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College Student Engaging in Cyberbullying Victimization: Cognitive Appraisals, Coping Strategies, and Psychological Adjustments

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ABSTRACT

The study's purpose was to explore whether frequency of cyberbullying victimization, cognitive appraisals, and coping strategies were associated with psychological adjustments among college student cyberbullying victims. A convenience sample of 121 students completed questionnaires. Linear regression analyses found frequency of cyberbullying victimization, cognitive appraisals, and coping strategies respectively explained 30%, 30%, and 27% of the variance in depression, anxiety, and self-esteem. Frequency of cyberbullying victimization and approach and avoidance coping strategies were associated with psychological adjustments, with avoidance coping strategies being associated with all three psychological adjustments. Interventions should focus on teaching cyberbullying victims to not use avoidance coping strategies.

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It is estimated that between 10% and 21.9% of college students have been cyberbullied (Dilmac, 2009; Finn, 2004; Schenk, 2011), and 55.3% of college students have reported being victims of cyberbullying at least once in their lifetime (Dilmac, 2009). Hinduja and Patchin (2009) defined cyberbullying as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (p. 5). Eight types of cyberbullying behaviors have been identified: cyberstalking, exclusion, flaming, outing, online harassment, trickery, denigration, and impersonation (Willard, 2007). The most common methods of cyberbullying involve use of instant messaging, chat rooms, e-mail, and blogging (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Social networking and text messaging are commonly used for cyberbullying among college students (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010). In 2009, 93% of young adults used the internet and 72% used social networking websites, with 16% having profiles on multiple sites (Horrigan, 2009). Also, college students use the internet as a major means of communication in their daily routines (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Fallows, 2004). According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, college students seek emotional and physical intimacy with peers and romantic partners through the internet more than through face-to-face interaction (Horrigan, 2009). Therefore, college students may be at risk for cyberbullying victimization, which in turn may make them more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

Depression and anxiety are significant public health problems among young adults in the United States (American College Health Association, 2013). Approximately 10% of college students have reported being diagnosed with or treated by a professional for depression or anxiety within the last 12 months (American College Health Association, 2013). College students are considered to be in the emerging adult developmental period, which extends from ages 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000). A key developmental aspect of emerging adulthood is identity exploration in love, work, and world views that may lead to psychological risks such as depression and anxiety (Arnett, 2000). For college students, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem can have a negative influence on their academic performance (American College Health Association, 2013; Twenge & Campbell, 2001). In addition, depression can lead to an increased risk of attempting or committing suicide (Zullig & Divin, 2012).

Some psychological problems of college students, such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, may be related to the experience of cyberbullying victimization. Because victims of cyberbullying are being ignored, disrespected, threatened, picked on, or made fun of, they experience negative emotions such as frustration, anger, hopelessness, and sadness (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Victims of cyberbullying exhibit more depression and anxiety symptoms than those not experiencing cyberbullying (Gámez-Guadix, Orue, Smith, & Calvete, 2013; Schenk, 2011) and tend to have low self-esteem (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Although cyberbullying is a serious and growing problem among college students and has a negative influence on victim's psychological adjustments, there is little understanding of who is at high risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem as a result of cyberbullying.

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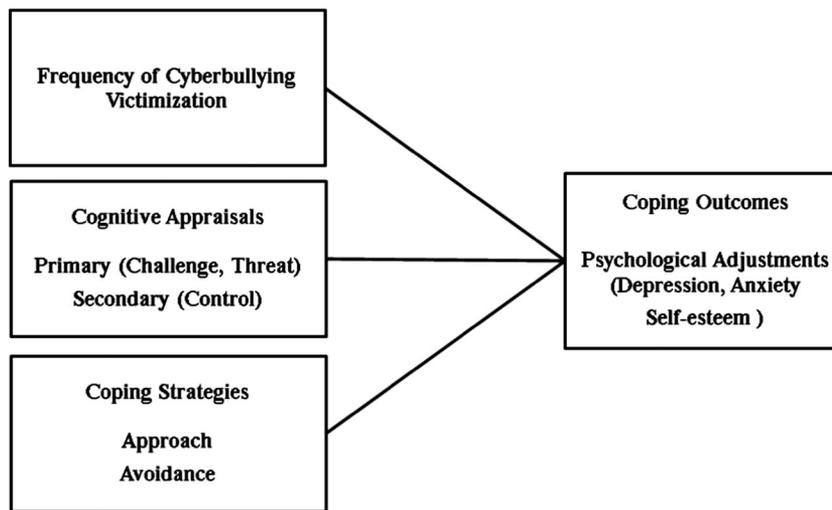


Fig. 1. Model Modified from the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping.

