



Universiteit Utrecht

School Bullying in Adolescence:

The association between perceived popularity and two types of defending

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Abstract

Previous studies have shown a positive association between perceived popularity and defending behavior in situations of bullying. But there is still limited information about the association between perceived popularity and the two types of defending, namely bully-oriented defending and victim-oriented defending. Therefore, this study examines if the association between perceived popularity and two types of defending differs depending on the two types of defending. Data were collected among a sample of 383 Dutch adolescents in 11 high schools ($M_{\text{age}} = 12.96$; $SD: 0.78$). Among them 232 were participants and they filled in questionnaires in order to collect data. The questionnaires included self-reported and peer nomination questions. Results showed that the association between defending behavior and perceived popularity differs depending on the types of defending. Higher levels of popularity are positive and significant associated with the two types of defending behavior. However, the association between perceived popularity and bully-oriented defending is stronger. Furthermore, there was a significant gender difference for the two types of defending, girls scored higher than boys on both types of defending. In contrast, the interaction effect between perceived popularity and gender was not significant, therefore gender does not have a moderating effect between defending behavior and perceived popularity.

Keywords: bullying, adolescents, perceived popularity, defending behavior

Association Between two types of Defending and Perceived Popularity

Bullying is defined as aggressive behavior which is carried out repeatedly and over time in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power in favor of the perpetrator (Olweus, 1994). There are two types of bullying to distinguish, namely direct physical and/or verbal attacks and indirect abuse in the form of social exclusion and spreading of rumors (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). On average, 12,6% of adolescents reported being bullied (Craig et al, 2009; Currie et al. 2012). The effects of being bullied can be severe and long lasting (Wolke & Lereya, 2015) and can be considered as a significant risk factor for increased psychological problems like social anxiety, depressive symptoms, and suicide risk (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005), as well as a vast range of physical and academic adjustment difficulties (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013). However, being defended is positively related to the adjustment and social status of the victim (Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2010).

Defenders are peers who take side with the victim by either comforting their victimized peer or by confronting the bully (Caravita, DiBlasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, Altoè, 2008; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010). Bully-oriented defending can be seen as direct confrontation of the bully on behalf of the victim, and victim-oriented defending can be seen as supporting and comforting the victim (Reijntjes, Vermande, Olthof, Goossens, Aleva, & Van der Meulen, 2016; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010). Although most peers feel sympathy for the victim and disapprove of the bullying, bystanders intervene in only 10% of bullying situations (Padgett & Notar, 2013; Salmivalli, 2010). Possible motives underlying defending behavior are a sense of social justice, a moral responsibility to intervene and different coping responses to observations of bullying (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012). In addition, most defenders show higher levels of perceived popularity, an index of visibility, prestige and influence (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2012; Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2010). The association between defending and perceived popularity might be different for confronting the bully or supporting the victim. Therefore the aim of this study is to examine whether the association between defending and perceived popularity differs depending on the type of defending.

Characteristics of defenders. Defenders can be described as bystanders who take a stand on behalf of the victim by either confronting the bully or comforting the victim (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). One of the characteristics to distinguish defenders from passive bystanders is a high sense of moral responsibility (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). Peers who report high levels of empathy are more likely to intervene to stop bullying (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoé, 2007; Nickerson, Mele & Princiotta, 2008). The tendency to intervene is also associated with high levels of social self-efficacy (Chen, Chang, &

Cheng, 2016). To defend a victim of bullying, socially competent behavior and problem-focused strategies are needed (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). Furthermore, when defenders hold a positive attitude towards the victim, they feel more responsible to intervene (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012).

Likeability and perceived popularity, both related to high peer status, increases the likelihood of peers acting on their self-efficacy or empathy (Caravita, DiBlasio & Salmivalli, 2009). Characteristics of the defender (e.g. empathy) and the interaction with the context (e.g. peer status) are both factors which influence defending behavior (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010). In addition to peers, teachers also play an important role in defending behavior. The support of the teacher motivates and supports the defender to stand up for the victim (Kollerová, Jonosová & Rican, 2015).

