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Cyberbullying and Social Media Communication: Spiral of Silence, Bystanders, Relational Aggression, and Schadenfreude

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Extant literature has identified cyberbullying tactics and consequences as well as school- and community-based anti-bullying strategies and policies. However, research that explains bullying behavior from a communication perspective in a social network via social media platforms is still lacking. This work theorizes cyberbullying as a relational communication behavior by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates the theories and constructs of personality traits, bystander behavior, spiral of silence, relational aggression, uses and gratifications, and communication competency. Based on the analysis, synthesis and theorization, a set of research propositions and empirical study designs is presented to help guide future research. abstract text.

Keywords: bystander behavior, communication competency, cyberbullying, empathetic communication, relational aggression, relational drama, schadenfreude, social media communication, spiral of silence, uses and gratifications, voyeuristic gratification

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According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Diliberti et al., 2019), 33% and 30% of middle and high school students reported cyberbullying incidents at school or away from school at least once a week, respectively. Cyberbullying is considered a type of bullying, just as verbal, physical, and relational bullying (Olweus & Limber, 2017). Researchers have maintained that while bullying and cyberbullying behaviors are unquestionably related, cyberbullying can exceed traditional bullying in causing social and psychological harm, due to its public nature in an online environment (Englander et al., 2017). Bullying and cyberbullying behaviors usually begin during school years.

Common types of peer bullying include appearance-based teasing against overweight or obese children – according to a national sample of students in 6th -10th

grades (Wang et al., 2010) – as well as youth with disabilities (Knox & Conti-Ramsden, 2003) and diverse sexual orientations (Rivers, 2001). Extant literature has identified the tactics and consequences for the bullied victims as well as school- and community-based anti-bullying strategies and policies (e.g., Cross, 2015; Knauf et al., 2018). Prior literature has addressed several key psychological and socio-contextual factors that motivate or explain the bystander effects in the cyberbullying context, including cognitive and affective empathy, with inconclusive results (Bastiaensens, 2014; Machackova & Pfetsch, 2016). Other research has also profiled the demographic characteristics, personality traits and behavioral tendencies of the "bullies" and their victims (e.g., Ekşi, 2012).

Mason (2008) considered distinct and defining features of cyberbullying to include instances when (1) an individual's personal communication is being copied and sent to others, (2) a large number of negative icons or emoticons are being sent to one person, and (3) altered photos of an individual are being sent to others. Snakenborg et al. (2011) described cyberbullying as the use of electronic communication – to repeatedly send or post content about an individual or a group – that a reasonable person would deem cruel, vulgar, threatening or harmful.

In essence, cyberbullying is a form of online communication that focuses on relational aggression towards another individual or a group of individuals. This type of relational aggression, as conveyed through words and images, could be seen as a type of violent communication behavior with malicious intent. Platt et al., (2016) contended that relational aggression is "a situation-specific communication strategy…for particular purposes and toward specific ends, using multiple modes of communication," (p. 152) and cyberbullying is a method to "achieve the goals of bullying and relational aggression" (p. 153). Common relational aggression can include behavior such as teasing, gossiping, spreading rumors, socially isolating selective individuals, ostracizing selective individuals within the peer group and the like.

Importantly, Porhola et al. (2006) observed that "Communication studies should aim at improving our ability to identify mentally violent communication behaviors and processes as well as to identify the communicative strategies that form an effective defense against them… Theoretical and conceptual frameworks from the discipline of communication offer particularly useful resources for explicating such factors" (p. 232). To

date, research that examines the cyberbullying phenomenon as an aggressive communication behavior using communication theories, including the behavior of the players who belong to the same social network, remains very limited. Likewise, extant literature has shown limited empirical evidence that explains the bystander phenomenon in the cyberbullying context (see Schultze-Krmbbolz et al., 2018).

