A social cognitive perspective in cyberbullying prevention

Vassilis Barkoukis, Lambros Lazuras & Haralambos Tsorbatzoudis
Department of Physical Education and Sport Science,
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Definition of cyberbullying
Nowadays, youth spend more time online than ever before. The use of the cyber world offers young people a huge database with information facilitating learning and exploration (Blais et al., 2008). In addition, it provides to young people with tremendous opportunities for communication and interaction with other people beyond the traditional face-to-face social networks (Mishna et al., 2010). However, there are also important risks that should be taken into account, such as cyberbullying, online harassment and cyberstalking (Mishna et al., 2012). Online harassment refers to isolated episodes of molestation through internet, while cyberstalking reflects the use of electronic means, such as the internet, to stalk an individual or a group of individuals (Brighi et al., 2009; Wolak et al., 2007). On the other hand, cyberbullying has been defined as the distorted and inappropriate use of electronic means, such as the internet and the mobile phones, to repeatedly attack a person, usually defenseless, in order to hurt him/her and cause damage to his/her reputation (Smith et al., 2008). Since cyberbullying is a repeated behavior, an important issue pertaining to the severity of the incidents is their frequency. Brighi et al. (2009) summarizing prior research on the severity of the cyberbullying suggest that in order to define the severity of the cyberbullying incidents a relative small time frame of two months should be used, a frequency of at least two or three cyberbullying acts in this time frame is required to judge an incident as a serious one.

Education as a venue towards cyberbullying prevention
Cyberbullying so far has led to suicide attempts and changing of school environment. Taking also into consideration that a) the use of electronic means by youth increases every year increasing the number of the possible interactions and b) children start using these technologies in smaller ages which is associated with a less mature use of them, it is obvious that education and prevention acts should be prepared and applied (Dooley et al., 2009). Barkoukis and Panagiotou (2012) suggested that the school can offer an appropriate environment for the application of prevention intervention targeting cyberbullying mainly because a) schools offer access to the population that is mainly involved, either as victim or as an aggressor, in cyberbullying and b) the school’s primary objective is to
educate children and promote social and moral values. This view is also supported by Farrell et al. (2001) who argued that school-based programs should be included in prevention intervention strategies against youth violence and aggression.

In addition, Daunic et al. (2006) suggested the application of prevention interventions to schools in order to reduce risk factors in youth and maintain their health and safety. Cullinan (2002) indicated that these interventions should be both universal and selective. Universal interventions target all students and aim to increase awareness and educate them how to avoid risks and improve safety, and maintain health through the development of healthy lifestyles. On the other hand, selective interventions involve activities targeting groups of students at risk and aim to deal with the specific behavior at hand. For instance, a selective intervention could try to resolve a severe cyberbullying incident appeared in a school and could include activities such as discussions with the bully, discussions with the victim, role playing etc.

Several interventions have been developed to combat various forms of aggression, such as traditional bullying (Baldry & Farrington 2004; Olweus & Limber, 1999; Salmivalli, 2001) and cyberbullying (Knol et al., 2012; Lazuras et al., 2012; Ortega et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2012; Wölfer et al., 2012). The application of these interventions indicated that there were specific aspects associated with their effectiveness. These aspects involved a) a sound theoretical basis, b) a strong commitment from the school (administration and educators) and members of the research team, c) a whole-school approach involving the development of a school ethos against aggression, the assistance of educators, the provision of information to parents and education to students, d) the use of robust measures and sophisticated analyses, e) the development of safe and supportive school environments, f) educators’ training on successful management of aggressive behaviours, g) the use of practices and strategies both at individual and peer levels, h) the integration of cognitive-behavioural strategies to achieve long-term change, and i) the support from parents (see Vreeman & Carroll, 2007 for a detailed description of the characteristics of successful interventions).

