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# Cyberbullying and Its Relation to Right and Left Authoritarianism, Trait Victimhood, and Mental Illness

Christopher J. Ferguson  
Department of Psychology, Stetson University

Many policymakers, advocates, and the general public perceive online discourse has having become aggressive, with widespread issues related to cyberbullying and harassment. However, not all individuals engage in noxious online behaviors equally. In the current study, we sought to identify correlates of cyberbullying behaviors in a community sample of 361 adults (range 18–69). All methods and analyses were preregistered. Results suggested that cyberbullying was related to trait victimhood and directly to right-wing authoritarianism. In exploratory analyses, trait victimhood was itself related to both right- and left-wing authoritarianism, as well as to general mental health symptoms. It is concluded that cyberbullying is related to a tendency to report mental health issues, along with perceiving oneself as a victim and with a willingness to embrace authoritarian worldviews, particularly from the right. By contrast, trait victimhood is related to both right and left authoritarianism.

### Public Policy Relevance Statement

Online bullying remains a common experience for many. The current research highlights that a combination of traits, specifically both left- and right-wing authoritarianism, mental health problems, and trait victimhood, work together to increase the risk of cyberbullying perpetration. By understanding better who most engages in cyberbullying, we can examine policies to reduce these behaviors.

*Keywords:* cyberbullying, authoritarianism, mental health, trait victimhood

Across the political spectrum, there is widespread concern that online discourse has become increasingly abrasive, polarizing, and mean-spirited, in some cases to the point of cyberbullying and harassment. However, consistent with myside bias (the tendency for people to be more generous to arguments consistent with their own worldviews rather than opposing worldviews), each broad side of the political spectrum, left and right, tends to view the other pole as more responsible for this phenomenon (Stanovich et al., 2013). The experience of cyberbullying and harassment is widespread among both men and women, with men experiencing more threats and women experiencing more sexual harassment (Vogels, 2021). Yet, it is unclear how best to understand the phenomenon of online bullying and harassment and, in particular, which individuals are most prone to engaging in this phenomenon. Recent scholarship has suggested that individuals with certain mental health disorders, those who have personality

traits related to perceived victimhood (i.e., trait victimhood), and those who embrace more authoritarian worldviews may be particularly prone to cyberbullying. This study sought to address this issue of how personality and mental health related to cyberbullying using an online sample collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given apparent relationships between sociopolitical beliefs and bullying online, it is important to understand how internal personality characteristics, including the tendency to adopt victimhood status and concurrent authoritarian beliefs, may contribute to online bullying behaviors.

Understanding cyberbullying can be important to reducing people's exposure to this phenomenon online. As of yet, relatively little interaction has examined pathways between mental health, political authoritarianism on left and right, and how perceptions of victimhood influence aggressive cyberbullying behaviors online. This issue is particularly relevant in the current age, where considerable turmoil occurs online around political polarization, issues of free speech, and self-proclaimed oppressed status.

Cyberbullying can be defined as intentionally aggressive behavior directed at individuals or groups designed to cause harm or shame, and which occurs online (e.g., Lee et al., 2015). Cyberbullying may include behaviors such as spreading untrue rumors about someone, saying mean things to someone with an intent to harm (as opposed to friendly "smack talk"), attempting to ostracize people from online social groups, or making false accusations against someone, implying they are immoral. In this sense, cyberbullying can be considered distinct from trolling (in which a user posts content designed to get a negative reaction from often random/anonymous others), but may overlap considerably with flaming, in which individuals or groups bombard others with insulting, hostile messages.

Christopher J. Ferguson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0986-7519>

The author thanks Seth Schwartz and Cory Cobb for their comments on an earlier draft. This study has been preregistered, and the preregistration can be found at: <https://aspredicted.org/ie4n2.pdf>. Data for the study can be found at: <https://osf.io/jgbw8/>.

Christopher J. Ferguson served as lead for conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christopher J. Ferguson, Department of Psychology, Stetson University, 421 North Woodland Boulevard, DeLand, FL 32729, United States. Email: [CJFerguson1111@aol.com](mailto:CJFerguson1111@aol.com)

Research indicates that for traditional, offline bullying, males are more often involved as both perpetrators and victims (e.g., [Smith et al., 2019](#)) though this may also reflect a tendency to emphasize physical bullying. For instance, other research suggests males and females may be more similar than different with regard to verbal aggression, with females engaging in more indirect or relational aggression than males ([Björkqvist, 2018](#); [Connell et al., 2014](#)). Given that cyberbullying is, by nature, devoid of physicality, some evidence suggests girls engage in more cyberbullying than do boys (e.g., [Connell et al., 2014](#)).

