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The interplay of negative experiences, emotions and affective styles in adolescents' cybervictimization: A moderated mediation analysis



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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying research has uncovered several contextual and personal risk factors for cybervictimization, but their interaction has not received much attention. However, the combined influence of several individual and situational factors and the interplay between them may have a different influence on the risk of cybervictimization than each factor separately. Therefore, this longitudinal moderated mediation study, conducted among a large sample of early adolescents, examined how the events adolescents experience in daily life influence their risk of being victimized online via the emotions they experience, and whether this process is moderated by differences in adolescents' habitual tendencies to regulate their emotions (affective styles). The results indicated that negative events were directly and indirectly, via experiencing negative emotions, related to later cybervictimization. Furthermore, the association between negative events and emotions was moderated by concealing and tolerating affective styles: Adolescents who habitually concealed or tolerated their emotions were more likely to experience negative emotions associated with negative events, especially when they experienced few negative events. These findings illustrate the importance of taking person-environment-interactions into account when studying cyberbullying and support the implementation of prevention and intervention programs that assist students in developing adaptive emotion regulation and coping skills.

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1. Introduction

Adolescents are avid users of the internet and are often confronted with online risks such as cyberbullying (Mascheroni & Cuman, 2014). Prevalence estimates vary considerable between studies, but in general between one to four out of ten youngsters report to have been victims of cyberbullying, depending on the definition used, participants' age, country of origin, and reporting time frame (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014).

Research on cyberbullying has yielded important insights into the antecedents, correlates, and consequences related to online victimization and perpetration (Chen, Ho, & Lwin, 2015; Guo, 2016; Kowalski et al., 2014). Many personal as well as contextual factors

that influence the risk of cyberbullying victimization have been identified (Baldry, Farrington, & Sorrentino, 2015; Cross et al., 2015; Kowalski et al., 2014). Broadly, these risk factors can be categorized into two groups: factors relating to individual features, such as demographic attributes, personality traits, motives, attitudes, and affect, and factors relating to situational or contextual features, such as family dynamics, parenting styles, peer influences, school climate, and societal norms and values. As such, cyberbullying can be understood from the framework of the socioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which views social phenomena as an interaction of social, physical, institutional, cultural, and community contexts as well as individual characteristics.

However, the interaction between individuals and their environment has largely been neglected in most studies on cyberbullying, which have focused either on personal or situational influences. Yet, it could be that some personal factors moderate the influence of contextual factors on cyberbullying involvement, and vice versa. For instance, the negative effect of a hostile school

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climate on cyberbullying may be buffered among students who have an optimistic attitude, whereas it may be exacerbated among depressed students. Therefore, studying personal and contextual factors simultaneously may be important to reveal associations and interactions that do not show up when studying the factors in isolation. For this reason, this study aims to take into account the interaction of individual and situational factors by examining how the events adolescents experience in daily life might influence their risk of being victimized online through the emotions they experience and whether this process is moderated by the way adolescents respond to negative events (*affective style*).

1.1. Negative life events, affective processes, and cyberbullying

Negative experiences in several life domains have been associated with cybervictimization (Guo, 2016). In the peer domain, one consistently found predictor of cyberbullying is previous experience with offline or online victimization (e.g., Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kowalski et al., 2014; Li, 2007; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009; Walrave & Heirman, 2011). Peer rejection and low peer support also seem to play a role in cyberbullying (Bayraktar, Machackova, Dedkova, Cerna, & Ševčíková, 2014; Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010; Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009). In the family domain, low parental support, poor parent-child relationships, and family conflict have been associated with cyberbullying victimization (Ortega-Barón, Buelga, & Cava, 2016; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). In the school domain, low support from teachers, a negative school climate, and the transition from primary to secondary school have been related to cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2014; Ortega-Barón et al., 2016; Price & Dalgleish, 2010). In sum, negative contextual factors, whether they are situated at home, at school, or in contact with peers, seem to increase the risk of becoming a target of negative online practices.