The current study is among the first to help fill this theoretical gap, aiming to elucidate a conceptual framework based on communication theories to explain and address the relational conflicts through cyberbullying behavior. The objective of this study is to synthesize and theorize cyberbullying as a relational communication behavior to explain the interrelations between by-standers, victims and aggressors for those who share the same social interpersonal network in the social media universe. To contextualize our theoretical framework of aggressive relational communication behavior, this work will utilize the theories of personality traits, spiral of silence, relational aggression and uses and gratifications to serve as the basis for this conceptual exposition. It will also propose a set of communication competencies that can help prevent cyberbullying behavior starting at a young age.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CYBERBULLYING

Social media is a term that describes a group of web-based applications that enable users to – 1) consume and publish content, 2) engage in discourse with other users, and/or 3) interact with institutions and companies – in real time or sequentially from any location (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The most important forms of social media platforms are social networks, blogs, opinion platforms, and content sharing platforms; these platforms allow individuals to directly engage in communication with others who may belong to different clusters of social networks (Lin & Rauschnabel, 2016). As a digital and interactive communication venue, social media make it possible for individuals to express their opinions and for unknown groups to gain visibility for themselves (Zerback & Fawzi, 2017).

In the context of cyberbullying in social media, as 40-50% of the victims may know who their perpetrators are, this suggests that at least half of all cyberbullied victims don't know the identity of their attackers (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Previous studies have also documented that bullying content presented in social media can become permanent as

well as engender widespread and rapid dissemination through one social media platform to another (Heirman & Walrave, 2008). Another study also demonstrated that one-fourth of the respondents had a private video or photo posted online without their permission, and half of the perpetrators were a friend of the victim (Mishna et al., 2018).

Personality Traits

Scholars have considered the factor of personality traits to help explain the behavior of cyberbullying perpetrators and victims, as bullying typically starts with participants who experience anger as a personality trait and exhibited state anger in a social context (Lonigro et al., 2015). The "big five" personality theory (Goldberg, 1990), which reflect five personality dimensions –extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness – has been applied to study cyberbullying behavior. According to a meta-analysis on traditional bullying, bullying perpetration was associated with a lower degree of agreeableness, openness and conscientiousness as well as a higher degree of extraversion and neuroticism, albeit with a small effect size (Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015).

Extant research examining the relation between cyberbullying and Big Five personalities remains limited. Preliminary work (N=408, ages 12-19) demonstrated that individuals who scored higher on extraversion and lower on agreeableness were more likely to be both perpetrators and victims; those who scored higher on openness and conscientiousness were more inclined to become victims (Festl & Quandt, 2013). These results were partly validated by Semerci's (2017) study (N=290, high school students), which showed that openness was the strongest predictor of both cyberbullying perpetrators and victims; while both extroversion and agreeableness predicted the former, openness and conscientiousness predicted the latter.

By comparison, van Geel et al's (2016) work incorporated both the Big Five with the Dark Triad personality traits, where the latter refer to Machiavellianism (i.e., deceitful and manipulative), narcissism (i.e., feelings of grandiosity and entitlement) and psychopathy (i.e., low empathy and high fearlessness). Their findings, based on 1,568 respondents (ages 16-21), suggested that those who demonstrated a low tendency for agreeableness but a high tendency for narcissism and psychopathy were also more likely to be cyberbullies. Escortell et al. (2017) studied 548 children (ages 10-13) and found that

as victims were characterized by higher extroversion, agreeableness and openness but lower neuroticism, bullies had the profile of having scored lower on extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness but higher on neuroticism. Their findings on bystander traits indicated that bystanders shared similar traits with both the bullies and the victims, by scoring lower on extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness, but scoring higher on neuroticism.

Other studies have also examined the bystander characteristics using the Big Five personality model. For example, a study of female college students found that those with high empathy, extroversion and support for homosexuality were more willing to engage in online bullying intervention (Freis & Gurung, 2013). Similarly, another college student study also suggested that the empathy trait was a predictor of intervention (defending the victim) in a cyberbullying simulation (Shultz et al., 2014). Zhou et al. (2019) further reported that the agreeableness trait was negatively – whereas neuroticism was positively – related to college students who did not intervene as bystanders in a cyberbullying event. Given the research findings about personality traits summarized here, bystanders can assist the perpetrators, defend the victim, or do nothing.

