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Platts, J., Coyne, I. orcid.org/0000-0002-5729-7584 and Farley, S. orcid.org/0000-0003-0782-4750 (2023) *Cyberbullying at work: an extension of traditional bullying or a new threat?* *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, 16 (2/3). pp. 173-187. ISSN 1753-8351

<https://doi.org/10.1108/ijwhm-07-2022-0106>

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Cyberbullying at Work: an extension of traditional bullying or a new threat?

Abstract

Purpose

Research comparing offline and cyberbullying is relatively sparse, with scholars suggesting the need for empirical investigations to clarify whether cyberbullying and offline bullying are similar or different constructs.

Methodology

Using an experimental vignette methodology, the current study of 163 working participants obtained via social media, examines the effect of medium (offline vs cyberbullying), type (person-related vs work-related) and the interaction between medium and type on perceptions of definitional criteria (severity, frequency, power and intent) and outcomes (negative emotion, fairness, job satisfaction and turnover intention).

Findings

Significant differences between offline and cyberbullying were seen only for ratings of severity, job satisfaction and turnover intention, with cyberbullying perceived as more severe and as having a more detrimental impact on job satisfaction and turnover intention. Stronger effect sizes emerged for type of bullying, with person-related bullying having a stronger negative impact on definitional criteria and outcomes than work-related bullying. Moreover, interaction effects suggested differences between the two media were dependent on type of act – with person-related/cyberbullying acts seen more negatively than other acts.

Originality

This paper is the first to use a vignette approach to test the similarity or difference hypothesis between offline and cyberbullying. Overall, limited support is seen for the notion that offline bullying and cyberbullying are perceived as different constructs, with type of behaviour suggesting a more complex relationship between the two.

Keywords: workplace bullying; cyberbullying; power; fairness; job satisfaction

Cyberbullying at Work: an extension of traditional bullying or a new threat?

Traditional (offline) workplace bullying, defined as “situations where an employee repeatedly and over a prolonged time period is exposed to harassing behavior from one or more colleagues (including subordinates and leaders) and where the targeted person is unable to defend him/herself against this systematic mistreatment” (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018, p.73) has an extensive evidence base across several work settings, with meta-analyses of exposure to bullying reporting target rates of 15-16% (Dhnani *et al.*, 2021; Nielsen *et al.*, 2010). By contrast, cyberbullying is defined 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” (Vranjes *et al.*, 2017, p.326). Cyberbullying has only recently been studied systematically in the workplace (Celuch *et al.*, 2022; Coyne *et al.*, 2017; Choi and Park, 2019; Forssell, 2019), with prevalence rates ranging between 2.8% to 26% (Baruch, 2005; Forssell, 2016; Gardner *et al.*, 2016; Privitera and Campbell, 2009). Given findings that indicate 1 in 10 employees experienced their latest harassment episode over email or social media (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2020), research on cyberbullying needs to advance.

In the traditional psychological aggression literature, debate persists on the extent of overlap between different constructs, such as bullying, incivility and aggression (Baillien *et al.*, 2017; Hershcovis, 2011). Researchers argue these constructs differ in intensity, intent, frequency, and power imbalances (Baillien *et al.*, 2017; Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018). Yet, others posit this is not necessarily supported by empirical evidence (Hershcovis, 2011). In the cyber aggression literature, we see the same

construct confusion, with constructs including cyberaggression, cyberbullying and cyber-incivility being professed (Farley *et al.*, 2016; Weatherbee and Kelloway, 2006). Investigation of cyber aggression constructs has added a level of complexity to the literature on workplace mistreatment. Not only is there fragmentation of within-media constructs (e.g., cyberbullying and cyber-incivility), but we also need to take cross-media relationships (online/offline) into account and consider if cyber constructs differ from their offline counterparts. Answering this question is important as if there is little difference between cyberbullying and offline bullying, organisations do not need to develop specialised policies for cyberbullying. However, if these constructs are conceptually distinct, with different antecedents and outcomes, a more tailored approach may be necessary.

