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## Perpetrators on the internet: Analyzing individual and structural explanation factors of cyberbullying in school context



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### ABSTRACT

Although research on cyberbullying has grown rapidly in the last years, holistic explanation approaches are still rare. In a first step, the present study discusses a theoretically derived, integrative model explaining a cyberbullies behavior referring to individual and structural influencing factors. This model was empirically tested among a sample of 1428 German high school pupils within a two-wave panel survey. Additionally, it was investigated whether the explanation patterns vary depending on the particular audience reached by the cyberbullying behavior. The results showed that technical resources enhanced the perpetration mediated via higher levels of perceived behavioral control. In contrast, social resources and norms also directly favored the perpetration of cyberbullying, however, only if this was witnessed by a certain audience. It is assumed that there is a group of cyberbullies who use the behavior as an instrumental strategy in order to reach socially motivated goals.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Triggered by some individual tragedies, the public perception of cyberbullying strongly increased during the last years. Parallel to this enhanced sensitization, an extensive interdisciplinary area of research developed, including communicational, psychological and pedagogical approaches referring to the general field of adolescence research as well as aspects of communication research. The relevance of the phenomenon is especially traced back to the omnipresence of media, especially the Internet, in the everyday lives and growing-up of adolescents (Lenhart et al., 2015).

However, it is not only the use of electronic media, which seems to differentiate cyberbullying from its traditional predecessor in school. There rather is an array of specific communicational features that underlie a person's online communication, and thus also have to be considered in the context of cyberbullying acts. Communicating online, for example, is often associated with enhanced opportunities to act anonymously, which, in turn, is supposed to further disinhibit a person's behavior (for example, Suler, 2004; Udris, 2014). Researchers moreover emphasized the privacy of online communication by adolescents (for example,

through an own Internet access in the bedroom), which seems to enable acting without any external control. However, the most exclusive characteristic of online communication may be the 24/7 attainability of a nearly unlimited audience. Therefore, compared to traditional bullying in school, cyberbullying can be perpetrated in front of many more bystanders who may not even know the victim in first instance (see Heirman & Walrave, 2008; Slonje, Smith, & Frisé, 2013; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). This larger reachable audience also includes new resources for socially orientated behavior and, thus, already points to the necessity of a more socio-structural perspective on cyberbullying behavior.

Most of the previous research on cyberbullying focused on individual explanation factors (Slonje et al., 2013) such as socio-demographic risk groups (for example, Tokunaga, 2010) or certain psychological features (Brewer & Kerlake, 2015; Sticca, Ruggieri, Alsaker, & Perren, 2013). However, already in its basic form, the perpetration of cyberbullying can be considered as social acting that always refers to another, mostly inferior person. Although most of the cyberbullying acts among adolescents not directly happen in school (due to school-based restrictions of cell-phone use), a large part of them still occur between person who are embedded in the same higher-level social network, mostly the same class or school (for example, Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, & Russell, 2008). This, in turn, points to fundamental parallels

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<sup>1</sup> The present paper is a shortened, revised and translated version of my phd thesis (see Festl, 2015).

between online bullying and traditional bullying in school already proven by numerous empirical findings (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014). Recent studies increasingly directed the focus on the social structures and circumstances surrounding the cyberbullying behavior (Festl & Quandt, 2013; Heirman et al., 2015; Wegge, Vandebosch, Eggermont, & Pabian, 2016). However, these approaches are still rare and mostly did not address a holistic view on cyberbullying behavior including individual and structural explanation patterns.

Following these considerations, the present study strives to develop an integrative research model explaining the perpetration of cyberbullying on base of individual characteristics as well as structural factors resulting of the adolescent's integration in different (social) contexts. Moreover, the role of the reachable audience in context of cyberbullying will be investigated. Thus, I analyzed whether or not the explanation patterns vary depending on the different targeted audience reached by the specific cyberbullying behavior. The model is tested among a large sample of German high-school pupils using a two-wave study-design.