In addition to contextual risk factors such as negative life events, several individual characteristics have been associated with increased risk of cyberbullying involvement. Many of these involve affective or emotional factors such as emotion regulation deficits, lack of empathy, depression, and emotional intelligence (Baroncelli & Ciucci, 2014; Cappadocia, Craig, & Pepler, 2013; Gámez-Guadix, Orue, Smith, & Calvete, 2013; Hemphill & Heerde, 2014; Topcu & Erdur-Baker, 2012; Zukauskienė, Steffgen, Pfetsch, König, & Melzer, 2010). Research has also demonstrated the role of specific emotions such as anger and envy in predicting cyberbullying perpetration (Ak, Özdemir, & Kuzucu, 2015; den Hamer, Konijn, Aartsen, Veldhuis, & Spekman, 2015; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Lonigro et al., 2015). However, to the best of our knowledge, to date no longitudinal studies have examined the precipitating role of emotions in cybervictimization. Yet, when people experience negative emotions, they might become easy targets of cyberbullying (Vranjes, Baillien, Vandebosch, Erreygers, & De Witte, 2017). Distressed persons may express their emotions in a socially less accepted way, such as posting too much about their emotional state or disclosing too much negativity, which can elicit negative reactions from others (Bellur, High, & Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2008; Forest & Wood, 2012). Additionally, their emotional expression may show that they are vulnerable, making them “easy” victims (Erreygers, Vandebosch, Vranjes, Baillien, & De Witte, 2016; Vranjes et al., 2017).

We propose that one possible path to connect negative events with cyberbullying runs via the experience of negative emotions. Although there is no one-to-one correspondence between events and emotions across individuals, in general negative events (or

events that would generally be evaluated as negative) do elicit negative affect (Larson & Ham, 1993). Therefore, we expect that the experience of negative events, albeit at school, at home, or with peers, will generally elicit negative emotions. Furthermore, negative emotions have been associated with cyberbullying perpetration (den Hamer et al., 2015; den Hamer, Konijn & Keijer, 2014; Erreygers et al., 2016; Sjørø, Fandrem, & Roland, 2014). In the current study, we aim to examine whether affective processes also play a precipitating role in cyberbullying victimization. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1. *Negative events predict increased cyberbullying victimization via the experience of negative emotions.*

1.2. Emotion regulation and affective styles

People have the capacity to regulate their emotions, i.e., emotion regulation. Through emotion regulation, individuals can influence which emotions they have, their timing, their intensity, and their expression (Thompson, 1994). There are many different types of emotion regulation strategies (Gross, 2014), but most research to date has been conducted on reappraisal (or changing your way of thinking about an event) and suppression (or changing your behavioral response to an event). Generally it is found that reappraisal is an adaptive strategy that tends to generate positive outcomes, whereas suppression is disadvantageous (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; Cutuli, 2014; Gross & John, 2003; Gross, 1998; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). However, which emotion regulation strategy is effective is also supposed to be contingent on the specific situation or emotional cue (Haines et al., 2016; Larsen & Prizmic, 2004). For instance, seeking social support might be an adaptive strategy to cope with fear, but it is probably less effective to regulate anger.

Nevertheless, research has shown that across situations people have individual preferences to use some strategies over others. In other words, individuals seem to differ in the strategies they habitually use, or which strategies they prefer in general across situations and emotions (John & Gross, 2007). These differences in emotion regulation tendencies, or the way in which individuals habitually use emotion regulation strategies, have been described as affective styles (Davidson, 1998). Affective styles can be seen as stable individual tendencies (or traits) to use particular emotion regulation strategies (Hofmann, Sawyer, Fang, & Asnaani, 2012). Affective styles, as individual tendencies, are proposed to influence the process from experiences to emotional response overall, as a predisposing and moderating factor, whereas emotion regulation strategies are used in specific situations and are more context-dependent (or state-like).

In the emotion literature, three affective styles have consistently been identified: concealing, adjusting, and tolerating (Hofmann & Kashdan, 2010). Adjusting refers to the tendency to regulate and re-adjust affect to accommodate to contextual demands, e.g., being able to cheer oneself up after a negative experience. Concealing refers to the habitual tendency to suppress or conceal affect, e.g., not showing to others that one is sad. Tolerating refers to an accepting and nondefensive attitude towards (potentially distressing) affect, e.g., telling oneself that it is ok to be upset.

Propensities in affective styles are associated with interindividual differences in responding to negative events, well-being, and emotional disorders (Davidson, 2004; Hofmann et al., 2012). A propensity to conceal or suppress affect generally seems to lead to negative outcomes, whereas adjusting and tolerating seem to be more adaptive forms of emotion regulation (Aldao et al., 2010; Gross & John, 2003; Hofmann & Kashdan, 2010; Ito & Hofmann, 2014). Furthermore, research consistently indicates that children

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