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High School Students' Perceptions of Coping With Cyberbullying

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Abstract

Cyberbullying can have a variety of negative effects on student mental health (Internet Safety Technical Task Force, 2008). An understanding of students' coping with cyberbullying could help researchers and professionals to determine ways to alleviate and/or prevent the negative effects of cyberbullying. Qualitative methods were used to provide an in-depth examination of coping with cyberbullying. The results revealed three primary coping themes as follows: *reactive coping*, *preventive coping*, and *no way to prevent cyberbullying*. *Reactive coping* included avoiding the cyberbully situation by deleting or ignoring messages. *Preventive coping* strategies included *talk in person* and *increased security and awareness*. Some students reported that there was *no way to reduce cyberbullying*. These strategies were interpreted in terms of current theories of coping and findings suggested a need for a new comprehensive model of coping with cyberbullying. In addition, implications for future research and practice were discussed.

Keywords

cyberbullying, coping, high school students

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The increase in available technology has allowed students to extend bullying beyond the school and into the cyberworld, a virtual space that is difficult for adults to monitor students actions (Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Students' usage of electronic devices has increased over the past 5 years, particularly with regard to social networking and cell phones (Rideout et al.). Electronic bullying, often referred to as cyberbullying, represents a new form of victimization that has gained increased attention in recent research and the popular press (Internet Safety Technical Task Force, 2008). The current study defined cyberbullying as the use of electronic methods of communication, such as the internet or a cell phone, to repeatedly cause intentional harm or emotional distress (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

The emotional distress experienced by cybervictims can have a number of negative consequences. For example, victims of cyberbullying were more likely to exhibit depressive symptoms and problem behaviors, such as bringing weapons to school, in comparison with their nonvictimized peers (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). Researchers also found that victims of cyberbullying between the ages of 10 and 17 were more likely to report substance abuse (Ybarra & Mitchell). Smith, Mahdavi, et al. (2008) documented that even though cyberbullying may have a shorter duration (3-6 months) than traditional bullying, the resulting negative effects (e.g., increased depression, fearfulness) have been found to be just as great, if not greater. The increased negative affect may occur, in part, because a cyberbullying incident may be witnessed by a larger audience and remains in a more permanent state in cyberspace (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Smith, Mahdavi, et al.).

Given the potential negative impact of cyberbullying, it is important to examine how students may attempt to cope with cyberbullying. Two theories of coping that were particularly relevant to the current study included the approach-avoidance model (Roth & Cohen, 1986) and the transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Rohen and Cohen reported that coping could be divided into two categories such as, approach or avoidance. Approach strategies included actions that addressed the problem directly and involved a cognitive and emotional acknowledgment of the stressor or trauma (Roth & Cohen). For example, a student using this strategy may confront the cyberbully in person rather than ignore the incident. This strategy is best used when the person believes that the situation is within his or her control

and feels that he or she has the necessary resources to address the problem (Roth & Cohen). Avoidance strategies involved evading the stressor or traumatic situation which may fail to address the possible emotional effects (Roth & Cohen). Students using this type of strategy may delete threatening messages, ignore people who are cyberbullying, or claim that cyberbullying does not bother them. Avoidance coping could be useful in situations that cannot be controlled or when resources are limited (Roth & Cohen).

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model also described coping as the relationship between the stressor and available resources. These researchers proposed that when facing a potential threat (or life stressor), one conducts a primary and secondary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 2004). The primary appraisal stage involved assessing the situation (e.g., a text message) to determine if it is a threat (e.g., cyberbullying). The secondary appraisal stage required the person to take stock of his or her coping resources. Decisions made during each appraisal stage will elicit certain coping reactions. Reactions to the demands of a stressor (e.g., being victimized by a cyberbully) were considered either problem-focused or emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping strategies were those used by students to solve the problem and prevent it from occurring in the future (Lazarus & Folkman, 2004). A student using a problem-focused coping strategy may stand up to the cyberbully directly or ask a parent or teacher to intervene. Emotion-focused coping strategies were described as ways to address emotional consequences of victimization and may involve some form of emotional release (Lazarus & Folkman, 2004). Emotion-focused coping strategies also may include an individual changing the way in which the situation is perceived; for example, deciding there were more important things to worry about (Lazarus & Folkman, 2004). Students using emotion-focused coping may cry, vent to their friends, or focus on the positive aspects of their life. Tenenbaum, Varjas, Meyers, and Parris (2011) found that victims of traditional bullying (N = 102 fourth- through eighth-grade students) reported implementing various emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies in response to traditional bullying, with more frequent reports of problem-focused strategies. They found that some strategies could be considered both problem-focused and emotion-focused (Subbiah et al.). Skinner, Edge, Altman, and Sherwood (2003) also reported that some coping strategies fall within multiple categories, arguing against categorical methods of grouping coping strategies.

