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Willingness to Self-Disclose Cyber Victimization to Friends or Parents: Gender Differences in Cyber Victimization a Year Later

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Abstract

As computer access and use continue to expand for increasingly younger children, online social settings will continue to provide a prominent platform for children to experience victimization. Of particular interest to the present research was children's (222 children, boys = 105; girls = 117) willingness to tell a friend and willingness to tell a parent about experiences of cyber victimization (Grades 3 and 4). This self-disclosure was then examined in relation to cyber victimization a year later (Grades 4 and 5), controlling for initial levels of cyber victimization at Time 1 and cyber usage at Time 1 and Time 2. For boys, willingness to tell a friend at Time 1 about cyber victimization was associated with less cyber victimization at Time 2 than not being willing to tell a friend. For girls, willingness to tell a parent at Time 1 about cyber victimization was associated with less cyber victimization at Time 2 than not being willing to tell a parent. These findings underscore the possible importance of willingness to self-disclose as a coping strategy to reduce future incidences of cyber victimization and highlight the complexity of this strategy in terms of gender and nature of social support.

Keywords: cyber victimization; gender; disclosure; longitudinal

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Introduction

Children's social interactions increasingly occur using internet-accessible devices, and these communications are being embraced at younger ages as access and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) continue to increase (Mishna et al., 2009). Availability of internet at home is widespread with approximately 85% of households reporting broadband internet access (Martin, 2021) and 39% of children as young as 10–12 years engaging in daily use (DePaolis & Williford, 2015). By the time they reach adolescence, 95% of teens in the US report having smartphone access and 45% report high levels of online engagement (Pew, 2018).

Although ICT access can provide needed services, such as in the context of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Patrick et al., 2021), ICTs can also serve as a platform for problematic social interactions, such as cyber victimization. Considering the abundance of negative effects of cyber victimization, reviewed below, it is imperative for researchers to examine possible coping strategies children may use to prevent cyber victimization from occurring, stop victimization after the fact, or buffer the possible negative impacts (Machackova et al., 2013; Perren et al., 2012). The current research focused on a potential, but understudied, coping mechanism which may be helpful in dealing with cyber victimization—intentions or willingness to disclose cyber victimization to another person, specifically to a friend or to a parent, and the extent of reported cyber victimization one year later

The present research was designed to evaluate the extent of self-reported cyber victimization by third and fourth graders one year later (when in fourth and fifth grades), in relation to prior willingness to tell or not tell a friend or a parent about the victimization. The use of a short-term longitudinal design and assessment of elementary school-aged children are rare in this area of research and are particular strengths of the present study. In the remainder of this Introduction, we provide a review of relevant research on benefits and challenges of cyber engagement including cyber victimization and consider coping strategies victims may use and the effectiveness of those strategies.

Online Engagement: Benefits and Challenges

Blair and Fletcher (2011) identified three common themes in a qualitative analysis of 7th graders regarding the benefits of owning a cell phone: 1) providing a source of connection to friends and family, 2) being a source of social status, and 3) facilitating adolescent autonomy. Communication through ICTs may allow for the maintenance of existing friendships and for the ability to stay connected, regardless of physical location (Bessière et al., 2008). This form of communication also has allowed for opportunities to boost social connectedness and well-being through increased closeness and bonding (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Early adolescents perceive online communication, particularly instant messaging, as being important for the maintenance of friendships (Mittmann et al., 2022). Furthermore, the internet has provided opportunities for collaborative learning experiences (Beran & Li, 2005).

Although the internet is most commonly accessed at home, youth have also reported accessing the internet in public spheres, including academic settings. In a sample of 7th–12th graders, nearly 47% of respondents were reported to use their cell phones at school (Li, 2010). Entertainment (87%) and communication (76.6%) were found to be the dominant reasons for using ICTs, followed by academics (67.9%) and self-expression (53.6%) (Huang & Chou, 2010).

As noted, despite these social and educational benefits, there are also potential risks in internet usage, such as experiencing cyber victimization. Cyber victimization is defined as being the recipient of an act of aggression through ICTs including cell phones, computers, and other electronic devices (Schoffstall & Cohen, 2011). Cyber victimization has allowed aggression to extend beyond face-to-face encounters and into the homes and private lives of children (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006), with 83% of cyber victimization reported by third to fifth grade children occurring at home (DePaolis & Williford, 2015). There are a variety of ways in which children can become cyber victims, including being impersonated, harassed, hacked, outed, excluded, or stalked (Willard, 2006). Huang and Chou (2010) reported that the three most common cyber victimization behaviors in a sample of Taiwanese youth (grades 7th–9th) were threatening/harassing, inappropriate joking, and rumor spreading.