**Traditional social cognitive frameworks towards the development of prevention interventions**

A social cognitive perspective has been proliferated among the best practices to tackle aggressive and violent behaviors in adolescence (Thornton et al., 2000). Such a perspective involves learning, thinking, and reasoning, and as such it fits well with the educational objectives of the school (Barkoukis & Panagiotou, 2012; Boxer & Dubow, 2002). The social
cognitive perspective applied so far to tackle aggressive and violent behaviors in adolescence have typically employed four approaches, a) attribution retraining, b) social problem solving and skills training, c) pairs therapy and d) instruction and curriculum change. Each approach is based on a specific social cognitive background and offers a set of practices, guidelines and strategies derived from this background (Hudley & Graham, 1995).

More specifically, attribution retraining is based on the notion that dysfunctional cognitive interpretations of the social world and subsequent behavioral intentions provide clues to understanding aggressive behavior (Hudley & Graham, 1995). An aggressive child perceives neutral stimuli as aggressive acts against him, feels angry and tends to justify himself/herself to respond accordingly. However, when these stimuli are attributed to unintentional acts, then aggressive impulses can be controlled (Krieglmeier et al., 2009). Based on these, attribution retraining has been proliferated as an appropriate strategy for antisocial behavior change as it can help training children infer unintentionality in situations of attributional ambiguity and, hence, decrease the experience of anger and the possibility in retaliating with bullying behaviors. Such a prevention intervention program includes role play, story reading, brainstorming, and discussion of personal experiences, through which students are trained to search for, interpret, and properly categorize the verbal and behavioral cues presented in ambiguous situations. The attribution retraining approach is thought to enhance causal thinking on subsequent social behavior which is also important for preventing cyberbullying behaviors.

The second social cognitive approach typically used to tackle adolescents’ aggressive behaviors involves social problem solving skills training. A consistent finding in the aggression literature is that social rejection leads to aggressive behaviors (see Leary et al., 2006 for an extensive review). Also, social rejection is associated with a lack of the social problem solving skills needed for effective interactions with peers, such as negotiate conflict and influence by peers (Nangle et al., 2002). Prior evidence has documented that training of social problem solving skills can improve the social functioning of children manifesting bullying and antisocial behaviors (Webster-Stratton et al., 2001). The focus of this type of interventions is the increase of the awareness on the social consequences of bullying behaviors and the improvement of social acceptance for peer-rejected adolescents. This is mainly done by teaching students to choose the appropriate solutions that will produce effective interpersonal behavior in ambiguous situations (Hudley & Graham, 1995).
The interventions employing the social problem solving skills training approach have been grouped in those using a) social skills training, b) cognitive–behavioral skills training, and c) multicomponent cognitive–behavioral skills training. The social skills training focused interventions included activities such as instruction, modeling, behavioral rehearsal, feedback, and discussion. Through these activities the intervention aimed to enhance social skills, such as participation, cooperation, and communication. In cognitive-behavioral skills training intervention the basic aim was to promote students’ social problem solving skills. This type of interventions included activities such as listening to and observing others, discussing others thoughts, feelings, and motives in problem situations, drawing pictures, playing with puppets, dialoguing and role playing. Through these activities the interventions aimed to enhance problem-solving skills, such as generating alternative solutions, thinking of consequences of actions, and pairing solutions and consequences. Finally, multicomponent cognitive–behavioral skills training interventions tried to combine the previously used procedures to anger control and other cognitive–behavioral variables, such as social problem solving, self-instruction, relaxation, perspective taking and self-regulation. This type of interventions include activities such as development of group roles, control of arousal in anger situations, cooperative work for the preparation of material promoting anger control and social problem solving skills, dialoguing, discussion, role playing and goal setting in order to develop self-statements helping in anger control (Nangle et al., 2002).