There have been initial attempts to identify students' strategies to cope with cyberbullying (e.g., Agatston, Kowaski, & Limber, 2007; Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston,

2008; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith, Mahdavi, et al., 2008). One frequent example was deleting or blocking threatening messages (Agatston et al., 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2008; Smith, Mahdavi, et al., 2008). Agatston and colleagues also reported that students ignored the situation whereas others pretended to ignore cyberbullying (Dehue et al., 2008). Researchers have suggested that although students were more likely to avoid the situation, some may choose to retaliate (Agatston et al.; Dehue et al.).

Seeking social support was another coping strategy reported by students in some research (Dehue et al., 2008; Kowalski et al., 2008; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith, Mahdavi, et al.). Although some students reported incidents of cyberbullying to friends or parents (Slonje & Smith; Smith, Mahdavi, et al.; Stacey, 2009), researchers have suggested that when compared with victims of traditional bullying, victims of cyberbullying were less likely to seek help (Dehue et al.; Li, 2006; Slonje & Smith). One possible reason was the fear that technology would be taken away (Kowalski et al.; Stacey). Slonje and Smith stated that victims were more likely to seek social support from friends; however, friends were less likely to consider cyberbullying important. Another possible reason for not seeking social support involved the students' lack of confidence that cyberbullying could be stopped (Mishna et al.; Smith, Mahdavi, et al.). Smith, Mahdavi, et al. suggested that students would not seek social support because it would mean disengaging from something (i.e., technology) that was perceived to be enjoyable. Previous research also has demonstrated that when seeking help for cyberbullying students needed to perceive that the adult was trustworthy and could offer resources (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Smith, Mahdavi, et al.).

Although these strategies (e.g., avoidance, seeking social support) have been discussed as a response to cyberbullying, coping strategies also can be preventive. Knowledge of student suggestions for preventive strategies can help to inform school personnel and parents about preventing cyberbullying. Smith, Smith, and Samara (2008) reported that school policies related to antibullying were not likely to address cyberbullying and that such specificity is needed to adequately respond to cyberbullying incidents that may occur in school (Chibbaro, 2007; Diamanduros et al., 2008; Mason, 2008). Kowalski and colleagues (2008) provided student-generated suggestions for parents to address cyberbullying. These suggestions included setting age appropriate limits on technology use, banning certain websites, monitoring their child's technological activities and sharing evidence of cyberbullying with the school. Students also recommended that adults not blame the victim or punish them by restricting their use of technology.

It is important to consider student perceptions and interpretations, based on their own language and words when exploring the various aspects of reactive and preventive coping with cyberbullying. By using student voice, researchers may be able to more accurately represent students' in-depth perceptions and experience of particular occurrence. One way to explore students' experiences and the language they use to describe a phenomenon is through qualitative methodology which allows researchers to gain in depth information, creating a thorough and comprehensive examination of emotions, experiences, and perceptions that may be lost when using strictly quantitative measures (Lazarus, 2006). Specific to cyberbullying, qualitative methodology may serve as a way to explore the language and complex aspects of the phenomenon that is not easily captured by quantitative methods (e.g., surveys, questionnaires).

We have found a few published articles that used qualitative methodology to examine student perceptions of cyberbullying using focus group interviews to obtain information regarding experiences with cyberbullying (Agatston et al., 2007; Mishna et al., 2009; Spears, Slee, Owens, & Johnson, 2009; Stacey, 2009). Coping strategies such as deleting messages, seeking social support, and increasing security measures were discussed by these studies; however, coping was not the primary focus of the research questions. Although there are advantages to these prior studies using focus groups, there also is a need for a study which specifically examines coping with cyberbullying. Individual interviews provide students an opportunity to share personal experiences and opinions they may feel less comfortable sharing in front of a group. These experiences and opinions are also less likely to be influenced by other students. Finally, individual interviews allow for more detail and attention to be given to individual stories and experiences, providing a more comprehensive understanding. Therefore, the current study used individual, semistructured interviews to provide in depth and comprehensive information about students' coping with cyberbullying.

The purpose of the current study was to expand on previous research regarding cyberbullying by examining the specific ways that students reported coping with incidents of cyberbullying. The study addressed two research questions as follows:

Research Question 1: What coping strategies did high school students report using following a cyberbullying incident?

Research Question 2: What coping mechanisms did high school students report as preventive strategies regarding cyberbullying?

Method

Context and Participants

The current study was conducted in a suburban high school located in a Southeastern public school district. The student demographics of the target high school were 66% White, 18% African American, 9% Hispanic, 7% other, and 16% of students received free or reduced lunch. A combination of convenience and criterion sampling was used (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). The criteria for participation included that the student was enrolled in the high school and had access to and used technology. Creswell (2002) suggested a minimum sample size of 20 to 30 participants for ethnographic studies; therefore, 20 student volunteers were recruited by researchers who placed fliers in the school hallways and common areas. Requests for volunteers to participate in interviews were announced over a public announcement each morning before school started. In addition, the assistant principal helped recruit students and schedule interview times. Recruitment and interviews were conducted from January 2008 through March 2008. Approximately 40% of the sample for this study was African American ($n = 8$), 30% White ($n = 6$), 15% Hispanic ($n = 3$), 5% Asian ($n = 1$), 5% Middle Eastern ($n = 1$), and 5% Trinidadian ($n = 1$). Participants were between the ages of 15 and 19 ($M = 17.5$, $SD = 1.05$). There was one 15-year-old, two 16-year-olds, six 17-year-olds, eight 18-year-olds, and three 19-year-olds. Participants were in Grades 10 ($n = 2$), 11 ($n = 5$), and 12 ($n = 13$). The sample was 65% male ($n = 13$) and 35% female ($n = 7$). Participants reported a mode of 4 hours of daily technology usage.

