

The Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence between PEN Personality Factors and Cyberbullying in a Student Population

Oluyinka Ojedokun ¹, E.S. Idemudia ²

¹. Department of Psychology (Ipelegeng Child & Family Centre), Faculty of Human and Social Science, North West University (MC), South Africa

². Department of Psychology (Ipelegeng Child & Family Centre), Faculty of Human and Social Science, North West University (MC), South Africa
yinkaoje2004@yahoo.com

Abstract: A new trend in the bullying research is cyberbullying which is considered as a serious social problem among youth. Because this trend is so recent, little is known about the personality traits of cyberbullies. Although studies have investigated the association between psychosocial factors and cyberbullying, little attention is paid to the intervening variables in this association. To fill this gap in knowledge, we investigated the moderating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between PEN personality factors (psychoticism, extroversion and neuroticism) and tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying among 199 males and 198 females Nigerian undergraduates in the age range of 18-27 years. Results showed that emotional intelligence moderated the relationship between cyberbullying and each of the PEN personality factors. Furthermore, gender difference existed in cyberbullying. These findings have implications for prevention of cyberbullying among the students. Therefore, university authorities are encouraged to combat cyberbullying, this they can do through the development of self-control strategies among the students. To this end, psychologists should be involved in the development of self-control strategies for students with low emotional intelligent to curb their tendencies to perpetrate cyberbullying.

[Ojedokun O, Idemudia ES. **The Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence between PEN Personality Factors and Cyberbullying in a Student Population.** *Life Sci J* 2013; 10(3):1924-1930] (ISSN: 1097-8135).
<http://www.lifesciencesite.com>. 285

Keywords: Cyberbullying, personality factor, emotional intelligence, students

1. Introduction

Cyberbullying is a modern form of aggression deployed through digital spaces. Researchers [e.g., 1-8] have identified cyberbullying as a social problem among students in schools. The findings [e.g., 2, 9-14, 6, 15-16] indicated that the phenomenon has negative consequences for the socio-emotional wellbeing and academic success of the victims and the perpetrators. Hence, finding ways to prevent cyberbullying is an ongoing challenge for students, parents, school administrators, educators, policy makers and researchers [6].

Although studies [e.g., 2, 4, 7, 17-21] have documented incidence and psychosocial predictors of cyberbullying among students in different countries around the world, few studies, if any, on the moderating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between PEN personality factors and cyberbullying have been published yet. The present study therefore, examined the moderating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between PEN personality factors and cyberbullying.

An understanding of the moderating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between PEN personality factors and tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying would results in more effective prevention strategies to curb cyber bullying among

adolescents and youth who are predisposes to perpetrate cyberbullying due to their personality predispositions.

Theoretical background and review of literature

Cyberbullying is an aggressive, intentional act carried out by an individual or a group, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself [22]. In this paper, “bullying” – a persistent harassment deployed against someone for the purpose of establishing dominancy over the person refers to bullying in the traditional sense, and “cyberbullying” refers to bullying via electronic communication tools such as email, cell phone, personal digital assistant (PDA), instant messaging or the World Wide Web.

According to Willard (2005),^[23] cyberbullying may occur as flaming (sending angry, rude or vulgar messages to individual[s] privately or to online groups), harassment (sending offensive messages repeatedly to a person), cyber stalking (threats of harm/intimidating someone), denigration (posting harmful, untrue or cruel statements about other people), masquerading (pretending to be someone else and sending material to make that person look bad or get into trouble), outing and

trickery (sending/posting material that contains private or embarrassing information about a person, engaging in tricks to solicit embarrassing information to make that information public, and forwarding private messages and images) and exclusion (actions that intentionally exclude a person from the community of an online group).

In the traditional bullying research, some authors have postulated the “personality hypothesis” to explain the association between certain personality characteristics and bullying. For instance, Olweus (1984)^[24] posited that bullying could be explained mainly by personality.