The third social cognitive approach employed to tackle bullying and aggression involves pair therapy or pairing. This approach is based on the view that deviant behaviors are initiated by problems integrated into the self and as such they require individual therapy. The aim of this type of interventions is to a) offer students knowledge on the causes and consequences of bullying and aggression, b) develop students’ risk management skills in order to be able to effectively interact with peers and c) establish a low personal meaning for bullying and aggressive behaviors. The focus of this approach is the teaching of interpersonal negotiation and intimate sharing of experience in pairs of at-risk students (typically each pairs consists of a bully and a victim). Typically these interventions are employed as counselling programs to students identified as having deviant behaviors. Under adult guidance the selected students work in pairs towards defining and understanding the problem at hand, developing alternative to bullying and aggression responses, selecting the best strategy in dealing with provoking situations and evaluating the outcomes of the alternative behaviors. Likewise, multicomponent cognitive–behavioral skills training
interventions, in pair therapy besides discussing the pairs are actively engaging in a number of activities such as role playing, videotaping and playing with puppets. These activities are thought to enhance the friendship between the students and more effectively deal with the bullying behavior.

The final social cognitive approach to develop interventions against bullying and aggression involves changing the instructional styles and the curriculum. Prior evidence has indicated that aggressive and bullying behaviors were associated with low academic performance. Hence, these changes are thought to have a positive influence on the academic performance of students. The focus of this type of interventions is to enhance students’ self-esteem and develop positive attitudes towards school and school achievement. Through this way students will be more reluctant in manifesting deviant behaviors. The proposed curriculum changes involve an emphasis on positive role models, on the development of values for academic achievement and on the establishment of a psychologically safe school and class climate (Hudley & Graham, 1995). Regarding instructional style, a teaching approach fostering mastery orientation is thought to develop students’ moral and social skills resulting in lower bullying and aggressive behaviors (Telama & Polvi, 2007). The TARGET intervention program, developed by Ames (1992), offers guidelines and practices towards the development of a mastery-oriented class climate. The program consists of six dimensions (i.e., Task, Authority, Recognition, Grouping, Evaluation, and Time), whose initials form the acronym TARGET. The Task dimension suggests that a variety of drills is used and students are allowed to work at their own level. Alternative drills should be provided to students and opportunities for goal setting. The Authority dimension involves students’ participation in decision making and offering them opportunities to lead an activity in the class. The Recognition dimension has to do with the type and the timing of the rewards provided to students. According to guidelines pertaining to this dimension rewards should be provided for self-improvement, achieving personal goals and exerting effort during the class. Also extra-curricular activities should be recognized and praised. The Grouping dimension suggests the use of cooperative teaching approaches, where students work together in small and heterogeneous groups in order to promote students’ social interaction. The Evaluation dimension suggests the use of self-referenced criteria for students’ evaluation, such as personal improvement, achieving personal goals, participating in the lesson, and exerting effort. In addition, self-evaluation through keeping personal records and monitoring of the goal-setting process should be encouraged. Finally, the Time dimension reflects the organization of the class. Maximizing learning time, using behavior
‘protocols’, maintaining discipline in the class and allowing students to work on their goals are fundamental practices in this TARGET dimension (Barkoukis et al., 2008).

**Contemporary Social Cognitive Approaches to Cyberbullying Prevention**

The aforementioned prevention strategies provide a general overview of social cognitive approaches that have been developed over the last decades and have provided useful recommendations for prevention strategies against adolescent aggression and bullying in educational settings. This section will advance our discussion about social cognitive approaches to cyberbullying prevention by presenting related research and evidence-based practices used in the field of adolescent risk behaviour. Specifically, the section will unfold through two major parts respectively addressing the roles of individual differences (empathy and moral disengagement), and social cognitions (self-efficacy, attitudes, social norms, and behavioural intentions). It is noteworthy that these variables have not been extensively addressed in cyberbullying research to date, but provide useful avenues for future study and evidence-based preventive strategies.

**Individual Differences in Cyberbullying prevention: The Roles of Empathy and Moral Disengagement.**

Empathy is a cardinal aspect of human behaviour that facilitates social interactions, and helps people communicate emotions and feelings more effectively (Cohen & Strayer, 1996; Davis, 1983; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Empathy is defined as the person’s ability to perceive and understand other people’s emotional states, and accordingly shape or modify his/her behavioural reactions (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Unlike attitudes, beliefs, and other more transient states of social cognition, empathy is best conceived as a stable attribute that is likely to be shaped along the individual’s personality and affect different types of social behaviours (Loudin et al., 2003; Strayer, 1987). Furthermore, instead of being a unitary construct, researchers have noted that empathy is multidimensional and can be distinguished between a cognitive and an affective part (Davis, 1983). The former reflecting the ability to understand and cognitively process other people’s emotions and the latter representing the capacity to understand other people’s feelings through an emotional and less cognitively-bound channel (vicarious emotional sharing; Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2009; Smith, 2006).