The purpose of this study was to explore whether frequency of cyberbullying victimization, cognitive appraisals of cyberbullying and coping strategies for the situation were associated with depression, anxiety, and self-esteem among college student cyberbullying victims. We used the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) to explore these associations. The relationships between the variables are illustrated in the conceptual model in Fig. 1.

TRANSACTIONAL MODEL OF STRESS AND COPING

The transactional model of stress and coping focuses on four key concepts: stress, cognitive appraisals, coping strategies, and coping outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For the purpose of the study, cyberbullying victimization was considered to be a stress. Cognitive appraisals consisted of victims' appraisals of the experience as taxing their resources and endangering their psychological well-being. Coping strategies consisted of victims' attempts to manage the experience. Psychological adjustments were considered to be coping outcomes related to the cognitive appraisals and coping strategies used. These outcomes were examined in terms of the levels of depression, anxiety, and self-esteem reported by cyberbullying victims.

Cognitive Appraisals

In this study, college students' evaluations of the cyberbullying situation as it related to their psychological adjustments were classified as primary cognitive appraisal and secondary cognitive appraisal. Primary cognitive appraisal was the students' determination of the cyberbullying situation to be a threat or a challenge. Threat cognitive appraisal was the students' anticipation of harm or loss and generated fear, anxiety, and anger, whereas challenge cognitive appraisal was the college students' readiness to confront the situation and promoted eagerness and excitement. Secondary cognitive appraisal, or control cognitive appraisal, was the college students' determination that they had control over the situation due to their coping resources and strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Hunter and Boyle (2002) and Hunter, Mora-Merchan, and Ortega (2004) explored the relationships between cognitive appraisals and psychological adjustments among adolescents who experienced the traditional form of bullying. They found that cognitive appraisals differed by gender and the frequency of the bullying experience and that these appraisals were related to coping strategies and psychological adjustments (Hunter & Boyle, 2002; Hunter et al., 2004). There has been considerable research on traditional bullying among adolescents, but because cyberbullying has arisen

relatively recently, little is known about college students' appraisal of cyberbullying situations.

Coping Strategies

Coping strategies are ongoing processes and refer to cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage a stressful event (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) confirmed two distinct types of coping strategies: approach and avoidance. In our study, these strategies were identified in terms of how victims of cyberbullying appraised and managed the experience. Specifically, approach coping strategies were considered to be attempts to change the cyberbullying situation and included problem solving and seeking social support, whereas avoidance coping strategies were considered to be attempts to evade the cyberbullying situation and included cognitive distancing, internalizing, and externalizing. Recent studies have found that victims of cyberbullying who used avoidance coping strategies were more likely to experience depression (Völlink, Bolman, Dehue, & Jacobs, 2013; Völlink, Bolman, Eppingbroek, & Dehue, 2013). These studies have been conducted among adolescents aged between 9 and 15 years, and consequently little is known about the coping strategies used by college student cyberbullying victims.

Only a limited number of studies have attempted to explain how victims cope with cyberbullying and/or to determine whether cognitive appraisals and coping strategies influence psychological adjustments among cyberbullying victims. Therefore, among college students, researchers do not yet know who copes well with cyberbullying and who does not. Additional studies are needed to explore the predictors of psychological adjustments in order to expand our knowledge of which college student cyberbullying victims are at risk for depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

The purpose of this study was to explore whether frequency of cyberbullying victimization, challenge cognitive appraisal, threat cognitive appraisal, control cognitive appraisal, approach coping strategy, and avoidance coping strategy were associated with depression, anxiety, and self-esteem among college student cyberbullying victims. For depression, we hypothesized positive associations with frequency of cyberbullying victimization, threat cognitive appraisal, and avoidance coping strategies and negative associations with challenge cognitive appraisal, control cognitive appraisal, and approach coping strategies (H.1). For anxiety, we hypothesized positive associations with frequency of cyberbullying victimization, threat cognitive appraisal, and avoidance coping strategies and negative associations with challenge cognitive appraisal, control cognitive appraisal, and approach coping strategies (H.2). For self-esteem, we hypothesized negative associations with

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