Conceptually, a polarisation of views has surfaced regarding the relationship between cyberbullying and offline bullying. Some scholars (e.g., Forssell, 2019; Vranjes *et al.*, 2017) promote the difference hypothesis, suggesting offline bullying and cyberbullying are distinct constructs. To support their view, they point to unique features of cyberbullying such as the reduced cues in online communication, the scope for anonymity, the blurring of the public/private boundary, power expressed by technical expertise, repetition, and viral reach. Other researchers (e.g., Coyne and Farley, 2019) counter with the similarity hypothesis, arguing offline bullying and cyberbullying are conceptually identical. They posit that the unique features of cyberbullying do not change the conceptualisation of the behaviour (bullying is still bullying whatever media is used), rather, they may help to explain why people engage in the behaviour and the extent of impact on the target.

Empirically, research is currently inconclusive on the question of the relationship between offline and cyberbullying. Qualitative and quantitative investigations have

reported differences in experiences, victim categories and bystander responses depending on whether the behaviour is offline or online (Coyne *et al.*, 2019; D’Cruz and Noronha, 2013; D’Souza *et al.*, 2022; Gardner *et al.*, 2016; Heatherington and Coyne, 2014; Forssell, 2016), yet also similarities in rates of exposure to both behaviours, relationships between both behaviours, and relationships with outcome variables (Coyne *et al.*, 2017; Choi and Park, 2019; Privitera and Campbell, 2009). This has led to calls for further research to investigate the relationships between offline and cyberbullying (Coyne *et al.*, 2019; Vranjes *et al.*, 2020). Currently, research tends to focus on offline bullying and cyberbullying separately. Few studies have set out to compare both behaviours (Baruch, 2005; Coyne *et al.*, 2017; Kowalski *et al.*, 2018), with most just including offline bullying as an additional research variable in scale validation (Farley *et al.*, 2016, Vranjes *et al.*, 2017) or to capture antecedents and outcomes of both offline and cyberbullying separately (Choi and Park., 2019; Gardner *et al.*, 2016).

Whether offline bullying and cyberbullying differ, or not, may be too restrictive a perspective to take, as the type of bullying (e.g., person-related vs. work-related) should also be factored into the discussion. Work-related bullying involves behaviours directed at the victim’s work tasks, including giving them unreasonable deadlines or workloads, whereas person-related bullying involves acts directed at the victim’s character or appearance, such as insulting personal remarks or spreading gossip and rumours (Einarsen *et al.*, 2020). Differences between work-related and person-related acts emerge for offline as well as cyberbullying (Einarsen *et al.*, 2009; Escartin *et al.*, 2009; Coyne *et al.*, 2017). Further, some research suggests an interaction effect between medium and type of bullying on bystander intended actions (Coyne *et al.*, 2019).

In answering the call by scholars (Farley *et al.*, 2021; Vranjes *et al.*, 2020) and by comparing directly offline bullying and cyberbullying, this paper adopts a vignette approach to enhance the embryonic research on cyberbullying at work. It provides a much-needed insight on the difference or similarity hypothesis debate, as well as examining the moderating effect of type on perceptions of offline and cyberbullying at work.

Hypotheses development

To identify the variables to study, we used a model by Hershcovis (2011) developed from her critique of differences espoused by researchers between workplace mistreatment constructs (e.g., bullying, abusive supervision, incivility). Hershcovis found limited evidence for such differences and proposed a generic model of overall workplace aggression identifying several variables hypothesised as moderators (definitional components of intent, frequency etc.), mediators (attributions, emotions and justice) and outcomes (e.g., attitudes, well-being). We do not propose to test the model in this study. However, as we are posing a similar question to Hershcovis, albeit with the addition of a cross-medium comparison, the variables presented in the assessment of differences between various offline negative workplace behaviours are a helpful reference to guide variable choice in the assessment of differences between offline and cyberbullying in our study. For the current study we focused on the definitional criteria variables of severity, frequency, power and intent, and outcome variables of emotion, fairness, job satisfaction and turnover intention. These variables are not only present in the Hershcovis model, but they have also been considered in the research literature as part of the similarity/difference debate (Vranjes *et al.*, 2020).

