



# Does the offline bully-victimization influence cyberbullying behavior among youths? Application of General Strain Theory



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## ABSTRACT

The current study attempts to examine the relationship between traditional bullyvictimization and cyberbullying behavior based on General Strain Theory perspectives. Offline bullyvictimization can create negative emotional strains. This negative strain combined with the anonymity in cyber space may lead youths to be engaged in cyberbullying behavior as the externalized response to the strain. Using longitudinal Korean National Youth Survey data, this study empirically tested the above theoretical explanation. First, this study found the declining trend of cyberbullying engagement among Korean youths. Secondly, consistent with GST, offline bully-victimization was significantly related to the cyberbullying engagement. Youths who were victims of traditional bullying showed a higher tendency of becoming cyberbullying assaulters with externalizing their strain in cyberspace.

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## 1. Introduction

The activities of youths in cyberspaces are growing rapidly via Internet services at home and through wireless mobile devices. In 2011, approximately 97.2% of households in South Korea had Internet access (OECD, 2012). Approximately 48% of Korean high-school students and 41% of Korean middle-school students reported that they had smartphones with Internet available anytime (Ministry of Gender Equality, 2012). This omnipresence of the Internet has improved our lives notably positively. We can use on-line maps, chat, play games, and access valuable information at anytime from anywhere. However, the Internet also exhibits negative aspects. Recently, attention has focused on Internet offenses such as cyberstalking, child pornography, and cyberbullying (Bhat, 2008; Seto, 2002). Cyberbullying in particular has become a serious social problem. A number of media outlets have reported the consequences cyberbullying victimization, including suicide. For example, a middle-school student in Dae-gu, South Korea committed suicide in 2012 after experiencing severe bullying victimization both offline and online (Choson, 2012). Police found evidence of a long history of cyberbullying in the victim's smartphone.

Despite the high level of concern related to the occurrence of cyberbullying, there is a clear paucity of research on the subject (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013). Previous research on cyberbullying has reported on its prevalence, its frequency within specific groups,

its negative impacts, and the relationships between traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Smith, 2012; Tokunaga, 2010). A few studies have reported an overlap between traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Salmivalli & Pöyhönen, 2012). One study reported that those who were involved in traditional bullying also showed cyberbullying behavior (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Smith et al., 2008). Another study found that those who were victimized by traditional bullying showed a high tendency for cyberbullying victimization (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschank, 2009). However, there is a clear lack of research regarding the relationship between traditional bullying victimization and cyberbullying behavior. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) suggested that some cyberbullies may be victims of traditional bullying. However, no empirical evidence of this relationship has been presented until now (Smith et al., 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008).

The current study attempts to examine the relationship between traditional bullying victimization and cyberbullying based on concepts borrowed from General Strain Theory. Offline bullying victimization can create negative emotional strain. This negative strain, in combination with the anonymity offered by cyberspace, may lead youths to become engaged in cyberbullying behavior as an externalized response to the strain. Using Korean National Youth Survey data, this study empirically tests the abovementioned hypothesis.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. The definition and negative consequences of cyberbullying

Traditional bullying has been studied extensively in many different countries and different cultural settings, but there is no

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unified definition for it (Olweus, 1994; Peterson & Ray, 2006). Nevertheless, traditional bullying is generally defined as intentional behavior to harm another repeatedly, creating a situation in which it is difficult for the victim to defend himself or herself (Olweus, 1999). Cyberbullying has been defined as “an aggressive act or behavior that is carried out using electronic means by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Slonje et al., 2013, p. 26). Compared to the definition of offline bullying, the definition of cyberbullying has been the subject of debate with respect to the issues of (1) repetition and (2) power imbalance. In the case of cyberbullying, one act of cyberbullying may easily cause repeated victimization because other Internet users can spread the original posting to other websites or social networking services (SNS). Therefore, a single act of posting may be repeated several times by others (Slonje et al., 2013). Second, in the case of traditional bullying, a power imbalance is assumed to exist between bullies and bullying victims (Olweus, 1999). The bully in cyberspace does not have to be physically stronger than the victim. Cyberbullies can easily use pseudonyms. Therefore, a physically weak but technologically advanced person can be a cyberbully. Moreover, traditional bullying victims may become bully assaulters in cyberspace as a way of obtaining revenge or expressing strain.

The physical, psychological, and emotional strains experienced by a victim of cyberbullying represent the largest problem of cyberbullying (Bhat, 2008; Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, & Storch, 2009; Şahin, Aydin, & Sari, 2012). With respect to cyberbullying and psychological distress, some studies have suggested that cyberbullying, similar to school bullying, can result in anxiety and emotional distress. There is also evidence that indicates that cyberbullying can result in more serious psychological harm, such as major depression, self-harm, and suicide (Erentaitė, Bergman, & Zukauskienė, 2012).