With reference to gender, there are differences in defending behavior. Not only show girls higher levels of moral engagement (Caravita, Gini, & Pozzoli, 2012), but they also report more self-efficacy (Obermann, 2011; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010). Moreover, empathy only predicts defending behavior for girls, but not for boys (Barchia & Bussy, 2011). Defenders often are from the same gender as the victim (Huitsing et al., 2014). Girls who were well liked and showed high levels of perceived popularity scored highly on both forms of defending (e.g. confronting the bully and comforting the victim). However, girls who were well liked but showed low levels of perceived popularity scored highly only on victim-oriented defending. Boys who score highly on perceived popularity but are disliked scored high on bully-oriented defending (Reijntjes, Vermande, Olthof, Goossens, Aleva, & Van der Meulen, 2016).

Defending and perceived popularity. Although a strong sense of self-efficacy and empathy for the victim are associated with the reputation of being a defender, both factors are moderated by perceived popularity (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010). To put it differently, self-efficacy affect defending behavior only when perceived popularity was high. Also the association between empathy and defending was moderated by perceived popularity (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010). A positive association was found between defending and popularity for girls, but not for boys (Duffy, Penn, Nesdale, Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016).

Popularity can be defined as a peer who acts in a dominant way and is visible to others (De Bruyn, Cillessen & Wissink, 2010; Van den Berg, Burk & Cillessen, 2015). Adolescents who scored highly on bully-oriented defending, also score high on bullying (Caravita, DiBlasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007). Because adolescents who engage in bullying are often highly popular, defenders need to have an equally high peer status to have the courage to stand up for the victim (Caravita, DiBlasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; Peets, Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2015). As a result, an adolescent might feel empathic or capable of defending the victimized peer, but still

not able to act upon these emotions and cognitions, unless he or she has a secure position in the peer group (Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2010; Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2010). Therefore, the association between perceived popularity and bully-oriented defending might be stronger than the association between perceived popularity and victim-oriented defending.

Present Study. Previous studies mentioned that there is a positive association between defending and perceived popularity. Still there is limited information on whether the association between perceived popularity differs depending on the type of defending. The aim of this study is to examine whether the association between defending and perceived popularity differs depending on the two types of defending. The association between defending and perceived popularity might be different when defending is about confronting the bully and when defending is about supporting the victim. The first hypothesis is that there is a positive association between perceived popularity and bully-oriented defending and that there is a positive association between perceived popularity and victim-oriented defending. Standing up for the victim is a social risk in such that it is a challenging task because the defender could possibly becoming the next victim. Also social status within the group is an important factor when it comes to standing and acting up on cognitions and emotions of other peers (Pöyhönen, Juvonen & Salmivalli, 2010). Therefore, the second hypothesis is that there is a stronger positive association between perceived popularity and bully-oriented defending compared to the association between perceived popularity and victim-oriented defending, given that it takes more courage to take a public stand against the bully (Duffy, Penn, Nesdale, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016).

Furthermore, the third and final hypothesis is that gender could have a moderating effect on perceived popularity for both bully-oriented defending and victim-oriented defending. This is based on the fact that girls show more defending behavior than boys (Obermann, 2011). In other words we expect that the relation between perceived popularity and defending behaviour differs for boys and for girls. We have this expectation for both types of defending.

Method

Sample. Data were collected as part of a large study among Dutch adolescents. The full sample consisted of 383 students between the age of 11 and 15 ($M = 12.96$; $SD = 0.78$) through a peer nominations' procedure and self-reports. The participants belonged to 14 classrooms in the first and second grade of 7 high schools across the Netherlands. Of the full sample, 63% did received parental consent. Among them, 70% agreed to participate themselves. The total number of participants were 232. Adolescents who did not receive permission to participate or were unwilling to participate, were included in the sample as non-participants. Among the participants, 44% ($n = 103$) were

boys and 55% ($n = 128$) were girls. 96% of the participants were born in the Netherlands.