Medium of bullying – offline or online

Severity refers to the level of harmfulness the target attributes to the aggressive behaviour (Hershcovis, 2011), with workplace bullying perceived as a severe psychosocial stressor. Although not universally agreed, scholars argue that cyberbullying may be perceived as more severe than offline bullying because the unique cyber characteristics of anonymity of the perpetrator, the viral reach of the act, the relative permanence of some behaviours and the ability of perpetrators to maintain contact with the victims at any time, present a more stressful experience for a target than for offline bullying (Coyne *et al.*, 2017, D’Cruz and Noronha, 2013; Ford, 2013). Additionally, severity may be enhanced because online communication reduces perpetrator empathy (Slonje and Smith, 2008) and increases the aggressiveness of the behaviour (Suler, 2004) towards the target.

Frequency of offline bullying refers to the same person regularly experiencing negative behaviour over a prolonged period. Frequency is also espoused as an important indicator of workplace cyberbullying (Coyne *et al.*, 2017; Farley *et al.*, 2016; Forssell, 2016). However, while cyberbullying may include a perpetrator directing abuse at a specific target over time, it can also be a one-off event viewed repeatedly by a broad audience (D’Cruz and Noronha, 2013; Vranjes *et al.*, 2017). Langos (2012) posits frequency is a necessary indicator of cyberbullying in private (communications within an organisation) but not public (messages on public forums such as social media) contexts, whereas Vranjes, *et al.* (2017) argue only one-off acts which directly intrude into a target’s private life should be classified as cyberbullying.

Power imbalance is seen as a key component both within definitions of offline (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018) and cyberbullying (Farley *et al.*, 2016). Cyberbullying presents new opportunities for a power imbalance between perpetrator and target (Vranjes, *et al.*, 2020). Power can be derived from a lack of policing online, technical

knowledge by the perpetrator, the anonymity of the perpetrator, the victim feeling trapped by the boundaryless nature of cyberbullying, or the victim feeling powerless to avoid the behaviour (Farley *et al.*, 2021). Linked to the notion of viral reach and bystander behaviour online (Coyne *et al.*, 2019), perpetrator power could also be enhanced online as a result of the number of followers they have. Power within cyberbullying changes because individuals can use technological features of online communication to enhance their power (Farley *et al.*, 2021).

Intent reflects a target's perception of the perpetrator's intention to inflict harm. Intent is not explicitly present within definitions of workplace bullying but is purported to be assumed within bullying (Hershcovis, 2011) and perceived by targets, individuals, and HR professionals as an important component of bullying (Baillien *et al.*, 2017; Salin *et al.*, 2020). Intent is included in definitions of cyberbullying within youth contexts (Tokunaga, 2010), but Farley *et al.*, (2021) suggest workplace cyberbullying definitions should exclude intent because the reduced social cues present in online communication may make it difficult to establish the true intent of the perpetrator. Intent could be further complicated if perpetrators are aware of their digital footprint being used against them (Farley *et al.*, 2021).

If offline and cyberbullying are different, we would expect there to be differences in perceptions related to definitional criteria. Our first hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1: Perceptions of severity, frequency, power, and intent will differ between offline and cyberbullying.

Offline bullying results in a variety of negative outcomes for both individuals and organisations. Specifically, evidence shows relationships with negative emotion (Bowling and Beehr, 2006), reduced job satisfaction (Lee and Lim, 2019) and increased turnover intention (Glambek *et al.*, 2014). Albeit less advanced, research on

outcomes of cyberbullying report relationships with negative emotion (Coyne *et al.*, 2017), injustice perceptions (Farley *et al.*, 2016), low job satisfaction (Farley *et al.*, 2015) and turnover intention (Muhonen *et al.*, 2017).

