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Abstract

The author's aim was to investigate the relationship between cybervictimization and depression, as well as using peer attachment and culture as moderators by giving questionnaires to 1347 participants (age range = 11-15 years) from India and the United States. Through four questionnaires, adolescents reported their levels of endorsement in either individualism or collectivism culture, levels of cybervictimization, levels of depression/depressive symptoms, and their levels of peer attachment. Adolescents reported that there is a significantly positive correlation between cybervictimization and depression. Differences were found according to culture and peer attachment, as well.

Cybervictimization has begun to erupt worldwide as internet usage begins to skyrocket. It is considered to be a widespread, national issue that continues to affect the development and well-being of adolescents on more levels than one and has been seen to trigger the development of depression and other maladaptive social skills among adolescents (Wei et al., 2024; Hawker, & Boulter, 2000). As the use of social media continues to increase, cybervictimization can occur more frequently among adolescents and their peers. As adolescents rely predominantly on peer engagement to develop their social skills, cybervictimization can cause adolescents to have lower peer attachment than adolescents who are not involved in cybervictimization (Kamble, 2015; Burton, Florell, & Wygant, 2012). There is little to no research regarding cultural values with cybervictimization and depression among adolescents. To address the gap in research, this study aims to analyze the role of culture and peer attachment with levels of cybervictimization and depression among adolescents in India and the United States.

The role of culture

Culture and cultural values may play a part in adolescents' ability to suppress or endorse cybervictimization, as well as depression. There are two main cultures that will be discussed that is prominent in both India and the United States. Collectivism culture can be seen in many countries around the world, including India, China, and Cyprus. Individualism culture can also be seen around the world in countries like the United States and the Czech Republic. It is also important to note that individualism is practiced in some parts of India as well.

Collectivist culture can predominantly be seen in Indian culture. Collectivist culture is a distinct ideology that emphasizes interdependence and group harmony. In these cultures, the members feel as if they are part of a large group that are loyal to each other. In collectivistic cultures, they value teamwork, norm conformity, collaboration, respect (especially to tradition and authority figures), and members are expected to put the group needs above individual needs (Gurval, 2023; Nickerson, 2023). Collectivist culture members are typically introverted, and social networking is primarily the source of information, so maintaining relationships within the community is important (Wright, et al., 2017). Collectivist culture also emphasizes negative behavior and encourages members to be vocal about negative feelings.

Individualistic culture can predominantly be seen in the United States, with many saying the United States is the epitome of individualism. Individualistic culture is all about personal success and the right for individuals to chase their own personal dreams and aspirations. Individualistic culture practices a self-supporting lifestyle. Individualistic culture expects members to discover their own values, regardless of social norms, and many members believe competition and personal achievement is important. This also means that the individuals will typically use their needs to dictate their social behavior (Gurval, 2023; Nickerson, 2021).

There is very little information about how culture can influence levels of cybervictimization. What is known is that adolescents who migrate from one culture origin to another, may face cybervictimization due to having a different culture than the majority (Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2022). It can be implied that cultures that embrace technology and the media more may be prone to more cyber threats, thus increasing their levels of cybervictimization. It can also be implied that cultures that focus more on social norms and traditions can lead to elevated levels of cybervictimization as well.

Culture can play a role in depression and depressive symptoms as well. In cultures that shine a light on negative feelings, they may consider a wider variety of distress disorders to be depressive symptoms, like in India (MentalHelp.net, n.d.). Culture can also change what an individual considers to be a depressive symptom, as well as culture having a play on why the patient thinks they are having these depressive symptoms (Brickstock, 2019). The way culture views mental health may impact how individuals understand and cope with their symptoms, and whether or not they report these symptoms. Social structures involved in different cultures also can play a part in depression. In collectivist cultures, social support networks may provide a buffer against depressive symptoms because their idea of family and community is strong. In individualistic culture, individuals may feel more isolated and not feel as welcome to talk about their struggles, because independence is extremely important.

The role of peer attachment

Peer attachment is the emotional bond, connection, and trust that people feel for the individuals around them. Peer attachment is important among adolescents and how they socialize with others, as well as with themselves. Through peer attachment, adolescents are able to develop the ability to empathize, as well as create positive peer relationships. It can also predict if adolescents will have positive social and behavioral outcomes to peers (Schoeps et al., 2020). Peer attachment allows adolescents to have a strong support system.