Based on the preliminary empirical evidence summarized here, it appears that bystander behavior could have an impact on the communication dynamics involving both the perpetrator and the victim. The following discussion will apply the spiral of silence hypothesis to explicate the role of bystander behaviors in a cyberbullying scenario.

Bystander Behavior

Prior research has defined the relationships between bullies, victims and bystanders (Van Hee et al., 2018). Specifically, the most widely adopted typology, developed by Salmivalli et al. (1996), examines the interpersonal bullying phenomenon based on the role played by adolescents. This typology classified 23.7% of adolescent participants as *outsider* and 12.7% without a significant role; hence the outsiders (or bystanders) and "no role" group made up 36.4%. Schultze-Krumbholz et al.'s (2018) cyberbullying study found that 28.4% of the students could resemble bystanders ("communicating outsiders") and another 52% of the students could be quasi-bystanders ("prosocial defenders") who would comfort the victim (unclear whether this would be done in private or public). As these percentages could shift over time and vary by population, it

would not be unreasonable to assume that bystanders may represent at least about a quarter of the cyberbullying witnesses.

For instance, a preliminary study investigating how college students responded to bullying language in social media provided a glimpse into this scenario. Specifically, this study showed that even though a majority of college student participants (91%) identified cyberbullying in a simulated conversation on Facebook – where negative words are directed to a student – most participants did not post a "comment" to join the conversation (Shultz et al., 2014). Another study indicated that while 44.2% of female college students surveyed across four different universities reported themselves as cyberbullying victims, 36.2% of the respondents were also identified as bystanders (Selkie et al., 2016).

While positive bystander behavior could reflect offering support to the victim, negative bystander behavior could indicate supporting or assisting the cyberbully to oppress the victim or ignore the cyberbullying episode (Van Cleemput et al., 2014). Contextual factors investigated in past research indicated that more positive bystander action, or active intervention to support the victim, could take place more often in a private, instead of a public setting (Bastiaensens et al., 2015). Contrastingly, when the number of anonymous bystanders increased, positive bystander behavior (or intervention) might occur up to a point, before it declined into a curvilinear relationship (You & Lee, 2019). Most importantly, bystander silence could be interpreted by all those who witnessed the bullying incident as an approval of the bullying behavior (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012). To examine the communication factors that can help shape bystander behavior in relation to the cyberbullying phenomenon, we will discuss the potential effect of spiral of silence below.

The Spiral of Silence

Above and beyond the commonly studied cognitive and affective empathy and personality trait factors, a bystander's willingness to intervene or speak up should also be examined from a communication perspective. One approach to examining silent bystander behavior could be to explicate it through the spiral of silence dynamic. The phenomenon of spiral of silence is usually observed in a public environment, where individuals choose to disengage from a controversial or sensitive topic by refraining from expressing their opinion. The social media platform is a type of public communication environment where

one's linguistic and paralinguistic cues are seen by others who are members of the same virtual social network.

The spiral of silence hypothesis, originally proposed by Noelle-Neumann (1974), asserts that when people perceive their views on a controversial or value-laden issue in society are in the minority, they may refrain themselves from expressing their opinion to avoid potential social isolation or ostracism. Empirical research on the spiral of silence phenomenon has primarily focused on a wide variety of societal opinion spirals (Hayes, 2007; Lin & Salwen, 1997; McDevitt et al., 2003; Salwen et al., 1994; Wu et al., 2020). Individual differences in conflict avoidance were also found to play an important role in people's decision on whether to speak out or remain a bystander online (Wang et al., 2017).

