

Abstract

Upon the widespread use of the Internet as a predominant means of social interaction among adolescents, cyber victimization has become an ever-growing concern in the past decade. Despite the emerging cross-sectional research that suggested a positive correlation between cyber victimization and social anxiety symptoms, there is a lack of definitive research on the directionality and causality of these relationships. The present study used a community sample of Hong Kong adolescents aged 12 to 18 to investigate the one-year longitudinal bi-directional relationships between social anxiety symptom severity and cyber victimization, and further explored the moderating effects of gender and perceived social support on the relationships. Autoregressive cross-lagged path analyses revealed that whilst controlling for baseline social anxiety, baseline cyber victimization is not a significant predictor of follow-up social anxiety, this relationship differs across gender where girls, but not boys, are shown to experience later increased social anxiety symptoms following baseline cyber victimization. On the other hand, controlling for baseline cyber victimization, baseline social anxiety does not significantly predict follow-up cyber victimization for both gender. Perceived social support does not significantly moderate the relationship between cyber victimization and social anxiety. The results emphasize the potential role of cyber victimization being an antecedent of social anxiety symptoms for girls, and highlight the pressing need for future research to identify protective factors and to develop gender-tailored interventions to reduce adolescent social anxiety.