Cyber victimization may be accompanied by many negative aspects of mental health, including anxiety, in both high school (M_{age} = 15.84, Fredstrom et al., 2011; M_{age} = 15.5, Juvonen & Gross, 2008), and elementary-aged samples (M_{age} = 9.70, Guhn et al., 2013). Cyber victimization and depression are positively correlated for children ranging from 10–17 years old (Ybarra, 2004) and high school students aged 14–18 (Landoll et al., 2015). Suicidal ideation and self-harm behaviors have been noted in middle-school samples (M_{age} = 12.8, Hinduja & Patchin, 2010) and college samples (ages 18–21, Skilbred-Fjeld et al., 2020) Furthermore, Ybarra et al. (2007) found school functioning to be negatively impacted by experiences of cyber victimization (M_{age} = 12.6). Cyber victims were significantly more likely than non-victims to be suspended or given detention and engage in delinquent behaviors such as skipping school and carrying a weapon to school.

Prevalence of Cyber Victimization

In a review, Tokunaga (2010) concluded that approximately 20–40% of youth experience victimization online, with experiences peaking in 7th–8th grade. However, young children can also experience cyber victimization. DePaolis and Williford (2015) reported that 17.7% of their sample of 3rd–5th graders had experienced cyber victimization since the beginning of the school year—primarily through online games (67%). Similar cyber victimization rates of 14% were found in a sample of 8- to 13-year-old children (Sidera et al., 2021). High internet usage may relate to incidents of cyber victimization, although the findings have been inconsistent (see Tokunaga, 2010), and the rate of reported cyber victimization varies greatly across studies. For instance, a review of 35 longitudinal studies found cyber bullying prevalence rates among middle school students ranged from 1.9% to 84.2% (Camerini et al., 2020). The varied reported frequency of cyber victimization may be due to methodological differences in the reports

including varying operationalization of cyber victimization, sample size, and age range (Kowalski et al., 2014). For example, lower rates of victimization have been found for younger samples (10–12 years old), perhaps due to lower rates of access to, or usage of, the internet (Olenik-Shemesh & Heiman, 2014). Regardless of the discrepancies surrounding prevalence rates, cyber victimization has been shown to negatively relate to the victim's social adjustment and this type of harassment appears to be on the rise. The Youth Internet Safety Survey identified 6% of youth 10–17 years old in their nationwide survey to have experienced cyber harassment in 2000, which then increased to 11% by 2010 (Jones et al., 2012).

Coping With Cyber Victimization Through Disclosure

Disclosure is defined as telling another individual about one's experiences, in this case, the experience of cyber victimization. Children often opt to not tell anyone about their victimization (Bjereld, 2018; Cassidy et al., 2013; Price & Dalgleish, 2010). In fact, doing nothing at all in response to cyber victimization is a common strategy (Craig et al., 2007; Monks et al., 2012). However, for those victims that do choose to act, social support, specifically disclosure of victimization, has been identified by previous research to be the most common coping strategy employed by victimized youth—both in cyber and traditional contexts (Black et al., 2010; Frisén et al., 2014; Machackova et al., 2013; Monks et al., 2012).

When children decide to disclose, there are a variety of individuals they can turn to including their parents/caregivers, friends, siblings, teachers, school personnel, and other adults. Furthermore, they can report victimization to more formal agents, such as police, health professionals, or victim support services. Cyber victimized youth, ranging from ages 12–20, are more likely to disclose cyber victimization to their friends/peers than to adults (Cassidy et al., 2013; Dehue et al., 2008; Li, 2010; Matos et al., 2018; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Huang and Chou (2010) found that 7th–8th graders were more likely to turn to their peers (33.4%) and siblings (16.1%) than their parents (11.6%) or teachers (5.9%). Similarly, Patchin and Hinduja (2006) found that cyber victimized youth, ages 12–20, were most likely to tell online friends specifically, followed by friends in general, when asked their responses to online harassment.

Several reasons have been given regarding children's decision to not disclose cyber victimization, particularly to adults. Adults have been suggested by children (ranging 10–18 years old) to trivialize the experience or overreact, and some children fear they would not be believed and also that telling adults may in fact make the situation worse (Daneback et al., 2018; deLara, 2012; Navarro et al., 2018; Priebe et al., 2013). Some children may fear that they will lose internet privileges if they report to their parents. Furthermore, many adolescents suggest that they want to handle the issue independently (Huang & Chou, 2010; Mishna et al., 2009).

As a result, children's intentions to disclose experiences with cyber victimization are an important, and understudied, component of understanding how children cope with cyber victimization. The Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) suggested that behavioral intentions, which are informed by beliefs and attitudes, are important predictors of later behavioral enactment. For instance, intentions predicted later marijuana use among teen mothers (Morrison et al., 2002), In addition, based on a meta-analysis examining studies with experimental manipulations of intent, Webb and Sherran (2006) found that changing one's intentions resulted in later behavior change. Although research has examined intentions of bystanders to intervene in situations of bullying (e.g., Ingram et al., 2019), research on the willingness of the victims themselves to share this information is lacking and is likely a key component in initiating the intervention process. If victims do not disclose their experiences with aggression, peers and parents may lack key information to respond appropriately. Therefore, understanding this critical first step of reaching out to others for support, by specifically being willing to disclose, is important and an understudied component particularly for the young age group in the current study, who might not yet have experienced cyber victimization.