Researchers propose that the unique features espoused for cyberbullying may result in targets facing worse outcomes than those experiencing offline bullying (Coyne *et al.*, 2017; D’Cruz and Noronha, 2013). The limited evidence to date is mixed. Coyne *et al.*, (2017) reported a stronger negative correlation between job satisfaction and cyberbullying than offline bullying, although there was no significant difference in correlations for mental strain. Baruch (2005) on the other hand found no significant effect of email versus other bullying (which included face-to-face) on job satisfaction, turnover intention, absenteeism, anxiety and performance.

While researchers suggest there may be more severe outcomes for cyberbullying compared to offline bullying, empirical evidence is limited to date. Therefore, our second hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of negative emotion, fairness, job satisfaction and turnover intention will differ between offline and cyberbullying.

Type of bullying

Taxonomies of offline and cyberbullying cover a range of behaviours, but there is consensus that behaviours can be categorised into work-related and person-related acts (Farley *et al.*, 2016; Hauge *et al.*, 2007; Salin *et al.*, 2020; Vranjes *et al.*, 2017). However, evidence indicates bullying behaviours are not always perceived similarly or have the same impact on individuals. Work-related bullying is perceived to be less severe (Escartín *et al.*, 2009) more acceptable (Salin *et al.*, 2019) and more subtle (Fox and Cowan, 2014) than person-related or physical bullying.. In terms of outcomes, offline work-related behaviours correlate less strongly with psychological

stress symptoms than social isolation (Hogh *et al.*, 2012). and acts which promote marginalisation or exclusion impact more negatively on target mental health (Hoel *et al.*, 2004). Within workplace cyberbullying contexts, Coyne *et al.*, (2017) showed stronger relationships for work-related over person-related cyberbullying with justice, job satisfaction and negative affect and, with respect to witnessing behaviour, individuals are less likely to intervene for work-related than person-related bullying (Coyne *et al.*, 2019). Reasons given by these scholars for the differences include severity of behaviour, ambiguity of the act and the impact being exposed to isolation can have on our ability to satisfy basic needs. Therefore, like medium of bullying, research points to differences in perceptions of definitional characteristics and outcomes depending on type of behaviour. We therefore propose two further hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: Perceptions of severity, frequency, power, and intent will differ between work-related and person-related bullying.

Hypothesis 4: Perceptions of negative emotion, fairness, job satisfaction and turnover intention will differ between work-related and person-related bullying.

Interaction between medium and type

Studies show that targets experience both work-related and person-related bullying offline and well as online (Coyne *et al.*, 2017, Farley *et al.*, 2016; Privitera and Campbell, 2009; Vranjes *et al.*, 2019). This suggests there may be an interaction effect between medium and type of bullying. Proponents of the similarity and difference hypotheses of offline/cyberbullying have not considered the moderating effect of type, even though as seen above, type does effect perceptions and outcomes. Coyne *et al.*, (2019) argue that the ambiguity associated with work-related and online behaviours may interact to reduce empathy and inhibit bystander responses. In their

study, they found bystanders were least likely to support a victim and more likely to side with a perpetrator for work-related acts enacted online. Further research is needed to address this interaction effect resulting in our final hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5: There will be an interaction effect between medium and type on perceptions of severity, frequency, power, and intent.

Hypothesis 6: There will be an interaction effect between medium and type on perceptions of negative emotion, fairness, job satisfaction and turnover intention.

Method

Participants

One-hundred and sixty-three participants aged 18-48 years took part in the study (*Mean* age = 23.97, *SD* = 4.49). Of these participants, 51 were male and 112 were female. No further demographic data was collected. All participants formed an opportunity sample, sourced from social media sites such as LinkedIn (*n* = 11), Facebook (*n* = 143), Twitter (*n* = 3) and Instagram (*n* = 6). Inclusion criteria required all participants to be 18 or over and be in employment/previously employed. The study was approved by the Ethics Review Subcommittee at Loughborough University.