The physical effects of cyberbullying are more tangible than other effects. For example, weight loss or gain, bruises or cuts, the use of substances, and in the worst cases, death may all be perceived (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Each of these effects can be caused by cyberbullying and the stress it creates in victims. Many different psychological effects may arise when enduring cyberbullying. Psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression may evolve. The loss of self-worth and self-esteem can arise and cause individuals to become reclusive and afraid of the world around them. Dempsey et al. (2009) surveyed 1684 American students and observed statistically significant results for social anxiety, but not depression, in relation to cyberbullying. Perren, Dooley, Shaw, and Cross (2010) found a significant correlation between cyberbullying and depression symptoms in a sample of 1694 students from Switzerland and Australia. The disparity between the results indicates differences between the samples, but the psychological issues that cyberbullying causes are real. The emotional disparities that victims of cyberbullying experience are vast; they may range from extreme sensitivity to aggression (Şahin et al., 2012) and even helplessness (Butler, Kift, & Campbell, 2009).

## 2.2. Comparison between cyberbullying and traditional bullying

Cyberbullying is distinct from traditional bullying in that electronic communication allows for perpetrators to remain anonymous and creates opportunities for messages to be posted to a larger audience (Robert, Ann, Lydia, & Shari, 2012). These factors allow for perpetrators to remain unaccountable for bullying actions unlike in traditional bullying incidents, thus opening the door for students who would usually be bullying victims offline to be bully assaulters in cyberspace.

Cyberbullying, compared to traditional bullying, demonstrates a lack of supervision by authority figures (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

The lack of law enforcement agents in cyberspace and ambiguous legal issues (such as the jurisdiction or legal definition of cyberbullying) create a lack of supervision of cyberbullying. In addition, parents, teachers, and other adults cannot always supervise youths' online activities because youths can access the Internet anytime and anywhere using smartphones.

In the case of traditional bullying, the majority of bullying occurs in or near school. Therefore, access to bully targets can be controlled by changing a school's physical and social environments. Moreover, traditional bullying usually occurs during school hours. Once victims return home, the bullying temporarily ceases. Cyberbullying, in contrast, can occur at anytime and anywhere with the omnipresence of the Internet through smartphones (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

Traditional bullying and cyberbullying both involve an imbalance of power between one individual and another (Felix, Sharkey, Green, Furlong, & Tanigawa, 2011; Lee and Song, 2012). However, the source of power is different between the two different types of bullying. In the case of traditional bullying, an imbalance of power can arise in anything from size, age, and socioeconomic status to psychological development (Griezel, Finger, Bodkin-Andrews, Craven, & Yeung, 2012). Usually, the victims of traditional bullying are physically or psychologically weak persons. In the case of cyberbullying, an imbalance of power can be created by advanced technical skill in using information and communication technologies (ICTs) and anonymity. A greater knowledge of ICTs may contribute to the empowerment of an individual in cyberspace (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008), and anonymity empowers potential assaulters to engage in cyberbullying with a low possibility of detection.

Up to this point, we have examined the differences between traditional bullying and cyberbullying. However, there is an overlap between the two types of bullying. According to previous research, individuals who were victims of cyberbullying were targets of traditional bullying as well (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Tokunaga, 2010). Other studies reported that many students who were offline bully-assaulters also committed cyberbullying (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Smith et al., 2008). Bullying and being bullied are interwoven between offline and online spaces. Slonje et al. (2013) reported that many students' engagement in cyberbullying initially started from a face-to-face argument. Additionally, an argument in cyberspace sometimes led to offline bullying. Because the offline world and online world are connected to each other, the bullying incidents are closely related each other.

To date, studies on bullying have confirmed the overlap between bully incidents in both traditional and cyberspaces (Smith et al., 2008). However, little is known about the sequence of events that links traditional bullying victimization and cyberbullying (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). The current study attempts to examine whether offline bullying victimization experience leads to cyberbullying behavior based on GST.

## 2.3. General Strain Theory and cyberbullying

GST proposes that strains cause delinquency (Agnew, 1992). Agnew (1992) listed three main sources of strain: (1) failure to achieve positively valued goals, (2) loss of positively valued stimuli (for example, parental loss), and (3) the presence of negative stimuli (for example, bullying victimization or emotional abuse). According to GST, individuals who suffer the three aforementioned types of strains experience negative emotions (such as anger or anxiety). The externalization of those strains can be expressed as delinquent or violent behavior (Agnew, 1992). GST argues that strain results from individuals' feeling as if they are not treated as they would prefer to be treated or experience undesired outcomes. Examples of this treatment include “hostility from parents, exclusion from peers, negative school experiences, and

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