Gender and Cyber Victimization: Rates and Coping Strategies

The research findings on potential gender differences in extent of being cyber victimization are mixed. Although a number of studies found no gender differences in experiencing cyber victimization (e.g., Guhn et al., 2013; Jackson & Cohen, 2012; Lapidot-Lefler & Dolev-Cohen, 2015), some studies have found girls to be cyber victimized more often than boys (e.g., Cappadocia et al., 2013; Matos et al., 2018). Other research has found boys to report more cyber victimization (e.g., Sidera et al., 2021; Sjursø et al., 2016; Wang, 2022). Interestingly, gender differences have been found regarding the electronic device (e.g., cell phones, computers, online games, etc.) used to conduct

or experience cyber victimization, with 3rd–5th grade girls more likely to experience cyber victimization on school buses with smartphones, and boys more likely to experience victimization at home, perhaps by means of online games (Williford et al., 2018). This suggests gender differences in locations and types of media used, which may account for inconsistencies in the literature (DePaolis & Williford, 2015; Williford et al., 2018). Wright (2020) suggested that gender stereotype traits (e.g., masculine, feminine) may be the important construct. In Wright's study of 8th graders, children displaying higher rates of masculine traits, regardless of gender, were identified as having higher rates of cyber aggression compared to their feminine counterparts.

Gender stereotype traits may also play a role in how children cope with cyber victimization. Girls employ coping strategies, specifically disclosure, more than do boys to deal with traditional victimization, and this strategy may be effective for both younger children (K-8th grade; Black et al., 2010) and early adolescents ranging from 12–16 years old (Murray-Harvey et al., 2012; Skrzypiec et al., 2011). Boys have been reported to use physical aggression, humor, and revenge more than girls to cope with traditional victimization (Craig et al., 2007). However, these gender differences decline as the number of ways children are bullied increases (Skrzypiec et al., 2011). Consistently across studies, girls are more likely to disclose cyber victimization than boys (Betts et al., 2022; Cerna et al., 2016; Daneback et al., 2018; Hellfeldt et al., 2020; Machmutow et al., 2012; Priebe et al., 2013). In a study using hypothetical situations where the target of the cyber aggression presumably knew the cyber aggressor, Frisén and colleagues (2014) reported that girls were more likely to recommend telling an adult, and boys were more likely to suggest face-to-face retaliation later. Consistent with the gender role hypothesis, in a qualitative study conducted by Dennehy et al., (2020) adolescent males suggested it was harder to disclose cyber victimization due to the need to appear "macho." Males may not perceive telling someone/seeking support to be an effective method of stopping or reducing victimization. In short, research reveals some consistency with regards to girls coping with the use of social support or disclosure practices and boys with the use of retaliation or physical aggression. It is unclear how gender may play a role in willingness to disclose cyber victimization. It should also be noted that the vast majority of research including the examination of gender has defined gender as binary and in terms of gender assigned at birth.

The Present Research

The internet is an important medium in the social lives of children, with high rates of availability and cyber usage providing both benefits as well as a new platform to experience victimization. It is imperative to investigate how willingness to self-disclose victimization, an important component in intervention, may relate to future experiences of cyber victimization. In addition to utilizing a longitudinal design, allowing for the examination of change in cyber victimization, the current study considered willingness to share cyber victimization with a friend or a parent.

The present research advances our understanding of children dealing with cyber victimization by not only examining intentions to self-disclose, but by also examining middle childhood aged children (Grades 3 to 5). This is an age range often neglected in cyber victimization research, despite technology being used by increasingly younger children (Mishna et al., 2009). As previously reviewed, cyber victimization is experienced by elementary and middle school-aged samples (e.g., DePaolis & Williford, 2015; Sidera et al., 2021). In addition, in a study of 12- to 16-year-olds, younger cyber victims were more likely to seek help than older adolescents (Pereira et al., 2016). In the present research, we assessed intentions to disclose by asking children about their willingness to tell a friend or a parent. Although there are possibly differences between these two constructs, the phrase "willingness" seemed more appropriate when asking about self-disclosure for our entire sample. In terms of responses to cyber victimization disclosure, Bokhorst and colleagues (2010) found that children 8–10 years-old perceived parents and friends to be equally supportive; however, at 16–18 years old, friends' support exceeded that of parents. Therefore, for the age ranges in the present study, we expected willingness to self-disclose to parents and friends to be equally important in reducing later cyber victimization the following school year.

The second primary goal of the present study was to examine the possible moderating effect of gender in the relation between willingness to disclose and later cyber victimization. Based on past research as reviewed above, we expected girls to be more likely than boys to be willing to seek support from both parents and peers. In addition, it is possible that self-disclosure to friends may be particularly important and protective for girls. Junior high school girls report valuing aspects of friendship intimacy and support more than boys, who focus on the value of companionship (Rudolph & Dodson, 2022). Therefore, we expected that girls' willingness to self-disclosure to friends would be more strongly associated with lower levels of later cyber victimization than for boys.

