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Victimization and Adolescent Psychological-Behavioral Problems: The Mediating Role of Emotion Regulation

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Abstract. Given such speedy development of digital technologies, cyberbullying has now become a rather serious global public health hazard for the mental health of youths. Victims generally have serious psychological and behavioral problems such as depression, anxiety, self-harm, etc. and more harmful than the traditional one. This study explores the mechanism of cyberbullying victimization on adolescent's mental, behavioral problems focusing on emotion dysregulation. A systematic review of empirical papers was conducted to show that cyberbullying victimization makes teenagers use ineffective emotion regulation methods like ruminating, self-blame, and imagining the worst. These strategies keep people stuck in a continual state of emotional distress. Due to the characteristics of cyberbullying that are anonymous, lasting, and difficult to escape, the process is even worse and weakens the adolescents' ability to cope. Emotion dysregulation then progresses into two main maladaptive pathways, internalizing problems like depression and anxiety, and externalizing problems like aggression and rule-breaking. In more serious cases, this may also increase the risk of self-harm and suicide. Longitudinal studies suggest that cyberbullying and emotional regulation problems feed off of each other. In addition, age and sex have similar influences on the strength of the impact. In general, the results show that it is necessary to have intervention regarding the regulation of emotions to prevent and reduce the psychological and behavioral problems of cyberbullying. Good strategies need to work on all levels – family, school and more wide-ranging policy action.

Keywords: Cyberbullying Victimization, Emotion Dysregulation, Adolescent Mental Health

1. Introduction

With the rapid growth of digital technology, adolescents' social lives have increasingly moved online, leading to a major public health concern—cyberbullying. It is defined as intentional and repeated harm inflicted through electronic media on individuals unable to defend themselves. Cyberbullying has become a serious global threat to adolescent mental health, particularly in relation to elevated risks of depression, anxiety, and self-harm among victims [1].

There is increasing evidence that victims of cyberbullying experience serious psychological and behavioral problems, such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and impaired academic and social functioning. Lee et al.'s meta-analysis of longitudinal studies showed strong evidence that cyberbullying victimization at T1 significantly predicts later

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mental health symptoms (T2) over time. Even more alarming, extreme events like suicide are strongly linked to being bullied. Van Geel et al. discovered a strong connection between peer victimization and both suicidal thoughts (OR = 2.23) and suicide attempts (OR = 2.55). Significantly, the connection between cyberbullying and suicidal thoughts (OR = 3.12) was greater than that between traditional bullying and suicidal thoughts (OR = 2.16), indicating a more serious mental impact [2].

This raises a central question: why does cyberbullying exert such particularly severe and distinctive effects on adolescents' psychological and behavioral outcomes? Barlett et al. tested the differences hypothesis and confirmed that even after controlling for traditional bullying, cyberbullying still has a significant additional effect on psychological outcomes. its distinct qualities of being anonymous, unerasable and unavoidable make it a particularly strong and persistent stressor [3].

Though the connection between cyberbullying and mental health problems is well-established, the underlying psychological mechanisms remain less clear. Why do some teenagers have internalizing problems like feeling sad or worried, but others have externalizing problems like being mean or breaking rules?

This review suggests that emotion dysregulation is the key mechanism connecting cyberbullying victimization to these poor outcomes. Conceptually, the proposed pathway can be summarized as follows: cyberbullying victimization leads to emotion dysregulation, which in turn increases the likelihood of internalizing and externalizing problems.

Understand this mediating process is very valuable both theoretically and practically, it can give us some ideas when we make emotional-centered activities to reduce how cyberbullying makes teens feel bad.

2. Core concepts

2.1. Definition and characteristics of cyberbullying

Bullying is a highly prevalent form of interpersonal violence among children and adolescents and is widely recognized as a major public health concern. Olweus defined bullying as “the act of a person or a group who intends to do something against someone and who repeat the behavior over time, and who have an imbalance of power in favor of the person doing the bullying”. Three core elements are identified in this definition: the intent to harm, the repetitive nature of the behavior, and the power differential between those involved [4].

Bullying can generally be divided into 2 types, traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Traditional bullying is done face-to-face and includes physical, verbal, and relational forms of bullying. In contrast, Abregú-Crespo et al. define cyberbullying as "deliberate and repetitive harm that is carried out by means of electronic equipment and social media." Cyberbullying also has unique characteristics such as anonymity, continuity, and the inability to escape and frequently intersects with traditional bullying.

