

Chapter 62

Cyber Aggression and Victimization Among Emerging Adults: The Associated Adjustment Difficulties

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a study with the objective to examine cyber aggression involvement among emerging adults across technologies and relationships. Another purpose was to investigate the bidirectional associations between emerging adults' cyber aggression involvement and adjustment difficulties over four years. Participants were 1,483 emerging adults (Mage = 24.67; 60% female) from Southeastern universities in the United States. Emerging adults completed questionnaires on their cyber aggression involvement and adjustment difficulties. The most frequently utilized digital technologies and tool to harm others were text messages. Ex-friends were frequently involved in cyber aggression. Cyber aggression involvement predicted all adjustment difficulties across four years and all adjustment difficulties predicted cyber aggression involvement, suggesting bidirectional relationships among these variables. There were magnitude differences such that the bidirectional relationships were stronger when predicting all adjustment difficulties from cyber aggression and cyber victimization.

INTRODUCTION

Emerging adults are enmeshed in a digitally connected world. Being digitally connected to just about anyone in a matter of seconds and having access to an assortment of information at the “click of a button” are just a few of the benefits associated with emerging adults’ internet and digital technology use. Many emerging adults go online or utilize digital technologies at least once a day (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). Although the internet and digital technologies provide various opportunities and conveniences in emerging adults’ lives, they might be at risk for internet addiction, identity theft, sexual predation

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and exploitation, and cyber aggression (Copes, Kerby, Huff, & Kane, 2010; Finn, 2004; Weigman & van Schie, 1998; Wright & Li, 2012). Utilizing digital technologies increases the likelihood of experiencing or perpetrating cyber aggression (Alvarez-Garcia, Nunez Perez, Gonzalez, & Perez, 2015; Holt, Fitzgerald, Bossler, Chee, & Nq, 2016; Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012; Perrin & Duggan, 2015). Emerging adults' high levels of internet and digital technology consumption increase their online risks, particularly their risk of cyber aggression.

Despite emerging adults using the internet and digital technologies at similar or higher levels than children and adolescents, little attention has been devoted to their exposure and perpetration of cyber aggression. High profile cases of cyber aggression sometimes involve emerging adults, although the general public typically believes that these behaviors are a concern for children and adolescents. Failure to acknowledge emerging adults' vulnerability to cyber aggression might neglect the development of intervention programs aimed at reducing risks among this population. Furthermore, not recognizing that cyber aggression is a concern for emerging adults might exacerbate their psychological, social, academic, and behavioral difficulties. Research on cyber aggression and emerging adults is increasing, although much of this research involves studies utilizing cross-sectional research designs, which limits our understanding of the long-term predictors and consequences of these behaviors. The first objective of the present study was to describe the nature of cyber aggression and victimization among emerging adults by focusing on what digital technologies are used and the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. The second objective of the present study was to investigate the longitudinal, reciprocal relationships between cyber victimization, cyber aggression, suicidal ideation, non-suicidal self-harm, depression, loneliness, anxiety, and grade point average among emerging adults over four years, using cross-lagged modeling.

BACKGROUND

Definition of Emerging Adulthood

More and more high school students plan to attend college nowadays, delaying their plans for marriage and families (Badger, Nelson, & Barry, 2006). Consequently, many people in college do not consider themselves to be adults. Coalescing together, these factors have created a unique developmental period, often referred to as "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is characterized by an increased level of exploration and instability until one reaches their mid to late twenties, before taking on adult roles and responsibilities. Other characteristics of emerging adulthood include pursuing personal goals (e.g., traveling, school), creating an identity that is influenced by work, school, or interpersonal relationships, becoming involved in intimate relationships, and engaging in risky behaviors, such as using illegal drugs or driving while drunk (Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Nelson & Barry, 2005). Given these characteristics, many researchers consider emerging adulthood a unique developmental period, separate from adolescence and adulthood.

Definition of Cyber Aggression and Victimization

Typically conceptualized as an extension of face-to-face traditional aggression, cyber aggression involves purposefully and hostilely embarrassing or intimidating others (Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Kowalski

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