



The process of coping with cyberbullying: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying is an established threat to the well-being of youth worldwide. How victims cope with cyberbullying has the potential to buffer against negative effects. The present study is a systematic review of research on coping with cyberbullying to identify whether the process of coping is being used to identify pathways to resilience. In this review the process of coping with cyberbullying, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, and to what degree existing studies have examined the process of coping were considered. Findings indicated that much of the prior literature has identified components of the process but few studies have looked at the process itself. Understanding the process of coping with cyberbullying has important implications for how victims appraise the threat of cyberbullying, select coping strategies, and perceive their ability to enact those strategies (self-efficacy). The need for additional research and an explanation of how a better understanding of the process is needed to design effective cyberbullying interventions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Cyberbullying is a serious problem facing youth today. Definitions vary, but cyberbullying can be defined as any repeated hostile or aggressive behavior performed through electronic or digital media intended to

inflict harm or discomfort, where the victim feels powerless to stop the interaction (see Nocentini et al., 2010; Slonje, Smith, & Frisen, 2013; Tokunaga, 2010 for discussion of definitional issues). Worldwide rates of cyberbullying victimization vary from 9%–40% (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Kowalski, Limber & Agatston, 2008; Tokunaga, 2010). Cyberbullying can take many forms including: sending hostile, threatening or harassing messages to the victim; exclusion; intimidation; creating hate or defaming posts or websites; or taking/altering pictures to humiliate or abuse a victim (Li, 2007; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; Smith et al., 2008). Cyberbullying reportedly most often occurs through

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cell phone text-messaging, social networking sites (SNS), instant messaging and synchronous chat sites (O'Brien & Moules, 2013; Raskauskas, 2010; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

Cyberbullying has been established as a threat to victims' well-being (Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012; Ortega et al., 2012; Perren, Dooley, Shaw, & Cross, 2010). It is most consistently associated with low levels of self-esteem (O'Brien & Moules, 2013; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010) and high levels of depressive symptoms (Nixon, 2014; Perren et al., 2010; Raskauskas, 2010). Cyberbullying victimization has also been related to suicide ideation and, in extreme cases, suicide attempts and completion by victims (Gini & Espelage, 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Schenk and Fremouw (2012) found that victims of cyberbullying scored higher than matched non-victims on depression and anxiety, and that more cyber victims reported suicide ideation and attempts.

However, not all youth who encounter cyberbullying suffer negative effects. How victims cope with cyberbullying may differentiate between those who suffer negative effects and those who are resilient in the face of cyberbullying. Unfortunately, research on coping with cyberbullying has suffered from design shortcomings including inconsistent measurement of coping strategies, lack of theoretical framework, and failure to assess the process of coping and related factors like self-efficacy (Bauman & Newman, 2013; Chi & Frydenberg, 2009; Pieschl, Porsch, Kahl, & Klockenbusch, 2013; Singh & Bussey, 2010; Vollink, Bolman, Dehue, & Jacobs, 2013). This has limited understanding of the coping process, how youth select coping strategies to respond to cyberbullying, and whether strategies selected are effective. The present study will use the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to examine the literature on coping with cyberbullying.

1.1. Theory

TMSC is a dynamic process model explaining how individuals cope with stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). When facing a threat such as cyberbullying, the coping process is activated. Coping refers to conscious efforts individuals use to regulate emotion, cognition, behavior, internal states, or situation to reduce threat (Kokkinos, Antoniadou, Dalara, Koufoglazou, & Papatziki, 2013). According to TMSC, coping begins with threat appraisal, which is the individual's perceptions of how stressful the event is and how it may threaten well-being (Taylor, Sullivan, & Kliewer, 2013). Appraisals occur at two levels: (1) the primary appraisal, which includes assessing the situation to determine whether it is a threat (i.e., is a message post cyberbullying?); and (2) the secondary appraisal assesses the changeability of the situation (or the power to change it) along with the person's resources to manage the stress associated (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