Recent research addressing online opinion expression dynamics indicates that online users' perception of majority opinion was influenced by the number of available examples of a certain opinion online; user decision to speak out was based on determining whether they perceive their own opinion is in the majority online in comparison to the perceived majority opinion of the general population (e.g., Zerback & Fawzi, 2017). In contrast, a recent online experimental study found that participants exposed to uncivil comments with emotional valence were more likely to speak out regardless of the perceived opinion climate – if such exposure generated higher levels of anger or depression – and vice versa (Massullo et al., 2021).

From a social communication perspective, the phenomenon of "spiral of silence" can play out on a public stage visible to those who belong to the *same social network online*. The following discussion will introduce two conceptual dimensions to expand the existing scope of spiral of silence hypothesis to explore its theoretical mechanism via *cyberbullying within an individual's online social network*.

Misguided Silent Majority. A highly polarizing, vocal and aggressive minority in an informal or formal social network – such as a school, fraternity or workplace (Pearson et al., 2005) – could regularly present forceful views that may threaten the network equilibrium preferred by the majority. By implication, the net effect of this group dynamic could engender a phenomenon where a vocal minority may subtly or even overtly dominate the majority. For example, the leader(s) of this vocal minority could be

persistent in ingratiating, manipulating or even intimidating the more vulnerable or sympathetic members in that social network to back the vocal minority's agenda behind-the-scenes over time.

If this vocal minority is capable of leading the majority in a social network to misjudge the minority opinion to be the majority opinion, this then could create a *misguided majority*. When faced with a controversial or sensitive issue, this *misguided majority* who believes that they are in the minority could then fall victim to the spiral of silence effect. For example, when social media postings convey relational aggression via verbal and/or visual expressions against a member of a social network, a vocal minority (i.e., the bullies and their friends) could attempt to mainstream the perceived "public opinion" about such aggression to misguide the majority. This could be done by members of this minority group clicking "Like" to help popularize, sharing, and reposting bullying messages – in addition to adding comments to validate these postings – to mislead the majority in the same social network. When the majority misperceives that the vocal minority is seemingly presenting a majority consensus, this, in turn, could help pressure them to become silent bystanders to those relational aggression postings.

This silent bystander behavior could also be in part a result of interpersonal relations, in which people may trust or engage in a close relationship with someone who elicits the false and harmful information online (Stanek, 2016). In the context of cyberbullying, social media platforms can offer bystanders the possibility to stay anonymous and this anonymity can thus alter the functioning of the bystander effect (Brodi & Vangelisti, 2016). In essence, remaining a silent bystander could help an individual stay out of any potential conflict with others in the same social network, which turns the individual into a member of the misguided silent majority. To summarize the conceptual link between the misguided majority and silent bystanders in the context of cyberbullying, the following theoretical proposition is advanced.

Proposition 1: If individuals are misled to accept the social network support for a relational aggression event to represent the majority opinion, then they are more likely to assume the role of misguided silent bystanders.

Indifferent Silent Majority. Elaborating on Noelle-Neumann's (1974) original conception of spiral of silence, Moscovici (1991) maintained that silence can influence

opinions just as much as speech can; the public possesses a "quasi-statistical" sense of their perceived minority status and a perceived need to stay silent for fear of public embarrassment. He further suggested that this growth of spiral of silence could result in how "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer" (p. 302) and "Majorities get more and more in the majority and minorities dwindle out of sight" (p. 302). The "quasi-statistical" process of making a judgment on the minority vs. majority status is similar to the phenomenon of *pluralistic ignorance* – where a given conduct is presumed to represent the majority consensus or group norm – even though the actual but hidden majority privately believe neither to be true (Rendsvig, 2014).

Likewise, Schultz and Roessler (2012) suggested a *subjective–pluralistic pattern* of information seeking to describe how Internet users may selectively access consonant or dissonant public opinion, which could help reduce or enhance the spiral of silence effect. For example, in the context of social recommendations, Kim (2014, p. 189) commented, "When a large number of recommendations lead people to falsely believe that the majority shares their opinions, they may express their opinions, though they are in the minority in reality. On the other hand, a relatively small number of recommendations could falsely lead people to perceive their opinions as being in the minority and discourage them from speaking out, even if they are, in fact, in the majority." Hong and Park (2011) suggested that when the effects of social recommendation systems were perceived to be greater on others than on themselves, individuals were also more willing to express their opinions on the subject at hand.