Design Procedures and Instrumentation

Participants were interviewed using a semistructured format using open-ended questions to discuss student experiences and perceptions of cyberbullying (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Schensul, Schensul, et al., 1999). Definitions of cyberbullying, threatening electronic communication, and other aspects of cyberbullying were not provided prior to the interview to allow participants to offer definitions and examples in their own words. Probes (i.e., follow up questions) were provided when appropriate to encourage students to provide more detail, to think more about the question, to clarify statements, and to elaborate on examples (Schensul, Schensul, et al.). For example, students were asked "What are some things you or others could do to cope with threatening electronic communication?" To obtain a copy of the interview protocol, please contact the authors.

Interviews ranged in length between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted by three female graduate research assistants. In addition, two additional members of the research team reviewed initial interviews and met with the interviewers to ensure that questions, language, and the interview process were appropriate. Parental consent was obtained for all students who were under the age of 18 and were collected before the interviews were conducted. Students under 18 years signed assent forms and students 18 years or older signed consent forms. All procedures and forms were approved by the university Institutional Review Board.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word. Each interview was imported into Atlas.Ti 5.0, a computer based data management program that facilitated organization and analysis of coded interviews. The first phase of data analysis used inductive methods to analyze student responses allowing themes and codes regarding coping to emerge from the data, without the influence of previous literature (Nastasi, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Inductively derived themes were then reexamined using deductive methods to determine how they related to previous research findings and theoretical models of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Roth & Cohen, 1986). Thus, codes were developed using an inductive-deductive model, considering both data driven and literature-based information (Nastasi; Strauss & Corbin; Varjas, Natstasi, Moore, & Jayasena, 2005).

Although an inductive-deductive method was used for the development of codes, a constant comparative method was used to apply the codes and finalize the coding manual (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The constant-comparative method involved the two researchers meeting weekly to discuss interviews and review the coding process. Interviews were examined based on question-response segments; that is, each coded segment consisted of the original question presented by the interviewer and the entire student response. The two researchers independently identified themes and possible codes for each interview segment, per interview, until both researchers believed all information obtained from the interviews could be coded using the refined coding manual. Codes were organized in a hierarchical fashion and included primary coping themes (Level 1 codes) that were further broken down into secondary subcodes (Level 2 codes). A total of nine interviews were coded before the 90% criterion of interrater reliability (IRR) was met (Bakeman & Gottman, 1986; Schensul, LeCompte, Nastasi, & Borgatti, 1999) with an overall IRR mean of 86.5%. Once this criterion was met,

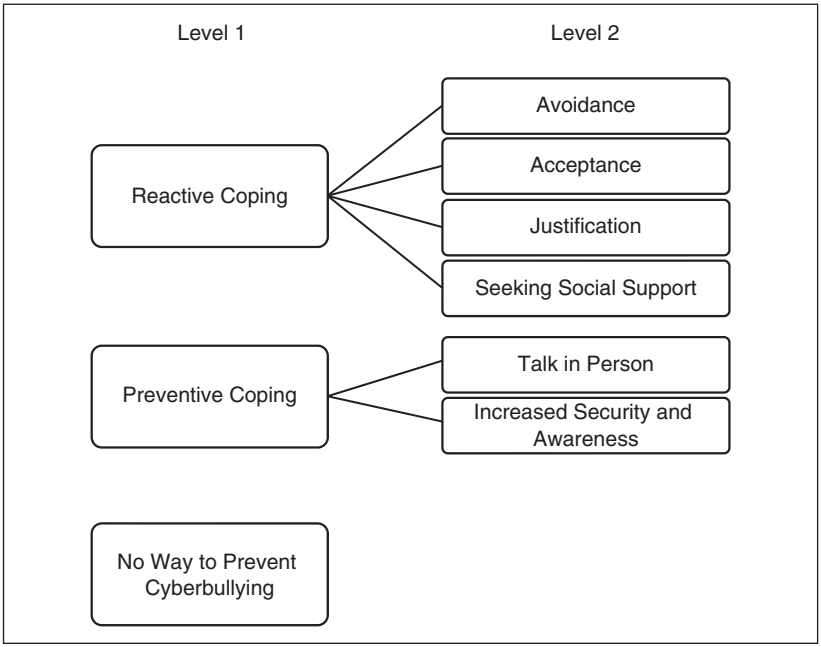

Figure 1. Coding hierarchy

researchers began to code individually. After reviewing 12 interviews new themes and codes were no longer emerging from interviews and the coding manual was finalized. Using the finalized coding manual, two researchers independently coded the remaining interviews ($n = 8$) and then compared the application of each code until 100% consensus was obtained (Bakeman & Gottman, 1986; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). To control for observer drift, which is the "tendency for observers/coders to change their interpretations or definitions of codes over time" (Schensul, Schensul, et al., 1999, p. 38), IRR was calculated for 10% of each remaining interview ($M = 96.8\%$).