Procedure. The study was conducted by 11 third-year Bachelor students of Utrecht University under the supervision of an Assistant Professor of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences. The students collected the data in the classrooms. They contacted high schools known in their own network, explained the purpose of the study to the manager of the school and/or teacher and asked for permission to conduct this study. After approval, an e-mail was sent to the teachers to ask if the students could fill out a questionnaire during one of their lessons. After their assent, the students sent an e-mail to the parents with information about the study and a parental consent form as an attachment. After collecting the parental consent forms, adolescents were asked to give their consent. Both the parental and adolescents consent forms provided information about the subject of the study and insured that all data were treated confidentially and processed anonymously by using ID numbers instead of the participant's name. Also was mentioned that participating in this study was completely voluntary, there would be no consequences for non-participation and participants could stop at any time. Furthermore, the form stated that parents and adolescents could get access to the important study results.

At the beginning of the study, each participant was assigned an ID number that were given to the participants and appeared on the questionnaires that were given to the participants. In addition, a list of classmates was provided with the corresponding ID numbers. Participants filled out a questionnaire which were handed to them during regular teaching hours in their classrooms and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The study took place in the third semester during spring. Participants who declined to participate in the study, received a fake questionnaire with general knowledge questions as an alternative assignment, within the same classroom. The ID numbers were used to enter the data.

Measures. At the beginning of the questionnaire, a definition of bullying was given to the participants. It included a description of the different kinds of bullying. Hitting, kicking, punching and taking away and destroying personal belongings of the victim are examples of direct and physical forms of bullying. Verbal attacks include offending and ridicule. Furthermore, indirect bullying includes gossiping and to exclude peers to join group activities. The participant was reminded that bullying is about repeatedly hurting and upsetting a peer.

Perceived popularity. This variable was assessed by the two following questions: '*Which classmates do you find the most popular?*' and '*Which classmate do you find the least popular?*'. For each question, participants could nominate as many peers in their class as they wanted by using the ID numbers. The number of nominations

received for each question, were summed up for each participant. Next, the least-popular item was subtracted from the most-popular item. The number of nominations received were divided by the number of nominators per class, resulting in proportion scores of perceived popularity.

Defending behavior. Two types of defending were assessed, namely victim-oriented defending and bully-oriented defending. Victim-oriented defending was explained by displaying the different ways to show comfort to the victim, namely by being friendly to the victim or inform adults about the bullying. Victim-oriented defending was assessed by the following question: '*Do you know classmates who try to help a victim by supporting the victim? Who are they?*'. The participants could nominate peers who support the victims by using the ID numbers. Bully-oriented defending was explained in display the different ways in how peers can confront the bully, specifically by being angry at the bully, to get involved with the bullying situation or to scare off the bully. Bully-oriented defending was assessed by the following question: '*Do you know classmates who try to help a victim by confronting the bully? Who are they?*'. The participants could nominate peers who confront the bully by using the ID numbers. Participants could nominate as many peers in their class as they wanted. The number of nominations received for each question, were summed up for each participant. The number of nominations received were then divided by the number of nominators per class, to obtain proportion scores.

Results

Descriptive statistics. In Table 1 the descriptive statistics for all main study variables the mean, standard deviation and range are included. Furthermore, we tested whether there was a difference between boys ($n = 153$) and girls ($n = 182$) for each type of defending and for perceived popularity, by using independent samples t tests. These results are shown in Table 2. There was a significant gender difference on victim-oriented defending, $t(332) = -4.356, p = < .001$, two-tailed, 95%CI [-.08, -.03]. Girls scored higher ($M = 0.09, SD = 0.12$) than boys ($M = 0.03, SD = 0.11$). There was a significant gender difference in bully-oriented defending, $t(327) = -3.013, p = .003$, two-tailed, 95% CI [-.04, -.01]. Girls scored higher ($M = 0.04, SD = 0.08$) than boys ($M = 0.02, SD = 0.06$). There was no significant gender difference on perceived popularity between girls and boys, $t(333) = -1.240, p = .22$, two-tailed, 95% CI [-.13, .03].

Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics of Main Study Variables (N = 382)*

	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Victim-Oriented Defending	,00	1,20	,07	,12
Bully-Oriented Defending	,00	,60	,03	,07
Perceived Popularity	-.1,80	1,40	,01	,38

Table 2 *Means, standard deviations and t-test for boys (n = 153) and girls (n = 182) for Victim-Oriented Defending, Bully-Oriented Defending and Perceived Popularity*

	Girls		Boys		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>t</i>
Victim-Oriented Defending	0,09	0,12	0,03	0,11	-4.356***
Bully-Oriented Defending	0,04	0,08	0,02	0,06	-3.013**
Perceived Popularity	0,02	0,35	-0,03	0,37	-1.240

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Correlations. The correlations in this study were computed for the main variables; victim-oriented defending, bully-oriented defending and perceived popularity. They are shown in Table 3. The association between victim-oriented defending and bully-oriented defending was significant and positive, $r(380) = .62$, $p < .001$. Perceived popularity was positively correlated with victim-oriented defending, $r(380) = .16$, $p = .002$. Also perceived popularity was positively correlated with bully-oriented defending ,

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$r(380) = .28, p < .001$. By using the Fisher r -to- z transformation, the correlation between bully-oriented and perceived popularity was found to be significantly stronger than the correlation between victim-oriented defending and perceived popularity, $z = 1.74, p = .04$, one-tailed.

Table 3 *Correlations Among the Main Study Variables (N = 382)*

	Victim-Oriented	Bully-Oriented	Perceived Popularity
Victim-Oriented Defending	-	.62***	.16**
Bully-Oriented Defending		-	.28**
Perceived Popularity			-

Note. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Regression Analyses. Linear regression analyses were conducted to test the effect of perceived popularity on the two types of defending, victim-oriented defending and bully-oriented defending, controlling for age and gender. Furthermore, in this study we also tested if the effects of perceived popularity were moderated by gender therefore an interaction effect was included in the analysis. Hence, in this part of the analysis the variables age and perceived popularity were mean-centered (i.e., the mean was subtracted from each score in order to reduce multi-collinearity). In this analyses two separate analyses were run, for the main effects and for the interaction effects.

Victim-Oriented Defending. The results for victim-oriented defending are presented in Table 4. Model 1 shows the main effects and was significant, $R^2 = .10, F(4, 242) = 7.73, p = < .001$. Age had a positive effect on victim-oriented defending ($B = .02, SE = .010, p = .02$). Also gender had a significant effect on victim-oriented defending, ($B = .05, SE = .015, p = < .001$); Girls scored higher than boys. Furthermore, perceived popularity had a positive effect on victim-oriented defending, ($B = .08, SE = .022, p = < .001$).

Model 2 shows the same model with the addition of the interaction between perceived popularity and gender. The model was significant, $R^2 = .12, F = 7.73, p = < .001$. Age had a positive effect on victim-oriented defending, ($B = .02, SE = .012, p = .02$). Gender had an effect on victim-oriented defending, ($B = .05, SE = .015, p = < .001$).

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Girls scored higher than boys. However, perceived popularity had not a significant effect on victim-oriented defending ($p = .05$). Furthermore, there was no significant interaction between perceived popularity and gender, $p = .66$.