Personality is a dynamic organization, inside the person, of psychophysical systems that create the person’s characteristic patterns of behavior, thoughts and feelings [25]. In this study, the personality theory of Eysenck (1976),^[26] a theory of personality development and general learning theory offers an explanation for the development of delinquent and antisocial behavior. Eysenck posited that personality development is the result of an interaction between temperament and socialization. He submitted that an individual acquires self-control or ‘conscience’ through a conditioning paradigm and that conformity to social norm through reinforcement of self-control varies according to temperament-based personality characteristics. In other words, some people have a temperament that makes them either more or less sensitive to experiences that could potentially lead to self-regulation (i.e., inhibition for acting anti-social) and therefore more or less easily socialized.

Eysenck (1976)^[26] suggested that many antisocial behaviors are probably reinforcing in a way that gratifying the individual performing them. Thus, such behavior functions as an antecedent for reinforcement, which in turn maintains the behavior. In contrast, if an antisocial act is associated with punishment consistently, the behavior becomes a conditioned negative stimulus for a conditioned negative emotional response (e.g., anxiety about a possible punishment). Thus, anxiety about possible punishment leads to the inhibition of the behavior. Eysenck theory implies that good conduct could be the result of socialization.

Eysenck’s hypothesis was that individual differences in susceptibility to conditioning result from the interaction of two temperament traits: extraversion (E) and neuroticism (N). Persons high on E are less responsive than persons low on E to the conditioning of operant and respondent responses. A person high on the E trait has a low basal arousal level in the neocortex and does not acquire anxiety-based constraints on behavior as easily as a person with a high level of arousal in the neocortex (low E). According to Eysenck the biological basis for E

resides in the ascending reticular activating system (ARAS). This system governs the functioning of the cortex, specifically the neocortex, and its response to incoming stimuli. One function of the cortex is to inhibit the activities of the lower brain centers. Thus, a highly aroused cortex easily inhibits behavior. Because of their high basal level of cortical arousal, introverts (low E) are more likely to acquire effective self-regulation of their behaviors than are extraverts (high E).

High N is associated with ease of emotional arousability, which increases the difficulty of self-control [26-27]. A person low on the N trait reacts slowly and moderately to most emotional stimuli and ceases reacting when the stimuli are withdrawn. Conversely, a person high on the N trait is quickly and easily aroused emotionally and the arousal is more persistent, which makes inhibition of behavior more difficult. Thus, Eysenck hypothesized that individuals who are low to average on both the E and N traits will be more likely to acquire an effective self-regulation system because they conditioned more easily and can easily control impulsive act. Eysenck also theorized that criminality and antisocial behavior are both positively and causally related to high levels of psychoticism. In summary, Eysenck theory predicted that, those low on P, E, and N would exhibit better behaviors than those high on the three traits.

Connolly and O’Moore (2003)^[28] have reported that bullies scored higher on psychoticism, extraversion and neuroticism, when compared to none bullies. Slee and Rigby (1993)^[29] also identified high levels of psychoticism among bullies. Byrne (1994)^[30] found that bullies displayed higher neuroticism levels than none bullies. Mynard and Joseph (1997)^[31] found that bully-victims had higher neuroticism and psychoticism levels than none bullies. Whilst there has been substantial research on the characteristics of those involved in traditional bullying little is known about the personalities of cyber bullies. However, a study conducted in Turkey [2] examined cyberbullying within a population of undergraduate university students, and found that higher level of psychoticism was associated with increased tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying.

Emotional intelligence might moderate the relationship between PEN personality factors and cyberbullying. This connection is implied in the Eysenck’s theory that low scorers on E and N factors have more self-control because they are conditioned more easily and can easily inhibit impulsive act.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability, skill or a self-perceived ability to identify, assess and control one’s emotions and those of others/groups. Ojedokun (2010, 2009)^[32-33] reported that EI

moderated the relationships between some psychosocial factors and anti-social behavior. Ability to recognize and manage self and other's emotion inherent in people with high levels of EI is suspected to be responsible for this association.

Findings regarding gender difference in cyberbullying are inconclusive. Researchers [e.g. ³⁴] reported that females engage in cyberbullying more than males because cyberbullying is considered as a relational type of bullying which is mostly done by girls. While Arıcaç et al., (2008), ^[31] Dilmaç (2009), ^[9] Erdur-Baker (2010) ^[35] and Erdur-Baker and Kavrut (2007) ^[36] challenge the claim that girls are more likely to engage in cyberbullying because girls are socialized in their own culture to be less aggressive.

