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Co-rumination via cellphone moderates the association of perceived interpersonal stress and psychosocial well-being in emerging adults



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ABSTRACT

Adolescents' and emerging adults' social interactions increasingly revolve around cellphone use, but little research has investigated the psychological properties of cellphone interactions. The current study explored co-rumination via cellphone; that is, the use of cellphone functions to excessively communicate about problems or negative feelings. Face-to-face co-rumination and co-rumination via cellphone were examined as potential moderators of the association between perceived interpersonal stress and psychosocial well-being (i.e., positive mental health and social burnout) in a sample of 142 college students. Face-to-face co-rumination was not a moderator. However, co-rumination via cellphone was a significant moderator such that higher levels of perceived interpersonal stress were associated with lower levels of well-being only among college students who reported higher levels of co-rumination via cellphone. Co-rumination via cellphone should be further investigated to elucidate its developmental trajectory and mental health correlates.

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Cellphones are now firmly situated at the center of adolescents' and emerging adults' social lives. According to a recent national survey, 72% of undergraduate students owned smartphones in 2013, up from 65% in 2012 and 50% in 2011 (Pearson, 2013). Smartphone owners between the ages of 18 and 24 years reported sending and receiving a total of 3852 text messages and making and receiving a total of 183 calls in an average month in 2013 (Fetto, 2013). College students use text messaging more than any other form of mobile telecommunication and consider it essential to their social interactions (Skierkowski & Wood, 2012).

Although social benefits of cellphone use have been identified (Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011), heavy cellphone use has been associated with compromises in young adults' psychosocial functioning (Lepp, Barkley, & Karpinski, 2014; Murdock, 2013). These compromises may be associated with the volume of cellphone use as well as the purposes or characteristics of the communication itself. For instance, individuals may use their cellphones as vehicles for co-rumination, which involves extensively and repeatedly discussing, rehashing, and speculating with others about causes of problems or negative feelings (Rose, 2002).

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Psychological and social implications of co-rumination

Among adolescents and emerging adults, co-rumination has been associated with higher levels of friendship closeness (Calmes & Roberts, 2008; Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007; Starr & Davila, 2009). However, co-rumination has also been linked with compromises in psychological functioning, including internalizing symptoms such as depression and anxiety (Calmes & Roberts, 2008; Hankin, Stone, & Wright, 2010; Stone, Hankin, Gibb, & Abela, 2011), externalizing symptoms (Tompkins, Hockett, Abraibesh, & Witt, 2011), and production of the stress hormone, cortisol (Byrd-Craven, Geary, Rose, & Ponzi, 2008). Among female undergraduates, higher levels of co-rumination have also been associated with greater alcohol consumption and binge drinking (Ciesla, Dickson, Anderson, & Neal, 2011).

Co-rumination contains elements of rumination, a perseverative focus on negative thoughts or feelings that has been consistently associated with poor problem-solving and risk for depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Co-rumination also involves self-disclosure, a process of sharing inner thoughts and feelings that can be associated with building relational intimacy (Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005) and a sense of relief or catharsis for the discloser (Affi, Caughlin, & Affi, 2007). However, the psychological effects of self-disclosure vary based on factors such as whether the disclosure is met with a supportive response (Greene, 2009) and/or a response that helps the discloser to make sense of the problem (Kelly & Macready, 2009). In a recent study, Affi, Affi, Merrill, Denes, and Davis (2013) found that when emerging adults verbally ruminated with a friend who responded in an unsupportive manner, friendship satisfaction decreased and anxiety increased. When verbal rumination elicited a supportive response, friendship satisfaction increased but interestingly, anxiety levels were not significantly reduced. Thus, ruminative attempts at coping appear to be ineffective even within a helpful social context.

Repeatedly disclosing and/or discussing problems or negative emotions can carry social costs when it causes stress to spread to others (Saxbe & Repetti, 2010) or when friends become fatigued of hearing about the stresses of their peers (Stroebe, Zech, Stroebe, & Abakoumkin, 2005). If ruminative social interactions happen repeatedly, as in co-rumination, these psychological and social costs may be amplified (Affi et al., 2013). In fact, studies have found that co-rumination contributes to the generation of interpersonal-dependent stressors, which are controllable forms of social stress that the individual has a hand in producing (Bouchard & Shih, 2013; Hankin et al., 2010). Starr and Davila (2009) found that in a sample of early adolescent girls, co-rumination was associated with a decrease in number of friends one year later. Finally, Davila et al. (2012) found in one sample of college students that higher levels of co-rumination were associated with higher rates of negative interactions via social networking behaviors, including texting. Thus, there is evidence that co-rumination can be associated with compromises in individuals' social functioning.

Co-rumination in a cellphone lifestyle

To date, published co-rumination research has focused on in-person interactions. Co-rumination has been positively correlated with frequency of text messaging among undergraduates (Davila et al., 2012), and given the ubiquity of college students' cellphone use, it is important to investigate if co-ruminative interactions have taken root within cellphone-mediated communication. Cellphone communication differs from face-to-face interaction not only in its multimodality (e.g., calls and texting), but also its accessibility. The stimulus for face-to-face co-ruminative interactions is effectively removed when individuals are physically separated from one another. In contrast, the opportunity to co-ruminate via cellphone is nearly omnipresent for a majority of emerging adults who own cellphones (Pearson, 2013), keep them within arm's reach (Dey et al., 2011), and are subject to liberal social norms regarding appropriate times to utilize them (AFP Relaxnews, 2013). In fact, these conditions may shape emerging adults' use of co-rumination as a method of coping with interpersonal stress.

Interpersonal stress, co-rumination, and psychosocial functioning

Interpersonal stressors are negative experiences involving conflicts or difficulties in social relationships, and they have been associated with both co-rumination and indicators of psychological functioning. For example, Bouchard and Shih (2013) found that among college students, the frequency of interpersonal stressors was positively correlated with co-rumination and with depressive symptoms. Nicolai, Laney, and Mezulis (2013), investigating the content of co-ruminative interactions among high school students, found that co-rumination about interpersonal stressors was associated with depressed mood, but co-rumination about nonsocial stressors was not.

There is evidence that interpersonal stress and co-rumination exert interactive effects on psychological functioning. In a multiwave longitudinal study, Hankin et al. (2010) found evidence for a transactional model in which interpersonal stress, co-rumination, and internalizing symptoms influenced one another dynamically across time in adolescent development. Co-rumination may have different implications within low versus high stress contexts. In a recent daily diary study of college students, White and Shih (2012) found that over and above the variance accounted for by frequency of life stressors, daily co-rumination predicted within-day increases in depressed mood. Additionally, baseline co-rumination moderated the association of life stressors with within-day increases in depressed mood across one week; stress was significantly associated with depressed mood only at levels of baseline co-rumination at or above the mean. These findings suggest that individuals with a tendency toward co-rumination may be particularly ill-equipped to successfully cope at high levels of interpersonal stress.

The context of interpersonal stress may be particularly important to consider in the investigation of cellphone-mediated co-rumination. In a recent cross-sectional study of first year undergraduates, a high frequency of cellphone use, which may

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