

## REGULATION DIFFICULTY IN CYBERBULLYING INCIDENTS

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**Abstract:** Emotional regulation refers to our emotional response to a particular situation. It is defined as the deliberate or automatic attempt of a person to influence what emotions to have, when and how to have them and how to express them. To tackle the relationship between helping attitudes and emotional regulation scale in cyberbullying incidents, our project *Hate's Journey*, financed by Erasmus+, 2018-2-ES02-KA205-011733 has designed an online questionnaire composed by some single item research questions, general data collection and tests regarding emotional regulation, internet content awareness and helping attitudes. The hypothesis of this research is that between helping attitudes and emotional regulation scale in cyberbullying incidents there is a curvilinear effect. Research's 206 participants are residents of Latvia in 24.8%, Romania 24.8%, Spain 24.8%, and Turkey 25.7%, 39.8% males and 60.2% females, age mean of  $m=30$  years. In order to test our curvilinear hypothesis, we have used SPSS' multiple linear regression analysis, based on multiple regression analysis for curvilinear effects, where helping attitudes scale was the dependent variable for the independent variables emotional regulation. As results show in Model 1 the model that supposes linear relationship, emotional regulation difficulty accounts for 7% of the variance in helping attitudes with an  $F=16.699$  significant at a  $p<.01$ . In Model 2, the model that supposes curvilinear relationship, emotional regulation difficulty accounts for 13% of the variance in helping attitudes with an  $F=16.323$  significant at a  $p<.01$ . Results show that a very high level of emotional regulation difficulties and a very low level of emotional regulation difficulties play an important role in the process of helping attitudes display, acting like a buffering effect. Conclusions on further testing of a moderated mediation effect and implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** cyberbullying, emotional regulation difficulties, helping attitudes, curvilinear relationship

### 1. Theoretical correlates

In a new study, published in 2017 in the Journal of Psychological Bulletin, a group of American researchers showed that we tend to use three broad types of strategies to regulate our emotions. How we manage our emotions influences our physical and mental health, but also our social relationships. Most mental disorders are related to difficulties in emotional regulation.

Emotional regulation refers to our emotional response to a particular situation. Mauss and collaborators (2007) defines it as the deliberate or automatic attempt of a person to influence what emotions to have, when and how to have them and how to express them.

In other words, due to the fact that emotions are malleable, we can control them. We can diminish, intensify or maintain the intensity of the emotion, depending on the goals we have (Mauss et al., 2006). James Gross (2007), a leading researcher in the field of emotions, concludes that one of the biggest challenges of our lives is the ability to control our emotions.

People use different strategies of emotional regulation. The most common are: acceptance, avoidance, distraction, expressive suppression (trying to inhibit or reduce the emotional expression of emotional experiences), mindfulness, problem solving, cognitive reassessment (reinterpreting a situation to change its emotional relevance), rumination (repetitive negative thoughts) or concern. The authors noted that the psychological literature includes many different strategies for emotional regulation, but there is little data on how they relate to each other. They believe that grouping them into smaller categories could provide people with more effective ways and tools to regulate their emotions.

Thus, the researchers analyzed hundreds of studies that reported associations between the different strategies of emotional regulation that people tend to use to manage their negative emotions. They analyzed what their common features were and then tried to group them into much simpler categories.

They have found that people tend to use more strategies in a simultaneously manner. If one of them doesn't work, people immediately move on to the next one. Based on the common characteristics found, they grouped these strategies into three main categories:

- Emotional disengagement,
- Fixation on negative states (aversive cognitive preservation),
- Adaptive commitment.

Emotional disengagement includes strategies such as distraction and avoidance. When people use these strategies they try to feel better by directing thoughts and attention elsewhere, escaping from the present moment.

Fixing on negative states includes strategies such as rumination. When using strategies included in this category we tend to remain stuck in repetitive negative thoughts about personal or self-blame failures.

Adaptive commitment includes strategies such as acceptance and problem solving. When people use these strategies they tend to be flexible and try to feel better, looking for solutions to problems or accepting what they cannot change.