Based on the aforementioned literature, it was hypothesized that PEN personality factors will significantly predict tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying but this prediction will be moderated by EI, so that the tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying will be attenuated in the presence of high levels of EI.

2. Material and Methods

Design: This is a cross-sectional quantitative survey research. The independent variable is the PEN personality factors, cyberbullying is the dependent variable and emotional intelligence is the moderating variable.

Participants: A total of 397 students from a university located in the South-western Nigeria participated in the study. They were recruited from various faculties and disciplines. They comprised of 199 (50.13%) males and 198 (49.87%) females with age ranged between 18 and 27 years (Mean = 22.44, Sd= 4.06).

Measures

A personal information form, EPQ, emotional intelligence and cyberbullying measures were used to collect data.

Personality factors. The short form Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ-R ^[37]) is a 48-item scale measuring extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism and a lie scale. Each item is assessed on a two-point scale: "Yes (1) and No (0)".

Emotional intelligence. The Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS: Wong & Law, 2002) ^[38] was used to assess EI. The scale comprises of 16 items, organized into four dimensions: Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA), Others' Emotional Appraisal (OEA), Regulation of Emotion (ROE), and Use of Emotion (UOE). Example items include: "I have a good sense of why I have certain feelings most of the time"; "I always know my friends'

emotions from their behavior"; "I always set goals for myself and then try my best to achieve them" and "I am able to control my temper and handle difficulties rationally". The response is on a 7 point scale ranging from "strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7)".

Cyberbullying. Self-reported tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying was assessed with the Cyber Bullying Scale (CBS Çetin et al. 2011) ^[39]. The CBS consisted of 22 items that measure perpetration of cyber bullying. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the items included in the scale on a 5-point scale (Always =5, Frequently = 4, Occasionally =3, Rarely =2, and Never =1). Çetin et al., (2011) ^[39] reported an alpha of .89 for the CBS. In this study, an alpha of .91 was obtained.

Procedure

Surveys were administered in the class environment while students were having their lectures. Researchers administered the surveys and answered participants' questions about the study. Prior to administering the surveys, participants were informed about the study and voluntarily completed a consent form attached to the questionnaire. They were instructed not to influence each other while responding to the survey items. To ensure that the respondents responded to the questions honestly and sincerely, participants were told not to identify themselves in any way on the survey. They were also informed that their responses are for research purposes only and would be kept confidential. The survey required approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete. All data were coded and entered in an SPSS file.

Data analysis

Pearson multiple correlation and moderated hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the hypothesis of the study.

3. Results

In order to test the relationships among the variables of study, we computed the Pearson r correlations among the variables in the study. The mean, standard deviation and correlation coefficients are presented in Table 1.

Table 1, Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for study variables (n=379)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CB	—					
2. EI	-.55**	—				
3. Psycho	.38**	-.22**	—			
4. Extro	.38**	-.32**	-.32**	—		
5. Neuro	.25**	-.28**	-.16**	-.37**	—	
6. Age	.02	-.08	-.05	.01	.00	—
Mean	45.94	34.25	18.75	17.96	19.77	22.44
Sd	10.65	8.32	3.87	3.37	3.34	4.09
Alpha	.91	.87	.89	.75	.84	-

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 levels.

CB = Cyberbullying, EI = emotional intelligence, Psycho = psychoticism, Extro =extroversion, N euro = neuroticism

An initial bivariate correlation analysis revealed that cyberbullying was significantly and negatively related to emotional intelligence ($r = -0.55$; $p < .001$). Cyberbullying was also positively and significantly related to psychoticism ($r = 0.38$; $p < .001$), extroversion ($r = 0.38$; $p < .001$) and neuroticism ($r = 0.25$; $p < .001$). There was no significant relationship between cyberbullying and age ($r = 0.02$; $p > .05$).

