attribute, much like personality (Block & Block, 2014; Masten & Garmezy, 1985). From this resilience approach, adolescents exposed to victimization may exhibit positive outcomes. These adolescents may possess a number of protective factors, such as high levels of competence, resourcefulness, flexibility and emotion regulation (Waug, Thompson, & Gotlib, 2011), which help them avoid the negative outcomes associated with victimization processes.

Many scales are available today to ascertain the extent to which a person has developed resilience at a given point in his/her life (Artuch-Garde et al., 2017). Recent reviews have identified at least 20 different instruments to measure resilience in adolescence (Smith-Osborne & Bolton, 2013). Some scales, such as Wagnild and Young's Resilience Scale (RS) and the Conner-Davidson Resilience (CD-RISC), have been developed with adult populations, but have been used frequently with adolescents (Jorgensen & Seedat, 2008; Pritzker & Minter, 2014). RS and CD-RISC represent cognitive/individual factors of resilience (Burt & Paysnick, 2012). According to the review by Ahern, Kiehl, Lou Sole, and Byers (2006), CD-RISC may be more useful than RS because it has clinical criteria used to identify those individuals with lower versus higher overall resilience. Researchers have found positive correlations between higher CD-RISC scores and self-esteem and life satisfaction (Yu & Zhang, 2007), higher coping skills (Sexton, Byrd, & von Kluge, 2010), and negative associations with psychiatric disorders (Scali et al., 2012). Campbell-Sills and Stein (2007) developed the unidimensional brief CD-RISC-10, which was validated in China (Wang, Shi, Zhang, & Zhang, 2010) and Spain (Notario-Pacheco et al., 2011).

### 1.4. Resilience and bullying behaviors

Although research has indicated that resilience plays a significant role in the process of overcoming everyday challenges in life and coping with traumatic events (Sołtys & Woźniewicz, 2016), very few studies have explored the relationship between bullying and resilience. With

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