## Background on Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying research has continued apace since the early 2000s, when the phenomenon began to become widely recognized (e.g., [Lenhart, 2007](#)). A subject search in PsychINFO (conducted March 2023) returns 2,768 hits, suggesting a wide interest in the topic among researchers. Nonetheless, in their review of the field, [Vismara et al. \(2022\)](#) detail several ongoing issues. First, no agreed upon definition of cyberbullying unites the field. Second, clinical profiles of perpetrators of cyberbullying remain lacking. And third, randomized controlled trials of prevention and intervention efforts have not yet highlighted a clear approach to reducing the phenomenon. This article will concern itself mainly with the second issue: understanding and providing a clinical profile for individuals higher at risk of perpetrating cyberbullying.

As with any behavioral condition, inputs are likely to be complex and multivariate. [Vismara et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest that the field has congealed on several promising elements, however. Perpetrators tend to be both impulsive and aggressive, as well as experiencing reductions in emotional regulation, a combination reminiscent of borderline personality disorder. Interestingly, individuals who are victims of cyberbullying also tend to be at higher risk of becoming perpetrators, suggesting a link between victim status and perpetration.

**AQ3** In their review of the field, [Ansary \(2020\)](#) notes that cyberbullying research has often been atheoretical, and those models that have been developed for cyberbullying are often too simplistic, ignoring both person and situation-specific factors and the relationship between victimization and perpetration. Models, which take a diathesis–stress framework, focused on the interplay between genetic, personological, and situation factors may be most promising in understanding cyberbullying though, by their nature, they tend to be rather complex. Nonetheless, understanding these complexities is critical as, though there are similarities between cyberbullying and traditional bullying; cyberbullying has unique features ranging from anonymity to the public nature of the bullying ([Chan et al., 2021](#)).

Less studied has been the issue of political cyberbullying, though it is relevant to the current age where considerable cyberbullying occurs in the context of sociocultural debates ([Bauman, 2020](#)). This can be particularly important to consider as political cyberbullying can influence and suppress public debates or create a distorted perception of consensus in important policy issues. In this context, cyberbullying can become one means of promoting political authoritarianism.

With this prior literature in mind, the current article seeks to add to the available data by focusing particularly on personological inputs into cyberbullying phenomena. Specifically, given evidence suggesting mental health and victimhood inputs, these will be considered in the specific context of political authoritarianism. In subsequent sections, this article will consider specific inputs in this context and review the prior literature on each.

## Mental Health and Cyberbullying

A certain degree of cyberbullying behavior can be attributed to the medium in which it occurs (e.g., social media). Notably, factors such as anonymity (being unknown to others engaged in dialogue) or asynchronicity (not holding dialogue in real time) may work to foster moral disengagement, thereby increasing the prevalence of cyberbullying ([Wang & Ngai, 2020](#)). Online aggression can be promoted by perceived anonymity, perceived normality of aggression, and perceived temporariness of content (e.g., posts are unlikely to be viewed after a short period of time; [Wright, 2014](#)). However, anonymity effects can be reversed when coupled with moral absolutism wherein behaving aggressively toward a perceived bad actor results in accolades, likes, reshares, etc., within one’s sociopolitical group ([Rosz et al., 2016](#)). Thus, a fair amount of cyberbullying (such as left-wing ideologues bullying Trump supporters or trans individuals being harassed online) is perpetrated by nonanonymous confirmed accounts, such as those on Twitter.

Aside from these structural elements in online communities, some individuals are more likely to engage in cyberbullying than others. To facilitate intervention efforts, it can be helpful to understand who may be most prone to such behaviors. Much of the evidence on cyberbullying focuses understandably on the mental health of victims. However, could certain mental health disorders make individuals more prone to engaging in cyberbullying? Some evidence suggests that neurotic personality traits predict online aggression ([McCreery & Kathleen Krach, 2018](#)). This observation may apply to borderline personality disorder symptoms specifically ([Stockdale et al., 2015](#)). Some evidence suggests that both borderline and histrionic personality tendencies may predict cyberaggression, including online stalking ([Spitzberg & Veksler, 2015](#)); and histrionic and borderline personalities, as well as depressive symptoms, are associated with cyberbullying in young adults ([Kircaburun et al., 2020](#)). As such, further examination of mental health issues and personality disorders, such as borderline or histrionic, appear to be warranted.