In essence, pluralistic ignorance could mislead members of a social network to erroneously perceive their opinion to be in the minority, instead of the majority. This misapprehension could then lead them to become *indifferent bystanders*, as they experience low self-efficacy, fear of intimidation or perceived powerlessness to voice their dissenting opinion. This type of inner group communication dynamic could hence permit the vocal minority to dominate the opinion spiral. To conceptualize the connection between the misjudged majority and bystanders on relational aggression via a social network cyberbullying context explicated here, a theoretical proposition is advanced below:

Proposition 2: If individuals misjudge the social network support for a relational aggression event to represent the majority opinion, then they are more likely

to assume the role of indifferent silent bystanders.

Relational Aggression

According to boyd (2014), American teens tend to "hang out" in social media sites to conduct most of their discussion and social interaction; relational drama that takes place in school can also continue in social media. Allen's research, based on focus groups and in-depth interviews with high schoolers (2012, pp. 109-110), characterized 'drama' in cyberspace social interaction as (1) conflict; (2) excessive emotionality; (3) excessive time and attention; and (4) practices that overlap with bullying, gossip, and aggression. The study also found that 'drama' – perceived as a form of social interaction – was associated more with females than males and differentiated from aggression or bullying.

Other researchers have suggested that the bully-victim dyad (Hawkins et al., 2001) or binarism (Farrell, 1999) does not necessarily describe the perceived peer bullying realities. For example, Marwick and boyd (2011) pointed out that teens tend to characterize online discourse involving conflicts and skirmishes as digital "drama" – instead of bullying – to stay clear of a bully vs. victim narrative. Schultze-Krumbholz et al. (2018) reported similarly mixed adolescent perpetrator and victim grouping, where there were skilled manipulators in each group.

Marwick and boyd (2014, p. 1191) defined drama displayed in cyberspace as "performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media." In particular, when especially hurtful and negative status messages are posted about interpersonal relationships, then a public drama begins to emerge with others weighing in via making comments, expressing their "liking" of a comment, reposting/sharing the original postings, and the like. Their study also found that this relational drama is bi-directionally directed by the presumed bullies with greater initial power than others, as it allows teens to frame relational aggression in their own narratives – to make it distinct from the adult definition of perpetrator-victim dyad – and to reduce the perceived seriousness of its potential social harm.

Hence, social media 'drama' can double as a "relational war" soap opera online. As the drama plays out, the bully-victim distinction may become blurry. As such, the peers of the dyad, whether they are active participants or silent bystanders, are all "entertained" with *voyeuristic gratifications*. This process then could help reduce the negative impact of

"bullying" and puts life back to "normal" again for some, when the drama ends (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Even so, while their peers watch the relational dramas unfold as spectators, these dramas could produce undesirable consequences on the bullies and those who have been bullied.

These negative consequences can include anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and impaired emotional well-being (Best et al., 2014; Cassidy et al., 2013; Willford, 2016)—as well as academic problems and behavioral consequences—such as drug use or even suicide (Baker & Helm, 2010; Willford, 2016). Importantly, the negative psychological effects of bullying and cyberbullying experience during elementary, middle and/or high school years could potentially continue into adulthood (Goodboy, Martin & Goldman, 2016; Schafer et al., 2004).

To encapsulate the relationship between relational aggression and relational drama in relation to onlookers present in a social network online, a proposition is proposed as follows.

Proposition 3: If individuals assume the role of bystanders in a relational aggression event, then they are more likely to perceive such aggression as a form of relational drama.