In relation to aggressive behaviours, empathy has been extensively addressed in studies of adolescent violence and traditional bullying (e.g., Bartholow et al., 2005; Lovett & Sheffield, 2007). The available evidence
suggests that lower levels of empathy are strongly related to higher levels of aggression and bullying incidents in the school environment (e.g., Endresen & Olweus, 2002; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Olweus, 1993). Thus, it is no surprise that empathy has figured prominently in the most recent studies of cyberbullying behaviour. In particular, a study by Ang and Goh (2010) showed that both male and female adolescents with lower empathy levels, scored higher in cyberbullying behaviour. Furthermore, the role of empathy in cyberbullying was addressed by Schultze-Krumholz and Scheithauer (2009), who found that both cyberbullies and cyberbullying victims reported lower empathy levels, as compared to adolescents not involved in cyberbullying incidents. In terms of preventive strategies, the aforementioned studies suggest that empathy training should be included in the agenda of educators and policy makers interested in reducing the incidents of cyberbullying behaviour (Ang & Goh, 2010). More specifically, it appears that addressing both cognitive and affective aspects of empathy will impact involvement in cyberbullying incidents (Ang & Goh, 2010; Campbell, 2005).

Moral disengagement represents another aspect of individual differences that has been associated with bullying and cyberbullying behaviours in young people. The term moral disengagement was addressed by Bandura in his social-cognitive theory of the moral self (Bandura, 1986, 1991). Bandura argued that moral reasoning guides behaviour through specific self-regulatory processes, such as moral disengagement. This process can be described in several stages whereby the individual cognitively ‘moralizes’ behaviours that would otherwise by accepted as immoral ones or as against personal moral values (Bandura et al., 1996; McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2006). Bandura (2002) further argued that engaging in moral disengagement may help individuals self-justify for their behaviour and reduce any cognitive dissonance and tension between their (moral) attitudes and (immoral) behaviour.

In relation to bullying behaviours, several studies have shown that adolescents with higher levels of moral disengagement are more likely to be involved in traditional bullying, cyber-bullying, or both modes of bullying either as aggressors, or as victims (Bauman & Pero, 2011; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012; Pornari & Wood, 2010). Therefore, any attempts to prevent cyberbullying behaviour in educational contexts should take into account individual differences in moral disengagement and accordingly promote the skills and increase awareness so that students are more morally engaged with others/cyberbullying victims (Bauman, 2010).
Moving beyond individual differences: Social cognitions, intentions, and their effects on behaviour

Individual differences provide a useful and holistic approach to our understanding of cyberbullying behaviour, and can be effectively targeted by related prevention strategies and school-based interventions. Nevertheless, their direct impact on actual behaviour is not clear. Scholars have argued that individual differences are likely to directly influence behaviour, but they actually represent distal predictors of behaviour, whose effects tend to be mediated by more proximal variables (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Conner & Armitage, 1998). Ajzen’s (1991) theory of planned behaviour (TPB) provides a good example of how social cognitions (attitudes, norms, and self-efficacy) and intentions mediate the effects of individual differences and personality traits on behaviour. In support of this argument, Lazuras and Ourda (2012) found that self-efficacy beliefs mediated the effects of empathy on cyberbullying intentions among Greek adolescents.

The mediating properties of social cognitions in personality-behaviour relationships have been also addressed by the more recently developed Integrative Model of Behavioural Prediction (IM; Fishbein & Yzer, 2003). This theory is an extension of the original TPB approach and clearly discusses the ways through which individual differences exert their influence on intentions and actual behaviour. As in TPB, the main postulate of the integrative model is that personality attributes and individual characteristics influence behaviour through attitudes, affective, normative, and self-efficacy beliefs, and behavioural intentions (see also Armitage & Conner, 2000; 2001). We will now consider the effects of each of these potential mediators and discuss their role in the prevention of cyberbullying among adolescents.