Among the general population of 11-15 year olds, approximately 10% report having been a victim of traditional bullying, and approximately 6% report that they have been a perpetrator. The percentage of involvement in cyberbullying is between 3% - 7%, and the incidence has been on the rise for the past 10 years. Bullying involvement usually has 3 roles, victims, perpetrators, and perpetrator-victims.

Involvement in bullying is associated with a range of adverse outcomes, including suicidal ideation, substance use, violent behavior, and heightened anxiety and low self-esteem. It is, thus,

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deemed as a significant but preventable risk factor of mental health problems in children and adolescents [5].

2.2. Emotion regulation and its dysfunction

Adolescents' mental health may be impacted in two ways by bullying: first, by the act of bullying itself; second, by the repercussions of bullying on the ability to regulate one's emotions. Emotion regulation encompasses the ways in which people manage their emotions, including controlling when they feel them, how they perceive them, and how they express them. This ability is especially important during adolescence, a time of developmental change like puberty, new intimate relationships, and different schools. Adolescents have to develop adequate cognitive and behavioral skills to deal with emotional problems in this period [6,7].

In general, emotion regulation strategies can be divided into functional and dysfunctional ones. Functional strategies assist individuals to handle and process their emotions, whereas dysfunctional strategies include avoiding or repressing negative emotional experiences. Cognitive reappraisal is the most representative adaptive strategy, which means reinterpreting the situation in order to change the emotion. In contrast, a typical maladaptive technique is expressive suppression, which is repressing one's internal emotions and keeping them hidden from others. Studies indicate that the more cognitive reappraisal used, the less aggressive one is; whereas, the more expressive suppression used, the more aggressive and hostile someone can be.

Within the multidimensional model of emotion regulation difficulties, Gratz and Roemer described 6 dimensions of emotion regulation difficulties: Non-acceptance of emotional responses, Difficulty engaging in goal-directed behavior, Difficulties with Impulse Control, Lack of Emotional Awareness, Lack of Access to Emotion Regulation Strategies, and Lack of Emotional Clarity. Of the factors listed above, the least accessible emotion regulation strategies was the factor that was most closely linked to suicidal ideation [8].

There is a moderating effect of dysfunctional emotion control mechanisms on the association between bullying victimization and psychological symptoms, according to the empirical data. Researchers Vacca et al. found that victims of bullying were more likely to experience depressive, anxious, and stress symptoms if they used maladaptive cognitive processes to regulate their emotions. Furthermore, negative affect mediates the relationship between aggressiveness and expressive suppression; individuals who exhibit higher levels of aggressiveness also tend to have greater negative affect. Additionally, the compounded effects of emotion regulation challenges and being bullied can intensify self-harm behaviors among adolescents. Kennedy and Brausch found that bullying moderate the relationship between emotion regulation difficulties and both suicide attempts and non-suicidal self-injury. If there is any place where people have experienced bullying, the problem of emotional management in relation to the problem of self-injury will be a very strong connection.

To conclude, emotion regulation is very important for how teens deal with upsetting situations like bullying. Dysfunctional emotion regulation strategies can be mediators or moderators of the relationship between victimization and mental health problems.

3. The relationship between cyberbullying victimization and emotion dysregulation

Building on the elaborations of important notions, this chapter moves to underlying things linking the phenomena of cyberbullying, bullied, can't control emotions. As an important ability to deal with stressful life events, emotion regulation is important for adolescent mental health. However,

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cyberbullying is a distinctive and severe kind of psychosocial strain. The damage is not only in the events themselves, but also in how it consistently damages and misshapes adolescents' ability to control their own emotions. This chapter reviews the empirical literature that explains how the experience of cyberbullying victimization leads to an increased use of dysfunctional emotion regulation strategies by adolescents and how the characteristics of cyberbullying make this process worse. Moreover, it shows the role of demographic factors like age and gender as moderating variables in the relationship between cyberbullying victimization and emotion regulation.

3.1. Dysfunctional emotion regulation strategies as mediators

It is well recognized that experiencing bullying may directly lead to difficulties in managing one's emotions. A cross-sectional research conducted by Vacca et al. with 638 high school students from Italy offered compelling evidence of this process. Using structural equation modeling, we look at how cognitive emotion control mechanisms mediate the relationship between experiencing distress and being a victim of bullying. Depressive, anxious, and stressed symptoms were strongly mediated by faulty cognitive emotion regulation techniques in the correlations between bullying victimization and these symptoms. Rumination, self-blame, catastrophizing, and blaming others were the dysfunctional techniques. More importantly, the path from victimization to functional cognitive strategy is nonsignificant, which implies that the harm caused by victimization is not a decrease in the ability to use adaptive strategies, but the activation and strengthening of maladaptive cognitive strategies.