## Authoritarianism

Given the current polarized state of politics in the United States and elsewhere, another possible source of cyberbullying may involve authoritarianism. Namely, individuals with more extreme views who enforce obedience at the expense of personal freedoms, such as disregard for free speech and due process, as well as more nihilistic views of their culture, may become “keyboard warriors,” engaging in cyberaggression in the name of sociopolitical causes. Within social science, much of this area has focused on right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), particularly support of conservative, nationalist, or even racist movements that disregard free speech and due process. However, this focus on RWA, though certainly justified, may neglect left-wing authoritarianism (LWA) or movements that are pro-Marxist, identitarian, or engaged in what has colloquially been termed “cancel culture.” This disinterest in LWA (see [Costello et al., 2022](#)) may be explained by social scientists’ own bias toward left-wing causes ([Redding, 2001](#)) and myside bias ([Stanovich et al., 2013](#)).

Evidence regarding how personality and mental health influence cyberbullying is generally sparse. Some evidence suggests that social dominance orientation (the need to impose one’s values on others) tends to be the most consistent predictor of cyberaggression, whereas

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social dominance orientation could theoretically apply to either right or left authoritarianism (Jagayat & Choma, 2021). Authoritarianism, however, has been shown to be related to bullying behaviors in other contexts, such as workplace hazing (Thomas & Meglich, 2019), workplace bullying (Guo et al., 2015), and the transmission of bullying behaviors from authoritarian fathers to their children (Knafo, 2003). Therefore, more research on the relationship between authoritarian styles and cyberbullying would be welcome.

## Trait Victimhood

Recent research has indicated that trait victimhood, the tendency to make victimhood and perceived slights by others central to one's identity, is an important personality variable to consider regarding cyberbullying (Gabay et al., 2020). The concept appears to be sound and reliable and is associated with greater degrees of aggression. In particular, individuals with trait victimhood tend to perceive their own aggression as morally justified based on their perceived victimization by others.

Some evidence suggests that perceived victimhood in politics, which can occur on both the left and right ends of the political spectrum, can lead to stronger support for authoritarianism (Armaly & Enders, 2021). However, because trait victimhood is a fairly new construct, little evidence has examined it in the context of cyberbullying. Could it be that, given the association between trait victimhood and aggression, this may spill over into the online context, with such individuals justifying their behavior through the lens of their perceived victimization? We believe this possibility is worth considering.

## Conceptual Model

The conceptual model for this study borrows from two theoretical approaches. These are taken consistent with the observation that diathesis–stress models appear to be particularly promising as theoretical models (Vismara et al., 2022). First, the Catalyst Model of Aggression (Ferguson & Beaver, 2009; Surette, 2013) explores aggression generally from a diathesis–stress personality perspective. This model suggests that aggressive personalities arise from a combination of evolutionary/biological propensities combined with harsh early childhood environments. From this approach, the development of personality characteristics is key to the development and maintenance of aggressive behavior.

The conceptual model also takes from the Process Model of Cyberbullying. This model suggests that social cognition can result in moral disengagement and reduced empathy (Lazuras et al., 2013). Taken together, these models integrate how personality characteristics, when coupled with the moral absolutism characteristic of authoritarianism and trait victimhood, may lead to aggression.

As of yet, few conceptual models have tended to focus on the behavioral consequences of trait victimhood (e.g., Gabay et al., 2020). In particular, trait victimhood leads to both negative emotional states, but also aggressive behavior, particularly toward those the individual high in trait victimization views as oppressors. Other research has examined antecedents for trait victimhood. For example, in examining “virtuous victimhood,” one study found that Dark Triad traits (narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) were associated with virtuous victimhood (Ok et al., 2021). Granted, signaling virtuous victimhood is not necessarily equivalent to trait victimhood, although the notion of personality development origin is compelling.

Other evidence suggests that trait victimhood may work through political affiliation to produce behavioral outcomes. For instance, Maaravi et al. (2020) found that individuals high in trait victimhood tended to be more fearful of COVID-19 and more rigidly and unquestioningly adhered to masking and social distancing, particularly as doing so may have been associated with moral superiority.

If a personality origin is compelling, for trait victimhood (rather than cynical signaling of victimhood one knows to be false), borderline personality disorder appears to be a reasonable origin point, given the mixture of aggression, depression, and relational instability characteristic of that disorder. Adherence to political ideologies on either the right or left that promote perceptions of victimhood may also accelerate this trend. Thus, for this study, a conceptual model is adopted by which borderline personality is seen as developing into trait victimhood for some individuals, propelled by adherence to left and right extremism. In turn, trait victimhood is associated with cyberbullying behaviors. This conceptual model is represented by Figure 1, which is included in the results section.

