Adolescent Coping Strategies in the Face Of Their “Worst Online Experience”

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents’ increased use of virtual environments (e.g., online games, social networking sites) provides opportunities for social and emotional learning and development. Negative online experiences in particular require adolescents to use social and emotional competencies to navigate these experiences. The present study used qualitative methods to describe adolescents’ worst online experiences and to examine their coping strategies in managing these experiences. Results indicated that adolescents most frequently described negative experiences with themes of sexual and relational harassment, online stalking and feuds, followed by ethnic/racial harassment, online fraud, bystander experiences, and technical issues. Adolescents’ coping strategies included direct problem solving, positive cognitive restructuring, distraction, avoidance, and support seeking. Gender and white vs ethnic minority differences in negative online experience types and coping strategies were examined. Findings extend work that explores the application of offline coping strategies to virtual environments.

Keywords: Adolescents, Coping, Online Harassment, Social Media, Virtual Environments

INTRODUCTION

The Internet plays an important role in adolescents’ daily lives (Pew Research, 2013). Over 95% of youth in the United States aged 12-17 use the Internet and 80% of this group use virtual environments1 such as Facebook and Twitter (Madden et al., 2013). These online contexts provide new platforms for adolescents to carry out developmental tasks and to engage in social interaction (Michikyan & Subrahmanyam, 2012; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). While there are many benefits to these interactions (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011), there is a growing body of work that shows that youths’ experiences often include negative social encounters such as online harassment victimization (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013). Research suggests that online victimization may be associated with poor well-being (Barchia & Bussey, 2010; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Ybarra, 2004) and problem behavior (Hinduja

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& Patchin, 2007; Suzuki, Asaga, Sourander, Hoven, & Mandell, 2012). These negative outcomes are likely due to adolescents’ negative affect and perception of a devalued social identity (Beran & Li, 2005; DeHue, Bolman, & Volink, 2008). Despite the concerns for the impact of online harassment on adolescent health and adjustment (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007; Jones et al., 2013), we know little about the coping strategies this population chooses to use to negotiate social experiences in virtual environments. Using adolescents’ own words, the present study explored their negative online experiences and the array of coping strategies they employed to navigate these events. Such an in-depth analysis of youths’ online social interactions can provide a unique window into their psychological world (Greenfield & Yan, 2006), and illuminate their perceived ability to “hold their own” in these virtual spaces.

To understand the nature of adolescents’ coping with negative online experiences, we first consider that these experiences may be associated with negative affect (Beran & Li, 2005; DeHue et al., 2008) and that little is known about adolescent coping strategies with stressful events online (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). What we speculate, however, is that youth may use social and emotional competencies to successfully manage their negative affect and decision making related to social media use. Social and emotional learning competencies are: (a) self-awareness: identification of one’s thoughts and emotions and their impact on one’s behavior; (b) self-management: effective management and regulation of one’s thoughts, emotions, and behaviors; (c) social awareness: engagement in perspective-taking and empathy with others from diverse backgrounds; (d) relationship skills: maintenance of positive interactions and relationships through communication, cooperation, and conflict negotiation; and (e) responsible decision-making: making respectful choices about personal behavior during social interactions while considering moral standards and the well-being of others (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2005). Adolescents’ ability to describe their worst online experiences is predicated on their engagement in the competencies of self-awareness and social awareness in that they must be able to identify, understand, and describe their thoughts and behaviors during the negative experience. They must also be able to engage in perspective-taking to attribute thoughts and intentions to perpetrators of harassment during negative online social interactions. On the other hand, youths’ coping strategies reflect competencies in self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

To engage in coping strategies, adolescents must regulate their thoughts and emotions in service of behavioral goals, communicate or negotiate conflict with familiar and unknown perpetrators of online harassment, and make responsible choices on how to handle their negative online experiences while considering their own and other’s well-being. We use this framework of socio-emotional competence to offer commentary on the various socio-emotional processes that simultaneously occur during adolescents’ negative online experiences.

Given that part of successful adolescent development is dependent on the effective negotiation of offline social interactions (both positive and negative; Olbrich, 1990) adolescents’ general coping strategies likely transfer to the coping strategies they employ to navigate online negative interactions. For instance, young people employ various coping strategies (Price & Dalgleish, 2010) offline that range from confronting the bully/harasser to reporting the incident to someone (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012), or doing nothing to address the harassment (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007). Similarly, when dealing with negative online events, young people may also choose to confront the virtual aggressor directly, report the incident to server administrators, change their site credentials or privacy settings, log off of the site or chatroom and/or log off/turn off the computer to cope with the situation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Riebel, Jaeger, & Fischer, 2009; Sleglova & Cerna, 2011; Tokunaga, 2010). Thus, stress and coping theories developed
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