



## Full length article

## The dark side of working online: Towards a definition and an Emotion Reaction model of workplace cyberbullying



Ivana Vranjes<sup>a, b, c, \*</sup>, Elfi Baillien<sup>b</sup>, Heidi Vandebosch<sup>c</sup>, Sara Erreygers<sup>a, c</sup>,  
Hans De Witte<sup>a, d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Occupational & Organizational Psychology and Professional Learning, KU Leuven, Belgium

<sup>b</sup> Department of Work and Organization Studies, KU Leuven, Belgium

<sup>c</sup> Department of Communication Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium

<sup>d</sup> Optentia Research Focus Area, North-West University, South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

The introduction of new technologies created avenues for new forms of bullying. Despite an impressive body of research on cyberbullying amongst youngsters, studies in the work context have largely neglected its electronic counterpart. In this study, we define workplace cyberbullying and propose an Emotion Reaction Model of its occurrence. Our model aligns with the main proposition of the Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), that emotions evoked by certain work events may fuel emotion driven behaviors. However, in our model these relationships are further specified combining different literature traditions. Making inferences from the workplace bullying literature, we suggest work stressors to be the work events leading to cyberbullying. Furthermore, building on the literature on cyberbullying amongst youngsters, computer-mediated communication and emotions, we propose discrete emotions of anger, sadness and fear to play a significant role in explaining this stressor-cyberbullying relation. In addition, different moderators (i.e., control appraisal and emotion regulation) of this relationship are suggested and implications of the model are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Cyberbullying – defined as aggressive behavior occurring through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (Smith et al., 2008) – has been substantially studied in research on childhood, adolescence and emerging adulthood. This is not surprising given the explosion in use of modern technologies for communication amongst youngsters (Livingstone & Brake, 2010). However, many current employees are confronted with at least some form of ICTs in their job too. Work processes that have previously been conducted through face-to-face contact are increasingly replaced by computer-mediated communication (CMC). Working with ICTs can potentially expose employees to harmful online activities, which are already found to be widespread amongst youngsters. It is therefore surprising that, to date, there

have not been many contributions in the field of workplace cyberbullying. Especially given the many negative outcomes related to this form of online misconduct. In the youth literature, cyberbullying has been linked to various negative effects, such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse, suicide, sleeping problems and physical symptoms (see Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). In addition, the few studies conducted in the work context find that workplace cyberbullying is related to perceived stress (Snyman & Loh, 2015), reduced mental and physical well-being (Coyne et al., 2016; Farley, Coyne, Sprigg, Axtell, & Subramanian, 2015; O'Driscoll et al., 2015), emotional problems (Staudé-Müller, Hansen, & Voss, 2012), reduced job satisfaction (Baruch, 2005; Coyne et al., 2016; Snyman & Loh, 2015) and decreased performance (Baruch, 2005).

We aim to address the current void by (a) providing a comprehensive definition of workplace cyberbullying and (b) proposing a model including antecedents of this phenomenon, as well as different mediators and moderators in this process. In defining workplace cyberbullying, we acknowledge that the core of the 'traditional' bullying concept and its online counterpart is

\* Corresponding author. Dekenstraat 2 – Bus 3725, 3000 Leuven, Belgium.

E-mail addresses: [ivana.vranjes@kuleuven.be](mailto:ivana.vranjes@kuleuven.be) (I. Vranjes), [elfi.baillien@kuleuven.be](mailto:elfi.baillien@kuleuven.be) (E. Baillien), [heidi.vandebosch@uantwerpen.be](mailto:heidi.vandebosch@uantwerpen.be) (H. Vandebosch), [Sara.Erreygers@uantwerpen.be](mailto:Sara.Erreygers@uantwerpen.be) (S. Erreygers), [hans.dewitte@kuleuven.be](mailto:hans.dewitte@kuleuven.be) (H. De Witte).

essentially the same: a negative social interaction between a bully and a victim who cannot easily defend him- or herself. However, we argue that – despite these apparent similarities – cyberbullying is a distinct phenomenon with its own specific characteristics as well. In building a theoretical model of workplace cyberbullying, we depart from the main premises of the Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). That is, we start from the proposition that certain affective work events evoke affective reactions that in their turn may lead to affect driven behaviors. We concretize this basic idea by building on the existing knowledge of and the most recent advancements in the workplace bullying literature and by integrating insights from the literature regarding cyberbullying amongst youngsters, cyber-psychology and emotions. In doing so, we construct an Emotion Reaction model of workplace cyberbullying. It is important to note that this model does not represent the only possible causal relationships in the cyberbullying process, but that it points out some critical mechanisms that can come into play. The contributions of this paper are fourfold. First of all, we shed light on the phenomenon of workplace cyberbullying and its distinctiveness from the ‘traditional’ bully concept. Second, while many studies on traditional workplace bullying focus on victimization processes, only little is known about the processes leading to becoming the perpetrator of bullying behavior. In building a theoretical model within a relatively new research domain, we do not wish to employ the same single sided focus. Therefore, in our model, we specify both the victimization and the perpetration path. Third, emotions have predominantly been examined as a consequence of workplace bullying and an indicator of strain. We propose that emotions and emotion regulation can play a respectively mediating and moderating role in the cyberbullying process. Finally, in our model, we account for both environmental and personal factors in predicting workplace cyberbullying. In doing so, we follow the recent trend in the field of traditional workplace bullying, being the application of the interactionists approach (Douglas et al., 2008).