## Current Study

Within the current study, we sought to examine the links between mental health, authoritarianism, and trait victimhood in terms of how they relate to cyberbullying. Using a survey-based approach with regression analysis, it is hypothesized that each of these categories of variables will be associated with an increased propensity to engage in cyberbullying. Specific hypotheses include:

*H1:* Borderline personality traits will be associated with both trait victimhood and cyberbullying.

*H2:* Histrionic personality traits will be associated with trait victimhood.

*H3:* Both right-wing and left-wing authoritarianism will be associated with trait victimhood and cyberbullying.

*H4:* Trait victimhood will be associated with cyberbullying.

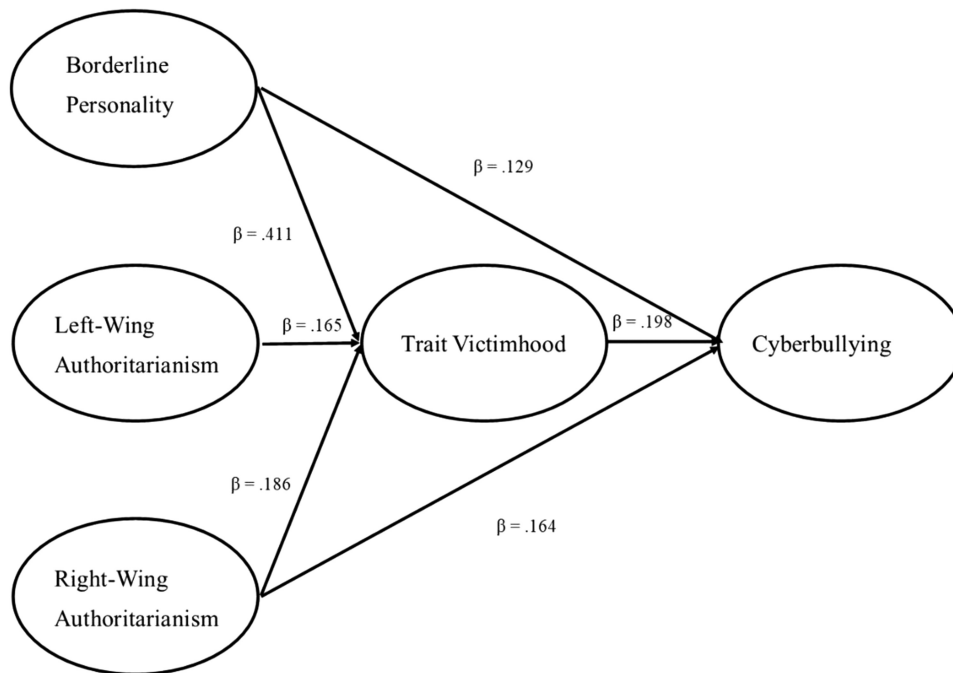
## Method

This study has been preregistered, and the preregistration can be found at: <https://aspredicted.org/ie4n2.pdf>. Data for the study can be found at: <https://osf.io/jgbw8/>. All procedures described below were passed per local IRB review.

## Participants

Participants in the study included 361 adults. Individuals who reported being under age 18 ( $n = 12$ ) were removed from the dataset. Recruitment occurred both through a liberal arts university in the U.S. South, as well as via online formats such as Facebook and Twitter to broaden the sample. As per the preregistration, individuals who failed two reliability check questions also were eliminated from the sample. The final sample had a mean age of 23.5 ( $SD = 9.2$ , range 18–69). There were more biological females ( $n = 256$ , 70.9%) than males in the sample. Regarding gender identity, cisgender individuals represented 93.3% of the sample, with 2% nonbinary; 0.6% trans male; and 4.2% queer, other, or preferred not to say. Regarding sexual orientation, 74.4% reported being heterosexual, 14.4% reported being bisexual, 5% reported being homosexual, and 2.5% reported being asexual, with the remainder being “other” or “prefer not to say.” Regarding race/ethnicity, 74.4% of the sample

**Figure 1**  
*Conceptual Path Model*



reported being White, 11.6% reported being Black, 0.6% reported being Native American, and 2.8% being Asian, with the rest being Polynesian or other. Due to an error, we had intended to ask Hispanic ethnicity as a separate variable from race, but the question ultimately was mistakenly excluded. As such, we do not have data on Hispanic ethnicity. About 25% of the sample came from online recruitment, and these did not appear to differ from the student sample on any of the main study variables. Demographic variables are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristics*