These cognitive appraisals determine the coping style selected. Coping styles include: problem-focused, emotion-focused, or avoidant-focused coping style. Problem-focused coping is when the person addresses the problem and prevents it from occurring in the future. For instance, standing up to the cyberbully or seeking help from an adult or peer to intervene (Parris, Varjas, Meyers, & Cutts, 2012). Emotion-focused coping focuses on managing the emotional consequences of the cyber victimization. Avoidant-focused coping includes the victim's attempts to mentally or physically disengage from the stressful situation (Jacobs, Dehue, Vollink, & Lechner, 2014). Youth who use problem-focused coping strategies tend to adapt better to stressful situations than youth that use passive emotion-focused coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). The problem is that victimized youths tend to use passive or avoidant styles and are less likely to employ effective coping styles or strategies (Skrzypiec, Slee, Murray-Harvey, & Pereira, 2011; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2011). The process of choosing a coping strategy depends on both the stressor itself and the resources available to the person attempting to cope with it. Fig. 1 shows the process of coping with cyberbullying based on TMSC.

Using TMSC as the framework for describing the coping process, the mediating factors between cyberbullying and negative or positive outcomes are predicted to be appraisals and coping strategies. The key mediators will be discussed in more detail; Appraisals are discussed in Section 1.1.1, coping strategies in Section 1.1.2, and self-efficacy, another factor that may mediate this process, in Section 1.1.3.

1.1.1. Appraisals

Personal perceptions of the threat and the evaluation of resources available to combat it, and/or the resulting stress, are called appraisals. Examples of threat appraisals include threats to the self (e.g., negative self-evaluations and negative evaluations by others), threats of harm (e.g., to oneself or others), and threats of loss (e.g., loss of objects and loss of relationships) (Catterson & Hunter, 2010; Hunter & Boyle, 2004; Kliewer & Sullivan, 2008). Appraisals can also include attributions or explanations for the cause of one's own and other's behaviors (Weiner, 1986). Attributions have been studied in relationship to peer victimization. Graham, Bellmore, and Mize (2006) found that victims reported internalizing attributions where they consider victimization their fault and something that is both stable and uncontrollable. This constellation of internal-stable-uncontrollable attributions has been referred to as characterological self-blame and found to relate to less effective coping (Batanova, Espealge, & Rao, 2014). Characterological self-blame has been related to loneliness, social anxiety and low self-worth (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Shelley and Craig (2010) found that self-blame predicted concurrent peer victimization for girls and boys, and predicted peer victimization over time for girls.

Threat appraisals are important because they drive coping efforts, include a judgment of consequences to an individual (and thus can differ from person to person), and predict negative outcomes. In general, individuals tend to use problem-focused coping strategies (attempts to solve the problem) when a stressor is perceived as controllable but emotion-focused strategies (attempts to manage distress) when a stressor is perceived as uncontrollable (e.g., Newman, Holden, & Delville, 2011). For example, Hunter and Boyle (2004) found that children who appraised their peer victimization experiences as unstable or controllable were more likely to use effective coping strategies like social support seeking and problem solving than those who did not. Perceived lack of control of peer victimization situations was associated with increased use of ineffective coping. Similarly, self-blame attributions for peer victimization have been associated with less support seeking coping and more depressive symptoms (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Raskauskas, 2010). It is possible that self-blame plays a similar role in the coping process for cyberbullying.

1.1.2. Coping strategies

It has been shown that the negative impact of cyberbullying on well-being can be mitigated by coping strategies either through reducing immediate stress or by preventing long-term consequences (Machmutow et al., 2012; Perren et al., 2010; Sleglova & Cerna, 2011). Within the categories of problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping there are various coping strategies youth can employ. Common strategies used in coping include the problem-focused strategies of problem-solving, in which action is taken to change the stressful situation alone or in collaboration with others; and social support seeking, in which others are elicited to help alter the situation or provide support to buffer negative effects. Two emotion-focused coping strategies are internalizing, in which emotions from the stressful situation are directed inward but not discussed with others and externalizing, which involves dealing with the negative emotions from the stressful encounter by taking them out on others or objects. Avoidant-focused coping strategies include distancing coping, in which one avoids or removes him or herself from the stressful situation either physically (walking away or blocking upsetting messages) or cognitively (not thinking about it or saying nothing can be done) (Jacobs et al., 2014).

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