## 2. Conceptualizing workplace cyberbullying

### 2.1. Traditional view on workplace bullying

Studies of traditional workplace bullying pioneered more than 20 years ago in the Nordic countries and quickly spread to the rest of the world (Einarsen, 2000). The ample tradition is especially apparent from the presence of various meta-analyses and reviews uniting the results of the studies conducted in this field (e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2013; Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010; Rayner & Hoel, 1997; Zapf & Einarsen, 2001). In general, workplace bullying – also referred to as ‘mobbing’ (Leymann, 1996), especially in the German research tradition – can be placed under the broad umbrella term of ‘counterproductive workplace behaviors’ (CWB). These are volitional behaviors harming individual employees and the organization (Spector & Fox, 2010). However, bullying distinguishes from other CWBs in that it is dynamic (i.e., repetitive), interpersonal and is usually studied from the target’s perspective (Fox & Spector, 2005). Also, while the aspect of intentionality has been considered a necessary condition for many CWBs, this aspect has been generally left out of workplace bullying definitions, because bullying behaviors are considered ambiguous with regard to intent (Aquino & Thau, 2009). The latter underlines the subjective nature of the phenomenon. Workplace bullying scholars agree on the following five elements: (1) victim’s experience of negative behavior(s), (2) persistency of these behaviors, (3) victim’s experience of harm (psychological and or physical), (4) power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator and (5) actual perception of

being bullied (Rayner & Keashly, 2004). These elements are combined in the generally accepted definition of workplace bullying as repeated negative acts carried on over a period of time by an individual or a group towards one or more other individual(s) who cannot easily defend themselves (Einarsen, 2000).

### 2.2. Defining workplace cyberbullying

Conceptualizing workplace cyberbullying brings additional complications. In the youth literature, cyberbullying is defined as intentional aggressive behavior, occurring repeatedly and over time through electronic technologies between a perpetrator and victim who are unequal in power (Kubiszewski, Fontaine, Potard, & Auzoult, 2015; Smith et al., 2008). Although the previous definition seems to suggest that cyberbullying is merely a constriction of the traditional bullying concept within the online context, this is not quite so. Just as traditional bullying, cyberbullying is an act of interpersonal mistreatment that involves a power imbalance (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008; Olweus, 2013). However, the electronic environment in which cyberbullying occurs is compounded by additional factors that need to be taken into account in order to fully understand this phenomenon.

There are several theories trying to capture the essence of what makes online communication inherently different from face-to-face communication (for an overview see Walther, 2011). First, one of the most important aspects is the *lack of non-verbal cues* in online communication. This has been the focus of the cues-filtered-out theories (Culnan & Markus, 1987) that generally regard communication via computers as less ‘rich’ as it does not allow for all contextual information (i.e., non-verbal cues) to be transmitted in a similar way as in face-to-face interactions. Consequently, in view of bullying specifically, perpetrators could be less aware of the effect of their behavior on the victim when bullying online as opposed to offline and this might further reinforce cyberbullying behavior (Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross, 2009). Second, while in traditional bullying the perpetrator is usually known, online communication offers many opportunities for the perpetrators to stay *anonymous* (Staude-Müller et al., 2012). This is problematic because it further hinders the targets of negative behavior to take action against their abusers. It also limits the target’s feeling of control over the situation, which can make this type of bullying uniquely harmful (Wingate, Minney, & Guadagno, 2013). Additionally, given that the perpetrator of cyberbullying is able to stay anonymous, there have to be some indications in the negative acts themselves that the bullying arose in the work context. These indications may include the nature of the negative acts (e.g., making someone’s work impossible), the context of acts (e.g., via work intranet) or the information disclosed (e.g., perpetrator makes reference to work related issues).

Another important aspect of online communication is its *intrusive nature*. Victims of traditional bullying can usually escape the bullying incidents from colleagues, supervisors, subordinates or third parties related to the work context (e.g., clients), while at home. However, online communication allows the transgression of the private/public boundary: individuals can communicate everywhere (i.e., at work as well as at home) and any time (i.e., during and after work hours). Because of this, it may be much harder for the victims of cyberbullying to escape this behavior (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Furthermore, online environment provides violators with the opportunity to access private information, previously unattainable in a face-to-face interaction. In support of the previous arguments, the aspects of pervasiveness and boundarylessness, which relate to behaviors invading into someone’s personal life and making individuals feel pursued, were reoccurring themes in people’s experience of cyberbullying at work (D’cruz & Noronha,

2013). Also, in a study by Heatherington and Coyne (2014), crossing of boundaries emerged as an important theme in cyberbullied workers, with one worker explicitly referring to the intrusive nature of this behavior. Next, *power imbalance* (social, psychological or physical) between the target and the perpetrator is seen as a defining characteristic of bullying. However, the aspect of power imbalance changes meaning online. 'Power' in the online context is argued to stem from technological opportunities (i.e. availability of online content or characteristics of the CMC such as anonymity), allowing individuals low in power in a physical context to still be perpetrators of cyberbullying in the online environment (Dooley et al., 2009). Finally, both bullying and cyberbullying can be aimed both directly (e.g., insults) and indirectly (e.g., gossiping) at the victim. However, compared to traditional bullying, indirect cyberbullying behavior has the potential of reaching a much larger audience (Langos, 2012). This relates to the *viral reach* of a negative cyber-act: the volume of message viewing, sharing, and forwarding by Internet users carried out either online or offline (Alhabash et al., 2013).

Following these distinct characteristics of the online environment, it has been put forward in the cyberbullying literature that, while repetition is a necessary defining condition with regards to traditional bullying, a single act of negative cyber-behavior can sometimes suffice (Vandebosch & van Cleemput, 2008). According to Langos (2012), repetition is a necessary condition for cyberbullying in the private context – that is, when electronic communication is directed towards the victim (e.g., text messages, e-mails and telephone calls). On the other hand, repetition is not necessary in the public context – that is, when electronic communication has been distributed to individuals other than the victim only (e.g., social media, public websites and blogs). When conducted as such, a one-time negative act (e.g., posting an embarrassing picture online), may pose an ongoing threat for the target of this behavior through repetitive exposure to others (Dooley et al., 2009). However, we do not fully endorse this view as there are cyberbullying acts which do not meet these criteria, such as gossiping through the use of ICTs. Despite happening in the public context (i.e. distributed to other individuals than the victim), we argue – following the traditional view – that it still needs to meet the criterion of repetition. Another example is hacking of personal information: despite happening in the private context (i.e., electronic communication directed towards the victim), we argue that this act does *not* require repetition. This is because even if committed only once and in a private context, it invades one's personal life in a way that is very threatening for the victim. Namely, it leads to a threat of private information being exposed online or more adversely, it results into an actual dissemination of individuals' private information, which is then available for repeated consultation by others.