When the victims of peer aggression experience peer aggression, they will have a large amount of cognitive resources used up, and it is difficult for them to take adaptive coping. They end up relying more on maladaptive patterns like ruminating and blaming themselves. This proclivity for catastrophizing and being submerged in rumination is a key element of emotional dysregulation. Supporting this viewpoint, Bäker et al. found through path analysis that dysfunctional emotion regulation not only predicted victimization by bullying but also mediated the link between peer alienation and victimization. This suggests that maladaptive regulation could be both a consequence of bullying and a preexisting vulnerability that makes an individual more prone to interpersonal risk. Such results indicate there might be a mutual connection between bullying and emotion regulation problems, which is significant in terms of comprehension [9].

3.2. Unique disruptive mechanisms of cyberbullying

Even though a direct correlation of traditional bullying to emotional dysregulation has been as would be expected, when established, the addition of cyberbullying makes for a worse problem. Due to the internet aspect of it. Evidence for this was strongly provided in the meta-analysis conducted by Barlett et al. They calculated partial correlations across 38 separate meta-analyses while statistically controlling for traditional bullying victimization and found that cyberbullying was still significantly associated with most of the psychological outcomes. Supporting the incremental validity of cyberbullying — indicating that cyberbullying is more than traditional bullying in an online environment, and that it has its own mechanisms [3].

Cyberbullying’s unique quality is that it disturbs emotional control procedures. First, online attacks are anonymous, which creates an air of unknown danger and a loss of control. Not knowing the attacker leaves victims without the option of applying problem-focussed coping and turns them inwards to rely on ineffective emotional responses such as catastrophising and paranoia. Secondly, online content being permanent and replicable makes it so that victims cannot escape the experience

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of bullying by simply changing their environment like they can with traditional bullying. Once harmful content is posted online, it can be repeatedly viewed, shared, and archived, exposing victims to ongoing reminders that intensify emotional pain and maintain ruminative thinking. And this exposure is the catalyst for the endless rumination, acting as a constant fountain of emotions, leaving little room or chance for the victim to be free from the rumination emotionally.

3.3. Longitudinal evidence and moderators

To know for sure that the mechanism works, we will have to see it over time. Lee et al. provided strong causal support through a meta-analysis of 27 longitudinal studies including 13,497 adolescents between 8 and 19 years old. Their results showed that cyberbullying victimization did indeed predict later mental health symptoms, with an overall effect size of r=.23. This time order gives very important proof for the cause and effect line between being bullied, having trouble managing emotions, and then having mental health issues.

The more significant finding is that the meta-analysis has identified age and gender to be important moderating factors. The results indicated that the effect of cyberbullying on mental health was larger among older adolescents, and age significantly moderated this relationship ($\beta =. 04$, $p <. 01$). The researchers went against what we think would happen and said that older teenagers might feel it more because they need their friends more and have more ideas about who they are. Attacks occur in online social spaces where much of their social identity is built, causing more emotional and identity-related damage. In terms of gender, it was found that the effects of cyberbullying were more negative when there was a greater number of males ($\beta = -.003$, $p <.01$). This challenges the traditional research that females were more likely to have internalizing problems and supports the idea that cyberbullying has its own unique characteristics. And it might mean male adolescents are more likely to use bad strategies like telling yourself to stop feeling sad and get mad because of that, causing more problems in their head.

3.4. Bidirectional dynamics and vicious cycles

And it gets even crazier, though, and there's a vicious cycle because. He et al. discovered bidirectional links among school bullying, depressive symptoms, and sleep issues in a longitudinal study. Early bullying predicted future depression, and the early on-set of depression symptoms, which can signify emotional dysregulation, predicted later victimization. which gives off the feeling of a not good kind of vicious cycle: cyberbullying causes emotion dysregulation, emotion dysregulation causes depression and social isolation, which in turn makes teenagers an even easier target for more bullying. Breaking this cycle means more than just dealing with the act of bullying - it needs help with managing feelings to lower risk [10].