Bully-Oriented Defending. The results for bully-oriented defending are presented in Table 5. Model 1 shows the main effects and was significant, $R^2 = .10$, $F(3,243) = 8.82$, $p = <.001$. Age had no significant effect on bully-oriented defending ($p = .22$). Gender had an effect on bully-oriented defending, ($B = .02$, $SE = .009$), $p = .03$; Girls scored higher than boys. Also perceived popularity had a positive effect on bully-oriented defending, ($B = .06$, $SE = .012$), $p = <.001$. Model 2 shows the same model with addition of the interaction between perceived popularity and gender. The model was significant, $R^2 = .10$, $F(2, 242) = 6.85$, $p = <.001$. Age did not significantly predict bully-oriented defending ($p = .25$). Gender had an effect on bully-oriented defending, ($B = .02$, $SE = .009$), $p = .03$; Girls scored higher than boys. Also perceived popularity had a positive effect on bully-oriented defending, ($B = .04$, $SE = .019$), $p = .03$. However, there was no significant interaction between perceived popularity and gender ($p = .33$).

Thus, the results indicate that the association between defending behavior and perceived popularity differs depending on the two types of defending. Higher levels of popularity are positive and significant associated with both types of defending. However, there is a stronger positive association between perceived popularity and bully-oriented defending than between perceived popularity and victim-oriented defending. Furthermore, the t -test showed that between the two types of defending and gender, girls score higher on bully-oriented defending and victim-oriented defending than boys. Moreover, there was no significant gender difference between girls and boys for perceived popularity. On the other hand the analyses in this study did not show an interaction effect between perceived popularity and gender for both types of defending. This means that gender does not influence the association between defending behavior and perceived popularity. Girls showed more defending behavior than boys and this was independent of the level of perceived popularity.

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Table 4 *Regression Analysis Predicting Victim-Oriented Defending*

	Model 1: Main effects		Model 2: Interaction effects			
	B	S.E.	β	B	S.E.	β
Intercept	,040**	,012	,040**	,012		
Age	,024*	,010	,149	,024*	,010	,147
Gender	,053***	,015	,207	,053**	,015	,208
Perceived Popularity	,079**	,022	,219	,068	,034	,187
Perceived Popularity * Gender				,020	,045	,041

Note. The coding for gender was: Boys: 0; Girls: 1. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 5 *Regression Analysis Predicting Bully-Oriented Defending*

	Model 1: Main effects		Model 2: Interaction effects			
	B	S.E.	β	B	S.E.	β
Intercept	,017**`	,006		,017**	,006	
Age	,007	,005	,075	,006	,005	,071
Gender	,019*	,009	,133	,019*	,009	,136
Perceived Popularity	,055***	,012	,273	,041*	,019	,203
Perceived Popularity * Gender				,024	,025	,092

Note. The coding for gender was: Boys: 0; Girls: 1. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

The main purpose of the study was to examine if the association between defending behavior and perceived popularity differs depending on the two types of defending, namely bully-oriented defending and victim-oriented defending. The first hypothesis was that perceived popularity would have a positive association with both bully-oriented defending and victim-oriented defending. The results in this study showed that there is a positive significant association between perceived popularity and bully-oriented defending and a positive significant association between perceived popularity and victim-oriented defending. Thus, these findings were consistent with the first hypothesis in this study. Adolescents that scored high on perceived popularity were also more likely to defend the victim, regardless of the type of defending. These results were also found in other studies (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007; Reijntjes, Vermande, Olthof, Goossens, Aleva, & Van der Meulen, 2016). The second hypothesis was that the association between perceived popularity and bully-oriented defending would be positive and stronger than the association between perceived popularity and victim-oriented defending. Although both bully-oriented defending and victim-oriented defending are positively and significantly correlated with perceived popularity, the correlation between perceived popularity and bully-oriented defending is stronger. This finding is consistent with the second hypothesis. An explanation for this finding is that it takes more courage to take a public stand against the bully and to confront the bully directly with the risk of becoming the next victim of bullying (Duffy, Penn, Nesdale, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016; Pöyhönen, Juvonen & Salmivalli, 2010).