We therefore argue that the nature of negative behavior is what actually differentiates acts that require repetition from the ones that do not. It was already stated above that intrusion (i.e., transgression of the private/public boundary) is an important distinctive factor of cyberbullying. We argue that in order to meet the one-time requirement, the negative behavior has to pose an intrusion into one's private life (e.g., hacking, identity theft, posting private photos or videos online). With this type of behavior, individuals' private space becomes invaded, making them feel pursued and unable to escape. In addition, private information that was never meant for the public eye can subsequently become exposed to and consulted by a wide online audience. This invasion together with the constant threat of public exposure or its actualization makes this kind of acts especially distressing, even after a single occurrence. Furthermore, if made public, the negative behavior committed once from the perspective of the perpetrator becomes repeated by others who are able to frequently access, view, share

and repost this information.

A definition of cyberbullying applied to the specific context of work is still absent from the literature. The few studies investigating this issue mainly applied generalist definitions adapted from the youth context (e.g., Brack & Caltabiano, 2014). However, the very different setting (organization versus school) of this behavior and the fact that one-time acts have generally not been taken into consideration in the previous definitions, calls for a clear-cut and comprehensive definition in the work context. Bringing together the above insights, we define workplace cyberbullying as *all negative behavior stemming from the work context and occurring through the use of ICTs, which is either (a) carried out repeatedly and over a period of time or (b) conducted at least once but forms an intrusion into someone's private life, (potentially) exposing it to a wide online audience. This behavior leaves the target feeling helpless and unable to defend.* While most cyberbullying behaviors from the school context, such as gossiping online and insulting someone via online messages, are applicable to the work context, only focusing on these behaviors would make many important cyberbullying acts at work unaccounted for. Some examples of this behavior are: purposely deleting someone's work files, forwarding someone's e-mails to third parties in order to harm him or her and ignoring someone's e-mails at work.

### 3. Developing the Emotion Reaction model of workplace cyberbullying

The much-applied Affective Events Theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) explains how affective work events can lead to different work attitudes and affective driven behaviors through the experience of emotions, such as anger or fear. Originally intended as a theory of work satisfaction, AET integrated previous knowledge on emotions in order to provide some future directions for the work on emotions in the organizational context. However, AET presents a 'macrostructure' of emotions in the workplace, needing further concretization and clarification of the different processes that may come into play (Weiss & Beal, 2005). That is, the different premises of the model need to be made explicit and to be elaborated on, depending on the specific focus of the research in which they are applied. Following AET, we see emotions as the fuel behind cyberbullying behavior and argue that the presence of work stressors will elicit emotions, which in their turn will give rise to workplace cyberbullying. However, given the comprehensive nature of the AET model, we use additional theories and empirical evidence from different fields (e.g., workplace bullying, emotions and computer-mediated communication) in order to concretize and substantiate the different building blocks of this model and the mechanisms that occur herein. In addition, we propose different moderators in the model that specifically focus on the emotions as the central construct in the model and have theoretical relevance in altering their experience and/or expression. In other words, we made a selection of moderating constructs necessary to better understand the condition under which emotions will be salient and lead to cyberbullying. In doing so we construct and propose an Emotion Reaction model of workplace cyberbullying (Fig. 1). This model focuses both on the victimization as well on the perpetration path in this process. Traditionally, in the workplace bullying literature, a distinction has been made between the perpetrators and the victims. According to Glomb (2002), there are no mere perpetrators or victims in the workplace and one can become either one at various times. In line with this, it has already been demonstrated in the school context that there is a high correlation between the two roles (Kowalski et al., 2014) and this is even more so for cyberbullying (Law, Shapka, Domene, & Gagné, 2012). This implies that similar mechanisms may be operating for the two roles, but in

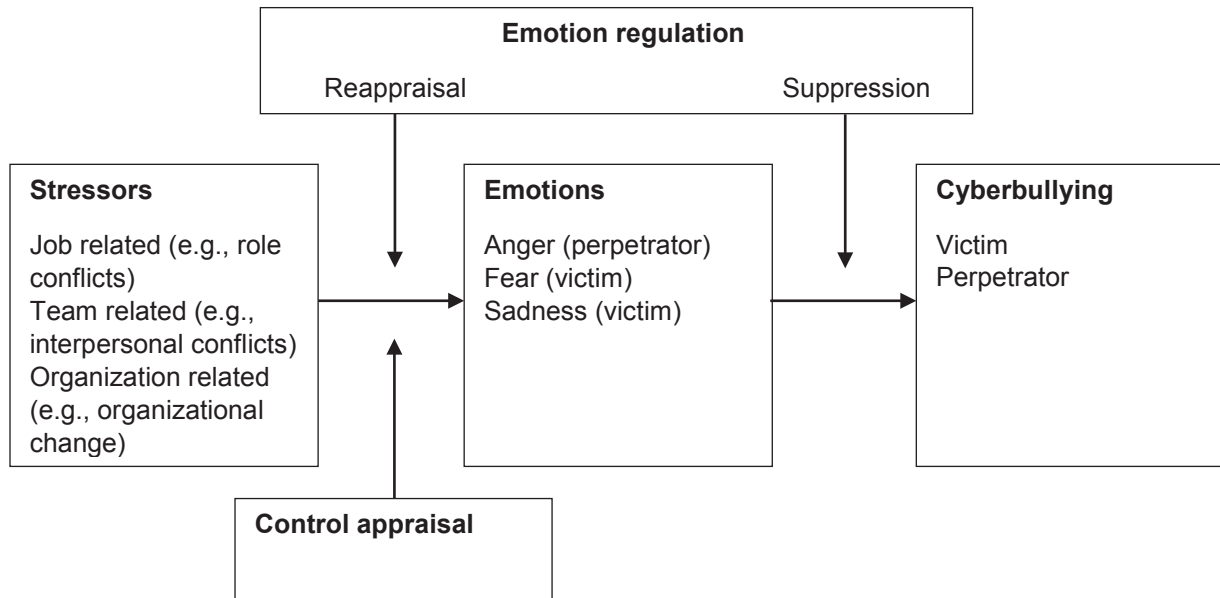


Fig. 1. A theoretical model of workplace cyberbullying.

