



Cyber-ostracism and its relation to depression among Chinese adolescents: The moderating role of optimism



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ABSTRACT

Internet has been a popular medium and means to interconnect with others, with increasing opportunities for inclusion; at the same time, being ignored and excluded, a phenomenon referring to cyber-ostracism also increased. This study investigated the influence of cyber-ostracism on Chinese adolescents' depression, and the moderating role of optimism between them. First, a scale with 14-item was developed to measure the cyber-ostracism experience of adolescents. Then, a survey was conducted among 1626 Chinese adolescents aged 12–18, and the results showed that: (1) cyber-ostracism was positively correlated with depression, while optimism was negatively correlated with depression, (2) optimism could moderate the influence of cyber-ostracism on depression, with a stronger association for adolescents with low level of optimism. Results indicated that cyber-ostracism is a negative interpersonal experience as ostracism in real life, while optimism could alleviate the detrimental effect of cyber-ostracism.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, Internet has become an integral part of our daily lives throughout the world. Also, it has been a popular medium and means to interconnect with others (CNNIC, 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), providing more convenient ways and opportunities for social interaction (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). However, with increasing opportunities for inclusion in online social interactions, being ignored and excluded, a phenomenon referring to cyber-ostracism also became more and more common, which has negative effects on individuals as ostracism occurs in real life (Williams et al., 2002; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). Although ostracism and its detrimental influences have received much attention, less is known about the ostracism occurrence online (Williams et al., 2002). At the same time, studies on ostracism and cyber-ostracism were mainly conducted with experimental paradigms (Tobin, Vanman, Verreynne, & Saeri, 2014; Williams et al., 2000), which could not investigate the general situation of cyber-ostracism.

Though ostracism may occur across the life span, it is particularly outstanding during the period of adolescent, as they are jockey for

social position and influence in the peer group, and extremely sensitive to being excluded or ignored by others (Coyne, Gundersen, Nelson, & Stockdale, 2011). Thus, compared with children and adults, the deleterious effects of ostracism are more pronounced among adolescents (Pharo, Gross, Richardson, & Hayne, 2011; Rich, Adrienne, C Nathan, Adams, & Inga, 2012). At the same time, online communication is especially popular among adolescents (CNNIC, 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Thus, they may also be more likely to be encountered with ostracism online. In addition, adolescence is also a vulnerable period for behavioral and emotional health problems, and there is a significant increase in depression during adolescence (Hankin, 2006). So adolescents' cyber-ostracism experience and its relation to depression deserve more attention.

Based on this, the current study aimed to investigate adolescents' cyber-ostracism, as well as its association with depression through questionnaire method, which may not only deepen our understanding on adolescents' cyber-ostracism, but also contribute to the prevention and intervention for adolescents' depression.

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1.1. Cyber-ostracism and depression

As many studies have shown, people are born with a basic need for belonging and social interaction, which is vital to individuals' physical health and psychological well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hammell, 2014). Thus, the close association between interpersonal relationship and depression has been well examined (Hames, Hagan, & Joiner, 2013). Relevant results also indicated that, good social relationship, such as peer acceptance and high-quality friendship, could act as protective factors against depression (Brendgen et al., 2013; Swords, Heary, & Hennessy, 2011); while negative interpersonal experience, such as peer victimization and bullying, would lead to depression (Yabko, Hokoda, & Ulloa, 2008; Zhou, Liu, Niu, Sun, & Fan, 2017).

Ostracism, which is defined as being ignored or excluded by others, is a commonly negative and stressful experience in our daily lives (Williams, 2007a). Considering ostracism's negative influences on individuals' basic need for belonging and social connection, as well as the important role of good human relations in individuals' health and well-being, it is a painful and distressful experience with powerfully detrimental influences for the individuals being ostracized (Nezlek, 2012; Williams, 2009). It was found that, being ostracized by others would endanger the satisfaction of individuals' four fundamental human needs (i.e., belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence) (Williams, 2001), and further increased individuals' psychological pain and negative affect (Williams, 2007b). As to depression, studies also revealed that ostracism would greatly increase the risk of depression (Dewall, Gilman, & Sharif, 2012; Niu, Sun, Tian, Fan, & Zhou, 2016; Williams & Nida, 2011).

