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Assuring a sense of growth: A cognitive strategy to weaken the effect of cyber-ostracism on aggression

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ABSTRACT

Prior studies have shown that cyber-ostracism increases aggression. The present research provided the first experimental support for the prediction that assuring a sense of growth after cyber-ostracism can weaken the effect of cyber-ostracism on aggression. Specifically, we found that ostracized participants who were primed with the beliefs that ostracism was detrimental behaved more aggressively than their included counterparts. In contrast, ostracized participants who were primed with the beliefs that ostracism could aid their growth and development no longer behaved aggressively. These findings highlight the significance of post-ostracism cognitive processes in influencing various behavioral responses of ostracism and other interpersonal maltreatments in the cyberspace. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Across culture and history, humans live in social groups and desire harmonious social relationships, which can provide successes in survival and reproduction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People often perceive ostracism, which is defined as being ignored and excluded by individuals or groups, as detrimental because it threatens the fundamental need to belong (Williams, 2007a, 2009). As a consequence, people often react combatively when perceiving signals of ostracism. In particular, cases of school shootings occur at high rates around the globe, and most shooters were found to be victims of ostracism and social rejection (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). These incidences have aroused considerable interest among researchers and psychologists seeking to examine factors that predispose ostracized people to behave aggressively (see Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006 for a review).

The advancement of technology has created new modes of communication and social interaction. Traditionally, the need to belong is often satisfied through pleasant and lasting face-to-face interactions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In the present cyber age, people often communicate and interact with friends, acquaintances, and strangers online, such as via social networking sites and

online discussion forums (e.g., Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). According to the United Nations (2013), the percentage of internet usage in the populations of most developed countries (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Netherlands) reached over 80% of the population. The popularity of online communication has also created a new avenue of psychological research because people may experience ostracism, bullying and other related forms of interpersonal maltreatments in the cyberspace, which poses threats to both individual and societal well-being (e.g., Ochoa et al., 2011; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). In particular, recent research has found that people's basic needs (i.e., belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence) can be threatened after experiencing a brief episode of cyber-ostracism over the Internet (e.g., van Beest & Williams, 2006; Hartgerink, van Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015; Kassner, Wesselmann, Law, & Williams, 2012; Williams et al., 2000). Worst still, people can behave aggressively when they are ostracized during a web-based social interaction (e.g., Ayduk, Gyurak, & Luerssen, 2008; Chow, Tiedens, & Govan, 2008; Poon & Chen, 2014; van Beest, Williams, & van Dijk, 2011).

Thus far, the literature has provided evidence for a causal relationship between ostracism and aggression in both online and offline settings (e.g., Poon & Chen, 2014; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; see also Leary et al., 2006), and has identified some of the mechanisms underlying the effect of ostracism on aggression (e.g., hostile cognitions; DeWall, Twenge, & Gitter, & Baumeister,

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2009). However, relatively little research has been devoted to explore whether post-ostracism cognitive processes can reduce the aggressive urges of ostracized people, especially for those who are ostracized in the cyberspace. The present research aims to contribute to the literature by filling this knowledge gap.

Social connection endows people with easy access to important resources and benefits (e.g., information and happiness; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Ostracism unjustifiably blocks their access to these benefits, and thereby people may perceive that ostracism hinders their growth and development, even if they are merely ostracized by strangers online. Such detrimental perceptions can create frustration and in turn motivate cyber-ostracized people to behave aggressively by lashing out in the cyberspace. Therefore, assuring cyber-ostracized people that their ostracism experience can aid their personal growth and development should weaken the effect of cyber-ostracism on aggressive behavior.

As illustrated above, cyber-ostracism is detrimental to people's social well-being (e.g., Williams et al., 2000; van Beest & Williams, 2006) and is a strong antecedent of aggressive behavior (e.g., Ayduk et al., 2008; Poon & Chen, 2014). The anonymous nature of online interaction has also created a chance for more aggressive and unsuitable behaviors that might prove destructive to others (Zimmerman & Ybarra, in press), which can further facilitate aggressive responses of cyber-ostracized individuals. It is therefore important to understand how to weaken the link between cyber-ostracism and aggression by using internal cognitive coping strategies in order to prevent negative consequences or even an escalation of online violence from occurring. Understanding how to effectively weaken the effect of cyber-ostracism on aggression can provide useful insights into helping people cope with cyber-ostracism in more adaptive manners.