The researchers believe that the most useful strategies are those in the adaptive engagement category, but emphasize that the strategies in the other two categories can be useful in certain contexts. For example, when ruminating, people think intensively about problems and analyze them in depth. This analytical process could help them explore variants and find solutions to those problems.

One of the most anticipated results of emotional regulation is the decrease in intensity and duration of dysfunctional negative emotions. However, there are situations in which the strategy used is unhealthy. For example, some people resort to alcohol or drug abuse as a way to change their emotions and feel better.

Therefore, the way we regulate our emotions has an effect on the way we feel but also on our relationships and activities. A healthy interaction involves adjusting and coordinating our emotions with others in different contexts. For example, it can be helpful if we manage to calm ourselves in a tense situation or to accept the opinion of someone we disagree with. Or, as in the case of present research, we will analyze how the emotional regulation difficulty impacts the helping attitudes display towards the victims involved in cyberbullying incidents.

## **2. Research methodology**

Our research team has developed the Erasmus+ funded project *Hate's Journey*, with the aim of in-depth understand the dynamics of online hate speech among youth from Spain, Romania, Turkey and Latvia. Our research's present inquiry is the identification of the existent relationship between emotional regulation and helping attitudes toward the victim of a cyberbullying incident. In this regard, our team has designed an online questionnaire composed

by descriptive data, specific single item research questions, the emotional regulation scale, an internet content awareness scale and the helping attitudes scale.

Our hypothesis states that our two research variables: emotional regulation and helping attitudes toward the victim of a cyberbullying incident are in a curvilinear relationship. In order to test our curvilinear hypothesis, we have used SPSS' multiple linear regression analysis, based on multiple regression analysis for curvilinear effects, where helping attitudes scale was the dependent variable for the independent variables emotional regulation.

Research's 206 young participants are coming from Latvia in 24.8%, Romania 24.8%, Spain 24.8%, and Turkey 25.7%, with an age mean of  $m=30$  years, 39.8% males and 60.2% females. Regarding sample's educational level, 3.9% finished primary school, 1.9% own a professional diploma, 29.1% finished high school, 32% own a Bachelor degree, 29.1% have a Master degree and 3.9% have a PhD. As for professional status, 5.8% are unemployed, 43.7% are students, 1% is volunteering and 49.5% are employed.

An important issue we wanted to address also, was the online time spent by respondents, thus 1% responded with never or hardly ever, 8.7% responded with every week, 20.4% responded with daily or almost daily, 46.6% responded with several time each day and 23.3% responded with almost all the time. Thus the frequent users of internet are net superior over the non-users, with 69.9%.

### 3. Results

Among other instruments that are not part of this research's focus, we have used the 18 items of Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale - Short Form (DERS) (Kaufman, et al., 2015). The instruction was to rate the 18 statements according to how much they resonate with: 1=almost never, 2=sometimes, 3=approximately half of the time, 4=most of the time, 5=almost always. The scoring was done by summing all items scores, taking into account the reversed items, a high value reflecting a greater difficulty in emotional regulation.

The second instrument used was the Helping Attitudes Scale (HAS) developed by Nickell, G.(1998), a 20-item measure of respondents' beliefs, feelings, and behaviors associated with helping. Each item is answered on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Items 1, 5, 8, 11, 18, 19 are reverse scored. The scores for each item are summed up to form an overall score, ranging from 20 to 100. According to the author, a 60 is a neutral score.

Regarding the internal consistency of the DERS scale, we have obtained an alpha coefficient of .828, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency, a reliability coefficient of .70 or higher is considered acceptable in most social science research situations. Our calculated ANOVA with Friedman's Test shows a Friedman's Chi-Square coefficient of 479.036, significant at a  $p<0.01$ , a Grand mean of  $m=2.40$  and a Kendall's coefficient of concordance of  $W = .106$ .