Methods

Participants and Demographic Characteristics

Participants included elementary school children attending a university-affiliated public school in the southern United States. Two independent cohorts were included in the sample and each was assessed twice: Cohort 1, tested in November 2015 and 2016 and Cohort 2, tested in November 2017 and 2018. For both Cohorts, at Time 1 (T1), students were 3rd and 4th graders and at Time 2 (T2) students were 4th and 5th graders. Children with any missing data were excluded from all analyses. Of the 135 total number of children in Grades 3 and 4 in Cohort 1 at T1, 110 had complete data at Time 1 and Time 2 (81%) (Grades 4 and 5). Of the 132 total number of children in Grades 3 and 4 in Cohort 2 at T1, 112 (85%) had complete data at T1 and T2 (Grades 4 and 5). In sum, complete data were collected from 222 children.

Demographic information regarding children's grade, gender, and ethnicity was provided by the school administration. The total sample was generally evenly split by gender (boys = 105; girls 117) and grade level (3rd: 117; 4th: 105). The racial composition of the sample was White (67%), African American (21%), and Other ethnicities (12%). The students primarily came from middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds, as evidenced by less than 20 percent of the families qualifying for any school lunch subsidy.

A university IRB approved the measures and procedure for the present study. At school enrollment, parents were provided information about a variety of studies. Letters were sent to all parents describing the specifics of the current study and they were given the opportunity to decline having their children participate. Approximately six parents declined participation for their children for each cohort. At the beginning of every data collection session, all children were informed about the nature of the research, the confidentially of the measures, and their right to refuse or discontinue participation at any time with no penalty. All children assented to participate in the study.

Measures

The current study used assessments from a larger longitudinal investigation of children's peer relations. Self-reports of cyber victimization, willingness to tell a friend and/or a parent, and technology usage, were obtained for each participant at each testing, one year apart.

Cyber Victimization

Children completed a self-report questionnaire (Jackson & Cohen, 2012) to assess cyber victimization at T1 and T2. Four items, in a larger measure of 15 items, were used to directly assess incidences of cyber victimization (*Have you ever been bullied on a computer, phone, or tablet?; Have you ever been teased in a mean way on a computer, phone, or tablet?; Have you ever been called hurtful names by someone on a computer, phone, or tablet?;* and *Have you ever had rumors spread about you on a computer, phone, or tablet?*). Answers were provided using a 4-point rating scale, anchored as never, rarely, sometimes, and often. Responses were summed (never = 1, often = 4) to get an overall score for cyber victimization for each child (range = 4–16). The reliability of this measure, as reported by Jackson and Cohen (2012) was 0.79. In addition, structural equation modeling demonstrated the distinctiveness of this measure of cyber aggression from a measure of traditional aggression (Jackson & Cohen, 2012) as well as correlations with measures of social competence such as lower social acceptability, peer optimism, and number of friendships. Internal consistencies of reported cyber victimization for the current sample were high: 2015, Cronbach's α = .85, 95% CI [.80, .89]; 2016, Cronbach's α = .82, 95% CI [.76, .86]; 2017, Cronbach's α = .87, 95% CI [.83, .91]; 2018, Cronbach's α = .87, 95% CI [.83, .91].

Willingness to Tell a Friend and/or a Parent About Cyber Victimization

After reporting on their own cyber victimization experiences, participants were given two items to assess their willingness to tell others about cyber victimization. Children were asked to imagine mean things happening to them on the internet or in a text message. They were then asked to indicate if they would tell a friend and if they would tell a parent. Children responded either *Yes* or *No* to these questions at T1. These two items demonstrated a small, but significant correlation with each other, (r = .19, p = .006).

Cyber Usage

At both T1 and T2, children completed a self-report questionnaire to assess cyber usage. Five items were used to directly assess for various uses of the internet (Email, Texting, Messenger apps like Facebook Messenger, Whatsapp, Social Networking Sites like Facebook, Snapchat or Instagram, etc.). Children indicated their responses using a 4-point rating scale, anchored as never, rarely, sometimes, and often. Internal consistencies of cyber use for the current sample were adequate: 2015, Cronbach's α = .74, 95% CI [.65, .81]; 2016, Cronbach's α = .79, 95% CI [.72, .85]; 2017, Cronbach's α = .72, 95% CI [.63, 80]; 2018, Cronbach's α = .78, 95% CI [.71 to .84]. These values reflect there is some consistency in cyber usage across different cyber platforms.

Procedure

Data were collected in the Fall semesters of 2015 through 2018 as part of a larger ongoing longitudinal study regarding children's peer relations. The questionnaires were administered to participants in 50-minute group sessions with classroom peers (one session per classroom). The children were assured that their responses were confidential, and that no one other than the researchers would see their answers. The sessions were led by at least two psychology graduate students, and some additional graduate and undergraduate research assistants also were present. A session leader read the instructions aloud for the children, and the other researchers aided if any individual assistance was needed.

