Chapter 1

Negative Psychological Outcomes Associated With Emerging Adults’ Cyber Aggression Involvement

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ABSTRACT

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. The findings of the study were consistent with cross-sectional studies, with the present study revealing longitudinal and reciprocal relationships between cyber aggression, cyber victimizations, suicidal ideation, non-suicidal self-harm, depression, anxiety, and GPA over four years. Additional research attention should be given to understanding more about these associations.

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 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 experi-

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 ... 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. Such a gap in the literature is unfortunate as many 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, and reduce the likelihood that someone might intervene and reduce the impact of negative outcomes. 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. The aim of this study is focus on cyber aggression and victimization exclusively among emerging adults. This developmental period represents a unique developmental stage for understanding the impact of negative interactions on emerging adults’ mental health.