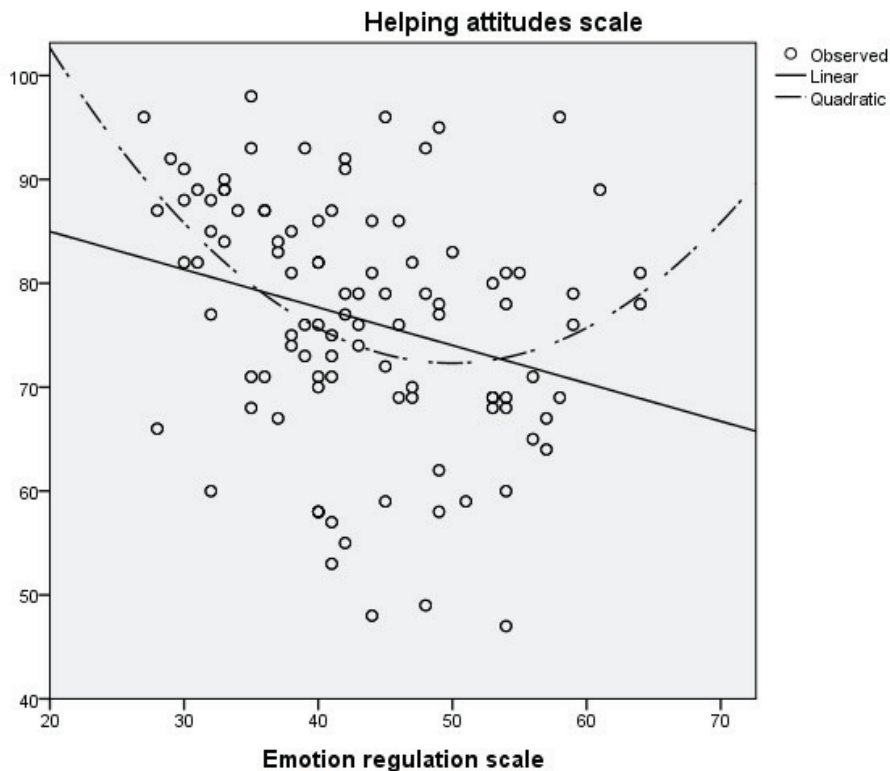
Regarding the internal consistency of the HAS scale, we have obtained an alpha coefficient of .894, suggesting that the items have relatively high internal consistency, a reliability coefficient of .70 or higher is considered acceptable in most social science research situations. Our calculated ANOVA with Friedman's Test shows a Friedman's Chi-Square coefficient of 529.268 is significant at a  $p<0.01$ , a Grand mean of  $m=3.82$  and a Kendall's coefficient of concordance of  $W = .095$ .

Thus, for testing our hypothesis that states that between emotional regulation and helping attitudes there is a curvilinear relationship, we have used a confirmatory factor analysis, based on multiple regression analysis for curvilinear effects. We describe a curvilinear relationship as a relationship between two or more variables which can be graphically depicted by anything other than a straight line. A particular case of curvilinear relationships is the situation where two variables grow together until they reach a certain point (positive

relationship) and then one of them increases while the other decreases (negative relationship) or vice-versa, the graphical representation of the function being an U or an inverted U shape (Rad, D., Dughi, T., Demeter, E., & Rad, G., 2019).

This relationship can be easily identified graphically by a Scatterplot, choosing additional two representations of the regression line: Linear and Quadratic model, for depicting curvilinear effects. The Scatterplot diagram presented in Figure 1 indicates the curvilinear relationship between emotional regulation on the horizontal axis and helping attitudes, represented on the vertical axis. The sample consists of 206 young participants.

**Figure 1** - Linear and quadratic curve estimation of emotional regulation and helping attitudes



There is a very high correlation between emotional regulation difficulty ( $m=43.22$ ,  $SD=8.85$ ) and helping attitudes ( $m=76.50$ ,  $SD=11.77$ ) of  $r=-.275$  significant at a  $p<.01$ , which methodologically gives us incentives to compute the multiple linear regression analysis (Rad, D., Dughi, T., Demeter, E., & Rad, G., 2019).