Results

Three Level 1 themes reflected the ways that students reported coping with cyberbullying: *reactive coping*, *preventive coping*, and *no way to prevent cyberbullying* (see Figure 1). *Reactive coping* strategies included four Level 2 subcodes: *avoidance*, *acceptance*, *justification*, and *seeking social support*.

The *preventive coping* strategies included two Level 2 codes: *talk in person* and *increased security and awareness*. The third theme was *no way to prevent cyberbullying*. The following sections describe each of these themes and subcodes whereas using quotes from the high school students to provide examples in their own words.

Reactive Coping

Students reported using *reactive coping* (Level 1) strategies in response to cyberbullying (see Figure 1). These strategies were defined as attempts to respond to cyberbullying after it had occurred and included ways to end the cyberbullying or attempts to lessen negative consequences. One 17-year-old male student stated that one way to cope was by "telling [his] parents so they can call the police," resulting in an action by another person who would reprimand the cyberbully. There were four *reactive coping* strategies: *avoidance*, *acceptance*, *justification*, and *seeking social support* (see Figure 1). Each of these subcodes will be discussed.

Avoidance. *Avoidance* (Level 2) was coded when students described strategies to evade the cyberbully or cyberbullying situation. Students described this strategy as a way to remove oneself from the situation thereby avoiding the negative affect that can result from cybervictimization. Of the 20 participants, 18 reported *avoidance* as one way to cope with cyberbullying. Students often described actions associated with this strategy as deleting messages, deleting online accounts, blocking numbers, or ignoring the situation. For example, one 17-year-old male student suggested that "if something bad is happening just remove yourself from it" by deleting accounts or messages. A 16-year-old female described how a friend was being cyberbullied and did not want to "deal with that . . . so she just doesn't get on MySpace anymore to cut the girl out."

When discussing how often this particular strategy is used, an 18-year-old male student stated that "every once in a while you get [a threatening message] from a random person but I mean 99% of people just delete it." When asked how a person may react to being cyberbullied, another 17-year-old male explained,

> They might try to avoid you, just because, like, most people if you sent them something, like, they are not going to ask you why, cause if you just sent them something, like "I'm going to beat you up or tear you head off" or something then you are going to avoid them, so they are not going to have a chance to talk to you about it.

A 17-year-old female, explained that *avoidance* is the only way to cope with cyberbullying. She stated that "the only thing is that you might delete the person . . . everybody will still know your business anyways and [cyberbullying] is just immature. So the best thing is to just stay off Myspace." Other students described *avoidance* as the best form of coping when the victim is not able to approach the cyberbully effectively. For example, the 15-year-old male participant explained that if you could not "calm down and express your ideas" to stop the cyberbully, then you "just ignore it."

Acceptance. *Acceptance* (Level 2), involved acknowledging cyberbullying as a part of life. Students described this strategy as believing that cyberbullying is going to occur regardless of actions taken. Students explained that when cyberbullying is viewed as a part of life it is easier to focus on more positive aspects of life. Seven of the 20 participants reported using this strategy. One 18-year-old female student stated that she was "better off just moving on and not dwelling on the situation." Students often described *acceptance* as "just letting it go" and "moving on."

Some students described cyberbullying as something that frequently occurred as a part of life but that it should not be the main focus of a student's attention and efforts. For example, a 17-year-old male student explained that although "[cyberbullying] happens every day, without a doubt" he does not dwell on the incidents. Other students focused on the fact that cyberbullying can be temporary. A 18-year-old female student explained that "it's not really that serious . . . there is no emotion with it really so it is here one second and it is gone the next second." Some students explained that cyberbullying could not be stopped and is a part of life; therefore, it's not something to worry about. A 17-year-old female student illustrated this view by stating "there's not a way you could ever stop [cyberbullying]. I think people will always do what they feel that they want to do. But, just, I'm just going to tell people not to take it to heart."

Justification. This Level 2 code, *justification*, is a strategy that involved evaluating cyberbullying and determining reasons why cyberbullying should not bother the student. Students reporting this coping strategy often discredited the cyberbully and/or the cyberbully's use of electronic devices (rather than face-to-face methods) to bully. Nine participants reported *justification* as a response to cyberbullying. Students reported making cyberbullying into a joke, stating that it was not the victim's problem, understanding that the cyberbully did not know the victim, or stating that if the cyberbully was unable to approach someone in person then he or she had a problem, not the victim. For example, one 18-year-old male student reported that cyberbullying "is a big joke" and interpreted the situation as one not worth taking seriously. Another 18-year-old female participant focused on the student's inability to

face the victim in person, stating that if "you're going to cuss me out on the internet I'm not really going to bother with you."

