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Students' perceptions of the effect of social media ostracism on wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Two studies were conducted to examine perceptions of online social media ostracism among school and university students in order to further test Williams' need threat model. In both studies, participants were randomly assigned to read a vignette describing either inclusion or exclusion on Facebook, they were asked to imagine that they were the target of this inclusion/exclusion, and to estimate how they would feel. In study 1 (N = 61, Mean age = 16.98), participants in the excluded condition estimated a significantly higher threat to their sense of belonging compared to their sense of self-esteem, control and meaning. Study 2 (N = 172, Mean age = 18.83) replicated and extended these findings by comparing school and University students' views of social media ostracism whilst controlling for their technological familiarity with Facebook. Both school and university students detected social media ostracism and anticipated impacts on their mood and psychological needs. Social media vignette interacted with educational institution demonstrating that university students perceived social media ostracism more negatively and social media inclusion more positively. Taken together, these findings suggest that whilst both school and university students perceive social media ostracism as psychologically painful, those in their first year at University, who are particularly reliant on online social media, may be more sensitive to the potential effects of exclusion and inclusion on this platform.

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1. Introduction

Psychologists have proposed that belonging is a fundamental human need; we need to experience positive, frequent and stable interactions with people who care about us, in order to stay mentally and physically well (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The immediate effects of being ostracised or excluded include lower positive mood, higher negative mood and lower sense of belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence and control (Williams, 2007); longer-term behavioural consequences of ostracism include decreased self-regulation and increased aggression and retaliatory behaviour (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco & Twenge, 2005). Therefore it is crucial to understand how people perceive ostracism and its effects. The studies reported here aim to investigate late adolescents' understanding of social media ostracism and its impact on well-being.

Using social networking sites (SNS) is among the most popular activities of today's young adults (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart,

& Madden, 2015; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Digital media technologies play a pivotal role in young people's experiences of friendship and identity, and online peer communication can promote important peer processes such as a sense of belonging and self-disclosure (Davis, 2012). However, not all online behaviour is positive; considerable levels of reported cyberbullying among secondary school pupils (Smith & Steffgen, 2013) and university students (Gahagan, Vaterlaus, & Frost, 2016). Whilst online exclusion is included in Li's (2007) taxonomy of seven types of cyberbullying, other research suggests that young adolescents do not spontaneously refer to ostracism when asked about types of cyberbullying (Baas, de Jong & Drossaert, 2013) and so it is unclear how such behaviour is understood by adolescents. Williams and Zadro (2001) has argued that cyber-ostracism maybe more ambiguous due to technical issues such as connectivity providing an alternative explanation for non-reactance.

The current studies therefore sought to examine school and university students' perceptions of the effect of social media ostracism on their wellbeing. Whilst previous research on adults suggests that cyber ostracism has comparable effects to in-person ostracism (Filipkowski & Smyth, 2012; Hartgerink, van

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Beest, Wicherts, & Williams, 2015), this previous research focused respectively on participants' reactions to being excluded from virtual ball-toss games (Williams' cyberball paradigm), and an online chat room discussion. Therefore an investigation of younger children and adolescents' perceptions of the effects of social media ostracism was considered important and timely. A specific online social media platform, Facebook, was chosen in order to provide a realistic and familiar space within which participants could experience ostracism. Recent research suggests that despite the emergence of newer SNS, Facebook is still the most frequently used social networking site among to-day's teenagers (Fleming, Paderni, Elliott, Egelman, & Glazer, 2015).

2. Williams' theory of ostracism

The threat of ostracism seems to be a widely spread if not universal social tool for increasing group cohesiveness (Gruter & Masters, 1986). Most people have experienced ostracism in one form or another (Williams, 2002), it can be as subtle as avoiding eye contact, or as extreme as exile from society (Williams, Cheung & Choi, 2000). The experience of ostracism (being left out or excluded), has been shown to be hugely detrimental to mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Williams (2009) proposes that ostracism is so damaging because it threatens four fundamental psychological needs: to belong; to have a sense of control; to experience self-esteem; and to feel one has a meaningful existence. Positive, frequent and stable interactions with others, who care about our wellbeing, are essential for maintaining these psychological needs and consequently our mental and physical health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When we are ostracised, Williams (2009) suggests that these needs are threatened in a variety of ways. Disapproval from others can cue fears of social rejection and threaten our need to belong. Feeling like we are being punished for reasons unknown can lead to self-criticism and threatened self-esteem. Our sense of control can also be threatened by ostracism. This is because unlike other forms of conflict or disapproval (where we can defend ourselves, answer back, or shape the dialogue in some way), ostracism is unilateral: if the source will not engage with us, we are powerless to do anything. Finally, ostracism can threaten our sense of existential meaning, and even cue thoughts of our own death, by making us feel as though we do not matter, and that others barely notice we exist.