Mean age	23.5 (9.2)
Sex	
Female	256 (70.9%)
Male	105 (29.1%)
Gender identity	
Cis	93.3%
Nonbinary	2%
Trans male	0.6%
Queer/other	4.2%
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	74.4%
Homosexual	5%
Bisexual	14.4%
Asexual	2.5%
Other	3.7%
Race	
White	74.4%
Black	11.6%
Native American	0.6%
Asian American	2.8%
Polynesian/other	10.6%

The preregistration included an outlier plan mainly focused on eliminating individuals who failed the reliability check questions. These include a standard distractibility question (“please mark this answer as ‘mostly true’”) and a mischievous responding question (“I once owned a three-headed dog.”). From an original response pool of 393, 32 individuals who failed the reliability checks were eliminated, resulting in the final sample of 361. The resulting outcome variables of cyberbullying (skewness = 2.04) and trait victimhood (skewness = −.05) had skewness statistics within acceptable ranges, suggesting little further concern about outlier effects.

## Materials

Note all scales below are Likert-type items unless reported otherwise. Means and *SDs* for all scales are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Means and SD for All Measures*

	Male <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Female <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
BSI	1.61 (0.60)	2.07 (0.66) <sup>a</sup>
Histrionic	2.23 (0.50)	2.21 (0.55)
Left-wing authoritarianism	1.74 (0.66)	2.42 (0.63) <sup>a</sup>
Borderline	1.54 (0.49)	1.88 (0.50) <sup>a</sup>
Right-wing authoritarianism	1.89 (0.49)	1.85 (0.48)
Social desirability	1.50 (0.19)	1.49 (0.18)
Cyberbullying	1.32 (0.38)	1.26 (0.28)
Trait victimhood	2.36 (0.57)	2.67 (0.49) <sup>a</sup>

*Note.* Bonferroni correction of .007 was used to control Type I error due to multiple comparisons. BSI = Brief Symptoms Inventory. <sup>a</sup>Statistically significant difference using independent samples *t*-test.

## Cyberbullying

Our main outcome measure was the Cyberbullying Perpetration Scale (CPS) developed by Lee et al. (2017). Developed for use with adults, the CPS is a 20-item scale with sample items such as “I have spread rumors about someone online to damage the person’s reputation” and “I have excluded someone from online community groups to make them feel left out.” Coefficient  $\alpha$  for the present sample was .73. Although males were slightly higher in cyberbullying than females (see Table 1), this difference proved to be nonsignificant,  $t(150.99) = 1.705, p = .090$ .

## Mental Health Symptoms

The Brief Symptoms Inventory-18 (BSI-18; Derogatis, 2000) assesses three dimensions of psychological distress: somatization, depression, and anxiety. For this study, a total score (the global severity index [GSI]) was calculated based on a summation of all three subscales. Based on this sample of participants, the BSI-18 provided scores with acceptable reliability (Cronbach  $\alpha = .92$ ).

## Histrionic Symptoms

To assess symptoms consistent with the Histrionic Personality Disorder (attention-seeking and seductiveness), participants completed the *Brief Histrionic Personality Scale* (BHPS; Ferguson & Negy, 2014). The BHPS consists of 11 statements. Based on this sample of participants, the BHPS provided scores with acceptable reliability (Cronbach  $\alpha = .79$ ).

## Borderline Symptoms

For borderline personality symptoms, we used the short version of the Borderline Symptom List (BSL, Bohus et al., 2009). This scale consists of 23 general items for borderline symptoms (“I thought of hurting myself”) as well as 11 supplemental items (“I had outbreaks of uncontrolled anger or physically attacked others”). We used the combined 34 items, which provided scores with a coefficient  $\alpha$  of .94 with the current sample.

## Right-Wing Authoritarianism

We employed the short version of the Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (Rattazzi et al., 2007) to assess this construct. Sample items for this scale include “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important values children should learn” and “What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil, and take us back to our true path.” Coefficient  $\alpha$  for the present sample was .88.

## Left-Wing Authoritarianism

As we could not find a similar scale as the RWA for LWA, we developed one consisting of rigid left-wing beliefs and willingness to eschew free speech or due process to enforce those beliefs. Sample items include: “People who, as teens, made jokes that were racist, sexist, or transphobic should not be admitted to universities, even years later;” “It is sometimes necessary to censor people or books who/which promote views that I feel are racist, transphobic, sexist, or otherwise hateful”; and “Sometimes it is necessary to use physical violence against those who marginalize vulnerable communities, even if those people have not engaged in physical violence

themselves.” The full scale is openly available at: <https://osf.io/a35dx/>. Coefficient  $\alpha$  for the present sample was .95.

