



UNDERSTANDING SELF-HARM and COPING AMONG MINORITY YOUTH***Timothy Oblad**

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Abstract

The current study explores how cyber-victimization, depression, self-control, social capital and coping among primarily Hispanic youth in rural South Texas predicts self-harm and suicidal ideation. Results are informed by Self-control Theory to provide a structured, meaningful lens among cyber-victims engaging in harmful thought or behaviors. As part of an IRB approved pilot study, students (N=131) between 14-18 years of age participated in a health empowerment program to educate and assess their overall well-being (e.g., risk-taking, coping, peer influence, nutrition). Results indicate 12.7% of the sample reported sometimes/often thinking about attempting suicide and 23% reported cyber-victimization more than once. Through hierarchical analyses, demographics and other independent variables were entered in steps to determine to what extent they predict self-harm. In the final model, cyber-victimization and depression were the only significant predictors of self-harm. A repeated regression measure split by gender, revealed cyber-victimization as the only significant predictor of self-harm among males. For females, depression was the only significant predictor of self-harm but coping ($p = .055$) and cyber-victimization ($p = .06$) were trending.

Keywords: Cyber-victim, Self-harm, Suicidal Ideation, Coping.

INTRODUCTION

Cyber bullying risks and concerns have been well documented in the news media, school classrooms and in the home. Still, there are varying rates of prevalence of perpetration and ongoing threats across multiple platforms that too often result in teenagers becoming depressed, increase deviant behaviors, contemplate-or actually carry out-suicide (Diaz and Fite, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2018; John *et al.*, 2018). Negative outcomes such as extreme dieting, poor academic performance, suicide, bullying, etc. have been measured. To date, few researchers have explored successful coping methods that is also informed by a theoretical framework, fewer researchers have analyzed minority groups in rural areas. This study thus adds to the theoretical and cultural gaps through a cross-cultural lens, comprised of Hispanic youth participants.

Self-control theory

Traditionally, Self-Control Theory (SCT) attempts to explain why crimes are committed, often through the assertion that deficits force individuals into deviant behavior (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983). An additional component of SCT is the notion that targets of bullying are likewise forced into negative behaviors (e.g., striking back, seeking revenge). One study (Bossler and Holt, 2010) tested whether self-control had an effect regarding cyber victims and the researchers found students with low levels of self-control were more likely to report harassment online as well as reports of hacking of personal passwords. Similarly, other researchers (Ngo and Paternoster, 2011) reported low levels of self-control predicted cybercrime victimization. They found individuals with higher levels of self-control were at lower risk of receiving unwarranted online harassment. Lastly, researchers found disparities between youth with delinquency issues in that self-control moderated delinquency. Those with high self-control were less susceptible to delinquency despite having similar/same factors as those with low self-control.

In the context of this study, the authors are primarily interested in how SCT accounts for the characteristic of self-control (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983). Theoretically, individuals with higher self-control should report fewer cyber victimization and/or avoid negative coping tactics. Theorists claim that self-control is developed through positive social factors that serve as protective buffers (e.g., positive parenting, involved teachers, youth pastors, coaches, etc.). Further, that exhibiting high self-control also predicts better academic success and fewer mental health issues (Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone, 2004). Through this lens, protective buffers are important as they serve to reinforce acceptable behaviors and simultaneously discourage or curb negative behaviors.

Cyber victimization

Bullying has been a concern for several decades but the pervasive nature of cyber bullying has become a public health issue given the emotional and mental consequences from others' actions. A recent study in Canada (Cenat *et al.*, 2018), found that teenagers who were cyber bullied were more likely to use illicit substances (compared to non-victims). Moreover, researchers found that cyber bullying victimization, exposure to violence, and specifically, being female, were each significantly associated with an increase of psychological distress. Another study by Kim and colleagues (2018) in Canada analyzed a nationally representative sample of children and youth (N=10,530). These researchers sought to identify outcomes from cyberbullying victimization and were able to identify that emotional problems arose among females and behavioral problems among males. Other studies have also found victims of cyberbullying are at greater risk of self-harm and suicidal behaviors compared to non-victims of cyberbullying. Through a novel meta-analysis that reviewed independent studies, John and colleagues (2018) explored the connection between self-harm and cyber victims. The researchers found cyber victims were nearly two-and-a-half times likelier to self-harm and over twice as likely to show suicidal behaviors compared to non-victims.

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Correlations of Variables Split by Gender (Upper Triangle is Female); N=114

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Age	-	.02	.05	-.20	.01	-.05	-.10	-.05	-.05
2 Ethnicity	-.02	-	.10	-.11	.11	.24*	.15	.09	-.01
3 Parental Care	-.13	-.13	--	-.22^	.31*	.09	-.11	-.48***	-.37**
4 Self Control	.14	.14	-.20^	--	-.36**	.09***	.03	.29*	.45***
5 Social Capital	-.15*	-.25	.42***	-.19^	--	.19	-.24*	-.38**	-.49***
6 Positive Coping	-.29**	-.06	.49***	-.11	.44***	--	.04	-.14	-.21^
7 Cyber Victim	.04^	.19	-.25*	.35***	-.23*	.07	--	.49***	.31**
8 Depression	-.02	.05	-.02	.41***	-.04	.15	.27*	--	.65***
9 Suicidal Ideation	-.07	.13	-.03	.19	-.37**	-.20^	.12	.07	--
10 Self harm	.016	.06	-.10	.37***	-.15^	.60***	.25*	.29**	-.04

Note *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001; ^trending p = .051 - .056

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Final Models for Variables Predicting Self-harm among Adolescents (N = 114)

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	ΔR ²	F Change	Df1	Df2	Sig. ΔF
1	.282	.08	.046	.085	2.65	4	109	.05
2	.337	.11	.064	.04	2.05	2	107	.13
3	.778	.604	.570	.49	42.96	3	104	.001

Also of note, cybervictims were over two-and-half times more likely to actually attempt suicide and more than twice as likely to report suicidal ideation, compared to their non-victim counterparts.