The central role of emotion dysregulation is most clear with the most severe outcomes. Kennedy and Brausch found that bullying significantly moderated the relationships between emotion dysregulation and both suicide attempts and non-suicidal self-injury. Among the adolescents who had bullied experiences, the link between emotion dysregulation and self-harming behavior especially for lack of effective regulation strategies. , indicating that emotional dysregulation has a multiplying effect; it takes the harm caused by being bullied and magnifies it even more so as to cause greater self-harm; it calls for a need for even more emotion-regulation training for people who are bullied.

To conclude, cyberbullying victimization is closely linked to emotion dysregulation. Maladaptive thoughts such as rumination and catastrophizing act as key mediators between victimization and

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emotional distress. The unique features of cyberbullying—its anonymity and persistence—intensify this effect by increasing victims' sense of helplessness. Longitudinal findings suggest a lasting and possibly cyclical relationship. Age and gender moderate these effects, indicating group differences that interventions should consider. Overall, difficulties in emotion regulation amplify the psychological harm of cyberbullying, leading to severe outcomes like self-harm and suicidal behavior. Strengthening emotion regulation is therefore essential for prevention and intervention.

4. The consequences of emotion dysregulation: internalizing and externalizing problems

This chapter expands on the last one by arguing that emotional dysregulation is a key component of the chain reaction connecting cyberbullying victims to a wide range of mental health consequences. Negative emotions are not processed but instead appear as symptoms, and adolescents lose the ability to control their emotions in a flexible manner. Extreme instances of self-harm or suicide may result from either the externalizing route of aggressiveness and delinquency or the internalizing path of sadness and anxiety.

4.1. Emotion dysregulation, internalizing problems

Internalizing problems, especially depression and anxiety, are the most immediate consequences of emotion dysregulation. Following cyberbullying, adolescents may adopt inappropriate approaches like ruminating and blaming themselves, causing them to remain in a state of emotional distress for an extended period of time.

A meta-analysis of 130,000+ youths by Ye et al. found that bullied youths were 2.77 times as likely to be depressed as those who were not victims, and "bully-victims" had the highest risk (OR = 3.19). This means that to be both victim and perpetrator causes the most emotions. Likewise, Abregú-Crespo et al. demonstrated that bullying is generally connected to both internalizing and externalizing issues, particularly for adolescent populations that have neurodevelopmental or psychiatric vulnerabilities [11].

Physiological factors too mediate this. Tang et al. discovered that sleep disturbances partly accounted for the connection between bullying and psychological symptoms. Emotional pain disrupts sleeping, while bad sleep makes you sadder and more nervous, making things worse for you, like a bad loop that ties together feeling bad, thinking wrong, and being sick [12].

4.2. Emotion dysregulation and externalizing problems

Emotion dysregulation could also cause a person to become aggressive or hostile when they release their suppressed negative emotions. Adolescents using expressive suppression will continue to have an increasing build up of tension until they are able to engage in either violent and/or impulse behavior.

Gutiérrez-Cobo et al., showed that suppression led to higher aggression through negative affect. Adolescents who habitually repress their emotions build up anger and hostility that may be vented by means of verbal or physical aggression at some point. In contrast, cognitive reappraisal displayed a protective effect and reduced aggression levels.

And over a period of time these patterns turn into larger social and behavioral issues. Walters discovered that victimization from bullying forecasted later delinquent conduct (r =. 13), which implies that unattended emotional dysregulation might fortify into maladaptive behavioral patterns that enhance the long-term social hazards [13].

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4.3. Extreme outcomes: the incremental impact on suicidal risk

Emotion dysregulation also functions as a huge accelerator that takes people to these kinds of extremes like self-harm, suicides. Individuals lose psychological tools that help deal with the sense of despair and helplessness and the self-destruction may seem like an escape.

A meta-analysis conducted by Van Geel et al. indicated that peer victimization was significantly linked to suicidal ideation (OR = 2.23) and suicide attempts (OR = 2.55). It is significant that the cyber-bullying is found to have more correlation than the bully with suicidal ideas (OR=3.12) (OR=2.16). The exposure is relentless, the anonymity absolute – these two things combined cause people to ruminate more and feel more helpless; emotional systems get pushed towards collapse [2].

As the victim's ability to regulate their emotions breaks down, they have a narrowed perspective of cognition. When they are unable to see any alternatives, suicide might be perceived as the only option. This cascading process illustrates the harm caused by cyberbullying to emotional regulation, the increase of internal distress, and the final trigger of suicidal risk.