## Trait Victimhood

For this construct we used the trait victimhood scale developed by Gabay et al. (2020). This scale consists of 22 items, with sample items including “People claim that I have hurt them because they cannot see that they are the ones hurting me” and “I feel that other people don’t hesitate to take advantage of my weaknesses.” Coefficient  $\alpha$  with the present sample was .90.

## Social Desirability

Because of the sociopolitical loading of many of the questions, we believed it was important to control for social desirability. Social desirability was controlled using a 14-item scale developed by Ferguson and Negy (2006). This scale involves true/false items that are unflattering but typically common for most individuals (e.g., “Some people make me want to hit them”). Coefficient  $\alpha$  was .69.

## Procedures

All data collection occurred online via Qualtrics surveys. Student participants were given class credit in exchange for participation, whereas non-students were not offered incentives for participation. As per the preregistration, responses with significant missing data, or failing to pass the two reliability checks, were eliminated from data analysis. Two additional questionnaires, one regarding mating preferences and another regarding motivations for listening to music, were included among the surveys to serve as distractor tasks to obscure the study hypotheses for participants. These were not included in the data analysis. The primary study analyses were OLS regressions using pairwise deletion for missing data.

When variance inflation factors were examined, multicollinearity concerns emerged between the BSI (general mental health) and BSL (borderline) variables (VIFs of 3.4 and 3.6, respectively). This is not surprising given the high correlation between these variables ( $r = .83$ ). As such, BSI was dropped from the main, pre-registered, model. Rerunning the model with BSI instead of BSL did not alter the results described below.

## Results

Table 3 provides bivariate correlations between our main predictor and outcome variables.

## Primary Analyses

The primary analysis used cyberbullying as the outcome with general mental health, borderline and histrionic traits, as well as LWA and RWA and trait victimhood as predictors, controlling for social desirability. The resulting regression model was statistically significant,  $R = .361, R^2_{adj} = .116, F(6, 353) = 8.84, p < .001$ . Among the individual predictors, social desirability ( $\beta = -.17$ ), RWA ( $\beta = .22$ ), and trait victimhood ( $\beta = .15$ ) emerged as statistically significant. Although it had emerged as a significant bivariate predictor of cyberbullying ( $r = .20$ ), borderline personality traits

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591**AQ31** **Table 3**  
592**AQ32** *Bivariate Correlations Between Main Predictor and Outcome Variables*

	BSI	Histrionic	LWA	Borderline	RWA	Social des	Cyberbullying	Victimhood
BSI	1.00	-.039	.289*	.829*	-.133	-.334*	.178*	.422*
Histrionic	—	1.00	.031	.104	-.004	-.267*	.101	.135
LWA		—	1.00	.295*	-.356*	.003	.076	.220*
Borderline			—	1.00	-.133	-.408*	.196*	.435*
RWA				—	1.00	.184*	.156	.072
Social desirability					—	1.00	-.206*	-.306*
Cyberbullying						—	1.00	.266*
Trait victimhood							—	1.00

602 *Note.* BSI = Brief Symptoms Inventory; LWA = left-wing authoritarianism; RWA = right-wing authoritarianism. <sup>a</sup>Bonferroni correction for multiple  
603 comparisons of .0018 was employed.

604 \* Statistical significance at the .0018 or lower level.

605 were nonsignificant as a predictor in the regression model.  
606 Standardized regression weights are presented in Table 4.

### 607 Exploratory Analyses

608 Given the recent attention to the trait victimhood construct, a multiple  
609 regression was run with this as an outcome. The resultant regression  
610 model was statistically significant,  $R = .52$ ,  $R^2_{adj} = .26$ ,  $F(5, 354) =$   
611  $25.91$ ,  $p < .001$ . For individual predictors, social desirability  
612 ( $\beta = -.21$ ), borderline ( $\beta = .32$ ), LWA ( $\beta = .21$ ), and RWA ( $\beta = .23$ )  
613 all predicted trait victimhood. The highest VIF for this model was  
614 1.37, suggesting that multicollinearity issues were likely not of concern.