In recent years, there is a great increase in online communication among people of all ages throughout the world. Along with this trend, various forms of rejection or exclusion, such as feeling left out or ignored by others on Internet, also appear. Compared with the ostracism occurs in real life, cyber-ostracism may be more illusory and uncertain, because of such features as asynchronism, dependence on technology and lack of social cues in online interaction (Mattila, Andreau, Hanks, & Kim, 2012; Williams et al., 2002). Cyber-ostracism is typically ambiguous and many episodes appear minimal and trivial, individuals being ostracized online is often unsure whether and why it is occurring. However, humans are equipped with an ostracism detection system that works quickly and crudely, any cues detected as ostracism is distressing and hurtful (Kerra & Levineb, 2008; Williams, 2007b). Thus, despite of its uncertainty and ambiguity, cyber-ostracism may also lead to negative outcomes. Relevant research with experimental paradigms also suggests that individuals encountering ostracism on Internet (such as video games and social network site) may experience the similar negative effects with those encountering ostracism in real life (Tobin et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2000); and these negative influences are even powerful, and the effect sizes could be medium to large in magnitude (Filipkowski & Smyth, 2012; Kassner, Wesselmann, Law, & Kd., 2012). Thus, it was hypothesized:

H1. Cyber-ostracism will be positively correlated with depression.

1.2. The moderating effect of optimism

Although ostracism and cyber-ostracism are painful and distressful, with powerfully negative effects on individuals being ostracized, it is possible that not all people are equally influenced (McDonald & Donnellan, 2012). Research on ostracism found that, positive personal traits, such as hope, forgiveness, and resilience, could moderate or buffer the negative effects of ostracism (Johnson, 2010; McDonald & Donnellan, 2012; Niu et al., 2016). In addition, according to the basic ideas of Diathesis-stress Model, individuals with different personal traits or diathesis would be differently influenced by similar stressful or negative experience, it is the individual-context interactions that

account for the occurrence and development of depression (Monroe & Simons, 1991). Thus, it is of great necessity to examine individual variables that may alleviate the association between cyber-ostracism and depression.

As a positive personal trait, optimism refers to a generalized expectation for positive experiences and outcomes throughout one's life, as well as the confidence in one's ability to cope with challenges (Gallagher, Lopez, & Pressman, 2013; Scheier & Carver, 1985). Research have found the important role of optimism in promoting people's psychosocial adaptation, optimism is positively associated with self-esteem, life satisfaction and subjective well-being (Daukantaitė & Zukauskienė, 2012), while negatively associated with hopelessness, thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, depression, and suicidal ideation (Rasmussen & Wingate, 2011; Tucker et al., 2013).

Research have also found that being optimistic is associated with a preferred outcome despite stressful or negative circumstances (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). Thus, optimism may serve as a protective factor to reduce the potential risks of negative or stressful experiences, which has been found to moderate the relationship between negative or stressful experiences and psychosocial adaptation (e.g., self-esteem, depression and well-being) (Hirsch, Walker, Wilkinson, & Lyness, 2014; Lai, 2009). Research has also revealed that, positive personality traits, such as hope and optimism, could moderate the negative effects of ostracism (Johnson, 2010). On this basis, it was therefore hypothesized:

H2. Optimism will be negatively correlated with depression;

H3. Optimism will moderate the relationship between cyber-ostracism and depression.

Thus, this study aims to investigate the association between cyber-ostracism and depression among adolescents, as well as the moderating effect of optimism between them.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Data for the main study were collected at two middle schools and two high schools in central China, 1797 adolescents between 12 and 18 years old were recruited to participate in this study. All parents and students received a detailed information letter about the study, and passive consent was obtained. Then a paper-pencil questionnaire was completed during class under the supervision of a researcher and teacher. After completion, students were compensated with a small gift (approximately 0.5 US dollar). At last, 1626 adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 14.31$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.52$; 45.6% boys) completed the whole set of questionnaires without missing data.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Cyber-ostracism

A self-developed 14-item Cyber-ostracism Experience Scale for Adolescents was used, which was developed through below process.

Firstly, a semi-structured interview was conducted among 24 adolescents (12 boys) about the common ostracism they encountered with online, and initial items were generated through streamlining, refining, and integrating the interviews. Then, authors perused these initial items and individually removed any they felt did not capture the essence of cyber-ostracism or redundant (inter-rater agreement was over 90%). The above process led to 18 items, and respondents were asked to indicate how often they are encountered with each item. Response categories ranged from "Never" (1) to "All the Time" (5).

Then, a total of 623 adolescents ($M_{\text{age}} = 14.78$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.90$; 48% boys) participated in pre-test survey to build and debug the instrument through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Because confirmatory analyses requires larger sample size (Noar, 2003), a random

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