Schadenfreude and Voyeuristic Gratifications

Extant literature suggests that a key driver for social media traffic among members of a social network is a set of mediated communication motives that could lead to the fulfillment of certain cognitive and affective needs (Whiting & Williams, 2013). The uses and gratifications perspective (U&G, hereafter) proposes that individuals are motivated to seek mediated content and communication to meet their cognitive and affective needs, which could enable them to obtain and enjoy a diverse set of psychological and behavioral gratifications (e.g., Blumler, 1979; Katz et al., 1974; Lin, 1993; Rubin, 1993).

Zhang et al. (2011) identified several dimensions of social media gratifications among young adults, including social surveillance, recognition (group identity), emotional support, network extension, and entertainment. All of these gratification dimensions were also found to be correlated with collective self-esteem (e.g., worthy of the group membership) and emotional openness (e.g., easy to expose inner thoughts or often talk

about oneself). Kim (2014) reported that the use of social recommendation systems (e.g., "Like") was linked to strong expression-seeking, entertainment-seeking and social interaction motivations.

According to Schutz (1966), interpersonal needs that are considered "social" in nature can influence three different aspects of human communication, including inclusion, affection and control. By implication, social media use could enable individual users to help exercise and gratify their interpersonal needs for social inclusion, affection and control through relational communication. For instance, Young et al. (2017) reported that romantic motivations, social belongingness motivations, and greater social comparison tendencies were related to online aggression victimization; in addition, romantic motivations, social comparison, and social media use were associated with online aggression perpetration.

As indicated in a study by Coyne et al. (2010), relational aggression is frequently found in reality TV programs; both children and adults are regularly exposed to these types of "reality-based" relational drama content. Empirical literature showed that voyeuristic appeals of reality TV programs were related to the consumption and enjoyment of these programs (Nabi et al., 2006; Tsay-Vogel & Krakowia, 2017), as were voyeuristic viewing orientations (Baruh, 2010). A focus group study conducted by Hall (2006) suggested that part of what the participants found reality shows "funny" was "watching people behaving badly" or "seeing someone be called out humiliatingly" (p. 204). Hall (2006) dubbed this element of enjoyment as "*schadenfreude*," or "taking pleasure in another's misfortune" (p. 204).

Prior research has suggested that social media are voyeuristic by nature, as they present content that could be both great and creepy at the same time as a hook to attract users' attention and interest (Pempek et al., 2009). Mantymaki and Islam (2014) also indicated that an individual's use of social networking sites is related to a form of voyeurism (through maintaining maximum control over one's use of media) and exhibitionism (through making oneself known to others).

Given that the relational aggression exhibited on reality TV shows via traditional media and in a social network via social media bears a lot of resemblance, a parallel may also exist in the voyeuristic gratification or *schadenfreude* for bystanders exposed to both

media venues. Since the role of perpetrator and victim could be interchangeable as discussed above, both actors involved in the relational aggression/drama may even savor their moments in the voyeurs/ bystanders' *schadenfreude*. To theoretically integrate the concepts of relational aggression and the social media U&G via cyberbullying in a social network, the following proposition is posited.

Proposition 4: If individuals accept relational aggression as relational drama, then they are more likely to derive entertainment and voyeuristic gratifications.

Social Communication Competency and Cyberbullying

Active use of social media to connect with one's social network typically begins in early adolescence. Pew Research study (Anderson & Jiang, 2018) reported that children aged 13-17 are active users of the following social media platforms: YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. Cyberbullying among teens is usually driven by peer dynamics at school (Schneider et al., 2012); aggressors and aggression targets are typically acquaintances (Ybarra et al., 2012). Hence, the same "audience" from school both offline and online is readily available to witness the unfolding of a targeted relational aggression incident or drama.

Persaud's (2017) interview with high school teachers reported the distinction in perceived severity between the labels of "bullying" and "drama" as follows: teachers tend to respond to the complaints about "bullying" and dismiss the reports about social drama incidents. Smith et al.'s (2018) study of college students (or emerging adults) indicated that although young adults admitted how relational drama can escalate to the point of bullying, the connection between relational drama and bullying was somewhat unclear to them. These findings reflect the lack of empirical clarification on whether the effects of cyberbullying could be considered as traditional bullying in an online environment.