Measures and procedure

A within participants experimental vignette methodology (EVM) using best practice guidelines (Aguinis and Bradley, 2014) was adopted. This approach was chosen as it is an ethically appropriate method to assess sensitive issues (Aguinis and Bradley, 2014), has been used successfully in previous workplace bullying/cyberbullying research (Bastiaensens *et al.*, 2014, Coyne *et al.*, 2019) and better captures components of frequency and duration required for bullying than is obtained by laboratory designs (e.g., Giumetti *et al.*, 2013). Vignettes adapted from Coyne *et al.*, (2019) were used as the foundation for the research. All participants were presented with scenarios of all four combinations of type (work-related vs.

person-related) and medium (offline vs. online). To counterbalance order effects, a random number generator was used to randomise scenario order (see Appendix 1).

Different to Coyne *et al.*, (2019), participants were asked to imagine they were the target (Sam) in the situation and not bystanders. Further, to ensure legitimate power was not conflated with perceived power difference, we revised the perpetrator to be a co-worker and not a supervisor. Finally, given the rapid growth in the use of Microsoft Teams during the pandemic (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1033742/worldwide-microsoft-teams-daily-and-monthly-users/>), scenarios were devised to represent a more realistic setting of online Microsoft Teams meetings than just email bullying seen in Coyne *et al.*, (2019). Work-offline and person-related-offline scenarios used behaviours from the original study.

A pilot study was conducted asking 10 individuals to read and answer the vignettes and provide feedback on their comprehension and clarity. All participants agreed scenarios were clear and understandable.

Definition criteria

To reduce participant time completing the survey and promote satisfaction with the study (Allen *et al.*, 2022) we used single-item measures to assess all outcome variables. There are disadvantages to the use of single item scales in psychological research (Allen *et al.*, 2022), however meta-analyses of single item measures have shown comparability with multi-item measures (Ang and Eisend, 2018; Wanous *et al.*, 1997).

Definitional criteria were assessed with participants rating responses on a scale of 1 (Very strongly disagree) to 7 (Very strongly agree). For severity, participants were asked ‘To what extent do you agree that the behaviour you are experiencing is severe?’ Frequency required participants to respond to the question, ‘To what extent do you agree that the behaviour you are experiencing is frequent?’ For power difference, respondents rated their agreement to the question, ‘To what extent do you agree that the behaviour you are experiencing would make

you feel vulnerable and unable to defend yourself?', and for intent participants were asked, 'To what extent do you agree the behaviour you are experiencing is intentional?'

Emotions, fairness and outcomes

Negative emotion, fairness and job satisfaction were adapted from Coyne *et al.*, (2017). The negative emotion and fairness questions used a 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Extremely) scale. For negative emotion participants were asked to rate the question, 'If you were Sam, to what extent would you feel negative emotion (e.g., upset, afraid, irritable, nervous) in the job?' and for fairness the question, 'If you were Sam, to what extent would you feel you are being treated fairly with dignity and respect in the job?' Job satisfaction, 'If you were Sam, how satisfied would you be with your job?' was assessed using a 1 (Very satisfied) to 7 (Very dissatisfied) scale and turnover intention, 'If you were Sam, how likely would you be to leave the organisation?' by a 1 (Very likely) to 7 (Very Unlikely) scale.

Results

Table I details descriptive statistics on ratings of severity, frequency, power and intent and Table II shows similar data for negative emotion, fairness, job satisfaction and turnover intention. A 2x2 (type x medium) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to test main effects and interaction between type and medium on all dependent variables.

