Daily cybervictimization among Latino adolescents: Links with emotional, physical and school adjustment

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The current study examines how Latino adolescents' daily cybervictimization experiences are associated with their emotional and physical well-being and school adjustment. Latino high school students ($N = 118$) completed daily checklists across five consecutive school days. Hierarchical linear modeling results revealed that daily cybervictimization experiences were associated with greater feelings of distress, anger, shame and physical symptoms. Moderation analyses showed gender differences such that the daily level associations with distress and anger were significant for Latinas but not Latino adolescents. Daily cybervictimization experiences were also related to increased school attendance problems such as arriving late to class or skipping a class. Mediation models indicated that daily feelings of distress accounted for the association between single episodes of cybervictimization and attendance problems. The results address several voids in the cybervictimization literature and demonstrate that a discrete encounter of victimization online is associated with compromised well-being and school adjustment among Latino adolescents.

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Within the past few years, cyberbullying, the use of the Internet or other digital communication devices to insult or threaten someone (Juvonen & Gross, 2008), has emerged as a new social and health concern facing adolescents. As cyberspace becomes the latest context of social interactions and development for adolescents, it is critical to understand the negative peer incidents they experience online. A recent report concluded that although there have been declines in face-to-face victimization, rates of cybervictimization (e.g., being threatened or embarrassed on the Internet) are increasing (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012). Specifically, based on data from three cross-sectional national telephone surveys, the rates for youth experiencing at least one incident of "online harassment" increased by 83% from 2000 to 2010 (Jones et al., 2012). A longitudinal study also found a trend indicating that cybervictimization is increasing among youth (Ybarra, Mitchell, & Korchmaros, 2011). Given the disconcerting rise in cybervictimization rates, it is important to understand how these on-line experiences are related to adolescents' adjustment. Moreover, cybervictimization studies have predominately focused on the experiences of White adolescents. Thus, our understanding of cybervictimization experiences among Latino youth and how these experiences are linked to their well-being is limited. This underrepresentation in the literature exists despite the fact that Latino adolescents' use of electronic communication devices now parallels use among White youth (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). Thus, the current study aims to extend cybervictimization research by relying on daily

diary methodology to examine whether cybervictimization incidents are associated with daily emotions, physical symptoms, and school adjustment among an understudied population of Latino high school students.

Links with emotional and physical well-being and school adjustment

Consistent with research on school bullying and victimization (e.g., Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003), research indicates that targets of cybervictimization are also at-risk for psychosocial adjustment problems. Students who experience cybervictimization report greater psychological distress, depressive symptoms and anxiety (e.g., Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, & Kift, 2012; Ybarra, 2004), compared to youth who are not targeted online. For example, based on results gathered via web-based anonymous surveys, Juvonen and Gross (2008) found that over and above reports of school-based victimization encounters, cybervictimization experiences predicted feelings of social anxiety. In a descriptive study, Patchin and Hinduja (2006) found that among cybervictimized youth, the most common feelings were frustration, anger, and sadness. In addition to negative affect and psychosocial problems, recent studies have linked cybervictimization experiences also to physical health complaints. A study among Swedish adolescents showed a significant association between cybervictimization and psychosomatic health problems such as headaches and having little appetite (Beckman, Hagquist, & Hellström, 2012). Moreover, a recent meta-analysis of 131 studies concluded that cybervictimization experiences were related to a number of psychosocial and physical health constructs such as depression, loneliness, and somatic symptoms (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder,

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& Lattanner, 2014). Thus, largely stemming from studies utilizing traditional, one-time surveys, evidence indicates that adolescents who, on average experience more cybervictimization than others, are also, on average more likely to report psychosocial problems.

With regards to school adjustment, studies with large samples, multiple data waves and multi-informants have rather consistently shown that school victimization is linked to lower grades, lower engagement, and negative school climate perceptions (e.g., Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2009). Mixed results exist among the few studies examining cybervictimization in association to school adjustment. For example, one study documented a relationship between cybervictimization and school problems, such as trouble paying attention and learning problems, but only among boys (Brown, Demaray, & Secord, 2014). Online victimization has been linked to school problems such as detention, suspension, and skipping school (Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). However, studies that focus on academic grades find no association (e.g., Li, 2007). The aforementioned meta-analysis (Kowalski et al., 2014) also concluded that there was no association between cybervictimization and academic achievement. Thus, rather than focusing on academic outcomes such as grades, as they are likely to capture distal outcomes, more proximal indicators (e.g., engagement) may better help us understand the link between cybervictimization and school adjustment.