To begin with, attitudes represent core evaluations of target behaviours (e.g., smoking, drinking, cyberbullying) and are more transient than, say, individual differences and personality traits, thus are more malleable and more easily changed by tailor-made interventions (Ajzen, 2001; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Attitudes are typically formed through classical conditioning and learning, as well as by social interactions with family members and peers and persuasion (Olson & Fazio, 2001; Wood, 2000). They can be captured by self-reports, but more recent approaches to attitude theory suggest that people may be reluctant to express their attitudes towards sensitive issues (e.g., racism, prejudice, aggression), and therefore have suggested the use of more implicit methodologies to capture individual attitudes (e.g., the Implicit Association Test; De Houwer, 2006; Greenwald et al., 2002; McConnell & Leibold, 2001; Wilson et al., 2000).
Nevertheless, despite the exact method used to capture attitudinal beliefs, researchers have noted that what’s important is the way attitudes can change and accordingly guide behaviour (Fazio & Olson, 2003; Glasman & Albarracin, 2006; Greenwald et al., 2009).

To this end, educational approaches against adolescent violence and aggression have much to offer, mainly by intervening early and influence the attitude formation process (Merrell et al., 2008). Besides, attitudes have been found to significantly predict bullying behaviour among children and adolescents and researchers have called for school-based interventions targeting attitudes (e.g., Rigby, 2005). In relation to cyberbullying, this implies that a good preventive strategy would be to educate children about cyberbullying and its effects from an early stage, long before cyberbullying incidents are likely to occur (e.g., in elementary school). Of course, such educational approaches should not only tap the negative aspects of cyberbullying, but also teach young people how to effectively use new social media for social interaction, exchange of information, and social integration. This approach would ensure that negative attitudes towards cyberbullying are forged, while at the same time positive attitudes towards the effective and responsible use of digital communication applications are shaped. Finally, it is important to consider attitude formation approaches to reduce bystander effects. That is, preventive efforts should also promote positive attitudes towards intervening (where possible) to prevent cyberbullying, or if such an intervention is impossible due to external obstacles, to report cyberbullying incidents to the respective authorities (e.g., school counsellors, educators, school principal; Campbell, 2005).

Social norms represent another important aspect of social cognition approaches. Traditionally, much of adolescent risk-behaviour, including unsafe sex, careless driving, drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, has been largely attributed to normative influences, such as peer pressure, advertisement, social approval, and biased frequency (prevalence) estimates (Kobus, 2003; Reyna & Farley, 2006; Petraitis et al., 1995; Steinberg, 2004). Normative influences on adolescent behaviour have been described by a wide range of theories, including the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), and the prototype-willingness model (Gibbons et al., 1998). Still, before discussing how normative influences can be addressed in the context of cyberbullying prevention, it is noteworthy to provide some basic information about the different types of social norm beliefs.

Initially, much attention was paid to the effects of subjective norms, which represent perceived social pressure or approval by significant
others (Rivis & Sheeran, 2003). This process is relevant to behaviours that are enacted because of affiliation motives (e.g., to gain approval and be accepted by peers), and lower self-esteem (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Lazuras et al., 2009). Another main type of social norms, however, is descriptive norms. This concept was addressed extensively by Cialdini and colleagues (Cialdini, 2007; Cialdini et al., 1990; Nolan et al., 2008), and reflects beliefs about the prevalence of the perceived frequency of a given behaviour within a target population (e.g., among peers, classmates, or even in the general population). It has been argued that unlike subjective norms, which require some sort of action planning and goal-oriented behaviour (e.g., I will act in this way so that I am liked more by my friends), descriptive norms may operate more automatically and predict behaviour without any prior planning or consideration of goals (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Lazuras et al., 2009; Nolan et al., 2008; Rivis & Sheeran, 2003). Put simply, the mere perception of other people acting in a specific way should be enough to initiate action. This approach rests on evolutionary explanations of social influence (e.g., Sundie et al., 2006), but has been also supported by research on implicit social cognition and priming effects on behaviour (e.g., ‘perceiving is for doing’; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Therefore, descriptive norms can operate at both conscious and unconscious (implicit) levels, and, thus, have ‘dual-process’ impact on behaviour.