Results

Preliminary analyses were performed to determine the extent of cyber victimization experienced by this population and evaluate possible associations of variables which were not the focus of the present research. The primary analysis directly evaluated the association of willingness to tell a friend and/or parent about cyber victimization to the extent of cyber victimization in the following year, controlling for cyber usage at T1 and T2 and extent of cyber victimization in T1. The primary analysis also considered the possible role of demographic factors, such as gender, in reported willingness to share cyber victimization experiences with others.

Preliminary Analyses

The cyber victimization questionnaire contained four items scored 1 to 4 each (never to often). Children were assigned a score of 4 if they reported experiencing no cyber victimization, and a score ranging from 5 to 16 if they experienced any cyber victimization. For this sample, 25.8% (n = 54) reported experiencing any cyber victimization at T1, which rose to 33.6% (n = 71) at T2. The majority of children reported *yes* to willingness to tell a friend, 58.8%, and willingness to tell a parent, 82.8%. Boys and girls significantly differed on their willingness to tell a parent, with girls (88.1%) being more willing to tell their parents than boys (77%), $t(207) = 18.99$, $p = .034$. Boys reported higher rates of cyber victimization at T1 (M = 5.30, SD = 2.62) and T2 (M = 5.01, SD = 1.98) compared to girls (T1: M = 4.68, SD = 1.57; T2: M = 5.06, SD = 2.06).

Based on previous research, we were interested in gender and cyber usage in relation to the extent of cyber victimization over time. The variables of cohort, grade, and race were not the focus of the current study, however, we wanted to determine their possible association to the outcome variable. We conducted a 2 (Cohort: 2015–16/2016–17; 2017–18/2018–19) x 2 (Grade: 3rd, 4th) x 3 (Race: African American, White, Other ethnicity) x 2 (Cyber Victimization: T1, T2) mixed model ANOVA. Cohort, Grade, and Race were independent variables and Cyber Victimization was a repeated measure. Because cyber victimization did not significantly interact with any of the independent variables, we eliminated cohort, grade, and race as independent variables in the primary analysis reported below.

Primary Analysis

The primary research question concerned the extent of cyber victimization reported by children one year later, considering prior levels of cyber victimization and willingness to tell a friend or parent about cyber victimization. A 2 Gender x 2 Willingness to Tell a Friend at T1 (Yes, No) x 2 Willingness to Tell a Parent at T1 (Yes, No) analysis of variance was conducted on the dependent variable of extent of self-reported cyber victimization at T2. We

recognized the need to control for extent of Cyber victimization at T1 and Cyber Usage at T1 and T2 and included these as covariates. As expected, the covariate of Cyber victimization was found to be significantly related to the outcome variable of Cyber victimization at T2, $F(1, 188) = 18.52$, partial $\eta^2 = .098$, $p < .001$. The covariate of Cyber Usage at T1 was also found to be significantly related to the outcome variable of Cyber victimization at T2, $F(1, 188) = 7.68$, partial $\eta^2 = .043$, $p = .006$, as was the covariate of Cyber Usage at T2, $F(1, 188) = 7.18$, partial $\eta^2 = .041$, $p = .008$.

No main effects were found to be statistically significant for the independent variables of Gender, Willingness to Tell a Friend at T1 or Willingness to Tell a Parent at T1. The only significant interactions were two 2-Way interactions: Gender x Willingness to Tell a Friend at T1, $F(1, 188) = 7.40$, partial $\eta^2 = .042$, $p = .007$, and Gender x Willingness to Tell a Parent at T1, $F(1, 188) = 3.93$, partial $\eta^2 = .023$, $p = .049$. Oneway ANOVAs were performed to examine sources of differences in each interaction. For each interaction two oneway ANOVAs were conducted: the effects of Willingness to Tell (Friend, Parent) were considered separately by Gender and Gender effects were considered separately for responses to Willingness to Tell (Friend, Parent). These interactions are discussed below and displayed in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

All four comparisons of groups shown in Figure 1 proved to be statistically significant. For the Gender x Willingness to Tell a Friend significant interaction, both Willingness to Tell a Friend effects proved significant, males: $F(1, 102) = 5.67$, partial $\eta^2 = .053$, $p = .019$; females: $F(1, 113) = 5.42$, partial $\eta^2 = .046$, $p = .022$. Boys who responded *yes* to willingness to tell a friend about cyber victimization reported less cyber victimization than boys who responded *no*. Girls showed the reverse pattern. Girls who responded *yes* to willingness to tell a friend about cyber victimization reported higher cyber victimization than girls who responded *no.* Comparisons of boys and girls revealed significant effects for both responses to Willingness to Tell a Friend: No: $F(1, 87) = 6.36$, partial $\eta^2 = .068$, $p = .014$; Yes: $F(1, 128) = 4.78$, partial $\eta^2 = .036$, $p = .031$. Boys who responded *no* to willingness to tell a friend reported higher cyber victimization than girls who responded *no.* Girls who responded *yes* reported higher cyber victimization than boys who responded *yes.*

Figure 1. *Interaction of Gender and Willingness to Tell Friend for Cyber Victimization at Time 2.*