a different manner. Therefore, we build a single model in which both cyberbullying victimization and enactment are integrated. The two roles can be differentiated by the distinct realization of the variables represented. We point out that this model is not intended as an exhaustive representation of the variables and processes involved, but that it points out the most crucial elements in the cyberbullying process. We also acknowledge that causality may run in different directions, but we limit our discourse to the normal causation path.

### 3.1. Stressor-strain view of workplace cyberbullying

The stressor-strain premise has been the most widely applied framework in bullying studies. This idea posits that exposure to stressful work conditions (e.g., role conflicts) leads to physical (e.g., somatic complaints), psychological (e.g., anxiety) and behavioral (e.g., aggression) strain (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001). Workplace stressors are thereby defined as the work-related environmental conditions that have the potential to decrease the health and well-being of workers (Hurrell, Nelson, & Simmons, 1998). When trying to predict its occurrence, workplace bullying can be perceived as a behavioral strain caused by workplace stressors. This is also reflected in the most widely used and supported framework in explaining workplace bullying, the work environment hypothesis (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994; Leymann, 1996), which emphasizes the importance of the psychosocial work environment as a precursor of bullying. In that respect, job related factors, such as role conflicts, role ambiguity and workload (e.g., Baillien & De Witte, 2009; Balducci, Cecchin, & Fraccaroli, 2012; Notelaers, De Witte, & Einarsen, 2010; Reines, Einarsen, Knardahl, & Lau, 2014), team related factors, such as conflicts and leadership (e.g., Baillien, Bollen, Euwema, & De Witte, 2014) and organizational factors, such as organizational change and social climate (e.g., Baillien & De Witte, 2009; Baron & Neuman, 1996; Coyne, Chong, Seigne, & Randall, 2003) have been found to predict workplace bullying victimization. This has also been supported in the few studies investigating relationship between work stressors such as workload, role conflicts and job insecurity and perpetrators' reports of bullying (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011; De Cuyper, Baillien, & De Witte, 2009).

As the core of traditional bullying and cyberbullying is essentially the same (i.e., negative interpersonal behavior that leaves the target feeling helpless), we follow this stressor-strain view in predicting incidences of workplace cyberbullying. We consider workplace cyberbullying as a form of behavioral strain following from similar predictors as offline bullying, being the presence of workplace stressors. This idea aligns with evidence in the youth literature that bullying and cyberbullying have common predictors (Casas, Del Rey, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2013) and with the recent evidence that poor work environment predicts workplace cyberbullying as well as offline bullying (Gardner et al., 2016). Furthermore, we expect this to be the case both for cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. This is because of the considerable overlap in predictors of both experience and enactment of workplace aggression (Hershcovis & Reich, 2013). Also, the few studies that specifically investigated workplace bullying enactment, suggest the same antecedents for the two roles (Baillien et al., 2011; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2009; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007).

**Proposition 1.** *Workplace stressors (job, team and organization related) will predict cyberbullying perpetration and victimization.*

### 3.2. Emotions at play

Previously, emotions have been largely discarded in the organizational context, owing to a focus on rationality and deliberate modes of performance in organizations (Domagalski, 1999). In recent years, however, there has been an increased interest in the implication of emotions for individual, group or even organizational performance (Elfenbein, 2007). Despite this increase in interest, emotion research lacks consistency regarding the definition and emotion terms applied. Hence, it is important to create clarity with regards to different labels used, the most prevalent ones being emotion, mood and affect. Reduced to its core components, an (discrete) emotion (e.g., anger, joy) can be described as an internal reaction to a stimulus, with a range of possible behavioral consequences (Frijda, 1988). It arises as a reaction to a situation perceived as relevant for our goals; and it also drives us to react (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Mood (e.g., depression, euphoria) can be distinguished from discrete emotions by the aspects of intensity,



duration and diffuseness (Frijda, 1993). A mood is considered to be a less intense state, to have a longer duration and to lack specificity with regard to a particular object or response. It is a vague feeling individuals have and cannot fully grasp. Because of this, moods do not drive individuals to act in a certain way. Lastly, the concept affect can be considered as an overarching term, encompassing the above states (Gross & Thompson, 2007). So, when speaking of affect, one refers to all different kind of emotional states, both the specific ones (i.e., discrete emotions) and the more general and vague ones (i.e., moods). Affect has already started to receive some attention in the traditional bullying research with recent theoretical models proposing inclusion of emotions in predicting occurrence of workplace bullying (e.g., Douglas et al., 2008; Samnani & Singh, 2015). However, it seems that emotions could have a particularly important role in the cyberbullying processes.

Workplace stressors are known to evoke negative emotions in individuals. For instance, interpersonal conflicts (Ayoko, Konrad, & Boyle, 2012), unjust treatment (Fitness, 2000) and unjust procedures at work (Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999) have been found to elicit feelings of anger. In addition, in creating a taxonomy of affective events at work, Ohly and Schmitt (2013) identified 11 clusters of work events relating to both positive and negative affect. However, as much as people experience negative affect at work, the formal nature of the work environment and the fact that keeping one's job is of great importance, can prevent people from overtly expressing how they feel. However, this might not hold online.