 Peer attachment could have an effect on cybervictimization. As adolescents rely predominantly on peer engagement to develop their social skills, cybervictimization can cause adolescents to have lower peer attachment than adolescents who are not involved in cybervictimization (Kamble, 2015; Burton, Florell, & Wygant, 2012). Adolescents who have strong peer connections may also be less susceptible to cybervictimization because they are able to freely talk about the emotional impact and ask for advice.

Peer attachment could also have an impact on rates of depression among adolescents, and it has been found that adolescents who are not satisfied with their social support network are more likely to have concurring mental health problems (Adedeji et al., 2022). Having high peer attachments can make adolescents have a sense of belonging and acceptance. This can lead to more positive associations with mental health, as the adolescent would have a support system to rely on. Peer attachments also create a sense of felt security.

The present study

Though there is a reasonable amount of research regarding the relationship between cybervictimization and depression among adolescents, there is a huge gap in literature discussing how peer attachment and culture can play as moderators of cybervictimization and self-reported depression symptoms. The goal of the present study is to address the gap in research and literature by analyzing cybervictimization and self-reported depression data among adolescents from India and the United States, while controlling for their involvement in individualism and collectivism, as well as their level of peer attachment (peer trust and peer communication). This will allow the ability to examine whether peer attachment and cultural values have an impact on experiencing depressive symptoms and/or cybervictimization. Adolescents were sampled by researchers within their country of origin. Adolescents were asked to rate how often they experienced cybervictimization, rate their feelings/experiences on different situations with peers and depression. Adolescents completed four different questionnaires that were divided into rating scales for level of depressive symptoms, level of peer attachment, how often they experience cybervictimization and prosocial cyber behaviors, and whether they engross in individualism or collectivism.

      Based on the provided literature, it is hypothesized that adolescents who experience cybervictimization will experience more depressive symptoms than adolescents who do not experience cybervictimization. It is also hypothesized that adolescents' level of peer attachment will have an impact on their involvement in cybervictimization and levels of depressive symptoms, specifically hypothesized that lower levels of peer attachment will result in higher levels of cybervictimization and depression and vice versa. There is not enough literature to be able to make a hypothesis regarding how culture plays a part in levels of cybervictimization and depression. There were five research questions to help the investigation:

Research Question 1. How does peer attachment influence or affect levels of cybervictimization among adolescents?

Research Question 2. How does peer attachment influence or affect levels of depression/depressive symptoms among adolescents?

Research Question 3. How does culture influence or affect levels of cybervictimization among adolescents?

Research Question 4. How does culture influence or affect levels of depression/depressive symptoms among adolescents?

Research Question 5. How do levels of cybervictimization and levels of depression/depressive symptoms impact each other?

Methods

Participants

There were 1347 adolescents (age range = 11-15 years) from India (n = 480; 35.6% girls) and the Unites States (n = 867; 64.4% girls) included in the study. Participants were from six urban

schools in the Karnataka state of India and seven schools in an urban city in the Midwest of the United States. Data was collected at the beginning of the fall 2013 school year.

Missing data

In total, 0.01% of the data was missing, resulting from 886 incomplete answers, namely 4 from India and 882 from the United States.

Measures

Culture: Collectivism and individualism
For the cultural aspect of the study, adolescents were asked to participate in a 16-item questionnaire to determine if the participants were more engrossed with individualism or collectivism (Li, Wang, & Shi, 2010). The questionnaire consisted of eight questions supporting individualism (e.g. individual before the group) and eight questions supporting collectivism (e.g. win as a group). These questions were rated on a 9-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*absolutely disagree*) to 9 (*absolutely agree*). To form composite scores, each group of eight questions were averaged separately. Cronbach's alphas for collectivism were 0.83 for India and 0.76 for the United States. Cronbach's alphas for individualism were 0.80 for India and 0.73 for the United States.