1.1. The association between cyber-ostracism and aggression

Given that social connections are very important, one can easily anticipate that people feel hurt when they are ostracized. The pain overlap theory suggests that social pain (e.g., ostracism) and physical pain share common neurological underpinnings (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Worse still, compared with that of physical pain, the pain of ostracism can be more vividly re-experienced through retrospections (Chen, Williams, Fitness, & Newton, 2008). From an evolutionary perspective, ostracism meant social "death" because it deprives people's access to resources that are critical for their survival (Case & Williams, 2004; Williams, 2007b). Therefore, people are often hyper-vigilant to signals of ostracism because misses can be much more costly than false alarms (Case & Williams, 2004; Williams, 2007b).

Cyber-ostracism is a specific form of ostracism, which happens over the Internet (Williams et al., 2000). The literature has shown that people can react strongly when they are merely ostracized by strangers over the Internet for a short period of time. For example, prior studies have consistently demonstrated that cyber-ostracism threatens people's immediate fundamental social needs (i.e., belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence; e.g., Hartgerink et al., 2015; Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007; Kassner et al., 2012; van Beest & Williams, 2006; Williams et al., 2000). Moreover, a brain-imaging study has found that people who experience cyber-ostracism during a web-based social interaction have higher activations in brain regions that are involved in experiencing physical pain (i.e., the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and anterior insular; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). Prior research has also shown that cyber-ostracism still hurts when people are told that the computer is pre-scripted to ostracize them in an online ball tossing game (Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004).

Aggression is defined as any action that intends to harm another individual who is motivated to avoid the action (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bushman & Huesmann, 2010; DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011). In response to cyber-ostracism, people often behave aggressively towards innocent people who are not involved in the ostracism episode. For example, prior studies have demonstrated that cyber-ostracism increases displaced aggression against unknown strangers. Compared with their non-ostracized counterparts, people who are ostracized in a web-based social interaction tend to blast intense and prolonged unpleasant white noise to strangers, give more negative evaluations to candidates who want to get a desired job, assign longer and colder painful cold water to unknown research participants, and dole out large amounts of spicy hot sauce to people who hate spicy food (e.g., Ayduk et al., 2008; Chen, DeWall, Poon, & Chen, 2012; Poon & Chen, 2014).

To be sure, not all people behave aggressively following ostracism. The literature has shown that the relationship between ostracism and aggression can be influenced by certain personality variables. For example, following ostracism, narcissists feel angrier and behave more aggressively than non-narcissists (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Moreover, implicit theories of relationship can moderate the effect of ostracism on aggression, such that ostracized entity theorists behave more aggressively than ostracized incremental theorists (Chen et al., 2012). Furthermore, ostracized people who are rejection sensitive (Ayduk et al., 2008) and who do not endorse just-world beliefs (Poon & Chen, 2014) are particularly aggressive.

Situational factors can also play an important role in determining whether ostracized people will behave aggressively. Research has shown that pre-ostracism relationship with sources of ostracism may moderate the relationship between ostracism and aggression. In particular, ostracized people who had previous pleasant interactions with the ostracizers behaved more aggressively than ostracized participants who had previous unpleasant interactions with the ostracizers (Wesselmann, Butler, Williams, & Pickett, 2010). Moreover, the aggressive urges of ostracized people are reduced if their thwarted feelings of belonging (DeWall, Twenge, Bushman, Im, & Williams, 2010) or control (Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006) are fortified.

Whereas past research has identified some post-ostracism manipulations that can moderate the relationship between ostracism and aggression, these investigations exclusively focused on the role of external factors, such as whether the external environment allows ostracized people to exhibit their control (Warburton et al., 2006) and to gain social acceptance (DeWall et al., 2010). Moreover, most of these previous research focused on people's coping of face-to-face ostracism. It is still unclear whether some post-ostracism internal cognitive coping strategies can moderate the effect of cyber-ostracism on aggression. The next section fleshes out our conceptual framework for why assuring cyber-ostracized people that their ostracism can aid their growth and development should weaken the relationship between cyber-ostracism and aggression.

1.2. Growth beliefs moderate the effect of cyber-ostracism on aggression

Why might cyber-ostracism increase aggression? The literature in aggression has long suggested that frustration, which is triggered by the blockage of goal attainment, can cause aggression (Berkowitz, 1989; Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939; see also Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Such a frustration-aggression linkage has received strong empirical support, such that prior studies have repeatedly found that frustrated individuals, compared with their non-frustrated counterparts, behave more

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