Different theories propose that emotion expression is more overt online as opposed to offline. According to Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence theory, individuals are driven by fear of isolation. This leads them to scrutinize their environment in order to assess whether or not it is safe to openly express their opinions. The online environment is characterized by reduced social presence, limited contact between the individuals, anonymity and reduced threat of negative sanctions by others. Because of these characteristics, individuals may be less inhibited in expressing how they truly feel in CMC (Ho & McLeod, 2008). In fact, according to the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004), people can express different selves online, that can be sometimes dissociated from their offline persona. In addition, Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, and McGuire (1986) have proposed an equalization effect phenomenon. They argue that CMC reduces observable status differences, allowing people to feel more comfortable in speaking out in CMC. Also, the hyperpersonal perspective of CMC (Walther, 1996) proposes that the absence of nonverbal and identity cues, amongst other things, may prompt users to exchange more intimately online as opposed to face-to-face. Finally, there are fewer shared standards regarding online conduct (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). This further contributes to acting out and expressing one's negative emotions in cyberspace as opposed to face-to-face (Byron, 2008). The fact that individuals say and do things in cyberspace that they would not say and do in the face-to-face context, has been previously documented in the literature and described as the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). In support, Ho and McLeod (2008) found that while fear of isolation inhibited opinion expression in face-to-face interactions, this effect disappeared in CMC. Also, Tidwell and Walther (2002) found that in CMC, individuals had more intimate exchanges, disclosing more to their conversation partners than face-to-face. Furthermore, in their review of studies regarding emotions in CMC, Derks, Fischer, and Bos (2008) conclude that intense negative emotions are expressed more overtly in CMC as opposed to face-to-face. They owe this to the fact that CMC is likely to reduce negative social appraisal (Manstead & Fischer, 2001), which refers to being aware of and paying attention to the potential negative consequences of one's emotional reactions.

Adding to that, empirical evidence from the youth cyberbullying literature suggests that emotions could play an important role in the cyberbullying process. Varjas, Talley, Meyers, Parris, and Cutts (2010) found that high school students' motivation for engaging in cyberbullying was more often internal (e.g., to redirect feelings) as opposed to external (e.g., because of anonymity). Also, the most commonly reported motive for cyberbullying amongst youngsters was anger (Gradingier, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009). With regard to victimization, there is evidence that youngsters experiencing emotional difficulties seem to be more prone to being cyberbullied (Cross, Lester, & Barnes, 2015). This suggests that the presence of emotional difficulties may make these individuals easy targets. Another significant observation stems from Baroncelli and Ciucci (2014). They found that not being able to use emotions properly in social interactions (a component of the trait emotional intelligence) was an important factor in cyberbullying but not in traditional bullying. Hence, the above evidence seems to suggest that cyberbullying is related to individuals' emotions. This can be related to the specific context in which this behavior occurs.

Taking together, the evidence suggests that (a) workplace stressors, which are argued to predict the occurrence of workplace cyberbullying, are an important source of emotions at work and that (b) emotions, being that they are expressed more overtly online, could play an important role in the cyberbullying process.

**Proposition 2.** *Emotions will mediate the relationship between workplace stressors (job, team and organization related) and workplace cyberbullying victimization and perpetration.*

### 3.3. Discrete emotions in cyberbullying

In predicting cyberbullying occurrence, we follow Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) in opting for a focus on discrete emotions rather than moods. First of all, mood impacts on cognition rather than action (Clore, Schwarz, & Conway, 1994). Therefore, mood is a very good indicator of mental health and has been mostly studied as such. However, in our model, we see emotion as the driving force behind cyberbullying behavior. This view corresponds with the definition of discrete emotions, as states that drive people to react. Second, we look at the situational predictors (i.e., work stressors) of affect, which aligns with discrete emotions being defined as a reaction to a specific situation or object.

There is still a dispute over which emotions should be considered as discrete or basic emotions. The list of discrete emotions includes from as little as five to as much as sixteen different emotions and there is much dispute with regards to whether or not certain affective terms, such as jealousy, guilt and shame, should be included in this list. Reviewing the vast emotion literature, it is notable that the emotions of anger, fear, sadness, joy and love are the most reoccurring ones in various classifications, reaching the most consensus from different authors (e.g., Lench, Flores, & Bench, 2011; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). In our model, we focus on the three negative emotions. Negative emotions arise when individuals are hindered in fulfilling their goals (Lazarus, 1991), which is the case when confronted with work stressors. Furthermore, negative emotions not only have a strong impact on interpersonal relationships, but they also have a stronger power in predicting behavior than positive ones (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). In addition, the three negative emotions of anger, fear and sadness are the most substantiated ones with regards to the specific behavioral tendencies they evoke (e.g., Ayoko et al., 2012; Lazarus, 1991; Moons, Eisenberger, & Taylor, 2010; Tiedens & Linton, 2001). For all these reasons, we specifically focus on these three discrete emotions in trying to predict cyberbullying occurrence.

According to the appraisal-tendency framework (Lerner & Keltner, 2000), emotions are related to certain appraisals of goal-relevant events. Anger emerges as a consequence of an event appraised as threatening and is associated with the perception of dominance, individual control and other-blame (Lazarus, 1994). It makes individuals more prone to risky behavior (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Fear is also related to events appraised as unfavorable, yet combined with a sense of not being in control, insecurity and an uncertain threat (Lazarus, 1994). It leads to avoidance behavior and risk aversion (Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Tiedens & Linton, 2001). Both anger and fear are found to be evoked by stressful experiences, with anger mobilizing energy for confrontation and fear mobilizing energy for retreat (Moons et al., 2010). Lastly, sadness is related to blaming the situation (Tiedens & Linton, 2001) and to withdrawal behavior (Lazarus, 1991). Sadness makes individuals come across to others as weak, submissive and in need of help (Tiedens, 2001).