When using *justification*, students often described focusing on the cyberbully's negative characteristics (e.g., being a coward, being immature). A 15-year-old male student reported that cyberbullies didn't bother him because "It's like [they are] a baby and [they are] a wimp to say it over the internet." A 17-year-old female student reported that

> If they can't yell at you or confront you or whatever in person, then it's not worth listening to over the internet. You should just be like, "Well, if you can't tell me this to my face why should I listen to you now?"

Other students explained that sometimes the cyberbully was not someone they care about, and thus were not worth getting upset over. One 18-year-old male student stated that "if it is a random kid who I don't really like in the first place doing like these threats then it is not really that big of a deal to me."

Seeking social support. *Seeking social support* (Level 2) involved approaching another person, such as other students, parents, or police, to obtain advice or action that would help stop a cyberbullying incident. Eight students mentioned this coping strategy. The goals reported were to have an authority figure stop the cyberbully or to gain advice on how to deal with the cyberbullying. For example, one 16-year-old male participant explained that it may require someone else intervening and that "after it reaches a certain point, then you tell somebody about it." Another 18-year-old male student reported that "you would inform someone in secret and allow them to handle the problem" to keep from being called a "tattle tale" and making the situation worse.

When discussing the *seeking social support* strategy, a 17-year-old female student suggested letting others in cyberspace know about the problem. She stated that "since [the cyberbully] sent you a message, you go out and make a big bulletin and let everybody know 'this kid is trying to mess with me.'" Although not all situations required social support, one 16-year-old male student explained that "if [it is] something that can actually physically change my life, get shot or something, then I am probably going to tell someone." When discussing who a student may choose to tell about cyberbullying, another 18-year-old male student stated that one could tell a "parent, teacher, counselor, [or] friend."

Preventive Coping

Preventive coping strategies (Level 1) were described as coping mechanisms that may decrease the likelihood of being cyberbullied (see Figure 1). Students

using these strategies sought to protect themselves from possible cyberbullying. For example, a 18-year-old male participant explained that students should "stay away from websites that put [them] at risk." A 17-year-old female stated that "you need to be careful about what information you put up there for everyone to see." *Preventive coping* included *talk in person* and *increased security and awareness* (see Figure 1).

Talk in person. Twelve of the 20 participants suggested strategies that emerged under the Level 2 code *talk in person*. *Talk in person* was defined as addressing interpersonal issues in face-to-face conversations so that tone could be detected and not misunderstood. The inability to detect tone and sarcasm may lead a student to misinterpret a message and thus react in a hostile nature, perhaps cyberbullying the sender as a form of retaliation. However, some students explained that if the student approached the sender in person to discuss the message then tone and sarcasm would be apparent, thus preventing what could have been a cyberbullying incident. For example, one 18-year-old male student explained that in a potentially hostile situation then "you should talk to that person face to face . . . because they may misinterpret [the message]." Another 19-year-old female student described a situation in which a misunderstanding about a comment left on a social networking site led to a cyberbullying incident, concluding that "it is better to talk to them in person." When facing a potential cyberbullying situation, one 18-year-old girl explained that "I may go face them and be like, hey, what is this about? Tell me more, why are you angry?" By approaching the sender of the message, the student was able to prevent their argument from escalating to cyberbullying situation.

A 16-year-old male student discussed arguments via electronic communication and how talking in person can prevent the argument from leading to cyberbullying. The student described a situation in which two students were in an argument or upset with each other, and that "instead of, you know, going to confront the situation and stuff, they call and leave threatening messages and stuff" and that "if they have a problem, then going straight to the person and working it out or you know asking them what's going on" would help prevent the a cyberbullying incident. Students also explained that being able to detect lies, which is easier when face-to-face with a person, may help prevent cyberbullying situations. For example, one 16-year-old female participant stated "if you tell me face to face then I will be able to tell if it is true."

Increased security and awareness. Students suggested that increasing security measures (e.g., password protection, limited identifying information) and overall awareness (e.g., knowing websites that may not be safe) might help prevent cyberbullying. Increased security measures could help minimize the

risk of someone hacking into the student's account or locating the student if he or she was a stranger. In addition, increased awareness of risky situations, cyberbullying incidents, and how one's actions may influence cyberbullying were described as ways to decrease the likelihood of experiencing cyberbullying. One 17-year-old female participant suggested that cyberbullying may be prevented if students hear about the negative consequences of cyberbullying through the news, adding that "it's better to hear about it, like close to home." By increasing student awareness of cyberbullying and its negative effects, students may be less likely to engage in cyberbullying.