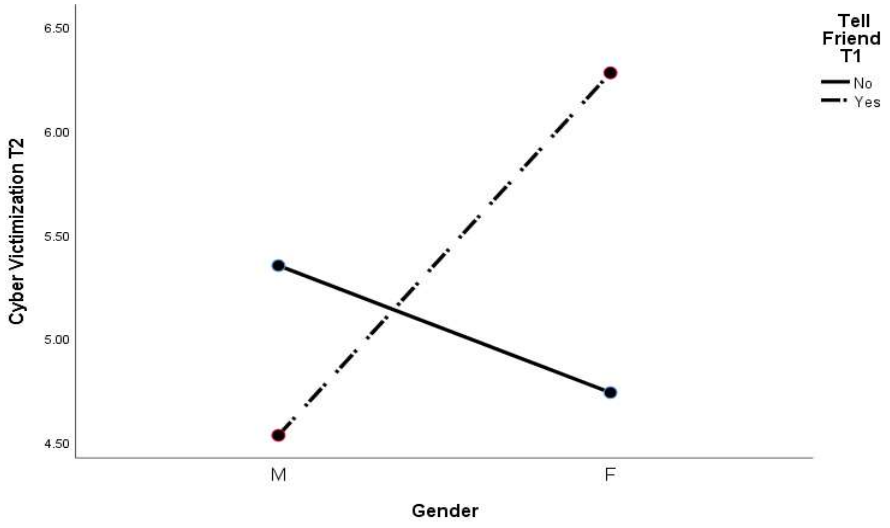
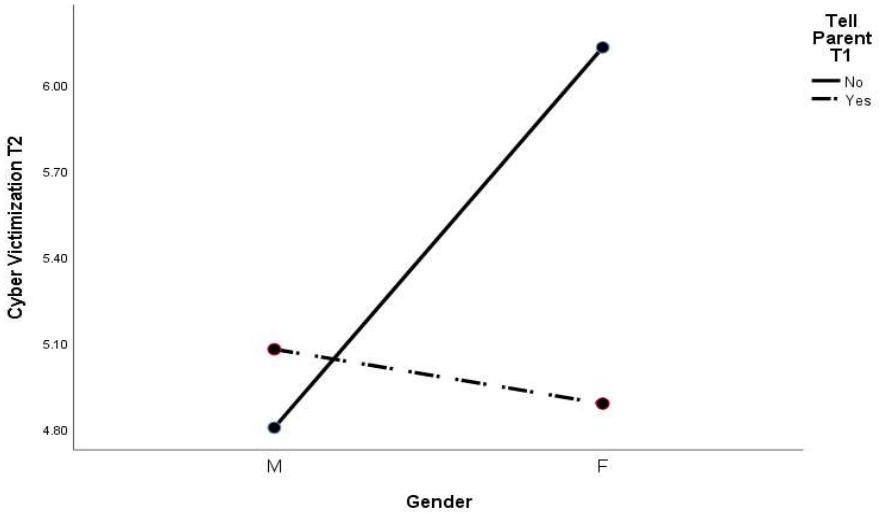


Figure 2 displays results for the significant Gender x Willingness to Tell a Parent interaction. Overall, two of the four comparisons proved statistically significant. For the Gender effects for Willingness to Tell a Parent, the significant findings were obtained for females but not males; males: $F(1, 102) = 0.142$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$, $p = .707$; females: $F(1, 113) = 13.20$, partial $\eta^2 = .105$, $p < .001$. Opposite to the findings for Willingness to Tell a Friend, girls who responded *no* to willingness to tell a parent about cyber victimization reported higher cyber victimization than girls who responded *yes.* Comparisons of boys and girls revealed one significant effect for gender comparisons for Willingness to Tell a Parent: No: $F(1, 40) = 5.34$, partial $\eta^2 = .118$, $p = .026$; Yes: $F(1, 175) = 0.44$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$, $p = .506$. Girls who responded *no* to Willingness to Tell a Parent reported higher cyber victimization than boys who responded *no.*

Figure 2. *Interaction of Gender and Willingness to Tell Parent for Cyber Victimization (T2) at Time 2.*



Discussion

A substantial literature documents that cyber victimization is associated with a variety of negative consequences for children (e.g., Fredstrom et al., 2011; Guhn et al., 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), and can be a significant challenge in children's lives. In the present study, some level of online engagement was found in children as young as grades three through five, underscoring the importance of examining young samples in studies of coping with cyber victimization. Disclosure about cybervictimization is a common coping strategy used by youth (Frisen et al., 2014; Machackova et al., 2013) and it is important to understand more about how intentions or willingness to disclose cyber victimization to friends or parents might relate to later cyber victimization. The current study also controlled for extent of cyber victimization at T1 (Grade 3) and cyber usage at T1 (Grade 3) and T2 (Grade 4).

In summary, both willingness to tell a friend and willingness to tell a parent related to the extent of subsequent cyber victimization after controlling for initial levels of cyber victimization and cyber usage. These findings suggest that a willingness to seek social support was an effective coping strategy for children. Importantly, the association of willingness to disclose with later reduced cyber victimization interacted with gender and with whom the child was willing to tell (friend or parent).