Finally, the most recently developed concept of normative beliefs is ‘moral norms’, which describe personal moral standards and principles towards a given behaviour (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Moral norms do not represent influence from others rather they reflect personal moral values. So, unlike subjective and descriptive norms, moral norms guide behaviour by reminding people that they’re acting in discord with their moral principles and personal values. Several studies have shown that moral norms predict intentions and behaviour across behavioural domains, and even more so in behaviours with a strong moral character (Conner & Armitage, 1998; Godin et al., 2005).

In terms of cyberbullying prevention, social norms can provide a useful tool. Firstly, as already noted, adolescents are susceptible to normative influences, thus, manipulations of social norms by related interventions can have an impact on the perceived social approval and prevalence of cyberbullying behaviour. It is important to note that both subjective and descriptive norms should be addressed, as selecting either of them could lead to a boomerang effect. Specifically, one study showed that merely targeting prevalence rates of a target behaviour (i.e., targeting descriptive norms), can lead to opposite effects, unless coupled with...
subjective norms training (i.e., tapping the social approval aspect; Schulz et al., 2007). Thus, interventions to reduce cyberbullying effects would be more likely to achieve their goal by tapping both descriptive and subjective norms. Finally, perhaps a greater impact of normative education could be achieved by incorporating moral norms in related interventions. Although not actually addressing normative influences (i.e., influences exerted by others to the person), moral norms may be jointly addressed and provide a more coherent and holistic approach to norms training; along with teaching adolescents about the social disapproval of cyberbullying and providing information about its prevalence, educators can also forge moral norms and remind them to the students (i.e., bolster the belief that engaging in cyberbullying is against individual moral values and principles, and that intervening to prevent cyberbullying incidents is the ‘right thing’ to do).

Even if adolescents possess ‘desirable’ traits, attitudes, and normative beliefs against cyberbullying, they often have to fight with impulses generated at ‘the spur of the moment’, mainly due to external pressures. In simple words, are negative attitudes and social norms against cyberbullying enough to predict whether an adolescent can cope effectively with direct social pressure to engage in cyberbullying? In most cases, it turns out that another important variable that should be addressed in preventive strategies related to adolescent risk-taking is self-efficacy. This term was central to Bandura’s (1989) social cognitive theory, who argued that self-efficacy beliefs play a central role in self-regulatory processes and the exercise of behavioural control and coping strategies. Self-efficacy has been successfully incorporated in other theoretical models, including the TPB (see Ajzen, 2005) and the transtheoretical model of change (TTM, Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983), and numerous studies have shown that efficacy beliefs are strong predictors of adolescent risk-taking tendencies and behaviour (Armitage & Conner, 2000; DeVries et al., 1988; Petraitis et al., 1995).

Within the context of cyberbullying behaviour, self-efficacy training can be really useful for the following reasons. Firstly, teaching young people that they can cope with cyberbullying incidents is an important aspect of their social empowerment. Namely, adolescents may feel unable to abstain from cyberbullying incidents (especially in the face or explicit social pressures or coercion by peers), or feel reluctant to intervene and prevent cyberbullying, because they simply believe that they cannot do it. Thus, self-efficacy training is important because it can bolster a ‘can do’ attitude, which may, in turn, determine actual behaviour. Secondly, learning specific coping strategies is essential for promoting self-regulation and reduce bystander effects (i.e., What to do in a cyberbullying
incident? How to handle emotions and behaviour? Where to report the incident?). In fact, such an approach will further expand the impact of self-efficacy training by providing specific guidelines and steps that will facilitate the process of intervention against cyberbullying.