### 3.3.1. Cyberbullying perpetration

From the perspective of the cyberbullying perpetrator: anger has been shown to result from stressful work experiences (e.g., Ayoko et al., 2012). Furthermore, anger is an outward-focused emotion that stimulates other-blame and retaliation (Barclay, Skarlicki, & Pugh, 2005). That is, anger experienced as a consequence of workplace stressors will potentially lead one to act out against another individual. We expect this to be especially so in the online context, which is characterized by reduced social presence, limited contact between the individuals, anonymity and reduced threat of negative sanctions by others, stimulating more uninhibited self-expression (Ho & McLeod, 2008). First of all, emotions guide subsequent behavior, sometimes even in response to objects or events that are unrelated to the actual cause of emotions (e.g., Gasper & Clore, 1998; Raghunathan & Pham, 1999). This can be explained by the notion of displaced aggression (Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). Displaced aggression takes place when individuals experience anger, but they cannot express it against the eliciting stimulus because of fear for negative consequences, because of unavailability of the stimulus or because the source of frustration is intangible (Miller, 1941). In the work context, one may experience anger because of, for example, unreasonably high job demands. When perceiving oneself to be unable to cope with this emotion, anger could be displaced towards a more tangible target, being a co-worker or a subordinate. In support, displaced aggression has been found to be a very robust effect in many different contexts (Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000). In addition to displacing aggression, online environment could also provide individuals with the opportunity to 'even the score' in situations in which one would normally fear retaliation. There are many instances in the work context in which aggression should not or cannot be displayed towards the original instigator. This is for instance the case when the instigator is one's supervisor. However, the possibility to stay anonymous in online communication can elevate the fear of retaliation and lead to subordinates acting out against their supervisors. In support, Forsell (2016) found that individuals in supervisory position were more often exposed to cyberbullying at work as opposed to people working in non-supervisory positions. In contrast, in the offline context, bullying has often been identified as a top-down phenomenon (e.g., Roscigno, Lopez, & Hodson, 2009). Finally, anger has already been empirically related to cyberbullying behavior within youngsters (Ak, Özdemir, & Kuzucu, 2015; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010), underlying its importance in the cyberbullying process.

**Proposition 3a.** *Discrete negative emotion of anger will mediate the relationship between workplace stressors and cyberbullying perpetration.*

### 3.3.2. Cyberbullying victimization

From the perspective of the cyberbullying victim: we expect that the experience of fear or sadness will be of importance. This is because, as described above, both fear and sadness are related to lack of power and withdrawal behavior. Experiencing these emotions can make individuals easy targets of displaced aggression. This is in accordance with the biological model of approach/avoidance which suggests that individuals are motivated to approach situations benefitting them and to avoid situations with negative consequences (Ferris et al., 2011). Thus, angry individuals may be more motivated to act out against sad or frightful individuals, from whom they do not expect retribution. The notion that expression of certain emotions (i.e., fear and sadness) makes certain individuals more prone to becoming targets of displaced anger aligns with the emotions as social information (EASI) model (Van Kleef, 2009). According to EASI, emotions regulate social life, in that the expression of emotions informs the observer of these emotions on how to react. With regard to cyberbullying, we argue that observing fear and sadness in others will make angry individuals more inclined to act out against these individuals. This can happen in two ways. First, a potential perpetrator could observe emotions of weakness in their potential victim in the face-to-face work context but choose to act on it in the 'safe' online environment. Second, as already stated, the absence of nonverbal cues online stimulates individuals to exchange more openly and intimately (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1996). Thus, people may overshare their negative emotions online, leading to others regarding them as easy victims. Alternatively, Cooper, Agocha, and Sheldon (2000) found that negative emotionality motivates people to engage in risky behaviors in order to escape these aversive emotional states. Sad and fearful individuals might commit risky online behaviors, such as sharing personal information online, providing others with means to misuse this information. In support, Peluchette, Karl, Wood, and Williams (2015) found that cyberbullying victimization was associated with risky online behavior such as posting indiscreet or negative content online. Finally, anxiousness has already been shown to emerge as a consequence of workplace stressors (e.g., Rodell & Judge, 2009) and to be related to (cyber)bullying victimization (e.g., Rodríguez-Muñoz, Moreno-Jiménez, & Sanz-Vergel, 2015). This also holds for the feeling of sadness (e.g., Espinoza, 2015; Gualdo, Hunter, Durkin, Arnaiz, & Maquilón, 2015).

**Proposition 3b.** *Discrete negative emotions of sadness and fear will mediate the relationship between workplace stressors and cyberbullying victimization.*

### 3.4. Moderators of the stressor-emotion-cyberbullying relationship

According to the AET, certain personal factor may alter the emotional experience of the individuals following the affective work events. In line with this, bullying scholars have recently stressed the importance of looking at the interaction between personal factors and factors related to the work environment in predicting workplace bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011; Hershcovis & Reich, 2013; Samnani & Singh, 2015). However, studies on personality traits as predictors of bullying – as proposed by the individual dispositions hypothesis (Zapf & Einarsen, 2011) – report mixed findings. That is, in both the cyberbullying and workplace bullying literature there is little consistency regarding personality traits involved and their precise relationship with (cyber)bullying (e.g., Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Glaso, Matthiesen, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2007; Persson et al., 2009). However, as indicated previously, individual's emotional life seems to be of particular importance for

cyberbullying. In the following sections, we therefore select and propose personal factors particularly relevant for the experience of emotions as moderators of the stressor-emotions-cyberbullying relationship.

