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Family poly-victimization and cyberbullying among adolescents in a Chinese school sample



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ABSTRACT

The sustained increase in their use of social networking facilitates the development of adolescents but comes with the risk of cyberbullying, which creates new challenges in regard to adolescent protection. Past evidence shows that family victimization may play an essential role in the way adolescents learn cyberbullying behaviors. Yet, research on the co-occurrence of family victimization and cyberbullying is limited. This study aims to investigate the associations between cyberbullying and family victimization among adolescents, and to examine the health correlates of cyberbullying and family poly-victimization. A large sample of 18,341 students, aged 15–17, from six cities in China, collected between 2009 and 2010 is employed in the present study, which investigated the association between various kinds of family victimization and adolescent cyberbullying. Data analysis was conducted in 2017. In-law conflict, intimate partner violence, elder abuse and neglect, and child maltreatment were associated with a higher possibility of children becoming internet victims. Parents' divorce and separation, low family income, mother's low level of education, and father's unemployment were all associated with cyberbullying victimization. Cyber victimization was positively correlated to symptoms of PTSD and depression, self-harm, and other physical and mental health variables. Possible explanations for the relationships found in this study are discussed and implications for future research and services are provided. Proactive screening for family poly-victimization and cyberbullying is suggested. Schools are highly recommended to cooperate with parents to promote cyber safety.

1. Introduction

Adolescents, who have been exposed to a cyber-saturated environment, can have a dynamic grasp of information technology and develop their digital capacities and citizen participation through this new platform (United Nations Children's Fund, 2014). In 2009, 28.9% of the youth population (under the age of 25) in China had access to Internet. The internet coverage among this group increased rapidly to 50.3% in 2016. Internet-access rate appeared to be even higher as 85.3% (China Internet Network Information Center, 2010; CINI, 2016).

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The development of smartphones and tablets has diversified youths' access to cyberspace. In China, 95.1% of adolescents under the age of 18 had access to the internet at home with access to mobile phones or laptops (CINIC, 2016). In the US, a total of 75% teenagers have a smartphone with access to the internet and 92% report that they go online on a daily basis (Lenhart, 2015). Social interactions have been significantly transformed by the increasing use of social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Weibo, and other forums (Kwan & Skoric, 2013). The disclosure of personal data, broadcasting of adolescents' own lives, and leaving comments on others' posts have improved the efficiency of social interactions. Yet, it also inevitably facilitated the risks of cyberbullying (Hong et al., 2016).

Cyberbullying is the most common risk of cyberspace for adolescents (United Nations Children's Fund, 2014). It has attracted increasing attention and has been documented in various countries and districts. Studies reported that the prevalence rates of cyberbullying among adolescents varied from 10% to 53% globally, depending on the variance on definitions and methodologies (Finkelhor, Turner, Hamby, & Ormrod, 2011; Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, & Morgan, 2014; Smith et al., 2008; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). A recent systematic review on studies published between 2007–2014 found that around 25% of adolescents reported a history of being cyberbullied and at least 16% reported that they had cyberbullied others (Hutson, 2016).

The definition of cyberbullying is changing with the transition of social interactions from electronic text to various mediums, such as pictures, videos, and chatrooms, through computers, smartphones, and other electronic devices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). We adopted the definition by Patchin and Hinduja (2015) and defined cyberbullying as willful and repeated harm inflicted through computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices. Cyberbullying differs from the traditional form of bullying in some ways. Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is mostly anonymous and based on cyberspace, which make it easier to occur but more difficult to identify the perpetrator than bullying through face-to-face contact. Cyberbullying can take place online 24/7, leaving the victims no escape from the victimization (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). An imbalance of power between bullies and victims is hard to determine in cyberspace, where power is not necessarily related to anything physical. Both cyber victims and perpetrators are found to have higher risks of depressive symptoms (Gamez-Guadix, Orue, Smith, & Calvete, 2013), anger and sadness, low self-esteem, self-harm, suicidal ideation, academic difficulties, and problems with peer relations (Daine et al., 2013).

Cyber and real-world bullying share some common characteristics and may overlap on the prevalence, where real-world violence victims may also use Internet-based tools to take revenge (Smith et al., 2008). Similar to the traditional forms of bullying, cyberbullying is a social-ecological phenomenon. Understanding the protective and risk factors within both individual and family contexts should be the preliminary step (Espelage, 2014). On an individual level, prior victimization offline, long-term psychological problems, negative social attitudes, and low self-concept are found correlated with cyberbullying (Espelage, 2014; Sanzone-Goodrich, 2013). Research on traditional bullying reports that girls have a higher risk of victimization involving relational aggression, such as spreading rumors. Similarly, literature on cyberbullying documents the way in which girls are more frequently bullied than boys online (Hong et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2008; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Wang et al. (2009) also found that boys were more likely to be cyberbullying perpetrators, whereas girls were more likely to be victims.

External environment may bring risks of bullying and victimization to adolescents (Bandura, 1986). Victimization within the family environment may bring greater risk for children to "learn" violent behaviors and internalize their weakness as a stable personal trait, which may then increase future possibilities of being cyber-bullied (Wilczenski et al., 1997). Child victims of bullying tend to come from families with extensive conflicts, poor parental supervision, or emotional deprivation (Finkelhor et al., 2011). Cross-sectional investigations also found significant associations between direct and indirect exposure to family violence and bullying behaviors (Hong et al., 2016). The majority of elderly people aged 65 years or above often live with their children in China. Married women may receive help from co-residing elders in regard to chores and childcare, but caregiving for elderly parents is found to be associated with lower marital quality, which may lead to more conflict or violence with elders in the same house.

Children in violent families may spend more time in cyberspace, where they can find more social support than they do at home. Cyberspace is one of the places where bullies are able to gain self-control; and long internet usage was found to be related to a higher possibility of cyberbullying (Sanzone-Goodrich, 2013). Family victimization, including direct abuse and neglect by parents, intimate partner violence among parents, and elder abuse or in-law conflict, have been reported in recent studies to have positive relationships with victimization experiences of children (Chan, Fong, Yan, Chow, & Ip, 2011; Chan, 2017), while no research has reported about the relationship between the cyberbullying and family poly-victimization experiences. We hypothesized in this study that family poly-victimization is positively associated with adolescent cyber-bullying. This present analysis is the first to contribute to this area and aims to contribute to our understanding about the impact of co-occurrence of various kinds of family violence on adolescents' cyberbullying victimization.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and sampling

The study employed data from a large population study, which was conducted in China from 2009 to 2010. Using a two-staged stratified sampling method, a total of 150 schools were first randomly sampled from Hong Kong and five cities in mainland China, with a response rate of 76.7% at the school level. At the second stage, Chinese grades 9–12 students aged 15–17 years old were randomly selected from the 150 schools. A total of 18,341 agreed to participate, giving a response rate of 99.7% at the individual level. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire which included items on their preceding year experiences on victimization in a private room at school under the instruction of trained interviewers. There were slightly more male participants (53.3%) than

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