All 20 participants mentioned *increased security and awareness*. One 17-year-old male student suggested, "don't give your password out to anyone you don't know." In addition to keeping passwords secret, students also suggested changing their password multiple times. For example, a 16-year-old girl stated "Me, personally, I'm paranoid so I change my password like every two weeks. So no one's ever getting my password. I'm thinking it's going to be changed before they decide to get on it." A 15-year-old male, reported that to reduce the likelihood of being cyberbullied he "only give[s] out [his] email to people that [he] knows." One 17-year-old male participant explained that

> You can set your profiles to private . . . in MySpace and Facebook and you know . . . I leave mine open but in order to actually send messages to me or even comment me you have to add me as a friend first.

When discussing *increased security and awareness*, some students discussed a general knowledge of cyberbullying. For example, a 16-year-old female student suggested that one should not accept a friend request online if you can't find them elsewhere, if your friends do not know them, and if you do not recognize anyone from their list of friends. This would be an indicator that this person does not know you and adding a stranger may put you at risk for being cyberbullied. Another 16-year-old female student stated that to help prevent future cyberbullying, she thinks students should "be more aware of what's going on . . . I think just being aware and being respectful of other people." With regard to community awareness, a 19-year-old male student explained,

> If there's not enough talking to people in the community about "Hey, don't bully people you don't know online cause it's not going to do anything, it's not going to make you feel better about yourself." There's not enough of that going on nowadays and there probably should be.

No Way to Prevent Cyberbullying

The Level 1 code *no way to prevent cyberbullying* was used when students stated that there was no way to stop or prevent cyberbullying from occurring (see Figure 1). Nine students reported that there was nothing that could be done about cyberbullying. Students who reported that there was *no way to prevent cyberbullying* often referred to the lack of consequences for the cyberbully and the perpetrator's ability to remain anonymous. For example, one 18-year-old male student stated that "kids are going to do what they want to do regardless like what parents and teachers tell them to do." A 18-year-old female participant reported that even if the cyberbully were blocked from a person's online account "they'll just find another way" to cyberbully the target. Students reported that even when banned from social networking sites, it was easy for a cyberbully to create a new profile and begin cyberbullying again. Some students reported that adult efforts focused on limiting or altering technology (e.g., banning websites, taking technology away from perpetrators) were ineffective because, according to the 15-year-old male participant, one "can't really fix technology because . . . there's always ways to bypass it."

Discussion

One important contribution of this study was identifying coping strategies (*acceptance*, *justification*, *talk in person*) that previously had not been reported in cyberbullying research (e.g., Agatston et al., 2007; Dehue et al., 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2008; Smith, Mahdavi, et al., 2008). For example, *justification* was described as ways that students cognitively reframed cyberbullying by placing negative attributes on the cyberbully, and cyberbullying in general, rather than on themselves. Students discussed this reactive strategy as a way to rationalize why victims should not be upset by cyberbullying. New information also was found regarding *acceptance* strategies that were used to decrease negative effects of cybervictimization by recognizing that cyberbullying was a part of life.

This study also contributed new information about how high school students prevented cyberbullying by using strategies before cyberbullying occurred. In addition to previously reported preventive strategies that included *increased security and awareness* (e.g., Kowalski et al., 2008), students in the current study discussed the strategy *talk in person*. Students indicated that the inability to detect tone and sarcasm during electronic communication could create misunderstandings, which might lead to cyberbullying. For example, when arguing with a friend, students explained that it

was important to have conversations face-to-face to prevent confusion about what is said that may lead a student to cyberbully. Future research is needed to examine how these new strategies are used and their effectiveness in addressing cyberbullying.

Although the current study provided new information about coping with cyberbullying, it also confirmed prior findings that the students in this study were less likely to use seeking social support, compared with other strategies, when coping with cyberbullying (Dehue et al., 2008; Kowalski et al., 2008; Li, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Participants reported that they were reluctant to seek social support from adults because they might be seen as a "tattletale" by peers and there was little others could do to help in a cyberbullying situation.

The current study supported previous findings that students were more likely to report avoidance strategies, such as deleting messages, when compared with other possible coping mechanisms (Agatston et al., 2007; Dehue et al., 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2008; Smith, Mahdavi, et al., 2008). Students often reported that there was little connection between what happened in the cyberworld and their life at school. That is, incidents in the cyberspace did not always affect their relationships at school. Support for the lack of connection between cyber- and school-environments in relation to feeling safe at school and cyberbullying was provided by findings reported by Varjas, Henrich, and Meyers, (2009). Future research is needed to elaborate on these findings.

Based on the findings of this study, an adaption of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model was created to illustrate the stages of appraisal and coping strategies specifically for cyberbullying (Figures 2 and 3). In addition to the problem-focused and emotion-focused categories described by Lazarus and Folkman, the figures identify strategies that may be considered approach or avoidant. Figure 2 demonstrates the appraisal and coping strategies that may be used in reaction to cyberbullying. Following an electronic communication, student appraisal is used to determine whether there was a threat (i.e., cyberbullying). If a cyberbullying threat is found, the student then uses secondary appraisal to assess potential responses. Based on their belief about whether they have resources to address cyberbullying, the student would then choose one of four coping strategies (i.e., *acceptance*, *avoidance*, *justification*, or *seeking social support*).