615 We examined the resilience of our main models to alternate  
616 regression approaches. For the cyberbullying variable, skewness  
617 was within tolerable parameters (2.04), but kurtosis was elevated  
618 (7.23). Thus, we reconducted that regression as ordinal logistic.  
619 Results were unchanged from the OLS model, as was the case for  
620 rerunning the trait victimhood analysis.

621 Finally, more complex relations between the variables were tested  
622 using path analysis in JAMOVI. As presented in Figure 1, these  
623 results supported the conceptual model. Borderline personality traits  
624 mostly strongly predicted trait victimhood, but both LWA and RWA  
625 also did to a lesser degree. In turn, cyberbullying was most strongly  
626 predicted by trait victimhood, but also RWA and borderline person-  
627 ality traits. Fit statistics for the model were  $\chi^2 = 1.25$ ,  $p = .264$ ,  
628 CFI = .996, GFI<sub>adj</sub> = .998, and RMSEA = .026. Indirect effects  
629 for borderline traits ( $\beta = .082$ ), RWA ( $\beta = .04$ ) and LWA ( $\beta = .03$ )  
630 were all much smaller, though statistically significant ( $ps < .02$ ).

### 631 Discussion

632 The issue of cyberbullying is of interest to policymakers,  
633 scholars, and the general public. With the dawn of the social

634 **Table 4**  
635 *Standardized Regression Weights in Main Analyses*

Predictor	Cyberbullying	Trait victimhood
Social desirability	-.172*	-.208
Histrionic	.027	.041
Borderline	.058	.315*
Left-wing authoritarianism	.105	.207*
Right-wing authoritarianism	.222*	.226*
Trait victimhood	.145*	N/A

636 *Note.* \* Statistical significance.

637 media age, people's experience of cyberbullying is common.  
638 As such, there is value in understanding factors related to  
639 increased cyberbullying prevalence. The current study sought  
640 to shed some light on these issues from a personality and mental  
641 health perspective.

642 Previous research suggests that cyberbullying is complex, with  
643 multiple inputs that are personological or situational. In particular,  
644 diathesis-stress models of cyberbullying may be most conceptually  
645 useful. In focusing on personological variables, this research sup-  
646 ports this contention, finding that cyberbullying may involve a com-  
647 plex mixture of mental health, perceived victimhood, and political  
648 authoritarianism.

649 Related to authoritarianism, RWA but not LWA was associated  
650 with cyberbullying. However, this observation is tempered by the  
651 observation that neither form of authoritarianism was correlated  
652 with cyberbullying in bivariate analyses. As such, it is possible  
653 that some form of suppressor effect is in play for RWA, and this  
654 should be observed with some caution. Both forms of authoritari-  
655 anism, however, are associated with trait victimhood confirming  
656 prior research suggesting that those high in trait victimhood may  
657 seek out oppressive means to obtain social dominance. Past  
658 research has suggested that RWA is associated with ideological  
659 aggression such as is often seen in cyberbullying (e.g., Depauw  
660 et al., 2022), yet less is known about LWA as this has not appeared  
661 to be an area of interest to primarily liberal/progressive scholars  
662 (see Redding, 2001)

663 Regarding mental health, although both general mental health and  
664 borderline personality symptoms were associated with cyberbully-  
665 ing in a bivariate context, when reanalyzed in multivariate analysis,  
666 they were not. This may be because the victimhood trait with which  
667 both were moderately correlated may be the key element that is driv-  
668 ing cyberbullying, not mental health issues more broadly. This  
669 appears to fit well with prior evidence on trait victimhood. Past evi-  
670 dence has suggested that certain mental health disorders, but border-  
671 line personality disorder specifically (e.g., Moore et al., 2018), are  
672 associated with increased rates of aggressive behavior. Though cor-  
673 relational, the current data may suggest some mechanisms to help  
674 identify which individuals with these symptoms may be particularly  
675 prone to aggressive behavior.

676 Regarding trait victimhood itself, aside from being associated  
677 with cyberbullying, it was also related to both LWA and RWA, as  
678 well as borderline symptoms. As such, trait victimhood may reflect  
679 an aggressive, domineering, and unstable/retributive style that uses  
680 expressed victim status aggressively against others. Trait victimhood



may, in fact, be a key variable to consider in regard to identifying who may be particularly prone to cyberbullying behaviors. This fits well with the limited but existing data on trait victimhood, which finds that individuals higher in this trait are prone to aggression toward others (e.g., Gabay et al., 2020).