In order to test our hypothesis, the present study proposes a hierarchical multiple regression analysis, the dependent variable being helping attitudes, and the independent variable in step 1 emotional regulation difficulty, and in step 2 emotional regulation difficulty and squared emotional regulation difficulty.

Table 2 presents the fitting of the two models, linear – Model 1 and curvilinear/quadratic – Model 2. As we can see in Model 1 the model that supposes linear relationship, emotional regulation difficulty accounts for 7% of the variance in helping attitudes with an  $F=16.699$  significant at a  $p<.01$ . In Model 2, the model that supposes curvilinear relationship, emotional regulation difficulty accounts for 13% of the variance in helping attitudes with an  $F=16.323$  significant at a  $p<.01$ .

**Table 2.** *The relationship between emotional regulation difficulty and helping attitudes, model summary, ANOVA and coefficients*

Model Summary									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	Change F	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.275 <sup>a</sup>	.076	.071	11.345	.076	16.699	1	204	.000
2	.372 <sup>b</sup>	.139	.130	10.980	.063	14.817	1	203	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Emotion regulation scale

b. Predictors: (Constant), Emotion regulation scale, sqrtERS

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2149.403	1	2149.403	16.699	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	26258.092	204	128.716		
	Total	28407.495	205			
2	Regression	3935.577	2	1967.788	16.323	.000 <sup>c</sup>
	Residual	24471.919	203	120.551		
	Total	28407.495	205			

a. Dependent Variable: Helping attitudes scale

b. Predictors: (Constant), Emotion regulation scale

c. Predictors: (Constant), Emotion regulation scale, sqrtERS

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	92.282	3.943		23.402	.000
	Emotion regulation scale	-.365	.089	-.275	-4.086	.000
2	(Constant)	156.654	17.153		9.133	.000
	Emotion regulation scale	-3.375	.787	-2.542	-4.290	.000
	sqrtERS	.034	.009	2.280	3.849	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Helping attitudes scale

All standardized coefficients of Beta ( $\beta = -.275$ ;  $\beta = -2.542$  and  $\beta = 2.280$ ) are significant at  $p < .01$  which gives a high consistency to our both models. Changing Beta coefficient's sign from + to - means that the effect is growing in the opposite direction, which demonstrates that the relationship between the two variables: emotional regulation difficulties and helping attitudes is not linear, but curvilinear. The additional incremental predictive capacity of 6 percent, added by including the squared emotional regulation difficulties variable which is accounting for the band in the regression line, indicates that there is a curvilinear relationship between emotional regulation difficulties and helping attitudes.

This curvilinear relationship demonstrates that extreme aspects, extremely reduced and extremely high levels of emotional regulation difficulties, significantly influences the helping attitudes, making the process of helping attitudes display process inefficient. Normal levels of emotional regulation difficulties triggers an accepted level of helping attitudes display towards the victims of cyberbullying, meaning that the process of emotional regulation functions in an

adaptive manner. Thus a very high level of emotional regulation difficulties and a very low level of emotional regulation difficulties play an important role in the process of helping attitudes display, acting like a buffering effect.

### 3. Conclusions and implications

The present study investigated if emotional regulation and helping attitudes toward the victim of a cyberbullying incident are in a curvilinear relationship. The obtained results confirm the proposed hypothesis, meaning that extreme aspects, extremely reduced and extremely high levels of emotional regulation difficulties, significantly influences the helping attitudes, making the process of helping attitudes display process inefficient. Average levels of emotional regulation difficulties triggers an accepted level of helping attitudes display towards the victims of cyberbullying, meaning that the process of emotional regulation functions in an adaptive manner. Thus a very high level of emotional regulation difficulties and a very low level of emotional regulation difficulties play an important role in the process of helping attitudes display, acting like a buffering effect.

This inference gives us methodological reasons to believe that between the two concepts either moderation or mediation interaction processes are obvious. In a further research we will investigate the role of internet content awareness, online time spent and other variables over the relationship between emotional regulation difficulty and helping attitudes.

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