## 2. Considerations towards an integrative explanation model

### 2.1. Theory of Planned Behavior and cyberbullying

In the last years, research on cyberbullying has grown rapidly; however, up to now theoretical-derived explanation approaches are still rare. Already in 2010, Tokunaga pointed to an application of the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (TPB; see Ajzen, 1991) as a valuable theoretical framework for explaining the perpetrators' behavior. Following this suggestion, some researchers already transferred the basic TPB-model to the context of cyberbullying confirming its overall value and usability for this kind of behavior (Pabian & Vandebosch, 2014; Walrave & Heirman, 2012). Thus, the perpetration of cyberbullying was well explained by a person's behavioral intention, which, in turn, could be specified by a person's individual cognitions. The TPB requires the focused behavior to be, at least to a certain extent, under the volitional control of the acting individual (Ajzen, 1991, p. 181). Surely, this should be also true for an "intentional act" such as cyberbullying (see definition by Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). However, especially in the context of cyberbullying the actual harm of another person may not always be directly intended, but can be a more or less consciously accepted result of a, for example, socially motivated behavior (for example, to be accepted by friends; see McMillan, Higgins, & Conner, 2005). Thus, motivational processes regarding cyberbullying behavior have to be considered multidimensional and were not part of the present study. I rather focused on the underlying cognitive processes influencing the perpetration of cyberbullying. In TPB research, these individual cognitions include a person's behavioral attitudes, subjective norms indicating the perceived social influence as well as a perceived behavioral control indicating a psychological proxy for actual control (see Ajzen, 1991).

### 2.2. Structural extension of the basic model

Although the TPB-model can be seen as a suitable starting point in order to explain the perpetration of cyberbullying, a mere micro-perspective is expected to not go far enough. As mentioned before, the acting person always is embedded in certain medial and social structures that may also affect the behavior. To determine the relevant structural aspects on cyberbullying behavior, it first has to be clarified what is meant by the term "structure". A useful definition was provided by Giddens (1997, p. 77–78), who describes structures as a recursive organized amount of rules and resources. The former include generalizable techniques and procedures used

for the perpetration and reproduction of social practices and, in first instance, for sanctioning social behavior (p. 73). If the negotiation of social conditions seems to be necessary (for example within stable social contexts such as school classes), formal and informal social norms arise and can influence an individual's behavior. Previous studies already successfully extended the TPB basic model by the concept of descriptive norms, which specify the actual behavior of significant others (Rivis & Sheeran, 2003). Regarding the concept of resources, Giddens distinguishes between (allocative) material resources enabling the control over objects and goods (technical resources) as well as (authoritative) social resources enabling the control over persons (1997, p. 86).

In general, Giddens proclaims a duality of these structural aspects and the individual acting. Transferred to the context of cyberbullying, this for example would mean that a high level of social resources provides the conditions for a perpetration (without fearing social isolation), while the behavior, in turn, can consolidate the existing social relationships among adolescents. As known from previous cyberbullying research, individual features also play an important role, when analyzing the perpetration behavior (Brewer & Kerlake, 2015; Sticca et al. 2013). Therefore, it further has to be asked, where the individual is located within this duality of structures and social acting. According to the basic assumptions of TPB, all "external variables" should influence the behavior solely via according behavior-based cognitions (see Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980, p. 82). The actual behavior of important others ("descriptive norms") is mainly assumed to reflect informal negotiated social rules that also affect the subjective perceived expectations of others ("subjective norms"), via which they may favor the perpetration of a positively evaluated behavior. Moreover, the concept of opportunities and resources was already brought up by Ajzen himself (1991, p. 182). He pointed to the fact that the performance of most behaviors also, to some degree, depends on non-motivational factors, which he summarized under the term of "actual control". "To the extent that people are realistic in their judgments of a behavior's difficulty, a measure of perceived behavioral control can serve as a proxy for actual control and contribute to the prediction of the behavior in question" (Ajzen, 2002, p. 666). However, what if the mere availability of resources directly favors a behavior without the acting person correctly estimating his or her behavioral control? Direct effects on an individual's behavior, not being mediated via according cognitions and a behavioral intention, were, at least, already identified for the construct of descriptive norms (McMillan et al., 2005; Pabian & Vandebosch, 2014).

Summarizing these theoretical considerations, an integrative model for a long-term explanation of perpetrating cyberbullying can be developed. Thereby, individual cognitions primarily are assumed to occupy a mediating role between important individual background factors as well as structural aspects and the individual perpetration of cyberbullying. However, in some situations, or more specifically due to some social constellations, I also expected a direct influence of structural aspects without intermediary individual beliefs (see Fig. 1).

### 2.3. Research questions and hypotheses

The first overall research question investigates *to what extent the perpetration of cyberbullying can be explained by a person's individual cognitions as well as additional individual, social and medial factors (RQ1)?* In the center of the presented integrative model, the basic assumptions of the *Theory of Planned Behavior* appear. As mentioned before, the theory expects individual cognitions favoring the perpetration of cyberbullying to be positive, long-term predictors of an according behavior (see Ajzen, 1991). Walrave and Heirman (2011) for example found anti-bullying attitudes to

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