Willingness to Tell a Friend or a Parent

The results confirmed previous research (Frisen et al., 2014, Olenik-Shemesh et al., 2017) documenting that children in middle childhood were willing to tell friends and parents about their previous cyber victimization experiences; 58.8% of the total sample reported they would tell a friend and 82.8% reported they would tell a parent. As previously reviewed, past research has found that young children aged eight to ten perceive high levels of social support, at equal levels from parents and friends (Bokhorst et al., 2010). High perceived social support from both parents and friends may therefore account for children's willingness to tell in the current sample. However, more children in the present sample reported willingness to tell parents than friends. This is consistent with past research on 11- to 15-year-olds, finding that older children perceived their friends to be helpful while younger ones perceived their parents to be helpful in coping with cybervictimization (Betts et al., 2022). Perhaps disclosure to friends may become more important as children progress towards middle school, with parents maintaining their importance as well. Once in adolescence, it is possible that the perceived support of parents may decline with age.

In the present study, girls were found more likely than boys to be willing to tell a parent about cyber victimization experiences at T1. This finding is consistent with past research (e.g., Armstrong et al., 2019; Betts et al., 2022; Cerna et al., 2016; Daneback et al., 2018). For instance, in an Australian sample of 12- to 14-year-olds, girls reported they were more willing to seek social support from a parent by telling the parent about cyber victimization than boys (Skrzypiec et al., 2011).

Willingness to Tell as a Strategy to Deal With Cyber Victimization

Willingness to tell about cyber victimization appeared to be an important first step in effective coping, as evidenced by lower future incidents of cyber victimization, interacting with gender along with to whom the child was willing to disclose. For boys, being willing to tell a friend may be helpful, as evidenced by the reductions in the extent of their cyber victimization at T2. For girls, willingness to tell a parent was associated with reductions in cyber victimization at T2. This pattern of findings is interesting, and contrary to our second hypothesis.

For girls, it is encouraging that their willingness to tell a parent was related to reductions in later cyber victimization, considering that girls were more likely to disclose to parents than boys. Perhaps this willingness to disclose is related to girls' expectations, later fulfilled, that parents would be an effective mechanism for addressing problematic peer behavior. The importance of reaching out for girls has been established in prior research, with avoidant methods of coping positively related to traditional forms of victimization for girls (Shelley & Craig, 2009).

Willingness to tell a friend was not an effective coping strategy for girls and was associated with increases in T2 cyber victimization. This is surprising considering past research on the importance of social support for reducing girls' traditional victimization (Shelley & Craig, 2009) as well as the importance that girls place on friendship intimacy (Rudolph & Dodson, 2022). However, it may also be important to consider the identity of the cyber aggressors. A social network study found that cyber aggression was 4.3 times more likely to occur between those who were initially friends 4 weeks earlier (Felmlee & Faris, 2016). In addition, the social networks of girls at this age tend to be smaller than that of boys (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996). Therefore, girls may realize that disclosing to friends may not be an effective strategy as it may be those same individuals who later serve as their cyber aggressors. Earlier disclosures of cyber victimization to friends may provide additional content that could be used to later harm the victim when a friend becomes a cyber aggressor. In contrast, boys' social networks tend to be larger and more diverse, which may provide an increased opportunity to effectively disclose to a friend who is not involved in cyber aggression.

In addition, understanding girls' motives to tell a friend along with how friends respond to cyber victims' disclosures may shed light on this phenomenon. Cyber victims may disclose to friends for various reasons including seeking emotional support or instrumental support, such as advice on stopping or reducing cyber victimization. Telling a friend may function as an effective coping strategy for cyber victimization through buffering the negative emotional impacts associated with victimization (Sasson & Mesch, 2014). Girls may not be expecting their friends to aid in preventing or stopping future cyber victimization, but instead are motivated to tell in order to receive emotional support. Friendship quality may be another factor at play. Girls in the current sample reported willingness to tell a friend, however, we are unable to determine if the "friend" they told considered them a friend as well (i.e., mutual friend). These peers may not be motivated to help reduce child's cyber victimization experiences. Furthermore, friends/peers of children may provide inappropriate emotional/instrumental support resulting in increases in cyber victimization—such as advice to retaliate or do nothing, both of which have been reported as ineffective coping strategies (Armstrong et al., 2019; Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Shelley & Craig, 2010).

Interestingly, there were qualifications in the data, indicating that willingness to self-disclose was not always associated with cyber victimization reduction. Although our sample reported a high rate in willingness for boys at T1 to tell a parent (77%), willingness to disclose was not related to later increases or reductions in cyber victimization in boys. This pattern was quite different than that for girls and reflects the possibility that boys may be more likely to experience a range of responses from parents. Although parent disclosure could be helpful in reducing cyber victimization, several studies have addressed children's reluctance in telling adults due to lack of confidence in parent's ability to provide appropriate help along with fear of over-reactions, restrictions, and being misunderstood (Cerna et al., 2016; Dennehy et al., 2020). This variability may be more likely for boys, compared to girls, should parents expect their boys to engage in more masculine behaviors. Some parents may not intervene and, in fact, withdraw social support and approval following their male children's request for assistance. Future research should explore how and if parents respond differently to boys and girls when they disclose victimization, and how their responses impact those children both in terms of the extend of future cyber victimization and social competence factors.