To test the hypothesis of the study, a moderated hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to determine the moderating role of EI in the relationship between PEN personality factors and cyberbullying. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Moderated multiple regression in terms of PEN Personality Factors

Variables	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
	B	SE	β	t	P
(Constant)	24.601	3.526	-	6.977	.001
Gender	0.385	0.832	.11	1.754	.050
Age	0.216	0.201	.04	1.078	.282
EI	-0.958	0.212	-.39	-6.074	.001
Psycho	1.027	0.058	.74	7.723	.001
Extro	0.505	0.076	.45	6.614	.001
Neuro	0.412	0.046	.29	4.976	.007
P x EI	-0.135	0.039	-.23	-4.204	.002
E x EI	-0.395	0.029	-.19	-3.534	.006
N x EI	-0.175	0.043	-.17	-3.258	.008
R = .77, R ² = .59, AdjR ² = .58, F = 69.919, P < .001					

** $p < .001$

EI = emotional intelligence, P = psychoticism, E = extroversion, N = neuroticism

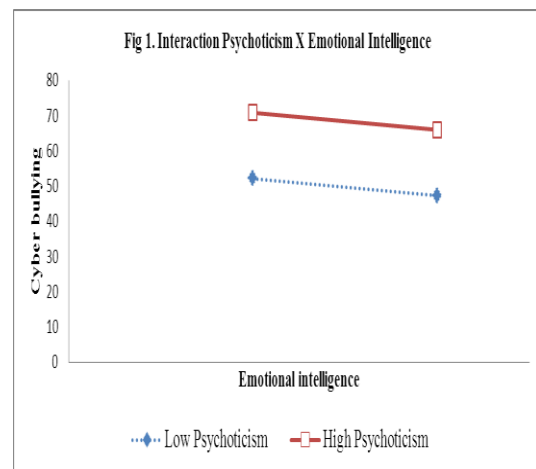
B = unstandardized regression coefficient, SE = standard error, β = standardized regression coefficient, t = t-test, p = probability value, R = multiple correlation coefficients, R² = proportion variance explained, F = F-ratio.

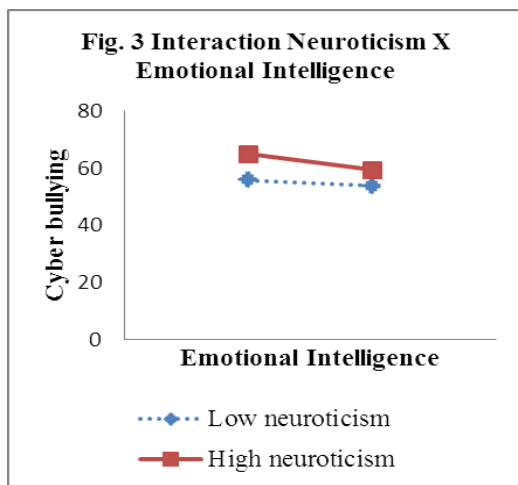
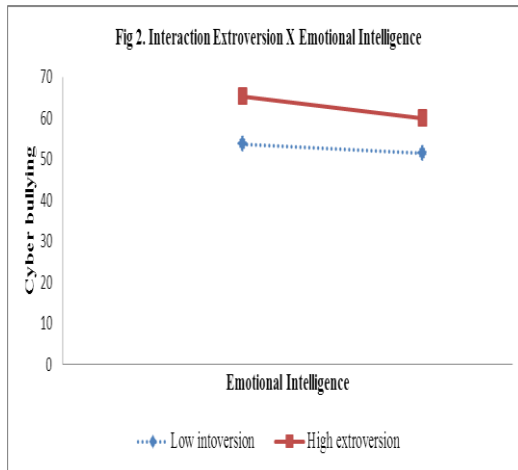
The results indicated that the whole model significantly predicted cyberbullying with $R = .77$, $R^2 = .59$, $F(9,387) = 69.919$, $p < .001$, suggesting that all the variables in the model contributed about 59% to variance in cyberbullying. The results also indicated significant independent influence of gender, EI, P, E and N on cyberbullying ($\beta = .11$, $t = 1.754$, $p < .05$; $\beta = -.39$, $t = -6.074$, $p < .001$; $\beta = .74$, $t = 7.723$, $p <$

$.001$; $\beta = .45$, $t = 6.614$, $p < .001$; $\beta = .29$, $t = 4.976$, $p < .001$).

In addition, emotional intelligence significantly moderated the relationships between the PEN personality factors and cyberbullying -P ($\beta = -.23$, $t = -4.204$, $p < .01$), E ($\beta = -.19$, $t = -3.534$, $p < .01$) and N ($\beta = -.17$, $t = -3.258$, $p < .01$). These findings imply that emotional intelligence attenuated the influence of personality factors on the tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying.