#### 3.4.1. Control appraisal

Stressors at work have previously been argued to elicit negative emotions in individuals. These can be either feelings of anger, sadness or fear. The question that arises consequently is why some people would experience anger following certain workplace stressors, while others would experience fear or sadness. Identical situations can elicit quite different emotions across individuals, depending on how they are appraised (Siemer, Mauss, & Gross, 2007). According to the appraisal theories of emotion (Frijda, 1986; Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1988; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), specific emotions are triggered by a two-step appraisal process. First, during the primary appraisals, an event is perceived as either being favoring or harming to the individual goals. Second, during the secondary appraisal, one's own resources to cope with the event are evaluated. Based on these appraisal processes, specific emotional experiences are triggered (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Roseman, Spindel, & Jose, 1990; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). While anger, sadness and fear all arise following the appraisal of an event as harming (primary appraisal), they are associated with different appraisal of control (secondary appraisal). Whereas anger is associated with the appraisal of individual control for negative events, sadness and fear are associated with situational control for negative events (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). That is, angry individuals will attribute workplace stressors to individual factors (e.g., work pressure as a consequence of an underperforming colleague), while sad or frightened individuals will attribute them to situational factors (e.g., work pressure as a consequence of restructuring). Consequently, we propose individuals to experience anger when perceiving work stressors to be under individual control and to experience sadness or fear when perceiving work stressors to be under situational control.

**Proposition 4.** *Control appraisal will moderate the relationship between workplace stressors and experience of discrete emotions. Individuals (a) who appraise workplace stressors to be under individual control, will experience anger and individuals (b) who appraise workplace stressors to be under situational control, will experience sadness and/or fear.*

#### 3.4.2. Emotion regulation

Also important to consider is the way individuals deal with their emotions. When faced with stressful work experiences, some individuals exhibit significantly impaired functioning, while others thrive. According to Troy and Mauss (2011), it is the ability to regulate one's emotions that increases one's resilience when faced with a challenging work environment. Emotional regulation refers to a dynamic process by which either the experience or the expression of emotions is increased, decreased or sustained (Gross & Thompson, 2007). By applying adaptive emotion regulation strategies, experienced emotions can be readjusted appropriately. However, emotion regulation as such is not necessarily adaptive (Gross & Thompson, 2007).

The process model by Gross (1998), distinguishes between two emotion regulation strategies: antecedent focused and response focused. Antecedent focused emotion regulation strategies refer to strategies that are applied before the emotion response tendencies are fully activated. This is done by regulating the precursors of emotions (e.g., the situation or the appraisal). Response focused emotion regulation strategies are the strategies applied once an emotion is already evoked. Thus when emotions arise, these

strategies modify the observable or physiological signs of emotions – the emotion expression. According to John and Gross (2004), most commonly used emotion regulation strategies, that also lend themselves to individual difference analysis and which represent antecedent and response focused strategies, are respectively reappraisal and suppression. Reappraisal refers to a cognitive change in how one thinks about a situation in order to decrease its emotional impact. This strategy is expected to alter the whole trajectory of the emotional response (i.e., experiential, behavioral and physiological). Suppression indicates an inhibition of ongoing emotion-expressive behavior. It is expected that this strategy, while decreasing emotion expression, will in fact fail to decrease emotional experience and will even increase physiological responses in an individual due to the amount of effort required (Gross, 2002).

The distinctiveness of the two emotion regulation strategies has been demonstrated in many empirical studies. First of all, from a neurophysiological perspective, there is evidence that reappraisal and suppression have a different brain structural basis (Hermann, Bieber, Keck, Vaitl, & Stark, 2014). But also from a psychosocial perspective, these two strategies seem to be related to different outcomes with regard to individuals' functioning. Reappraisal has been shown to increase the experience of positive and decrease the experience of negative emotions and to positively impact well-being and social functioning. Suppression was related to increased experience of negative and decreased experience of positive emotions, to lower well-being and to poorer cognitive and social functioning (Gross & John, 2003; Richards & Gross, 2000). In addition, while reappraisal leads to being more liked by others, having more close relationships and to a greater self-esteem, suppression is associated with feelings of inauthenticity, avoidance of others, less close relationships and a low self-esteem (Gross & John, 2003).

According to Proposition 3, the experience of negative emotions (i.e., anger, fear and sadness) resulting from negative work events, will be related to workplace cyberbullying. In other words, work stressors are expected to increase the experience of negative emotions (stressor-emotions relationship), whilst the latter are expected to give rise to cyberbullying behavior (emotions-cyberbullying relationship). We believe that the use of emotion regulation strategies will moderate this relationship in two ways. Given that reappraisal weakens the experience of negative emotions, this strategy is expected to buffer the effect of stressors on subsequently felt emotions, both for the victims and the perpetrators. Considering the evidence that suppression in fact increases the experience of negative emotions, we expect this strategy to predict an increase in cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. This is because, although an individual may inhibit a direct expression of anger, fear or sadness evoked by workplace stressors, the accumulation of negative emotions experienced as a consequence may actually lead this individual to convey these emotions in an alternative way. In the case of victimization, evidence exists that suppression of emotions evokes a stress reaction in both suppressors and people they interact with and that it limits formation of new relationships as well as maintenance and growth of existing ones (Butler et al., 2003). The stress reaction, reflected in the increased activity of the autonomic nervous system (Gross, 1998), in combination with the above-mentioned social isolation, make an individual vulnerable and thus an easy target of cyberbullying behavior. In the case of perpetration, there is evidence suggesting that suppression results in less empathy (Pogrebin & Poole, 1995). Moreover, in their review of the relationship between emotion regulation strategies and aggression, Robertson, Daffern, and Bucks (2012) conclude that over-regulation in the form of suppression makes individuals more prone to aggression. This conclusion has also been supported in



studies examining the neurological underpinnings of suppression (Davidson, Putnam, & Larson, 2000; Kim & James, 2013).