Empathetic Communication. Bullied victims are often expected to simply "get over it" and endure the victimhood, so that they could build and strengthen their character (Hunt, 2011) in their maturation process. This cultural psyche illustrates a lack of collective efficacy to reduce the bullying phenomenon as an ethical obligation. Luce-Kapler et al. (2010) proposed a new kind of ethic – based on an empathetic understanding of real human beings in the online space – to increase teen awareness of how relational drama abuse can affect their peers in real ways in real life. Schultze-Krumbholz et al.'s (2016)

longitudinal study, for instance, found intervention on cognitive and affective empathy resulted in a decrease in cyberbullying. Cultivating adolescents to become empathetic communicators to reduce their relational aggression within their social network in a social media context may require the acquisition of a sufficient level of communication competency.

Studies that examined the relationship between empathetic communication and cyberbullying are scarce. According to the findings of a tangentially relevant survey study, when adolescents had a higher level of ethical media competence, their media use had a significant negative effect on cyberbullying and a non-significant effect on cybervictimization (Müller et al., 2014). By implication, developing ethical media competencies could potentially decrease the use of online media for cyberbullying and cybervictimization.

For example, a survey of Spanish teens showed that while a higher level of social and emotional competency was negatively related to cybervictimization and cyberperpetration, the opposite was true with greater use of emotional content online (Marín-López et al., 2020). These findings suggest that it is important to develop both emotional empathy competencies and emotional self-control skills. For instance, a Chinese adult survey found individual differences in self-control to be a stronger mediator in the relationship between moral disengagement and cyberbullying behavior for those with higher callous-unemotional traits (Lin et al., 2023). A study of Polish teens further indicated that as emotional self-control reduced cyberbullying frequency, so was group mechanisms which was influenced by pro-sociality and peer support (Rębisz et al., 2023).

It is logical to assume that negative social interaction outcomes are associated with a lack of communication competency to exercise emotional competency and self-control. For example, a Portuguese adolescent study reported that while an aggressive communication style was significantly related to perceived fairness of cyberbullying behavior, decreased emotional well-being, and cyberbullying intentions, perceived fairness/unfairness of cyberbullying could help contribute to cyberbullying intentions (Pereira et al., 2022). These findings reveal that communication style, ethical media competence, and social-emotional competence can all play a role in preventing cyberbullying behavior. It should be further noted that ethical media competency and

social-emotional competency don't necessarily equal to communication competency, which informs and governs an individual's communication style.

Communication Competency. The communication competence model proposed by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) advocates training students to develop the knowledge, ability and motivation for competently engage in communication behavior appropriate for a given social context. Light (1989) conceptualized the concept of communicative competence to include 5 principles: functionality and adequacy of communication as well as sufficiency of knowledge, judgment, and skills. Spitzberg (2006) later proposed a "computer mediated communication (CMC) competence model" – which entails CMC motivation, knowledge, skills as well as message factors, contextual valence, and cofactors – to explain how individuals form and develop their CMC personal relationships. Light and McNaughton (2014) further added psychological factors and environmental elements to Light's (1989) original model as the components that will affect levels of communication competence in a digital era.

Scholars have shown that communication competence is not a fixed attribute of a person. Instead, it is an evolving characteristic that advances in response to changes in one's skill sets and motivations (Blackstone et al., 2011). As such, communication competency in the context of cyberbullying should also enable social media users to understand the civil legal consequences associated with libel and defamation (Jones, 2017), in addition to criminal offense outcomes for cases involving bodily harm or suicides (Lynch, 2018). Empirical research has shown that promoting communicative competence can help increase social, emotional and coexistence relationships among secondary school students (González-Alonso et al., 2020).

As no existing research has addressed the relationship between communication competency and relational aggression in social network communication, a proposition is postulated below to conceptually link these constructs in a cyberbullying context.