As Figures 1 to 3 showed, the influence of PEN personality factors on tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying was attenuated with increased levels of emotional intelligence. Fig 1 showed how the relationship between psychoticism and cyberbullying was attenuated with increased levels of EI. Likewise in Fig 2, emotional intelligence moderated the relationship between extroversion and cyberbullying. Lastly, in Fig 3, the relationship between neuroticism and cyberbullying was moderated in the presence of increased levels of emotional intelligence. Therefore, the study hypothesis which stated that emotional intelligence will moderate the relationship between PEN personality factors and cyberbullying was supported by the data.





4. Discussion

The study investigated the moderating role of emotional intelligence in the relationships between PEN personality factors and tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying. The findings confirmed that emotional intelligence moderated the associations between PEN personality factors and tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying.

The findings indicated that each of the PEN personality factors contributed significantly to the tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying. These findings corroborate the findings which indicated that higher levels of psychoticism were associated with increased tendencies to perpetrate cyberbullying [2]. The findings were consistent with Eysenck personality theory and findings reported in traditional bullying research [see 30-31]. In this regard, the findings extend our knowledge on the association between cyberbullying and personality by investigating the personality profile of cyberbullies.

Findings also indicated that emotional intelligence contributed significantly to prediction of cyberbullying. In other words, what seems to set

cyber bullies apart most of all is their low or lack of skills or abilities to control their impulsiveness and understanding other's feelings. Individuals who lack self-control are more likely to abuse relationships. The findings are consistent with findings in this area [see 32-33]. This is interesting because multi-media technology provides veritable platform for people to unleash their bottled-up emotions on others without detection. The findings suggest the importance of emotional intelligence in designing anti-cyberbullying interventions.

Apart from the relative contributions of the PEN personality factors and emotional intelligence, the findings also indicated that emotional intelligence moderated the relationship between each of the PEN personality factors and cyberbullying. In other words, perpetrators of cyberbullying seem to be characterized by low levels of emotional intelligence and high levels of psychoticism and neuroticism. They are also extroverts. The findings are in line with those of Ojedokun (2010, 2009) [32-33] that found emotional intelligence as a moderator of the relationship between certain psychosocial factors and anti-social behavior. The implication of this is that, cyber bullies are distinguished by their personality traits which predispose them to engage in anti-social acts, but the good news is that all hope is not lost, because emotional intelligence moderated this anti-social tendency. Thus, in addition, to other prevention and intervention approaches enumerated in literature, training on handling of self and others' emotions would undoubtedly complement other psychological interventions to curb cyberbullying.

Lastly, findings revealed a significant influence of gender on tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying, but in this case, males are the offending party. This is contrary to the findings of Keith and Martin (2005), [31] but consistent with argument of some researchers in this area [see 3, 9, 35-36]. Nevertheless the controversy over gender difference in cyberbullying rages on and it calls for more research to unravel the process of gender in cyberbullying.

Conclusion

The present study is not without its own limitations. Though, the personality approach and moderating role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between PEN personality factors and cyberbullying have not been sufficiently studied, and when it is explored, as in the present attempt, it is with cross-sectional design. This limits the conclusion in causal-terms, and suggesting refining the approach of data collection. The findings may also suffer from common method variance problem because all measures were self-reported from the

same source. However, this is not considered as a serious problem that could invalidate our findings.

In conclusion, the present study provided evidence that PEN personality factors influence tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying. Further, emotional intelligence moderated the association between the PEN personality factors and tendency to perpetrate cyberbullying. Finally, there was gender difference that has implications for future study.

Finally, the findings have implications for prevention of cyberbullying among students. Therefore, university authorities are encouraged to combat cyberbullying among students, this they can do through the involvement of psychologists in the development of appropriate emotional intelligence strategies.

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Oluyinka Ojedokun

Department of Psychology (Ipelegeng Child and Family Centre), Faculty of Human and Social Science, North West University (MC), Private Bag X2046, Mmabatho, South Africa, 2735

E-mail: yinkaoje2004@yahoo.com

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8/12/2013