Figure 3 illustrates a similar process of choosing a *preventive coping* strategy by reducing the likelihood of future cyberbullying. As students become aware of cyberbullying, primary appraisal assesses the need to prevent potential future threats. Secondary appraisal is used to determine resources the

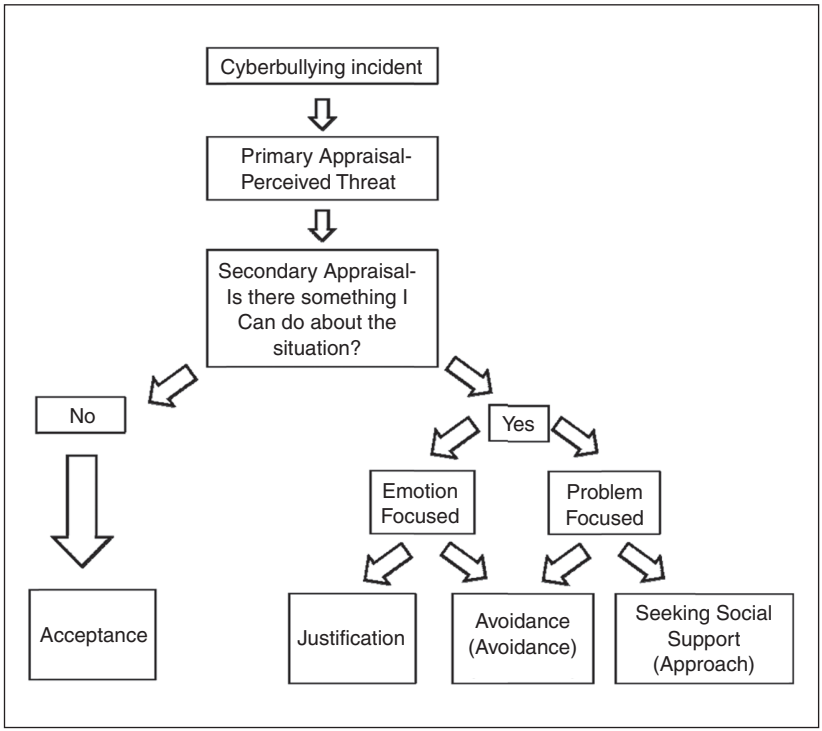

Figure 2. Transactional model adaptive for reactive coping

student can use to prevent cyberbullying. If the student concludes that nothing can be done, they adopt the belief that there is *no way to prevent cyberbullying*. Otherwise, they could seek to *increase security and awareness* or to *talk in person*. The adaption of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model presented in Figures 2 and 3 can be used to inform a comprehensive model of coping with cyberbullying, as well as provide implications for working with students dealing with cyberbullying, which will be discussed later in this section.

The coping reported by students in this study had expected and unexpected connections to current models of coping (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Roth & Cohen, 1986). Some strategies discussed in this study clearly fit within the categories described by these models, such as seeking social support, which was described by the participants both as a problem-focused (Lazarus