Cybervictimization
For the cybervictimization aspect of the study, adolescents were asked to participate in a 13-item questionnaire to determine how often they experience cyberbullying victimization (Li & Wright, 2013). The questionnaire consisted of four questions revolved around receiving prosocial cyber behavior (e.g. intent to benefit others with no reward) and nine questions revolving around cybervictimization (e.g. receiving negative behaviors online). These questions were rated on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all the time*). To form a composite score for this study, the first four questions of the questionnaire (questions relating to prosocial cyber behavior) was separated.

Peer attachment
For the peer attachment aspect of the study, adolescents were asked to participate in a 17-item questionnaire to analyze their peer attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). This questionnaire included 17 questions that were divided into two sections. Seven questions revolved around communication among peers, while ten questions revolved around trust in peers. This questionnaire was scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*almost never/never have*) to 5 (*always/always true*). To form composite scores, peer trust and peer communication were averaged separately.

Self-reported depression
For the depression aspect of this study, adolescents were asked to participate in a 21-item questionnaire to self-report their feelings of depression (Beck). This questionnaire included 21

questions that asked about depressive symptoms and feelings. This questionnaire was scored on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*none*) and 3 (*a lot*). Items 9 and 21 were not included in the study.

Procedures

In order to recruit schools, emails were sent out to school principals within India and the United States. Once approval from the principals was received, trained research assistants began to make classroom announcements. These assistants would explain the purpose of the study, what adolescents were being asked to do if they agreed to participate, as well as consent and assent procedures. Parental permission slips were then sent home, to which the adolescents were given a few weeks to return the permission slips to their teachers. The permission slips were collected and a list of the adolescents with permission to participate was made. Consent procedures were followed in both countries. During data collection, adolescents gave their own assent to participate, and no adolescent refused to participate. Adolescents then completed measures on their individualism and collectivism, cybervictimization, peer attachment, and self-reported depression. All measures provided translations for main languages of the countries of origin of the adolescents.

Analytic strategy

To calculate the data, correlations between the variables were made. These correlations included Cybervictimization x Depression, Cybervictimization x Peer Attachment, Cybervictimization x Collectivist Culture, Cybervictimization x Individualist Culture, Depression x Peer Attachment, Depression x Individualist Culture, and Depression x Collectivist Culture. These correlations were then made separately between the data from India and the data from the United States.

Results

The correlation tables for the main variables in this study are presented in this section. Correlations and significance symbols for all variables for India is present in Table 1, and Table 2 has the correlations and significance symbols for all variables for the United States.

Table 1: Correlations between variables of interest within India

	Individualism	Collectivism	Peer Attachment	Cybervictimization	Depression
Individualism	-				
Collectivism	**0.776****	-			
Peer Attachment	**0.001**	**-0.045**	-		
Cybervictimization	**-0.100***	**-0.147****	**-0.140****	-	
Depression	**-0.036**	**-0.043**	**-0.119****	**0.256****	-

*Note: * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)*

*Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

Table 2: Correlations between variables of interest within the United States

	Individualism	Collectivism	Peer Attachment	Cybervictimization	Depression
Individualism	-				
Collectivism	**0.162**	-			
Peer Attachment	**-0.063**	**0.021**	-		
Cybervictimization	**0.071***	**-0.055***	**-0.362****	-	
Depression	**0.011**	**-0.025**	**-0.344****	**0.444****	-

*Note: * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)*
*Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

Statistics

Cybervictimization and peer attachment

Indian (p < 0.01) and American (p < 0.01) adolescents both had a negative correlation between cybervictimization and peer attachment. Adolescents in both countries, on average, had low levels of cybervictimization, and high levels of peer attachment.

Cybervictimization and self-reported depression

Indian (p < 0.01) and American (p < 0.01) adolescents both had a positive correlation between cybervictimization and self-reported depression. Adolescents in both countries, on average, had low levels of cybervictimization and self-reported depression.

Cybervictimization and culture

Indian (p < 0.05) adolescents had a negative correlation between cybervictimization and individualism culture. On the contrary, American (p < 0.05) adolescents had a positive correlation between cybervictimization and individualism culture. Indian (p < 0.01) and American (p < 0.05) adolescents had negative correlations between cybervictimization and collectivism culture.

Self-reported depression and peer attachment

Indian (p < 0.01) and American (p < 0.01) both had negative correlations between self-reported depression and peer attachment. Adolescents in both countries, on average, had low levels of self-reported depression, and high levels of peer attachment.