Williams argues that the immediate reaction to ostracism is reflexive, participants report depleted needs and negative mood, in particular sadness and anger. These immediate reactions have been shown to imitate feelings of physical pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman & Williams, 2003). They also seem impervious to moderation, (both in terms of who is ostracising us, and our individual differences). It seems we all detect ostracism quickly and feel it keenly.

The reflective stage is where people seek to rectify the situation. Williams (2007) has argued strategies typically follow one of two paths, pro or anti-social activities to fortify the threatened needs. He argues that threats to control and meaning lead to their re-assertion often through aggression, whereas threats to self-esteem and belonging are addressed through bridge building pro-social behaviour. The final stage in Williams' model concerns the long term effects of chronic ostracism, where he argues the victim becomes resigned. This is characterised by a sense of hopelessness. Research into the longer term effects of ostracism is mostly based on retrospective accounts since it is difficult to study experimentally.

2.1. Effects of cyber ostracism

The majority of research into virtual or online ostracism uses the cyberball paradigm (Williamset al., 2000), as this is a relatively ethical way to manipulate inclusion and exclusion in an online game. In the original version of the experiment the participant is led to believe that they are playing with two other people also recruited online and this is used to either set up a cyber ostracism condition, or cyber inclusion. Just a short exposure to this minimal form of ostracism results in a significant decrease in participants' sense of belonging, self-esteem, control and a meaningful existence. In a review of 120 studies employing the cyberball paradigm, Hartgerink et al. (2015) found that cyberball resulted in a large effect size for ostracism. The effects of online ostracism using the cyber ball paradigm included lower positive mood, higher negative mood and lower sense of belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence and control (Williams, 2007). These effects were found to be generalizable across countries and gender.

Other research on the effects of cyber ostracism has compared the effect of in-person ostracism to that of virtual ostracism in an online chat room. Williams (2002) found that whilst being ostracised in a chat room discussion appeared to protect participants against threats to their sense of self-esteem and control, it had similar negative effects to in-person ostracism on mood and sense of belonging. Filipkowski and Smyth (2012) compared ostracism in a chat room discussion (around a less controversial topic) to in-person ostracism, again finding that whilst chat room ostracism was less damaging to self-esteem, the two types of ostracism had comparable effects on participants' mood. Taken together, these findings suggest that whilst ostracism online and in-person may affect psychological needs differently, both types of ostracism may be similarly psychologically distressing.

2.2. Age differences in effects of cyber ostracism

Despite much of the rhetoric concerning the applied value of ostracism research to the increased understanding of its impact on adolescence (for example its application to high school shootings), research on the effects of ostracism on children and young people is still very limited. However, adolescence may be a period during which individuals are particularly vulnerable to the effects of ostracism by peers given the increased amount of time spent with peers and increased levels of intimacy in peer friendships reported at this age (Berndt, 1982).

Abrams, Weick, Thomas, Colbe, and Franklin (2011) simplified the cyberball paradigm so that it was appropriate for children as young as eight years old. These researchers compared ostracism effects for children aged between 8 and 9 years, children aged 13−14 years and young adults (20 year-old university students). This research used a number of cyberball stages to explore whether prior inclusion trials had an impact on subsequent exclusion trails. They also made sure that all participants' last experience of the game was an inclusion version. This was to safeguard against lasting effects of ostracism. Abrams et al. found that cyberball had a negative effect on all of their participants' needs, however, the type of effect it had was different depending on age group. Ostracism affected younger children's self-esteem more than it did the other needs, whereas for the teenagers it was their sense of belonging that ostracism targeted. Additionally these researchers compared the effect for gender of participant and gender of cyberball players (source of inclusion or exclusion), and this had no effect. Abrams et al. (2011) interpret their results as indicating that younger children have less of a frame of reference to draw positive esteem from. Similarly, they argue that belonging needs are more crucial to teenagers than they are to university students who can draw social