**Proposition 5.** *Reappraisal will moderate the Stressor-Emotions relationship, in that applying this strategy will buffer the experience of negative emotions (i.e., anger, fear or sadness) as a consequence of workplace stressors.*

**Proposition 6.** *Suppression will moderate the Emotions-Cyberbullying relationship, in that applying this strategy will boost the relationship between (a) anger and cyberbullying perpetration and (b) fear or sadness and cyberbullying victimization.*

#### 4. Discussion

As our work environment evolves from a physical to an increasingly virtual one, we believe that the phenomenon of workplace cyberbullying will grow in importance. The virtual environment is one that offers an outlet for different emotions, while creating an electronic barrier that minimizes the awareness of the impact of online behavior. Building on the comprehensive Affective Events theory and concretizing it using insights from multidisciplinary literature (e.g., the work environment hypothesis, the stressor-strain paradigm, appraisal-tendency framework, EASI model, etc.), we propose an Emotion Reaction model of workplace cyberbullying. By building this model, we expand the theoretical understanding of this little explored phenomenon and provide a starting point for further research in this area. In this model we propose that confrontation with workplace stressors will elicit negative emotions in workers and that these emotions will in their turn give rise to cyberbullying behavior. We also propose that this relation will be altered by control appraisal and the appliance of emotion regulation strategies. We do not claim that there are no other possible variables which can be of important in this process. However, we believe emotions to play a crucial part in the workplace cyberbullying development and therefore focus on the core variables necessary in explaining this relationship. Nonetheless, future research could, hopefully based on more empirical research in this area, further expand this model by proposing additional variables that can be of importance in this process. These can be demographic variables such as age and gender (e.g., Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Reese, 2012), personality variables such as narcissism (e.g., Ang, Tan, & Mansor, 2011), cognitive variables such as moral disengagement (e.g., Pornari & Wood, 2010) and other situational variables such as anonymity (e.g., Postmes & Spears, 1998). Also, while the focus of this paper was on the instigating factor of cyberbullying at work, the model could be supplemented to include outcomes of this behavior as well. We thereby believe they will be similar to the outcomes that have already received much support in the youth literature (e.g., anxiety, depression, substance abuse and suicidal thoughts; Kowalski et al., 2014). In addition, we acknowledge the possibility that environmental and personal factors will not only affect the occurrence of workplace cyberbullying, but that this experience will also affect environmental and personal factors in return. In order to gain a better understanding in the cyberbullying dynamics, we therefore encourage researchers to apply longitudinal designs in testing this model.

This paper has different theoretical implications. First, in defining workplace cyberbullying we include a specific set of one-time behaviors. That is, one-time acts that pose an intrusion into one's personal life and a (potential) threat of public humiliation. This type of act underlines the important distinction between the online and the offline context. In the latter context, one-time negative behaviors are argued to represent related concepts such

as hostility, incivility or aggression rather than bullying. This is not to say that in the online environment, all one-time negative behaviors will constitute cyberbullying. Cyberbullying as well can be distinguished from related concepts such as cybercrime and cyber incivility. These two constructs are different in that they are respectively: a negative behavior that does not target a specific person and a more mild form of negative online behavior that is not intrusive in nature. In sum, we see the one-time intrusive behaviors as an important part of the cyberbullying phenomenon and therefore encourage researchers to consider these acts when constructing and validating cyberbullying questionnaires.

Second, we recognize that there are similarities between the traditional bullying construct and its online counterpart. This offers us the unique opportunity to gain knowledge on the cyberbullying phenomenon at work by the already well-established domain of 'traditional' workplace bullying. Building on this knowledge, we see workplace stressors as the instigating factors of negative workplace behavior such as cyberbullying. We encourage future research to empirically validate this proposition. In that respect, it can be interesting to explore the most important workplace stressors and whether these will differ depending on the role one partakes in the cyberbullying process or depending on the type of bullying behavior (e.g., online versus offline). However, it is also important to recognize the specific context in which cyberbullying occurs. This context — characterized by the lack of non-verbal cues, anonymity, intrusiveness and viral reach — creates its own dynamics. CMC has been shown to change the way individuals handle and express their emotions. We therefore propose that emotions could play a key part in the cyberbullying process. In doing so, we tie in with the call for more research on discrete emotions in the organizational context (Gooty, Gavin, & Ashkanasy, 2009). Different theoretical models have already incorporated some form of emotional constructs when trying to predict workplace bullying. In the Three Way Model of workplace bullying, Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, and De Cuyper (2009), suggested that the experience of frustrations due to individual, task, team and organizational characteristics can lead to workplace bullying, through inefficient coping. More recently, Samnani and Singh (2015) included moral emotions as predictors of workplace bullying. However, emotions are key with regards to cyberbullying, given that the online context enables an even more uninhibited and explicit communication of emotions. This overt expression of emotions online is partly responsible for the success of online help groups (Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2001). However, we argue that this aspect of the online environment can also have its downside.

Third, while there have been many contributions with regards to bullying victimization in the workplace bullying research, fewer efforts have been made to better understand bullying perpetration. We therefore probe into the little explored world of bullying perpetration in formulating different propositions in addition to looking at cyberbullying victimization. We propose that similar situational predictors will be of importance for the two roles, as both bullies and victims are subjected to the same organizational context. This is in accordance with the evidence from Balducci et al. (2012) who found that role conflicts predicted both being bullied and bullying enactment at work while personal predictors for the two groups differed. However, we propose that depending on the emotions experienced and emotion regulation strategies applied, one will end up either on the delivering or the receiving end of aggression. Given the paucity of evidence regarding bullying perpetration at work, we strongly encourage the examination of the enactment path in future studies on workplace cyberbullying, in addition to the victimization path.

Finally, from a practical point of view, we hope this model provides organizational practitioners with a framework that can



guide their actions in both preventing and eliminating cyberbullying in the workplace. Our model suggests both environmental factors (e.g., work characteristics) and personal factors (e.g., emotion regulation strategies) which may contribute to the occurrence of workplace cyberbullying. Given the negative effect of cyberbullying on workers (Staude-Müller et al., 2012), this indicates the need for managers to respond to this potential threat by investing in both the reduction of workplace stressors and the stimulation of adaptive emotion regulation strategies.

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