Place Table I about here

Results showed a significant main effect of medium (offline vs. online) only for ratings of severity [$F(1, 162) = 4.86, p = 0.029, r = .17$], a small effect size based on Cohen (1988). Severity ratings were higher for cyberbullying than offline bullying ($M_{diff} = .17, 95\% CI [.02, .32]$). This provides limited support for hypothesis 1.

Significant small to moderate main effects of medium were seen only for ratings of job satisfaction [$F(1, 162) = 8.75, p = 0.004, r = .23$] and turnover intention [$F(1, 162) = 15.92, p < .001, r = .30$]. Participants tended to be less satisfied ($M_{diff} = .17, 95\% CI [.02, .32]$) and

more likely to leave the organisation ($M_{diff} = .17$, 95% CI [.02, .32]) when the bullying was online than offline. Some support is seen for hypothesis 2 in this analysis.

Place Table II about here

For bullying type (work vs. person-related) significant effects were seen for ratings of severity [$F(1, 162) = 386.49$, $p < .001$, $r = .84$], frequency [$F(1, 162) = 282.23$, $p < .001$, $r = .80$], power difference [$F(1, 162) = 200.63$, $p < .001$, $r = .74$] and intent [$F(1, 162) = 327.85$, $p < .001$, $r = .82$].) – all large effect sizes. Ratings were higher for person-related-related than work-related bullying on severity ($M_{diff} = 1.81$, 95% CI [1.63, 2.00]), frequency ($M_{diff} = 1.31$, 95% CI [1.15, 1.45]), power ($M_{diff} = 1.36$, 95% CI [1.17, 1.55]) and intent ($M_{diff} = 1.85$, 95% CI [1.65, 2.05]), providing strong support for hypothesis 3.

Large significant main effects of bullying type on ratings of negative emotion [$F(1, 162) = 274.61$, $p < .001$, $r = .79$], fairness [$F(1, 162) = 104.66$, $p < .001$, $r = .63$], job satisfaction [$F(1, 162) = 156.62$, $p < .001$, $r = .70$] and turnover intention [$F(1, 162) = 208.12$, $p < .001$, $r = .75$] emerged. On average, participants rated negative emotion ($M_{diff} = 1.80$, 95% CI [1.59, 2.02]), job dissatisfaction ($M_{diff} = 1.24$, 95% CI [1.04, 1.43]) and turnover intention ($M_{diff} = 1.72$, 95% CI [1.49, 1.96]) higher, and fairness ($M_{diff} = 1.19$, 95% CI [.96, 1.42]) lower for person-related than work-related bullying. Strong support emerges for hypothesis 4.

Significant small to medium interactions were seen between type and medium on severity [$F(1, 162) = 22.03$, $p < .001$, $r = .35$], frequency [$F(1, 162) = 4.92$, $p = .03$, $r = .17$] and power difference [$F(1, 162) = 5.03$, $p = .03$, $r = .17$], but not intent. Ratings of severity, frequency and power difference for person-related bullying (when compared to work-related bullying) were higher when behaviour was online than offline (see Figure 1 for severity, other figures are obtainable on request). Hypothesis 5 was partially supported.

Place Figure 1 about here

Significant, although small, interactions were seen between type and medium of bullying on negative emotion [$F(1, 162) = 6.20, p = .014, r = .19$], fairness [$F(1, 162) = 12.19, p < .001, r = .26$] and job satisfaction [$F(1, 162) = 4.80, p = .03, r = .17$], but not for turnover intention. Negative emotion and job dissatisfaction were perceived higher for person-related bullying (when compared to work-related) for cyberbullying than offline bullying. By contrast, fairness perception was rated lower for person-related, as compared to work-related bullying, significantly more for offline than cyberbullying. Partial support is seen for hypothesis 6.

Discussion

This research offers several advantages to extant scientific literature on offline and cyberbullying at work. First, it compares directly both acts and their effect on definitional criteria and outcomes to better assess whether offline and cyberbullying are similar or different constructs. Second, it examines the moderating effect of bullying type (work-related vs. person-related) across study variables. Third, it adopts a robust experimental vignette methodology (EVM) using good practice recommendations (Aguinis and Bradley, 2014).