Self-reported depression and culture

Indian adolescents had a negative correlation between self-reported depression and individualism culture, with little significance. American adolescents had a positive correlation between self-reported depression and individualism culture, with little significance. Indiana and American

adolescents both had a negative correlation between self-reported depression and collectivist culture, with little significance.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to investigate the relationships of peer attachment and culture with cybervictimization and depression. Overall, the results from this study suggest that peer attachment plays a role in both depression and cybervictimization, while there is no concise significance of the relationship between culture and cybervictimization or depression.

The role of cybervictimization on adolescents' depression

There was consistent research and patterns found among the data for the correlation between cybervictimization and depression/depressive symptoms. The results from the present study are aligned with a study by Peprah, who states that cybervictimization is one of the various factors that impact suicidal behavior among adolescents, which is a depressive symptom (2023). It also is supported by research by Fisher et al, that concluded that there were positive associations between cybervictimization and depression (2016). With the provided literature and the data analysis, it is concluded that cybervictimization has a significant impact on adolescent depression.

Cybervictimization: Differences based on peer attachment and culture

There was consistent research and patterns found among the data for the negative correlation between cybervictimization and peer attachment for both India and the United States. The results from the present study are aligned with a study by Mona that concluded social support to be a protective factor for non-suicidal self-injury (depressive symptom) among adolescents (2016). It also is shown that adolescents who have stronger relationships with their friends have lower levels of mental health issues, including depression. With the provided literature, and an ample amount more research concerning cybervictimization and peer attachment with adolescents, it is concluded that peer attachment is a huge moderator for cybervictimization.

However, there is not a lot of literature that investigates culture as a moderator for cybervictimization. There are articles that explain the ideologies of collectivist and individualist culture and those ideologies may affect someone's level of cybervictimization. The results show that adolescents in India have a negative correlation between both cultures and cybervictimization, although the correlation between cybervictimization and collectivism culture is more significant. On the contrary, in the United States, there is a positive correlation between cybervictimization and individualism culture, but a negative correlation between cybervictimization and collectivism culture. This still raises the question as to how exactly culture affects cybervictimization if there are different correlations and significance levels within two different countries.

Depression: Differences based on peer attachment and culture

There was consistent research and patterns found among the data for the negative correlation between depression and peer attachment in both India and the United States. The results from the present study aligns with the research of Ju and Lee, who argued that high peer attachment reduces depression levels in adolescents (2018). It also aligns with research from Millings et al. who concluded that peer relationships are likely to have an impact on adolescent depression (2012). With the provided literature and the data from the present study, it can be concluded that peer attachment has a significant correlation to depression in adolescents.

However, there is not a lot of literature that investigates culture as a moderator for depression. There are articles that explain the ideologies of collectivist and individualist culture and those ideologies may affect someone's level of depression or how they respond to different stressors. The results show that adolescents in India have negative correlations between both individualism and collectivism cultures, but neither are significant. On the contrary, in the United States, there is a positive correlation between depression and individualism culture, but a negative correlation between depression and collectivism culture, both with no significance. This makes it fair to conclude that culture ultimately does not impact or affect levels of depression.

Limitations and future directions

The present study focused on adolescents when gathering data. It could be proven beneficial to incorporate other age groups into the study, to see if there are significant correlations between the variables with other age groups. This study also focused on data gathered from adolescents in India and the United States. It would be beneficial to incorporate other countries. Incorporating more countries into the study would help establish a more profound relationship between the variables. It also could be beneficial to see if different countries who use either collectivism/individualism culture have different data than India and the United States, as there is not a lot of research done on the impact of culture.

Conclusions

The present study allowed for an investigation into the relationships of peer attachment and culture with cybervictimization and depression among adolescents in India and the United States, as well as looking at the relationship between cybervictimization and depression. It is one of very few studies that examine the relationships between cultural values and cybervictimization. It is also one of the first studies to examine the relationship between cultural values and depression. It also allowed for further research into the relationship between peer attachment and cybervictimization and depression. The result of the present study suggests that researchers should consider peer attachment and cultural values when looking at cybervictimization and depression within other countries.

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