Limitations and Future Directions

As the current study found that willingness to disclose cyber victimization was related to later victimization, future research should explore the specific mechanisms through which this link might operate. Specifically, the current study did not measure actual cyber victimization reporting and we do not know how parents or friends might have responded. What do these conversations look like and what type of support, or lack of support, might be provided? How friends and parents respond to children's cyber victimization disclosure may impact the child's well-being, likelihood to disclose in the future, and extent of future cyber victimization.

In addition, the current study did not examine the quality of the relationship between the individual and their perceived target of the self-disclosure. This factor could influence both the likelihood to disclose as well as the nature of the support received. Interestingly, studies examining the role of support in traditional victimization have resulted in mixed findings (for a meta-analysis, see Schacter et al., 2021). For instance, in one study on adolescents, peer social support helped to buffer the effects of relational aggression on depressive symptoms (Cooley et al., 2015). However, Burke et al. (2017) found that neither parental nor friendship support helped to moderate depression in traditionally victimized adolescents. In addition, support may actually be related to more distress in adolescent girls in close relationships with other victimized females (Schacter & Juvonen, 2019). These contradictory findings suggest that the relation between social support and coping with victimization is complex, and worth more study, particularly with respect to cyber victimization, which is much less researched.

The current study also relied on self-report, which would seem to be most appropriate considering that the children themselves were likely to be the most knowledgeable sources regarding victimization and willingness to tell. However, it would be beneficial to obtain data from multiple informants, particularly as a verification of children reaching out for social support and perceptions as to the quality of the support provided. Qualitative data might also provide insight into the motives behind telling a friend or parent about cyber victimization, along with child's perception of this particular strategy's efficacy. In addition, moving to a more complex, not binary, understanding of gender may be useful in better understanding the dynamics involved and implications intervention approaches.

Because our sample had a low proportion of missing data, imputation was not used in the analyses. Although we believe this decision would result in a minimal impact on the study, it is important to note as a potential limitation. Furthermore, all children in the sample were asked to report on their willingness to tell; therefore both victims (of varying severity) and non-victims were included in the analysis. Past research on victim severity and willingness to tell has yielded inconsistent findings (e.g., Cerna et al., 2016, Navarro et al., 2018; Skrzyzpiec et al., 2011). For instance, Betts et al. (2022) found that teens reporting more cybervictimization were actually less likely to report disclosing these experiences to others. One reason for these findings could be due to a greater perceived harm and the fear reported by cyber victims in response to telling others (Daneback et al., 2018; Pereira et al., 2016). Therefore, future research should examine the role of victimization history and perceived harm in the disclosure of cyber victimization. Future research is needed to see if this same pattern of intentions to self-disclose, and reductions in cyber victimization, would be replicated in older samples. For instance, it is possible that older teens, regardless of gender, might hold stronger intentions to tell peers than parents than younger children, as well as be more influenced by past experiences of cyber victimization (e.g., Betts et al., 2022).

Conclusion and Implications

The findings of the current study have several implications for intervention. Consistent with the Theory of Reasoned Action, behavioral intentions, or willingness to disclose experiences of cyber victimization, were associated with extent of later cyber victimization. These outcomes differed by gender, perhaps due to the influence of gender stereotypes. Parents of boys who are cyber victims may benefit from parent-skills training which explores gender-norming expectations, particularly with regards to how boys should handle cyber victimization. Skills training for parents about how to appropriately respond to children, particularly boys, who report cyber victimization could also be helpful in increasing disclosure likelihood, as well as provide tangible assistance to the victims. Girls who are cyber victims may benefit from encouragement to continue to disclose to parents, as that is an effective mechanism for reducing cyber victimization. It is important to acknowledge that girls may be more willing to disclose their parents if they are correctly anticipating that this disclose will result in positive outcomes.

Children's use of ICTs has contributed to a growing concern regarding cyber victimization experiences. A strength of the current study is that it investigated the role of cyber victimization and willingness to tell in an age range often neglected in the cyber victimization literature—middle childhood. Considering the alarming prevalence of cyber victimization occurring at ages as young as third through fifth graders, it is important for research to evaluate strategies children use to deal with cyber victimization. The present research demonstrated that willingness to tell was an effective strategy in reducing cyber victimization, however, this relation interacted with children's gender and whom they are willing to tell (friend vs. parent). It is imperative for research to continue to shed light on middle childhood experiences with cyber victimization, with the aim to identify interventions to reduce future cyber victimization.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Authors' Contribution

Madeline R. Salton: conceptualization, investigation, formal analysis, writing—original draft. **Robert Cohen:** conceptualization, supervision, writing—review & editing. **Daneen P. Deptula:** conceptualization, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing. **Glen E. Ray:** writing—review & editing.

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