Coping methods and social capital

In the face of bullying, individuals may respond in a number of different ways. Researchers have found an overwhelmingly amount of evidence of adolescents responding negatively in terms of how they cope with bullying. This can range from delinquency (Hinduja and Pachin 2007; Oblad, Trejos-Castillo and Massengale, 2017), to problems with anxiety or depression (Dempsey *et al.*, 2009), and a myriad of other psychological problems (Sourander *et al.*, 2010). One study (Sleglova and Cerna, 2011) in particular, reported that many victims had feelings of shame and guilt after being targeted online and that they had not talked about it with friends or family. It is important to note that not all bullying victims internalize maltreatment with negative coping methods. One researcher previously referenced above conducted interviews with students and assessed importance of social capital and self-control. Sleglova and Cerna (2011) found students who felt they had support they needed were able to trivialize hurtful messages intended to cause harm or pain. Moreover, individuals who had support, claimed they could confide in others, receive reassurance of themselves and avoid feelings of guilt or depression. Victims who did not have this level of support were more likely to claim feeling guilt, shame, depression and fear of others. In 2013, Bradbury measured several positive coping strategies across cybervictims and identified two key strategies. Bradbury found much higher efficacy with those who reported having social support and (or) problem solving skills. The author found that victims of bullying with higher coping efficacy also had stronger support systems in place. Social capital provides rich networks or relationships that provide reciprocal value, thus a mutual benefit for individuals and others (Putnam, 2001; Woolcock, 1998). Those with low capital may lack such closeness and thus fail to cope in the face of targeting or ostracism. For example, Carney, Jacob and Hazler (2011) measured traditional victims of bullying lacked trust in others, felt more isolated and reported feelings of mistrust. Comparatively, Carney and researchers also reported students in the same classes who had not been bullied, reported higher levels of social trust, positive relationships and being treated fairly.

Researchers have found support for social capital as providing a buffer that inhibits maladaptive behaviors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data and Procedures

A South Texas high school participated in a piloted Youth Empowerment Program through an IRB-approved collaboration with a local University. Surveys were completed on a voluntary basis and provided in Spanish as requested. Data was collected and analyzed during the 2019-2020 academic year. Participating adolescents ranged from 14-18 (N=131) years. 56% of the sample were males (N=73) and majority of the sample were student-athletes (78%). Most students were freshman (38%), followed by sophomores (28%), juniors (20%) and seniors (14%). Lastly, students self-identified as Hispanic (80%) followed by Caucasian (10%), African-American (9%) and Mixed/Other (1%).

Measurements

All data was anonymous and confidential. The survey was designed to assess adolescent behaviors and opinions across health, importance of peers and friendships, self-harm, suicidal ideation and online behaviors. All question items used a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 or 1 to 7 on some scales. Questions were developed from the *CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey* (Kann, McManus, and Harris, 2017) and the *Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale-10* (CES-D-10). Five items from the *Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health* (Harris *et al.*, 2008) was used to measure self-control. To measure cyberbullying victimization five survey items were provided that assessed frequency of being bullied via online, email, chatrooms, text messaging or social media ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Lastly, positive coping methods were grouped into a single scale measured by active participation in sports, clubs, youth groups, or religious attendance.

RESULTS

Results indicate nearly 13% (12.7%) of the sample reported sometimes/often thinking about attempting suicide and 23% reported cyber-victimization more than once (during the past

year). Results also indicate a significant association between self-control and negative coping skills. Preliminary analyses were conducted to check for any violations of assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. Hierarchical multiple regressions were used to assess the ability of multiple control measures (e.g., social capital, coping) to predict levels of self-harm (e.g., cutting, over-exercise, suicidal behavior), after controlling for the influence of sex, age and parent attachment. Age and parent attachment were entered at step 1, explaining 5% of the variance in self-harm. After entering self-control, social capital and coping at step 2 the total variance explained by the model as a whole was only 11%. The final step added cyber-victimization and depression explaining an additional 60.4%, ($F(9, 104) = 17.63$, $p < .001$) in predicting involvement in self-harm.

DISCUSSION

When exploring the increased risk of self-harm it became clear that cyber victimization and depression were the only significant predictors after controlling for other variables. When controlling for gender, cyber victimization remained a significant predictor of self-harm for males-only which makes sense given that males typically are more involved in online aggression behaviors. For females, depression was the only significant predictor of self-harm but coping ($p = .055$) and cyber victimization ($p = .06$) were trending towards self-harm. This results in partial support towards the idea of self-control theory in that males may be acting more aggressive online, perhaps with revenge-seeking behaviors. On the other hand it is possible that females who are depressed may be more likely to choose negative coping methods (e.g., self-harm behaviors) as a means for navigating through depressive episodes which is deeply concerning. Future studies should continue to research differences in coping mechanisms and the connection to online behaviors such as cyber bullying or other at-risk behaviors. This study is comprised mostly of Hispanic adolescents and provides a voice to these students who may not be represented in larger cities closer to research-based universities. Further understanding of self-control and mechanisms for coping will help promote more positive development, particularly for those who are facing difficult experiences socially, academically and internally.

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