Our aim in conducting this research was to examine whether empirical support emerged for the similarity hypothesis or difference hypothesis in relation to cyberbullying and offline bullying. When examining the definitional criteria, greater support emerged for the similarity hypothesis (Coyne and Farley, 2019), as there were no significant differences in the perceived frequency, power differences, or intent of offline bullying compared to cyberbullying. This has theoretical implications as it suggests that the nature of bullying does not change when it occurs in online settings. Regardless of medium, both offline bullying and cyberbullying can be characterised as prolonged mistreatment that involves a power disparity between perpetrator and victim. Nevertheless, although we found few differences in the *nature* of bullying across different media, our results suggest that cyberbullying may exert a

more *detrimental impact* than offline bullying. Cyberbullying was rated as more severe than offline bullying, and it was perceived to have a stronger negative influence on job satisfaction and turnover intention, but not on negative emotion or fairness. A similar pattern of results was observed by Coyne *et al.*, (2017) who found that cyberbullying was more strongly related to job dissatisfaction, but not mental strain, when compared to offline bullying. Together, these results suggest that cyberbullying does not differ from offline bullying in how it affects psychological health, but it seems to more strongly influence how targets appraise their job and organisation. It is not clear why medium should influence job appraisals in this manner, however other research reports similar findings, and suggests that the traditional benefits of virtual working (e.g., autonomy and flexibility) may be suppressed to a greater extent by negative interpersonal relationships with colleagues (Golden and Vega, 2008). Therefore, virtual workers who experience cyberbullying may experience a reduction in their anticipated levels of autonomy and flexibility, with implications for their job satisfaction, whereas targets of face-to-face bullying may not experience a similar loss of benefit.

The addition of behaviour type into the analysis provides a more in-depth understanding of differences between cyberbullying and offline bullying. Person-related acts were rated consistently more negatively than work-related acts, which accords with the extant literature (Hogh *et al.*, 2012; Salin *et al.*, 2019). Work-related acts could be perceived less negatively because they are viewed as performance management (Salin *et al.*, 2019), subtle (Fox and Cowan, 2014), or “ubiquitous realities in the modern workplace” (Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.*, 2007, p.854). Effects were much larger between person-related and work-related acts than between offline bullying and cyberbullying, suggesting more support for a difference hypothesis for person-related and work-related acts than between offline and cyberbullying acts. However, while there is some criticism directed at measures of bullying not taking behaviour type into account when calculating scores on exposure to bullying (Escartin *et al.*,

2009), scholars do not promote person-related and work-related bullying as different constructs.

Interaction effects suggest a more complex comparison between offline and cyberbullying that depends on the type of behaviour enacted. Person-related acts within the cyber domain were considered more severe, frequent, and as involving greater powerlessness. Similarly, medium interacted with bullying type such that online person-related acts were considered to have a greater detrimental impact on negative emotion and job satisfaction, but offline person-related acts were considered less fair. These results can partially be explained by the unique features of cyberbullying, such as viral reach, increased visibility, and the blurring of home/work boundaries, as these features are likely to exacerbate the impact of person-related behaviours, but not work-related behaviours. For example, acts such as gossip and excessive teasing are likely to be more severe when they are viewed by a wide audience, particularly when they are visible to those outside the work environment. In contrast, work-related acts, such as excessive monitoring and unreasonable deadlines may be less likely to occur in a public setting, and even when they do, their more subtle nature may cause less embarrassment for the target. The moderating effect of behaviour type means a difference or similarity hypothesis for the relationship between cyberbullying and offline bullying is too simplistic a notion to entertain. Individuals may weight the combination of behaviour and medium, and this has implications for individual outcomes. This weighting may be based on the definitional components, with person-related/cyberbullying acts perceived as more severe, frequent and offering less opportunity to defend oneself. This suggestion would fit with Hershcovis' (2011) model in which definitional criteria are moderators of the aggression-outcome relationship.