Whether cybervictimization is directly associated with school adjustment or whether the concerns and worries about online incidents simply spill over to the school context has not been tested. Within school victimization research, support exists for indirect, or mediational models, such that victims tend to be less engaged in school, with psychosocial problems mediating the effects (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005). Thus, youth who experience cybervictimization may feel more depressed or anxious, and thus, have difficulty with school tasks such as making it to class on time. Overall, there is a dearth of cybervictimization studies testing mediating mechanisms to examine whether negative emotions account for links with school adjustment.

Addressing voids in current cybervictimization research

A few voids that exist in the cybervictimization research will be addressed in the current study. One limitation pertains to methodology; the majority of studies rely on traditional, one-time surveys. Extending the methods used to study cybervictimization will allow us to answer novel questions that have not been explored. The current study relies on daily diary methodology that permits examination of the associations between single incidents of cybervictimization and day-to-day fluctuations in adjustment. In contrast to one-time measures in which youth must rely on retrospective accounts, daily measures reduce the time elapsed between the actual experience and their account of the experience, minimizing potential biases and error (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). Moreover, daily methods allow estimation of the associations between variables of interest at the within-subject level, while accounting for individual differences. That is, this method allows estimation of whether specific events and feelings co-occur with another on a daily basis. For example, by assessing adolescents daily cybervictimization experiences and daily emotions such as distress, it is possible to test if within-subject changes in distress vary as a function of daily cybervictimization. Daily assessments remain unused in cybervictimization research and have only been used in a few school victimization studies (Espinoza, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2013; Lehman & Repetti, 2007; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). These studies have illustrated the usefulness of the method in detailing daily level associations with victimization incidents. Daily methodology also allows examination of potential lagged effects inasmuch as some of the negative associations with cybervictimization may linger to the next day.

Another limitation is that despite the growing use of online tools among Latino youth (Madden et al., 2013) and that Latinos are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), they continue to be underrepresented in victimization research. Few studies have even included a sample of Latino youth large enough to compare their cybervictimization rates with other groups (see Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013; Messias, Kindrick, & Castro, 2014 for exceptions). More research is needed with Latino youth to extend beyond drawing comparisons with other groups but to also explore potential within-group variations (e.g., gender, generational status). Given that Latino teens are at high risk of mental health problems (Gore & Aseltine, 2003; Roberts, Roberts, & Chen, 1997) and of doing poorly in school (Kohler & Lazarín, 2007), it is important to examine their social experiences online to better understand whether cybervictimization helps explain some of these adjustment indicators.

Finally, cybervictimization studies have largely focused on the experiences of middle school students with fewer studies, among high school students (Bauman et al., 2013). However, the high school years are an important developmental period to study. For example, older adolescents are more likely to be connected online (i.e., higher smart phone and computer ownership), compared to young adolescents in middle school (e.g., Lenhart, 2012), which may mean that they have more opportunities for negative online interactions with peers. Thus, employing daily diaries, an intensive longitudinal method, among an understudied population in cybervictimization research will provide us with a better understanding of how everyday experiences with victimization are related (or unrelated) to various indices of adjustment among Latino high school students.

Current study

Four central research aims guide this study. The first research aim is to describe Latino high school students' everyday cybervictimization incidents. Given how understudied Latino youth are in the peer relations and victimization literature, it is unknown how frequently they experience cybervictimization incidents.

The second aim guiding this study is to examine whether episodic (within-persons) and/or persistent (between-persons) cybervictimization experiences are related to adolescents' daily emotions (i.e., anger, distress, shame), physical symptoms, and school adjustment (i.e., school climate perceptions, attendance problems). Multiple indicators of emotions and school adjustment are assessed in order to capture the array of adjustment problems that are most closely linked with cybervictimization incidents. For example, past studies examining negative emotions have studied distress and depressive symptoms most extensively (e.g., Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Campbell et al., 2012; Ybarra, 2004). However, findings from descriptive studies indicate that students also report feeling anger and shame after being cybervictimized (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). One challenge in examining associations between cybervictimization and adjustment, particularly school adjustment indicators such as school safety and belonging, is that the relation may be partly accounted for by traditional, school-based victimization experiences (Olweus, 2012). To address this important methodological issue, additional models are conducted to take into account school victimization incidents. Moreover, to understand whether the impact of cybervictimization lasts longer than for a single day, lagged effects are tested. That is, if a cybervictimization incident on one day is associated with anger, does the emotion continue to be associated with the incident on the following day? Daily research on discrimination experiences among Latinos has shown that there is diminished recovery from one day to the next (Torres & Ong, 2010). Thus, these analyses will reveal whether the impact of a single cybervictimization incident persists to the next day.

The third study aim was to test the extent to which significant variability found in daily-level associations vary by grade, sex and generational status. With regards to grade differences, findings have been inconsistent in even simply identifying mean-level differences in reports of cybervictimization. Many studies find no significant grade