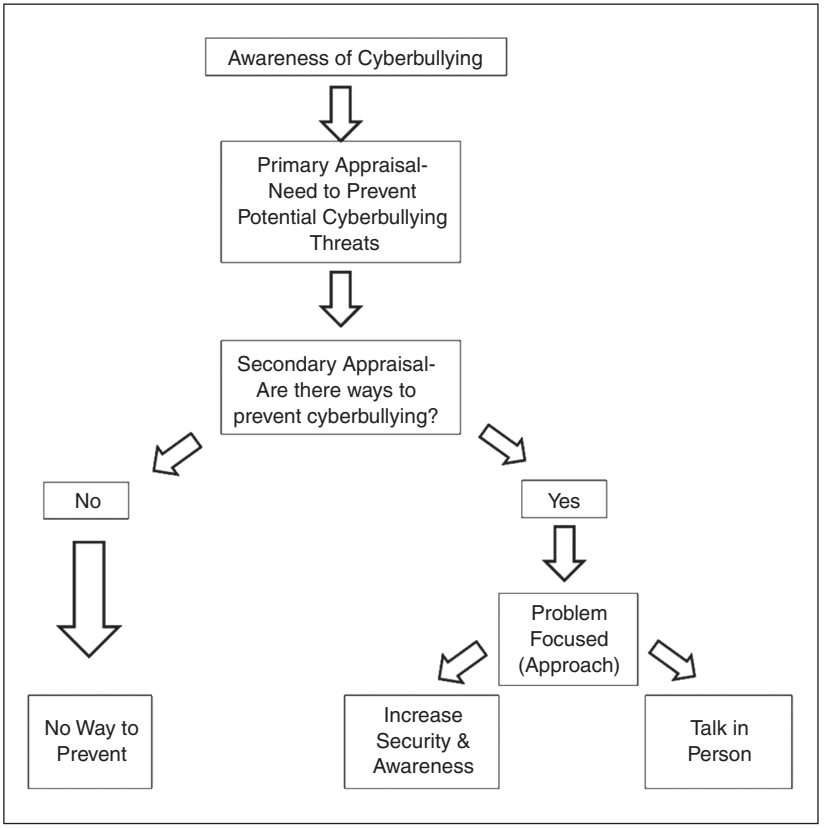

Figure 3. Transactional model adaption for preventive coping

& Folkman, 2004) and an approach strategy (Roth & Cohen, 1986). However, some strategies discussed by students did not clearly fit into the dichotomous categories of these two models. For example, *avoidance* strategies were sometimes described as both problem-focused and emotion-focused. Avoiding cyberbullying could be described as a strategy to stop cyberbullying through a lack of reaction, and thus be considered problem-focused. Yet some students also described *avoidance* strategies as emotion-focused, describing the strategy as a way to avoid the negative emotional effects of being victimized. These findings were consistent with Tenenbaum et al. (2011) who found that students reported strategies for coping with traditional bullying

that could be considered both problem-focused and emotion-focused. With regard to Roth and Cohen's (1986) approach-avoidance model, some strategies in the current study did not fall into either category. For example, *justification* used cognitive reframing that did not require approaching or avoiding the situation. Students chose not to participate in cyberbullying because they had determined cyberbullying to be something not worth their time or effort, not because they thought it was necessary to avoid. Likewise, *acceptance* did not include actions to approach or to avoid the situation. Students described accepting the situation rather than actively avoiding or approaching cyberbullying. These findings are consistent with Skinner et al. (2003) who reported similar difficulties placing coping strategies exclusively within the dichotomous categories described by both models.

The fact that high school students in the current study described using a variety of strategies that served multiple purposes suggested that student coping with cyberbullying was complex and may not be fully understood using previous models of coping. Perhaps a new comprehensive model of coping is needed to provide a more accurate description of coping with cyberbullying. This model should take into consideration the multiple uses of coping strategies, allowing strategies to be discussed as both problem-focused and emotion-focused. The model also should allow for strategies to involve inaction, as opposed to being approach or avoidance. Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate how the strategies presented in the current study may fit into such a model. Future research should examine these strategies to confirm the need for such a model when describing coping with cyberbullying and to elaborate on key components for this model.

This investigation has several important implications for parents, school personnel, and community service providers who work with students who may be vulnerable to cyberbullying. Figures 2 and 3 provide a framework from which adults can teach coping skills to students who may experience cyberbullying. One important finding was that students may not report cyberbullying because they do not believe adults can help in this situation. Therefore, providing supportive environments, demonstrating knowledge of resources, and having open discussions about cyberbullying may increase student confidence that seeking help from an adult would be helpful. Another implication for adults from this study is the need to increase student knowledge of strategies and resources, including both reactive and preventive strategies, because many students reported nothing could be done to reduce cyberbullying. By doing so, adults can provide a better understanding of coping and enhance resources and guidance for students experiencing cyberbullying.

Limitations and Future Research

A strength of this study was the inclusion of a range of participants that included different ages and ethnicity, and that did not restrict participation to those who had been victims of cyberbullying. This variability in sampling was designed to provide a range of reports about coping with cyberbullying. However, the inclusion of students who were not victims of cyberbullying also may be a limitation as coping mechanisms were sometimes reported based on either experiences of friends or hypothetical situations. However, future research should systematically obtain perceptions from victims of cyberbullying to learn about the strategies they found most effective in their own experience. Research on the perceived efficacy of coping mechanisms could inform intervention and prevention models to alleviate or prevent negative effects from cyberbullying.

The current study focused on the perceptions of suburban high school students with a disproportionate representation of male students in the 12th grade. In addition, socioeconomic status was not determined for each participant. Therefore, systematic analysis of differences in coping with cyberbullying based on gender, age, or socioeconomic was not possible. Future research may seek information from a broad range of settings and include rural, suburban, and urban school settings. Future research is needed to examine students from different genders, SES, and ethnicities. In addition, middle school students may experience cyberbullying differently than high school students, and use different coping mechanisms. Future research also is needed to examine a wider age range of students.

Researchers in the current study were able to gather in depth information by spending time with each student individually to complete the interviews. Although interview strategies provided an opportunity for participants to clarify the interviewer's emerging understanding, member checking (i.e., allowing participants to review the results and conclusions of the study) was not conducted. Future research may consider providing students with the outcomes of the study and allowing for feedback. In addition, future research may benefit from multiple interview sessions to gain additional information that could not be obtained within the 45 to 60 minutes interview sessions and to provide opportunities for member checking, which would help ensure conclusions made by the researchers accurately reflected the thoughts and beliefs of the participants (Schensul, LeCompte, et al., 1999).

In summary, the current study was able to offer some insight into coping with cyberbullying that has not been offered in previous research. Information about how students cope with cyberbullying has implications for interventions with

victims of cyberbullying. In addition, this information can be used to help teach preventive coping skills to all students. Finally, this information sheds some light on the complexity of coping with cyberbullying and can help inform future models of coping with this phenomenon.

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