Practical considerations

Our findings suggest that cyberbullying does not differ in nature from offline bullying which suggests that organisational interventions geared towards reducing offline bullying, should also work to reduce cyberbullying. Evidence from the youth context seems to confirm this (Gradinger *et al.*, 2016; Palladino *et al.*, 2016). However, given the more severe nature and impact of person-related bullying, organisations do need to consider the type of behaviour and how it is experienced by employees. For example, emphasising the unacceptability of person-related actions in bullying policies by giving clear examples may help employees understand where behaviour ‘crosses the line’.

Limitations

There are several limitations with our research. Firstly, it could be argued that scenarios did not test explicitly the unique features of reduced social cues, anonymity, blurring of public/private boundary, power through technical power, frequency, and viral reach suggested as distinguishing cyberbullying from offline bullying (Forssell, 2019; Vranjes *et al.*, 2017). However, except for anonymity and viral reach, we contend features were implicit within our scenarios. Online scenarios focused on the use of the chat function in Teams (reduced social cues) compared to direct communication in offline scenarios, indicated working remotely from home for 6 months (blurring of boundary) versus being in the office, and asked participants to provide ratings of power and frequency. Perpetrator anonymity was not studied. Evidence suggests anonymous bullying scenarios are seen as more severe than non-anonymous ones (Sticca and Perren, 2013) and perpetrator anonymity enhances the relationship between harassment and fear (Ford, 2013). However, Tokunaga (2010) argues in school cyberbullying contexts, 40-50% of respondents know the perpetrator. In work contexts, perpetrator anonymity in cyberbullying cases is seen (D’Cruz and Noronha, 2013), but conversely evidence indicates targets of cyberbullying knew exactly who their perpetrators were (Heatherington and Coyne, 2014). Viral reach was not manipulated because

to contextualise the behaviour within a work context, we focused on acts in a private context (within an organisation) and not a public (public domain) one. Future research could consider examining the extent of viral reach on perceptions and outcomes.

Secondly, as we only included cyberbullying in a private context (Teams meeting forum) we cannot generalise the findings to different forms of cyberbullying, especially those in a more public context (e.g., social media, online chat). More support for the difference hypothesis may occur if behaviours are within a public than a private context because public acts are perceived as more severe than private ones (Sticca and Perren, 2013). We chose to restrict to a private work-based context to advance the previous scenario work which only used email (Coyne *et al.*, 2019) and to reflect the reality of working life for many people during the pandemic, thereby enhancing the sense of realism within the scenarios (Aguinis and Bradley, 2014). Additionally, Farley *et al.*, (2021) argue the distinction between public/private settings should not inform the way cyberbullying is defined.

Finally, the use of experimental vignette methodology (EVM) has been criticised for limitations in external validity, especially in terms of the fidelity of the vignette (Aguinis and Bradley, 2014). These authors advocate the use of technology (e.g., video, audio, pictures and virtual reality) to enhance the realism of the scenario. We chose to use written scenarios because of the costs involved in developing technologically based vignettes and of the potential ethical issues in immersing participants in realistic abusive behavioural settings. We have also addressed to some extent the issue of realism through inviting participants to respond remotely in their own settings (Aguinis and Bradley, 2014)

In conclusion, using an EVM design, the present study is the first to test directly whether offline and cyberbullying are perceived as separate or different constructs. Results indicate more support for the similarity hypothesis across the variables tested, although a more complex pattern emerges with the inclusion of behaviour type. In the main, person-

related/cyberbullying acts are seen in a more negative light than other combinations of medium and type. Implications for organisations revolve around adopting an overall approach to managing bullying at work with the consideration that online/person-related acts may result in more negative outcomes for individuals.

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