The aforementioned variables (attitudes, norms, and self-efficacy) can directly predict behaviour, but their effects on behaviour can also be indirect, mediated by behavioural intentions (Azjen & Fishbein, 2005; Fishbein & Yzer, 2003). Specifically, more negative attitudes and social norms towards cyberbullying, and greater efficacy to cope with, report, or intervene to prevent cyberbullying incidents can lead to the formation of stronger intentions, which, in turn, predict actual behaviour. Intentions represent the person’s motivation or eagerness to execute a specific course of action, and are said to be the most proximal predictor of actual behaviour (Azjen, 1991, 2001). Thus, building stronger social cognitions against cyberbullying through educational interventions, can lead to the formation of stronger intentions to intervene, report, or abstain from cyberbullying incidents. Nevertheless, intentions do not always predict actual behaviour (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Webb & Sheeran, 2006), either because other goals intervene or because individuals simply forget their intentions, or are distracted by other stimuli (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). One way to ensure an effect on behaviour, however, is to furnish intentions with specific action plans (Orbell et al., 1997; Sheeran & Orbell, 1999). These action plans are often referred to as ‘implementation intentions’ and represent the individual’s specific and detailed plan of action under specific circumstances. So, unlike just stating a strong intention to intervene or report cyberbullying to authorities, or a weak intention to engage in cyberbullying, we should expect greater outcomes by having adolescents form specific action plans on how they will realize their stated intentions under specific circumstances.

Before proceeding with a detailed analysis of how we can help adolescents form such implementation intentions, it must be explicitly stated that implementation intentions would work only if strong intentions have been formed in the first place (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). Therefore, it is crucial that educational or school-based interventions have firstly met the requirements of building strong anti-cyberbullying intentions (a collective term used here to denote strong intentions to abstain, report, or intervene to prevent cyberbullying and weak intentions to engage in cyberbullying) by forging attitudes, normative beliefs, and self-efficacy skills in the ways discussed earlier (Gollwitzer, 1999; Sheeran et al., 2005; Sniehotta, 2009). Once this requirement is met, then building implementation intentions usually requires two basic steps. Firstly, we need
to identify the conditions under which adolescents will feel more at risk to observe incidents of, or engage in cyberbullying. These could include several situations (e.g., chatting with friends in Facebook) the details of which can be drawn from the adolescents’ reported experiences with similar incidents in the past. Secondly, once the risk-conducive situations are identified, it is important to form ‘if-then’ plans. The ‘if’ part of these plans describes the specific situations (e.g., and if I am chatting with friends in Facebook and witness a cyberbullying incident...), whereas the ‘then’ part reflects the action-initiation plan (e.g., then, I will ask my friends to stop it; Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).

Gollwitzer et al. (2005) provide numerous examples of how such if-then plans can be formed. For instance, someone could describe an action-initiation (e.g., I will report the cyberbullying incident), or an avoidance plan (e.g., I will abstain from the cyberbullying incident), or furnish his/her intentions with both types of action plans. The existing evidence shows that furnishing behavioural intentions with implementation intentions strengthens the intention-behaviour link in several domains (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006; Sniehotta, 2009). Therefore, considering implementation intentions in cyberbullying prevention can further enhance the outputs and impact or related interventions targeting social cognitions against cyberbullying. This is even more so in efforts to boost self-efficacy training, as it is relevant to providing specific guidelines for action initiation (e.g., how to cope with or report cyberbullying).

Overall, this section described how social cognitive variables derived from leading theoretical models in social psychology can be utilized for the prevention of cyberbullying behaviour in educational settings. The roles of attitude formation, normative education and self-efficacy skills training were discussed in terms of both direct and indirect effects on behaviour. While these variables are likely to predict behaviour directly, or through the formation of anti-cyberbullying intentions, we should recall that a complete approach to prevention interventions should also incorporate the concept of implementation intentions that will teach adolescents how to form specific action-initiation plans against cyberbullying. This will further enhance the impact of shaping anti-cyberbullying attitudes or norms, and will also help in de-normalizing cyberbullying, and creating a stronger ‘can do’ belief.
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