The third and final hypothesis was that gender could have a moderating effect on perceived popularity for both bully-oriented defending and victim-oriented defending. The results of the independent sample *t*-test showed that the gender difference was significant for the two types of defending. Girls scored higher on both bully-oriented defending and victim-oriented defending. A possible explanation for these findings is that girls have higher levels of moral engagement and empathy (Barchia & Bussy, 2011; Caravita, Gini, & Pozzoli, 2012; Obermann, 2011). Moreover, in our study two separate interaction models were included for each type of defending in order to test if the interaction between gender and perceived popularity was significant. The results showed that there was no significant interaction effect for both types of defending. Hence, gender did not have a moderating effect between defending behavior and perceived popularity. Girls were more likely than boys to show defending behavior, this was independent of the level of perceived popularity.

Limitations. Some limitations of the study must be mentioned. Even though all questions were explained within the questionnaire, the adolescents asked a lot of questions about what was expected of them. For example, it was not clear to them what

popularity refers to and how to determine which peer is popular or non-popular. The oral explanation of the administrators might have been different between the classrooms. While completing the questionnaires by the participants in the classrooms, it became clear to the administrators that the participants showed feelings of discomfort about the topic by hesitating to answer the question about nominating who was being bullied and by expressing their sympathy for those affected by bullying. Hesitating might have had an influence in how they answered those questions.

Another limitation in this study is that the participants were randomly selected which means that the sample could be less representative. Furthermore, the sample size of this study, consisting of 232 participants, is a rather small sample which can be a limitation regarding external validation. Therefore, when generalizing the results, caution is required. Also this study was cross-sectional and therefore no causal conclusion can be made.

Practical implications. The following recommendations can be given. This study emphasizes the importance of perceived popularity for the two types of defending behavior, bully-oriented defending and victim-oriented defending. High peer status involves both likeability and popularity. In every classroom there are peers who score high on perceived popularity. Those who have high levels of perceived popularity are able to use their empathy and self-efficacy to support their victimized peers (Chen, Chang, & Cheng, 2016; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoé, 2007; Nickerson, Mele & Princiotta, 2008). When students with high scores of perceived popularity but have low scores of empathy and self-efficacy, it is important to enhance these factors. Therefore, a useful intervention program such as the Anti bullying programme 'KiVa' which focusses on the support group approach could also work for adolescents. This programme aims to improve problem solving strategies, to address bullying situations in a non punitive manner. The teacher has an important role within this intervention programme (Van der Ploeg, Steglich & Veenstra, 2016). The role of the teacher in the classroom is important because it can be a motivational factor for adolescents to stand up for the victim (Kollerová, Jonosová & Rican, 2015). A teacher who encourages peers in the classroom to share their feelings and thoughts and work together are important aspects that could be contribute to an environment in which (Barboza et al., 2009) peers feel safe enough to stand up in bullying situations, especially for those adolescents who show lower levels of popularity and who do not stand up easily for the victims in bullying situations. Moreover, in the process of addressing of the bullying situation, this study showed that it is valuable to take gender difference into account. There is a gender difference for the two types of defending: girls are more likely to stand up for the victim in bullying situations. Because girls score higher on moral engagement and empathy rather than boys (Barchia & Bussy, 2011; Caravita, Gini, & Pozzoli, 2012; Obermann, 2011), boys

need to develop a stronger moral engagement and enhance feelings of empathy. A sense of self-efficacy could be developed by providing them appropriate ways to intervene in bullying situations (Crismaru, 2012). Although the focus should be on boys and girls in general, boys might need more instructions to intervene in bullying situations.

Conclusion. This study extends on previous research about the association between defending behavior and perceived popularity. The results in this study showed that the associations between defending behavior differs depending on the two types of defending. Although both types of defending were positive and significant associated with perceived popularity, the association between perceived popularity and bully-oriented defending was stronger. This indicates that adolescents who show higher levels of perceived popularity are more likely to confront the bully directly. Furthermore, the interaction effect between perceived popularity and gender was not significant. Girls tend to show more defending behavior rather than boys despite of the level of perceived popularity they showed. Although the association between perceived popularity and bully-oriented defending is stronger, further research needs to investigate which type of defending behavior is effective to reduce bullying.

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