Emotion dysregulation emerges as the main outcome of cyberbullying victimization, forming two primary maladaptive routes. In the internalizing path, maladaptive regulation of regulation leads to depression and anxiety as well as even more extreme cases like poor sleep. On the externalizing path, the suppression-related tension becomes aggression which predicts future antisocial behavior. In an extreme case, the continuous failure of emotion regulation in the face of cyberbullying pressure may increase the risk of suicide. Together, these findings point to emotion regulation as an important target for interventions designed to reduce the psychological and behavioral harms of cyberbullying.

5. Discussion and suggestions

5.1. Practical implications and interventions

The identified mechanisms provide clear directions for intervention. Prevention is effective at the 3 levels – environmental, individual and social-ecological.

First, reducing bullying itself is the foundation. School-based anti-bullying programs are effective in reducing perpetration and victimization according to Gaffney et al., however the reductions are only slight. Given the special nature of cyberbullying, intervention efforts must break free from the constraints of schools to encompass digital literacy and online safety education, assisting adolescents in recognizing and reacting to online risks.

Second, interventions need to target emotion regulation as a central mediator. Because the victims tend to use maladaptive strategies like ruminating or suppressing, the programs should include cognitive behavioral elements that teach adaptive skills, like cognitive reappraisal. To train adolescents to reinterpret their bullying experiences, so as to reduce negative emotional buildup and interrupt pathways leading to internalizing and externalizing problems.

Lastly, enhancing protective social factors is necessary. Feng et al. pointed out that positive family functioning, good teacher-student relationships, and peer support can mitigate the negative effects of bullying. Tang et al. also confirmed the moderation role of parent - child attachment. Therefore, intervention must extend into the family and school, parent workshops can help provide emotional support and a secure attachment, schools should create a supportive peer environment which reduces social isolation and encourages seeking help [14].

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5.2. Limitations and future directions

Despite the inclusion of a substantial amount of evidence, there are still several limitations to the study. Many studies that are critical use cross-sectional designs which makes it difficult to determine the causal direction of bullying, emotion dysregulation, and psychological problems. Although some longitudinal data offer partial support, more evidence is required to support the idea that emotion regulation has a time-related moderating function. Furthermore, much of the research makes use of self-report measures, which can create an overestimation of the association because of a common method bias. There are conceptual and measurement differences among researchers on how cyberbullying is being defined, thus, it creates methodological challenges because of the overlap with regular bullying.

Future studies need to be done for these research gaps in these ways:

Use longitudinal designs that repeatedly assess cyberbullying, emotion regulation, and symptoms over time to test the mediation model.

Conduct randomized controlled trials with an emphasis on emotion regulation training as the main intervention for cyberbullying victims and examine long-term results.

Make full use of multi-source data, such as peer nominations, teacher reports, and physiological and neurobiological indicators, to make the emotional dysregulation more objective.

Find out how safeguarding bits do things like what it means to be near a person or be part of a bunch and how they use those things to learn ways to handle their feelings.

Do cross-cultural comparative research on how cultural contexts mold both cyberbullying experiences and emotion regulation routines, to give more universally valid interventions.

This paper reviews in summary that Emotions are right at the center of the negative mental health effects of cyberbullying. To strengthen this capacity, via family, school, and policy level activities, is the most promising avenue for mitigating both the acute and longer term harms of online victimization.

6. Conclusion

This study reviewed the evidences related to what negative mental and behavior problems will happen if bullied online during adolescent period, and emotion dysregulation is an important factor in between. Cyberbullying being a robust psychosocial stressor, brings about dysfunctional regulation methods such as rumination, self-blame, and catastrophizing which keeps the victims in an endless loop of emotional suffering.

It increases feelings of helplessness and makes it hard to use adaptive coping. Consequently, the two pathways of emotion dysregulation are respectively internalized problems such as depression, anxiety, and exacerbated sleep issues; and externalizing problems such as aggression, delinquency. Severe cases have an increased risk of self-harm and suicide due to prolonged emotional collapse.

Longitudinal findings also point to a cycle, with victimization feeding emotion dysregulation and vice versa. Age and gender moderate the effects, showing different groups that need to be focused on for prevention and intervention.

Cyberbullying intervention should focus on reducing bullying, improving adolescents' emotion regulation, and strengthening family–school–peer support. Research limitations highlight the need for longitudinal, multi-source, and cross-cultural studies to develop more reliable and universal prevention strategies.

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