Proposition 5: If individuals acquire adequate communication competency to engage others in their social network, then they are more likely to reduce their initiation of relational aggression toward others.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The current synthesis integrates the spiral of silence hypothesis, uses and gratification perspective, relational aggression construct, and communication competence model to conceptualize cyberbullying behavior within a social network and in a social media context. Through this synthesis, it is clear that most seemingly denigrating or cruel communication exchanged on social media revolves around interpersonal conflicts and does not neatly fit the academic definition of cyberbullying (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2010). A meta-analysis study suggested that risky information-technology use, moral disengagement, depression, social norms, and traditional bullying perpetration were more strongly related to cyberbullying perpetration than other predictors such as parental interaction or mediation (Chen et al., 2017).

The relational drama seen on a reality TV show such as *Survivor* typically ends with the "survivors" and "losers" – who have plotted against each other – wishing each other well without a show of malice. A real-life relational drama involving aggressive communication behavior doesn't necessarily end like the season finale of the *Survivor* show. Bullies tend to gain power or status by being tenacious or forceful in their coercive action, whether such action is displayed overtly and/or subtly offline or online. In particular, if a vocal minority successfully misleads the majority to believe the minority position as representing the majority opinion, then the majority could become *silent bystanders* – as they misapprehend themselves as the powerless minority – and join the ranks of a *misguided* or *indifferent majority* in reality.

To achieve a better understanding of the communication dynamics inherent to relational aggression in a social media environment, future research could consider empirically testing the theoretical propositions proposed in the current study. For instance, research should explore how perpetrators and victims alike may maneuver and mobilize a vocal minority to create a misguided or indifferent silent majority to achieve their relational aggression communication goals. A potential approach to implement this research could harvest social media messages posted by the "dueling parties" – for a specific cyberbullying event in a school setting to study relational aggression (e.g., school gossip) – or a societal setting for examining social aggression (e.g., conspiracy theory). Specifically, applying the "spiral of silence" typologies conceptualized above, a textual

analysis combined with a sentiment analysis could identify how both the aggressor(s) and the victim(s) may attempt to persuade their supporters to launch an emotional "communication campaign" that aims at misguiding the majority or neutralizing them into an indifferent majority.

Research could also be developed to differentiate relational aggression with malicious intent from relational drama for "entertainment" purpose, by investigating the motivations for engaging in aggressive communication and the gratifications anticipated from bystanders. For example, a 2 (target: male vs. female) x 3 (message: criticism vs. ridicule vs. tease) experiment can measure participant evaluation of perceived motivations behind different types of relational aggression, followed by randomly exposing them to a social media post in one of the six message conditions before measuring gratifications obtained (including entertainment and voyeurism). The mocked cyberbullying event could be about an individual's physical appearance, a potentially offensive utterance or an embarrassing photo.

Furthermore, longitudinal research could be developed to validate whether increasing communication competency in a child's socialization will decrease cyberbullying behavior in the long run. This type of training could be easily incorporated into a school's curriculum to teach students the all-important communication skills required for successful interactions with others – as well as the necessary information and media/social media literacy – for understanding the positive/negative effects of mediated communication on others in society. To empirically examine the effectiveness of this type of curriculum, a field experiment that utilizes a repeated measures design could assess the beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and communication behaviors between children who receive communication competency training (including social-emotional competency) and those who do not receive such training over time. An evaluation study could also be implemented to record, analyze and evaluate social media interactions between students who have received the communication competency training vs. those who have not received such training.

Taken together, the current study has conceptualized cyberbullying as a relational communication behavior and presented a set of research propositions for empirical testing, in addition to several potential empirical study designs that can further our

understanding of relational aggression in the social media space. The theoretical propositions and empirical designs advanced here have therefore provided a good start for driving more theory-based research and evidence-based practices for use in reducing cyberbullying in social media and its negative social emotional consequences in a school and a societal setting in general.

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