Past research has differed on whether males or females are more involved in bullying behaviors, with important contextual differences between sex-specific behaviors. In the current analysis, males and females were more similar than different regarding their perpetration of cyberbullying. This differs from research with adolescents finding higher rates of cyberbullying among female youth (e.g., Connell et al., 2014). This may reflect the slightly higher age of the current sample. Typically, aggression recedes with age, and it is possible that, compared to youth samples, adult females decrease in relational aggression to be more comparative to males, at least in regard to cyberbullying.

### Conceptual Model and Clinical Implications

The conceptual model supported previous observations about trait victimhood as arising from other mental health variables but also often incorporating aspects of aggression and authoritarianism (Gabay et al., 2020). In the case of the current data, adherence to more extreme political beliefs on both right and left was associated with trait victimhood. Trait victimhood was also predicted by borderline personality traits, which may not be surprising given the degree to which borderline traits tend to emphasize aggression, depression, and worry over lost support from others, as well as impulsivity. Consistent with prior research on trait victimhood, trait victimhood subsequently predicted cyberbullying behaviors. Although speculative, it is likely such individuals believe their own aggression to be warranted given perceptions of their own victim status. In other words, to them, aggression is *righteous* likely with their victims belonging to some group of oppressors responsible for their own perception as victims. It is cautioned that the current data are cross-sectional, and causal paths cannot be determined, but this model suggests hypotheses to be tested in subsequent longitudinal designs.

Vismara et al. (2022) commented that developing a clinical model for cyberbullying is critical for intervention and prevention efforts. Developing such a model is likely to be ongoing, but this research suggests that conceptual models which exclude personological factors will miss considerable predictive variance. Specifically, though the profiles of individual perpetrators are likely to be idiosyncratic, the intersection of mental health, perceived victimhood, and political authoritarianism appears to be a ripe avenue for pursuit. Clinicians may work to identify these traits in individuals and help these individuals identify and cope with these traits before engaging in online aggression.

The clinical implication of this finding suggests that identifying trait victimhood may help individuals high in this trait become more aware of their behavior and its origins. It may be possible to help such individuals in therapy identify the motivations that drive them toward aggression to obtain more insight into those motivations and find better, less aggressive outlets to get those needs met.

Clinicians may also help patients to identify the degree to which the adoption of rigid and authoritarian beliefs may be related to both their aggressive behavior and perceptions of victimhood. Although evidence suggests that victimhood can function as a

personality trait, clinicians may be able to assist patients in finding coping mechanisms for their more aggressive impulses and also aid them in understanding that ambiguous situations should not necessarily be interpreted as further victimization.

For policymakers concerned about online environments, these data suggest that authoritarianism often accompanies perceived victimhood. Politicians that lean into the latter may exacerbate the former. Rather, it may be more constructive to help differing communities work together through their concerns rather than perpetuating victim narratives which may increase aggression and discord. Similarly, politicians and other individuals in positions of authority and power would do well to understand that political cyberbullying can create a distorted perception of public consensus or outrage that may not, in fact, represent majority opinions. Thus, policymakers would do well to be cautious in overreacting to, for instance, moral outrage mobs online.

### Limitations

As with all studies, this one has limitations. First, all data are correlational and of self-report in nature. As such, no causal attributions can be drawn. Second, the LWA scale used in this study was newly designed for this study. When it was constructed, the work of Costello et al. (2022) was not yet available. Third, given that the current data are cross-sectional, it is not possible to test for developmental paths between these variables. Fourth, the results of this study are related to cyberbullying but may not reflect other negative behaviors, such as trolling.

### Future Research

The current article examined a conceptual model by which authoritarianism and borderline personality traits were predictive of trait victimhood which, in turn, was predictive of cyberbullying. With cross-sectional data, however, causal implications cannot be made. This invites a longitudinal assessment of these qualities, particularly from a developmental perspective. Since these constructs include personality traits we might expect to be reasonably stable, understanding their developmental sequence would be important.

Further, it would be valuable to better understand the developmental paths that lead to RWA and LWA. Particularly, LWA remains poorly understood, perhaps because liberal/progressive biases within academia left scholars less curious about this phenomenon. At the moment, it is unclear how much of LWA may occur through revisionist history or social science taught in K12 and universities, social media, via families, peers, or other influences. Understanding this better, as well as how to counteract these authoritarian impulses, would be important.

### Conclusions

Cyberbullying remains an important behavior to consider. Its causes are undoubtedly multifaceted. The current analysis suggested that trait victimhood may be particularly valuable as a construct to consider as relates to cyberbullying. Future research would particularly be valuable to consider the development of trait victimhood and cyberbullying in a developmental context. Work that is preregistered would particularly be valuable.

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